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Simon Theobald

"We Deserve Better": Ideologies of Deservingness and Status in the Interpretation of Chinese Goods in an Iranian Bazaar

This article argues that even as Chinese imports occupy an increasingly large percentage of the space in Mashhad's bazaars and marketplaces, such goods are interpreted not only as being of poor quality but, critically, as insufficiently "worthy" of the Iranian middle class who positioned themselves as "deserving better." In attempting to assess why this is the case, the article suggests that such framing both reveals much of, and requires us to consider, the pivotal role of status in Iran. It holds that this concern for status is expressed at multiple levels: that of the family, as a class, and finally, of the nation. At each of these levels of expression, it is possible to trace different post-revolutionary social phenomena. These include the reification of the family as a moral unit, major shifts in the demographics of education and urbanization, the rise of a consumer culture and the perilous decline of the fortunes of the middle class, and, finally, imaginings of national exceptionalism. This article then uses such readings of Chinese goods as a window into middle class ideologies of worth and deservingness.

Keywords: China-Iran; Status; Consumptive Behavior; Class; Deservingness; Aspiration

Introduction: Chinese Goods Perceived Darkly

During my ethnographic fieldwork in Iran between 2015 and 2018, the bazārs of Mashhad were filled with Chinese imports, from fabrics and plastics to technical wares like Huawei phones. Yet to ask the bazāri about the caliber of such goods was to elicit the inevitable response "it's Chinese quality" (*jensesh chini-ye*). This answer encapsulates in microcosm the basic consumer attitude towards Chinese goods in Iran. That they are of poor quality, shoddy workmanship, etc., is virtually axiomatic. This should not be altogether surprising. The circulation of global discourses about exports from the People's Republic has done much to malign their value.[1] What *was* marked among my interlocutors, though, was something different. Not only were such goods understood to be of low quality, but more importantly, such

Simon Theobald is a PhD candidate at the School of Archaeology and Anthropology, Australian National University.

[1]See e.g. Midler, *Poorly Made in China*.

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materials and their apparently mediocre caliber was understood as demeaning to Iranian middle class consumers, who, I was routinely informed, deserved better.

Take the following key vignette from my fieldwork. In January 2018 I returned to Iran for a month, hoping to collect some final pieces of data for my PhD thesis. I stayed with a young family I had become close to on my previous visits, the Rezāis, who were paradigmatic representatives of the Islamic Republic's middle classes. Both university-educated, Hamed Rezāi worked for a large engineering company, while Elmira, having trained in architecture, now spent most of her time juggling commitments to two part-time jobs and looking after their five-year-old son. Like most of the other residents of the city's west, their parents' generation had migrated from the countryside in search of work, and they lived now in what was an increasingly affluent and aspirational sector of the city.

With Hamed out of town, on a winter evening I found myself called upon to join Elmira, her son, and her sister in-law Fatemeh on a shopping trip. Our destination was the major shopping complex emerging around the square of Ferdowsi and Jānbāz boulevards. On one side of the street was Hyper-me; on the other side, Promā—both multi-story shopping centers with hundreds of shops. Several smaller malls had grown up around the consumer center. The site was famous in Mashhad as a place where items could be found that were otherwise unavailable in the relatively homogenous city. European food, Turkish white goods, Chinese consumables could all be bought there.

We went from store to store, but it was on the second floor that we found what the women had come looking for. A small shop sold a variety of unbranded consumer items—drink bottles, mugs, pencil cases, small lamps, much of it marked with "kawaii"-esque[2] pictures; cartoon calves, piglets, and the like. Eyeing a glass mug with some English text on it, Elmira inquired as to where it was made.

"It's Chinese," responded the shop owner.

Elmira wrinkled her nose and put the container back down on the shelf. Picking it up, I read the English writing emblazoned on its side. "Field[e] of Gold: Treein Art" it stated in gold lettering.

"What does it mean?" Fatemeh inquired.

"It doesn't mean anything" I said. "See?!" she responded indignantly. "They think we Iranians are idiots. They just stamp any old English writing on there, and think it will make more money that way," Fatemeh remonstrated. "But we're better than that. We deserve better [*lāyeq-e behtar hastim*]."

This paper aims to unpack the following question: why did my Iranian interlocutors, representatives of the middle class, understand themselves to be deserving of a better standard than the "low quality" of Chinese goods they received. In searching for an answer, I suggest that these are multivalent references that mark deeply held indigenous concerns about status in the Islamic Republic, an anxiety that is itself a

[2]A Japanese adjective "meaning 'cute', 'adorable', and 'loveable'" and an "important aspect of Japanese material culture and a key affect word used to describe things that are small, delicate, and immature." Burdelski and Mitsuhashi, "She Thinks You're Kawaii," 65.

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product of the complex overlaying of a variety of post-revolutionary social phenomena. The deserving "we" that they refer to is likewise multilayered, a reference not just to the family, but something that is expressed equally at higher levels of abstraction—at that of the class bracket, i.e. as the middle class, and finally that of the nation. I should stress that although this article surveys why it is that my Iranian interlocutors understood themselves as deserving, the corollary to this is not that I believe them to be *undeserving*. Rather, what I am interested in is how this sense of deservingness was deployed and from where it originates.

In attempting to explicate my answer, I have organized this article along the following lines. Using this ethnographic vignette as an entry point into the major themes of the rest of this paper, I begin first with an overview of status and consumerism in Iran, and how these are linked to interpretations of Chinese goods by my interlocutors. In the next section of the paper, I unpack where this sense of deservingness emerges from and how it is expressed at three different layers—first the family, then as the middle class, finally as the national unit. The final section of this paper concludes by situating this research in its broader context.

Status and Consumerism in Iran

Appearing in the works of Adelkhah, Beeman, Khosravi, and Mahdavi, and refigured with a new intensity by Olszewska, the role of status, prestige, class, and especially aspiration to a higher social standing has been a matter of central importance to the anthropology and ethnography of Iran.[3] Some of this has roots in the pre-revolutionary period. Beeman, for instance, from his work in the 1970s, holds that "there are few societies that take the obligations of status as seriously as does Iranian society."[4] Yet for all that status is imbricated in the pre-revolutionary period, it is in post-revolutionary Iran, and particularly in the last twenty to thirty years following the end of the war with Iraq, that questions of status, competition between social classes, and especially fear for the decline of status, have taken on a new life. In contemporary Iran, status remains "encoded in, and a crucial part of language, comportment, and social etiquette" in the country.[5]

Inextricably linked to the question of status is the emergence of a consumer consciousness in the country.[6] As with concerns for status, consumerism in Iran has old roots in the country, even if it fell into a short period of abeyance during the Revolutionary period. Schayegh suggests that the origins of Iranian consumerism lies in the nineteenth century, when goods from Russia, the West, British India, and the

[3]Adelkhah, *Being Modern in Iran*; Beeman, *Language, Status, and Power in Iran*; Khosravi, *Young and Defiant in Tehran*; Khosravi, *Precarious Lives*; Mahdavi, *Passionate Uprisings*; Olszewska, "Classy Kids and Down-at-Heel Intellectuals."

[4]Beeman, *Language, Status, and Power in Iran*, 12.

[5]Olszewska, "Classy Kids and Down-at-Heel Intellectuals", 850.

[6]For a thorough study of the culture of consumerism as it relates particularly to interior design, see Karimi, *Domesticity and Consumer Culture in Iran*.

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Ottoman Empire began entering the country in large quantities.[7] Amin notes that the 1920s and 1930s saw the emergence of a "beauty culture," heavily influenced by American concepts, and in conjunction with the Women's Awakening Project of 1936–41.[8]

Nonetheless the development of such a culture was hampered by political instability following the Constitutional Revolution, World Wars I and II, and the Great Depression, with Schayegh asserting that the "social class basis for mass consumerism … did not crystallize until the 1950s."[9] By the 1950s and 1960s, Tehran had reached a population of some 2 million, with growth particularly strong among the middle classes, who benefited from the rise in state employment.[10] The other significant factor that shaped Iranian consumer habits at this time was the introduction of television. The earliest commercial station—*Television of Iran*—run by an American, Vance Hallack, was marketed to an emerging demographic of "status conscious housewives," its audience increasing from 2.1 million in 1970 to 15 million in 1974, with the majority of air time devoted to serials and movies from the US.[11]

The rise of a consumerist society in the 1950s and 1960s was not without opposition. Much has been written about the intellectual opposition to the import of western culture among particular academic circles, most famously iterated by the likes of Jalal Al-Ahmad, whose work *Gharbzadegi* was a trenchant critique of both European thought and the supposedly pale Iranian-made imitation of the West.[12] Similar critiques of "worldliness" were made by Ali Shariati.[13] Khomeini, too, decried the adoption of western consumer habits. In his tome *The Unveiling of Secrets* (*kashf ol-asrār*), he bemoans the adoption of European dress, and chastises intellectuals for "strolling up and down the streets with a chamber-pot-shaped hat … occupied with naked girls, being proud of this state of affairs," a claim he repeats throughout the work.[14]

When Khomeini ultimately came to power, state ideologues pushed a pious image of self-denial, frugality, and asceticism that valorized humility and poverty, particularly as the war with Iraq set in. Rooted in traditional Shiʿite imagery of the "suffering" Imams, the semi-mendicant lifestyle of the radical clerical classes at the time, and a revolutionary groundswell that drew heavily on egalitarian rhetoric, the Ayatollah became the embodiment of the new, humble, fakir-like mystic and ascetic that Iranians were encouraged to imitate.[15] Yet the model of righteous hardship proved unstable as a trope, if it ever was truly hegemonic. By the late 1980s, the centralized

[7]Schayegh, "Iran's Karaj Dam Affair," 612–13.
[8]Amin, "Importing 'Beauty Culture' into Iran the 1920s and 1930s."
[9]Schayegh, "Iran's Karaj Dam Affair," 613.
[10]Ibid., 614.
[11]Sreberny and Mohammadi, *Small Media, Big Revolution*, 62.
[12]Ahmad, *Gharbzadegi*.
[13]Shari'ati, *On the Sociology of Islam*.
[14]Khomeini, *Kashf-al Asrar*, cited in Arjomand, "Traditionalism in Twentieth Century Iran," 206.
[15]See e.g. Brumberg, *Reinventing Khomeini*; Moin, *Khomeini: Life of the Ayatollah*; Seyed-Ghorab, "Khomeini the Poet Mystic."

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economy had been virtually exhausted by the war with Iraq, and under the authority of Ayatollah Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the country began a process of economic liberalization, with flow-on effects that directly impacted consumptive behavior, such that by the mid-1990s Adelkhah noted that:

> the principle of competition, in Iran's social conditions, is giving rise to solid conformism. … The result, despite the severity of the economic crisis, is a feeling of bourgeoisification, a real frenzy of consumption which is in contrast with the revolutionary romanticism of 1978–79 and even with the patriotic austerity of the war years.[16]

If the 1980s and the early period of the 1990s had been characterized by a somber austerity, by the time I arrived in Iran in early 2015, a culture of conspicuous consumption and a desire for brand-name goods was fully in vogue. Emblematic of this shift was the Instagram page *Rich Kids of Tehran*. The website styled itself as revealing a lifestyle that was in stark contrast to images encouraged by both the state and international media of Iran as a deeply religious society. With images of scantily clad women, luxury cars and homes, and wild parties, all within the confines of northern Tehran, the site valorized conspicuous wealth and the consumption of western brand-name goods, with gaudy videos set to music depicting the city's wealthy elite purchasing and using items such as iPhones, wearing Swarovski jewelry, and riding Italian Vespas and luxurious Mercedes Benz cars. What marks this as distinct from the pervasive global "influencer" culture is not its conspicuous consumption, but the context in which such behavior is situated. It is *against* the normative and ideologically sanctioned backdrop of religiously inspired austerity that these images are positioned, with the implicit (and sometimes explicit) intent of challenging an assumption of Iran, and Tehran as its capital, as a monochromatic, homogenous, and unitary society in which the values of the Revolution remain indisputable.

Such behaviors were not limited to the secular upper classes. Where the rhetoric of local sheikhs had once encouraged humility, in a manner reminiscent of Protestant prosperity gospels my informants pointed to sermons that praised the wealthy and their riches as a sign of God's favor.[17] Referred to as the "Rich kids of the *nezām*" on Instagram, wealthy *āghā-zādes*, the children of the clerical elite, also flaunted their wealth and prestige, albeit in more subdued tones and with less flesh exposed.

While the Rich Kids of Tehran and their religious counterparts were also criticized by some, such displays of ostentatious wealth both reflected and continued to catalyze the broader preference and desire for brand-name items from the West and South Korea.[18]

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[16]Adelkhah, *Being Modern in Iran*, 173.

[17]See e.g. Adelkhah, *Being Modern in Iran*; Godazgar, "Islam versus Consumerism and Postmodernism."

[18]Like western brand names, Khosravi notes positive associations with South Korean brands, stating: "South Korea is regarded as a modern nation with high standards and advanced technology. Its electronics companies such as Samsung and LG, as well as motor companies such as Kia and Hyundai, are dominant brands in the Iranian market. Unlike Chinese products, South Korean brands are presented regularly on television as being of good quality, fashionable, and chic." Khosravi, *Precarious Lives*, 196.

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These visual manifestations of the preference for western brand-name goods both exemplified and set the tone for consumer behavior at a broader level. Throughout my time in Mashhad, I was struck by the way in which western-made goods were reified by my interlocutors, who routinely praised them not only for their supposed better quality, but also their value as items that demonstrated the "classiness" (*bākelāssi*) and status of an individual. Indeed to describe someone as classy (*bākelāss*) or cultured (*bāfarhang)* was usually synonymous with their ability to access western-made goods.

When driving through city streets, my informants would frequently point out western, especially European, brand-name cars that were considered to be aspirational items that they themselves dreamed of purchasing and understood as exhibiting elements of classiness. Or take the case of the following. A close informant, Ahmad, aged thirty-two, was an upper-middle class businessman, recently married to the younger Maryam, aged twenty-six, a woman from a relatively high-status family, her father having had a career in the prestigious tertiary education sector as a professor at the city's main state university. As part of their courtship, Ahmad had routinely bought gifts for Maryam. Hoping to present her with a superlative gift, Ahmad had gone to buy her a new phone, discussing the proposal with his then fiancé beforehand. Maryam agreed, but insisted that the mobile phone be an iPhone. "A phone that is not an iPhone, is not a phone," she had declared. That is, any mobile that did not carry the iPhone branding so lacked the connotations of status and quality that it was not worth buying. Complicating matters, the iPhone is made in China, but American designed. The problem then is not so much whether the goods were produced in China. After all, both the mug at the beginning of this article and the iPhone here claim Chinese provenance. Rather, the issue was in their status associations. One item, the iPhone, American designed if not made, met the standards of deservingness that Iranian middle class consumers set themselves. The other, the mug, did not. Why this was so is explored in greater detail later in this article.

"Huawei vs. the iPhone": Western contra Chinese Goods

These status-seeking behaviors were particularly pronounced when it came to comparing western consumer items to those that were of Chinese origin. Not only were western brands preferable, but they were explicitly more so when compared to Chinese brands sent to Iran, which were in many ways considered the antithesis of classy and cultured. Chinese goods were understood as lacking style and desirability, being cheap and of low quality, and explicitly compared against western goods that were "obviously" stylish, desirable, expensive, and of high quality. Someone whose home or person was decked in Chinese items was prototypically classless (*bikelās*) and uncultured (*bifarhang*).

This appraisal was exemplified in the emblematic gap in desirability between the aforementioned iPhone and its Chinese "competitor" Huawei. Just as Maryam and Ahmad had demonstrated the desirability of the iPhone, a symbol of success and

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status, so too was ownership of a Huawei the contrastive model associated with a lack of culture and class. A close informant, Muhammad, was a twenty-six-year-old lower middle class salesman living in the outer suburban reaches of Mashhad. In the market for a new mobile, he had researched the latest models, and concluded that a Huawei would suffice, meeting all the specifications he required. Yet as soon as he had bought the phone, he was ridiculed by his friends and co-workers, who were incredulous that he had not bought a more expensive iPhone. In response, Muhammad complained, other brands were both more expensive, and less practical under sanctions. Yet his friends and colleagues continued to mock his decision.

My interlocutors' skepticism about Chinese goods was not matched by a nationalist sentiment in favor of locally produced Iranian wares. On the contrary, Iranian goods were held in perhaps even lower esteem than Chinese goods. We see this in the failure of government calls for what has been termed the "resistance economy" (*eghtesād-e moghāvemati*), part of the effort to circumvent US and European sanctions. First mentioned as early as in 2010 by the country's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the resistance economy, although something of a chameleonic term, was generally understood to represent a repudiation of the kind of marketeering that was read as the embrace of neoliberal and anti-interventionist economics that had inspired much of the 1990s and 2000s.

As the Supreme Leader suggested, it invoked a return to, quoting Smyth (*The Guardian*, 19 April 2016), "observing economic justice in production and distribution, defending underprivileged people, fighting the capitalist culture, showing respect for ownership, capital and labour, refusing to melt into the global economy and preserving the independence of the national economy." What this was understood to imply was a greater stress on self-sufficiency and domestic production, and a new-found willingness to buy Iranian-made goods. In practice, though, calls for Iranian consumers to buy domestically produced items largely fell on deaf ears. With the exception of some rare commodities that were felt to be of higher quality, such as handmade carpets, or some locally grown produce like saffron, Iranian wares were potentially the object of even greater derision than Chinese-made goods.

What I suggest in the above is that we can better understand how Chinese goods intersect with ideas of deservingness principally through an analytical focus on the question of status in the post-revolutionary period. With this framing in mind, I now want to explore the origin of this sense of deservingness that defines the perception of Chinese goods among my interlocutors. To begin, I look at the domestic unit, before turning to the precarious middle class, and finally the nation, that provide different levels of abstraction for interpreting how ideologies of deservingness are mobilized.

The Deserving "Family": State Reification and Neoliberal "Bootstrap" Ideologies

In this section, I want to suggest two points of origin for the idea of the "deserving" family. First, we have the process of the reification of the domestic unit by the state, the legacy of which, even as it has changed over time, persists today, I argue, in the

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belief that families *ought* to be the focus of state attention and the prime beneficiaries of Islamist governance. Second, the radical social shifts that have occurred in the demographics of the country both before and after the Revolution have seen massive urbanization and the rapid and pervasive expansion of education within the course of almost a single generation.

The idea of a "moral family" has been at the heart of the Islamist project in contemporary Iran since the final victory of the Revolution of 1979. Explicit in this was a rejection of the "superficial"[19] westernization of the Pahlavi period, evidenced in the rescinding of family protection laws, the enforcement of the obligatory hijab, and the restriction of salaried employment for women.[20] Shifting in structure from extended kinship networks towards a focus on the smaller, nuclear familial unit, the new ethical family was to live simply, "traditionally," and above all piously, with Khomeini's own domestic life in many ways the model for the rest of the nation. Among my interlocutors in Mashhad, even those who were ardently opposed to the model of Islamic governance imposed by Khomeini and his acolytes admitted that the cleric had lived "very simply," and that this image formulated a pattern for the rest of the country to adhere to. Yet, as I have suggested, the tropes deployed by the state have nonetheless proved to be unstable over the past four decades, and while the image of a *pious* family may have been retained, the economic visage of a humble, simple—if not poverty-stricken—domestic unit has given way to more consumer-minded imagery.

It is important to stress the reification of the family as a central unit of the Islamist regime's focus and policy. Particularly during the war with Iraq, where natalist policies only served to further raise the standing of the family, this domestic grouping became the nation's social unit par excellence. With few cultural institutions holding the same cachet, the family became a pillar of society and the locus of government largesse, the state promising in particular to "provide for families that gave a martyr."[21] One of the legacies of this, I suggest, persists today in the ideology of deservingness expressed by families in Mashhad. Because of the early revolutionary policies and such focus, families continue to understand themselves as deserving of the best that the Islamist polity has to offer.

In tandem with this has been a phenomenon associated with rapid demographic changes in the country. The mass urbanization over the past forty to sixty years has seen the wholescale inversion of previous population pyramids, from one in which the vast majority of the population lived in rural areas to the present situation, with an increasingly urban society.[22] The outcome has been that many previously rural, often uneducated or only traditionally educated families have seen a radical change in their social position, frequently in the course of a single generation.[23]

[19]Fathi, *Women and the Family in Iran*, 5.

[20]See e.g. Nassehi-Behnam, "Change and the Iranian Family"; Mir-Hosseini, *Marriage on Trial*.

[21]Varzi, *Warring Souls*, 65.

[22]Fanni, "Cities and Urbanisation in Iran," 408.

[23]The explosion of institutes of higher education in Iran has been described as an "over-education" crisis by commentators like Habibi. See Habibi, "Iran's Overeducation Crisis."

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Among my interlocutors, many were the children or grandchildren of individuals who had effectively been born as rural indentured laborers with extremely limited social prospects at birth. Yet this older generation now presided over children and grandchildren who counted among their number doctors, lawyers, and other high-status occupations. Take the Rezāis, who began this article. With ancestral ties to communities of Sunni Turkmen living on the frontier territories between Mashhad and Turkmenistan, Hamed's parents were farmers in a remote village near Sarakhs. Hamed's father supplemented their income working as a truck driver, having left school at a young age to pursue work. Yet he and his wife now counted five university-educated engineers among their six children.

Critically, among my informants, such radical transformation was rarely expressed or understood as the outcome of anonymous or large-scale social forces that had reconfigured the political landscape of the country, but were rather situated as the product of individual acts of hard work and accomplishment. This neoliberal-esque valorization of the supposedly entrepreneurial spirit situated those families who had done well in such shifting climates as the deserving beneficiaries of their "own" achievements.

As such, "the family" was understood to be doubly deserving, firstly as the focal unit of state largesse and a pillar of society and secondly through their own "hard work," which had transformed, within the space of a generation, indentured laborers and rural peasantry into a sophisticated, educated, urban-living, and modern family unit. The concentration on the family as *the* ethical unit in contemporary Iran, has, I suggest, important ramifications for how status is perceived. It is in part because the family remains the most important moral institution in the country, and in part because of an ideology of "self-improvement," that my Iranian interlocutors understood themselves to be deserving of better. But it is not exclusively through the family that this sense of deservingness is situated. So too is it experienced, I suggest below, as a product of middle class identity.

Competition and Material Decline: The Precarious Status of the Middle Class

When Fatemeh referred to a sense of deservingness, I suggest that she made reference not just to family status, but also to a sense of identity as members of the middle class. In this section, I extrapolate how pressures on the middle class, and the threat of status decline, ensure that those who preserve their "precarious" position understand themselves to be deserving of better than the quality of goods they receive from China.

The precarity of the middle class in Iran has been noted by Khosravi, who argues that, more than just a feature of the labor market in the country, it has become a "defining feature of society in general," covering a "range of social vulnerabilities that Iranians are struggling with."[24] Khosravi holds that this "precarious-ization of life" is a "consequence of the recent transformations in Iranian politics and

[24]Khosravi, *Precarious Lives*, 4–5.

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economy," notably the "valorisation of the entrepreneurial individual, a preference for the market over rights, the withdrawal of the state from the service sector, and prolonged un(der)employment."[25] I agree that much of this sense of precarity is rooted in the transformations of the last twenty to thirty years, although I feel that these changes can be ascribed to broader forces than just the neoliberalization of society. Take for example the relationship between classes.

Throughout my fieldwork, my middle class interlocutors complained that one of the outcomes of the Revolution had been to "scramble" the normative class hierarchy that had existed in the pre-revolutionary period. This ethnographic insight is backed up by scholarly work from Behdad and Nomani who suggests that since the Revolution, Iranian society has been characterized by a jostling social arrangement in which status pivotally is not fixed and classes have shuffled up and down.[26] Olszewska likewise notes that "changing economics and social policies have also led to the expansion or contraction of various classes, and the grievances of some (for example, unemployed university graduates) may be attributed to the fact that their aspirations have been raised and then not fulfilled."[27]

Comparable to the cheapening of educational credentials noted by Bourdieu in *Distinction*,[28] where the educated middle classes had once been used to moving from higher education into comfortable, typically government jobs, such certainties were no longer fixed. With education providing an increasingly limited pathway toward employment, many of my interlocutors had endured long periods of either unemployment or underemployment, or at the very least were employed in work outside their area of interest and specialty. For example, Elmira, who we were introduced to at the beginning of this article, despite having trained as an architect, had never worked in the profession, and had spent much of her adult life in and out of odd jobs, ranging from working in an import and export business, to teaching English, to technical support at a small office. As such, my interlocutors decried the outcome of a "topsy-turvy" system in which the lower classes had been elevated to positions of power and prestige within the Islamic Republic at the expense of the middle classes whose education, so they suggested, should have rendered them the natural agents of statecraft, something likewise noted by Harris, who suggests that the "upwardly mobile middle class perceive themselves blocked by the state from the pathways to social power."[29]

This class-based uncertainty has had consequences. Because in such a system status was not assured, it had to be constantly reiterated. One of the outcomes of this shuffling then has been the emergence of a hyper-competitive consumer culture in which displays, often ostentatious ones, of wealth and success have become normative. In addition to this, there has been the emergence of a particular kind of dogged social

[25]Ibid., 9.
[26]Behdad and Nomani, "What a Revolution!"
[27]Olszweska, "Classy Kids and Down-at-Heel Intellectuals," 843.
[28]Bordieu, *Distinction*.
[29]Harris, "The Brokered Exuberance," 436.

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competition, referred to as "*cheshm o ham cheshmi*," or "keeping up with the Joneses." In describing the phenomenon, one of my interlocutors, Leyla, suggested that *cheshm o ham cheshmi* referred to:

> Competing with each other. It refers to this competition. For instance, somebody goes to his or her cousin's house, and they see that they're using a new set of furniture, everything is new, they would come back, and they would decide to change everything, just because the cousin did that.

The term has appeared in some of the most recent literature of Iranian sociology and anthropology, and is typically taken to refer to material competition—in plastic surgery and especially rhinoplasty[30] and in the bride-price.[31] Khosravi summarizes *cheshm o ham cheshmi* as "competition between families, neighbours, people who know each other, over being more successful than others,"[32] manifest also in educative policies like the school-leaving certificate, the *konkur*, and metaphorically similar to *jolo-zadan*, the practice of trying to outpace other drivers on the road.

This competitive sociality is coupled with the declining purchasing power and material standing of the middle class, one of the "social pressures" (*feshār-e ejtemā'i*) that my interlocutors understood themselves as facing. The Iranian middle class has long struggled with a decline in purchasing power and a drop in material standards of living.[33] This has become significantly more pronounced though with the introduction of sanctions on Iran in 2007, and has only become worse following the return of US sanctions after the withdrawal of the United States from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). The return to sanctions in 2018 saw the economy contract, the value of the rial plummet, and the cost of living skyrocket.

The outcome of these changes is a pervasive sense of insecurity that inflects the life worlds of the middle classes in Iran, a real feeling that the potential to "drop out" lurks just around the corner, and a stress on the constant need to reiterate and reperform status. I want to suggest that the argument for deservingness is in part a kind of compensatory mechanism for these pressures, that those who have managed to "survive" the ravages of Iran's economic downturn, class reshuffling since the Revolution, and its competitive sociality, understand themselves as a tenacious bulwark who have struggled—successfully—to achieve or preserve their position. It is in part because they have endured these travails since the Revolution that they understand themselves as deserving of more than the "low quality" goods that they receive from China.

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[30]Lenehan, "Nose Aesthetics."

[31]Reza-Rashti, "Iran: Women and Higher Education"; Reza-Rashti and Moghadam, "Women and Higher Education in Iran."

[32]Khosravi, *Precarious Lives*, 232.

[33]Alizadeh, *The Economy of Iran*.

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The Status of the Nation and National Exceptionalism

I want to return one final time to the "we" of Fatemeh's question. We should interpret this as a reference not just to the specificities of one family, or to the middle class as a scion of Iranian society. I think there is a third element broadly encapsulated, i.e. "we" in the national sense, the "we" of the Iranian nation. Itself a fundamentally problematic and historically located imaginary, Iranian modernity is marked by a particularly visceral nationalist politics, one that is fought over by both secularists and Islamists.[34] These two competing ideologies nonetheless share some sense of what might best be referred to as Iranian exceptionalism.

Referred to briefly in the work of Sadegh Zibakalam,[35] Iranian exceptionalism has nonetheless been relatively under-theorized compared to other kinds of national exceptionalism, particularly American. This exceptionalism is rooted in a constellation of often fictionalized, sometimes real, but always consequentially understood points of difference between Iran and its neighbors. These range from the minute to the major, from forms as seemingly quotidian as the organization of time, to Iran's identity as a majority Shiʿite nation in a mostly Sunni world, to the supposedly preternatural blessings of resources that have been bestowed upon the country. This culture of exceptionalism, I suggest, is part of a constant effort of stressing, underlying, and further establishing Iran's "difference" not only from its close neighbors, but also as a unique "civilization," with a distinct and particular past, present, and future.

Here there are two subsets of such exceptionalism that I want to call attention to. The first is what Zia-Ebrahimi refers to as "dislocative" nationalism.[36] In essence, this thesis holds that contemporary Iranian nationalism is inflected by an ideology that espouses a vision of Iran not as one country amidst its neighbors with which it shares a cultural continuity, present and historical, but rather as a nation that is alien to and alienated from the territories and cultures that surround it. Rooted in discourses of "Aryanism" that situate Iran as a "European" country adrift in a sea of foreign, culturally dissimilar states, such an ideology posits not only difference, but actively *denigrates* the region as inferior to Iran.[37]

Secondly, deservedness is tied to understandings of national endurance (moral and material) of conditions in the post-revolutionary period. Regardless of individual attitude towards the Republican regime, there is a shared sense of national pride and moral outrage at having endured not only the long and bloody war with Iraq,

[34]Iranian nationalism is a vast topic. For just a few examples of the academic literature on the topic, see Zia-Ebrahimi, *The Emergence of Iranian Nationalism*; Kian and Riaux, "Crafting Iranian Nationalism"; Ringer, "Iranian Nationalism and Zoroastrian Identity."

[35]Zibakalam, "Iranian Exceptionalism."

[36]Zia-Ebrahimi, *The Emergence of Iranian Nationalism*.

[37]Zia-Ebrahimi reads this anti-regional sentiment as exclusively a kind of anti-Arabism, but I would suggest that this extends further than just Arabs, and is positioned towards Iran's other major neighbors, including Afghanistan and Pakistan, both of which are denigrated, if perhaps not with quite the same passion as Arab states.

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but also the string of on-again-off-again sanctions that have been inflicted upon the country in the period following the Revolution. My Iranian interlocutors saw themselves, and their country, as having weathered a unique set of particularly trying experiences that positioned Iran as deserving of a certain degree of respect in the international arena.

The relevance of these to Chinese goods may seem tangential, but I maintain that there is in fact a strong correlation between these assumptions of national exceptionalism, and the positioning of foreign imports into the country. Firstly, the import of low-quality Chinese goods is interpreted not as the outcome of Iran's positioning in the region, as a middle-income country subject to an international sanctions regime. Instead, Iran is imagined as being properly and ideally situated among the league of culturally "advanced" European and other western nations. With such a formulation, Chinese "junk"-quality goods become, in effect, good enough for Afghanistan, Iraq, and the like—all states read as impoverished and war-torn—but insufficient for Iran, whose true place culturally, if not geographically, is among those western powers that are presently reaping the very best of what the growing superpower has to offer. In essence, my middle class interlocutors insisted that they were left with the metaphorical crumbs of China's rise, when they should, in fact—at least this ideology suggests—be receiving Beijing's finest, as befits their place among the advanced civilizations of the West. And, secondly, having braved such perilous circumstances in the post-revolutionary period, heavy sanctions on top of war, other countries, including China, might pay them a modicum of the respect they feel they deserve and export high-quality merchandise to them.

Conclusion

When my interlocutors argued that they deserved better than the supposedly low-quality Chinese goods they were provided with, they made reference to a multilayered concern for status that pervades both the local and national imaginations of the middle class in Mashhad. There is no single point of origin for such an understanding. Rather it is the culmination of a series of overlapping social phenomena that have marked the pre-, but particularly the post-revolutionary period, that have helped to define this sense. Here I make reference to three main points.

Firstly, we must understand the elevation of the status of the family in the discourse and practices of the Republican period. As the supreme social institution, the Republican government did much to raise expectations about what family life ought to be, the largesse that they should receive from government, and their sense of moral worth. Coupled with this are the foundational demographic shifts in urbanization and education patterns that have seen a predominantly rural country with limited literacy transform into a heavily urbanized and increasingly well-educated society. Rather than recognizing these changes as structural shifts beyond the scope of any individual or family unit, however, they were interpreted by my interlocutors in a typically individualistic fashion. That is, as a product of the "hard work" of families and individuals

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who raised themselves out of poverty and illiteracy and within a generation reinvented themselves as a cohort of doctors and lawyers.

These dovetail with increasingly competitive and status-driven class formulations. The jostling class arrangement in post-revolutionary Iran has ensured that status is not fixed, and must be constantly reiterated. This is all the more the case for the increasingly precarious middle class, who find themselves caught between a competitive social logic that demands displays of high-quality consumer goods, and their declining purchasing power and material position. Those that have managed to preserve or assert their position in the face of these challenges thus understand themselves as a deserving bulwark. Finally, we have the discourse of national exceptionalism that situates Iran, and the middle class, as citizens of the country, as the bearers of a unique cultural tradition that is fundamentally unlike its neighbors who are actively denigrated as inferior to the Islamic Republic. Iran is understood as properly situated, or at least compared, to the wealthy European, and especially western European nations, to whom my middle class informants believe they are more culturally and socially similar. In conjunction with this is a sense of national pride and moral outrage, born of the trials and tribulations of the war with Iraq and the subjection to international sanctions, that reads Iran as likewise deserving of a higher level of respect from the international community. The corollary to this is that just as western states are conceived of as receiving the best that China has to offer, so too should Iran.

That Chinese goods should be interpreted as being insufficiently worthy of my Mashhadi middle class interlocutors, then, should not be altogether surprising. It is instead the outcome of the intersection and overlap of a host of pre- and post-revolutionary social changes that have convinced the middle classes that they are deserving of more than they receive.

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