

Book Review: Consumption in China: How China's New Consumer Ideology is Shaping the Nation by LiAnne Yu

blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsereviewofbooks/2014/10/14/book-review-consumption-in-china-how-chinas-new-consumer-ideology-by-lianne-yu/

2014-10-14

In this lively and accessible book, **LiAnne Yu** discusses how consumerism has replaced traditions and given people upward mobility in China. **Hang Kei Ho** recommends this book to students looking to get an overview of Chinese consumption and identity construction.

Consumption in China: How China's New Consumer Ideology is Shaping the Nation. LiAnne Yu. Polity. 2014.

Find this book: 

LiAnne Yu's *Consumption in China: How China's New Consumer Ideology is Shaping the Nation* attempts to offer an ethnographic understanding of why the growing Chinese middle class are obsessed with luxury brands and western consumption practices in post-communist China. Yu's research is based on empirical data collected through observations made and ethnographies conducted with several dozen middle and upper-class Chinese consumers, mostly in Beijing and Shanghai between 1990 and 2013. Yu – who received her PhD in Anthropology from UC San Diego and is an independent consumer consultant with expertise in emerging markets, having worked with clients such as Microsoft – also conducted additional conversations with consumer experts.

Yu's aim is to understand 'what is global and what is unique about China's consumer revolution' (p.27). To address this question, Yu frames her research through five empirical chapters – Spaces, Status, Lifestyles, Commoditisation and Awareness, which examine how citizens engaged in consumption during Mao's China (1949-76), and what they do now.

The author's starting point is that under Mao Zedong's regime, consumption was controlled by the state, even down to the choice of toilet paper, which only came 'in one variety – rough and vivid pink' (p.2). However, the change started with the emergence of western corporations in China in the 1990s. This only became more apparent when 'Communist leaders abandoned the image of a simple, peasant lifestyle for European cars, French wines, and American-style suburban homes' (p.5).

My reading, rather than Yu's schema of the text, can be divided into three key themes: how consumption is conducted in both physical and digital spaces; how consumers create an identity through consumption; and how the state and citizens deal with political, moral and environmental consumption issues.

Taking the first of these themes, spaces are important because modern China has given way to western forms of consumption, such as shopping malls, American fast-food chains and high-end fashion houses, which have become 'cathedrals of consumption' for citizens (see Ritzer's *Enchanting a Disenchanted World: Continuity and Change in the Cathedrals of Consumption*). Previously this was impossible because under Mao's regime, the modes of production, consumption and citizens' leisure time were under strict state control. With the rise of Chinese forms of social media such as Sina Weibo and Renren (the Chinese copies of Twitter and Facebook), consumers share their consumption experiences online and no longer differentiate between virtual and real spaces. They 'move seamlessly between the two throughout the day, initiating consumption in one realm and continuing it into the other.



The virtual and the real are experienced as a continuum of consumer experiences' (p.53) writes Yu.

In terms of identity, a second theme, this text is concerned with how status is acquired through consumerism, the creation of consumption-focused lifestyles, and the ways that the public and private lives of citizens are commodified. As a result, 'home-making, child rearing, gender expressions, celebrations, and urban-rural relations are becoming increasingly subject to the forces of commodification' (p.146). More importantly, western products are perceived as more exclusive, of better quality and reflecting the cultural knowledge of the users. As such, 'owning prestige brands when it comes to fashion, accessories, autos, and technology appears to be a national obsession' (p.64). The key argument is that consumerism has replaced traditions and given people upward mobility.

Considering a third theme, Yu points out the benefits of citizens expressing their freedom through consumption but also provides a counterargument on the negative effects consumerism brings to Chinese society. Yu argues that 'it has become increasingly problematic for the state to control free speech while allowing its citizens to consume freely' (p.168). From the consumers' perspective, they enter the political sphere through naming and shaming corrupt corporate practices or boycotting goods of certain origins, but the state may or may not support the views of consumers, depending on the context.

In the final chapter Yu concludes that while some notions of consumption taking place in China such as commodification and conspicuous consumption follow patterns that happened in the West, others do not, because of 'changes in technology and global balances of power that have taken place in the last few decades' (p.186). The author calls this 'consumption with Chinese characteristics'.



77th Street Plaza underground mall in Beijing. Credit: [Alexandra Moss](#) CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

The book's main contribution is the idea of combining academic research and her business experience to further our understanding of why consumption practices in China are unique. Yu has provided many empirical examples to illustrate such uniqueness. For instance, Yu explains that the consumers of luxury goods are not necessarily the super-rich, but rather, the young middle income earners. Hence, they buy fewer but more visible luxury items 'to demonstrate their participation in China's consumer culture' (p.64). Luxury brands such as Coach have responded to this observation by introducing more affordable wallets for customers who do not have the money to purchase a 'full blown Coach bag just yet' (p.69). Another strength is that readers without a background in Chinese Studies are offered a brief history of China in the last century and a narrative on how the country has reinvented itself through economic reforms (p.9-17).

The book has some limitation, the biggest being the lack of engagement with well-established scholarship on consumption. Judging from the title, one may think that the text would cover the notion of the state, market and citizens in relation to consumption. The framing of such a sociological and political question requires a wider

discussion of literature in the relevant fields. This is currently absent. Specifically, as suggested in the second part of the title (which is missing from the book cover), addressing how the concept of nation is expressed by Chinese citizens through consumption. To elaborate, Yu's research framework mirrors Bauman's *Consuming Life*, which deals with consumerism in relation to the role of the state, commodification of the self and citizens' engagement with the public and private sphere through the market. My concern is that Bauman (and other scholars) have already addressed the aforementioned debates while Yu has yet to come up with a convincing conclusion.

There are also concepts in consumption which the author has overlooked that would make significant intellectual contributions to the text. I will name two here. First, the localisation of global products can be conceptualised through the notion of indigenisation (see Appadurai's *Modernity at Large*, for example). Second, the relationship between producers and consumers (p.147), and what they do on the internet for that matter, can be framed through the notion of 'prosumption' (see Ritzer and Jurgenson's article "[Production, consumption, prosumption: the nature of capitalism in the age of the digital](#)").

A further major weakness is the lack of engagement with literature from scholars who have already worked on consumption in South East Asia. As it stands, the limited intellectual debate comes from the works of Bourdieu, Baudrillard, de Certeau, Marx and Veblen. This to me is using a western lens to look at Chinese culture. I would like to see the examination of Chinese forms of consumption through Chinese ideologies, such as the notion of 'face' (roughly translated to respectability), Confucian capitalism (see Yao's *Confucian Capitalism: Discourse, Practice and the Myth of Chinese Enterprise*), and so on.

A final limitation of the research is in the methodology. The work was carried out with a relatively small sample of middle-income consumers in Beijing and Shanghai but overlooked other key cities such as Shenzhen and the Pearl River Delta region. Given the enormous size and population of China, readers may wonder to what extent the findings reflect the country at large.

Overall, given its accessibility and lively style, those who are unfamiliar with Chinese consumerism can see this text as an introduction. Entrepreneurs may also use this as a reference to identify consumer trends which are yet to come in China. Nevertheless, it lacks deeper theoretical debates which academic readers may have hoped for.

Dr Hang Kei Ho is a Postdoctoral Researcher in the Department of Sociology at the University of York and Visiting Research Fellow in the Department of Sociology at Goldsmiths, University of London. His doctoral thesis, *Drinking Bordeaux in the 'new' Hong Kong: Exploring changing identities through alcohol consumption* explores the way that Hong Kong deals with the West and mainland China through consumption. His current ESRC funded research investigates the socio-economic implications of real estate investment in London by the Hong Kong super-rich. He also holds an MEng in Electronic Engineering, an MA in Digital Culture and Technology and an MSc in Geography. [Read more reviews by Hang.](#)

- Copyright 2013 LSE Review of Books