

Book Review

Consumption in China: How China's New Consumer Ideology Is Shaping the Nation. By LiAnne Yu. Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2014. xi, 207 pages.

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In less than a generation, China transformed from stark socialist scarcity to conspicuous consumption wonderland, awash in colossal shopping malls, luxury brands, and elite cosmopolitanism. As high rises replaced hutongs, China became stuffed with Western fast-food restaurants, five-star hotel chains, and retail behemoths such as Walmart, whose large, clean stores, standardized service, and dizzying array of products were viewed as the epitome of modernity. What do the Chinese make of these rapid changes? How do such transformations follow patterns seen in the West? To what degree is China's shift from Cultural Revolution to consumer revolution unique? LiAnne Yu, who bills herself as an "independent anthropologist and consumer insights strategist," tackles these and other questions in her book *Consumption in China*.

Yu, who spent a year in Beijing as a foreign-exchange student and later returned with a PhD in anthropology to consult Fortune 500 companies, draws from her dual background in academia and business. This hybridization proves to be both strength and drawback. Borrowing heavily from 19th-century scholars such as Karl Marx and Thorstein Veblen, Yu reports that the Chinese have been commodified through corporate influence and commercialization. These critiques, however, are tempered by Yu's reliance on consumer theorists who assert that shopping can be a powerful act of identity construction with ample doses of agency and resistance. It is difficult to imagine that the twin target audiences for this book—scholars and corporations looking for insights into Chinese

consumptive behavior—will come away completely satisfied. Because she caters to both cultural Marxists and corporate marketers, Yu proves to be an unreliable narrator. Ultimately, Yu's background in corporate consulting is foregrounded, and she peppers the book with tips and advice aplenty, ranging from how best to glocalize products and services for the Chinese consumer to optimal strategies for aggressive viral marketing. At times, one wishes that Yu were a bit more circumspect, less of a cheerleader for Chinese capitalism by any means necessary.

Yu employs a qualitative approach, delving into the lives of individuals well known to her. Yu's subjects are largely "Singletons," only children born under China's One-Child policy in the late 1970s and 1980s. Singletons make for a unique case study because they grew up during China's transformation from communism to consumerism. Now adults in their thirties and forties, Yu's subjects are middle and upper-middle class residents of first-tier cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, and they are hyperaware of their unique position and perspective. A shortcoming of the book is that other voices are lost. Nearly half of China's population remains in rural areas, living under conditions largely unchanged from fifty years ago. Poor, rural Chinese have no place in Yu's examination of the country's "most 'obvious' consumers—the ones that corporations covet" (9).

At the book's core are five standalone chapters that explore Chinese consumption from varying angles. This includes examinations of virtual and real-world shopping spaces, social class identity and status, lifestyles, the commodification of private life, and the degree to which Chinese consumers are aware of and reflective about the transformation from communism to cosmopolitanism. A limitation to this approach is that Yu's chapters do not build on one another or intersect in meaningful ways. One of Yu's strengths is that one can quickly gain information about the topics of most interest.

Yu asks intriguing questions: "Have corporations taken over the work of the CCP in organizing and manipulating behaviors" and attitudes? (124). The answers, however, are often less thought provoking. The author concedes that the government's power and influence has been usurped by

rampant consumerism, but she asserts that the state continues to shape the lives of the Chinese in subtle-but-powerful ways. Yu labels this the “consumer public sphere,” a space where “individuals negotiate meanings with the state as well as with producers seeking to define their identities not only as consumers, but as citizens” (25). Despite Yu’s protestations to the contrary, however, it would appear that the Chinese have become just like the rest of us: They take selfies in restaurants, talk too loudly on their cell phones in public, text incessantly, buy stuff online, and display status through expensive purchases.

Throughout the book, Yu takes pains to explore the implications of the internet vis-à-vis consumerism in contemporary China. Despite government intervention, Yu writes, the use of technology is as fundamental to shopping in China as anywhere else, perhaps more so. Yu offers convincing evidence that, although the government censors Western social media portals such as Facebook and Twitter, Chinese-based companies offer alternatives that are functionally superior and widely used. Thus, the Chinese enjoy a web experience that is as dynamic and varied as that found in the West. Yu falters in trying to take this a step further, insisting that young Chinese reside in what she dubs a “virtu-real” world where occupants use mobile devices and social media to pivot seamlessly between the physical and virtual realms. Yu marvels that these supposed pioneers “often inhabit both worlds at the same time, layering the experiences of one on top of the other” (60). As evidence of this supposed bleeding edge use of technology, Yu recounts an anecdote about a group of office workers who find a restaurant online, gather there to eat, and post pictures of their meals on social media sites. Get this, Yu has even heard some older folks bemoaning the “sight of a group of young adults in restaurants, each one absorbed in the world of their mobile phones rather than interacting with each other” (55). Of course, anyone who’s spent five minutes on a social media site, or even just eaten in a restaurant lately, knows that there’s nothing novel here.

What makes *Consumption in China* most enjoyable is that Yu continually offers up fascinating factual tidbits: In 1979 there were no skyscrapers in Shanghai; today, the city has twice as many as New York.

In the 1990s, as conspicuous consumption was taking hold, Chinese who could afford refrigerators displayed them prominently and proudly in their living rooms, where they were most likely to be seen and admired by visitors. Starbucks had the audacity to open an outlet in the 600-year-old Forbidden City, which was later closed due to public outcry. These anecdotal morsels, which Yu sprinkles liberally throughout the text, prove to be more interesting than her subjects, whose vapid consumerism is less remarkable than Yu seems to believe.

“[We] need to think beyond familiar frameworks,” Yu writes at one point, discussing class-based identity (90). She’s correct. China’s transformation from socialism to surrealism is a unique case that is ripe for groundbreaking theoretical analysis that leads to new understandings. Unfortunately, despite its many charms and potential use value to corporate marketers, *Consumption in China* does not travel far beyond the familiar.