

Consumerism

Xiāofèizhǔyì 消费主义

Consumerism in China is not a new development; for hundreds of years Chinese have used material goods to convey status and identity. Mass consumerism, however, is a relatively new phenomenon that has both advantages and disadvantages to the social and economic fabric of China.

The development of modern mass consumerism in China and subsequent transformation of most aspects of life has been both beneficial and detrimental to the Chinese. Hundreds of millions of people have been lifted from poverty and have the opportunity to enjoy products and services previously unavailable or unaffordable. In the past few decades, China has become the world's largest consumer of a number of products, including everything from meat to mobile phones. The lives of tens and even hundreds of millions of consumers in urban China increasingly resemble their American, Japanese, and European counterparts. At the same time, China's rapid increase in per capita consumption threatens its and the world's environment.

Chinese elites have used luxury goods as a way to create identity and communicate status for hundreds of years. As late as 1800, the wealthiest part of China in the lower Yangzi Valley surrounding Shanghai may have been as wealthy as the richest part of Western Europe. And local elite circles created social capital by exchanging rare gifts, assembling expensive dowries, collecting art objects, and hosting lavish weddings and funerals.

Textiles, teas, opium, books, and other commodities were consumed well beyond the regions where they were produced. Consumption habits gradually spread down the social hierarchy and luxuries such as sugar and tea became more widely consumed.

But “modern consumerism,” which refers to the consumption of branded, mass-produced goods and services, and the orientation of social life and rhetoric around consumption, is a more recent phenomenon. The bleak material conditions in China from World War II through the civil war (1945–1949), and throughout the Maoist era (1949–1976) misleadingly suggest that modern Chinese consumerism arrived only after the death of Mao and Maoism. But China has had elements of modern consumerism since the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Urban China, particularly the key treaty ports of Guangzhou, Tianjin, and particularly Shanghai, encouraged consumerism through modern retailing, exhibition halls, and advertising. Varying modes of transportation, such as rickshaws, automobiles, and bicycles, established more integrated markets, and new public environments within modern schools and workplaces were used to showcase new products. In addition, urban China supplied the energy sources necessary for the electricity required by new consumer products and lifestyles. During this time, Chinese people, especially but not exclusively urban elites, introduced new objects into their homes and leisure activities. And a growing number of Chinese altered their appearance from head (Western-style hats) to toe (leather shoes and cotton socks).

Understanding the impact of these commodities is challenging, particularly with regard to how people used

and thought about all the products and services they consumed. Unlike Americans and western Europeans, Chinese did not leave detailed probate records revealing exactly what households owned, but the memoirs of foreign travelers readily show that Chinese adapted imports for local and even individual purposes. For instance, fashionable urban women in the early twentieth-century confidently mixed and matched traditional and imported clothing articles to invent their own original styles. This adaptation also was common for Chinese citizens least likely to have access to information about or contact with foreigners and how they used their material artifacts. Often the Chinese weren't encumbered by the knowledge of a product's intended use. Urban slum dwellers, for example, built shacks out of discarded iron Standard Oil cans.

Despite these consumptive behaviors, Chinese consumers were not always free to consume whatever they could afford, nor could they determine the social significance of the items they bought. In China, modern consumerism has always been connected with imperialism. During the nineteenth century, Europeans, Americans, and eventually the Japanese demanded access to Chinese markets. Through the First Opium War (1839–1842) the British and subsequently many others achieved access to

Chinese markets at a time when the relative superiority of Chinese material culture had declined markedly. That is, the products of the industrializing imperialist powers were appealing, and the Chinese learned to desire imports. In the nineteenth century, the most prominent of these imports were opium and Western military hardware, but by 1900 the desire for imports extended to a vast array of consumer goods, including silk, considered to be the symbolic heart of China. Japanese silk displaced Chinese silk in foreign markets and increasingly penetrated the domestic market. From concepts of male and female beauty, to forms of sport and entertainment, to styles of architecture and personal appearance, Chinese associated the foreign and Western with a better and more fashionable lifestyle.

During the first half of the twentieth century, the rapid increase in imports and the desires they stimulated threatened powerful domestic interest groups. Chinese politicians worried about trade deficits and the new consumer lifestyles. Educated elites, who had begun to read works on Western political economy, feared the loss of sovereignty implicit in the growing foreign dominance of the economy, and manufacturers struggled to produce products to compete against new imports. These concerns ultimately produced a multifaceted “Buy Chinese” campaign



Chinese shoppers peruse the wares at a mall. Thanks to China's recent economic boom hundreds of millions of people have been lifted from poverty and can now enjoy products and services previously unavailable or unaffordable. PHOTO BY TOM CHRISTENSEN.

Shoppers in the Playboy section of a Beijing department store. The familiar long-eared bunny is part of the logo, but there are no magazines for sale. In China, as in many locations worldwide, the department store sells Playboy-branded apparel and accessories. PHOTO BY TOM CHRISTENSEN.



conducted in cities across the country. Advocates developed countless ways to exhort fellow Chinese to consume China-made goods, including skillfully co-opting foreign commodity spectacles like product exhibitions. Also, as the outbreak of frequent anti-imperialist boycotts demonstrates, they forced consumers to buy Chinese. Nevertheless, in the absence of a powerful state to enforce the nationalistic consumption of Chinese products through tariffs, such efforts had limited success.

The establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 soon ended the ease with which consumers embraced consumerism for four reasons: Mao Zedong's well-known anti-urban biases, the initial decision to emulate the Soviet Union's economic model with its emphasis on state-owned heavy industry and neglect of consumer goods, the elimination of private enterprise, and the appeal of autarkic (self-sufficient) economic growth after a century of imperialism. The Communists gradually forced foreign multinationals to leave China and eliminated most foreign brands from the marketplace by imposing higher tariffs and outright bans. After some initial hesitation, which allowed consumer lifestyles to persist into the mid-1950s, the state appropriated all private enterprises, eliminating the trend-setting consumer class of urban capitalists.

"Consumerism" is not usually associated with Mao's China because China under Mao radically reshaped consumerism; however Mao's influence never eliminated consumerism fully from Chinese life. China continued to mass-produce a limited number of branded goods, and consumer goods and services remained objects of everyday discussion and important building blocks for personal and collective identity. The Communists worked tirelessly to eliminate all traces of consumerism, particularly following the shift to ideological over material incentives during the Great Leap Forward (1958–1960) and the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), but even the most extreme attempts to eliminate consumerism may have had unintended consequence of heightening a form of consumer consciousness.

The spread of consumerism in East Asia after World War II culminated in China. In 1978, Deng Xiaoping began depoliticizing daily life and launched economic reforms that led to growth rates equal to Japan's earlier record levels. Now the Chinese state stakes its political legitimacy on economic growth and encourages citizens to consume, a shift in attitudes and policies toward consumerism embodied in the popular Communist Party slogan of the 1980s: "To get rich is glorious!"

The market reforms of the late 1970s and 1980s

introduced tremendous uncertainty for consumers. Fixed prices shifted to market prices, creating new consumer issues, including resentment of unfair pricing, the sales of imitations through deceptive packaging, food adulteration, false advertising claims, product liability, and warranty issues. Chinese consumerism was fraught with media scandals and popular panics and rumors surrounding products and services. For instance, in the summer of 1985, a scandal erupted over the sale of supposedly dirty imported used clothing that was sold as new. Furthermore, a Beijing textile and clothing association report concluded that the clothing was not just used but came from people with diseases. That winter at least twenty cities and counties participated in efforts to find and destroy the offending clothing.

This unstable environment led to a “consumer movement” that included academic, bureaucratic, and social dimensions. In 1983, the Chinese government sponsored the creation of the Chinese Consumers’ Association, the country’s central consumer protection association. By 2001, the association had 3,000-plus local branches across China and had received over 6 million consumer complaints. The 1980s also saw the beginnings of the academic study of consumerism and the publication of consumer magazines and newspapers to protect “consumer rights,”

as they became known. Finally, the Chinese Communist Party recast itself as a protector of consumers. The party-state established regulatory agencies such as the National Administration of Industry and Commerce, which regulates trademarks and advertisements, and the Commodity Inspection Bureau, which requires companies to add product warnings.

For over a decade but especially after the global financial crisis of 2008, Chinese and world political and business leaders have pinned their hopes for domestic and global economic growth on Chinese consumers. In other words, Chinese must save less and consume more. In 2008, rising political star Vice Premier Li Keqiang voiced the conventional wisdom among top policy makers, “Boosting domestic demand is essential for proping up growth,” (China’s vice premier urges demand boost: state media, 2008) especially in the face of global economic weakness. Chinese leaders have implemented policies designed to address the anxieties behind high savings, which include escalating medical, education, housing, and retirement costs. To counter rising costs of living, Chinese leaders have permitted the establishment of private lending companies, accelerated urbanization, and instituted extended holidays around the lunar New Year, National Day (1 October), and, until 2007, Labor



Shoppers in a superstore in China. China’s economy has become more consumer based as the number of people attaining middle-class status rapidly increases. PHOTO BY TOM CHRISTENSEN.

Day (1 May). They have also deregulated the financial sector to facilitate consumer borrowing through mortgages, credit cards, and car loans.

While some politicians and scholars anxiously wonder whether Chinese will consume enough, others speculate the opposite. The rise of Chinese consumerism with its reliance on a rapidly escalating use of non-renewable resources has created urgent questions about the sustainability of modern consumerism in China and elsewhere. The scale and scope of environmental problems directly related to the production of consumer goods for China and for the world cannot be overstated. Acid rain already falls on a third of the country, three to six hundred million Chinese lack access to clean drinking water and, with sixteen of the world's twenty most polluted cities, a third of all urban residents breathe polluted air, prematurely killing over 400,000 people a year from asthma, emphysema, and lung cancer. What will happen as Chinese consumers, further urged by their government and the world, to "catch up" with the global North in per capita consumption of energy and other goods and services? Likewise,

what's the responsibility and culpability of the rest of the world for creating this dire situation?

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Further Reading

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ivory in a dog's mouth?

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