

THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF

THE HISTORY
OF
CONSUMPTION

Edited by

FRANK TRENTMANN

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Looking back now at my notes on the initial conception of this volume, I am not sure whether to be touched more by its ambition or by the intellectual generosity and collaborative spirit of the many contributors who helped make it a reality. We all too rarely bring together scholars working on different eras, continents and topics. Of the thirty-six chapters initially planned, thirty-four saw the light of day. One chapter on contemporary spaces fell victim to the demands of higher education politics which became (almost) all-consuming in 2010. The chapter on elderly consumers yet awaits its historian. The aim of this volume was to be thematic and, we hope, refreshing. It is not meant to be a Cook's tour of the entire world. Inevitably, the regional and thematic focus reflects the state of scholarship. Most research on consumption is still conducted in North America, the United Kingdom, and Continental Europe, although this is changing fast. As this volume shows, this does not, however, mean it has to result in a provincial outlook. This book looks to Africa, the Atlantic world, and to Asia as well as to Britain, the Netherlands, and the United States of America, which used to be treated as the consumer society par excellence. As handbooks in history go, this one also suggests some bridges with neighbouring disciplines, with chapters on technologies and practices, status and identity, well-being and everyday life. Between 2002 and 2007 I was fortunate to direct the 'Cultures of Consumption research programme', co-funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and the Arts and Humanities Research Council. The programme planted the seeds for several of the ideas and intellectual friendships that came to fruition in these pages. In addition to my own college, I must also thank the European University Institute, Florence, for awarding me a Fernand Braudel Senior Fellowship which gave me time to get this project rolling. As always, the editors and production team at Oxford University Press have provided just the right touch of professional support.

Frank Trentmann

Birkbeck College, University of London
February 2012

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	xi
<i>Notes on Contributors</i>	xiii

1. Introduction	1
FRANK TRENTMANN	

PART I TRADITIONS

2. Citizen Consumers: The Athenian Democracy and the Origins of Western Consumption	23
JAMES DAVIDSON	
3. Things in Between: Splendour and Excess in Ming China	47
CRAIG CLUNAS	
4. Material Culture in Seventeenth-Century 'Britain': The Matter of Domestic Consumption	64
SARA PENNELL	
5. Africa and the Global Lives of Things	85
JEREMY PRESTHOLDT	

PART II DYNAMICS AND DIFFUSION

6. Transatlantic Consumption	111
MICHELLE CRAIG McDONALD	
7. The Global Exchange of Food and Drugs	127
FELIPE FERNÁNDEZ-ARRESTO AND BENJAMIN SACKS	
8. From India to the World: Cotton and Fashionability	145
PRASANNAN PARTHASARATHI AND GIORGIO RIELLO	

PART III RICH AND POOR

9. Luxury, the Luxury Trades, and the Roots of Industrial Growth:
A Global Perspective 173
MAXINE BERG
10. City and Country: Home, Possessions, and Diet, Western
Europe 1600–1800 192
DOMINIQUE MARGAIRAZ
11. Standard of Living, Consumption, and Political Economy
over the Past 500 Years 211
CAROLE SHAMMAS

PART IV PLACES OF CONSUMPTION

12. Sites of Consumption in Early Modern Europe 229
EVELYN WELCH
13. Public Spaces, Knowledge, and Sociability 251
BRIAN COWAN
14. Small Shops and Department Stores 267
HEINZ-GERHARD HAUPT

PART V TECHNOLOGIES AND PRACTICES

15. Comfort and Convenience: Temporality and Practice 289
ELIZABETH SHOVE
16. Consumption of Energy 307
DAVID E. NYE
17. Waste 326
JOSHUA GOLDSTEIN
18. Saving and Spending 348
LENDOL CALDER
19. Eating 376
ALAN WARDE

PART VI STATE AND CIVIL SOCIETY

20. Consumer Activism, Consumer Regimes, and the Consumer
Movement: Rethinking the History of Consumer Politics in
the United States 399
LAWRENCE B. GLICKMAN
21. Consumption and Nationalism: China 418
KARL GERTH
22. National Socialism and Consumption 433
S. JONATHAN WIESEN
23. Things under Socialism: The Soviet Experience 451
SHEILA FITZPATRICK
24. Unexpected Subversions: Modern Colonialism, Globalization,
and Commodity Culture 467
TIMOTHY BURKE
25. Consumption, Consumerism, and Japanese Modernity 485
ANDREW GORDON
26. Consumer movements 505
MATTHEW HILTON
27. The Politics of Everyday Life 521
FRANK TRENTMANN

PART VII IDENTITIES

28. Status, Lifestyle, and Taste 551
MIKE SAVAGE
29. Domesticity and Beyond: Gender, Family, and Consumption
in Modern Europe 568
ENRICA ASQUER
30. Children's Consumption in History 585
DANIEL THOMAS COOK
31. Youth and Consumption 601
PAOLO CAPUZZO

32. Fashion	618
CHRISTOPHER BREWARD	
33. Self and Body	633
ROBERTA SASSATELLI	
34. Consumption and Well-being	653
AVNER OFFER	
<i>Index</i>	673

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

.....

Figure 8.1.	Painting of a Rajaput nobleman wearing a red robe and turban. Opaque watercolour on paper, early nineteenth century. Victoria and Albert Museum, IS.115-1960.	149
Figure 8.2.	Japanese 'yogi', a thickly padded sarasa cotton textiles imported into Japan by the Dutch from the seventeenth century. Made in the nineteenth century. Victoria and Albert Museum, FE.1550-1983.	152
Figure 8.3.	Baju (Jacket) tailored in Sumatra with cloth from the Coromandel Coast of India. Late eighteenth century. Victoria and Albert Museum, IS. 101-1993.	156
Figure 8.4.	Fabric used to line a wide-brimmed straw hat worn by the women of Friesland in the Netherlands. The fabric is a calico from the Coromandel Coast of India, c. 1725-50. Victoria and Albert Museum, IS.23-1976.	158
Figure 8.5.	Palampore produced on the Coromandel Coast of India. Second half of the eighteenth century. The unusual design with two trees suggests that it might have been made for the French market. Victoria and Albert Museum, IM.85-1937.	160
Figure 8.6.	Annual Consumption of Fibre per Capita in Britain, 1798-1861 (in Kilograms).	165
Figure 12.1.	Canaletto, <i>Piazza San Giacomo in Rialto</i> , c.1740-60. © National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.	230
Figure 12.2.	Herb market in Amsterdam (oil on canvas), Gabriel Metsu (1629-67), Musée du Louvre, Paris. © Giraudon / The Bridgeman Art Library.	234
Figure 12.3.	Abraham Bosse, <i>La Galerie du Palais</i> , British Museum. © The Trustees of the British Museum.	236
Figure 12.4.	After Pieter van der Borch, 'A Pedlar Robbed by Apes', c.1660, published by Robert Pricke. © The Trustees of the British Museum.	239
Figure 12.5.	Ambrogio Brambilla, 'Ritrato de quelli che vano vendendo et lavorando per Roma con la nova agionta de tutti quelli che nelle altre mancavano sin al presente', Rome 1582,	

CHAPTER 21

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CONSUMPTION AND NATIONALISM: CHINA

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KARL GERTH

THE topic of *consumption and nationalism* combines two of the most important historical forces in modern history and, unsurprisingly, of recent historical studies. While *consumption* occurs in all times and places, *consumerism* is an historically more recent and precise phenomenon that refers to consumption of branded, mass-produced goods and services, the proliferation of media images about them, and the orientation of social life around them. That is, consumerism involves the creation or reproduction of social identity through the consumption of such things, rather than through family, generation, ethnicity, gender, place of work, or class, though, of course, these forms of identity are never mutually exclusive. Consumption and nationalism have intersected with efforts by nation-states, business leaders, patriotic students, and other figures to define buying and use as a political statement through the non-consumption of things from other countries and the consumption of one's own nation's goods and services.

The modern Chinese experience reveals the range of activities linking consumption and nationalism. Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere, the politicization of consumption at the end of the nineteenth and start of the twentieth century became a key way in which intellectuals and politicians *defined* and the general population *experienced* nationalism.¹ In China and throughout the globe, consumption has served as a battleground in the creation of the modern nation. This essay traces the changing manifestations of these historical connections between consumption and nationalism across modern Chinese history up to the present, focusing on the most conspicuous form of economic nationalism in the twentieth century, boycotts, as well as a newer form, brand nationalism.

¹ For an extensive discussion on the introduction, spread, and political uses of economic nationalism throughout urban society in China before the Second World War, see Karl Gerth, *China Made: Consumer Culture and the Creation of the Nation*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

China provides a useful basis of comparison for scholars of other nations. After all, China was not the only country to attempt to nationalize its nascent consumer culture by constraining individual consumer behaviour in the name of national interests.² The *swadeshi* (belonging to one's own country) and non-cooperation movements in India (1904–8, 1920–22) are the best-known and best-studied equivalents of China's efforts.³ Likewise, scholars of American history have been aware of links between consumerism and nationalism since late colonial times to the present.⁴ Indeed, Chinese seeking to link nationalism and consumption regularly sought to justify such links with reports on the activities of similar campaigns in other countries, often arguing that economic nationalism is the foundation of Western power and not simply a reaction against Western domination of trade.

Thus economic nationalism in China should be seen as one among many forms rather than as a unique phenomenon. What makes the Chinese case particularly interesting for comparative purposes is that the country was not formally colonized yet lacked many aspects of sovereignty, including the ability to set tariffs, the most straightforward way states push citizens to consume certain products, by making imports prohibitively or simply unattractively expensive. To use the common Chinese term for the country's situation, China was 'semi-colonial' (*ban zhimindide*). And, for this reason, the Chinese efforts to promote patriotic consumption were not, nor could have been, solely state directed.

LINKING NATIONALISM AND CONSUMERISM VIA BOYCOTTS

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Although Chinese intellectuals were developing ideological and state policy forms of economic nationalism in the late nineteenth century, in the early twentieth century boycotts became the most visible—and violent—aspect of the Chinese attempts to nationalize consumption. A key problem facing those who wished to link consumption and nationalism in any nation, then as now, was how to convince one's compatriots to 'buy domestic', or, more fundamentally, how to persuade people to think of products in terms

² On the intersection of nationalism and consumerism in Latin America, see Benjamin S. Orlove (ed.), *The Allure of the Foreign: Imported Goods in Postcolonial Latin America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).

³ For a good overview of the better studied Indian case, see C. A. Bayly, 'The origins of Swadeshi (Home Industry): cloth and Indian society, 1700–1930', in Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 285–321; Sumit Sarkar *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903–1908* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973).

⁴ For a survey of efforts to link nationalism and consumption in America from the Boston Tea Party to the present, see Dana Frank, *Buy American: The Untold Story of Economic Nationalism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999).

of their nationality—to divide the world of goods into ‘foreign’ and ‘domestic’ products—and then enlist consumers to buy goods based on nationality rather than other criteria such as price or quality.

During and since the twentieth century, boycotts have played a pivotal role in instilling, sometimes even forcibly, the notion that every product has a nationality and that product nationality should determine consumers’ purchasing decisions. In the first third of the twentieth century, boycotts precipitated or accompanied major turning-points in China’s relations with the imperialist powers, affecting not only consumers but also merchants and manufacturers as the former removed or disguised imported products and the latter purged foreign materials or design elements from their goods to make them appear as Chinese as possible. Significant consumer boycotts of foreign goods took place every few years between 1905 and 1931 and then nearly continuously into the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937–45.⁵ The policies behind the boycotts may have even provoked the war with Japan, which Japan fought to ensure access to Chinese markets.⁶

In several ways, the nationalistic boycotts of foreign consumer products that began before the Sino-Japanese War followed a predictable pattern. They invariably began after a specific ‘national humiliation’ (or *guochi*, as the Chinese label such incidents then and now) prompted a popular protest that included a boycott. They generally ended when government suppression from above, inertia from below, and the profit motive of merchants who priced imports irresistibly inexpensively undermined the commitment of participants. Yet these individual boycotts should not be seen—as they usually are in textbooks and monographs alike—as suddenly emerging from nowhere as an emotional response to an act of foreign aggression, but rather viewed as simply the most conspicuous aspect of a broader, continuous effort to combine nascent nationalism and consumer culture by teaching the Chinese to differentiate ‘Chinese products’ from ‘foreign products.’ Although boycotts always included opportunists such as hooligans and petty government officials who used the events to shake down merchants, their core supporters remained active between boycotts, cultivating the basis of economic nationalism more generally. Even when boycotts inevitably failed to ban the targeted imports, they played a pivotal role in developing Chinese nationalism and anti-imperialism.

Take, for example, the anti-American boycott of 1905. Like subsequent boycotts, this one had an identifiable spark: the increasingly restrictive US immigration measures

⁵ The most comprehensive survey of anti-imperialist boycotts remains Charles F. Remer, *A Study of Chinese Boycotts, with Special Reference to Their Economic Effectiveness* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1933). Remer’s study differs from my own in that he views boycotts as recurring but only loosely connected events rather than part of a broader web of economic nationalist activity and institution-building. The best study of the economic impact of various boycotts remains Kikuchi Takaharu, *Chūgoku minzoku undō no kihon kōzō: Taigai boikotto no kenkyū* (The Historical Background of the Chinese National Movement: a Study of Anti-foreign Boycotts) (Tokyo: Daian, 1974), who does a better job intensifying the key merchant organizations behind boycotts.

⁶ This link between boycotts and the war is made in Donald A. Jordan, *Chinese Boycotts Versus Japanese Bombs: The Failure of China’s ‘Revolutionary Diplomacy’, 1931–32* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991).

toward the Chinese. To express their outrage and pressure the United States to change its policies, Chinese merchants in cities throughout China began to boycott American products. This boycott was critical to the development of a sustained economic nationalist movement for four reasons: it initiated a long series of anti-imperialist boycotts, was national and even international in scope, cut across class lines, and created new ways and co-opted others to foster popular participation. These methods included modifying popular songs, destroying stocks of American products, soliciting pledges, tearing down advertisement posters for American goods, spreading rumours (e.g., that American cigarettes contained poison), and using advertisements to identify products as Chinese and encourage their consumption. Protestors used different media to reach as many people as possible: newspapers for the cultural elite; songs, lectures, slogans, drama performances, and cartoons of mistreated Chinese for a wider audience; and handbills, leaflets, and placards written in the colloquial language for intermediate groups. In short, the boycott, which gradually dissolved by 1906, began to force a link between consumption and nationalism by promoting a sense of empowerment through consumption choices.⁷

The protests surrounding the Versailles Peace Conference (1919), which grew into the larger May Fourth Movement, provide another example of how boycotts furthered the development of Chinese nationalism. Again, a specific ‘national humiliation’ was at the centre of these protests, in this case a shift in foreign control of Shandong province. Since the late nineteenth century, the province had been part of Germany’s ‘sphere of interest’ in China. During the First World War, however, Japan took it over and required China to recognize its interests there as part of the Twenty-One Demands the Japanese had presented to Chinese president Yuan Shikai in 1915. China, however, had expected to recover control of the Shandong concessions as a reward for entering the war against Germany, an expectation heightened by Woodrow Wilson’s rhetoric of self-determination. But Japan had carefully laid the groundwork for assuming control with secret agreements, and the publicizing of these agreements during the Versailles Peace Conference sparked Chinese demonstrations. On 4 May, several thousand students gathered in Tiananmen Square at the entrance to the Forbidden City to advocate the return of Qingdao and denounce the Versailles settlement. In the following weeks and months, the inhabitants of some two hundred Chinese cities in more than twenty provinces participated in strikes and boycotts that aimed to translate humiliation into retaliation by boycotting Japanese products, ships, and currency. For more than a year, new humiliations continually stoked anti-imperialist sentiments and kept the boycotts alive.

Chinese politicians also tacitly or openly encouraged boycotts to politicize consumption. By 1925, the Nationalist Party (*Guomindang*) had begun to strengthen its relationships with organizations advocating economic nationalism, and the boycotts it

⁷ On the many forms of protest adopted and created by participants in this first nationwide boycott, see Wang Guanhua, *In Search of Justice: The 1905–1906 Chinese Anti-American Boycott*, East Asian Monograph series (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001). For a thorough account of how Chinese and foreign businesses positioned themselves during boycotts, see Sherman Cochran, *Big Business in China: Sino-Foreign Rivalry in the Cigarette Industry, 1890–1930* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980).

supported in 1928 and 1931 were the most effective to date.⁸ Although the Nationalists were able greatly to extend the scope of these boycotts, they never completely controlled them.⁹ In fact, it can be said that proponents of economic nationalism used the Nationalist government as much as the other way around, as when they used an official government campaign against cigarette-smoking in the mid-1930s as a pretext for confiscating foreign cigarettes. Ultimately, heavy pressure from Japan and the policy of 'first internal pacification, then external resistance' convinced Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek (Jiang Jieshi, 1887–1975) to withdraw his party's support for boycotts. Nevertheless, even after his government tried to suppress the May 1932 boycott by, among other things, banning the popular term 'enemy products' (*dihuo*), many Chinese continued to pressure merchants by picketing stores, confiscating goods, sending intimidating anonymous letters and postcards, disrupting distribution channels, pasting posters on store fronts, and forcing shopkeepers to place advertisements vowing not to sell imports in local newspapers.

NATIONALISM AND COMMODITY SPECTACLES

A more subtle mode of linking consumerism to nationalism in the early twentieth century was an interlocking set of nationalistic commodity spectacles that included modern imaged-based advertising, museums, department stores, and exhibitions that all articulated and propagated this link through a nationalistic visuality.¹⁰ Once again, China provides an interesting contrast with Western cases. While the idea of such commodity spectacles may have been borrowed from Western countries and Japan, in China they were taken a step further and transformed to promote nationalistic consumption through museums devoted to displaying national products, markets and stores that sold only national products, and an advertising culture that constructed and emphasized product nationality. Collectively, these efforts projected onto commodities such nationalistic aspirations as unity against foreign imperialism and domestic division, economic strength and self-sufficiency, and, above all, the possibility of following a modern lifestyle without surrendering to imperialist economic penetration.

Chinese advocates of nationalistic consumption appropriated commodity spectacles from Europe and America, often by way of Japan. As with many other modern institutions, Japan helped introduce industrial exhibitions to China. The Japanese government

⁸ On these links between the Nationalists and business organizations, see Joseph Fewsmith, *Party, State, and Local Elites in Republican China: Merchant Organizations and Politics in Shanghai, 1890–1930* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985), which also contains a very helpful account of early economic nationalist ideology in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

⁹ Gerth, *China Made*, especially ch. 4. A central argument of this book is that boycotts should not be viewed as isolated incidents that arise out of nowhere and recede to nowhere after they sputter out. By the same token, this does not mean that that are creations of the Nationalist government, as contemporary foreign observers loudly argued.

¹⁰ See Gerth, *China Made*, especially chs. 5 and 6.

began organizing industrial exhibitions and smaller bazaars (*kankōba*) within Japan around the time of the 1868 Meiji restoration.¹¹ Early Chinese reformers such as Kang Youwei, a leader of the Hundred Days Reforms of 1898, which tried to revive China's struggling Qing dynasty, suggested that China follow Japan's lead by holding trade fairs.¹² Indeed, from government officials to merchants to students, Chinese who promoted the idea of economic nationalism consistently referred to the need to emulate the Japanese use of commodity spectacles to promote nationalistic consumption. They saw such displays not only as an element in Japan's rise to industrial power but also as a tool in its imperialistic designs on China by winning over consumer loyalties. Now China sought to appropriate these same institutions.

At the same time as major cities throughout the world were holding cosmopolitan events intended to showcase products from as many countries as possible, China began hosting dozens—even hundreds—of exhibitions limited strictly to 'national products' (*guohuo*), as such products were now called.

The study of economic nationalism via consumers and consumption is a potentially rich field of historical and contemporary investigation. Despite the emergence of consumer nationalist movements throughout the globe, historians have neither devoted much attention to them nor suggested that they are key aspects of nation-making. When mentioned at all, the nationalization of consumer culture is treated as a natural by-product of the creation of nation-states. In fact, the causes and consequences of nationalizing commodities played a crucial role in creating nations. Perhaps modern nation-states did not precede the notion of each nation having its own 'national products'. Rather, the two constructs may have evolved together dialectically. Nation-making included learning, or being coerced, to shape preferences around something called the nation and away from items deemed 'foreign'—a problematic process reinforced by institutional elaborations, and driven by consumer nationalists.

AFTER 1949: NATIONALIZING CONSUMPTION VIA THE STATE

By far the least studied period of economic nationalism in twentieth-century China is the period from the formation of the People's Republic of China in 1949 until the death of Mao Zedong in 1976. This period sees fundamental changes in the manifestations of economic nationalism in China. In short, the new state soon ends the ease with which consumers could choose foreign products, making earlier social movements to promote patriotic consumption of Chinese 'national products' unnecessary and irrelevant.

¹¹ Yoshimi Shun'ya, *Hakurankai no seijigaku: manazashi no kindai* (The Politics of Exhibitions: a Look at Modernity) (Tokyo: Chūkō shinsho, 1992).

¹² Hsiao Liang-lin, *A Modern China and a New World: Kang Yu-wei, Reformer and Utopian, 1858–1927* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1975).

Unsurprisingly, popular expressions of economic nationalism focused on consumption fade while Mao Zedong's regime attempts to turn cities known for their consumption into centres of production instead, emulating the Soviet Union's economic model that emphasized state-owned heavy industry over consumer goods. China also gradually forces foreign multinationals to leave China, thereby eliminating most foreign products from store shelves. After some initial hesitation that allowed bourgeois consumer lifestyles to persist into the mid-1950s, the state appropriated all private enterprises, and consumer culture was virtually outlawed.

Thirty years later, after the death of Chairman Mao in 1976, China once again dramatically changed political course, which allowed for the re-emergence of older forms of economic nationalism.¹³ Since the start of China's market reforms under Deng Xiaoping in 1978, imports from capitalist countries have once again arrived in ever greater numbers. As China has reintegrated itself into global capitalist markets, boycotts have re-emerged as an economic and political weapon in the face of increased competition with established Chinese economic interests and a growing consumer movement, which is ever ready to call a boycott against companies and countries deemed to have treated Chinese consumers unfairly.

With the start of Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms and the policy known as 'opening to the outside world', or simply the Open Door Policy, China slowly began to permit the importation of consumer goods, reasoning that allowing imports was a small price to pay for access to foreign consumer markets for their own products. But over the past three decades, as the range and volume of imports has grown, the tension between Chinese 'national products' and 'foreign products' has periodically re-emerged in Chinese attitudes. Beginning with the lead-up to China's ascension to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, nationalistic consumer activism has grown, for several reasons. First, WTO commitments that allowed multinationals easier access to the Chinese market rendered countless domestic enterprises uncompetitive and created millions of unemployed workers. Second, a new generation of patriotic students has continued to invoke the language of economic nationalism and call for boycotts, as in the widespread boycotts of the French retailing giant Carrefour in China in the spring of 2008 in retaliation for the disruption of the Olympic torch relay in Paris. Finally, domestic consumers periodically call for boycotts of specific foreign products when they feel they have collectively been treated poorly by multinational companies. Such actions demonstrate doubts among the Chinese about the wisdom of leaving national well-being to the 'free market'.

It is clear, then, that the strong connection between consumption and nationalism did not end with China's entry into the WTO in 2001. Especially since the global financial crisis began unfolding in 2008, political and business leaders around the world have increasingly called upon Chinese consumers to rescue the global economy by saving less

¹³ For a discussion of these new and re-emergent forms of economic nationalism since 1989, see Joseph Fewsmith, *China since Tiananmen: The Politics of Transition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

and consuming more. China's leaders have had their own reasons for wanting to promote domestic consumption and to shift China from a producing to a consuming society. In 2008, Li Keqiang, a rising political star, voiced the conventional wisdom among top Chinese policymakers that 'boosting domestic demand is essential for propping up growth', especially in the face of global economic weakness.¹⁴ Thus Chinese leaders have implemented policies designed to dismantle barriers to increased consumption, particularly of domestic goods and services, including macroeconomic policies such as making it easier for banks to lend money by easing credit and reserve restrictions and discouraging savings by lowering interest rates. With a vast potential consumer market outside China's major cities, officials have also attempted to stimulate rural consumption by improving the power grid and subsidizing the costs of mobile phones, washing-machines, and flat-screen televisions.¹⁵ To encourage indirectly consumers to tap into their 'rainy day savings', they have also begun to re-strengthen social welfare provisions by introducing health insurance and ensuring minimum income (*di bao*). They have also increased buying power by giving civil servants pay rises, abolishing agricultural taxes, and allowing the Chinese currency to appreciate within limits.¹⁶

These policies have been implemented with a growing sense of alarm. Wanting to avoid the stagnation experienced by other Asian export-led economies such as Japan, Korea, and Taiwan, Chinese leaders have identified domestic demand as the key to long-term economic security. They have long feared that the country has become too dependent on overspent US consumers and that a political backlash in America over surging imports and the growing trade deficit could lead the United States to restrict China's access to its markets. To counter this, China's policymakers hope to increase the country's annual average consumption rate from 35 per cent of GDP—already down from the mid-1980s, when it stood at 50 per cent, and the lowest for any major economy—to something closer to the US and world average of 70–80 per cent.

The Chinese government has also enacted specific policies to promote leisure spending as it anxiously pushes its economy away from an over-reliance on polluting and energy-intensive heavy industry and towards service industries. China has implemented weekend or 'double leisure days' (*shangxiu ri*) and the five-day, forty-hour work week, and promoted the relatively new notion of vacationing as patriotic. The government's intention, as announced by former Vice Premier Wu Yi at the 2006 Hangzhou World Leisure Expo, is to see that leisure activities do not become 'the privilege of a minority of people' but, rather, popular and widespread.¹⁷ The most high profile of these efforts has been the creation of Japanese-style Golden Weeks, three seven-day annual national holidays around Chinese Lunar New Year, Labor Day, and National Day Golden Week

¹⁴ 'China's vice premier urges demand boost: state media', *Agence France-Presse*, 20 August 2008.

¹⁵ Andrew Jacobs, 'China's economy, in need of jump start, waits for citizens' fists to loosen', *New York Times*, 2 December 2008; Elaine Kurtenbach, 'China boosts subsidies for car, appliance buyers', *Associated Press*, 19 May 2009.

¹⁶ Kathy Fong, 'China wants to boost consumer spending', *China Daily*, 9 January 2006.

¹⁷ 'Wu Yi: Jiji fazhan xiuxian fuwu, buduan tigao shenghuo zhilian' ('Wu Yi: The positive development of leisure and service, steadily improve the quality of life'), *Xinhua*, 23 April 2006.

(commemorating the establishment of the People's Republic of China on 1 October 1949). These weeks have provided a huge boost to domestic tourism, so much so that the government recently discontinued them in an attempt to spread Chinese travel more evenly throughout the year. During the first National Day Golden Week in 1999, some 28 million Chinese took to the road; eight years later, the number had climbed to over 120 million. The increased promotion of leisure activities and travel have led to the overnight creation of a massive tourist industry in China, now a critical and deeply entrenched part of the economy. Travel agencies, once few and state-run, have become ubiquitous. Likewise, Hainan Island, once a sparsely populated and underdeveloped hinterland off the coast of Vietnam, is becoming for the Chinese what Hawaii is to Americans.

The policy shift of moving from a labour- and energy-intensive economy to one focused on services and consumerism has led to new forms of economic nationalism. In China, branding—always a central feature of modern consumer cultures—has now become much more overtly an issue of economic nationalism than in the United States and elsewhere.¹⁸ In China, consumerism is not simply a product of the free market, something that developed naturally once the Chinese state got out of the way, but rather a consequence of ongoing policy decisions by China's leaders. Chinese leaders see stimulating domestic consumer demand as the key to the country's long-term economic (and therefore political) well-being. In addition to its decision to join the WTO and allow multinational companies much greater access to Chinese consumers, China's government has committed its influence and resources to building internationally competitive China-based brands. Building or buying such brands is considered a matter of national economic security and national pride. The success of Chinese brands depends, first of all, on convincing Chinese consumers to buy them, as opposed to ensuring consumer loyalty to domestic manufacturers as had been the case since 1949—by protecting China's markets, banning imports, limiting access to the foreign currency needed to buy imports, and levying tariffs so high that foreign goods became prohibitively expensive. In effect, then, the logic of China's economic development strategy is leading it to urge both state and private companies to spend billions building brands.

Having caught up with its foreign competitors as a global manufacturing superpower, the Chinese recognize that their country now needs to move up the value chain and also become a brand superpower. Chinese government and business leaders view domestic ownership of global brands and intellectual property as symbolic of national wealth and power, the economic equivalent of hosting the Olympics, but much more permanent. China wants its own domestic companies to join the list of prominent global brands associated with powerful countries such as the United States (Microsoft, Boeing, Starbucks, Google), Germany (BMW), Japan (Honda, Nintendo, Sony), and Korea (LG, Samsung). The government also wants to develop competitive brands across the

¹⁸ I explore these newer forms and manifestations of economic nationalism in *As China Goes, So Goes the World: How Chinese Consumers are Transforming Everything* (New York, NY: Hill & Wang, 2010), especially Chapter 5.

spectrum of consumer products and services, including high-tech consumer electronics, and to revive 'established brands' in traditional areas such as medicine. This push to create Chinese-owned brands also applies to the service sector, where the Ministry of Commerce has set ambitious targets for developing restaurant and hotel brands and prominent brands in the beauty, laundry, and home service industries.¹⁹ To help accomplish these goals, state policies have promoted the creation of large-scale, horizontally integrated, multinational corporations to compete against foreign multinationals. In the 1990s, the state selected a 'national team' of 120 industrial groups to receive state assistance and promoted 925 top domestic brands.²⁰

That this government-directed movement has had some success in weaning Chinese consumers from a preference for international brands can be seen in the growing popular indignation at what is seen as the inferior treatment of Chinese consumers by foreign companies. As domestic product quality has improved and demand for higher-quality products and luxury goods has grown, so have expectations of brand performance. Consumers, no longer content with First World market leftovers, have felt increasingly aggrieved, arguing that multinationals do not respect Chinese consumers, take market access for granted, cut corners on safety and quality, ignore Chinese laws, and dump their low-end products in the country. The Chinese media, sensitive to such slights and feelings, inevitably highlights the foreignness of a company and its commodities whenever any consumer scandal related to imported goods breaks out. In 2003, for instance, media stories about a Shanghai-based company that claimed to have been overcharged by Dell for computers, led to a public campaign against Dell and other foreign companies, forcing Dell to compensate customers. In 2005, quality problems and recalls undermined the reputation of several major international brands, such as KFC, Heinz, Nikon, Sony, and Nestlé. In contrast, powerful domestic brands are sometimes protected from similar consumer scandals. For instance, in 1997, the head of the Beijing *Youth Daily* was fired after publishing a report claiming that yoghurt drinks manufactured by the state-owned Hangzhou Wahaha Group had fatally poisoned several children.²¹

As China becomes increasingly inundated with new waves of products and brands, Chinese consumers demand that the government protect Chinese brands against international rivals, even as those same consumers simultaneously often prefer and buy foreign products. Chinese companies sometimes take advantage of these sentiments to boost business, building bigger businesses and creating nationalistic-minded consumers at the same time. Take online gaming, where imports account for 90 per cent of China's \$500 million market. This led a Chinese software company to collaborate with the China Youth Union, the Communist Party's youth division, to develop an online game called

¹⁹ 'Zhonghua laozihao' Beijing Zuiduo, Shangwubu muqian gongbu shou pi mingdan' ('China's established brands: Beijing has the most'), *Beijing yule xinbao*, 8 October 2006.

²⁰ An Li, '925 ge chanpin de juhui' ('A gathering for 925 products'), *Zhongguo zhiliang yu pinpai*, 1 (2006). Cambridge University Professor of Management Peter Nolan has written extensively on the subject of China's 'national team'; see, for instance, his *China and the Global Economy* (New York, 2001).

²¹ 'Consumer rights—buyers bite back', *China Economic Review*, 23 January 1999.

Anti-Japan War, set in the 1937–1945 war between the two nations. Players begin as farmers or workers who aspire to become soldiers in the Chinese Communist Party's Eighth Route Army by rescuing anti-Japanese guerrillas and elderly citizens endangered by Japanese soldiers. The Beijing-based company Huagizixun similarly marketed a line of domestically developed and manufactured digital cameras by naming them after significant events in the war against Japan. The Patriot V (Aiguo V) series included models such as the V815, named after the date of the end of the Second World War (15 August).

In 2002, the Chinese state further strengthened its control over large companies by creating the very powerful State Assets Supervision and Administration Council (SASAC), which owns and runs over 150 enormous corporations, including eight of the fourteen mainland Chinese enterprises listed on the Fortune 500. Since the early 1990s, the Chinese government has used SASAC to entice Chinese companies to 'go global' with favourable policies, including the abolition of foreign currency restrictions for overseas investment.²² Through these new, internationally prominent brands, China intends to remake the perception of Chinese brands, and hence of China itself, around the globe. The effects of the Chinese government's pressure on the nation's biggest companies to sell more branded products abroad is most visible in developing markets, where the Chinese already sell branded appliances, consumer electronics, and even automobiles, but these initiatives are simply a dry run for competition in developed markets such as the United States. China's biggest appliance maker, Haier, already sells refrigerators under its own name in the United States and is aggressively trying to acquire established white goods brands, including a failed attempt to buy Maytag in 2005 and a subsequent effort to buy GE's white goods division.

In other words, although international pressure and its entry into the WTO forced China's leaders to remove formal barriers to foreign products, that has not stopped them from playing both a direct and indirect role in promoting a new form of economic nationalism centred on brands. For instance, in 2003 the former chief negotiator in China's efforts to join the WTO, Long Yongtu, claimed that encouraging Chinese consumers to purchase Chinese products 'will violate neither the WTO rules nor the market economic rules.'²³ Likewise, in the summer of 2008, the national government even incorporated the establishment, protection, and management of national brands into its National Strategy.²⁴ Government-sponsored promotion of Chinese brand consciousness has also included setting up new mechanisms to help domestic consumers identify Chinese products among the torrent of brands now available. In anticipation of stiff foreign competition after entry to the WTO, the State General Administration for Quality

²² P. Bellabona and F. Spigarelli, 'Moving from open door to go global: China goes on the world stage', *International Journal of Chinese Culture and Management*, 1/1 (2007), 93–108; SASAC Director Li Rongrong: Only the best state-owned enterprises should make acquisitions in Europe and the United States, *Zhongguo zhengquan bao*, 27 September 2008.

²³ 'Official: Consumption of Chinese Products should be Encouraged,' *China Daily*, 19 September 2003.

²⁴ 'Guojia zhishi chanquan zhanlue gangyao' ('The guiding principles of national intellectual property strategy'), <<http://baike.baidu.com/view/1736822.htm>>, accessed 5 June 2009.

Supervision and Inspection and Quarantine, China's watchdog for product quality, set up a 'China brand name strategy promotion commission' and awarded 57 brands from 45 enterprises the title of 'China's Top Brand'. The goal was to alert Chinese consumers to high-quality domestic brands.²⁵ In a move reminiscent of China's anti-imperialist nationalist economic campaigns of the early twentieth century, the government now organizes exhibitions for 'established brands' (*laozihao*) to increase national brand awareness among consumers.

Another advantage Chinese companies have over their international competitors is that the huge and highly competitive Chinese market forces multinationals to adapt international brands to local tastes, which becomes ever more essential as Chinese consumers, now confronting choice rather than scarcity, become pickier about what they buy. International companies have learned that they cannot target 'the Chinese' as a homogenous market of largely identical consumers. The resulting move toward market segmentation—the recognition that subgroups within a market have common characteristics within them that set them apart from each other—is forcing international companies to expand their product offerings to accommodate regional, generational, class, and other preferences. To meet regional taste preferences, for instance, KFC sells 'Old Peking Style Chicken Rolls' with sweet bean sauce and mushroom chicken porridge.²⁶ Consuming segment-specific branded products has become a way for Chinese consumers to manifest differences in wealth, education, and regional identity.

A half-century ago, Chinese leaders and media conducted a nationalist economic campaign that urged the Chinese to buy Chinese products and extolled the success of home-grown businesses such as that of Wu Yunchu, known as the 'MSG king' for successfully competing against the Japanese in the market for food flavouring. Today, Lenovo offers the Chinese a story of a home-grown company that is so successful that it was able to buy the most famous international computer brand, a corporate rags to riches tale. Founded in 1984 with \$24,000, Lenovo, a state-owned enterprise that originated in the Chinese Academy of Sciences, began as a distributor of computer brands, including IBM. In 1990, it began manufacturing its own computers, profiting from state commissions and little competition. By 1997, it controlled over a quarter of the Chinese market, making it the largest-selling brand of PCs in China. In 2000, it followed the government edict to 'go global' and began selling overseas.²⁷ In April, 2003, because of copyright conflicts in other countries where the company's original English name, Legend, was already registered, the company renamed itself Lenovo.²⁸ (In Chinese and in China, it is still called *Lianxiang*.) It became the world's third-largest producer of computers in

²⁵ '45 businesses scoop top brand gongs,' *Xinhua*, 8 September 2001.

²⁶ See Jing Wang, *Brand New China: Advertising, Media, and Commercial Culture* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 67.

²⁷ Ling Zhijun, *Lianxiang fengyun: Jiemi lianxiang jituan guanli neimu* (*The Inside Story of the Lenovo Group's Management*) (Beijing: Zhongxin chubanshe, 2005).

²⁸ 'China steps up efforts to forge world name brands,' *Xinhua*, 6 January 2004; Xin Bei, 'Lenovo deal a huge step for Chinese brands,' *China Daily*, 10 December 2004.

December 2004 by spending \$1.25 billion to acquire the PC arm of IBM, which was then three times its size and much more recognizable worldwide. Now Lenovo sells billions of dollars worth of computers under its own global brand.²⁹

This purchase proved a harbinger of what was to come, as a stronger yuan made it possible, and even strategically necessary, for Chinese companies to buy iconic foreign assets. There have been many such acquisitions, particularly of established but struggling international brands, such as Nanjing Auto's purchase of MG-Rover and Dongxiang's acquisition and successful marketing of the Kappa brand—most closely associated with British football hooligans but now a leading fashion brand in China—and of Phoenix, a Japanese ski-wear brand. Li Ning, China's top domestic sports brand, entered into an alliance with Lotto Sport Italia, and Peace Mark, Asia's biggest watch retailer, bought Swiss watch brand Milus.³⁰ The Chinese are subjected to endless media coverage of these successful acquisitions. Within Chinese pop culture, these branding efforts represent heroic successes in China's struggle to move from a previously semi-colonized country to an economic superpower in the era of global capitalism.

Despite government investments and policies that favour China's own products, Chinese companies face a number of challenges as they make the transition from its earlier fragmented, state-run, and production-oriented economy to one driven by creating consumer desires and meeting consumer demands. The first of these challenges is one China faced a century ago when Japan overtook it as the world's largest exporter of silk and the British in India took a commanding share of the global tea trade: consistency in mass production. Under the productivist paradigm of the Maoist era, consistency was much less important than supply; demand was assumed and, thanks to shortages, was assured. But with the country's reintegration into global capitalist markets, China's political and business leaders want to consolidate and standardize domestic products before foreign companies' rival products replace or acquire them. Take the tea industry, where one would assume China would have a competitive advantage. China has over 1,000 varieties of tea, many of which are renowned throughout the world, but yet no national ones. Thanks to climate and soil conditions as well as traditional preferences, most Chinese tea brands are regional and many are still produced by families, making it nearly impossible to ensure their quality. These problems, combined with a growing Chinese appetite for trustworthy branded products, have confirmed the government's fears of aggressive foreign expansion by the Anglo-Dutch Unilever Group's Lipton brand.

Other Chinese companies have had a difficult time making the transition from state patronage and the prestige derived from a lack of access for other producers or monopoly situation to market competition and advertising. Take Maotai, the famous Chinese liquor distilled from fermented sorghum and manufactured exclusively in the south-west province of Guizhou (like Champagne, Maotai is trademarked by place). Maotai, used to toast at important state occasions, was a favourite liquor of Chinese leaders Deng Xiaoping, Zhou Enlai, and Mao Zedong. Because of its high profile and the fact that

²⁹ Pepe Escobar, 'Selling China to the world', *Asia Times*, 15 January 2005.

³⁰ Robin Kwong, 'Luxury brand ownership on rise in Asia', *Financial Times*, 29 April 2008.

one needed written permission to obtain it, Maotai never needed to advertise. Although Maotai is now affordable, available, and heavily advertised, intense competition in the liquor industry has undermined its status and therefore the value of the brand.³¹ Cognac is the liquor of choice today, thanks to its position as a status symbol among China's newly rich.

Despite government efforts to help officially designated established brands compete, the companies behind these brands still often make basic mistakes of brand management based on socialist-era assumptions; indeed, branding itself is often considered a waste of money. In 1990, the former Ministry of Commerce awarded the title 'old and famous brands' to 1,600 shops and enterprises in the clothing, medicine, and food and beverage industries. These nationalized hangovers from the pre-Maoist eras had never needed to turn a profit, and even household names like Quanjude's Peking Duck, Tongrentang's traditional Chinese medicine, and Wuyutai's tea have faced difficult transitions. Twenty per cent of these designated famous brands have been operating at a loss for years and are nearly bankrupt, while another 70 per cent are barely profitable. Thus these former pillars of Chinese consumer consciousness have begun to disappear. In January 2003, for instance, Wangmazi Scissors, a Beijing institution founded in 1651, sparked a national debate on traditional brands by announcing its bankruptcy.³²

Officials and business leaders acknowledge that products associated with China have had difficulties overcoming negative images as old-fashioned (or even pre-fashion) and lacking innovation and style. State-owned monopolies like the mobile phone company China Mobile have also had to fight image problems connected with state ownership. When China Mobile was established in Guangzhou in 1987, it was unconcerned with branding, but by the 1990s company managers worried that the name invoked an image of an unresponsive state-owned, bureaucratic enterprise, uninterested in product improvements or customer service. Its success, however, suggests that it is possible to vitalize the state-owned image, as subscribers grew from 20,000 in 1990 to 3.65 million in 1995 and 100 million in 2002. But the true test only began when foreign competition arrived.

CONCLUSION

Among the consequences for Chinese consumers of this national obsession with creating national brands is the increasing standardization of brands across the nation, a foundational element of a national consciousness through consumerism. One might view this as a Chinese McDonaldization or internal Coca-colonization—as China, like America in the early twentieth century, goes from having countless local brands to having a handful of national and international ones. To compete, Chinese brands will have

³¹ 'Maotai liquor: from drink of officials to drink of ordinary people', *China Daily*, 29 September 2002.

³² 'Brands may not live forever', *China Daily*, 4 May 2004; 'Old firms need brand protection', *China Business Weekly*, 9 August 2004.

to do all the obvious things. They will have to provide a value for whatever they change, including making high-quality, innovative products. They will also have to make their brands household names with positive associations though advertising in all its wondrous forms, from the yeoman bus-stop poster to subtle product placement in popular movies and TV shows.

China's leaders, like the leaders of market economies, wanted 'consumerism'—an economy with high value added via the marketplace for branded products. What the world has got is a Chinese government with an updated version of economic nationalism channelled into the state-sponsored creation of global brands that will challenge those of the rest of the world. Since the late nineteenth century, China's leadership (if not necessarily its housewife-on-the-street consumers) has developed a strong sense of economic nationalism and demonstrated a willingness to make any sacrifice to develop world-class industries in the name of 'national survival', including sacrificing the well-being of its workers and the health of its environment. In the current post-industrial world, Chinese leaders see ownership and control over world-class brands as the next battleground, the key to continued economic development. Thus one can confidently predict that scholars studying the intersection of nationalism and consumption will find this new intersection of the two in brands a productive area of research for the foreseeable future.

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