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Environmental advertising in China and the USA: the desire to go green

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Environmental advertising in China and the USA: the desire to go green, by Xinghua Li, London and New York, NY, Routledge, 2016, 158 pp., £90.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-415-74413-3

In an international climate where the virtues or perils of ‘going green’ continue to be debated, and as marketers and consumers alike grapple to find responses to a growing impetus towards assuming self-responsibility for environmentally impactful behaviours, this text is timely in that it engages with some of the pressing discussions surrounding how green marketing may either aid or hinder environmental sustainability, what role the consumer has to play and how the green narrative coalesces across differing cultural contexts. Focusing on the complex relationship between the constructed narratives presented in Chinese and American green advertising and the consumer, Li effectively exploits a psychoanalytical frame to unearth the tacit anxieties, paradoxes and ambivalences experienced by both sets of consumers as they seek to navigate their own consumption behaviours. Arguing that “advertising forms a perpetual loop of traumatization and defense that puts consumer society in a downward spiral” (p. 19), Li essentially concludes that, while both Chinese and American consumers are forced to confront their own behaviours through advertising, this confrontation manifests in two distinct responses – either that of an ‘hysterical’ Chinese response or an ‘obsessive’ American one. Both the antecedents and consequences of these two mirroring responses, argues Li, emerge from the starkly differentiated approaches to how green advertising and, by extension, green consumption play out across the two national contexts. Following chapter one’s introductory comments on context, the text investigates four advertising sites to illustrate how Chinese hysteria and American obsessiveness underpin the green consumption discourse in their respective contexts. Cars, home products, food and fashion are each given individual attention across the four main chapters of the text.

Chapter two entitled ‘Morphing the Self: Hybrid car advertising and the (dis)appearing ego’ opens with an account of the psychological symbolism associated with the car as the object of the ‘driving self’ before moving to a comparative analysis of hybrid car advertisements in America and China. Reading American ads from Prius and Mercedes-Benz against Chinese ads from Prius, Lexus, Honda and Buick, the chapter illuminates how the driving self is either erased or multiplied. The chapter argues that American hybrid car advertising is characterised by an erasure of the individual, charging the consumer with the impossible task of consuming while leaving no self-trace. Illuminating the moral regime of a compliance derived of guilt, the chapter posits American hybrid advertising as being charged with paradoxical overtures of consuming into self-oblivion, driven by a self-censuring desire to act responsibly. The irony is of course that to achieve such erasure, or a compliant minimisation of environmental impact, the consumer must consume the hybrid car – thereby enacting a perpetual cycle of consumption and guilt.

By contrast, the analysis of Chinese ads demonstrates an absence of environmental cues, instead leveraging a Chinese preoccupation with being seen as equal market participants in the eyes of the West. Various positioned as a source of liberation, status and modernity, the car plays out Li’s observation of a Chinese hysteria that seeks affirmation from the Other. As such, the explicit environmental messaging made prescient in American advertising is largely absent from its Chinese counterpart. Rather, the emphasis on technological innovation, drivability and escape

from urban environments to the catharsis of 'nature' play out the hysteric's desire to achieve status or visibility.

Chapter three entitled 'Detoxing the Private: Parenting philosophy in green home product advertising' captures the striking differences between American and Chinese perceptions of the so-called green home and how it must be managed. The chapter offers an account of how parents manage the home environment for their children and navigate the relationship between indoor/outdoor environments. The themes of parenthood and spatial boundary negotiation illuminate the Chinese 'hysteric's' reluctance to permit engagement with the external world, choosing instead to maintain clearly demarcated boundaries for children and to eliminate the toxicity of a polluted world from entering the private sphere. By contrast, American homes are read as open to the natural environment. Children are encouraged to step outside the parameters of the home and play in nature, thus disavowing indoor/outdoor, private/public distinctions.

Green marketing of home products is seen to play out this key distinction between Chinese and American perceptions of the internal/external world. While both markets promote a range of green home products, the chapter argues that the green discourse works to two rather different ends. On the one hand, Chinese green home advertising plays out the hysteric's desire to rid the home of toxins or pollutants, thus re-affirming a commitment to a 'cocoon'-like view of the home, safe from the intervening threats of the external world. On the other, American green home advertising embraces a spirit of *jouissance*, a playful refusal to acknowledge the toxicity of the world in order to preserve an almost naïve repression of threat.

Chapter four entitled 'The "Organi-vore's" Dilemma: Social (in)equality on organic food marketing' theorises the different approaches to organic food marketing, grounded in two radically different political perceptions of organic food. This distinction rests on the argument that while Chinese consumers understand organic food as the purview of the elite (since 'clean' food has traditionally been reserved for senior statesmen or those in high social positions), American consumers view organic food as connected to anti-corporate sentiments, preservation of small-scale farming and a sense of social advocacy.

This distinction is enacted across the respective sets of advertising analysed in the chapter. First, the Chinese milk brands Jindian Organic and Telunsu Organic are shown to illustrate the discourse of wealth and privilege. Using royal colours such as gold and blue, the advertisements emphasise purity and naturalness as their key tenets. Equally, celebrities are frequently leveraged to advertise these products to the urban middle-classes who can participate in a market once accessible only to the uppermost echelons. By contrast, American milk advertising seeks to re-connect American consumers to their sense of the local, the small-scale and the intimate as a panacea against the relentless assault of mass food production. While Chinese advertisements ensure an absence of 'low-class' farmers (as though their presence may sully the elitist narrative at work), American ads habitually feature a smiling farming family along with their anthropomorphised cows. These two approaches construct an 'organic' narrative, albeit working to different ends. However, as Li points out, neither approach speaks to the realities of food production and what organic might actually mean in the context of feeding populations in a sustainable

way. Appeals to privilege or a faux sense of ‘escaping the market’ elide the fundamental environmental impacts.

Chapter five entitled ‘The “Useless” Sustainability: Discourse of eco-fashion and the utilitarian fantasy’ draws counterpoint between America’s fast fashion industry claims to environmental responsibility and the work of Chinese fashion designer Ma Ke. The chapter commences with an account of Ma Ke’s status in China, highlighted by the designer’s commission to dress China’s first lady Peng Liyuan, and subsequently traces how her ethos of ‘useless’, but nonetheless emotionally vested, fashion works as a sharp counterpoint to the eco-fashion industry ethos of America.

While the chapter flags Ma Ke’s contributions, it then moves to an account of eco-fashion as represented by recycling, thrift-storing and footprint assessment in the American marketplace. Tracing ads from Levis, H&M, Timberland and Patagonia, the analysis identifies how such contradictory activities such as recycling (which uses huge resource), footprinting (which does little to lessen impact) or, in the case of Patagonia, tracing production through GPS, may make the obsessive consumer feel better about their fast fashion purchases while doing little to disrupt the flow of wasteful consumption. If fashion, as Li suggests, is driven by the desire to recuperate the unified self in an impersonal market universe, real disruptions are rendered impossible – yet the obsessive’s need to consume without guilt is palpable.

By contrast, the philosophy of uselessness espoused by Ma Ke paradoxically results in one of the few examples offered of seemingly genuine commitment to sustainability. Ma Ke imbues her clothing with a philosophy of material memory or an acknowledgement of the ensuring connectedness between clothing, the environment and human experience. In a departure from an American emphasis on [re]-creating the ‘new’ in each garment, Ma Ke’s philosophy of material memory is reflected in travelled effects of wrinkles, creases and marks of agedness on the fabric. As such, the garment is rendered ‘useless’ as exchange commodity; its only value resides in its embodiment of experience and memory. The chapter does not deal with Ma Ke’s advertising (or indeed any Chinese fashion advertising) as such but rather focuses on the media re-actions (at fashion shows etc.) to her work and the 2007 *Wu Yong* documentary about the designer. While Li’s account of Ma Ke’s work drifts from the otherwise consistent reading of the Chinese hysteric, it nonetheless suggests the possibility of a departure from the American positioning of the obsessive consumer. In this respect, Ma Ke is read as a panacea to the utilitarian view of fashion at play in the American context with Li concluding that Ma Ke believes “true ethical consumption lies in us falling in love with the lost object... It is through this object-love that can find a more sustainable relationship to our desire, community and ecology” (p. 136).

Just the first chapter begins with an anecdote from Li’s own family experience of ignoring the impending perils of climate change, the conclusion opens with an evocation of Li’s father’s life as a textile worker. The story outlines how, throughout his professional life, Li’s father never paused to consider the dangers of working in a toxic environment. Rather powerfully, the story is used to punctuate the most important finding of the text; we are likely only to act upon environmental risk once we experience some form of loss (i.e. health) but we remain oblivious to such losses because to acknowledge them would overwhelm us. In this way, Li makes sense of

the many psychoanalytical jugglings and manipulations (by both marketers and consumers) discussed throughout the text, concluding that these delusions/repressions are required because for anyone to really confront the imminent risks upon us is beyond our psychical capacities.

Li's willingness to problematise and re-theorise through the psychoanalytical lens the discourses and behaviours that have come to trouble the possibility of legitimate and transparent global dialogue on the risk of environmental destruction forms a constant through-line in this text. The argument that marketing simultaneously provides succor for, and exploits, the hysterical tendency of the Chinese or the obsessive American consumer highlights the reality that very few of green marketing's designs focus on a serious environmentally oriented intent. While we are familiar with the argument made in marketing scholarship that green marketing has frequently been leveraged for reputational purposes, this text adds the further insight that it also preys upon fundamental consumer anxieties about what it is to be 'responsible' or worthy in the eyes of one's family, community and marketplace. Oscillating between self-delusion and self-consciousness, the text gives an informed account not only of how advertising captures the game of green marketing across different cultural and historical contexts but also the ambivalence among would-be green consumers. The inclusion of a highly visible psychoanalytical frame lends further interpretative richness to the text and illuminates various underlying tensions that would otherwise remain occluded. The adoption of a tenable psychoanalytical stance is somewhat unusual in marketing literature and so this text represents a valuable theoretical evolution for the discipline. As such, Li offers a compelling, if not at times rather despairing, account of how green marketing is unfolding in contemporary Chinese and American consumer culture that will be of interest to those working not only in the international green marketing arena but also those interested in the psychoanalytical approach to advertising and consumer culture.

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