



**Queensland University of Technology**  
Brisbane Australia

This is the author's version of a work that was submitted/accepted for publication in the following source:

O'Connor, Justin (2011) Going native : a review of Jing Wang's 'Brand New China'. *Creative Industries Journal*, 3(3).

This file was downloaded from: <http://eprints.qut.edu.au/43730/>

© Copyright 2011 Intellect Press

**Notice:** *Changes introduced as a result of publishing processes such as copy-editing and formatting may not be reflected in this document. For a definitive version of this work, please refer to the published source:*

[http://dx.doi.org/10.1386/cij.3.3.273\\_5](http://dx.doi.org/10.1386/cij.3.3.273_5)

Jing Wang *Brand New China: Advertising, Media and Commercial Culture*. Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass. 2008

Justin O'Connor, Queensland University of Technology, Australia

*Creative Industries Journal*, 3 (3) 2010

## Going Native

Jing Wang's early published work was squarely within the tradition of literary theory, though applied to quintessential product of classical Chinese culture – *The Story of the Stone*. In the late 1990s she followed with an account of Chinese cultural debates in the post-reform and then post-Tiananmen period – *High Culture Fever*. There she traced a dynamic encounter between Chinese intellectuals, the state and popular culture whose complexities and nuances seemed to baffle the simplistic assumptions of western postmodernism. Her growing concern with popular culture in contemporary China, evidenced in a number of edited collections, saw an emphasis on a grounded ethnographical method and on complicating the notion of commercial culture. It was not passive consumption, it was not a pure global import but nor was this market necessarily 'free' or opposed to the state. Her deeply grounded knowledge of western cultural theory (she taught this at Duke and MIT) and contemporary Chinese culture (she reads and writes Mandarin) meant that such an approach was both a refreshing change from many western accounts of Chinese culture and of a high scholarly order.

In this volume Jing Wang enters the belly of the beast. She goes to work for *Ogilvy and Mather* in Beijing and through actually managing an account gets first-hand insight into just how the advertising business is working in China. Initially the book seems to promise an historical and ethnographic account of the Chinese advertising industry and its attempts to come to terms with the emerging and fast-moving Chinese consumer market. But this promise is thwarted by two other ambitions. The book proffers, first, a critique of cultural studies' approaches to advertising and marketing and second, an attempt to stake out a cultural politics around the emergent 'creative consumer' in China. It ends up being non of these things, or shifting between them in ways that make the book very uncertain as to its real object. In the Preface she writes that the book is for 'industry, advertising, media, academic and general readers interested in gaining an in-depth understanding of the rise of China from the vantage point of branding and marketing culture'. The problem is that there is no clear narrative that the sort of general reader, browsing through the business section of the airport bookshop, could latch on to. And whilst there are very clear and detailed descriptions of issues any ad industry reader needs to understand these are interspersed with sections debating contemporary cultural theory which they probably don't. At one point, before launching such a discussion, she suggests that 'more business-oriented readers' skim or skip directly to the next chapter. It is not just a question of skipping sections, the problems are more structural.

'I began this study as a "pure" academic. But frankly, after pulling all-nighters as a strategic planner in an ad agency, I can no longer think like the straight scholar I once was'. To read this in the Preface is somewhat disturbing. Many professionals – from

human rights lawyers and politicians to gamblers and sportspeople – have written accounts of their profession and in so doing have attempted to move beyond their own professional selves towards a more scholarly overview. This means an attempt to give an account that can be contested or examined in an objective way. Is Jing Wang saying that this is not, or only partially, an objective, scholarly account? Or is she suggesting that her ‘pure’ academic stance, as a critical cultural theorist rather sniffy about commercial culture, has given way to a greater sympathy with her object of study. Or is it simply that her account might be used by academics but also by industry?

Cultural academics have frequently done work in areas with which they might be deemed not to sympathise - such as financial services or the military. And some might subsequently attest to their changed perspective on these sectors and the people involved. But they don’t normally then confuse their scholarly work with their new interest in playing the markets or circuit training. Jing Wang’s book is not an ethnography or historical account of an ad agency or of the sector as a whole. Though there are some detailed descriptions of workshops and focus groups, and some background historical accounts of advertising and ad agencies international and domestic, the book is organized around accounts of specific campaigns or target audiences – ‘Bohos’, Youth, Girls, the Blue Collar worker and so on. Rather than a systematic history or ethnography the organizing principle of the book, and the source of its confusion between industry and academia, is the claim that cultural studies researchers can use the paradigms and methods of ad agencies to study Chinese popular culture.

There are, we are told, two problems with Cultural Studies. First, it is overly concerned with the semiotic decoding of adverts as ‘texts’ when in fact they are the outcome of a complex production process. Second, they tend to see advertising and marketing as a top-down imposition on a passive consumer. To the contrary, Jing Wang argues that ad agencies and marketers have a methodologically privileged access to contemporary Chinese popular culture. For one, the ad agencies actually talk to the consumer rather than armchair de-coding. Her production based approach emphasizes how the product emerges from close and extensive engagement and negotiation with the target consumer all the way down the line. A successful product is one that has touched a real market out there – markets which are not immediately apparent to the naked eye but have to be uncovered from a pile of assumptions and wishful thinking. For example, the luxury goods industry imagines that the ‘middle class’ Chinese consumer is about aspiration and large disposal income. Jing Wang tells us that this is a myth; that the vast bulk of ‘blue-collar’ (technical and professional) workers (and thus the vast bulk of Chinese consumers with money to spend) are more concerned with security than aspiration and with gift-giving rather than desire-driven spending. Being forced by economic compulsion to dig down and grasp the complexities and nuances of the Chinese consumer means that the ad agencies – domestic and international – can provide real insights into Chinese culture.

It’s almost a defining characteristic of cultural studies books that they begin by attacking cultural studies. The decoding of advertisements without reference to the actual use or context of the receiver is of course a standard trope of the discipline since Barthes. When linked to the idea of a top-down, manipulative ad industry it makes for some simplistic and patronizing writing. But this account does no justice to

the work on ethnographies of consumption, material culture and consumer adaptation and 'detournement' that are rife in cultural studies. Nor does it acknowledge the work done within cultural and media industry studies which are fully aware of the complex processes of production involved in advertising and marketing. Cultural studies here is just a straw man; the desire not to bore her business audience means she rarely gives their arguments any treatment in depth. The result is that as opposed to the isolated narcissism of cultural studies, ad agencies are presented as in touch with the real world.

Ad agencies do extensive consultation and market discipline means they are judged by selling product. How they approach this task, how they frame the object of knowledge and validate their findings – these are interesting questions and the findings can give us insight. But the book suggests that when the agencies have hit the market they have somehow struck the real, and the categories they used to frame this social reality are therefore correct. What gives the book its continued radical tone – rather than being dismissed as an apology for consumer capitalism – is that the consumer is the Chinese consumer and the dominating ad agencies are international. There is a sense that, through the clumsy blunders and imperialist assumptions of the big ad agencies, the Chinese consumer is asserting him- or herself, making them listen to the real needs and demands of an emergent consumer market very different from the west. This vaguely post-colonial theme grows throughout the book; towards the end the rise of new social media and user generated content finally allows the Chinese creative consumer to step up to a new political role, between free market and the authoritarian state. It is these cultural political conclusions, rather than the straight ad agency hype, that make it a rather disturbing book.

We might take Jing Wang's strictures on the top-down, over-semiotic and anti-commercial approaches of cultural studies on board – but do we jettison *all* of their findings? One very basic point is that ad agencies are there to sell – to encourage consumption in general and of particular products. The knowledge generated is founded on this explicit interest – but nowhere is this seen as in any way problematic. Indeed, in the Introduction advertising is presented as co-terminus with markets, simply being the provision of information to allow the buyer to choose. We then fast forward to the 20<sup>th</sup> century where the huge expansion of the industry it is simply more of the same writ large. This is naïve in the extreme. We don't need to be a rabid anti-capitalism to see that the promotion of consumption through the stimulation of endless desires which are never to be satisfied might bring problems. Or that that marketing agencies might actually help create the markets which they claim simply to have discovered – as we are told 'it is difficult to tell which comes first – a real life tribe or its incarnation as a market segment' (210).

It seems that because it is about markets and (real) money, and because it is based on extensive focus groups then it must be real, yet in other parts we learn otherwise. Thus in the chapter on 'bourgeois bohemians' we are told that it was an importation of an alien concept from America, that it was picked up - without the original satirical elements - by the Chinese ad industry, and used to identify and thus promote a particular type of discerning urban consumer. "Did it matter if China did not have bobos so long as upscale consumers wore the lifestyle on their sleeves? Marketers couldn't care less...bobos as an urban imaginary and marketing in the name of the bobo seems to have paid off...Nothing seems to stop the Chinese from indulging

themselves in a social imaginary that their fans dream of being part of the global, cosmopolitan' culture' (193) Unfortunately understanding this 'social imaginary', how it is constructed or even co-constructed by ad agencies, and with what consequences beyond the sales agenda of these agencies is not addressed. This hardly recommends itself as a robust research methodology. Cultural studies might not touch the real but at least it doesn't make it up as it goes along. Though claiming its horny handed, pulling-all-nighters, access to the real, most of the ad industry (as most of cultural studies knows) is about fantasy and illusion.

The book is very much concerned with the global-local question and constantly chides cultural studies with false binaries. The attack on binaries as necessarily false and A Bad Thing is standard for post-structuralism inflected cultural studies, and very few of them would claim some rigid distinction between global and local. But not only is this another straw man but it smuggles in not complexity and nuance but indeterminacy and fudge. We are told that not only is the global-local barely operative in China but most ad people would laugh at you for suggesting it. (Which must surely get your nose twitching). The global-local divide is resisted here in its suggestion that global ad agencies are rolling into China with western products, aspirations, identities and norms. To the contrary they soon come a cropper unless they adapt to the multiple and complex realities of the contemporary Chinese market. This is barely news – as anyone who has witnessed the HBSC ads will know. But Jing Wang then tells us that it does not matter where the product comes from or the nationality of the add agency promoting it – it's what the consumer thinks it is that counts. From the ad agency perspective this might be so, but from other perspectives this is clearly not so. The Chinese government blocks certain foreign products or limits market penetration; health inspectors need to know the provenance of a product; logistical firms similarly. It might not matter if the Chinese consumer did find out that what they think is a Chinese Cola drink is not such, or it might mean an awful lot; if it was the latter case the ad company are involved in lying or subterfuge. It all depends on the value you might want to ascribe to national identity and the role of consumption – creative or passive – within this. This is not a discussion we get any depth in the book.

Similar acceptance of ad agency wisdom as sociological fact can be found throughout. The invention of branding – not selling what a product is but what it means – is traced to David Ogilvy's 'Hathaway Man' ad. 'A dose of mystique, danger and romanticism was successfully associated with the Hathaway shirt. Rather than citing this ad as the beginning of the deception of mass consumers by advertisers, adman would rather see it as a moment of invention as significant as Newton's law of gravity. (24) Going on to briefly trace the subsequent progress of this shift into brand equity and total brand management Jing Wang drops the *arriere pensee* and sees the world as so constructed as an unproblematic account of the real. A financial service anthropologist is not expected to rant about the evils of sub-prime mortgages on every page but rather account for the way in which they construct and act upon the world. Jing Wang asks us to accept their account on face value and even adopt it for our own use.

We are told by many of the CEOs that consumers create value not advertising agencies; this is accepted uncritically in this book. On the one hand it seems to mean that they talk to their target audience and that it is only when this audience identify with or recognize it for what they want that it acquires value. As a salutary warning against hubris – like 'The customer is always right' hung in the retail shop – this is

fine but as social science it is thin. If the customer creates value then why do we need ad agencies – to simply provide the information to allow the customer to choose? But perhaps this issue no longer needs to be addressed as we move into the age of the creative consumer. The active co-creation of the consumer is no longer restricted to the focus group and the circuits of market feedback – new social media and user-generated content allow the direct involvement of consumers in advertising. Following Henry Jenkins' account of fan participation in the marketing and development of *The Matrix*, *Survivor* and other media products, she, like him, goes on to suggest that this people power is acting as a check on corporate power. From passive dupe to elusive discerning identity constructor the consumer now is the scourge of corporate abuse. And indeed, not only this but the consumer is now an active creator of product incorporated by the ad agency or media or games production company in new ways. Co-creation, prosumers, citizen consumers are now emerging in China and we should take note.

The citizen consumer is a challenge to established ad agency operations – though something to which they need to adapt rather than a mortal threat – and to 'cultural studies' and its passive consumer. Like others pushing the creative consumer – such as John Hartley – Jing Wang is in need of a straw man of top down cultural studies in order avoid asking probing questions. Thus we are shown a viral ad agency (*DynoMedia*) run by energetic twenty- and thirty somethings and which builds in self-made content to its website. Immediately we are introduced to China Creative Commons and its defence of the right to adapt and re-use as a form of democratic creativity. These are two different agendas – surely creative commons was not set up to defend the rights of viral marketing companies? On the other hand in the two years since the book appeared the co-option of UGC and social networking into the mainstream of marketing has run on apace. Indeed 'DynoMedia is a fascinating model because it isn't corporate (state) media' per se. It strives to become a social media platform brokering the relationship between commercial networks and social networks' (303). Them and most of the corporate ad industry across the globe!

There is no doubt that new media are opening up new areas of democratic cultural practice – but these are certainly not to be defined in terms of a creative consumer and they are unlikely to be uncovered from the particular perspective of an international ad agency. The collapse of the citizen into the consumer that Jenkins, Hartley and others have proposed is increasingly being challenged (see Graeme Turner's recent work). Its wishful thinking is transposed onto the Chinese context where Jing Wang uses it to suggest as a third way between resistance and domination (cultural studies) and the state and free market (western liberals). The new creative consumer will transform China, or more precisely generation Y will, 'the single child generation who set their own agendas and who know how to get what they want with a determination and optimism rarely seen in previous generations. Nobody can hold them hostage for long' (246). Yet what reason do we have to think they will transform China? The state certainly has no problem with what they do and has effectively managed to direct and co-opt their new media. Indeed, elsewhere in the book she evokes the 'cool', the disaffection, the purposeless of much contemporary consumption amongst youth. There is no political project behind this other than 'self-expression' which – as with the bobos – is hardly oppositional and mostly narcissistic.

The confusion of 'scholarly' and 'industry focused' thus runs deep throughout and makes this a deeply unsatisfactory book. It is neither an airport handbook or industry insider manual, it is not an ethnography or a history, it's barely a critique of cultural studies. It is a rather uncritical adaptation of insights gleaned through an ad agency to a cultural studies project whose deeper critical impulses are stifled. It ends by sounding progressive but can only evoke some unknown 'generation x' or 'y' whose wayward consumption habits and social networking are the way forward. But on what grounds and for what ends? For all the talk of ethnography and listening to people there is a strange absence of real people in this book. There are no admen just quotations, there are no consumers just focus group participants, there are no people in real lives in real places buying things. Desperately seeking the consumer these rounded lives and real situations are secondary to the requirements of ad agency knowledge that they eventually sell 'em stuff. Sociologists used to wear wrist watches and short sleeves to show drug takers that they were not one of them. Ethnographers studying the financial services experience the uncomfortable sensation for academics of looking at people perhaps cleverer and certainly better off than themselves. Maybe Jing Wang should have placed a photo of Adorno on her desk to remind herself who she was during those long all-nighters.