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Brand New China: Advertising, Media and Commercial Culture

by Jing Wang. Harvard University Press
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reviewed by ESTHER C. M. YAU

B*rand New China* is a cross-disciplinary examination of media advertising in China. Jing Wang shows that transnational and local advertising agencies in Beijing are at the forefront of shaping the brand identity of China itself, along with its many exports and imports. Drawing on two summers of fieldwork examining the production culture of Beijing advertisers, during which the author did some consumer ethnography, the book places brand theories and a variety of Chinese marketing practices in dialogue with British and American cultural studies. Wang demonstrates the innovative potential of cultural studies unlimited by area studies and open to production analysis. Her chapters explore brand theories, joint-venture strategies, corporate product branding case studies, consumer self-fashioning stories, and television media advertising practices, as well as digital media opportunities. Speaking simultaneously to practitioners, academics, and general readers, the book makes bold strides in the direction of an emerging “Global China Studies.”

Wang, who is the author of *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng's China*, has written another insightful study of a major phenomenon involving media and popular cultural trends.¹ The culture craze in recent years has shifted into name brand consumption, making Wang's study of brand engineering a timely window on the marketing tactics that reach out to a billion consumers. Lively examples in the book show how the Chinese state, media, corporations, manufacturers, and ad agencies make brands out of events as momentous as the 2008 Olympic Games and as mundane as provincial TV drama advertising. In two consecutive chapters, Wang relates competitive localizing strategies and joint-venture complications involving



1 Jing Wang, *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng's China* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996).

Western transnational corporations and native manufacturers. Her examples of imports include Coca-Cola, Procter & Gamble, Danone, Wahaha, and Future Cola, and her two Chinese corporate legends include Lenovo and Haier. Wang reveals a synergy that refutes binary notions of global domination and local resistance: branding processes for transnational products depend upon the high level of marketers' awareness of what up-to-date "Chineseness" entails. There is also an absence of consensus among competitors: for some, branding must consider autonomy in a company's own global future while making a deep appeal to localness; for others, branding should place emphasis on the targeted audiences' subjectivity along with an appreciation of the crossovers between the local and the global.

Wang's examination of aspiring global brands of Lenovo and Haier also takes note of their residual "Red Chinese" characteristics: the entrepreneurial spirit speaks in commercial and global idioms while the organization head engages in the Mao-like military speak of social control. The complexities of corporate China go beyond this legacy, however, and Wang delves into a whole corpus of advertising literature research. Not surprisingly, the book's bibliography of Chinese-language advertising studies shows that the latter has become a major field in communication and media studies in China's universities.

The chapters on "Bourgeois Bohemians in China?" and "Hello Moto: Youth Culture and Music Marketing" may well be the most engaging parts of the book with their combination of advertising research, consumer ethnography, cultural analysis, and commentary on visual imagery. Wang discusses the concepts of "tribes" and "neo-tribes" that have traveled from anthropology research to the marketing field, and uses the volatile trend of "Bobo Fever" in three southern cities to examine marketer-induced consumer self-validation. Unlike post-affluent Western prosumers, Chinese consumers still take the display of tastes and consumption habits as an important practice. But "Bobos" and neo-tribes are invented market segments rather than social formations, and are therefore distinct from social classes in China. However slightly, a discussion of "*xin xinnenlei*" (neo-neo-tribes) and Japan's "*otaku*" and "*kogal*" as well as a Hong Kong-style "Sammy" devil brings the social imaginaries of East Asia into the picture. While the chapter's intention is to debunk the idea that existing terms can keep their connotations once they show up in various Chinese settings, the study inadvertently touches upon a Sinocentric consciousness that its East Asian components somewhat counteract.

The book takes issue with cultural studies paradigms and approaches of an earlier phase. Wang argues that an exclusively text-based approach to researching advertising production culture has obvious inadequacies, although her criticism of textual analysis of advertisements seems more applicable to works completed over a decade or more ago than to recent studies published in U.S. journals. Wang's own examples of encoding and decoding show that it is not close reading as an activity that has lost value, but the fact that marketers and consumers have multiple ways of engaging texts in a wide variety of media surfaces and platforms that require researchers to explode earlier notions of frame-limited image/text interpretation by a single reader. But to this reader, there is a far more important phenomenon in the culture industries that makes the

book's findings resonate with contemporary cultural studies: the thriving transnational advertising culture industry generates its own theories and research methods to make sense of what strong transnational and local dynamics succeed in each market. The global advertising industry armed with its reifying concepts raises new questions for media scholars of "production culture." Branding strategies, branding narratives, consumer service surveys, and prosumer activism are some of the salient idioms and practices of a generative, self-assessing, and increasingly culture-savvy advertising industry that stakes its place among other global industries by assimilating intellectual resources from the social sciences and even the arts and humanities.

Wang shows that an academic who immerses herself in the industry can maintain her own analytical bearings while examining the advertising industry in its own terms. That said, the book comes short of probing critically into the industry's strategy generating methods and the advertising researcher's use of theoretical sources. The author's border-crossing research could have produced some key questions about how a postmodern advertising industry comes to shape its own consumer "cultural studies." Research into the "production cultures" of film and television has raised awareness of culture industry's assimilation of critical knowledge of the media, and John Caldwell's examination of Hollywood's increasing self-reflexivity in its products and discourses is a superb study of this phenomenon.² Along this line of thought, the advertising industry's self-reflexivity could be telling. Wang's ethnographic narrative of a young Chinese rebel with the makeup of an entrepreneur is revealing and it prompts one to think about whether there is a corresponding entrepreneurial undertaking in a friendly study of a burgeoning Chinese advertising industry as well. Wang's readiness to question cultural studies' assumptions could be turned upon her own ethnographic analysis and upon her accounts of the ad tactics she explicates, which at times seem to embrace the (old) positivism that anthropology has challenged for nearly two decades. Another problem is the book's running criticisms on cultural studies' deception and victim theses and its overarching ideological formulations. Absent a solid discussion of the growing body of industry-savvy cultural studies in recent years, some of Wang's criticisms of this field sound like a reductive version of Adorno's theories. A detailed explication of the advertising industry's idioms and marketing stories without taking these to task is bound to invite questions from critical perspectives. Handing over authentic thoughts to journalists and industry writers is hardly the best move when the author has shown dense and complex networks between marketing agents and state apparatuses ready to capitalize on all languages, not to mention curbing oppositional discourses. This is perhaps why a hybrid study like *Brand New China* is a much-valued early step in the cross-disciplinary innovations that will continue to enrich cultural studies, while putting China and Chinese consumers into a different world picture. *

2 John Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (Durham, NC & London: Duke University Press, 2008).