

Consuming Hong Kong. Edited by Gordon B. Mathews and Tai-lok Lui. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2002. xiii + 340 pp. Index, references, maps, illustrations, photographs. Cloth, \$45.00. ISBN 9-622-09546-1.

Reviewed by Yin-wah Chu

Consuming Hong Kong is the first systematic analysis of consumption and consumers in Hong Kong. Business practitioners looking for market intelligence, whether in the form of consumer profiles or advertising strategy, are bound to be disappointed. However, readers interested in understanding urban life in contemporary Hong Kong will find this collection indispensable.

Like James Watson's *Golden Arches East* (1997), Beng-huat Chua's *Consumption in Asia* (2000), and Deborah Davis's *The Consumer Revolution in Urban China* (2000), this book does not examine Asia exclusively as a metanarrative of decolonization, modernization, or capitalist development. Rather, it construes Asian society as an integral part of the "postmodern" world that merits investigation in its own right. Consumption, a source of both pleasure and anguish for most people and a domain that allows individuals to carve out a sense of selfhood, here becomes the lens through which to examine ordinary lives.

Consuming Hong Kong is a collection of ten research papers. Two were presented originally at a 1996 conference, entitled "Consumer Culture in Hong Kong," that was organized by the Department of Japanese Studies at the University of Hong Kong, and the remaining eight papers were solicited for this volume at a later date. The authors are a diverse group, representing the disciplines of anthropology, communication studies, sociology, and urban studies. Their essays deal with various aspects of consumption: shopping malls; movie-going; fashion trends; brands of alcohol; yuppie gathering spots (such as the one at Lan Kwai Fong); Chinese art collecting; home decorating by public-housing residents; private apartment purchasing; and the Snoopy craze fostered by McDonald's in 1998. A final essay charts the changes in cultural identity after 1997, when Hong Kong ceased to be a colony.

Despite their diverse themes, the essays represent a unified quest: to understand the meanings of consumption from the perspectives of the consumers. The authors adopt a combination of documentary and ethnographic methods to explore this question, consulting research reports, memoirs, feature stories, and newspaper commentaries, and, less formally, observing unfolding events and conducting formal or informal interviews. However, most of the cases are based on small samples, and the documents appear to have been selected haphazardly. Despite a lack of rigor in their research methodology, the writers demonstrate keen powers of observation and report in a lively style on complex patterns of consumption as practiced by people from disparate social classes, ethnic backgrounds, and age groups. In their introduction, the editors maintain that the book has implications for theories of consumption, as espoused by Pierre Bourdieu, Thorstein Veblen, and others. They point out that neo-Marxist criticisms are superfluous, as consumption is a source of pleasure and a sign of progress for most Hong Kong people, conducted for its social and cultural significance rather than for its purely economic utility. To give a few examples: goods are consumed to mark socioeconomic status (e.g., drinking Heineken rather than a local beer), to promote friendship (e.g., waiting in line to buy a McDonald's Snoopy doll for a friend), to affirm cultural identity (e.g., collecting Chinese art), and to shape personal space (e.g., installing three televisions and two phone lines in a 200-square-foot apartment). Finally, because Hong Kong is both a former colony and a society that lacks an aristocratic past, the editors contend that the goals of acquiring wealth and establishing an association with the West have become more important than attaining "high culture."

While I generally subscribe to their viewpoint and enjoyed reading the contributions, I found the treatment lacking in two areas: First, the essays do not fully explore all the possible connections between consumption and social class, ethnicity, age, time, and place that underlie the rich ethnographic and historical content. These ideas have not been captured fully by the editors' three highlighted themes: (1) "money as the measure of all worth"; (2) "Hong Kong as a mixture of Chinese and Western"; and (3) "Hong Kong as the most crowded city on earth" (pp. 10–13). I would like to have seen the contributors pay more attention to the cultural significance of the phenomena they studied and address theories of consumption more seriously. Second, few of the writers

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systematically examine the role of the state. No mention is made of either the colonial government's provision of public housing for 35 percent of the population or its deliberate refusal to impose a political identity on the colony. An exploration of how people in Hong Kong have used consumption to relate to, distance themselves from, or ignore the state would be a worthwhile topic for another book.

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