

China Made: Consumer Culture and the Creation of the Nation. By *Karl Gerth*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003. xv + 445 pp. Illustrations, photographs, notes, bibliography, index. Cloth, \$50. ISBN 0-674-01214-3.

Reviewed by Arif Dirlik

In *China Made*, Karl Gerth offers an original and interesting discussion of the relationship between consumption and nationalism in China from around the turn of the twentieth century through the radical movements and unstable governments of the 1910s and 1920s to the re-establishment of a national government under the Guomindang in the 1930s. Gerth's claim that "the process of nationalizing consumer culture was a primary mechanism for developing and extending nationalism in China" (p. 8) exaggerates his findings, especially as his treatment of China's efforts to nationalize consumption is much stronger than his scrutiny of how the population at large received those efforts. Nevertheless, the endowment of "things" with national character does open up new ways of thinking about politics and of connecting "top-down and bottom-up" approaches to the study of nationalism during this period (p. 4).

Gerth's thesis can be expressed as follows: "Consumerism played a fundamental role in defining nationalism, and nationalism in defining consumerism. Nationalism molded a burgeoning consumer culture by applying the categories 'national' and 'foreign' to all commodities, creating in effect the notion of 'treasonous' and 'patriotic' products. This nationalized consumer culture became the site where the notions of 'nationality' and of China as a 'modern' nation-state were articulated, institutionalized, and practiced" (p. 3). The author recognizes (if without much analysis) that the protection of national goods is by no means restricted to China. In the case of China and of other societies in similar positions of economic and political weakness, the task of defending against "commercial wars" tends to fall, for the most part, on social constituencies with an interest in such trade protection. In China, these constituencies were able to mobilize the state in their cause whenever there was a semblance of a working government, as occurred in the early 1910s and again in the 1930s. But the most important force during this period was the National Products Movement (so described by

its constituencies), with the National Products Preservation Association (NPPA) at its core. The NPPA was organized by Shanghai Native-place associations shortly after the outbreak of the revolution against the Qing in 1911, and represented powerful economic interests in the Jiangnan region. The Association not only articulated the Movement's ideology but also played a role in shaping native fashions. The Movement was neither centralized nor coherent; while its influence reached out from major urban areas to localities around the country, much of its constituency remained fleeting and transient. Nevertheless, it provided "the continuing organizational and discursive foundations" (p. 168) of the many boycotts against foreign goods from 1905 to 1937. Gerth's identification of the movement as a source of the boycotts, rather than the other way around, is a major contribution to our understanding of economic politics during this period.

Some of the most interesting material, in Chapters Two and Seven, relates to the construction of a national goods discourse through the fashioning of men's and women's consumption. The "nationalistic commodity spectacles," featured in department stores and museums (under the Guomindang), created visions of national goods in localized mimicry of the world's fairs and great expositions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The most elaborate was the exhibition of 1928, marking the founding of the new Guomindang government, that provided a display of national economic unity in all its diversity by allowing for "the expression of powerful native-place affiliations while placing them within a national system of representation" (p. 275).

Throughout, Gerth is sensitive to difficulties the Movement faced in sorting out the "national origins" of commodities, particularly in the case of items whose parts were manufactured elsewhere, a distinction that continues to be difficult to make up to the present day. The Movement also faced social problems arising from the contradictions between the demands of modernity, which encouraged fashionable consumption, and the demands of nationalism, which militated against it. An article in the Shanghai Chamber of Commerce journal in the mid-1920s complained that even the working class aspired to wear foreign underwear. Gerth suggests that women bore the brunt of nationalist puritanism by the equating of the "modern woman" who used foreign commodities with the prostitute, and more broadly, with the prostitution of the nation. However, the

ultimate failure of efforts to control consumption after 1949, when China had a much stronger state, indicates the lures of bourgeois modernity, and capitalism may have the last word over nationalist efforts to control and shape consumption.

The study's biggest weakness, ironically, lies with its central thesis concerning the Movement, its organization, and the public reception of its messages, especially outside major centers like Shanghai. The nationalism at issue here may best be described as a mercantile nationalism, which accorded most closely with the political vision of an emergent bourgeoisie that was not universally shared even by those who participated in the National Products Movement, especially during its eruption into boycotts. The irony arises from the fact that this incoherence, and the ideological conflicts it suggests existed over issues of nation and nationalism, calls into question the very idea of the Movement that informs the volume. By privileging a particular vision of nationalism, the author exaggerates the role of the Movement in fashioning nationalism during this period. Nevertheless, his study opens up a new area of inquiry that adds a valuable dimension to our grasp of the complexities of national imaginings and anxieties in twentieth century China.

Arif Dirlik is Knight Professor of Social Science and professor of history and anthropology at the University of Oregon. He is the author or editor of many book-length works on China, the Pacific, globalization, and postmodernity, as well as over 150 journal articles.