

Chinese Medicine Men: Consumer Culture in China and Southeast Asia. *By Sherman Cochran*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006. x + 242 pp. Index notes, bibliography, maps, photographs, tables. Cloth, \$45.00. ISBN: 0-674-02161-4.

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Historians of Asia have been torn between the desire to highlight the distinctness of their regions and the urge to emphasize the role that Asia has played in broader patterns of world history. Sherman Cochran uses this tension to frame his rich empirical study of five pharmaceutical entrepreneurs and the rise of Chinese consumer culture in the first half of the twentieth century. Drawing from recent writings on globalization, he asks if his cases support understandings of globalization as a top-down process of homogenization, or as a bottom-up process in which commodities are appropriated and localized through the agency of individual consumers. He concludes that his cases offer evidence for both perspectives, but also that those perspectives provide an incomplete account because they focus only on large corporations and individual consumers. To better understand the complex transformations that come with the spread of consumer culture, we must also look at the brokers and other local entrepreneurs who actually marketed and distributed medicines. These figures innovated a hybrid of Western and Chinese management and sales techniques that localized products and companies even as they simplified understandings of medicine into a mutually exclusive binary of “Chinese” and “Western.”

The nuances and complex trajectories of Cochran’s argument are best captured in his empirical material. Of all the entrepreneurs in the book, Yue Daren had the most extensive experience in the West, which he used to build a chain of traditional Chinese drugstores after 1912. He was also the only entrepreneur who did not use modern mass advertisements, instead capitalizing upon his family’s reputation for traditional Chinese medicine by creating low-profile “olde shoppes” that carefully crafted an aura of tradition. This localization extended to recruiting and training local managers rather than staffing his branches through home-town ties, the common practice in most other Chinese

firms, both “traditional” and “Western.” The Yue family reputation was so strong that Morishita Hiroshi, a Japanese arrival, borrowed characters from the shop name in branding his own patent medicine, Humane Elixir (*rendan*). As one of the best-selling medicines in China through the 1940s, it was supported by a massive advertising blitz using images that seeped into popular culture. In turn, the Chinese pharmaceutical entrepreneur Huang Chujiu tried to profit from the popularity of Humane Elixir by slightly altering the title for his own patent medicine, Human Elixir (*rendan*). At first he attempted to boost the sales of Human Elixir by obscuring its Chinese origins, but this tactic was unsuccessful, and he later advertised it as a Chinese product during anti-Japanese consumer boycotts.

Unlike Yue, Huang had dropped out of school at fifteen and had no Western experience. But he aggressively embraced and pioneered Western marketing techniques. His best seller, Ailuo Brain Tonic, was a Chinese recipe packaged to look like Western patent medicine down to the English language label and advertising that emphasized the superior efficacy of Western medical science. Huang also embraced new marketing methods, including pin-up calendars of seminude women, extensive radio advertisements and the the Great World amusement center, which he founded in Shanghai. Aw Boon Haw from Burma, founder of Tiger brand medicines, similarly created a series of “Tiger Balm” theme parks across southeast Asia after the 1930s to tout his products.

Huang’s main competitor, Xiang Songmao of Great Five Continents Drugstores, also appropriated the prestige of Western science to sell his medicines. All of his branch stores were constructed in “Western” style. This did not mean that they looked like Western drugstores, but that each used an eclectic mix of “Western” architectural forms and styles that were unique to China and varied according to the context of the city where the store was located. In the 1930s and 1940s, Xu Guangqin, of New Asia Pharmaceutical, took the development of scientific medicine a step farther. He established a research and development department and published the journal *Healthy Home* to teach readers about the compatibility of traditional Chinese family life and scientific hygiene standards.

Case studies such as these make a strong argument for the need to incorporate brokers and hybridity into a more nuanced understanding of globalization and consumer

culture. Cochran only hints at the significance of his work for our historical understanding of globalization, choosing instead to address disagreements among Chinese historians over whether to think of the communist era from 1949 to the 1970s as a period when the foundations of mass culture were established, or as a time when the earlier republican foundations were lost until their reemergence in the 1980s. But the implications of this work for a truly global history of globalization are enormous. In most narratives of globalization, China appears around 1990 when the first McDonalds in Beijing demonstrated that even the Middle Kingdom could no longer resist the seductions of Western expansion. But books like this show that the rest of the world outside the West did not exist in isolation from globalization, merely waiting for its franchises to arrive, but that it was generating and mediating globalization over the past two centuries. Dichotomies such as West and East or corporate transnationalism versus local consumer are not necessarily objective descriptions of the generating and receiving ends of globalization but are products of globalization itself. Even distinctions between “Chinese” and “Western” medicine are a product as much of globalization-driven marketing campaigns as of any actual pre-globalization differences.

Conciseness and economy of language are among this book’s many virtues. But with only 170 pages of text, an additional chapter on a Western or Japanese drug company in China would have been welcome. A chapter that attempted to substantiate Cochran’s claim that the development of consumer culture in China was “contemporaneous” with the rise of consumerism in the United States would also have been valuable. Such a chapter could not have reached any definitive conclusions, but it would have helped both to attract readers who might otherwise pass over this book because of its seemingly narrow appeal to area specialists and to frame a more global perspective on business and consumer history.

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