HONG KONG
Culture and Society

Consuming HONG KONG

Edited by
Gordon Mathews and Tai-lok Lui

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Contributors

Joseph BOSCO is an Associate Professor in the Department of Anthropology at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, and is the co-author (with Puay-peng Ho) of *Temples of the Empress of Heaven* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1999). He is currently doing research on the rise of interest in heritage and local traditional culture in Taiwan, and on the spread of consumerism in China, focusing on soap and shampoo.

Annie Hau-nung CHAN is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Politics and Sociology at Lingnan University, Hong Kong. She has published articles on popular culture, fashion, and domestic work in Hong Kong. Her research interests include popular culture, consumption and women's occupational attainment.

Helen Hau-ling CHENG holds an M.Phil. from the School of Journalism and Communication, the Chinese University of Hong Kong. She is now pursuing a Ph.D. in Communication Studies at the University of Iowa. Her research interests are advertising and culture.

Sea-ling CHENG obtained her M.Phil. from the Department of Sociology, the University of Hong Kong. She is now doing her doctorate degree at the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Oxford. She has researched and published on food culture in Hong Kong. Her doctoral thesis is an examination of issues of sexuality and nationalism as seen through the sex industry in Korea.

Tai-lok LUI is an Associate Professor in Sociology at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. His recent publications include *Waged Work at Home* (1994), *City-States in the Global Economy* (1997), *Check, Please!: A Sociologist's Notes on Hong Kong Society* (1997, in Chinese), *Our Football Pitch* (1998, in Chinese), and *The Dynamics of Social Movement in Hong Kong* (2000).

Eric Kit-wai MA is an Associate Professor in the School of Journalism and Communication at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. He is the author of *Culture, Politics and Television in Hong Kong* (Routledge, 1999). He is currently doing research on a project entitled 'Media Representations and Identity Politics of Transborder Marriages'.

Gordon MATHEWS is an Associate Professor in the Department of Anthropology at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. He has written *What Makes Life Worth Living?: How Japanese and Americans Make Sense of Their Worlds* (University of California Press, 1996) and *Global Culture/ Individual Identity: Searching for Home in the Cultural Supermarket* (Routledge , 2000), and is now doing research on the generation gap in Japan, and senses of national identity in Hong Kong.

Gary W. McDONOGH is the Professor and Chair of the Growth and Structure of Cities Program at Bryn Mawr College. A scholar of urban representation, cultural power and social conflict, he has worked in Barcelona (Spain), Savannah (United States), Philadelphia (United States), Hong Kong and Buenos Aires (Argentina). He is the author of *Good Families of Barcelona* and *Black and Catholic in Savannah, Georgia* and co-editor of the *Encyclopedia of Contemporary American Culture.*

Nuala ROONEY was formerly an Assistant Professor at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University and now lives in Northern Ireland. She has been doing research on Hong Kong public housing homes since 1992, and in 1998 she was awarded a Ph.D. from Napier University, Edinburgh. Her first film, *A Thousand Pieces of Gold*, received the Gold Award at the Hong Kong Independent Film and Video Awards in 1998.

Eric Otto WEAR is concerned with the phenomenology of visual and material practices in both historical and contemporary circumstances. Since 1988, he has been active as a critic, curator and artist in Hong Kong, where he is the Associate Head of the School of Design at the Hong Kong

Polytechnic University. He has recently served on the Hong Kong Arts Development Council and is currently President of the Hong Kong section of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA).

Cindy Hing-yuk WONG is an Assistant Professor of Communications at the College of Staten Island, City University of New York. She has worked extensively on grassroots cinema and the politics of media in the United States and Hong Kong, and is currently investigating film festivals as worldwide social phenomena. She is a co-editor of the *Encyclopedia of Contemporary American Culture.*

Introduction

Gordon Mathews and Tai-lok Lui

Consumption forms a critical part of Hong Kong people's lives today, but it is extraordinary how little academic attention has been paid to consumption in Hong Kong. In the years before and after Hong Kong's reversion to Chinese rule, hundreds of books and articles have been published that explore the political, legal, economic and social aspects of the hand-over. Many of these books and articles are valuable, and provide interesting and sometimes extraordinary insights. However, it is hard to avoid the conclusion, upon reading these works, that they fail to touch upon areas of Hong Kong that are far more important to most Hong Kong people than the hand-over of Hong Kong to China. Perhaps the key such area is that of consumption.

Some may think of consumption as no more than frivolity, the province of rich people with money and time to spend. On the contrary, every person in Hong Kong consumes, in one form or another, every day: we consume not only food, drink, clothing, electronic goods and housing, but also television programmes, hit pop songs, advertisements, images and ideas. Consumption we may think of as the obverse of production. In Hong Kong, as in other 'post-modern' societies, the focus of life has shifted for many from production to consumption; many people do not live to work but work to live, with their leisure pursuits, particularly their purchase and enjoyment of goods and experiences, being most central to their lives. Beyond this, however, consumption transcends this dichotomy;

consumption, broadly conceived of as the choosing and taking in of goods and experiences from a vast array that might have been chosen, is with us every hour of every day. Consumption, we may say, is the central focus of most people's lives in Hong Kong. Despite this, with a few exceptions that we discuss below, consumption in Hong Kong has not captured the attention of scholars.

This volume is designed to begin to fill this lacuna. Its various authors, all scholars who have done extensive ethnographic research in Hong Kong, explore such diverse areas as the advent of the shopping mall, tenants' senses of design in cramped public housing, the varied experiences of movie-going, alcohol as a marker of social class, young women's fashion sense, the consumption of art, the dream of owning a flat of one's own, Lan Kwai Fong 蘭桂坊 and its meanings, the McDonald's Snoopy craze of autumn 1998, and the post-hand-over consumption of cultural identity. Consumption in Hong Kong, in all its facets, is worthy of a dozen volumes, not just one; as we compile this collection, we are well aware of its inevitable gaps. However, we see this volume not as an end but as a beginning, an initial treatment of a topic that deserves more attention. We hope that this volume may help to spark further research and further volumes, in order that the complexities of life in Hong Kong today can be more fully understood.

Before proceeding to this volume's chapters, let us begin with a larger overview, first in terms of consumption in general, and then in terms of consumption in Hong Kong and why Hong Kong is a unique place in which to study consumption.

❑ Consumption

Consumption has become an increasingly important topic of study today, as consumption itself becomes ubiquitous: 'part and parcel of the very fabric of modern life' (Miles 1998: 1). For a small, privileged élite throughout history, consumption was paramount — the very rich of imperial China or Rome or Egypt could choose from a cornucopia of foods and goods for their pleasure — but for the vast majority of people throughout recorded history, life was lived sufficiently close to the edge of subsistence to make free consumption all but unimaginable (see Harris 1977). The splendours of Christian and Muslim heavens were conceived precisely because of the lack of such splendours in this earthly life.

It was only recently in history that consumption became imaginable for any more than the very élite few. Daniel Defoe, writing in the early seventeenth century, expressed his shock that ladies of his day were 'spend[ing] a whole afternoon … only to divert themselves in going from one mercer shop to another, to look upon their fine silks and to rattle and banter the shopkeepers' (quoted in Mumford 1961: 496); he was shocked because the ladies were going shopping, not merely to buy necessities but for amusement and pleasure. Karl Marx, writing in the mid-nineteenth century, believed that the proletariat, too poor and oppressed to be able to consume the goods that they themselves produced, would rise up in revolution against the bourgeoisie who consumed the fruit of their labour. Within three generations, Henry Ford was producing his Model-T Ford as an automobile that his own factory workers could afford to buy — a luxury for the proletariat — and indeed they did so buy. By the early decades of the twentieth century, the United States had become a full-fledged 'culture of consumption' (Fox and Lears 1983), and in ensuing decades, between wars and depressions, much of the rest of the world followed suit.

By the closing decades of the twentieth century, consumption had become worldwide, with Coca-Cola, McDonald's and Walkman as worldwide icons. Consumption has also, paradoxically, become increasingly variegated, no longer responding to the mass production of goods but rather to the production of a multitude of goods for different market niches, as consumer choice has exploded in the first world and, to a degree, throughout the world. Consumer choice is increasingly seen as the foundation of a new historical era, that of post-modernity, in which 'consumer lifestyles and mass consumption dominate the waking lives' of human beings (Lyon 1994: 56). Some look upon this state with wonder and admiration, others with distaste, but this is the world in which we now live. Our breathless historical sketch in these paragraphs may reflect the obvious for some readers (see Campbell 1987 and McCracken 1988 for more detailed accounts of the history of consumption), but it is essential that we never forget that the cornucopia of consumption of today is absolutely new, reflecting a new form of capitalism (Jameson 1985) and perhaps a new form of being in the world (Baudrillard 1988).

Theorists of consumption long emphasized only the economic side of consumption, assuming that it was no more than a matter of 'rational individuals buying goods to maximize their satisfaction' (Featherstone 1995: 17). Thorstein Veblen ([1899] 1994), writing at the turn of the century, was one of the first theorists to explore the social nature of consumption:

'conspicuous consumption' was his famous term to describe the behaviour of 'the leisure class', who consumed not for reasons of economic utility but precisely to demonstrate the lack of economic utility, and to show the world around them their high economic status. Georg Simmel, another prescient turn-of-the-century thinker, explored in several essays ([1903] 1971, [1904] 1971) how consumption was a means through which people in the anonymous urban mass could create for themselves a sense of individuality.

However, through most of the twentieth century, sociology and anthropology, the two disciplines in the social sciences now most concerned with consumption, had no interest in the topic. Sociologists traditionally tended to focus on work and production in industrial societies; anthropologists traditionally tended to focus on tribal peoples' 'ways of life'. But all this has now changed: over the past two decades, there has been a veritable explosion of works on consumption within the two disciplines. In sociology, Pierre Bourdieu, to mention just one key figure, has explored in his monumental work *Distinction* (1984) how consumption is a process through which one's 'cultural capital' is demonstrated and one's fitness for belonging to one's social class thereby confirmed; this book today remains perhaps the single most influential book yet written on consumption, and has influenced many of the essays in this volume (see Bocock 1993; Corrigan 1997; and Ritzer 1999 for more detailed discussion of the sociology of consumption). In anthropology, Daniel Miller has tried to persuade his fellow anthropologists to rethink the idea of culture in terms of consumption, since 'culture has become increasingly a process of consumption of global forms' (1995a: 8; see also Miller 1995b); parallel to this, a number of anthropologists in recent years have turned to the topic of cross-cultural consumption in their work (for example, Watson 1997a; Howes 1996; Tobin 1992).

These theorists have expanded the concept of consumption; they analyse consumption not simply as a matter of acquiring things but also meanings, not a matter of material goods but of symbols. 'Advertisements,' Judith Williamson has written, 'are selling us something else besides consumer goods. … They are selling us ourselves' (1978: 13); and indeed, most sociologists and anthropologists analysing consumption today agree that consumption is far more complex than the buying and selling of goods alone. Rather, it is intimately wrapped up with the construction of meaning and identity (see McCracken 1988 and Douglas and Isherwood 1979 for further discussion of this approach).

There are, however, huge issues that divide current debates over consumption. One of the most important issues is: to what extent are today's consumers free agents, constructing themselves from a cornucopia of possibilities, and to what extent are they in fact slaves of worldwide marketing and ultimately worldwide capitalism, falsely believing that they are free? This argument is paralleled by a larger argument, over whether consumption and consumerism (the ideology underlying consumption) represent the liberation of humankind, or rather an ever more pervasive enslavement of humankind by dehumanized capital.

Scholarly arguments on consumption such as some of those discussed in the preceding paragraphs make stimulating reading, but it is sometimes all too easy to get lost in their abstractions. Some of these books are concerned with the analysis of other books more than with the consumption patterns of actual people in the world. The chapters in this volume are consciously set forth in contrast to such abstraction; they are all very specifically grounded, examining in depth the consumption choices and meanings of certain groups of Hong Kong people.

At the same time, however, these chapters do have something interesting to say about the larger theoretical questions discussed in the previous paragraphs. Theoreticians sometimes write of the vast worldwide structures of marketing and capital, and of consumers imagining their freedom within those structures. But they neglect the third crucial element of the equation: the specific social worlds within which consumers live and perform their consumption. The shoppers for fashion described in Chapter 5, for example, choose items of fashion from the worldwide array of products that match their conditioned senses of who they are; but they then display their choices before their friends, family, co-workers or lovers, who may affirm or deflate their efforts at identity construction. (A tactless remark such as, 'Where did you get that shirt? It makes you look fat!' may cause that shirt to be banished forever to the closet.) The drinkers of alcohol described in Chapter 4 seem to drink less to satisfy their own taste buds than to impress the eyes and minds of their fellow drinkers, who are the audience for their performance of social class. The collectors of art described in Chapter 6 buy what they can afford from the worldwide market in Chinese art, as filtered through their own acquired tastes and cultural and economic capital, and display their acquisitions to their fellow aficionados for their approval or scorn, upon whom almost the entire meaning of their consumption may depend. Similar statements can be made about the consumers in every chapter of this volume.

Indeed, the chapters in this volume all show, in different ways but with a common subtlety, how consumers are manipulated by the wiles of advertisers and marketers, and ultimately by the imperatives of worldwide capitalism, but struggle to maintain a sense of personal autonomy. These chapters show consumers' efforts to maintain this sense of autonomy despite being closely judged by their social worlds, worlds that inhabit consumers' own minds. The chapters in this volume hardly answer the question raised above — like many theoretical discussions of consumption, they tend to take a middle position, seeing consumers as partially duped and partially free, creating a tiny niche of freedom from within the inescapable world of capital's iron laws and corporate brainwashing — but they do shed particular light on these large theoretical issues, by addressing them within a specific ethnographic frame. In this sense, this volume's explorations may have a meaning and significance beyond Hong Kong, to address consumption in the world as a whole.

But this volume is ultimately about Hong Kong. Let us now turn to the meanings of consumption in the particular time and place of Hong Kong today.

❑ Hong Kong

Most books written about consumption over the past 20 years have Western societies, particularly the United States, Great Britain and France, as their focus. However, recent books on consumption have ranged farther afield. Joseph Tobin's edited collection *Re-made in Japan* (1992) explores how Japanese marketers and consumers take a range of foreign items and make them 'Japanese'. James Watson's edited collection *Golden Arches East* (1997a) examines how McDonald's in five East Asian cities fundamentally differs in the meanings consumers give to it, in accordance with their societies' social structures and cultural values. Brian Moeran and Lise Skov's *ConsumAsiaN* book series (published through Curzon Press) has offered a number of recent volumes discussing consumption in various Asian contexts. Some of these books specifically call into question the universalizing assumptions of Western theory. Watson's book, for example, calls into question Ritzer's analysis (1993) of McDonald's as exemplifying a global process of homogenization; because McDonald's, in the five societies portrayed in Watson's book, takes on such different social and cultural meanings, it is shown to be not so clearly a force for global homogenization. Many of the other works cited above also call into question universalizing

Western social theory by bringing in Asian counter-examples that contradict or at least contextualize such theory.

Hong Kong, however, has yet to play much of a part in such a process, in that very little about consumption in Hong Kong has yet been published in English. (There have been a number of interesting studies published in Chinese dealing with cultural critique and with the emergence of Hong Kong popular culture; these too, however, do not deal with consumption in an in-depth way.[1]) One fascinating exception is Watson's chapter on Hong Kong in his book (1997b), which explores how McDonald's became a part of Hong Kong culture, and how, in that process, the global was very distinctly localized, taking on particular Hong Kong meanings. Another example is Wong's (1998) discussion of a Japanese-owned Hong Kong department store, which, although more directly concerned with corporate employer–employee relations, does indirectly deal with a key area of Hong Kong consumption — that of consumption from department stores. Aside from this, there have been a number of technical reports by scholars of marketing, offering statistical surveys of consumer satisfaction; and there have been a number of M.Phil. theses exploring from different scholarly disciplines such topics as television-viewing and fashion. However, until this volume, the ethnographic study of consumption in Hong Kong has been all too rare. This is unfortunate, because Hong Kong's patterns and meanings of consumption call into question some of the assumptions of Western theory; the particulars of Hong Kong cast a shadow of doubt upon any globalizing theory.

To take just one example of this calling into question of Western theory, consider Pierre Bourdieu's celebrated concept of 'distinction' (1984). Distinction refers to how consumption is used to show oneself as distinct from others, particularly those of a lower social class. Through one's cultural capital — knowledge and sophistication — one can show that one has the capability of appreciating and consuming modern art or classical music or any other high cultural product, and can thereby demonstrate one's 'natural' worthiness in belonging to a higher social class, unlike those of lower status who lack such 'natural' worthiness.

Bourdieu arrived at the concept of distinction through his analysis of France, where class structures are particularly rigid and where high culture is highly valued. While the concept no doubt has a degree of cross-cultural and even universal applicability, its limitations are evident when it is applied to Hong Kong. Hong Kong has been widely regarded as a 'cultural desert', where high culture is not much appreciated. Because its population is so

fluid, and because of its recent rapid rise in wealth and its colonial status, for much of its history, no large, stable high class has had the chance to develop, one whose membership could be based on criteria such as intimate familiarity with high culture.

Instead, social class in Hong Kong has been based, quite nakedly, on money: the richer you are, the higher class you are. The old, well-established Hong Kong families often prospered under colonialism by playing the role of comprador bourgeoisie; but they never made themselves into cultural aristocrats. This was partly the result of their lack of cultural capital; and it was also because of the resulting emphasis on wealth alone as the source of cultural capital. The new rich encountered no difficulty in claiming their place in high society through donating money to charity, marrying top movie actresses, and obtaining the right kind of exposure in local media. While education (which in Hong Kong is mainly measured through credentials and academic titles rather than through actual knowledge or refinement) is respected and helpful in assisting people to obtain well-paying 'decent' jobs, education alone is not sufficient to bring one into the more restricted circles higher in the social hierarchy.

As a colony and a trading port, old Hong Kong never cultivated its gentry class. As a modern industrial city and then a world financial centre, contemporary Hong Kong is pragmatic, materialistic and down-to-earth. The rich, given the fact that they have little cultural capital to draw upon, do not much bother creating barriers to entry to the upper social class through criteria of taste and cultural distinction. Ordinary people, despite improvements in their overall economic well-being, remain materialistic in their concerns and world-view (Ho and Leung 1997). At the end of the day, it is always money and wealth that really matter in Hong Kong. In this respect, Hong Kong truly is an open society: the new rich can socially confirm their privileged positions by spending — some on donations to 'good causes', but more on their own conspicuous consumption.

This is why the high-class furniture stores in Hong Kong are stocked with pricey imitation-Louis-XIV furniture that may leave foreign visitors aghast at its tackiness — the aim of such furniture is not to display one's taste but one's wealth. This is also perhaps one reason why Hong Kong professors are paid such high salaries compared to professors in the United States and Western Europe. In societies in which membership of the upper classes is acquired through cultural capital, there is no need to pay professors much, since their high social status is already assured. In Hong Kong, however, where money alone tends to be the measure of social class, if the

government wishes to indicate that it values education, it logically must pay its professors high salaries.[2]

Distinction does of course exist in Hong Kong: no one who looks at young people monomaniacally pursuing the latest fashions and then quickly dropping them as soon as everyone else is pursuing the same fashions, can fail to see the pursuit of distinction at work. However, unlike Bourdieu's France, distinction as linked to cultural capital has little tie to social class in Hong Kong. Knowledge of art may be important in some circles, as Chapter 6 in this volume explores; but knowledge of art alone, without money, will not raise a person's class standing: distinction in this sense carries only indirect class meaning.

Clearly, then, as the above discussion shows, Hong Kong is a place with its own array of particular consumptive meanings that theories imported from elsewhere cannot altogether explain. Let us now outline some key characteristics of life in Hong Kong that shape its particular patterns of consumption and consumptive meaning.

The Rise in the Standard of Living of Hong Kong

Over the past few decades, the standard of living in Hong Kong has risen by an extraordinary degree, and this is an absolutely essential fact to remember in understanding consumption in Hong Kong today. Up until the 1960s, Hong Kong was very much a developing economy in its per capita income, but by 1997, Hong Kong's per capita income, in real purchasing power, was roughly equal to that of Japan and 80% of that of the United States. Other East Asian societies too have experienced extraordinary rises in income — Japan, Korea and Taiwan all come to mind — but an interesting fact about consumption in Hong Kong is that this rise has peaked so recently. To be exact, it peaked in 1997, when Hong Kong (at the same time, coincidentally, that it was returned to Chinese rule) underwent an economic downturn from which, as of this writing, it has yet to fully recover.

To offer one illustration of the rise in Hong Kong's standards of living and expectations, we who co-edit this volume find that many of our students, who are now comfortably entering the middle class in accordance with their education and the occupational passport it provides, come from families of humble background: their parents may be labourers or street hawkers. They may have grown up in squatter areas or in the kind of public housing described in Chapter 2. For such students, and indeed, for just about

everybody we have spoken with in Hong Kong, the argument that consumerism represents no more than the consumer's ever deeper enslavement within capitalism's dictates, makes little sense (true though it may be). For people who have grown up in comparative poverty, to now have the possibility of wealth and of freely consuming seems an unalloyed good. One finds, in Hong Kong, very little criticism of consumption and consumerism, outside of refined intellectual circles; it is seen by almost everyone as a positive thing. The great rise in the standard of living in Hong Kong in recent decades is perhaps most clearly shown in this volume by the two chapters on housing. Chapter 2 depicts how the basic one-room flats of public housing built decades ago may now be chock-full of the very latest electronic goods, as tenants — particularly the young, as opposed to their aged parents — assume a higher standard of living and material sophistication. Chapter 7 shows how middle-class people may progressively buy their way up to bigger and better flats; this progression has come to seem natural for many, the taken-for-granted progression to a wealthier and thus a better life.

'Money as the Measure of All Worth' in Hong Kong

We discussed above how the concept of distinction through high culture does not apply to Hong Kong social class, since that class structure is based nakedly on money. The above point provides one reason why this is the case: with the standard of living rising so rapidly, established class structures cannot easily be maintained. Beyond this, there is the oft-noted 'refugee mentality' that has long characterized Hong Kong. Until the 1970s, the majority of Hong Kong inhabitants were born in China; they tended to see themselves as sojourners, fleeing economic and political turmoil in mainland China. A local Hong Kong identity came into being from the early 1970s on, as Chapter 1 in this book discusses. This identity continues to be powerfully felt in Hong Kong today, as Chapter 10 explores, although many Hong Kong people have emigrated to cities such as Sydney, Vancouver and Toronto, their place in Hong Kong taken over by new immigrants from the Mainland.

In a cultural environment of such flux, money, to a greater degree than in more established social environments, becomes the dominant social measure. It is often said that 'in Hong Kong people live only for money'; and this has been explained by one informant in the following terms: 'People in Hong Kong are interested in money because with everything else

uncertain, money is all that you can depend upon.' The criticism often directed at the *nouveau riche* that one hears in European societies as well as in Japan and the United States, is muted in Hong Kong; that Hong Kong has had the world's highest per capita possession of Rolls Royces is not only a measure of Hong Kong's wealth, but more, an indication that most Hong Kong people will not disdain those who flaunt such cars but instead see them as admirable. Moving down the social ladder, it is often noted that many in Hong Kong have an extraordinary collecting mania: first-day covers at the post office may draw lines stretching for blocks; the Snoopy craze of 1998, as discussed in Chapter 9, involved tens of thousands of people lining up outside McDonald's outlets in the effort to obtain Snoopy dolls. This too is due partly to the importance given to money; by collecting, one can through one's speculation possibly make a mint in the future, and thereby attain higher status, at least in one's dreams (Chapter 9, however, argues against overemphasis on this interpretation).

Hong Kong as 'A Mixture of Chinese and Western'

Hong Kong, the tourist brochures say, 'takes the best from East and West' and 'is at the interface of China and the world'. This cultural mixture is readily apparent in Hong Kong consumption, albeit with a higher valuation often given to 'the West' than to China. There seems to be a broad class pattern whereby those who are older, less educated and less affluent tend to consume more purely Chinese elements, whether in the foods they eat, the movies they watch or the clothes they wear, while the younger and more affluent and educated tend to consume more internationally: from Japanese, European or American sources in movies, clothes, food, magazines, and many other areas. In our own university, at a centre for the study and celebration of Chinese culture in Hong Kong, some students use 'Chinese' as an adjective meaning 'old-fashioned' and 'out of it', and deride those whose clothing is less than dashingly casual as looking 'Chinese'.

But all of this may be changing, due to Hong Kong's reversion to Chinese sovereignty. Until very recently, Hong Kong has been one of the few places on earth that have not been bounded within a nation; but now Hong Kong belongs to China, and at least some Hong Kong people (although far fewer than Hong Kong's rulers would like to imagine) feel a new sense of pride. The contradictions in concepts of 'Chineseness' can be seen in chapters throughout this book. The collectors of Chinese art in Chapter 6 collect in part to demonstrate to themselves and others their underlying 'Chineseness';

on the other hand, some of the middle-class movie-goers of Chapter 3 now go to Western theatres only and would not dream of going to the Chinese theatres they attended in their childhoods. Lan Kwai Fong may have recently taken a turn towards 'Chineseness', as Chapter 8 discusses, but most drinkers would not dare exchange their European beer for Chinese rice wine for fear of a tumble in social status, as Chapter 4 explores. The mixture of 'Chineseness' and 'Westernness' and the ambiguity of these terms in shaping consumption cannot ever be forgotten in considering Hong Kong consumption; and this ambiguity remains as apparent as ever in post-hand-over Hong Kong, as Chapter 10 explores.

Hong Kong as 'The Most Crowded City on Earth'

Hong Kong is an extraordinarily crowded city; one of its districts, Mong Kok (in Kowloon) is said to be the most densely populated on earth. This is one reason for Hong Kong's extraordinarily high property prices and incredibly expensive housing, as discussed in Chapters 2 and 7: there are far too many people in too small a space. However, to blame Hong Kong's high property prices and expensive housing on crowding alone is insufficient; other forces too are clearly at work. One factor is that some 40% of Hong Kong land is designated as country park, and thus cannot be built upon (but see So 2000). This leads to the extraordinary situation that within a few hundred yards of Hong Kong's tallest skyscrapers, there are hiking trails through forests and past waterfalls. It also means a severe shortage of land that can be built upon (much of the land in country parks is too steep to build upon).

An even more important factor in the shortage of land is the structure of Hong Kong's economy. The Hong Kong government owns all of Hong Kong's land and merely leases it to developers; it obtains a huge amount of revenue from this. Outsiders sometimes look at Hong Kong's taxation system — a system that, in terms of income tax, amounts, essentially, to a 15% flat tax — and see Hong Kong as a free-market paradise, but this is contradicted by the government's collusion with property developers to keep property at far higher than market rates — it is this cartel that effectively dominates the Hong Kong economy, according to *The Economist* (1998).[3] The effect of this upon the people described in this volume is that they live in what to outside observers seems to be a shockingly small amount of space in apartments. Non-Hong-Kong-based readers, for example, may be shocked to find in Chapter 2 that families can exist in such tiny spaces

without tearing one another's eyes out; upon reading Chapter 7, they may be amazed that people in Hong Kong are willing to spend so many millions of dollars* for apartments that remain miserably tiny by world standards. This lack of space has a very direct effect on consumption patterns: unlike, for example, American houses, there is little room for storage in Hong Kong apartments, and what is bought must be compact. To continue the American comparison, only a small percentage of Hong Kong families own automobiles, as compared to over 90% of American families, but far more families in Hong Kong than in the United States own videodisc players and use mobile phones. There may be specific cultural reasons for this (see Bosco 1996 on the cultural reasons for pager use in Hong Kong), but perhaps the biggest factor is that conspicuous consumption can take place only within extremely limited physical space in Hong Kong. The fact of limited physical space may be the most important factor shaping consumption in Hong Kong.

There is a multitude of other factors also shaping Hong Kong's consumption patterns, but the above four seem most salient. Their influence can readily be seen throughout the chapters of this volume.

❑ The History and Contents of This Volume

Consuming Hong Kong began with a conference organized by Brian Moeran and his colleagues at the Department of Japanese Studies at the University of Hong Kong, under the auspices of the *ConsumAsiaN* organization. This conference, entitled 'Consumer Culture in Hong Kong', took place in April 1996; following this conference, Lui and Mathews were asked to co-edit a volume based on the conference's papers. However, we soon found that such a volume would be extremely difficult, not because the papers presented at the conference were not highly interesting, but because they approached the topic of consumption from different incommensurable angles. Some were works of marketing science, which made heavy use of statistical data to explore who buys what, when and where, but did not probe into what consumption actually means for those who consume. Others were works of cultural studies, an amorphous discipline growing out of English and comparative literature that analyses texts — advertisements, song lyrics, movies and so on — in various ways. The papers

* At the time of publication, HK$7.8 = US$1

based in cultural studies offered interesting insights into texts relating to consumption, but did not look at how actual consumers — Hong Kong people — thought about their consumption, and what consumption meant to them. These two approaches to consumption both have real validity within their own disciplines, but make little sense when placed side by side. In between these two incommensurable camps, a few contributors to the conference offered papers following what might be thought of as a middle path. These papers were ethnographic in focus, looking in depth and in detail at how people within different areas of Hong Kong life actually engaged in consumption.

Faced with the difficulties of editing such a volume, we initially declined to go through with the project; yet Brian Moeran urged us not to give up, but to send out announcements worldwide for potential contributors to a volume on Hong Kong consumption. He also gave us his blessing in pursuing publishing venues beyond his *ConsumAsiaN* series, for which we are grateful. As it stands, two of the ten chapters in this volume — those of Eric Otto Wear (Chapter 6) and Sea-ling Cheng (Chapter 8) — were originally presented at the 'Consumer Culture in Hong Kong' conference; the other eight chapters emerged from our own subsequent efforts to locate papers dealing with consumption in Hong Kong from a specific ethnographic focus.

We decided to pursue publication in Hong Kong because this volume, while bearing theoretical implications worldwide, is about Hong Kong and needs to be read in Hong Kong. We have, however, published in English rather than in Chinese, thereby allowing international readers to comprehend what we have done. Social scientists in Hong Kong have had a powerful local impact in several venues. *The Other Hong Kong Report*, published each year by The Chinese University Press as an alternative to the official government report, has been authoritative in describing the state of Hong Kong from a social-science perspective. The 'Hong Kong in Transition' series, published by Hong Kong University Press, has offered an important set of astute political and social analyses of Hong Kong's return to Chinese rule. However, as noted at the beginning of this introduction, no academic books on the essential topic of consumption in Hong Kong have yet been published in Hong Kong. We are, accordingly, proud to offer this volume as a beginning.

The chapters in this volume, as noted above, cover a broad range of topics related to consumption in Hong Kong. Let us now briefly discuss each chapter.

In Chapter 1, 'The Malling of Hong Kong', Tai-lok Lui explores the

historical process through which consumption came to be seen as 'the Hong Kong way of life'. This took place, by his account, through the emergence of shopping malls, and their transformation from the haunt of tourists to a place and home for Hong Kong people themselves. He dates this shift to the late 1960s and early 1970s, and particularly to the opening of the Ocean Terminal shopping mall in 1966. In his account, the localization of consumption in shopping malls was linked not just to Hong Kong's emerging affluence, but also to the emergence of a distinct sense of autonomous Hong Kong identity among Hong Kong's young people. His analysis is thus, in a sense, that of the birth of today's Hong Kong through consumption.

In Chapter 2, 'Making House into Home: Interior Design in Hong Kong Public Housing', Nuala Rooney examines how families living in the most basic form of Hong Kong public housing, the one-room flat, turn such incredibly cramped space into home. Her account explores how Hong Kong people deal with high-density living by personalizing space in highly economical and innovative ways. Her account also illustrates the course of Hong Kong history: how housing designed 50 years ago to meet the needs of squatters is inhabited now by the upwardly mobile with their VCDs and computers and custom-made furniture. Given Hong Kong's high housing costs, tenants in public housing would rather adapt and accept their limited space than leave.

Chapter 3, Cindy Hing-yuk Wong and Gary W. McDonogh's 'Consuming Cinema: Reflections on Movies and Market-places in Contemporary Hong Kong', is similarly rooted in history, in its examination of how the experience of 'going to the movies' has shifted over recent decades in Hong Kong. Unlike most analyses of film, which focus on films themselves, their piece explores the different environments in Hong Kong in which films are experienced, from neighbourhood theatres to movie palaces, to multiplexes, and to the Hong Kong International Film Festival. The chapter thus depicts the complex diversity of Hong Kong's movie consumption, and shows how Hong Kong as a whole differs from other world cities in the experiences of movie-going that it offers.

In Chapter 4, Eric Kit-wai Ma examines 'The Hierarchy of Drinks: Alcohol and Social Class in Hong Kong'. The advertisements he analyses and the people he interviews lead to a class analysis of purveyors and consumers of alcohol in Hong Kong: from Chinese wine, in the lowest category, to the many varieties of beer jockeying for middle-class status, to brandy, the drink of the new rich, now being challenged by red wine in the cultural sophistication that its consumption may require. People drink what

they drink in Hong Kong, Ma shows, not simply because it tastes good — taste is an effect rather than a cause — but because it looks good to one's fellows and feels good to oneself, in the ongoing game of pursuing, finding and maintaining one's social status.

Chapter 5, Annie Hau-nung Chan's 'Shopping for Fashion in Hong Kong', examines what some observers have seen as the epitome of Hong Kong consumption in recent decades: the pursuit of fashion. After outlining the history of fashion in Hong Kong, in its shift from 'Chinese' to 'Western', she looks at contemporary fashion theory, fashion as constructed by the capitalist world system and fashion as cultural resistance. Then she takes us on an intimate journey with three young women as they tour their favourite fashion stores and buy or resist buying what they see. In this chapter, Chan removes contemporary fashion theory from its abstractions, and looks in great detail at how these three young consumers actually comprehend their shopping for fashion.

Chapter 6, Eric Otto Wear's 'The Sense of Things: Chinese Art in the Lives of Hong Kong Collectors and Connoisseurs', examines an area not commonly thought of in terms of Hong Kong consumption. However, art collectors, as he shows, are consumers *par excellence*, in their fascination for and immersion in the art objects they own, as well as in the careful intricacies of the social display of their art and their sophistication. One aspect of this chapter is its exploration of 'Chineseness'. As Wear implies, collecting Chinese art is a way of asserting an enduring cultural identity that may in some sense be a fiction. However, through their consumption, these aficionados are attempting to make this fiction fact.

Chapter 7, Helen Hau-ling Cheng's 'Consuming a Dream: Homes in Advertisements and Imagination in Contemporary Hong Kong', is in a sense a continuation of the analysis of Chapter 2: it concerns the dream of not merely renting but of owning a home of one's own. Cheng begins her analysis by noting the fact that in Hong Kong, perhaps unlike anywhere else, property is advertised on the front page of newspapers; but these advertisements do not show the actual flats to be bought, but rather the sea and mountains. Why? Cheng's analysis takes her from the advertisements themselves, to interviews with advertising designers, to interviews with prospective buyers of flats. She eventually arrives at the conclusion that exterior space, in all-too-cramped Hong Kong, suits the dream if not necessarily the reality of being 'high class'.

Chapter 8, Sea-ling Cheng's 'Consuming Places in Hong Kong: Experiencing Lan Kwai Fong', examines the diverse meanings of that upscale

drinking district for those who consume within it. Lan Kwai Fong has been seen by most Hong Kong people as a place of exotic marginality: a place for *gwailou* 鬼佬 [white foreigners], gays, trendy bars and casual sex. However, Lan Kwai Fong, Cheng argues, is not a single place but a multiplicity of places, seen in different ways by those in different social positions, whether Chinese or expatriate, rich or poor, young or old, straight or gay, artist or mainstream. This diversity of perceptions, she argues, puts Lan Kwai Fong on the cutting edge of consumption of the 'modern' and 'global' in Hong Kong, but in another sense epitomizes Hong Kong consumption today.

In Chapter 9, Joseph Bosco analyses 'Hong Kong's McDonald's Snoopy Craze'. In autumn 1998, McDonald's restaurants in Hong Kong staged a promotion of Snoopy dolls that erupted into a craze: news stories flashed around the world about how Hong Kong consumers were going wild over a mere plastic doll. In this chapter, Bosco argues that the most widely offered explication for the craze, that consumers sought to collect Snoopy dolls as economic speculation, is inadequate. He shows how the Snoopy craze is better rationalized through a range of cultural and social factors, including the fondness for *gungjai* 公仔 [dolls] in Hong Kong, the immense social pressure generated by fads, and, perhaps most important, gift-giving, an aspect of consumption heretofore not much considered in the Snoopy craze and in Hong Kong consumption as a whole.

In Chapter 10, Gordon Mathews examines 'Cultural Identity and Consumption in Post-colonial Hong Kong'. Mathews begins by seeking to expand the concept of consumption; it is, he argues, not only a matter of consuming goods, but also information, ideas and identities. He then discusses the meanings of 'Chinese' and 'Hongkongese' in Hong Kong; he argues that whereas 'Chineseness' is thought of as belonging to a particular cultural identity, 'Hongkongese' means, in part, belonging to the global cultural supermarket, from which one can consume unencumbered by any particular cultural identity. However, this may be ending with the resumption of Chinese control over Hong Kong; as Hong Kong returns to cultural Chineseness, what will this mean for its consumptive future?

As earlier noted, these chapters provide a far from complete picture of Hong Kong consumption — we would have liked to have included ten more chapters, on such topics as Chinese restaurants, electronic goods, the Internet, the Japanese influence on Hong Kong, and consumption and tourism, among many other aspects of consumption. However, this volume does touch upon the major aspects of consumption in Hong Kong, and in this sense provides a start for an academic enterprise that we believe to be essential to understanding what Hong Kong is today.

❑ Notes

1. Local studies of consumption published in Chinese can be broadly grouped under three main categories: critique of mass culture and cultural studies, the study of local culture and local identity, and the study of urban culture. Tsang's seminal article, 'Hong Kong's Last Tango', originally published in 1976, was an application of the Frankfurt School's cultural critique to the study of the commodification of sex and pornographic culture in Hong Kong (Tsang 1976). Cultural critique (or the critique of everyday life) became an important component of student radicalism in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Inspired by Frankfurt School Marxism and Stuart Hall's Marxist critique of ideology and popular culture, student activists saw cultural studies and cultural critique as a means to launch their attacks on Hong Kong's capitalist economy and colonial regime (see Lui 1983 for a collection of essays representing this approach to popular culture and consumption).

   Partly triggered by the development and growth of cultural studies as an academic discipline and partly a response to the growing influence of media culture and mass consumption, there was a proliferation of research on local popular culture in the late 1980s and early 1990s (for some useful collections of articles, see for example Leung 1993; Sze and Ng 1993; Sinn 1995; and various issues of the *Heunggong Mahnfa Yihngau/Hong Kong Cultural Studies Bulletin* 香港文化研究). In this new wave of cultural studies, the topics covered and the approaches adopted to study popular culture are significantly more diverse than those in the 1970s. This new wave of cultural studies was developed at a time when Hong Kong people encountered the 1997 question. As a result, the study of culture blended nicely with the study of local identity (see, for example, Turner and Ngan 1995).

   The third category is slightly different from the first two in the sense that it carries a heavier emphasis on urbanism and city life (see Chan 1986; Lui and Ohashi 1989; and Yau 1997). Another work, from still a different perspective, is Wong's study of Hong Kong's advertising culture (1999).

   This extended note is intended to illustrate the relevance and irrelevance of local studies of popular culture to our volume on consumption. While much has been done to analyse the emergence of Hong Kong's local popular culture (and concomitantly a local identity) in Chinese — and indeed, several of the contributors to this literature are represented in this volume — few attempts have been made to probe consumption in depth. In this sense, this volume represents a new development not simply in its language, but more in the range and depth of its ethnographic explorations of consumption.
2. The claim that high professorial salaries are due to the peculiarities of social class in Hong Kong has been disputed by one initial reader of this introduction, who says that these high salaries are largely an accident of history. Hong Kong professors are treated as civil servants and are paid accordingly. This salary was actually not so comparatively high, by worldwide standards, until the 1990s, when cost-of-living adjustments coupled with housing benefits, in the

context of Hong Kong inflation, significantly elevated the professorial pay package, since the cost of housing itself was fuelling inflation. It should also be noted that Hong Kong professors are paid on a uniform scale, unlike in the United States, for example, where payment varies by discipline. Thus, the standard salary paid to a humanities professor in Hong Kong might seem extraordinarily high, but that salary paid to a business professor might seem low compared to what that person could earn in the private sector. Despite these points, which certainly have validity, we stand by our argument in the text.

3. It seems that the property developers have made a fortune out of Hong Kong people's eagerness to acquire their own properties. The popular psychology behind Hong Kong people's dream of buying their own property is very complex. This dream is partly a matter of speculation — many Hong Kong people from different walks of life have been tempted by the booming property market, thinking that they can secure huge profits out of buying and selling (Lui 1995). This is also an outcome of a population with a migrant background settling down in a local economy. Parents of the post-war baby boomers found their homes in Hong Kong through making their living during Hong Kong's transition to an industrial city, and securing a permanent settlement for their families through the government's project of mass public housing. The dream of owning one's own home is an extension of this long road of building families in Hong Kong. See Chapter 7 of this volume for a more detailed discussion of many of these points.

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