1 Consuming Asians: Ideas and Issues

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> …and, above all, crowds of Asian consumers at McDonald's or with the ubiquitous mobile phone in hand.[1]

Since mid-1997, most of the hitherto rapidly expanding economies of East and Southeast Asia have been brought down to different stages of economic recession and crisis; the possible exceptions being Taiwan, which continues to enjoy economic growth, and the People's Republic of China (PRC), which is experiencing an economic slowdown not amounting to recession. Starting with the tumultuous devaluation of the Thai currency, the currency crisis spread to other Asian economies in quick succession, particularly those of South Korea, Indonesia and Malaysia. Until this point, the first impression of foreigners and the first expression for locals, of the benefits of rapid economic growth in these countries had been the same: sustained economic growth had translated into a rapid expansion of consumerism as part of daily life, as illustrated by the opening quote which describes a street-scene in pre-crisis Asia. Undoubtedly the economic crisis has now decreased the level of consumption throughout the region.

However, it should be noted that not only have the effects of the crisis been unevenly distributed spatially, both within a given nation and across nations, they have also been unequally distributed across class divisions and in relation to the economic positions of individuals. Thus, even in the midst of economic crisis there were individuals, all over the region, who were able to capitalise on the radical price reductions brought about by the crisis and to accumulate desirable goods and services at a fraction of the prices during boom times. For example, in Indonesia, the worst-affected economy in the crisis, the radical devaluation of the Indonesian currency against the US dollar enabled individuals who had

dollars either to pay off their mortgages outright or to sharply reduce the period of payment. To the extent that the crisis favoured those with either external incomes and/or cash, the purchasing of goods, particularly positional goods, continued, and the symbolic value of such goods was preserved among their owners. With the progressive stabilisation of the affected economies, beginning in early 1999, the sharp decline of consumption in the early days of the crisis will undoubtedly recover in step with economic recovery in each country.

Indeed, by the time of the 1997 economic crisis in Asia, the broad-based expansion of consumption had already been established in most of the affected locations in industrialised East and Southeast Asia, with the possible exception of Indonesia. However, the expansion had been unevenly distributed. Thus, with the exception of those who were rich enough to afford everything they desired, all social strata struggled to keep up with acquisition of objects which were within their respective 'normative' horizons of expectation. These horizons kept changing and expanding, adding new 'needs' and 'desires', and bringing additional stresses to everyday life. Daily life had been transformed into different 'lifestyles' by the consumer goods and services which marked out the new rich in Asia, a group constituted by the new class of businessmen and the emergent middle class of professionals and bureaucrats (Robison and Goodman 1996). Desire for a new lifestyle of consumerism among the new middle class was a phenomenon spawned not only by rapid economic growth in contemporary Asia but also by the global expansion of consumerism.

This collection of writings on consumption in different Asian countries has, therefore, three explicit aims. First, to provide empirical analysis of the changing objects and levels of consumption practices in various Asian countries, which are at different stages or levels of economic development and integration into global capitalism, from such low-income countries as the People's Republic of China and Indonesia to high-income ones like Japan and Singapore. Second, to examine the cultural/ideological discourse that the expansion of consumption engendered in different locations in Asia, across class, generational and ethnic divisions. Third, to engage conceptually the very extensive and continuously expanding social science literature spawned by the global expansion of consumption. The empirical instances analysed will provide opportunities to examine many of the prevailing concepts. For example, different facets of the idea of 'globalisation' are confronted in different chapters: 'globalisation as Americanisation'; the tension in the 'global/local' cultural development; the 'indigenisation' of globally marketed products. The entry point into this collection is, therefore, through a review of the

extensive literature on consumerism, teasing out some of its themes and concepts which engage, explicitly or implicitly, the contributors to this collection. This global phenomenon is reflected in the explosion of social science literature on consumption as a field of investigation.

The phenomenon of consumption

By the late 1970s, with the vast expansion in globalised capitalism, consumption as a phenomenon could no longer be subsumed under the mantle of production (Friedman 1994:4–11). Consumption expansion had by then generated fundamentally different ways in which advanced capitalist societies were organised. This 'reconfiguration' has been conceptualised, in rather exaggerated manner, as a 'new' mode of domination: 'the substitution of seduction for repression, public relations for policing, advertising for authority, needs-creation for norm-imposition. What ties individuals to society today is their activities as consumers, their life organised around consumption' (Baumann 1987: 168 quoted in Warde 1994:59), Or in more modest terms:

> consumption is not a by-product of industrial production but a self-generating economy and way of life no longer limited to the 'family unit' but now characterised by highly fluid and heterogeneous channels of consumption that, in turn, are symptoms of important changes in the very conception of 'production' and 'market'.
>
> (Chambers 1990:47–8)

Arguably, it is in the context of its effects and changes to capitalism that consumption as a subject for analysis in its own right finally emerged within the social sciences.

Pioneering works in the field of consumerism research were often grounded within the conceptual boundaries of specific social science disciplines and traditions.[2] Rapid developments in the field, as part of the investigation of popular culture, were aided by the emergence of a loosely conceptualised discipline of 'Cultural Studies', which spawned numerous journals in rapid succession.[3] Cultural Studies itself blossomed rapidly from its beginnings—in the English speaking world, from the pioneering works of Raymond Williams through the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies—with the popularisation of several 'post-phenomena'[4]: postmodernism, poststructuralism and postcolonialism.[5] From mid-1970s, writings on consumption have proliferated and they continue unabated.

This proliferation is determined in part by the 'idea' of consumption as a phenomenon. Visually it is ubiquitous and indubitable, but conceptually its 'unity' is highly problematic. Each item in the constantly expanding array of goods and services which modern urban individuals and households have to consume routinely in order to reproduce their everyday life is surrounded by its own systems of production, distribution, marketing, procurement and, finally, consumption. Each of these systems is in turn constituted by its own multifaceted and segmental economies in an increasingly globalised capitalism.

Take the manufacturing of clothes, for example. The production of a particular garment is no longer located at a site within its local market catchment area but may be dispersed across different sites around the globe: an American clothing company may buy cotton from Africa, transform it into fabric in Switzerland, design the garment in New York, cut and sew it in one of an increasing number of locations in Asia. The finished garment is re-exported and distributed to its global market locations, including relatively affluent Asian ones. At these market locations, internationally organised marketing and advertising agencies work with local media and direct retailers to move the item to its final destination, that is, consumption by a particular individual or household. It is possible to analyse every point in this circuit from production to consumption. Multiplying these possibilities with the seemingly endless items of consumption will explain why social science literature on consumption continues to proliferate now that it has emerged from the dominance of production analysis.

The difficulties of examining every item of consumption on its own terms is one reason why much of the analysis has moved to the more generalised level of examining particular industries related to consumption. For example, the different ideological effects of the advertising industry and its techniques of interpellating individual consumers have been subjected to feminist, semiotic and psychoanalytic analysis (Williamson 1978; Wernick 1991; Nava, Blake, MacRury and Richards 1997). The retail sector as a whole has been studied through analyses of 'shopping' as a social, cultural and economic activity (Falk and Campbell 1997), of shopping mall as a location of consumption of dreams and desires, abetted by architectural designs and display technologies,[6] and of the interactions between sales-person and customers in the realisation of sale (Peretz 1995). All these retailing processes may be studied at a generalised level as part of the economy or examined through the routes travelled by specific items of consumption.[7]

A central concern of the analysis of particular items of consumption is the place of these objects in the identity construction of its consumers.

At its most elementary level, as found in market research literature, this concern is conceptually expressed in the idea of the 'investment' of self in objects (Belk 1998). At a more complex level, the concern is with broader cultural strategies 'of constitution of meaningful existence' (Friedman 1994:1), such as in Baudrillard's (1981) conceptualisation of consumption of the 'sign-value' of objects as an element in the process of identity formation in postmodernity.

The positive spin on the idea of consumption as identity formation contrasts sharply with earlier writings on consumption. For example, social scientists had been inclined to adopt the 1950s' (Packard 1957) image of consumers as easily manipulated, hoodwinked into buying products, useful or otherwise, by false promises emblazoned in advertisements; consumers were conceived as 'the malleable wax to the thumbprint of either commerce or the law' (Hebdige 1993:83). Such, for example, had been the Marxist tradition, which saw mass consumption as the instrument of capital which transformed working individuals into consumers in order to further its own interest—capital accumulation (Ewen 1976; Haug 1986). The classic statement for such an argument has to be, 'The man with leisure has to accept what the culture manufacturers offer him', from Horkheimer and Adorno of the founding generation of the Frankfurt School ([1944] 1972:124).[8]

In contrast, postmodernist writers project a different image of the consumer as one who actively uses mass-produced and mass-marketed commodities in ways other than those desired or dictated by the producers as projected through advertisements. Consumption is to be treated 'as a process by which artefacts are not simply bought and "consumed", but given meaning through their active incorporation in people's lives' (Jackson 1993:209). The innovative ways of using undistinguished mass-production goods are conceptualised as 'styles' which are expressive of the individualities/identities of the users. In the construction of lifestyles, the use-value of an object of consumption is secondary to the object's signifying effects, to its 'sign-value', organised around what Hebdige calls, 'a theology of appearances' (1993:89). Usages that go 'against the grain' are particularly highlighted as 'subversive' or 'aestheticised', as part of the 'cultural politics' of everyday life. Within this cultural politics, beyond the individual styles, social collectives are deemed to be constituted of a 'series of narrowly defined markets, targets, consumption, taste and status groups' (Hebdige 1993:88).

Significantly, the reconceptualisation of the consumer from 'passive automaton' to 'active creator' of new cultural meanings has not eliminated debate on 'morality' of consumption. Among the many forms that

this morality debate take are those that turn on the, by now, old distinction between 'high' and 'low' cultures, between the moral 'spirituality' of 'high' art that often implies an asceticism in the face of material plenty against the immorality of the unquenchable 'materialism' of 'low' art. Promoters of high art conceive Art as a medium of intellectual/ spiritual reflection, a process that requires a long period of specialized training, of 'cultivation', both in its production and appreciation/ critique. According to Miller, such a stance is based on a Kantian perspective which 'is one of refusal, a foregoing of the immediate pleasure of the sensual and the evident in favour of a cultivated and abstracted appropriation through an achieved understanding' (1987:149). The best, if not the only, concession that these promoters of Art are willing to offer to popular culture is that it is not entirely devoid of aesthetic qualities, but its aesthetic is borrowed from Art and in the re-presentation of the appropriated aesthetic to the 'masses', the original Art is devalued (Macdonald 1957). Popular culture is thus seen as Art emptied of its 'intellectual/spiritual' elements the better to provide it with new meanings so as to re-embed it in the various media of mass consumption: product design, advertisement and other modes of 'entertainment', i.e., the 'capitalist cultural industry'. It should be readily apparent that the argument against the mass circulation of Art is one which privileges what Bourdieu calls the 'happy few' (1984:31), while the masses are condemned to the consumption of objects of 'vulgarised' aesthetics (Whiteley 1994), which depend only on immediate sensory perceptions. Acquisition of the unending proliferation of objects of consumption, repackaged with borrowed and devalued Art, is then conceptualised as the unreflective, excessive materialist orientation of modern life—'a preference for immediate entertainment, pleasure, the gut feeling, a regard for the sensual and the representational' (Miller 1987:150)—at the cost of tradition, spirituality and other supposed moral high grounds.

On the contrary, defenders of the popular inevitably invoke, amongst other things, critical class analysis of the rhetoric of Art (Bourdieu 1984). Against the background of electronic mass circulation and its effects, 'cultivated' artists and critics are seen as insignificant and impotent:

> What artist can compete with advertising when it comes to visual impact, ubiquity, effect and general exposure? What use is critical interpretation of a text or a semiotic reading of an image in a world where information never stays in place, where information, communication, images are instantly produced, transformed,

> discarded in a process of endless complexification, polyphony, supercession and flux?
>
> (Hebdige 1993:83)

Thus, against the view that mass circulation is a process of aesthetic degeneration, defenders of the popular conceptualise the embedding of artistic elements in everyday life—the mass circulation of Art itself—as a process of 'democratisation'. The consumer is in turn reconceptualised as active participants in the creation of social and cultural meanings; the consumption of lifestyles becomes a process of 'aestheticisation' of everyday life. An explicit formulation of this defence of consumerism is the configuration of what Warde (1994:69) characterised as a 'heroic consumer': 'consumer culture uses images, signs and symbolic goods that summon up dreams, desires and fantasies which suggest romantic authenticity and emotional fulfilment in narcissistically pleasing oneself' wherein 'people open themselves up to a wider range of sensations and emotional experiences' (Featherstone 1991:27 and 24).[9] Again, spirituality and consumerist materialism are drawn together. However, instead of being diametrically opposed orientations where consumerism is the death of spirituality, consumerism is rendered as the facilitator of spirituality.

This brief explication of the literature on consumption and consumerism in late capitalism in the developed West has resonance in the globalised economies and societies of Asia. However, local conditions in Asia will undoubtedly impact on the phenomenon, giving it new accents, meanings and nuances.

Consumption in the Asian context

> It is as consumers that the new rich of Asia have attracted an interest of almost cargo-cult proportions in the West. They constitute the new markets for Western products: processed foods, computer software, educational services and films and TV soaps. They are the new tourists, bringing foreign exchange in hard times.
>
> (Robison and Goodman 1996:1)

This statement was made before the mid-1997 economic crisis. Undoubtedly, the crisis has seriously hindered further expansion, even reversing the existing level of consumption as a significant proportion of the population in the region has become unemployed and risked sinking into poverty. In Singapore, an economy that had largely withstood

the regional economic devastation, unemployment was 4.5 per cent in the third quarter of 1998, while in Indonesia, 50 per cent of the total population of 230 million was poverty stricken by the end of 1998. Yet there is no denying that there had been rapid economic growth in East and Southeast Asia in the past two to three decades. In every nation, the new industrial wage-earning, urban population could not avoid consuming mass-produced goods as they continued to increase their labour power. Every urban individual and household, whatever the income level, was likely to consume a range of what might be called 'discretionary' consumption goods that had become constitutive elements of their everyday life. For example, in Singapore, low-income families living in one-room rented public housing flats were rarely without such household durables as TVs, VCRs and telephones. However, the roots of the culture of consumerism remained relatively shallow in the region, unlike the situation in the developed West or Japan. Reflecting this shallowness was the fact that many Asian governments, before the economic crisis, were still using as measures of their respective administrative achievements, the number of TV sets, telephones and refrigerators in the households, i.e., goods that have become taken-for-granted 'necessities' in developed nations. This shallowness was significant in several ways.[10]

First, tangible improvement in the material conditions of the population had been, to varying degree, a cornerstone of governments in the region; it constituted the 'performance' criterion for political legitimacy. Second, class divisions, an emergent phenomenon because of late industrialisation, were becoming increasingly apparent, as evidenced by differing capacities to consume (Chua and Tan 1999). Third, in each nation, there remains a significant population segment who have lived through underdevelopment, whose collective memories of material deprivation and thrifty ways are still fresh. Their moral/ideological position on savings has made them resistant to the rapid expansion of consumerism. In addition, this group often sees the arrival of consumerist culture as the consequence of the penetration and contamination of traditional cultural practices by 'Western', particularly American, cultures. Thus, the moral debate on consumption has often been characterised as a 'generational conflict', supposedly between the deprived generation who embody thrift as a traditional value and the affluent and fast-spending, 'Westernised' generation.

Before the economic crisis, each of these three elements had received much public attention and generated its own social and political discourse on consumption in East and Southeast Asian nations. Together they framed the then prevailing public discourse of consumerism in these countries.

State and consumerism

Until the late 1980s, the governments of East and Southeast Asia were all at best semi-democratic, if not authoritarian. In all instances, one 'covenant' between the governments and their respective peoples was that of improved standards of living in exchange for restraints on political freedom; the more authoritarian the regime the more essential is high-economic growth to rationalise it, if overt repression were to be avoided. It was, therefore, in the interests of these governments to encourage expansion of consumption, as evidence of their successes in generating and maintaining economic growth.

Yet, ironically, with the exception of Hong Kong where the flaunting of wealth in conspicuous public display was a regular affair drawing little public approbation (*Asia Magazine,* 19–21 January, 1996),[11] the same Asian governments concurrently emphasised the need for restraint on consumerist lifestyles for several reasons. The first and most immediate reason was that these governments encouraged high savings among their respective populations as part of the process of capital formation and reduced dependency on international borrowing. For example, Taiwan and Singapore are among the nations with the highest capital reserves in the world. In Singapore, stringent conditions for issuing of credit cards and unsecured personal loans are still in place; for example, credit cards are not issued to any individual whose monthly income is less than Singapore $2000 (in the current economic downturn this is equivalent to the salary level of young professionals with several years of working experience). Thus, it is important to note here that excessive borrowing of foreign funds by private-sector enterprises, which is a significant cause of the current economic crisis, has little to do with private individuals' debts resulting from excessive consumption.

Second, consumerist culture might lead to 'excessive' materialistic orientation, generating insatiable demands for which a government might be held responsible if it were unable to provide. A manifestation of this was people's complaints against ever-increasing costs of living while simultaneously expanding and upgrading their consumer choices. For example, in Singapore, in the election year of 1996–7, cost-of-living increases were capitalised on by opposition parties and turned into a political issue (*Straits Times,* 7 August, 1996).

Third, 'excessive' consumerism of those who were economically successful inevitably served as a reminder to the lower-income groups of their own deprivations, thus exposing and emphasising class divisions, potentially generating social disunity and class conflict. For example, in the aftermath of the riots on 27 July, 1996 that followed the

government's storming of the Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI) headquarters in Jakarta, a political scientist suggested that the rioters were partly made up of unemployed urban youth. According to him, these youths were 'living in an urban environment increasingly impregnated by market advertising and consumer lifestyles' and had therefore acquired 'a cumulative sense of severe deprivation' that could be 'easily exploited, motivating them to acts of desperation and destruction'. He further suggested that it was this concern that prompted the then highly authoritarian Soeharto government in Indonesia to appeal to its rich citizens to adopt 'simple lifestyles' (Juwono Sudarsono quoted in *Straits Times,* 8 August, 1996).[12] For the above reasons, among others, a moral/ ideological discourse against 'excess' was generated and circulated by governments, particularly in Southeast Asia and Korea, with the hope of keeping demands in check.

Finally, many of the Asian countries maintained an anti-welfarist administrative stance either because of economic underdevelopment or explicit ideological commitment. This stance acted to restrain expansion of consumption. Without consumption subsidies through welfarism, individuals and households were forced to purchase at substantial costs certain goods and services which are often provided as a public service in developed nations. For example, in the absence of adequate publicly-funded child-care and elderly-care facilities, affluent middle-class families often engaged live-in domestic maids from poorer neighbouring countries such as the Philippines and Indonesia to take care of the young and the old, along with other domestic chores. These services could consume a substantial portion of a family's disposable income, significantly reducing its discretionary expenditure. For many families the cost of such services meant they had to take on additional paid work, such as doing overtime or moonlighting in supplementary employment. In turn, these additional work commitments were hailed by the governments concerned as signs of 'Asian' ethics of hard work, in contrast to growing dependency in the welfare states of the West. With the current economic crisis, the hiring of foreign maids has become less affordable. This has led to wage cuts and lay-offs, which often also means the maids being sent home. Thus, those who were already among the lowest-paid workers in the region suffer the most. In one instance, for example, an employment agency transferred its placement fees entirely onto the Indonesian women who were seeking employment in Singapore, in contrast to the 'normal' practice of charging the employer.

In sum, official discourses on consumption were always ambivalent: concurrently promoting expansion of consumption as the basis of political legitimacy and also exhorting restraint for fear of political

and social disquiet. However, this ambivalence had very identifiable outer limits. Discouraging consumerism among local citizens could potentially undermine the viability of the extensive retail sector which had been directly encouraged by several of the governments, i.e., through land-use allocations for shopping centres, which was most apparent in the cases of Singapore, Hong Kong and Bangkok, Thailand. Although supposedly aimed at tourists, these shopping centres inevitably also stimulated, and catered to, the desires of the local population. With the tourist dollar shrinking, particularly after the burst of the Japanese economic bubble in the early 1990s, the retail sectors throughout major tourist cities in Asia have been in recession for the past several years.[13]

The retail-sector recession has, of course, deepened as a result of the economic crisis that has afflicted the entire region since mid-1997. In addition to the absence of tourist dollars, the respective domestic populations have also drastically reduced their discretionary expenditure because of actual unemployment or the fear of it. As the extensive retail sector constitutes a very significant part of the domestic economy, the need to prop it up has led all the governments in the region, with the possible exception of Indonesia, to encourage those who still have steady employment to spend their money rather than save excessively, albeit with varying levels of success (the private savings rate in Malaysia stood at 40 per cent in the midst of current economic crisis (*Straits Times,* 18 December, 1998)). To stimulate consumption, the Singapore and Hong Kong tourist boards and their retail organisations intensified the promotion, throughout Asia, of their respective annual month-long 'Great Sale'. While in Malaysia, the government had reduced the minimum level of monthly credit card payment from 15 to 5 per cent (*Straits Times,* 18 December, 1998). In general, the crisis-stricken economies need to stimulate consumption to kick-start the domestic economy which may, in turn, provide, at least symbolically, a sense of confidence in the economies themselves. The epitome of the need to stimulate consumption is to be found in the insistence that Japan must aggressively 'stimulate' domestic consumption in order to help the ailing economies of Asia, including its own. Indeed, one of the obstacles to recovery has been the high level of intra-Asian trade, as the ailing economies have no financial means to continue to import and consume each other's products (Park 1998). Thus, across the region, the 'traditional' morality of savings is to be sacrificed in order to save capitalism in Asia! And government exhortations and administrative strategies to restrain consumption have given way to a drive to stimulate consumption among those who have not been adversely affected.

The 'curse' of Westernisation

Whereas the political Other of Taiwan, and now of Hong Kong, continues to be the PRC, the official discourse of Southeast Asian countries, especially in Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia, has long been a trope of being 'anti-West' in general and anti-American in particular. The primary motivation behind this anti-Westernism is political. The emphasis on liberal democracy based on individual rights in Western developed nations constitutes an ideological challenge to the authoritarian and semi-democratic states in Asia. The political differences are often discursively formulated, in Asia, in terms of the 'Otherness' of the West; thereby creating the space for a discourse of cultural 'difference' between the 'East' and the 'West', in which the latter is criticised as an 'unhealthy' cultural penetration into 'wholesome' cultures of the former (Chua 1996). The bridgehead of this 'insidious invasion' is supposedly in the 'Western culture' that is inscribed in products imported from the West. This 'Asian' cultural critique can be gleaned from the difference with which goods from Japan and the West, particularly America, are ideologically treated in the importing nations.

Asia is the market not only for Western but also, very significantly, for Japanese consumer goods. Yet, with the exception of Taiwan (Ching 1994), there is no anti-Japanism in the consumer cultural discourse, as there is anti-Americanism. The difference in attitudes is due only in part to the 'cultural' contents of the goods imported from the two countries.

In general, the bulk of Japanese imports to the rest of Asia are identified with 'technology' items, for example, household goods such as cars, TVs, refrigerators, radios and other electronic goods. Japanese technological 'superiority' is recognised in these consumer goods. However, they are seen as instruments without 'cultural' substance. For example, as in the case of TV or different kinds of audio-receiving or audio-recording instruments, the substantive TV and music programmes for these instruments, in which cultural contents are embedded, are overwhelmingly dominated by American products, not only in Asia but globally.[14] It is to the 'cultural' contents that the anti-Western and anti-American sentiments are ideologically directed.

Mass-entertainment programmes are seen as the carriers and harbingers of Western/American 'liberal' values, especially that of individualism. The programmes are deemed to reflect the moral 'laxity' of liberalism, where individual rights and self-interest rule, with such disastrous consequences as high divorce rates, legal protection for criminals over the rights of crime victims, sexual promiscuity and drug abuse. While

these may be common themes of films, TV programmes and popular music from the West, and particularly America, they are read as reflecting the 'reality' that is America; i.e., a land where criminals are sometimes turned into folk heroes and promiscuity is celebrated. The official fear is ostensibly that liberal individualism will make inroads into the cultural sphere of local Asian populations, leading them away from local 'traditional' values and undermining local social cohesion. The discourse of value conflict reached an apogee in its being reformulated as a 'clash of civilisations' by the American professor of political science Samuel Huntington (1993; see also, Mahbubani 1994). In this mutually 'demonising' discourse on cultural difference, 'America' has a central symbolic place. It is, on the one hand, a place of attraction for populations which are deprived of democratically guaranteed freedoms. On the other hand, it is a place of 'moral decadence' for governments which are reluctant, even afraid, to institutionalise the same freedoms. 'America' is thus both an object of attraction and repulsion.

That the anti-West/anti-American discourse in Asia *vis-à-vis* the critique of consumerism has been somewhat self-serving on the part of local governments, regardless of economic conditions, is quite obvious. The conservative values that these governments juxtaposed against liberalism have the potential effect of generating support for the political status quo, thus benefiting the government.[15] While such official readings of Western/American popular cultural products obviously do not give serious consideration to the complex character of local reception (Chua 1998), they are not without public resonance, otherwise their ideological efficacy will be very limited indeed. Until the economic crisis that has engendered in the entire population in the region a sense of economic uncertainty, support for official condemnation of emergent 'decadence' in the cultural sphere had come largely from the generations who had just emerged from economic underdevelopment themselves, and the target of their criticism was the later generations who grew up in conditions of relative prosperity. However, current economic uncertainties and the difficulties of finding and keeping employment may have given the hitherto 'affluent' generations the same sobering lessons of the need to be thrifty, much to the detriment, as mentioned earlier, of the domestic retail sector.

Generational divide: the consuming youth

Against the background of economic deprivation of the period before rapid economic growth in the nations in question and until the recent economic crisis, the youth of East and Southeast Asia had been, relative

to their elders, 'children of affluence'. Their exposure to and participation in globalised consumerism had, in the eyes of the elders, transformed them into exemplars of lifestyle consumers, inscribed with 'Western decadence'.

Generally speaking, the period between teenagehood and marriage —'youth' —is a window for unlimited consumption, constrained only by financial circumstance. Without concerns for 'big' ticket items like a house and unburdened with familial concerns, one can freely spend on oneself. The body thus emerges as the primary locus of consumption, with body adornment its primary modality. Consumption patterns of youth are thus highly visible and make an easy target for criticisms. There is a tendency to criticise youth for excesses in their 'yuppy' lifestyles; togged out in 'designer' or 'branded' clothes and accessories and spending time and money in discos and expensive foreign restaurants, a condition only aggravated by stints of living and studying in foreign lands in the case of returned students.

This criticism of 'excesses' was at the same time both economic and moral/ideological. The older generation was inclined to suggest that they were 'frugal' by attitude or character in contrast to the profligacy of the new youth. Yet, the fact is that the older generations lived in underdeveloped conditions in which 'poverty' and 'frugality' were indistinguishable phenomenon; frugality was the only response to poverty, to force of circumstance. The critique of the old was thus a classic case of ideology formation: 'naturalising' the historical response of being frugal, making a virtue out of necessity. The question, of course, remains: Would they have been frugal if they had the relative wealth of the younger generations?

Under the cloud of moralising criticisms, the question remains unanswered as to just how spendthrift were the new wage-earning populations in Asia. As an empirical question it requires serious research. For example, in two newspaper-financed national surveys, Singaporeans as a whole and youths in particular were found to be more responsible about money than the popular image of 'excessive' consumption promoted by the media itself would suggest. In one survey, it was found that if Singaporeans desired a consumer item but had no money at hand: 67 per cent would save up money before making the purchase; 53 per cent would forget about buying altogether; no more than 20 per cent would borrow from family members, friends or banks to make the purchase or pay by instalments (*The New Paper,* 15 May, 1994). In another, it was discovered that among the most popular jeans among Singaporean youth were not the high-priced designer jeans but the low-end Gordiano jeans made in Hong Kong (*Straits Times,* 31 July, 1995). In one survey

of South Koreans, more than 90 per cent of respondents thought that excessive consumption was a serious social problem in Korea, but more than 80 per cent of the same respondents said that they were not excessive consumers themselves![16] At an abstract level, applicable to all the Asian nations investigated in this book, the question concerns the actual rate of change of people's attitude towards money: How quickly do people move from being frugal, an attitude borne of economic underdevelopment, to being spendthrift in newly industrialising nations? It would appear from the Singapore example that the frugality has more staying power than is assumed by the gatekeepers of social morality, from government to media.

The ideological/moral criticism of excesses had a 'cultural' as well as an economic element, directed at the supposed 'Westernisation' or 'Americanisation' of Asian youth. This can be best illustrated by examining youth fashion. At a very general level, a perennial question regarding youth fashion is: Why do youth always dress to 'shock' their elders, without any apparent understanding that 'shock' is a mechanism through which teenagers define themselves against their parents, thus acquiring identity as 'youth'? A second issue is parents' scepticism regarding youth's claim to 'individuality' through the way they dress; they point out that the latter in fact wear similar clothes and are thus conforming to a code rather than breaking away with individual styles. Such criticism fails to engage with a central characteristic and dynamic of 'fashion'. In fashion, consumers' desire to be different is a limited desire of individualising *within* a trend. Few desire to be totally different from the others, because this would mean reducing oneself to being 'weird' rather than 'fashionable'. Fashion is necessarily a trend, which is constituted by mass participation. To be 'fashionable' is to be with the trend, with the crowd. Individuality is expressed through the way fashionable items are configured on one's own body rather than by breaking with the fashionable crowd.

Regarding 'Americanisation', to the extent that the fashionable items are largely derived from 'styles' found in the US-dominated globalised popular culture industries, such as TV, movies and popular music, youth has been criticised for 'aping' the West. Evidence of this 'mimicking' is still readily found in the easy availability in stores that specialise in a wide spectrum of items of what may be called 'American street fashion'. One reading of this mimicking, preferred by the older generations, is that it is symptomatic of cultural confusion of youth who are lost in terms of their own essential identity as 'Asians'. However, there is little to suggest this supposed 'confusion' outside the fashion sphere. Indeed, youth in Asia seem always to have been very stable and socially responsible.

In most of the Asian nations in question, youth delinquency rates have been never particularly high, while rates of passing stringent examinations in the highly competitive education systems have remained high, if not increased over recent decades. Even in Indonesia, where there were persistent high unemployment rates among youth, public order was not routinely disrupted by confused and disgruntled youth. Their wrath was apparently stored and reserved for corrupt politicians, being unleashed during the economic crisis to bring down the Soeharto regime, and instead of being confused, they constitute the moral force in the sustained agitation for fundamental political change.

An alternative interpretation of the lifestyles of youth, including fashion consumption, may be offered here. The 'identity confusion' argument is intelligible only against a background assumption that identity formation and stability is entirely dependent on a notion of unchanging 'tradition'. However, the youth are drawn elsewhere. Youth in Asia, as in other parts of the world, draw from an 'image bank' that is internationalised through popular mass media. The reference point in the imaginary is, therefore, a globalised image of youth rather than local cultural images. It is the global rather than the local that provides their identity as 'youth'. However, consumption of this global image unavoidably passes through local cultural and political conditions.

Thus, in particular instances, where the spaces of everyday life are institutionally highly administered within reinvented local 'traditions' aimed at eliciting conformity from the populations, as is the case in Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and Taiwan (Chun 1996), America can and has been transformed in the local ideological Imaginary as an icon of 'freedom'; the land of freedom, where individuality and differences rule, and are indeed celebrated. The attractiveness of American street fashion continues to be filtered through the suppressed desires of the Asians in question. In this sense, debates on 'Americanisation' in the cultural sphere have more to do with ideological contests within the Asian states themselves than with what is 'really' going on in America. Consumed through local semiotics, American products have been used to express resistance to local repressions. 'America' as an imaginary terrain is but a metaphor in the contest for freedom versus restraints in the body politics of Asian nations.

The impact of the economic crisis

As a result of the economic crisis that began in mid-1997, the three features discussed above have been focused on somewhat less in public

discourse as individual citizens turn their attention to actual or possible unemployment and affected countries become preoccupied with macroeconomic deflation and prolonged recession. The much-touted 'performances' of many governments in the region have been exposed as a veneer laid over massive corruption and nepotism leading, as the veneer was stripped away, to political change, even crisis. For example, in the year between mid-1997 and mid-1998, South Korea elected the veteran opposition party into the presidency for the first time; Thailand changed its prime minister from an ex-military general associated with corruption and economic incompetence to a civilian leader with popular support; Japan went through changes of prime ministers and finance ministers and, in the worse case of Indonesia, the more than 30-year reign of Soeharto ended abruptly, realising a popular desire that was, nevertheless, unimaginable until the event actually took place on 14 May, 1998. In countries with relatively clean governments, such as Singapore and Hong Kong, the ability of the existing governments to avoid sliding into economic crisis, let alone to sustain previous growth has been severely tested.

The boundaries of the emergent class divisions, noted earlier, have also been blurring as unemployment, or its likelihood, affected every rank of wage earners and bankruptcy threatened owners of enterprises of all sizes. In the latter case, luxury goods that were acquired to announce business successes in good times often had to be unloaded at fire-sale prices before being 'repossessed' by the finance companies or banks. Symbolically, the most dramatic of such sales must have been the weekend 'flea/flee' market for the once wealthy in Bangkok, where goods ranging from expensive items of self-adornment, such as expensive watches, to private modes of luxurious transportation, such as imported cars and private aeroplanes, were placed on sale for a fraction of their purchased prices. In Hong Kong and Singapore, the respective property bubbles burst, causing inflated prices to plunge by up to 50 per cent in both private and public housing. The differing financial experiences across generations have also been narrowed by the economic crisis. Individuals who had experienced only the affluence of the past two to three decades have been made to face, directly or indirectly, the anxieties and hardships of unemployment and other kinds of economic uncertainty. They have become more frugal and are thus now closer to the older generation in attitudes towards money.

However, it is important to note that the effects of the crisis have fallen unevenly on the middle classes and the rich. The selling-off of property by a segment of relatively wealthy consumers has, simultaneously, eased the entry into property ownership for those who have hitherto

been propertyless and provided opportunities for others who, with secure and continuing employment, have been looking to upgrade their accommodations, buying properties that would have been unaffordable before the crisis.[17] The crisis conditions thus favour those with cash; as the saying goes, 'Cash is king'. Commodities, including real estate, which had been exorbitant and out of reach of the many have become available at bargain prices for those with cash.

It is also interesting to note that, rather than diminishing in times of recession, the symbolic value of consumption becomes all the more important. The need to 'maintain' a lifestyle is all the more necessary for one of the newly rich to communicate to the world that is falling apart around him/her that he/she remains 'unaffected' and continues to be doing well economically, in hope of retaining the confidence of colleagues and business associates. Thus, even in the worst case of Indonesia, one still needs to make the rounds of the bars and other popular haunts at regular intervals in order to be seen to be able still to afford the time and the price, even if one is drinking and eating at a much reduced rate (*Straits Times,* 2 May, 1998). If at all possible, one should buy a new house and/or a new car to demonstrate both the soundness of one's financial position and business savvy in buying when prices are down. So, in Singapore, in December 1998, in the midst of the economic downturn, 200 new Mercedes were sold in the first week of the annual car show![18] The concern, therefore, is not abstinence but rather manipulating the symbolic value of consumption.

Finally, the softening of public focus and discussion on consumption expansion and emergent consumer culture notwithstanding, the centrality of consumption expansion to the political legitimacy of the respective governments continues to render consumption a privileged site for analysing both 'escapes' from and 'resistance' to their respective domination. In general, as a mode of privatisation of everyday life, material consumption is a sphere of activity that is largely beyond state regulation. Where consumption activities are subject to direct policing by the state, such as in censorship of movies, reading material and popular music, these activities can emerge as sites of ideological contestation and resistance.[19]

Again in general, the politics can be analysed at two levels: the first and most obvious level, is in terms of the ways which consumption as a social phenomenon produces and reproduces class relations and privileges in the societies examined. The second level is in terms of how specific sites of consumption constitute moments of ideological escape from or contestations of the official discourse in the polities examined. Contestation may be analysed through either the political processes in the consumption sites themselves or by offering alternatives to official

discourse on a particular object of consumption. The case studies in this volume will exemplify the politics of consumption both at a regionally generalisable level and at the level of specific privileged objects at specific locations.

The chapters

The chapters in this collection may be placed within the discursive space delineated by the interaction of the conceptual developments in the study of consumption and the three features of the public discourse on consumption prevailing to different degrees in various countries in Asia. The outline of this discursive space and the location of the chapters may be marked in the following manner. First, it should be apparent that the discourse on consumption in the countries of East and Southeast Asia is still very much tied to issues of their respective political economies. This serves as a corrective to the overemphasis on the symbolic and the personal in the conceptual concerns of contemporary European and American studies of consumption, where the context of an already developed economy is implicitly assumed. The embeddeness in political economy also places the discussion on consumption closer to the ideological and political contests in the respective Asian countries analysed. Thus, in most of the chapters, the level of economic and political development of the country in question is examined not only as part of the context but also as a determining element in issues of consumption. Second, as expansion of consumption is a relatively recent phenomenon throughout most of industrialised Asia, the moral/ideological discourse remains one of 'traditional' thrift against 'excesses' in consumption, rather than a debate on high art versus degenerate art. This thrift/excess debate is examined in the chapters on South Korea and Malaysia. The translation of this debate into actual social divisions constituted by differences in personal attitudes towards consumption is explored in the chapter on the internal differentiation of the new middle class in Hong Kong. In many Asian countries, the 'excesses' were supposedly imported from the 'West' or specifically 'America'; the 'degeneracy' laid not in the aesthetics of the consumer goods but in the 'West'/'America', rendering the latter an ideological Other in public discourse on consumption. This discursive/ ideological position has been turned into an object of analysis in its own right in the chapters from Singapore and Japan, which take up the question of 'America' and 'Americanisation' directly. Third, the national specificities of Asian countries do not render invalid the conceptual formulation of an active consumer who uses consumer goods

and services to resist and contest the constraints of the normative and to fashion different symbolic universes in which self and group identities may be realised. The chapters on Taiwan and Indonesia address these issues in their respective locations. In this context, the Indonesian case is particularly ironic, as the issue of 'lifestyles' seems to have sprouted in the very infertile ground of an economically poor country. Even before they sink further into abject poverty in the face of the current economic crisis, the consumption situation of the overwhelming majority of the population was more concerned mostly with meeting daily survival needs than any idea of 'lifestyling'. For a sense of the uplifting of a whole population from a very low income base into higher rungs of consumption, we have the case of the People's Republic of China, where the primary consumption concerns are still at the level of accumulating household goods.

A certain shift in analytical framework is necessary for the inclusion of a chapter from Australia. Australia, geographically a continent unto itself and the immediate neighbour of Southeast Asia, has historically been culturally and economically oriented towards Europe and America. In recent years, however, largely because of the ascendancy of capitalism in Asia, and despite the current economic decline, Australia has become increasingly 'Asian'-oriented, seeking greater economic co-operation, if not integration, and greater regional political dialogue. However, reflecting both its developed economic context and its Western intellectual orientations, the chapter from Australia is located squarely in contemporary theoretical debates on popular culture and consumption, in contrast to those from within Asia, thus making apparent the distance between Australia and Asia both in intellectual orientation and in economic and political development, thereby illustrating the actual and conceptual difficulties of 'Asianising Australia' (see Ang and Stratton 1996 and Chen 1996).

Let us discuss the chapters in greater detail. Until the recent economic downturn, Asia had been an important destination for the global marketing of consumer goods. The emergent culture of consumption of the new rich in Asia undoubtedly contains several general and generalisable features. However, any discursive delineation of this emergent culture would be unable to account for the different paths through which consumerism is culturally expressed in the different countries, since local/national patterns might be expressed through particular modalities or objects of consumption. Examination of locally privileged modalities and objects may, therefore, provide better insights into their respective cultural spheres. For example, street-food is ubiquitous in all Asian cities, and is a key component of their informal atmosphere. However street-food provides a privileged entry into the cultural hybridity of everyday life of multiracial

Singapore, in particular, which official insistence on racial categories tends to gloss over (Chua and Rajah 1996). Analysis of locally/nationally privileged objects of consumption within a discernible generalised pattern across nations is thus necessary, not as a supplementary piece but as a central component in any serious attempt to understand the patterns of consumption among Asia's new rich.

A general pattern of consumption among Asia's new rich can be gleaned from the case study of Malaysia. The obvious objects of consumption among the emerging Malaysian middle class were housing, cars and children's education. That same range of goods and services was in demand across Asia, although not explicitly mentioned in all the chapters. There was, therefore, a certain level of homogenisation of lifestyle among the emergent new rich in Asia. In economically good or bad times, all three items are both symbolic and functional. Children's education has always been both an investment in their future and a symbolic display of the parents' ability to pay. Similarly, houses are always functional and simultaneously one of the best media for conspicuous display of wealth. And, perhaps more specific to Asia, anyone who calls the latest model Mercedes, purchased at inflated prices and maintained at high cost, merely a 'car' clearly misses the symbolic point of such a possession. Obviously, these large items of consumption contribute much to the 'identity' of their owners/consumers.

Even under favourable economic conditions, the high costs of housing, car and education account for a very large proportion of the incomes of professionals in Asia, thereby limiting their expenditure on other consumption items. Take Singapore, which ranks within the top ten wealthiest countries globally,[20] as an example. The Prime Minister noted that 'for the middle-income Singaporeans, there [was] not enough money' (*Straits Times,* 28 April, 1996) because of the high cost of property and cars.[21] The fact that the Singaporean middle class had been willing to 'impoverish' itself in cash just to own a house and a car only reinforced the generalisable claim that these two items of status, or positional goods, were central to the lifestyle of Asia's new rich. With the economic crisis, every middle-class household's ability to maintain all these 'big ticket' items is being severely tested. Children who had been in boarding schools or universities overseas have been called back, as the spiraling fall in the relative value of Asian currencies has made their continuing maintenance overseas difficult, especially during the early days of the crisis in mid-1997. Meanwhile, status goods such as cars and houses have been sold off quickly to reduce debt and avoid bankruptcy. Not everyone succeeded in rescuing themselves financially; many have seen their houses repossessed and sold in public auctions. However, as suggested above, such sell-

offs also create opportunities for those who are cash-rich to accumulate much-desired durable assets or ostentatious items of self-adornment.

As suggested in the introductory remarks, the general expansion of consumption in Asia had taken place against a historical background whereby collective memories of material deprivation of the recent past were very much alive. The memories in turn framed a moral discourse against this expansion in general and the consumption by youth in particular. This discourse is examined, among other things, in the case study on South Korea, which is Chapter 3 in this volume. Not surprisingly, attitudinal surveys in South Korea on consumption expansion appeared to be full of contradictions. As noted earlier, while more than 90 per cent of the respondents in a national survey agreed that 'excessive' consumption was a social problem, only 4 per cent of the same respondents considered themselves excessive consumers. Who then was doing all the 'excessive' consumption? The moral, or perhaps more accurately 'moralising', discourse is thus best read as an ideological discourse that emerged at a point of changing attitudes, when perception was as significant as actual change itself.

The younger generations appear to have perceived themselves to be more consumerist than their elders, thus apparently accepting the latter's moral disapproval. Beyond South Korea, such an admission can still be easily drawn from youth anywhere in industrialised Asia. For example, it is common to hear, in Singapore, that the younger people of today are much more materialistic and consumerist than previous generations. Furthermore, this can be 'empirically verified' by the sheer number of consumer goods the younger generations possess in comparison to those owned by their elders in their youth. However, it should be noted that such simple 'verification' misreads and confuses the 'ability' to consume with 'attitude' towards consumption. The question remains: Had the elders not been economically deprived because of economic underdevelopment and had been instead as affluent as the youth of today, would they have been less consumption-oriented? I very much doubt it.

Significantly, memories of past deprivations need not be experienced as 'generational differences' in Asia. There are throughout newly industrialised Asia an abundance of individuals who lived through the period of social and economic transition. They embody in their own lives the differences between the two eras of deprivation and affluence. Their biographies are inscribed by these differences and the past continues to express itself in their attitudes to the present. The persistence of past attitudes to money and consumption is examined in Chapter 5 on the Hong Kong middle class. Here the social origins of members of the

new rich are shown to have a significant effect on their attitudes to the aesthetics of consumption. These social origins, expressed through consumer 'tastes', serve as markers in the internal differentiation of the new middle class itself.

In contrast to Singapore, South Korea, Malaysia and Hong Kong where a new middle class has already been established, the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Indonesia remain at the other end of the continuum, where the middle class is barely emerging and even now is apparent only in urban areas. With the current economic crisis in Indonesia, the ranks of the middle class, which was sparse to begin with, have been severely depleted, as more and more people sink into poverty. However, as the case studies of the PRC and Indonesia in this volume show, even under conditions of relative underdevelopment, identity construction and status display through consumer products seem unavoidable, as goods become loaded with social meaning. This can be examined at two levels: the household level and the individual level. The former enables the analyst to capture the general consumption patterns of the society as a whole, bringing into relief the presence of widely maintained normative standards in consumption, while the latter provides information on the strategy of individual identity construction under conditions of deprivation.

The household level is examined in Chapter 4 on the PRC. Given its relative economic underdevelopment, the primary status goods at the household level in the PRC were far more modest than in the industrialised Asian countries. Consumption practices evinced an interesting 'collective' phenomenon, reflecting the general economic condition. Advancement in consumption appeared to move in terms of 'clusters of goods'. The 'big four' items of sewing machines, watches, bicycles and radios in the days before economic reform was introduced in the late 1980s gave way to the 'big six' of colour TVs, refrigerators, electric fans, washing machines, cameras and tape recorders. Conceptually, each rung of the 'consumption ladder' was constituted by a discrete cluster of goods. A family would likely attempt to climb up the next rung up when it was in possession of all the items that constituted a lower rung. These are the stages that many of the currently relatively affluent countries in Asia would have gone through on their own road to development.

Take the case of the sewing machine, for example. Up to the late 1970s, one of the skills that many female Singaporeans acquired was dress-making. In addition to commercial dress-making 'schools', community centres all over the country had dress-making classes to cater to this demand. Every household either owned or strove

to own a sewing machine; it formed part of the bride's dowry in marriage. Dresses were largely home-made. By the late 1980s, it was rare to find any female Singaporean under 30 years of age who could sew. Clothing, reconfigured as fashion, is now purchased off-the-peg, according to one's consumption capacity, in stores of all sizes. The sewing machine trade is a dying trade and a sewing machine repair person is now a rarity. I know of two individuals who have switched trade from selling and repairing sewing machines in Singapore to re-exporting industrial sewing machines from textile industries in Singapore to less-developed countries such as Pakistan and Vietnam.

Even before the current political and economic crisis, Indonesia was already the poorest of the countries analysed in this volume. For the purposes of examining consumption practices, there is, ironically, a certain analytic advantage in studying Indonesia. The generally low level of consumption in the population as a whole served to bring into relief the symbolic aspect of consumption. Certain commodities, which signified an imagined 'lifestyle' of the 'middle class' were found to be prominently displayed in the home or worn on the body. However, these displayed items would often be considered 'insignificant' and 'unworthy' goods by wealthier individuals. The items displayed in the home included plastic icons that signified distant lands but could be obtained without having to travel, while bodily adornments of clothes and inexpensive jewellery were usually borrowed or owned collectively by those who pooled their meagre resources to buy them. Reflecting the underdeveloped economic conditions, no credit facilities were available for making personal purchases in Indonesia. The 'overemphasis' of the 'symbolic' in the Indonesian instance is nicely captured by turning the noun 'lifestyle' into a verb, 'lifestyling'. As 'style' was more important than 'life', the specific consumption practices might be properly labelled 'postmodern', in a socio-economic context where modernity and modernisation are still far off in the distance.

The chapters on Malaysia, South Korea, Hong Kong, the PRC and Indonesia collectively examine a set of interrelated aspects of the generalised phenomenon of rapid expansion of consumerism as a way of life of Asia's new middle class. However, as suggested earlier, for a more comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon, certain locations are best examined through particular and privileged objects of consumption, which embody the conditions of emergence, reproduction and change of both the locations and the objects. The specificity of both the sites and the objects provide insights into the differentiation of lifestyles

across national boundaries and dispels any easy conclusion regarding the cultural 'homogenisation' of Asia and its new middle class. The analysis on the cultural significance of KTV in Taiwan in Chapter 7 bears this out.

As an indigenous cultural product which emerged out of the specific context of Taiwan in the 1980s and subsequently spread globally, KTV is more than just a mode of entertainment. It represented the historical moment in which the economic, cultural, political and social forces in Taiwan coalesced into a specific object of consumption. The list of constitutive elements included traces of different indigenous and successive colonial—particularly Japanese and Han Chinese—cultures, that is, the cultural heritage of singing in public; post-War American popular cultural influence; the rise of consumerism in the newly industrialising economy; the need to 'escape' from regulations of the military state and, in the case of youth, from the surveillance of families; and, finally, the entrepreneurial acumen of operating in cultural margins with the collusion of corrupt government officials and agencies. All these elements played their respective roles in the creation of the KTV. However, as soon as it crossed cultural and national boundaries and became just one of many alternative modes of entertainment its cultural significance was lost, as the new locations appropriated it into their local cultural contexts.

For ideological reasons, recognition that the cultural meanings of an object change when it crosses boundaries may be intentionally suppressed. This is the case with the ideological thematisation of 'American' cultural products in different parts of Asia because, as mentioned earlier, 'America' occupies a symbolically central place in the culture/ ideology of these locations. Indeed, given the overwhelming dominance of America in the global popular culture industry, the ideological thematisation of 'America' is much more widespread than Asia. This is reflected in the marketing of American products in one of two ways: the 'celebration' of 'America' or the suppression of 'America', depending on the ideological context of the country in question. In Chapter 8 this either/or process is analysed through a comparison of the marketing strategies of McDonald's in Singapore and in European locations, thus highlighting the tension between global products and local culture.

Being one of the most aggressive promoters of 'Asian' values as the cultural underpinning of capitalism in Asia, the political leadership of Singapore has been very explicit in its condemnation of 'American' decadence.[22] Against this ideological background, to sell McDonald's via selling 'America' would have incurred the wrath of the state. Therefore,

in seeking to insert itself into the daily life of Singaporeans, into their daily diet, McDonald's continually invokes in its advertisements the government-sponsored ideological markers of 'local' culture; this is in contrast with its invocation of 'freedom' in its French advertisements. The result, at the ideological level, is an attempt to 'Singaporeanise' McDonald's rather than 'Americanise' Singaporeans via McDonald's. The Singaporean instance, shows that, ultimately, for all capitalist enterprises which market their products globally, profit is the strategic interest and cultural marketing is merely tactical.

The 'Singaporeanisation' of McDonald's notwithstanding, the symbolic place of 'America' remains an important cultural phenomenon in Asia. The Asian country that has the longest history of ideological entanglement with 'America' is, perhaps, Japan. This depth of history makes Japan the ideal place for examining the trajectory of change in the cultural appropriation of the idea/image of 'America'. As Chapter 9 demonstrates, the symbolic 'America' that occupied a central place in the Japanese psyche in the 1920s became a culturally ambivalent object—simultaneously an object of admiration/desire and repulsion— in the 1950s. By the time Disneyland, the quintessential 'American' cultural product, arrived in a suburb of Tokyo in 1983, its cultural impact was, arguably, minimal because the retail spaces of Tokyo had already been 'Disnified' —a process by which the 'foreign' and 'exotic' is domesticated through its shallow representation as signs inserted into a local site. Whether this pattern will be reproduced in other Asian locations or elsewhere on remains, of course, an open question.

Finally, as mentioned earlier, despite the so-called 'Asian turn', the chapter from Australia signifies the cultural and historical distance between the two continents and their respective component cultures. However, in the consumption sphere, both Australia and Asia have been absorbed into the market and 'suffer' similar advertisement-effects of goods that have achieved truly global distribution, as in the fashion trade where all major players are global producers and distributors. The 'imaginary' or 'notional' community into which these products are inserted constitutes a 'globalised' reference point for the consumers; suppressing, even erasing, the latter's local identities. An example can be seen in the way that youth in Asia draw on the globalised image-bank, provided by all consumption outlets, including fashion, for constitutive components in the construction of their identity as part of the 'global' youth culture and community, in contrast to local, 'traditional' identities of past generations. The erasure of multiple local identities and their replacement by a global notional identity and community constituted by consumers of similar globally marketed products render the notional identity unstable,

as it is permanently caught in the unending changes of fashion. The consumer, as a result, is delivered into a sustained state of anomie, if not schizophrenia.

The analysis of the anomic world of the high consumer brings the volume back to the issue of the globalisation of consumption, where local conditions often constitute something of a hindrance but not, ultimately, a serious obstacle to market penetration. As the hyperreality of fashion, not only in terms of clothes but in the more general idea of 'trends' and 'trendiness', absorbs us all, the only relevant location is the world of the global consumer. The analysis of what may be called the 'dark side' of the global fashion industry serves at least two purposes in this volume. First, it draws our attention to the parallel between the moral discourses that have been circulating around issues of consumption in contemporary Asia and the ongoing debate in the West, particularly in the nineteenth century, which was also a period that saw rapid expansion of consumerism. This shows that such debates cut across time and space and that, perhaps, the moral anxieties around consumption will always be part of the dialectic of social life. Second, by drawing out the frenetic character and destabilising effect of consumption on identity, the last chapter provides a glimpse into the future for consumers in Asia. As such, it serves as a warning to an Asia which is pinning its hopes on a future of material plenty achieved by catching up with global capitalism.

Conclusion

As a result of the currency and economic crisis that plagued the economies of East and Southeast Asia, beginning in mid-1997, much of the accumulated public and private wealth of these nations has been radically devalued. Consequently, the rapid expansion which was so very noticeable during the growth years has declined sharply. In these countries, with the exception of Indonesia, destabilised consumer confidence has probably contributed equally to the shrinking of consumption, as have actual increases in unemployment and personal bankruptcies, as evidenced by the very high savings rates of up to 40 per cent in the midst of the crisis. Undoubtedly, as the currencies stabilised, as they did by January 1999 in most of the affected countries, confidence will return and economies will correspondingly recover and expand, albeit the process may take several years. If, as mentioned above, the symbolic dimension of consumption gained in importance during the crisis and consumption has been sustained among those with cash, then, consumption will

undoubtedly increase again as the economies of the region recover. While expansion of consumption which follows economic growth may 'naturally' draw the attention of social scientists, it is precisely because the symbolic importance of consumption does not diminish, even under economically adverse conditions, that it emerges as a sphere of analytic interest in its own right. In this sense, the current economic crisis and the overall decline of consumption in affected East and Southeast Asian countries might have marginalised concern with issues of consumption and consumerism in the respective local public discourses but it certainly has not reduced their analytic importance to the ongoing understanding of these countries.

This volume has three main foci. First, to examine several aspects of the rapid expansion of consumption among the emergent new middle class and bourgeoisie, thrown up by the economic growth of the past three decades in the East and Southeast Asia. It may be said that a relative homogenisation of consumption in certain goods and services gives to these emergent social groups a coherent identity as the 'new middle class'. However, in drawing together eight countries in Asia at different stages of capitalist economic development, the chapters together provide a 'big' picture of how the lifestyles of the respective 'middle classes' change and develop as society reaches various stages of development. They provide information not only on how the middle classes dress, spend, and live, what they buy, drive and eat, but also on their anxieties about maintaining their lifestyles.

Second, to examine the ways in which consumption has been a site for ideological contests across generational and national divisions within these countries in Asia. These contests constituted part of the discourse on values in these nations; a discourse which has come to be characterised as a contest between 'Asian' versus 'Western' values. In this context, consumer products sourced from Europe and America were seen as already culturally inscribed, i.e., they embodied the cultures of their site of design and conception, if not production. Consumers of such products thus risk being 'infected' by these values, leading to possible moral decline of the Asian population. Such an ideological construction of the politics of consumption as a contest of values was often promoted by the governments in Asia as a veil over the politics of class and unequal distribution. However, such constructions have clearly not been without public resonance, for they have not been ineffective. Public support was at the very centre of the cross-generational construction of contemporary Asian youth as 'materialistic', 'consumerist' and 'Westernised', hence 'morally' wanting. Whereas, on the part of the youth, consumption of certain cultural products constituted means of

escape and resistance to the domination of both their elders and often authoritarian governments.

Third, to the extent that consumption is a field of academic analysis in its own right, these essays also engage in and contribute insights to wider theoretical discussions in the field. In this context, it bears reiterating that the case studies in this volume bring back into focus the political and economic conditions that underpin consumption as a social cultural phenomenon, at a time when these conditions have been often neglected by many analyses which are focused on consumption purely as a form of identity politics. Obviously, as the chapters in this volume show, the types and practices of consumption that go into identity politics are determined very significantly by the level of political freedom and economic development of the location in question. In addition, a note should be made of the various methodological stances taken in the different chapters. About half the chapters are quantitative in character, using largely survey and other aggregate quantitative data. The other half are closer to a Cultural Studies framework, currently the more popular approach to the study of consumption. The inclusion of the quantitative essays is important for they set out the base-lines of societal attitude and more widespread consumption practices. In this way they provide the wider frame within which to analyse the privileged products taken up in other chapters. The two halves are therefore to be read complementarity. Thus, in accord with the fragmented character of consumption as a social phenomenon, each chapter should be read both in terms of its own contribution to the thematic concerns of the collection as a whole and as a stand-alone piece that offers specific information, insights and reading pleasure.

Notes

1 From the opening paragraph of Robinson and Goodman's (1996:1) introduction to the first volume in this series on the New Rich of Asia.

2 The list is too long to compile. Some of the notable ones are Grant McCracken (1988) on the history of consumption in Europe, Stuart Ewen (1976) on the rise of advertising industry in the US, Haug (1986) on the manipulative aesthetics of advertisements, B.Miller (1981) on the history of the department store in Paris, Daniel Miller (1987) on the place of material culture in the thoughts of various nineteenth-century thinkers and their application to mass consumption, Douglas and Isherwood (1979) and A.Appadurai (1986) on anthropology of material culture.

3 The more notable among these journals are *Cultural Studies, Theory, Culture and Society* and *Public Culture*.

4 As a reflection of its success, there are now competing claims to the origin of Cultural Studies, see Wright (1998), McNeil (1998) and Tomaselli (1998).
5 For a comprehensive review of this body of literature as it relates to Marxism, see Lee (1993).
6 A very extensive review of this literature is provided by Goss (1993).
7 A valuable example of an attempt to look at the retail economy via specifically two items of consumption, fashion and food, is Fine and Leopold (1993).
8 For a history of American and European workers' struggle for expansion of leisure and consumption between the two world wars, see Cross (1993).
9 A similar 'heroic' conceptualisation of TV reception/consumption is provided by Fiske (1987). An alternative postmodernist formulation of the figure of contemporary consumer is as a 'psychotic' or 'schizophrenic' consumer (Hebdige 1993:83), one must add, without irony or negative connotations.
10 For detail theoretical discussion on the difficulties of making the distinction between necessary consumption as 'needs' and discretionary consumption, see Lee (1993).
11 Whether this will change under the rule of the People's Republic of China is anyone's guess.
12 Professor Juwono Sudarsono was Dean, Faculty of Political Science, University of Indonesia and rose to be the Minister of the Environment in the last days of the Soeharto regime. He was retained and redeployed as the Minister of Education, under the new government of Dr B.J.Habibie.
13 For details of the generalised slump in retail trade in Singapore and Hong Kong see 'Retail Blues', *Asia Magazine,* 2–4 June, 1995.
14 This is in part because the Japanese cultural industry 'does not actively export cultural products' (Iwabuchi 1994), as the Japanese 'find it a strange notion that anyone can "become Japanese"' (Hannerz 1989:67, quoted in Iwabuchi) and are, therefore, more inclined to emphasise Japan's 'uniqueness' and 'difference' from others.
15 For discussion on the similarities between conservative traditions in Western political thought and what is known as 'Asian values' see Rodan and Hewison (1996).
16 See Kim Seung-Kuk in Chapter 3 of this volume.
17 In the meantime, the post-handover Hong Kong administrative authority's ambitious plan to build and encourage public housing ownership among the low-income groups is being placed on hold for unspecified period.
18 As Singapore remains the wealthiest nation in Southeast Asia, Singaporean banks have been acquiring troubled financial institutions in the region, and Singaporean upper middle-class and elites have been acquiring real estate, especially in Malaysia.
19 An example, which is significant in the development of the cultural sphere in Singapore, is the debate on 'forum theatre' which is now banned by the government (see Krishnan *et al.,* 1996).

20 United Nations Development Programme, Human Development Index 1996, reported in *The Economist,* 20–26 July, 1996, p. 94.
21 The Prime Minister's statement may be read as inadvertently substantiating an earlier comment by Singaporean political scientist, Bilveer Singh, that most Singaporeans live a 'hand-to-mouth' existence; a statement for which he was publicly chastised and which he was later forced to withdraw unconditionally from the public press.
22 This does not preclude it from publicly suggesting that the United States of America is the world's most 'benevolent' superpower and that the continuing presence of the US military might act as a safeguard for continuing peace in the Asia Pacific (Acharya and Ramesh 1993).

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