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ENVIRONMENTAL ADVERTISING IN CHINA AND THE USA

The desire to go green

XINGHUA LI

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Environmental Advertising in China and the USA

Since the late 1980s, green consumerism has been hailed in the West as an efficient solution to environmental problems. However, Chinese consumers have been slow to warm up to eco-friendly products. Consumers prefer SUVs to hybrid cars, health supplements and snake oil medicines to organic foods, and eco-fashion is still secluded in high-end designer studios. These choices contradict the findings of many sustainable lifestyle surveys that claim to register a rising desire for green products among the Chinese.

This book examines the psycho-cultural differences that disrupt the translation of "eco-friendly" appeals to China by analyzing environmental advertising. It explores the different notions of "green", the structures of desire that underlies the advertisements, and how they are shaped by ideological, cultural, and historical differences. Rather than arguing the superiority of the American or Chinese version of green consumerism, the book interrogates the role of advertising in the global spread of Western ideologies and explores the possibilities for consumers to resist transnational corporate hegemony in the green movement.

This book fills an important gap in the critical scholarship on green marketing and should be of interest to students and scholars of environment studies, green advertising and marketing, environmental communication and media studies, China studies and environmental sociology, ethics and cultural studies.

Xinghua Li is Assistant Professor of Media Studies at Babson College, Massachusetts, USA. She writes about the global spread of consumer capitalism through the perspectives of psychoanalysis, environmental communication, and critical media theory.

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To My Parents,
Who inspired this book in more ways than one

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How to Access Advertisements in this Book

Due to copyright concerns, advertisements analyzed in this book are published not alongside the text, but on the author's private blog: "Environmental Advertising in China and the USA." Please visit this book's official publisher website (http://www.routledge.com/books/details/9780415744133/) to obtain the URL address for this private blog. Or, a simple web search of the blog title can help the reader locate the address.

This private blog belongs to the author alone and does not connect to Routledge-Earthscan. It contains over eighty images for the print, television, and online ads analyzed in this book. The author strongly recommends the reader to view these images, which will provide more vivid understanding of the following analysis.

1 Introduction

Advertising, Desire, and the Environment

In 2006, when I was still a graduate student in the US, I watched Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*. It predicted that imminent global warming disasters would put many cities, including my hometown Shanghai, in danger of complete inundation. Terrified, I called my parents in China, urging them to move. Seemingly unfazed, my father responded: "Don't worry, we live on the 11th floor, we'll survive." My mother chimed in: "It's great that your uncle lives on the 10th floor in the next building. We can just buy a boat to visit him!" My parents' mocking angered me. What upset me more, however, was that I sensed something profoundly incommunicable in the apocalyptic anxiety I was experiencing. Having lived in the US for several years, I was familiar with the Western apocalyptic narrative in science fiction novels and disaster movies, and thus had no difficulty imagining a global-scale environmental catastrophe. But since the apocalypse genre is absent from Chinese traditional belief systems and narrative traditions, it was difficult for my parents, who rarely watched Hollywood movies, to imagine the world ending. Moreover, my warning came at perhaps the worst time in their lives for them to take it seriously: after half a lifetime of poverty and political repression, my parents finally achieved their long overdue "good life" and bought their first property. For my father, the 11th floor condo was his pride and joy and it elevated them away from the problems of ground-level flooding below. On what grounds could I demand that they give up their hard-earned "right" because of a distant risk that they could not envision?

This particular gap in my parents' imagination – a prevalent gap among the Chinese – gave me serious pause for thought. What would motivate Chinese consumers to be concerned about the environment? How do they imagine the environmental crisis differently from Americans and, to what extent do these differences owe to the cultural, ideological, and historical conditions of these two countries? What role do media and communication play in shaping these consumers' desire for environmental change? As consumerism spreads globally, is there an ethical way to resolve the conflict between the desire to consume and the urgency to preserve the environment? These are the questions that motivated this book, questions that interrogate the relationship between media, desire, and consumerism in the face of the global environmental crisis.

In a nutshell, this book conducts a cross-cultural comparison of environmental advertising in China and the US. I target advertising for its ubiquity in the public sphere and as an institution that notoriously manufactures consumer desire. Named by Raymond Williams (1980) as the "magic system," advertising manifests the fantasies and dreams of a society and produces interesting artifacts for examining the relationship between media discourse, social imagination, and collective desire. Similarly, environmental advertising functions as an object for revealing a society's collective imagination vis-à-vis environmental threats and remediation. The term "environmental advertising," when defined broadly, refers to advertising that contains environmental messages or promotes pro-environmental attitudes and behaviors. This includes a wide variety of public discourses, such as NGO public service announcements, governmental propaganda, corporate image campaigns, and green product advertising, among others. This book defines the term narrowly as commercial advertising that promotes eco-friendly products and services to consumers. Also known as "green" advertising, it aims to propagate green consumerism – the market solution to mitigate humans' environmental impact by having them purchase ecofriendly products and services. Originated in the US (and Europe) in the late 1980s, green consumerism has been widely hailed by Western marketers as an effective solution to environmental problems. In the new millennium, it has evolved into an international phenomenon and has gained global hegemonic status as a corporate-led, commerce-driven environmental movement. Environmental advertising, as an important aspect of this movement, both shapes and bears witness to how consumer culture responds to environmental crises.

The US and China are the world's two largest consumer economies and top greenhouse gas contributors. By bringing these two countries into a dialogue, I seek to understand the driving forces of these important consumer cultures and explore the political, ideological, and historical differences that underlie their environmental endeavors (or lack thereof). As previously stated, Western environmental media often use apocalyptic appeals to motivate the audience, but China's civil religion lacks an imaginary anticipation of the End of the World. Can an environmental apocalypse occur in a country that does not believe in the "apocalypse"? As my research later reveals, Chinese-American cultural differences also exist on other significant fronts, including individual identity, family structures, social and class relations, historical attitudes, religious traditions, educational philosophies, and so on. These differences have contributed to the profound disjunction in the understanding of "green" between these respective national audiences and could disrupt the cross-national translation of environmental messages. Many of these differences can be readily observed, as I intend to demonstrate, in environmental advertising.

In Western academic literature and mass media, green advertising and green marketing has been a heated topic of discussion. The main debate takes place between marketing scholars (e.g. McIntosh 1991, Hailes 1998, Prothero 2000, Scott & Peñaloza 2006), who believe that green marketing is a

progressive movement that raises the public's environmental consciousness, and cultural critics (e.g. Smith 1998, Monbiot 2002, Meister & Brown 2006, Williams 2007), who see it as a profitable but dubious effort to "greenwash" the public and perpetuate wasteful consumer behaviors. However, both sides of the debate share a commonality: they are mainly concerned with the "external" effects of green advertising on consciousness raising or behavior changing and tend to ignore the "internal" questions of desire, subjectivity, and ethics. This book employs a critical interpretive method informed by psychoanalysis to supplement this lack. Psychoanalysis is known for its conceptualization of desire through the notion of the *unconscious*. As I will later elaborate, the unconscious problematizes the assumption of a rational, sovereign subject that will take rightful actions after its consciousness is raised; it also challenges the assumption of a passive, controllable subject that will alter its conduct after the right "behavior buttons" are pushed. Psychoanalysis speaks of the *subject of the unconscious*, who is radically divided from consciousness and its immanent social conditions. This division, inflicted by human symbolic actions, is what constitutes desire, the psychic force that propels our actions. It is also, for psychoanalysis, the very foundation of ethics. The job of the critic in my position, therefore, is to read the structure of desire embedded in symbolic texts (i.e. environmental advertising) and identify the pathologies manifested as "irrational" interruptions in the preordained "consciousness-behavior" formula. During the past two decades, psychoanalysis has been increasingly applied to the analysis of environmental problems. Critics (e.g. Killingsworth & Palmer 1995; Giblett 1997; 2008; 2009; 2011; Lertzman 2008; Dodds 2011) identify an inextricable link between desire – a fundamental psychic lack – and the social and ecological imbalance that plagues the modern world. Insisting on the continuity between mind, society, and ecology, my book extends the psychoanalytic framework via a cross-cultural comparative study and explores the pathologies of desire manifested in and through Chinese and American "green" advertising.

China's Consumerist Boom and Environmental Crisis

To explore the relationship between desire, consumerism, and environment, one cannot overlook contemporary, urbanizing China. With a population of 1.4 billion, China is the world's fastest-growing major economy, with an average growth rate of 10 percent over the past thirty years (IMF 2013). Since the 1990s, the country has jumped-started its growth by applying low-cost labor and abundant resources to the manufacturing of exported goods. As its economy grows, the "world factory" is turning into the "world market." Nationwide, more and more people experienced an unprecedented income rise and started to use their newfound wealth to fulfill the long-standing desire for consumer goods. Smith (1997) enumerated the most wanted household commodities in China, which had evolved from "a wrist-watch, a radio set, a bicycle and a sewing machine" in the 1960s and 1970s, to "a color television, refrigerators, tape recorders and automatic washing machines" in the mid-1980s and 1990s,

and to "air-conditioners, video recorders, motorcycles, and [even] the ultimate status symbols – a private car and a house" towards the new millennium (4). Among the different social strata, the most prominent group of consumers is the urban middle class. Estimated to be around 300 million in 2012, and to rise to 700 or 800 million by 2022, these new economic elites function as the pillar of China's consumer economy (Barton 2013). Many have the buying power to emulate affluent Western lifestyles, and have developed a voracious appetite for real estate and various types of modern consumer goods, including cars, electronics, fashion, food, luxury, vacation, etc. (Doctoroff 2013).

The rapid rise in domestic consumer demands, driven by a longing for a Westernized and modernized "good life," has taken a heavy toll on China's environment. Everywhere, forests and farmland are being converted into luxury condos and shopping malls; the rise in automobile ownership installs the perennial and noxious smog in the city atmosphere; rivers and streams are replete with wastewaters from factories that churn out thousands of pieces of new clothing daily; the soil is chockfull of pesticides and growth stimulants from excessive industrial farming. China's consumer revolution also has global implications. In Africa and South America, Chinese industries are expanding their extraction of energy resources and raw materials; its polluted air and waters have reportedly flowed to its Asian-Pacific neighbors and its trash has washed up as far away as the California coast; but more importantly, in 2008, China surpassed the US to become the world's current largest carbon dioxide emitter. Its obstinate use of coal does not show any sign of slowing down and neither, therefore, does the process of global warming. Elizabeth Economy (1999) calls it China's "Faustian bargain:" while the country opted for economic growth and improved living standards, it had also agreed to trade away its own environment and that of the world.

However, it seems unfair to be blaming merely the Chinese for pursuing their age-old aspirations. Having long been deprived of material wealth, the Chinese have historically yearned for the affluent lifestyles of the West and recently of its economically developed Asian neighbors. Zhao (1997) calls it the "window effect," where developed nations display their high living standards in front of the developing countries and generate their desire to emulate. This "window effect" did not occur in China accidentally. In large part, it owed to the orchestrated efforts of cross-cultural marketing and advertising that dates back to the nineteenth century. According to O'Barr (2007), Western advertising had entered China after the Opium War of 1842 when large coastal cities were forced to foreign trade. "Western products in shops attracted both the curious just to gawk and the wealthy to purchase some modern item" (Laing 2004, 2, quoted in O'Barr 2007). Along with Western products came advertising in the form of "signboards, posters, black-and-white newspaper ads, and colorful advertising calendars" (O'Barr 2007). Prospering in major coastal cities during the early twentieth century, foreign advertising planted the seeds of desire for Western products in Chinese minds. After China's economic reform at the end of 1970s, these desires were rekindled. In 1980s and 1990s, multinational

advertising agencies set offices in large cities such as Shanghai and Guangzhou and successfully promoted new waves of Western goods (fast food, gum, sneakers, cars, etc.) to the Chinese (O'Barr 2007). To a large extent, it was international trade and marketing – initiated by developed nations – that had taught the Chinese to desire and consume like the First World.

But it might be too late to point fingers. The predicament of climate change is too pressing. What would happen if the 1.4 billion Chinese all started to live high-consumption lifestyles? This is the question that captured a group of Western authors who became deeply concerned about China's raging consumerism. In *When A Billion Chinese Jump* (2010), Jonathan Watts fears that the demands of a billion Chinese bent on becoming prosperous consumers could "knock the world off its axis." Although the West had invented industrialization, Watts writes, its negative environmental impact was confined to a handful of small countries and was relatively local. When China takes up the unsustainable model of the West, it induces a global game-changer as it amplifies the potential environmental disaster by both scale and speed. Karl Gerth, in his similarly provocative *As China Goes, So Goes the World* (2010), points out that China's booming consumerism will certainly accelerate the opportunities for multinationals such as GM, McDonald's, and Starbucks, but it will also initiate a new tidal waves of global challenges, especially to the environment.

Hence the question: How to motivate the Chinese to be concerned about the environment and change their current patterns of consumption? Many invest their hope in green consumerism – "the use of individual consumer preference to promote less environmentally damaging products and services" (Irvine 1989, 2). The commerce-driven solution places advertising and marketing right at the center of the green revolution. Ironically, advertising, the stimulator of consumer desire and the potential contributor to the environmental crisis, now has taken up a new role and become the primary means of disseminating environmental messages. According to cultural critic Sut Jhally (2000), modern advertising emerged alongside industrial capitalism, with the goal to stimulate market demand. As industrialization quickened the speed of production, massive quantities of goods were churned out and far exceeded what societies could previous consume. To ensure that commodities speedily "go through the circuit of distribution, exchange and consumption," the advertising industry attaches fantasies and wish fulfillment to material objects, which effectively disintegrates after purchase (Jhally 2000, 185). This practice keeps consumers permanently under-satisfied and desiring, which fuels the capitalistic economy of mass production and mass consumption. The ecological impact of this system is grave: it has led to worldwide environmental degradation, resource shortage, and especially, climate change. In the documentary *Advertising and The End of the World* (1997), Jhally suggests that consumer society look into the future of the human race and start shifting its direction before it is too late. But he adds that, the current commander of consumer culture – advertising – is incapable of stimulating this social change. "The time-frame of advertising is very short-term," writes Jhally (2000), "it does not

encourage us to think beyond the immediacy of present sensual experience [and the] value of a collective social future does not, and will not, find expression within our commercially dominated culture." However, the rise of green marketing seems to undermine Jhally's point. Since the end of the 1980s, the Western advertising industry has started to withdraw from its hedonistic discourse and began to promote "long-term," "collective" interests. Environmental sustainability became one among many "ethical" values that corporations now tout in their annual reports and PR campaigns. So, has Jhally been proven wrong? Or should we not celebrate this advertising's "prodigal return" too quickly?

The Rise of Green Marketing in the US

The scheme of green marketing has been brewing since the heyday of the American environmental movement. In 1975, the American Marketing Association (AMA) held the first workshop on "ecological Marketing." In 1988, the first green consumer guide was published in the US, signaling to many the rise of green consumerism. *Advertising Age*, the flagship magazine of the American advertising industry, began to hold annual Green Marketing Summits since 1991. Since the end of 1980s, "eco-friendly" claims started to appear on product packages. Over the next three decades, green marketing has evolved into a multi-layered promotional culture, including product advertisements, corporate image campaigns, public service announcements, and lifestyle journalism. It resorts to a wide range of appeals, such as ecological harmony, social equality, civic responsibility, individual wellbeing, among others. In commercial media and business literatures, green marketing has received many accolades. Supporters not only valorize it for fostering eco-friendly consumption habits, but also praise its track record in raising the public's environmental awareness. For example, Hailes (1998) argues that green advertising uses the corporations' international prestige to "green the consciousness" of the Americans. Calfee (1998) suggests that advertising is a good medium for environmental communicators to outreach to the public, as "its mastery of the art of brevity, its ability to command attention, and its use of television" touch the population that scientific communities or governmental agencies are desperate to reach. Prothero (2000) compares green advertising and environmental news and argues that the latter always "polarize and simplify the ongoing debate concerning sustainability" and that the former "can be used just as successfully by those seeking to achieve environmental enlightenment as it can for those who aspire to ecological martyrdom" (46).

From a traditionally hedonistic medium to an allegedly responsible one, the apparent renaissance of advertising did not take place in a historical vacuum. Its emergence and popularization can be traced to three social movements occurring in the US since the 1960s and 1970s: the environmental movement in the political realm, the neoliberal movement in the economic realm, and the New Age movement in the religious and cultural realm. First of all, green