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China's Creative Imperative: How creativity is transforming society and business in China

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China's Creative Imperative: How Creativity is Transforming Society and Business in China. Kunal Sinha. Singapore: John Wiley & Sons (Asia) Pte. Ltd., 2008. 221 pp.

With the downturn in the world's economy and consumer confidence, China has caught the eyes of multinational corporations and global brand marketers with its vast population size and eagerness to improve its living standard through consumption. Several books such as *Brand New China* (J. Wang, Harvard University Press, 2008), *Billions: Selling to the New Chinese Consumer* (T. Doctoroff, 2005) captured the economic and cultural changes in China in the recent decade and gave insightful understanding of Chinese consumers.

While most of the studies on Chinese consumers place much emphasis on changes in demographics, economic factors, geographic characteristics, and the political-legal environment, this book reviewed here is devoted entirely to one fundamental underlying consumer motivator, consumers' responses to creativity. As Chinese culture places strong emphasis on pragmatism, the evolving consumers' consideration of creativity as a factor in product and service choices indicates the nation's move from the satisfaction of basic needs to the pursuit of satisfaction of higher order needs. Creativity, artistic values, fun, humor, expression of individuality are now becoming an important element in product as well as service design and marketing. The trend

is first picked up among the younger and the more affluent consumer groups, and further penetrates into the mass market.

The book serves as evidence of this consumer trend. The author, Kunal Sinha, is Executive Director-Discovery at Ogilvy & Mather Greater China. The book is the result of a year long research on how creativity transforms Chinese consumer taste and business. The book is divided into nine chapters. The first three chapters introduce the readers to the objective of the study and provide readers with a brief review of the art and political culture of China. For readers who are not familiar with the past of China, these three chapters help to set the stage of the thesis of the book.

Each of the chapters 3 to 8 puts emphasis on one particular industry and exhibits how creativity interacts in that particular context. Chapter 4 focuses on the music industry, discussing the learning of musical instrument among children, the booming of the violin and piano making industry, the emergence of world-class musician such as pianist Lang Lang, and the evolvement of rock music as well as bands in China. Chapter 4 also argues that in modern China, creativity is set in a boundary. Even though the author said it is up to the individual to test what those boundaries are, our interpretation is that musical expression in lyrics should pay respect to the Chinese heritage as well as the existing political regime. Revolutionary ideas challenging various forms of authorities should be discouraged. Chapter 5 focuses on the

art market, featuring creativity in visual images, including mass production of oil painting, peasant painting, art and art exhibitions, drawing lessons for children, installation art display; even the emerging of the flea market and art villages are included in the discussion. Visual creativity is the most commonly understood form of creativity. This chapter has done a good job in introducing the trend of creativity in visual imagery in China.

Chapter 6 places the emphasis on the television and film industry. Popular directors such as Zhang Yimou, Ang Lee are introduced and their works are elaborated. With the force of a market economy in the television sector, new television programs using imported genres such as Super Girl (inspired by American Idol) hit a great success. The program created a platform for 1.3 billion Chinese people to materialize the dream of “rich and famous” through self expression and talent shows. Television programs such as Pink Ladies (inspired by Sex and the City as well as Desperate Housewives) triggers the birth of the Chinese-style situation comedy and romance genre. All these new popular programs are target at the youth and female executives. These two consumer segments are most willing to catch up with the latest fashion trends that the author argues. Chapter 7 discusses the exhibit of creativity in product and fashion product design. It introduces how Lenovo encourage creativity by building a facilitating organization structure, by hiring international talents, by encouraging teamwork, and by enhancing environment friendly measures. Some of the big

corporations are beginning to see creativity as a survival tool, rather than something just good to have. The role of designers in China has been elevated from art designers who are responsible to make the product pretty, to problem-solver who are responsible for bring an innovative process as well as a smart solution. Several design companies for a variety of applications were introduced. The later part of the chapter reviews the birth of local fashion designers and the spread of fashion literacy.

The eighth chapter turns the focus away from companies and industries, and investigates how creativity is demonstrated at an individual level. Most of the applications featured show people's wisdom in solving daily nuisances and problems. For example, a picture showed women wear sunscreens and poncho in order to protect themselves from sunlight and dirt when riding bicycles. Another example showed a housewife in Linxia, Gansu use disposable paper to make a lovely paper swan for home decoration. Many of such creative ideas turn into business opportunities. Examples include personalized T-shirt, photo shooting services, wire figures, dough artists, and even comic cosplayers. The author attempts to illustrate the point that creativity is captured in different parts of China, and at different demographic groups as well.

In the last chapter, the author discusses eight myths about creativity in China and put forward their observed reality. For example, Myth 7 states that the Chinese are still in the early stages of self-expression. In contrast,

Sinha's observation is that Chinese creativity and self-expression are increasingly being played out digitally, and on an unprecedented scale. The author suggests that creativity in China is rooted in its rich cultural heritage and many new ideas are new combinations of traditional and contemporary artifacts.

companies. The book is crispy, easy to read, and up-to-the-point. The author also supplements the text with web site addresses so that serious readers can dig out further information.

Many scholars conceptualize the essence of creativity by the five "p"s, including person, product, process, place, and persuasion. The contents of the book focused on the characteristics of creative persons as well as creative products. We probably need another book that gives us further information about how creativity transforms the problem-solving process of Chinese individuals as well as business entities. It will be great also to examine how creativity is demonstrated in certain place and contexts, and how creativity does a persuasive job.

The book will be beneficial to international marketers and companies who are aiming at the Chinese consumer market. The change in Chinese consumers' mindset and the search for innovative ideas with practical implications should guide the marketers in product design and promotion. Researchers in advertising, marketing communication, public relations will find this book a resourceful guide for formulating further studies about consumers' responses to new marketing tools such as online marketing and

search engine marketing. Cultural studies and anthropology scholars will find it interesting for the understanding of the contemporary consumer culture in China. The book orients readers to a deeper understanding of the creative need of Chinese consumers. In my opinion, however, the book will be even more interesting if chapters 2 and 3 (on cultural and political history) are moved to the back of the book as an extended Appendix documented in chronological order. Readers may enjoy it more if they jump start from chapter 4.

The book is qualitative in nature. The evidences provided to disapprove the myths are based on observations in a small scale. The book fails to provide evidence based on quantitative studies with sufficient numbers and representations from different parts of China. The “reality” argued by the author in the last chapter is found to be a bit superficial and subjective. As China is an emerging consumer society, the myths and realities about creativity is expected to co-exist. While creativity may become a buzz word among the urban consumers, practicality will remain sturdy among the rural consumers. The coverage of the book is insufficient. Some of the creative industries such as architecture and gaming industry are excluded from the discussion. A question that the book has not solved is that, “if creativity is so valued now, why counterfeit products are still prevalent in China?” Despite the limitations, the book shall benefit readers in appreciating the changes occurring in the contemporary Chinese consumer market.

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1484 words.