Media, Erotics, and Transnational Asia

Schein, Louisa, Mankekar, Purnima

Published by Duke University Press

Schein, Louisa and Purnima Mankekar.
Media, Erotics, and Transnational Asia.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/64019
One rainy Sunday in Beijing, in 1997, I went to a shopping mall bookstore in search of popular works of health advice. The shops in the complex were crowded. They were always busy on Sundays, but this day the rain had led more people to seek the warmth and stimulation of this seven-story department store with its many boutiques. In the bookstore, there were two cases full of popular health books, a bonanza for me, since I had just begun an ethnographic project exploring the popular space between the institutions of Chinese medicine and the daily life of health-related practices. Planted in front of these cases were two men in their early twenties, both noticeably down-at-the-heels in an urban sort of way. Standing one at each case, and each examining his own copy of the same book, they made room for me grudgingly. As I worked my way down the shelves, sampling books on everything from nutrition therapy to home care of the aged, I could see that the book they were reading was an illustrated guide to sexually transmitted diseases. Though both men were careful not to display the book’s cover, and thus its title, to me, the topic was not hard to discern. Page after page of color photographs exhibited horrifying skin conditions afflicting both male and female genitals. I too wanted to look at this book, for scholarly reasons, of course. But they had the only two copies, and in the end I could not outwait them; when I left with my stack of health books, they were still there, fending off all browsers and intently poring over the lurid color plates in their books.

This is one of the few times I have witnessed someone in the act of reading popular health literature. Of course, I wondered why these two men were reading this book in that way. Anthropologists are supposed to be able to ask
people why they do things. When we do, and when people will talk to us, we tend to privilege the answers we get as if they were the authentic voice of the people. But in this situation, had I asked, even had I known these two men and established some form of (anthropologically fabled) rapport with them, what could they have told me about their reading process? With incredible luck, I might have gotten them to admit to an instrumental reading; perhaps they feared infection themselves and wanted to recognize the symptoms to protect themselves. On the other hand, maybe they told themselves that was their motive, when in fact it was some other gratification they sought in those pages. Even the most minimal form of nonfiction reading, thought of as gathering information or remediating ignorance, has its attendant pleasures or frustrations, and few readers, if asked, could or would articulate much about this aspect of reading. One wonders whether any of us know why we read, and keep reading.

In any case, one can hardly doubt that these two young men, with plenty of time to kill while rain poured down outside, had some kind of highly charged interest in the illustrations they were studying. The unsentimental exteriority of the photographs, as they clinically flattened, isolated, collected, and published body parts that are normally inner, folded, private, and continuous with the rest of the person, transgressed the ordinary limitations of vision and experience and carried, no doubt, its own thrill. It is this textual practice of both flattening and multiplying, and the rather unprecedented visibilities it achieves, on which I focus in the discussion that follows. At the same time, I examine a number of methodological problems that plague efforts to understand the popular and the everyday in any scholarly project.¹

Let me begin, then, by confessing the many false starts and methodological self-doubts that assailed me as I broached the study of modern Chinese self-health literature and its consumption. Like other areas of research on popular culture, this domain cannot be delimited except by arbitrary authorial fiat. This is the classic problem of the village for anthropologists, who need to select and map a site in which they can do field research. In the case of modern Chinese popular culture, the site for fieldwork is emphatically not the village in which ethnography’s privileged method of ethnography came into being. The domain of the popular in China is neither remote nor small nor grounded in a community of people who share a local history and mundane conditions of life. The traditional, easy devices by which we frame a manageable project are denied us in the study of popular culture.

One cannot, for example, render the project much simpler by looking at a small sector of the popular culture market. Even though I only collected,
read, and discussed family magazines, popular health education books, and traditional Chinese medical books, it rapidly became clear that every point of view was available in these materials. For every article on dieting there is one warning about the dangers of dieting and extolling the charms of rich food; articles that conflate pleasure with consuming are side by side with articles that argue for a back-to-basics simplicity; every exhortation to cultivate some Chinese essence is matched by plenty of articles on a universal psychology or civilization. So the focus of first resort, which for an anthropologist is usually culture, understood as a system of meanings and values held in common by a group, seems to be ruled out. Ideas and phrasings drawn from apparently Chinese sources are mixed up with advice and insights identified with U.S., European, Japanese, and even Latin American and Native American cultures. There is no neat cultural system here; in fact, hybridity of a very cosmopolitan kind is much more evident. With this mass-market literature, the textually inclined cultural anthropologist who considers a content analysis in search of a specific Chinese culture is immediately frustrated. This is not only because of the tidal wave of global banalities that fills the pages of cheap self-health publications; one is also discouraged by the realization that even the more cultural-nationalist genres of writing draw their rhetoric from a familiar repertoire of worldwide themes.

In China studies, we can of course do content analyses of the fads and fevers that sweep the popular media and periodically dominate consumption practices. But this is frustrating, since the moment we identify most such movements, they have already begun to recede, and our interpretive effort over the meaning of their content becomes outmoded before it can be published. If commentary on the meaning of current events is what we seek to produce, we can never compete with journalists, some of whom have crafted fairly sensitive discussions of popular consciousness. Trying to avoid the merely journalistic in our efforts as true scholars to identify lasting truths, we aim for interpretive depth and explanatory power, hoping to grasp not only the meaning of Disco Fever or Mao Fever but to explore the indigenous cultural processes through which meaning is made. Even where this attempt at depth evades the twin pitfalls of cultural essentialism and universalization, however, it does not completely solve the challenge of the brief temporality, the transitory quality, of fads and fevers. We may, in neo-functionalist manner, posit a “need for making meaning” in our reading of popular fashions, but we have not thereby explained why meaning has to be
made over and over again in so many different ways. In the classic dilemma of the study of culture, we think we can explain stability and conservatism with the relatively ahistorical concept of culture. But once the similarity of forms in the present to those known from the past is understood as a product of repetition or reinvention, we are challenged even more acutely by the problems posed by agency and change. The classic cultural anthropology of meaning, however rewarding it may be in its thick descriptions, is rather vague on questions of agency and famously inadequate for explaining change.

Other ways of limiting the scope of popular-culture investigation are also hard to sustain. For example, one could treat the category of materials I collect, health information, as an epistemological problem, asking what people in Beijing appear to know these days and how this sort of knowledge is formed and structured both by logical imperatives (for example, by asking what objects or conditions operate as unexamined assumptions) and by sociopolitical conditions (for example, by noting agendas that might arise from the monopoly the Women’s Union appears to have on magazines for women). But somehow, as one reads the material that fills the pages of magazines and self-health handbooks, it is hard to think of this as knowledge, and this is not just because it is so shallow and obvious. Knowledge, after all, should accumulate; it should add together to give us a more or less coherent representation of the world or, in this case, of the healthy body and the wholesome life.

This classical vision of knowledge does not help us when we turn to popular culture. In magazines, of course, but also in the popularizing works of traditional medicine, any epistemological investigation encounters only a miscellany, an excess, factoids flying off in every direction, implying all manner of lifestyle alterations while requiring none. What we seem to have here is the difference between truth and truism; the former is a high and demanding problem that will never be solved; the latter is “a proposition that states nothing beyond what is implied in any of its terms” (Fowler, Thompson, and Fowler 1995). In other words, the truths we can collect in popular health advice verge on being self-evident, preresolved, commonsense, grandmotherly nuggets. As such, they are not saved, or even remembered, much of the time, and they are not in themselves transformative. Their greatest power is to converge with many other nuggets as part of a short-lived fad, and their longest temporality is as recycled fragments of a thick and heterogeneous stratum of common sense.

A third way of delimiting the domain of popular culture is to openly em-
brace a critical project and then proceed to collect deconstructible texts on which to apply a critique. Of course we have seen a great many such projects in the United States, where critiques of the commodification of women’s bodies, the snares and delusions of studio photography, and pandering journalism about the rich and famous are well advanced. These critical projects could, and perhaps should, be exported to reform China along with the images and representations that have occasioned them. But who will be applying the critique? Every writer must answer this question for himself or herself. In my own case, the critic would be a more or less feminist, more or less privileged, more or less American anthropologist who, steeped in poststructuralism, routinely seeks to relativize and denaturalize cultural phenomena. Increasingly, however, we are asked to examine our agenda and consider what is at stake in this kind of work. I am not sure I can embrace a project that seeks to awaken Chinese people from some consumerist ideological dream, mostly because I have no way of being sure that “Chinese people” are asleep in the way this critique tacitly presumes. Moreover, what would be accomplished? Capitalism, with all its seductions and sins, would go right on expanding in China. So, perhaps, would my reputation as a critic. Practically speaking, it is hard to see where the liberation promised by this kind of media critique can come from.

These three approaches to delimiting the field of popular culture—the cultural, the epistemological, and the critical—all have their virtues, and their central concerns cannot be purged from our research. (Nor should they be.) But each is perhaps a little too successful in limiting the field, to the point of severe reductionism, at times. So while we may delineate an object or a domain worthy of contemplating, interesting in itself, even as we do so, the endless stratagems and devices of social life go right on working through media ranging from television to calendar art and rumor. In the domain of the popular, counterevidence for our every argument emerges even before we have fully realized what it is we wish to argue.

Consequently, in the remainder of this chapter, I explore how the popular self-health media are used, and I comment on some of the daily practices in which they have an appeal. Though practice is not really separable from language use and the powers of discourse, I devote little attention to cultural or epistemological content analysis, while at the same time avoiding criticism of any specific contents or styles. Graphic images and textual material are here considered together. This is partly because few of the more accessible magazines and advice books in China rely much on visual material, but more important because I will be exploring some features of nonfiction represen-
tation that are shared by both technological forms. The attempt here is to think through some of the broad characteristics of the self-health explosion as a social genre, considering its modes of informing rather than its particular information.

Let us go back to that warm, dry, well-lit, upscale family bookstore and its two scruffy patrons studying pictures of private parts in a venereology and dermatology textbook. I pointed out that the book each of these men had propped against the display cases both collected many cases of bizarre and unusual conditions and flattened their symptoms into an unusually visible format, offering disease to the gaze in a manner quite unlike the way it would be experienced in any ordinary nonclinical life.9 The very fact that there were two books on the shelf that could be studied in tandem may be a minimal defining feature of popular genres. Mechanical reproduction had disseminated these privileged, private phenomena outward into the public, taking images both from the lives of particular sufferers and from the clinics in which experts collected and studied a series of such privacies. Actual rashes, boils, and swellings had become pictorial information aimed, by definition, at an indefinite number of nonexpert consumers.10

This book was nominally produced for medical education, a process that makes experts from nonexperts. This reminds us that there are two implicit trajectories traced between the “real world” and the pages of popular health materials. The first trajectory, we are told, leads from actual phenomena to the represented information about it. Medical disorders, psychological processes, or biographical events, for example, present themselves in life and make their way into print and visual media re-presented as two-dimensional images. But particularly in nonfiction popular media, this representationalism has a necessary corollary, which is that information presented on mechanically reproduced pages takes its significance from the fact that it can lead back to some more real and particular domain. Medical students examining the pictures in this text may hope to be better prepared to treat individual cases of skin diseases connected to one (embarrassed, confused, demanding, careless, etc.) patient at a time, “presenting symptoms” in an outpatient clinic; our two bookstore browsers may imagine other settings in which they might encounter these disease symptoms or come into contact with another person’s genitals, diseased or healthy. In any case, the point of this collection of real things opened out to the gaze of anybody and everybody is the forging of a link to the real, practical life of the reader. Ideas and images move from one life to another (or from many to many) via the printed page or the broadcast signal. The lives that are targeted, those of
media consumers, are presumed to become better informed through this consumption process. There is, in other words, a true information process going on, one in which an increased awareness of the banal characteristics of many others can provide guidance for the self.

What often goes unnoticed in this standard ideology of information media is the violence of representation (Tagg 1993). A picture or a realistic description purports to deliver the phenomenon, delineating all its pertinent characteristics so that its lessons may be seamlessly applied to the phenomenal world of the reader or viewer. In this respect, my embarrassing example continues to serve as a useful illustration. In these pictures of genitalia, though the folds may be unfolded and obscuring structures held aside in order to reveal the affected tissues clearly to the reader’s gaze, there are dimensions of these skin disorders that cannot be represented: pain, inconvenience, fear, embarrassment, moralism, secrecy, and so forth. Of course, the reader imagines these things. But as any person who has suffered from disease knows, imagining an affliction is not the same as actually having it.

Much of the existing critique of the manipulativeness of popular representations seems to presume that consumers are both fooled and constituted by them. I do not think, however, that readers are entirely unaware of the reductionism of the informing image. The very casualness with which people in the United States read magazines, as opposed, for example, to the Bible or an encyclopedia, suggests that they are not turning to these pulpy pages for Absolute Truth. If images had the power to distort reality in the way we critics suggest they do, one wonders why there have to be so many of them, endlessly new versions in multiple serial publications that constantly repeat the obvious as if it were news. Apparently it is hard and endless work to constitute a modern bourgeois reality from mass-media representations. Perhaps the style of information one finds in popular publications in China is more authoritative than magazines and self-help books in North America; but the speed with which these items flow through cohorts of friends and acquaintances in Beijing and the relative casualness with which people mix tidbits of information about health from print media with their own experiences and family lore suggest that there are more commonalities than differences with U.S. experience.

So I am turned from the critical insight that popular information reduces and distorts reality to the ethnographic observation that people consume these trivial representations with a certain implicit understanding of their limitations. Chances are that the venereology and dermatology textbook and its color plates left our two young men as ignorant (or knowing) and curious
(or bored) as they were before they studied the book. But it is also likely that the process of reading the book was rewarding in itself. Perhaps the act of applying information to life, comparing collected facts about genitalia and disease to one’s own embodied life and carnal experience, is its own reward. The seductions of reading about the life of the body are well known. Medical students report self-diagnosing imaginary illnesses throughout their first few years of study, and advertising has a long history of generating problems that can only be solved by the purchase of a commodity (body odor, smelly feet, and bad breath, for example). As we read, we put our own body into the state described by the text, and we consider adopting or rejecting the intervention the text proposes. If this practice of learning is its own reward, then in the act of reading, people show us that they somehow know this. Reading itself is a pleasurable form of consumption, and perhaps little longer-term reward is expected from nonfiction popular media.

Lurking in this observation is the classic problem of false consciousness. It is easy for us as scholars to see the clinical representations of the venereology textbook as reifying or dehumanizing or manipulative, and we have built much of our critical agenda on elaborating such observations. But what are the implications for our practice if we realize that it might be just as easy for “ordinary people” to perceive the processes through which media manipulate them (and us)? Implicit in the ways people use popular publications—casually, endlessly, forgetfully, and sometimes addictively—is a certain multiple consciousness in which problems of truth and falsehood recede into unimportance. To take a recent example from the United States, perhaps people knew that O.J. Simpson’s bloody glove was the wrong size and that this knowledge was of only limited value; perhaps they watched the long trial and the associated coverage not to learn the truth from TV but to enjoy the process of constructing their own stories from the miscellaneous materials provided by the trial coverage. This is not so much error, or even epistemic murk (Taussig 1987, 93–135), as it is a more or less enthusiastic engagement and collaboration in the activity of making (true or false, multiple or singular) consciousness.

**Pop Psychology, Traveling Norms**

The notion of consciousness invites, then, a turn from external but normally hidden bodily tissues to the folds and depths of the mind. As Chinese self-health literature makes very clear, psychology is a favorite arena of popular consumption. *Xinlixue* (psychology, or the study of the patterns of the heart-mind) is a fad that began to gain prominence in the mid-1980s and
only seems to have expanded since then. It is incredibly well suited to the practices of consuming popular media. In the very similar writing we know as popular psychology in the United States, there hardly seems to be a moment between psychological instruction and becoming. We are told, for example, that men are more visual and women more tactile, that men act and women respond, that men externalize and women internalize, and that men avoid commitment and women seek it. Reading this, how can we disagree? We nod and sigh and say, “How true!” We may regret that human nature is this way, but we do not stop to interrogate the categories on which such observations are based. We seldom note psychology’s fixation and reification of conceptual divides between kinds of people—“men” and “women,” “parents” and “children.” We do not usually wonder if these observations are about behavior or feelings, nor do we ask where the experts draw the line between a behavior and a feeling. We may challenge the asymmetry and conventionality of the relations between entities in psychology, but the entities themselves (“men,” “women,” “children,” “society,” “libido,” “identity,” and all manner of “needs”) take on reality in our own hearts and minds almost at the moment we are told of them.

Is this what is happening in China’s psychology fever? I do not know, but I confess that I find Chinese psychobabble especially shocking. As a cultural anthropologist, I have been more committed than I always like to admit to the cultural specificity of “Chinese” subjectivities. Bolstered by the difference of Chinese languages and steeped in a traditional medical literature that places a premodern archive near the forefront of reading habits, my project has refused to conflate Chinese experience with a universal, natural human experience. But this is exactly what the popular discourses of psychology do. Beginning many articles with those seductive words, “Foreign experts report that,” the mental self-health literature unceremoniously lumps Chinese women with all women, Chinese teenagers with all teenagers. Then it confidently expounds on the psychic characteristics and “needs” of people in this global category, seldom failing to conclude with advice about how “you” can adapt to and modify the unavoidable tendencies of your (universal) kind. This kind of psychological lumping is not only problematic in an anthropological or “other-cultural” context, of course; it elides important differences in North America, too. But given that it seems to me particularly easy to imagine or remember prepsychological ways of existing in China, it is also particularly easy to be disturbed by the popular-cultural processes through which subjectivity is being gently but rapidly transformed. Psychology minutely carves the personal into globally recognizable categories, objects, and
forms, making not just any individual but an individual who can consume responsibly, exercise political “rights,” sign contracts, and demand that his or her personal needs be met by “significant others.” Perhaps I would worry less about the appearance of this bourgeois subject in China if there were any evidence that modern individuality led more reliably to personal happiness. But I suspect there is more pleasure in attempting the transformation to modernity than in actually living the life of the modern subject.

Of course, there is still hope. We do not really know, and perhaps cannot know, what the actual efficacy of psychological discourses is for contemporary Chinese readers. It would be premature for me to generalize about the modern selves that might emerge from this process or speculate on how psychological self-health information is read. But the universalizing structure of the discourse is almost as interesting as its content and its reception. Like the documentary photographs discussed above, psychological reports flatten the intimate and expose it to multiple gazes and imaginations. Often citing the survey method of data collection, this kind of information both individualizes and generalizes experience by way of the useful fiction of the abstract individual (Foucault 1977, 184–94; Lukes 1973). There is a marked horizontal quality to what one learns from psychology. I am reminded of a psychologist I met once who, much to my alarm, wore a button announcing, “I’m a lot like you.” The popular mental health literature in Chinese makes the same disturbing announcement to its readers. Adopting a journalistic appeal to the everyday reality of readers through carefully crafted case histories and realistic details, at the same time the psychological discourse links these mundane conditions to broad universals. Young wives in Chengdu or Guangzhou or Beijing are presumed to be just as worried about keeping the romance in their marriage as people of their age and gender in New York or Manchester. Men “don’t cry” in China for the same reasons they don’t cry in Atlanta or Kolkata. A lack of self-confidence is presented as crippling in the Chinese business world just as it is considered to be a handicap on Wall Street.

One would think that a truly psychological discourse would seek depth of insight into specific personal states. But this xinlixue proceeds (like North American psychology) by first abstracting the xin (heart-mind) from all social, historical, and personal contingency and then, aided by the powerful generalizing tools of the statistical survey, attributing to it self-contained inner patterns that can be studied (xue). The resulting human nature is then reported to the general reader and appropriated by that reader into her or his own life in (undoubtedly) a variety of ways.
We could denounce the superficiality and the illegitimate generalization of this media practice for a long time, and there is a certain amount of critical literature on the fallacies of psychology to assist us in doing so (Henriques et al. 1984; Hirst and Woolley 1982, 93–210). But I think there is something important going on here that should also be sympathetically appreciated. Implicit in the universalizing and the naturalizing rhetoric of psychology (in both English and Chinese) is the ruling concept of the norm. The readerly appropriation presumed by this literature is structured around the question, “Am I normal?” Some readers may most enjoy asserting their deviations from the natural norm, while others may take comfort in being nothing but entirely normal. We should never underestimate the pleasures of conformity, despite the fact that we seldom discuss them explicitly. But all who engage with the vast flow of psychological information to which modern Chinese readers are now subjected are given some sense of where the global mainstream lies. No single article or book summarizes or captures the essence of psychological normality, but a multiplicity of facts and a plurality of suggestions serve as navigational aids for readers who steer their personal lives with, against, or along the edge of the global human mainstream.

Medical Popularizing

But is there a global human mainstream? Or is this an illusion painted in American colors and propagated by promoters of certain models of modernization and development? My long-standing engagement with traditional Chinese medicine has been an effort to show that we can only see the actual multiplicities of today’s world if we adopt a point of view from the margins of those areas of knowledge and practice that the world’s elite takes to be at the center (Farquhar 1991, 1995a, 1995b, 1999). But when we turn to traditional-medicine information in consumer-oriented publications, some of the same practices of flattening, displaying, multiplying, and collecting are evident.

Take herbal medicine, for example. Within the professional confines of Chinese medical practice, there is a highly technical art of administering herbal medicines in customized prescriptions (fangjixue), and much of the insider debate in the field centers on the logic, aesthetics, and clinical uses of these complicated combinations of herbs. Moreover, few of the disorders managed by herbal formulas are categories of illness that are mentioned in everyday use anymore. The expert art of discerning a complex and particular pattern of bodily disorder and then prescribing an herbal decoction to treat it (bianzheng lunzhi) specifies and compares phenomena in a practice that
at first appears difficult to popularize. The most respected Chinese medical experts base their analyses of illnesses on a long-standing engagement with a large medical archive and considerable accumulated clinical experience. Especially if one attends to the specialist discourses of the field, which valorize embodied knowledge and sensitive face-to-face management of infinitely diverse phenomena, traditional medicine appears to mount a strong resistance to capitalist commodification.

But doctors know that the general public consumes individual herbs or efficacious foods for many common illnesses; people also buy lots of herbal patent medicines, or chengyao, which are often cheaper and more convenient to use than a classic customized prescription that requires a sustained engagement with a Chinese medicine specialist. Especially as health services have become privatized, people in many walks of life have developed a newly activist approach to personal health care. Once they would have relied on their work unit or village health center for all primary care; indeed, in the mid-1980s I found that villagers in Shandong, served by a minimal but responsible collective health center, kept no medications at home. It was easier then, if you were ill or needed a regular dosing, to drop by the health station and pick up a couple of aspirin or a cold remedy or to receive your daily shot of chemotherapy. Now, with services more expensive and advertising for medications vastly increased, many of these villagers consume over-the-counter medicines according to their own evaluations of what they need. In nearby towns and cities, urbanites have also found the expanding marketing of over-the-counter medications, both Western and Chinese-style, consistent with their recent sense that quality professional health care is hard to find and expensive.

Acknowledging these popular habits, the traditional-medicine establishment speaks to health consumers in various mass-market publications. A common professional response is to warn against the overuse of some herbs or foods (“Swallow’s Nest Is Not a High-Class Moistening Tonifying Product”) or to focus articles on the everyday management of commonly recognized illnesses using foods and chengyao (“A Prescription for Headache Sufferers”; “Kids with Night Sweats”; “Does Hysterectomy Influence Sex Life?”). In keeping with the ruling “nurturing life” (yangsheng) ideology of modern (and arguably ancient) Chinese medicine, the usual moral tenor in such writings is to advocate a life that is well regulated as a whole. But the units in which this information is offered are the easily recognized fragments from which real, everyday lives are (haphazardly) made up. This is true even of self-health monographs, which have detailed tables of contents with help-
fully accessible categories of suffering or therapy so readers need not waste their time with the general ideas in the preface or opening chapter.18

The mass media, or lay (waihang), life of Chinese medicine thus allows us to perceive once again the logic of popular information. There is a movement from one life to another, from one headache sufferer or child with night sweats to another, or from many to many, via the printed page or broadcast image. The authoritative doctor or institution also mediates, of course; but since any frequent reader of self-health advice surely realizes that experts do not agree with one another, their authority, though necessary to the genre, is somewhat weakened as their advice accumulates. From the point of view of the academic centers of Chinese medicine, then, there is a paradoxical transformation of the profession taking place. Expert knowledge and skill are removed from authoritative practitioners, turned into bits of information, framed in the obligatory moralizing tone, and pushed out into the public domain, where people with who-knows-what deep-seated illness patterns are free to scratch away at the surface of their problems with products they can buy from storekeepers in their local market street. I have not detected much outrage in the Chinese medical community about the popularization of information and drugs; this is, after all, a long-standing aspect of medical marketing in China, and patients have never treated traditional practitioners as gatekeepers to health care the way they do with “personal physicians” in the United States. But there is also no doubt in any expert’s mind that popular self-health information is not “really” medicine; rather it is “popular” (liuxing, flowing-going), bits of consumable flotsam and jetsam carved out, flattened, collected, indexed, and displayed in the mass media.

Though few are shocked or surprised by popularization, internal critics in the field of traditional Chinese medicine do deplore some of the deeper shifts toward commodification in the context of a newly market-driven medical economy. Patients, they say, should not be the same as customers, and profit-seeking doctors who develop large patient loads can only do so by lowering their standards of medical practice. Even doctors in state-run work units (not to mention the many others who have gone private completely) are now tempted to compete for patients by advertising “secret formulas” and “magical techniques” (Farquhar 1996). It appears harder and harder to find a doctor who adheres rigorously to the once-standard bianzheng lunzhi practice.

This situation offers an interesting model for understanding developments in the popular domain in the 1990s. In the mid-twentieth century, and then more thoroughly in the 1980s, Chinese medical people assembled an extraordinarily rich and beautifully theorized traditional archive cover-
ing more than two thousand years of writing on illness and therapy. At the same time, they built institutions and clinical practices that were flexible, diverse, and yet productive of distinct professional identities and clearly focused technical debates. If any field could resist the fragmenting and flattening pressures of consumer capitalism, it should be this one. (I have, of course, made this resistance the center of my work in the past, and there will be good topics for research on “pockets of difference” in Chinese medicine for years to come.) But the corrosions of the marketplace are very strong; it is difficult to sell a long-term clinical relationship that incorporates an inconvenient technology (nasty-tasting, time-consuming herbal formulas, and acupuncture treatments that sometimes hurt and take at least half an hour) and sometimes unwelcome advice. Doctors who can meet consumer desires are best able to make a living today.

But bodies do not always cooperate with economic transformations. People who are chronically ill still crowd the clinics in which some variety of standard Chinese medicine is practiced. Many of these patients have tried, and continue to try, all manner of readily available chengyao and baojian techniques. But they are also often persuaded that only the continuous, demanding intervention of an “old Chinese doctor” (laozhongyi) will reach the root of their malady.

Is it possible that the rise of popular commodification produces its own other? The recent history of Chinese medicine hints that the field of the popular itself might generate new forms of elite expertise, new forms of nonpopular esotericism. In the world of Chinese medicine, for example, while hospital practice grows more and more hybrid (incorporating many biomedical technologies, drugs, and procedures) and commercialization of patent medicines becomes a larger and more visible industry, there are also a number of purist, traditional clinics opening. In such private or semiprivate clinics, senior doctors practice diagnostic and therapeutic regimens they take to be thoroughly classical, demanding of their patients an extended commitment to an often uncomfortable regimen. At the same time, these clinics write advertising copy that emphasizes the esoteric character of their practitioners’ skills and the commitments to tradition of the clinic group. Individual doctors decry the improper techniques and misunderstood technical concepts used by their counterparts in the popular marketplace. The fluid and ever-shifting boundary between the popular and its esoteric others should engage some of our attention, especially since much of the daily activity and strongest views of elite experts could be seen as devoted to maintaining this boundary with the clearest possible distinctness.
In conclusion I briefly place these quite unsurprising observations about the practice of the popular in the context of three broader developments: the emergence, or crafting, of private selves in modern China; the globalization of culture; and the stubborn refusal of history to be canceled.

The Ziwo (Self) in Ziwo Baojian

In Beijing and Shandong I frequently ask people why they perform some of their daily or weekly routines. Whether the practice in question is fan-dancing, swimming in a frozen lake, eating garlic, or taking a walk after dinner, the answer is always “it’s good for health.” The very self-evidence of this response has long mystified me. This failure to understand is undoubtedly a product of my position as a middle-class American. Here, people who do a lot of things “for health” are known as health nuts. Though their number is legion, their practice is still marked as a sort of obsession, a way they have chosen to modify or even distort our natural laziness in the service of a higher goal. The fan-dancers and garlic eaters I talk to in China do not treat health itself as a deliberate project, however; rather, it is taken to be the obvious goal of an absolutely normal, everyday life. So to claim that swimming in a frozen lake in January is good for the health is to place a rather bizarre practice squarely in the taken-for-granted mainstream. The swimming might be a concerted project, but health itself is not.

An even more interesting aspect of these wholesome avocations is their personal character. Though a lot of exercise and nutritional regimens involve groups, the payoff in health tends (nowadays) to be seen as entirely personal. Once upon a time the people’s health was a national responsibility and part of each citizen’s patriotic duty. In the 1990s the term “baojian” has moved away from barefoot doctors, public health, class struggle, and collective projects. Reading about health is clearly about self-cultivation, no matter how disorganized people may be about taking good advice. Self-health information is packaged for maximum ease of consumption. These genres name problems clearly (sexually transmitted diseases, loveless marriages, headaches) so readers can identify in ways that are consistent with their own experience, and they offer ready-to-use techniques and commodities (from antibiotics to massage and lingerie) for easy appropriation by individuals.

This self-building through cultural and consumer appropriation is a very uneven process, however. There is a certain shift taking place as everyday life goes commercial and as the institutional entities of socialist China are privatized. People were once defined by their role in an organization and seemed to care about being personally visible or legible only to those with
whom they worked and lived. This kind of visibility did not require fashionable clothes or up-to-date language. Now one can see a great deal of experimentation with a different kind of visibility. The shift in question is between practices in which people use advertising to locate the products they desire and practices through which people attach products to themselves as a way of advertising their personal characteristics. Conspicuous consumption is visible everywhere, but it is also subject to a practical critique in the habits and attitudes of many who find this kind of consumerism repellent. These same critics of consumer showmanship may, however, be cultivating themselves in other (less visible but highly palpable) ways, swallowing tonics and pills, doing qigong in the park, or studying a dog-eared copy of the *Book of Changes*.

**Beyond Cultural Imperialism?**

These days it seems that the only people who are really distressed by the fact that there is no longer any spot in Beijing from which a McDonald’s is not visible are foreigners. Chinese parents, like U.S. parents, are often quick to comment on the bad food sold by McDonald’s, but Beijing’s children and young people have taken to this emblem of the global with enthusiasm. One can, on a moment’s reflection, understand some of the charms of McDonald’s “culture”: like other popular phenomena, it provides individualized and egalitarian service, the product is standard and widely thought of as hygienic, and the setting is fairly anonymous, all of which provides a sort of relief from neighborhood restaurants in the same price range (Yan 1997).

Obviously this equalizing, standardizing, and individualizing function is shared by the self-health literature I have considered here. Magazines in particular seem to offer a broad and diverse surface of global culture (the most up-to-date, the most glamorous, the most intimate) from which readers can select, unobserved, those fragments they find most usable and affordable. It is interesting to note that little distinction is made between Chinese and American (or Japanese) consumables. As everyone knows, postcoloniality and cultural imperialism are not often identified as problems in the popular media. Nationalist and culturalist topics are present, of course, but they are placed alongside topics taken from many other parts of the world. In the unsupervised act of appropriation, one fragment seems much like another. Modern Chinese sexual practice is, for example, colonized both by Masters and Johnson and by the traditional “Taoist” erotic arts. What is the difference between these bodies of knowledge? On what common (and possibly new) ground do they build their appeal? Is an ancient Chinese erotics
better-suited to Chinese people, as some consumers of antiquarian books seem to think? Is the biology of sex universal, or are there, as Margaret Lock has argued, “local biologies” (1993)? Research might answer these questions in interesting ways, but it cannot address them at all without taking seriously the global capitalist field that has recently become urban China’s most noticeable environment.

It is, of course, the global field in which cultural imperialism becomes an issue. Unfortunately, our sense of scandal as we watch the world (apparently) going American is too tangled up in a continuing naturalization of nations and cultures. It is not uncommon to insist on a Chinese essence that distinguishes this nation and its people from all others, nor is it unusual to denounce the latest fashions in ideas or products as too thoroughly “American.” But given that many ordinary people do not seem to care about the national identity of their modernity, this paired romanticism and denunciation begins to appear facile. We have to ask ourselves, what is the other of the global? Can it be empirically found? Are there really resistant centers of difference that are violated by commodity flows and ideological translations?

The answers to these questions are not obvious, since it can easily be demonstrated that the sense of the local these days often arises in reaction to global processes. Put more powerfully, the local itself is a process, an array of localization practices that continually produce “neighborhoods” (the language is Arjun Appadurai’s) from very diverse and often dispersed resources (Appadurai 1996, 178–99; Gupta and Ferguson 1997a). “Traditional” *ars erotica* or medicine or music, “Confucian” ethics, and local-culture studies have all had their feverish careers as Chinese essences in the reform period. The struggle against foreign incursions in these arenas of national or regional expertise has, in a sense, been going on from the very first moment at which the arena was discerned. Moreover, we should perhaps admit that our sense that something fine is being violated has a lot to do with our position as intellectuals whose careers have been advanced by our ability to distinguish the fine from the vulgar, the noble from the base. Perhaps we are too committed to our traditional task of praising that which appears essential, lasting, and deep while dismissing the transitory and superficial.

Let me be clear. I do think that transnational cultural flows violate something. I do not find the conspicuous consumption of the 1990s in Beijing very attractive, nor do I wish to see the vocabulary of pop psychology colonize conversation in Chinese. It is comparatively easy to admit the contingency of one’s own tastes, but such an admission goes only part of the way toward a more satisfactory critique of cultural imperialism. In other words, our dis-
comfort with the spread of bourgeois culture and grief for lost traditions must be grounded in something larger and perhaps less comforting than the class-inflected preferences of cosmopolitan intellectuals like ourselves. So when I try to answer the question, what is the other of the global, all the while keeping an eye on my joint interest in Chinese medicine and the popular self-health literature, only history presents any answers.

**History: From Tongzhi to Zazhi**

China’s postsocialist modernity seems to have turned away from the totalizing idealism of a collective “common will” (*tongzhi*, comrade) to make considerable public space for the “various wills” found in the world of magazines (*zazhi*, literally “miscellaneous aspirations or marks”). This apparent devolution has not gone unnoticed in either criticism or everyday talk. In the fall of 1997, there was no shortage of people in Beijing who were anxious to explain to me why the bad old days of the Cultural Revolution were, at least morally, superior to the present.

Some intellectuals have recently echoed this refrain, as well.19 In keeping with my comments above, we could understand the historical seriousness of intellectuals as merely a way of building cultural capital, setting apart a stratum of society for those elite thinkers who are above the vulgarities of the mass media. But the fact that ordinary people in many walks of life are just as disturbed by the speed and thoughtlessness with which Chinese people seem to be turning away from the collective, away from responsibility for national life and for each other, argues for the generality of a contemporary unease. Perhaps nostalgia for the values and collective demands of socialism, along with outrage at the “selfishness” and “greed” of contemporary urbanites, is just another fever that periodically sweeps Beijing. Maybe it is, like other fads that sweep the capital, state fostered (J. Wang 2005). But there is no doubt that people have invested considerable feeling in this form of critique.

This nostalgia is more than just a trendy idea. It impresses me as being rooted in habits of thought and patterns of practical life that were substantially formed under the sway of Maoist socialism. The habits and patterns of life inculcated through practice and imposed by the built environment have, as Pierre Bourdieu has so extensively argued, a certain conservatism (1990, 52–65). They may be mostly inarticulate expectations about what is or should be routine and what is or should be the goal of life, and they certainly evolve as conditions change. But there is a genuine resistance at the level of habit. Popular self-health literature may promote the cultivation of private (or even selfish) selves, and it may propagate “foreign” products and facts
without a second thought, but it cannot entirely erase (yet) the values, commitments, and expectations of readers who learned to be Chinese before the 1980s. In other words, a lot of people still have a historical consciousness that can tell the difference between then and now. They may feel lucky to be able to devote their time and energy to modern self-cultivation, or they may deplore the unthinking selfishness of their neighbors and even their children. They may be rudderless and anxious in a sea of commodities, or they may experience heightened gratification as they buy things they never could have dreamed of buying in the past. Even if modern Beijingers cannot tell the difference between an emergent Chinese modernity and a U.S. or global modernity, they know that the socialist world in which they grew up is no longer with us.

This inarticulate but certain knowledge provides the provisional answer to the question, what is the other of the global? For the time being, in Beijing and much of the rest of developed China, it is neither local cultural essences nor some kind of atemporal national identity; it is a people with a shared past. People in China may remember their collective past’s being violent and catastrophic, or they may recall its being more unitary and more comradely than the booming, buzzing atomism of the present. They may even remember it as thoroughly totalitarian (though I have the impression that few in China do remember the Maoist period in this way). But people’s conscious memories of history are less important than the difference that has been worked in them by history. When we look at the consumption of popular cultural forms from the point of view of the historically constituted consumer, we can see that while the commodity (or the fact or the image) on offer may be identical in China and the United States, its mode of appropriation can hardly have exactly the same character or significance in these two places.

Since I have returned to the specificity of the reader-consumer here, let us reconsider the scene with which I began, that of two young men reading the same book on sexually transmitted diseases in a family bookstore. They were not very old and thus not likely to be actively nostalgic for (or “wounded” by) Maoist culture. They were not very rich and therefore not among those who are currently most enjoying the consumer boom in Beijing. They were not very attractive, and chances are they would never in life encounter the private parts of many different people. It is hard to avoid the suspicion that most of the information they were collecting had very little pertinence to their past or future lives.

Why were they not reading adventure comics or illustrated sports maga-
zines or television fanzines? Of course, I do not know, but I suspect the fascination of those textbook pages had something to do with the multilayered transgressions they performed. It was not only norms of modesty, of visibility and invisibility, that were being violated. The large number of the plates, combined with the dramatically gruesome pathologies they documented one by one, suggests a certain minor but definite transformation that could be perpetrated on the reader: once informed by these representations, the reader will never again look around and see only hosts of normal people. Anyone, no matter how “typical” in appearance, might harbor some secret malady. Abnormality is real but not necessarily visible, except in these peculiar publications.21

I wonder, then, whether the flattened collections of data and the clinically cataloged deviations presented in magazines and other mass media do not have a certain appeal as diversity itself. People may read the ziwo baojian literature—stories on everything from lesbianism to liver disease, plastic surgery to paranoia—partly to improve their own lives but also to assure themselves of what they are not and where they will not go. Scattered over the surfaces of the postsocialist media are facts, images, and commodities that can serve as orientational aids to an unbounded and unmappable terrain. This space of self-building, consumption, nostalgia, hope, and contingent visibilities may not best be thought of as either global or local, either Chinese or universal, either private or public. It is perhaps all of these, with every reader at every moment assembling versions of self and other, here and there, from the most miscellaneous materials. All this multiplicity may be only seemingly diverse, a surface variation atop a monotonously imagined modernity. But for the time being, I think this seeming is important to people for whom the monologue of Maoist discourse is gone but not entirely forgotten.

Notes
This chapter is reprinted, with permission, and with very minimal emendations, from positions 9, no. 1 (spring 2001): 105–31.

1. I believe these methodological problems are relevant to many forms of research in cultural anthropology and cultural studies. They are especially acute for projects that attempt to describe subjectivity and its modes of production, whether such projects target cultural others or contemporary North Americans. In order to avoid implying that epistemological doubt only applies to ethnographic or historical research with subjects who are far removed from the life of the investigator, I have adopted a frequent use of the first-person plural pronouns “we” and “our.” This usage, combined with a more than usually conversational style, is intended to keep the community of reference an
open question—sometimes “we” are groups of scholars interested in the topic of popular culture, sometimes we are embodied human beings, and sometimes we are North Americans who share a historically conditioned kind of common sense. Such a usage can presume too much and should be read critically. Here I wish to presume that there will be a critical reading, thereby proposing that many possible groupings (but not the classical Orientalist groups of East and West) can be salient in research.

2. Most of the observations in this article are drawn from field research conducted part time in Beijing in the autumn of 1997. I have continued to do research on the health-related mass media in urban China, but this chapter does not reflect the results of that research, or the evolution of my thinking on the subject. In a few cases, though, I have altered some obsolete references.

3. This is not the only definition of culture that could be used; it is just a relatively easy one. For a discussion of the use of the culture concept in Chinese studies, see the work of Judith Farquhar and James Hevia (1993).

4. As Lydia Liu (1995) has argued, it is not a simple (or ultimately, perhaps, even desirable) task to sort out what components of contemporary thinking and common sense might have a purely local (in this case Chinese) origin and history.

5. A particularly interesting example of such journalism has been conducted by Jianying Zha (1995).

6. See the work of Arjun Appadurai (1996, 83–85), for a discussion of the problem of repetition in cultural explanation. In this context he also proposes that ephemerality itself is a source of considerable pleasure, a point quite consistent with the present argument.

7. The term “thick description” is drawn from the essay of the same name by Clifford Geertz (1973b). For a pertinent critique of cultural anthropology’s responses to social change, see the work of Vincent Pecora (1989).

8. I am here bracketing any epistemological interest in technical Chinese medical discourses, focusing instead on what might be thought of as the appropriations of professional Chinese medicine in popular genres. This is not to say, however, that top professionals in the field are not often themselves the very agents of this appropriation.

9. This collection process that renders surfaces visible in ways quite distinct from the visibilities of everyday life is the very definition of the clinical, and a continuation of processes begun with the birth of the clinic (Foucault 1973).

10. Chinese medicine has an analogous practice and literature in tongue diagnosis. Thinking about the textbook under discussion here has helped me to understand why—in the early 1980s, when this publication practice was brand new—I found the color plates of gummy, flaky, and discolored tongues in diagnosis textbooks rather shocking and disturbing. These images seemed at the very least an invasion of the privacy of the patients concerned, even though their identities could not be discerned from the close-up shots. (And, of course, Chinese patients tended to have a very different idea of privacy than I did.)

11. This date may impress some as a bit early. I base it on the emergence of psychology as an explicit interest in Chinese medical literature in the mid-1980s.
12. A study of the use of the second-person, “you,” as a form of direct address to the reader, would be an interesting way of reading popular nonfiction genres. Thus far I have the impression that the second person is used in the self-health literature in a way that marks especially “popular” and “accessible” genres. The device is arguably an important tool of psychological reality production.

13. This is, of course, more what psychoanalysis attempts, though not without some of the same crippling abstractions I here attribute to popular psychology.

14. The middle term in “xinlixue” is most conventionally written without the wang radical on the left, and thus (in this context) means “inner.” A common variant, however, renders the word with the wang radical, giving it the meaning of “patterns.” This usage parallels the words for physiology (shenglixue) and pathology (binglixue) in Chinese medicine and thus is not surprising. Hence my gloss here of “xinlixue” as the study of the inner patterns of the heart-mind.

15. I have elsewhere considered the ideological holism and practical multiplicity of professional Chinese medicine in modern China, as has Volker Scheid (2002). Scheid’s study demonstrates especially clearly the complicity of Chinese medical theory, especially its tendency to totalize the field, with the state agenda since 1949. He shows, however, that this “holism” and “harmony” have been built in parallel with social processes that systematically diversify Chinese medicine in practice.

16. Indeed, one small genre of recent publications in public health is “how to find a doctor” guides; these mass-marketed lists of hospitals, clinics, and specialists, covering both regional and national services, meet the new need for information about both private and government health care, stemming from the fact that the old, nested hierarchies of services run by the government are defunct.

17. Health and Happiness World 5 (May 1997). This journal is published by the National Administration of Chinese Medicine and Pharmacy.

18. The most active area of traditional medical-health education in the mass media is television, which is outside the scope of this chapter. But it is worth noting that hospitals, clinics, and successful individual practitioners are verging on the infomercial genre as they “educate” the viewing public with numerous lengthy specials on Chinese medical therapies and regimens.

19. I base this observation on conversations with academics in Beijing in 1997. (But also see, for example, Jianying Zha’s [1995, 19–20] study.)

20. The literature of the wounded (or scar literature) was a term used to refer to some of the fiction and essays that appeared in popular venues in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

21. I here invoke norms and normativity in Chinese society as if they functioned quite similarly to their parallels in U.S. life. This is not necessarily the case, of course. But it is hard to avoid the sense that certain very strong, normative expectations condition many kinds of daily life in modern China. I know of no extended study that focuses on this issue, unfortunately.