

attention to how the state and the immigrant community interacted to shape immigration policy and administration, this study puts greater weight on the immigrants themselves, treating them not as unrelated individuals passively responding to adversity, but as associate agents actively pursuing effective means of counteracting adversity. It also examines, in much detail and depth, the encounters, interaction, and negotiation between immigrants and immigration officials.

Overall, Lau's *Paper Families* constitutes an insightful new study of Chinese exclusion and makes an original contribution to research on Chinese immigration and Chinese American history. It is also methodologically sound. Lau innovatively employs a combination of techniques, including historical ethnography, which combines the careful reading and systematic analysis of hundreds of individual case files; content analysis of various types of documents, particularly transcripts of the inquiries during the entry examination process; and thematic analysis of predefined themes drawn from established theories and prior empirical research. However, the study would have benefited from a more sophisticated racial analysis, as the issues of concern under investigation pertain to racial formation.

Exotic Commodities: Modern Objects and Everyday Life in China. By Frank Dikotter. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007. Pp. 384. \$38.00 (cloth).

Omar Lizardo
University of Notre Dame

In his important and wide-ranging book, *Exotic Commodities*, the historian Frank Dikotter explores patterns of consumption of foreign commodities in late imperial and early republican China (roughly 1850–1949). His main goal is to explode the myth of an economically “backward” and “globally isolated” Chinese society that has only in the post-Cold War era begun to enjoy the same levels of integration into global commodity currents as the Euro-American West. Instead, Dikotter attempts to establish that rather than being of local origin, the material culture of the *majority* of the Chinese population (including those living in the rural countryside) has been deeply connected to transnational commodity flows since at least the latter third of the 19th century. This goes from the most mundane of “necessities” to the most coveted foreign “luxuries” (a boundary that itself shifted radically during this period): from yarn, iron, and oil, to toothpaste, soap, gramophones, and cameras.

The ambitious argument that late-imperial China could be clearly characterized as a “consumer society” also implies that an incipient (but distinctively Chinese) *consumer culture* had already developed there, along with the requisite infrastructural apparatus needed to sustain a system

of mass consumption. Thus, in order to establish his case, Dikotter first has to dismiss the “authenticity myth” (that of a late 19th century China strongly holding on to an unchanging culture that had remained static for centuries) that in his view has been fostered by most observers of the period, both lay and academic. In order to sustain this view, these writers tend to ignore willfully the massive material and infrastructural presence of the modern in late imperial China in their quest to find an “authentic” Chinese culture kept intact from the profaning touch of industrial modernity. Dikotter dismisses these histories and ethnographic reports as both elitist (insofar as they must perforce ignore the experience of the majority of the Chinese population) and not based on rigorous empirical evidence. The first half of the book is thus spent painstakingly documenting—using a wide variety and types of sources—the large-scale sociotechnical transformation that China underwent during the period. These include an emerging nationwide mass transit system, electrification, urbanization, and the establishment of a large-scale factory system, all of which, along with a vibrant consumer society, was in place by the 1930s (p. 151).

The second myth that has to be dealt with is that of the “xenophobic” Chinese, who “reject all things foreign.” Dikotter spends the second half of the book obliterating this presumption. He shows that foreign goods of all types—from “Dutch water” to Indian food, American toothpaste, and imported drinks—were actively consumed in China by broad segments of the population. Thus, a key part of the book’s argument consists precisely of showing that the consumption of foreign commodities during this period was *not* restricted to a small, urban elite. Dikotter argues that in early republican China, the relatively low intake of foreign goods cannot be equated with “a lack of interest.” Instead it is better seen as “a measure of their success, as they were quickly appropriated and transformed into local productions” (p. 48). Furthermore, he shows that early 20th century protectionist policies were a *reaction* to a previously demonstrated mass demand for foreign goods during the late 19th century. Competition against foreign competitors had dramatic effects on the local population of commodity producers—many going bankrupt even during the nationalist period—with most of them being forced to engage in direct copying of foreign product templates, creating what he calls a distinctively Chinese “copy culture” (pp. 36–39). This actually resulted in a proliferation and extension of the “world of foreign (and foreign-looking) goods” to the majority of the population. It is in this regard, even though “Republican China is often portrayed as a period marred by ‘political involution,’ ‘economic stagnation’ or ‘social disintegration’ . . . modernity was alive and well, as a golden age of openness allowed people, things and ideas to move in and out of the country as never before” (p. 153).

Dikotter situates his larger argument in the context of the recent explosion of interest on the twin subjects of “consumption” and “globalization” in the social sciences (pp. 7–12, 261–65). He rightly rejects overly

simplistic accounts of both processes. In regard to globalization, he criticizes top-down models in which the integration of a given population into global commodity flows is seen as inexorably leading to the loss of diverse local cultures and their replacement with alienating homogeneity. Instead, he argues that his research supports the claim that there is *always* a complex and historically situated interplay between the global and the local and that historical agents have at least some capacity to appropriate cultural products and integrate them into their everyday routines and social practices. He also rejects currently fashionable models from anthropology that emphasize the notion of globalization as implying “hybridity,” since this conception implies that local subjects realize that they are mixing parts of heterogeneous cultural orders. Such awareness, however, is not necessary, since sometimes “historical agents . . . did not see a clash in the juxtaposition of different objects” (p. 265). Instead, for Dikotter, consumption rather “*is* appropriation . . . a social activity by which objects produced become one’s own by subjecting them to personal meanings and differential uses” (p. 11).

Dikotter also takes to task sociological models of consumption that presume that a single, monolithic set of motives—that is, Veblenian and Simmelian models of competitive emulation and differentiation—can be adduced by the analyst to explain consumption patterns. He is inconsistent in this regard, however, since no sooner has he rejected the notion of competitive emulation and differentiation as an explanatory device than he informs us that “austere designs and high quality artefacts from Europe pleased wealthy elites eager to distinguish themselves from the ordinary farmers who bought shoddy but gaily decorated imitations” (p. 263). Furthermore, Dikotter’s own attempt to explore the parameters of China’s own “consumer culture” by engaging in an interpretative analysis of Chinese collective conceptions of the relationship between things and the person (in which he argues that the Chinese draw a very different line of demarcation between material and spiritual forces than that which we are accustomed to in the Judeo-Christian West, with material objects being endowed with magical and quasi-spiritual qualities, and persons seen as readily commodifiable entities), while suggestive, appears out of place in a book that hews so closely to claims that can be empirically substantiated. These flaws are nonetheless relatively small blemishes in a work that will surely make us rethink a good number of our deeply held assumptions (like the view, most recently articulated by anthropologist Marshall Sahlins, that sees modern consumerism as inherently tied to presuppositions about the person of Western, Judeo-Christian cultural origin) regarding the rise of the “consumer society.”