Christopher Rea and Nicolai Volland (eds)


In *The Business of Culture* editors Christopher Rea and Nicolai Volland and their contributors have provided a thought-provoking approach to considering the Chinese entrepreneur (both within China but also as part of the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia) not only as a business person but as someone whose fortunes and interests are interwoven with culture, as a producer of, purveyor of, or collaborator in cultural pursuits. From the book’s evocative cover, featuring the 1926 illustration of *Hong meigui* (Red Rose) with its depiction of “The Author” as representative of the scale and scope of the publishing industry (an individual literally depicted as a profit machine, churning out text), the reader is introduced to one of the focal points of this volume, that of the commercial press and print culture in China (p. 3). The reader gains a fresh approach to the Chinese entrepreneur, as arguably the cultural angle has been too often overlooked in the interest of business patterns, networks and innovations. This edited volume presents a long-overdue appraisal of the cultural dimension of Chinese entrepreneurship.

*The Business of Culture* is structured around three central tenets as a means of understanding the cultural entrepreneur. Cultural entrepreneurship is explained as a highly mobile form of cultural agency characterized in early-twentieth-century Asia by “active participation in multiple modes of cultural production” (p. 10). The three tenets of cultural entrepreneurship are further elaborated throughout the volume but particularly in both the introduction and in chapter one, by Christopher Rea. These basic paradigms are: the cultural personality model, the tycoon model, and the collective enterprise model. We are cautioned, however, to recall that the business of culture has evolved over time and that a framework for understanding it also has to develop (p. 10). This volume traces many business figures during periods of upheaval and change, effectively demonstrating how and why change should be factored in to any discussion of the cultural entrepreneur.

The cultural-personality model deals predominantly with personal branding. Here individuals create their own cultural products but also leverage on their persona or “personal brand” (p. 18). Detailed examples are given in the chapters by Grace Fong on Lü Bicheng, Eugenia Lean on Chen Diexian and his famed “Butterfly Mark,” and Michael Gibb Hill’s account of the success of correspondence schools helmed by entrepreneurs such as Fong F. Sec (Kuang Fuzhou). What stands out in these chapters is that by taking an approach that examines how culture is created and how personas are shaped, we are given...
insights into prominent individuals who skillfully combine entrepreneurial success with strong personal “branding.” The case of Lü Bicheng is particularly intriguing, as author Fong concedes that despite Lü amassing vast amounts of wealth there is scarcely any information on how she did so; here, “class, status and gender” may have led Lü to conceal her profit-driven ventures (pp. 38-9). In this case, building a persona as a cosmopolitan, highly literate single business woman is still constrained by societal pressures. Perhaps the reader may surmise that the cultural entrepreneur has to be conscious of cultivating a persona that will be “attractive” to a broader audience. This idea of appealing to a public audience is adroitly demonstrated in the study of Chen Diexian of the Butterfly trademark. Here, Lean argues that what set Chen apart from other entrepreneurs in the pharmaceutical industry was the fact that he was already established as a literary figure and promoted a persona as a man of “culture and feeling” (p. 68). The development of modern products alongside careful branding led not only to the butterfly mark being instantly recognizable but also to its coming, in time, to “symbolize the man himself” (p. 75).

Finally, in the chapter on correspondence schools, the Commercial Press, and the rise in popularity of magazines such as The English Student, Michael Gibbs Hill examines the enterprising methods used by individuals such as Fong F. Sec to rise from relative obscurity to gain recognition as a leading proponent of English teaching (p. 99). Fong was held up as the perfect model to emulate, and this is particularly apt, since the main rationale for the correspondence school was the leveraging on a public perception of the need to self-improve.

The Tycoon is the second pillar in this paradigm for considering the cultural entrepreneur. The key to the tycoon, it would appear, is not only the scale on which he or she operates but the attitude he or she demonstrates toward culture. The tycoon is not necessarily a creator of culture but treats it as an economic end and often outsources artistic creativity (p. 19). In some instances, such as in Sin Yee Theng and Nicolai Volland’s chapter on Aw Boon Haw, we can see that the Tiger Balm brand was enmeshed with the persona of Aw, but he, unlike figures such as Chen Diexian, was not a creator of culture as he was neither an artist nor a literary figure. Sai-Shing Yung and Christopher Rea’s chapter on Law Bun demonstrates that despite a very successful relocation from Shanghai to Hong Kong, and a transition from publishing to pulp fiction and action cinema, Law never promoted himself (or his “persona”) as part of his many enterprises. In Law’s case, the authors argue that agency is an important consideration; Law promoted culture as his business (p. 151). Certainly the issues of culture and the agency in large-scale business networks speak to the potential influence these tycoons have.