

# Consumerism and the Predicament of Moral Education

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## **Introduction**

Today as consumer society has risen and formed throughout the world after World War II, consumerism has become a topic of increasing interest throughout many academic disciplines, from sociology to anthropology, psychoanalysis to political philosophy. In education, there are some theorists such as Henry Giroux, Trevor Norris as so on discussing the influence of consumerism on education and schooling. In this paper, I intend to discuss consumerism as a new cultural ideology and its influences on moral education.

In the pursuit of modernization or development, many societies set up the economical growth as the target and market economy is treated as the main instrument to realize the target. The development of the market depends on the liberation and production of people's consuming desires. Raising the level of consumption has become the goal of the society and it is regarded as the only way to bring the society into the economic progress and even political thriving. Both western prosperous societies and other underdeveloped and developing societies are increasingly oriented around consumption\*: "the act of consumption, the desire to consume, and the extensive communicative apparatus designed to celebrate consumption and elaborate its signification". We have come into a consumption era. The commercialization of culture and society and the impact of mass media drive people to become consumers. In everyday life people are molded and evaluated as consumers who are liberated to seek the possible chances to get instant gratification. Consumerism has been a dominant ideology which deeply and widely penetrates into every corner of different societies and different cultures. People are being controlled by consuming structure and are bound up to the process of desire production and reproduction. The public sphere has been inundated by an unending parade of commodities and fabricated television spectacles that keep it preoccupied with the values of consumerism.

For the public at large, the integrating and transformative experiences of culture have been replaced by participation in consuming trends. Consumerism leads to a new kind of social control and it is techniques of social power that refashion mind and body.

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\* It is very easy for Chinese society to transit to consumerism. Socialist collectivism deprived peoples personal interests but on the contrast lead to extreme selfishness. "Culture Revolution" and class struggle undermined the morality both in public and private life. After people get certain extent freedom to pursue their own interests, they are attracted to get more money even by any kind of means. There exists morality vacuum in society and people have no shared universal values and moral consensus. In this situation the egocentricity is easy to grow and spread and the public are easily swayed onto the path of consumerism. In fact consumerism is the result of appeal for economical growth and it is also the strategy of mass that revolt to political and collective coercion. The reduction of cultural values to economic worth has produced a situation in our 'enlightened' society where material desire and pleasure become ethical justification and consumerism turns into a kind of politics.

*Consumerism has taken on a new form in which it has come to dominate our political life and our primary communicative apparatus through the proliferation of signs. Because production is alienating, we seek fulfillment in consumerism; yet consumerism itself in turn has become a deeply alienating experience. (Baudrillard, Jean. "The System of Objects", in Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings, edited by Mark Poster. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001, page 16.)*

Consumerism has very serious influences on moral life, because people are tempted only to concern about their own consuming desires and to throw themselves into the chase of pleasures of being consuming. Mass consumer culture becomes the ground of a pleasure-seeking morality and hedonist lifestyle, that is, a morality which concentrates individuals' selfish short-term ego-gratification. It causes the decadence, apathy to the public life, social alienation and egoism.

Consumerism is the myth, which believes that individuals will be integrated by consuming. It degrades the need for morally fulfillment to satisfaction of owning commodities, and it substitutes the requirement of capacity to do more consumption for the pursuit of virtues in the public and spiritual rebirth. In the myth of consumerism, there is no rebirth or renewal of moral personality. And there are no symbols to evoke transcendent truths and ultimate values. Because consumption is related with capital and money is the necessary condition of the consumption. Consumer society is giving rise of mammonism as well as fetishism.

In the midst of a major identity crisis and the loss of moral consensus, have we realized the lack of morality and humanism in our society, which is now supported by the transient satisfaction of ownership rather than the ontological value of the meaningful cultural and moral experience? Is consumerism a kind of social oppression that distorts moral freedom? Has it made education demoralizing? Have we realized the confliction between the pursuit of consumption and moral excellence? Have we really acknowledged the crisis which consumerism causes in our school moral education? What does education in a consumer society offer to the youth by the way of moral guidance? The challenge that Chinese society has confronted is somehow a predicament that the western world has involved since a long time before. So those questions can be raised globally. \*

### **Consumerism and Egocentrism**

In consumer society, the commoditization of everyday life made its reconstruction of values orientations and aims to depend on the desires production and consumption. Human values are only evaluated by the market and individuals' capacity of consumption. Therefore individuals only have commercial values that can be calculated and exchanged in the market. Everyone has no alternatives except to be subjected to the requirement that the commercial society pressed on the personal qualities because only in meeting the needs of the commercial market can he or she gain the satisfaction though consumption. Because of the relations

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\* I partly intend to address those questions in relation with the situation in which Chinese society has involved because consumer culture has demoralized our society and we devalued our children's moral education with the influences of consumerism.

between desires and consumption, everyone has become a servant to his consuming desires and concentrates his or her concerns on the desires that developed by the consumer market and on the capacity to get the satisfaction through calculating, competing and owning. Consumer culture drives people to worry about their personal abilities of consumption. Everyday life is a kind of practice to seek consumption targets that can satisfy the desires. As desires belong to private affairs and only can be satisfied individually, the consuming life is located in the pursuit of self-interest and it is competitive between people. Consumers don't care about the common well-being in case his own consumption interests and pleasure relates. They don't concern the universal values but the improvement of their instrumental functions in the consumption. Therefore in the consumer society individuals are atomically egocentric.

In the consumer culture people's preferences of desires determine their lives and sensual pleasure turns to be the central end of life. Consumption authorizes pleasure to be the particular forms of meaning and value of life. Commodities of consumption are not only the objects to meet the needs, but there are symbols of social identity and personality. Consuming desires and the tastes define the consumers and rank the social status and personal qualities. People are differentiated by their capacity of consumption and their particular tastes. From the consumption people define their lives and choose their life goals and social roles. Consumer culture forms an illusion that the realization of pleasure is the very kind of self-fulfillment. The meaning of consumption is substituted for the meaning of life, and an individual is evaluated by the owning of consumables. So consumption shapes and refashions the self-identities of people and their self-expectations, and provides them the fundamental values of lives. In the consumer culture, tastes and styles mark and reshape personalities. Everyone shows his or her characteristics by the idea of consumption and the way of consuming. The differences of personalities are produced by the differences of desires and tastes. In this way experiences of people become commercialized and personalities turn into reification, that is, people are characterized by reified pleasures. People have to seek out their differences of characters in the consumption because they aren't able to find who he or she is in the consumer culture. Pleasure satisfaction cannot give a real self-identity other than an illusion of self because materialized pleasure naturally is the same though it has the different degrees. Thus the egocentric pursuit of pleasure is the only thing that an individual feels real. Lives lose its spiritual and moral contour altogether.

For consumers, Self-worth is gauged by buying power. The acts of buying and owning reinforce self-worth and construct their selves as well as the social relations. Personal well-being is evaluated and marked by the amount of consumables that he or she is able to have. In the temptation of the consumption and competition for personal interests, people as consumers pursue the satisfaction of personal pleasures without any concerns about the social well-being. Things worth doing are only those related with their own consumption. Consumerism delivers the society into a state of social coldness and alienation from each other.

Consumerism produces egocentrism and undermines the sense of morality. People reject moral reflection on their lives that are now only based on personal preference of pleasure.

There are no value criteria to make judgment of the right and wrong. Consumption made lives devalued. What we teach in schools are not moral reason and virtues, on the contrary, we teach our children how to realize themselves in the pursuit of the success of appetite satisfaction. Consumer culture forms a new kind of individualism, narcissist individualism, which would cause fragments of social identity and collapse of morality. Except shared preference to certain tastes, no moral consensus and shared values can be identified in the society. Consuming structure occupies the terrain of whole life and selves are simulacrum molded by conspicuous consumption, and moral domain to pursue excellence in character is superseded by satisfaction of special tastes and pleasures. Egocentrism is rationalized and taken for granted as the right basis for moral behavior. School education confronted a very serious challenge when consumer culture causes moral and spiritual paralysis among the society.

### **Consumerism and Deconstruction of Moral Agency**

Moral agency is located in reflective moral practice in the wholeness of life, that is, life itself is essentially a matter of morality and individuals are moral agents in the life-world. But in the consumer culture, individuals are not moral agents. They lost their characteristic as moral agents because they don't think their lives matter morally. Consuming culture is guiding and training people to be consumers and the ethical essence of the personal lives are undermined by the consumerization and reification of life-world. Individuals are only consumption agents. Their lives are devaluing and demoralizing processes of being lifelong consumers. Consumer society produces individualized consumers through the production of desires and tastes, through the pleasure reinforcement. It predicates that the image of consumers is the social identity of individuals whose traits of consumption are new subjective habitus developed in the consumption era. This does mean that consumer culture defines individuals as consumption agents that it tries to produce. Though people are individualized in different tastes and desires, they are coincidentally produced as consumers and their personalities are structured by consumption. No personal spiritual subjectivities are marked as moral agency. Consumer personhood is being reproduced by consumerism and new kind of social integration and conformity are molded in consumer culture. Consumption is a structural mechanism that people are placed in to be after the passing fads that might give pleasure and a concordant identity with the consumption trends.

Consumer society produces an apparatus of social control which is different from totalitarian's whose tricks are depriving people's freedom from them, that is, to destroy their agency. In consuming culture people act as if they are free agents because everyone is liberated to make his or her own choice in consumption. Consumer structure provides freedom for people to get what they want in the process of production of the desires and catering for the tastes. Consumers seem self-determined, that is, they have positive freedom to meet desires and tastes. It seems that they have autonomy to decide their consuming behaviors and make their own choices. Can people really have personal autonomy in consumer society? People only have freedom to meet the desires that are produced by the market. This is a mutual-advantage process in which the market gets profits through the production and stimulation of desires and people gain pleasures from satisfaction through

catering for the market. Consumers are enchanted by the consuming market's surface freedom. Individuals are placed in the consuming structural chains of desires and pleasure seeking. The temptations permeate minds and bodies and refashion them in a very delicate way and weaken the people's value reflection of lives as reflective agents. Thus consumer culture puts the consumption market in a supreme status and enlarges and expands its capacity of manipulation. People are compelled into and are bounded up onto the chains of desire and pleasure. Consumerism eliminates personal autonomy and freedom to pursue the excellence and moral virtues and the consumption pleasure substitutes personal well-being.

In consumer society the primacy condition to be a consumer is that one must firstly be consumed by the social-economic system rather than to be an autonomous moral agent. Individuals must adapt themselves to the commercialized society and cater for requirements of consumption. They are commercialized and only have instrumental values. This full range of hidden mechanism through which consumer society conveys the social control deprives human agency under the mask of self-determining freedom. Desire-pleasure domination saturates life process and forms the homogeneity through the consumerization of individuals who turn into consuming objects selected by the social and economical systems. Only through catering for this process can he or she have the desires instantly satisfied and gratified. Man becomes a cheerful robot within the process of being consumed and being consuming. In such a situation the most important thing for an individual is to improve his competences with which he can be consumed by the systems and he can consume the objects, rather than to promote moral agency and flourish personal and social well-being.

In a consumer society the different levels of personal consumption are even regarded as the differences of personal qualities and merits. The values of lives seem to be located in what and how one can consume. Successful consumers' life style is set as the model of social striving. Schooling sets it as the image that the future consumers must have and education must shape for the consume agents. School education emphasizes the individual's competences of consumption more and more. This means that public school is a market where knowledge and education is commercialized. Education produces the commodities for the systems and primarily expects the students to be consuming agents. The relation between school and students is like the relation between the market and customers. Schools intend to cater for the consuming interests of families and students and they design the curricula according to the consumer society and distribute them to the student consumers. They foresee the consumption trends of future social market and allure the students in definite ways of catering for their tastes and promise them for the satisfaction. This is the new characteristic of modern education.

*schools are being transformed into commercial rather than public spheres as students become subject to the whims and practices of marketers whose agenda has nothing to do with critical learning and a great deal to do with restructuring civic life in the image of market culture. Civic courage--upholding the most basic non-commercial principles of democracy--as a defining principle of society is devalued as corporate power transforms school knowledge .( Giroux, Henry. Stealing Innocence: Youth, Corporate Power, and the Politics of Culture. New York: Palgrave, 2000, page 173.)*

The commercialization of school education changes personal spiritual communication in whole range into consumption. The school market service and the educational consumption change education and cultivation into a consumption style. The communication between education and people becomes relationship of the exchange. Education abandons its intrinsic values in the cultivation of moral person. Commercialized schooling debases moral education. Morality seems only to be a kind of adjustment to the social order and conventions to define peoples' activities.

In a consumption era children are exploited and socialized by commercial consumer culture and there are fewer public spaces and chances to develop agency and learn democratic and cooperative social relations and values in an increasingly commercialized and privatized culture and society. Individuals in the consumption culture do not represent the privileged terrain of moral agency, but rather serves as objectified bodies, whose values and lives are marketed and consumed by the consuming system that indulges stylized narcissism and forms simulacrums of selves. The consumer culture presents the fragmented individuals as actors of seeking of desire and pleasure in a commercialized life. The moral agents are dead because no moral autonomous persons are educated. Individuals are indulged to pursue the success of capturing more capitals and objects in consumption life and they lost themselves as reified bodies. The moral person no longer exists because the dominant consumer culture can only bring up consumers who are only intersecting concourse of needs, desires and pleasure.

The oblivion of moral agency occurs in the relation between needs and social structures, the relation between freedom of choice and the power of commercial systems. The reproduction of social order, prosperity and progress commercially decide the modern fate of individuals. In the intimate, private everyday world, questions of identity and ethics remain unanswered: what kind of social actors can individuals be? What form can we take as moral agents? How do we understand the very relation between the everyday world and moral autonomy, between our moral value and the ability of consuming? Do we think reflectively about the consumerist power which is the disposal over our lives? We see ourselves as people who are inescapably 'free' and self-managing, who make decisions about who we are, but consuming activities drive us to carry out a social identity of the consumer. Consumer culture endows a new identity for us instead of the nature of moral agency.

### **Consumerism and the new social responsibility**

In the rise of commercial society, the production and reproduction of desires and the objects of consumption form a new relation between individuals and society. People form the social conformity as consumers who are involved in the circle of desires and pleasure satisfaction. Choices of the multifarious commodities and their symbolization of meaning become the ultimate end of life, but the choices of moral values turn to be like "Supermarket Choice". Moral values are determined by personal tastes and personal preferences. Values relevant to self and others do not matter morally, which become neutral and everybody can freely determine how to dispose his own mind and body according to his desires and needs. Values have no relations with the flourishing of personal and social well-being. So there are no moral duties and responsibilities to self and communities in the values preferences. What is more, in

the dominant consumerism era, the difference of desires and the multifarious preferences bring the situation of lack of shared values and public spiritedness. To be apathetic to others' well-being and alienated from the community is regarded as the justified private morality. No common and shared social values hold the modern individuals together except the consumption mutual advantages. The social solidarity and social trust are degenerated and we are related each other not morally but in the consumerist way. Consumerism reduces the social life to a trivial materialism. It makes social responsibility lapsed and constructs lives in relation to a future devoid of moral obligations and social responsibility of citizenship.

*When public education becomes a venue for making a profit, delivering a product, or constructing consuming subjects, education reneges on its responsibilities for creating a democracy of citizens by shifting its focus to producing a democracy of consumers. (Giroux, Henry. *Stealing Innocence: Youth, Corporate Power, and the Politics of Culture*. New York: Palgrave, 2000, page 173.)*

The definition of an individual as a consumer has a reduced sense of social responsibility for the common well-being. In this sense modern man---the consumer has no moral commitment for the society because a life of consumption is not relevant to social responsibility. Anyway, the social and economic system has an urge for another kind of social obligation, a duty of consumption. Because consumption can increase the economy growth, it is kind of social labor and a modern contribution to the commercial society. This social obligation seems good for the common interests, but in fact it induces consumerism and it turns social responsibility into a self-directed desire-satisfaction that can be only realized through consumption. Thus consumer society turns individuals who have personal obligations for the common welfare of society into subordination to the market profit. Individuals become the means of the consumer society. This disavows the dignity of man as the ultimate end of society. Consumerism is detrimental to the commitment to the public life and common well-being and to the production of citizenship in democratic sense.

In consumer society social distinction and cultural discrimination made by consumption bring crisis to the social trust and concordance. Everyone cares about his self-interest and the ligament of social solidarity is at risk. Nothing can form the social coherence except the conformity of seeking and enjoying consumption. The fragments of society make the consumer culture to be new kind of social denotation and code to signify the social coherence and to endow the members new value commitment. Consumer culture produces the identification of the social conformity and provides the basis for morality. It firstly produces divisions of society and separates the individual members by the process of consumption and pleasure, and then it controls individuals by placing them into the desires and consumption circle. In other words, consumerism realizes the social control and disciplines through the temptation, reproduction and satisfaction of everyday desires. It creates social control by the means of isolating individuals. So the social control that consumerism casts onto individuals is coming up delicately in the name of free choices. It seemingly creates an environment free from any kind of social coercion and compulsion in which everyone can determine his fortune, but its domesticating force permeates every mind and body without any resistances. The production of desires and the catering for the tastes encourage individuals actively to accept

of the control. In consumer society, the mode of social control is that the temptation substitutes for suppression; apparatus of desire reproduction for panoptical surveillance technique, penetration of ads for coercion, propaganda and implantation, regulation of mutual advantages in consumption for the rules. Consumerism seemingly liberates people but makes consumption a new media of social control in a completely way.

Consumption is not simple based on meeting life needs. There are social influences or social pressures or processes of socialization in consumption through which society molds the individual. This molding force contradicts moral education in school, and causes great conflict in society. In the conditions of consumer culture, we desperately need shared values to underpin the social solidarity and to support the flourishing both of personal and social well-being, but we cannot have a shared basis of value commitment. If the consumption life can only tell us that moral values are just neutral like personal tastes and morality is no more than a matter of arbitrary choice, what kind of moral education can schools do? Can we have moral education without the guidance of fundamental moral values?

### **Consumerism and the displacement of virtues**

In consumer culture, personal well-being or happiness is evaluated by the possession of objects. The pursuit of the good life means seeking for instant gratification. The end of life is limited within possession and pleasure. This hedonistic life style drives away the virtues. Life is no longer the process in which man can realize good values and pursue virtues. It turns to be after the pleasure of possession and not to be a process of “eudemonia” with the involvement of virtues. Both life and life agents become means of possession in the consumption. The consumer puts the increase of his ability to gain pleasure in the first places so that he can maximize his personal pleasure and interests. Personal qualities are turned to be abilities and neutral skills rather than virtues and characters. Consumerism overturns the virtues that are very fatal to flourish personal and social well-being. It emphasizes those qualities that can increase the consumption pleasure. Individuals only think about how to maximize his pleasure through his competences and skills instead of caring about morality and values.

In the process of commercialism dominating the society, some neutral, instrumental competences were driven up as universal virtues. Those competences that can bring the interests and pleasure in the consumption successfully such as effectiveness, calculation, alertness, cunning and so on are taken granted as the most important contents in characters because they can be used to defeat the rivals and realize the self-interests in lives. They are substituted for moral virtues. Characters become the means of gaining personal pleasures of consumption. Qualities and virtues are evaluated by the realization of self-interest. Through the displacement, consumerism disroots the virtues from the characters that are underpinned by the moral values and formed in the pursuit of virtues. Consumption competences are important for the self-concerned consumers, but the removal of virtues dismisses the concern for others' well-being. Life is just a process of the competing for self-interest and consumption systems create a structure in which the rivalry is rationalized and justified. Everyone thinks competition for self-interest is justifiable and will take rivalry of abilities and

pleasures and gratification for granted. Consumerism supports those who are successful at this rivalry. This is the Social-Darwinism and consumerism obeys something like “jungle law”. In this rivalry structure consumers stress and place the competences and skills more than the moral virtues and characters.

**Conclusion: What can moral education offer to the students?**

Consumerism is a justified myth in our society and it is the malaise for moral education. Up to now we have not been acknowledgeable about the challenges that consumerism put forward to moral values and moral education. In the confliction and contradictory between consumerism and moral values, what does moral education offer its students by way of moral guidance, and what should it offer? What I can suggest here is only that moral education is a very important aspect of life politics. Facing consumerism we are feeling that we desperately need moral education to construct our cooperative public life and flourish our social well-being and to foster public spiritedness, citizenship, virtues and personal character. Moral education should develop some effective ways to let the students live an autonomous moral life with the understanding that morality is an art to look after and flourish our personal and social well-being in the reflection of what kinds of lives we are living and should live, of what kind of man we are being and should be. In this art, morality appeals man to have a moral commitment for others’ well-being and public well-being as well as personal well-being in pursuit of which we become morally excellent person. To be a moral person means to live a life that has moral meaning which develops personal moral visions of what is illusory in life and what is authentic. This is of paramount importance in the era of moral fragmentation and rootlessness as facts deeply damaging to us as individuals and to society as a whole. In this sense moral education cannot teach or instill a certain single set of values because moral values are themselves plural. it must be emphasized that moral education cannot imposes some single moral views on youths today as the nature of moral judgment and moral responsibility is such that it rests ultimately within the relation between the individual and community. So the most important is that how moral education passes on moral responsibility to the students in the guidance of moral reasoning and judgment and to develop students’ visions to be a virtuous person in leading a moral life in which integrate social well-being and personal well-being. In this perspective, it is the task of moral education to guide students to form the ability and character to commit moral vision, moral judgment and responsibility as active, free and equal citizens.

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