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[Chinese Youth: A Quick Q and A with Mary Bergstrom](#)

April 3, 2012 in [Interview](#) by [jwasserstrom](#)

By Jeffrey Wasserstrom

Whenever I take a trip that includes stops in Shanghai and Beijing, two people I make sure to meet up with are Jeremy Friedlein and David Moser, the Academic Directors of the CET study abroad programs in those cities. I do this for several reasons. One is that CET has deep ties to China Beat, since the blog's founding editor Kate Merkel-Hess and current editor Maura Cunningham are both alums. Another reason is that, for almost two years now, CET has been sponsoring [a series of literary events](#) at M on the Bund (in Shanghai) and now also Capital M (in Beijing) that put me in dialogue with local journalists and freelance writers. Last but by no means least, Jeremy and David know a lot of interesting people, so getting together with them always leads to my meeting at least one new person worth knowing. In the case of my most recent visit to Shanghai, this meant being introduced to Mary Bergstrom, who has been working on the topic of Chinese youth. Wearing her business professional's hat, she runs a firm, The Bergstrom Group, that provides expert information on the subject to various international businesses, and wearing her writer's one, she's the author of the new book [All Eyes East: Lessons from the Front Line of Marketing to China's Youth](#). I recently sent her a series of questions about her work, as well as a couple that ask her to respond to recent youth-related pieces of writing by Evan Osnos and Pallavi Aiyar, authors well known to readers of this blog. Here are the things I asked her and her responses:

JW: You've been tracking trends relating to Chinese youth for years now, so what do you think are three things readers outside of China might not know about young people in the PRC that they should? Or tend to get wrong about this population?

MB: 1. Chinese youth are not “just like” or “on the way” to becoming Japanese or American (or any other population).

Of course they exhibit in some ways like other international cohorts, but in terms of motivations and expectations, they are on their own path that allows them to assign fresh meaning. Without siblings or parents who can really help them navigate modern China, young Chinese are in a unique situation.

2. Consumption is an important social value.

While the word “consumerism” has almost become a dirty word in many places, having the ability to consume has positive meaning in China. It means that you are able to participate in a modern lifestyle; you are not being left out. Unable to participate politically or rebel openly against authority, youth can take their work as consumer pioneers very seriously. Sharing their experiences and expertise helps them build important social capital and get recognition for providing value to their social circles.

3. The future is up for grabs.

Youth in China are doing more than just buying brands and downloading free entertainment, they are quietly and irreverently changing the future of the world we all live in. Youth's ideas about intellectual property (a product's value to a consumer is more important than its value to a company), constant digital connectivity (a 24/7 lifeline and best friend), and flexibility about subcultures (valuing personalized mash ups over paying homage to past conventions) are a few areas where youth are leading.

JW: I often stress the impossibility of generalizing about “the Chinese,” due to the enormous variability within the population of the PRC, due to factors ranging from class to region to generation. I assume you would agree about the generation gap idea, which I argue is far more extreme than in, say, the United States due to the rapidity of change in China during the last couple of decades. I wonder, though, if you think regional divides are as crucial among young Chinese as they are among members of other generations. To put this another way, is popular culture and mass media making young Chinese in Shanghai less different than young Chinese in Sichuan than older Chinese in those two places might be in terms of the way they spend their time and think about the world?

MB: Many differences in attitude and behavior in China can be related to access. Because of the Internet, there is a certain amount of common culture that has no physical boundaries. The combination of this connectivity and increased time spent outside communities they are born into (for work, travel, study) allows people to explore specific interests and bring that knowledge back to their own communities.

Regional differences are important and migration patterns complicate matters further but the big and unavoidable difference is that someone from a larger city has more role models and outlets to broaden their ideas about what is possible—and acceptable. Youth in areas with less access are confined to the norms of their immediate communities.

JW: One piece on Chinese youth I've come across recently that interested me is [this blog post by Evan Osnos](#). Does it fit in with your feelings about the topic?

MB: An image of an individual figure holding up a sign to communicate a personal feeling is popular online and in magazines. I am glad to see that someone is taking the time to collect and share the style thoughtfully. Hopefully getting a wider audience for the real lives of young Chinese (not just the numbers) will inspire more investigation.

JW: [Here's a second, very different piece on young Chinese](#) I've read lately that I liked a lot. Any reactions to this one, which was written by Pallavi Aiyar?

MB: It's funny. I am reading this article in Paris actually and have just finished an errand for my *ayi* who just happens to be from Chongqing—buying a gift for her husband who is doing construction work in Inner Mongolia. I was tasked with finding a Swiss watch for him that would cost her more than a month's salary (but would cost around 5000 RMB). Unlike these young travelers, she is not rich but she does share the same aspiration to show that her family is part of the tide of change, they are not being left behind. This need to broadcast as a modern

consumer drives the stories of young Chinese saving months of salary for a luxury branded handbag or newly released mobile phone.

When it comes to paving the way for the next generation, Chinese parents are experts. Even though the article is about privileged families, middle class parents will gladly scrimp for months to help their child access tools that can help them get ahead in the future (extracurricular activities, tutoring, travel abroad, etc.). This article highlights two uniquely Chinese points of view: consumption is an important part of modern life and it is parents' role to pave the way for youth (with the understanding that youth will then reciprocate when parents age).

The last point in the article that I agree with that may shock readers is a pride in country, even after being exposed to the outside. Chinese are proud of their country's path and in terms of opportunity, flexibility, and pace of development, they understand that there is no place like home.

JW: Last but not least, about your book that I mentioned in the lead-in to this interview. When does it come out? What sort of audience or audiences did you have in mind when writing it? And what do you think it does that none of the other books on China—and there have been a flood of them lately—do?

MB: I wrote *All Eyes East* to serve as a testimonial to a truly unique population set adrift into the future without siblings or parents to guide them. When I first began researching youth in China, I wanted a book like this for myself. In all these years working with companies who depend on youth as workers and consumers, I wanted a book like this for them. It is built for those who are considering the market and also for those who have been here for decades.

First of all, it is a true honor and privilege to be able to share this. I wanted to make it a truly fundamental and worthy piece so I planned an outline that would help readers understand young Chinese as people and how their environment guides them as consumers. I gathered years of our own research and hand-picked the most interesting youth phenomena and marketing campaigns that would allow the audience to truly grasp the past and glimpse the future. Interviews with marketing icons, dedicated academics, and brand leaders were also carefully selected to help readers benefit from lessons earned.

I hope that the end result helps get people to feel like they know and understand the biggest game changing population of our time and maybe even inspire them to make better choices because of it. The book is out now in the US, the end of April in Europe and end of May in Asia.