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Service Encounters

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By Maura Elizabeth Cunningham

The action in Amy Hanser’s *Service Encounters* (Stanford University Press, 2008) moves smoothly among three separate but related urban consumer settings in Harbin: the Mao-era relic of Harbin No. X department store, Sunshine Department Store, a swanky oversized shrine to the new conspicuous consumption of wealthy Chinese, and the chaotic marketplace of The Underground, where young women will literally sell the shirts off their backs when presented with the opportunity. Hanser, an Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of British Columbia, focuses on these three sites as she examines the shifts that have taken place in Chinese retail practices during recent decades. To enhance her understanding of the exchanges occurring across the sales counter, Hanser

donned a salesclerk’s uniform in both the Harbin No. X and Sunshine stores and worked several months in each location as an “intern.” Having held (and disliked) similar jobs in the US, I am just as impressed by Hanser’s hands-on approach to research as I am by the thorough and tightly-woven literature reviews sprinkled throughout her chapters.

Almost all the salesclerks in *Service Encounters* are female, and Hanser’s analysis is most intriguing when she contemplates the relationships between class and gender in the Chinese retail profession. Harbin No. X clerks, representing the egalitarian working-class mindset of the pre-reform period, frequently remind me of my own opinionated aunts as they “establish themselves as both experienced and expert regarding the products they sold” (80), often disregarding customers’ preferences and asserting that *this* is the coat they must buy. Generally of the same class background as the people who shop at No. X, the clerks there feel considerable freedom to declare their authority and assure customers that their purchases are both of “good quality *and* good value” (175). The women of The Underground, a less expensive but riskier alternative to Harbin No. X, are “widely perceived as unscrupulous and disruptive people” (121), whose clothes and bodies emphasize a wild and even dangerous sexuality. Although The Underground provides young Harbin women with the latest fashions at affordable prices (much like H&M does for my friends in the States), it is still considered a morally questionable and problematic place, tainted by its association with rural China and primitive capitalism (135-136). Sellers in the market might fight this perception, claiming that the differences between department stores and The Underground are merely cosmetic, but nevertheless many city residents continue to consider both the market’s knock-off goods and its vendors “cheap, low-class, and disreputable” (123).

While Hanser’s coworkers at Harbin No. X and the sellers she observes at The Underground all emerge from her pages as vibrant and memorable characters, the sales associates of Sunshine Department Store mostly fail to do so—for good reason. Sunshine’s emphasis on deferential service and its strict rules and requirements concerning the appearance and behavior of its salesclerks results in women who are mute, at times even invisible to store customers (107-108). In Hanser’s description, the store becomes an enormous glass display case, filled with row after row of beautiful, demure, polished porcelain dolls, trapped inside until they grow too old for the job (at the ancient age of thirty!), after
which they are cast aside and a new crew is brought in to replace them. The upper-class shoppers of Sunshine demand "visible rituals that recognize customers' class-based claims to esteem and respect" (88), and the store’s management provides this by insisting that its clerks strictly distinguish themselves from the unruly and unprincipled sellers of The Underground, located directly beneath Sunshine. While the two retail sites are not physically distant from each other, customers, managers, and clerks at Sunshine all make a tremendous effort to draw a clear line between their carefully organized store and the exceedingly disorganized market lying below them.

Boundaries and their permeability are situated at the heart of *Service Encounters*; the three sites Hanser examines are all constantly establishing or negotiating the borders that lie between them. This continuous struggle over the demarcation of boundaries is evidence of what Hanser terms “distinction work” (9); in essence, the activities of salesclerks are organized in such a way as to emphasize the differences between them and those performing the same tasks in other settings. In other words, while salespeople at Harbin No. X, Sunshine, and The Underground are all executing similar tasks—replenishing stock, arranging goods on the sales floor, tending to customers—the manner in which they carry out those tasks is tailored to fit their specific environment (and, furthermore, would be inappropriate in any of the other retail sites Hanser examines). The attitudes exhibited by clerks in each setting reflect the symbolic boundaries they wish to establish between their store and others in Harbin, related to the class identity generally assigned to each retail site.

This is a complicated argument, and Hanser navigates its twists and turns skillfully; I was not at all surprised to learn that *Service Encounters* is based upon an award-winning dissertation. My only quibble with Hanser’s work is her claim that Harbin No. X suffers from a “crisis of trust” (165) due to customers becoming more fearful of purchasing shoddy or fake goods and less willing to take a salesclerk’s words at face value, an effect, she claims, produced by their experiences with the poor quality merchandise and dishonest vendors of bazaars like The Underground. Yet Hanser also notes that during the pre-reform era, “quality might be poor, but at least everything was cheap” (160); could this crisis of trust be a result of the fact that today’s working-class consumers pay higher prices for goods that they have always considered of questionable quality? Or that they feel more freedom to challenge a state-owned department store now that it is not their only possible source of merchandise? With more shopping options, customers can afford to be picky, and the clerks of Harbin No. X must work harder to make a sale.

In *Service Encounters*, Amy Hanser compellingly depicts the different distinction work done by clerks at each site as they strive to establish the boundaries of their organization in relation to other stores. That Hanser herself is part of the narrative and can share her own often humorous experiences as a sales associate contributes to the strength and readability of the work. Ultimately, I find myself most engaged by the questions Hanser raises about the role of women in the urban Chinese retail world: as department stores bloom across the country, will salesclerks become associated only with the Sunshine type of submissive, decorous, feminized service? Or will they resist the restrictions this imposes and incorporate the more assertive qualities frequently seen in Harbin No. X associates and Underground sellers? Given the fragmented but nonetheless interconnected retail culture among the three sites considered in *Service Encounters*, it seems possible that stores like Sunshine might absorb some of the ethos from markets such as The Underground. As Chinese society continues to change and social mobility increases, the boundaries painstakingly established by Sunshine’s management will become progressively more vulnerable to penetration by retail practices carried by customers from other sites, and sales associates will transform themselves once again.