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Best practice normally refers to the standardization of business praxis. What constitutes best practice is dependent upon locally relevant and historically specific discourses. The process by which “best” is defined, narrated, and legitimated is one of commensuration—the “comparison of different entities according to a common metric.”¹ It is this process of commensuration upon which the field of management consulting is founded. Since China’s 1978 “reform and opening” (Gai-ge Kai-fang), China has experienced institutional reform and the opening of its economy to foreign investment. China’s transition from a socialist planned economy to a market-oriented economy has involved massive restructuring. Alongside the structural changes to the global economy that have taken place over the last few decades and the rise of financialization—the rise of shareholder value as a structuring logic of capitalism—the field of management consulting in China has grown rapidly, just as it has in the rest of the world.

Best Practice: Management Consulting and the Ethics of Financialization in China is Kimberly Chong’s first research project in the anthropology of financialization, and it provides a first look at management consulting in China. The work is an ethnography based on Chong’s fieldwork among consultants and back-office workers in the China arm of a global management consultancy company, Systeo, for 16 months, beginning in 2008. She attempts to explore the daily practices and devices of the consultants who implement the changes to organizations. Chong argues in the book that management consulting is predicated on the creation of cultures of commensuration—a legitimate ethical project—through which the financialization of economic activity and labor is achieved. The ethical project in this context consists of practices of commensuration, which bring together an array of value scales—including financial value, social value, and the state-promoted value of “human quality,” a prominent socialist value within the Chinese collective.

Systeo is a leading global management consultancy that specializes in the implementation of IT management systems and outsourcing services. Chong’s field research was conducted both at Systeo’s main site in Dalian and at Systeo’s client sites, including the Beijing offices of a multinational company and a Chinese state-owned enterprise. Chong used traditional anthropological research methods of participant observation and in-depth interviews to collect data. She interviewed professionals such as consultants and back-office workers; socialized at clubs, bars, and karaoke parties; and met people in Starbucks and even along trips to fish markets. She also achieved much from her own reflexive insights as a liminal member of the consultancy. The book describes her pathway from an English corporate trainer to a contractor in Systeo and how this transformation from adjunct to employee enabled her to observe and analyze the expertise of consultants from various angles.

In order to build a rich portrait of the cultures of commensuration, Chong developed seven chapters in this book, each of which focuses on a different instantiation of commensuration that consultants practice and help to propagate. In Chapter One, the author explores the discourses and practices of making “high performance,” the making of financialized subjects that is associated with human resource management. The second and third chapters look at how the financialization of labor is enacted and operationalized. Specifically, Chapter Two looks at performance management and examines the politics of evaluating humans and explores the discourse and practices by which performance management can be performed as a meritocratic system of assessment. The author focuses especially on the process by which an equivalence between labor productivity and financial value is produced and how this is then translated into a notion of performance. Chapter Three

elaborates how cost generators are constructed by examining “shared services”—a form of organizational restructuring in which white-collar work is transferred to offshore platforms in the global south. The chapter analyzes how this kind of outsourcing is justified as a means of “reducing cost.”

Chapter Four identifies the importance of commensuration, the justification for selling consultancy and establishing the legitimacy of consultants’ expertise. Chapter Five presents how consultancy travels, as the analysis moves from Systeo’s offices to its client sites, including the Beijing offices of a multinational company and a Chinese state-owned enterprise. Chapter Six digs a little deeper into how local tropes and models of transformation are incorporated into management consulting by focusing on the vernacular ethics of expertise. The last chapter focuses on the official regimes of corporate ethics and the notion of “corporate social responsibility.”

To the reader’s understanding, the author’s arguments in the book are clear. Chong successfully achieves her overarching aim of the book, which is to show how consultants produce and legitimize their expertise by focusing on the knowledge practices of consulting. In addition, by analyzing how knowledge is created and how epistemological interventions are staged, this book provides a detailed description of how management consultants are connected to the practices of valuation and new logics of worth that have accompanied the financialization of corporations and everyday life. Further, the author elaborates how the Chinese employees employed at this global management consultancy draw on local tropes of modernity to understand and explain their apparently global expertise and how management consultants are implicated in processes of social and economic transformation in contemporary China. The work ends with an examination of how local rationalities—late socialism or Confucianism—interact with the rationalities of global, high-tech work.

With a background in finance, Chong had the advantage of being a liminal member in her field, with multiple roles and perspectives, which made the ethnography a rich one. In short, this ethnography is of groundbreaking value. As Chong herself expressed, “Many impressive ethnographic accounts of China’s manufacturing sector already [exist], but similar research into China’s knowledge economy was thin on the ground.” This ethnography provides a rich portrait of management consulting in China. Any reader interested in the knowledge economy in contemporary China or anthropology of financialization in 21st century China is strongly encouraged to have a look at this book.

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Notes

¹ Commensuration is a process in which social thought and analysis serve as a mode of power. The process of commensuration, in which an entity or practice may be assessed as the industry standard (*i.e.*, “incommensurable”) serves as the basis upon which “best practices” are identified.