

suburbs were born, and developers had to give suburban residents a place to buy what they needed. Thus was born the shopping center. But the suburban separation of work, shopping, and home—elements that were mostly integrated in the city—permanently changed American culture. Once we all shopped together in big, highly organized, well-marketed settings, we could see what others were buying and what it was possible to have. Aided by the growing influence of the media, our culture of consumerism was born.

But at what cost? Certainly not just the money we shell out for things. Our kids are bombarded by media messages telling them what they should buy, and they learn to value new purchases more than the simple pleasures of childhood. Our teenagers go to the mall to hang out and socialize, which can be a welcome distraction for kids with so many questions about life. “But sometimes,” writes Farrell, “shopping centers seem to suggest that distraction *is* the purpose of life, and that questions of consumption . . . *are* life’s big questions.”

Farrell spends plenty of time analyzing the contemporary mall: the history, the architecture, the retail design, the merchandising, even the escalators and the greenery. Most interesting are the developments that bespeak

our cultural values. We value fun, so malls now have movie theaters, places to eat, even amusement parks. We value luxury, so malls use more glass and marble to surround their tantalizing mix of aspirational and affordable retail. We value escape, so now we have Rainforest Cafe and other themed venues.

But the malling of America has also alienated us. On the nation’s retail floors, millions of sales clerks, underpaid and uninvolved, need only scan a UPC code to complete a sale. The human interaction once involved in a purchase is virtually gone. Through the magic of plastic, meanwhile, the question has changed from “Can I afford it?” to “Do I want it?”

Farrell also confronts readers with the harm American consumerism wreaks around the world. Overseas sweatshops employ children to churn out cheap goods; sprawling shopping centers damage the environment. With the media starting to pay more attention to these effects, Farrell believes that “the era of oblivious shopping is coming to an end.”

I’m not so sure. Retailers are geniuses at sanitizing what they sell, and Americans enjoy their obliviousness. The injustices deserve our attention, but what’s equally wrenching is the notion that we’re looking for that next purchase, the one that’s certain to make us happy.

—MARGARET WEBB PRESSLER

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

THE RETREAT OF THE ELEPHANTS: *An Environmental History of China.*

By Mark Elvin. Yale Univ. Press.
564 pp. \$39.95

Some 4,000 years ago, wild elephants roamed woodlands across much of China. Tame ones worked as war elephants in Chinese armies until 1662. Today, China’s elephants exist only in zoos and in tiny protected areas in the southwest. Mark Elvin, one of the foremost historians of China, uses this vanishing act as a symbol of environmental transformations over the course of Chinese history. Elvin made his mark more than 30 years ago with an insightful if controversial interpretation of the economic history of premodern China, *Patterns of the Chi-*

nese Past (1973). *Retreat of the Elephants* is a worthy successor, one that will long serve as the standard work on the subject.

The centerpiece of the story is the relentless deforestation of China, which has resulted from the extension of farming mainly to keep up with population growth. But Elvin takes pains to show that Chinese environmental history is not a simple Malthusian process; politics and the state played crucial roles. Regions that manipulated nature for short-term advantage, he contends, enjoyed a competitive edge over those that did not—more a matter of Darwinian politics than Malthusian pressures. This idea seems plausible for the periods when various regions struggled against one another in China, but less so for eras of centralized control.

Current Books

The book opens with masterly and engaging accounts of deforestation, species loss, agricultural expansion, and the establishment of irrigation. Next come tightly focused tales of three localities: Jiaxing, just south of the Yangzi delta; Guizhou Province in the south, originally home to the Miao people; and Zunhua in the northeast. These chapters place the themes of the book in specific contexts. The story of Guizhou, in which the Miao were gradually dispossessed and replaced by Han Chinese, is especially illuminating. Like the history of Amerindians and Euro-Americans in North America, this clash of cultures involved environmental transformation as a means of political control: To defeat the Miao, the Chinese replaced Guizhou's forests with cultivation. The final part of the book deals with Chinese perceptions of nature. Here Elvin concludes, as others have before him, that the reverence for aspects of nature expressed in countless Chinese texts did next to nothing to restrain the actual behavior of Chinese toward nature.

Chinese history is a broad canvas, and Elvin doesn't cover it all. He leaves aside the borderlands and the regions inhabited chiefly by non-Chinese. He also avoids the 20th century, in which environmental changes were overwhelming, as well as the invisible but important world of microbes. Still, his book is essential for those who want to understand the long sweep of Chinese history, and it will enhance the perspective of those who think they already understand it. A scholarly tour de force, it's not for beginners; Elvin doesn't always wear his immense learning lightly. But readers can skip the occasional algebraic formula or table of raw data on rice yields. Few books repay patience as generously as this one.

—J. R. McNEILL

THE PURSUIT OF PERFECTION: The Promise and Perils of Medical Enhancement.

By Sheila M. Rothman and
David J. Rothman.

Pantheon. 292 pp. \$25

When did we become a nation dedicated to the proposition that all men created

equal shouldn't have to stay that way? Columbia University professors Sheila and David Rothman show that Western medicine has been walking the slippery slope of medical enhancement for nearly a century. As far back as the 1920s, drug companies were aggressively marketing new treatments to the medical community, endowing research chairs, funding university laboratories, and exploiting individual doctors to advance their claims. These days, Genentech, the largest manufacturer of human growth hormone, routinely doles out research grants to the doctors who prescribe it. *Plus ça change*, the Rothmans would say.

Ludicrous medical practices have always gotten a warm reception in this country. In the 1930s, wealthy Americans raced to Europe for "sexual rejuvenation" by the Viennese doctor Eugen Steinach, who used x-rays to stimulate the ovaries and claimed to increase testosterone production via vasectomy. Researchers in St. Louis figured out how to create synthetic estrogen from the urine of sows and pregnant women, and soon gynecologists seeking to prevent miscarriages were freely dispensing DES, an estrogen compound later discovered to cause vaginal cancer in the daughters of its recipients. For the past half-century, despite reports of associated cancers, menopausal women have taken estrogen supplements to forestall normal aging.

Plastic surgery, which began as reconstructive work on World War I soldiers, came of age at midcentury, when such traits as a "Jewish" nose or small breasts were deemed especially undesirable. In the 1970s, a French doctor developed a method of removing fatty deposits from the body using gynecological instruments, and soon men and women were rushing for liposuction to correct genetically ordained fat distributions. Nowadays, plastic surgery is just another middle-class blood sport, albeit one fueled by self-loathing. At the opening of each episode of *Nip/Tuck*, the FX series about plastic surgeons in Miami, one of the doctors asks a new client: "Tell us what you don't like about yourself." Where to begin?

Though quackery abounds, the Roth-