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Chinese Consumer Culture and Brand Culture

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This roundtable brings together researchers interested in Chinese brand culture to discuss recent development, research methodology and interdisciplinary insights into how brands, consumers and culture interplay in the Chinese context. Key issues that advance this discussion include 1) debates over the conceptual and ideological issues of Chinese brand management and research into global brand culture, 2), how brand culture is evolving in Chinese transition economy, 2) theoretical issues that emerge from the interdisciplinary perspective of brands in Chinese context, 3) intense interest in Chinese brands and consumer culture from historical and geographical perspectives.

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SPECIAL SESSION SUMMARY

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Journal of consumer research sees an increasing amount of research that helps better understand the cultural context of brands, especially in emerging markets (e.g., China, India). Growing number of papers on brands (especially in Chinese context) also appear in other international journals such as *Consumption Markets and Culture*, *Journal of Consumer Culture*, *Journal of International Marketing*, *Journal of Macromarketing*, *Marketing Theory*, *Journal of Advertising*, and in other disciplines such as anthropology, geography, and sociology. Practitioners will get to know about what is the distinct of brand theories, how to make connection with other disciplines and how to make contribution to the global brand culture.

The distinctive perspective of the interdisciplinary research on brands has advocated a cultural approach to branding (Cayla and Eckhardt 2008). Brands could be seen as a cultural form that evolves with the changes of their historical, geographical and social context. Schroeder and Salzer-Mörling (2006, p.4), in their articulation of brand culture, state that "If brands exist as cultural, ideological, and political objects, then brand researchers require tools developed to understand culture, politics, and ideology, in conjunction with more typical branding concepts, such as equity, strategy and value". They define brand culture as "the cultural codes of brands - history, images, myths, art, and theatre - that influence brand meaning and value in the marketplace (p.124). Brand meaning and brand value are operated by "various authors" such as brand owners, consumers, popular culture (e.g. popular music, fashion, mass media), and other important stakeholders (Bengtsson and Östberg 2006; Holt 2004). Branding is thus a specific way of constructing the world, and "different types of brands and ways of managing and consuming brands have also emerged in different places, which we call brand cultures" (Cayla and Arnould 2009, 101). Different cultural backgrounds produce different kinds of brands.

Chinese brand culture has been understood largely in three different ways. Firstly, much research concentrated on how western brands influence Chinese consumers and how they develop in Chinese market. This stream of research has investigated the appeals of western advertisements, brand names and western movies (e.g., Tse, Belk, and Zhou 1989; Schmitt, Pan, and Tavassoli 1994; Wang 2000; Zhao and Belk 2008a, b; Zhou and Belk 2004; Dou, Wang, and Zhou 2006; Zhu 2002), how Chinese consumers consume western brands (Dickson *et al.* 2004; Dong and Tian 2009; Eckhardt 2005; Hooper 2000; Zhu 2002), and how western branding frameworks can be applied in Asian and Chinese market (e.g. Roll, 2005; Temporal 2001, 2005). In these researches, the cultural, economic, psychological and historical approaches are often applied to examine the change of Chinese consumer culture and brand culture, including the tensions between an ever-increasing homogenisation of global culture and the difference of Chinese culture (Briley, Morris, and Simonson 2000; Hsee *et al.* 2003).

Secondly, another stream of research focuses on the development of Chinese brands from a historical perspective (Eckhardt and Bengtsson 2007; Gerth 2003). For instance, Chinese consumers used material symbols to

manifest their social status, such as an affiliation with the Imperial Palace and showing the worth of family name even in imperial China (Eckhardt and Bengtsson 2010; Hamilton and Lai 1989; Zuo 1999). By tracing branding practices in China from 2700 BC to contemporary times, Eckhardt and Bengtsson (2010) unfold a sophisticated and distinctive brand infrastructure with a continuous history in China.

Lastly, the interaction between traditional culture and brands has been highlighted as important in the understanding of brands as a global representational system (Schroeder 2010). In Chinese context, studies of historical and geographic contexts of brands offer potential bridges to managerial intentions, consumption ideology and the mythology of brands. For example, how the traditions and religions influence Chinese brand development and consumer consumption behaviour, especially in the areas of 55 ethnic minority groups within China leaves an unstudied space for further research.

In the 2011 APACR conference, we seek to map out what we learn about Chinese brand culture, the potential tensions between localisation and globalisation of brands in Chinese context and therefore help researchers engage with distinctive perspective about brand research in Chinese context. We also bring together researchers to discuss how Chinese brand culture contributes to an increasingly interdisciplinary research and sheds lights on fundamental issues of consumer agency, consumer behaviour and consumer culture. More specifically, the researchers discussed what the emerging topics in the global brand culture are, how Chinese brands and identity interact within culture and with religion, history and politics as well as how western brands and Chinese brands work with Chinese consumers.

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