Buddhism and Consumption in China

Giana Eckhardt, Suffolk University, USA
Xin Zhao, University of Hawaii, USA

Buddhism emphasizes eliminating the desire for material goods, and the perils of becoming attached to possessions. In China, where outward displays of wealth are important status symbols, how can we reconcile this apparent paradox? Our respondents use their Buddhist beliefs to stay away from hedonistic experiences and to share their material wealth.

[to cite]:

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Giana Eckhardt, Suffolk University, USA
Xin Zhao, University of Hawaii, USA

Buddhist values have suffused Chinese culture for the past two thousand years. Along with Confucianism and Taoism, Buddhism forms the basis for much of the Chinese world view, morals and ethics. In relation to consumption, Buddhism emphasizes the importance of eliminating desire for material goods, and the perils of becoming attached to material possessions. Indeed, “few religions have attacked the material world with the intellectual rigor of Buddhism,” (Kieschnick 2003, p. 2). Kaza (2010) notes that in a Buddhist world view, consumption undermines the possibility of spiritual liberation, otherwise known as achieving enlightenment. Buddhism inherently recognizes that our thirst for possessions can never be quenched (Kieschnick 2003). To cultivate non-attachment, a person must be generous and should periodically give away material possessions, and one’s possessions should not evoke pride or greed (Pryor 1990). Not only does Buddhism advocate non-attachment to possessions, but goes further in discussing self-consumption or self-creation through consumption as an illusion (Gould 2006). Given this anti-materialist stance, in conjunction with Buddhism’s increased influence on Chinese society in the past five years (Lim 2010), we investigate how Chinese consumers incorporate their Buddhist beliefs with their increasing materialism (Durvasula and Lysonski 2010). We find that...

CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

In Buddhist thought, consumption is taken to be a limited source of happiness and satisfaction, and excessive consumption is considered to be harmful (Daniels 2005). Hence, consumption is often moderated and restrained. Buddhists are not anti-consumers, but rather conscious or mindful consumers (Loundon 2005). Importantly, Buddhism identifies three types of materialism – physical, psychological and spiritual – that unless guarded against, will co-opt our lives (Simmer-Brown 2002). Kaza (2010) summarizes the three primary components of a Buddhist critique of consumption as (1) that consumerism facilitates the formation of false identity, (2) promotes harm to other living beings (typically during the production process), and (3) impels clinging and attachment.

It is widely recognized that historically Buddhism has had an important effect on consumer behavior and material culture in many countries (e.g., Kieschnick 2003). For example, Cornwell et. al. (2005) demonstrate that Buddhists are more relativistic in terms of the ethics they apply to consumption situations than Christians and Muslims. Pongsakornrungsilp et. al. (2011) have demonstrated how Buddhist consumers in Thailand co-create consumption experiences via their spiritual fear, faith and desire. In a Western context, Belk (2011) suggests that following a Buddhist economic path could be a way to reduce rampant over consumption in the West. China’s Buddhist and consumer cultures

Since China has opened to the world in the 1970s, the Chinese economy has grown at an extraordinary rate. During this growth, society as a whole has put a lot of emphasis on using material objects, and in particular brands, as markers of social status. Durvasula and Lysonski (2010) suggest that as China goes through an unprecedented metamorphosis from centrally planned to market driven and consumer oriented, the Chinese psyche is changing as well, with money as a means toward power and prestige taking on a more important role. Even Buddhist monks are not immune to this focus on materialism, with monks using iPhones and eating fast food (Belk 2011), despite Buddhism forbidding clergy from accumulating wealth or even touching hard currency (Crispin 2003). Indeed, the head monk at the famed Shaolin Temple is reported to have an MBA and own a luxury SUV and other cars. Crispin (2003) suggests that to maintain their status in modern society, which in the past came from their spiritual enlightenment but today comes from outward symbols of rank such as brands, many monks feel like they need to have money and power.

At the same time as many Chinese monks are becoming materialistic and keen to acquire the latest consumer goods, Chinese consumers are having renewed interests in spirituality. Durvasula and Lysonski (2010) suggest that discontent with the prevailing mania for money is driving the search for deeper meaning among the Chinese. Since the government relaxed its ban on religious gatherings in 2006, a religious boom has emerged,
in particular among the younger generation (Lim 2010). Two thirds of those who describe themselves as religious are Buddhist or Taoist, and 62% are age 39 and younger (Lim 2010). Chinese consumers have embarked on a new march toward religious spirituality and flooded local altars to pray for material gains. Even Buddhist temples are competing with each other to build the largest Buddha statue in order to attract more followers. With Buddhist values and teachings reemerging in Chinese society, how can we understand the Buddhist views on consumption with the conspicuous consumption that is so ubiquitous in contemporary China? Similar paradoxes also exist in other countries that recently experienced rapid social transformations. For instance, Wattanasuwan and Elliott (1999) found that instead of detaching themselves from consumption, Buddhist teenagers in Thailand devote themselves to symbolic consumption in an attempt to create their Buddhist selves. Some scholars suggest that with the rise of mass consumerism, Buddhism’s core message that devotees should shun materialism is losing its resonance (Crispin 2003). How widespread is this interpretation?

METHOD

This research explores Buddhism and consumption within the wider lens of global consumer culture. In particular, we examine how Buddhism affects consumption in relation to other spiritual orientations. For example, Veer and Shankar (2011) suggest that in a Christian context, religious consumers make sense of their own materialism in relation to the non-materialistic teachings of the Bible via justifications for materialism, such as focusing on functional aspects of a product rather than materialistic aspects like the ability to signal status. We examine how Buddhism differs or overlaps with such religious orientations, and extend this stream of research by exploring how religion influences the transition to a consumer society in Asia. In essence, Buddhism stresses the fundamental role of desire in promoting an endless cycle of suffering (Kaza 2010), which differs substantially from other religions, and is a belief adhered to throughout Asia. We investigate its manifestation in daily life and its interaction with the predominant consumer culture within China.

We conducted fifteen depth interviews with Chinese consumers, which followed the logic of the extended case method, or ECM (Burawoy 1998). The ECM has become a favored methodology for researching global questions about markets and cultures from an interpretive perspective because it engages with the contexts in which phenomena occur (Holt 2002). We purposively sampled our respondents to have varying degrees of adherence to Buddhist beliefs. Six of our respondents engage with Buddhism as a means to increase their material wealth. Six of our respondents have a deep understanding of Buddhist values and engage with their consumption patterns more critically. Finally, we interview three Buddhist monks. The nature of the semi-structured interviews focused on the nature of the respondent’s engagement with Buddhism, their consumption behavior, and their use of material objects in expressing their Buddhism.

We supplement the interviews by examining the use of Buddhist statues and amulets in Chinese consumer culture, such as placement in restaurants, and placement amongst other iconographic material objects such as fortune cats and Chairman Mao statues and amulets. Additionally, we will be examining the discourse surrounding Buddhism and consumption within contemporary Chinese culture via a variety of mediums, such as in song lyrics and blog postings. This corpus of data allows us to create thick descriptions (Geertz 1973) of consumption phenomenon, and ultimately contribute to theory in terms of understanding the interaction between spiritual beliefs and consumption.

Our analysis occurred in an iterative fashion, going back and forth between data, and the literature on consumer culture in China and Buddhism. Our research team consists of one insider and one outsider to Chinese culture, and thus triangulation between co-authors lead to novel insights and allowed us to resolve differences in analysis.

MAJOR FINDINGS

Chinese consumers go to pray for good luck, especially during major holidays such as Chinese New Year. They often have stories of how amulets may protect them from suffering or accidents. Although it is commonly understood that Buddhist teachings direct their attention away from material possessions, it is taken to be a warning against obsessive consumption by many of our informants. Consumers influenced by Buddhism often expressed a sense of aloofness toward brands and focused on utilitarian goods rather than hedonistic experiences. It is considered unnecessary to engage in luxury consumption. It is understood that Buddhist teachings are not against consumption but against obsessive consumption or attachment to
Beliefs in Buddhism also cultivate the desire to share. Some consumers find it necessary to share with others what they have and what they can afford, so that beneficence can be accumulated over time. The sharing of material possessions differs from the individualization of consumption that often arises with a rising consumer society, and is similar to communal consumption.

It is also believed the Buddhism may help China to develop into a more harmonious society faced with increased disparity in personal wealth. Our informants also recognize that during this time of transition, there is a lack of strong beliefs, with communism fading, and hence Buddhism may help to cultivate moral activities in society. Buddhist thoughts are not taken to be conflicting with the government’s promotion of consumption in society.

REFERENCES


