Medical Chic: the Consumption of Traditional Chinese Medicine in Urban China

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Through semiotic analysis of print advertisements and depth-interviews, we examined the construction of cosmopolitanism in urban China. In particular, we seek to understand how Chinese consumers appropriate and negotiate the tensions between two conflicting medical cultures between Western biomedicine and traditional Chinese medicine to construe a cosmopolitan lifestyle. We discussed how traditional Chinese medicine is transformed by Western biomedical knowledge in contemporary China. Our preliminary findings have showed that traditional Chinese medicine has been exoticized and then used to construct a cosmopolitan identity by the emerging middle class consumers in urban China.

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has also been reinvented into a preventative medicine for a hip, middle-class, and cosmopolitan lifestyle that emphasizes on personal well-being (Farquhar 2001; Zhan 2009). In this paper, we examine how traditional Chinese medicine practice is transformed by Western biomedical knowledge in contemporary China. We seek to understand how Chinese consumers appropriate and negotiate the tensions between two conflicting medical cultures to construe a cosmopolitan lifestyle (Croll 2006; Rofel 2007). Debates on traditional Chinese medicine and biomedicine often evolve around the tensions among tradition, modernity, and science. Such discursive tensions reveal how knowledge, identities, and communities are constituted at a time of rapid social changes.

In the global era, cosmopolitanism is transnational in scope and reflects a willingness to experience multicultural diversity through consumption such as travel (Hannerz 1990; Thompson and Tambayah 1999). Cosmopolitanism is considered to produce different styles of consumption between high-cultural-capital consumers who are more likely to prefer the exotic, and low-cultural-capital consumers who are more inclined to the familiar (Holt 1998). Cosmopolitanism as the hedonistic and ideological manifestation of the global marketplace reproduces colonialism in the post-colonialist era, and structures consumption experiences in ways that privilege the Western ideal of the rational and autonomous individual (Thompson and Tambayah 1999). It has become a new ideological tool to subsume and manage cultural diversity within a global structure of common difference (Wilk 1995). However, these notions of cosmopolitanism have also been criticized as Euro-American centric and hardly reflecting the more recent experiences of the emerging economies such as China, Turkey, India, and East Asia (e.g., Cheah 2006; Ong and Nonini 1997; Yashin 2002; Zhan 2009). The meanings of cosmopolitanism are constantly reproduced and are over time recycled in different geographic locales. Cosmopolitanism in contemporary China emphasizes the domestication of the world through consumption, and it highlights the renegotiation of China’s position in the world (Rofel 2007). We seek to examine the Chinese construction of cosmopolitanism in the contested field of medicine.

Medical knowledge is often socially constructed by a variety of work processes rather than discovered (Armstrong 1994; Bynum 2006). Over the course of Western medical history, different schools of medical thought are linked to different ideologies (Desmond 1989; Jewson 1976). Although Western medicine strives to become scientific since the time of Hippocrates (Bynum 2006), the link between medicine and science is only invented in the twentieth century. Western medicine is introduced to China by missionaries as a way to demonstrate the superiority of Christian civilization (Unschuld 1985). The establishment of modern medical schools further institutionalizes Western medicine. During the 1900s’ Republican revolution, Chinese medicine came to be seen as an emblem of the old regime to be demolished. With the founding of PRC in 1949, attempts have been made to standardize medical practices to meet Western standards of medicine and to integrate Chinese medicine into China’s health care systems (Taylor 2000).

With the ascending consumer culture in recent years, traditional Chinese medicine is reinterpreted as a cosmopolitan alternative to Western biomedicine in urban China (Zhan 2009). A new concept of sub-health is construed to describe and characterize the health condition of the urban middle-class Chinese consumers who often work long hours under tremendous pressure. Practitioners in Shanghai and Beijing promote sub-health as a state between being healthy and being ill, and apply it to people who suffer from symptoms such as low energy, fatigue, insomnia, heart palpitation and a general sense of being unfit. Traditional Chinese medicine is reinvented as a super cure and as a preventive medicine for such sub-healthy condition. In this paper, we seek to understand how Chinese consumers negotiate the tensions of the modern and traditional, the old and new, and the Western and Chinese in their choices of medical service. A two-step study was developed to understand the transformation and changes of traditional Chinese culture under globalization. At the first stage, we collected advertisements of Chinese medicine to examine its commercial construction. Advertisements were selected from newspapers and magazines for the general public, based on how interesting and rich they can help to reveal the contested discursive debates between Chinese and Western medicine. Semiotic analysis was conducted to understand how discourses of Western medicine and scientism have been appropriated to promote Chinese medicine, which is based on different theoretical origins.

At the second stage, we conducted depth-interviews with both consumers and doctors of traditional Chinese medicine in order to develop a holistic understanding of how traditional Chinese medicine has been reinvented and how Chinese consumers negotiate the conflicting discourses of medicine in their choices of medical service to construe a cosmopolitan lifestyle. All of our forty-one interviews were started with grand tour questions regarding the meanings of traditional Chinese medicine, and followed up with probing questions about how it was used and understood (Thompson 1997; McCracken 1988). The informants were also shown some of the ads we selected and their responses were solicited (Scott 1994). The interviews lasted from half an hour to two hours, and were audio-taped and later transcribed. The transcripts were analyzed through an itinerary process (Spiggle 1994). Prelim analysis has yielded rich theoretical insights.

The rise of biomedicine in Western societies resonated with the industrial revolution and was better adapted to the industrial age than any other alternative forms of medical knowledge. It is also the dominant form of medical practices in today’s China. Far from extinction, traditional Chinese medicine is constantly contested and reproduced by its daily encounters with Western biomedicine. In this process, traditional Chinese medicine has also been exoticized and then used to construct a cosmopolitan identity by the emerging middle-class consumers in urban China. The marginality of traditional Chinese medicine is often turned into a vantage point from which the discourses of knowledge and identity can be developed. We have explored how consumers seek to negotiate a cosmopolitan identity through their choices of medical service. Preliminary findings show that traditional Chinese medical knowledge has offered a system of cosmopolitan values that go far beyond medical discourses of healthcare during the country’s rapid social changes. Implications on theories of global/local encounter are also discussed.

Selected References
For this study, we address Chinese consumers' perceptions of authenticity. It has been noted that most existing studies approach authenticity as “a general preoccupation of modern Western culture” (Jacknis, 1990, p.9), and as a result examine it at large within Western contexts and hence neglect to address it as a phenomenon with considerable universal implications. We thus chose to explore the Chinese consumer market not only because of its considerable size, but mainly because of its consumers’ differences in beliefs and attitudes in relation to many aspects of consumer behaviour in general, and authenticity in particular. These differences due primarily to cultural factors have been more recently attributed to the noticeable increase of consumerism along with the considerable expansion of offshore manufacturing companies within this wider region (Liu and Wang, 2009, Staake et al., 2009, Vann, 2006). As a result, Chinese consumers are currently exposed to numerous and diverse levels of authentic product offerings at their everyday market place.

Extended Abstract

Throughout history consumers have demanded authenticity; from the interest in authentic religious relics in Europe between ninth to the eleventh centuries (Phillips, 1997) to the demand of authenticity in the modern day consumptions in a wide variety of market offerings (Alexander, 2009, Beverland, 2006, Handler and Gable, 1997).

Nevertheless, many postmodern writers have argued that technology advancement and global commercialism have undermined consumers’ ability to distinguish the difference between the real and the fake (Orwell, 1989), while some argue that consumers are no longer interested in telling the difference between the two and even seem to often prefer the easily accessible replica to the more inaccessible original. Frow (1997) argues that this has destabilized the fundamental concept of authenticity. Moreover, and in combination with the proposition that “authenticity is a fluid concept that can be negotiated” (Goulding, 2000, p. 837), further research within consumer research has been called for (Penaloza, 2000). Therefore, the aim of this study is to explore empirically consumers’ perceptions of authenticity in the context of Chinese market offerings.

Authentic and Inauthentic Product Offerings

In consumer research the term authenticity has been used to describe something to be genuine, true, and not to be a copy or imitation (Stern, 1992; Peterson, 1997; Phillips, 1997). Grayson and Martinec (2004) propose a useful foundation for the assessment of authentic market offerings. Based on Peirce’s (1998) philosophy of signs, they supported the importance of indexical and iconic cues in the evaluation of authenticity. More specifically, Peirce’s work has linked certain types of cues (indexicality) with certain kinds of phenomenological experiences (iconicity). Thus, indexical authenticity refers to the original or real thing, while iconic authenticity refers to an authentic reproduction. As a result, “authenticity can be both a social construction and a source of evidence” (Grayson and Martinec, 2004, p. 310; Belk and Costa, 1998; Kozinets, 2001).

Even though, we are still not comprehensive with regards to under what circumstances consumers’ assessments of authentic market offerings would emphasize iconicity or indexicality, a clear distinction between authentic and inauthentic product offerings has been identified in previous research (Peirce, 1998; Grayson and Martinec, 2004; Leigh et al., 2006).

With this study, we address Chinese consumers’ perceptions of authenticity. It has been noted that most existing studies approach authenticity as “a general preoccupation of modern Western culture” (Jacknis, 1990, p.9), and as a result examine it at large within Western contexts and hence neglect to address it as a phenomenon with considerable universal implications. We thus chose to explore the Chinese consumer market not only because of its considerable size, but mainly because of its consumers’ differences in beliefs and attitudes in relation to many aspects of consumer behaviour in general, and authenticity in particular. These differences due primarily to cultural factors have been more recently attributed to the noticeable increase of consumerism along with the considerable expansion of offshore manufacturing companies within this wider region (Liu and Wang, 2009, Staake et al., 2009, Vann, 2006). As a result, Chinese consumers are currently exposed to numerous and diverse levels of authentic product offerings at their everyday market place.