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Shopping East and Shopping West— Chinese Consumer Behaviour in Two Worlds

Mike Willis

ABSTRACT. In today's China, consumers not only have the chance to sample products and services from around the world, but to experience cultural influences from a vast range of countries. In particular, Western products and services—and cultural values—have become increasingly popular. Consumers now shift between different worlds (Chinese and Western) with seeming ease. This research identifies the factors that encourage consumers to shift between these different worlds—and values. The factors include the situation and context (of the shopping experience), peer influence and dynamics, the role of conversation at or near the time of purchase, and the nature of the product and service. The role of “time,” “chance,” and “intuition” in the shopping experience and cultural shifts are also examined. What emerges from the study is a changeable, mobile, and flexible community quite capable of shifting between different sets of values (and consumer attitudes) easily and often very quickly. For companies, the key to success (at least to some degree) is to place their goods and services in a context that helps to create a complementary,

Mike Willis is a Senior Lecturer in Marketing at Monash University, Victoria, Australia.

Address correspondence to Mike Willis, Senior Lecturer in Marketing at Monash University, 10 Kitchener Street, Trafalgar 3824, Victoria, Australia. E-mail: mike.willis@buseco.monash.edu.au

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integrated, and supportive image of the world they wish to create in the minds of their Chinese consumers.

Q2 **KEYWORDS.**

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INTRODUCTION

The gradual opening of China to foreign products and services and a myriad of foreign cultural influences has raised a number of issues for researchers in the marketing and allied fields.

Some of the issues are: How important are foreign (and particularly Western) values in today's international and modern China? Have they started to replace more traditional values? Have they impacted on consumer behaviour and, if so, in what ways? Do foreign (and indeed Chinese) companies now need to take into account foreign cultural values when designing and selling their goods in the Chinese market and, if so, in what ways? These are just some of the issues, and questions, associated with this endlessly fascinating market.

In regard to the more specific area of shopping behaviour, have the cultural changes, shifts, and access to international values (not to mention products and services) changed the dynamics of Chinese shoppers, in particular of the younger generation? This is the scope of the present article.

LITERATURE SUMMARY

China has emerged as one of the largest markets in the world for foreign products and services (Hill, 1984; Wei, 1997; Dong and Helms, 2001). This has raised a number of issues of interest to marketers—one is the degree to which products and services should be adapted for this and indeed other foreign markets (Cavusgil et al., 1993; Gilmore, 2003); a second is the range of cultural issues that have faced marketers entering the Chinese market (for example, Levitt, 1984; Punnet and Yu, 1991; Shao, 1991; Rondinello and Roerhrig, 1994; Mann, 1997; Pangariya, 1997; Singh and Singh, 1997), which are often studied in the context of market entry cultural issues and problems; and the issue of product and service

placement in the rapidly expanding and changing Chinese market. Studies by Goodman and Segal (1991), to some extent, Roehrig
 Q4 (1994), Rondinello and Roehrig (1994), Fisher (1997), Rondinello
 (1997), Dutton (1998), and Huang et al. (1998), together with those
 Q3 by Ampalavanar (2000) and Willis (2003), have considered the nature 60
 of the Chinese consumer market in some detail, and what has
 emerged is that the market is far from homogenous in terms of its
 cultural behaviour, and that quite often consumers exhibit a range
 of values and consumer preferences from the West and from home.
 Traditional values, as depicted, for example, by Creel, 1953, and 65
 foreign values seem to coexist together. Consumers, on the one
 hand, may be traditional, cautious, group oriented, focused on
 issues of guanxi (encompassing concepts such as trust, respect,
 empathy, and reciprocity), and deeply aware of traditional values
 and roots, and this may express itself in a liking for traditional pro- 70
 ducts and services. But, they may also be Western dynamic, individ-
 ual, creative, assertive, and desirous of the vast range of Western
 products and services now available in China, particularly if these
 add to a sense of status, self-esteem, and peer approval (Willis,
 2004a, 2004b). This multi-layered approach to culture may lead 75
 consumers to shift or swing between very different worlds in terms
 of behaviour and buyer preferences, often over very short periods of
 time (Willis, 2004a, 2004b). Added to this issue is the influence of
 various other values (and products and services) from a range
 of non-Western countries such as Singapore and South Korea, 80
 creating a complex range of behavioural attributes and consumer
 preferences that sit side by side with traditional values and concepts.
 If one accepts that consumers have access to these various cultural
 values (for example, traditional and Western), the next issue to be 85
 studied is to identify the factors (almost cues) which trigger consu-
 mers to move from one set of values to the other. This is the aim of
 this research project.

METHODOLOGY

Respondents were male/female and aged between 20 and 35, as
 follows: 22 from Beijing, 20 Nanjing, 28 Dongguan (Guangdong 90
 province), 32 Shantou, 48 Hangzhou, 28 Suzhou, 22 Yiwu, 17 Dalian,
 16 Wuhan, 23 Shanghai, 12 Guangzhou, 17 Shenzhen, 6 Chengdu, 11

Kunming, 5 Xiamen, 8 from Gansu province (mainly Lanzhou), and 6 from North East China including Shenyang.

Respondents were selected in a quite random manner and were usually located in shopping areas (traditional and more westernised) in the various cities. About 120 were interviewed overall, but only the above were considered to be detailed enough to be used in the present study. Further analysis was undertaken in July 2007 to freshen findings.

Respondents were interviewed individually. They were asked to identify, in their own words and phrases, the factors that might affect them and their friends to shop in a Western or Chinese context and situation. To enable them to discuss this open-ended question, a short summary of previous research was provided, and they were also asked to comment briefly on that. It was explained that some research had indicated that the Chinese consumers of today sometimes moved between two rather different worlds. One world was associated with Chinese values encompassing ideas such as trust, empathy, respect, guanxi, and a palpable sense of the value of Chinese traditions, history, and what it is to be Chinese. It had been found that consumers often exercised these values when shopping for Chinese goods and services, and particularly when they were situated in a Chinese shopping precinct that was more traditional than some of the larger international shopping malls. Conversely, they might be at their most international and Western when shopping for a Western product or service in a large, international state-of-the-art shopping mall. In short, in modern day China it was possible to be traditional—and international—in one and the same person. Respondents supported the general concept of moving between various worlds in their consumer behaviour, and they were then asked to elaborate on the factors that might impact upon and affect this sense of shifting between values. Their responses were then grouped into the following categories and associated findings.

In addition to this approach, there was a degree of observational research as respondents (in about 60% of the cases) went on a typical shopping trip (sometimes more than once), enabling the researcher to observe how they would vary their behaviour and preferences over the course of an extended shopping tour. It is almost impossible for a researcher to become “invisible” when observing this kind of behaviour, but it was useful to watch and trail groups and observe how they shifted and varied their behaviour and consequence, and

associated consumer approach. Some of the observations made by the researcher were then discussed and analysed with the group members.

It was observed that people usually shopped in *groups* in China, and for that reason, most of the findings and discussion included in this article refer to “groups” and the interaction of the *group* rather than individuals per se. These groups tended to be quite flexible, based on situation, time, event, day of the week, and context. They usually were made up of friends and family. Given the group-based nature of China, still distinctly observable in mid 2007, the group tended to act as a holistic unit, not always but in many situations; but, in this study, respondents were interviewed individually to identify their own, distinctive views about shopping. These groups tended to be formed on the basis of networks (including *guanxi* networks, that is, close social, personal, or even business associations based on mutual benefits and shared experiences), family, friends, and, perhaps, rather more than in the West, moved around in shopping areas in units which shared values, perceptions, and a sense of fun, adventure, and a shopping experience as a group (and quite inclusive) experience. (“In China, I have fun if I can share a shopping experience with a group, and I buy for myself and for the group’s perceptions and shared views.” This was a common view.)

FINDINGS

Consumers felt that they did quite frequently shift and change their consumer behaviour between different sets of values and emphases, as follows. At times they could be at what they termed their most Chinese, when they would tend to:

- shop at Chinese language stores featuring Chinese goods and services;
- speak Chinese with their friends;
- seek out Chinese retail locations (i.e., streets, centres, and so on);
- exercise a certain degree of *guanxi* relationship with some shop owners if there was an existing relationship between them (for example, if they had shopped at the store frequently);
- shop in groups exercising due regard to peer views and group attitudes (for example, when choosing a product or service to purchase); and

- relax into what they tended to feel was a local and comfortable life-style while shopping. 170

At other times they would be far more international (and Western) in their orientation and would then tend to:

- shop at international stores featuring foreign brand name goods and services, such as Just Jeans in Beijing, for example;
- speak Chinese with their friends but with the use of some English and other foreign words (such as slang words and brand names); 175
- seek out foreign retail locations (i.e., streets, centres, and so on, where there would be a marked preference for international malls);
- exercise less of a certain degree of *guanxi* relationship with some shop owners if there was an existing relationship between them (for example, if they had shopped at the store frequently)—rather, they would be more offhand, assertive, and dynamic in their relationship with shop staff and shop keepers; 180
- shop in groups but would also exercise greater individual decision-making power; and 185
- adopt a more dynamic, proactive, assertive, international demeanour in their shopping and general behaviour (words provided by respondents).

However, there were also many situations where they would be somewhere in the middle of these two extremes of behaviour. This was where, for example, they would perhaps not seek out the latest and largest Western shopping mall in Beijing, but choose a smaller yet also somewhat Western mall. 190

They also felt that they would, at certain times and in regards to certain types of products and services, take on at least some aspects of other non-Chinese but not necessarily Western cultural values from locations such as Japan (when eating at a Japanese pizza chain or shopping for a Japanese product), but these values were far less extreme, or obvious, than the somewhat more polarised Chinese—Western (international values), since often the latter tended to subsume other values from various non-Western countries. This was because many respondents actually felt that behaviour and images from locations such as Japan and Korea were almost Western in their focus. 195 200

These basic findings reiterate what has been found in previous research by the author. Turning to the factors and associated issues 205

that facilitated groups moving from one set of values to the other, there were a range of issues and influences identified.

First, there was a time dimension to the issue. Consumers could shift between these two types of cultural behaviour:

- Over the short term—for example, it could be a particular stimuli 210 that would change their pattern of behaviour. An example is where they might pass a Western mall in Shanghai and then decide to go in and shop for Western products and services. This change of behaviour could be very quick. They may have had no initial intention earlier in the day of shopping in a western location. The 215 decision could be quick and not premeditated.
- Over a longer term, where their behaviour tended to be more planned, premeditated, and organised—for example, they might carefully plan an expedition to the local Chinese shopping area and to have lunch there. They might decide to avoid the larger 220 and more ornate Western areas of the city.

However, even when shoppers planned a particular type of trip (and associated behaviour), this could change on the spur of the moment. They might plan to go to the local Chinese area of town but then change their minds as they passed Starbucks. The converse 225 was also possible in that they could plan a trip to a major Western mall (and dress and start to act appropriately), and then change their minds at the last moment, or along the way. Indeed, for many consumers, there would be a tendency to mould and remould their behaviour over the time of a shopping trip. However, it is also true 230 to say that at other time they would develop and maintain their orientation over a reasonable period of time—for example, as in the example cited above where they might plan their day and then stick to it.

Second, there was a peer aspect to the issue. Peers can be divided 235 into several categories—friends, parents, siblings. The subtle interaction between these people influenced the type and form of shopping behaviour in a range of ways:

- One or more dominant people in the shopping group could influence the behaviours of the others and could dominate the decision-making process (for example, insisting that “we shop at the Western malls today”); or 240

- All of the members of the shopping group could interact in a more *seamless* and perhaps indecisive manner than above and could gradually develop a joint and agreed position on their shopping behaviour. 245

Peers could influence behaviour before and during the shopping experience—that is, before the group set out and as they shopped. Once again the process could be at once volatile and changeable.

Third, the type of product or service desired also impacted upon the behaviour of the shopping group. 250

Some products and services had such strong “auras” (if one can use that word), that they actually had the ability to impact upon the behaviour of the shopping group at times. For example, the group might pass a Starbucks, or a “much westernised product” such as a foreign music CD, and they might be lured into thinking, acting, and shifting to a more Western stance, for a period of time, anyway. The ability of a Western product or service to influence behaviour depended on a range of factors including: 255

- The *brand name and status* of the product or service; 260
- The perceived ability of the product or service to add *lustre, status, power, image benefit*, to the purchaser and his or her peers;
- The *level of trendiness* of the product or service;
- The degree of *personal benefit* of the product or service (if the product or service was perceived to have a direct and quite personal benefit or impact, such as a perfume product the consumer might be particularly attracted to); and 265
- The *location of the product or service* (as discussed below), i.e., a Western product in a very Western location enhanced its appeal and behavioural impact. 270

Above all, people would shift toward a Western product or service (with consequent changes in behaviour) based on its appeal and image to them and its ability to add power and lustre to their self-image and their perceived self-image as indicated by colleagues and peers. Functionality was often subsumed by issues of image, status, and self-esteem as perceived in terms of the group as a whole. 275

Conversely, the group might be “lured” by a particularly Chinese product or service. For example, they could be walking down a particular road in Nanjing and then see a particularly enticing Chinese

restaurant and then move in that direction. Once again, they would be attracted on the basis of issues of image, status, self-esteem, and so on. 280

It can be noted that the higher the perceived value of the product or service, the greater the tendency was to purchase well-known (and original) branded products and services on the basis of their perceived value, image (to oneself and to others), and status. One would visit Starbucks just to be seen there, and one would purchase a luxury fashion product so that everyone would know that one could afford it—high-end products and services were about image, status, and money. However, the product or service had to be perceived to be authentic, original, usually foreign (for status), and not adapted too much to China (in Starbucks in Hangzhou, for example, the design, colouring, layout, and even names of products in the shop were the same as in America—Chinese script was used sparingly and cunningly—i.e., inside the menu but not on the outside, which remained proudly English. This was so that consumers and their friends could feel, think, and announce that they were smart, wealthy, international, trendy, and successful). However, and this is a key aspect of this article, sometimes consumers did not want this sense of international, high-end power and status in their shopping experience—sometimes they wanted to be traditional, Chinese, local, and “at home.” So, they would walk straight past Starbucks and go to a local tea shop. They would happily drift seamlessly between these two worlds (international and traditional) with barely a thought—often their behaviour was quite intuitive. 285 290 295 300 305

Fourth, the location of a product or service also had considerable impact upon its status and image. There were various aspects of this issue:

- The location of the product or service in respect to other similar products or services within a store setting was important, as this set the scene (image, environment) for the group to be attracted to the Western (or Chinese) experience. In the example of Starbucks in Hangzhou, they were always located in proximity to other trendy international brands. 310
- The location of the store in terms of its proximity to other similar stores in the local area was also important to consumers. If the store was located in a Western shopping centre, in a Western-looking street, people would tend to be at their most Western. The 315

confluence of store design, location, and street design were all important to create a complete set of consistent and like-minded images. 320

Consumers tended to feel that, if there were the following linkages in a particular street, they would develop a predisposition to be at their most Western (or Chinese if the images were all Chinese):

- Design of product or service 325
- Location of product or service in the shop (adjacent to similar products or services and supported by consistent promotion, design and layout)
- Location of the shop in the street (adjacent to others)
- Design and layout of the street itself (for example, Western and modern). 330

All adding up to a *consistent* set of images could be transferred into a set of behavioural actions.

In this sense, consumers noted that it was quite possible to walk up one street and feel a particular way about their shopping and then walk down another street on the very same day and then change their behaviour because of its image and appearance. Streets and associated retail hubs such as the Xidan district in Beijing created a strongly Western feeling and form of behaviour amongst consumers, whereas some other areas were less westernised and consistent in their image, and the behavioural impact was therefore muted and even dissipated. Some stores created their own Western “world,” such as some of the new department stores in Beijing, including, for example, the Kempinski centre, with almost no local products, marginal use of Chinese language, and a very strong “New York” or European feel to them. Conversely, some areas of Beijing still conveyed the image—almost a world—of Chinese traditions and values. These would be visited and valued because of their innate respect for old traditions and values. People moulded their views, attitudes, and behaviour on the basis of these physical images and cues. 335
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Fifth, consumer sentiment was influenced by conversations held amongst the group. Consumers often discussed the nature and aim of their shopping trip before, during, and after their actual trip, and all of these conversations impacted strongly on their buyer behaviour. These conversations could be consistent in the sense that 355

they would reinforce behaviour over the course of the shopping trip, or they could be changeable in that they could change the behaviour of a group from one form of behaviour to another. Some respondents felt that they might often change their minds depending on the nature of the make up of their group and the content of their conversations. 360
 It was common to change their minds, even after making their way to a particular retail location in a city such as Beijing.

Factors that affected the conversations held within the group were:

- The environment (physical image) of the street, shop, or part of town they were planning to shop in; 365
- The nature of the people in the group (perhaps a dominant person might direct the behaviour of the others);
- The experience of shopping where, for example, the group might find a particular service or product was not to their liking after all (perhaps it was too expensive), and in this situation they could 370
 decide to switch behaviour (a common response was to reject a foreign product such as a TV set in favour of a local and cheaper one because of issues of cost, and in this situation one needed to save face, so one would quickly praise the local product and declare a degree of cynicism about foreign products and values. 375
 One might say “who wants the expensive foreign one after all—it is not that good!”); and
- The type of product or service being discussed, as conversations could affect behavioural change more for some kinds of products and services than for others. For example, for some products and 380
 services (such as foreign luxury perfume products), consumers felt that they would be less likely to change their minds compared to less critical issues such as where to eat at lunchtime. This was because foreign products and services (such as perfumes) had a particularly powerful image and status, therefore minimising the 385
 likelihood that consumers would change their minds.

The next factor that affected the behaviour (and its degree of “shifting”) of buyers was their personalities. Some people were *more* inclined to favour traditional or Western values and associated products and services, while others were more flexible and happy to 390
 move between the two worlds (and in between). Others were more influenced by the power of foreign brands and icons or Chinese. Personality attributes in this regard were heavily influenced by peers,

friends, and especially parents. Parents often encouraged their siblings to display flexible behaviour and to purchase (and value) foreign products and services for two reasons: they were associated with “success” in the new China, and they were often goods and services that had not always been available to the parents themselves. Grandparents sometimes exercised an even stronger motivating force in this regard, since they remembered the years when they had no access to foreign goods and services at all. They remembered the days of deprivation and often lived their lives now through their children and grandchildren, urging them to become rich and to experience all that the world had to offer. Respondents noted that the pressure to buy and act “rich and Western” was quite marked, yet, at the same time, so too was the need to recognise, absorb, and understand traditional values . . . so consumers lived in a complex and mixed world of sometimes conflicting and often powerful values imposed by parents and grandparents—and this all had an impact on their buyer behaviour and the degree to which they were prepared, and indeed able, to shift between the two very different worlds. They needed to experience the world and associated consumer context, yet retain their roots—two anchors in a fast changing world.

One must also wonder whether the political, social, and economic fabric of a rapidly changing and globalising China played a more generic and over-arching role and it did. The aim of China, to be a globally successful economic powerhouse, was reflected at the local, individual, and group-based level by perceptions of the need to make money, be successful, show off to others (about wealth and success), and to adopt international ideas, behaviours, and attitudes. Yet even so, there was also, at the national, regional, and local level, a tangible and often proud sense of renewed pride in what it was to be Chinese and traditional. As some people noted in Suzhou in June 2007, in China one always looked forwards and backwards at the same time—that is, one wanted to be able to live in two worlds, the international and the traditional, both adding vigour and freshness to the other.

The interaction between these various factors affecting cultural behaviour made shopping behaviour quite volatile and changeable. The way in which the factors interacted with each other was also revealing, and it is to this issue that this article now turns.

Sometimes it was the locational and situational factors that seemed to be the prime and key motivators—the well spring—for changed

behaviour. In this sense these factors would become the “lead” factors for behavioural change. For example, the group might pass a modern Western shopping mall in Beijing, and this could be a trigger for their behaviour. In this situation and context, the mall might trigger a range of conversations and subtle levels of interaction between the peers, which affected consumer sentiment and subsequent behaviour. Products and services that reflected the behaviour would not be expected because the location and situation of the experience had provided a trigger for action—a process of acting as a catalyst for the other factors discussed thus far to come into play.

Conversely, it could be the interaction of the group itself that could provide the initial “trigger” for behaviour, or it could be conversations held within the group that channel behaviour. For example, someone might just start talking about Starbucks, and then gradually the rest of the group would start to move in this direction. As they discussed ideas and preferences, peer issues might emerge as the interactive dynamics of the group are energised. Finally, the nature of the product (or service) could itself dictate and impact upon behaviour. In this situation, peer interaction and dynamics would therefore start the “change process.”

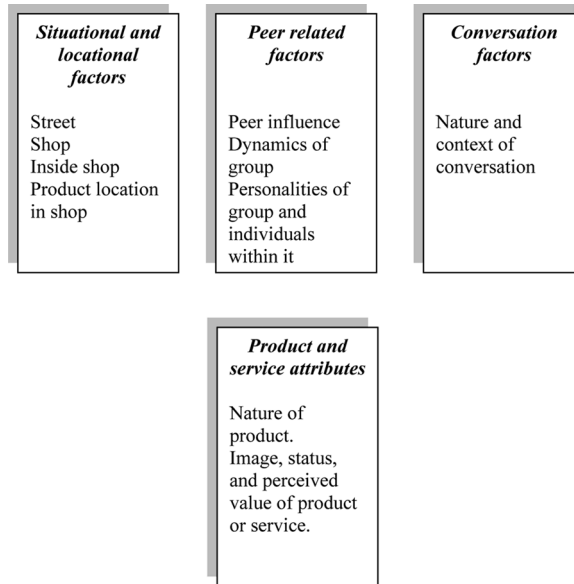
Therefore, the various factors and issues tended to interact with each other to effect change, and sometimes one would become the trigger for the rest to come into play.

In summary, then, there were at least four key factors, or groups of sub-factors, which interacted to provide behavioural change in a consumer setting and context (see Figure 1).

To these four factors must be added the issue of time. Each of these factors could be operationalised, activated, or utilised at the same time, at different times, in a sequence, and before, during, and after the actual shopping trip and purchase of a product or service. Often respondents felt that one set of factors did seem to trigger behavioural change as noted. It could be the dynamics of the group as they interacted at a particular point of time, it could just be random conversations, it could be the nature of the product or service, or it could be a subtle mixture of all. The time issue can be considered then in terms of five dimensions or categories (see Figure 2).

However one chooses to consider the issue of time, it was evident that behaviour of the shopping group and the interplay of the various factors noted above could be quick, slow, and in a kind of integrated process, or in what appeared to be a very volatile and not always

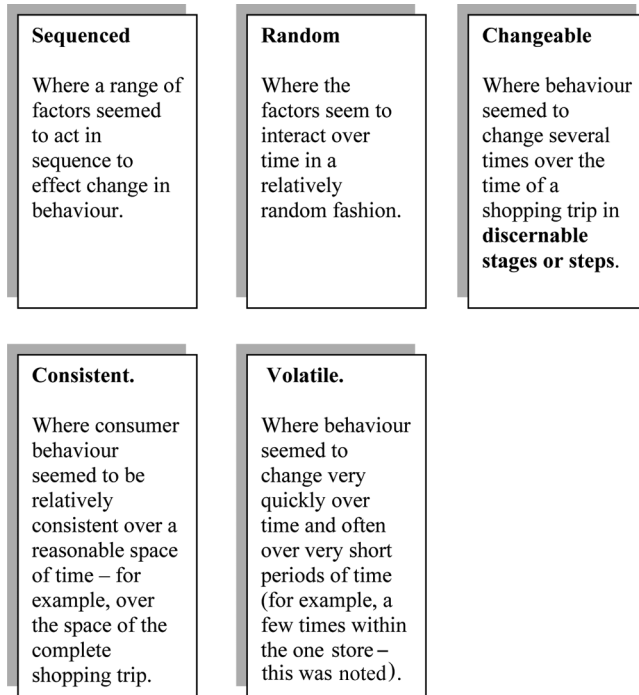
FIGURE 1. Factors Affecting Behaviour



clear pattern. Sometimes the group would maintain a consistency of purpose for the whole of the trip; at other times they would change their minds frequently. Quite often the whole process was flexible, frequently changeable, and always unpredictable in the sense that the same group might react to the same set of stimuli (or factors) differently on a different day. 475

Indeed, one could almost add another factor that impacted upon behaviour, which is the factor of chance or intuition as expressed by the group. That is, at times, the group would simply *change its mind* about their shopping intention and associated behaviour. When this happened, they were not always aware that it had even happened because they were more focused on having fun than on evaluating their processes of making decisions. At times, they were not even aware, individually or as a group, that they had changed behaviour—it all happened because of a whim, without thinking or analysis. Nevertheless, the factors identified in this article helped to shape, form, and reform opinions over time, whatever the time span actually was. 480 485 490

FIGURE 2. Role of Time



The products and services themselves can also be placed in some basic categories, which were identified in interviews with respondents. These also had a role to play in behavioural change. These products and services are shown in Figure 3.

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Despite the allure of high-value products and services (which, incidentally might not be valued on the basis of just the price, but also on a more subtle range of concepts centered around the perceived value, status, and impact of the product on self-image), the group could still decide to either purchase these or not! It was not the case that in every situation they would gravitate toward a high-valued foreign product or service, but if the value was strong enough, this would help them to adjust their behaviour in favour of that particular product or service.

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However, some of these product and services had *such a strong image* that they could cast a considerable and often mesmerising

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FIGURE 3. Types of Products and Services

Basic low value products and services	Medium value products and services	High value products and services
<i>No one generally changed behaviour over these as no one cared whether they were Chinese or foreign as they had marginal value and status. Example: cheap household products.</i>	<i>The group might change its behaviour over these products and services - maybe. An example cited was a not so well known foreign coffee chain. Trendy but not critical to one's esteem!</i>	<i>The group probably would (often, but not always) be swayed by the "power and status" of these products and services, such as foreign perfumes and Starbucks.</i>

(and not always cognitive) spell on the shopping group—for example, a Starbucks cafe, and even a MacDonald's store which seemed to be, in the minds of respondents, transplanted from a New York or at least American setting—much to the delight of shoppers who admired MacDonald's not for its food but its physical image, its Western image and feel. However, if the product or service only had a marginal sense of value or appeal to the group (such as some less well known foreign clothing brands, or wines), the group could be more discerning, and more critical, better able to resist the lure of the West in favour of a local substitute.

The whole of this discussion raises the issue of what happened when consumers were met with a range of possibly *conflicting images and factors* in their shopping trip. For example, what happened when they visited a shopping street that had a range of foreign images and icons as well as some local ones—a situation that was far from uncommon in locations such as Nanjing. Respondents felt that they would:

- be drawn to *one key set of images* and respond accordingly (perhaps because of conversation or other associated factors);
- be drawn to *various sets of images* and respond in a *sequenced way* and manner (i.e., “we will go there first and for lunch—let's forget all of this and go Chinese!”);

- *move seamlessly* between the two worlds and amongst them. This was quite common, and respondents reported that it was “easy” to glide between a variety of images and forms of behaviour—between *East and West* as it were, without even thinking about what they were doing. Theirs was not always a conscious form of behaviour, and it was quite easy to move between various sets of values without any apparent discord. At times, consumers were not even particularly aware that they were moving in and out of these worlds, although, at other times, there was a deep sense of making changes and moving between values and associated forms of behaviour.

Another issue raised by this research is whether the groups had any preference for one “world” or the other. In virtually all cases, they noted that:

- They tended to prefer Chinese products and services and associated values (such as trust, respect, guanxi, and so on) in situations where they wanted to be particularly relaxed, where they were with their parents (on certain days such as Sunday), where they felt they did not have to “prove anything” (often an issue of who they were shopping with), and where they were “out of view”—that is, in situations and context where they felt they would not lose face, status, or self-image. There was a slight view that, for some products and services: “Who cares? Buy local.” For example, no one would be at their most international and Western when buying a packet of noodles at the local shop. However, they might be at their most Western when shopping for the latest international brand watch; and
- They tended to prefer foreign products and services and exercise some attributes of foreign behaviour when they wished to impress themselves and others, when they desired to purchase the latest and the best foreign product (or service), and when the particular product or service “demanded” this form of buyer behaviour—for example, when they wanted to purchase a luxury spa.

Ultimately, they had no particular preference for any of the worlds they inhabited. Pragmatic and singularly unconcerned, they moved back and forth between values—and associated products and services—but they also emphasised that the worlds never completely

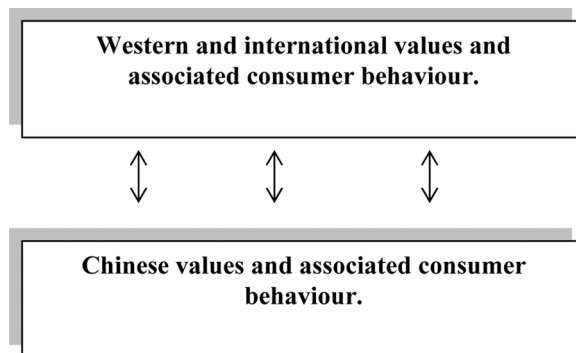
merged. Respondents felt that it was appropriate to conceptualise this issue as shown in Figure 4. In the diagram in Figure 4, Chinese values and associated behaviour (bottom) formed the foundation stones or wellspring of Chinese culture, whereas foreign values somehow were placed at the top of the more traditional values—linked to (by the arrows) but distinct from the traditional values. The two sets of values were exercised depending on the factors identified in this article—at least in regard to retail behaviour!

The two sets of values were also exercised in a somewhat seamless manner, with consumers (individually and in groups) moving happily between one and another. Some people would spend more of their time (and consumer orientation) in one set of values than the other, and this also depended on the various factors noted in this study and, in particular, their personalities.

Another issue raised by this research was whether there were any variations between the various cities and locations in China. The answer is that there were virtually none, but this was because each of the locations studied had similar international malls (albeit some cities had fewer than others) and similar traditional shopping areas. An international multi-story mall in Nanjing was not very different from one in Shanghai or Beijing, except that the latter two cities had more malls and taller buildings! Even in more remote locations, there was virtually no variation in behaviour.

A more thorny issue was whether people always and in every situation displayed a Chinese or traditional behaviour when they were

FIGURE 4. Western and Chinese Values



shopping for traditional or international/Western products and services. That is, was it the case that when consumers shopped for the latest Western products, they always put on their best Western behaviour (to quote one group)? It was found that:

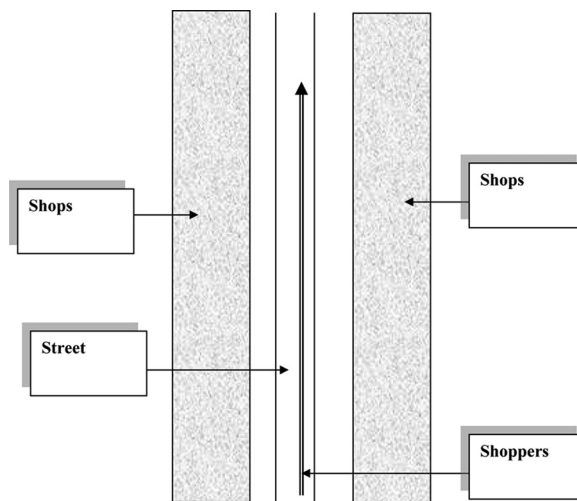
- there was a direct and discernable correlation between the types of products and services being purchased (and the location in which they were purchased) and the type of behaviour demonstrated by the group—that is, if the group entered a Starbucks they would tend to be “at their most Western” (to use a common set of words) compared to eating at the local Chinese restaurant on Sunday with their friends and family; but
- the level of correlation between products and services and the type of behaviour exhibited was affected (and influenced) by all of the factors noted in this article, such as peer influence, type of product and service, and so on, and therefore was a more complex issue than a direct and simple correlation; but
- it was, however, still possible for a group to “buy Western” without exhibiting any particular Western behaviour (or “buy Chinese” without necessarily exhibiting marked traditional forms of behaviour), but there was still an overall tendency for purchase to be linked to behaviour and vice versa. One reason for this is that, if a group purchased a Western product or service, particularly one with a high sense of status or fashion, without exhibiting any particular change in their behaviour, they would miss out on what many felt was part of the whole Western buyer process. The purchase and the overall behaviour were generally if not in every situation linked as suggested by previous research.

All in all, it was true to say that “when in a Western mall” people were at their more Western than when in a local shopping precinct, but the degree of the intensity of this behaviour depended on the factors noted above. One reason why it is possible to make this general statement (allowing for the conditions noted above) is that for many respondents, the very reason to go to a Starbucks was not just to drink coffee but in fact to “play the Western game”—showing off how sophisticated and Western they were! Conversely, when they were downtown in a local restaurant, it was a chance to relax back into comfortable local values and forms of behaviour. Respondents also felt that it was perhaps most

correct to indicate that the form of behaviour and the issues of product and service (and the other factors discussed above) were reflective of a holistic and integrated (and not always specific and measurable) form of consumer and associated behaviour. For example, they would refer to an image such as the one shown in Figure 5. In this diagram, one can imagine people walking down a street. They would pass by a range of shops, and they would be affected by the image and the veneers of the shops, and, at the same time, they would also be affected by their conversations and discussions as they proceeded down the road way. The group could:

- adopt a particular view and associated behaviour and maintain that for the distance of the road;
- vary their behaviour any number of times, depending on the influence of factors discussed in this study; and
- adjust their behaviour (if they were going to) in an organised, random, or “fuzzy” way, where their behaviour would split in and out of various types and forms (i.e., Chinese and Western and in between).

FIGURE 5. “The Street”



They might see a foreign store (Starbucks), for example, and this could influence their behaviour one way or the other or even neutrally (no impact). They might say: “wow, there is a Starbucks, and let’s go. . . .” Or they might say “that place is very expensive let’s go someone local and cheap. . . .” Or they might not even notice that it was there—or the whole reason for their trip might be to go to Starbucks, and therefore they might have already “fixed” their behaviour and associated intentions. They might even decide on the spur of the moment to enter Starbucks, and then in a split second (almost) change their mind because of whatever factor or reason. As noted above, for all of the impact and power of the factors discussed in this article, there was also the issue of pure chance, where one or more of the group might just change their minds for whatever reason, which might not even be identifiable to themselves.

If they identified two “star icons” in the same street near each other (for example, a Starbucks and a Chinese Beijing restaurant), the decision about one or the other (or neither) depended on the way in which the factors came into play. In a sense, the group might tend not to so much swing from one set of values to another, but glide between them depending on what they wanted to do at a particular point of time.

Once they entered a shop, their behaviour could still change again. For example, they might enter an international-looking department store on a mission to purchase a foreign perfume, which always carried with it all sorts of images of the West, including visions of power, status, success, Hollywood, and so on. These images might float through their minds as they entered the store. If the internal layout of the store, the layout of the display counter containing the products, and even the dress and look of the attendants was consistent with their image of the Western product, they would continue to follow their behavioural pattern. If there was something wrong, a small doubt might seep into their thinking, and the whole group could turn away—perhaps the product was too close to Chinese perfume products; perhaps the store was a bit messy, or perhaps the attendant’s skin was too dark (perfume was associated with whiter skin, which was associated with success and “The West”!). At almost the last moment, they might turn away and go elsewhere, either in a Western frame of mind: “that was no good, but let’s try somewhere else,” or in a more traditional state: “it was too expensive anyway!” What was important at this juncture was the influence of peer discussion and

also that of saving face. Nothing was simple, and everything in this situation was about face, image, and status—the very concepts associated with the product itself.

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A further issue raised by this discussion is the degree to which a particular type of behavioural orientation (i.e., Western) would last over time in, for example, a shop or a mall. For example, would it remain *static* or *dissipate*—or, indeed, would it gradually become even *stronger* and more assertive? In short, when a group walked into a Western shopping complex or shop, several options might be available to them during the course of their shopping trip (Figure 6).

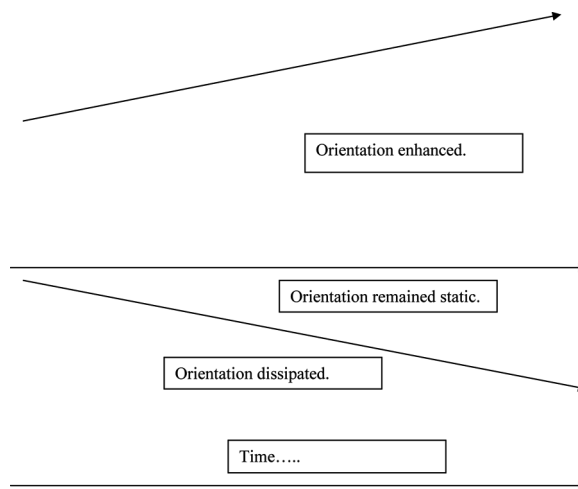
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All three options were observed and noted by respondents. First, a group could walk into a shopping complex, and the sights and sounds of this experience could enhance (strengthen) their Western orientation in terms of the way they interacted, the words and phrases they used, the kinds of products or services they sought out, and so on. They might even use a few Western words and phrases, show off to each other in a way they would associate with the West (i.e., America), and act in what some of them called a more free and easy and liberated manner (other phrases cited were chic, trendy, smart, clever, naughty, fun, assertive, dynamic, individual, independent). They would rush off to seek out the latest Western drink (at

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FIGURE 6. Consumer Orientation



Starbucks or equivalent), look over the latest foreign clothes, and so on. Gradually, their behaviour would become (to quite more than one respondent) almost intoxicated by the experience, for at least a short space of time—they might even imagine that they were in New York or London. 710

Conversely, their behaviour might remain rather neutral—in the sense that it might not change over the space of their shopping time inside the Western-style mall or shop. It might remain static, or unchanged, pegged at the kind of attitude, perception, and behaviour exhibited when the group entered the shop. Finally, the behaviour might dissipate; it might actually decline and perhaps even evaporate, based on factors such as the physical image of the shop or mall (disappointing), conversations, buyer intentions (which might change), peer influence (perhaps someone in the group soon tires of the hustle and bustle of the mall and starts to talk the group out of the experience), and what can perhaps best be termed an umbrella phrase of “internalised group behaviour,” where it was possible that the group would become so focused on its own issues (almost its own world) that the image, and power, of the mall would start to fall away and dissipate. This could happen at any time and could last for any length of time, too. Respondents noted that at times they would simply no longer worry about the external environment, but only on their own internal issues, discussions, and needs. Their antennae, as it were, would become internally focused rather than external in orientation. This kind of behavioural change (or issue) is depicted in Figure 7. Normally, the group would interact with the external world (the sights, sounds, shapes, and so on) of the external world (i.e., the shopping mall), and this is indicated in Figure 7 by the small two-pronged arrows. Sometimes, however, the group situation could be insular, as shown in Figure 8. In this situation, the level and degree of interaction between the group and the external world has been almost severed (no arrows), and the group tended to live in its own internalised world—for however long. External stimuli would now count for nothing, and the group would become impervious to their surroundings. Their behaviour would become internalised and unaffected by the environment, and this would dissipate any sense of, for example, being on any kind of Western shopping spree. 715 720 725 730 735 740 745

The issue of exhibiting enhanced, neutral, or dissipated behaviour could also, of course, apply to a Chinese environment and context. Once again the group would respond to a range of external cues

FIGURE 7. Interactive Group

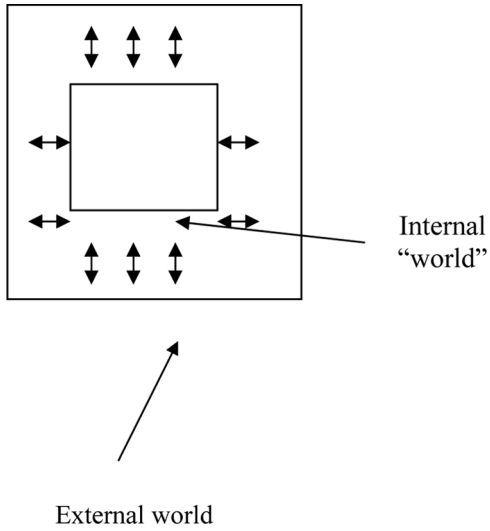
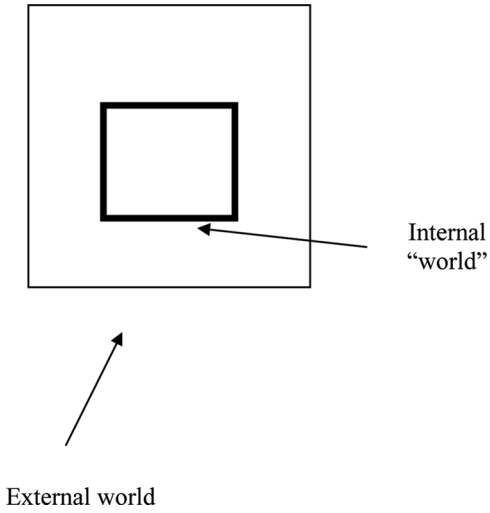


FIGURE 8. Insular Group



and its own internalised dynamics, including personalities or conversation, to effect behavioural change.

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The complicating factor of the issue of behavioural change, as discussed in the above few paragraphs, was that it could vary quite frequently, or might not, and was not always predictable or consistent. For one shopping group walking around a complex in Beijing, there were quite a few changes in behaviour, as charted and then discussed and verified with them, as shown in Figure 9. In this example, the group might start with a somewhat neutral stance when they entered the centre, a very large international mall. Then they might feel that they were getting—to quote one group—“pretty excited (A) as we went passed some really trendy shops, so we kind of sparked up and *went shopping!!!* It was a lot of fun—warm, lots of lights, really smart design, and great signs and stuff. After a while (B), we sort of got a bit blasé about it all—it was after about an hour, I guess, and we sort of felt a bit tired. It was fun, but kind of tiring. It was perhaps a bit of overkill with so many lights, shops, and we were running out of money—fun but tiring. Then we passed a really fun place (C) and, well, it was *on* again! It was a kind of clothing market thing with quite a few Western stores laid out together, and it was real fun and so we were back into it again! Then we really were tired and without any money and so we kind of drifted back again until we hit the food court, and it was a final fling of Western food, menus, internets, and all of that, and then we went home. Tired but we had lots of fun.”

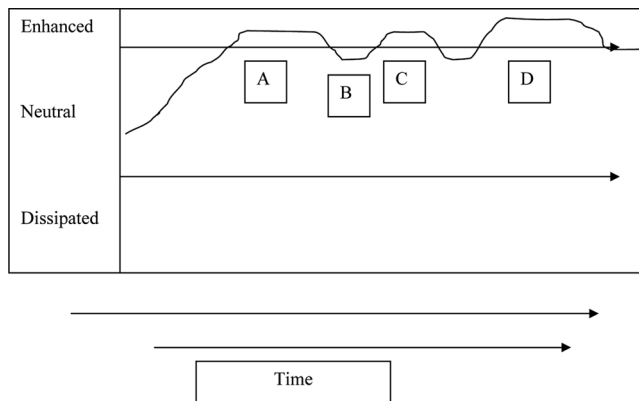
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FIGURE 9. Behavioural Change Over Time



This drifting between various forms of behaviour and attitudes was typical of shopping groups, who would often not notice or think about the issue until after their shopping trip.

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VALUE OF THE RESEARCH

The research identifies a range of factors that influenced behaviour amongst Chinese consumers in a variety of retail environments. These factors, individually and collectively, held to mold consumer behaviour as it moved between Western and Chinese worlds.

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Companies wishing to encourage Chinese consumers to move into a more Western frame of mind (perhaps wishing to market Western products and services) could consider the following.

- locating a western store in a street and general location that is similarly international and Western in image, status, and orientation (i.e., Xidan in Beijing) so as to preserve a consistent set of images; 785
- situating products and services in Western-style stores adjacent to other Western products or services to enhance their image and status;
- featuring point-of-sale promotions that accentuate the Western orientation and image of the product or service; 790
- producing promotional material that enhances the image, value, and Western orientation of the product or service (often a matter of promoting the image more than just the features of the product or service); and 795
- holding events, activities, and demonstrations that involve the consumer in the “world of the West,” to quote some respondents—that is, to make them part of the Western image that is related to the particular product or service.

Companies wishing to accentuate the Chinese side of their consumers should consider the following. 800

- locating their store, product, or service in a distinctly and more traditionally Chinese part of the city;
- using Chinese images, colours, language, and icons to accentuate the Chinese value of the product or service (perhaps avoiding English, for example); 805

- emphasising the Chinese value, features, and traditional values of the product or service to accentuate their local distinctiveness; and
- perhaps, and in some situations, focusing on nationalist and patriotic themes (for example, to sell books) that, in a sense, discreetly emphasise the Chinese value of the product or service. 810

Further research can now be undertaken to identify whether there are specific variations in behavioural change for particular (Western and Chinese) products or services, and it would also be valuable to investigate the role of intuition and chance play in this process. It would also be interesting to identify whether consumers changed their behaviour and viewpoints in regard to Western products and services and Chinese-made products and services designed in a very Western way (such as a Chinese hamburger shop!). 815

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