International Journal of Consumer Studies

International Journal of Consumer Studies ISSN 1470-6423

Materialism and conspicuous consumption in China: a cross-cultural examination

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Keywords
Materialism, conspicuous consumption, Chinese consumer behaviour, Chinese materialism, young adult materialism, Chinese conspicuous consumption.

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doi: 10.1111/j.1470-6431.2010.00930.x

Abstract

With the growing rise in consumer spending and economic power in Asian societies, it is increasingly important to explore the implications of these developments on consumer culture. This cross-cultural study first discusses the rise of materialism and conspicuous consumption in post-revolution China then examines differences in these phenomena between young adult consumers, aged 18–35, living in urban China and the United States. Utilizing survey data from over 600 respondents, significant differences were found in both materialism and conspicuous consumption, with Chinese young adults scoring higher in both variables. The findings show, that compared with past comparative studies, it appears both materialism and conspicuous consumption are on the rise among urban Chinese consumers.

Introduction

As China continues to rise as a global economic power and move further into a market economy, it is important to examine the effects of this movement on consumer behaviour and attitudes. In the wake of the global economic crisis, spurred on by overspending, overconsumption and the race to accumulate conspicuous goods, it is of paramount importance to further understand consumer values and tendencies. Materialistic values and the practice and attitudes surrounding conspicuous consumption are especially important to examine, as these phenomena, once viewed as largely western ideals, have begun to take hold in east Asian economies that are rapidly witnessing changes in social structures and traditional values. These changes have alarmed many who are concerned that traditional ways of life and deeply held beliefs are quickly vanishing in the rush to accumulate material wealth.

This cross-cultural study examines materialism and conspicuous consumption in China and the United States in regards to young adults (aged 18–35) with the intent of revisiting the differences in attitudes between consumers in these two nations with very different, yet converging, social and cultural orientations. The United States is often seen as the exemplar of the western free market and, in recent years, has had to deal with negative economic fallout largely brought on by consumer overspending on housing, big ticket durable goods and energy. China is quickly becoming the industrial growth centre of the world and is currently undergoing a variety of changes in its class structure and consumer spending patterns that mirror free market economies. This article first discusses materialism and conspicuous consumption, conceptually, then traces these phenomena in the context of post-revolution China. This research culminates in an empirical study in which data from young adult Chinese consumers are compared with those living in the United States. Implications and limitations are discussed.

Materialism

There are two prevailing theoretical perspectives, each comprising of a number of variables, in regards to conceptualizing materialism. Belk (1985) defines materialism as 'the importance a consumer attaches to worldly possessions', and sees it as a combination of three dimensions – *Possessiveness, Nongenerosity* and *Envy*. These factors are believed to capture the degree to which one values his/her material items, dislikes sharing his/her items and feels jealous or envious when others acquire more (or more valuable) goods.

Richins and Dawson (1992) conceptualize materialism in a slightly different manner than Belk. They view this concept as a phenomenon where individuals have material acquisition at the centre of their lives and view these material possessions as the key(s) to their happiness. Concurrently, they believe that highly materialistic individuals judge personal success (and the success

of others) as a function of the number and quality of possessions owned (Richins and Dawson, 1992). Operationally, the Richins and Dawson scale in 1992 contains three measures – *Success, Centrality* and *Happiness*. Further, they find that those high in materialism tend to place a higher value on items that can be worn or seen in public (Richins, 1994) and may often derive more pleasure from showing the good as opposed to actually using the good (Richins, 1994).

Materialism itself has been linked to a variety of consumer behaviours including social consumption motivation (Fitzmaurice and Comegys, 2006), compulsive buying (Rindfleisch *et al*., 1997; Roberts *et al*., 2003), brand perception (Kamineni, 2005), attitude towards advertising (Yoon, 1995), self-doubt and insecurity (Chang and Arkin, 2002), social influence conformity (Schroeder and Dugal, 1995) and self-esteem contingent on praise (Deci and Ryan, 1995). It has also been found to be an outcome of issues surrounding specific family structures (Roberts *et al*., 2003; 2006). Because of its effects on greater society and the individual, which are seen as potentially negative, there exists a strong urge to study the phenomenon and its related factors, one of which is conspicuous consumption.

Conspicuous consumption

Similar to the concept of materialism, conspicuous consumption is a behaviour in which an individual displays wealth through a high degree of luxury expenditures on consumption and services (Trigg, 2001). Conspicuous goods are often segmented from general shopping goods in the sense that the primary need satisfied is prestige (Grubb and Grathwohl, 1967; Belk, 1988; Shukla, 2008) and that product satisfaction is often derived from audience reaction as opposed to actual product use (Wong, 1997). The study of conspicuous consumption in the modern era gained momentum in the times of the Industrial Revolution, spurred by Veblen's (1899 republished in 1994) Theory of the Leisure Class. Veblen (1994) presented a framework of this phenomenon whereby consumer preferences are developed based on social status. Adding to that framework, Duesenberry (1949) posited that an individual's conspicuous consumption takes into account personal expenditures on items in comparison with the expenditures of others. In other words, consumers buy certain goods in the hopes to be seen more favourably in the greater social hierarchy. This leads, in largely capitalistic societies, to the use of conspicuous consumption in an attempt to find greater social status (Mullins, 1999), especially when one considers the consensual nature of public meanings related to conspicuous products (Richins, 1994).

Materialism and conspicuous consumption in China

In the post-industrial era, it has been theorized that happiness seeking via consumption is something that originated in western societies (Campbell, 1987; McCracken, 1988, Wong and Ahuvia, 1998) that comes largely as a result of economic affluence (Ger and Belk, 1990). The rise in materialism witnessed in Japan in the 1980s was seen (by some) as a result of the convergence of western influence (Belk, 1985) and rapid economic ascension. With the exponential growth in industrialization in Asia, specifically China, in recent years, there has been a significant surge in the consumption of western-style luxury goods, such as those produced by Prada and Louis Vuttion; however, it may be incorrect to assume that the consumption of these goods arrived in tandem with western materialistic values (Brannen, 1992).

While traditional Chinese culture includes a strong habit of thrift (Kieschnick, 2003), proper manners, focus on family (Chan *et al*., 2006) and a Confucian-centered orientation (Wong and Ahuvia, 1998), it is also a collective-oriented society in which the concept of 'face' (known as *mien-tsu*) is of paramount importance (Yau, 1988; Chan and McNeal, 2003; Chan *et al*., 2006). *Mien-tsu* is often represented by symbols of prestige or reputation gained through the expectation of, and impression on others. In this respect, while Chinese consumers value frugality, the traditional value of face and standing in the community encourages the acquisition of similar material goods other members in the community and/society possess.

The Chinese view of the self has been viewed as the 'center of relationships' (Tu, 1985) or 'interdependent' (Markus and Kitayama, 1991) where one's identity is found in terms of family, professional and social relationships, as well as in his/her culture. Conformity to the group is also seen as desired and expected (Yang, 1963). This self-concept guides the individual through decision-making (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). This is different from the western view of the self where regulating behaviour is largely dependent on personal tastes and values, abilities and preferences (Wong and Ahuvia, 1998). To the interdependent Chinese consumer, class is not traditionally seen as something obtained solely through personal income, or even personal achievement, but rather as part of one's group – which can be family, relatives or kinship clan (Hsu, 1981), and *mien-tsu*.

Consumption practices in China post-cultural revolution

With Chinese consumers long restricted in terms of consumer choice under Maoism and the Cultural Revolution, many Chinese consumers looked to the West as a means to 'catch up' with the rest of the world and break the uniformity and drabness of Chinese society (Croll, 2006). This all came at a time in China's history where the Heshang phenomenon rose to prominence, where much of the population began to openly question and criticize China's revolutionary past (Chen, 1992). As much of the population looked for a different lifestyle more consistent with the rest of the 'modern', western world, many embarked on a rapid increase in the consumption and purchase of western goods. Additionally, western-style clothing allowed a stronger sense of gender-identity for both men and women long encouraged to wear androgynous uniforms (Li, 1998). The increased use of western-style accessories and cosmetics incorporated the changing notions of beauty, which had been influenced by Western films, ads and television programmes.

With this influx of western infusion into Chinese life and culture, coupled with the eventual demise of the Cultural Revolution, Chinese consumers found themselves appropriating a modern and more progressive world, one in which goods from the west symbolized a new found freedom. For many Chinese people, images of the West and, seemingly, its lifestyle, were best exemplified through the tools of marketing, specifically, advertising in imported magazines and billboards (Croll, 2006). The Western

world was seen as a land of plenty where the ability to earn a high income would lead to an ability to purchase a wide variety of goods, which would eventually lead to happiness (Rice, 1992). Being one of the first to obtain western luxury goods was seen as both a demonstration of individuality as well as privilege and success. Those with the newest goods were seen as trendsetters and the source of envy (Croll, 2006). As such, these processes tied to status in the community, as well as a rise in income in the newly opened economy, ushered in a greater prevalence of conspicuous consumption that had not been seen in China for many generations. The consumer revolution spread through China rapidly, with retail sales increasing by an average of 22% per year from the period 1985–95 (Studwell, 2002). By the dawn of the new millennium, even those who did not enjoy this new-found wealth were still eager to engage in the consumption of western style goods.

Today many are critical of China's consumption patterns and see it as the cause for the divide between the 'haves' and the 'have nots' (Davis, 2000). Many also see it as the cause of migration to China's large industrial cities where once rural peasants now find themselves at the heart of their nation's industrial machine. A further implication, for better or for worse, is the challenge to the traditional vertical relationship between subject-citizens and the state, with many Chinese residents increasingly relying on each other for kinship, information exchange and cues on consumption behaviour (Davis, 2000). As Chinese society goes through a variety of consumption-related changes, many look specifically to China's newest generation of young adult consumers who were the first to have been raised in the era of the free market.

Understanding young adult (18–35) Chinese consumers

Differences in consumption patterns between age groups is seen as a fundamental characteristic of the Chinese market. Major changes in the country's institutions have socialized parents and their children with conflicting ideologies, and have presented them with different opportunities and constraints. China has undergone multiple distinct and momentous revolutions and political campaigns during the past 50 years. Consumer demand in China, a socialist market economy, may be more strongly affected by institutional decree than it would be in a full market economy. We identify the Cultural Revolution (1966–79), the Economic Reform Era (1980–91) and the Era of Globalization of China (1992–present) as major events that have given birth to the recent generational consumer cohorts in China. The Cultural Revolution was the most disruptive of these events in terms of shaping consumer behaviour. The Economic Reform Era and the Era of Globalization of China, though less disruptive at the personal level, introduced new social orders, ideologies and institutional drivers that cultivated coming-of-age group values. Young consumers in China were subjected to the influence of three sets of values, including communistic values that emphasized personal sacrifice and contribution to the state, Confucian values about frugality and saving up for long-term needs, and materialistic values that were about spending money for personal enjoyment (Chan, 2003). While urban Chinese young people in the 1980s often searched for life's meaning, contemporary youth in urban China are more success-oriented and openly seek the good life (Chan and Zhang, 2007). The millennials in today's China are the children of the generation raised during the Cultural Revolution. Largely because of globalization, Chinese millennial viewpoints and attitudes are often different from those of their parents. A central feature of these attitudes is a kind of individualism that stands emphatically opposed to the collectivist spirit promoted during the Cultural Revolution – an individualism that is influenced by western culture.

Cross-cultural measures of materialism

Prior research in cross-cultural materialism studies has yielded mixed results. It has generally found Americans to be comparatively more materialistic than those in other less developed nations including India and Thailand (Ger and Belk, 1996), Mexico (Eastman *et al*., 1997; Clarke and Micken, 2002) and China (Schaefer *et al*., 2004). At the same time, Americans have been found to be more materialistic than those in other developed western nations including France (Ger and Belk, 1990; Lundstrom and White, 1999), New Zealand, the United Kingdom and Germany (Ger and Belk, 1996).

Previous research has indicated that adolescents in urban China may be prone to a high degree of materialism (Chan *et al*., 2006), with those at the end of adolescence (aged 17–19) scoring higher in the Richins and Dawson scales than those younger. It has been hypothesized that increased exposure to materialistic values and models of behaviour including personal encounters with a growing number of 'successful' people in Chinese society has lead to the encouragement of greater tendencies towards materialism (Chan *et al*., 2006). Additionally, among these same Chinese adolescents, it has been found that communication with peers and watching television advertising encourage materialism (Chan *et al*., 2006). Much of the advertising that Chinese adolescents and young adults have been exposed to in recent years has come from, or been influenced by the West (Croll, 2006) [though it should be noted that Schaefer *et al*. (2004) found that exposure to American television did not lead to a significant identification with western values]. Furthermore, because of China's one child per family policy in recent times, many Chinese parents wish to compensate for their own lack of material wealth by providing a material-rich lifestyle to their offspring (Zhao, 1996).

At the same time, however, China is a nation with a rich cultural history based on Confucian values. These values have been part of Chinese culture for an extraordinary amount of time – emerging within the culture many centuries before the rise of western civilization. Filial piety is one of these key Confucian values where Chinese children often look to their parents as role models and have a great deal of respect for their ancestors. For many generations, Chinese culture has been centred around a strong cultivated habit of thrift and frugality (Chan *et al*., 2006) and an interdependent self-concept (Wong and Ahuvia, 1998).

Materialism and happiness seeking via consumption as a key societal norm emerged and developed in Western civilization (Belk, 1985; Campbell, 1987; McCracken, 1988; Ger and Belk, 1990; Wong and Ahuvia, 1998), which achieved an elevated and esteemed place in both industrial and post-industrial societies. With the rise in globalization and the continued openness in Chinese society, especially in terms of Western influence, it is interesting to study materialism and conspicuous consumption in today's comparative context.

Methodology

Sample

Data for this study were collected utilizing a survey instrument administered in both the United States and China. In order to obtain a representative sample of Chinese consumers working and/or residing in industrial centres, three Chinese cities were selected for data collection: Beijing, Shanghai and Shenzen. Data were gathered from December 2008 through March 2009. Survey respondents were selected using two methods. The first involved street intercepts, where we asked a variety of shoppers, near or on university campuses, who appeared to be between the ages of 18 and 35, to fill out short forced-choice questionnaires. This method yielded 106 usable surveys for analysis. The second group of respondents came from pools of university students (both graduate and undergraduate) at large, urban Chinese universities (located in Beijing, Shanghai and Shenzen). This second method yielded 139 usable surveys. A total of 44% of Chinese respondents were male and 56% were female. The mean respondent age was 23 years old.

Data from American consumers was obtained from November 2008 through April of 2009. Three hundred sixty-five usable surveys were obtained in total. Respondent data came from the states of Maryland, New Jersey and Pennsylvania. Surveys were completed by students at three different universities (one in an urban setting at a large public university, one suburban public university and one private university located in a small city). Additional survey data came from members of a large, national, non-profit organization who were given a $1 donation for each completed survey (see Podoshen, 2006). A large majority of these respondents were also university students (undergraduate and graduate). The mean age of the American respondents was 22 years old. A total of 45% of American respondents were female and 55% were male. Key sample characteristics can be seen in Table 1.

Measurement instrument

The questionnaire was comprised of a variety of consumption-related questions. To reduce hypothesis guessing, the survey instrument asked respondents additional questions in regards to items that were not related to materialism and conspicuous consumption. These additional items focused on preferences for music, entertainment and retail establishments. After a short pilot study, the survey was administered in both the United States and China. For the Chinese version, the survey instrument was translated to Chinese. A different translator then back-translated the survey.

The materialism scale was comprised of a set of items taken from the Richins and Dawson (1992) materialism scale. The present study used nine items from the scale (see Richins, 2004; Kilbourne and Pickett, 2008) with three measures for each of the factors that comprise materialism. These factors are *Success*, *Centrality* and *Happiness*. It should be noted that the items found in the *Success* scale have previously been used with high reliability in East Asian studies (Tambyah *et al*., 2009). An additional four items to measure the factor of *Envy* were included from the Belk (1984) materialism scale. The scales to measure conspicuous consumption and fashion consciousness were adopted from Chung and Fischer (2001), which is an amalgam of previously utilized measures developed by Moschis (1981) and Lumpkin and Darden (1982). This scale was used by Chung and Fischer with an ethnic Chinese population. The Richins and Dawson materialism scale has previously been used in China (Yang and Ganahl, 2004; Chan *et al*., 2006) with acceptable reliability.

Results

Scale reliability for the nine materialism measures resulted in a coefficient alpha of 0.724, with 0.697 for the US sample and 0.742 for China. Mean inter-item correlation was 0.33. Though this is relatively low number, it has been suggested that with the number of items used in the scale we utilized, a coefficient alpha can be at an acceptable level even with relatively low inter-item correlations (Cortina, 1993; Netemeyer *et al*., 2003). For the four conspicuous consumption measures a coefficient alpha was found to be 0.857, with 0.844 for the US and 0.726 for China. Mean inter-item correlation was found to be 0.60. The two *Fashion* consciousness measures resulted in a coefficient alpha of 0.656, with 0.690 for the US and 0.577 for China. Mean inter-item correlation was found to be 0.49. Finally the four-item *Envy* scale was found to have a coefficient alpha of 0.399 and a mean inter-item correlation of 0.14. Because these scores were below acceptable thresholds in cross-cultural research (Hui 1988), the *Envy* questions were removed from further analysis (though we have still reported their results in the tables). All of the other measures were found to be in the acceptable range for exploratory and cross-cultural studies (Hair *et al*., 1998; Schaefer *et al*., 2004). A factor analysis confirmed three factors in regards to materialism (*Success*, *Happiness* and *Centrality*) consistent with Richins and Dawson (1992).

As seen in Table 2, significant differences from MANOVA were found in six of the nine materialism measures, when comparing all

Table 1 Key sample characteristics

	Chinese respondents	American respondents
Total number	245	365
Cities surveyed	Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzen	Philadelphia, Baltimore, Lancaster, Atlantic City
Mean respondent age	23	22
Marital status	90% single, 10% married	95% single, 5% married
Age range	18–35	18–34
Gender	56% female, 44% male	45% female, 55% male
Dates sample obtained	December 2008–March 2009	December 2008–March 2009

Table 2 Significant differences in materialism measures

Item	*F*-statistic, (df = 642)	Sig. ($P < 0.05$)
Success factors		
I admire people who own expensive cars, homes and clothes.	10.952	0.001
The things I own say a lot about how well I'm doing in life.	26.794	0.000
I like to own things that impress people.	101.957	0.000
Centrality		
I try to keep my life simple as far as possessions are concerned.	289.438	0.000
Buying things gives me a lot of pleasure.	0.101	0.919
I like a lot of luxury in my life.	11.644	0.001
Happiness		
My life would be better if I owned certain things I don't have.	58.819	0.000
I'd be happier if I could afford to buy more things.	2.735	0.099
It sometimes bothers me quite a bit that I can't afford to buy all the things I'd like.	0.643	0.423
Envy		
There are certain people I'd like to trade places with.	4.600	0.032[a]
If I have to choose between buying something for myself vs. someone I love, I would prefer buying something for myself.	19.504	0.000
I am bothered when I see people who buy anything they want.	17.851	0.000
People who are very wealthy often feel they are too good to talk to average people.	0.050	0.822

[a]Note that this is not significant when a Bonferroni adjustment is utilized.

Table 3 Mean scores between Chinese and American samples (five-point scale with 1 as strongly agree and 5 as strongly disagree)

	Chinese sample		American sample		Mean effect
Item	Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation	size difference (Cohen's *d*)
Success factors					
I admire people who own expensive cars, homes and clothes.[a]	2.61	0.939	2.87	1.04	0.26
The things I own say a lot about how well I'm doing in life.[a]	2.67	0.899	3.07	0.992	0.42
I like to own things that impress people.[a]	2.15	0.865	2.95	1.02	0.84
Centrality					
I try to keep my life simple as far as possessions are concerned (R).[a]	1.77	0.664	2.94	0.925	1.4
Buying things gives me a lot of pleasure.	2.40	1.00	2.41	0.955	0.01
I like a lot of luxury in my life.[a]	3.00	0.899	2.71	1.03	0.29
Happiness					
My life would be better if I owned certain things I don't have.[a]	2.36	0.895	3.00	1.07	0.65
I'd be happier if I could afford to buy more things.[a]	2.56	1.00	2.70	1.076	0.13
It sometimes bothers me quite a bit that I can't afford to buy all the things I'd like.	2.91	0.992	2.99	1.11	0.08
Envy					
There are certain people I'd like to trade places with.	3.00	1.03	3.20	1.176	0.18
If I have to choose between buying something for myself vs. someone I love, I would prefer buying something for myself.[a]	3.46	0.950	3.79	0.929	0.35
I am bothered when I see people who buy anything they want.[a]	3.42	0.917	3.06	1.11	0.35
People who are very wealthy often feel they are too good to talk to average people.	3.19	1.03	3.17	1.08	0.02

[a]Denotes significant difference at $p < .0125$ (with Bonferroni adjustment).

Chinese and American respondents at an alpha level of 0.05. *Post hoc*, we used a Bonferroni adjustment to the significance levels. Significant differences were found in all three *Success* measures and two of the three *Centrality* measures. Only one measure showed a significant difference in the *Happiness* measures. The means, as seen in Table 3, show that Chinese respondents score higher in materialism in virtually every measure, with the one exception of the first centrality item (reverse scored). Mean effect size differences, using *Cohen's d*, are reported in absolute terms in Table 3 as well. As can been seen, most of the mean effect size differences are under 1, utilizing a five-point scale. Of particular note is the third *Success* factor which yields a difference of 0.84 between American and Chinese respondents, with Chinese respondents indicating a stronger prevalence towards the statement, 'I like to own things that impress people'. We should also note that no significant effects were found using the control variables of gender and age.

Table 4 Significant differences in conspicuous consumption and fashion measures (Chinese vs. American respondents)

Item	*F*-statistic (df = 642)	Sig. ($P < 0.025$)
Conspicuous consumption		
Before purchasing a product, it is important to know what friends think of different brands or products I am considering	184.411	0.000
Before purchasing a certain product, it is important to know what kinds of people buy brands or products I am considering	66.792	0.000
Before purchasing a product, it is important to know what others think of people who use certain brands or products I am considering	222.677	0.000
Before purchasing a product, it is important to know what brands or products to buy to make a good impression on others	169.427	0.000
Fashion		
It is important that my clothes are of the latest style	6.974	0.000
A person should always try and dress in style	0.476	0.491

Please note that we utilized a Bonferonni adjustment in this analysis.

Table 5 Mean scores between Chinese and American samples (five-point scale with 1 as strongly agree and 5 as strongly disagree)

Item	Chinese sample		American sample		Mean effect size difference (Cohen's *d*)
	Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation	
Conspicuous consumption					
Before purchasing a product, it is important to know what friends think of different brands or products I am considering.[a]	2.59	0.992	3.72	1.03	1.12
Before purchasing a certain product, it is important to know what kinds of people buy brands or products I am considering.[a]	2.83	1.02	3.51	1.03	0.66
Before purchasing a product, it is important to know what others think of people who use certain brands or products I am considering.[a]	2.39	0.912	3.58	1.03	1.2
Before purchasing a product, it is important to know what brands or products to buy to make a good impression on others.[a]	2.59	0.874	3.60	0.978	1.01
Fashion					
It is important that my clothes are of the latest style.[a]	3.36	0.876	3.13	1.09	0.23
A person should always try and dress in style	3.20	0.860	3.13	0.990	0.07

[a]Denotes significant difference at an alpha level of $P < 0.025$.

In terms of the four measures for conspicuous consumption, when comparing all Chinese and American respondents, as seen in Table 4, significant differences were found in all four-scale items at an alpha level of 0.05. A significant difference was also found in one of the two measures for *Fashion consciousness*. Table 5 shows the means and standard deviations for each of the six items. Table 5 also shows the mean effect size differences, using Cohen's *d*, in absolute terms. While utilizing a five point scale, three of the four items have effect size differences greater than 1 (though each of the four items shows a statistically significant difference between the two groups). As can be seen, Chinese respondents scored higher in each of the conspicuous consumption scales. American respondents scored slightly higher in the one *Fashion consciousness* item that showed significance.

We also ran a test for correlation between materialism and conspicuous consumption. After reducing the data using a principal component factor analysis, significant correlation was found in the Chinese sample (Pearson $r = 0.397$, $P < 0.000$), the American sample (Pearson $r = 0.369$, $P < 0.000$) and the combined sample (Pearson $r = 0.408$, $P < 0.000$)

Discussion

Our results clearly show a significant difference in materialistic values and conspicuous consumption between Chinese and American young adults. The implications of this study are significant as they both confirm some fears regarding the direction of Chinese consumer society and show, based on previous studies, that materialistic tendencies may be changing rapidly. Only 5 years ago, Schaefer *et al*. (2004) found Chinese teenagers aged 14–17 to be less materialistic than teens in both Japan and the United States. These teens today are now young adults in a Chinese society that has seen a rapid ascent in the global marketplace, creating a new focus on wealth generation and consumer spending. While it is important to note that the sample in the Schaefer *et al*. study came from the interior region of China

where respondent families are more likely to have government jobs and conservative backgrounds, young Chinese adults today find themselves more interested in attending university and looking for upward social mobility in China's rapidly expanding industrial centres. In fact, Western universities that traditionally had seen Chinese students from large industrial (and more cosmopolitan) cities such as Shanghai and Shenzen travel abroad for study are now seeing students from interior cities like Xi'an, rapidly infused with capital from outsourcing and contract manufacturing.

The results of our study lend some further credence to Eastman *et al*. (1997) who found higher levels of materialism among Chinese undergraduate students in Nanjing when compared with their American university counterparts. We did not, however, find any difference in terms of gender in our Chinese respondent sample. It is interesting to note that Eastman *et al*., well over a decade ago, warn of concerns about the dangers of materialism in the Chinese population in regards to how these attitudes relate to the misuse of natural resources. Thirteen years after their warning, it appears that the authors' fears have become a significant reality.

Looking into the future, the results of our study should sound an alarm for those concerned with Chinese social policy and consumption habits. China's Confucian way of life may have significant challenges in the road ahead as buying patterns may lead to a potential rift in traditional family obligations. With China's one child policy, parents are left with few potential caretakers as they age. Traditionally, Chinese children have valued thrift and made sure to save appropriate amounts of money to care for their elders. In this new consumer-minded society, however, we have to ask who will take care of Chinese elders when the children have spent their savings on conspicuous consumer goods. Additionally, we need to ask if the western idea of generalizing people and their character based on possessions is something that will take hold in greater Chinese society? It is quite possible that possessions have replaced or encroached on family and the traditional ways of life in the urban Chinese landscape.

Along the same lines, we see a situation in which the interdependent Chinese culture may dangerously cultivate a continued surge in materialism and conspicuous consumption. As mentioned in Schaefer *et al*. (2004), Westerners may be more apt to engage in conspicuous consumption because they want to, based on personal tastes, and East Asians might also feel the same way; however, they have the added pressure of engaging in this type of behaviour because it is possible they feel they must in order to maintain stature in the community. Respective communities may then see a rise in what is considered an 'appropriate' level of consumption behaviour, requiring a greater and greater conspicuous effort for community members to adhere to the standard. With this interdependent perspective of the Chinese self-concept on the national scale, it is possible that we are witnessing a continuous adoption of more materialistic values in China on the whole. As witnessed in the United States in recent years, this rapid rise of macro-materialistic behaviour is not without severe consequence as consumers continuously over-extend themselves and may quickly spiral into spending patterns that result in massive debt accumulation – leading eventually to national (or international) economic meltdown. Chinese citizens may quickly find themselves in what was once seen as a very 'Western' style situation, where future economic stability is mortgaged for short-term conspicuous gains.

Limitations and future directions

The results of this study may not generalize across the entire young adult populations of either the United States or China. Our Chinese sample was obtained from respondents in three of China's largest cities and many of these respondents were university students, indicating, to some extent, that they may be highly motivated towards achieving material success. Those living in China's cosmopolitan cities may differ in a variety of consumption patterns compared with their more traditional inland counterparts including media usage and purchasing power (Cui and Liu, 2000). Granted, many of China's inland cities are witnessing a rapid rise in industrial might and consumer spending, we should stop short of generalizing our particular study to the attitudes of Chinese young adults as a whole. It is advisable that future research occur in the inland areas where traditional values may hold greater weight than the rapidly growing industrial cities found near China's coastal areas.

Moreover, additional research may be warranted in further examining the impact of possessions on the Chinese family. While many agree that possessions change the traditional way of life in China, it is possible that this is not a zero-sun game where focus on possessions gains and families lose. It is certainly possible that the traditional Chinese values relating to the focus on the family facilitates or even runs parallel to materialism and/or conspicuous consumption – meaning it might be possible for Chinese families to both succeed as consumers who love luxury and respect their family traditions at the same time. This is an area that warrants further study in the coming years as China's economic growth shows no signs of slowing down.

The American sample also has limitations. While data were obtained from residents of urban, rural and suburban areas, it should be noted that each of the areas are located in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States – a region which is generally seen as having a higher per capita income than other parts of the nation. Similar to the Chinese sample, the majority of the respondents were students at universities and may have more materialistic and consumer-based aspirations in terms of their life's goals when compared with other Americans living in more rural or agriculturally oriented regions. Future researchers may wish to focus efforts of collecting data on the concepts studied here from areas in the mid-west and southern United States (regions with smaller cities and larger rural areas) which many see as having a unique culture from the mid-Atlantic region.

Finally, it should be noted that we examined only young adults, and that to generalize our results as a proxy for the entire American population or the entire Chinese population would be dangerous and ill-advised. China has a significant population of those who no longer work and who were part of the cultural revolution – a period in time where many perished for the cause of Mao-style socialism and an alleged end to class in Chinese society. The passion of those loyal to the ideas of Mao should not be discarded or considered out of touch as many of these people still hold a great deal of power in Chinese society. Certainly, today there are many Chinese citizens who do not look to the West or the free market as their beacon of happiness or well-being. Future studies that examine attitudes of these older Chinese citizens would shed additional light on the phenomena and provide an interesting comparison.

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