

Cultural Paradoxes Reflected in Brand Meaning: McDonald's in Shanghai China

Giana M. Eckhardt
Australian Graduate School of Management

Michael J. Houston
University of Minnesota

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Giana M. Eckhardt is a Lecturer with the Australian Graduate School of Management, UNSW Sydney NSW 2052, Australia. Contact by email at giana@agsm.edu.au. Michael J. Houston is Ecolab/Grieve Chair in International Marketing, University of Minnesota, 3-140 CSOM, 321 19th Ave. S, Minneapolis MN 55455, USA. Contact by email at mhouston@csom.umn.edu. The authors gratefully acknowledge the financial contributions of the ACR-Sheth Foundation.

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Centre for Corporate Change
Australian Graduate School of Management
The University of New South Wales
Australia

Phone: (61 2) 9931 9500 Fax: (61 2) 9663 4672

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Abstract

Brands are powerful symbols that reflect not only the image with which marketers hope to imbue them but also the cultural milieu in which they are imbedded. If that milieu is in a state of flux, brands can come to represent some surprising ideas and values to which marketing efforts must be sensitive. In this research we relate the nature of societal change, a common occurrence in many developing markets and especially China, to evaluation of a brand from a broad cross-section of urban Chinese consumers. Using the methodology of scenario completion, it is revealed that the McDonald's brand is evaluated in the context of societal norms and values that are brought up in various usage situations. Brand evaluations can be inconsistent and often paradoxical depending on the context. The results suggest marketers should be closely involved with how their brand is interacting with cultural values in transitional markets.

The Nature of Brand Meaning in China Cultural Paradoxes Reflected in Brand Meaning: McDonald's in Shanghai China

Brands are powerful symbols that reflect not only the image with which manufacturers and advertising agencies try to imbue them but also the cultural milieu in which they are imbedded (Levy 1959). If that milieu is qualitatively different from that of the society where the brand originated, brands can come to represent some surprising ideas and values to which marketing efforts must be sensitive. In China today, ancient belief systems rooted in Confucianism and Taoism are intermingling with Western ideologies (Davis 2000), especially with regards to consumption, consumerism and brands. Nowhere is this melting pot of ideas more evident than in Shanghai, which is one the most attractive consumer markets in China.

There has been remarkably little work done in the marketing field as to the relationship between brand meaning and the nature of traditional culture, especially where traditional culture is changing. This should be of paramount importance to marketers, as a brand's image comes from the interplay between the culture surrounding it and a marketing campaign. If culture is in a state of flux, brand meaning can also fluctuate. In this research we relate the nature of societal change to evaluation of a brand from a broad cross-section of urban Chinese consumers.

Specifically, this study investigates the meanings the brand McDonald's can hold for a wide range of Shanghainese consumers. For some consumers in some situations, McDonald's can be used to uphold traditional thought patterns, values and ways of interacting, while for others and in other situations, McDonald's is an appropriate venue for consumers to explore new beliefs and ways of acting. For many of the participants in this study, McDonald's does both, and has come to symbolize the paradoxes in modern Chinese life. Important implications for branding strategies of companies pursuing the Chinese consumer market result.

As documented by Hamilton and Lai (1989), brands have historically been used for social purposes in China. Under the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368-1911 AD), the use of brand names was related to the social structure, not the production system. The authors argue that branding came about due to the uncertainty of one's family status at any one point in time. Because of the decentralization and ambiguous class divisions, there was a constant rise and fall of family wealth and position. This necessitated the use of material symbols to mark status. Hence, Hamilton and Lai (1989) conclude that the function of brands was social. Tse (1996) argues this social function of brands

is still paramount today, as Chinese consumers use brand names as a tool to build social relationships. He proposes that Chinese consumers place more emphasis on the social value of brands than do Westerners. He also suggests brands are used to maintain a distance from outgroups and a similarity to ingroups to a greater extent than in the West, with ingroups more of an influence on brand name choice. Chinese consumers can be expected to match their social status with a brand name to a greater extent than Westerners. The social value of brands positively relates to the consumer's need for social identity.

If the primary purpose of brands is social for most Chinese consumers, then brand meaning will reflect the ways in which people interact with each other and the way they think about their society. Traditionally, Chinese society has been characterized as collectivist, with an emphasis on interdependence by members of ingroups (Tu 1985). Confucian and Taoist views of the world stress recognizing one's place in the social order and not striving to deviate from it but rather harmonizing with others for the betterment of society (Tu 1985). This collective orientation leads to, for instance, no seating arrangements in Chinese restaurants for parties of two but instead large tables for parties of eight. Privacy from others in the ingroup is not a traditional desire (Markus and Kitayama 1991). When restaurants like McDonald's are introduced into the society, where there is seating for two, it provides an opportunity for people to embrace a new set of ideals – gaining privacy for instance. Yan (1997, 2000) documents that McDonald's in China is being transformed by consumers to fit their needs and wants in addition to the fact McDonald's is changing some aspects of the consumer's previous way of life. We investigate how consumers psychologically perceive the brand McDonald's and how it manages to both engender social change as well as provide a medium for carrying on customary ways of interacting.

The Study

The key to discovering the range of meanings a brand name can take on is to ground the consumer's evaluation of the brand in specific and varied contexts. Thus, divergent scenarios were developed surrounding the patronage of McDonald's, a brand name that represents the changes occurring in modern urban Chinese society and has a history of multi-dimensional brand images (Watson 1997). The methodology of scenario completion, when respondents are given various scripts, usually in a narrative form, and then asked how they would respond in each of the given scenarios, has been successfully utilized in cultural psychological studies (i.e., Greenfield 1997), and is recommended as a way of getting at hidden cultural meanings (Triandis 1995). By giving people specific situations to respond to, and especially by introducing scenarios in

which potentially incongruous or perceived unacceptable behavior is exhibited (breaching), this method provides a very insightful way to capture people's underlying meaning systems. This methodology has also been noted for revealing the process of the development of cultural meanings, not just the meanings themselves (Greenfield 1997).

For this study, three scenarios were created that portray three very different situations where the protagonist is eating at McDonalds (see Appendix 1). Two scenarios were created to represent different, important social situations in China. The first scenario is designed to elicit thoughts relating to how McDonald's is seen when with older family members, and how and if the brand relates to traditional Chinese eating habits. By introducing incongruity in the scenario (McDonald's is typically not seen as an appropriate place to go when with older family members), it provides an opportunity for the respondents to articulate symbolic meanings associated with McDonald's in relation to familial hierarchies. The second scenario was designed to induce respondents to articulate the meanings they attach to the McDonald's brand with reference to romantic liaisons, another symbolically important usage situation. Finally, the third scenario represents a non-social situation in which the consumer is alone. Our purpose here is to see whether non-social attributes of the brand emerge as part of its meaning. The versions that appear in the Appendix are the final versions, after being modified following comments received by expert judges in the U.S. and after a pilot study was conducted in Shanghai.

Twenty-four respondents in Shanghai completed two scenarios each. The respondents were chosen to represent a variety of ages, occupations, neighborhoods, income levels and education levels within the Shanghai population. The sessions lasted an hour and a half each and respondents were paid 50 RMB for their participation. Gender was equally divided between women and men. Participants responded to the scenarios first in written form individually and also verbally in a group. See Table 1 for a profile of the participants.

Table 1—Participant Profiles

NAME	GENDER	DISTRICT	AGE	OCCUPATION	INCOME (yuan/month)	EDUCATION
M. CHEN	F	HUANG PU	18	STUDENT	NONE	MIDDLE-SCHOOL
P. DIN	F	PU DONG	21	SALESPERSON	2000Y/M	COLLEGE
Y. XU	F	XU HUI	23	CUSTOMER SERVICE	1400Y/M	COLLEGE
H. LIN	F	HONG KOU	24	SECRETARY	1300Y/M	COLLEGE
J. ZHAO	M	YANG PU	23	ENGINEER	2500Y/M	UNIVERSITY
W. HAN	M	PU TUO	22	REPAIRPERSON	1000Y/M	MIDDLE-SCHOOL
J. ZHANG	M	XU HUI	22	OFFICE WORKER	2000Y/M	COLLEGE
B. WU	M	ZHA BEI	24	STAFF MEMBER	2000Y/M	COLLEGE
Y.	M	PU DONG	28	OFFICE WORKER	1200Y/M	COLLEGE
L. ZHANG	M	XU HUI	27	ACCOUNT MANAGER	3500Y/M	COLLEGE
W. LI	M	YANG PU	34	TEACHER	3000Y/M	COLLEGE
C. SONG	M	ZHA BEI	26	TEACHER	1200Y/M	UNIVERSITY
L. WU	F	PU TUO	34	ORDERPERSON	900Y/M	MIDDLE-SCHOOL
L. LIN	F	CHANG ING	31	ANALYST	1400Y/M	COLLEGE
Y. SHEN	F	LU WAN	34	SHOP ASSISTANT	1800Y/M	COLLEGE
W. FANG	F	CHANG ING	26	NURSE	1600Y/M	COLLEGE
Q. WANG	M	HUANG PU	45	MANAGER	2500Y/M	COLLEGE
J. XU	M	CHANG ING	39	PURCHASER	2000Y/M	COLLEGE
D. CHEN	M	LU WAN	42	ARC WELDER	900Y/M	MIDDLE-SCHOOL
M. LI	M	ZHA BEI	36	OFFICE WORKER	2000Y/M	MIDDLE-SCHOOL
M. YANG	F	XU HUI	40	SALESPERSON	1400Y/M	COLLEGE
Y. GAO	F	XU HUI	42	WAREHOUSE KEEPER	1300Y/M	COLLEGE
Q. YAO	F	CHANG ING	44	WORKER	800Y/M	MIDDLE-SCHOOL
L. WEI	F	HONG KOU	42	TEACHER	2500Y/M	COLLEGE

The pilot study suggested important changes in the procedures. Ultimately, the 24 respondents were divided into three groups of eight based on age, with each group receiving the two scenarios most relevant to their age group, i.e., respondents aged 18-24 received scenarios 2 and 3, those aged 26-34 responded to scenarios 1 and 2, and those aged 36-45 responded to scenarios 1 and 3.

All of the data collection took place in Mandarin through the assistance of Chinese colleagues. Professional translators were used on all materials, and a decentering approach (Campbell and Werner 1970) was taken when translating all the materials, as this approach most closely reflects the emic goals of this study.

By having each group complete two of the three scenarios, a within group as well as across group analysis was possible for each scenario. A hermeneutic analysis (Thompson 1997) was conducted using fifty-seven single spaced transcripts that included both the participants' written responses along with their verbal responses. Common themes and meanings were developed and are presented below. Specific techniques used included iterative coding of the data, negative case analysis to challenge emerging themes and illuminate paradoxes in the data, and refining the themes based on the literature as well as the lead investigator's knowledge of the Chinese milieu and previous fieldwork (Spiggle 1994).

Results

Three major themes emerged, each of which demonstrate the inconsistent nature brand meanings can have in China today due to the changing nature of contemporary urban society.

The paradoxical nature of social space

Aspects of the actual space inside a McDonald's restaurant were revealed to be important when evaluating the McDonald's brand. These aspects include the way the food is ordered and delivered, the décor, the noise level, and especially the way in which the tables are set up. Depending on the scenario, social space concerns can lead to the brand being interpreted as either symbolic of a break with Chinese eating traditions or as providing opportunities to meet traditional interpersonal goals such as gaining or giving face. Specific ways in which social space concerns were prominent in each scenario are outlined below.

For most of the respondents who received the family birthday party scenario, McDonald's is seen as too public in this situation – all the seating

arrangements are the same and the diners are in full view of each other. Traditionally, birthday parties take place in Chinese restaurants where families are given their own section of the restaurant, using however many tables they need (each table usually seats 8 to 10 people). Special food and drinks are ordered that set them apart from other diners. This is in congruence with the hierarchical nature of Chinese society, in which people display their rank and gain face with important members of their ingroups by being more conspicuous than those around them. In McDonald's, where all the food and the seating is the same for everyone, these aspects of social space are lost, and are not looked upon favorably in this situation. Hence, the social space aspects of the restaurant are perceived negatively.

For Mr. Zhang, McDonald's is too noisy for a birthday party. However, Chinese family birthday parties are typically raucous events, with the male members of the family drinking alcohol and the entire affair being extremely noisy. When he says McDonald's is too noisy, it is more the wrong kind of noise than actually being louder. Meaning, the noise is coming from others (members of the outgroup) rather than from the ingroup members. Chinese society is typically characterized as one in which members of an ingroup (family, work colleagues or neighbors) are so close to a person as to be regarded as part of the self (Markus and Kitayama 1991). Outgroup members (strangers) are largely ignored and in some cases are considered to be a negative influence on the goals of the ingroup. Thus, noise coming from the outgroup is what makes it undesirable, or inappropriate, in the McDonald's setting and not in the typical Chinese restaurant setting, as the noise is from the ingroup there.

Ms. Wei says she will not go to McDonald's in this scenario because it is not fancy or expensive enough for a proper celebration.

“We Chinese rarely go to McDonald's for a birthday. I remember I had a friend come back from abroad. He wants to get together. I said which restaurant. He said McDonald's. We think he is stingy. What can you eat at McDonald's? I will not go. It is the same for a birthday party. It is cheap to go to McDonald's.”

The overall meaning for her is one of McDonald's as a place where you cannot give face to important members of the ingroup. The concept of giving and receiving face is one that still has a large impact on many consumption practices today in China, eating out being no exception. If others in the ingroup perceive the restaurant or the food to not be of a prestigious nature, then it will be evaluated negatively. This is context dependent, however: in the dating scenario many respondents felt McDonald's was a good place to gain face.

In the second scenario (the date situation), the social space aspects were again of prominence. McDonald's is still sometimes seen as crowded and noisy in this context, but the publicness is seen in a positive light – consumers gain face by having others see them on a date. Paradoxically, in comparison with the crowdedness and noisiness and publicness that most respondents discussed in the birthday scenario, McDonald's is often seen as a place to find privacy in this scenario, allowing for a couple to be 'alone' by virtue of the two person seats that are not found in non-Western restaurants. This echoes a finding reported by Eckhardt and Houston (1998) that privacy is often found in public places (the frontstage becomes the backstage) in China due to the lack of privacy found in most homes (the typical backstage in Western settings). Impression management theory posits the backstage is where people can really get to know each other, and hence the seating in McDonald's facilitates getting to know the "inner" other person, an individualist notion that correlates with choosing one's mate.

Dating is a relatively new phenomenon in China – the idea of choosing one's partner and romantic love, which dating facilitates, is not traditional (Bond 1986). Ms. Xu has a strong negative reaction to the idea of going to McDonald's on a date. She thinks McDonald's is

“...awful, disgusting and terrible. It is too embarrassing to directly face the boy across the table, the tables are too small – it is noisy, inconvenient and stupid.” She would go to a noodle shop instead: “It is clean and reminds one of ancient things.”

For her, dating seems to be a situation in which Westernization, in the form of small tables for two, is wholly inappropriate.

For most others the publicness of McDonald's is positive. Mr. Huang for instance see the publicness as an asset in the date scenario because one can gain face by taking a date to McDonald's as then everyone will know he is on a date. Mr. Song thinks the seating is conducive to dating (two people can sit together without others at the table), and it allows people to “celebrate in a foreign way,” which is acceptable to him on a fourth date. He thinks McDonald's is quite fashionable and “in,” and that university students embrace these ideals. In this case, foreignness has become something good in that it facilitates social interactions in this context. For him, it is okay to “celebrate in a foreign way” when there are only two people and no filial piety concerns, as there are in the birthday party situation. Similarly, for Mr. Wu in this scenario the underlying meaning of McDonald's is that of a social space outside of the home in which two people can be “alone” and sit for a long time. In Chinese

restaurants, one eats and leaves immediately afterwards. In McDonald's, people tend to subvert the 'fast food' element and sit for a long time (Yan 1997).

Social space aspects were largely irrelevant in the context presented in scenario three (eating lunch alone on a workday). Many scholars such as Yan (1997, 2000) have suggested social space concerns are almost always of prominence for Chinese consumers of McDonald's, but because people were alone in this scenario, individual rather than social traits were salient, and in this situation Yan's conclusion is not born out. In sum, the social space aspects of McDonald's can lead to the brand being perceived as representing breaking with tradition, in the guise of separation of family members (due to seating arrangements) and the perceived noisiness by others (outgroup members). Yet the social space aspects of McDonald's also can lead the brand to be representative of positive attributes, such as the openness of the space providing the opportunity for one to gain face when on a date, and the seating arrangements encouraging the advent of privacy from ingroup members along with romance and dating. Much as consumers themselves are grappling with how to fit these new opportunities presented by the space in McDonald's into their everyday lives, so the brand is also permeated with alternate meanings and evaluations.

The fluctuating nature of otherness/foreignness as represented in the brand

The notion that the McDonald's brand represents foreignness, or non-Chineseness, was a prominent finding. This is hardly surprising, as McDonald's has been noted for being a symbol of the United States of America and indeed globalization in many countries around the world (Watson 1997). However, how the consumer interpreted this varied depending on the context within which the brand was imbedded. In some situations the foreignness was interpreted positively, as it could provide face in certain social situations, whereas it could be quite negative in situations where consumers felt long held traditions should not be broken. Following is an analysis of how this occurs.

The primary situation in which notions of the other and the foreign were prominent was in the family birthday party scenario. Here McDonald's is typically seen as too noisy and not Chinese (too foreign). The 'otherness' relates primarily to the food, the lack of alcohol, the atmosphere (pop music, bright lighting), and the seating (small tables); also the standardized menu, which is perceived as negative in this situation. Mr. Huang says, for a party,

“Maybe it [McDonald’s] is okay for foreigners but not for Chinese.

Like divorce is okay in foreign countries, you would not do that in China.”

In this situation, the exotic and Western nature of McDonald’s is precisely why he would not go there for a family celebration. For Mr. Song, the primary meaning associated with McDonald’s is one of McDonald’s not being traditional, not being Chinese, and hence not appropriate for a Chinese family event.

“It’s all right to go to McDonald’s for a change, but not for a meaningful event.”

Others also indicated McDonald’s represents superficiality and one cannot achieve anything deep or meaningful in terms of social interactions there. He also equates his profession – teacher – with being traditional, and a traditional person would not go there for a birthday. Thus, the primary meanings for him in this situation are that of McDonald’s being nontraditional and superficial. The Chinese throughout history as well as today generally feel their culture (especially food) is superior to that of the West, and hence it is not surprising to see McDonald’s evaluated in this way.

Mr. Xu primarily thinks of McDonald’s negatively in the party situation because there is no alcohol available. As discussed in Yan (1997), one of the reasons women like McDonald’s and in fact find it empowering is because there is no alcohol available there, which for the most part is socially unacceptable for them to drink at Chinese restaurants. At traditional celebrations in Chinese restaurants, the women are expected to take care of the men who drink too much, and this tradition of men drinking as much as they please at family gatherings is one that many males want to hold onto. Hence for many males, alcohol is something that must be present for a proper celebration. The overall meaning in this situation for Mr. Xu seems to be one of McDonald’s not being capable of upholding traditional gender and hierarchical roles, and is thus perceived negatively.

For Mr. Wang, when discussing why he would not go to McDonald’s for a family party, the underlying meaning of McDonald’s is standardization and simplicity, which is negative in this situation. He wants a large choice of varied foods for a party as well as elegant surroundings. He thinks McDonald’s has a good atmosphere, but that it is "too simple" for this situation. Similarly, Mr. Chen sees McDonald’s as not being able to uphold traditional values that should be adhered to for celebrations due to its uniformity.

You go there “for a change in food and to relax, not to celebrate.”

For a celebration, you must go to a “famous restaurant” that has round tables and is not so “simple” and has more staff to wait on the party.

Thus, McDonald’s represents a break from tradition, and is perceived negatively.

Here we see the McDonald’s brand taking on a variety of meanings related to its difference to the traditional way of eating and socializing in China. These can be both negative and positive. For a celebration, McDonald’s is largely not seen as a place that gives proper face to the guest of honor, as the prices and seating arrangements are standardized, and thus there is no opportunity to make a special display. Yet it is just this standardization that, in the dating situation, becomes a positive attribute since the man taking out the girl does not have to be worried about losing face to another couple who is ordering a more lavish meal. The notion that the McDonald’s brand is novel and prestigious but yet not meaningful or deep due to its foreignness is also prominent. While McDonald’s is a fun place to eat, it is not someplace where a significant event should take place, like an intergenerational celebration or getting to know the inner feelings of a potential mate. Finally, the last way in which the McDonald’s brand can be paradoxical with reference to its otherness/foreignness is the lack of alcohol served there. While that is interpreted negatively by some, as alcohol is considered a necessity at traditional gatherings, it is empowering to others, mainly women, and is a welcome break in tradition.

The interpretation of modernity and youth as represented in the McDonald’s brand name

McDonald’s is seen as representing modernity and youth in all three scenarios, although this takes many different forms and is interpreted quite differently depending on the specific situation. Modernity in relation to McDonald’s takes the form of cleanliness, sanitation, technology, brightness and newness. The connotation with youth comes primarily from the food – because the food is so different from Chinese food, it is the young people who are the most willing to try it or eat it on a regular basis. Also, McDonald’s has promoted itself as a place for children’s birthday parties, with ‘Uncle Ronald’ as an icon for the children. The interpretation of the representation of modernity ranges from very positive to very negative depending on the cultural values brought up in each situation.

In the birthday party scenario, the representation of modernity and youthful values is at odds with something quite traditional like a multigenerational

family celebration, so the modernity is seen in a negative light. For instance, Ms. Wu thinks the fact the food is different from Chinese food makes it inappropriate for a multigenerational party but good for children's birthday parties. From her response to the first scenario, she exhibits what Yan (2000) describes as an acceptance of her own traditionalness and at the same time a desire for her child to be modern. However, this perception of McDonald's as modern is not as straightforward as it seems. Mr. Li, who sees himself as the epitome of the modern Chinese consumer, sees McDonald's as something "fresh" and "new," whereas someone who identifies herself as traditional (Ms. Yao) sees McDonald's as "old" and not new to the Shanghainese. Cosmopolitan Chinese are hanging on to McDonald's as a representation of their worldly outlook, when to most 'regular' Chinese people it is not that at all anymore since it has been operating in the major cities for over five years now and is 'old hat' in the rapidly changing scenscape of urban China. Ms. Yao thinks McDonald's is nothing new to the Shanghainese anymore, it is not special anymore.

"In Shanghai, almost everyone has been to McDonald's. If I want to take the whole family out, I should go to a special place."

Also, the prices are too cheap to give proper face to the honoree. The fact that she, as an older, more traditional Chinese consumer, finds McDonald's to be *passee* demonstrates the tension between the various meanings it can take on. It can represent modernity to some people in some situations, but this is certainly not universal.

In the date scenario, the meaning of McDonald's as representing youth and modernity was also seen in this situation, as in scenario one. But in this context it is viewed as positive. Mr. Zhao demonstrates the youthful aspects of the brand as he observes that young people find McDonald's romantic and exciting for a date due to the fact that it is Western and represents American culture. He even says about McDonald's,

"It is Western, American culture. You know how the Shanghainese like everything from abroad. Like we used to have 'Ronghua' Chicken, and we don't have it anymore. 'Ronghua' feels like Shanghai, and the Shanghainese like Western stuff. Young people dating like these Western places. I take my girlfriend to McDonald's almost every time we are on a date."

Mr. Zhang's response echoes these same meanings of youth and modernity. Elements of the social space such as the background music (typically Hong Kong or Taiwanese pop music) are the primary consideration in the situation, and the evaluation of this is positive. Mr. Li brings another interpretation of

the brand in this context. The notion of individual will and free choice become dominant for him, as described in Yan (2000). He will go to McDonald's on a date because "you can have your own choice" and "choose freely" from the menu. The meaning of free choice is linked in his mind with going on a date, which is understandable as choosing a mate is also an example of this, and notions of romanticism and choosing a mate are ideas only recently introduced into Chinese society and thus are interpreted as modern.

Finally, different aspects of modernity were also exhibited in the interpretation of the brand name in the eating alone scenario. The fact that McDonald's is sanitary, and by proxy modern, was of considerable importance. The standardization that McDonald's represents is quite clear in this situation – it is very important to know what you will get when in unfamiliar surroundings. For Ms. Chen, the clean and sanitary conditions are the overriding reasons she will go there. Mr. Zhao indicates the standardization McDonald's represents becomes important when alone – when in an unfamiliar part of town without a way to judge whether a Chinese restaurant is sanitary or not or what the food will taste like, McDonald's is a "safe" option. For him, the overriding meaning in this scenario is one of standardization and trustworthiness. Ms. Gao says, "noodles and dumplings are not as hygienic" as McDonald's, and Ms. Yao says the primary reason she will go to McDonald's in this situation is due to the sanitary conditions of McDonald's ("cleaner than traditional restaurants"), a theme that has been echoed by many of the older participants in group three. In this way, modernity seems to be positive for these older respondents.

We have seen how the McDonald's brand can embody many different facets of modernity and youth, and also how this connotation can be evaluated positively in some situations by some consumers and negatively in other situations, sometimes by the same consumers. Davis (2000) chronicles the ambivalence urban Chinese consumers are feeling about modernity: they want the prosperity, increased standard of living, and respect on a global scale that it can bring, but yet most people are fiercely proud of the old way things have been done, and in many circumstances do not want to embrace the changes modernization brings. Some of this is captured in Deng Xioping's catchphrase, "Modernization without Westernization." Whether modernization without Westernization can occur or not remains to be seen. As we have seen here, some of the paradoxical nature of this is represented in the meanings attached to the McDonald's brand name.

Discussion

It seems McDonald's can both stimulate social change as well as uphold traditional ways of interacting. One of the ways this occurs is through the use of social space in the dining experience while in McDonald's. This happens in two ways. First, the divided and hierarchical set up of the dining experience in traditional Chinese restaurants is not adhered to – the seating arrangements are open, and everyone has equal access as to where to sit and what to order. This can lead to a positive or negative interpretation of the brand, depending on the context. The second way social change can be engendered through social space is the specific seating arrangements, allowing for two people only to share a table and sit together. This leads to a negative interpretation of the brand when engaging in a traditional food consumption situation, but can be interpreted positively in situations where consumers are exploring the freedoms that can come with modernity, such as dating. We also saw the McDonald's brand name as a symbol of the other, which could stimulate social changes or reinforce traditional norms. For instance, the lack of alcohol served there leads some consumers, primarily women, to embrace being able to be on a more equal footing with men while eating. On the other hand, the lack of alcohol served there also causes people to evaluate the restaurant as inappropriate for certain occasions, and thus the status quo is upheld by going somewhere traditional instead. Finally, McDonald's as representing modernity and youth also facilitates change as well as tradition. The cleanliness and standardization of both the restaurant and the food are changing how and where people eat when in unfamiliar surroundings, and these characteristics of the brand are evaluated positively in this context. Yet the modernity and standardization are decidedly negative in other situations, leading to other restaurants being chosen to uphold traditions.

All of this suggests that in rapidly changing societies, brands can take on disparate cultural values and may even be central to how these disparate cultural values (traditional or new) are being evaluated. For marketers, it becomes a difficult task to control the image the brand has in the marketplace. Marketers need to be aware of the cultural and societal connotations the brand is taking on, and how these are changing or staying the same as norms of interacting are changing or staying the same.

The results reported here suggest the meanings attached to a brand name by consumers can be malleable and sometimes paradoxical in societies where cultural norms are in flux. The results also indicate that the meaning attached to a brand name at any given moment in time is largely dependent on the cultural values brought up in the specific usage or evaluation situation. Three implications for brand managers stem from this analysis. First, an effort needs

to be made to find out how a brand image is reacting with current cultural mores. This will be especially true for high profile consumer brands that represent alternative ways of life for many consumers, such as McDonald's. Second, an attempt at recognizing the different meanings the brand takes on besides the one put forth through marketing efforts should be undertaken in countries where values are in flux or the emphasis of consumption is social, such as China. Finally, more attention needs to be paid to the specific context of the message when trying to establish a brand image through marketing channels. One message could be entirely appropriate in one context but be evaluated very negatively in another context.

Appendix 1

Scenario One

Chen Shan is going out to dinner with his family on a Saturday night. They are going out to dinner to celebrate his wife's birthday. He is going with his wife and daughter, his younger brother and his wife and daughter, their parents, and their father's brother and his wife. Shan's younger brother suggests they go to McDonald's for dinner. What would you do in this situation? Would you take the entire family to McDonald's or choose another restaurant? If yes, what makes McDonald's appropriate for this occasion? If no, what makes it inappropriate? Please explain what you would do and why in as much detail as possible.

Scenario Two

Wang Haipong, a university student, is planning to take his girlfriend, also a student, out on a date on a Friday night. This will be their fourth date. Some of his friends have suggested going to McDonald's. Would you take your girlfriend to McDonald's if you were Haipong (or want to be taken by Haipong)? Where would you go instead if you chose not to go to McDonald's? What characteristics of McDonald's make it appropriate or inappropriate for this date? Please explain what you would do and why in as much detail as possible.

Scenario Three

Deng Xiaoming is returning to work after doing some errands for the boss. It is lunchtime, and she is very hungry, so she wants to stop in a restaurant to get something to eat before going back to the office. She passes a noodle shop and a cafeteria, and finally decides to go to McDonald's, as she wants to get food that tastes good but is not too expensive. Do you think she made a good choice? Would you have chosen McDonald's if your criterion were the same as Xiaoming's? How would you rate each of these options in terms of satisfying hunger, tasting good, and being inexpensive? Please answer in as much detail as possible.

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