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The Long March of the Commodity in China

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Abstract

This chapter charts the complicated development of consumer culture in China. It begins with the influence of Confucianism in dynastic times; explores the burgeoning consumer culture of the Republican era; the pause on consumerism under Mao's regime; and the nuanced position of consumerism within China since Deng Xiaoping opened up the country to the West in the late 1970s. In doing so, the chapter explains the roles of nationalism, the rural-urban divide; the generational divide; and explores the interpretations of modernity and individualism that are playing out. It posits consumerism as a complicated and long march, playing upon Mao's 'long march' across China.[1]

Key words

consumerism, Confucianism, consumer society, production, individualism, modernity

[1] The 'long march; is the term used to describe the 6000-mile trek across rural China from 1934-35 which resulted in the relocation of the communist revolutionary base from south-eastern to north-western China and saw Mao emerge as the Communist Party leader. The heroism attributed to the long march inspired many young Chinese to join the Chinese Communist Party during the late 1930s and early 1940s.

Introduction

From a dynasty of spectacular things, so desired by Western consumers, to the 'factory of the world' of today, the commodity has loomed large in China's economic history, even if the path of consumerism has been far from smooth in terms of both economic growth and conceptual continuity. By way of illustration, the Tang dynasty (618 to 906) is generally known as a golden age for Chinese innovation and commodity production, during which it was viewed as a spectacular land of wonders by foreigners. As Timothy Brook points out, the scholar Chen Yao complained in the 1570s (Ming dynasty, 1368-1644) that, no longer content with the customary light silk gauze, young men in China's villages had begun to lust for Suzhou embroideries, long skirts and wide collars, broad belts and narrow pleats, in a quest to obtain 'the look of the moment' (*shiyang*)' (Brook 1998, 220). Antonia Finnane argues a similar interest in fashion existed in the late Qing dynasty, and continued to do so into the era of the Kuomintang's Republic of China[2] (Finnane 2007). Wu Juanjuan asserts that even in the earlier part of the Mao era (1949 to 1976) certain small differences in clothing were tolerated; differences that amounted to fashion. For example, she describes how minor details in women's and men's wear, such as the number of buttons and pockets, did exist, and how women often put the collar of their inner shirt over that of their outer shirt so that the pattern could be seen or wore different styles of scarf (Wu 2009, 37-38). This was not the case however, during the Cultural Revolution period (1966-1976).[3] Similarly, Schrift argues that Mao badges, of which there were a variety, were used to gain a sense of uniqueness (Schrift 2001). So, while Western scholars often find it tempting to posit a sudden leap in consumer society following the end of the Mao era in 1976, this rather ignores the elements of consumer society that were present pre-Mao and perhaps even in minor ways during the Mao era. This is of course, not to suggest that the sweeping Economic Reform (often referred to as the 'opening up policies') introduced by Deng Xiao Ping from 1978 onwards were not very sudden and impactful, but rather, that what followed was not born out of thin air. As Zhao and Belk argue, consumer society in China was not a sudden onslaught of consumerism with no back-story (Zhao and Belk 2008). In fact, it relied heavily upon elements from the pre-Mao eras of China's history, not least the re-appropriation of elements of Confucianism.

This chapter will chart a brief history of consumerism in China, comparing and contrasting the established key eras in China's history.[4] It will begin with the dynastic era (up until 1912) which spans

[2] The Republic of China existed from 1912 to 1949 under the Nationalist government of the Kuomintang (KMT). This is not to be confused with the Peoples Republic of China from 1949 to the present which is specific to the Communist Party's governance of China.

[3] The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) was the period where Mao reasserted his control and encouraged the 'Red Guards' to enforce strict adherence to the Party line, punishing any behaviour deemed to be remotely capitalist or celebrate capitalist influences.

[4] Chinese Studies has typically separated Chinese history into certain eras and it is these that are used within this chapter. They are the dynastic era, the Republic of China era/Republican era, the Mao era, and the reform era (which continues to this day).

from the first known dynasty[5] (the Shang dynasty 1600-1050 BCE) to the fall of the last dynasty (the Qing dynasty) in 1912. This section will explore how part of the reason dynastic China is often imagined as a non-consumerist entity is the perceived role of Confucianism in encouraging propriety and non-material aspirations. The chapter will then analyse consumerism in the Republican era (1912 to 1949) that followed. In particular, movements such as the national products movement that Karl Gerth's work explores, and how the distrust of the West continued to inform China's consumption and its burgeoning consumer culture. A brief synopsis of the Mao era (1949 to 1976) will follow and will attempt to insist on a nuanced understanding of what happened to China's consumerist desires and behaviours during this period. The next section will tackle the reform era (1978[6] – present) specifically analysing the aforementioned pre-existing lineage between Confucianism and aspects of Maoism, and how Deng Xiao-ping utilised this in order to substantiate the opening up policies of 1978 onwards and encourage not only the creation of wealth, but, crucially, the spending of it. The final section of the chapter will address the most recent two decades of the reform period up to the present. It will note how consumerism has become a stated ambition within China's economic plans. Specifically, it will look at how consumerism began to be promoted not only to soak up excess production, especially following the 2008-2009 financial crisis, but also to create domestic waste that could be re-used as raw materials[7] for production. The conclusion evaluates the bumpy path to a consumer society in China and discusses the socio-economic and cultural reasons for the way in which the onset of consumerism has not been, and continues not to be, straightforward in China.

In plotting this brief history of the formation of consumer society in China, this chapter hopes to challenge the idea that China has essentially followed a smooth economic trajectory in which it has progressed from pre-industrial to industrial to consumer society. It also seeks to incite a more nuanced understanding of the conceptual shifts that have taken place, confronting the idea that the Mao era was an 'historical blip' in a trajectory towards consumer society, and indeed the idea that the Mao era itself provided seamless continuity, when in fact just prior to the Cultural Revolution consumption was encouraged by the Party (see Riskin 1987). Rather, this chapter, acknowledges that continuities and ruptures run throughout China's history informing its iterative processes of change. This is to insist on the specificity of China's history and indeed the uniqueness of its present.

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[5] Some historical accounts cite the Xia Dynasty (c. 2070-1600 BC) as the first dynasty. However, as no contemporary sources exist, very little is known about the Xia period. For this reason, some scholars believe it to be mythical or quasi-legendary and therefore it is standard practice to consider the Shang dynasty as the first dynasty.

[6] The Mao era is considered to have ended in 1976 when Mao died. However, the Reform era is not considered to have started until 1978 when Deng Xiaoping came to power. The intervening period between 1976 and 1978 saw China ruled by an interim leader Hua Guofeng who essentially continued Mao's policies.

[7] See the author's own work *On the Commodity Trail* (2015) in which she explores the buying in of domestic waste from the West in order to gain cheap raw materials for production.

Dynasties and Desires

China's dynastic period spans thousands of years and it is of course impossible to analyse such a long historical period in a few hundred words, and anyway information about the extent of consumerism in early China is scant. However, there are two key features of the dynastic era that are known and are highly relevant to an overview of consumerism in China. The first is the fact that China was an incredible producer of beautiful products and that as a result the West was desperate to trade with China as soon as explorers, missionaries and merchants began to travel there. Crucially, for the large part, China was disinterested or actively protectionist (not without good reason). The second, is the role of Confucianism up until the fall of the last dynasty in 1911 and the creation of the Republic of China in 1912. Therefore, what follows will focus on these two aspects of consumer culture within the dynastic period.

From its early dynasties China began producing sophisticated and beautiful products, such as silks and ceramics. Early accounts of exploration in China, detail its scale and wealth. Pliny the Elder (AD 23-79) describes chariots of gold and silver – the China he describes is one of exotic riches and dominated Western imaginations of China for many centuries (Pliny quoted in Yule and Cordier 1913, 198). Marco Polo (1254-1324)[8] too was impressed by China's size, richness and prosperity, its flourishing commerce and inter-regional trade, and its splendid cities - especially Kinsai (present-day Hangzhou). In fact, Richard Humble argues it was Polo's account that caused China to be seen as synonymous with Eldorado (Humble 1975, 35). Portuguese soldier, sailor and merchant adventurer, Galeote Pererira (16th century), emphasizes the size and commerce of China in his accounts (in Boxer 1953, 13). Gonzalez de Mendoza's (1545-1618) hugely influential *History*[9] impresses upon the reader the size of China and the beauty of its cities, and the Jesuit explorer Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) also emphasized the scale of China and the abundance of food, clothing and other delicacies within it. Finally, and perhaps most influentially, Du Halde (1674-1743) in his *General History of China* relates the enormity and prosperity of China (despite never having set in foot on Chinese soil[10]). This work was relied upon by so many later writers including Montesquieu, de Guignes, the Encyclopedistes, Rousseau, Voltaire, Hume, and Goldsmith.

As a result, Western traders quickly became extremely keen to enter into the exchange of goods with China. This is famously illustrated by the well-known episode of the McCartney embassy, named after

[8] Marco Polo dictated *The Travels of Marco Polo* to a fellow captive whilst being held as a prisoner of war from 1298 to 1299. It is thought to be inaccurate and wildly exaggerated. Many historians believe that Marco was never in China. Regardless, the *Travels* had a huge impact on the Western imagination of China.

[9] According to Boxer, *History* was the point of departure for all later works on China written in Europe before the 18th century. (See Boxer….)

[10] All du Halde's writing is from his editing of the *Lettres edifiantes et curieuses* (1709-43).

its leader – George McCartney – who was sent to China in 1793 at the request of the then King of England – George the Third. The embassy aimed to convince the Qing dynasty via the Chinese Emperor - Qianlong - to ease restrictions on trade. China at this time used the 'Canton System'[11] to control trade with the West. The system forced any non-domestic trade through the area of Canton (current day Guangzhou), and thus through one of thirteen factories managed by Chinese merchants known as 'hongs'. (See Carroll 2010). The British traders found this restrictive, and therefore the McCartney embassy asked Emperor Qianlong for 1) a permanent embassy in Beijing, 2) possession of 'a small unfortified island' for British traders to live on and store goods, 3) reduced tariffs on Western traders in Canton. They showed the Emperor various British products they felt would be desirable and induce him to be more open towards trade with them. Yet, despite these advances, the Chinese remained ambivalent towards trade with the West, the Qianlong emperor writing to George 111 in 1793 to say "We possess all things. I set no value on objects strange or ingenious, and have no use for your country's manufactures." Despite this, the official report by George Leonard Staunton (1797) was, on the whole, a eulogy of China and the Chinese. McCartney himself wrote an account at the time that was also relatively positive about the Chinese. He criticized Britain as well as China, and found many positive aspects in the Chinese culture, calling the Chinese 'a strong hardy race, patient, industrious' It was clear, that despite being a nation that had skills and pride in producing products for consumption, the Qing leaders had no interest in growing that consumer market through engaging with Western players. However, it is important not to interpret this reticence towards trade with the West, as a more general isolationist stance. China did trade very actively, in certain eras of dynastic rule, with its Asian neighbours. For example, as Craig Clunas details, during the earlier Ming dynasty there were vibrant trade relations in painting and ceramics (including the famous blue-and-white porcelain of the period), weapons, architecture, textiles, and books (Clunas 2007). Indeed, Clunas argues that the Ming-era manuals of taste[12] show how important consumption was as a vehicle for connoisseurship and the showing of good taste. Clunas describes the manuals as part of an elite consensus for 'the way things ought to be' in terms of what constituted the refined versus the vulgar (Clunas 1991:53).

This kind of elite consensus must be viewed within the context of an all-pervasive Confucianism, and the accompanying social mores about appropriate behaviour (including consumptive behaviour). Indeed, it is perhaps all too easy to imagine China as a non-consumerist entity in this period due to the perceived role of Confucianism in encouraging propriety and non-material aspirations. Put very briefly, the central tenets of Confucian belief are 1)personal and governmental morality, correctness of social relationships, justice and sincerity, 2) the valuing of hierarchy in both political and social spheres, and

[11] The Canton System existed from 1757–1842. It was eventually challenged by the Opium Wars in which Britain forced opium upon China in order to gain access to the products it wanted (namely tea), and as a result of which certain 'Treaty Ports' including Hong Kong were leased to Britain and other foreign powers.

[12] Clunas refers specifically to Ming-era manuals such as those written by Gao Lian, Tu Long, and Wen Zhenheng, whose 'Treatise on Superfluous Things' provides the inspiration for the title of Clunas's own book.

the accompanying assertion that in the political sphere citizens were not and should not be equal, 3) the valuing of intellect – the scholar – and the notion that only those who worked with their minds were fit to rule, 4) the idea of propriety and 'proper behavior according to status' (*li*), and 5) filial piety – the idea that the 'lesser' party - son, wife, student, subject—must show loyalty and obedience to the father/husband who must deliver assistance (Confucius1998). This emphasis on correct behaviour and knowing one's own status played out in terms of what was consumed and by whom. As Stearns describes, under Confucian ethics, 'ordinary people should not plan on material indulgence at all, for this would contradict appropriate social ranking' (Stearns 2001, 5). He goes on to posit Confucianism as 'a climate in which consumerism would nevertheless clearly be rejected' (Stearns 2001, 5).

However, as Geir Sigurdsson points out, wealth, under Confucian thought, although not an acceptable goal in its own right with frugality presented as a commendable virtue, was not considered 'wrong' per se (Sigurdsson 2014). He goes on to argue that Confucians 'would not see anything wrong as such with material wealth as it simply provides conditions for good living' (Sigurdsson 2014, 132). Similarly, in contrast to those who associate Confucianism with a strict moral framework, Ruiping Fan sees this acceptance of wealth on the condition it is not the sole aim, as a pragmatic vein running through Confucianism, which presents wealth as legitimate when it is the source of family and individual well-being (Fan 2010, 233). This perhaps explains why trade and consuming, although not considered the highest form of lived expression under Confucian ethics, was thriving throughout many of the later dynasties. Indeed, Sigurdsson argues that despite having a generally negative view of the commercial class, 'Confucian scholar-officials produced favourable economic policies during the imperial period in China', their pragmatism enabling them to distinguish between economic policies and economic attitude (Sigurdsson 2014, 128). Therefore, whilst it might be reasonable to assume that Confucianism tempered any material excesses, it did not curtail consumerism in any direct way and as mentioned above, the work of Clunas and others shows very clear how rich a material culture existed throughout much of the dynastic era.

Republicanism, nationalism, and Westernism

By the late nineteenth century, China was growing increasingly dissatisfied with its dynastic leaders. The Qing dynasty had, it was felt, been weak in the face of foreign invasion, and the emperors (and empress) were blamed for the foreign domination of ports and the opium crisis (1839–1842 and 1856-1860). A growing nationalist sentiment abounded, fed by the dislike of foreigners, yet ironically coupled with the desire for precisely the wealth and political power witnessed in the West. In addition, there were frustrations with Confucianism, in particular its emphasis on hierarchy, obedience and what had come to be seen as 'useless' intellectualism (i.e. intellect that had no application in real life). Indeed, China had also began to generate images of its *Confucian* self as lazy, and there was a widespread acknowledgement, popular amongst left wing thinkers of the time, of the way in which dynastic rule and Confucian thought had apparently held back the nation and created gaping inequalities between

rich and poor. Through writers such as Lu Xun[13], Confucianism came to be associated with privilege and laziness. The literary stereotypes created at the time remain part of popular imagination and common parlance today. A classic example is Lu Xun's character Kong Yi Ji – a Confucian failed scholar who typifies laziness by being an unemployed alcoholic, and who possesses arcane knowledge that is irrelevant to a modernizing China. In the eponymously titled short story, Kong Yi Ji regularly drinks as a specific bar, where he often owes money on his tab, and spends his time quoting erudite texts to anyone who will listen. His pomposity and use of archaic phrases are portrayed as only serving to maintain a rigid class system and therefore being truly oppressive. Lu Xun's creation of this character was a reaction against the norms of Confucian scholarship and the traditions and privileges that came along with it (see Jameson's interpretation of the character, 1986). In the story, Kong has his legs broken and is forced to beg for a living, being seen around less and less and eventually presumed dead. If one accepts Frederic Jameson's (1986) view that Lu Xun writes characters as allegories for China (or parts of Chinese culture), it plausible to interpret what happens to the character of Kong as representing the breaking of Confucian norms and the disintegration of the privileges associated with dynastic rule. Such cultural changes challenging the privileged few and questioning Confucian social norms paved the way for the end of dynastic rule and the beginning of the Republic of China under Sun Yat Sen [1866-1925].

Sun Yat Sen was of course a Nationalist and had come to power not least as a result of nationalist sentiment, so the nationalist context cannot be ignored when attempting to consider China's history of consumerism. Particular attention should be drawn to movements such as the national products movement that Karl Gerth's work explores, and how the distrust of the West continued to inform China's consumption and its burgeoning consumer culture. In fact, the consumer became, more than ever before, a vehicle for fighting nationalistic battles. The major concern during the Republic of China period was that the Chinese should consume products created by themselves, rather than those supplied by foreign forces. (see Gerth 2003). Consumption, in other words, was entirely embedded in Nationalism. As is always the case though, the consumer was unruly. The fact that in many cases the consumer became a vehicle for nationalism, did not mean that this was true evenly across the board. For example, Frank Dikoter's landmark study into material objects in modern China asserts at every turn the frequency and plentitude with which foreign goods could be found in the China of the 1930s (Dikotter 2006). Furthermore, as Gerth admits, obstacles such as the lack of a tariff economy and genuine sovereignty, not to mention the strong association of foreign goods with modernity, and allegiances to lineage and clan as much as to nation, allowed imports to pour into China, making the

[13] Lu Xun (1881-1936) was a famous Chinese author best known for 'Diary of a Madman' and 'The Real Story of Ah Q'. His work has been seen as presenting many allegorical characters that represent China as a nation (see Frederic Jameson's 'Third World Literature in the Era of Multi-National Capitalism' on this point). Lu Xun was part of a left-wing writer's scene in Shanghai and has been entirely appropriated by the CCP in the contemporary era despite certain anomalies in his own thought which meant he never joined the Communist Party.

success of nationalistic consumption a challenge to say the least (Gerth 2003, 355). As Gerth says, 'in short, the movement [national product movement] did not instil product-nationality as the pre-eminent attribute of a commodity' (Gerth 2003, 355-56).

However, as Gerth concedes, the national product movement did filter into Chinese culture in a way that provided many legacies that would come to the fore throughout the twentieth century. It is difficult to consider the anti-Japanese boycotts of the mid-1980s, the 'war of the chickens', between KFC and domestic competitors, or indeed the success of the famous *China Can Say No*, without returning to the Republican era sentiments of consumer patriotism that were more subtly embedded in Chinese culture. Indeed, from the Republican era onwards, there has been a strong element of nationalism in China's consumerism. Whether the Republican desire to protect Chinese markets from Western products, the Maoist urge to develop through domestic production, or the reformist determination to catch up with the West through exports and latterly through consumerism itself, nationalism has never been entirely off the agenda.

Mao and the great provision

Under Mao, consumerism became provision, and it was the vision of a wonderful provision for all that became the hook for national loyalty. The good life under Mao was specifically based on the idea of provision, and it was this guarantee of having enough that motivated the industriousness of the Mao era. The promise of the 'iron rice bowl' was extremely attractive to a populace who had suffered extreme poverty at the hands of past leaders who enabled a hierarchical distribution of resources. Mao promised the provision of resources and services for all according to their personal circumstances and needs - it was about *provision* in a fair system. This was part of being comradely – the sharing of effort, and the sharing of the results of effort. And, as Vladislav Todorov argues, it was precisely this sharing of production processes (as depicted in the posters) in condensed spaces (such as factories), which created 'technological togetherness' and lead to a 'fellowship of collaboration' that would come to be known as comradeship (Todorov 1995, 48). Industriousness then, created the way of the comrade, and its reward was a mutual enjoyment of the gains.

Mao built on the thinking of left-wing writers such as Lu Xun and was to ban Confucianism, largely due to its emphasis on accepting hierarchy (see Leese 2011). Not only did its insistence on the legitimacy and positive impact of hierarchy sit in direct opposition to his stance on social equality, but he also blamed its traditionalism for China's 'backwardness' in terms of science and development. This backdrop of righteous frustration with the state China was in, its 'humiliation', and the desire to quash any tradition that maintained social inequalities, added force to Mao's rhetoric of industriousness in order to gain a 'happy life for all'. 'Catching up' with the West was of the utmost importance according to him, and was to be gained through the physical exertions and incredible labour capacity of the population – which was proudly celebrated. The industriousness of the masses was China's great blessing, and would be its salvation, enabling the creation of a world of plentiful provision for all, in

which comradely relations and the lack of concerns about life's necessities would provide the basis for a new utopia – the communist 'happy life'. It was via this powerful rhetoric and the positing of this utopian vision, that Mao was able to galvanise the population despite their exhaustion following extended periods of global and domestic war and unrest. And so, the twin paradigms of industriousness and its reward – the good life – were born and they would continue with greater or lesser influence throughout Mao's reign.

Despite the outlawing of Confucianism, elements of it found their way into the Mao era in unlikely ways. For example, the Confucian view of miserliness is perhaps more aligned to the Marxist one than would at first appear obvious. Under Confucianism, frugality that leads to miserliness is seen as deplorable in much the same way as Marx depicts early traders in 18th century Manchester (England) as 'old misers' with 'a passion for wealth as wealth', who, in order to accumulate, exercised extreme parsimony and 'were far from consuming even the interest on their capital' (1976:741). In addition, the exemplary person under Confucianism is willing to financially help those in need, but always tries not to increase the wealth of those who are already rich (see Anelects 6.4; 11.17). The concern, according to Confucius, ought to lie with wealth distribution – '… the ruler of the state or the head of a household does not worry that his people are poor, but that wealth is inequitably distributed ... For if the wealth is equitably distributed, there is no poverty (Anelects, 16.1). Similarly, for both Marx and Mao, the concern was with equality and the distribution of wealth.

Despite the anti-consumerist times, certain goods were purchased and coveted under Mao – bicycles and wrist watches for example. And, as Wu Juanjuan claims, even in the Mao era certain small differences in clothing were tolerated; differences that amounted to fashion. She describes how minor details in women's and men's wear, such as the number of buttons and pockets, did exist, and how women often put the collar of their inner shirt over that of their outer shirt so that the pattern could be seen or wore different styles of scarf (Wu 2009, 37-8). So, as previously argued, there were elements of consumer society that were present pre-Mao and perhaps even in minor ways during the Mao era. This is of course, not to suggest that the changes introduced by Deng Xiao Ping in from 1978 onwards were not very sudden and impactful, but rather, that what followed not born out of thin air. Consumer society in China was not a sudden onslaught of consumerism with no back-story. In fact, it relied heavily upon elements from the pre-Mao eras of China's history.

Reform and the coming of the market

In 1978 Deng Xiaoping became leader of the Chinese Communist Party (hereafter, the CCP) and began his now famous policies of 'opening up' China to the rest of the world. Initially, this comprised of the creation of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) most notably that of Guangzhou in which trade with the West could take place. (It is no coincidence of course that this is the same area that had housed the 'hongs' under the Canton system, and been a treaty port from the latter half of the nineteenth century enabling it to already have the infrastructures and practices in place for economic success.) The SEZs

meant that suddenly China was open to trade and there was a huge influx of products that would previously have been deemed too 'bourgeois' and/or too Western. In addition, Deng encouraged the setting up of small business, and 'leaping into the sea' (giving up one's State employment and becoming an entrepreneur). This ideological change and the cultural changes amongst many Chinese people that it led to, was as much of a revolution as the officially recognised 'Communist revolution' that had come before it. Daily life was unrecognisable. Thus, cultural reassurance was necessary as, despite the desire for change from both populace and much of the Party at the time, Deng could not simply instigate such enormous changes without some kind of continuity with the past that would convince, or at least appease, those more conservative Party members who were sceptical of his plans. This continuity was achieved by requisitioning aspects of China's past attitudes towards consumerism, in order to legitimise a plan for its future. Confucianism, via Maoism, was re-branded for the market.

This was achieved by the state taking specific 'Confucian values' and positing them as the necessary ingredients for the new economic aims of entrepreneurialism and wealth generation. As Sigurdsson argues, a Confucian work-ethic, family-based loyalty, sense of duty, and attitude towards thrift, all began to be celebrated as quasi-Protestant qualities necessary for market development (Sigurdsson 2014, 129). Deng actively encouraged this re-appropriation of Confucianism in the new context of business entrepreneurship, for example, by emphasizing the importance of family ties and encouraging would-be business people to borrow money from relatives in order to cover their start-up costs and provide them with initial capital. This was to position the family as the basis of profit-oriented entrepreneurialism in exactly the way that Mao had been concerned about as he felt it could lead to spontaneous capitalistic urges. Deng in fact, wanted nothing more than to utilise these capitalistic urges in the name of a communism that was almost unrecognisable to that of Mao's. In the process, he managed to attach Confucianism to industriousness, via the notion of family responsibility, whereas Mao (and the preceding generation of authors and thinkers) had attached it firmly to laziness, un-earned privilege, and lack of efficiency. Importantly, the reward for industriousness this time around, was not provision, but the ability to consume. After the avowed anti-consumerism of the Cultural Revolution, consumerism was back - legitimate in Confucian terms as it was part of providing well-being for one's family and was not 'for its own sake'; and in Communist terms because it helped 'share the wealth' in order that an improved standard of living could be achieved alongside greater economic equality. This idea of wealth creation for individuals as beneficial to all members of society loomed large. It was posited as Confucian pragmatism, but could just as easily be seen as the promotion of trickle-down economics – the idea that the enrichment of the upper income levels will benefit poorer members of society by improving the economy as a whole. Deng's faith in the trickle-down effect was in effect the philosophical outcome of him having been the

first Chinese leader to look to western classic economics to inform the country's economic policy. However, Deng made trickle-down more palatable to those with nationalistic and/or Maoist sentiments by presenting it as a form of equal distribution of wealth, thus maintaining the Maoist ideal and continuing the revolutionary path.

Conclusion – the politics of consumption in present-day China

Since Deng Xiaoping's death in 1997, Chinese leaders have actively supported the creation and promotion of a consumer society in China. It has become a stated ambition within China's economic plans, first emerging in the 2011 '12th Five Year Plan', which called for the continued expansion of domestic demand in order to enable continued economic growth. At the time, this was of course most necessary, as global exports had decreased during the 2008/9 financial crisis, and domestic consumption in China was still low when considered as a proportion of GDP – only 34%, compared to 60% in Japan, 64% in the UK and 72% in the US (The World Bank, 2013). Subsequent Five Year Plans have continued to place emphasis on domestic consumption.

As part of this emphasis on consumer society, successive leaders have concerned themselves with the creation and expansion of a middle class or 'xiaokang'. (It is important to note that this middle class ought not perhaps to be read in the same way as one might read the British middle class or indeed the American middle class, both of which have their own specific connotations not to mention wealth levels.) Deng Xiao-ping used the term xiaokang in 1979, positing it as the ultimate goal of Chinese modernization. The suggestion was that the enabling of all to reach this state would involve wealth distribution and create the desired 'balance' and 'harmony' within Chinese society. Creating a xiaokang was also part of Hu Jintao's 'scientific development' theory, which emphasized sustainable development and social welfare in pursuit of a 'socialist harmonious society'. In perusing this harmonious society Hu chose to return to the Confucian language of balance and modesty using the term 'xiaokang', meaning 'basically' or 'functionally' well-off or middle class but without huge wealth, living comfortably but ordinarily. Similarly, the xiaokang is fundamental to Xi Jinping's notion of the 'Chinese Dream'[14] – an aspirational society in which building oneself a good life is entirely possible for all.

The attitudes and consumer behaviour of the younger end of the xiaokang has been of particular interest to China analysts and academics. The appeal of products to the younger generations in China is very much about them taking up their ability to assert their own personalities and individuality, and

[14] In 2013 began promoting the phrase 'Chinese Dream' as a slogan, leading to its widespread use in the Chinese media. Xi describes the dream as 'national rejuvenation, improvement of people's livelihoods, prosperity, construction of a better society and military strengthening'. Some believe the slogan to have come from Helen Wang's 2010 book - *The Chinese Dream* – which is based on over 100 interviews of members of the new middle class in China. She did not define the Chinese Dream (but could have provided the idea).

how this is seen as part of being ‘modern’ and extends to other choices such as taking part in certain protests. (See Hulme, 2018 for an explanation of how products have become linked to asserting one’s individuality). This has seen the biggest generational rift yet witnessed in Chinese culture, as well as the increased polarisation of rich and poor, urban and rural. As Li Conghua states, ‘the first generation of single-child consumer, or the s-generation, is now entering adulthood and assuming the real-life responsibilities (Li 1998, 6). And this is not without its complexities. There are vast generational attitudinal differences in terms of life priorities, the importance (or not) of saving, and ideas about what is ‘enough’. Successive changes in welfare policy in China, such as the improvement of health and pension provision, have been geared towards providing a greater safety net for Chinese citizens, and this has in no small part been about convincing them to part with their savings and spend. ‘Golden week’ holidays have been created specifically to provide time for travel to cities in which one might wish to consume things one could not in one’s own local area. In addition, emphasis has somehow become placed on the consumption of certain types of goods and experiences (often those with a classic European ‘pedigree’) in order to gain ‘suzhi’ (quality) as a person.

Overall, the encouragement of consumerism has not been, and continues not to be, straightforward in China. As this chapter has shown, the interweaving of different strands of Chinese culture has provided an unsteady gestation period for China’s consumer society. The Chinese citizen has not been easily convinced of the delights of consumerism, or indeed his or her duty to engage with it. Whilst consumerism is mainstream and highly prevalent across most of China now, it has indeed been a long march.

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