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### **The Influence of Western Culture on Chinese Consumer Behavior**

From bustling city markets in Shanghai to online shopping, Western influence is prevalent through the choices of millions of consumers in China. However, this hasn't always been the case—China's consumer culture has attracted worldwide attention in recent years due to its rapid development. This rapid economic development and globalization of China has led to significant changes in consumer behavior, with a shift towards adopting Western consumption patterns. In this paper, I will explore how Western culture has influenced Chinese consumer behavior, focusing on China's historical development, Western influence in China, and the younger generations' impact on Chinese consumer behavior.

The starting point for understanding Chinese consumer behavior is rooted in the philosophy of Confucianism. Chinese society has long been rooted in Confucian practices, emphasizing collectivism and social harmony.<sup>1</sup> Collectivism prioritizes the needs of the group over individual desires, fostering a sense of mutual responsibility within the society. This cultural orientation has historically encouraged modest consumption patterns and the sharing of resources.<sup>2</sup> Frugality, another key aspect of Confucian values, promotes the careful use and allocation of resources and wealth. Excessive spending and consumption, as well as an overt display of wealth, is typically discouraged. These Confucian values of collectivism and frugality contributed to China's limited economic presence from the 16th century on, as they valued social

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<sup>1</sup>The Geography of Thought, Chapter 8, 191-217

<sup>2</sup>Schütte, Hellmut, and Deanna Ciarlante. *Consumer behaviour in Asia*. Springer, 2016.

harmony and resource conservation over aggressive economic expansion.<sup>3</sup> However, Western consumer culture has historically been related to modernity, freedom and individualism. Western cultures often view material consumption as a display of social status due to the emphasis on individualism, economic prosperity, and the perceived correlation between personal success and the acquisition of material goods.<sup>4</sup> This is closely tied to capitalist ideologies, which is the predominant economic system in the West. In opposition to these capitalist ideas, the Chinese Cultural Revolution, which took place from 1966 to 1976, was a political and social movement led by Mao Zedong, the leader of the Communist Party of China. The main goals of the revolution were to enforce communism by removing capitalist, traditional, and cultural elements from Chinese society and to strengthen his control over the Communist Party.<sup>5</sup> In opposition to the collectivist ideas behind the Cultural Revolution, a growing shift towards more individualistic attitudes arose– individualism directly influenced by Western culture.

Throughout the Cultural Revolution, people in China had little access to Western goods, and even domestic products with Western styles or qualities were limited. After the revolution ended and international trade increased, Western products were gradually reintroduced into China. The reintroduction of Western products marked the beginning of China opening up to global influences, and economic reforms and international trade accelerated this. Chinese consumers were curious about Western products and individualistic ideas, leading to changes in consumption patterns.<sup>6</sup> Many people in China are beginning to place a larger emphasis on individualism, rejecting traditional Confucian values and cultural forms. In Shi Yan's paper on

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<sup>3</sup>Chen, "East Meets West: Historical Background and Cultural Legacies," 13-41

<sup>4</sup>Yan, Shi. "Differences and Integration of Consumer Cultures between China and Western Countries and their Impact on the Recovery of Ethnic and Rural Areas." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 20.2 (2018): 9.

<sup>5</sup>Lee, Hong Yung. *The politics of the Chinese cultural revolution: A case study*. Vol. 17. Univ of California Press, 1978.

<sup>6</sup>Jeffrey Podoshen, et al., "Materialism and Conspicuous Consumption in China: A Cross-Cultural Examination," *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, V35, N1, 2010

the differences and integration of consumer cultures between China and Western Countries, he explains, “Under the impact of the Western consumer culture, Chinese traditional consumption culture is suffering from an unprecedented penetration, shaking Chinese ideology and values, and creating deep contradictions in the society.” As a result, contemporary Chinese consumer behavior is becoming increasingly characterized by a blend of Western influences and evolving values, showing a profound shift in the cultural landscape.

Following the revolutions and China’s opening to global markets, traditional ideas have particularly been challenged by China’s younger generations, who are interested in Western culture. Generation Y in China is described as “far better educated than [their] predecessors . . . open to Western ideas and products, yet still proudly supportive of their own culture.” They experienced childhoods marked by two significant developments: the opening of China’s economy, and the rise of the Internet.<sup>7</sup> The widespread use of the Internet, social media, and Western entertainment has significantly influenced Chinese youth, with a noticeable inclination among the young to give greater validation to anything coming from the West. In his research article about materialism and conspicuous consumption in China, Jeffrey Podoshen writes that Chinese society “has seen a rapid ascent in the global marketplace, creating a new focus on wealth generation and consumer spending.” He explains that young Chinese adults are more interested in pursuing higher education and upward social mobility. These differences in consumption patterns between Generation Y and other age groups are a defining feature of the modern Chinese market. Podoshen, as well as others who have researched and written on the subject, fears that the Chinese may soon find themselves in a scenario similar to the West, where immediate gains in conspicuous consumption jeopardize their long-term economic stability.

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<sup>7</sup> Giele, Frans. "Chinese consumer behaviour." *Retrieved June 30 (2009): 2017.*

In conclusion, the evolution of Chinese consumer behavior over time is a result of the upheavals of the Cultural Revolution, a change in attitude towards traditional Confucian values, and the influence of Western culture in recent decades. China has undergone a transformation in its consumer culture, characterized by the younger generations' embracement of Western culture, as well as their reshaping of traditional Chinese identity. Research shows China's economy shows no signs of slowing down, and as the country continues to navigate this transition, the trajectory of its consumer behavior will likely continue to evolve in response to changing cultural dynamics and global influences.

## Sources

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