

# **“THE YOUNG AND THE RESTLESS”: GRAPPLING WITH THE YOUNG CHINESE CONSUMER MINDSET**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*China will boast a population of almost 500-million young people under age 30 by 2015. The sheer size of the Chinese youth market and young people’s discretionary income make this market one of the most sought-after in the world. The status and continuing development of Chinese youth culture is especially interesting to marketers and scholars worldwide. Recent media reports depict Chinese youth as “restless” and as experiencing an internal psychological conflict between “private selves” and “public selves,” between “private identity” and “public identity”(Griffiths, 2012). Few studies have provided analysis of the causes of this seemingly “bi-polar” psychological state. The paper explores this situation by delving into the “core” values of Chinese tradition in the context of China’s contemporary socioeconomic realities—focusing on the paradoxical, conflicting, and even opposing cultural values that are rooted in China’s past and present. Among the dilemmas are “standing out and fitting in,” “individual freedom and society’s demands,” and “soaring aspirations and limited opportunities.” This paper demonstrates that the “restlessness” of contemporary Chinese youth is the logical results of feeling trapped and directionless at the seismic boundaries between the culture’s unshakable Confucian values and group orientation, and the ever-shifting trends in individual consumerism that China is embracing.*

**JEL:** M31, M37, M38

**KEYWORDS:** China, Advertising, Global Marketing, Youth Culture

## **INTRODUCTION**

The past three decades in China have witnessed the most rapid changes in society and the most drastic adjustments in China’s social structure. Consumption has become one driving force behind the country’s economic development. Having been banned for almost three decades, Chinese commercial advertising was resumed in the wake of the country’s economic reforms that started in late 1978. Since the ideological debates in the early 1980s on the “shoulds” and “should nots” in the so-called Chinese “socialist commercial advertising” advocated by the Chinese government, the advertising industry in China has grown to become the world’s second largest after the United States, in terms of ad spending. With the changes in societal values, Chinese masses, especially young people, follow their own paths to pursue their dreams of happiness and success in different fields, from business to sports, from fashion design to entertainment, investing new meanings in their sense of self. Collectively, they have ushered in a multifaceted new Chinese identity. In taking on this new identity, Chinese youth perhaps are one of the most interesting groups, in terms of their cultural characteristics and their social, economic, and political impact on Chinese society. The significance of the impact of Chinese youth culture on society is multidimensional, but most prominently seen in the following three areas: First is the vibrant Chinese youth market. According to the report, China will boast a population of almost 500-million people under age 30 by 2015 (Bergstrom, 2012). Currently, in the explosive growth of consumption, the 400-million-plus Chinese young people who were born after the 1980s and 1990s have stood out as targeted groups for global marketers. Approximately a third of these young people are urban and are from households with relatively high income.

## The Rise of Chinese Youth Culture

The “one-child policy” enforced by the Chinese government in 1979 has resulted in a situation in which the only-child in the family, nicknamed “little emperor,” or *xiao huangdi* in Chinese, has become the focus of family spending. The sheer size of the Chinese youth market and young people’s discretionary income makes this market one of the most sought-after in the world. Second is the complexity of the Chinese youth culture. Penetrating the gigantic Chinese youth market requires deep understanding of the youth culture. The first generations of Chinese young people have experienced the country’s unprecedented economic boom, open markets, and capitalism (with “Chinese characteristics”). Similar to young people in Japan, the United States, and other Westernized societies, these Chinese young people grew up drinking Coca-Cola, listening to Rock and Roll, watching Hollywood movies, and wearing blue jeans. In other words, to many people, present-day Chinese youth are “Westernized.” But close studies reveal there is no easy equation between the Chinese youth culture and that in other countries influenced by Western cultures. Chinese young people may look and act like their contemporaries in other Western-influenced consumer societies, and share certain cultural values. The paper will show later that Chinese youth, at heart, are still *Chinese*. Featured by interactions between Western ideals and native cultural origins, Chinese youth culture provides insights for understanding trends in the global youth culture. This young Chinese market demographic is exerting, and will continue to exert a powerful influence in shaping global business and marketing strategies in the foreseeable future.

The third area of impact is the Chinese youth workforce. In 2010, nearly 30 percent of the 550-million industrial workers in China were under age 30 (Moore, 2011). The size of the Chinese youth workforce is affecting Chinese society as a whole and shaping the direction of China’s economic development. Currently, China has about 150-million migrant workers. Among them, an estimated 100-million-plus were born after 1980 (Cingcade, 2008). They build China’s glittering skylines, highways and fast-speed train railway, serve at restaurants, hotels, and clubs visited by the newly rich and international travelers, and make fashions and sports-ware products sold around the world.

Chinese youth’s contributions to the country’s economy are far beyond the construction and the service sectors. It is well known that the Chinese youth population is savvy in technology. In 2005, then Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao announced a new and far-reaching strategy by the Chinese government in building a “comprehensive national strength” to identify technological innovation as the nation’s top priority. Afterwards, Internet users in China increased from 33.7 million to 513 million at the beginning of 2012. Among them, 256 million were young people (Bergstrom, 2012). Being the main labor force in science and technology, Chinese youth have become the pillar of China’s high-tech industry, information networks and e-commerce, and other cutting-edge economic domains, thus playing a more and more important role in China’s social and economic advancement.

The present study intends to facilitate further understanding of Chinese youth culture. Following this introduction, the paper will provide a literature review of existing scholarship, highlighting the main characteristics of Chinese youth culture. Then the paper will closely examine the mindset of contemporary Chinese youth in the complex interplay between the persisting values of Chinese tradition and the realities of a society going through rapid changes. Finally, the paper will conclude with a summary of the causes of the restless mindset of the young Chinese consumer. The concluding statements also will discuss the limitations of the present paper and ideas for future research on this important subject.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The emerging Chinese youth culture has drawn studies by scholars and business professionals both in China and abroad. To date, studies on Chinese youth mainly focus on examining Chinese youth’s cultural characteristics. The research method, in general, is data analysis based on observations by the researchers,

and on responses to the surveys conducted by the researchers. It has been noted that the market economy introduced by China's economic reform in the late 1970s has brought about awareness of the material benefits and economic gains among Chinese consumers. Western commercial ideas, such as individuality, luxury, freedom of choice of products, success, and modernity, have replaced Communist ideology. Similar to the young people in societies influenced by Western consumerism, present-day Chinese youth are generally characterized as being "open," "free," and "individual" (Guo, 2006, Rosenthal and Feldman, 1992). A survey by the Gallup Organization confirms this trend.

The Gallup survey shows that over the past decades, Chinese people have displayed changing tastes and wants: an increasing number of Chinese say that their personal goals have shifted. Goals that involve "a taste of life," "self-satisfaction," and "self-expression" have more than doubled in the past decades (William McEwen, et al. 2006). More recent studies suggest that this trend continues. The World Value Survey conducted by Jiaming Sun and Xun Wang reveals the younger generations in China have shifted "from traditional values to modern values in a recent social transformation." The responses to the survey show that among the younger generations born after the 1980s, 40.98 percent rate "self-development" as the most important value in life, and 54.5 percent rate "individualistic values" as the most important. On the other hand, among the older generations born before and during the 1950s, the percentage is only 14.83 percent and 21.7 percent, respectively (Sun and Wang, 2010).

Kindled by the increasingly affluent material world, Chinese youth have turned from being ideology-oriented to being practical, and from valuing spiritual fulfillment to valuing material gains. This is evidenced by the data shown in the Sun and Wang study: "materialist values" in China rank the highest (51 points on a scale of 100) of any country in the world (The United States: 16; Japan: 29; Britain: 20; India: 40; and South Korea: 46) (Sun and Wang, 2010). Chinese young people want to live their lives according to their own ideas and dare to pursue success, excellence, and material wealth. According to Yan Wang, Chinese youth's salient self-value orientation, practical behaviors, and independence are the results of the realities in contemporary Chinese society. Mobility and changeability, guided by the market economic mechanism require youth constantly make adjustments in order to adapt to social changes. The one-child policy greatly increases the sense of self-direction and independence among contemporary Chinese youth (Wang, 2006).

Research by business professionals examines Chinese young consumers' consumption behaviors. Chinese young people have stood out as a group targeted by global marketers for their excessive spending. The post-1980s generations are typically trend-conscious, impulsive, and relatively wealthy. Many youngsters shop to explore sensations of consumption (*xunzhao xiaoshou ganjue*). Their purchase decision is based on how much they like the product (*wo xihuan de, jiu shi hao de*), rather than on how much they need it (Doctoroff, 2005). In 2012, China overtook Japan to become the world's largest consumer of luxury goods. What merits attention is that, compared with Japan and the United States, Chinese consumers of luxury goods are younger—the majority are aged twenty-five to forty. According to the consulting firm McKinsey & Company, 80 percent of Chinese luxury goods buyers are under 45, compared with 30 percent of luxury goods buyers in the United States and 19 percent in Japan ("China Still Has an Appetite for Luxury Goods," 2009).

Some studies have called attention to the multidimensional nature in Chinese youth culture. Tom Doctoroff alerts global marketers that Chinese college students seek brands that will help them say "I am unique" without making them look weird or socially unacceptable (Doctoroff, 2012). Seeking to belong, as a value among Chinese young people, has been noted by John Solomon of Enovate, a consumer insights and design firm. According to Solomon, China's "one-child" makes decisions based on a sense of belonging and social acceptance while seeking individuality from their peers ("Branding China Youth: Uncovering Vital Trends Among Emerging Chinese Consumers," 2013).

Others point out that this tendency to seek acceptance explains Chinese young people's fanaticism in joining clubs and online shopping. Cultural clubs have mushroomed in today's China. Music clubs are popular in China's first- and second-tier cities. However, according to Jian Wang, most Chinese youth see music first as an entertainment rather than as a channel for serious self-expression. Young people use clubs as a networking venue where they party for fun and for a quick build-up of human capital (Wang, 2005). Online shopping is another new phenomenon in present-day Chinese consumer culture, with about 300-million new shopping choices online. For Chinese youth, exploring the online marketplace goes beyond the practical need to cut through the clutter in making purchase decisions. Online shopping is an emotional need to fit in and feel that one's choices connect one to the right group of people, even as one tries to stand out with a style of his/her own. For young consumers in China, "the starting point for shopping is shifting from advertising, brands, and retailers ... to people" (Caplan and Yu, 2012).

A number of studies show that despite the value changes in China, there is a persistent emphasis on family as a prevalent value in Chinese society. Xi and Xia have observed that the group-orientation is rooted in Chinese young people's value for family and country. The results in their survey show that while Chinese youth aspire toward "independence" and "individualism," 35 percent of respondents name their parents, rather than cool celebrities, as their "idols." Other young participants in the survey say that their life goals are to "contribute to the country" and to have "a happy and harmonious family" and a "successful career" (Xi and Xia, 2006). In addition to studies on Chinese youth's cultural behaviors, other research explores the psychological conditions of Chinese young people. The documentary film, *Young and Restless in China: Nine Stories*, profiles a group of young individuals from diverse backgrounds. The film tells stories of those individuals, showing mixed desires, opportunities, and courage, on the one hand, and anxiety, hopelessness, making sacrifices for their families, on the other hand (Cingcade, 2008). One readily discernable anxiety among Chinese young people is the burden of taking care of aging elderlies, as China is aging rapidly (Xi and Xia, 2006).

In conclusion, scholars seem to agree that Chinese youth culture has undergone an evolution from being inconspicuous on the margin to being at the center, from being an incidental phenomenon to becoming the primary outlook on values and the nucleus of culture, and from being a group sub-culture to being a social mainstream culture (Xi and Xia, 2006). Therefore, one cannot overestimate the importance of understanding the trends in Chinese youth culture.

### A Shift in Chinese Cultural Values

As displayed in the research summarized in the "literature review" section, China has experienced a shift in its cultural values, especially among Chinese youth. A 2008 survey conducted by a group of business professors, headed by King-Metters and Metters, shows significant changes in the degree to which individuals are integrated into groups, as compared with the findings of the study of different cultures conducted by Geert Hofstede some twenty-five years before. Hofstede's research showed Chinese cultures were very collectivist in the 1980s, while the later survey by King-Metters and Metters indicates that China today is very individualist (King-Metters and Metters, 2008). This pendulum swing in Chinese cultural values, from emphasis on collectivism to individualism, is because of China's "one-child policy" and the economic reforms simultaneously introduced by the Chinese government in the late 1970s. As a step toward population control, the Chinese government enforced a policy limiting families to one child per family. This "one-child policy" has resulted in the situation in which the only-child has become the focus of family spending. The little emperors grew up to become the first generation of consumers in China's market economy following the country's economic reforms. The book *Advertising to Children in China* begins with a vivid description of the shopping behavior of contemporary Chinese "little emperors" portrayed in a drawing by a nine-year-old when he is asked to draw what comes to his mind when he thinks about going shopping:

*The youngster's drawing shows him stepping boldly up to the toy counter of a department store with a five-Yuan note in his hand. It's his money, and he is attracted to the sign above the salesperson that reads, "Ship models on sale." The sign to his right beckons him with "Welcome. Visit Our Store." What this youngster is saying in his drawing is that he has money and he wants to spend it, in this case, on play items (Chan and McNeal, 2004).*

What the authors of the book try to tell the reader here is that Chinese youngsters today have the privilege to spend their "own" money on their "own" wants. The "one-child policy" makes Chinese youth of special value in China's consumerism. One survey shows that being the focal point of Chinese families with the structure of 4-2-1—four grandparents, two parents, and one child—this only-child constitutes a large share of present-day Chinese families' consumption, resulting in a shift in China's cultural values from traditional values of frugality to the values of a modern consumer society (Sun and Wang, 2010). To them, life is about "me." Different from the older generations in China, they often say "I" instead of "we." Self-realization is one striking characteristic of the new "Me Generation." The 1996 national survey of youth by Chinese Youth and Children Research Center reveals that 77.5 percent of the youth consider realizing self-value as their life goal. The sentiments of "what I want, what I like, and who I am" are rising among Chinese young people. They ooze confidence and a sense of superiority. Youngsters engage the world in new ways and pursue a "good life." They search for personal fulfillment, enjoying a lifestyle their parents could not have imagined. The sense of individuality and self-consciousness of this highly "liberated" young generation is acutely reflected in the expressions of "personal taste," "personal expression," and "personal identity" (*shihe wo, zhanxian wo, wo jiu shi wo*) that are popular among contemporary Chinese youth (Guo, 2006).

#### "The Young and the Restless": the Complexity of the Young Chinese Consumer Mindset

Yet, underneath the façade of being open, free, and individualistic, recent media reports depict Chinese youth as "restless" and as experiencing an internal psychological conflict between "private selves" and "public selves," between "private identity" and "public identity" (Griffiths, 2012). While the phenomenon of "restlessness" among Chinese young consumers has been noted in general, few studies have provided in-depth analysis of the causes of this phenomenon. The present study delves into the "core" structures of Chinese traditional beliefs and values in the context of present-day social-economic realities, and will show, in the sections to follow, that Chinese young people's "restlessness" can be explained by the paradoxical, conflicting, and, sometimes, even opposing cultural values deeply rooted in Chinese tradition and its current realities. Among the dilemmas facing Chinese youth are "standing out and fitting in," "individual freedom and society's demands," and "soaring aspirations and limited opportunities." "Standing out" is explicitly depicted in an advertisement, titled "Just Want to Stand Out," published in *Modern Advertising*, a major advertising magazine in China. In the advertisement, a doggerel is printed on the T-shirt over a young man's robust body. Faceless, the young body, however, is full of life and energy, with a flock of thick black hair anxiously growing out from the collar of the T-shirt. The doggerel reads:

Just Want to Stand Out!  
 Use your head, night after night.  
 Apply yourself, head down, buried between your shoulders.  
 Creativity trampled, you bow your head, with secret hate.  
 Are you willing to capitulate forever?  
 Are you willing to work yourself until your head turns gray?  
 Come, seize the opportunity to hold your head high,  
 While you are still young.  
 ("Just Want to Stand Out," 2006)

The advertisement captures the “young and eager to emerge” mentality of contemporary Chinese young people and their psychic need to find identity. According to Jib Fowles, most advertisements can be understood as having two orders of content. “The first is the appeal to deep-running drives in the minds of consumers.” The second is information regarding the goods or service being sold—such as the product’s name, its manufacturer, and its functions. Fowles asserts that by giving form to people’s deep-lying desires, and by picturing states of being that individuals privately yearn for, advertisers have the best chance of arresting attention and affecting communication (Fowles, 1998). Successful advertising plays with a product’s “emotional” functions for the consumer by associating commodities with feelings and emotions that the Chinese consumers find attractive.

In anticipation of emerging customer needs, smart marketers search for the soul of Chinese young consumers in order to sell their products by interweaving the actual and the imagined, and perpetuating the myth that consumption would make one’s dreams come true. Feeding on the eagerness of Chinese youth to “stand out,” modern Chinese advertising offers a world of success through consumption: The product is depicted as a symbol of wealth and status. The advertisement assures the audience that purchasing the product would bring power and self-worth and would provide a navigational guide for the voyage from the tortuous present to the ideal future. For example, an Audi’s television commercial depicts an Audi car smoothly pulling in on a seemingly endless red carpet. A sartorially splendid man steps out of the car, striding down the carpet. He is greeted by people waiting along the carpet, applauding. The advertisement’s body copy at the bottom says: “Audi-luxury, car for great leaders.” Bombarded by such advertising messages, a migrant worker who cleans office buildings in Shanghai emotionally tells the interviewer in the documentary film *China Revealed*: “If only...I had a car..., I would be someone... People would recognize me” (Harrison, 2006).

Chinese love to win and admire big winners. Climbing society’s ladder to the top is the ultimate goal in life for contemporary Chinese, especially for Chinese young people. However, seeking advancement in society and being successful are by no means new aspirations for Chinese people. In fact, success and advancement in society have been a primary drive for Chinese under Confucianism, and a noble calling by the government under Mao Zedong’s regime. However, the definitions and concepts of “success” have undergone changes over Chinese history. In Confucianism, being successful originally meant mastering Confucian classics and passing the civil service exam to secure a position at the imperial court. Under Mao’s regime, Communist ideology, however, advocates adhering to Communist doctrines to serve the people and the country. Since the economic reforms, mandated by Deng Xiaoping’s proclamation to “let some people prosper first,” acquisition of wealth has become the newest and most worthwhile pursuit for Chinese men and women. Being held back for decades under Mao’s dictatorship, contemporary Chinese are eager to become the first to enter the brave new world of material wealth.

Yet, despite the changes in the definitions of success, the Chinese characteristic of seeking to become established in society as a primary purpose in life remains unchanged. Desire for attainment and a sense of urgency depicted in the “Just Want to Stand Out” advertisement mentioned earlier echoes Confucius accounts of his own progress and attainment as Man: “At fifteen, I set my heart on learning; at thirty, I stood firm; at forty, I had no doubts; at fifty I understood the Decree of Heaven; ...” (*The Analects*, Book II). Likewise, life’s purposefulness and urgency are explicitly expressed in Mao Zedong’s *ci* poem composed in 1963: “Ten thousand years are too long. Seize the day, seize the hour!” (Mao, 1963) What merits attention, however, is that the urge to “stand out” is not all we see in Chinese youth’s psychic search for identity and success. “Fitting in” is equally important. While the attribute of being ambitious and competitive is a Confucian virtue mandated by society, Chinese people, on the other hand, are expected to adhere to another set of Confucian ideals, which are also of the utmost importance for Chinese—harmony in society and in human relationships. For harmony to be achieved, individuals must conform and comply, and be humble. Confucius defined human relationships as “Ruler-Subject, Father-Son, Husband-Wife, Big Brother-Younger Brother, and Friend-Friend.” In these Five Relationships, the senior and the male set

rules for the junior and the female, while the junior and the female must respect the senior and male, and must be obedient. In other words, Chinese are social beings and must know their places in society, their boundaries and duties, and must co-exist with each other in harmony.

As the Japanese say, “the nail that sticks up gets hammered down”; the Chinese wisdom says, “birds at the head of the pack get shot first.” Daoism is another school of philosophy in China and has significant influence on the Chinese way of life. The Daoist idea of non-action, or *wuwei* in Chinese, may cast a light on the phenomenon of Chinese young people feeling impelled to go with the flow. According to Daoism, the supreme Way of the Universe is to follow the course of Nature. “Water travels in its own way when it arrives at the head of the bridge.” Forcing things to happen will destroy the balance in Nature and will be catastrophic. This philosophical view is admired even by Chinese *linglei* youth, or society’s radical outcasts. In Jing Wang’s study, an interviewee, Jian Cui—an idol of Chinese *linglei* youth—contradicts himself during the interview, saying “... Too much self-exposure is not good,” after he has expressed his confidence in, and bragged about, his music talents. Another young music fanatic sees himself in a similar way, saying “Those who are content are happy. I don’t like big ups and downs.” Still another wants to learn “how to position himself in the middle for perfect balance” (Wang, 2005). Being small is virtuous and beautiful, and looms large in Chinese culture in the past or at present. “My humble self,” or “my humble surname” are expressions commonly used by Chinese to refer to themselves, even by the imperial emperors and by Mao Zedong.

In his book *What Chinese Want*, Tom Doctoroff, the North Asia director and Greater China CEO for the advertising firm J. Walter Thompson, succinctly points out that Chinese individuals “are driven by an ever-present conflict between standing out and fitting in, between ambition and regimentation” (Doctoroff, 2012). As mentioned earlier, Chinese youth show a strong sense of belonging and social acceptance by their peers while seeking individuality. Research conducted by the students in my Chinese visual culture class in 2009, based on the advertisements in the Chinese version of *International Advertising*, 2007-2009, found that the three most frequently appealed desires to Chinese during this period were: need for prominence or achievements, need for affiliation, and need for security.

Another dilemma facing Chinese youth is individual freedom in the face of regimented social structures. Contemporary Chinese young people often are perceived as “free spirits.” Themes of “dreams,” “power and self-worth,” and “freedom and happiness” prevail in contemporary Chinese advertisements. One can see individuality stressed in the catchy marketing slogan of Li Ning Corporation, China’s largest sports-wear products company, “It’s better to be yourself than to be someone else.” Ambition is inspired by Nike’s “Just do it,” Adidas’ “Impossible is nothing,” and PepsiCo’s “Dare for more”; freedom is evoked in the slogan “There is no boundary between you and freedom” seen in ads for IBM ThinkPad (T40).

However, closer examination of China’s reality today shows that new paths are hard to break. One daunting challenge for Chinese young people is how to balance their individual ambitions with their sense of family responsibilities and society’s demands. Tom Doctoroff has pointed out, “[Chinese] individuals have no identity apart from obligations to, and acknowledgement by, others” (Doctoroff, 2012). In pursuing success and self-satisfaction, China’s individuals cannot shake off regimented social structures. Ambitions are intertwined with individuals’ irrevocable responsibilities to family and society. Contemporary Chinese—man, woman, old, and young—are, as ever before, under enormous pressure to bring honor to the family, or *guangzong yaozu* (glorify the ancestors). This Chinese “characteristic” has not changed. Parents are mandated to provide their children a bright future. A survey in 2001, carried out by the Economic Situation Monitoring Center under China’s National Bureau of Statistics, revealed that education had become a significant part of household expenses, consisting of 10 percent of a Chinese family’s total household expenses (Xi and Xia, 2006).

Little emperors fear being a disappointment to their families when they grow up. They eventually have to face challenges in the real world and to balance their individual interest with their family responsibilities. To glorify the family name, young students bury themselves in books, studying day and night to pass the college entrance exam. The PBS *Frontline*'s documentary film *Young and Restless in China: Nine Stories* tells a story of the emotional dilemma of a young market executive who comes from an affluent Beijing family. Being renowned scholars, her parents put pressure on their daughter to succeed academically. This successful business woman tells the interviewer that for years, she has struggled to move out of the shadow of her parents and to sort out who she is and what her values are (*Young and Restless in China*, 2008).

At Marietta College, where I teach, many international students from China feel equally oppressed, even though they are thousands of miles away from home. Quite a number of them come to Marietta College to fulfill their parents' dreams. The family provides financial support for the young person's education. A young student chooses his/her major and career based on the parents' wishes. One student told me that his academic interest was in the humanities, but, to please his parents, he majored in accounting, then switched to finance, then to international business—only to feel miserable. Recently, he decided to follow his heart and declared his major in Asian Studies, but without his parents' knowledge. Some female Chinese students at Marietta College are depressed because they are under pressure to drop out of college before they receive a college degree, and return home to marry and help with their family business.

To an extent, education for young Chinese women is a double-edged sword. Girls still are distinctly second-class citizens, particularly in rural areas. When families with limited resources have to decide which child to send to school, it is always the son, because, traditionally, when young women marry, they leave their natal families to live with their husbands' families. Young women are expected to sacrifice their own interests to support their families. On the other hand, many women who do hold higher education degrees face a different problem: they are difficult to marry, because most Chinese men do not want to marry a "strong woman," or *nü qiangren* in Chinese. To put it in another way, many Chinese young women have their lives complicated several ways: first, they are facing the pressure (like their brothers) to be successful and to bring honor to their families. Second, in family decisions, young girls are more likely to be asked to make sacrifices and give the opportunities of education to their brothers, in the name of the family interest. Third, those who do get the chance to become educated, face the danger of becoming "unmarriageable," which is equally unacceptable by China's norms today.

According to Confucianism, filial piety is the root of all virtues. No matter how spoiled China's little emperors are, they must learn filial piety by heart at a young age. However, taking care of aging elderlies has become increasingly challenging for Chinese young people. Aging population is a pressing problem in China and will have significant impact on Chinese youth, urban or rural. China is aging rapidly, largely because of the "one-child policy." It is reported that by 2030, China will have more people over age 65 than the entire population of the United States. China joined the world's aging countries in the late 1990s, with those over age 60 reaching 126 million, accounting for 10 percent of the country's population. It is predicted that by 2020, the percentage of China's senior population will rise to 11.8 percent. In 1990, the percentage of the Chinese working population caring for the aged was 13.7 percent; in 2000, it rose to 15.6 percent; in 2025, it is estimated to grow up to 19.46 percent; and by 2050, 48.49 percent. In other words, the per capita burden on working population has risen from 20 to 25 percent in the past to the present 50 percent; and will rise to 100 percent by 2050 (Xi and Xia, 2006).

As a release from the pressure cooker of social attainments and family responsibilities, Chinese young people spend time finding relief. Marketers promote products as relief of anxiety. Emotions are evoked in advertisements to offer the consumer a world of imagination, a utopia, or a world of spiritual transcendence and freedom from anxieties. Li Ning Corporation positions sports as relaxation, not a platform for competition. In their Television commercials, text floats across the screen: "Goodbye fatigue, goodbye toil, fear and fat... Yesterday's worries are over" (Doctoroff, 2005). Pizza Hut's advertisement asserts that Pizza



Hut provides the number-one place for pastimes and for entertainment. Starbucks promotes the idea of its coffeehouse as a Third Space, or *di san kongjian* in Chinese.

This *di san kongjian* position plays with the word *kong* in Buddhism, which means “emptiness.” The Buddhist “emptiness” invokes detachment or being free from desires or worries. Thus the motif of Starbucks’s Third-Space aims to create peace and tranquility: a cup of Starbucks coffee drunk *in situ* will set free one’s spirit from the mundane. Furthermore, Chinese young people are oppressed by the reality in contemporary Chinese society: aspirations outstrip opportunities. With the importation of Western-style advertising and foreign goods to China, life for the Chinese has been a dizzying whirl. China’s new middle-class consumers have enough disposable income to purchase non-essential goods. In other words, they can afford to make purchases based on what they “want,” not just on what they “need.” During the 1990s, China’s elites liked to gather on the Bund in Shanghai for Western food, outdoor cafés, bistros, and boutiques that had a foreign cachet. They did not hesitate to show off their newly acquired Western-brand products, such as Armani and Louis Vuitton. Commercial advertisements further validate Chinese youth’s belief that immediate success and luxury are consummated with goods and labels. In his book *Foreign Advertising in China*, Jian Wang describes a visual confrontation of an “upscale” and “cool” Hennessy brandy commercial displayed in downtown Beijing:

*Displayed on the billboard are three “heroes”—a Caucasian man, a Caucasian woman, and a Hennessy bottle set against the backdrop of a peaceful blue sea. The dark-suited man, glass in hand, is posed in the middle of the background. In the left foreground, barely visible in the scene, the woman is showing only a shoulder draped in a beautiful scarf. On the right is the big Hennessy bottle, with its shape and texture occupying almost a quarter of the billboard space. Between the back and the front is a row of Greco-Roman arches. The ad caption written in Chinese characters reads, “Hennessy. The original X.O.” (Wang, 2000).*

A report in *The Wall Street Journal* predicts “a wave of development in China’s luxury sector—rich Chinese are seeking a greater appreciation of what their newly minted wealth can bring” (Ernst & Young, 2006). With the liberation of retail law, China’s luxury market has ballooned to more than US\$2 billion in annual sales in the first decade of the twenty-first century, with 20 percent annual growth through 2008. Major luxury retailers, such as LVMH Louis Vuitton, Moët Hennessy, and Prada Group NV, operate their own stores in China. In 2012, China surpassed Japan to become the world’s largest luxury goods consumer (“Chinese Buy Most Luxury Goods in the World,” 2013).

The phenomenon of excessive and competitive consumption, or *dou fu* in Chinese, can be explained by the Chinese belief in the role of luxury spending in social construction and class distinction. Consumption in post-Mao China symbolizes modernity. Acquiring and consuming material goods *tastefully* has become an intrinsic part of modern living in China and a validation of one’s high social standing. To a certain extent, youth are encouraged to demonstrate their role as consumers. As previously explained, the 4-2-1 family structure has resulted in the situation that six family members overindulge the only-child to consume luxury goods.

As China is transforming itself from a production-centered Communist society to a Capitalist consumer society, youth are encouraged to explore definitions of modern *Chinese-ness* by demonstrating their powers in consumption. When private cars, real estate, and luxury brands become available, youth are quick to claim them as their own status markers. Marketers explore ways in navigating young Chinese consumers in their move to the psychic haven of consumption so as to ensure that they are in the driver’s seat in Chinese youth’s “Consumer’s Happy Express Train” (*xiaofeiqun de xingfu banche*), as characterized by a Chinese critic (Guo, 2006).

However, excessive consumption crashes head-on, not only with China's tradition of frugality, but with China's reality today: not everyone can afford the price of success. The surreal world of tranquility, luxury, and sophistication depicted in the Hennessy commercial is a dreamland for millions of Chinese. To be more accurate, it is a land that is beyond the imagination for ordinary Chinese men and women. While many Chinese are benefiting from the country's booming economy, many are not. China's highly competitive, consumption-driven environment inevitably forces many to the bottom. A Gallop survey shows that while Chinese buyers are many, and incomes are rising, most citizens remain too poor to purchase what they want. China today is a country that has the world's widest chasm of "haves" and "have-nots." At the time of the survey, 1.2 billion out of the 1.3 billion Chinese led a modest life, struggling through sweat and toil to cover just the basics (McEwen, et al., 2006).

Underneath the façade of glory, freedom, and happiness portrayed in contemporary Chinese advertisements, there is tension between big dreams and lack of opportunities. Disparity and identity crisis are effectively captured in the following "Save the Children" public-service advertisement: The ad depicts a shoe-shine boy shining shoes outside of a subway station in Beijing, and another boy having his shoes polished. The two boys in the ad are identical, showing the same age and the same face. The legend on the ad says: "Same life, different fate." One boy appears wealthy, confident, and privileged while the other is poor, hopeless, and enduring life's hardships. Reading the advertisement metaphorically, the ad illustrates the psychology of Chinese youth in a highly competitive commercial society. The wealthy boy can be seen as presenting an enviable image for the shoe-shine boy, enjoying wealth, privilege, and power. On the other hand, the shoe-shine boy presents a fearful image for the rich boy: if the rich boy fails, he will turn into a shoe-shine boy ("Save the Children," 2005).

## CONCLUSION

A typical Western fairy tale conclusion is "... and they all lived happily ever after." The happy-ending conclusion of the modern Chinese consumers' fairy tale, however, remains to be seen. China's reality seems to allude to another type of fairy tale—the Cinderella story. When the clock chimes at midnight, the coach will give way to a pumpkin; the beautiful princess in elegant attire will be dressed in rags and return to scrubbing floors on her hands and knees. Ambitions outstrip opportunities. How to survive in a very competitive society preoccupies the Chinese mind. A survey conducted by the Northwest University of China shows that 88 percent of the respondents agreed that "there is no mercy in competition; only those who can adapt to it will survive" (Wang, 2006). In this brave new world, millions of contemporary Chinese find that their privileges, values, education, and work ethics—the honor that they used to find in their lives and behaviors—are disappearing. Under these circumstances, all segments of Chinese society have been "restless"—struggling to find a new identity that will provide a new source of societal and personal stability and a new source of societal and personal purpose.

The Chinese youth segment of society has experienced this restlessness primarily as a struggle to define their larger social role ("public identity") and to define their individual selves ("private identity"). China's "one-child policy"—under which, typically, six adults become the economic and social underpinnings for the launch of each new child into the society—has provided the impetus for the creation of contemporary Chinese youth culture. Chinese youth culture is grounded along two dimensions: the search for personal expression of individual identity, and the need to find one's place in the larger society—"standing out" and "fitting in." The dynamic created by the interaction of these two forces at work on the psyche of young Chinese has enabled a shift in cultural values among Chinese youth, away from traditional Confucian and Maoist values toward the values of a modern consumer society: knowing one's social position by what one can afford to display, and knowing one's self by the consumer products one *chooses* to acquire. However, it has been argued that there are elements of any culture that are central and invisible (e.g., cultural values) and there are elements that are peripheral and visible (e.g., behaviors). A culture's core values are likely to be more resistant to change than behaviors, which change constantly (Rosenthal & Feldman, 1992). In

other words, a culture's "core" values and an individual's cultural identity may be less likely to change than the individual's behavior, such as his or her hobbies, taste in food and fashion, or consumption behavior.

This situation has resulted in a phenomenon in which Chinese young people find that while they relinquish some behavioral elements of their cultural origin with increasing acculturation to the Western consumerism, the "essence" of Chinese culture, or Confucianism, as represented in such characteristics as filial piety, family, and conformity persists over time. Often, the young people feel their individual desires overshadowed in their real-life situations and their voices silenced. Chinese youth's "core" Confucian self demands that Chinese young consumers be "collectivist" rather than "individualist," and "interdependent" rather than "independent."

The present study is an in-depth analysis of Chinese young people's "restless" state of mind resulting from two forces working on the psyche of Chinese young people. The two forces under study are the invisible, but unshakable, Confucian values, on the one hand, and the visible and ever-shifting values in individual consumerism, on the other. One point should be made, however, is that Chinese youth, though they share some commonalities, are not a unified entity, but have diverse interests, needs, and concerns; this divergence is a result of their diverse backgrounds, such as regions (rural or urban), education (domestic or foreign), professions (migrant workers, professionals, or government employees), and economic levels. Similarly, young people's "restless" psyche manifests differently among the different groups. One limitation of this paper, which seeks to generalize about Chinese youth across particular backgrounds and experiences, is the lack of close exploration of the mindsets of each of the individual groups. For example, could the effects of the two forces mentioned above on the young people with a domestic university diploma differ from the effects on those who returned to China with a degree of higher education abroad? How do these two groups of youth differ in their search for the meaning of existence in an ever-changing Chinese society? Why do they differ?

To answer these questions, investigation by means of focus groups may help to capture the pluralistic trend of Chinese youth in the diversification of values, concerns, and "restlessness." For my future research on this subject, I will carry on focus-group studies of young people who were born after the 1990s. The focus groups will include: 1) migrant workers, 2) Chinese university degree holders, 3) people with advanced degree returned from overseas, 4) small business owners, and 5) enterprise elites. I believe that, together, these groups are the key to China's economic development and play a decisive role in China's future. Another limitation of the present paper is the lack of insight from business professionals in addressing Chinese young people's so-called "bi-polar" psyche.

International consumer-goods companies—and more recently, their Chinese domestic counterparts—have recognized this psychic state in the Chinese youth demographic, and increasingly, have focused on exploiting it. Future research needs to look into the points of view of marketers and advertising professionals. How do they address the issue of Chinese young people's psychological complexity? What marketing strategies will they use to evoke emotional responses among Chinese youth? The acculturation and identity crisis that Chinese young people are experiencing also are seen in young people of other global emerging markets. The analysis of young Chinese consumers' mindset and their struggle between the influence of Western consumerism and the values of their native cultural tradition, and the lessons learned in the Chinese consumer market will be applied, with appropriate modifications, to other developing markets, and other Asian markets in particular.

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