

From Comrade heroes to advertising's A list

China is one of the world's top three countries for celebrity endorsement. So how did that come about in a country founded on the joint pillars of Confucianism and socialism? *Saurabh Sharma* and *Jason Spencer* fill in the context.

1. Role models – past and present

The years between 1949 and the early 1980s occupy a very special place in the history of Chinese broadcast media. It was the time when content of mass media was dominated entirely by state-sponsored communication campaigns. Such government communication often created model military heroes, or as they were called 'Heroic and Model Servicemen' (*jun dui mo fan*). They were designed to inspire 'improved' behaviour and 'enhanced thinking' among the Chinese population. People in China have had extensive experience with the promotion of such moral and ideological 'best practices'. These communication campaigns were, and some are still, famous for the memorable messages and the distinct impression they left

in the minds of millions of Chinese. Examples range from 'Learn from Comrade Leifeng' (1940-62) to stories about Ouyang Hai (1940-63) and Wang Jie (1942-65). These personality promotion campaigns highlighted the virtues of ordinary everyday acts of service to the society and the country.

All such campaigns used the iconic charisma of one role model or another. More often than not it was supported by the larger than life image of Chairman Mao himself.

In the process of constructing a socialist society, government communication intuitively embraced what now looks like the role model culture. This has had tremendous impact on the way many Chinese think.

The post-1978 emergence of 'Socialism with



Chinese characteristics' led to the slow but steady demise of government communication campaigns that valorized the self-sacrificing communist role models. In the past couple of decades, the media market nexus has been busy creating the new consumption culture.

This new world of consumption needs its own heroes, and Chinese celebrities have come to occupy this position. These celebrities symbolize knowledge, trust and aspiration, that emerges from their demonstration of special skills, talent and fame. Commercial media loves their fame and leverages it to attract eyeballs. But in their zeal to attract the audience, more and more celebrities end up doing similar things.

Today's celebrities are surely the most logical extension of the legacy left behind by socialist heroes; and yet the new celebrities do not always match the deeper impact left behind by heroes from the socialist era.

2. Culture and popular culture: collectivism collides with individualism

Historically, China has been a collectivist society. The Confucian ideal of government assumed harmony of interest between the ruler and the ruled. The individual was naturally more disposed to adhere to than to confront, to conform rather than contest. For example until very late, there was no word for



A soldier celebrity from the People's Liberation Army in the 1960s – Lei Feng is a household name even today. He is referred to as the 'paramount heroic and model serviceman' in China. Although Lei Feng was in the army his story of heroism has little to do with the spoils in the battlefield. Instead he is loved, revered and remembered for his deeds in everyday life.



‘individualism’. Similarly, it is surprising to note that until very late there was no word in Chinese for freedom, neither in a political nor in a philosophical sense. The word *zi you*, which is still used for ‘freedom’, really means ‘to be on one’s own’, ‘to be left alone’ – i.e. it could also a negative connotation.

Historically, as the Chinese saw it, no man was equal to another: he was older or younger than another, superior to women in that he was male, or more highly placed in the state hierarchy.

Furthermore, the



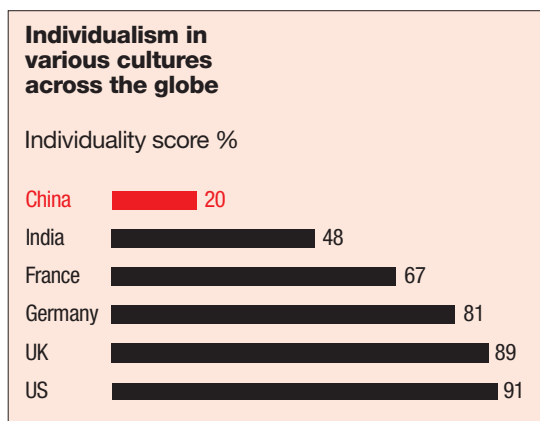
Confucian ethic that formed the framework for the social contract prescribed man’s duties but had little to say about his rights. There are examples in language that point at limited individualism. The Chinese word for everybody, for example, is *da jia*, which means



a ‘big family’. The word for country is *guo jia*, which translates into ‘home state’ – once again, it is a big family, not just strangers.

There may be many people, but all of them come together in one big cohesive familial unit. Chinese culture tends to bend towards the notion of many people not implying many voices, but one single unit.

Even some cultural researchers (Hofstede, 2001; Hus, 1979) have pointed out that the conception of ‘personality’ or ‘individuality’ is naturally weak in Chinese culture. China scores low on the global Individuality Score (see chart below). Although there are words for ‘personality’ in the language, their connotations and implications are somewhat different to Western languages. Hofstede argues that Chairman Mao’s anti-individualist, pro-collectivist ethos is in fact deeply rooted in Chinese tradition.



In this wider context, celebrities are as much aspirational role models as they are a way for people to express and experience individualism vicariously. It is a kind of restrained release of individualism – otherwise impossible in a collective society.

Compare this traditional reality with today’s socio-cultural context: the media market nexus, rising popularity of reality TV and widespread access to the internet that help the average person to express themselves. Reality TV and the internet are becoming the breeding grounds of self-styled celebrities such as the blogger Furong Jiejie.

Today, like never before, individualism and collectivism co-exist in China through different channels and across different age groups. On one side are the traditional principles of collectivism and individual restraint, and on the other hand is the new ambitious and hedonistic wave of consumption.

Together they create a dynamic tension that makes people choose different things in different contexts but often make people unsure about their choices and decisions. This offers to marketers a unique opportunity to resolve the underlying tensions by creating brand narratives that can bridge these tensions.

3. China’s search for values and beliefs

Modern Chinese society is looking for a value system. First it was Communism’s deconstruction of religion and traditional Chinese social mores that created a void. And now the new construct of a socialist market economy is rewriting the classic socialist values. This process is once again amplifying the void of belief in the society.

This has come into increased focus in the last decade, due to what Chinese academics and the media have described variously as China’s ‘moral crisis’, ‘family crisis’, ‘marriage crisis’, and ‘motherhood crisis’ (Liu, 1999). Many Chinese grapple with such questions as “what should we believe in?” Is it success? Is it fame? Is it religion? Is it money? Is it nationalism? Is it self?”

The Party state has responded to these ‘crises’, and tried to bridge the gap between what remains of the Chinese socialist value system and the changing social environment. It tries to promote a ‘people first’ principle (*yiren weiben*) and is trying to construct a ‘spiritual civilization’, a ‘new socialist core value system’ and ‘harmonious society’ (Hu, 2005). This at best has had mixed results.

The recent rise in the number of people looking for a religious belief is another case in point. In a 2007 survey by two professors at Shanghai’s East China Normal University a third of the 4,500 people interviewed described themselves as religious. If that figure is representative for the whole country then 400 million Chinese regard themselves as religious. This is a huge leap as compared to an earlier figure of 100 million and signifies a yearning among Chinese for a value system.

In the midst of such widespread social, economic and cultural flux, celebrity endorsement for brands has a bigger potential opportunity than mere awareness. Bringing alive the values that these celebrities stand for will only add more texture to the brand’s meaning in the consumer’s mind thus making the brand more unique than others.



4. Pace of market development and lack of category vocabulary

China has changed very quickly in the past 30 years. In terms of physical infrastructure, technological capability, and size and scale of business transactions, some of the key cities in China such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen, are indeed world class.

But in spite of this development, most of the modern advertising and marketing for consumer products in China has a history of only 25-30 years. Brands in many of the categories could still be targeting consumers who are buying these products for the first time. This has a huge impact on the nature of marketing communication in China. As also observed by Marieke de Mooij, “Generally, advertising in developing markets focuses on product attributes, and only when the market is developed do more sophisticated approaches emerge.”

As a developing market, where a lot has happened simultaneously, China still shows a lack of discrimination. A lot of consumption is still driven by the desire to acquire the biggest, brightest and the most popular. People are still learning to consume

and many categories and brands are still educating buyers about what the product is for, how to use it and what makes it superior.

In this context, celebrities have a vital role to play. They are a mode of perception – a shorthand for what the brand means. They give meaning to what they are being associated with and their use is a shortcut to the adoption of new concepts and habits. In a developing market with limited vocabulary for many of the new product categories, celebrities provide a bridge of familiarity with a healthy dose of aspiration.

In a single shot, they both hasten and glamorize the process of learning. This makes celebrities very powerful in their ability to help people try new things and consume with greater confidence. ■

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Faceless People and Unsung Heroes –
Imperatives for Celebrity
Advertising in China

Atticus Abstract



Upside to the downturn

Spend Shift
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In the wake of the financial crisis, John Gerzema and Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Michael d'Antonio travelled around America, discovering how consumers have revised

their values and adjusted their behaviour in a rejection of the credit-fuelled materialism that has prevailed for three decades.

The result is *Spend Shift*, a best-selling book that documents changing lifestyles that have seen many people rediscovering old-fashioned values such as self-reliance and thrift to redefine what is understood by “the good life”. And they investigate the new business models springing up around the country to cater for this shift in attitude. These range from a community-based café in Detroit to bigger companies like Ford and Zappos which have understood the change

in consumer psyche and responded to it.

Among the changes taking place, consumers are looking for value and certainty, they are turning against big corporations in favour of small enterprises, people are finding empowerment in starting their own businesses and becoming self-sufficient, and they are looking after the goods they have rather than simply going out and buying new ones. The pain that many have suffered ensures that the changes will be lasting. “We are moving from a credit to a debit society,” say the authors. “While consumption will recover, thrift is here to stay.” ■

