

Confucian/Chopsticks Marketing

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Friends have come from afar, how happy we are – an age-old Confucius saying, was revived at the recent opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics. Rejected by the early communist leaders of China, Confucianism has made a comeback in schools, businesses, and governments in China and East Asia. The topic of this special issue is meant to tease out the extent that this age-old value has influenced marketing practices worldwide.

Confucius teaching is a set of pragmatic rules that governed people's behavior and the relationships among people. These rules – which include proper living, respect of authority, desire for harmony, conservatism, contentedness, tolerance of others, order, and stability – have been retained and taught to successive generations by Chinese and East Asian parents. As a result, the Confucian doctrine that mandates honesty within families, businesses, and governments are embedded in Chinese and East Asian minds. Chinese culture also stresses fostering relationships through reciprocity, sentiment, and kinship networks; hence, a Chinese would identify him/herself as a subset of a society whose life centers on passive acceptance of fate determined by the surrounding community and nature. In contrast, a Westerner would identify him/herself as a separate entity whose life centers on self-reliance, equality, and a personally managed mode of living.

Friends are important in most businesses. Be they producers, suppliers, distributors, or consumers, and whether they are local or from afar, everyone plays a vital role in ensuring a successful business deal and a harmonious relationship. Synonymous with this business model is the use of chopsticks. Used predominantly by Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, and Vietnamese, chopsticks are held between the thumb and fingers either for picking up food from common plates or for scooping rice into the mouth. Individually, a chopstick is an essentially functionless stick. The ascendancy of chopsticks over other eating utensils is clouded by the mists of history. Confucius proclaimed that knives are for warriors, but chopsticks are for scholars. Analogous to the intricacy of eating with chopsticks, marketing effectively to East Asian consumers entails identifying and understanding local customs, traditions, values, and consumer behavior. Success also depends on how well marketers harness networks composed of government officials, religious bodies, suppliers, distributors, and consumers. A deep appreciation of local cultural values is key to Confucian/Chopsticks marketing.

The Confucian ethic is omnipresent and relevant to every aspect of family life, social gathering, and business activity. To followers of this ethic, the family is the prototype for all organizations; household heads must first show their ability to manage their own family before offering their services to companies. In parallel, some Chinese companies will not promote an employee to a supervisory position until that employee proves he/she is a filial son/daughter. Although social gatherings with siblings, neighbors, friends, and business partners may be informal, unequal interpersonal relationships are anticipated. Each attendee has his or her position and obligations

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at that gathering, and usually their focus is on politeness, friendliness, sincerity, and preservation of face. During the occasion, the time-honored traditions of paying homage to elders, giving gifts, and being humble, are cherished.

In business transactions, the Confucian ethic entails compromise and the need for flexibility, which can help harmonize people with their environment. Under the Confucian mindset, natural disasters are attributed to nature fighting against man; hence, celebrating a business deal at such times is considered inauspicious. Because doing business with a person in mourning also is considered unethical, counterparts should be respectful of the mourner and be flexible with deadlines.

We selected nine articles for this special issue that may help marketing managers improve their strategies for winning a share of the relatively untapped Asian market. These articles can be grouped into three topics: "Harmony with Consumers"; "Government, Trust and Relationship"; and "Ethical Behaviour and Negotiation".

The initial three articles fall under the "Harmony with Consumers" topic. The first article, by Cheng Lu Wang and Xiaohua Lin, is entitled "Migration of Chinese Consumption Values: Traditions, Westernization, and Cultural Renaissance." It highlights Chinese consumers' growing preference for consumption experiences with traditional values, reversing the Westernization philosophy promoted during China's initial free market experiments. Wang and Lin attribute this cultural renaissance to Chinese consumers resisting the invasion of Western culture.

In "Harmonious Norms for Global Marketing – The Chinese Way," Leila Choukroune asks two questions: (1) Is there a Confucian vision for China's marketing law and practices?" and (2) Have China's marketing norms – in particular, protection of intellectual property and advertising law – been challenged by the government's new policy to promote societal harmony? Based on her analysis of official speeches and legislative measures, Choukroune argues that the answer to both questions is "No". She concludes the current legal framework mainly draws on international influences and the socialist rule of law rather than Confucianism.

In "The Impact of Chinese Culture on Corporate Social Responsibility: The Harmony Approach," Lei Wang argues that Western conceptualizations of

CSR are ill suited for Chinese markets. As an alternative, Wang proposes a new CSR concept called the harmony approach to CSR, which incorporates Confucian and Taoist teachings for respecting nature and living people.

The middle three articles fall under the "Government, Trust and Relationship" topic. The article by Shaomin Li, Kiran Karande, and Dongsheng Zhou, is entitled "The Effect of the Governance Environment on Marketing Channel Behaviors: The Diamond Industries in the U.S., China, and Hong Kong." Li et al. propose that a country's governance environment, rather than its cultural differences, influence the way organizations conduct market exchanges. Their diamond industry example suggests that market exchanges in rule-based places like the US and Hong Kong are characterized by open marketing channels, low entry barriers, high quality and readily accessible public information, and reliance on public rules for dispute resolution. Seemingly, the opposite prevails in relation-based places like China.

In "Confucius, Cars and Big Government: An Examination of the Impact of Government Involvement in Business Enterprises on Consumer Decision Making in the Context of Confucianism," David Ackerman et al. examine the effects of Confucianism on consumer trust of government involvement with products and company brands. Based on their survey of 1440 Chinese automobile consumers, Ackerman et al. posit that Chinese consumers prefer the functional attributes of products from government-involved businesses. They also suggest that Chinese businesses may benefit from government involvement, as it fosters higher consumer trust and purchase intention.

"Does Relationship Quality Matter in Consumer Ethical Decision Making: Evidence from China," by Zhiqiang Liu et al., explores the connection between Chinese consumers' ethical beliefs and their unethical behaviors. Results based on a sample of 290 Chinese consumers support (1) a linear logic between consumers' ethical beliefs and unethical behaviors and (2) a moderating effect of relationship quality on unethical behaviors (e.g., consumers are less likely to act unethically if they have a close relationship with the seller).

The final three articles fall under the "Ethical Behaviour and Negotiation" topic. The article by Nick Lee et al., is entitled "A Study of the Attitudes

toward Unethical Selling amongst Chinese Salespeople.” Based on their query of 69 Chinese sales executives, the authors conclude that Chinese salespeople, relative to their US counterparts, are more favorably predisposed to unethical selling behavior. The reason proposed for the relative acceptance of such behavior: pressures caused by the recent emphasis on profit and competition in Chinese market socialism.

The article by Yunxia Zhu is entitled “Confucian Ethics Exhibited in the Discourse of Chinese Marketing Communication.” Zhu uses a discourse approach to explore the application of Confucian ethics in Chinese Expo invitations. Her results suggest that ethics such as *guanxi*, interdependence, harmony, and *mianzi* underpin Chinese Expo and trade fairs advertising.

In “Chinese Negotiators’ Subjective Variations in Intercultural Negotiations,” Clyde Warden and Judy Chen explore how Chinese negotiators modify their negotiating tactics when confronting US and Japanese counterparts. Results show that negotiators with a Chinese value background are more accommodating of distant cultures than near cultures, and more attentive to sacrificing self-interest when it means saving face for their counterparts.

In total, these nine articles reveal the complexity of understanding Confucianism in marketing. Anal-

ogous to eating with chopsticks, effective marketing in Asia requires a deep understanding of the local culture. To this end, these articles should extend that understanding and provide a better backdrop for consumer-related research and managerial decisions.

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