Journal of Macromarketing
30(3) 210-221

DOI: 10.1177/0276146709352219
http://jmmk.sagepub.com

A Brief History of Branding in China

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Abstract

In this article, the authors explore whether brands as they currently conceive of them existed in premodernity. They trace branding practices in China from 2700 BC to contemporary times and demonstrate that China has had a sophisticated brand infrastructure with a continuous history that has no known correspondence in any other part of the world. They review previous research on the history of branding and create a systematic overview of what is currently known about branding throughout history. From an historical analysis of branding practices and consumer culture in China, they find that premodern brands were important agents of consumer culture as early as the Song dynasty (960–1127). In China, brands emerged outside of a capitalist context and served primarily social functions. They chronicle the consumer culture of the time in China, and how brands developed out of it, demonstrating that brands can develop in varying ways.

Keywords

brands, consumer culture, history, China

Brands have assumed important roles in contemporary consumer cultures, serving as key agents in structuring marketplace interactions and social life (Askegaard 2006; Lury 2004). To understand the evolution of consumer cultures, and how and why brands came to be such important symbols, it is necessary to understand how brands and branding activities have emerged throughout human history (Koehn 2001). Inquiry into the history of branding practices suggests that such activities have been occurring for at least 9,000 years. In a recent article on branding practices in Mesopotamia, Wengrow (2008) provides compelling archeological evidence that product seals, a branding system used in the urban revolution in fourth century BC were being used to signal quality control, authenticity, and ownership to consumers, all characteristics of modern brands. Furthermore, in China in 2700 BC, pottery was marked with the manufacturer's identity (Greenberg 1951), and complete brands, with text and symbolic logos, have been traced to the Song Dynasty (960–1127); (Wang 2008; Zuo 1999).

Brands have a long and storied history that is starting to be reflected in branding scholarship (e.g., Moore and Reid 2008). Branding as a practice is most often traced to ancient Roman times when shopkeepers used pictures to indicate the specialty of their store, creating a shorthand device for potential customers (de Chernatony and McDonald 2003). While recognizing that branding activities took place in Rome, scholars generally claim that it was not until modernity that brands became important agents in marketplace interactions (e.g., Moor 2007). For instance, Aaker (1991, 7) writes that "although brands have long had a role in commerce, it was not until the twentieth century that branding and brand associations became so central to competitors. In fact, a distinguishing characteristic of modern marketing has been its focus upon the creation of differentiated brands."

Holt (2006, 299) argues that "it wasn't until the late 19th-century—when American hawkers of patent medicines began using their brands to promote not only physical remedies but also therapeutic salves for social ailments—when brands became important agents in what the authors now understand as consumer society." Thus, the emergence of brands as an important marketplace agent tends to be designated to modern Western societies (Low and Fullerton 1994). As new evidence emerges from various civilizations from around the world, one can begin to demonstrate this has happened earlier. The development of marketing as a practice has been shown to be much older than previously thought (Fullerton 1988), and in this article the author's suggest the same is true for the origin of branding practices by introducing a history of brands in China wherein symbolic brands were in use from 960 AD onward.

Holt (2008) suggests that contemporary brands are distinguished from older branding practices by virtue of being mediated by mass culture, providing heuristic shortcuts for consumers, being key tools in consumer identity construction, exploiting cultural tensions, and relying on "magic" to persuade

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consumers of the product's efficacy. These characteristics can transform brands into agents of consumer culture. In this article, the authors trace the history of branding in China and demonstrate that brands were being used as important agents of consumer culture before the advent of modernity (Cochran 2006) and did indeed hold powerful cultural symbolism (Wengrow 2008), which suggests there may be more parallels between premodern and modern brands than currently known. Moore and Reid (2008) refer to pre-twentieth-century brands as protobrands and suggest they served logistical and informational purposes rather than symbolic functions. In this article, the authors modify the conceptualization of Moore and Reid (2008) by demonstrating that premodern brands have image characteristics beyond functional ones.

In this article, the authors' historical analysis describes how the branding system that developed is based on market evolution in Imperial China. This lends support to the contention that branding systems are culturally constructed and situated (Wengrow 2008). For example, Holt (2002) argues that the modern branding system developed through a focus on cultural engineering, with managers shepherding the development of new brands using scientific and psychological branding principles. In contrast, brand development in China, because it was not related to capitalism and served a more social function, developed through an alternate system, where consumers and the government were also involved in the brand development processes. Thus, there can be a multiplicity of ways brands can evolve (Miller 2008), and these evolve based on common understanding and practices. Documenting how this process occurred in the Chinese context allows us to clarify the brand concept and demonstrate how varying types of branding systems can emerge.

In the next section, the authors summarize the research to date on the history of branding practices. They then provide a brief overview of consumer culture throughout Chinese history and outline their methodology. From there, they chronicle the alternate ways in which brands were conceptualized, developed, and used in the Chinese context. Branding in Imperial China is then specifically investigated, followed by its influence on post-Imperial branding. Finally, a discussion follows regarding the implications of brands as social signifiers and as representing an alternate branding system.

History of Branding Practices

Until recently, branding practices have most commonly been traced to ancient Greek and Roman times (e.g., de Chernatony and McDonald 2003). Twede (2002) chronicles how the shape of amphorae, ceramic vessels used to ship liquid products throughout the Mediterranean from 1500 BC to 500 AD, served the branding functions of product identification and differentiation. In Iron Age Greece (825–336 BC), mottos on pottery were used to give information and portray an image to the consumer (Moore and Reid 2008). Perkins (2000) points out that some of the Roman olive oil amphorae had identifying stamps on them circa first to third century AD. These identifying stamps were seen on pottery at this time as well (Perkins 2000).

However, the emergence of brands goes back much further in history, as indicated in table 1. For example, the Harrappan civilization (2250–2000 BC), located in modern day India, used seals with animal and geometric motifs for branding purposes (Moore and Reid 2008). Table 1 includes accounts of inquiries such as this into the history of branding in various parts of the world and time periods and chronicles brand development over time and place. The table should not be considered a complete representation of branding activities throughout human history but rather an account of what has currently been explored. As scholars continue to study the history of branding practices, a more complete picture of the evolution of brands in different parts of the world throughout history should emerge.

The oldest branding practices found to date have been traced to the seventh century BC (Wengrow 2008). Through an extensive analysis of archaeological artefacts, Wengrow (2008) provides evidence of commodity branding in Mesopotamia (present day Iraq). The branding activities occurring during this time were sealing practices, with the seals acting as marks of quality and provenance. The seals also linked the commodities to central cultural concerns of the time. Wengrow (2008) argues that the standardization of these sealing practices formed the basis of a brand economy. This is because the seals helped to generate demand, not just respond to it by providing added value. He demonstrates that branding is specific neither to modernity nor to capitalist societies.

Similarly, Richardson (2008) describes how conspicuous characteristics of products were used as brands during the late Middle Ages in Europe (thirteenth to sixteenth century). These characteristics fulfilled many of the same functions as brand names do today by identifying the maker but more importantly by thwarting counterfeiting. Because no trademark law existed at the time, the name or place of origin stamps could readily be counterfeited. Using a distinct weave in fabric or pewter that resonated at a particular pitch was the only way to ensure authenticity. This is similar to the conspicuous characteristics of copper in Cyprus during the late Bronze Age (1500–1000 BC) and purple dyed garments from Phoenicia (1000–500 BC), in that the characteristics of the products themselves functioned as a brand (Moore and Reid 2008). The conspicuous characteristics in Medieval Europe were conceived and enforced by manufacturing guilds and Richardson (2008) contents that these guilds served as branding mechanisms. The guilds took on the cost and management of creating and maintaining reputations. Thus, Richardson also demonstrates branding practices outside of modernity and capitalism.

In this article, the authors add to the above burgeoning research stream by presenting evidence of brands, which existed in premodern China, and demonstrate how these brands went beyond being signifying marks. These brands were woven into the culture, and possessed social power, both of which are characteristics mentioned by Holt (2008) that brands need to possess to act as agents of consumer culture. Brands in premodern China were able to achieve this due to some specific characteristics of the material culture of the time, detailed next.

Table 1. Evidence of Branding Practices Throughout History

Time period	Region	Branding practices	Source
Seventh to third century BC	Mesopotamia	Sealing practices	Wengrow 2008
3000 BC	Egypt	Commodity labeling	Wengrow 2008
2700 BC	China	Marks of origin on pottery	Greenberg 1951
2250–2000 BC	Harrapan (present day India)	Sealing practices, indicating how goods were received, stored, and processed and identifying the sender	Moore and Reid 2008
2000–1500 BC, Shang Dynasty	China	"Zu" family crests used to indicate quality	Moore and Reid 2008
1500–1000 BC	Cyprus	Quality of copper as sign of origin	Moore and Reid 2008
1300 BC	Hindustan (present day India)	Picture symbols on merchandise	Greenberg 1951
1000–500 BC	Phoenicia	Uniquely dyed garments	Moore and Reid 2008
825–326 BC	Greece	Inscription of mottos on pottery to portray an image to the buyer	Moore and Reid 2008
221–206 BC, Qin Dynasty	China	Stamp made of mud or ceramics	Ma 2007
206 BC–200 AD, Han Dynasty	China	Family and place names used to delineate product origin, paper advertisements	Kaufman 1987; Ma 2007
618–906 AD, Tang Dynasty	China	Government imposed product branding	Ma 2007
960–1279 AD, Song Dynasty	China	Product labels, complete brand (text and symbolic logo), print advertising	Hamilton and Lai 1989; Wang 2008; Zuo 1999
27 BC–1453 AD	Rome	Name inscription in pottery and oil lamps, retail signs	Mollerup 1999; Diamond 1975; Perkins 2000
1500 BC–500 AD	Greece and Rome	Distinctive amphorae	Perkins 2000; Twede 2002
1368–1644 AD, Ming dynasty	China	Identifying labels, place branding, consumer cocreation	Hamilton and Lai 1989; this study
Thirteenth to sixteenth century, Middle Ages	Europe	Conspicuous product characteristics	Richardson 2008
1644–1911, Qing Dynasty	China	Retail signs, symbolic brands, trademark protection, carefully managed company image, development of brand concepts: baoji, hao, lei, gongpin	Bolu 2002; Cochran 2006; Wang 2008; Ma 2007; Hamilton and Lai 1989
1772–	England	Name inscription in pottery, segmentation, advertising, sales force	Koehn 2001; McKendrick, Brewer, and Plumb 1982
1870–	United States	National brand, imaginative advertising, aggressive promotion, carefully managed company image, organized sales force	Koehn 2001; Low and Fullerton 1994; Strasser 1989

Material Culture and Consumerism in Historical Context in China

> . . . [A] highly commoditized economy can exist independently of capitalism in any one of a number of sophisticated pre-modern societies, of which the pre-modern societies of Asia are perhaps the classic example. (Clunas 1991, 116)

As Clunas (1991) alludes to above, Imperial China had a sophisticated marketplace economy from a very early date. Stretching back as far as the Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD), Chinese society has been heavily dependent on trade (Kaufman 1987). China has pioneered a rich, consumer-focused material culture since at least the Song Dynasty (960–1127); (Adshead 1997). During this time, Chinese society developed toward a consumerist culture, where a high level of consumption was attainable for a wide variety of ordinary consumers not just the elite. A consumerist culture implies a society in which consumers formulate their goals in life partly through acquiring goods that are not needed for subsistence (Stearns 2001). Adshead (1997, 24) describes consumerism as, "... more than consumption. It is consumption at a high level and on the basis of particular scales of values." A consumer economy, where focus shifted from individual patrons toward consumer classes, developed several hundred years earlier in China than in England, for example (Hamilton and Lai 1989). This existence of consumer classes, who are not necessarily the elite, is central to the existence of a consumer society (McKendrick, Brewer, and Plumb 1982).

In late Imperial China, which encompasses the time period from 1368 to 1911, a consumerist society was well established, and Clunas (1991) suggests that Imperial consumer culture reached its peak during the Ming dynasty, more specifically in the time period 1426–1566. During this time, gaining and maintaining status through consumption was a common preoccupation, where consumers used material symbols to manifest their social status (Hamilton and Lai 1989). Because the focus on material goods among a wide swath of society was so high

during this period, the consumer culture has even been referred to as vulgar. For example, Brook (1998) writes that, ''Commentators of the mid-Ming [mid 1500s] remark on the decreasing distance between the urban world of markets and traders and the rural world of agricultural production, worrying about the invasive expansion of the former and the corruption of the latter.'' Indeed, the Ming period is the only period in Imperial Chinese history that merchants were able to climb up the rung of Confucian society, in which they were traditionally at the bottom, and gain entry in gentry circles (Rawski 1985). Indeed, the merchants rose high enough during the Ming to see them engaging in traditionally elite consumption patterns such as book collecting, patronage of the arts, and creating elaborate gardens and mansions (Rawski 1985).

There is even a suggestion at this time that consumerism may be good for society, as illustrated by a magistrate in the 1540s who declares that, ''the people gain advantage from the circulation of commodities'' (Brook 1998, 135). Rawski (1985) argues that increased participation in marketplace exchange at this time opened broader horizons for peasants, and for the first time social mobility was possible. In the sixteenth century, peasants and artisans produced for mass markets where the primary consumers were the administrative and landowning elite (Hamilton 2006). Along with increased social mobility came increased social differentiation and tension as well, which is why Hamilton and Lai (1989) argue brands flourished at this time: to help in communicating a family's place in society, as it was no longer guaranteed by birth rights only. Because elite status was not hereditary in Imperial China, elite consumers needed to consume conspicuously to demonstrate their social position (Hamilton 2006).

If by a consumer culture the authors imply a social system that is mediated through markets and where consumption of commodities dominates social reproduction (Slater 1997), then it seems there was a flourishing consumer society in China ahead of its appearance in Europe. For instance, Clunas (1991, 148) argues that, ''. . . the distinctly European development of a capitalist society may well have to be explained at a level deeper than that of a special attitude to material culture and manufactured things.'' An important characteristic of this consumer society, especially during the Ming period, was that consumers routinely made informed distinctions about the kinds of products they would buy in the marketplace through the use of brands (Hamilton and Lai 1989). Product differentiation allowed consumers to buy according to their means, status, and aspirations for the future. As Hamilton and Lai (1989) argue, this is the mark of a consumer society. They now turn to investigating how this consumer society led to the development of brands.

Method

This article now turns to investigating how this consumer society outlines the role of brands throughout Chinese history using interpretive analyses (Witkowski and Jones 2006). The research examines branding as a practice in Imperial China, representing a case history of a specific marketing practice. Historical research in marketing has played an integral role in the development of marketing as a discipline (Jones and Monieson 1990). For example, Fullerton (1988) and Jones and Richardson (2007) challenge the myth of the marketing revolution (Keith 1960) by investigating, among other sources, Canadian trade journals that show a marketing orientation existed during the period known as the production era. This article takes a similar critical approach to understanding the origin of branding.

The authors' examination of the origin of branding in China is based on a synthesis of a variety of secondary data sources published in both Chinese and English. This literature addresses the history of material culture and consumer culture in China covering the period from the Han Dynasty to contemporary times. The data sources the authors synthesize in this research are generally published outside the field of marketing. Most of the secondary sources published in Chinese reproduce the brands they use in their analysis, so they are able to examine the complete textual and visual elements of the brands they study. Chinese native-speaking graduate students fully familiar with the goals of this research translated the Chinese data sources into English. As Witkowski and Jones (2006) describe, fresh readings of historical research in fields outside of marketing can generate significant contributions to the literature on marketing history.

The authors triangulate sources to identify patterns in the data (Witkowski and Jones 2006). To study the meaning of brands, a semiotic approach is taken, in which both the textual and the visual elements of the brand are analyzed (Mick et al. 2004). This analysis is used to describe the uses and symbolic meanings Chinese brands have had and their connection to social systems and cultural contexts, in line with recommendations from Fullerton (1988) to integrate historical analysis with the social and cultural systems of the time. This follows in the tradition of analyzing visual mediums to understand historical consumer cultures, such as decoding Italian Renaissance art to gain insights into Renaissance consumer culture (Schroeder and Borgerson 2002).

The Development of the Concept of Brands in China

In China, ''zu'' family crests were used on wares to indicate quality as far back as the Shang dynasty (2000–1500 BC); (Moore and Reid 2008). Family names and place names stamped on wares to delineate their origin were common from the Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD) onward, and the first recorded complete, symbolic brand was developed in the Song Dynasty (960–1127); (Zuo 1999): the white rabbit, which is expanded on below. Brands have been commonplace throughout Chinese history despite the absence of a capitalist economy, which did not emerge there until the late twentieth century (Hamilton 2006). In China, brands have not developed solely as an instrument of commerce but rather have served a variety of social purposes ranging from signifying an affiliation with

the Imperial Palace (Zuo 1999) to demonstrating the worth of a family name (Hamilton and Lai 1989). Brands in Imperial China were also used as aids in marketing products, as opposed to a means to regulate the activities of merchants, as was the case in medieval Europe (Hamilton and Lai 1989). Table 1 summarizes the major branding developments in various dynasties.

Historians studying consumption in late Imperial China, specifically the Ming and Qing dynasties, have found that brands were commonly available and used as important means for status seeking during this time. In particular, brands were used by consumers to find their place in a society characterized by fluid social structures (Hamilton and Lai 1989).

Moreover, historically, the marketplace and people involved in it have never been held in high social regard. While Chinese society has long been a highly commoditized society, in the Confucian social hierarchy, merchants were ranked last, below scholars, farmers, and craftsmen (Stockman 1992). In the Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD), for example, merchants were able to acquire considerable wealth, but they were not able to rise up in social status above scholars, farmers, or artisans (Kaufman 1987). Imperial governments saw marketing activities as a source of disorder and immorality, which could introduce a disturbing element of status inconsistency into the social hierarchy (Stockman 1992). As previously described, brands were important for their social value in a time of fluid social structures, yet marketing as a practice was frowned upon and considered to have negative effects on society.

A variety of terms are used to encompass the Western conception of brands. Stern (2006) points out that in its oldest usage in the West, brand was a synonym for sword in the English epic poem Beowulf (circa 1000 AD). She also notes brand was used as a metaphor for the imprint that a beloved knight makes on a woman's heart in the poem *Albion's England* (circa 1600). This notion of an imprint is most clearly represented in the widely held definition of a brand as "a name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competition" (Keller 2008, 2). The essence of this definition is that any visual or textual element that serves to make an object unique and distinct from others is a brand.

At least four Chinese terms relate to this definition. The oldest terms for brands include *biaoji* and *hao*, representing two distinct cultural categories. In the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), brands occurred in the form of biaoji, which identified the name of the producer or the area of production of the seller, and could be a firm or group of merchants (Hamilton and Lai 1989). Hao is the brand of a retail outlet, which has to have a long history and a great reputation, as well as represent the spirit of Chinese culture and maintain the social values of China. Hao is first a cultural concept and was named after a place, people, legend, or image of the Chinese nation (Ma 2007). The cultural essence of hao includes honest and fair values, contribution to public life, and honest and credible business ethics. Examples of Qing dynasty hao include Pian Yi Fang, a roast duck restaurant in Beijing (Bolu 2002), and the Tong Ren Tang medicine store (Wang 2007), both of which are prominent retail brands today.

During the Qing dynasty, biaoji and hao were used for a number of different commodities such as medicine, needles, writing paper, and clothing, and typically the same brand name was used for the producer's or seller's entire product portfolio. Biaoji and hao were not necessarily used separately but could be used in conjunction for one product, sometimes also in conjunction with a *lei*, which was a quality grade for commodities such as tea, rice, and liquor (Hamilton and Lai 1989).

Another concept that had a symbolic function was *gongpin*, referring to objects such as clothes, shoes, combs, medicines, and food that were of such premium quality that they were given as tribute to the emperor (Yang 1987). Gongpin objects are not brands, as they were not used in an exchange of objects, but rather used as distinction after the exchange between the manufacturer and the Imperial Palace had already taken place. In this way, gongpin status functioned solely as a distinguisher of image for each manufacturer's perceived quality (Yang 1987). Products that were given as gongpin were not intended to be sold to ordinary consumers, as they were reserved for the emperor. However, craftsmen who were suppliers of gongpin would offer similar products to ordinary consumers. Typically consumers would know through word-of-mouth which craftsmen were suppliers of gongpin. While the products that gongpin manufacturers made for regular consumers were different from those made for the emperor, their gongpin status exhibited a halo effect and served to differentiate them from competitors (Yang 1987). The use of gongpin is similar to the stamps given to official purveyors to the royal families all throughout Europe, which has been occurring since the twelfth century (Heald 1989).

Considerably more recent terms that convey the concept of brand are *paizi* and *pinpai* (Wang 2007). These terms refer to modern brands and came into use during the late Qing dynasty in 1904 when brands began to have a legal status. The informal term paizi is used more often in spoken language, but in written language the more formal pinpai is used as the equivalent to the English word brand (Xin Hua Dictionary Online 2008). Both terms refer to the names and visual imagery of modern products such as motorcycles, cars, cell phones, and refrigerators. Heritage brands such as Wang Mazi scissors, a very well-known biaoji established in 1651, are typically not considered to be a paizi or a pinpai by contemporary Chinese consumers, although many biaoji and hao are now registered as trademarks and have the same legal status as modern brands (Wang 2007).

The existence of these varied terms, and the concepts they embody, demonstrate that the many different meanings of a brand to the Chinese (quality signal, location and family signal, formal and informal). In comparison, the Western conception of a brand is consistent, no matter how and in what way its elements identify and differentiate. Most importantly, the four primary terms for brands that are described above represent different cultural categories that are used to organize the marketplace.

The Emergence of Brands in Imperial China

If brands did not develop as a precursor to or a result of capitalism, then what is the explanation for the development

of brands in China? The concept of branding has a long, storied, and sometimes complex history in China. If a brand is defined as a signifier that serves to identify a product and to differentiate it, from its competitors (Davies and Chun 2003; Keller 2008; Stern 2006), the first evidence of this occurring takes place circa 2700 BC, in the form of stamps on pottery (Greenberg 1951). In the Shang dynasty (2000–1500 BC), "zu" family crests were used to indicate origin and quality (Moore and Reid 2008). Stamps on pottery continued through the Qin Dynasty (221–206 BC), where brands took the form of a stamp made of mud or ceramics, which was used to demonstrate the credibility of the seller (Ma 2007). In the Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD), family names or place names stamped on wares are used to delineate their origin. For example, evidence shows that certain types of alcohol and arrows were stamped with their maker's names (Zuo 1999). The Chinese invented printing with movable type during the Han Dynasty, followed quickly by the commercial use of printed paper. Shortly after that, the first paper advertisements with printed words and pictures emerged during the latter part of this dynasty (Ma 2007).

In the Tang Dynasty (618–906), the government began to develop regulations stipulating that products be stamped with the producers' names before going to market. The government was able to enforce this policy and lawsuits were filed when manufacturers did not comply (Zuo 1999). It is interesting to note that the impetus to branding during this time period was not coming from the manufacturers themselves as a way to differentiate their products from competitors or to be able to charge a price premium based on their superior quality. Rather, the government imposed the branding process on manufacturers to safeguard consumers by ensuring acceptable quality levels. Branding regulation was connected to the Imperial Palace. Having gongpin status was a very important characteristic to consumers, and the government wanted Imperial Palace suppliers to have a standardized way of displaying this so consumers could know they were getting the highest available quality level (Ma 2007). Note that although the reasons for doing so are different today, the Chinese government still actively pushes and supports companies it has identified as having strong potential in the marketplace to pursue a strong branding strategy (Barboza 2005).

The Song Dynasty (960–1127) marked a turning point in the level of branding sophistication. Branding as a practice was mature by now. Brands were often used as a signal of good wishes from a manufacturer to their customers, as a way to increase customer satisfaction (Ma 2007). In addition, brand elements moved beyond just a place or person name and began incorporating pictures along with names and also became more abstract or symbolic. For example, what is considered the earliest surviving complete brand in the world, the white rabbit (Hamilton and Lai 1989), which is now displayed in the Museum of Chinese History, was developed in the Shandong province during this period (see figure 1).

The white rabbit brand is for sewing needles, an important product category in China at that time (Zuo 1999). The needle manufacturer had a rabbit made of stone in front of the shop

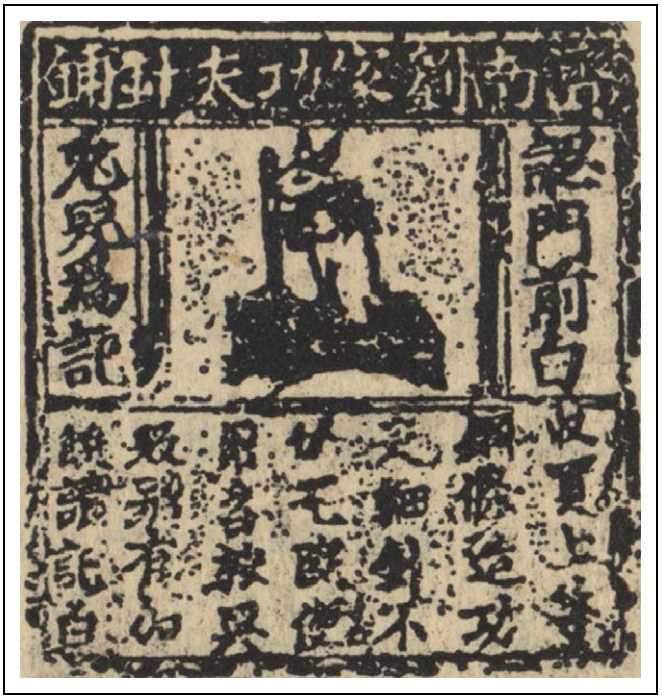

Figure 1. White rabbit, earliest documented complete brand in the world, Song Dynasty (960–1127).

and used this image to represent the brand. The rabbit that is depicted in the brand is crushing herbs using a pestle (Ma 2007). The owner's store name, *JINAN LIU JIA GONG FU ZHEN PU*, is displayed on top of the rabbit and means "the Liu family's good needles store in Jinan." On the two sides of the rabbit, the text reads "use the white rabbit that is in front of the door as recognition." Below the rabbit is text describing that the brand uses excellent steel in the manufacturing process, that the needles are easy to use, and that special discounts are available for retailers. The white rabbit brand was printed on paper that was used as packaging for the needles (Ma 2007). These brand elements illustrate the advanced knowledge about brand design and usage during the Song dynasty (Wang 2008).

The white rabbit that is depicted in the image is not just a rabbit but an important symbol that was favored by local people (Zuo 1999). Because the primary target market for the needles was women with limited literacy, the rabbit was an important symbol that could facilitate brand recognition. Additionally, the white rabbit comes from a very well-known Chinese legend dating from the Xia and Shang Dynasties (2000–1066 BC), where it is said that long ago there lived a famous archer, Hou Yi, who was able to slay all the ferocious beasts of the day. Once, while he was away on a mission for the Emperor, Hou Yi's wife, Chang E—a beautiful but mischievous woman—drank the elixir of immortality, which Hou Yi kept hidden in their house. Chang E then ascended to the Moon, where she and her white rabbit became the embodiment of "yin" feminine principles (Werner 1994/1922). With the connection between the white rabbit and feminine energy, this image would appeal

to the target market. Thus, the white rabbit image was chosen for its symbolic and mythic properties, a hallmark of modern branding, and the use of the white rabbit image demonstrates the magical persuasive qualities that brands could take on in Imperial China.

In addition to the white rabbit, one of the most famous older Chinese brands is Tong Ren Tang, a brand of traditional Chinese medicine that is currently a Chinese superbrand (Wang 2008). Tong Ren Tang was established in 1669 (Qing Dynasty, 1644–1911) by the honored royal doctor Xianyang Le (Ma 2007). The brand was the sole supplier of medicine to the Imperial Palace (Bolu 2002) and is the oldest surviving brand name for traditional Chinese medicine, a product category that has its origins in antiquity (Ma 2007, Wang 2007). See figure 2 for a visual image of the brand. The three characters in the middle depict the characters for Tong Ren Tang, which roughly means to help people for good public order (Bolu 2002). The characters have been written in calligraphy by a famous artist named Gong Qi, which lends status to the brand. The two images on the side are stylized dragons that resemble herb leaves. The dragons represent the connection to the Imperial Palace and the similarity to herb leaves reinforces the medicinal focus of the brand. Both of these symbols also reinforce the connection to the essence of Chinese culture. On the very top of the logo, there is a pearl, which symbolizes the high value of the medicine. Similar to the white rabbit, the aesthetics of the Tong Ren Tang brand are highly symbolic, and Wang (2008) describes the brand as a coexistence of the poetic and the commercial.

The Tong Ren Tang brand managers used their official connections to a much greater degree than their rivals to gain advantages for the brand, which was one of the reasons the brand was able to rise to prominence and remain there for such a long period of time (Cochran 2006). The brand was very closely managed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in terms of aggressive trademark protection and limiting franchise opportunities (Cochran 2006). Today, the brand is lauded for appealing to Chinese consumers not through Western means but rather by using traditional Chinese marketing and branding strategies, such as keeping the retail design of the stores in the old-fashioned style (Cochran 2006). The brand is now available in eighteen countries around the world and is a registered trademark in more than fifty countries (Ma 2007).

The white rabbit and Tong Ren Tang brands represent pioneering cases of differentiated and symbolic brands. The existence of these brands provides support to the contention that a consumer society in which symbolism played a significant role in consumption existed in Imperial China.

Alternate Forms of Brand Development

Brands proliferated during the Ming dynasty (1426–1566) and many of them related to place names (Hamilton and Lai 1989). While these place names were not sophisticated brands using abstract symbols in the way the white rabbit brand did, they

Figure 2. Tong Ren Tang, traditional chinese medicine brand, from the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911).

oftentimes developed when a town would become widely associated with the manufacturing of a particular product. The way this happened was primarily through consumers' word of mouth over an extended time period. When a critical mass of consumers had accumulated positive experience with a particular product from a place such as a town or a region, a positive impression about the place and its manufacturing capability emerged in the marketplace. This process is similar to branding practices in the Middle Ages in Europe, where place names would eventually become generic names for products (Richardson 2008).

This happened in China for example with the liquor brand Mao Tai (Yang and Zhang 1999). Manufacturers or sellers did not necessarily initiate the place name brand. Instead consumers linked the product with the name of the place and established the place brand in the marketplace. Place branding also happened with combs made in the Changzhou region, dating back to the Jin Dynasty (265–420; Changzhou's Learning and Literature Committee 2004). Changzhou had multiple manufacturers of combs, and their products were perceived to be of high quality. Over time, combs made in Changzhou gained a reputation all over China and became known as Changzhou combs (Changzhou's Learning and Literature Committee 2004). They were given as tribute to Emperor Huangxu during the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) and thus became gongpin. This prominent supplier to the emperor boosted the reputation of the combs even higher and from then on the combs from Changzhou were known as the Royal Comb, as they still are today. See figure 3 for a depiction of Changzhou combs.

The Changzhou comb illustrates that place names in China became well known not because of the manufacturer's strategic decision to brand the product with the name of the place of

origin. This suggests that in the absence of brands that distinguish one manufacturer from another, consumers can designate the place of origin as the brand that then serves to differentiate the product. It has been demonstrated, that this process took place in China as well as in Medieval Europe (Richardson 2008).

In addition to these place name brands, evidence indicates significant consumer-driven word-of-mouth promotion of brands during the Ming Dynasty. Around 1426–1435, this was the case for a number of brands such as Liu Bi Ju pickled vegetables and Sheng Xi Fu hats (Zuo 1999). Although brands were quite prevalent in China by this time, little marketing supported these brands, probably because marketing activities were looked down upon in this Confucian society as mentioned earlier. Thus, consumers took on the role of promoting the brands via word of mouth. This effort was very successful, and these brands rose to national prominence. Indeed, Liu Bi Ju and Sheng Xi Fu are still famous brands in China today, which means that they are among the oldest brands that are still in commercial use in the world today.

Historical Influence on Postimperial Chinese Branding

The above brief description of the long history of consumer culture and branding in China demonstrates that the marketplace is not just now becoming a consumer society driven by symbolic brand consumption, as is so often argued both in the popular press and in the academic literature (Davis 2000). Cochran (2000) and Wang (2008) point out that, contrary to the popular notion of a new revolution in consumption in China, current Chinese consumer culture bears a striking resemblances to that before 1949.

For example, contemporary Chinese consumers tend to exhibit national patriotism in their brand preferences (e.g., Klein, Ettenson, and Morris 1998). This consumer ethnocentrism has cultural and historical explanations. Although China was involved in considerable exchange with the West throughout history, most Western goods were rejected or resisted prior the twentieth century (Zhao and Belk 2008a). Consumer ethnocentrism can be linked to the use of antiforeign brand campaigns that many Chinese brands undertook during the early twentieth century. The Imperial system came to an end in 1911 when the Republicans came to power. One of their stated goals was to rid China of the foreigners—primarily Europeans and Japanese—who had arrived during the past 100 years or so. During the Republican period, which lasted until Chairman Mao came to power in 1949, brands commonly reminded consumers to "think of their own country" and "to buy domestic products" (Cochran 2000). For instance, an ad for Yapuer light bulbs (Zuo 1999, 41) urged consumers to "Please use domestic product."

Besides such general advocacy of domestic products, some brands took advantage of the considerable anti-Japanese sentiment among the Chinese population that was caused by the Sino-Japanese war (1931–1945); (Cochran 2000). The wool brand Diyang, whose meaning implies "resist foreign," is an example of a brand that was promoted as an anti-Japan brand. The brand was intensively promoted during the war and became widely known among consumers not just as a brand for knitting wool but more importantly as a symbol of the time when everyone was against foreigners in general and Japanese in particular (Zuo 1999). Another war-time brand was 918, which refers to the day (September 18, 1931) when Japan began the invasion of China. The 918 brand of cigarettes was positioned as an anti-Japan brand and used Zhang Xueliang, a well-known general belonging to the Kuomintang party, as an endorser for the brand (see figure 4; Zuo 1999, 35). This is one of the first instances of celebrity endorsement in modern branding.

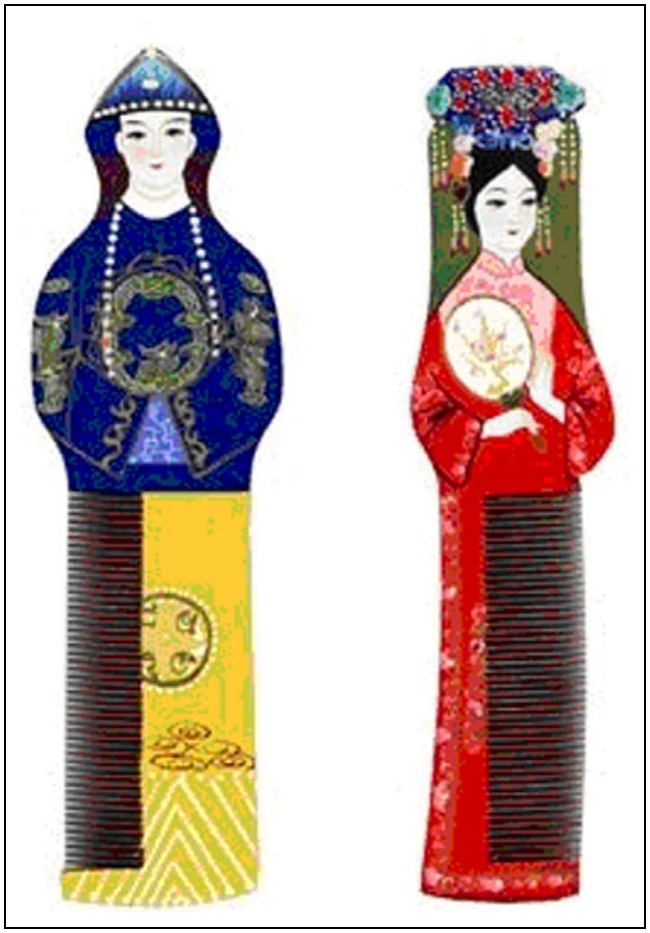

Figure 3. Contemporary Changzhou combs, which originated in the Jin Dynasty (265–420).

The historical accounts examined in this article demonstrate that China has a long history as a consumerist society, where large groups of consumers have been involved with brands. Wang (2008) argues that many of today's successful Chinese brands, such as Haier and Lenovo, engage in "marketing with Chinese characteristics," and this way of managing brand activity stems from China's long history of market orientation.

Yet consumerism was discouraged after 1949 for almost 30 years under the leadership of Mao Zedong, who defeated the

Figure 4. General Zhang Xueliang was a celebrity endorser for the antiforeign cigarette brand 918, 1931.

Republicans to usher in communism to China. During the Cultural Revolution, the communist-led government banned brands that used foreign symbolism, such as Hadamen cigarettes, or brands that discriminated against women (Stearns 2001; Zuo 1999). Although the communist movement constituted a great reversal of consumerism in China (Stearns 2001), there is evidence that consumerism was not entirely suppressed during Mao's leadership. While many department stores were taken over by the state, many brands were allowed to continue to operate in the marketplace (Zuo 1999). For instance, the liquor brand Mao Tai, established in 135 BC, became an important brand in the formation of the Peoples Republic of China, where Mao Tai was used as the official liquor during the banquet celebrating the advent of the republic (Yang and Zhang 1999). Mao Tai was subsequently used as an icebreaker when President Nixon and Mao Zedong met in China to resume diplomatic relations in 1972. Mao Tai liquor is a preferred liquor brand of Chinese consumers and was ranked as the ninth most valuable brand in China in 2007 (Interbrand 2007).

As the government changed its economic policies under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping in the late seventies, the consumer society has quickly regained its strength. From a period with ambivalent attitudes toward consumption in the 1980s, the communist party has since downplayed socialist ideology to instead emphasize nationalism, where pride in China is now equal to pride in Chinese consumer lifestyles and hope for Chinese global brand leadership (Zhao and Belk 2008b). In summary, China has had a sophisticated brand infrastructure with a continuous history that has no known correspondence in any other part of the world.

Discussion and Conclusions

To understand the role of brands in contemporary consumer cultures, one need to have a thorough understanding of the evolution of brands throughout history. The emergence of brands is commonly attributed to the industrial revolution and advent of capitalism in Europe and the United States. This research, in concert with recent inquiry into the history of branding by Wengrow (2008) and Richardson (2008), demonstrates that brands have existed a very long time before the industrial revolution and are not necessarily tied to capitalism. In this article, the authors systematically document what is currently known about the historical development of brands and then extend the work already done by chronicling Chinese consumer culture as well as Chinese brands to demonstrate that brands were important agents of consumer culture (Cochran 2006) and suggest that premodern brands can function similarly to modern brands.

If one uses the contemporary marketing definition of a brand as a differentiating mark (Keller 2008; Stern 2006), then brands clearly existed in Mesopotamia and Egypt throughout antiquity. What one does not know is to what extent these brands were important agents in the consumer cultures of those societies, which Holt (2006, 2008) suggests is the defining characteristic of modern brands.

In this research, the authors have provided evidence suggesting that brands had a prominent, symbolic, and mass-mediated role from the Song dynasty in China onward, especially in the late Imperial period and have continued to be important in Chinese society beyond simply serving as differentiating marks ever since. This is not to say that brands cannot have had similar functions in Egypt or Mesopotamia as early as 5,000 years ago. However, one will never know exactly what these brands meant to consumers in various historical settings. Modern day ethnographic data are far richer than the accounts provided in historical records. As Cochran (2006) puts it, this conundrum "makes a historian yearn for the opportunity to interview the dead" (p. 158). Written accounts can give us clues, though, such as suggesting that brands in the Ming Dynasty were indeed used in identity construction in a time of social fluidity (Hamilton and Lai 1989).

This research contributes to the field of sociology of branding (Arvidsson 2005; Holt 2006). By demonstrating that a consumer culture existed in Imperial China, where brands were used extensively in the symbolic, sophisticated way they are used today, the authors help to deanchor branding as a core activity of capitalism (Holt 2006). Brands were embedded in the social systems and cultural discourses of Imperial China. The nascent field of the sociology of branding takes the view that brands are a weapon yielded by capitalists to extract rents out of consumers, but this exploration of brand development in China suggests that the existence of brands seems to be related to an innate human desire for differentiation and quality assurances. With the omnipresence of brands in contemporary times, they have been portrayed as key cultural forces that structure marketplace interactions (Lury 2004). In this article, the authors historicize this contention and demonstrate that the advent of the brand as a marketplace mediator and as an important cultural and social force occurred before the evolution of modern brands.

This historical analysis of branding in China has several implications for contemporary brand theory. First, the relationship between capitalism, brands, and consumer culture has to be reconsidered. Brands are generally considered to have emerged as a consequence of a capitalist economy where manufacturers used them to achieve differentiation and improve profits. However, historical evidence from China suggests

brands can emerge for other, social reasons. This implies that brands are an outcome rather than the mechanism that generates consumer culture. That is, consumer culture develops because of social needs and tensions and brands emerge to provide status and stratification. The evolution of brands in China appears to be in sharp contrast to their development in the United States in the nineteenth century, where brand manufacturers pushed their brands on the market, seeking to overcome consumer resistance (Strasser 1989). In the United States, this rise of brands in the nineteenth century did generate consumer culture, but this relationship does not hold in all societies at all time periods throughout history.

Examining branding through a historical lens allows us to see the concept and practice as well as the complex underpinnings of branding in a different light (Schroeder and Salzer-Mörling 2006). Branding does not necessarily arise through management activities only, and the brand concept has been used in a wider variety of contexts than previously thought, as evidenced by the varying Chinese terms for brands over time. There were a variety of stakeholders involved in Chinese branding practices, including the government and consumers. This suggests that the seminal concept of the cocreation of value of Vargo and Lusch (2004) is not necessarily something that is occurring in today's marketplace due to modern (post-1700s) economic conditions, as argued by Vargo, Lusch, and Morgan (2006), but rather a practice that has been ongoing in the marketplace throughout history.

This research builds upon the work of Stern (2006) as well as Davies and Chun (2003) on brand meaning to understand what the term brand means from a historical perspective. These authors rightly point out that one cannot use constructs such as brand equity and brand loyalty if one does not fully understand the meaning of the brand concept. However, Stern (2006) traces the linguistic term brand only in English, and Davies and Chun (2003) investigate the metaphors that underlie the brand concept in a Western context only. By examining the various terms in Chinese which relate to the English concept of brand, like baoji, hao, lei gongpin, piazi, and pinpai, one can see they embody characteristics such as family status, quality grading, and upholding traditional Chinese values. This helps to fully represent what the brand concept can mean in other languages and cultural contexts and suggests new metaphors and relations between brand and society. That is, when viewed through a Chinese lens, brands are not only features to be used by consumers to differentiate competing products from each other (e.g., Keller 2008) but also demonstrate that they can be used to uphold traditional values and represent family status.

All of this in combination suggests important implications for branding theory. First, the brand concept may be broader than what has previously been acknowledged. Second, given that an alternate branding system has been demonstrated, one need to be open to the idea there are a multiplicity of ways brands can evolve, as recently suggested by Miller (2008). Finally, the authors have expanded upon Kaufman's (1987) depiction of marketing practices in ancient China by demonstrating how branding as a marketing practice has influenced and been influenced by the economic, social, and political systems in Chinese society.

Future research can examine the role that traditional branding concepts such as biaoji, hao, and gongpin have in the contemporary Chinese marketplace. How are consumer perceptions altered in product categories featuring heritage brands, such as prominent haos or brands with gongpin status? Why do not Chinese consumers consider biaoji and hao to be pinpai? Additionally, other historical contexts in which brands and marketing systems presumably existed should be investigated. Moor (2007) suggests that the emergence of brand-like markings of goods is related to the expansion of empires, and imperial conquest is a precondition for the separation of production from consumption, on which branding depends. Thus, investigating empires on the move throughout history can provide a starting point. The limited amount of research represented in table 1 demonstrates the need for this type of research. As Wengrow (2008) puts it, brands have "been a long-term feature of human cultural development, acting within multiple ideological and institutional contexts" (p. 21). By documenting how branding systems emerged in a variety of cultural, economic, and historic contexts, one will have a better understanding of the brand as a cultural symbol, and as an agent of marketplace growth, compared to simply studying the brand as a Western outcome of capitalism and the Industrial Revolution.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank Chen Yan, Chen Jiayan and Yao Huani for their assistance in the collection and translation of historical documents, the participants in the 2007 Thought Leaders International Conference on Brand Management and the 2007 MSI Creating and Cultivating Brand Connections Conference for their valuable feedback, and Julien Cayla and Fleura Bardhi for their comments on earlier versions of this manuscript.

Declaration of Conflicting Interest

The authors declared no conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article.

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