

Resonating Brands and Aesthetic Values: A Case Study of Chinese Brand Culture

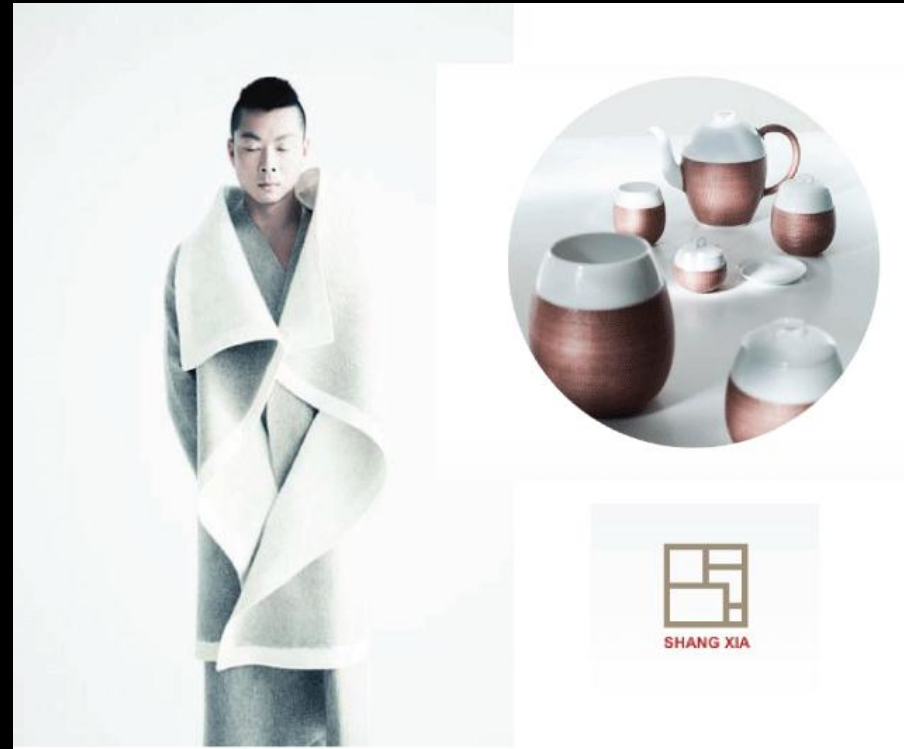
Jonathan Schroeder and Janet Borgerson
Rochester Institute of Technology, USA

Wu Zhiyan

Shanghai University of International Business
and Economics

An Overview

- This study combines consumer-based approaches with managerial concerns within an overarching framework of brand culture.
- Findings reveal Chinese consumers' desire to express deep resonance between Chinese values and aesthetics and favored indigenous brands, and also point out Shang Xia's potential to co-create culture.



The Chinese Branding Context

- Our research investigates Chinese brands shifting away from focus on cheap commodities toward high quality and brand development.
- We explore processes and possibilities of developing global brands, in Chinese contexts, via a brand culture approach that serves as a complement to existing brand globalization models.

Brands and Culture

- Culture can be perceived as a resource upon which branding and branding processes can draw – but branding processes and practices and brands themselves go beyond this subsidiary role and co-create culture.
- How brand development contributes to public discourse and other aspects of living culture is often underplayed.

Positioning Brand Culture Research

Explorations in brand culture suggest:

“If brands exist as cultural, ideological, and political objects, then brand researchers require tools developed to understand culture, politics, and ideology, in conjunction with more typical branding concepts, such as equity, strategy and value” (Schroeder & Salzer-Mörling, 2006)

3 Streams of Branding Research

Brand Identity – the strategic heart of the brand – what the brand manager imagines brand to be (brand equity, strategic brand management, brand leadership, living the brand programs, etc.)

Brand Image – psychological and consumer approaches – in the minds of the customer, in the actual marketplace (brand community; brand relationships; online brand forums; segmentation models)

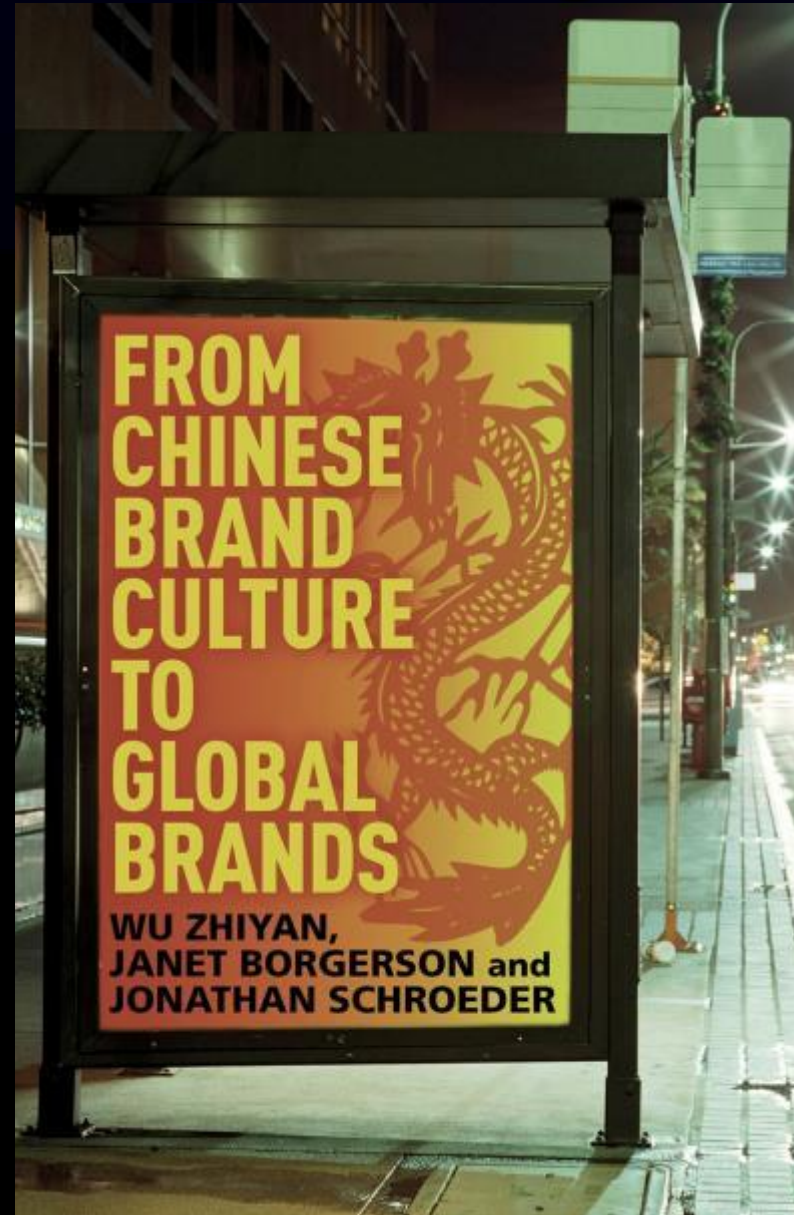
Brand Culture – the cultural dimensions or codes of brands – history, images, myths, art, science – that influence brand meaning and value in the life world, the marketplace, as well as the workplace (cultural co-creation)

Research Motivation

- In what ways are relationships between consumers and the brand activated when cultural values and aesthetics are part of brand identity, brand image, and brand development in Chinese contexts?
- Conceptual and strategic relationships between brands and culture and consumers
- Intersections of consumer meaning making and brand development

Previous Research: Shanghai Tang

Our research on Shanghai Tang (上海滩) revealed the ways in which incorporating Chinese heritage and aesthetics into brand identity, marketing communications, and particular products co-creates practical and social value in contemporary Chinese cultural contexts.



Shanghai Tang Promotional Image



Case: Shang Xia

- Shang Xia (上下) was founded in 2008 by Chinese designer Jian Qiong Er and the French luxury brand Hermès.
- Opened Paris boutique in 2013
- Their brand story:

“Shang Xia is a brand for art of living that promises a unique encounter with the heritage of Chinese design and craftsmanship.”



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Shang Xia

- Promises harmonious way of life in midst of harried, shifting contemporary China.
- Furniture, housewares, accessories, clothing, and limited edition “cultural objects”
- Rather than advertising, fashion shows or celebrity events, two three-week long showcases, including live demonstrations, exhibiting high quality materials, and a history of craftsmanship.

Where Contemporary Design meets Chinese Heritage Crafts

From the Shang Xia website:

Building on 5,000 years of unique inheritance, and in the spirit of dialogue between tradition and modernity, SHANGXIA integrates the warmth, balance and harmony of Chinese grace into all its products.



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Shang Xia

- Focused branding strategy around use of Chinese culture and history, gaining inspiration and concrete ideas for decoration, detail, and design from core elements of the Chinese tea ceremony – shapes of early tea pots, scents, textures and colors of tea leaves, elegant, slow pace of ceremony.
- The tea ceremony offers a deep well of material culture and Chinese aesthetics from which to draw.

Methods

- Retail visits and observation
- Website analysis
- Interview data (snowball sampling):
 - Interviews in Shanghai and Beijing, 60-150 minutes, in Chinese, translated to English, then further translated and checked.
 - Shang Xia brand manager and five consumers (2 males, 3 females) ages 30-45

A Unifying Cultural Thread

One informant, after commenting on the high quality of Shang Xia's products, said:

So it “threads” its product lines through a Chinese tea ceremony, rather than a commercial brand structure. As we all know, the tea ceremony was of the highest significance in Chinese hospitality. During the tea ceremony, we often need a nice tea set to serve the tea, a comfortable chair to sit in, a comfortable dress, necklace or bracelet to wear, the great scent of sandalwood incense to enjoy.

Resonance between Esteemed Cultural and Aesthetic Values and the Brand

Shang Xia products:

“all looked simple, yet graceful, in the mode that Peng Liyuan wore on her first trip overseas as China’s first lady”

[a TV image within the store showed Peng Liyuan dressed in a simple black pea coat and carrying an elegant unbranded bag].

Revaluing Chinese Craftsmanship and Creativity

Focusing on both the move away from mass production and an awareness of a deep cultural connection to Shang Xia, a 45 year old art teacher said:

“For example, both the name and the concept of Shang Xia were fabulous. The word “Shang” meant “top” while “Xia” meant “bottom”. At first, you might feel that the brand was confused or joking.

But consider further. You realize that “Shang” (top) often stood for Heaven and the Past while “Xia” (bottom), stood for Earth and the Present. The Heaven and Earth was a very important subject in Chinese culture as both, in balance, could create peace and harmony.

Revaluing Chinese Craftsmanship and Creativity

“The Past and Present was a very powerful topic for the brand as they were inheriting the past, yet creating their products for the present. What is more, the characters themselves stood for a philosophy of life: the encounter, then in balance, and finally the circulations between two energies, such as Yin and Yang, past and future, tradition and innovation, craftsmanship and contemporary design and so on. I think Shang Xia stands for a balanced and harmonious lifestyle from the social sphere to the private”

Our informants agreed that Shang Xia positions itself as a Chinese modern lifestyle brand committed to inheriting Chinese traditional culture and rejuvenating Chinese craftsmanship, in part by supporting Chinese artisans from throughout China.



Implications

- An ever-evolving brand culture, and more specifically, the co-creation and circulation of brands and cultures represent key opportunities for the development of Chinese global brands.
- Creating a lens through which to observe productive and co-creative aspects of Chinese brand development in the Chinese and global marketplace that sheds light on the ways in which brands and culture circulate and construct each other.
- Further, we use these insights to argue for the development of Chinese brand culture into a strategic brand resource.

Future Research Directions

- Further analysis of Chinese brand culture exploring how aesthetic values and historical culture inform, and hold out possibilities for, a global as well as local reception of branded products and services.
- Looking at brand heritage and history from multiple perspectives: firm, customer, tribe and community
- Understanding how brands co-create meaning and build value by telling and sharing cultural stories.
- Brand culture within organizations.
- Investigating brand literacy.