

China Watch: Using Ethnography to Track Brand Awareness in Shanghai

Laura Oswald, Ph.D.

Director, Marketing Semiotics Inc., Evanston, Illinois

Adjunct Professor, DePaul University Kellstedt Graduate School of Business

As a consumer research professional, I talk to people throughout the country about their daily rituals such as cooking and cleaning, their relationships with family and friends, and their deep-seated attitudes and feelings about the world in which they live. In September 2001, I had an opportunity to travel to China to develop research protocols for future marketing studies in Shanghai. I interviewed women about the effects of modernization and consumer culture on their lives. I conducted micro-studies with two segments, including in-home interviews with three middle-aged, working-class housewives and a three-day observational and discussion study with five M.B.A. students at Tong Ji University. With the help of an interpreter, I focused on the personal care rituals of the housewives and their perceptions of brands in the personal care category, including shampoo, soap, and body lotion. With the M.B.A. students, all in their early twenties, I discussed changes in the perceptions and experiences of being a woman in the “new China.”

My experiences in China confirmed that the most satisfying part of my work is finding the common bond that connects people throughout the world, in spite of our social and cultural differences. I visited Shanghai one week after the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington. On a deeply personal level, people from all walks of life reached out to share my grief over the events of September 11. A shopkeeper in an open market tried sign language to communicate her sympathy, since she spoke no English and I spoke no Chinese. She wrote “911” on a pad of paper with a look of sadness and understanding in her eyes, a moment of intense cross-cultural communication I shall never forget.

Shanghai provided a perfect backdrop for these interviews. [Figure 1] A booming port and commercial crossroads for centuries, Shanghai stands as a salute to the new millennium. The city boasts of a new airport, a modern subway system, and super highways that would put to shame the equivalent amenities in many American cities. Convention centers bring together merchants



Figure 1 Modern Shanghai

from all over the world to display state of the art trends in everything from workout equipment to women's fashion. Stylish boutiques and department stores peddle famous brands from Europe and the U.S., such as Hermes and the Gap, and familiar American logos such as the golden arches and the KFC dot the horizon. There was even a Starbucks near my hotel.

Shanghai is nonetheless steeped in tradition and history. Shopkeepers still cook breakfast on grills in front of their shops, worshipers remember the dead with incense at shrines and temples, and the ubiquitous bicycle still outperforms the automobile as the most common form of personal transportation. Moreover it was refreshing to discover, in spite of the inconvenience, that most people still did not speak English, that this was truly a foreign culture where nothing could be taken for granted.

Contemporary China has been shaped by dramatic social and political events throughout the twentieth century, including the overthrow of the emperor, the rejection of colonial rule, the Japanese occupation, the communist takeover, the Cultural Revolution under Mao Tse-tung, and

most recently, the “opening” of traditionally closed Chinese society to the influence of free enterprise and global markets. Given the confluence of old and new, and East and West in Shanghai society, it is no wonder that the women I interviewed returned time and again to problems of assimilating age-old traditions into the mosaic of modern political and economic life.

In discussions, the housewives, all in their forties, remembered growing up during the Cultural Revolution, in a world without brand names, television, or mall shopping. Society was controlled by the state, from public concerns such as the state-run economy, to private matters such as birth control, choice of profession, and housing. Though couples are still officially limited to one child, people with enough money can pay for the privilege of a having more children. Under the controlled, communist economy of the previous generation, their parents obtained personal care products, such as shampoo and shaving cream, free at the state-run offices and factories where they worked. The dress code was limited to drab, uniform clothing, and shoppers had little choice at the market. As the women talked to me, I tried to imagine life before brands - no billboards, radio jingles or TV spots exhorting one to taste, experience, and buy goods and services because of the emotional rewards that the advertisements promised. Examples abound in American culture: drink Coke for life, let McDonalds make you smile, *Just Do It!*

The experiences of the women I interviewed exemplify ways Chinese women have responded to the aggressive introduction of brand marketing into their culture. Today women in urban China are exposed to brands through television, radio, and the Internet, as well as billboards and retail displays. For the most part, within a relatively short period of time, they have embraced Western styles of modernism. For instance, they save money, often by working

multiple jobs and renting out rooms in their homes, and invest savings in the Stock Market. One woman, when asked how often she used the Internet, said, “only to check on my stocks.” What a change from the days when the government, not personal investors, controlled the market!

Today’s women prefer European and American brand names to local brands or generic products, and to some extent use brands the way

consumers use them in the West: to fulfill emotional and social needs for love, security, and status. They indulge in make-up and colorful clothing within their means, and may claim that the shampoo with a famous brand name such as Sassoon is better than a less famous brand. By contrast,



Figure 2 At a Street Market

vendors still sell hot meals, fresh produce, and meat at age-old open markets. [Figure 2]

In spite of the many political, social, and cultural differences separating the Chinese from Americans, on a personal level these housewives share some of the same concerns as their counterparts in the United States - educating their children, saving for retirement, keeping up with the Joneses. Though these women, like the average American housewife, pride themselves on saving money and getting more for less, they repeatedly avoided answering questions that directly addressed the issue of price shopping, preferring to be perceived as favoring quality at any price. My local guide pointed out that this was their way to “save face.”

Some of the women were more resistant to advertising messages, taking pride in their ability to make purchase decisions based on product attributes and price alone. It is possible that

their attitudes are shaped by geographic location. The students who had moved to Shanghai from far-flung provinces were more resistant to change than those who came from large cities. Whether or not even they can long remain impervious to the effects of brand marketing remains to be seen. Though market researchers I interviewed in Shanghai professed difficulty in eliciting rapture and enthusiasm from respondents about brands, my own observations suggest that brands will increasingly shape consumer choice in this rapidly changing market. By using advanced research techniques such as projective tasks and ethnographic observations, the researcher can probe the depths of the consumer's psyche much more effectively than by direct questioning. In the current study, through drawings and story-telling, even the women who protested most about brands betrayed an emerging susceptibility to them.

The women I interviewed enjoy many of the material comforts, technology, and individual choice offered by modernization. However, they are apprehensive of changes which threaten the security of the family and home, such as the changing role of women from caregivers to career professionals, the greater social and geographic mobility of the individual, and the economic instability of private industry.

The university students I interviewed voiced these concerns in particular. [Figure 3] These women came from various regions of China, and their presence in Shanghai is a privilege of studying in Shanghai. I met them at the Expo at the Convention Center in Shanghai. On another day, all five students and I went to a cafe. They were not merely an object of curiosity, but a part of the facts of life at an earlier stage of modernization. In ways Chinese society was confronted with these changes.



Figure 3 Chinese Students and me.

conservative atmosphere of the past. We also shopped at a street market where merchants from the countryside sold fresh fish, meat, and produce in the open air, the way their ancestors had done for generations. The young women then spent three hours in a group setting answering questions about themselves and their perceptions about the impact of the recent changes in China on women.

Some of the students, who viewed themselves as “modern,” expressed interest in name brands, particularly make-up and clothing, that they would buy if they had enough money. One of the most popular attractions at the Cosmopolitan Magazine Expo was the colored contact lens booth. As one of the students explained, women in China all have dark brown eyes, and like to play with eye color, not only to imitate women in the West but also to express personal choice. [Figure 4] On the other hand, some of the students expressed disdain for the materialism that brands represent, claiming to be entirely indifferent to the effects of advertising. Here again it appeared that attitudes toward brands might depend on geographical location, since the women from the north were more conservative than those from the south. This observation, however, would have to be tested with research that is more extensive than the present study.

In order to generate discussion about the attitudes and values of the students about changes in China today, I asked them to draw pictures, first of the traditional Chinese woman, then the modern Chinese woman, and to list attributes they associated with each. Though the students came from various regions in China, including Hunan, Ji Lin, and Sichuan provinces, they agreed on essential perceptions of old and new



Figure 4 Contact Lens Craze

ways. In particular, they cherish changes in the woman's social status from the more submissive role their mothers and grandmothers played, to the more liberal role women enjoy today, particularly in big cities. They also agreed that women today enjoy far more options concerning education and work, dress much more casually, and cut their hair for convenience. Unlike their mothers, these students report, the modern woman values her own needs and desires rather than focussing exclusively on the needs and desires of others.

The students pointed out that modernization also brings disadvantages. They agreed that they often experience alienation and loneliness as the result of their newfound freedoms. The woman's liberation from strict obedience to family and husband has been accompanied by a breakdown of family ties, leaving these women with a sense of the insecurity and loneliness of urban life. While their grandmothers and mothers had less independence and personal choice, they were nonetheless embraced by a strong family network, since they were personally in charge of maintaining family ties and overseeing the household. On the other hand, today's university students admitted to feeling adrift in a society whose changing values and expectations left them with little guidance for their lives. Though they cherish their independence from traditional roles and enjoy an active social life, they feel isolated and cut off from their communities; they complained that they were all too busy to have close friends at the university.

These interviews confirmed my belief that the Chinese perceive social change differently than we do, because they frame these changes within a long history and cultural heritage that Americans cannot possibly know. While Americans often view the convulsive political and social events of the twentieth century as defining moments in our cultural make-up, the women I met in Shanghai viewed crises such as the Japanese occupation, the Communist revolution, and the current economic "opening" in the context of 3500 years of Chinese history. They perceive

their culture as a core identity that transcends current political and social crises. As one woman said, “The Cultural Revolution was not a revolution in our *culture*. It was just a fight between some politicians. The Chinese culture is still the same.” They point out that even when women were relegated to submissive roles within the family, traditional women, like their contemporary counterparts, were psychologically strong. Chinese women of all generations had to be strong and courageous in order to take care of their families in the face of economic deprivation, political uncertainty, and social upheaval.

This brief study of the consumer attitudes, lifestyles, and culture of Chinese women made clear that marketers from the U.S. face important challenges as they strive to take advantage of developing markets in the People’s Republic of China. Not only must they contend with the sheer size and multi-cultural reality of the country, but they must navigate a fine line between the consumer’s deeply entrenched respect for tradition and their boundless enthusiasm for the possibilities offered by the future.

Evanston, Illinois

March, 2002