Cultural Paradoxes Reflected in Brand Meaning: McDonald's in Shanghai, China

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ABSTRACT *Brands are powerful symbols that reflect not only the image with which marketers hope to imbue them but also the cultural milieu in which they are imbedded. If that milieu is in a state of flux, brands can come to represent some surprising ideas and values to which marketing efforts must be sensitive. In this research, the authors relate the nature of societal change, a common occurrence in many developing markets and especially China, to evaluation of a brand by a broad cross-section of urban Chinese consumers. Using the methodology of scenario completion, the authors reveal that the McDonald's brand is evaluated in the context of societal norms and values that are brought up in various usage situations. Brand evaluations can be inconsistent and often paradoxical depending on the context. The results suggest that marketers should be closely involved with the way their brand is interacting with cultural values in transitional markets.*

Brands are powerful symbols that reflect not only the image with which manufacturers and advertising agencies try to imbue them but also the cultural milieu in which they are imbedded (Levy 1959). If that milieu is qualitatively different from that of the society where the brand originated, brands can come to represent some surprising ideas and values to which marketing efforts must be sensitive. In China today, ancient belief systems rooted in Confucianism and Taoism are intermingling with Western ideologies (Davis 2000), especially with regard to consumption, consumerism, and brands. Nowhere is this melting pot of ideas more evident than in Shanghai, which is one the most attractive consumer markets in China.

Remarkably little work has been done in the marketing field as to the relationship between brand meaning and the nature of traditional culture, especially where traditional culture is changing. This should be of paramount importance to marketers, as a brand's image comes from the interplay between the culture surrounding it and a marketing campaign. If culture is in a state of flux, brand meaning can also fluctuate. In this research, we relate the nature of societal change to evaluation of a brand by a broad cross-section of urban Chinese consumers.

Specifically, this study investigates the meanings the brand McDonald's can hold for a wide range of Shanghainese con-

sumers. For some consumers in some situations, McDonald's can be used to uphold traditional thought patterns, values, and ways of interacting, whereas for other consumers and in other situations, McDonald's is an appropriate venue for consumers to explore new beliefs and ways of acting. For many of the participants in this study, McDonald's does both and has come to symbolize the paradoxes in modern Chinese life. Important implications result for the branding strategies of companies that pursue the Chinese consumer market.

As Hamilton and Lai (1989) document, brands have historically been used for social purposes in China. The authors argue that branding under the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368–1911) came about because of the uncertainty of a person's family status at any point in time. Because of the decentralization and ambiguous class divisions, there was a constant rise and fall of family wealth and position. This necessitated the use of material symbols to mark status. Therefore, Hamilton and Lai (1989) conclude that the function of brands was social. Tse (1996) argues that this social function of brands is still paramount today, because Chinese consumers use brand names as a tool to build social relationships. He proposes that Chinese consumers place more emphasis on the social value of brands than Westerners do. He also suggests that brands are used to maintain a distance from out-groups and a similarity to in-groups to a greater extent than in the West, and in-groups are more of an influence on brand name choice. Chinese consumers can be expected to match their social status with a brand name to a greater extent than Westerners. The social value of brands positively relates to the consumer's need for social identity.

If the primary purpose of brands is social for most Chinese consumers, brand meaning will reflect the ways people interact with one another and the way they think about their society. Traditionally, Chinese society has been characterized as collectivist, with an emphasis on interdependence among members of in-groups (Tu 1985). Confucian and Taoist views of the world stress recognizing one's place in the social order and not striving to deviate from it but rather harmonizing with others for the betterment of society (Tu 1985). This collective orientation leads to, for example, a lack of seating arrangements in Chinese restaurants for parties of two but instead large tables for parties of eight. Privacy from others in the in-group is not a traditional desire (Markus and Kitayama 1991). When restaurants like McDonald's, where there is seating for two, are introduced into the society, it provides an opportunity for people to embrace a new set of ideals—such as gaining privacy. Yan (1997, 2000) documents that McDonald's in China not only is being transformed by consumers to fit their needs and wants but also is changing some aspects of the consumers' previous way of life. We investigate how con-

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sumers psychologically perceive the brand McDonald's and how it manages to both engender social change and provide a medium for carrying on customary ways of interacting.

THE STUDY

The key to discovering the range of meanings a brand name can take on is to ground consumers' evaluations of the brand in specific and varied contexts. Therefore, we developed divergent scenarios surrounding the patronage of McDonald's, a brand name that represents the changes occurring in modern urban Chinese society and has a history of multidimensional brand images (Watson 1997). The methodology of scenario completion, when respondents are given various scripts, usually in a narrative form, and then are asked how they would respond in each of the given scenarios, has been used successfully in cultural psychological studies (i.e., Greenfield 1997) and is recommended as a way of discovering hidden cultural meanings (Triandis 1995). By giving people specific situations to respond to, and especially by introducing scenarios in which potentially incongruous or perceived unacceptable behavior is exhibited (breaching), this method provides an insightful way to capture people's underlying meaning systems.

For this study, three scenarios were created that portray three different situations in which the protagonist is eating at McDonald's (see the Appendix). The specific nature of the scenarios emerged from fieldwork conducted by the first author and other related studies that had taken place previous to this study, in conjunction with an emic approach. The three scenarios chosen had emerged as the most salient situations that evoked different brand meanings. Two scenarios were created to represent different, important social situations in China. Scenario 1 is designed to elicit thoughts related to how McDonald's is perceived when consumers are with older family members and how and if the brand relates to traditional Chinese eating habits. By introducing incongruency in the scenario (McDonald's is typically not perceived as an appropriate place to go with older family members), it provides an opportunity for the respondents to articulate symbolic meanings associated with McDonald's in relation to familial hierarchies. Scenario 2 was designed to induce respondents to articulate the meanings they attach to the McDonald's brand with reference to romantic liaisons, another symbolically important usage situation. Scenario 3 represents a nonsocial situation in which the consumer is alone. Our purpose here is to examine whether nonsocial attributes of the brand emerge as part of its meaning.[1] The versions that appear in the Appendix are the final versions, after they were modified following comments received by expert judges in the United States and after a pilot study was conducted in Shanghai.

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Ultimately, 24 respondents (three groups of 8) in Shanghai completed two scenarios each. The groups were formed on the basis of age,[2] and the two scenarios received by each group were the ones most appropriate to the respondents' age group.[3] This design allowed for analysis both between and within respondents. The respondents were chosen to represent a variety of ages, occupations, neighborhoods, income levels, and education levels within the Shanghai population. The sessions lasted an hour and a half each, and respondents were paid 50 RMB for their participation. Sex was equally divided between women and men. Participants responded to the scenarios first in written form individually and then further expanded on their responses verbally within their group. This was done to provide a record of the participant's responses without the influence of the group as well as to then give them a comfortable situation in which to expand on their answers. For a profile of the participants, see Table 1.

All the data collection took place in Shanghainese Putonghua through the assistance of Chinese colleagues. Professional translators were used on all materials, and a decentering approach (Campbell and Werner 1970) was taken when translating all the materials into English, as this approach most closely reflects the emic goals of this study.

We conducted a hermeneutic analysis (Thompson 1997) using 57 single-spaced transcripts that included the partici-

Table 1.
Participant Profiles

Name	Sex	District	Age	Occupation	Income (Yuan/Month)	Education
M. Chen	F	Huang Pu	18	Student	None	Middle school
P. Din	F	Pu Dong	21	Salesperson	2000	College
Y. Xu	F	Xu Hui	23	Customer service	1400	College
H. Lin	F	Hong Kou	24	Secretary	1300	College
J. Zhao	M	Yang Pu	23	Engineer	2500	University
W. Han	M	Pu Tuo	22	Repairperson	1000	Middle school
J. Zhang	M	Xu Hui	22	Office worker	2000	College
B. Wu	M	Zha Bei	24	Staff member	2000	College
Y. Huang	M	Pu Dong	28	Office worker	1200	College
L. Zhang	M	Xu Hui	27	Account manager	3500	College
W. Li	M	Yang Pu	34	Teacher	3000	College
C. Song	M	Zha Bei	26	Teacher	1200	University
L. Wu	F	Pu Tuo	34	Orderperson	900	Middle school
L. Lin	F	Chang Ning	31	Analyst	1400	College
Y. Shen	F	Lu Wan	34	Shop assistant	1800	College
W. Fang	F	Chang Ning	26	Nurse	1600	College
Q. Wang	M	Huang Pu	45	Manager	2500	College
J. Xu	M	Chang Ning	39	Purchaser	2000	College
D. Chen	M	Lu Wan	42	Arc welder	900	Middle school
M. Li	M	Zha Bei	36	Office worker	2000	Middle school
M. Yang	F	Xu Hui	40	Salesperson	1400	College
Y. Gao	F	Xu Hui	42	Warehouse keeper	1300	College
Q. Yao	F	Chang Ning	44	Worker	800	Middle school
L. Wei	F	Hong Kou	42	Teacher	2500	College

pants' written and verbal responses. We developed common themes and meanings, which are presented subsequently. Specific techniques used included iterative coding of the data, negative case analysis to challenge emerging themes and illuminate paradoxes in the data, and refinement of the themes based on the literature as well as the first author's knowledge of the Chinese milieu and previous fieldwork.

RESULTS

Three major themes emerged, each of which demonstrates the inconsistent nature that brand meanings can have in China today because of the changing nature of contemporary urban society.

The Paradoxical Nature of Social Space

Respondents' interpretations of the space inside a McDonald's restaurant were revealed to be important in their evaluations of the McDonald's brand. These aspects include the way the food is ordered and delivered, the décor, the noise level, and especially the way the tables are set up. Depending on the scenario, social space concerns can lead to the brand being interpreted either as symbolic of a break with Chinese eating traditions or as providing opportunities for patrons to meet traditional interpersonal goals such as gaining or giving face. Specific ways in which social space concerns were prominent in each scenario are outlined subsequently.

For most of the respondents who received the family birthday party scenario (Scenario 1), McDonald's is perceived as too public in this situation—all the seating arrangements are the same, and the diners are in full view of one another. Traditionally, birthday parties take place in Chinese restaurants, where families are given their own section of the restaurant, using however many tables they need (each table usually seats eight to ten people). Special food and drinks are ordered, which sets them apart from other diners. This is congruent with the hierarchical nature of Chinese society, in which people display their rank and gain face with important members of their in-groups by being more conspicuous and making higher-status consumption choices than those around them. In McDonald's, where all the food and the seating is the same for everyone, these aspects of social space are lost, and this loss is not looked on favorably in this situation. Therefore, the social space aspects of the restaurant are perceived negatively.

For Mr. Zhang, McDonald's is "too noisy for an adult birthday party." However, Chinese family birthday parties are typically raucous events, in which the male members of the family drink alcohol and the entire affair is extremely noisy. When Mr. Zhang says McDonald's is too noisy, he means that McDonald's has the wrong kind of noise rather than that it is louder: The noise is coming from others (members of the out-group) rather than from the in-group members. Chinese society is typically characterized as one in which members of an

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in-group (family, work colleagues, or neighbors) are so close to a person as to be regarded as part of the self (Markus and Kitayama 1991). Out-group members (strangers) are largely ignored and in some cases are considered a negative influence on the goals of the in-group. Thus, noise coming from the out-group is what makes the McDonald's setting undesirable or inappropriate, whereas in the typical Chinese restaurant setting, the noise is from the in-group.

Ms. Wei says she will not go to McDonald's in this scenario because it is not fancy or expensive enough for a proper celebration:

> We Chinese rarely go to McDonald's for a birthday. I remember I had a friend come back from abroad. He wants to get together. I said, which restaurant? He said McDonald's. We think he is stingy. What can you eat at McDonald's? I will not go. It is the same for a birthday party. It is cheap to go to McDonald's.

The overall meaning for her is one of McDonald's as a place where she cannot give face to important members of the in-group. The concept of giving and receiving face is one that still has a large impact on many consumption practices in China, and eating out is no exception. If others in the in-group perceive that the restaurant or the food is not prestigious, they will evaluate it negatively. This is context dependent, however: In the dating scenario, many respondents believed that McDonald's was a good place to gain face.

In Scenario 2 (the date situation), the social space aspects again were prominent. McDonald's is still sometimes perceived as crowded and noisy in this context, but the publicness is viewed in a positive light—consumers gain face by having others see them on a date. Paradoxically, in comparison with the crowdedness, noisiness, and publicness that most respondents discussed in the birthday scenario, McDonald's is often perceived as a place to find privacy in the date scenario, enabling a couple to be "alone" by virtue of the two-person tables that are not found in non-Western restaurants. This echoes a finding reported by Eckhardt and Houston (1998) that privacy is often found in public places (the frontstage becomes the backstage) in China because of the lack of privacy in most homes (the typical backstage in Western settings). Impression management theory posits that the backstage is where people can really get to know each other, and thus the seating in McDonald's facilitates getting to know the "inner" other person, an individualist notion that correlates with choosing a mate.

Dating is a relatively new phenomenon in China—the idea of choosing a partner and romantic love, which dating facili-

tates, is not traditional (Bond 1986). Ms. Xu has a strong negative reaction to the idea of going to McDonald's on a date. She thinks McDonald's is "awful, disgusting, and terrible. It is too embarrassing to directly face the boy across the table, the tables are too small—it is noisy, inconvenient and stupid." She would go to a noodle shop instead: "It is clean and reminds one of ancient things." For her, dating seems to be a situation in which Westernization, in the form of small tables for two, is wholly inappropriate.

For most others, the publicness of McDonald's is positive. Mr. Huang, for example, views the publicness as an asset in the date scenario because he can gain face by taking a date to McDonald's: "Then everyone will know I am on a date." Mr. Song believes that the seating is conducive to dating (two people can sit together without others at the table), and it enables people to "celebrate in a foreign way," which is acceptable to him on a fourth date. He thinks McDonald's is fashionable and "in" and that university students embrace these ideals. Foreignness has become something good, in that it facilitates social interactions in this context. For him, it is acceptable to "celebrate in a foreign way" when there are only two people and no filial piety concerns, as there are in the birthday party situation. Similarly, for Mr. Wu in this scenario, the underlying meaning of McDonald's is that of a social space outside of the home in which two people can be "alone" and sit for a long time. In Chinese restaurants, people typically eat and leave immediately afterwards. In McDonald's, people tend to subvert the fast-food element and sit for a long time (Yan 1997).

Social space aspects were largely irrelevant in the context presented in Scenario 3 (eating lunch alone on a workday). Many scholars such as Yan (1997, 2000) have suggested that social space concerns are almost always of prominence for Chinese consumers of McDonald's; however, because people were alone in Scenario 3, individual rather than social traits were salient, and Yan's conclusion is not borne out. In summary, the social space aspects of McDonald's can lead to the brand being perceived as representing breaking with tradition, in the guise of separation of family members (because of seating arrangements) and the perceived noisiness from others (out-group members). Yet the social space aspects of McDonald's also can lead the brand to be representative of positive attributes, such as the openness of the space, which provides the opportunity for a person to gain face when on a date, and the seating arrangements encourage the advent of privacy from in-group members along with romance and dating. Much as consumers themselves are grappling with how to fit these new opportunities presented by the space in McDonald's into their everyday lives, the brand is also permeated with alternative meanings and evaluations.

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The notion that the McDonald's brand represents foreignness, or non-Chineseness, was a prominent finding. This is hardly surprising, because McDonald's has been noted for being a symbol of the United States and indeed globalization in many countries around the world (Watson 1997). However, how the consumer interpreted this varied depending on the context within which the brand was imbedded. In some situations, the foreignness was interpreted positively, because it could provide face in certain social situations, whereas it could be quite negative in situations in which consumers believed that long-held traditions should not be broken. Following is an analysis of how this occurs.

The primary situation in which notions of the other and the foreign were prominent was the family birthday party scenario. Here, McDonald's is typically perceived as too noisy and not Chinese (too foreign). The "otherness" relates primarily to the food, the lack of alcohol, the atmosphere (pop music, bright lighting), and the seating (small tables); also, the standardized menu is perceived as negative in this situation. Mr. Huang says, for a party, "Maybe [McDonald's] is okay for foreigners, but not for Chinese. Like divorce is okay in foreign countries, you would not do that in China." In this situation, the exotic and Western nature of McDonald's is precisely why he would not go there for a family celebration. For Mr. Song, the primary meaning associated with McDonald's is that McDonald's is not traditional, not Chinese, and thus not appropriate for a Chinese family event: "It's all right to go to McDonald's for a change, but not for a meaningful event."

Others also indicated that McDonald's represents superficiality and that people cannot achieve anything deep or meaningful in terms of social interactions there. He also equates his profession— teacher—with being traditional, and a traditional person would not go there for a birthday. Thus, the primary meanings for him in this situation are that McDonald's is nontraditional and superficial. The Chinese throughout history as well as today generally believe that their culture (especially food) is superior to that of the West, and therefore it is not surprising that McDonald's is evaluated in this way.

Mr. Xu primarily thinks of McDonald's negatively in the party situation because "there is no alcohol available." As discussed by Yan (1997), one of the reasons women like McDonald's and find it empowering is that there is no alcohol available there; for the most part, it is socially unacceptable for women to drink at Chinese restaurants. At traditional celebrations in Chinese restaurants, the women are expected to take care of the men who drink too much, and this tradition of men drinking as much as they please at family gatherings is one that many men want to maintain. Therefore, for many men, alcohol is something that must be present for a

The Fluctuating Nature of Otherness/Foreignness as Represented in the Brand

proper celebration. The overall meaning in this situation for Mr. Xu seems to be that McDonald's is not capable of upholding traditional sex and hierarchical roles, and he thus perceives it negatively.

For Mr. Wang, when discussing why he would not go to McDonald's for a family party, the underlying meaning of McDonald's is standardization and simplicity, which is negative in this situation. He wants a large choice of varied foods for a party as well as elegant surroundings. He thinks that McDonald's has a good atmosphere but that it is "too simple" for this situation. Similarly, Mr. Chen perceives McDonald's, because of its uniformity, as unable to uphold traditional values that should be adhered to for celebrations. "I go there for a change in food and to relax, not to celebrate. For a celebration, I go to a famous restaurant that has round tables, is not so simple, and has more staff to wait on the party." Thus, McDonald's represents a break from tradition and is perceived negatively.

Here the McDonald's brand takes on a variety of meanings related to its difference from the traditional way of eating and socializing in China. These can be both negative and positive. For a celebration, McDonald's is largely not viewed as a place that gives proper face to the guest of honor, because the prices and seating arrangements are standardized and thus there is no opportunity to make a special display. Yet it is just this standardization that, in the dating situation, becomes a positive attribute because the man taking the woman out does not need to worry about losing face to other people who are ordering a more lavish meal. The notion that the McDonald's brand is novel and prestigious but yet not meaningful or deep because of its foreignness is also prominent. Although McDonald's is a fun place to eat, it is not a restaurant where a significant event should occur, such as an intergenerational celebration.[4] Finally, the last way the McDonald's brand can be paradoxical with reference to its otherness/foreignness is the lack of alcohol. Whereas this is interpreted negatively by some, as alcohol is considered a necessity at traditional gatherings, it is empowering to others, mainly women, and is a welcome break in tradition.

The Interpretation of Modernity and Youth as Represented in the McDonald's Brand Name

McDonald's is perceived as representing modernity and youth in all three scenarios, though this takes many different forms and is interpreted differently depending on the specific situation. Modernity in relation to McDonald's takes the form of cleanliness, sanitation, technology, brightness, and newness. The connotation with youth comes primarily from the food: Because the food is so different from Chinese food, the young people are the most willing to try it or eat it on a regular basis. Also, McDonald's has promoted itself as a place for children's birthday parties, and "Uncle Ronald" is an icon

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for the children. The interpretation of the representation of modernity ranges from very positive to very negative depending on the cultural values evoked in each situation.

In the birthday party scenario, the representation of modernity and youthful values is at odds with something traditional, such as a multigenerational family celebration, so the modernity is perceived in a negative light. For example, Ms. Wu believes that because the food is different from Chinese food, McDonald's is inappropriate for a multigenerational party but "good for children's birthday parties." In her response to Scenario 1, she exhibits what Yan (2000) describes as an acceptance of her own traditional values and at the same time a desire for her child to be modern. However, this perception of McDonald's as modern is not as straightforward as it seems. Mr. Li, who considers himself the epitome of the modern Chinese consumer, perceives McDonald's as something "fresh" and "new," whereas someone who identifies herself as traditional (Ms. Yao) perceives McDonald's as "old" and not new to the Shanghainese. Cosmopolitan Chinese embrace McDonald's as a representation of their worldly outlook, whereas to most average Chinese people, it is not that at all anymore, because it has been operating in the major cities for more than five years now and is "old hat" in the rapidly changing scenescape of urban China. Ms. Yao believes that McDonald's is nothing new to the Shanghainese; it is not special anymore: "In Shanghai, almost everyone has been to McDonald's. If I want to take the whole family out, I should go to a special place."

Also, the prices are too inexpensive to give proper face to the honoree. That Ms. Yao, as an older, more traditional Chinese consumer, finds McDonald's passé demonstrates the tension between the various meanings it can take on. It can represent modernity to some people in some situations, but this is certainly not universal.

In the date scenario, McDonald's was perceived as representing youth and modernity, as in the birthday party scenario. But in the date context, it is viewed as positive. Mr. Zhao demonstrates the youthful aspects of the brand as he observes that young people find McDonald's romantic and exciting for a date. He says about McDonald's,

> It is Western, American culture. You know how the Shanghainese like everything from abroad. Like we used to have "Ronghua" Chicken, and we don't have it anymore. "Ronghua" feels like Shanghai, and the Shanghainese like Western stuff. Young people dating like these Western places. I take my girlfriend to McDonald's almost every time we are on a date.

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Mr. Zhang's response echoes these same meanings of youth and modernity. Elements of the social space, such as the background music (typically Hong Kong or Taiwanese pop music), are the primary consideration in the situation, and the evaluation of this is positive. Mr. Li brings another interpretation of the brand in this context. The notions of individual will and free choice become dominant for him, as described by Yan (2000). He will go to McDonald's on a date because "you can have your own choice" and "choose freely" from the menu. The meaning of free choice is linked in his mind with going on a date, which is understandable because choosing a mate is also an example of this, and notions of romanticism and choosing a mate are ideas that have only recently been introduced into Chinese society and thus are interpreted as modern.

Finally, different aspects of modernity were also exhibited in the interpretation of the brand name in the eating alone scenario. That McDonald's is sanitary, and by proxy modern, was of considerable importance. The standardization that McDonald's represents is clear in this situation—it is important for consumers to know what they will get in unfamiliar surroundings. For Ms. Chen, the "clean and sanitary conditions" are the overriding reasons she goes there. Mr. Zhao indicates that the standardization McDonald's represents becomes important when he is alone—in an unfamiliar part of town without a way to judge whether a Chinese restaurant is sanitary or what the food will taste like, McDonald's is a "safe" option. For him, the overriding meaning in this scenario is one of standardization and trustworthiness. Ms. Gao says that "noodles and dumplings are not as hygienic" as McDonald's, and Ms. Yao says the primary reason she goes to McDonald's in this situation is its sanitary conditions ("cleaner than traditional restaurants"), a theme that was echoed by many of the older participants in Group 3.[5] In this way, modernity seems to be positive for the older respondents.

We have shown how the McDonald's brand can embody many different facets of modernity and youth and how this connotation can be evaluated positively in some situations by some consumers and negatively in other situations, sometimes by the same consumers. Davis (2000) chronicles the ambivalence urban Chinese consumers feel about modernity: They want the prosperity, increased standard of living, and respect on a global scale that it can bring, but they are fiercely proud of the old way things have been done, and in many circumstances, they do not want to embrace the changes modernization brings. As we have shown here, the paradoxical nature of this conflict can be represented in the meanings attached to the McDonald's brand name.

DISCUSSION

It seems that McDonald's can both stimulate social change and uphold traditional ways of interacting. One of the ways

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this occurs is through the use of social space in the dining experience while in McDonald's. This happens in two ways: First, the divided and hierarchical setup of the dining experience in traditional Chinese restaurants is not adhered to—the seating arrangements are open, and everyone has equal access as to where to sit and what to order. This can lead to a positive or negative interpretation of the brand, depending on the context. The second way social change can be engendered through social space is the specific seating arrangements, enabling only two people to share a table and sit together. This leads to a negative interpretation of the brand when consumers engage in a traditional food consumption situation but can be interpreted positively when consumers are exploring the freedoms that can come with modernity, such as dating. The McDonald's brand name can also be a symbol of otherness, which can stimulate social changes or reinforce traditional norms. For example, the lack of alcohol served there leads some women to embrace being on a more equal footing with men while eating. In contrast, the lack of alcohol served there also causes people to evaluate the restaurant as inappropriate for certain occasions. Finally, McDonald's, representing modernity and youth, facilitates change as well as tradition. The cleanliness and standardization of both the restaurant and the food are changing how and where people eat when in unfamiliar surroundings, and these characteristics of the brand are evaluated positively in this context. Yet the modernity and standardization are decidedly negative in other situations.

All of these findings suggest that in rapidly changing societies, brands can take on disparate cultural values and may even be central to how these disparate cultural values (traditional or new) are evaluated. For marketers, it becomes a difficult task to control the image the brand has in the marketplace. Marketers need to be aware of the cultural and societal connotations the brand is taking on and the way these are changing or staying the same as norms of interacting are changing or staying the same.

The results reported here suggest that the meanings attached to a brand name by consumers can be malleable and sometimes paradoxical in societies where cultural norms are in flux. The results also indicate that the meaning attached to a brand name at any given moment is largely dependent on the cultural values evoked in the specific usage or evaluation situation. This in turn suggests that an effort needs to be made to find out how a brand image is reacting with current cultural mores and whether the meanings being taken on by a brand are substantially different from those put forth through marketing efforts. This is especially true for high-profile consumer brands such as McDonald's, which represent alternative ways of life and experiences for many consumers, and in

countries such as China, where values are in flux or the emphasis of consumption is social.

Chen Shan is going out to dinner with his family on a Saturday night. They are going out to dinner to celebrate his wife's birthday. He is going with his wife and daughter, his younger brother and his wife and daughter, their parents, and their father's brother and his wife. Shan's younger brother suggests that they go to McDonald's for dinner. What would you do in this situation? Would you take the entire family to McDonald's or choose another restaurant? If yes, what makes McDonald's appropriate for this occasion? If no, what makes it inappropriate? Please explain what you would do and why in as much detail as possible.

Scenario 2

Wang Haipong, a university student, is planning to take his girlfriend, also a student, out on a date on a Friday night. This will be their fourth date. Some of his friends have suggested going to McDonald's. Would you take your girlfriend to McDonald's if you were Haipong (or want to be taken by Haipong)? Where would you go instead if you chose not to go to McDonald's? What characteristics of McDonald's make it appropriate or inappropriate for this date? Please explain what you would do and why in as much detail as possible.

Scenario 3

Deng Xiaoming is returning to work after doing some errands for the boss. It is lunchtime, and she is very hungry, so she wants to stop in a restaurant to get something to eat before going back to the office. She passes a noodle shop and a cafeteria and finally decides to go to McDonald's, because she wants to get food that tastes good but is not too expensive. Do you think she made a good choice? Would you have chosen McDonald's if your criteria were the same as Xiaoming's? How would you rate each of these options in terms of satisfying hunger, tasting good, and being inexpensive? Please answer in as much detail as possible.

NOTES

1. Previous fieldwork and related studies have suggested that though Yan (1997) notes that the meanings of efficiency and economic value are irrelevant for most consumers, these meanings may become salient when people are eating alone. Scenario 3 was designed to explore these issues further and uses specific questions to do so.
2. Group 1: 18–24 years of age, Group 2: 25–34 years of age, Group 3: 34–45 years of age.
3. Group 1 received Scenarios 2 and 3, Group 2 received Scenarios 1 and 2, and Group 3 received Scenarios 3 and 1. Note that the order of scenarios has been balanced among the groups.
4. Although consumers in many countries other than China would no doubt echo sentiments such as these, what makes the results reported here unique is that these inter-

pretations are context dependent. Consumers only associate these meanings with McDonald's when certain cultural values are evoked. In the dating scenario, for example, respondents believe that McDonald's is not superficial and is an appropriate place to get to know a potential mate.

5. Again, these interpretations are manifested only in certain situations; these respondents do not interpret McDonald's this way all the time.

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