On the malleable nature of product meaning in China

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While we know that consumers can hold varying meanings for products depending on context, the source of the variation is not clear. We investigate the source of malleable meanings in the Chinese context, as Chinese consumers are especially likely to hold multiple meanings for the same product. We discover that meanings can be inherently malleable, as opposed to one “true” meaning being altered by situational variables, and that the overwhelming importance of interpersonal relationships and the cultural categories that become salient in varying contexts are what allows incongruent meanings to be held non-problematically in the Chinese context. This suggests that in China, marketing communications can be difficult to craft because consumer interpretations will be contextually driven, and that social relationships should be emphasized.

Introduction

While we know that consumers can have situational meanings for the same products depending on context (Belk, 1975; Richins, 1994), the process of how a consumer creates varied meanings for the same product is not well understood, and thus the source of the variation in meaning is not clear. Chinese consumers are especially likely to hold multiple meanings for the same product. For example, Chinese indigenous psychology places an emphasis on encompassing duality (Tu, 1994), and Chinese consumers have been shown to hold dual meanings for products (Eckhardt and Houston, 2002).

We investigate the source and process of these malleable meanings for Chinese consumers. The results highlight the importance of interpersonal relationships and consumption contexts as the keys to understanding the process of how variations in meaning come about. The results add to and provide an explanation for the growing literature showing malleability in a variety of important consumer contexts related to emotions (Aaker and Williams, 2002) and attitudes (Wilson et al., 2000), and suggest that (1) meanings can be inherently malleable, as opposed to one “true” meaning being altered by situational variables, and (2) the overwhelming importance of interpersonal relationships and the cultural categories that become salient in varying contexts are what allows incongruent meanings to be held non-problematically in the Chinese context.
First we discuss the conceptual background of the research with a focus on how consumers develop meanings for products and how this might interact with aspects of Chinese culture. Next the research questions and methodology are described, and the findings are analyzed with an eye toward indigenous Chinese psychology. Finally, the implications for consumer research and marketing in China are discussed.

**Conceptual foundations**

**Meaning making in consumer research**

*What is product meaning?*

A basic definition of meaning is a perception or interpretation of an object (Kleine and Kernan, 1991). Meaning is inherently subjective. The objective characterizations of an object are merely features for which there is a consensus among perceivers (Kleine and Kernan, 1991). Researchers have conceptualized product meaning as a multidimensional construct (Friedmann and Lessig, 1986). Meaning is subjective interpretation on the part of the consumer which allows a dynamic rather than static nature, as a consumer's interpretations of products can change over time and in varying contexts.

*How do products acquire meaning?*

Richins (1994) proposes that possessions have both public and private meanings. Public meanings are those assigned to the object by non-owners, by society at large. Private meanings are those known only to the owner, unless disclosed to others. Public meanings come from shared knowledge by those in a society (e.g., a Lexus is an expensive car), and private meanings from an individual (e.g., this particular Lexus is a cherished gift from my parents).

McCracken (1986) describes how products carry and communicate cultural meaning, and hence shows how their meaning and value come from their cultural value. The meaning of consumer goods is constantly in transit, as it flows from the culturally constituted world, through the goods and ends up with the individual consumer. Finally, Wallendorf and Arnould (1988) argue that attachment to and derivation of meaning from objects occur around the world, in all societies, and “create intelligibility in the world and make visible and stable the categories of culture as they experience them” (p. 533). We can expect that in a culture that values public meanings like China (Eckhardt and Houston, 1998), and whose culture and psychology emphasize malleability, change, and holistic, yin/yang outlooks (Tse, 1996), that product meanings would be dynamic.

*Can meanings be malleable?*

Although there is limited literature explicitly examining the issue of product meaning malleability, evidence exists to suggest that aspects of consumer psychology are not as stable as previously assumed. For example, the structure of brand meaning can differ based on cultural attributes in different cultures (Aaker et al., 2001). Also, Aaker and Sengupta (2000) report that their Chinese subjects can combine incongruent product information without needing to solve the incongruency and do not discount pieces of information to reduce dissonance, as with the case of research using American subjects. Within the realm of information processing, then, there is emerging evidence that incongruity can be held non-problematically, but it is unclear to what other domains this may extend. Finally, Aaker and Williams (2002) show that for Asian Americans, persuasion appeals that exhibit conflicting emotions do not lead to less favorable attitudes toward the brand, as it does with non-Asian Americans, and attribute this to Asian American’s culture based psychological capacity to accept duality. However, the authors note that which part of culture may underlie the capacity to experience duality non-problematically needs to be uncovered. In sum, evidence that malleability and even incongruency can exist within consumer’s psychologies is emerging in the literature.
especially in a Chinese context, but there is a need to investigate which cultural categories may influence this, and what the source and process of these multiple meanings may be.

The malleable nature of Chinese consumer psychology

There are some important aspects of Chinese consumer culture that make it an appropriate milieu for expanding on the meaning-making concept in consumer psychology. Chinese psychology has been described as being malleable and holistic at its essence. Some researchers have suggested that understanding social interactions with important others is of the utmost importance when trying to unpack Chinese consumer behavior (Joy, 2001; Wang, 2007). Additionally, attachment to possessions is considered problematic in the Chinese context. For example, Buddhists are taught to overcome the belief that possessions will bring happiness (Ross, 1991), and materialism is discouraged in the Chinese school system (Chan and McNeal, 2004). Possessions tend to be used for alternate purposes than self-fulfillment (Eckhardt and Houston, 2001); most notably, to facilitate social interactions.

Tse (1996) suggests that Chinese consumers place more value on the social cache of products and brands than do Americans, and use products and brands to identify with important in-groups. This use of products and consumption activities to reinforce social ties is in line with the idea that the Confucian self is not defined by abstract intrapersonal characteristics, but rather that people are inherently social beings, who are defined by relationships (Bockover, 1997). This interdependent self, and all its internally held beliefs, attitudes, and values, are defined and sustained with respect to significant relationships (Heine, 2001). Therefore, we are interested in examining the interaction between relationships as an important source of meaning and malleability of product meaning, from a cultural psychological perspective within the Chinese marketplace.

Research objectives and methodology

We set out to understand in a naturalistic fashion how meanings can be malleable for Chinese consumers through a cultural psychological approach (Eckhardt and Houston, 2007). Cultural psychology is an interdisciplinary field, stemming primarily from anthropology and social psychology, and seeks to understand people in an “experience near” fashion (Shweder and Sullivan, 1993). Cultural psychology takes a relativistic perspective toward psychological diversity, and tends to utilize qualitative methods to gain an in-depth perspective on how culture is manifested in psychological phenomenon (Miller, 1994). Thus, similar to an interpretive approach within consumer behavior, the goal of this research is not to be generalizable to any particular population, but rather to illuminate how culture is manifested in psychological phenomenon (Ratner, 1997).

Within cultural psychology, there are a wide variety of qualitative methods to choose from. We utilize the methodology of experience sampling, a method that samples various experiences a person has throughout the day in order to capture a range of naturally occurring situations (Moskowitz et al., 2007). Because experience sampling is grounded in daily activities and is naturalistic, it is a particularly valid way to determine situational influences on behavior based on cultural contexts (Triandis, 1995).

Participants were recruited to represent a variety of ages, incomes, education levels, and occupations, and were equally balanced on gender. See Table 1 for a profile of the respondents. A total of 22 Shanghainese respondents filled out a response form three times per day for a total of 21 days. As Shanghai is the most developed marketplace within China, Shanghainese consumers are actively navigating a rapidly growing and sophisticated consumptionscape, making them ideal to study how product meaning is developed. The respondents were outfitted with signaling devices which went off randomly three times
per day, at which time they answered questions relating to the situation they were in at the moment as well as the important products they were using to facilitate whatever activity or interaction in which they were engaged. They were instructed to fill out the form within 10 minutes of the signaling device going off. Participants were paid 450 RMB for their participation. Instructions were given to the participants at orientation sessions. Respondents mailed back the forms at the end of each day. These procedures represent best practice in experience sampling methodology (e.g., Moskowitz et al., 2007), and resulted in all respondents staying in the study until the end.

The response form questions were developed based on previous fieldwork related to product meaning and malleability (see Appendix A). As Ratner (2002) notes, having a comprehensive and detailed understanding of the context in which the research takes place is imperative for formulating response questions in a meaningful way when utilizing a cultural psychological approach. Eckhardt and Houston (2001) report that product meanings in China are almost wholly related to representing, maintaining, and enhancing relationships with important others. From this, as well as our fieldwork which confirmed this finding, we developed the response form questions to reflect this focus on others when forming product meanings; in particular Question 10. Pretests were engaged in to finalize the wording of the response form, and participants in the pretest were interviewed extensively about how and why they responded to the questions in the manner they did (Stone et al., 1991). Pretest participants confirmed that a product's ability to facilitate relationships was the most important aspect of product meaning to them, which suggested to us that we should devote a question (Question 10) to exploring

Table 1. Participant profiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Company description</th>
<th>Household income (RMB/month)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Wu 45</td>
<td>Post secondary</td>
<td>Administrator</td>
<td>Local steel company</td>
<td>2000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mr. Yin 31</td>
<td>Senior middle school</td>
<td>Laborer</td>
<td>Ship manufacturer</td>
<td>2500</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Post secondary</td>
<td>Trade department supervisor</td>
<td>Securities Company</td>
<td>5000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Ren 34</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Business supervisor</td>
<td>Distribution company</td>
<td>6000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Cheng 24</td>
<td>Post secondary</td>
<td>Clerical</td>
<td>Western fast food company</td>
<td>2500</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Hu 33</td>
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<td>Manager</td>
<td>Engineering company</td>
<td>5000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Xu 28</td>
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<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Primary school</td>
<td>2500</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Tian 19</td>
<td>Technical school</td>
<td>Secretary</td>
<td>Health-care company</td>
<td>2500</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Ms. Shen 21</td>
<td>Post secondary</td>
<td>Office worker</td>
<td>Electrical machine company</td>
<td>5000</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Ms. Liu 45</td>
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<td>Inspector</td>
<td>Machine tool factory</td>
<td>2500</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Senior middle school</td>
<td>Salesperson</td>
<td>Telephone company</td>
<td>1500</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Industrial products manufacturer</td>
<td>1500</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td>Car manufacturer</td>
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<td>Hotel restaurant</td>
<td>4000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mr. Lu 24</td>
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<td>Clerical</td>
<td>International shipping company</td>
<td>6000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Machine tool factory</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Manager</td>
<td>Department store</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Cheng 45</td>
<td>Post secondary</td>
<td>Bookkeeper</td>
<td>Garment manufacturer</td>
<td>3000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*a*Note none of these companies are joint venture companies except for the one described as Western.
relationships to be able to identify and analyze the nuances of product/relationship interaction.

Each form took no more than 10 minutes to complete, in order to avoid overburdening the participants. The questions were open-ended, with the participants invited to add to the back of the form any information they felt was relevant. The time periods for the random sampling took place between 9 a.m. and 10 p.m. on the weekdays, and 10 a.m. and 11 p.m. on the weekends. Regular contact was maintained with the participants throughout the study, as recommended by Moskowitz et al. (2007). This was accomplished by periodically phoning participants to remind them to post their response forms each day and to see if they were experiencing any difficulties. All respondents were treated equally in this regard, and this contact did not influence the respondents unevenly, but rather served to ensure full participation given the relatively long and intrusive nature of the study.

All of the data collection took place in the local language and dialect. The lead researcher spent 3 years conducting field work off and on related to this study, and thus she had a grounded knowledge of the local context and language. The data were collected in collaboration with a local research partner who was intimately familiar with the goals of the studies and the methodologies utilized. The local research partner conducted the translations in full consultation with the lead researcher to extract the local meaning from the responses. All of this immersion in the research context and focus on local meaning is a prerequisite for achieving trustworthiness and credibility when using a cultural psychological approach (Eckhardt and Houston, 2007).

Two hundred four pages of single spaced transcripts from the response forms were used for the analysis. A within-respondent hermeneutic analysis took place for each participant (Thompson, 1997). The data were analyzed with the dates in random order as well as sequentially so as to eliminate any themes emerging due to respondent fatigue. Common themes were developed from the changes in meaning that occurred within each respondent. The analysis was iterative, with a focus on discovering common themes and meanings in a part-to-whole understanding. Specific techniques used included summary descriptions, developing alternate coding schemes before the final coding scheme was developed and refining them based on the literature and other field notes, preliminary interpretation of themes, and category formation (Spiggle, 1994). Because we engaged in a hermeneutic analysis, representing the data in narrative form is considered the most valid and reliable way to demonstrate the insights from the data to the audience (Thompson, 1997), and thus we present our findings through the consumption narratives of three of our respondents.

Findings

We discovered that product and brand meaning change based on context and the nature of the interpersonal relationship in varying usage situations, in line with conceptualizations of Chinese consumer behavior by Aaker and Sengupta (2000) and Tse (1996). The aspect of the Chinese context that is most important in introducing this malleability of meaning is interpersonal relationships. In other words, for our Chinese respondents, the meaning of a product depends on the nature of the relationship between the respondent and whomever she/he was interacting with when using the product. We now discuss the impact of family relations, public product meanings, and following the requirements of one’s role on product meaning malleability in the Chinese context.

Others will think I know how to change my life: Family relations and malleable meaning

Ms. Liu is a 45-year-old inspector at a machine tool factory. She is married with one daughter, earns 2500 RMB/month, which puts her solidly in the working class, and lives in a somewhat undesirable part of town. Even though she is a
working mother and wife, she still takes on all of the traditional duties of the woman in the household with no help from her husband, as is typical for most of our female respondents. Cooking is quite important to her, as her enjoyment of and the symbolic meanings attached to meals and food are intimately wrapped up in her relationship with her various family members, as well as her perceived duties as a housewife, mother, and daughter. When cooking lunch for her husband and daughter on the weekend, she says, "I have enough time to improve the quality of the dishes today because it is the weekend. Most of the products at the supermarket are frozen fast food, so their taste is not good. Today I have enough time to cook several good dishes to improve the quality of life. [Others think that] I'm a good housewife."

On day 10 of the study she went to her parent's home with her husband. "I bought a Hong Da roast chicken, beef, and two bottles of Pepsi-cola because these dishes are convenient to use. Buying cooked dishes can save time for cooking and washing, and I can have more time to accompany my parents. [Others think] I am a good daughter to my parents."

Even though convenience is the reason for the purchase of these particular foodstuffs, it is not to save herself time, but rather to be able to be a more filial daughter to her parents and spend more time with them. Later that day, when still at her parents, but with the arrival of her brother, sister, sister's husband, and daughter, etc. (a total of 10 people), who also brought dishes as well, she says, "Today's dishes are sumptuous, including beer, cola, roast chicken, fish, shrimp, egg, etc. [These products are appropriate] because it is a party of the whole family. Because we all have our own families, and not much time when not working, it is interesting to meet at our parent's home to communicate and chat on a Sunday." As to what others would think of them based on their food selection: "It is a harmonious and fortunate family."

When eating by herself, many of the above meanings associated with food and eating disappear and the experience of eating is focused on taste and enjoyment. This is the only time the attributes, or her personal enjoyment of the food, come out, as she does not have social roles to influence her interpretation. For people with interdependent self-orientations, social concerns overwhelm personal concerns in social situations (Markus and Kitayama, 1991), but for our respondents, when they are alone, their thoughts on the traits of the product could emerge, as they did not have any social role to enact.

When cooking lunch and washing dishes by herself on a weekend, for example, she is having meat and won tons: "Today is a rest day, so I would like to eat won tons instead of rice. Most of the working days, we are used to eating rice, so I want to have a change on the rest day. Others will think I know how to change my life."

This variety in the diet for pleasure is only evident when she is eating by herself. However, note that she still uses the term, "Others will think..." to describe her feelings even when alone, illustrating that her understanding of her self is still driven by an internalized view of herself as others see her, typical of Chinese psychology (Bond, 1996). Almost all of our respondents used this term even when alone, demonstrating the veracity of this inherently interdependent understanding of the self (Markus and Kitayama, 1991).

One day when her parents come to her house to visit on the weekend for dinner, she buys Zhending Chicken, Suntory beer, Coca-Cola, and quick frozen dishes. We have already seen she does not think frozen dishes are very high quality in certain situations. She says,
“Since my parents visit my home, I bought these dishes which are easy to cook; thus I can have time to spend with them. It is easy to cook semi-processed or processed food, and it isn’t troublesome for me to cook even more dishes. They would think I arrange reasonably.”

The interpretation of preprepared food has switched from being an inferior foodstuff to enabling her to be a more filial daughter. Prepared foods are a way for her to maintain face in front of her parents (Li and Su, 2007) - she can still provide them with a meal served inside her home, which is considered much more filial than going to a restaurant, unless it is a special occasion (Davis, 2000).

In sum, the symbolism of the consumption act of preparing and eating food for Ms. Liu is almost wholly related to her situational role with respect to the others she is with, and thus changes as the situations change. This is akin to the social surrounding element of situational effects, discussed by Belk (1975), wherein others’ roles and interpersonal interactions affect consumption behaviors. For Ms. Liu, the saliency of product attributes changes based on the nature of her relationships with others in each product usage situation, and thus psychological product meaning changes as well. Product meanings are almost wholly determined by interpersonal relationships when others are around, and can relate to internal attributes when alone. Thus, not only is there malleability with respect to the actual product meanings, but also malleability with respect to the sources of meaning.

The malleability of public product meanings

Next, Mr. Ke, a 38-year-old working as a repairperson for an industrial products company, earns a comfortable middle class income. He is married with a daughter. In many ways he embodies the consumer transition happening in urban China today. He is very much aware of the conflicting societal interpretation of consumption, and often expresses opposite points of view with reference to his own consumption. For example, when riding his motorcycle,

“Some people think I know how to save time and improve efficiency. Some people think I like to be in the limelight.”

When using the washing machine,

“Some people will think that it is normal for men to wash clothes, yet others will think women should do this.”

Mr. Ke is aware of the multiple, opposite public meanings that can be associated with such products depending on one’s view toward and immersion in the new economy.

The definition of publicly held meanings is that the meanings are understood and agreed upon by members of the culture or subculture (Richins, 1994). As described in Davis (2000), these are rapidly changing based on the swift changes occurring in the marketplace in urban China, and Mr. Ke is a consumer who is aware of and demonstrates this flux in symbolic public product meaning.

Following the requirements of his role

Finally, Mr. Ren is a 34-year-old university graduate, who works as a salesperson for a company that sells various goods to department stores. He is married with one daughter, with an income of 6000 RMB/month, which puts him in the category of the nouveau riche. The way he attaches meaning to products reflects values consistent with conspicuous consumption more so than any of the other respondents. He is also very status oriented. He very much strives to be “Western” (his term) with regards to consumption - he likes to buy Western brands and tries to model his consumption of various products around an imagined notion of how “Westerners” would do it. Yet, he almost always purchases products in relation to others rather than himself. In other words, a paradox emerges: the more he wants to be Western, and

expresses that desire through various consumption behaviors, the more he is actually engaging in Chinese consumption styles, such as striving to fit in with an in-group and placing enormous importance on giving and receiving face to important others (Tse, 1996).

Mr. Ren drinks coffee (Nestle) often, in keeping with his preference for Western brands. When drinking it (cold) with a customer, he says, in answer to the question how did you choose this product for this occasion,

“First, the customer likes to drink it. Second, I also like drinking a cold drink on a hot day.”

The concern for others (the social element) is the primary consideration. When drinking Brazilian coffee with a work acquaintance, he says,

“I have Western style and know how to appreciate it. I’ve developed a hobby of drinking coffee, like drinking Nescafe at home. Others will think I have a Western style life, and know how to enjoy my life.”

Similar to Ms. Liu, when alone, some of the characteristics of the coffee itself become important.

“Drinking coffee in the morning can make me energetic all day long. Nestle is a famous brand, I like drinking it at home.”

Overall, the meanings coffee can embody for him are Westernness, enjoyment, energy, and giving face to a customer and to himself (Li and Su, 2007), depending on the context and the relationship he has with the person(s) in each particular interaction. As he is giving and getting meanings out of his usage of this product, he is not doing this autonomously, but in an interdependent way (Markus and Kitayama, 1991).

With reference to beer, when he is out bowling with his friends one night, he is drinking Heineken beer, and says,

“Heineken Beer belongs to the senior class, because the consumers are of high social status. Heineken Beer is a very famous beer. Others think I respect my friends very much and have good taste.”

He is using the beer to gain face with his friends, to show them how much he respects them by buying them this famous beer. Similarly with cigarettes, when with business contacts he buys Yun Yan cigarettes.

“First: it is a famous brand. Second: my friends like it. Others think I pay attention to this occasion and respect my friends very much.”

Morris (1994) suggests that the Chinese self has little meaning outside rigidly defined social contexts. This is evidenced in the consumption behaviors described above: the meanings ascribed to products as they are used symbolically change based on the expected, defined nature of the relationship one is in at any given moment. This is in line with the Confucian nature of Chinese social psychology: societal and individual harmony will be achieved if everyone is conscientious in following the requirements of his or her role (Bond and Hwang, 1986), and one’s role changes in varying social situations. These three respondents are illustrative of interpersonal relationships being almost wholly the source for malleable and sometimes incongruent meanings, and they also exhibit the process of how meanings change based on the product’s symbolic purpose in varying social contexts.

Discussion and implications

The results reported here demonstrate that as Chinese consumers are going through their everyday lives, the meaning of products change as the nature of distinct interactions change. Various meanings for the same product were exhibited in relation to the various relationships people have in their lives and the prominence the maintenance of those
relationships takes over almost every other aspect of their lives.

Hirschman (1980) defines a product’s psychological meaning to be a person’s subjective perception of a product or brand that characterizes those aspects of the product most salient to him or her. That an internally held psychological meaning can be malleable based on context is in line with characterizations of Chinese psychology. For example, sense of self in China is extremely interdependent, holistic, and malleable (Morris, 1994). Bond and Hwang (1986) outline three essential aspects that shape the Chinese psychological makeup: (1) individuals exist through, and are defined by, relationships to others; (2) these relationships are structured hierarchically and are immovable; and (3) social order is assured through each party honoring the requirements in the role relationship. This interdependent view of the self, therefore, implies that one will behave and have thoughts, feelings, and actions primarily in relation to the context one is in rather than in relation to internally held beliefs or values, as demonstrated by our respondents. Thus, consumers can hold malleable meanings that rise out of context non-problematically, as they are not in conflict with internally held beliefs or values.

Additionally, we demonstrate that for our Chinese consumers, the symbolic meanings of products do not come from the mixed model proposed by Richins (1994), but rather they come primarily from others - that meanings stem almost exclusively from social concerns. Most psychological models of meaning (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981) assume that meanings are stable except as people go through various stages in the life cycle or experience a life altering rite of passage. We are suggesting that meanings can be inherently malleable, as opposed to one “true” meaning being altered by situational variables. As Chang (2001) points out, inconsistency is not only unremarkable in the Chinese context, it is in fact highly regarded by many Chinese as a way of life.

Moreover, discussions of possession meaning typically do not entertain the idea that possessions can mean different or even opposite things to the same consumer at any given time (e.g., Kleine and Baker, 2004). It became evident that within our respondent’s naturalistic everyday lives, the symbolism that the same product could hold, in some cases, was different depending on the people around them and the dynamics of the context they were in. In some contexts notions of modernity, tradition, gender identity, and foreignness were important and thus a part of the symbolic meaning of the brand, and as context varied so did these concepts as they related to the product.

We have demonstrated how incongruent perceptions of various attributes of a brand, and also the brand itself, come about. That the dynamics of interpersonal relationships hold precedence in consumption related interpretations for our respondents, and opposite meanings for the same brand can be related to the cultural categories brought up in various interpersonal situations, builds upon and provides an explanation for the results reported in Aaker and Sengupta (2000). They report their Chinese subjects can combine incongruent product information without needing to solve the incongruency and do not discount pieces of information to reduce dissonance, as has been reported in the literature using American subjects. Our results suggest that this is because the dynamics of interpersonal relationships and the cultural categories made salient are what allows this incongruency to be non-problematic, and also extends the domain in which non-problematic incongruency has been identified from information processing to meaning making.

The fact that inconsistency and incongruency are non-problematic and indeed a part of daily life in China, has important implications for marketers. Because the meaning ascribed to products will be almost wholly contextually driven, marketing communications become difficult to craft. Establishing a consistent, powerful brand identity in the Chinese consumer market may require the use of more abstract brand associations. If brand identity is to cut across multiple situations...
where meaning differs, the brand essence and overall identity may need to be based on more abstract associations that allow the malleability to occur without loss of brand equity. This is similar to the process described by Cayla and Eckhardt (2008), wherein Asian brands utilize an assortment of abstract cultural referents to develop brands with recognizable identities, yet are designed to be interpreted in multiple ways.

Additionally, interpersonal relationships, rather than specific product attributes, for example, will be fundamental to product interpretation and usage. Thus, social relationships should be emphasized in marketing communications. Demonstrating how relationships can be furthered through product usage is a message that would be relevant to and positively interpreted by many Chinese consumers. Indeed, Zhao and Belk (2008a) demonstrate that this was a successful tactic in 1930s Shanghai advertising.

**Limitations and future research**

As this study has taken a cultural psychological approach (Eckhardt and Houston, 2007), which seeks depth rather than breadth to contribute to theory building, the results cannot be generalized to any population. Rather, the contribution is to expand on process and provide explanations for phenomenon identified in the literature. While China is a milieu where we an expect malleability in meaning to emerge due to aspects of indigenous Chinese psychology, future research can determine how widespread the acceptance of malleability in meaning is amongst the Chinese population. Malleability does seem significant enough in the Chinese consumer to warrant special precautions in planning academic or applied research on the Chinese market. As product or brand meaning varies across social situations, researchers must accommodate this phenomenon in their research approaches in order to avoid a static view of meaning.

Additionally, this study identified the importance of interpersonal relationships to malleability of product meaning. Other factors may also affect malleability of meaning, and future research should investigate what these might be. For example, from a more macro perspective, changes in societal interpretations of product and brand meanings may affect malleability in the Chinese context (Zhao and Belk, 2008b).

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**Biographical notes**

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**References**


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### Appendix

#### Self interview protocol

Please answer the following questions within 5 minutes of your signaling device going off. Feel free to use the back of the page if you need extra space. Please mail this form along with the other two you fill out today tomorrow morning in the provided envelopes. Remember, your answers should reflect only the situation you are in at the time when your device goes off.

1. Today’s date _____________________
2. The time the page was received _____________________
3. The time this form was filled out _____________________
4. Where are you right now? Please identify the place and why you are there.
5. What activity are you currently engaged in (what are you doing)?
6. Who are the important people you are with? Please list the people’s names and their relationship to you.
7. What are the most important products or services or brands you are currently using? Remember, this includes the clothes you are wearing, the food you are eating (if any), and objects you are using (i.e., bicycle, books, cooking utensils, computers, games, radios, etc.).
8. Describe how you came to be using the products you listed above AT THIS PARTICULAR TIME (what prompted your product usage)?
9. Describe why you have chosen these particular products for this particular day/situation/activity?
10. What do you think your use of this product is communicating about you to others in this situation?