

THE MODERN RENEGOTIATIONS OF CONFUCIAN ETHICS AND IMPLICATIONS ON ETHICAL CONSUMPTION IN CHINA

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the ethical ideologies and the renegotiations of traditional Confucian values (TCV) resonating with the younger generation of Mainland Chinese consumers. It examines the extent embedded Confucian ethics play a part in consumption and the prospect of ethical consumption and sustainability in China. The study finds that notions of individualism and rampant materialism have superseded the value of collectivism, righteousness and the long-term orientation of saving. The TCV of face (*mianzi* and *lien*) along with frugality still maintains to be of great significance. Implications of each value for ethical consumption are discussed. This study's inclusion of Confucian ethics addresses some fundamental gaps and contributes to the ethics literature by encompassing crucial elements of Chinese philosophy needed to holistically further understand Chinese ethical reasoning, intention and consumption behavior.

INTRODUCTION

Green and sustainability marketers express that the limited research on ethical consumption is the major obstacle in seeing the international expansion and success of green products (Garau and Ranchhod 2005). Uusitalo and Oksanen's (2004) defines ethical consumerism as buyer behavior that demonstrates concern with the problems that arise from unethical and/or unjust global trades, such as child and low-paid labor, infringement of human rights, animal testing, labor union suppressions, inequalities in trading relations with the Third World and pollution of the environment. With globalization bringing together consumers and businesses from around the world and an individual's culture affecting one's ethical perspectives and decision-making (e.g. Ferrell and Gresham 1985; Hunt and Vitell 1986), there is a compelling need to acknowledge how values within certain cultural contexts informs the perspectives of ethics and directs consumption behavior.

Ethical Consumption

A plethora of research regarding ethical consumerism exists (e.g. Carrigan and Atalla 2001; Harrison et al. 2005; Devinney et al 2010). Over the last decade the concept of ethical consumerism has evolved from shifting its focus from being predominantly regarding environmental issues to a more extensive concept to include matters of conscience (Carrigan et al 2004) such as those stated above. The growing awareness among consumers of the environmental and social impact of their own consumption has led to the increased demand for more 'ethical' product alternatives (Shaw et al 2006). This may indicate that consumer values are experiencing a shift from the inward facing materialistic outlook, towards a more socially and environmentally proactive mindset (Freestone and McGoldrick 2007). The importance of research pertaining to this area has been noted due to the seemingly endless demand for consumer products induced by heightened materialism whilst rapidly depleting the earth's finite resources; easily trading off worker's rights and social wellbeing for consumer frivolity.

Ethical Consumption in China

The growing attention concerning the sustainability of developing regions such as China is driven by China being the second largest economy in the world, but at the price of having the world's worst environmental standards (Wang and Duce 2010). Firstly, the interest is in the significance this market plays in contributing to the unsustainable level of resources through excessive economic growth and consumption (Anderlini 2010), leading to the need to control and mitigate detrimental ecological consequences. Secondly is the increase in disposable income and higher standards of living (Starmass 2011) possibly indicating a higher potential of acceptance towards ethical consumption behavior in China.

China has been labeled the "most ecologically unsound place in the world" (Martinsons et al 1996) and the "world's biggest polluter" (Wang and Duce, 2010), Chinese citizens have become conscious of the environmental ramifications (Johri and Sahasakmontri 1998). In 2010, the environmental conservation spending totaled at 1.5% of GDP at \$175 billion with China spending more on clean energy than the US; a total investment of \$34.6 billion compared to only \$18.6 billion spent in the US (Bullis 2010). Furthermore, China is predicted to spend \$738 billion on clean energy projects in the next decade (Wang and Duce 2010), highlighting a shift in priorities to address the rapid environmental degradation, leading this pertinent issue to be at the forefront of academic, business and government attention.

Research by the Cambridge sustainability research digest (2007) suggests that Chinese citizens seek protection and restoration of the environment and are willing to act upon this. In this study they found that 86% would change their lifestyle to address these concerns. While 83% supported higher energy costs and 85% would pay higher taxes on coal and oil. Huang et al (2006) found that a staggering 70-80% of Chinese respondents were willing to pay a premium for environmental-friendly products such as baby food, recycled paper, and aerosols. Chan (2001) indicates that the promising advocacy of environmentally aware Chinese individuals is derived from cultural variation; mainly the man-nature orientation having significant influence on Chinese consumer's attitudes, intentions and behavior towards ethical consumption.

Ip (2003) along with Chan and Lau (2001) supports this and found that although the Chinese ecological knowledge and behavior is low, the Chinese express a positive emotional attachment and intention derived from the man-nature orientation. A common theme in the literature highlights the common perception that Chinese have the 'oriental' worldview (Chan and Lau 2001; Jenkins 2002; Ip 2003 and Piron 2006), characterized by non-duality of humanity and cosmos and concern for harmony rather than conflict (Vachon 1983) and other Confucian influences. This is theorized to direct consumption behavior and attitudes towards the environment, which makes the ethical attitude of the Chinese unique. Furthermore once the eco-knowledge is learnt, they display a willingness to use greener products.

Other studies find the optimism surrounding Chinese ethics in consumption unconvincing, Yeung (1998) who sampled Chinese adolescents found that the majority do not show much willingness to take active roles in environmental protection in circumstances where it conflicts with personal freedom, physical effort, expression of opinions or attempts to influence other people were involved. Some reasoning was assigned to the growth of materialistic values in Chinese society. Many researchers attribute the low engagement of ethical behavior to be the lack of education surrounding ethical consumption, and correspondingly, an increase of attention towards policy and education was seen to be imperative (Yam-Tam and Chan 1998; Martinsons et al. 1996; Yeung 1998). Extant research findings are inconclusive with varying findings supporting both facets of Chinese consumer's willingness to adopt ethical consumption behavior, instigating further inquiry within this domain of research.

Traditional Values and Confucian Ethics

Belk et al (2005) assert that to study ethical choices without explicitly considering cultural context is largely unrealistic. Deng et al (2006) purport that the ethical consumption concern relates to the concept of culture, which regards to the shared ideals, values, formation and uses of categories, assumption about life, and goal directed activities. The notion that different populations with specific social practices and cultural traits are likely to hold different values on attitudes towards the nature and the environment is asserted by many (e.g. Bartels 1967; Singhapakdi et al. 2001; Singhapakdi et al. 2005). Ethicality is ingrained into the traditional values, attitudes and beliefs of a given society, with culture being recognised as a powerful force shaping consumers attitudes (Deng et al. 2006) and to varying degrees mould the person's behavioural patterns (Singhapadki et al. 2005).

Chinese cultural values base around the notions of interpersonal relationship and social orientations, influenced by the work of Confucius (Yau 1988; Fan 2000) signifying an interconnected and cohesive nature of the two areas; traditional Chinese values and Confucian ethics. This study accounts for this and uses the concept 'Traditional Confucian Values' (TVCs) for the incorporation of both sets of values seen in literature. Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961) surmise that five orientations make up the Chinese cultural values; man to nature (harmony with nature and Yuarn/Karma), man-to-himself (abasement and situation-orientation), relational (respect for authority, interdependence, group-orientation and face), time (continuity and past-time orientation) and personal-activity (the doctrine of the mean and harmony with others). Fan (2000) amalgamates and examines the Confucian influenced Chinese cultural values adapted by a number of social scientists, resulting to 71 values in total, demonstrating the nuance and complexity of these values and meanings.

Woods and Lamond (2011) outline six Confucian values prerequisite for being "human": (1) Benevolence (*Ren*); (2) Righteousness (*Yi*); (3) Ritual propriety (*Li*); (4) Wisdom (*Zhi*); (5) Trustworthiness (*Xin*); (6) Filial Piety (*Xiao*). The idea of righteousness or uprightness (*Yi*) relates to living and behaving according to moral principles, rather than on material gain and exuding self-interested behaviors (Fan 2001). This doctrine appears to be subsiding, causing societal dilemma, with consumers increasingly following their self-gratifying materialistic desires in order to display status and attain their goals in various self-identity projects. Self-regulation is commonly discussed in Confucius teachings with thriftiness, social consciousness, face and moderation being deemed as values that direct the degree of moral self-control (Kindel 1985). This

moral control leads the process of governing one's behavior towards the self-cultivation and refinement of one's character (Tu 1998), which in turn is the central focus of historical Confucianism (Little 2006).

The concept of 'face' is unique to the Chinese and a well-researched notion within Chinese business ethics research (e.g. Ang and Leong 2000) '*Mianzi*' and '*Lien*' are the two concepts of face. *Mianzi* is the embodying of the prestige that is achieved through success in life and ostentatious acts (Hu 1944; Ho 1976; Ang and Leong 2000) also known as '*materialistic face*' (Durvasala and Lysonski 2010). *Lien* varies from *mianzi* in that it represents society's confidence in the integrity of the individual's moral character (Ho 1976), which is also seen as the '*moral face*' (Durvasala and Lysonski 2010).

Even though values are relatively stable within context, several recent studies found that ethical perspectives of Mainland Chinese consumers now reflect a mixed influence of Confucian values and an emerging market ethic (Redfern and Crawford 2004; Erdener 1998). Unlike the older generations of Chinese that were subjugated to the ideals of communism under the Marxist dictum "from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs", the new generation has been allowed to embrace modernity (Durvasala and Lysonski 2010). Whilst Pan (1990) notes that, even when the modern Chinese society feels the full impact of Western culture, many Chinese individuals still immerse in their own pride of national culture. Durvasala and Lysonski (2010) assert that Confucianism is viewed as a philosophy that can promote a return to traditional values and a countervailing force opposing the preoccupation of the social and ecological degradation along with the rampant materialism instilled in modern Chinese life.

A review of the literature illustrates empirical research concerning general ethical consumption awareness, motivations and influences of Chinese Consumers. Despite this, many of the samples originate from China's neighboring regions e.g. Hong Kong, Taiwan, which does not fully encapsulate the developing status and the range of economic, cultural and social complexities within China. All the studies reviewed did not utilize any qualitative methodologies, opting for quantitative self-reported survey data (e.g. Huang et al. 2006; Martinsons et al. 1996), which highlights the dubiousness of the results suggesting extremely high ethical consideration in China. The lack of focus and understanding of the ethical ideology of Mainland Chinese consumers may contribute to the researchers' conjecture that China's state of development provides little scope for research of ethical consumption together with the low potential for green companies aspiring to enter the Chinese market. Alternatively it could lead to exaggerated optimism of China's readiness to embrace sustainability, both creating uncertainty surrounding the underpinnings of ethical consumption research and practically, the success of a ethical consumption market in China.

The study explores whether TCV are still significant to Chinese consumers lifestyles, how these values direct ethical evaluations within consumption, together with how this implicates for the potential for ethical consumption in China. It addresses some fundamental gaps and contributes to the ethics literature by encompassing crucial elements of Chinese philosophy needed to holistically further understand Chinese ethical reasoning, intention and consumption behavior.

METHODOLOGY

Research within ethics (e.g. Fishbein and Ajzen 1967; Hunt and Vitell 1986; Chatzidaki et al. 2007; Carrigan and Attalla 2001) and specifically Chinese ethics (Chan et al. 1998; Martinson et al. 1998; Chan 1999, Lee 2008, Yeung 1998) have mainly been empirically carried out through quantitative means. The utilization of qualitative inquiry, which is neglected in Chinese consumer ethics research, is adopted within this study, specifically in-depth interviews. A qualitative methodology is suitable for new and exploratory research (Ghauri and Grønhaug 2002), Kvale (1983: 174) defines a qualitative interview as "an interview whose purpose is to gather description of the life-world of the interviewee with respect to interpretation of the meanings of the described phenomena". Thus using this method, descriptive accounts of individual's attitudes, perceptions, beliefs, views and feelings, along with the meanings and interpretations (Hakim, 1994) of what values and ethics remain to be perceived as significant can be purposefully cultivated. Furthermore, due to the potentially sensitive nature of looking at the role of ethics and values, interpretivism mitigates the predicament of social desirability (Devinney et al. 2010), prevalent in ethics research.

Only Mainland Chinese consumers serve as the sample since it takes into consideration China's past political and social ramifications that may impact consumption lifestyles. 42 interviews with 27 participants were conducted. The sample represents the Chinese students studying overseas in the UK who will most likely return back to China and hold relatively senior positions in Chinese businesses and government upon finishing their postgraduate degrees. They potentially play a huge role in the avocation and instigation of ethical action within businesses and the wider society in order to develop more sustainable development within China.

The basis of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967) is used as the main explorative tool and the basis for interpreting the data. Interviews are conducted prior to acknowledging definitive theories and the review of the literature being exhausted; rather it is consulted as part of an iterative, inductive and interactional process of data collection, simultaneous analysis, and emergent interpretation (Goulding 2005). Analysis and review is ongoing throughout the data collection with interpretation of data stipulating slight modifications in later interviews. Phenomenological analysis through co-axial thematic coding (Dittmar and Drury 2000) provides a framework to guide the rigorous process of transcribing, coding and mapping. Bringing together fragments of ideas identifies the themes, which are often deemed meaningless when viewed alone (Leininger 1985).

FINDINGS

Divergence of TCV: Righteousness to Materialism

The traditional bearing of righteousness, hardship and moderation is quashed by the substantial influence of status-seeking materialism as Chinese individuals see more importance in finding a rich husband or living conspicuously to display their social significance in society, thereby rescinding the Confucian ethic of righteousness.

"My peers in school don't want to work hard, they just want to marry a rich husband to buy whatever they want, maybe me as well, well wouldn't you like that?" (RA)

Materialistic values is seen to be at odds with the aim of ethical consumption; by exhibiting self interested desires rather than those of the greater welfare of society.

"They just buy nice cars, luxury things to show off, they just care about that. Just because they have money, they may not pay extra for ethical goods, people will just laugh and think you're stupid, why did you pay more for that". (JY)

Only a few participants suggest an attachment towards a man-nature orientation, and despite evidence of environmental awareness and social concerns, it fails to impress a significant factor towards actual behavior. Their cultural environment and their social norms direct their ethical evaluations, Here it illustrates that the participant mother's observation of the government instills in her mind what is ethical and what is necessary to lead a comfortable life, and in turn, this influences her son's materialistic consumption and ethical behavior. Through having evidenced corruption and other's frivolous consumption, it provides them with a benchmark to assess their own philosophies and lifestyle.

" No, I never think of the ethics of the product and workers when shopping. Mother agrees with me spending a lot but my father doesn't. My mother is an accountant in government and my father is a businessman of a private railway construction company. My mother sees the government spend the tax payer's money on good cars, good clothes, they never pay with their own money, That's why my mother thinks it's okay and that young people need to buy things to show off". (RX)

Divergence of TCV: Collectivism to Individualism

The study shows that the decreasing attachment to the collectivism and the growing individualism value results in a double-edged sword. Individualism is seen to fracture the social community and benevolence, leading to the degradation in social values and public safety. This following excerpt shows concern about factory working conditions; not for benevolent or virtuous reasons but for self-gratification and protection from harm.

"Yes, I have read something that most of the clothing are made in the poor area in China, I think about these poor conditions. Yes, so every time when I buy clothes, I will wash it before I wear it for the first time". (LZ)

Individualistic self-interested behavior pervading Chinese society contributes to business malpractice, consequently causing skeptical consumer behavior. Many are skeptical of the credentials of ethical claims:

"Sometimes I buy organic but don't know if it's really organic or not. People are just so interested in themselves and making money, they don't care. We have food scares, like milk scandals, fake eggs, medicine you don't know what is true or. In the UK, I believe the labels, they have tight audits". (LT)

Although aspects of deference to authority, collectivism and filial piety is to an extent, sidelined, individualism is also something to be embraced, a value that is seen to have held back previous generations. Notions of critical thinking and resistance to conform to social consensus if conflicting with own aims are advocated. The following participant associates ethical consumption merely with habits; their interpretation of habit was to disallow other factors to become a deterrent to ethical consumption. This demonstrates an individual at the post-conventional level; aware of the variety of ethical beliefs and relativism in social rules (Fukukawa 2003), ready to resist social norms and act according to their own principles (Ho et al. 1997).

"No, it's not difficult to maintain, but this kind of behavior is very strange if most people around you eat a lot of meat, and you are vegetarian. People think you are strange. But its life, it's not important, because it's your habit, you're used to being like that. You just need willingness. If you want to do that, you can do it well". (YY)

Despite the respect for the other's wisdom and knowledge, the ability of widening social circles and knowledge networks drives the importance in individualized non-conformist opinion, self-learning and self-cultivation, which increasingly affects the changing virtue of wisdom.

"Going abroad has broaden my horizons, I see myself a little different to the rest of my peers in China. Schools in China, you just memorize but do not think critically, they do teach ethics to be good person and treat parents well. The way they teach is like a brainwash, but it doesn't work". (SP)

Thus, again, iterating the notion of individualism to be a double-edged sword, in the essence that the benefit of a rise of individualism is the prospect of critical thinking, highly nurtured in western education, independent of conformist thinking which may be detrimental to the wider ethical consumption agenda.

Maintenance of TCV: Facework (Mianzi and Lien)

Loss of face traditionally associates with the immorality of character, now it appears that this value aligns highly towards the failure of high status within society. Attempting to uphold mianzi is achievable thorough the act of "appearing" successful in life through the acquisition and display of high social-value material goods.

"If someone is earning 1000 yuan a month, they will say they earn 2000 yuan. If they can't afford an iPhone, maybe they will borrow from friends and parents so they can show that they are better than you and they have a good life". (MQ)

Most respondents admit in overlooking ethical issues when shopping due to the lack of ethical products and clear labeling as well the unclear link perceived as to how consumers are suppose to help alleviate these problems when a higher price or inconvenience is attached. The attainment of lien (moral face) is deemed significant where the participant relates this through the use of status seeking motivations, which could possibly overcome the possible hindrances of ethical consumption:

"If ethical products can be packaged in a way that it is obvious that it's ethical, because I want to say, yes I am well educated, I am a person who is different with others. I can realize something which other people can't totally". (RT)

A lot of rationales concerning face work is evident; the gaining and upholding of lien, together with the undesirable loss of mianzi (Ho 1976). This illustrates the continued strength of this value, suggesting that the need for collectivism and social acceptance do remain manifested in certain social situations.

Maintenance of TCV: Frugality

There is less conservation surrounding the value of saving since participants emphasize being more present and short-term orientated of enjoying life. They have less qualms about borrowing and being in debt as opposed to the older generation. However, they highlight the value of frugality prevailing in certain situations that could possibly contribute to policymaking and instigate ethical consumption behavior change.

"Everyone brings their own bags to go shopping, but it's because there's a 1 yuan charge for a plastic bag". (LI)

The next participant's discusses ethical behavior, predominantly due to frugally rather than altruistic motivations. For them, they recycled everything; it was convenient since someone would come collect the recycled goods in addition to receiving a small sum of money.

"My mum, I don't think she got same standard to protect the environment and recycle, just that she can earn money, she never throws empty bottles in the rubbish, because that is like throwing money away". (Z1)

DISCUSSION

There is evidence of rampant materialism amongst the middle-upper class of Chinese consumer, which is often seen to be at odds with ethical consumption, however Harrison et al (2005) suggests wealthier consumers can realize the desire to consume ethically once their primary needs have been met. They suggest that if the consumer's basic needs are achieved, they have reached the top of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs in which consumer's need to self-actualize by buying status goods or being ethical. He suggests that being ethical in our consumption is the main way, which can be a simultaneous aim for the goal. This supports the recommendation that marketers need to evoke the appeal of being an ethical consumer by highlighting emotions of self-gratification, promoted with conspicuous luxury packaging. The overall association of ethical induced consumption behavior should align with actions belonging to consumers amongst society's "finest", the "Chinese ethical self-actualizers" who are at the top of the achievement ladder; achieved and acquired everything else that people are now trying to attain.

The skeptical behavior of Chinese consumers results from individuals within businesses revealing Individual expressions and gratification of own needs that are considered a threat to the collective society (Winfield 2000). There is greater trust in international firms and their claims thus there is need to harness consumer's belief in ethical behavior by exhibiting rigorous and transparent international ethics standards. In addition, firms need to demonstrate reputable and philanthropic activity with high profile evidence to offset existing business malpractice in the domestic marketplace. The intensified adoption of individualism rejects the need of appeasing others and being in larger networks of the West harnesses the liberation of critical thinking and self-cultivation that was previously suppressed by the state. More external influences of Chinese values and inherently ethical philosophies would need to be recognized and harnessed in the research of ethics. Furthermore, it highlights the fundamental role that western education has on the impact of setting the foundations of critical knowledge and ethical consumption education.

With regards to the concept of face, both mianzi and lien plays a critical role in Chinese rationales of consumption. Marketers and policymakers should emphasize social consciousness and the probability of losing one's mianzi through unethical consumption behavior, together with the provision of social avenues to conspicuously recycle or buy environmentally friendly products to develop their lien, especially in high visibility public areas. The signifying of higher educational level and status possibly achieved through "conspicuous ethical consumption" could promote individuals lien by being seen advocating ethical behaviour, indicating behavior of the 'wealthy, educated compassionates, with righteous character.

By tapping into the frugality value, financial incentives in policies or social practice as seen above, result in immediate changes in action amongst frugal consumers, eradicating the need for the slow process of nudging consumers to develop the appropriate ethical attitude and intentions. Through developing more systematic incentives for action, it can then build into their habitual behavior where they may later act ethically regardless of monetary enticement.

Despite presenting implications for ethical consumption when considering values derived from the Chinese context, the limitations of the paper should be highlighted. The sample was restricted to Chinese students studying overseas in the UK, thus could possibly demonstrate bias, representing views of an individual from a middle-high income family. The sample may have a differing view of ethical consumption with someone from a less well-off background and those in China who have not had first-hand exposure to a Western environment, thus this limitation on the study's findings needs to be considered.

Overall the study focuses on contextually ingrained traditional values and Confucian ethics and contributes in the developing of a more accessible framework to assess Chinese ethics, as called for by Smith (1995). The findings bring to light the inadequate attention of Confucian values and customisation when transferring generic western ethics models to China. It illustrates that Confucianism in China, having undergone societal, cultural, political and economical changes; the deeper understanding of redefining how Confucianism guides consumers in china is imperative in developing ethics and ethical consumption research in China. This could variably assist in developing "new cross-cultural, macro-level models of societal

ethics (Robertson and Crittenden 2003: 385), which in turn would assist policy makers and managers in assessing Chinese consumers thought process and consequential decisions (Fukukawa 2003). This has wider implications for researchers who require a more inclusive observation of ethical evaluation in china along with practitioners wanting to tap into the Chinese market with ethical goods, especially seeing the potential value the role of Confucian ethics in packaging and advertising can hold.

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