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A Brand Culture Approach to Chinese Cultural Heritage Brands

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Introduction

China has emerged as one of the largest global markets for luxury goods (Millward Brown/Lightspeed Research, 2014; Yu, 2014). The growing research literature on branding in China reflects this growth (for example, Melewar *et al,* 2006; Cayla and Eckhardt, 2008; Eckhardt and Houston, 2008; Li *et al,* 2012; Yu, 2012; Zhan and He, 2012; Walley and Li, 2014). However, few papers have focused on efforts to build Chinese luxury brands from within China (for example, Chevalier and Lu, 2010). In addressing this lack, we have turned our attention to two Chinese luxury brands, Shanghai Tang and Shang Xia, which offer insights into brand development and consumer response within China. Shanghai Tang and Shang Xia were launched in collaboration with leading European luxury brands, but nevertheless are generally recognised as Chinese brands, and they each promote distinct aspects of Chinese aesthetics, culture and values in their marketing and retail strategy.

We argue that Chinese consumer engagement with brands contributes to the development and emergence of new cultural forms in the 'new China', and thus the world. This study investigates consumer response to Chinese luxury brands via a brand culture approach, which suggests that brands do not only draw upon meaning resources from particular cultures and histories, but that new cultural meanings and

practices emerge and develop in relationship to brands. Indeed, there are many ways in which branding processes and practices – and brands themselves – go beyond a subsidiary role and co-create culture.

From a brand culture perspective, the term brand does not only refer to a firm or organisation, but also to material and symbolic forms of communication. For example, brands can embody cultural values, ideology and personal identity (Askegaard, 2006; Luedicke *et al,* 2010). Brands, in this sense, foster imaginative engagement between brand actors, which often create discrepancies between brand identity and brand image.

Culture has been defined as 'the way of life of a group' (Kendall and Wickham, 2001, p. 14), including the meanings that arise from this way of life, and 'the transmission, communication and alteration of those meanings, and the circuits of power by which the meanings are valorised or derogated' (Kendall and Wickham, 2001, p. 14). From this perspective, the aspects – or expressions – of culture and cultural meaning that are 'valorised or derogated' may vary. This variation provides openings for multiple cultural narratives and diverse interpretations, and informs the potential of branding in interesting ways (Puntoni *et al,* 2010). Further, it is equally important to recognise how the past is implicitly filtered through the present (Lowenthal, 1985).

In brand management contexts, it is generally agreed that culture and cultural meanings function as resources upon which branding processes and practices can draw; and that these cultural resources may provide productive paths for brand development (for example, Holt, 2002; Schroeder and Salzer-Mörling, 2006; Allen *et al,* 2008; Cayla and Arnould, 2008; Schroeder, 2009; Balmer, 2013). For example, a classic marketing campaign for Chevrolet linked the brand to American cultural icons – hot dogs and apple pie (Holt, 2004). More subtly, Burberry draws upon cultural traditions of British fashion, such as Burberry's signature check design (reminiscent of historical Scottish tartans), Savile Row bespoke tailoring and punk style (for example, Balmer, 2012; Peng and Chen, 2012). However, the interaction of brands and culture goes much deeper. For instance, Cayla and Eckhardt (2008) have argued that brands help create an 'imagined community' throughout Asia.

This article focuses on the ways in which consumers respond to cultural heritage brands that invoke aspects of cultural history – apart from the firm or organisation's history – in their branding strategies (for example, Brown *et al,* 2000; Chronis *et al,* 2012; Schroeder 2015). The analysis focuses on consumer perceptions of Shang Xia's current position in the Chinese market. We concentrate largely on how wider aspects of

culture and history connect with a group of Chinese consumers, and do not emphasise how firms strategically position their corporate brand heritage. Nevertheless, in order to engage in conversation with previous work in brand management, it is useful to distinguish between history and heritage, as well as between brand heritage, brand culture and cultural heritage, and between corporate brand heritage and cultural brand heritage. From this perspective, corporate brand heritage is different from what has been called cultural heritage, which encompasses how brand meanings engage with iconic cultural themes, such as those consumers might recognise in Burberry, Louis Vuitton or Ralph Lauren.

Our research examines the emerging dialogues of brands composed and co-created with consumers, but also with managerial workers and the media, in an effort to analyse meanings and circulations of brands and cultures. We are interested in how brands draw upon, and at the same time co-create, aspects of 'Chineseness' in efforts to become global, and how consumers pick up on Chineseness and use related characteristics and aesthetic values to develop relationships with the brand, which in turn contributes to the development of the brand. In the following, we clarify various branding concepts. We then review consumer-focused research on Shanghai Tang before presenting a case study of Shang Xia to draw out conceptual and managerial implications for understanding cultural heritage branding in China and beyond.

Corporate heritage brands, cultural heritage brands and brand culture

Aspects of both heritage and history can play strategic branding roles (for example, Balmer, 1995, 2011, 2013; Sharpe, 2009; Hudson, 2011; Hudson and Balmer, 2013; Burghausen and Balmer, 2014). Lowenthal has argued that history, though 'never totally objective', is different from heritage, in that 'Heritage is necessarily false' (Lowenthal, in Edwards and Wilson, 2014, p. 113). Within brand management research, however, brand heritage has been defined 'as a dimension of a brand's identity found in its track record, longevity, core values, use of symbols and particularly in an organisational belief that its history is important. A heritage brand is one with a positioning and value proposition based on its heritage' (Urde *et al*, 2007, p. 4). In other words, a heritage brand captures aspects of a corporation's history in a manner that allows that history to be communicated as an authentic foundation for brand identity and communications. Thus, we can speak of a corporate heritage brand (Balmer, 2011).

The branding literature implies a distinction between brand heritage and corporate brand heritage (for example, Balmer, 2013); however, for our purposes both concepts can be differentiated from cultural heritage. Corporate heritage, linked as it has been to a particular history and corporate narrative, is not the same as cultural heritage (cf. Hakala *et al,* 2011; Ko and Lee, 2011; Burghausen and Balmer, 2014), and does not operate the same way as cultural heritage. Cultural heritage, within the brand management context, has been described as 'a composite of the history and coherence and continuity' of defining characteristics (Hakala *et al,* 2011, p. 450), for example, of a culture, an object, a people or a nation. In other words, a cultural heritage brand is not primarily 'about' a corporation and its history. Corporate brand heritage, as it is defined, discussed and operationalised by Urde *et al* (2007) is essentially related to the specific firm or organisation from whose history, beliefs and practices this 'heritage' emerges over time. In other words, corporate heritage brands appeal to an apparently authentic past linked to a particular organisation's path of change and development (for example, Urde, 2003; Balmer *et al,* 2006; Burghausen and Balmer, 2014).

Whereas there are identifiable ways in which a specific firm's corporate brand heritage can be co-opted, stolen or transferred – ranging from outright purchase or revitalising a brand to counterfeiting a brand and its products, generally speaking, a firm's corporate brand heritage is not portable in the same way the meaning resources of cultural heritage are portable. Furthermore, country of origin, which might be considered essential to corporate heritage brands, need not be inextricably linked to a cultural heritage brand, such as a brand that draws upon aspects of a country's cultural heritage or historical culture generally.

For example, Budweiser is a US brand that communicates what are considered to be iconic US values, yet Ambev, a Belgian–Brazilian conglomerate, owns the company. In another case, Häagen Daz, which draws upon European culinary traditions and notions of quality – as communicated through the umlaut over the 'a' in the brand name – is in fact an ice cream company established in the Bronx, New York. In contrast, Wayne's Coffee, a Swedish firm, attempts to capture recognisably American associations about coffee shops by serving 'American' coffee, bacon and eggs, and bagels and cream cheese breakfasts and generally adopting an American atmosphere, with English language signage and music in their outlets throughout Scandinavia. Along these lines, Hai Karate cologne attempts to communicate apparently masculine characteristics by drawing upon values and representations of Asian martial arts, yet the corporate brand heritage is based outside Asia, as

the US pharmaceutical corporation Pfizer currently owns the brand. These examples can be considered cultural heritage brands that do not match their particular corporate brand heritage. In sum, there are important distinctions between *corporate* heritage brands and *cultural* heritage brands.

Furthermore, corporate brand heritage is not the same as brand culture. Corporate brand heritage can be seen as a component of brand culture, where brand culture speaks to broader developments and emergences of brand image in co-creation with consumers and cultural resources, as well other brand actors. Brand culture captures the co-creation of brands and cultures, not specifically limited to the firm or organisation's heritage.

A brand culture approach emphasises co-creation. Generally co-creation refers to consumers and producers – so called brand actors, including brand owners, managers and branded employees – working together in ways that are both intentional and unintentional, to create brand meaning and value and influence brands (for example, Schau *et al*, 2009). Fournier's work on brand relationships showed how co-creation works – consumers invest brands with particular meanings and value by consuming them in socially negotiated ways and, further, brands as companions co-create and contribute to life experiences (Fournier, 1998).

Aspects of a corporation's intended meanings – brand identity – might be expressed by images and text in marketing communications and other brand stimuli, but consumer perception, experience and aspiration may intervene with unanticipated, unexpected or unintended meanings – to form brand image (for example, Balmer 2001, 2012; Schroeder, 2005; Schroeder and Salzer-Mörling, 2006; Cornelissen *et al*, 2007; Borgerson *et al*, 2009). This interplay between brand identity and brand image forms part of the co-creation process (Pongsakornrungsilp and Schroeder, 2011).

A brand culture approach emphasises cultural resources, including cultural tensions, heritage, history and mythology that build brand meaning and value. In his work, brand strategist Holt has argued that iconic brands such as Budweiser engage with cultural tensions such as corporate downsizing, the decline of manufacturing and employee anonymity in their brand communication (Holt, 2004). Even cultural atrocities, such as war, have been drawn upon in what organisational researchers Muhr and Rehn (2014) call 'dark side' brand campaigns.

Brand culture research asks how co-creations of brand actors interact with brand image and brand identity (for example, Bengtsson and

Östberg, 2006; Schroeder and Salzer-Mörling, 2006; Kipnis *et al,* 2014). For example, brand researchers have argued that co-creation depends upon a minimal level of competency in reading or understanding the brand – or brand literacy (Oswald, 2010). Brand literacy constitutes 'the ability of the consumer to make sense of and compose the signs of a brand culture and to understand the meaning systems that are at play' (Bengtsson and Fırat, 2006, p. 377). Brand literacy, brand identity, brand image and brand relationships form important components of brand culture.

These concerns include how employees embody and communicate the identity of the brand, or what has been called operational identity (Borgerson *et al,* 2009). Co-creative processes may alter developing and emerging brand culture or heritage, of course, but also a community or nation's culture, as well. In contrast, proponents of brand heritage research might ask, what is the culture of the firm that is launching the brand? Or, what is the heritage of the organisation or corporation that has a particular brand identity? We propose that brand culture augments brand identity and brand heritage, and highlights the realm of brand image for insights and key developments.

Balmer *et al* (2006) introduced the concept of a corporate heritage brand, illustrated by their research on monarchies. They argue that monarchies function as, and can be managed as, brands (Balmer *et al,* 2006). From this perspective, the monarchy, seen as a brand with a specific institutional heritage, is assumed to have an authentic and traceable lineage of its own that must be managed for long term symbolic value, much like a corporate brand. We would say, additionally, that most monarchies exhibit characteristics of *both* corporate heritage brands and cultural heritage brands: monarchies are inextricably intertwined with the 'external' cultural heritage and history of the countries they serve. The cultural heritage aspect can be perceived in what Balmer *et al* (2006, p. 158) call the 'corporate rebranding' of the British Royal Family in switching from the German names of Gotha and Saxe-Coburg to Windsor. In the Chinese examples we discuss in this article, the relatively new brands, Shanghai Tang and Shang Xia, represent recently created corporations. Thus, they have little history or heritage of their own to draw upon for branding purposes. Instead, as we argue, they form cultural heritage brands.

In summary, cultural heritage can be distinguished from corporate heritage in several ways. Whereas corporate heritage is focused on a specific corporation or institution – its origins, founders and history – cultural heritage is not limited to, or even singularly attached to, a particular organisation's or institution's own narrative, history or heritage. Unlike

corporate heritage, the meaning resources of cultural heritage are portable. For example, aspects of cultural heritage upon which an organisation's brands draw need not be linked to that organisation's country of origin, or that particular corporation's own heritage. Thus, cultural heritage brands engage with iconic cultural themes generally, and may elude an essential linkage to a particular organisation or institution.

A brand culture perspective can shed light on how developing Chinese brands interact with cultural history, cultural tensions and identity formation. We argue that brands such as Shanghai Tang and Shang Xia represent Chinese consumers' perceptions and interpretations of an emergent affluent Chinese lifestyle, and provide resources for Chinese consumers to reflect on their own Chineseness. The consumers in our studies embraced these elements, suggesting that they may help resolve what Holt (2004) calls identity tensions. Further, by building upon a rich historical legacy, these brands may help change often negative perceptions of China as a country of origin (for example, Gilmore and Dumont, 2003; Henderson *et al*, 2003; Bian and Veloutsou, 2007; Rein, 2012; Aichner, 2014; *China Economic Review*, 2014). In the following section, we set the stage for our exploration of Shang Xia by reviewing recent brand culture research on Shanghai Tang.

Setting the stage: A Shanghai Tang case study

Shanghai Tang promotes itself as the first and only luxury brand to have emerged from China. David Tang, a charismatic British-educated entrepreneur, founded Shanghai Tang in Hong Kong in 1994. The Richemont Group, owner of luxury brands such as Alfred Dunhill, Cartier and Chloé, bought Shanghai Tang in 1998. The Shanghai Tang brand includes a range of luxury goods, including bespoke tailoring for dresses and suits, all of which are intended to convey the image of a modern Chinese lifestyle, fusing iconic elements of Chinese culture with stylish contemporary fashion (Chua and Eccles, 2010). Recent research on the Shanghai Tang brand served to address an important unanswered question: Might branding and branded products successfully draw upon historical Chinese culture?

As part of this research, a CEO of a prominent automobile manufacturer in China was interviewed. The relevance of Shanghai Tang emerged during his interview, when he reported that they were looking for successful ways to invest their products with historical Chinese features. They considered re-fashioning historical features into appealing product traits – such as using a dragon design for the

car's badge – a relatively straightforward, but somewhat unsophisticated use of cultural resources. Pursuing the potential importance of such cultural resources, this interview was followed up by surveying managers and marketers in China and abroad, and noted how often they mentioned Shanghai Tang as an illustrative exemplar. Shanghai Tang represented a distinctively Chinese brand with global ambitions, and provided an ideal company for investigating cultural aspects of Chinese global brand development. Moreover, the notion of 'Chineseness' with respect to Shanghai Tang had come to represent a cultural resource transcending local and regional boundaries. Thus, what emerged showed how the selective definition of historical and traditional Chinese cultural resources, in conjunction with global fashion systems, had the potential to transform a local and regional brand into a global brand (Zhiyan *et al,* 2013). However, in this article, we do not focus on Shanghai Tang's corporate heritage or details of its' corporate brand development.

The outcome of this research revealed the ways in which incorporating Chinese cultural heritage and aesthetics into brand identity, marketing communications and products built an emerging global brand (Zhiyan *et al*, 2013). The research, which included interviews, site visits and participant observation, encompassed managerial perspectives, consumer vantage points, managerial and consumer networks, and the interactions between these, across multiple locations to come to an understanding of how Chinese brand development crosses national boundaries and intersects with a global context. Interview subjects included Shanghai Tang managers and international consumers at universities, corporations and market research firms in the United Kingdom and China. Interviews with Chinese participants were conducted in Chinese, and subsequently translated into English. The rest of the interviews were conducted in English. Activities were personally observed in Shanghai Tang retail stores: in Shanghai (three stores), Beijing (four stores), Hangzhou (one store), Guangzhou (one store) and London (one store). Researcher participation also included taking pictures and undertaking visual analyses of aspects of the Shanghai Tang brand identity in the retail environment (cf. Breazeale and Ponder, 2013).

In interviewing global consumers and employees of Shanghai Tang in different locations and by observing its stores, related consumption behaviour, relevant Websites and other media resources, the Shanghai Tang case study reveals the possibilities and processes of understanding and engaging Chinese cultural resources through fashion codes in Chinese global branding strategy. Further, the research shed light on the

macro context and the processes of cultural formation via the circulation of meanings, objects and identities in contemporary society.

The Shanghai Tang story illustrates several key points. For example, design is crucial: details such as store layout, colours and clothing fasteners all play a part in the overall brand DNA, including the way the Shanghai Tang name, in conjunction with these more specific factors evokes, the lively past – and present – of the Shanghai Bund. The Bund, Shanghai's famous waterfront district and tourist destination, represents two worlds – modern skyscrapers and colonial heritage (Hibbard, 2007). In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, the Bund served as the financial centre of East Asia as well as the political hub of the international community in China (Horesh, 2009). Thus, the Bund serves as a powerful cultural symbol.

One of the informants stated that Shanghai Tang's strategic citation of Chinese design features, such as such as mandarin collars, frog closures and butterfly buttons, was among the most appreciated features by people who complimented him on his attire. The consumer interviews helped uncover Shanghai Tang's role in what has been called 'the myth of the modern Chinese lifestyle', that is, Shanghai Tang provides a set of codes that contemporary cosmopolitan Chinese consumers might embrace – or reject – in identity construction and maintenance (for example, Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998; Miller, 2001). On the managerial side, designers, store managers and sales associates occupy a key position in brand meaning – they produce the products, spaces and commercial habitat that meet consumer demands for brand cosmopolitanism (Thompson and Tambyah, 1999). Further, non-Chinese consumers of Shanghai Tang can attempt to establish cosmopolitan identity by consuming Chinese culture, or *Chineseness,* through Shanghai Tang brand attributes, aesthetics and values.

Chineseness refers to a general look or impression of being Chinese or of Chinese origin. The notion of Chineseness suggests an overarching impression of nationally unified traits and characteristics, that while failing to refer to the full variety and multiple identities of peoples within national boundaries, or competing versions of historical narratives, nevertheless communicates meaning in relation to Chinese identity. For example, film scholar Metzger argues that iconic Chinese objects such as the qipao dress and the Mao suit represent Chineseness for both Chinese and Western audiences, in terms of national identity, race, gender and politics (Metzger, 2014). Such a Chinese identity, as expressed in notions of Chineseness, may capture and include aspects of the Chinese diaspora, including Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan, and

is not necessarily limited by national boundaries. Thus, Chineseness need not be perfectly aligned with Chinese country-of-origin. This assertion also reflects how 'national' brand identity need not correspond with brand ownership. Thus, when Shanghai Tang and Shang Xia are referred to as Chinese brands, it does necessarily imply that they are wholly Chinese-owned, nor defined by political borders.

Wearing Shanghai Tang imparted fashionable, not overly 'local' Chineseness, which offered a distinctive look that consumers felt helped in climbing 'the ladder of success', in the informants' words. Almost all the Shanghai Tang consumers who participated in the study appreciated the brand's introduction of isolated Chinese style elements into more Western styles to make them fashionable, for example, iconic patterns and strategically located signature colours on cuffs and collars of polo shirts and pullover sweaters. Chinese styling has been the key to Shanghai Tang's brand, and this is particularly evident in the brand's seasonal collections, in which designers focus on small, distinctive details, such as bamboo buttons, Chinese dragon motifs and patterns with symbols of Chinese ingots, which were historically used as money in China, and are often considered emblems of wealth and status (Welch, 2012).

Regardless of whether it deploys ancient ingots or images of social upheaval in old Shanghai, Shanghai Tang's strategy consists in first isolating then re-introducing familiar features into novel arrangements that juxtapose the past and the present. Once-precious ingots become more commonly available and wearable in the form of a Shanghai Tang dress. A Shanghai Tang bag invokes the traumatic Cultural Revolution with shadowy, Maoist imagery. Their tight-fitting qipao made of black leather lends an edgy, contemporary look to a traditional Chinese garment. This fashion strategy, which engages the cultural interest of consumers by re-engaging the old within the new, does not provide explanations for such use of symbols, but rather represents them figuratively across designs. Creativity and innovation is central in any brand's development, but Shanghai Tang's success depends on the negotiation of Chineseness across its global product portfolio, retail design and marketing communication. Below, we discuss how this strategy is both deeper and subtler in the case of Shang Xia.

Informant comments about Shanghai Tang products underscore an emphasis on what they saw as subtle Chinese aesthetics. For the most part, they thought that Shanghai Tang products are aligned with notions of harmony. The designs, colours, fabric quality and cuts are uniformly subtle: when details do stand out they do so without disturbing the

peace of the whole. They are meant to capture the eye but ultimately enhance the effect of the harmonious whole. This aesthetic contributes to the meaning of the brand, and frequent consumers would be able to read the various aesthetic codes that make up the lexicon of Shanghai Tang designs. Perhaps surprising in the wake of such subtlety, Shanghai Tang has become responsible for developing the Chinese blueprint of 'contemporary luxury lifestyle products' (Shanghai Tang, 2015). This strategy positions Shanghai Tang as a lifestyle brand, one conceived to sell products (and visual imagery) aimed not just at single functions, but designed for an overall way of life, a harmonious communication of status or taste, or lifestyle: this might include clothing, furnishings, lounge music collections and accessories (Zhiyan *et al*, 2013).

Consumer insights about Shanghai Tang reveal how Chinese cultural codes can be drawn upon to develop and embody cosmopolitan consumer identity, which in turn, depends in part upon consuming brands (for example, Belk, 1988; Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998; Strizhakova *et al*, 2008). For example, consumer research suggests that individuals construct identities as much through engagement with material objects and practices as they do through human relationships (for example, Belk, 1988; Fournier, 1998; Miller, 2001; Borgerson, 2013). For some consumers, Shanghai Tang represents a ladder for success. For others, it embodies authentic and nostalgic emotion. For most, it expresses a hybrid aesthetic of international style and *savoir-faire*.

Elements of Shanghai Tang's brand culture – consumers, managers, retail stores, and of course, design – demonstrate that diverse contributions are essential for the co-creation and development of brand meanings, brand growth, as well as a rationale for potential myth markets (see, for example, Thompson, 2004; Hudson and Balmer, 2013). Shanghai Tang served to connect ethnic Chinese to their Chinese identities. Furthermore, many comments discussed how Shanghai Tang clothing helped communicate cosmopolitan identity for consumers, both Chinese and others. Shanghai Tang provides a model of conceptualising a culturally conceived branding system by marrying global fashion systems with a Chinese imaginary. In the following sections, we discuss Shang Xia's attempts to do the same.

Shang Xia: 'Renaissance of Chinese Fine Living'

Shang Xia, a relatively new Chinese luxury brand, has chosen a focused and dense branding strategy around the use of Chinese culture and history, drawing inspiration and concrete ideas for decoration, detail and

design from elements of the Chinese tea ceremony. At its core, Shang Xia offers low-key luxury products that relate to a shared cultural activity (Ang, 2012). Shang Xia's Website presents their brand story as 'a mission to create a 21st century lifestyle founded on the finest of Chinese design traditions' and proclaims that Shang Xia offers a 'Renaissance for Chinese Fine Living' (Shang Xia, 2015). China market analyst Bergstrom noted that Shang Xia 'poses a central question about the possibility of luxury coming from a country known for mass-production' (Bergstrom, 2012, p. 176).

Shang Xia's product lines include furniture, housewares, accessories and clothing in a wide range of prices, from RMB 500 (US$80) to upwards of RMB 150 000 ($25 000), all of which communicate aesthetic values, attitudes and practices that radiate out from the Chinese tea ceremony, or ritual. Shang Xia promotes the brand as not only a fashion luxury brand, but also a luxury lifestyle brand, which blends the heritage of Chinese design and craftsmanship, attempting to attract consumers who focus on quality, rather than purely on Western luxury logos. Shang Xia aims to inherit Chinese traditional craftsmanship, and to revive Chinese cultural practice.

Tea permeates Chinese culture. From the design of early teapots, and the scents, textures and colours of the tea leaves, to the elegant, slow pace of the practice itself, the tea ceremony offers a deep well of material culture and Chinese aesthetics from which to draw in building the Shang Xia brand. Tea is generally believed to have originated in China, during the Tang dynasty (618–907) (Tong, 2010). Teapots are often seen as an auspicious object in Chinese culture, and are associated with fertility (Welch, 2012). Tea drinking forms part of many social rituals, such as hosting guests, bringing families together at weddings and showing respect to one's elders (Tong, 2010). The tea ceremony requires a variety of objects, including, of course, tea, but also teapots, teacups, tableware, furniture and often special clothing. Traditionally, many skilled artisans focused on producing high quality teapots and teacups, specifically designed for the tea ceremony. Today, the tea ceremony often signals connoisseurship, and is frequently part of the tourist experience for visitors to China.

Shang Xia was established as a joint venture between the Hermès Group and celebrated Chinese designer Jiang Qiong Er in 2008. However, Shang Xia has its own independent marketing and public relations department, which are not affiliated with Hermès China. We interviewed a Shang Xia brand manager in Shanghai, who noted that Shang Xia has an independent production line from Hermès, in order not to confuse consumers. He stated that for now, Shang Xia is working

on new products with rich traditional elements, like red sandal-wood furniture and white porcelain tea sets, with inspiration taken from China's long history and culture. These 'cultural objects', as Shang Xia refers to them, are aimed at collectors who might be interested in buying limited edition products.

Their cultural objects are designed by Chinese artisans who are commissioned to apply their traditional craft skills to developing objects to be branded as Shang Xia and sold in Shang Xia stores. The artisans that Shang Xia engages often demonstrate skills that are not widely taught, perhaps are quite local, and likely are not considered valuable in contemporary Chinese contexts. These skills could relate to a defunct, devalued, way of producing something from the 1960s, of course, that might challenge a specific notion of the 'traditional'; but more often Shang Xia's intentions are to revive craft techniques that were developed or supported by the Imperial court. Further, many crafts may represent suppressed cultural knowledge – most luxury goods were banned during the Cultural Revolution. Of course, the traditional crafts that Shang Xia supports relate to aesthetic values invoked and evoked by the brand. This strategy may alter and evolve; for now, the relevant artisans appear to be those with skills, often quite specialised, and essential to some aspect of life in the past – for example, making excellent pots to carry water – that can be drawn upon to aid in Shang Xia's brand positioning. In this way, Shang Xia promotes a kind of cultural policy programme by reviving traditional Chinese arts and crafts.

As the main creator of the brand, Ms Jiang's primary goal was to interpret and promote Chinese traditional arts and crafts. She is optimistic about their expansion strategy: 'Chinese culture isn't just geographically Chinese. It can be shared internationally. We are a good window to let more people experience Chinese craft, quality, design' (quoted in Ang, 2012). In a recent interview, Jiang stated, 'our company is all about reviving Chinese culture and craftsmanship' (quoted in Kolesnikov-Jessop, 2014). To support this strategy, Jiang invites historians and academic specialists to talk to her staff about culture every 2–3 weeks: It is noteworthy that Shang Xia has thus far refrained from advertising, or participating in fashion shows or other standard marketing activities (Ang, 2012). In an interesting diversion from typical brand promotion strategy, Shang Xia holds two 3-week-long showcases, which include live demonstrations exhibiting high quality materials and heritage craftsmanship in its products and cultural objects. The luxury giant LVMH – an Hermès investor and rival – has

recently launched a similar strategy by hosting 'Open Days' that opened up several French ateliers to the public, in an effort to boost its corporate reputation and introduce customers to the brand's fabled producers (Friedman, 2014).

Recently, Shang Xia has expanded into the European market by opening a Paris retail store: 'Shang Xia, which aims to revive Chinese crafts that were nearly destroyed by China's Cultural Revolution, including ancient styles of porcelain, cashmere, felt and furniture, is part of a new generation of Chinese brands elbowing their way into the crowded European luxury goods market' (Wendlandt and Denis, 2013). The Paris retail store is positioned to promote the brand values to Western consumers, and to persuade Chinese visitors in France to accept Shang Xia as a global luxury brand (Song, 2013).

Method

The relevant aspects of the Shang Xia case study consist of retail visits and participant observation, Website analysis and a set of interviews that took place in 2012 and 2013. This article focuses on the interview data, informed by insights derived from the other elements. Interviews took place in Shanghai and Beijing, and lasted from 60 to 150 mins. This technique has the ability to capture consumers' underlying assumptions about brands and products (Eckhardt, 2004). We used a snowball sampling technique to generate a set of interviews with people who were engaged and interested in the brand. In total, we interviewed a Shang Xia brand manager and seven consumers – two males and five females- who ranged from age 30 to 45 years old. We met and interviewed the Shang Xia brand manager in Shanghai first. Then, during an observational visit, we met a 42-year old female Shang Xia customer and asked if she would be willing to participate in an interview. She introduced us to two more women, and they introduced us to their husbands. These consumers emerged as ideal to discuss the nuances of Shang Xia; they were deeply engaged with the brand and articulate about the brand's identity. We do not claim they are 'representative' of Chinese consumers, rather, they provide illustrative examples of a growing luxury brand consumer segment within China.

The interviews were conducted in Chinese, and then translated into English by the interviewer, a native Chinese speaker. The interviews were then further edited and interpreted by a native English speaker, who checked the resulting meanings with the original translator.

Interviews: Emerging themes

In analysing our interviews, we discerned several themes that vividly capture aspects of these consumers' co-creation of Shang Xia brand meanings. We have worked with these brand meanings to further articulate and analyse their importance (Eisenhardt, 1989; Spiggle, 1994).

Chineseness: A unifying cultural thread between brand and consumer

One of most articulate consumer informants, a 45-year old French–Chinese art teacher was interviewed at the coffee shop at a Shanghai Hong Kong Plaza Service Apartment. Then, the interviewer accompanied her to Shang Xia's store in Shanghai Hong Kong Plaza. When asked about Shang Xia, she said:

> It is an organic brand, an independent brand with its own unique identity that brings Chinese heritage from the past into the future. So I think it is beyond time, beyond place. The definition of China in the Shang Xia project is not about a country or a territory, but about Chinese culture, as though it belongs to the whole world.

Her sense of Chinese heritage, and what can be called Chineseness, informs her appreciation of the brand. Another customer, a 30-year old man, who is a hairdresser and works in Beijing, was interviewed at a Beijing coffee shop. After commenting on the high quality of Shang Xia's products, he said:

> So it "threads" its product lines through a Chinese tea ceremony, rather than a commercial brand structure. As we all know, the tea ceremony was of the highest significance in Chinese hospitality. During the tea ceremony, we often need a nice tea set to serve the tea, a comfortable chair to sit in, a comfortable dress, necklace or bracelet to wear, the great scent of sandalwood incense to enjoy. So you know, since Shang Xia's collection stemmed from Chinese lifestyle, its collection provided an extended experience of tea to its guests.

He also thought Shang Xia's in-store exhibitions 'had a true traditional Chinese atmosphere'. Echoing this theme, another informant, a 38 year-old clothing designer and knowledgeable Shang Xia customer, said: 'More and more designers are emphasising inheriting Chinese culture. They desire to present something of Chinese

characteristics in their work. They offer me a clear view of the future of Chinese design'.

These consumers reveal keen insight into and appreciation of Shang Xia's brand strategy, embracing and reflecting nuances of Chinese brand culture. They clearly value understated aspects of the brand, and demonstrate a deep understanding of the 'unifying thread' of Shang Xia's Chineseness. They recognise and espouse the subtle symbols of the brand, and seem to embrace key aspects of Shang Xia's strategy. In this way, they may be working out what it means to be a Chinese luxury brand consumer. Moreover, they may be thinking through what Chineseness means in the global marketplace.

Resonance between aesthetic values and the brand

A 45 year-old communications manager enthused:

> I came to love Shang Xia from the first time I saw it. It was back in 2008. I love it so much because I think its logo is unique and very meaningful. In this logo, you will find the idea of simple design that is mainly found in furniture of Ming Dynasty. A little more, the two Chinese characters, "Shang" and "Xia", fit well in a square frame, which looks like a window from a distance. And, also important, the colour red symbolises the well-being of a family. Taking a look at the style of the two characters, they are curved in seal script, which has deep cultural connotations.

A 42-year old woman who works in the Shanghai Drama Art Centre was interviewed at a coffee shop in Shanghai. She revealed:

> I was touched by the outstanding craftsmanship, the simple designs and the fine materials that it [Shang Xia] used. In fact, almost every-thing Shang Xia offered was of other-worldly beauty. It was called a certain kind of 'splendid simplicity'. [...] Such simplicity was totally different from a bling-bling or logo brand. [...] Taking this floor-length cashmere felt robe as an example [she pointed to the robe in her bag]; this robe was created with a seamless piece of fabric and a Mongolian yurt-making technique. This completely handcrafted pearl-white robe was a simple cocoon design where the front lapels fall to the floor in waves – all achieved with no cutting.

She clearly has embraced the brand message, and reiterates basic aspects of Shang Xia's cultural strategy. She seems to respond well to

Shang Xia's branding, and displays an expert eye in appreciating the details of their product line. After sipping a coffee, she continued: 'They [Shang Xia's products] all looked simple yet graceful, in the mode that Peng Liyuan wore on her first trip overseas as China's new first lady', she said as she pointed to a TV screen in the coffee shop, which was reporting that Peng Liyuan had become an instant media sensation in China during her first trip abroad as China's first lady. She continued, 'When I bought this [Shang Xia] coat, for example, it felt like attending a private club'.

In these comments, this consumer reveals a literacy in Shang Xia's codes that most Western consumers would not (Oswald, 2012). She represents what Oswald calls the 'next generation' of Chinese consumers who associate luxury not with expense or high quality, but 'through a lens of Confucian values' of harmony and simplicity (Oswald, 2012; see also Wong and Ahuvia, 1998). In other words, these consumers seem to value what they consider to be Chinese values of harmony and simplicity, which are derived from Confucianism, more than high prices or high quality for its own sake.

Revaluing Chinese traditional craftsmanship and creativity

The French–Chinese art teacher reveals an awareness of a deep cultural connection to Shang Xia:

> It was time we worked together to bring back craftsmanship or keep it going all together. Mass production was not the answer to luxury, but Shang Xia perhaps was. It was simply transferring the three legacies of craftsmanship, creativity and style into a different environment.

We believe that her reference to 'we' signals her investment in the brand and its' aim to restore Chinese craftsmanship. Also, she refers to 'we' in the sense that she, as an engaged consumer and citizen, is anticipating a welcome shift away from China's practices of cheap mass production, towards higher quality production. She goes on to display an intense attraction to the brand concept:

> For example, both the name and the concept of Shang Xia were fabulous. The word "Shang" meant "top" while "Xia" meant "bottom". At first, you might feel that the brand was confused or joking. But consider further. You realise that "Shang" (top) often stood for Heaven and the Past while "Xia" (bottom), stood for Earth and the Present. The Heaven and Earth was a very important subject in

Chinese culture as both, in balance, could create peace and harmony. [...] I think Shang Xia stands for a balanced and harmonious lifestyle from the social sphere to the private; from the urban to nature. This requires a kind of splendid simplicity.

These comments show a strong connection between Shang Xia's brand values of harmony and subtly and this customer's tastes. At Shang Xia's store in Shanghai Hong Kong Plaza, she went on to explain why she liked various products, pointing them out within the retail space as she spoke:

In terms of heritage and innovation, the first case that came to mind was this collection [She pointed to the zitan table, which is part of the Da Tian Di collection]. The Da Tian Di collection was inspired by traditional Ming dynasty-style furniture and had smooth, graceful and modern lines. It used a more complex square outline with rounded inner lines, instead of the common rounded outer lines. Then with hundreds of thousands of polishes, a mortise-and-tendon joint was developed by perfectly aligning the round stool with the square back of the chair. Handcrafted zitan wood [Chinese imperial wood] has the most comfortable and velvety texture.

Not all consumers might make these cultural connections, of course, but for this one, Shang Xia offers a complex constellation of Chinese aesthetics, industry and meaning. She exhibits traits of what Bengtsson and Fırat (2006) call a highly brand literate 'brand professional' – willing and able to engage with and fully participate in the brand culture of Shang Xia. She seems intrigued by heritage and innovation beyond functional attributes or status hierarchy. In other words, she values aspects of Chinese craftsmanship and innovation over time more than what the products do or how they might connote status.

Discussion

During their recent economic boom, China has largely focused on mass-market, low-end production and has been plagued with scandals over poor quality. Furthermore, Chinese consumers have often been perceived to buy luxury products to display status and affluence in a hierarchal society (Lu, 2008; cf. Eckhardt *et al*, 2015). We hear from the Shang Xia consumers a sense of pride in Chinese craftsmanship and artisanal production, as if their engagement with Shang Xia helps

mark a shift from mass production to quality and a renewed respect for Chinese cultural references and aesthetic values. Shang Xia itself seems to embody this shift. Moreover, we suggest that brands like Shang Xia may help consumers work through what it means to be a global consumer in a powerful economy, as well as revisit aspects of Chinese culture long suppressed or controlled by the Chinese government. This consumer insight helps reveal how Shang Xia connects with consumers via a cultural heritage strategy, based on Chinese cultural traditions. This positioning has resulted in a broad category and product range, as well as intensive labour in making the products.

An emerging brand literacy

In articulating themes of Chineseness: a unifying cultural thread, resonance between aesthetic values and the brand, and revaluing Chinese traditional craftsmanship and creativity, our interview subjects revealed a profound sense of brand knowledge and expertise, rooted in deep knowledge of and appreciation for Chinese aesthetics and Chinese values, as articulated by an emerging Chinese luxury brand. In other words, they understood and were willing to participate in brand culture, articulating the co-creation of brands and cultures, beyond typical expectations of Chinese consumers. An analysis of Chinese brand culture suggests that aesthetic values and historical culture inform, and hold out possibilities for, a global as well as local reception of branded products and services.

Shang Xia does not focus on indiscernible cheap commodities, as many Chinese brands do. Rather, the brand emphasises Chineseness and their luxury target market provides an opening for new insights from brand culture. Our informants described Shang Xia as a Chinese modern lifestyle brand committed to inheriting Chinese traditional culture and rejuvenating Chinese craftsmanship, in part by supporting skilled Chinese artisans from throughout China. In this way, Shang Xia is attempting to build a Chinese luxury brand based on Chinese design, production and themes, which marks a distinctive brand strategy. Shang Xia is also implicitly engaging with China's troubled history by revitalising crafts that were suppressed during the Cultural Revolution, as well as by referencing artisans, craftsmanship and traditions from Imperial China. Brand literacy may represent a key component for the future of Chinese branding; as the Chinese consumer's brand literacy is developing at the same time global interest in Chinese culture is expanding (Oswald, 2012; Griffiths, 2013). This case study offers a lens through which to observe aspects of Chinese brand development in the

global marketplace, and sheds light on the ways in which brand culture connects companies and consumers. Furthermore, we use these insights to argue for the development of Chinese brand culture into a strategic brand resource.

Similar brands, distinctive strategies

Although both Shanghai Tang and Shang Xia reveal a similar link to Chinese brand culture, they are marked by important differences. Whereas Shanghai Tang uses high quality materials in their products, they do not emphasise artisanal or craft production in the way that Shang Xia does. Shanghai Tang remains focused on ready-to-wear clothing and accessories, whereas Shang Xia's product lines include expensive, limited edition collectibles. Shanghai Tang has participated in a number of co-branding ventures; for example, they offered notebooks together with Moleskin, the Italian producer, and they produced tableware in collaboration with contemporary Chinese artist Jacky Tsai (Shanghai Tang, 2015). Thus far, Shang Xia has not participated in such co-branding initiatives. Finally, Shang Xia is much more closely associated with a single, charismatic designer than Shanghai Tang, which relies on a team of designers. In sum, Shang Xia takes the brand culture approach further than Shanghai Tang, as their brand image is deeply connected to Chinese aesthetics, Chinese craftsmanship and Chinese artisans, as revealed by consumer interviews.

An analysis of Chinese brand culture suggests that aesthetic values and historical culture inform, and hold out possibilities for, a global as well as local reception of branded products and services. Shang Xia represents a hybrid brand, one that draws upon Chinese culture, backed by European branding experience. The Richemont group, a prominent European luxury house, now owns Shanghai Tang. This hybrid strategy may represent a winning formula for developing Chinese luxury brands. However, the informants we interviewed did not mention Shang Xia's connection with Hermès, nor does the Shang Xia Website. Perhaps like the UK clothing brand Stella McCartney, which is a joint venture with Gucci, yet has achieved a distinctive brand identity, Shang Xia will be able to forge a separate brand identity of its' own.

Of course, these two brands target a rarefied – but growing – market of Chinese luxury consumers (as well as global luxury consumers), and their long-term success is unknown. Each deploys a specialised brand strategy, heavily dependent on brand literate consumers. Nevertheless, they offer important lessons for building Chinese luxury brands that move away from cheap mass production towards more sophisticated

and ephemeral luxury brands (see Berthon *et al*, 2009; Rein, 2012). In addition, the Shang Xia case study depends on a limited number of interviews to illustrate particular themes. As such, it represents a first step in understanding and documenting a new movement in Chinese brand culture. These consumers reveal a deep resonance to Chineseness as embraced by Shanghai Tang and Shang Xia, illuminating how brand culture functions for two noteworthy Chinese luxury brands.

Strategic implications

Some managerial considerations that emerge from this study include:

1. Distinguish between related branding concepts of corporate brand, corporate heritage brand and cultural heritage brand in brand management strategy.
2. China has a long history, with many rich cultural traditions. Developing Chinese brand culture may be one way to build a distinctly Chinese brand. This might include connecting to ideas of Chineseness and drawing upon shared cultural knowledge to build brand values.
3. Do not be afraid to deal with cultural tensions – branding can be a way to help consumers reflect on and resolve such tensions. Both Shanghai Tang and Shang Xia include potentially controversial elements in their brands, some referring to the Cultural Revolution, others embracing the Imperial Era, often criticised under Communist rule. Further, Shang Xia emphasises their production process, which has been considered a weak spot in Chinese brands.
4. Provide employees with in depth training about the cultural aspects of the brand in order to align branding strategy with what we have called operational identity. This recommendation goes beyond typical 'living the brand' (for example, Ind, 2007) programmes or sales force training. For example, Shang Xia regularly brings academic experts to lecture to their employees about Chinese culture, deemed essential for the brand. This helps develop brand literacy among employees, who in turn communicate it to consumers.
5. Alternative marketing strategies, such as in-store demonstrations and exhibitions, can connect with consumers. Not all brands need rely on traditional promotional tools such as advertising and trade events such as fashion shows. For example, Balmer *et al* (2006) have shown how monarchies traditionally do not rely on typical branding initiatives such as advertising.

6. Consider brand culture in thinking about and managing brands. Brand culture points to elements outside the firm, and beyond the consumer, as important aspects of brand management. These co-creative stakeholders play important roles in cultural heritage brands, and may present problems as well as possibilities. However, in the social mediated world of the Internet, brand managers can no longer 'control' all aspects of the brand (for example, Deighton and Kornfeld, 2009).

7. Be prepared to compete with new types of Chinese brands – those that tap into China's rich cultural heritage, instead of relying on cheap mass production to compete.

Brand culture research does call into question the ability of a corporate brand manager to control brand meanings, as well as, the directions that a brand may take: this is the point after all at the foundation of the distinction between brand identity and brand image (Balmer, 2001). This is also the positive power of recognising and welcoming the perspectives and agencies of brand actors outside that of brand managers. Indeed, we believe that a brand culture perspective, far from de-centring the work of the brand manager, provides further tools for the purpose. In other words, this is not to despair at the loss of apparent control that corporate brand managers would like to hold; rather, attending to the opportunities and potentials of a brand culture approach – including awareness of the resonances with historical eras and events, and attending to the co-creative contribution of consumers and cultures – allows a renegotiation at the very foundation of brand managers' work. If one is to work at managing brands, one must recognise the multiple and dispersed locations and arenas in which management of a brand occurs.

We have argued that brand culture and, more specifically, the co-creation and circulation of brands and cultures mark key opportunities for the development of Chinese luxury brands. In sum, building upon China's own rich aesthetic, cultural and historical legacy represents a potentially powerful approach to developing Chinese luxury brands.

Conclusion

Shanghai Tang and Shang Xia represent distinctive Chinese brands. The consumers and other brand actors interviewed for this research revealed a strong attraction for the brands, as well as a deep appreciation of their cultural heritage branding strategies. The brands' Chineseness is seen as a central element in these strategies. Further, in

the case of Shang Xia, the brand serves in a cultural policy role, rejuvenating and revitalising traditional crafts in China, revealing another way in which brands engage with culture. Thus, these two brands exemplify the cultural heritage brand concept, illustrating brand culture interactions.

This article represents an effort to fill the gap between brand development studies focusing expressly on Western brands and their markets and culture-specific global brand development in emerging markets, such as China. A brand culture approach offers new perspectives on how brand actors co-create, circulate and re-configure existing meanings of brands and cultures, and how Chinese brands become vehicles for meaning co-creation across national boundaries.

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