

Personal Taste and Family Face: Luxury Consumption in Confucian and Western Societies

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ABSTRACT

East Asia is currently the biggest market for luxury and prestige brands from the West. This article examines the cultural factors that lie behind this phenomenon and, based on distinctions between Southeast Asian and Western cultures, explores how the practice of luxury consumption differs in these cultures. As part of this examination, self-concept theory is reviewed and integrated in a cross-cultural consumption model. Conceptual linkages between existing theories of materialism and conspicuous consumption are noted. © 1998 John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

For LVMH, Hanoi and Guangzhou—not Lyons and Madrid—are the future. (Levine, 1997, p. 81)

The Pacific is where the action is. (Henri Racamier, head of Vuitton, quoted in Schissel, 1990, p. 4)

The Japanese these days gobble up anything that connotes class, prestige and status. (Powell, 1990, p. 48)

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Throughout Asia, cognac is an instantly recognized icon. A bottle of cognac affirms self-worth. The golden color of the liquor symbolizes worldly success in an obvious way: By definition, if you can afford the drink, you have arrived . . . Cognac is unmistakably seen as the mark of luxury and of everything positive about life: Luck, happiness, and sexual potency. *Asian Business*, (July 1994, p. 52)

Historically, happiness seeking via consumption as a major organizing norm for society first emerged in the West (Campbell, 1987; McCracken, 1988). Currently, however, consumer societies either have developed or are developing in a vast number of cultures around the world (Belk, 1988b). This development of consumer cultures is likely to continue and gain momentum worldwide as previously communist countries turn to capitalism, and as formerly third-world economies become more affluent. Due to the great concentration of wealth in the upper economic classes, this economic growth has swelled the number of consumers able to enter the market for luxury goods. It is not surprising, then, that luxuries are big business. In a 1991 worldwide study of 14 product categories, McKinsey & Co. estimated that the luxury goods market was around \$60 billion (Dubois & Duquesne, 1993).

East Asians are particularly avaricious luxury consumers, and are fast becoming the world's largest brand-name luxury goods market. Exports to Asia account for more than 50% of total turnover for French conglomerate of luxury labels LVMH (Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton), and cognac producer Remy Martin ships 58% of its foreign sales to Asian markets (*Asian Business*, 1994). Even these impressive statistics may underrepresent East Asia's share of this market, because American and European luxury goods retailers often make a sizable proportion of their sales to East Asian tourists shopping where prices are considerably lower (Hooper, 1997; Powell, 1990).

When we see Malaysians spending huge sums of money on weddings where the guests arrive in limousines, or we see Japanese consumers flooding into Louis Vuitton, Chanel, and Gucci showrooms, it is tempting to conceptualize this as Western-style materialism. As Brannen (1992a) wrote, "[T]he abundance of ostensibly Western products in Japan leads many people to assume that corresponding Western materialist values have been imported along with the 'Western' goods" (p. 167). However, just because many of the products are the same in Asian and Western societies does not mean that consumers buy them for the same reasons, or that the products have the same social functions in each society. As Linton (1936) noted, material items can be easily moved or copied, but their meanings are difficult to transfer across cultures (see also Brannen, 1996).

To understand the dynamic at work in East Asia, one must understand that, in addition to sharing a penchant for brand-name luxury goods, East Asian societies share a Confucian collectivist cultural tra-

dition. This article explores ways in which these two facts may be related. Specifically, it looks at five aspects of the Confucian tradition, the corresponding aspects of the Western individualistic tradition, and how these cultural orientations shape the *practice* of brand-name luxury consumption. The *practice* of luxury consumption refers to which brands are purchased, motivations for purchase, how these goods are used, and the meaning of those goods to the people that consume them. Finally, the discussion addresses the connection between conspicuous luxury consumption and materialism.

THE SOUTHEAST ASIAN CONFUCIAN TRADITION

Existing consumer theory is steeped in Western cultural values. As Tse (1996, p.1) wrote, “It describes how an individual from an individualistic society fulfills his/her needs through a market system that emphasizes individualistic goals.” As one seeks to understand consumption from a more global perspective, one needs to look more closely at collectivism’s influence on consumption. The current project focuses on the contemporary manifestation of Confucian collectivism operating in Southeast Asia, where many (but not all) traditional values are vital despite modernization (Hsu, 1981; Hofstede & Bond, 1988). Four aspects of this tradition are particularly relevant to the practice of brand-name luxury consumption: (a) interdependent self-concepts; (b) the balance between individual and group needs; (c) hierarchy; and (d) the legitimacy of group affiliations. A fifth traditional value, humility, is also discussed because of its declining importance in contemporary Southeast Asian consumption culture. In the current section, this article elaborates on the differences between Southeast Asian and Western cultures in terms of the values presented above. It then address the implications of these cultural differences for luxury consumption.

Interdependent/Independent Self-Concepts

It has been claimed that the different conceptions of the self, and of the relationship between the self and others, are the most significant source of differences among cultures (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Recent research suggests that both Eastern and Western cultures see the self as divided into an inner private self (consisting of emotions, desires, personal values, memories, impulses, etc.) and an outer public self (based on social roles and the persona presented to others) (Lebra, 1992; Markus & Cross, 1990; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In their seminal article, Markus and Kitayama (1991, pp. 226–227) outlined two different construals of self: Independent and interdependent. The independent construal of the self, which is dominant in Western cultures, is rooted in the belief that distinct individuals are inherently separate. For those

with independent construals of the self, the inner self (preferences, tastes, abilities, personal values, etc.) is most significant in regulating behavior. In contrast, the interdependent construal of the self, commonly found in Southeast Asian cultures, is based on the fundamental connectedness of human beings to each other. For those with interdependent selves, one's identity lies in one's familial, cultural, professional, and social relationships. Internal personal attributes and abilities are not considered particularly representative of the self. Instead, the self-knowledge that guides behavior is the self in relation to specific others in particular contexts. In sum, when asked, "Who are you?" a person with a highly independent self-concept would answer in terms of internal attributes such as intelligence, creativity, and shyness. Someone with a highly interdependent construal of self would talk mainly about social roles, family relationships, and national or ethnic affiliations.

The final difference between the interdependent and independent self-concept is based on the extent to which other people are integrated into the self-concept. Both Westerners and Asians incorporate others in their sense of self (Aron & Aron, 1986; Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992; Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991; Lancaster & Foddy, 1988; Markus & Cross, 1990; Trafimow, Triandis, & Goto, 1991), but this tendency is much stronger in interdependent cultures. McCort and Malhotra (1993) summarized that the Asian view of self has been alternatively viewed as the "center of relationships," (Tu, 1985; p. 232), "a configuration of roles expressed in self-other expectations," (Chu, 1985; p. 252), and an "individual's transactions with his fellow human beings" (Hsu, 1983; p. 4). For example, Americans generally see one's social class as primarily reflecting one's income level, which in turn is believed to reflect (at least in part) one's professional merit. But to the interdependent Chinese, class reflects not only one's achievement, but also the position of one's group, usually one's family, relatives, and kinship clan (Hsu, 1981, p. 159).

The independent and interdependent construals of self are not discreet categories. Rather, they lie on opposite ends of a continuum, and most cultures fall somewhere in between. Similarly, because cultures are not homogeneous, members of any particular culture will vary in the extent to which their self-concepts are independent or interdependent. As a result, global characterizations of collectivism and individualism are too simplistic. It is more accurate to see individuals as having both private and public self-concepts and to consider which aspect of the self would dominate in each social situation (Triandis, 1989, 1994). Bearing these caveats in mind, in this article a culture is said to be independent or interdependent based on which self-concept characterizes a majority of its people in the specific activity of luxury consumption.

Individual and Group Needs

The independent and interdependent conceptions of self are closely related to cultural assumptions about the proper relationships between groups and individuals (Triandis, 1990; Yamaguchi, 1994). In Western cultures, strength and integrity are demonstrated by being true to one's own opinions and tastes and not being swayed by social pressure to conform (Kashima, Yamaguchi, Kim, Choi, Gelfand, & Yuki, 1995). It follows that individual freedom is valued as a good in itself because it allows individuals to live an authentic life by expressing their inner values and tastes. This positive evaluation of nonconformity is consistent with a view that groups exist to meet individuals' needs. If a group—membership in which is defined by marriage, religion, or geographical basis—fails to meet those needs, individuals may legitimately attempt to change the group, or simply choose to leave it.

However, in the Southeast Asian Confucian tradition, conformity to the group is seen in a more positive light (C. K. Yang, 1963). Because the interdependent self-concept includes in-group members within the self, the very distinction between group and individual can become somewhat obscured. When a conflict between an individual's desires and his or her role expectations does arise, a good person is expected to be strong and mature (i.e., to put his/her internal feelings and impulses aside, acting in a way that facilitates smooth social relations and achieves group goals). As opposed to seeing individual freedom as a prerequisite to an authentic life, interdependent cultures evaluate freedom in terms of its costs and benefits to the group. The roots of this view can be found in Confucian ethics where, in order to be a man or a sage, it is necessary to perform one's duties first, not to claim one's rights (Lau & Kuan, 1988, pp. 50–51). For example, in their studies on social interaction patterns, Wheeler, Reis, and Bond (1989) found the Chinese to stress harmonious interactions among in-group members (which can involve restraining one's private internal preferences), whereas Americans focus on expressing the private self by meeting personal needs.

The Legitimacy of Group Affiliations

The interdependent self-concept tends to merge the individual with the group. This tendency means that people from interdependent cultures accept the legitimacy of the judging of individuals based on group identifies, such as family or nationality. In contrast, people from independent cultures tend to make much clearer distinctions between group and individual identifies. This leads them to be suspicious of group identifications, and to believe that each person should be judged as an individual (even though, in actuality, group judgments are still very common).

Hierarchy

Strong social hierarchies are a common trait of collectivist cultures (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, p. 236; Triandis, McCusker, & Hui, 1990). Within the Southeast Asian context, the five cardinal relations in Confucianism underlie the cultural values of respect for authority and obedience to political dictates (Bond, 1991). This is not to deny the important role of social hierarchy in contemporary Western societies as well, but in the West social hierarchy is seen as more suspect and potentially illegitimate, especially if it cannot be clearly linked to individual achievements (Hofstede & Bond, 1988; Wheeler et al., 1989).

The Value of Humility

Douglas and Isherwood (1996) report that collectivist societies frequently stress modesty and humility in consumption to control the potentially negative consequences of envy. The Confucian tradition also stresses humility, although it allows for more elaborate consumption if that is seen as appropriate to one's social station (C. K. Yang, 1963). In Max Weber's (1963) analysis, this stress on humility was part of a larger Confucian doctrine that Weber saw as too socially conservative to allow for the development of modern capitalism. As Southeast Asia has been drawn into a modern capitalist universe, the rhetoric of wealth as achievement has supplanted the Confucian language of humility (Tu, 1992). This is especially true among the younger generation of consumers who are widely seen as the driving force behind Asia's appetite for luxury brands. This can be seen among China's younger urban consumers in what Ariga, Yasue, and Wen (1997, p. 24) call the "One-Cut-Above-the-Rest Mentality" where consumers are "obsessed with the idea of wanting to make others say 'Wow! That guy's really something!'" Further evidence for this change in values can be found in the resistance it generates from proponents of the older consumer practices. For example, Tomotsu Sengoku, a Japanese sociologist, said of Japan's luxury-brand-loving teens, "With teens like these, Japan is finished" (Trendy Japanese girls, 1997, p. A5). Despite such complaints, traditional values of humility seem incapable of withstanding the modern consumerist pressures.

RESEARCH PROPOSITIONS

This article now turns to the ways in which differences in independent versus interdependent self-concepts combine with the Southeast Asian Confucian tradition to create an Asian style of luxury consumption (see Figure 1).

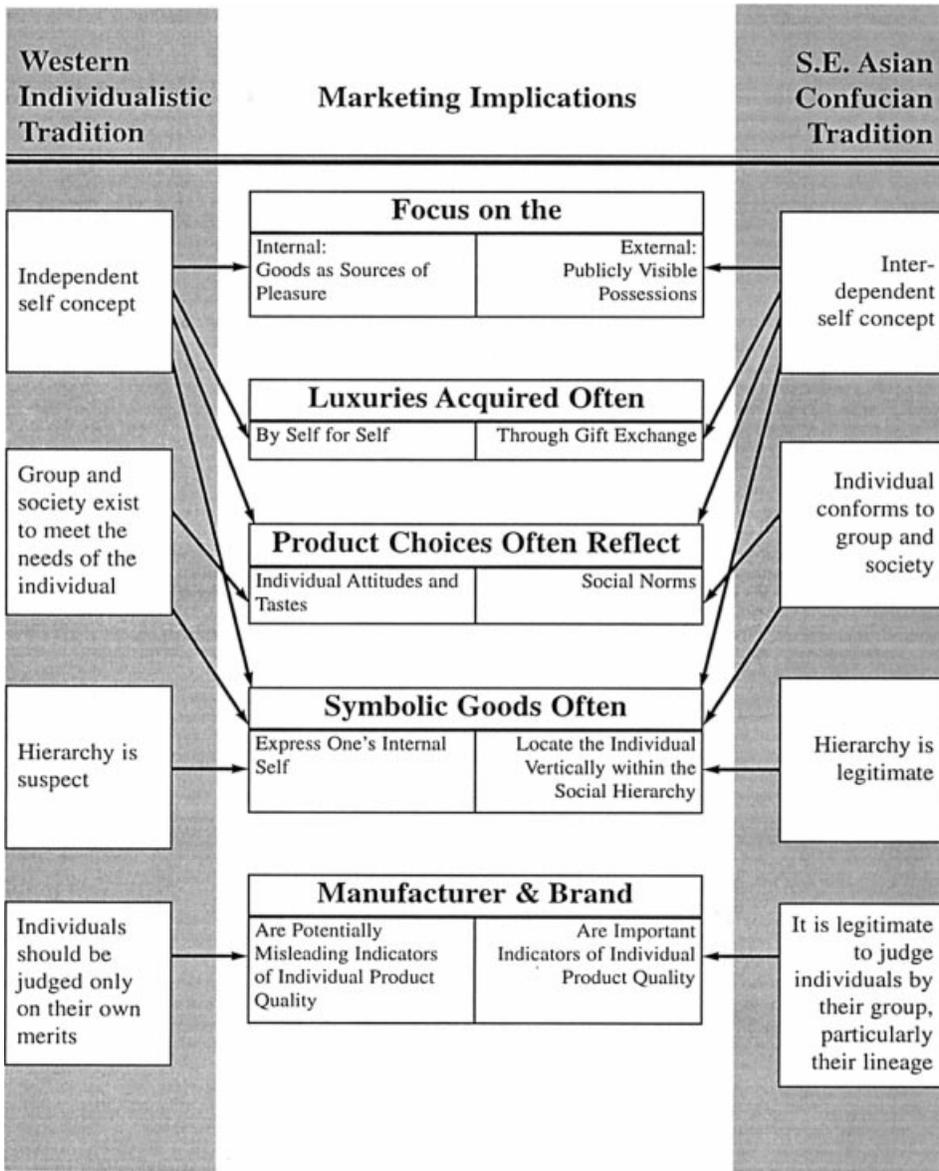


Figure 1

Focus on the Internal Versus External Aspects of the Self

Differences between independent and interdependent self-concepts have implications for the types of value consumers will seek. Products can be seen as yielding three types of value: Instrumental, symbolic, and hedonic. Most products provide each of these value types to a certain degree. For example, food provides instrumental value when it functions as a means to an end, such as maintaining a healthy body. Food provides

symbolic value when, for example, eating steak is used to convey masculinity. And food provides hedonic value when eating a delicious meal is a pleasurable experience.

Hedonic value primarily gratifies the internal, private self. No matter how closely P empathizes with O, when O eats a piece of chocolate, s/he tastes it in a way that P does not. Therefore, people with an independent self-concept who emphasize the importance of the internal self should also emphasize the importance of hedonic experience as a motivation for luxury consumption. This hypothesis explains findings such as those of Cheng and Schweitzer (1996), who note that American television ads stressed enjoyment much more than did Chinese commercials. Similarly, Tse, Belk, and Zhou (1989) also found that advertising in Hong Kong, which is the Asian society with the greatest exposure to Western culture, had more hedonic advertising themes than both Taiwan and China. They also found that the level of hedonic advertising appeals increased in direct proportion to the length of exposure to Western influences. The connection between an independent cultural orientation and a focus on internal experience also explains the finding by Abe, Bagozzi, and Sadarangani (1996) that Americans have a higher level of private self-consciousness (i.e., monitoring one's internal psychological states) than do the Japanese.

P1: Relative to Asian consumers, Western consumers will place a greater importance on hedonic experience.

Conversely, because the interdependent self-concept emphasizes social roles and public perceptions as central to one's identity, it leads to the Asian focus on "face" (Ho, 1977). Although it is a human universal, the "face" concept is particularly salient for people of Confucian culture and is claimed to be a key to explaining much of their behavior (Redding & Ng, 1983). Because of the importance of "face," people in Confucian cultures are more concerned with other people's perceptions of them, and with the maintenance of their own status. This tendency leads, for example, to the finding that Japanese have higher levels of social anxiety (i.e., anxiety over their public appearance) than do Americans (Abe et al., 1996).

P2: Relative to Western consumers, Southeast Asian consumers will place more emphasis on publicly visible possessions.

Taken together, Propositions 1 and 2 suggest that when faced with a trade-off between goods that provide hedonic value (say, a cheap sweet wine that the consumer likes) and those that provide symbolic value (an expensive dry wine with a taste that the consumer does not like), Asians, relative to Westerners, would place more importance on the symbolic value, at least when consuming in public. In addition to affecting the

overall emphasis placed on the symbolic value of products, these cultural orientations influence the *type* of symbolic value sought from products. Specifically, one would expect a difference in the importance placed on public versus private meanings in product symbolism (Richins, 1994b). Public meanings are symbolic meanings that are widely shared within a culture or group (e.g., apple pie represents traditional America), whereas private meanings are idiosyncratic to an individual (e.g., a lucky scarf). The relative emphasis placed on public versus private meanings of goods should be related to differences in self-concept as follows.

- P3a:** Relative to Asian consumers, Western consumers will place more emphasis on the private meanings of their possessions.

- P3b:** Relative to Western consumers, Southeast Asian consumers will place more emphasis on the public meanings of their possessions.

This article has just discussed the importance of a product's public meanings in Southeast Asia. Further analysis of the interaction between traditional cultural factors (e.g., hierarchy) and contemporary economic conditions helps explain *what kinds* of public meanings will be particularly important in Southeast Asia. Early work on the public meanings of goods focused narrowly on their ability to convey messages about wealth and social class (Veblen, 1899). But more contemporary research has investigated products' ability to convey a much broader range of meanings pertaining to social values, sexuality, age, ethnicity, hobbies, and a myriad of other aspects of identity (Blumer, 1969; Davis, 1992). Object markers (i.e., products whose public meanings convey an explicit message about their owner's social identity) are used to mark the social categories a culture considers important. The more a society focuses on economic status differences, the more emphasis it will place on symbolic goods that mark those differences (Wuthnow, Hunter, Bergesen, & Kurzweil, 1984). Two key factors contribute to the Southeast Asian consumer culture's focus on locating individuals vertically within the socioeconomic hierarchy. First, the hierarchical nature of many Southeast Asian societies creates a need to mark that hierarchy. Because one's position in these societies is determined largely by economic advancement, displays of wealth become important social markers. Second, many middle- and upper-class Western consumers have come to take affluence for granted, and hence have shifted their focus to other forms of self-expression and self-actualization (Abramson & Inglehart, 1995; Inglehart, 1990). But for most Southeast Asian societies, affluence is a new phenomenon. Therefore it is understandable that economic achievement would be a cultural fixation. In some societies, like Hong Kong, the recency of affluence is compounded by its potential transience.

A 23-year-old student at the University of Hong Kong was recently quoted as having said, "We cannot blame this generation [for its materialism]. People can get security from money. All the rest is uncertainty" (Leland & Clemetson, 1997, p. 46).

- P4:** Relative to Western consumers, Southeast Asian consumers will more often use products to symbolically claim a desirable vertical location within the socioeconomic hierarchy.

Conformity Pressures

So far this article has discussed how the Southeast Asian Confucian tradition predisposes consumers to focus more on the public meanings of luxury products than on hedonic experience or private meanings. The importance of conformity within Southeast Asian societies has been implicit in this discussion, but the issue plays an important enough role in luxury consumption to merit a more extended treatment. As noted above, "face" plays an important role in Southeast Asian luxury consumption. The dimension of "face" pertinent to material values is the concept of "mien-tzu: Which stands for a reputation achieved through getting on in life through success and ostentation" (Hu, 1944, p. 45). People in Confucian culture are always under pressure to live up to the expectations of others in order to preserve "face." Hence, the concern for mien-tzu exerts a mutually coercive power upon the members of the social network (Yau, 1986). Zheng (1992) explains how in Hong Kong, the need to maintain mien-tzu creates ever-escalating expectations of what possessions are needed to maintain a socially appropriate appearance.

Given the scarcity of resources and opportunities, everyone has to strive hard for them . . . Once they have succeeded in this, given the concentration of wealth in a geographically confined area, they need to show these achievements through the possession of publicly visible luxuries in terms of expensive automobiles, ostentatious jewelry, clothes, and rare antiques. In this way, they show themselves to be exemplars of Chinese achievers possessing the best that Western societies have to offer. However, when the superachievers begin their conspicuous consumption, the effects cascade down to people in middle and lower income segments, who feel the pressure to keep up. (pp. 110–112)

Herein lies the paradox: Instead of alienating the individual from the social group, this public display of wealth is enforced through the desire to fit in with the in group or elite class. In other words, if the in group prescribes expensive and ostentatious possessions or activities as socially appropriate, then a good member must subscribe to such public display of wealth in order to fit in.

Perhaps the greatest difference between East Asian and Western con-

spicuous consumption is the extent to which the purchase of status symbols reflects an inner personal preference for ostentatious goods. When one conforms to social norms and pressures, there is often no consistency between the internal private self and the public self. Because the true self in the West generally refers to one's private self, conformity is usually seen as a negative trait indicating a lack of personal integrity, a willingness to betray one's personal convictions and tastes to gain social advantage, or a cowardly fear of others' opinions. As Ryff (1989) reviews the Western literature on what it means to be psychologically healthy, she notes that "[t]he fully functioning person is also described as having an internal locus of evaluation, whereby one does not look to others for approval, but evaluates oneself by personal standards. Individuation is seen to involve a deliverance from convention, in which the person no longer clings to the collective fears, beliefs, and laws of the masses" (p. 1071). Even when Westerners use products to manage the impressions they give to others, they are either trying to express their true (i.e., inner) self or they are aware of their actions as strategic, and view them as deceptive.

On the other hand, such consistency between public consumption and internal values is not expected in East Asian cultures, where external roles are seen as legitimate. Rather than being an obstacle to the self (viz., the inner self), interdependent cultures see outward role demands as the center of the true self (Smith, 1983), and the ability to set one's personal preferences aside and conform to role expectations is seen as a sign of strength and maturity. Whereas in Western culture there is a greater tendency for people to conspicuously consume luxuries because they *want* to (i.e., the products reflect private preferences), in the East Asian Confucian societies, there is a greater tendency for people to behave this way because they feel they *have* to (i.e., the products conform to social norms). This notion is consistent with findings that subjective norms are more significant in predicting Korean consumers' behavioral intentions, whereas attitude is the only significant determinant of behavioral intentions for American consumers (Lee & Green, 1991; see also Bontempo & Rivero, 1992; Davidson, Jaccard, Triandis, Morales, & Diaz-Guerrero, 1976). The East's more positive orientation toward conforming to social roles also helps explain why the Chinese place great importance on anticipated reactions of others to their behavior (Yang; 1981, p. 161), especially when these others are in-group members (Tse, 1996). When they are alone, however, the social pressure to consume expensive goods is removed. Hence the marketing of *Prive*, a lower-priced brand of cognac sold in Japan. "Prive, as its name suggests, is designed for drinking at home—where no one will see that you're tipping cheaper" (Levine, 1997, p. 82).

P5: When conflicts arise between expressing one's personal preferences (i.e., one's personal attitudes and beliefs) and being socially

appropriate (e.g., by heeding of the subjective norms of important others), Southeast Asians will place a greater emphasis on social propriety than will Western consumers.

These differences between independent and interdependent cultures are much more a matter of degree than of kind, and many Western readers will be able to relate to the situation of having a professional wardrobe that may not express their personal tastes. The difference is the extent of the experienced pressure, and the number of social situations—not just professional situations—in which one feels the need for expensive attire and other publicly visible luxury goods. Because current cultural tastes in East Asian societies define expensive luxury goods as socially appropriate in a large number of situations, this tendency to behave in a situationally appropriate manner (Miller, 1984) leads many people to purchase luxury goods that they might otherwise have left on the shelf.

This pressure to adhere to social norms is compounded by the fact that people with interdependent self-concepts tend to integrate in-group members deeply into the structure of the self. Therefore, when one takes any action, one is not just acting as an autonomous individual, but as the representative of a group. Even if one is willing to resist the social pressure to conform, one must also think about how one's behavior reflects on one's family and other in-group members. In a large cross-national study of materialism, Ger and Belk (1994) noted that in collectivist cultures, "the wealth status and possessions of the family may be more important than that of the individual" (p. 34). This fact may underlie the finding that Chinese advertising stresses family far more than does U.S. advertising (Hong & Schweitzer, 1996). Childers and Rao (1992) also found that in Thailand the decision to choose a certain brand has more to do with whether it is the brand purchased by one's parents than one's personal opinion of the brand. Finally, in a study of Chinese achievement motivation, Yang (cf. Bond, 1991, p. 17) found that achievement goals are often presented as being for the benefit of the in group (e.g., family), rather than the individual, and the measures of one's success are defined by others instead of the individual. This has powerful implications for conspicuous consumption: When one is seen in possession of luxury goods, one is not labeled a selfish materialist, but rather is seen as an exemplar of social virtues in fulfilling familial obligation.

P6: Relative to Western consumers, Southeast Asian consumers will place a greater emphasis on the implications of their luxury consumption upon the public reputation of in-group members, particularly their families.

Gifts

Gifts establish and maintain social ties (Belk & Coon, 1993; Camerer, 1988), so it should not be surprising that they play a major role in in-

terdependent cultures. A particularly interesting and formalized example of this is the tradition of Japanese travelers for bringing home *omiyage*—local specialties purchased as gifts for families and friends at home. Unlike souvenirs, which are purchased for the self, *omiyage* are intended as tokens for others to share in one's travel experience. Nitta (1992) found that the Japanese Beach Press shopping checklist for Japanese travelers in Hawaii contains 19 categories of *omiyage* recipients, including self, parents, siblings, children, spouses, grandparents, teachers, employer, employees, boss, clients, colleagues, and marriage go-betweens. The importance of gifts in collectivist societies is relevant here because luxury goods are considered particularly appropriate for gift giving (Belk, 1994, p. 7). Symbolically, luxury goods encode esteem for the gift recipient by conveying the message, "This fine product is appropriate for you." Giving expensive luxury goods also brings honor to the gift giver by displaying his or her ability to afford to give the gift. Much of the East Asian concern with luxury goods, then, can be seen as a reflection of the important role gifts play in these cultures and the appropriateness of luxury goods as gifts.

- P7:** Relative to Western consumers, Southeast Asian consumers will be more likely to have acquired their luxury goods through gift exchange.

Brand, Manufacturer, and Country of Origin

This metaphor of individual identity versus group affiliation extends into brand choice as well. Westerners should be more disposed to judge each product individually, whereas Southeast Asians may place more emphasis on the product's affiliation to a group such as a brand, manufacturer, or country of origin (Han & Schmitt, 1997). For example, in America, P&G sells Pampers only under the brand name. But in Japan, they have started including manufacturer information at the end of their advertisements because they found that the Japanese didn't trust products until they knew who made them. Metaphorically, this can be interpreted as the Japanese asking who Pampers' parents are, and judging them in part by their family's reputation.

- P8:** Western consumers should be more ready to judge each product individually, whereas East Asians are expected to place more emphasis on the product's affiliation to a group, such as brand, manufacturer, or country of origin.

CONNECTING LUXURY CONSUMPTION TO THE MATERIALISM LITERATURE

The predilection for luxury goods among East Asians is often viewed by Westerners as a sign of materialism. This view raises the question:

What is the relationship between the public consumption of luxury products and materialism? This question is particularly important because materialism has become a highly researched area. Understanding the connection between conspicuous consumption and materialism is necessary if one wishes to evaluate luxury consumption in this larger research context.

At the layperson's level, materialists are viewed as focusing on the consumption of status goods, so materialism and the conspicuous consumption of luxury goods are often associated (Fournier & Richins, 1991; Mason, 1981). But in the academic literature the association is less clear. Belk (1985) sees materialism as manifested by three personality traits: Possessiveness, nongenerosity, and envy; a fourth trait, preservation, was added in cross-cultural studies of the materialism scale (Ger & Belk, 1996). Although none of these personality traits explicitly include conspicuous consumption, materialism and conspicuous consumption are implicitly linked through envy, because one only envies the possessions of others when one cannot easily obtain comparable possessions. The primary reason one cannot obtain a comparable, commercially available item is because one cannot afford it. Therefore, envy is often directed at expensive products. An envious person places a high value on these expensive products, so envy is clearly linked to the dynamic of conspicuous consumption of luxuries.

Richins (e.g., Fournier & Richins, 1991; Richins, 1994a, 1994b; Richins & Dawson, 1992) sees materialism as a value (the basic enduring belief that it is important to own material possessions), rather than a behavior or personality variable. According to Richins, one key element of materialism is the belief that one's own and others' success can be measured by the things one owns. If materialists believe that success can be visibly demonstrated through possessions, it stands to reason that expensive luxury goods would be a natural mechanism for such demonstrations. This inference is confirmed by empirical evidence which showed that compared to low materialists, high materialists are more likely to value expensive objects, items that convey prestige, and objects that enhance the owner's appearance (Richins, 1994a).

CONCLUSION

Redding (1990) concluded in his study of Chinese economic behavior that any attempts to explain social behavior from a Western model would be incomplete without due consideration of cultural factors. The Western rationality inherent in most consumer theories needs to be reinterpreted through the eyes of Eastern reality. That is, the premise that consistency exists between private and public selves in independent cultures needs to be reexamined in an Eastern framework, where

such consistency is not as crucial. In this model, Western independent assumptions are replaced by Eastern interdependent assumptions with the Confucian emphasis on interrelatedness, and an external orientation in behavior direction.

When one sees Southeast Asians consuming luxury goods, it is tempting to come to the same conclusion one would draw were one to see Westerners behaving in the same way. However, this behavior needs to be understood in light of the specific cultural context in which it takes place. Because East Asian culture is based on an interpersonal construal of self, East Asians value group norms or group goals more highly (Abe et al., 1996; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Miller, 1984). Furthermore, because the Asian interdependent self focuses more on the public, outer self than the Western, independent self, Asian group norms and goals frequently emphasize public and visible possessions. Because economic status is a central social concern in these hierarchical and newly industrialized (or industrializing) societies, publicly visible markers are needed to concretize and communicate financial achievement. Therefore, Southeast Asians pay a great deal of attention to possessions that are both public and visible, such as designer-labeled goods, expensive cars, jewelry, etc. But this apparent materialism may or may not reflect internal personal tastes, traits, or goals. Instead it may reflect the value that an interdependent self places on social conformity in a materially focused, family-oriented, and hierarchical culture.

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