Commentary – Look east young sojourner!

Introduction

A phrase attributed to 19th century American newspaper editor Horace Greely is “Go West, young man.” The phrase would have been offered at a time when the American West was still a land of opportunity and the frontier had not yet closed. The advice, supposedly given in 1833, would have been at a time when the Western half of the US had no states and a large part of it was owned by Mexico. So, it was really a suggestion to leave the US and seek one’s fortune in the largely unsettled part of what would become contemporary America.

There is an earlier, 16th century Chinese novel called *Journey to the West* (Chinese: 西遊記; pinyin: Xī Yóu Jì). The novel is about the pilgrimage of a Buddhist Monk, Xuanzang, who journeyed to the Western regions of Central Asia and India. There he obtains sacred Buddhist sutras with the help of three protectors. Besides being an adventure tale, it is also an allegorical tale of a journey toward enlightenment.

While these are both cases of looking westward, the task that this special issue sets itself is to look eastward toward the rising sun instead of westward toward the setting sun–perhaps apt metaphors for today’s rising and setting empires. This directed vision is important for several reasons. One is that it is Asian societies like China, India and Korea are becoming the economic powerhouses. They are forecast to take the place that has belonged to the west for the past century and a half. With developments like China’s Belt and Road and Maritime Silk Road initiatives, the nation is flexing its economic and political muscle and demonstrating its vision for the 21st century and beyond.

A second reason to applaud this attention by the west looking to the east is that it accords with what Colin Campbell (2007) calls *The Easternization of the West*. By this he means the West’s desire to capture what it regards as the ancient “wisdom of the East.” Starting in about the middle of the 20th century with the beatniks and continuing with the hippies, New Agers and hipsters, there has been a reverence for all things Eastern, including religion, philosophy, clothing, foods, martial arts, yoga, feng shui, reincarnation and wisdom more generally (e.g. Askegaard and Eckhardt, 2012; Kniazeva and Belk, 2012; Lau, 2000).

Thirdly, as Campbell (2007) emphasizes, this is not just faddish or fashionable attention to all things Eastern:

> Western civilization is increasingly dominated by a worldview that is essentially Eastern in character, the traditional Western values and belief having been demoted to a secondary position. The essential features of these two contrasting worldviews . . . Western dualistic materialism opposed by Eastern metaphysical monism . . . the latter has now come to dominate over the former (319).

He shows how this dominance has is revealed in Western movements toward the natural, including “the whole foods and vegetarian movements; the holistic health, environmental, and animal rights movements; and the human potential and astrology movements” (Campbell, 2007, p. 319).

So, this special issue is timely and significant. In my introduction below I will make some comments on each paper and conclude with some brief comments to tie them together as well as highlight fruitful avenues for future research.

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The papers in the special issue

The first paper by Yu, Yen, Cappellini and Wang offers an excellent introduction to the special issue. It is the result of interviews with British sojourners in China who are described as dissimilar to immigrants, tourists, and expatriates, all of whom stay for different amounts of time and have different agendas. Sojourners are defined as staying for a period of six months to five years and they often have a Chinese wife or girlfriend (all but one of the 18 people interviewed were male). The study focuses on two areas of consumption: food and media. Foods include both meals at home and restaurant food. Media includes both mass media and social media.

Interestingly, there is little reported food hybridization — foods are either Western or Chinese, although both include many national or regional cuisines. We do not learn much about beverage consumption, although one participant bemoaned the proliferation of Starbucks. In a study of grape-based wine consumption in southern China and Hong Kong, we found that people would typically drink wine with a Western meal, but not a Chinese meal (Groves and Belk, 1998). I wonder if this is still the case. It is an interesting observation that while Chinese tend to maintain identity by eating Chinese food abroad, Westerners tend not to do this. The paper mentions yin and yang attributes of Chinese foods and beverages, although it does not address the medicinal value of Chinese diets (Farquhar, 2002). It is also true that China does not have as many food taboos, except for pregnant women in southern China (Martin, 2001) and homophone foods during Chinese New Year.

I do find it interesting that the author complains about the censorship and propagandistic nature of Chinese media. I fully agree that this takes place, but I think most Westerners fail to appreciate the propagandistic nature of Western media (e.g. Boyd-Barnett and Herrera, 2011; Jenkins, 2013, 2017; Kumar and Kundnan, 2014; Redmond, 2017; Schou, 2016; Secker and Alford, 2017). These investigators suggest that US soft power is a bit more subtle, but that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and National Security Agency (NSA) have been funding, approving and rewriting scripts, and providing access and equipment to create films that manipulate audience sentiment in favor of US wars and against scapegoat nations and groups. Of course, rewriting history and shaping public opinion is nothing new. For example, the burning of the books and the burying of the scholars by China's first emperor, Qin Shi Huang is apparently a distortion by his biased biographer Sima Qian (Pines, 2005/06).

Overall the paper tackles the big issue of the tug-of-war between loyalty to Chinese products and habits and those of the West–an issue that troubles Chinese themselves (Tian and Dong, 2011; Wang, 2008; Zhiyan *et al.*, 2013; Zhou and Belk, 2009). Furthermore, this too is not a new issue and is one that troubled China during the occupation of the treaty port cities by the British and others (Dikötter, 2006; Gerth, 2003) in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Time will tell how much Chinese influence reshapes the 21st century world and whether Chinese brands can over-power those of the West.

The second paper in the Special Issue by Crick and Crick shows an admirable follow-up of quantitative work by qualitative work in an effort to understand the results of a survey. The paper, in the context of the New Zealand wine industry, is about competition versus cooperation. They are framed as the yin and yang of business. Foucault (2008) distinguished two types of competition that he termed "classical" and "neo." The neo form is the one that we now have with neoliberal market economics that has been with us since the mid-1970s (Harvey, 2005). While both forms share a vision of *homo economicus*, as Binkley and Capetillo (2009) argue, the shift from classical to neo-competition was a shift from an anthropology of exchange to one of competition. And as Davies (2014) observes, this involves winning at any cost as well as a winner-take-all system (Gane, 2020).

We can see the results of such neoliberal competition in Facebook, which also owns Instagram and WhatsApp as well as Google (Alphabet), which also owns numerous other companies. And during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) epidemic, the two giant corporations also worked together to create a contact tracing app (Doffman, 2020). As this special case illustrates, cooperation can sometimes produce things that competition cannot. At the opposite end of the continuum of size is the individual family. While the family could be organized on the basis of competition for resources, it is doubtful if the human species would have survived in this case (Widlok, 2017). Instead we generally have patterns of cooperation and sharing (Belk, 2010).

However, the term sharing has been hijacked as used in "the sharing economy," which is not about sharing at all, but rather about short-term rental (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2015; Belk, 2014). It instead produces tenuous participation in "sharing" rides, rooms and other resources within the so-called gig economy where facilitating platforms like Uber, GrubHub and Airbnb garner huge revenues that will get them through the current pandemic, while individual drivers and hosts may not continue to remain solvent (Naulin and Jourdain, 2020; Tencer, 2020). And even the household model of sharing may be diminishing as once household possessions like cars, computers, telephones and televisions become privatized individual possessions (Belk, 2010). In a broad sense the family too is victim of neoliberal ideology favoring competition over cooperation.

In the case of Crick and Crick's study of the New Zealand wine growers, the hypothesis supported that there was an inverted U-shape between amount of cooperation and performance, attenuated to some degree by intensity of competition. Because some growers did not have wineries (presumably), the qualitative data revealed that the sorts of cooperation involved were things like sharing equipment and information. There are several issues here. Because the index of performance was a rating of how the grower was doing versus competitors, issues of envy and suspicion of neighbors (e.g. they stole my ideas) may have tempered assessments of performance. In this case it would have been good to have some objective measure. Secondly, if all growers also had their own wineries and labels, a different sort of cooperation might have taken place in pooling funds to promote New Zealand wines or wines from their particular region. That is, they might have cooperated to promote primary rather than secondary demand.

It is probably not surprising that perceived intensity of competition suppressed the positive effects of cooperation. To the extent that intense competition favors larger growers with deeper pockets (the Facebook and Google in the discussion above), benign and even malicious envy (Belk, 2011a; van de Ven *et al.*, 2011) may result. If there is malicious envy, there could even be "money burning" effects in which one producer forgoes gains that they might accrue through cooperation in order to harm an envied competitor (Zizzo, 2008). However, projective measures would likely be needed to tap such socially undesirable feelings.

The third study by Wang, Pan, Zhu and Cai uses a data set of 149 East Asian films released abroad from 2010 to 2018 in order to investigate the hypothesis that cultural distance negatively affects foreign revenues for these films. Furthermore, aesthetic specificity weakens this relationship, while content specificity increases it. The film diaspora investigated in this paper offers further evidence of what Campbell (2007) called the Easternization of the West.

As noted above, films can carry very specific ideological content. Although the middle classes of Asian nations increasingly travel internationally, films also provide a window on the world leading to what George Gerbner (Gerbner *et al.*, 1986; O'Guinn and Shrum, 1997; Shrum, 2002) called "cultivation effects." Cultivation effects suggest that viewers get a distorted view of reality through such cultivation effects because TV and film do not reflect reality. Asian heavy viewers, for example, get a view of the West of being more violent and wealthy than it really is. Likewise, Western heavy viewers of Asian cinema and television are likely to get a distorted view of Asia. Because there are also distinct genres of Asian films (e.g. Bollywood, Tollywood, K-pop, Hong Kong films, Taiwan films) there is also a distinct aesthetic and formulaic effect, even when the film is ostensibly set in a Western culture. There is not enough evidence yet of the effects of Western borrowing of Asian manga, anime and video games and it no doubt matters whether they are from Japan, China or Korea. But here too we might expect that these media offer a distorted window into Asian culture.

Thus, the article's claim that these 149 Asian films released in the West are "an important carrier and mirror of culture" may require some additional scrutiny. It is also notable that the study only concerns East Asian films and not the vast South Asian film industry where aesthetic and language differences ("cultural distance") are more of a challenge (e.g. Bräunlein and Lauser, 2016; Desai, 2004; Levine, 2018; Morcom, 2019). We in the West would likely stand to learn more about Asian morals, gender relations and rituals from these films.

It might well be lamented that the film used the reductionist approach to culture distance based on Hofstede (e.g. for critiques see Baskerville, 2003 and Holt, 1994), but this is a superficial look at culture in any case. I also wonder of *The Life of Pi* (2015) by Ang Li whom the author makes a point of noting in Taiwanese despite having been partly educated in the US, may have been an outlier here. The film had global box office receipts of over US$600m which is likely many times that of most of the films considered here. Still, I do not doubt the basic premise demonstrated in this article: the greater the cultural distance between two countries, the lower the potential cross-over revenues from one to the other. Then again, is this likely to be a symmetric relationship and work just as well from West to East as it does for the reverse?

The next article in the special issue by Deng, Zhang, Ye and Chi ostensibly utilizes predictions from the Eastern philosopher Xunzi paired up, improbably, with the theory of planned behavior (TPB) to make predictions about consumer behavior. As a culturally sensitive scholar, any time (and it is not often these days) that I hear claims about "human nature," I put on my skeptic's hat. Such I admit was the case in reading this paper. When I read that the author was utilizing TPP, my skepticism was doubled. While I disagree with Xunzi that human behavior is inherently evil, I will readily agree that the TPB with its utility-maximizing premises is evil incarnate. In studying one Asian consumer behavior–prostitute patronage and unsafe sex at a time that acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) was rampant in Thailand and the disease was a sure death sentence, my research colleagues and I determined that reason takes a holiday (Belk *et al.*, 1998). Despite the simultaneous pre-brothel visit purchase of alcohol and condoms, young Thai men routinely consumed the alcohol first, after which the planned use of condoms seemed frivolous. This behavior is not due to these young men being high DEE (desires of the eyes and ears) or high UPI (unrestrained pursuit of personal interest) consumers. Rather they are seemingly experiencing a situational gulf between the planning and the behavior. Furthermore, the understanding of what it means to be rational also differs culturally (Kippax and Crawford, 1993).

There is also a bit of a puzzle why this study in a special issue on the Easternization of the West was carried out in amongst Chinese employees and Chinese students. What is perhaps the most interesting part of Xunzi's description of human motivation, the part involving the role of envy, is neglected in this study. When wealthy business owners used to entertain government officials and other business owners in elaborate networks of *guanxi*, it was common to book private rooms in restaurants and clubs in order to avoid the eyes of envious others (Osburg, 2013). Envious others could turn you into government officials for corruption in an exhibition of malicious envy (Belk, 2011a). On a more modest scale, Gell (1986) reports that the wealthy Muria Gond in India hide their wealth and avoid even such consumption items as watches, radios and bicycles, lest they provoke the envy of other villagers. Far more common today is intentionally provoking the envy of others with bling, fast fashion and conspicuous consumption. In this case the display of wealth takes place in large anonymous cities and on social media, so the expectation is that only benign envy will be provoked.

Also, in considering DEE via chatbot use in online shopping, it would have been interesting to examine the tendency in Japan for young men to pursue relationships with virtual girlfriends rather than flesh and blood girlfriends (e.g. Bosker, 2014; Demetriou, 2011; Galbraith, 2014). In 2009 one young man even went far as to marry his virtual girlfriend and to take "her" on a honeymoon to Guam (Moses, 2009). This scenario was rendered plausible in the West as well with the movie *Her* (Jonze, 2013) and with the chatbot Replika (Ta *et al.*, 2020).

Finally, rather than a top-down approach from 2200-year-old abstract theory to behavior, the approach that I favor is bottom-up, going from behavior to abstract theory. For example, Miller (1998) studied North London shoppers in order to develop a theory of shopping involving female shoppers sacrificing their time and energy in provisioning the family. They often buy themselves treats like a coffee or chocolate as a reward, but they see themselves as trying to win the love of their family members. Thus, Miller provocatively titles the first chapter in his book, "Making Love in Supermarkets." He then draws upon not only his data and that of a colleague, but he also seeks support in others' ethnographies in other cultures is creating support for his theory.

The fifth article in this special issue by Li, Wei, Zeng and Zhu introduces the Eastern, originally Buddhist, concept of mindfulness that has recently become popular in the West. The paper is an empirical tour de force with seven single-spaced pages of scale items completed by participants in the US and the UK. The article itself contains 7 pages of tables and 3 pages of figures. The focus on Western consumerism and Asian Buddhism is entirely consistent with the special issue theme. However, as with yoga (Askegaard and Eckhardt, 2012; Kniazeva and Belk, 2012) and the general "Easternization of the West" (Campbell, 2007) something is lost in translation. As Rawlinson (1997, p. 13) notes, "Western Buddhism is unlike anything that has existed before and hence is really a new kind of Buddhism." Starting with the post-WWII "Beatniks" who gravitated with Jack Kerouac to San Francisco, hippies and hipsters later began embracing a mix of Eastern religion and philosophy. While the Buddhist influence was evident in Kerouac's *Dharma Bums* and the poetry of Gary Snyder and Alan Ginsberg, figures like Neal Cassidy and Ken Kesey served as links between the Beatniks and the hippies like Timothy Leary. The mix of drugs, mysticism and Buddhism created a unique culture which became further reformulated in the New Age movement. And these transformations were also formed in the crucible of music from Bob Dylan, the Beatles and others (Campbell, 2007).

Thus, it is perhaps appropriate that this paper invokes such a wide mix of measures including mindfulness, voluntary simplicity, socially responsible consumption, locus of control, frugal purchasing, connectedness to nature and empathy. But despite the mix of measures and their ultimate reduction into a clear five-variable model, I cannot help feeling that something is lost in the process of measurement. There are really multiple ideologies, religions and movements involved here rather than a single cohesive set of mindful practices and participants (e.g. Badiner, 2002; Kaza, 2005; Payne, 2010). There are also subtleties between Eastern and Western approaches to something like "connectedness to nature." For example, one of the items in the measures used for this construct reads: "I feel as though I belong to the Earth as equally it belongs to me." This duality is not symmetric and does not play out in the same way within the East and the West. Güliz Ger and I used Dutch and Chinese art to compare how the two cultures regarded nature at the near simultaneously times in which they became consumer cultures in the 17th century/late Ming period (Ger and Belk, 1995; Belk and Ger, 2005). The way the Dutch and Flemish artists represented nature was in images of a profusion of plants, flowers and foods gathered from the farthest corners of the Earth. Flowers might be shown together that never occurred together in nature and that bloomed at different times of the year. The Chinese artists of the period, in contrast, represented the wonders of nature *in situ*. Literati would go out in early spring to view the earliest blossoms of the plum tree; they would go to different natural springs in order to do water tastings. In other words, the Westerners were shown behaving as if the Earth belonged to them, while the Easterners behaved as if they belonged to the Earth. This is also consistent with the premises of Shinto and Taoist beliefs and it is an important distinction.

The mix of measures also hides differences between views of Voluntary Simplicity (VS) versus those of "Buddhist Economics" (BE) (Belk, 2011b). The VS movement is premised on giving up something and is found to be associated upscale demographics, liberal views and innovativeness. It is more of a subculture or counterculture that is not likely to be adopted by the masses. It has not grown much since it was formulated by Richard Gregg (1936) in the thirties and Duane Elgin (1977) in the 1970s, despite attempts to repackage it as downshifting (Cherrier and Murray, 2007; Schor, 1998). The major premise for VS is to live a life that is "outwardly simple, inwardly rich" (Elgin, 1981). Buddhism, in contrast, even in variants such as Zen Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism and Theravada Buddhism, draws on a much richer philosophical and religious set of doctrines. And it has exemplars in the form of monks who devote themselves to these doctrines and perform certain rites for the living and the dead. By practicing such BE practices as caring, sharing, compassion and generosity (*dana*), practitioners shift their focus to others and the non-self. Accordingly, Watts and Loy (2002) suggest a turn in the concept of mindfulness form a purely individual practice to one of community mindfulness. As I have noted, while "Buddhism may involve renunciation of things previously thought to bring pleasure . . . it does not involve sacrifice of things that really do bring pleasure" (Belk, 2011b, p. 212). BE seeks a middle way between extremes. The two perspectives also differ in their regard for poverty. Whereas VS condemns involuntary poverty and lauds voluntary poverty, BE suggests that we pay too much attention to the problems of poverty and not enough attention to the problems of wealth.

But all this seems to imply that VS and BE are fixed and immutable. As was argued above, Buddhism changed when it came to the US It also differs and changes within Asia. Hutanuwar and Rasbash (2005) describe a compromised Buddhism in Thailand:

> The Thai Buddhist Sangha that is supposed to generate Buddhist values of simplicity, generosity, and compassion is now almost completely under the spell of goods such as mobile phones, BMWs, and portable computers (p. 105).

And Loundon (2005) observes, young Buddhists in Penang pursue masters of business administration (MBAs) and successful business careers. Even in Tibet Buddhist monks for whom money was once taboo and the four possessions of a begging bowl, a robe, a needle and a strainer to remove insects from drinking water were once enough (Chappell, 2005), now "handle money, eat junk food, and sport cell phones, computers and ipods" (Belk, 2011). Religions, movements and belief systems are in constant flux. Finally, there is the very large problem in assessing ethical behavior, namely, what people say and what they do are often vastly different (Belk *et al.*, 2005; Devinney *et al.*, 2010).

The final article in the special issue by Cui, Xie, Jiang and Xu uses an institutional theory perspective to examine the performance of Chinese firms' IPOs (Initial Public Offerings) in stock markets in the US as a function of identity salience. It is not a plus that the authors wait until well into the paper to define identity salience, and then only at an operational (mentions in the prospectus of "China" or "Chinese") rather than at a conceptual level. Nor is it a plus that they too use Hofstede's notions of cultural characteristics (see comments on Wang, Pan, Zhu and Cai above). And it seems that a missing consideration is the name of the company (vom Bruck and Bodenhorn, 2006; Derrida, 1993/1995; Kaplan and Bernays, 1997; Macnamara, 1982). I am not just talking about whether the offering uses a Chinese or English sounding name (e.g. Baidu versus Tencent), although that is part of it. It also matters what kinds of associations the name conjures (e.g. Alibaba and the magic of Ali Baba and the Forty

Thieves). There are also different connotations in different cultures, the appearance of the characters in Simplified Chinese, and, as noted earlier with regard to foods, homophones that may be consciously or subconsciously evoked by a corporate name. Then too, there is the abbreviation that will be used for the stock listing on the exchange. The name of a company or brand has important implications and is not a matter to be taken lightly (Taylor, 2007). As Charmaz (2006) observes,

> . . .names classify objects and events and convey meanings and distinctions. Names carry weight, whether light or heavy. Names provide ways of knowing—and being. Names construct and reify human bonds and social divisions. We attach value to some names and dismiss others (p. 396).

This paper may also be regarded as abutting two other literatures, although the authors do not make these connections. One is the literature of globalization versus localization, which also touches on the issue of naming. The other is the literature on country of origin effects. Both of these literatures are focused on the effects on consumers rather than investment banks, mutual funds, pension funds and other investors. But the effects are likely to be similar. It would be interesting to see this research extended into consumer domains. However, the moments of the IPO in a foreign country or at the time of a new introduction of a foreign product in a local market are the ideal times to test for such effects. Otherwise they may disappear into normality like the tale of the Japanese Boy Scouts who visited Chicago and were amazed to find that America had McDonald's too. In Hong Kong too, most students are unaware of the company's American roots (Watson, 2000).

Conclusion

This is a timely special issue. China's skillful handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and the US's inept handling show several things. One is that the West has much to learn from the East. Secondly, China is ready to fill the void left by the lack of US global leadership. China is also taking a more aggressive posture right now and its actions toward Hong Kong, Xinjiang, Tibet, the border with India, and the South Sea islands may make it difficult for the West to trust. This is exacerbated by issues of surveillance by both the East and the West (Zuboff, 2019) and an apparently impending Cold War between the US and China. Sinister though they may seem, these same surveillance systems were used for contact tracing during the pandemic.

So ultimately, we may need to pay attention to two issues here: learning and trust. I fear that it may easier to learn from one another than to trust one another. This special issue makes some initial steps in showing how we may do both. To date there has been far more research and scholarship on the East looking westward. I hope that this special issue has begun to reverse the binoculars and help foster more attention to what may be gained by the West looking eastward.

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