Marketing Japanese Products in the Context of Chinese Nationalism

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This paper examines the rise of consumer nationalism in China through an in-depth analysis of two recent controversial Japanese ad campaigns. I situate the analysis in the sociopolitical and cultural contexts of contemporary China. I argue that Japanese producers shoulder a particular burden of history as expressed in consumer nationalism, which is a combination of the production and reproduction of Japanese imperial history, the construction of Chinese identity, the expression of dissatisfaction toward the Chinese government and consumerist ethos in the context of globalization. The Internet has become a crucial space that organizes Chinese consumer nationalism and enables consumers to feel a sense of empowerment when they express complaints with the controversial ads. Consumer nationalism in China can also be understood as what Benedict Anderson (1991) calls an “imagined community” that attempts to unite the Chinese in a problematic way.

Keywords: Consumer Nationalism in China; Controversial Advertising; Japanese Marketing in China; Chinese Marketing; Internet Nationalism

In late November 2003, a state-owned Chinese magazine Auto Fan published in its December issue two ads for Toyota Automobile. One ad features a stone lion saluting and another lion kneeling down to a Toyota Prado with the slogan: “badao, ni bu de bu zunjing” (You cannot but respect Prado). Another ad features a Toyota Land Cruiser towing a green car in Kekexili, a sparsely populated area in Tibet. The ad implies that while the green car has broken down, the Toyota Land Cruiser shows its supreme quality to drive on rough surface (see Figures 1 and 2).

These two ads caused a great controversy among urban Chinese consumers in general and Chinese Internet users in particular. The majority of Internet users think it inappropriate, if not outrageous, to portray the stone lions, symbols of Chinese
culture, saluting, let alone kneeling down to a Japanese car. Some even pointed out that the statues symbolized the lion statues at the Lugou Bridge in the suburb of Beijing, where Japanese troops opened their first shot at the Chinese army and began

Figure 1. A Toyota Prado Ad (December 2003). Reprinted with permission from Auto Fan.

Figure 2. A Toyota Land Cruiser Ad (December 2003). Reprinted with permission from Auto Fan.
their formal invasion in North China in 1937. Regarding the Land Cruiser ad, many Chinese Internet users remarked that the green car was a Dong Feng vehicle, a symbol of Chinese self-reliance against Western imperialism. Some even asserted that the green car was a Chinese military vehicle. Seeing a Chinese military vehicle towed by a Japanese car implies the weaknesses of the Chinese automobile industry, the Chinese military and the Chinese nation at large. Chinese Internet users demanded apologies from Toyota, its ad agency Saatchi & Saatchi and the Chinese magazine. Toyota, Auto Fan and the ad agency apologized. The ads were immediately withdrawn from future issues of the magazine.

In September 2004, Nippon paint also ran into a similar trouble in the Chinese market. An ad for Nippon paint was published in International Advertising, a Chinese trade journal, to showcase its creativity of using Chinese cultural icons to symbolize the product features. The ad shows a Chinese pavilion, with two dragons winding around two pillars. While the left pillar appears grey with a dragon stuck to it, the right pillar has a dragon falling off it because of the supposedly glossy Nippon paint. Again, the ad led to numerous nationalistic postings over the Internet and in other Chinese media. Chinese newspapers again covered the controversy. The ad was withdrawn and the ad agency Leo Burnett and the magazine apologized\(^2\) (see Figure 3).

The above two controversial ad campaigns are manifestations of emergent consumer nationalism in China. The ads, which were created by Western ad agencies, contain perceived misrepresentations of Chinese cultural symbols by Japanese producers. The Internet and print media played an important role in shaping both controversies. This paper uses the two controversial ad campaigns as a starting point

**Figure 3.** A Controversial Nippon Paint Ad in China (September 2004, *International Advertising*). Reprinted with permission from International Advertising.
to examine consumer nationalism in the sociopolitical and cultural contexts of contemporary China. I will examine how different players responded in the controversies, how media, especially the Internet, produced and developed the controversies, and what the implications are.

I focus on nationalism targeted at Japanese advertising because Japanese producers and their ads have occupied prominent positions in the Chinese market since China opened its door to international capital in 1978. From the very beginning, Japanese advertisers have to constantly deal with anti-Japanese sentiments. Indeed, recent nationalism in China has largely been characterized by nationalists’ reactive responses to many Japan-related issues, such as issues over the Japanese war compensations, the Japanese textbooks of whitewashing the Nanjing Massacre, the territorial dispute over Diaoyu Islands, and the repeated Japanese Prime Ministers’ visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, among other things.

Even though consumer nationalism is a general phenomenon in China (Wang, 2005), I focus on Internet consumer nationalism because the use of the Internet has constituted an important part of daily life for middle-class urban consumers in China. According to a recent report issued by China Internet Network Information Centre, China had an Internet population of 221 million by February 2008, surpassing the United Stated and becoming the country with the largest number of Internet users. There was and still is an overlap of the demographics of Internet users and those of urban middle-class Chinese consumer. The great majority of urban-middle class consumers are Internet users. Indeed, one’s level of education and one’s income are positively related to one’s likelihood to use the Internet. Thus, the sentiments expressed over the Internet, to some degree, can be an indicator of feelings of the Chinese middle class. The Internet was also directly linked to the development of the controversies and it mediated the government critique. Studying online consumer nationalism thus provides insight into the mentality of young educated urban Chinese, who will become leaders of tomorrow’s China.

**Consumer Nationalism in China**

Jay Wang (2005) defines consumer nationalism as “the invocation of individuals’ collective national identities in the process of consumption to favor or reject products from other countries” (p. 225). Wang’s model examines the linkages between a nationalistic consumer base and corporate susceptibility and the factors that influence these two variables. A nationalistic consumer base can be viewed either in consumer ethnocentrism that stresses the virtues of buying domestic products and the rejection of foreign products in general (Shimp and Sharma, 1987; Wang, 2005) or in the animosity model that emphasizes nationalism targeted at specific countries (Klien et al., 1998). Wang proposes that a brand’s perceived nationality, visibility and magnitude are positively related to consumer nationalism, while its likability functions as a deterrent. Wang also uses Birkland’s (1997) concept of “focusing events” to describe unplanned sudden events that link a nationalistic consumer base to a transnational corporation. While Wang stresses events that are not directly
related to business operations, this paper examines events that are an inherent part of business operations of two Japanese corporations. This paper also adds to Jay Wang’s framework in that it examines how focusing events are developed and shaped on Chinese media in general and over the Internet in particular in the process.

Because of a general perception among Chinese urban consumers that foreign brands often have better quality than Chinese brands (Li, 2006, 2008), consumer nationalism targeted at Japanese producers is more characterized by the animosity model than consumer ethnocentrism. One of the most important sources of animosity lies in past Japanese aggressions and the failure of the Japanese government to correct the history.

Consumer nationalism in China has become an important part of popular and cultural nationalism, even though scholars on Chinese nationalism (e.g. He & Guo, 2000; Zhao, 2000; Hughes 2006; Shirk, 2007) often focus on state nationalism or “official nationalism.” While nationalism expressed in social and cultural domains is closely related to state nationalism, it can often develop independently of the state (Gries, 2004, 2005). Yoshino (1992), in his study on *nihonjiron* (Japanese uniqueness), defines cultural nationalism as “the aim to regenerate the national community by creating, preserving or strengthening people’s cultural identity when it is felt to be lacking, or threatened” (p. 1). Consumer nationalism in China can also be understood as a response to the perceived threat of globalization to the Chinese nation-state and a collective Chinese identity. Indeed, Chinese nationalism since the 1990s has become a middle-class consumerist phenomenon, and a widely shared sentiment that is associated with global capitalism. In response to global capitalism expansions, some leading Chinese economists have called for China to establish its own development model (Lin & Galikowski, 1999). A number of Chinese scholars, partially supported by the government, have also begun to call for the revival of Chinese tradition and Confucian culture since the 1990s. According to Zhang Xudong (2001), Chinese nationalism results from the challenges of Chinese market reforms in a global context “mediated, filtered, and sometimes blocked by the nation-state” (p. 42). Even though communication technologies have reduced the buffer formerly constructed by the Chinese government, Chinese people, when directly confronted by the strange outside world, often feel that they are placed in an unfamiliar environment and are thus likely to resort to nationalism to interpret their worlds. Consequently, a rapid economic development is accompanied by a more assertive Chinese identity (Zheng, 1999; Zhang, 2001).

Development of Chinese economy is also accompanied by an emerging consumer culture in China (Li, 1998; Davis, 2000). China has become a key market for many consumer products, including luxury goods. A strong purchasing power has further made Chinese people more confident in claiming their collective identity in choosing consumer goods. Indeed, whenever China’s relationships with Japan go sour, there have always been voices calling for boycotting Japanese goods (Gerth, 2003; Gries, 2004; Shirk, 2007).

Chinese nationalism, as a collective identification with the nation and the state, has been often characterized by its reactive response to contemporary and historical
issues between China and foreign powers. It has been shaped by China’s constant interactions with the international and historical contexts (Duara, 1993, 1997; Gries, 2004, 2005). Manuel Castells (1997) points out that nationalism is selectively built on historical materials, collective memory and shared experience. The collective memory of China’s semi-colonial history and shared experience of China’s current challenges in international affairs often contribute to and shape Chinese nationalism. Nationalism thus constitutes what Benedict Anderson (1991) calls “an imagined community.” Interestingly, Japan has always been one of the foci of Chinese consumer nationalism, whether it was in the late Qing Dynasty, in the early era of the Republic of China, during World War II, or in the last three decades (Gerth, 2003). Right after Japanese products entered China in the 1980s, Japanese producers had to deal with Chinese nationalism largely because Japanese products and their ads occupied prominent places in socialist China. The Chinese authorities had to handle constant complaints from Chinese citizens about Japanese advertising and the fear of Japanese economic invasion. Ads of Japanese products were complicated in particular because of past Japanese invasions in China. The sentiment to connect Japanese products to Japanese invasions has gained momentum since the 1990s partially due to the Chinese government’s effort to manipulate nationalism (Gries, 2004; Hughes, 2006; Shirk, 2007).

The Internet and Chinese Nationalism

What’s unique about consumer nationalism in contemporary China is that communication technologies, especially the Internet, have allowed consumers to express nationalistic views and shape the discourse of Chinese nationalism. Even though the Chinese Internet is still highly controlled and censored, nationalistic websites are often tolerated by Chinese authorities (Gries, 2004; Xiao, 2005; Shirk, 2007). The Internet is essential in channeling, shaping, producing, and reproducing nationalism in China. Internet users often express extreme views to attract attention, and, to some extent, the Internet Magnifies Chinese nationalism (Wu, 2005). Nationalistic views of the articulate few can be perceived as the majority views because the Chinese Internet is still not a space for rational reasoning, even though many scholars have attempted to apply Habermas’s (1989) public sphere to the space.

Also, the Internet has facilitated the spread of nationalism in anti-Japanese movements and the organization of online and offline protests (Gries, 2004; Shirk, 2007). It has mobilized Chinese nationalists to take actions in the name of national interest. For example, Chinese hackers organized massive attacks on government websites of the U.S., Japan, Taiwan and NATO in 1998–2002 when there were conflicts between China and these parties. The hackers claimed that they acted for China’s national interest (Chao, 2005). In 2005, when tens of thousands of protestors congregated in 17 major Chinese cities, including Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, Guangzhou, and Chengdu, to protest Japan for its request for a permanent U.N. Security Council seat, protests were largely organized through the Internet, cell phones, and text messaging (Gries, 2005; Shirk, 2007). In such demonstrations,
consumer nationalism has become a consistent theme. Protestors chanted, “Boycott Japanese goods, revitalize China!” “Boycott Japanese goods for a month, and Japan will suffer for a whole year!” and “Boycotting Japanese goods will castrate Japan.” Demonstrators smashed Japanese electronic goods, broke windows of Japanese stores, banks and restaurants, and kicked Japanese vehicles while taking pictures with Japanese cameras (Shirk, 2007). To some degree, nationalized consumption becomes an arena for constructing resistance. The following sections analyze the two controversial Japanese ad campaigns described at the beginning of this paper. I will examine how Chinese advertisers and ad professionals capitalize on consumer nationalism for their own agendas and draw conclusions.

Analysis of Two Controversial Japanese Ad Campaigns

Given the widespread anti-Japanese sentiments in China, it is not surprising that Chinese Internet users launched their attacks on the two controversial Japanese ad campaigns. On November 29 right after the December issue of Auto Fan was on the market, Internet users began to discuss the two “problematic ads” of Toyota on Internet bulletin boards. Within the first few days, there were over 3000 posts over Sina, the most popular Internet portal in China. Internet users also posted their views on Internet bulletin boards in websites such as tom.com, xcar.com, tianya.cn and xinhuanet.com. For example, an Internet user named Shen Zhuizhui was among the first to post views on a discussion board in Tianya.cn, one of the most popular Chinese online communities. In the post entitled “Toyota’s latest China-insulting ads” (fengtian gongsi zuixin ruhua guanggao), Shen stated, “the ads had an obvious purpose to insult China. I feel pity and hatred (kelian kehen) toward certain Chinese editors who allowed such ads on a regular Chinese publication!” He stated that the bridge was the Lugou Bridge, that the lion was giving Prado a military salute, and that the car towed by Land Cruiser was a Chinese military vehicle. He further remarked, “The Japanese are wicked people with wild ambitions (langzi yexin). Their intention to insult China appeared obviously on the paper (yaoran zhishang)!” His post attracted 200 follow-up posts within four days. Among them, 114 protest posts expressed their anger, dislike and condemnations, 29 posts were irrelevant or neutral, and 57 posts remarked that the Chinese were too sensitive. Of the protesting posts, the majority expressed the ideas that every Chinese should boycott Japanese products, try to develop China and condemn “Chinese traitors,” a derogative term used commonly to describe Chinese colluders who sell national interests. They stated, “benevolence toward killers is like suicide,” “boycott Japanese products starting from myself, my family, and my friends,” “[we should] develop Chinese economy quickly and avoid future pain for our offspring,” “hating Japanese needs no reason,” “there has never been evil intention to evaluate Japanese acts,” and “don’t forget our national hatred and family sufferings.” Even internet users who questioned the claim that the ads having insulted China often stated that they did not have good feelings toward Japan or Japanese products. Chinese Internet users also criticized a general phenomenon of “money pursuit” in China that shows little concern over national
feelings or integrity. Many further pointed out that Chinese people should focus more on domestic corruption and fake and counterfeit products in China, and that corrupted Chinese officials and regulatory systems made it impossible to boycott Japanese products. Through participating in the discussions, Internet users expressed a sense of empowerment and formed an online community. In addition, the product name Prado was also translated into Ba Dao in Chinese language, meaning “heavy-handed” or “supremacy,” which many Chinese Internet users interpreted as showing Toyota’s arrogance and Japanese conspiracy to control China.  

Chinese Internet users demanded apologies from Toyota, Saatchi & Saatchi, a British ad firm in Beijing, and Auto Fan, the Chinese publisher. Toyota, Saatchi & Saatchi, and Auto Fan were positioned together in such an odd way that all of them became the targets of anti-Japanese nationalism. Auto Fan was viewed as a Chinese traitor, Saatchi & Saatchi as a vicious colluder, and Toyota as the quintessential symbol of Japanese aggressions. An Internet user even produced a widely circulated online cultural jam of the Prado ad that features two triumphant lions, with a claw of one lion striking down a small Toyota car, together with the slogan “Ba Dao, Bu De Bu Na Xia” (Prado must be captured). This cultural jam image reverses the role between the lions and Toyota. While the Toyota car is represented as very small and fragile, the two lions are shown as very powerful (see Figure 4).

After Internet users started their debate, Chinese newspapers also covered this controversy with enthusiasm. On December 3, Xinhua News Agency and Beijing Entertainment Express (Beijing Yule Xinbao) published articles on this controversy. On December 4, Beijing Youth Daily (Beijing Qingnian Bao) and Jinghua Times (Jinghua

Figure 4. A Cultural Jam Image of Prado Ad by an Internet User. Courtesy to the Anonymous creator.
Shibao) gave follow-up reports. On December 5, Beijing Morning News (Beijing Chenbao) published a special report (zhuanti) on this issue. On December 10, Beijing Youth Daily reviewed this incident from beginning to end. All media reports were reprinted by important websites such as Sina, Sohu, Tianya, Xinhuanet, and Xcar.com. Xinhuanet even opened a special Internet forum that allowed consumers to express their objection and support for the ads, with links to views expressed by related parties. In all media reports, opinions expressed by Internet friends (wangyou) were quoted as the starting point for discussions when print journalists interviewed related parties, opinion leaders and government officials. While newspaper articles attempted to present balanced views from different parties, only nationalistic Internet views were quoted. Newspaper articles also attempted to understand the controversies from different perspectives and were thus much less critical of the controversial ads. All media reports were also immediately posted by Internet users on various Internet discussion boards for further discussions. The Chinese State Administration of Industry and Commerce in Beijing’s Xicheng District expressed its concern and required related parties to provide written explanations. Thus, the Internet played an important role in setting the media agenda, making the issue salient and providing a perspective that resonates with many nationalists. Chinese newspapers also played an important role in reinforcing and legitimating Chinese nationalism as one important perspective that should not be ignored. Indeed, mass media actively pursued controversies, largely because of their pressure to earn profits in China’s market economy. As early as 1997, there were more than 5,000 newspapers and more than 9,000 periodicals (Yan, 2002). The majority of them have to rely on advertising revenues for survivals. They are thus willing to produce, engage in and capitalize on controversial and nationalistic topics to raise their ratings.

Auto Fan, the Toyota Corporation and Saatchi & Saatchi acted very quickly and issued their apologies respectively. Auto Fan apologized on its own website stating on December 2:

We did not identify some images in the ads that hurt national feelings and that were easy to trigger people’s imaginations because our political level was not high... We have realized the seriousness of this issue. We sincerely apologize to all readers who have cared about and supported Auto Fan.

The magazine also promised not to allow similar things to occur again. Toyota had a quick emergency meeting on December 3. It then issued an apology on important Chinese websites on the same day. It held an immediate press conference to read the apology to Chinese journalists. Toyota stated, “These two ads are pure business ads with no other intentions.” The official apology was placed in over 30 Chinese media. Toyota also submitted a written explanation to the Chinese authorities. Toyota explained that the ad was created by a few Chinese. Its ad agency Saatchi & Saatchi also issued a public apology on December 3 stating:

We greatly respect the feelings of disturbance among readers for these two ads and we feel deeply sorry. Our purpose is to advertise and market cars without other intentions.
The ads were withdrawn from future issues of the magazine. The ad agency, the magazine and Toyota all stressed their cooperative attitudes toward the Chinese authorities. The apologies were accepted and welcomed by Internet users. The fact that Toyota, Auto Fan and Saatchi & Saatchi placed their apologies first on various websites suggests the importance of the Internet in shaping and developing the controversy. The conciliatory attitude and the quick responses of the three parties quelled in many ways the outrage of Chinese nationalists.

In Nippon paint case stated at the beginning of this paper, the purpose of the ad was to showcase an ingenuous idea of appropriating the dragon. Its creative description states:

The Dragon is a totem of Chinese tradition, which can be found in Chinese gardens and courts, and at city gates. The dragon is the best decorative symbol. This ad uses such an outdoor environment and the symbol of the dragon: the dragon sticking to a pillar falls down because of Nippon paint. The characteristics of Nippon paint are thus dramatically expressed.

Next to the image were the comments in Chinese from the Leo Burnett Global Product Committee:

This is a wonderfully innovative idea, which dramatically expresses the characteristics of the product. Such representation is a breakthrough of ads of similar products in China [see Figure 3].

Obviously the ad intended to portray the supreme quality of Nippon paint, but Chinese Internet users interpreted the ad differently. On September 14, an internet user named “scowl” first posted his opinion online claiming:

The Chinese dragon of our Chinese nation is holy, powerful and inviolable! But the Chinese dragon plays the role of a little clown here, [and becomes] an inglorious and humiliated figure! The dragon has mighty power to fly into the sky! It does not rely on a column to hold up its chest and throw out its head! Who incited Nippon Paint to produce such an ad?

In portraying the dragon as holy, undefeatable and glorious, this post intended to invoke national pride in Chinese users. Most Internet users were outraged. They called for boycotting Nippon paint in particular and Japanese products at large and for supporting Chinese products. They further linked this ad to past Japanese invasions and expressed a responsibility to develop China. For example, one typical post on Xinhuanet.com Internet bulletin board stated on September 17:

In the country of the dragon, the dragon can never fall down . . . Tomorrow is September 18, our national humiliation day . . . Every year at this sensitive moment, we should watch out obvious things that provoke us. Stand up, my fellow countrymen! Sing the national anthem. Fellow countrymen, do not forget the shameful history seventy years ago. Let’s go on to the street, to [people’s] square, to Liutiaohu, and to the memorial building of Nanking Massacre to listen to the shrieking warnings and sonorous bells.

Another post remarked on Xinhuanet.com Internet bulletin board system on September 19:
This ad expressed the idea that “once the dragon encounters Nippon Paint, it will fall down,” which seriously harms Chinese people’s feelings. This is a signal of Japanese cultural invasion (supported by colluding Chinese traitors). All Chinese people should watch out. In addition to economic and military invasions, cultural, emotional, and psychological invasions are now more concealed and harmful. In addition, my colleagues and I did not use Nippon paint when we painted our homes. We will not purchase other Japanese products either. At this moment, I am asking all Chinese: don’t forget national humiliations. Boycott Japanese goods. Everyone has an obligation to develop China.  

The posts linked the ad to past Japanese invasions and Chinese humiliations. September 18 was singled out because on that day Japan launched its first attack on the Chinese army in Northeast China in 1931 and consequently established the Manchuria State, a Japanese puppet regime. Other Japanese aggressions such as the “Sino-Japanese war” in 1895 and incidents such as Japanese businessmen collectively engaged in prostitution in China in 2004 were also associated with the ad. The Chinese magazine and ad creatives were criticized as Chinese traitors who only cared about money. Because very few Internet users questioned the assumption that the dragon represented China and thus was China, the fall of the dragon was viewed as the fall of China. Through referencing the Chinese anthem and other Chinese national symbols, the Internet discussions transformed the ad into a symbol of imperialism.

The fact that Nippon paint did not learn any lessons from the Toyota incident made some Chinese Internet users even more angry because they viewed this as an indicator of the arrogance and stupidity of Nippon (and Japanese producers in general). Generally speaking, the majority of Chinese Internet users were highly critical of Nippon, even though a very small percentage of Internet posts questioned the assumption that Nippon would challenge the Chinese on purpose and criticized the oversensitivity of some Chinese. For example, from September 14 to September 30, one thread of post over Xinhuanet.com attracted 124 responses. And 99 of them protested against this ad. Even posts that praised the ad’s creativity stated that the portrayal of the dragon was inappropriate. Many posts further called for the development of Chinese economy, and the fixing of prevalent money mongering and administrative loopholes so that no such ads would appear again. They further asked Chinese fellows to spend energy resolving China’s more urgent problems such as counterfeit products, poisonous rice, food and oil, and corruption. However, even such rational posts expressed no positive feelings toward Japan or Japanese companies. All posts expressed a common view that China should be made stronger to take on future bullies. Chinese newspapers such as Beijing Morning News covered this controversy on September 23. Many other newspapers also reported this issue. Not only were related parties interviewed, expert opinions were also sought after.

Nippon’s agency, Leo Burnett, was shocked at this controversy and unprepared for it. It responded almost 10 days after a heated discussion began on the Internet. It issued a statement through Beijing Morning News clarifying that the ad meant to portray Nippon paint as glossy, without the formation of small bumps or thorns.
It also stated that the creatives of Leo Burnett were all Chinese, but nobody challenged the creative concept. To manage the crisis, Leo Burnett further announced that this ad was only:

\[\ldots\text{an exchange of a creative idea. Nippon has never published this ad anywhere, and it will not publish it in the future. Nippon Paint does not know anything about it.}\]

It is certainly not true that Nippon knew nothing about the ad because no ad agency will create, let alone place, an ad for a client without a contract. Leo Burnett made this statement simply to protect Nippon from further attacks. As an American agency, Leo Burnett is in a better position to shoulder responsibility when anti-Japanese feelings were high in China. Needless to say, Leo Burnett viewed itself as responsible. A statement from Leo Burnett’s PR firm further remarked:

\[\text{In creating the ad, we consulted with [Chinese people] outside the firm. All of them were attracted by this idea. Thus, [we] ignored other derived meanings and imaginations of some segments.}\]

Obviously, Leo Burnett was attempting to confine the discussion to economic and business domains. It also mildly reminded Chinese nationalists that their interpretations were imaginations, because their Chinese creatives and the Chinese they consulted with had no problem with the ad.

The Toyota and Nippon controversies can be viewed in what Wang (2005) calls “the dangerous zone” for a transnational corporation that is featured by a strong nationalism and the company’s strong susceptibility. Numerous surveys indicate that there is a strong anti-Japanese feeling among the Chinese and that Japan is still predominantly viewed as a predator in China (Shirk, 2007, pp. 151–152). Also, urban Chinese consumers are very familiar with Japanese brands, including Sony, Panasonic, Toyota, and Nippon and the familiarity paradoxically makes the Japanese brands more susceptible to nationalistic attacks. What’s more, Japanese brands have also achieved a high level of market share in China, which can easily arouse nationalistic resentment once things go wrong.

The Toyota and Nippon controversies follow some general patterns. Both incidents started over the Internet and then migrated to traditional media. Apologies were demanded. The Chinese authorities were involved, resulting in apologies from the media, the ad agencies and the corporation. The quick apologies from related parties imply that they are skilled at catering to the “apology diplomacy” in China (Gries, 2004). Whenever there are controversial foreign ads, Chinese nationalists often require foreign corporations and related parties to apologize. Such requirement is often granted to soothe nationalistic feelings. Apologizing is a means to restore damaged social relations (Gries, 2004, p. 89). To grant and receive apologies suggests the predominant value of the “face culture” as well as “self-criticism” in Chinese culture. Because Chinese nationalists feel that China is insulted, an apology becomes absolutely necessary to restore the proper order between Chinese nationalists and other parties.
The controversies are also responses to the bitter relationship between China and Japan, which has been a constant topic in Chinese media. The unsettled history and continuing disputes between China and Japan have provided Chinese media with a handy reference frame when they report any Japan-related controversial issues. An economic and representational issue can be easily turned into a nationalistic one. When Chinese Internet users interpreted the towed car as a Chinese military vehicle and associated the lion statues with Lugou Bridge, Toyota was transformed into a symbol that supported and beautified Japanese imperialism. When the Nippon ad was viewed as downing the Chinese dragon and China, it became the enemy of China. Thus, it is important for related parties to stress that the issues are about “pure business.” Of course, advertising is not just about pure business, but about representations. Because developmentalism is a prevalent ideology in China, making money is generally recognized as legitimate, while foreign cultural influence is often treated with suspicion. The parties involved thus use the business logic to address Chinese nationalists. Indeed, all parties seemed to apologize to their target consumers, with Auto Fan and International Advertising apologizing to their readers, and the ad agencies and Toyota to the general public.

The responses to the controversies also reflect the co-existence of “victim” and “victor” narratives in constructing contemporary Chinese history (Gries 2004). Chinese history have constantly been produced and reproduced to serve the interest of the present. When China was under Mao’s leadership, China viewed itself as a victor in fighting against Japan and the West. In the last few decades, however, many Chinese have come to view China as a victim to the West, especially to Japan. A co-existence of the two narratives in contemporary China makes up a core aspect of Chinese national identity. Japan and the U.S. are central to the construction of recent Chinese nationalism. Although a popular view on Sino–U.S. relation is largely about China being a victor, a popular view of Sino-Japanese relation is largely about China being a victim. Chinese Internet users thus emphasize Chinese suffering. History is thus made highly relevant and salient when Internet users were constructing the relationship between Chinese consumers and Japanese producers.

The call for boycotting Japanese products also suggests that Chinese consumers have become aware of their consumer power. Consumption is an important arena for the Chinese to assert their national identity, precisely because the Chinese are denied voices and a say in politics, and government affairs. Indeed, “Chinese consumers have discovered the power of their pocketbooks and [of] the media and they are holding brands accountable,” said Christopher Millward, CEO of Firebrands, a Beijing-based consulting company. Chinese consumers have filed suits against foreign brands that failed to live up to the advertised claims. They do not hesitate to hold press conferences if consumer products do not meet up with their expectations. The lack of official processes in China to deal with consumer frustrations and the absence of a history of companies to mediate consumer dissatisfactions force Chinese consumers to use the media as one of the very few channels to express their complaints. Scott Kronick, Beijing-based president of WPP Group’s Ogilvy PR division in China, stated, “There is no historical behavior to call up a company and complain. Instead,
they end up calling a press conference.” Chinese consumers thus are using their purchasing power as a mechanism for social activism. Tracing the historical development of theorizations of consumerism, Nava (1991) argues that we should reconsider the relationship between buying and power and treats consumerism as a form of “political activism.” Chinese consumers, however, are not allowed to be organized even though consumer protection organizations in China are supposed to protect consumer rights, monitor product quality and prices and educate consumers about their rights (Palmer, 2006). In other words, Chinese consumers still have very limited channels to implement their rights and power.

The Chinese Internet plays an important role in fueling consumer activism in China. It produces a sense of empowerment and offers a channel to disseminate consumers’ dissatisfactions toward general social phenomena such as corruption, bribery, an excessive pursuit of money and unsafe products in China. Also, the Internet is a safer space to vent one’s complaints, with its capacity to attract immediate social support. Complaints targeted at foreign corporations can, in particular, function as a mechanism that allows participants to recognize their limited participatory power. In post-Mao China, economic participation is the only means for the Chinese to participate in the national project. The quick reactions from the Chinese authorities indicates that they have become more responsive to Chinese consumer demands in specific and to Chinese public opinion in general (Gries, 2004; Shirk, 2007). Chinese leadership has also constantly asserted the importance of Internet opinions in policy making process. Representatives of the State Council acknowledged the importance of online opinions in decision making. Government officials have started constant dialogues with netizens. Even Chinese president Hu Jintao and premier Wen Jiabao remarked that they constantly viewed Internet opinions (Zhang et al., 2004). Most recently, Hu Jintao communicated directly with netizens on Strong Country Forum (qiangguo luntan) when he visited People’s Daily on June 20, 2008.

The fact that both controversies first started over the Internet also gave the discussions a more nationalistic tone, for Internet users are often more nationalistic than the general population in China (Xiao, 2005). Internet users established the interpretative frameworks. The Internet not only made certain issues more salient but also somehow limited the interpretations of the incidents. Chinese newspapers reinforced the importance of the Internet through constantly referring to nationalistic Internet opinions in their coverage and in their interviews with related parties, scholars and the Chinese authorities.

The examples also suggest that meanings encoded by advertisers and their agencies are different from meanings decoded by consumers (Hall, 1980). When images go public, the meanings received are somewhat independent of meanings intended by producers. To some extent, foreign advertising agencies still don’t understand the potential interpretations of symbols and icons in wider social, political, and economic contexts. There is always a tension between being creative and being commercial in the advertising industry.
Capitalizing on Nationalism in China

The controversial ad campaigns had a great influence in the Chinese advertising profession. In early 2005, a Chinese creative Yihe Han produced an ad for Houyi brand of Henan Zhang Gong Wine Company. Houyi, a legendary Chinese hero, who has shot down nine suns out of 10, is standing on earth. He is drawing a bowl and preparing to shoot the setting sun far away. A mountain covered with white snow is seen in the sunset. A prominent headline states, “Houyi She Ri, raise cups to celebrate together.” “She Ri” in Chinese language can be translated into “shooting the sun” as well as “shooting Japan.” Many Chinese Internet users viewed this ad as a response to the Toyota and Nippon ads. They said that the snow-capped mountain resembled the Mount Fuji in Japan and that the image looked like a Japanese national flag. Many Chinese media reported this ad with enthusiasm, which implies that anti-Japanese feelings are shared sentiments (see Figure 5). Some Chinese advertising professionals further utilized the controversial ads for their own agendas. Because Chinese ad agencies and Chinese products are still viewed in China as having lower status than their transnational counterparts, Chinese producers and ad professionals use nationalism to compete with them (Li, 2008). For example, Cheng Ai, a Chinese adman and a rising star in the Chinese advertising industry, stated at an online advertising forum:

I will say that Chinese elements, the Chinese dragon and lion will not lower their heads . . . Nippon will fall down. But I will tell the Internet friends that Chinese people will not lower their heads and Chinese ad professionals will not lower their heads.

Figure 5. The Ad of Houyi Shooting the Sun. Reprinted with permission from Yihe Han.
Through calling Chinese Internet users friends, Ai sides with Chinese nationalism. He reinforces the view that these ads have secret agendas. Through expressing that Nippon will be eventually beaten, he implies his ambition and determination to win on behalf of the Chinese. As a founder of a Chinese ad agency, he uses nationalism to get support for Chinese agencies at large. Because most of employees in foreign agencies are Chinese, he further de-legitimizes them. He stated:

Many Chinese with black hair and yellow skin, who are eating rice and steamed buns, have done many stupid things because of their worship for foreign things . . . I know that the Nippon ad that downs the dragon was . . . created by Chinese. I also know that the ad that portrays the lions lowering their heads to Toyota was created by Chinese. I think these people are very stupid. They forget their own mothers. They forget their own fathers, and thus forget Chinese culture.

The fact that the controversial ads were created by Chinese ad professionals means double insult and betrayal to Chinese nationalists. People working in foreign firms are portrayed as traitors. His remark thus set up a contrast between “us” and “them.” Chinese people working in foreign agencies are thus criticized as un-Chinese. They are viewed as collaborators and running dogs of foreigners. It must be pointed out that professionals with experience in transnational agencies, however, often express more rational views and reservations over such nationalistic sentiments.

The controversial ads have also made foreign ad agencies more cautious in the Chinese market. A group account director of a large Japanese advertising firm stated: “On very sensitive dates such as September 18, we will try not to advertise [Japanese Products] to avoid unnecessary troubles” (Personal interview, July 22, 2005). Respondents from several large foreign agencies, in my interviews in the summer of 2005, stated that their companies instructed them to be cautious when using Chinese culture symbols in any ads. Saatchi & Saatchi has also become more prudent in using Chinese icons. It even persuaded a Japanese automobile company not to sue a Chinese company for misrepresenting its car in a commercial broadcast at CCTV and other media for fear of triggering the mental frame of “Japanese producer bullying a Chinese corporation” and for fear of reminding consumers of the controversial Toyota ads. Instead, the corporation used quiet diplomacy to solve the issue (Personal interview, July 20, 2005).

**Conclusion**

Consumer nationalism is not a unique or new phenomenon in China. Scholars (e.g. Schlesinger, 1957; Frank, 1999; Breen, 2004) have studied national products movement in the US and pointed out its role in nation-building. Other countries such as Japan, Ireland, Korea, Britain, France, Germany, Nigeria, and Spain, among other countries, also experienced the nationalizing of consumer culture from colonial times to the present (Gerth, 2003, p. 15). South Korea still has a strong nationalistic consumer culture (Nelson, 2000). Nationalism also played an important role in creating modern China and resisting imperialist powers (Gerth, 2003). Consumer nationalism targeted at Japanese products in contemporary China, however, has some
special features that can only be understood through examining the production and reproduction of the unsettled history between China and Japan, the development of Internet nationalism discourse, and the particular social conditions in China in the past three decades.

The analysis of controversial Japanese ad campaigns in China indicates that Japanese producers still face a particular challenge in the Chinese market as expressed in consumer nationalism, which is a combination of the production and reproduction of Japanese imperial history, the construction of Chinese identity, the expression of dissatisfaction toward the Chinese government and consumerist ethos in the context of globalization. The unsettled history constantly shapes the interpretations of Japanese business decisions in China. Any individual cases can be linked to past Japanese invasions and extended to Japanese products in general. Japanese producers and their agencies have to apologize quickly in order to restore their damaged reputations and regain trust of Chinese consumers. However, the involvement of Chinese agencies indicates that, on one hand, it is problematic to interpret Japanese businesses on a national basis, but on the other hand, these Chinese run the risk of being labeled as “Chinese traitors.” Chinese competitors can thus capitalize on consumer nationalism targeted at foreign counterparts in general, and Japanese corporations and Chinese collaborators in particular. The controversies also indicate that Chinese nationalists feel uneasy to construct the Chinese identity in the context of globalization. While globalization poses a threat to a collective Chinese identity, it simultaneously opens up new possibility for Chineseness that cannot be strictly interpreted on a national basis.

The Internet plays a very important role in organizing and shaping consumer nationalism. The Internet is the only public space where Chinese citizens can express themselves with a limited sense of freedom. Asserting their rights over this space gives Internet users a sense of empowerment and pleasure. Needless to say, Internet discussions also allow Internet users to form a sense of community. Also, the constant reassurance from Chinese authorities on the importance of Internet opinions in policy making allows Internet users to experience a participatory power in the national project. The quick response of Chinese authorities seems to verify the importance of public opinion in general (Gries, 2004; Shirk, 2007) and Internet opinions in particular. The Internet further sets up the agenda and makes certain issues more salient. Internet interpretations become a starting point for print journalists. In this sense, the Internet and print media shape Chinese consumer nationalism.

Consumer nationalism in China also functions as a kind of foil for Chinese dissatisfaction toward the Chinese government and other social conditions. Critiquing foreign products is a safe way to express general resentment. Indeed, when Internet users criticized the controversial ads, they always pointed out the seriousness of other social problems such as corruption, dysfunctional regulatory systems, and prevalent bribery in Chinese society. In China, a society that does not allow free speech, consumption is one arena where consumers can freely express their views. The “good citizen” in post-1989 China is defined as an economic participant
in the nation’s development. Thus, it is not surprising that consumption has been made into a nationalistic space, where citizenship and patriotism converge. Protesting against foreign advertising and products in particular and consumer products in general becomes a safe and limited space to comment on the problems and development and governance in China.

Consumer nationalism can be further understood as what Benedict Anderson (1991) calls an “imagined community.” It aims to unite all Chinese and create a unified Chinese culture under its banner, but such an effort is problematic, though. Symbols of Chinese culture, such as the dragon, the lion, and other icons are creations of the Han majority in China, whose meanings are not necessarily shared by other ethnic groups or even by people of Han nationality. The wide application of “traitor” implies that Chinese nationalists are anxious about the threat of globalization on Chinese national identity. The development of transnational governance, global networks and information flows and fragmentation of the Chinese society have called into question the often assumed stable relationship between citizenship and the nation-state and the shared interest of all Chinese. The involvement of Chinese media indicates such an irony, which means that a nationalistic goal is not necessarily shared. Indeed, even though there are prevalent anti-Japanese feelings in China, Japanese products still enjoy popularity in the Chinese market. Chinese nationalists thus experience a sense of powerlessness and turn to nationalism as the last resort.

Chinese nationalism has complicated the Chinese market and the globalization process in China. There are contradictions of economic policies and nationality aims, contradictions of the flexibility that Western advertisers typically treat advertising symbols and the inflexibly of iconography intended by Chinese consumers. While the Chinese government implements a propaganda campaign promoting that globalization is central to the nation’s modernization (Yan, 2002), Chinese nationalism can only make globalization proceed so far. There are always small battles in globalization. Paradoxically, China needs such globalized economic activities to develop its own national economy and stride toward its future of national promise and prosperity.

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Notes

[1] About 149,000 hits were found when a Google search was conducted using the key term “Toyota Prado Ad” in Chinese on March 23, 2006.

[2] Nippon paint did not have to give an apology because its agency Leo Burnett attempted to protect Nippon from attacks. In order to control the damage of this ad, Leo Burnett
announced that this ad was only “an exchange of a creative idea. Nippon has never published this ad anywhere, and it will not publish it in the future. Nippon Paint does not know anything about it.”

[3] During the period when the two controversial ad campaigns occurred, Chinese Internet users were dominated by educated unmarried young urban males. According to a report issued by China Internet Network Information Centre (CINIC) in July 2004, of 87 million Internet users, 70.5% were 30 years old or less than 30, 59.3% were male, 56.8% had associate degrees (dazhuan) or higher degrees, and 60.1% were unmarried. The majority of Chinese Internet users are still urban young male students. According to the report issued by CINIC in January 2008, the Chinese Internet users are still predominantly urban (75%), educated (71.5% having high school education or higher), male (57.2%), young (59.9% being between 18–35, with 31.8% between 18–24, which corresponded with college and graduate students) and unmarried (55.1%). And 54.7% of internet users had a monthly income of 1000 Yuan or higher and close to 5.2% had a monthly income over 5000 Yuan. Close to 42.5% worked in joint ventures, state-owned enterprises, governmental agencies, and foreign enterprises and 41.8% worked in private enterprises. In 2005, a typical Chinese Internet user was young, male, holding a job as a teacher, a white-collar worker with a high income, or a student (Guo, 2005). Even student Internet users are likely to come from middle-class families or become future middle-class consumers. Thus, there is an overlap of Internet users and white collar workers and the rising middle class in China.

[4] A large number of ad professionals during my interviews in Beijing 2005 stated that Chinese consumers viewed Japanese products as having better quality than Chinese products. Polls also indicate that Chinese consumers in large cities prefer foreign goods. For example, a Gallup poll conducted in 2004 indicated that 45% of consumers in Beijing, 40% in Shanghai, and 38% in Guangzhou think products made in Japan, Germany and the US are excellent, while only 15% of consumers have such a view about Chinese products. See, “Gallup poll: Chinese consumer still love foreign brands” (2008).

[5] A former director of Beijing Advertising Art Corporation recalled, “There were complaints that the Chang-An Avenue [a main avenue that goes through the Tiananmen Square with many important towering buildings and government agencies on both sides] had turned into a Japanese boulevard” in the 1980s. In response to such complaints, the Beijing authorities limited the placement of outdoor advertising along the Chang-An Avenue, at the Beijing Railway Station, and at the Beijing Airport in 1985. In 1985, when two gigantic Toshiba billboards were placed on top of Shanghai International Hotel, the landmark building in Shanghai, college students and some other Chinese were outraged. Some students even threatened to bomb the billboards. Some remarked, ‘in the past, Japan invaded China through military means and now it is economic invasion.’ The Shanghai Municipal Government had to order to place a Chinese billboard together with the Toshiba ads in order to neutralize the political. See the interviews with Wenfeng Han and Guiye Hu (1999).

[6] The name Ba Dao can be arguably interpreted as powerful and strong in Chinese language in a negative sense, though. This reminds us of General Motor’s (GM) Nova campaign in Spanish-speaking countries in the 1970s. GM executives were baffled by its poor sales until it was pointed out that “Nova” means “does not go” in Spanish.

[10] The creative description was in Chinese and this is the author’s translation.
[12] About 143 posts were found regarding this issue on the Internet BBS forum of Xinhuanet.com on March 22, 2006. Many might have been deleted from the forum. Netease (www.163.com) had 5258 discussion posts on this topic when a search was conducted on
March 22, 2006. All posts cited in the following section come from Xinhuannet.com. The first one was posted from ID 222.94.160.* posted on September 17, 2004, and the second one is from ID 211.90.169.* posted on September 19, 2004.

[16] About 61,700 hits were found for “Hou Yi She Ri Guanggao” using Google search on March 23, 2006. Influential Chinese media including Chinese Youth Daily, Yahoo!, Sina, Tom, and Xinhuannet all published articles about this ad.

References


