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Marketing and Nationalist Politics: The Case of India and China

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Résumé

Le marketing mondial fait face à des bouleversements liés aux transformations politiques et culturelles globales, notamment en Chine et en Inde. Ces deux pays rejettent de plus en plus les valeurs occidentales au profit de modèles nationaux, influençant la perception des marques internationales. Le marketing, historiquement anglo-saxon, doit prendre en compte ces nouvelles dynamiques qui favorisent les champions nationaux dans des secteurs comme le luxe et la mode. Enfin, cette montée du nationalisme économique remet en question l'universalité des produits occidentaux, signalant un changement profond dans les stratégies de consommation et de communication.

Summary

Global marketing faces upheavals due to political and cultural transformations, particularly in China and India. These two countries increasingly reject Western values in favor of national models, influencing the perception of international brands. Historically rooted in Anglo-Saxon traditions, marketing must now account for these new dynamics favoring national champions in the luxury and fashion sectors. Furthermore, this rise in economic nationalism challenges the universality of Western products, signaling a profound shift in consumption and communication strategies.

Mots-clés

Marketing mondial ; Nationalisme ; Image de marque ; Chine ; Inde ; Industrie du luxe et de la mode ; Identité culturelle ; Stratégie marketing ; Marques locales vs marques globales.

Keywords

Global marketing; Nationalism; Branding; China; India; luxury and fashion industry; Cultural identity; Marketing strategy; Local vs global brands.

Introduction

The world is undergoing significant change, with profound transformations challenging Western dominance in various forms across multiple continents. However, marketing professionals have yet to fully grasp the extent of this phenomenon despite its growing influence on consumption habits and patterns. This situation is even more paradoxical since marketing, as a management science discipline, has historically been distinguished by its ability to anticipate and respond to changes, whether political or cultural, by seeking to understand the underlying dynamics in order to succeed globally when these dynamics affect consumer attitudes and behaviors (Kotler P. & M. Kotler, 2014).

Recent high-profile incidents involving advertising campaigns that sparked scandals in China (Dolce & Gabbana, Rolls-Royce, Zara, etc.), though perceived in the West as blunders stemming from a lack of understanding of local cultural codes, highlight the inability of many brands (and their advertising agencies) to grasp the extent of the political and cultural transformations in the countries concerned. These brands often remain trapped in a form of projection (Boudon, 1977), arising both from the profession's specific values and social homogeneity, thereby preventing an adequate understanding of the global changes underway.

Whether we like it or not, politics significantly influences marketing, especially in international relations (Collins & Butler, 2015). This impact is even more pronounced because marketing has a history whose genealogy reveals a strong Anglo-Saxon foundation, as evidenced by the multiple definitions that have emerged over time, with the most influential coming from the American Marketing Association. Marketing is neither a neutral concept nor a set of neutral practices. It was born in a specific socio-cultural context, at a particular point in economic evolution. It is based on academic and empirical knowledge heavily influenced by Anglo-Saxon thought (Arnould & Thompson, 2005).

With the end of the Cold War, the market economy became widespread, yet development trajectories remain diverse (Rodrik, 2011). The promise of universal products that would satisfy all customers, regardless of geographic region, has fallen short (Stiglitz, 2002). Culture is both a means of differentiation and a form of resistance. While the post-war rejection of Westernism stemmed from political opposition from the Cold War and decolonization, the emerging rejection is political, and identity based. It is not just Western policies being criticized, but also its cultural practices, lifestyle, and values in a world that seeks to be multipolar. Globalization seems to lead to increased cultural differentiation, where local identities and cultures play a crucial role in resisting homogenization—an old phenomenon (Hofstede, 1984; Appadurai, 1996) but one that appears to be growing stronger. The "Global South," encompassing various African and Asian countries, critiques the lifestyles and practices it associates with the West. This movement, marked by solid nationalism and a desire for independence, rejects lifestyles perceived as contrary to its culture, history, and interests. Marketing cannot ignore this dynamic, as it already impacts product and communication strategies, evidenced by the rejection of advertising campaigns, sometimes orchestrated or relayed by political authorities (Chakrabarty, 2000).

Deep political changes impacting the business world

*The rejection of Western values in the name of a return to original civilization*¹

For more than twenty years, China and India have deliberately implemented policies aimed at replacing Western cultural references with values rooted in their national traditions under the pretext of promoting their respective civilizations. This policy is embodied in China by "socialism with Chinese characteristics" (Zhang, 2012), a central concept of President Xi Jinping. In India, the ideology of Hindutva (Nandakumar, 2022; Jaffrelot, 2019), which defines Indian culture through Hindu values and is now represented by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, symbolizes this lasting resurgence of nationalism. In both cases, these countries have experienced colonization (or the occupation of part of their territory), a domination they accuse of destroying their respective civilizations' very foundations.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which President Xi Jinping presents as the culmination of a millennia-old history, along with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, believe that 'de-Westernization' is an unavoidable necessity when Western culture conflicts with the fundamental principles of Chinese and Indian cultures. Xi Jinping, frequently invoking Confucius in his speeches (Zhao, 2019), emphasizes China's cultural self-sufficiency, suggesting that the country does not need to import external ideas. This conflict is not just a theoretical debate, but an urgent matter that needs to be addressed.

This cultural self-sufficiency could be reflected in marketing by the assertion that, with strong national brands, China feels no need to import foreign brands.

In a book with a prophetic title, *The Indian Way*, Indian Foreign Minister Jaishankar (2020) emphasizes how Indian thought shapes its political agenda and actions and points out that Western elites remain stuck in outdated frameworks, often preventing them from grasping the ongoing changes—an observation also shared by diplomat Gourdault-Montagne (2022). In both China and India, this is not merely a reactive nationalist moment, but rather large-scale political transformations aimed at replacing Western models with national ones in all aspects of life². With profound civilizational implications, these changes represent a shift that marketing must consider.

Brands as Cultural Markers

The idea that brands embody cultural myths and respond to consumers' identity needs is not new (Levy, 1959; McCracken, 1998; Holt, 2004). Therefore, it is understandable that brands, as carriers of global cultural values, often conflict with local values and vice versa (Cayla, Eckhardt, 2008). When Zara's advertisement features a woman with very Western features and freckled skin, the Western reference is being criticized. Conversely, when Dior is criticized for a fashion photo by Chinese photographer Chen Man, featuring a Chinese woman with slicked-back hair adorned with dried flowers, eyes darkened with makeup, and black false nails, it is the "clichéd" perception of China by the West that is denounced. This criticism is further

¹ On the concept of civilization, the reader is invited to refer to the seminal work by Braudel F. (1993), *Grammaire des Civilisations*, Champ Histoire, 744 pages, <https://bit.ly/3Z5EwHj>

² On Indian nationalism, see the comprehensive article by Racine J.L. (2020), « Inde : Le nationalisme hindou au pouvoir », *Politique Etrangère*, 2020/1, p.105-120, <https://bit.ly/4e2Rdqk>

amplified because the portrait evokes a dark period in China's history, the Century of Humiliation, between 1839 and 1849.

From another perspective, while Western companies often perceive their products as universal, consumers in other parts of the world increasingly see them as cultural creations—still appealing but carrying distinct values. This is particularly true in the fashion and beauty sectors. Therefore, it is not surprising that luxury fashion has become a political issue, as it reflects differentiated identities and histories.

Fashion and Luxury: The Emergence of National Champions

In a recent work, Joulia (2023) highlights that the Haute Couture sector in China is experiencing a surge with the emergence of designers who skillfully revisit cultural heritage. The author describes them as "talented women, creators liberated from the Mao years, and visionaries of new times," these new times indeed aligning with the directives of the Chinese Communist Party. Naturally, one thinks of Guo Pei, the "imperial couturier of China," but she is not the only one. Others include Uma Wang, Grace Chen, Angel Chen, and Huishan Zhang, etc.

Over the past decade, Chinese luxury consumers (in fashion and accessories) have been characterized by two notable trends that favor national leaders while not excluding international brands. On the one hand, the educated clientele increasingly prioritizes product quality over brand recognition. On the other hand, a strong sense of nationalism influences their purchasing choices. A distinct political phenomenon is currently unfolding: wearing Western luxury brands has become socially frowned upon, particularly in the fight against excessive wealth. This dynamic was highlighted by Rolex's experience during the anti-corruption campaign, known as the "Tigers and Flies" campaign, launched in 2012 and intensified over the years³. This movement aims to discourage ostentatious behavior, seen as incompatible with the values promoted by the Chinese government.

Although attachment to local brands varies across product categories, a 2019 Nielsen study indicates that 66% of Chinese consumers prefer to buy local brands across all sectors, compared to 28% who prefer foreign brands. This trend, reinforced by political direction at the highest levels of the Chinese government, is likely to intensify in the coming years, further supporting the rise of domestic companies in the local market. Beyond luxury ready-to-wear, Chinese designers increasingly target the mass market, as seen with Urban Revivo, often called the "Chinese Zara." Perfect Diary, a Chinese unicorn with global ambitions, is following the same path in the cosmetics sector. While the brand Shan Xia, due to its partnership with Hermès, has garnered significant media coverage, other lesser-known brands are positioned at the border of more accessible luxury: Herborist for cosmetics, Maotai for spirits, and Longio for watches.

The presence and influence of national brands in the luxury sector in China is not a recent phenomenon. For example, the jewelry brand Chow Tai Fook, founded in 1929, reflects this long-standing tradition. What is new, however, is the strategic alignment between political directives from the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, the strategy of Chinese brands, and the expectations of the local clientele. In other words, the Chinese government is actively

³ Starting in 2012, President Xi Jinping initiated a crackdown on corruption among officials at all levels. Luxury watches, valued for their resale potential and liquidity, became a symbolic target. Chinese internet users exposed, often through photographs, lower-ranking officials wearing expensive watches inconsistent with their official salaries. This public scrutiny, combined with the anti-corruption campaign, significantly affected the luxury watch market, with growth plummeting from +30% in 2011 to just +2% in 2013.

committed to promoting Chinese cultural and national values. Simultaneously, local brands emphasize their connection to national cultural traditions, drawing significant inspiration from them. At the same time, Chinese consumers increasingly value purchasing and consuming traditional or local brands, further reinforcing this trend of highlighting national cultural identities.

This alignment, a result of careful planning and execution, reflects a convergence aimed at promoting national brands as symbols of cultural pride and economic sovereignty. Sonia Cheng, Vice President of Chow Tai Fook, emphasized in a 2023 interview with *L'Officiel* the importance of "the brand's collaboration with renowned universities and museums to preserve Chinese traditions through our jewelry⁴". For Chinese authorities and many Chinese luxury brands, reconnecting with the past means reviving disappeared styles. However, it also carries a much more political message. Until now, Chinese consumers have been forced to adopt foreign fashions due to the lack of national brands, highlighting a period of dependence that is now being challenged by the resurgence of styles rooted in Chinese cultural heritage.

In all sectors, the Chinese regime encourages the emergence of national champions, each drawing from their respective fields to compete with foreign brands. While the "Sinicization" of domestic consumption patterns is currently a priority, the next step, already partly underway, is the internationalization of these national champions. In the sports sector, Chinese brands Anta and Li-Ning are fierce competitors for Nike, as Chinese consumer patriotism is quite natural. However, these brands still need to prove their ability to expand internationally. The challenge is even more pronounced for Indian brands: Who today knows of Amul, an iconic dairy brand in India, Parle Products, one of the world's largest biscuit manufacturers, or Bajaj Auto, a major motorcycle manufacturer?

Towards a Typology of Political Changes

When Political Changes Impact Marketing

From a practical standpoint, not all political changes necessarily hold significance for marketing. In pluralistic democracies, shifts in majority and institutional frameworks generally have little impact on consumption or production patterns, resulting at most in minor adjustments rather than significant upheavals. However, in the context of India and China, the ongoing dynamics go far beyond this, as they primarily aim to establish the absolute primacy of politics over any other consideration, particularly economic ones, and secondly, to reconnect with the civilizational fundamentals of these nations. Both Xi Jinping and Modi consistently emphasize the millennia-old character of Chinese and Indian civilizations to underscore their permanence and, in a way, though not explicitly stated, their superiority⁵.

The assertion of national preference, or even superiority, at the highest levels of the state, has a significant impact on international trade relations. Although China and India continue to adopt Western techniques, much like Japan during the Meiji era (1868–1912), they are increasingly reluctant to embrace Western cultural references. As a result, within a few years, the term "Western" has become, among the elites of these two countries, not only pejorative but

⁴ *L'Officiel*, July 5, 2024. The Hua collection, one of the brand's successes, is inspired by jewelry borrowed from various imperial dynasties.

⁵ From this perspective, the recent remarks of Indian Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar are unambiguous: "Until recently, a Western paradigm has dictated norms and values. China, as the first non-Western power to rise in the post-1945 era, has drawn on its cultural heritage to project its personality and shape the narrative. It is only logical that India too should follow soon."

sometimes even synonymous with hostility, to use Huntington's (1996) term "civilizational hostility." The famous document n°9⁶, released in 2013, outlines all the dangers facing the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and, by extension, China. The fight against Western influence holds a prominent place in the document, urging the Party to engage in an ideological struggle against the allure of Western values on the Chinese people, which weaken and corrupt society (constitutional democracy, universal values, civil society, Western notions of press freedom, neoliberalism, historical nihilism, democratic socialism, etc.). Similarly, Hindutva, which asserts the pride of being Hindu—a pride that has been undermined since the beginning of Muslim invasions in India, followed by Mongol rule and finally British colonization—was politically adopted in the 1920s and 1930s by the RSS⁷. The current Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, comes from the RSS.

From this perspective, while some product categories are considered neutral, others are much less so when they pertain to customs. Those former categories serve as cultural markers or involve technological sovereignty. According to Bougon (2023), the control China intends to exert over these product categories represents a "new market totalitarianism."

The consequences and the research questions raised

As previously mentioned, marketing must pay close attention to implementing the marketing plan, particularly in communication. However, the issue is more complex, as it is essential to distinguish between two categories of goods: on the one hand, those with relative cultural neutrality, being more utilitarian or functional than symbolic; on the other hand, those that carry cultural references and reflect a particular way of life.

The fashion and luxury sectors perfectly illustrate this second category of goods. For a long time, due to the influence of European fashion and luxury, these products and brands were considered universal and irreplaceable. This is a misconception. Chinese and Indian luxury and fashion have a long history, eclipsed by historical upheavals and now brought back to the forefront by the political will of their leaders. Pierre Cardin predicted it in his time when he stated, "China will become one of the major players in haute couture. It will dominate this market in the 21st century." While this perspective may have been premature, the fact remains that China has a tradition, expertise, and a political climate today that is conducive to the resurgence of Chinese luxury.

Behind this heightened nationalism lie economic considerations. For China, as well as for India, it is about reaffirming their independence and sovereignty. Nationalism thus becomes a strategic tool in support of a broader policy of economic sovereignty, skillfully promoted in sectors where emerging local industries directly compete with well-established Western brands (Chang and Pooga, 2023). In India, and possibly soon in China, this consumer support for local companies is further strengthened by high tariffs imposed on imported products, contributing to the reconfiguration of global trade.

What are the practical implications for Western brands, particularly regarding marketing and communication? Arrogance is no longer a tolerable stance if it was ever acceptable. Increased

⁶ For information on Document No. 9, see the chapter on the cultural war in the book titled *Dans la tête de Xi Jinping* by François Bougon (2023).

⁷ RSS, or "Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh," is the predecessor of the BJP, a nationalist movement that fought against both British colonialism and Islam.

vigilance is essential to avoid missteps that could escalate into ideological confrontations. This need for caution was exemplified by the controversy involving Christian Dior in 2022, accused of cultural appropriation by Chinese social media. The controversy centered around a wool skirt from the Autumn-Winter 2022 collection. Presented on the brand's official website as an "original piece emblematic of the Dior silhouette," the skirt, with its flared cut and side pleats, was perceived by many Chinese internet users as an appropriation of the design of the traditional māmianqún or "horse-face skirt," which dates to the Song and Liao dynasties. The hashtag linking Dior to the term "plagiarism" garnered over 20 million views on the Weibo social network, accompanied by comments such as: "Stop cultural appropriation and apologize to China."

We acknowledge that our research at this stage provides a diagnosis and highlights several challenges that Western brands must now face in Asia. This gives rise to several research questions that merit further investigation. Among these, the following seem to us to be of primary importance:

1. How can international brands adapt their marketing strategies to address the dynamics of cultural nationalism in countries like China and India?
2. To what extent do consumers perceive international brands as representations of Western cultural values, and how does this influence their purchasing decisions in nationalist contexts?
3. What role do local brands play as symbols of national pride in contexts of political and cultural transformation in China and India?
4. What are the main challenges Western luxury brands face when attempting to integrate local cultural references without being accused of cultural appropriation?

Conclusion

Our article aims to raise awareness among marketing thinkers and practitioners about the importance of integrating the political factor into their strategies, as brands, because they are cultural markers, play a key role in the emerging opposition between Western values and those of other nations, such as China and India.

Beyond a defensive strategy aimed primarily at avoiding missteps, the rise of cultural nationalism in China necessitates a strategic repositioning for Western brands. Several critical approaches deserve further exploration. First and foremost, adopting a culturally nuanced approach is essential. These brands need to integrate elements of Chinese culture into their products and communications while respecting local sensitivities and ensuring transparency in their collaborations with Chinese designers, artists, or experts. Furthermore, participating in or sponsoring cultural, artistic, or educational events offers an opportunity to demonstrate a genuine commitment to promoting local culture. Lastly, brand storytelling must be adapted to align with the national aspirations of Chinese consumers, emphasizing cultural pride and local heritage. This strategic repositioning also requires a stance characterized by humility and respect, taking care to avoid any behavior perceived as arrogant or neocolonial.

Of course, one must avoid oversimplifications that would equate defenders of local brands with nationalists and those who favor Western brands with cosmopolitan citizens. The work of Tian and Dong (2011), based on surveys and in-depth interviews with Chinese consumers from rural and urban areas, reveals a more nuanced reality: Western brands still (but for how long?) occupy

a Sino-Western space for Chinese nationalists, where love for China can coexist with a positive appreciation of the West.

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