TOYS

Material world: attitudes towards toys in China

Kara Chan, Hong Kong Baptist University, presents the results of research into the concept of materialism among Chinese children. Chan explains her study in the context of Chinese culture and provides a fascinating insight into the Asian toy market.

Parents and educators have been increasingly concerned about the adoption of materialistic values among children as it will affect the balance between private and public choices that the children make throughout their lives (Goldberg, Gorn, Peracchio & Bamossy 2003). Rapid commercialisation of childhood as a result of economic restructuring, new affluence and innovative retailing practices is occurring in both Western and Asian societies. However, the one-child policy and soaring economic development in China have enabled materialism to grow at a fast pace across all social strata in China (Davis & Sensenbrenner 2000).

There are 57 million children aged four to 12 in urban China alone. Chinese children have become the focal point of the family and they exert tremendous influence on household purchases (McNeal & Yeh 1997). The new generation of young Chinese consumers is more exposed to, and more open to, commercial sources than interpersonal sources for new product information (McNeal & Ji 1999). Chinese children were subjected to the influence of three different value systems:

1. Communistic values that emphasised personal sacrifice and contribution to the state and mankind
2. Confucian values about frugality and saving up for long-term needs
3. Materialistic values about spending money for personal needs.

Previous study of materialistic values among children in Western societies did not take into account the communistic and Confucian values. China is going through a period of rapid economic development and important social changes are occurring. The study of meaning and perception of material possessions among Chinese children will yield important insights into the evolution of value systems in developing nations and the socialisation of such types of values.

This article investigates how children in urban China perceive material possessions. Do more possessions mean more happiness, more friends, and higher self-esteem? As children are most familiar with toys as possessions, we asked children what they think about other children who possess (or lack) a lot of toys and other ‘cool stuff’.

Literature review

In John’s (1999) model, consumer socialisation is viewed as a developmental process that navigates through different stages as children mature into adult consumers. During the perceptual stage (ages three to seven), the value of possessions is based on surface features, such as having more of something. During the analytical stage (ages seven to 11), children begin to understand the value of possessions based on social meaning and significance. They place value on material possessions that help them to develop social relations, achieve social status and enhance self-fulfilment.
As children enter the reflective stage (ages 11–16), they fully understand the value of possessions based on social meaning, significance and scarcity.

In an experimental study, three groups of boys aged four to five (the first two groups saw an ad for a new toy while the third group was a control) were more likely to choose a hypothetical playmate who was ‘not so nice’ but owned the new toy, than a playmate who was ‘very nice’ but did not own the new toy (Goldberg & Gorn 1974). In a similar setting, children were also asked to choose between two play situations: either playing alone with the new toy or playing in a sandbox with friends. While about two thirds of the control group chose to play with friends, the majority of the two experimental groups chose to play with the new toy. The study demonstrated that very young children value the possession of material goods and that accessing a new toy could sometimes be preferred to playing with friends.

In a study among first and fifth graders of reasons for collecting, it was found that younger children liked collecting because it made them feel that they owned more than others. Older children liked collecting as a way of making themselves unique and feeling good about themselves. Younger children often compared their possessions to those of others in terms of quantity while older children compared in terms of speciality (Baker & Gentry 1996).

Seeing the importance of the concept of materialism and materialistic values in consumer socialisation, scholars have proposed various conceptual and operational definitions for it. Ward and Wackman (1971, p.426) operationally defined materialism as ‘orientation emphasising possession and money for personal happiness and social progress’. It was measured by summing responses (strongly disagree to strongly agree) to six items, such as ‘It is really true that money can buy happiness.’ This measure has been used in many studies (Buijzen & Valkenburg 2003; Churchill & Moschis 1979; Moschis & Moore 1982). Belk (1984) defined materialism as the importance a consumer attaches to worldly possessions, and whether such possessions assume a central place in the consumer’s life. Belk’s (1985) measure of materialism consisted of three factors (envy, non-generosity and possessiveness). Richins and Dawson (1990) conceptualise materialism to consist of success, centrality and happiness.

To conclude, the review of literature shows that children understand the concept of possession and value it from a very young age. The concept of materialism embraces perception and attitudes towards possession, the link between possession, happiness and success, the relative importance of possession and other life goals, willingness to share, and attitudes towards people who own a lot of possessions.

Consumer environment in urban China

Despite the rapid economic growth in China, a majority of its urban population had monthly household incomes below 10,000 yuan (equivalent to US$1,200). An analysis of China’s urban consumers based on a national sample survey in 1997 found four distinctive market segments that were labelled as working poor, salary class, little rich and yuppies. The largest group was working
Chinese consumer cultural values most frequently used represent a good mix of Eastern values (family, tradition and collectivism) and Western values (modernity, technology and youth).

poor, who made up 55% of the population and were the least satisfied with their current conditions. They refrained from costly leisure activities and were the least brand conscious. Most of their income went on necessities (Cui & Liu 2001).

Until recently, a wide range of consumer goods was not available to the average Chinese consumer, and the consumption of goods and services was very limited (Kim, Forsythe, Gu & Moon 2002). Mass consumption in China assumes Confucian characteristics that place strong emphasis on family and personal relationships. A dominant share of a family’s income is spent on the child as a necessary investment in the child’s health and intelligence. The investment in the child is expected to pay off for the parents and the extended family when the child grows up to be a success (Zhao 1997).

As a form of social and cultural communication, advertising is a carrier of consumer cultural values (Pollay 1986). An analysis of children’s television advertisements in China indicates that they reflect China’s traditional cultural values and its social and economic conditions. For example, the presentation mode and information content reflect China’s high uncertainty and avoidance tendency. The lesser portrayal of fun/happiness and adventure, and the usage of related settings, music and animation reflect China’s collectivism tradition. The use of uniqueness and popularity values, on the other hand, indicate a shift towards Western values (Ji & McNeal 2001). A content analysis of television commercials (for adults as well as children) broadcast in mainland China in 1993 and 1998 conducted by Chan and Cheng (2002) indicates that the consumer cultural values most frequently used represent a good mix of Eastern values (family, tradition and collectivism) and Western values (modernity, technology and youth).

Children’s television programming also reflects the influx of mass consumption in urban China. An analysis of a popular children’s television programme indicates that the most frequently featured consumption-type activities were travel, visiting theme parks and buying toys. The most frequently portrayed rewards for such activities were enjoyment and practicality (Xia, Chan & Chan 2004). To conclude, the consumer values reflected in Chinese television media are a mix of both traditional and Western values.

Method

Participants and procedures

Respondents were 15 students, grades 1 to 6, aged six to 12 years, who were recruited from an elementary school in Beijing, China. Beijing was selected as a representative site for exposure to more advanced forms of advertising. There were eight boys and seven girls. The average age was 9.6 years. The 15 respondents represented three different age ranges (6–8, 9–10 and 11–12 years). A female master’s degree student of Peking University assisted with the contacts with school and parents, and assisted in conducting the interviews. The researchers obtained the verbal consent of the parents of the participating children through the classroom teachers. According to the school principal, the sample of children came mainly from working class families.

The study was conducted in three sessions in June 2004 in the classroom when the school day was over. Children of the same age range were placed in the same session. Each child was given a piece of paper (size: 29cm/11.5 inches in height and 40cm/16 inches in width). The paper had two blank boxes of equal size. On top of each box was
a statement on the left, ‘This child has a lot of new and expensive stuff’ and on the right, ‘This child does not have much cool stuff’. The children were asked to draw what came to their minds for each of these two statements. They were told that there were no right or wrong drawings, that they would not be graded, and that they were not supposed to look at the drawings of others. When they had completed the drawings, they handed them to the researchers. The researchers then conducted personal interviews with the children individually in a nearby classroom away from the other participants. The children were asked to elaborate on their drawings. After that, four questions were asked:

- Are these two children happy?
- Do these two children have friends?
- Do these two children feel good about themselves?
- If you have a choice, which one do you want to be?

Each interview took about 10 to 15 minutes. One of the researchers recorded the interview and later transcribed it in both Chinese and English.

Findings
The drawings

All the drawings showed significant differences between the two illustrations in terms of quantity of toys and cool stuff. The first picture on the left (corresponding to the statement ‘This child has a lot of new and expensive stuff’) was jammed with toys and games. On average, there were 13 toys or play items for each picture. The actual average could be higher because one picture contained a safe box where the most expensive toys were kept. Among all the toys and play items displayed in the drawings, only one carried a brand name. It was a Barbie doll drawn by an 11-year-old girl. Brand names of Sony and Adidas occurred on a television screen and the clothing of a boy drawn by an 11-year-old boy. There were marked differences in the types of toys drawn. Boys were more likely to include trains, guns, swords, tankers, rockets, videogames and CD-ROMs. Girls were more likely to include stuffed animals and dolls.

The second picture (corresponding to the statement ‘This child does not have much cool stuff’) was quite empty. Eight pictures showed the absence of any toy or play items. Three pictures showed an average of three toy items. One picture showed five broken toys and one picture showed five toys with wings and speech balloons saying ‘bye-bye’. One picture showed four game cards in a shop where a mother is pulling the child away from the cards. Two pictures showed there were books and stationery. None of the items drawn carried brand names.

An example from the study, drawn by a boy aged 12. The wording is directly translated from the original drawing.
Eleven pictures showed that the children were playing alone in both boxes. One picture showed there were playmates in both boxes. One picture showed a playmate on the left hand side but no playmate on the right hand side. One picture did not show any child in either box. One picture showed a child with her mother in both boxes.

Altogether there were 11 speech balloons or descriptions about the child with a lot of possessions. In seven pictures, the child said, ‘It’s real fun!’ In two pictures, the child said, ‘These are all mine.’ In one picture, the child said, ‘I have more toys than I have time to play with.’ In one picture, the child said, ‘I want a Barbie and a sewing machine.’

Altogether there were 12 speech balloons or descriptions about the child with few possessions. In five pictures, the child was described as not having many things to play with. In four pictures, the child said that it was really boring (accompanied with a sad or an annoyed face). In one picture, the child said, ‘I really want a videogame player, some CD-ROMs and a
remote control car.' In one picture, the child sighed and said, ‘Other people got it but not me. But I have a strong heart.’ In one picture, the child said, ‘I don’t have many toys, but I am happy.’

**The interviews**

**Possession and happiness**

When asked whether the two children in the drawings were happy, all five children aged six to eight perceived that the child with a lot of possessions would be happy while the child with a few possessions would be unhappy.

‘The first child is happy because she has a lot of cool stuff. The second one is not happy because she has no toys. Unlike other children, she doesn’t have a happy childhood.’

[girl, 7]

The direct link between possessions and happiness seems to weaken for older respondents. Four out of ten children aged nine to 12 perceived that the child with a lot of possessions would be happy and the child with a few possessions would be unhappy. The other six thought that both of them would be happy. They perceived that a child with a few possessions would get pleasure from other means, such as playing with friends, reading books, performing well in study and doing exercise.

‘I think both of them are happy, because the first kid has many expensive toys, and the second one can get pleasure from books.’

[girl, 10]

‘I think both of them are happy. The first kid is satisfied with material goods and feels happy. The second one has something that other kids don’t have, such as a brave heart or doing well in study. So both of them are happy now. But the second child will be unhappy in the future. As he grows up, he will look for material goods. Then he will be unhappy.’

[girl, 11]

*Boys were more likely to include trains, guns, swords, tankers, rockets, videogames and CD-ROMs.*

*Girls were more likely to include stuffed animals and dolls*

‘Both of them are happy. The first kid has many toys and he can play with them. The second kid with a few toys can play with his friends instead of the toys.’

[boy, 12]

**Possession and social relations**

When the children were asked whether the two children in the drawings have friends, all five children aged 6 to 8 perceived that the first child with a lot of possessions had many friends while the second one with a few possessions did not. Again, the logic was straightforward. Toys mean fun. Friends are looking for fun. So, a child with fewer toys will attract fewer friends.

‘Children like to play with the first kid, because he has a lot of cool stuff to play with. The second one has fewer toys and other children will think that it is boring to play with him.’

[girl, 6]

‘The first kid has many friends, because he likes to share with others. The second one doesn’t have many friends, because he does not dare to make friends. He is afraid that friendship will be destroyed if his friends find out that he has only a few toys.’

[boy, 8]

Older children were less likely to perceive a strong link between possessions and good social relations. Two out of ten children aged nine to 12 perceived that the child with a lot of possessions
The children perceived that the child with a lot of possessions would be self-centred and would look down on others. The child with few possessions would have a lot of friends because he/she was kind, sensible and good-hearted.

would have more friends. For the remaining eight children, seven reported that the child with few possessions would have more friends. They perceived that the child with a lot of possessions would be self-centred and would look down on others. Also, his friends would not be able to keep up with the new toys that he got. The child with few possessions would have a lot of friends because he/she was kind, sensible and good-hearted. Others would pity him or her too.

‘The first kid doesn’t have many friends, for he always looks down on others. The second one has more friends, because he has less cool stuff. Most of his toys are broken. Other children will pity him and play with him.’
[girl, 9]

‘The second kid has more friends. The reason is that the first one always plays alone and seldom makes contacts with other children. The second kid makes friends with many kids.’
[girl, 10]

‘The first child has fewer friends. Most kids don’t like to play with him. The second child has many friends and they all like to play with him. Because the first child is overbearing and arrogant while the second one is not.’
[boy, 12]

One respondent perceived that both of them would have many friends.

‘Both of them have many friends. Many children can play with the cool stuff of the first child that they don’t have, such as toys and stationery. They are the first kid’s good friends. The second child is pure-hearted and generous, which makes him popular in school.’
[girl, 11]

Possession and self-esteem
When asked whether the two children in the drawings feel good about themselves, four of the five respondents in the age group 6 to 8 and three of the ten respondents aged 10 to 12 perceived that the first child would feel good about himself/herself while the second one would not.

‘The first one feels good about herself because she has a lot of cool stuff and friends, and her family is wealthy. The second one’s family is poor and she has no friends. So she feels bad about herself.’
[girl, 7]

‘The first one feels good about himself because he has both toys and friends. The second one does not because he has fewer toys and fewer friends. His only friend stays with him because he wants to read his book, not to play with him.’
[boy, 8]

One of the five respondents aged 6 to 8 and six of the ten respondents aged 9 to 12 reported that both children in the drawings felt good about themselves. The first child would be proud of his wealth while the second child would be proud of his good academic results, friends and a fit body.

‘Both of them feel good about themselves. The first kid with many toys thinks that nobody else has the same toys as him. The second one works hard and does well in his studies.’
[girl, 10]
Positive and negative associations for children with or without many possessions

**Have**

- Unwilling to share
- Got whatever he/she wants
- Happy, fun
- Rich family
- Feels good with himself/herself
- Many friends
- Can play with toys together with friends
- Can share toys with others
- Can give toys to others

**Have not**

- Positive associations
  - Has many books
  - Loves to read books
  - Has friends who love to study
  - Not distracted from study
  - Studies hard
  - Obedient
  - Knowledgeable
  - Successful
  - Will have a bright future
  - Likes to play with friends
  - Has a kind heart

- Negative associations
  - Possessions are old
  - Poor
  - Small house
  - Parents refuse to buy things for him/her
  - Poor family
  - Feels bad about himself/herself
  - Not happy, has no fun
  - Boring
  - Afraid to make friends
  - Friends don't like to play with him/her
  - Friends pity him/her
  - Feel good with himself/herself
  - Positive and negative associations for children with or without many possessions
‘Both of them feel proud of themselves. The first kid is proud of his wealth while the second one is proud of his fit body.’

[boy, 10]

‘Both of them are proud of themselves. Because the first child is proud of his toys, and the second child is proud of his friendship.’

[boy, 12]

Only one respondent indicated that the second child would be proud of herself while the first child would not.

‘The second one is proud of herself because she does well in study. The first one is not because she is arrogant and other children don’t like to make friends with her.’

[girl, 10]

Aspiration for possession

The last question asked the respondents which child he/she wants to be. This question attempts to measure children’s value orientation. Nine out of the 15 respondents reported that they wanted to be the second one, i.e. the one with few possessions. To our surprise, despite all the fun and friendship perceived to be associated with possessions among the younger respondents, four of the five respondents aged six to eight and five of the ten respondents aged nine to 12 wanted to be the one with few possessions. The reasons were that they didn’t want to waste money, they would not regret it when they grew up, they wanted to have more friends, to be knowledgeable and successful.

‘I wish to be the second one. Although her family is poor, she can play by herself. It doesn’t matter to have few friends. She can ask people to donate toys to her so that she will have some toys. What’s more, there will not be enough space for too many toys. We don’t need toys when we grow up, so it will be a lot of waste to throw toys away. The second child has many books, which makes him more knowledgeable than the rich kid. The first kid knows nothing but playing. Toys can’t make him intelligent.’

[girl, 7]

‘I wish to be the second one, because he will do well in study and become an important government officer in the future. He will be a knowledgeable man and have a successful life.’

[boy, 8]

‘I want to be the second child because he has a lot of good friends. There is an ancient Chinese saying that a man suffering the most bitterness will eventually excel in life.’

[boy, 12]

Three children stated that they wanted to be the first kid with lots of toys. The remaining three respondents were ambitious. They wanted to have the good qualities of both children.

‘I wish to own the good things of both of them. I like to be sociable like the first kid and to love reading like the second kid.’

[boy, 8]

‘I wish to be both. Isn’t it great to be wealthy as well as popular at the same time?’

[boy, 12]

Discussion and suggestions for future research

The figure on the previous page summarises the positive and negative associations with children who do or do not have a lot of possessions mentioned in the personal interviews. It demonstrates that children, even at very young ages (i.e. aged six to eight), were able to express the value of possessions based on their emotional attachment (i.e. fun and excitement), social meaning (i.e. the ability to attract friends), and relationship with future success and self-
esteem. So, there is evidence to question John’s (1999) model of consumer socialisation that hypothesises children in the perceptual stage will only understand the surface value of possessions, such as having more of something. Our study reveals that children in the perceptual stage differ from children in the analytical and reflective stages on the complexity of the perceived relationship between material possessions and social meaning and significance. Both the drawings and the personal interviews indicate that younger children are simple and direct. They perceived that more possessions mean strictly more fun, more friends and higher self-esteem.

For children in the analytical and reflective stages, the link between material possessions and social significance becomes more complex. They perceived that more possessions could bring more fun and more friends, but at the same time could also trigger selfishness, envy and arrogance. Most important of all, older children believed strongly that having a lot of toys and cool stuff would have a negative impact on scholarly pursuit. They perceived that play and study are rivals. They could not perceive the possibility of having a lot of toys and books at the same time. They also could not perceive that toys can aid learning.

The researcher was quite surprised to find that even young children expressed some anti-materialistic value orientation. For very young children, who are more egocentric, it was expected that they would prefer to be the ones with a lot of possessions. There is a strong normative belief about the virtues of frugality and the evil of wastefulness that serves as a deterrent to aspirations of material possessions. Children also demonstrated a strong preference for delayed reward and a ‘bitter now and sweet later’ situation. For example, a boy aged eight kept talking to us about ‘regret’. He could not explain to us what he might regret. He just expressed a deep conviction that he would regret it later if he enjoyed a lot of cool stuff now.

Even at very young ages children were able to express the value of possessions based on their emotional attachment, social meaning, and relationship with future success and self-esteem

Young children’s response to the fourth question indicates there are strong external socialising forces that are shaping children’s perceptions and attitudes towards material possessions. There is evidence to believe that schools and parents are playing an important role in shaping children’s value orientations. All elementary children in China need to attend at least one session of moral education in schools. An analysis of the stories in textbooks on moral education indicates that there is strong emphasis on frugality (Committee on Teaching Materials of Elementary Schools’ Moral Education and Secondary Schools’ Political Education 2002). Children are taught from early childhood about how to use household goods properly, how to conserve natural resources, and that they should be content with what they have.

The reason offered for frugality is that it contributes to communistic values. A grade 5 textbook on moral education explained that all possessions (whether belonging to individuals, groups or the nation) were the fruits of hard labour of the collective people in the country. Frugality should be glorified and wasteful behaviours should be condemned (Committee on Teaching Materials of Elementary Schools’ Moral Education and Secondary Schools’ Political Education 2002). Materialistic values are discouraged in schools. One of the moral guidelines for school-aged children is ‘Live a simple life. Don’t be choosy in what you wear and what
you eat. Don’t spend money irresponsibly.’ (Chan & McNeal 2004)

Parents also discourage endorsement of materialistic values at home. In our focus group interviews with parents of school-aged children, parents reported that when they discussed consumption with children, they always encouraged children ‘to live within means, to save as much as possible, and to refrain from buying luxurious goods’. We think that parents attempt to suppress children’s aspirations for material possessions for two reasons. First, given the low household income, a majority of Chinese families will not be able to satisfy most of the children’s purchase requests. In order to reduce parent–child conflicts, parents will teach children not to put too much emphasis on material possessions. Secondly, parents are afraid that material possessions (mainly toys and play items) will distract children from concentrating on their studies.

A previous study of Chinese children in Hong Kong indicated that younger children were more materialistic (Chan 2003). The author attributed it to consumer dissatisfaction with possessions among older children, the understanding of the value of possessions that goes beyond quantity and social desirability. The more complex link between material possessions and social significance perceived by older children provides us with one more possible reason to explain why older children were found to be less materialistic. As older children are more likely to attach negative connotations to material possessions, they will be discouraged from endorsing materialistic values.

In view of the strong perception that owning a lot of toys and cool stuff is wasteful and will have negative impact on academic achievement, these concepts should be explored further in the study of materialism of children in the Chinese context. Statements such as ‘owning a lot of toys is wasteful’, ‘owning a lot of toys is less clever’, and ‘I like to own fewer toys so that I can concentrate on studies’ should be added in future studies.

One phenomenon observed in the current study is the preference for delayed reward among children. Two respondents who preferred to be the one with few possessions mentioned that they wished to be successful in the future so as to ‘buy more toys later on’. If materialistic values are suppressed in childhood, it will be interesting to ask when will be a legitimate time to search for materialism in the Chinese context. Another question will be ‘Will Chinese children whose material aspirations are suppressed to a greater extent become more materialistic later on than those whose material aspirations are not suppressed?’ Further longitudinal research is needed to answer these questions.

The implication for marketers of children’s products in China is that they should be aware of the possible negative connotations attached to the value of possessions among older children. Advertising campaigns should encourage the instrumental materialism of how to use material goods to achieve a successful future. The current study has the limitation of a very small sample of a total of 15 students with five in each age group. It is difficult to generalise the results from such a small number of children. This study merely points the way for a larger-scale study to determine if the results will hold up.

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Kara Chan is Associate Professor in the Department of Communication Studies at Hong Kong Baptist University. She has worked in advertising and PR and as a statistician for the Hong Kong government. She is the author of more than 20 articles on advertising and consumer behaviour.

karachan@hkbu.edu.hk