THE LUXURY WATCHES AS DOUBLE-STORIED SYMBOL SYSTEM: BRAND HISTORICITY IN AHISTORICAL CHINA

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I.   *Swiss Watch Industries and Brand Historicity*

Swiss watch industries have strongly focused on luxury branding since the mechanical watch technology went obsolete in the 1970s (Glasmeier, 1991). Repositioning has been successful as the result of the rising richness in the emerging markets since the 1990s. The demand for luxury watches is high in the emerging markets, especially the China. It is said that Swiss watches increased by approximately 4 times during the period from 1991 to 2011 (Donze, 2014).

For luxury products, creating stories based on history has become a cliche of branding, which people would automatically accept. Before the introduction of the quartz watches and digital watches, the competitive focus for mechanical watches were on precision and the toughness so that professional users could trust the watches as partners. In advertisements, auto racing drivers, divers, airplane pilot, or astronauts have been used as those who were working in the frontiers of tough environments. However, when precision and toughness became easy specifications for quartz or digital technologies, watch brands had refocused their identity on the authenticity. History can be a powerful tool to give authenticity to a brand. It offers people the sense of historicity, which make them feel attached to the time and experiences of the brand.

The study on Chinese experiences in brand historicity, however, reveals the hidden mechanism behind the luxury-historicity connection, as historicity contains value systems where social and personal values are bound in a very intricate way.

Although history has been largely accepted in Western countries, the situation may not be the same in China. Firstly, the Cultural Revolution still casts a shadow. Secondly, the strong meritocracy has forced people to focus on achievement and practical things. Thirdly, historical education has lost substance. In the countries where a mass society was formed in the period from 19th to 20th centuries, such as in Europe, America and Japan, history has been used as a tool for the formation of a nation-state, as well as the authorization of emergent hierarchy and cultural capital. Therefore, it has been regarded as a positive element for the formation of brand equity. However, historicity could contain negative meanings, such as colonial rules or authoritarian states in many cases, in emergent nations in the 21st century. The purpose of this study is to clarify the meaning of historicity in transmitting the value of luxury brands.

Hereafter, authors discuss the impacts of brand historicity on the formation of brand equity through a study on the consumption of luxury watches in China.

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II.   *Chinese Consumers and Luxury Consumption*

Luxury is the world where mechanical watches inhabit. The first value of luxury products is that it stimulates an external motivation in the society, to impress other people from other worlds (Veblen, 1899; Berry, 1994; Vigneron and Johnson, 1994 and 2004). Consumers have a strong motivation to make their social image look better through their belongings. Its second value is that it stirs up an internal motivation of consumers to be appreciated in other worlds. In consequence, hedonist and perfectionist factors (Vigneron and Johnson, 1999 and 2004) need to be considered. Vigneron, Johnson (2004), Wiedmann, Hennings and Siebels (2007) et al. included four factors for the value of luxury brands, namely financial, functional, individual and social factors.

In this study, we focus on the historicity of brands, and examine how historical elements and brands are evaluated, respectively. What do they do to avoid the contradiction between the two evaluations? According to Zhu (2006) who examined the consumption of Chinese luxury goods based on the study of Vigneron, Chinese consumers put more weight on social relationships rather than personal tastes. He stated that China is strongly influenced by Confucianism that attaches great importance to "harmony that consists of the society". We would like center on the conflicting personal and social evaluations by focusing on the brand historicity.

III.   *Historicity*

Historicity is used to explain whether persons and events really happened in the actual history which is different from the historical myth or legend. The essential quality of the historicity concerns with the actuality, factuality and authenticity. In order for history to have historicity, therefore it has to acquire the status of the actual past. Since what constitutes the actuality depends on how a certain society sees or desire to see the past in the context of the present and the future, there can be various forms of the factors which can constitute the foundation of the historicity.

As historicity refers to the manner in which a subject in a certain society sees the past in relation with the present, it can vary depending on societies. In this sense, historicity is not the subject only open for historians but also for anthropologists. As Hirsch and Stewart (2005) points out, "historicity concerns the ongoing social production of accounts of pasts and futures". Anthropological approach is to be required as each society can have its own way of perception about the historicity.

The Western ways of historicity is the factual presentation of the past grasped according to rational principles. This has to do with the Western ways of grasping modernity in that modernization has progressed as a process to cut off the connection between history and modern ages. History has been ossified through the liberation from the authority and social position system in absolute monarchies and the opening of religions and values in Christianity. Before the late Enlightenment the term history meant not the structured facts but only a mere "congeries of discrete chains of events (White, 1987)". After the French Revolution, history referred to the world of civilization and to the processes of formation, expansion and

contraction of the European nation-state. The expression "Making History," applies to these processes indeed, and would not have made sense before Napoleon (White, 1987).

On the anthropological stands, we are to also look at the relativity of the historicity. As Claude Lévi-Strauss pointed out in The Savage Mind, the historicity of French Revolution is shared only by the French men and women who have been exposed to the myths (Lévi-Strauss, 1962). The Western notion of history is not universal and the different societies have their own version of grasping it. Native Americans, for example, have been said to have different time scale from the Westerns and take the past occurrence as if it was an actual present event. Asian counties which have adapted the Western manners of historicity only under the colonial governance are not likely to construct the same historicity as former Western colonizers.

Since historicity is bound with history, it might well change in the course of time. It would be difficult to perceive Napoleon as a symbol of the revolution toward modernity for the 21st century millennials. Why the Napoleon can be a historical content for the luxury brand at present day requires consideration.

The time when the historicity came in to the branding of the swiss watch industries coincides with the moment when post-modern philosophy came into the scene. When the economic growth decelerated, people would ask themselves where they are going in self-reflection. Historicity is this sense, both historicity and luxury can be regarded as an action of self-reflection. The people who have lost stories would begin to look for a meaning that becomes a base of a culture. It is a journey to discover historicity for some people, and pursue luxury for others.

When the luxury brands are promoted in China featuring the Western historical heroes/heroines and their stories, various manners and approaches to historicity are inter-mingled. Among the luxury brands, the exclusively expensive Swiss mechanical watches have special symbolic meaning in many countries.

The research questions in this study are as follows; Is the luxury brand strategy, which uses the elements of the historicity, effective in China? Consequently, the authors work on the following sub-questions:

1.   How is a luxury brand which stresses the historicity evaluated?
2.   What is the differences between the brand with historicity and one without it?
3.   Are there differences between the users and non-users of the luxury brand in their evaluation of the brand historicity?

IV.   *Conceptual Framework*

1.   **Brand Historicity**

Stories are often used to construct brand equity. The subjects of such stories vary, though historical elements are often used as the subjects of luxury brands. To be specific, historical elements are utilized to convey luxurious values in various ways and contexts, such as long tradition, founders and stories at the time of establishment, famous customers in the history, relation with the tradition and the current users. Why are historical elements able to convey

luxurious values?

Historicity is closely related to continuity (Morhart et al., 2014). Sociologists and library scientists have discussed the background, in which authenticity and historicity came to be regarded as important factors in connection with the postmodern thought (Thomas, 2006; Baudrillard, 1988).

The concept of authenticity has been argued about in the relevant fields, such as the fields of tourism and classical music. This concept was created in an attempt to regain the real and true values by recapturing the background of the objects whose real values had become impossible to be transmitted since the resulted in dysfunction in the process of history. The scale of brand authenticity has been devised in the field of marketing and continuity (Bruhn, 2012; Napoli et al., 2014) Consistency and originality have been emphasized for it.

Though the meanings of historicity could be multifaceted and complex, we define Brand Historicity as the extent to which the brand uses the elements of historicity such us year of establishment, founder story, and historical customers.
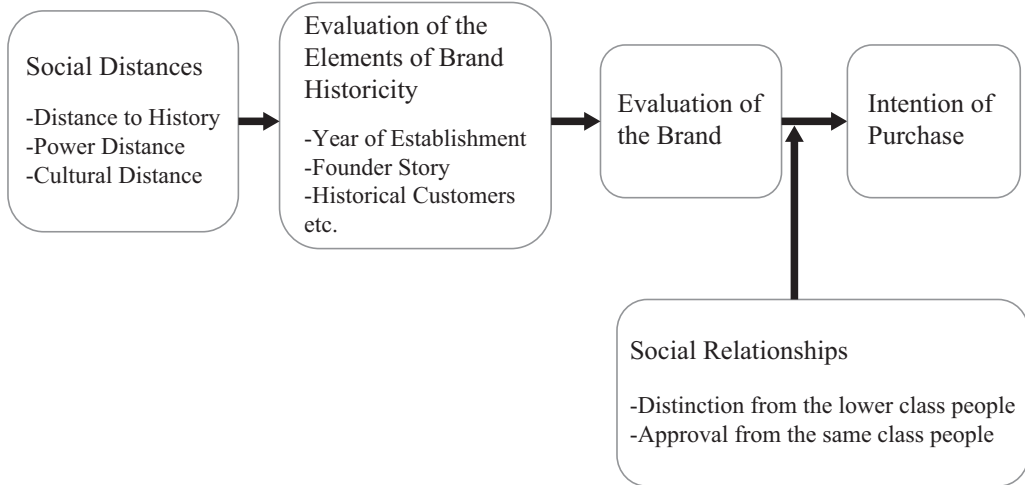

2.   Social Distances

Since historicity is to capture the past in connection with the present as well as future and provide its meaning, it is greatly influenced by personal sense of values. The attitudes toward history are formed historically. Hence, they greatly differ in different countries. During the process of modernization, a number of countries have experienced the democratization accompanied with the collapse of the past systems through revolution, war, and invasion etc. It is suggested that the attitudes toward history are closely linked with those toward authority and other countries. We investigated how the attitudes toward historicity are influenced by the three factors, namely distance to history, power distance and distance to foreign cultures (Hofstede, 1986).

3.   Social Relationships

New institutional theory in sociology has captured the dynamics with which ranks are formed based on the cultural capital in Europe and the U.S where class system have collapsed, in addition to the ranks that mainly have difference in wealthy degrees. Cultural capital is one of the technical terms in sociology proposed by Pierre Bourdieu, a French sociologist. It indicates personal properties, such as educational background and cultural quality, except those obtained with money (Peter Gay, 1999; Bourdieu, 1984; Paul DiMaggio, 1982). Taste and preference for arts and luxury products satisfy the desire to be attributed to the membership group and the demand for the differentiation from the non-membership group. Based on the studies on the art taste in the 19th century, the new-rich people acted as patrons of art and differentiated themselves from the emergent newer-rich people in the period when the economy was growing. According to the studies made by Bourdieu in the 20th century, the cultural capital structured for rank difference cannot be changed. Luxury watches have become an accessible target for the middle class in China, which has been developing rapidly in recent years. Wealthy people have got a strong motivation to distinguish themselves from the middle class. In this case, cultural capital is suitable for them to distinguish themselves from the consumers in the middle class who can neither deeply contact historicity with luxury products

FIGURE 1. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

nor understood the knowledge and stories of brands.

V. *Method*

This study mainly consists of the following three steps.

Step 1: Review of the investigations on consumers (nonusers) in relation to the "historicity" of the European and luxury watches.
Step 2: In-depth interview with the luxury watch users.
Step 3: Conceptualization and structuring on the basis of the interview results.

1. Step 1

Most luxury Swiss watches have long histories. Their traditions are more or less used for brand communication. However, there is a difference in the emphasis of historicity.

-Selection of watch brands for comparison

Firstly, the authors confirmed how the watch market is categorized in the Chinese market. In China, a number of evaluation sites on the web provide powerful reference frames for the brand choice of consumers. Above all, the categories in Wbiao.cn, which has the strongest influence, were employed. In Wbiao.cn, watches are classified into the following five categories, namely top class luxury (Vacheron Constantin etc.), luxury (Rolex, Omega, and Carter etc.), light luxury (Longines, and Tissot etc.), fashion brand (Tiffany, and DKNY etc.) and domestic/smart watch (HUAWEI, and Sea-Gull etc.). We examined the contents of the advertisement of the brands in each category, and found that historical factors are explicitly used by the brands on the top class luxury category. We further compared the contents of each brand in the above category. We extracted the two different approaches to the brand historicity.

FIGURE 2. WATCH CATEGORY

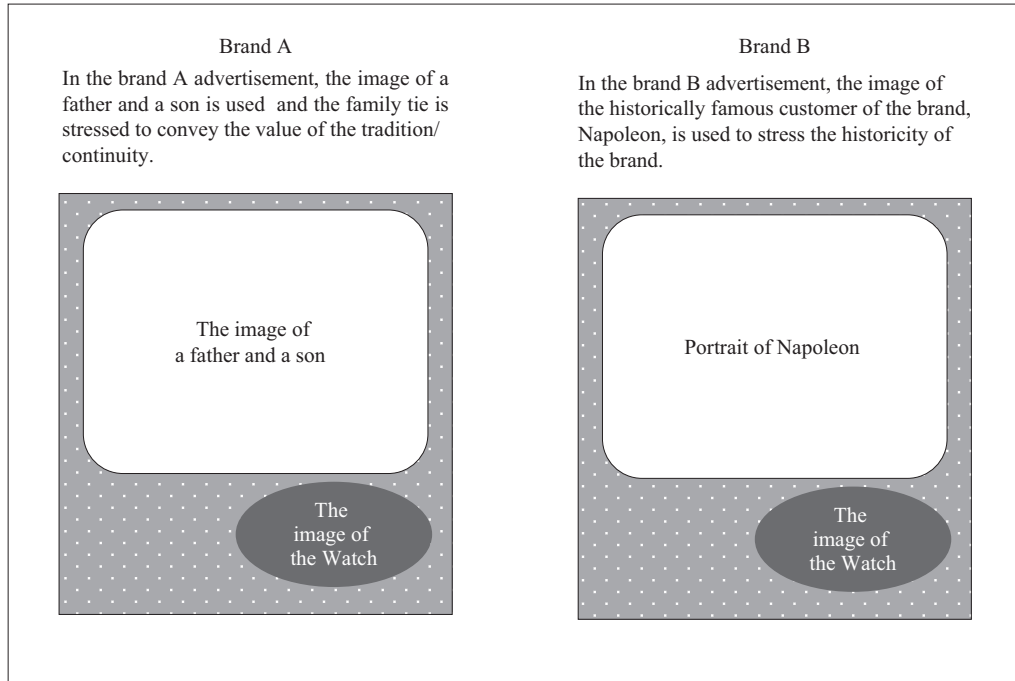| Category	Number of brand	Characteristics	Brands
Top-class Luxury Brand	15	Top-class luxury watch brands often demonstrate superiority of their technology, quality assurance and after-sales services by highlighting their brand history.	Vacheron Constantin, Moser, Patek Philippe, Breguet, etc.
Luxury Brand	23	Luxury brand, though being a little inferior to top-class brands technologically, are generally the same to top-class brands. Different brands adopt different marketing brands. For example, some invite celebrities as their spokespersons.	Omega, Rolex, Cartier, Maurice Lacroix, etc.
Affordable Luxury Brand	49	Affordable luxuries are below the luxury standard but above general brands. Their marketing is based on their promotion of certain lifestyle or life image.	Longines, Tissot, Marvin, Tudor, Ferragamo, etc.
Fashion Brand	28	Fashion brands pay more attention to design. Quality is not a pursuit of fashion brands. Therefore, items of fashion brands are exchanged frequently after several months or several years.	Tiffany, CIGA Design, DKNY, etc.
Domestic Watch Brands	_	Domestic watch brands are relatively cheap. Most of them are emerging brands still under development in the market.	HUAWEI, SEA-GULL, BEIJING, etc.

Source: WBIAO.CN

We picked up two brands(Brand A and Brand B) in which the two approaches are expressed straightforwardly. In the advertisement of Brand A, family tie is stressed to convey the value of tradition/continuity. The advertisement of Brand B directory uses the image of historically famous person, Napoleon to stress the distinguished historicity. The watches of both brands cost about 300,000 Chinese yuan.

-Selection of people for the interview

A one-hour preliminary interview was conducted with 18 young people who were non-users of two brands in the top class luxury category. The advertisement of the two brands were shown to the interviewers at the time of the interviews. Semi-structured questions were adopted, based on the factors obtained from the precedent studies on the attitudes toward history.

FIGURE 3. ADVERTISEMENTS SHOWN AT THE INTERVIEWS

Brand A

In the brand A advertisement, the image of a father and a son is used and the family tie is stressed to convey the value of the tradition/continuity.

The image of
a father and a son

The
image of
the Watch

Brand B

In the brand B advertisement, the image of the historically famous customer of the brand, Napoleon, is used to stress the historicity of the brand.

Portrait of Napoleon

The
image of
the Watch

2. Step 2

For the same two brands, average of three hours in-depth interviews were conducted with 8 wealthy Chinese consumers who are in their 40's. Firstly, we asked them if they knew Brands A and B, as well as their purchase intentions. Secondly, we asked the reasons why they show a strong or weak intention to purchase the brands. Similarly, semi-structured questions were asked. Since the wealthy people have experiences of purchasing brands in the top class luxury category, we asked for their opinion about the viewpoints that were not structured.

3. Step 3

The reactions of users and non-users to the semi-structured question items for evaluations and their attitudes toward history were recorded. The reasons for users' brand choice were obtained. Their factors were analyzed, structured and conceptualized.

VI. *Findings*

FIGURE 4. RESULTS

Class (Number of Interviewees)	Social Distances	Evaluation of Elements of Historicity		Brand Evaluation	Purchase Intention
Middle Class (18)	Power Distance (Big) Culture Distance (Big) History Distance (Big)	Year of Foundation Brand Founder Story Historical Customer Traditional Image	× × × ×	Brand A (15/18) Brand B (3/18)	Brand A (15/18) Brand B (3/18)
Affluent Class (8)	Power Distance (Small) Culture Distance (Big) History Distance (Middle)	Year of Foundation Brand Founder Story Historical Customer Traditional Image	× × × ×	Brand A (8/8) Brand B (0/8)	Brand A (0/8) Brand B (8/8)

1. Step 1

Among the 18 non-users for the interview, 15 selected Brand A, and 3 chose Brand B. It was clarified that those who selected Brand A did not highly acclaim historicity. The evaluations were made on the attitudes toward history, power distance, cultural proxy and favorability of the history in other worlds. Among those who chose Brand A the answers to the semi-structured questions about the evaluation of the historicity were generally negative or neutral. More specifically, the old history of the brand was not highly acclaimed, and their evaluation on its historical characters was strongly negative.

"I was forced to study histories at school regardless of my interest, so I hate the history itself".
"It (History) is not interesting at all, and is useless in my life."

Moreover, there seemed to be a certain cultural distance. Although they were not interested in history in general, they were proud of the history of their country. They were totally not interested in the history of other countries. The authors asked the non-users who chose Brand B for their reasons, and found that they did not necessarily favor the factors of the historicity of Brand B. The result is similar to that of those who chose Brand A. The reason why they highly acclaimed Brand B lies in the influence from their parents. Their parents belong to the wealthy class and they have favorable opinions about Brand B. It has been suggested preference for a brand is greatly influenced by parents.

2. Step 2

The results of the interview with the users of top luxury watches reveal that all eight subjects selected Brand B. Curiously they did not highly acclaim historicity. As for power distance, wealthy people are able to obtain various things with money. For this reason, their perception of the distance from power is relatively small. Nevertheless, they cannot obtain political power, even if they wish. Given this, the admiration and desire for political power are

easily reflected by the historical authority that exercised a strong power. Their cultural distance is almost equal to that of the middle class. The subjects do not have a sense of closeness to cultures. Their distance to history is slightly different from that of the middle class. Unlike the middle-class people who consider history to be negative obviously, the wealthy people in China do not like and dislike historicity. As a result, most of them are "disinterested" in histories. Although they have deep knowledge about the history of brands and that of Europe used by brands, they do not consider them to be positive. In other words, "historicity" is evaluated equally by users and non-users, though it is reversed in the actual buying intention. In other words, the negative attitude of non-users toward "history" is connected directly with the negative evaluation about the historicity of brands. Meanwhile, wealthy people, who are the users of luxury watches, have a negative attitude toward "historicity", even though their buying intention is high. This is a surprising result.

3. Step 3

Reasons for the brand choice of wealthy people in China.

Why do wealthy people in China choose brands that emphasize "historicity" though they do not necessarily acclaim historicity? We focused on this point, and arranged the contents obtained from the free answers. As a result, two factors, namely "differentiation from the middle class" and "reinforcement of the society network" were extracted.

-Differentiation from the middle class

Among the luxury brands, Brand A, whose advertisement use mild expression of tradition/succession, is well accepted by the middle class. One of the subjects in the wealthy class answered,

> "I would have definitely chosen Brand A if it were several years ago, but now I choose Brand B without hesitation. When I walk in the town thinking that I am wearing a brand-name product with historicity that middle class do not understand, I naturally feel superior."

-Reinforcement of the society network

Since watches are luxury items that easily stand out, they have a role of representing the social status of users when they attend a social event. One of the subjects answered,

> "For us, we have belonged to this social group for many years. It is no longer necessary to exhibit and prove our ability relying on brand ranking. We strongly wish to be differentiated from young new comers. If we choose the brand that everybody knows, we'll be laughed at by the old colleagues."

This feeling can be more enhanced regarding gifts. A subject replied,

> "It is common to send luxury goods as a gift that represents good faith for business tie-up or backroom. People often make safe, passable choice in such a case. However, we would choose more exclusive brands to express more good faith."

In other words, their motivation to differentiate from the middle class is strong for personal use in daily life, while their motivation to reinforce the society network works for the purpose
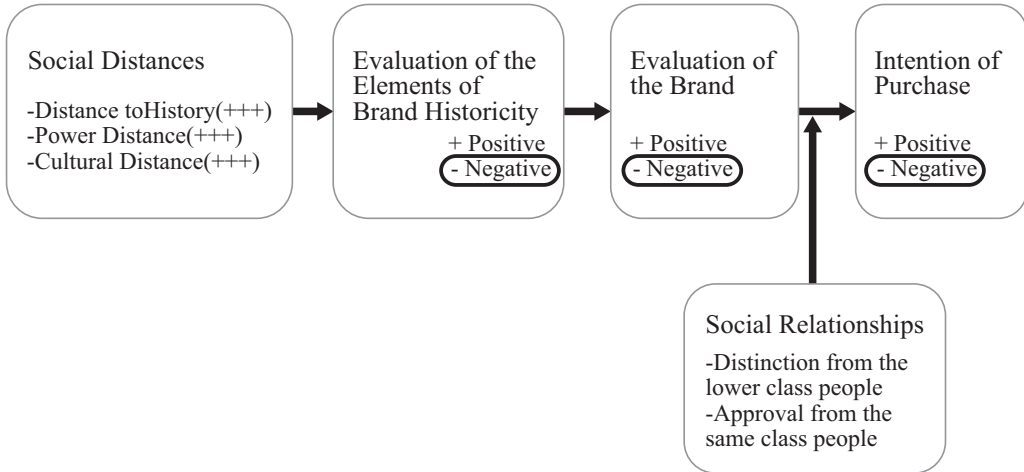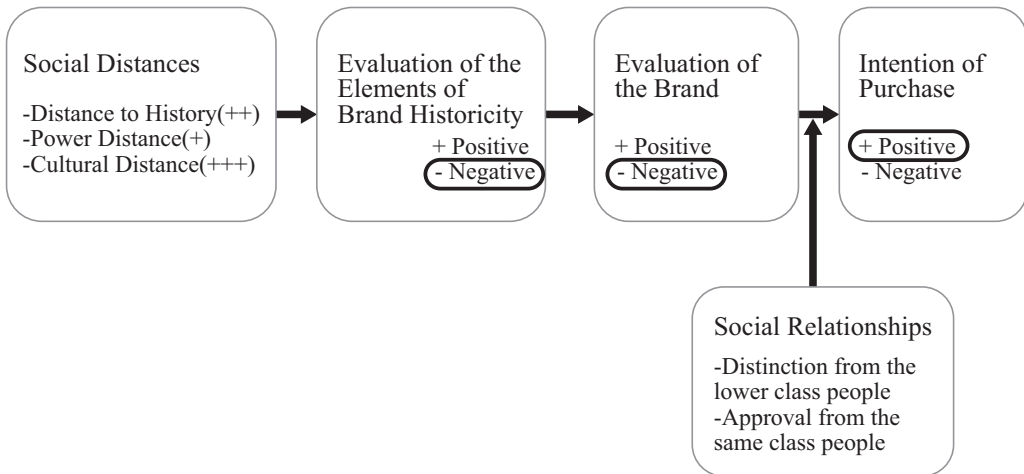
FIGURE 5. MIDDLE CLASS

| Social Distances

-Distance toHistory(+++)
-Power Distance(+++)
-Cultural Distance(+++) | Evaluation of the Elements of Brand Historicity
+ Positive
(- Negative) | Evaluation of the Brand
+ Positive
(- Negative) | Intention of Purchase
+ Positive
(- Negative) |

Social Relationships

-Distinction from the lower class people
-Approval from the same class people

FIGURE 6. AFFLUENT CLASS

| Social Distances

-Distance to History(++)
-Power Distance(+)
-Cultural Distance(+++) | Evaluation of the Elements of Brand Historicity
+ Positive
(- Negative) | Evaluation of the Brand
+ Positive
(- Negative) | Intention of Purchase
(+ Positive)
- Negative |

Social Relationships

-Distinction from the lower class people
-Approval from the same class people

of social events. In the case of gifts, historicity is treated as a "tool to send scarce goods." It has been clarified that historicity is not respected.

VII. *Discussion*

In China, "historicity" is a multi-storied symbol system. Firstly, meaning for the historicity differs between rich and middle class people. Rich people find it positive, middle class negative. The phenomenon that "cultural capital" was used for the distinction of the cultural

contents was observed in the West during the period from the 19th to 20th century. In the 21 century China, the Bourdieu's theory still applies in that the rich and middle class people find the different symbol systems in the luxury watch consumption.

Secondly, however, the historicity has double-storied meanings for the rich. It works differently at the social and personal levels. At the social level it is favorable as the rich can distinguish themselves from middle class. But at the personal level, they do not appreciate historicity just like the middle class people. The reason why the wealthy class people select the brands with historicity is that historicity is considered negative by the middle class rather than that they highly acclaim it. So the rich people are put in the double-bind situation in the Bateson's way. They like the historicity which they do not like.

Understanding the structure of the brand in China is, therefore, much more complicated than in Western counties. We have found that the social distances are deeply related with the structure of the symbol systems. Hofstede (1986) focused on power distance in an international comparison study on value system. Under the condition that countries have not been democratized like in the West, the authority cannot be easily acquired. In addition, the distances to the authority are greatly different among the classes in China. For the middle class, political power is too far, whereas the rich people might feel a bit closer to it. No matter how many efforts people make, they would never be able to obtain the authority.

The implication for the brand management is suggestive. The users of the luxury brands find the historicity positive not because of the affective reasons but from the effective reasons. They are not at all emotionally attached to the brand. In that case, it is very difficult to build the brand royalty at the affective level. Additional efforts would have to be made to cover the weakness of the brand equity.

Our discovery about "historicity" in the China suggests the paradigm of brand equity in non Western world. For the countries which have experienced the era of the colonial government and the later long-term dictatorial regime, the value of "historicity" is different from that for the advanced countries. In the countries where citizens do not wish to respect history, a deep consideration will be needed both practically and ethically for the types of brand equity that should be appealed for.

VIII.   *Conclusion*

The authors drew the following conclusions in this study.

1.   In China, both the middle-class and wealthy people have negative evaluations on and attitudes toward historicity.

2.   Among the middle class, the understanding and knowledge of "historicity" are undeveloped.

3.   The wealthy people in China not only understand and know about historicity, but also recognize it as a cultural capital.

4.   The wealthy people in China regard historicity as a cultural capital and a tool for the differentiation from the middle class.

5.   The wealthy people in China attach importance to historicity for the purpose of reinforcing the society network among them.

6.   Historicity has become a new power source, as a culture capital for the wealthy people in China.

IX.   *Limitation*

Since the aim of this study was to conduct an exploratory investigation on historicity, which is a new concept, a qualitative investigation was made. As the interview with wealthy people targeted only high-income earners, it was difficult to carry out sampling. Moreover, it is usually impossible to elicit a cooperation with such people. In view of this, the authors performed a snowball sampling using their personal network. On the one hand, this is an advantage. On the other hand, it is also a limitation of this study. It is desirable to conduct a same study in other countries for a competitive review. Additionally, it is necessary to try various approaches, so that wealthy people can open their mind to the same level as those in this study and frankly disclose their personal sense of values.

X.   *Further Researches*

Further studies should be made in two directions. Firstly, as concluded by the authors, it is necessary to verify whether the findings obtained in this study can be applied to the industries other than the watch industry. Since watches are easily used as a tool for appealing for the authority, it is uncertain whether a similar mechanism works for other products. It is worth making an in-depth study on consumer goods such as food and tea as similar targets. Secondly, it is necessary to verify the conclusions drawn by the authors in other countries. According to the frame proposed by Hofstede and the comparison between Europe and America, items such as power distance are similar in Japan and China. However, it is expected that the attitudes toward "historicity" might be totally different. What is more, the distance to authority recognized by distinct hierarchies should be different in the rising nations in Asia, and it will be important to study and clarify how they can be coupled with the value of brands.

XI.   *Managerial Implications*

The emphasis on "historicity" may eventually lead to the brand choice of wealthy people. Nonetheless, the brand companies in China need to deepen their understanding of the ironical structure. It is possibly because that "historicity" is not admired. Firstly, considering the reason why "historicity" has eventually become a selection criterion and functioned as an exclusive cultural assets in other worlds, it might be practically possible to combine with other measures to emphasize exclusiveness. For example, the "limited edition" based on the historical fact might be one possible measure. Secondly, an attempt to build a relationship with the customers whose emotions toward "historicity" is actually unfavorable might not only be ethically selfish and arrogant, but also might practically cause unexpected backlash.

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