



**Materialism in Chinese Society: The Historical,
Cultural and Contemporary Context**

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Abstract

Materialism is an area of research which has over the last decades become relevant and needs careful analysis. Materialism has many definitions and implies deconstructing the mindset and the psychology of humans and the factors which lead people to be happy with their lives. In the Chinese context, materialism has become an important topic of research as modernity has brought about dramatic and unprecedented changes in society, the rising aspirations and advances in technology impacting the changing identity of the Chinese. It would be interesting to see how materialism has been impacted by the historical, religious and contemporary changes over time.

Keywords: *China, materialism, culture, modernity, religion,*

Definitions of Materialism

There has been a lot of research carried out on various aspects and definitions of materialism but more work needs to be done to examine how materialism has been impacted by the cultural values of societies. Definitions and perspectives on materialism vary across academic discussions and across different societies. The sociologist has a different take on materialism, varying in considerable degree from the economist or the psychologist. When we look at materialism in the Chinese context, a lot of consumer research is now being carried out to examine how the changes in the economy have impacted Chinese society. Historians and sociologists have been examining how materialism has changed historically and been influenced by tradition, religion and the contemporary economic development in China in the last few years. Economists on the other hand are attempting to examine the complex structure of economies all over the global North and South and how globalization has brought an unprecedented form of imperialism which is quite different from its historical definition. The monopolies created by global companies and TNCs (transnational corporations) and the international finance structures are impacting consumer demand in different ways and it is interesting to look at the material wants of consumers.

This paper will look at the sociological aspect of materialism in Chinese society and how cultural values have impacted or can impact materialism. Confucianism talks about the values of *li* and *ren*. Benevolence and frugality, hierarchy, thrift, the importance of family, filial piety and supporting the community and conforming to the norms set by the community are values which are Confucian and have been a part of the value system of the Chinese over the centuries. These, combined with the economic development in the last decades and the increasing per capita incomes could have created a situation in which saving for the family on the one hand and new aspirations and wealth on the other hand have whetted the appetite for material goods.

Materialism in the Historical Context

Through ancient times, Chinese history has alternated between periods of political unity and peace, and periods of war. After the Song empire, the Chinese were wealthy and China was able to maintain and reproduce an extensive bureaucracy and a sophisticated civilization. Two successive defeats to Great Britain during the Opium wars in the mid nineteenth century led the Middle Kingdom to embark on the course of 'enriching the country and strengthening the armed forces'. Ever since the Manchurian court officials-led Westernization Movement to rescue the decaying Qing Dynasty *fu guo qiang bing* from total collapse failed, numerous attempts have been going on in China to learn from and catch up with the West. As Zhao Bin has noted, the rhetoric of modernization has been adopted and repeated by all regimes that have come to power over the last hundred years, regardless of their political orientations or strategies- Left or Right, capitalist or socialist, self-reliant or pro-West, isolationist or opening up to the West.¹ It is interesting and at the same time important to try to analyze how the history, traditional beliefs and religions have impacted the material aspect of Chinese society and whether they have actually as cultural constructs prevented an even more materialistic approach or whether they have been a part of, in a way, providing a backdrop to the characteristics of the materialist society today. The contention is that materialism in today's context may have stemmed from an identity crisis in China. From 1839 to 1949, China went through 'the Century of Humiliation (百年国耻)'. This was the time of the defeat by the West in the Opium Wars. The Sino Japanese war also took place during these years. In other words, China lost its place in the world and the middle Kingdom went through a lot of humiliation. There was a deep resentment towards the West (and Japan). Subsequently, Mao took a stand against Japan during the Second World War and the Guomindang and restored to some extent, China's prestige in the global arena. China was no longer regarded as the "sick man of Asia". However, it was only during the Deng Xiaoping era and through the open- door policy in 1978, that wealth was something that the Chinese were encouraged to dream of.

Shigeo Kobayashi, Jia Baobo and Junya Sano, in "The Three Reforms in China: Progress and Outlook" state that "The reform and open-door policy of China began with the adoption of a new economic development strategy at the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCPCC) in late 1978. Under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, who had returned to the political arena after his three previous defeats, the Chinese government began to pursue an open-door policy, in which it adopted a stance to achieve economic growth through the active introduction of foreign capital and technology while maintaining its commitment to socialism. The aim was to rebuild its economy and a society devastated by the Cultural Revolution as the incomes of the Chinese

¹ Bin Zhao. "Consumerism, Communism: Making sense of China today", NLR 222:43-59, 1977; Xin, W. "Desperately seeking status: Political, Social and Cultural Attributes of China's Rising Middle Class", MCS, 20(11): 1-45, 2013; Sun, G., D' Alexandra, & Wirzer, H *Traditional Cultural Values, Political ideologies and luxury consumption desire in China: A conceptual Model*, 2008)

were extremely low, compared to the incomes in the other Asian countries. Therefore special economic zones, open coastal cities, economic and technology open zones, the delta open zones, the peninsula open zones, the open border cities and the high tech industrial economic zones were set up. “The obvious aim of this policy shift was to rebuild its economy and society that were devastated by the Cultural Revolution. The policy shift also appears to have been prompted by recognition that the incomes of ordinary Chinese were so low, in comparison with incomes in other Asian economies, that the future of the Chinese state and the communist regime would be in jeopardy unless something was done to raise the living standards of its people through economic growth.” These policies brought about massive inflows of foreign investment, especially from overseas Chinese and from Hong Kong and later Taiwan. There was also an ‘entrepreneurial boom’ as the socialist market economy concept was promoted. “This led to a period of high economic growth in the first half of the 1980s. The economy stagnated around the time of the Tiananmen Square Incident in 1989, but in the first half of the 1990s, China was again boasting high growth rates. Rapid economic growth was accompanied by a rise in per capita GDP. In 1998, per capita income, though still only about US\$770, was 14 times higher than in 1980. Therefore, it seems reasonable to conclude that Deng Xiaoping’s first goal, which was to improve the economic status of the people, had been accomplished”.² During the Mao Zedong days, the Chinese willy nilly gave up material comfort. What little wealth they possessed was shared among the community. Materialism as a concept was simply non-existent in China.

To get Rich is Glorious

During the last decades, China has been through a period of reform with Deng Xiaoping’s famous quote “to get rich is to get glorious” (致富光荣) and it strikes true with many Chinese people today. In normal times, it is not uncommon to see young people walking down the streets of Chinese cities with iPhones, iPads, Galaxy Note IIs, listening to K pop and Beats by Dre headphones and other high-end electronics in use and on display, not to mention speeding bright coloured cars racing around the corner. China’s passion with modernization and materialism is hard to deny and thus has made it change to a more profit driving society. Chinese shoppers are among the world’s biggest buyers of luxury items and it can be said that the tendency to equate material goods with overall success seems to have, at least in part, surfaced from societal forces. Communism encourages the people not to follow any God and therefore, many don’t really have any beliefs. People with wealth or power are respected. The rich can have better medical care, better education and better living conditions. The more open economy allows more Chinese to see the world and thus raises their aspirations. Therefore, now millions of Chinese tourists go abroad for holidays every year. When you ask a Chinese

²Shigeo Kobayashi, Jia Baobo and Junya Sano, The “Three Reforms” in China: Progress and Outlook. Sakura Institute of Research Inc. September 1999 No 45.

what makes life better, the answer is the Party, or the economy and the reform. There is no spiritual aspect of this gratitude. The belief is that economic development is everything and the foundation of a good life for the future generations. Dating sites are full of suggestions for potential spouses and it is interesting to note that the material aspect is the most important. Property, cars and business success are the most important criteria for a woman looking for a potential husband.

Another aspect of the materialism in Chinese society may be linked to the impact of the one child policy. Since there was only one child who would be the inheritor of the wealth, there was much more purchasing power in the hands of the inheritor. The aspiration of most of the younger generation is that their lives should be better than their parents. The one child policy also has contributed towards an emphasis being placed on wealth. The one child who inherits the wealth of the parents also has a substantial amount of money, thus adding a material element to society. As stated by Luisa Tam, Chinese people, like most others, love money. “But to be more precise, we take great joy in scrupulously balancing between saving money and spending within our means. “As a popular Chinese saying goes, ‘The first generation makes the money, the second one holds onto the inheritance, but the third one spends it.’ This Chinese proverb serves as a warning and a reminder that sensible budgeting and frugality is not only a virtue but a survival mantra that needs to be etched on the mind.” Tam explains how attitudes towards money are shaped early in life by elders as an integral part of Chinese culture and upbringing and how they are told at a very young age that to be a responsible person, they must work hard and save up a nest egg to secure their future and consequently, the family’s future. “And all Chinese are also familiar with the saying, ‘To store up grains in case of a famine’. This obviously is the basic principle that illustrates they may be money-oriented but it’s all for good reason.”³

The Chinese can be said to be undergoing an identity crisis. On the one hand they are envious of the success of the West and at the same time slightly resentful of it. On the other hand, they want to be like the West but at the same time, form a firm foundation with a Chinese identity. The icons of Chinese culture such as Confucianism and traditional and folk religion, cultures and philosophies, as also Daoism and Buddhism are being stressed in order to develop and preserve this identity. But at the same time, they want to step out into the global arena and be able to buy all the top brands, so that they are not lacking in any way; and to make up for the centuries of feeling repressed and not in a position to acquire these material objects. The insecurity which comes from the desire for acquisition, the lack of a spiritual belief in life and its meaning, all come into play. Nationalism versus a global competing for success and face, also have a role to play in the insecurity and struggle for an identity. What is materialism? As stated above, materialism has many definitions. One connotation is the material commodification of religious symbols, ritual objects and deities. The Chinese markets are full of traditional Chinese ritual objects, statues of deities, historical

³ Luisa, Tam. “Blowing Water.” *South China Morning Post*, 26 Mar. 2018.

and mythological characters and these are sold in various markets irrespective of whether people actually use them in spiritual arenas or with religious beliefs. In the area where the Panjiayuan market is set up on weekends in Beijing, there is a vast variety of traditional ware, crafted items, teapots and other typical Chinese items that draw the attention of the hundreds of tourists milling around. There are objects which are depicted as ethnic, from the 56 ethnic communities across China. There are numerous red books with Mao on the cover, paintings depicting Daoist clouds on which ride the Daoist deities, mountains with incense burning across the calm waters and the terrain marked by pagodas and dragons. These paintings are flanked by those of Laoze, the Military God, Buddha and Confucius as well as contemporary scenes from Chinese cities. In the alleys where merchandise is sold, the brass objects stand out as material symbols of religiosity. There are symbolic of the ritual objects of veneration by Buddhist, Daoist and Confucian believers. There are no doubt other antique looking objects which can pass off as traditional ritual fare. Together with these, there are hand embroidered pictures of cranes, of lotus ponds, of chrysanthemum and peony bushes, bamboo groves and plum blossoms. The numerous vendors sell a whole range of artifacts which depict the symbolism of Chinese culture.

What stands out is the material. The brass objects range from ancient wine *jue* to incense holders and numerous other objects. The *jue* is a Chinese ritual bronze, a tripod vessel or goblet used to serve warm wine. It was used for ceremonial purposes by the Chinese of the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties. Often the *jue* had a handle, sometimes in the shape of a dragon. Bronze items, in the west of the Eurasian continent were in most cases used for agriculture and warfare. In China, the greatest part of discovered and preserved bronze items was cast to sacrificial vessels that symbolized the heavenly power of the ruler ⁴

Chinese archaic bronzes, dating from the Shang Dynasty (1600-1100 BC) all the way up to the Han Dynasty, which lasted from around 200 BC to 220 AD, depict the importance of rituals. According to Kate Hunt, a Chinese works of Art specialist, the lavishness of a bronze item was often dependent on the status of the individual who owned it. One of the most iconic forms was the Ding vessel: Chinese cauldrons standing upon legs with a lid and two facing handles. These vessels started out as humble cooking utensils in ceramic before the form was copied in bronze. Hunt explains how they became 'a very important symbol of power for rulers and nobility in China'. "Chinese bronzes are absolutely central to Chinese civilization," says Kate Hunt. "Bronzes were made for the very wealthy elite and were associated with power." The vessels, which were made to serve grain and wine, also played an important role in the ritual banquets that took place in family temples or over ceremonial tombs. The Chinese believed in the afterlife and ancestral worship, and wanted their deceased relatives to have food and wine to sustain them on their onward journeys. At the Silk Street and Hong Qiao markets in Beijing, similar to markets all over China, there are attractive Chinese crafts, brocade with typical Chinese dragons and other lucky symbols,

⁴ [ChinaKnowledge.de -An Encyclopaedia on Chinese History, Literature and Art\]](http://www.chinaknowledge.de/Art/Bronze/bronze.html)
(<http://www.chinaknowledge.de/Art/Bronze/bronze.html>)

fabrics in different textures and weaves; ceramics, paintings, cloisonne objects, brass and bronze ritual objects and statues of the Buddha and other traditional Chinese Gods; deities connected with Chinese folk religion, pearl and jewelry counters and a whole floor of leather and faux leather bags, shoes and travel bags. There is also a whole floor devoted to mobile phone accessories and high-end branded watches. A few years ago, if one wanted to buy a Gucci or a Christian Dior, Furla, Luis Vuitton, Versace or Armani bag in Hong Qiao, there used to be salesgirls who would silently gesture you to follow them, lead you to another building outside the main market, take you surreptitiously up the stairs to an apartment where they would quietly knock and without making any noise, lead you inside. Here you would see many duplicates of the bags available in the main market. The prices would be half those of the 'genuine' brands. Not only that, but soon one was led to another floor, where the 'duplicates of the duplicates' would be shown to the client. The price of those would be half the price of the duplicate. The material aspect of the Chinese psyche is clearly brought out in the above example. Not that this may not happen in other countries but there is a certain element of commitment to a cause, which in this case is earning a profit in a deeply motivated way.

Bargaining is a way of life that anybody visiting China or living in any Chinese city becomes familiar with. On the one hand, the price is presented to the buyer and on the other hand, there are all kinds of pressures and pulls to draw that person to buy the commodity. From complimenting people on their looks to making a person feel obliged to buy the good, the buyer feels compelled to ultimately buy the commodity. The element of persistence is what makes the Chinese stand out.

At present, there has been a situation where many Chinese cities have been impacted by the current health crisis but nevertheless, the historical and cultural connotations of materialism still remain relevant.

Powering the Global Luxury Market

According to the MacKinsey and Company, China Luxury Report 2019, "This is the story of how a new generation of Chinese consumers are powering the global luxury market, and the double-edged sword they present to the world's leading luxury brands. Set to be the engine of global spending on high-end shoes, bags, fashion, jewelry, and watches, China's affluent upper-middle class presents an enticing prospect for the world's designer brands. Imbued with a confidence to spend, underpinned by a lifetime watching new skyscrapers rise in tandem with their family incomes, these consumers are eager to tap luxury as a means of social advancement and self-differentiation. This is so even in the context of the sharpest slowdown in China's economy since the financial crisis, and with it a slide in demand for discretionary items such as new cars and mobile phones."The report states that young Chinese consumers view ownership and affiliation with designer brands as a form of social capital; not just something to wear, but a lifestyle choice that marks them as part of a distinct and exclusive community.

The report further states that China delivered more than half the global growth in luxury spending between 2012-18, and is expected to deliver 65 percent of the world's additional spending heading into 2025, according to research based on UnionPay transaction data for the 2019 McKinsey China Luxury Report. "In 2018,

Chinese consumers at home and abroad spent 770 billion RMB (\$115 billion) on luxury items—equivalent to a third of the global spend—with each luxury-consuming household spending an average of 80,000 RMB per year. Their outlay is set to almost double to 1.2 trillion RMB by 2025, when 40 percent of the world’s spending on luxury goods will be conducted by Chinese consumers. It is also clear that China’s post-’80s (born in the 1980s) generation are the driving force of the country’s luxury appetite. Consisting of 10.2 million luxury consumers, they accounted for more than half the total spending on luxury by Chinese consumers in 2018. Having grown up in step with China’s emergence as a global superpower, they are the primary beneficiaries of the economy’s rapid and unbroken growth, and spend an average of 41,000 RMB per person each year on luxury. Since they are now at the peak of their career and earnings, “and with a passport likely stamped with trips to the world’s most glamorous cities, they are spending to show off their success, and to demonstrate individualism in the world’s most populous urban landscape. “Similarly, China’s Generation Z, the young generation born post-’90s, spend 25,000 RMB a year on luxury goods as per research carried out as part of the above report, already as much as their parents. “The post-’90s consumers are the vanguard of China’s urban middle-class, a dynamic and digitally engrossed cohort that as the ‘single child generation’ are the recipients of an outside level of familial support. “Further, the report also states that “two-thirds of the young generation’s parents support their luxury spend, with McKinsey Global Institute modeling suggesting that upper-middle-class Chinese families top up their post-’90s children’s bank balance by at least 4,000 RMB per month, or half their personal income.

This financial cushion has a large impact on these young consumers’ willingness to spend, and spend big, on luxury.” Research for the 2019 McKinsey China Luxury Report showed that China’s young consumers are new to luxury, and thus have a less nuanced understanding of the heritage upon which the market traditionally trades. “Only 13 percent of post-’80s/’90s luxury spenders said they grew up in a family familiar with the finer things in life, while half of post-’90s, and 31 percent of post-’80s consumers, only made their first luxury purchase in the last year. Luxury is also a relative novelty for many of the post-’65s/’70s group—just under half bought their first designer item less than three years ago. Nine out of 10 of the youngest generation and more than two-thirds of post-’80s consumers, also only started their engagement with luxury within the last three years. Instead of legacy reputations established over hundreds of years in Europe, these new luxury consumers are influenced more by what is happening right now, leaving ample room for brands with the right strategy to shape their tastes. “Chinese consumers are looking to buy luxury items through e-commerce, digital data, social media and watching out for celebrities and famous actors in order to learn about brands, constantly tapping various forms of content as they strive to improve their awareness of the market, spending hours absorbing information on fashion and luxury brands, use e-commerce platforms to source facts about products, as well as read peer reviews and product experiences Consumer-to-consumer platforms like XiaoHongShu (RED) also allow China’s young luxury acolytes to share newly accrued knowledge by posting unboxing experiences, buyer’s guides, wearing occasions, and anecdotes.”China has more Gucci stores than any country in the world (60). China currently accounts for 27% of the world’s luxury goods sales, and Chinese spend 9.4 billion USD on designer goods each year.

Material culture has emerged as an important topic of research as an element in studying the current leaning and orientation of economies such as the Chinese. Tea in China is an attraction which has been used for selling its brand image. Tea culture, tea houses and tea ceremonies are well known and the many different kinds of tea are sold stating an underlying benefit which goes with each of them. The tea is expensive and provides a good business opportunity to thousands of sellers.

Commodification of Religious arenas and Ritual Objects

Commodification of symbolic religious objects can also be taken to be a form of materialism. The Buddhist temples across China are full of statues, ritual objects, incense burners, bronze vessels and containers. The statue of *Kuanyin* in Fayuan Temple in Beijing stands out among the male deities as the goddess of mercy. It is generally accepted by historians that *Kuanyin* originated as the Sanskrit Avalokitesvara, which is her male form, since all representations of Bodhisattva were masculine. In contemporary times, *Kuanyin* is most often represented as an elegant woman in a white flowing robe, since white is the symbol of purity. She is usually shown wearing necklaces which are similar to those worn by Indian or Chinese royalty. In the right hand is a water jar containing pure water, the divine nectar of life, compassion and wisdom, which is one of the eight Buddhist symbols of good fortune and in the left hand is a willow branch which is used to sprinkle the divine nectar of life on the devotees and to bless them with physical and spiritual peace. The willow branch is also a symbol of being able to bend or adapt to different situations but not break. The willow, moreover, has medicinal properties and is used in shamanistic rituals. A necklace or rosary represents enlightenment. Each bead represents living beings and the turning of the beads symbolizes that *Kuanyin* is leading them out of their state of misery and repeated rounds of rebirth into nirvana. Sometimes there is a book or scroll in her hands. This represents the Dharma or the sutras which *Kuanyin* recited from. *Kuanyin* is often seen as flanked by two warriors, one of them being the historical character Guan Yu and the mythological character Wei Tuo. *Kuanyin* sitting on a pink lotus is a sign for peace and harmony. The *Kuanyin* with a thousand arms has a special story behind it. It is said that Amitabha Buddha gave her a thousand arms to reach out to those who suffered in order to help them. The *Kuanyin* is one of the most popular deities to be marketed commercially. The difference between Indian and Chinese commodification of religious objects is that in India there is an element of spirituality that goes along with acquiring or presenting someone a deity where in China it is much more commercial.⁵ Similar to lighting votive candles in Christian churches, wearing Buddhist amulets or accessories also has a symbolic meaning to devotees. While meditating, counting the beads is significant. All these rituals came to acquire a deep meaning in the life of the laity and thus became objects to be sold and lead to a commercialism of sorts. Outside the Lama Temple in Beijing, the shops are full of such religious objects, pointing to the commercialization and commodification of religiosity, especially Buddhism and Daoism. The temple economy thrives on such objects together with Buddhist chanting and music CDs. According to Yanshuang Zhang, "Another manifestation of this temple economy is

⁵ https://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/Chinese_Customs/Guan_Yin.htm

the regularly held temple fairs (*Miaohui*), both in urban and rural areas. Originally, the temple fair was a solemn sacrifice activity adjacent to Buddhist or Daoist temples that was designed to transmit tenets and increase votaries, usually involving activities of worshipping deities, performing rituals and entertainment. Religious beliefs, discourses and practices were at the core. Some Buddhist sites still reserve the traditional form of temple fairs to celebrate birthdays of religious sages such as Buddha. Nowadays, the temple fair has gradually become a site for mass gathering for much truncated religious activities, and more for commodity exchange and other cultural activities. Famous temple fairs, such as the Altar of Earth temple fair in Beijing and the *Longhua* Temple fair in Shanghai, have become customary local festivals with different features in different places.⁶Buddhism which came across Central Asia to China from India is perhaps the most populous religion in China today with 244 million out of a total population of 1.4 billion⁷ (World Population Review 2020). It was at first looked at with suspicion but gradually adapted itself to borrow from Daoism and Confucianism and became an integral part of Chinese culture. Confucianism and Daoism also borrowed elements of religiosity from Buddhism and soon it became sinicized and as it is now called, became Chinese Buddhism. It became deeply grounded in the political and socioeconomic architecture of the country. Buddhists paid homage to the religious sages resembling those in ancient legends and myths of Daoism, so it was easier to merge some of the rituals and religious practices. There are numerous historical Buddhist sites all over the country, not to mention the caves and grottoes where tourists are led and which are pilgrimages for the people. The sacred mountains Wutaishan, Emeishan, Huashan, Song Shan, Heng Shan and Mount Putuo are some of the places of pilgrimage. The Luoyang temple or the White Horse temple as it is known, in Henan province is a tourist attraction as well and around it is the Indian style Buddhist shrine and the Thai temple, creating a hub for Buddhist believers and for international tourists. Thus, tourism also adds to the materialist element.

Islam was the second religion to arrive in China—after Buddhism and before Christianity. Christianity arrived from the West and although it did not integrate itself into the culture of China and adapt and borrow from the indigenous religions and beliefs, it is perhaps the fastest growing religion in modern China. (Centre for the Study of Global Christianity 2013). It also did not have much in common with the folk religions of China. There is a distinction between *Jidujiao* (Protestantism) and *Tianzhujiao* (Catholicism); between the government-supported Three-Self churches and independent “house churches”; between the country churches of rural people and city churches of Chinese middle-class people, rich business people and the highly educated. The Chinese government’s continuing containment and occasional crackdown towards Christians adds to the complexity. This explains well why Christianity is still deemed a minority. According to the above article, “the commercial and secular facet of Buddhism on Weibo has

⁶ Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture Volume 6, Issue 1 (2017) <http://jrmdc.com>. Digital Religion in China: A Comparative Perspective on Buddhism and Christianity’s Online Publics in Sina Weibo, Yanshuang Zhang Guangxi Normal University, China

⁷ <http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/buddhist-countries/>

unveiled a much larger picture of the religion's revival and development in contemporary China. The temple economy from the standpoint of inheriting and 'improvising' the ancient religious practices may contribute to a better understanding of how the modern practices relate to a broader, complex social, economic, and cultural landscape of Chinese contemporary society. On one hand, the temple economy can be well deemed as one driving force for economic development in some parts of the country such as south-eastern China. On the other, by tempering the capitalist drive for accumulation of wealth, the popular religiosity and kinship ethics of generosity in giving away wealth plays an important role in preserving the local identities and autonomy. Therefore, the temple economy provides the groundwork for the construction of an indigenous civil society in which religious rituals and festivals serve as one way to generate capital for the public good, such as improving community welfare and facilities." Hence local governments have been building Buddhist statues and pagodas, and commercializing them by selling tickets and religious items, soliciting donations and even listing temples on the stock market to obtain large incomes (China Daily 2009), despite SARA's (State Administration for Religious Affairs) occasional efforts to crackdown on religious profiteering (Associated Press 2012).

Buddhist philosophy is about the frugality of life, and if we set out to study the impact of Buddhism on Chinese material culture, we come across various issues which need to be analysed and deconstructed. First of all, the ritual objects are devotional in character and essentially important icons of spirituality by the believers. The paintings in the sacred caves of, for example, the Dunhuang grottoes in Gansu Province, were also a sign of devotion and belief. On the other hand, the way of life of a believer or a monk is frugal and an ascetic would meditate on a mountain in isolation. The frugality is in direct contestation with the material objects and ritual icons because they are in complete contrast. The monk is supposed to clean his bowl and not waste any food, in keeping with the ascetic way of life. The life of a monk is supposed to be very simple and humble. However, if one visits a temple or a monastery in China, one finds that the life of the monks has changed in keeping with the times and the developing technology. The rooms of the monks in many of the temples are air conditioned; many of the monks are educated and have been sent abroad to study management and acquire degrees in order to deal with the management of the temple economy in tandem with the changing conditions. In many cases, the monks are inclined towards seeking commercial ventures and also deal with various tourist projects. The other deconstruction is that although the life of the ascetics, the monks and the nuns and Buddhist believers is, according to the sutras supposed to be frugal, the objects of veneration have been, over the centuries, rich and have an element of the devotional in terms of the material aspect. Therefore, the statues and ritual objects are made of metals such as bronze, brass and some are even gold plated. Somewhere, the richness of the ritual object is connected to the extent of veneration of the believer. Hence there is an element of the material in the religious character of Chinese Buddhism. Right from the time that Buddhism became a part of the life of the Chinese, trade and commerce have been connected with the monastic way of life. Trade and commerce developed along with Buddhism, over the centuries. Connecting this to the contemporary scenario today, we observe that many Buddhist monks have been accused of unethical

doings. According to The National Religious Affairs Administration (NRAA) some Buddhist monks have been involved in corrupt practices. Shi Xuecheng, a former chairman of the Buddhist Association of China and a member of the national committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), had been involved in suspected cases of sexual harassment, illegal building construction, illegal use of funds, etc. Another renowned Buddhist monk, Shi Yongxin, abbot of the famous Shaolin Temple in Songshan, Henan, has recently become the focus of public attention, with his past misconduct being brought up again. He has been accused of commercializing the temple and is known as the 'CEO Monk'. In 2015, Yongxin was accused of misconduct, embezzlement, and swindling money. Mindful of the negative implications on social stability from the chaos in the Buddhist sector, the NRAA, which has been placed under the command of the United Front Work Department of the Chinese Communist Party has been working aggressively to promote the so-called "four entrance". An article in the Hong Kong Economic Journal ⁸states that "The 'four entrance' refers to the entrance of the national flag, the constitution, the socialist core values and the superb Chinese traditional classical Chinese culture into religious facilities and activities across the nation." Under "four entrance", Buddhist and Daoist monasteries, Christian churches, as well as mosques across the mainland are ordered to fly the national flag at all times in order to promote patriotic traditions and the "sinicization of religions".

Many are of the opinion that the political interference in religion has seriously contaminated the Buddhist sector and given rise to corrupt Buddhist leaders like Xuecheng and Shiyongxin, who managed to rise to prominence largely because of their connections with the top brass and collusions with powerful officials. It is stated that this is only the tip of the iceberg with a large number of other corrupt monks 'gone under the public radar.' Rightly so, the article claims that as commercialization and politicization have swept across the mainland Buddhist sector in recent years, corrupt practices among monks have basically run rife.

Quite relevant is the following analysis: "Worse still, as the communist party has been using religion as a tool to maintain social stability across the country, it has been aggressively pulling the strings behind the scene over the years, hence the massive invasion of malpractice and hidden rules that are commonplace in mainland politics into the Buddhist sector. "The continued politicization may have led to all sorts of corrupt practices in the Buddhist sector. Monks who are appointed at temples as abbots and directors are most likely those who have political leanings and are supporters of the top officials in the Party. This may involve providing monetary benefits to the officials and also making sure that they follow the straight and narrow as far as religious norms are concerned; in other words, making sure that their temples and monasteries do not step across the boundaries and that they go along with the restrictions. That probably explains why so many prestigious abbots and Buddhist priests in the mainland are on the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference or the National People's Congress either at provincial or central levels.

⁸ Hong Kong Economic Journal, Sept 1, 2018 (<http://www.ejinsight.com/20180904-beijing-cant-escape-blame-for-buddhist-monk-scandals/>)

Buddhism is already a big business in China. International forums like the China International Buddhist Items and Supplies Expos are platforms which bring in a lot of money. According to Chinese social media, fake monks have cheated wealthy believers out of cash. One of the most technologically advanced is Longquan Temple, on the outskirts of Beijing. Hundreds of people flock to the temple each weekend to attend Zen camps. Volunteers with the temple's technology team, some of whom come from China's top Tsinghua and Peking universities, have even designed robots that can help answer questions about Buddhism. Therefore, looking at materialism in the context of Chinese society today, adapted to modern times, as stated by Chen Yu-His, "While Buddhism also emphasizes contentment, it does not see material simplicity as a necessary condition. The Buddhist insight into simplicity and spontaneity centers around the transcendental quality of non-attachment and non-reactivity. A well-attained Buddhist can live in material abundance and yet keep his/her mind 'detached,' i.e., free from the said mechanism. This means that he/she will be happy too if he/she has to live in poverty. From the Buddhist perspective, this insight of non-attachment and non-reactivity is the source of blissful contentment."⁹ Daoism believes that the human life should go on as a natural flow. This implies that whether a person is poor or rich, he or she should accept the highs and lows and the yin and yang of life.

In conclusion, it can be said that notwithstanding the traditional beliefs of the Chinese and the religious values, and the fact that Confucianism believes in benevolence, *li*, *ren* and community and that making a profit should not be the primary motive of an individual, there are contestations in the contemporary context of the Chinese reality. In the modern society of these times, traditional values have been reinterpreted and rebooted to take different turns and the Chinese society is moving in a materialist direction, inspite of these. No doubt it can be said that these materialistic tendencies are present in other countries such as India. However, it would appear that the structure of governance in China has of late become even more authoritarian and there is greater stress on strengthening the state enterprise sector. In the light of this, the average Chinese may well wonder whether private enterprise and the desire for greater private accumulation of wealth is sustainable or can be safeguarded.

⁹ Contentment as the Way of Nature: Insights from Daoism. Website of International Network on Personal Meaning. Chen Yu-Hsi, Ph.D. Professor, Department of Religious Studies, Fo Guang University, Taiwan <https://www.meaning.ca/article/contentment-as-the-way-of-nature-insights-from-taoism/>

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