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Analysis of Cultural Consumption Demand in Belt and Road Countries: Evidence from Russian Consumers' Preferences for Chinese Cultural Symbols

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Abstract: Cultural trade underpins the "people-to-people bonds" of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), yet Chinese cultural and creative products remain weakly positioned in partner-country markets, largely because supply is organised around what China wishes to present rather than what foreign consumers understand and want. Using an online survey of 1,010 Russian consumers, this paper examines the structure of cultural consumption demand in a major BRI partner country. We measure awareness of and attitudes towards 27 Chinese cultural symbols, purchases of eight categories of Chinese cultural products, and differences in preferences by age, education and occupation. Three findings emerge. First, demand is layered by cognitive accessibility: symbols perceived directly through the senses (giant panda, tea, silk, porcelain, the Great Wall) are widely liked, whereas ideational and language-dependent symbols (Confucianism, Taoism, the Chinese language, folk music, Peking Opera) attract neutrality, dislike or unawareness. Second, preferences are heterogeneous: younger consumers favour high-recognition and participatory symbols, middle-aged and highly educated consumers favour symbols with interpretive depth, and older consumers favour historically anchored symbols; Pearson correlations between demographic attributes and symbol attitudes are small but statistically significant. Third, purchased products are concentrated in handicrafts, original toys and calligraphy and painting. We derive implications for the "Happy Chinese New Year" brand and for a tiered, segment-specific approach to cultivating cultural demand in BRI countries.

1. Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has been framed from its inception around "five connectivities", of which people-to-people bonds (minxin xiangtong) are the least tangible and, arguably, the most difficult to engineer. Cultural trade is one of the principal instruments through which such bonds are expected to form: the exchange of cultural goods and services carries symbols,

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narratives and aesthetic conventions across borders and, over time, reshapes how the publics of partner countries perceive one another [1,2]. Against this backdrop, the performance of Chinese cultural exports to BRI countries has been disappointing relative to China's position in merchandise trade. The domestic cultural and creative industry remains structurally weak, its products are at a competitive disadvantage in international markets, and the full-chain development model lags behind that of developed economies [2-4]. Studies of bilateral cultural trade consistently identify cultural distance and the associated "cultural discount" as the main friction: the value that a cultural good delivers falls as it moves into a market whose consumers lack the background knowledge needed to decode it [5-7].

This diagnosis has an important corollary that has received far less empirical attention. If the binding constraint on cultural exports is decoding on the demand side, then the appropriate response is not simply to increase the volume or visibility of supply but to understand how demand in the destination market is actually structured: which elements of the exporting country's culture are recognised, which are liked, which are misunderstood or ignored, and how these responses differ across consumer segments. In the marketing literature this is the elementary task of target-customer analysis, yet in the context of Chinese cultural "going out" it is frequently skipped. Critics have noted that Chinese cultural communication tends to start from what China wishes to present rather than from the needs and habits of the audience [8,9], and that product content leans heavily on a handful of already-famous material and artistic symbols while ignoring differences among audience strata [8-10]. The result is a supply of cultural and creative products that satisfies a generic, lowest-common-denominator demand but seldom matches the specific cultural appeals of identifiable customer groups.

This paper addresses that gap by examining the structure of cultural consumption demand in Russia, a BRI partner country that shares a long land border with China, has a centuries-old history of contact with Chinese culture (from tea culture in Russian literature to contemporary curiosity about Chinese medicine), and has hosted an intensive programme of Chinese cultural promotion in recent years. The most prominent vehicle of that programme is the "Happy Chinese New Year" (HCNY) brand launched in 2010 under the theme "Happy Spring Festival, Harmonious World", which by 2020 had reached more than 130 countries and regions [11]. In Russia alone, HCNY staged "Charming Xiangxi" in Moscow in 2018, "Beautiful China" at the China Cultural Centre in Moscow in 2019 with painting, calligraphy and Huangmei Opera, and a Heilongjiang-themed programme in Khabarovsk in 2020. HCNY has also experimented with digital formats (a bilingual mobile application released in 2012) and with commercial partnerships, including a 2017 event with the St Petersburg city government at the Russian-Chinese Business Centre [11]. The brand therefore provides both a natural laboratory for studying how Russian consumers respond to Chinese cultural symbols and a concrete policy object for which demand-side evidence can be translated into product and channel decisions.

Drawing on an online survey of 1,010 Russian consumers, we ask four questions. (1) Which Chinese cultural symbols do Russian consumers recognise and like, and which do they ignore, treat with indifference or dislike? (2) How do these preferences vary across age, educational attainment (as a proxy for cultural environment) and occupation? (3) Through which product carriers and channels is Chinese cultural content currently consumed? (4) What do the answers imply for the design and distribution of cultural and creative products in Russia and, by extension, in other BRI countries?

The paper contributes to the literature in three ways. First, whereas most BRI cultural-trade research is conducted at the level of aggregate bilateral flows [3,4], we provide micro-level evidence on the composition of demand in a single partner country, using a symbol-level instrument that distinguishes unawareness from dislike and dislike from indifference. Second, we document a

systematic layering of demand by the cognitive accessibility of symbols and show that this layering interacts with demographic attributes in ways that are directly usable for segmentation. Third, we connect demand-side evidence to the operational choices of a specific state cultural brand, offering an approach to "tiered cultural acceptance" that can be replicated in other BRI markets.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature and sets out the analytical framework. Section 3 describes the survey data and methods. Section 4 presents the results on symbol awareness and attitudes, segment-specific preferences, product carriers and correlation analysis. Section 5 discusses the findings, and Section 6 concludes with policy implications and limitations.

2. Literature review and analytical framework

2.1 Cultural consumption, cultural distance and cultural trade under the BRI

Cultural goods differ from ordinary commodities in that their value to the consumer depends on the consumer's capacity to interpret them [12]. Consumption of culture is therefore an act of decoding as much as of purchase, and the stock of interpretive competence that a consumer brings to that act is unequally distributed across societies and social groups [13]. In international trade this produces the cultural discount: a programme, artefact or performance rooted in one culture loses appeal in another because audiences find it difficult to identify with its style, values, beliefs, institutions and behavioural patterns [5]. Gravity-model studies confirm that cultural distance, language and shared history strongly condition bilateral trade in cultural goods [6,7].

The Chinese literature on BRI cultural trade largely mirrors these findings. Zhu and Hu [1] and Chen [3] show that China's cultural-product exports to BRI countries are growing but remain concentrated in low-value-added categories, with substantial unrealised potential. Feng and Chen [4] estimate trade efficiency and export potential with pivot countries along the routes and find that efficiency is far below the frontier. Consistent with the gravity-model evidence [6,7], the gap is commonly attributed to institutional distance and, above all, to cultural distance, which raises the cost of consumer decoding. Hua [2] argues that overseas cultural markets can only be opened effectively if trade paths are aligned with the reception conditions of the destination. The common implication is that demand-side understanding of partner-country consumers is a precondition for reducing the cultural discount, yet few of these studies measure such demand directly.

2.2 Cultural and creative products and consumer heterogeneity

A cultural and creative product (wenchuang chanpin) is a material product, or in the broad sense any product or service, that combines a cultural theme with a creative transformation to generate market value [14,15]. Its essence lies in transmitting the cultural story and cultural value that stand behind the physical object, rather than in merely grafting a cultural motif onto an existing article. Chen [14] distinguishes lifestyle-oriented products (handicrafts, creative merchandise) from products with an explicit institutional attribution (museum, gallery and scenic-site derivatives), and proposes a "3C resonance" logic whereby the product must resonate with the consumer's cognition, context and consumption. Luo and Dong [10] demonstrate experimentally that the type of cultural inspiration used in design affects design outcomes, implying that the choice of cultural element is not neutral.

Consumers of cultural and creative products are heterogeneous. Chinese observers commonly distinguish three tiers: enthusiasts who value the cultural content itself; ordinary consumers who buy under the influence of a cultural setting (a museum, a scenic site) or for aesthetic and souvenir reasons; and high-end consumers who use such products to signal cultivation and distinction [15].

This tiering echoes Bourdieu's [13] argument that taste is socially structured by education and occupation. Domestic marketing studies further identify age, education, occupation and cultural environment as the principal determinants of preferences for cultural and creative products [16], and note that current designs seldom differentiate among these groups.

2.3 Foreign publics' perception of Chinese cultural symbols

A series of large cross-national surveys conducted by Beijing Normal University's Academy for International Communication of Chinese Culture provides the most systematic evidence on how foreign publics perceive Chinese culture. Teng and Yang [17] report that foreign respondents show relatively high recognition of traditional and humanistic-resource symbols, particularly those with a strong historical imprint, but that recognition varies with the intrinsic difficulty of the symbol, that some complex symbols are neither accepted nor understood, and that willingness to engage with Chinese culture is higher among the highly educated and higher-income. A survey of youth in seven BRI countries reaches similar conclusions [18]. Ye [19], studying tea-culture promotion in Serbia, finds that Chinese symbols are welcomed but lack "closeness": audiences are impressed by historically deep, attractive and vital symbols but uninterested in complex or dated ideational content. Shared values ("minxin xiangtong") are, moreover, the basis of cross-cultural acceptance, so that the promotion of symbols should emphasise ideas held in common and adjust those that are not shared; the dragon, noble in China but often sinister elsewhere, is the canonical example [20].

For Russia specifically, Li [20] analyses the cultural factors shaping China's image among Russians and finds a mixture of long-standing familiarity with a few emblematic elements and limited depth of understanding. Han [9] and Jiang [8] argue that Chinese cultural communication has been insufficiently audience-centred, generating misunderstandings that stem from ignoring audience needs and audience stratification.

2.4 Analytical framework

Synthesising the above, we conceptualise cultural consumption demand in a BRI country as the joint outcome of (i) the cognitive accessibility of the cultural symbols on offer and (ii) the characteristics of the consumer that govern decoding capacity and taste. On the symbol side, we distinguish perceptual or material symbols that can be apprehended directly through sight, taste, smell or touch (a panda, a cup of tea, a piece of silk or porcelain, a wall or a garden) from ideational and language-dependent symbols whose meaning is accessible only through prior knowledge (Confucianism, Taoism, classical poetry, the Chinese language, traditional music and opera). On the consumer side, following the marketing and cultural-consumption literatures, we focus on four attributes: age, which shapes openness to novelty and accumulated cultural experience; cultural environment, proxied by educational attainment, which shapes decoding capacity and the density of cultural stimuli in the consumer's surroundings; cultural appeal, i.e. the type of symbol the consumer seeks (novel, deep, or historically anchored); and occupation, which channels exposure to particular cultural contents and correlates with both age and education. Preferences formed at the intersection of symbol accessibility and consumer attributes then determine which product carriers (books, audio-visual products, handicrafts, toys, calligraphy and painting, animation and games) are demanded and through which channels. This framework structures the empirical analysis in Section 4 and the design implications in Section 6.

3. Data and methods

3.1 Survey design and sample

The data come from an online questionnaire survey of Russian consumers conducted in the first half of 2020. The instrument comprised three blocks. The first block collected six demographic items: age (six bands), gender, federal district of residence (eight options), educational attainment (six categories from secondary schooling to candidate/doctoral degree), occupation (fifteen categories) and pre-tax monthly income (six bands in roubles). The second block presented 27 Chinese cultural symbols spanning heritage sites (the Great Wall, the Potala Palace, the Honghe Hani Rice Terraces, Chinese gardens, the Terracotta Army), material and lifestyle culture (Chinese cuisine, traditional Chinese medicine, silk, qipao/Tang suit, porcelain, tea, the giant panda, high-speed rail), language and letters (the Chinese language, Tang and Song poetry, calligraphy), arts and performance (Chinese painting, Chinese folk music, Peking Opera, kung fu/taijiquan, Go), thought and belief (Taoism, Confucianism, the taiji yin-yang diagram), festivals (Spring Festival) and institutions (Peking University, Tsinghua University). For each symbol respondents chose one of six responses: "do not know", "strongly dislike", "dislike", "neutral", "like" or "strongly like". A parallel item asked about awareness of and attitude towards Chinese cultural brands and services, including the Confucius Institute. The third block recorded the number of units purchased across eight categories of Chinese cultural products: books, film and video products, music products, television-drama video products, arts and crafts, animation and game products, Chinese original toys (e.g. kites, diabolos), and Chinese calligraphy and painting.

A total of 1,010 valid questionnaires were obtained. Table 1 reports the sample profile. The gender split is close to even (51.0% female). Age is spread across bands, with 42.0% aged 15–34, 38.0% aged 35–54 and 20.0% aged 55 or over. Respondents are drawn from seven federal districts and an "other" category, with the Central District (28.8%), Volga District (17.9%), Urals (14.3%) and Siberia (14.1%) most represented. Educational attainment is skewed towards bachelor's or master's degree holders (61.5%), followed by graduates of specialised secondary institutions (21.4%). The largest occupational groups are professionals such as lawyers, doctors and teachers (15.5%), retirees (15.5%), ordinary office employees (15.3%), workers (12.9%) and office managers (11.5%). Income is concentrated in the 10,000–30,000 rouble (42.3%) and 30,000–60,000 rouble (31.1%) bands; only 3.3% report more than 150,000 roubles per month. The sample is therefore reasonably balanced on gender, age and region, somewhat more educated than the Russian population as a whole, and predominantly low-to-middle income.

Table 1. Sample characteristics (N = 1,010)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Share (%)
Age	15–24	216	21.39
	25–34	208	20.59
	35–44	183	18.12
	45–54	201	19.9
	55–64	160	15.84
	65 and over	42	4.16
Gender	Female	515	50.99
	Male	495	49.01
Federal district	Northwestern	77	7.62
	Central	291	28.81
	Southern	114	11.29
	Volga	181	17.92

Variable	Category	Frequency	Share (%)
	Urals	144	14.26
	Siberian	142	14.06
	Far Eastern	40	3.96
	Other	21	2.08
Education	Secondary school	54	5.35
	Specialised secondary	216	21.39
	Current university student	85	8.42
	Bachelor's or master's degree	621	61.49
	Candidate or doctoral degree	24	2.38
	Other	10	0.99
Occupation	Office manager	116	11.49
	Ordinary office employee	155	15.35
	Retired	157	15.54
	University student	63	6.24
	Worker	130	12.87
	Civil servant	58	5.74
	Farmer	1	0.1
	Military or police	8	0.79
	Unemployed	49	4.85
	Businessperson	29	2.87
	Professional (lawyer, doctor, teacher)	157	15.54
	Business owner (<10 employees)	15	1.49
	Business owner (≥10 employees)	2	0.2
	Other	70	6.93
Monthly income (pre-tax)	Below 10,000 roubles	115	11.39
	10,000–30,000	427	42.28
	30,000–60,000	314	31.09
	60,000–150,000	121	11.98
	150,000–300,000	17	1.68
	Above 300,000	16	1.58

Note: "Farm owner" received no responses and is omitted. Source: authors' survey.

3.2 Analytical approach

The analysis proceeds in three steps corresponding to the framework in Section 2.4. First, we describe the distribution of awareness and attitudes across the 27 symbols, classifying each symbol by the modal response and identifying the symbols most often reported as unknown, disliked, neutral and liked. Second, we cross-tabulate the most and least liked symbols by age band, educational attainment and occupation, and the most purchased product categories by age band, to characterise segment-specific demand. Third, we compute Pearson correlation coefficients between each demographic attribute (age band, educational attainment and occupation, coded as in the questionnaire) and the six-point attitude score for selected symbols, using SPSS, to test whether the segment differences observed in the cross-tabulations are statistically distinguishable from sampling variation. Because the attitude scale is ordinal and occupation is nominal, the correlation coefficients should be read as indicators of the presence and direction of association rather than as precise effect sizes; we return to this point in Section 6.3.

4. Results

4.1 Awareness of and attitudes towards Chinese cultural symbols

Table 2 summarises the symbols that most frequently attract each type of response. The pattern is strikingly consistent with the accessibility distinction introduced in Section 2.4. The symbols most often liked are the giant panda (479 respondents, or 47.4% of the sample), tea (415; 41.1%), silk (341; 33.8%), porcelain (340; 33.7%) and the Great Wall (318; 31.5%). Every one of these can be apprehended directly: the panda is visually endearing, porcelain is visibly refined, the Great Wall and Chinese gardens are visibly monumental, tea is experienced through smell and taste, and silk through touch. By contrast, the symbols most often placed in the neutral category are precisely those whose meaning depends on prior knowledge: Confucianism (475; 47.0%), the Chinese language (447; 44.3%), Taoism (427; 42.3%), calligraphy (346; 34.3%) and the taiji yin-yang diagram (343; 34.0%). Neutrality here does not indicate balanced evaluation; it is better understood as the response of consumers who recognise a label but have no basis on which to form an attitude.

Table 2. Chinese cultural symbols most frequently attracting each type of response

Response category	Symbols (frequency of respondents; share of sample)	Interpretation
Liked ("like" or "strongly like")	Giant panda (479; 47.4%); tea (415; 41.1%); silk (341; 33.8%); porcelain (340; 33.7%); Great Wall (318; 31.5%)	Perceptual/material symbols with high international recognition; decodable through the senses
Neutral	Confucianism (475; 47.0%); Chinese language (447; 44.3%); Taoism (427; 42.3%); calligraphy (346; 34.3%); taiji yin-yang diagram (343; 34.0%)	Ideational and language-dependent symbols; recognised as labels but not understood
Disliked ("dislike" or "strongly dislike")	Chinese folk music (104; 10.3%); Peking Opera (93; 9.2%); Chinese language (66; 6.5%); Chinese cuisine (56; 5.5%); traditional Chinese medicine (53; 5.2%); qipao/Tang suit (45; 4.5%)	Performing arts and language with aesthetic conventions most distant from the Russian audience
Unknown ("do not know")	Tsinghua University; Tang and Song poetry; Honghe Hani Rice Terraces; Go; Potala Palace; Peking University (in descending order)	Institutional symbols and regional heritage never promoted to Russian audiences

Note: Frequencies are numbers of respondents (N = 1,010) selecting the response for the symbol concerned; shares are frequencies divided by N. For the "unknown" category the survey reports rank order; Tang and Song poetry and the Hani Rice Terraces each account for about 8% and 7% respectively of all "do not know" responses across the 27 symbols. Source: authors' survey.

Outright dislike is comparatively rare and concentrates on performing arts and language: Chinese folk music (104; 10.3%), Peking Opera (93; 9.2%), the Chinese language (66; 6.5%), Chinese cuisine (56; 5.5%), traditional Chinese medicine (53; 5.2%) and qipao/Tang suit (45; 4.5%). Traditional music and opera share the feature that their aesthetic conventions—tonal system, vocal style, stylised movement—differ most sharply from those of the Russian audience, so that exposure without interpretive scaffolding produces rejection rather than indifference. Finally, the symbols most often reported as unknown are Tsinghua University, Tang and Song poetry, the Honghe Hani Rice Terraces, Go, the Potala Palace and Peking University. Tang and Song poetry and the Hani terraces each account for roughly 7–8% of all "do not know" responses. These are either institutional symbols with no consumer-facing presence in Russia or regionally specific heritage that, despite UNESCO listing in the case of the Hani terraces, has never been promoted to Russian

audiences. Russian consumers, in other words, know the internationally famous icons—the Great Wall, the Terracotta Army—but not China's regional cultural geography.

Taken together, the results show that the cultural appeal of Russian consumers is oriented towards relatively simple, concrete objects whose cultural content can be sensed without instruction, and is weak for complex ideational and traditional-art symbols. The difference between Chinese and Russian intellectual traditions means that the philosophical layer of Chinese culture—the layer that Chinese promoters often regard as its core—is the layer Russian consumers are least equipped to engage with.

4.2 Age and cultural preferences

Table 3 reports, for each age band, the symbols most and least liked and the two most liked symbols identified from the top-two tabulation. Several regularities appear. The Great Wall is liked across all age bands, and porcelain is liked in nearly all of them, so that these two symbols function as universal anchors. Beyond the anchors, preferences shift systematically with age. Respondents aged 15–24 most like the Great Wall and the giant panda, i.e. the highest-recognition icons; those aged 25–34 most like Chinese cuisine and porcelain, symbols with a strong "hands-on" or participatory dimension; those aged 35–44 most like porcelain and silk; those aged 45–54 most like tea and Chinese gardens; those aged 55–64 most like tea and silk; and those aged 65 and over most like porcelain and the Terracotta Army. Dislikes are dominated in almost every band by Chinese folk music and/or Peking Opera, with the Chinese language and traditional Chinese medicine added among the 45–64 group and cuisine among the oldest respondents, who are the only group to reject a food-related symbol.

Table 3. Cultural symbol preferences by age band

Age band	Two most liked symbols	Other frequently liked symbols	Least liked symbols
15–24	Great Wall; giant panda	Silk, Chinese cuisine, porcelain	Chinese folk music; Peking Opera
25–34	Chinese cuisine; porcelain	Great Wall, giant panda	Chinese folk music; Peking Opera; qipao/Tang suit
35–44	Porcelain; silk	Great Wall, giant panda, tea	Chinese folk music; Peking Opera
45–54	Tea; Chinese gardens	Great Wall, porcelain, kung fu/taijiquan	Peking Opera; Chinese language; traditional Chinese medicine
55–64	Tea; silk	Great Wall	Chinese folk music; Chinese language; traditional Chinese medicine
65 and over	Porcelain; Terracotta Army	Great Wall, high-speed rail	Chinese cuisine; Chinese folk music

Source: authors' survey.

Aggregating into three life-stage groups clarifies the underlying logic. Young consumers (15–34, 42.0% of the sample) value novelty and currency: in addition to the famous icons they are drawn to cuisine, a symbol that is fashionable and can be actively practised. Middle-aged consumers (35–54, 38.0%) value depth: they favour symbols with rich interior content such as gardens and taijiquan, alongside silk and porcelain. Older consumers (55 and over, 20.0%) value historical anchoring: tea, the Terracotta Army and silk, all of which carry long documented histories, dominate their preferences. Age thus maps onto three distinct cultural appeals—newness, depth and history—each

of which calls for a different selection of cultural elements in product design.

4.3 Educational attainment and cultural preferences

Educational attainment serves in our framework as a proxy for the consumer's cultural environment, on the reasoning that more years of schooling both increase decoding capacity and place the consumer in a more culturally dense social milieu. Table 4 shows that the anchors again hold across groups (the Great Wall is liked at every level, porcelain at every level except the candidate/doctoral group, and Chinese folk music is disliked at every level), but that the differentiating preferences follow a clear gradient of cognitive demand. Respondents with secondary schooling most like the Great Wall and porcelain—landscape and material objects that reward viewing alone. Graduates of specialised secondary institutions most like the giant panda and silk, i.e. attractive, decorative symbols, and they are the only group to include Confucianism among their dislikes. Current university students most like porcelain and the taiji yin-yang diagram, and also list cuisine; their appeal is towards symbols that are somewhat challenging or unusual. Bachelor's and master's degree holders, the largest group, most like silk and tea and also gardens, symbols that are traditional and material but that invite deeper exploration (varieties of tea, styles of garden). Candidate and doctoral degree holders most like Chinese painting and Chinese cuisine, the two symbols in the set that involve the greatest technical skill and reward the most sustained study.

Table 4. Cultural symbol preferences by educational attainment

Educational attainment (share of sample)	Two most liked symbols	Other frequently liked symbols	Least liked symbols
Secondary school (5.4%)	Great Wall; porcelain	Chinese gardens, kung fu/taijiquan, giant panda, tea	Chinese folk music; Chinese cuisine; traditional Chinese medicine
Specialised secondary (21.4%)	Giant panda; silk	Great Wall, porcelain, tea, high-speed rail	Chinese folk music; Peking Opera; Chinese language; Confucianism
Current university student (8.4%)	Porcelain; taiji yin-yang diagram	Great Wall, Chinese cuisine, silk	Chinese folk music; Peking Opera
Bachelor's or master's (61.5%)	Silk; tea	Great Wall, porcelain, Chinese gardens	Chinese folk music; Peking Opera; Chinese language
Candidate or doctoral (2.4%)	Chinese painting; Chinese cuisine	Great Wall	Chinese folk music

Source: authors' survey.

The gradient is consistent with the tiered model of cultural consumers discussed in Section 2.2. Lower-education consumers' demand rests at the level of recognition and appreciation of appearance; degree-holders seek a deeper acquaintance with traditional material culture; the most highly educated seek symbols that require study to be understood, and for whom the product must go beyond appreciation to express cultivation. The dislike of Confucianism among specialised-secondary graduates, and its absence from the dislikes of more educated groups, likewise suggests that ideational symbols are rejected where decoding capacity is lowest and merely ignored where it is higher.

4.4 Occupation and cultural preferences

Occupation channels consumers into particular work and social environments and thereby into particular cultural exposures; a doctor may be drawn to herbal motifs, a cultural worker embodies a cultural symbol in his or her own profession. Table 5 lists the two most liked symbols for each occupational group. Three clusters can be identified. The first, comprising the two largest occupational groups—ordinary office employees (tea and Chinese gardens) and professionals (porcelain and Chinese painting)—together with retirees (tea and silk), favours symbols that open onto a rich internal taxonomy: kinds of tea (black, green), genres of painting (landscape, figure), styles of garden (Suzhou, the Summer Palace) and types of porcelain (blue-and-white, famille-rose). These consumers seek symbols with interpretive depth that can be studied. The second cluster, workers (the Great Wall and the giant panda), favours appreciation-oriented symbols whose value lies in appearance and representativeness. The third cluster—office managers (tea and cuisine), university students (porcelain and the Great Wall) and civil servants (silk and tea)—spans diverse symbol types and appears to have a high general acceptance of Chinese cultural content. Smaller groups show idiosyncratic patterns: businesspeople favour cuisine and traditional Chinese medicine, military and police personnel the Great Wall and Chinese painting, and small business owners high-speed rail and silk, the latter being the only group to place a modern technological symbol first.

Table 5. Two most liked cultural symbols by occupation

Occupation	Two most liked symbols	Occupation	Two most liked symbols
Office manager	Tea; Chinese cuisine	Military or police	Great Wall; Chinese painting
Ordinary office employee	Tea; Chinese gardens	Unemployed	Great Wall; Chinese gardens
Retired	Tea; silk	Businessperson	Chinese cuisine; traditional Chinese medicine
University student	Porcelain; Great Wall	Professional (lawyer, doctor, teacher)	Porcelain; Chinese painting
Worker	Great Wall; giant panda	Business owner (<10 employees)	High-speed rail; silk
Civil servant	Silk; tea	Other	Tea; silk

Source: authors' survey.

The three attributes are, of course, interrelated. Cross-tabulation of age against occupation shows that respondents aged 15–24 are predominantly students, those aged 25–34 predominantly ordinary office employees, those aged 35–54 predominantly professionals and those aged 55 and over predominantly retired; cross-tabulation of education against occupation shows that specialised-secondary graduates are concentrated among workers and that degree-holders are concentrated in professional occupations. Occupation is thus partly a product of age and cultural environment, and the occupational clusters above largely reproduce the age and education gradients: the professional cluster that seeks interpretive depth is the 35–54, degree-holding segment, and the appreciation-oriented worker cluster is the specialised-secondary segment. The student segment stands somewhat apart, being exposed during study to a wide and heterogeneous range of cultural stimuli and therefore displaying appeals that differ most from those of other groups.

4.5 Product carriers by age

Cultural symbols reach consumers embodied in products, and a symbol can be carried by many product types. Table 6 shows, for each age band, the four categories of Chinese cultural product most frequently purchased. Three carriers are common to almost every band: Chinese original toys (kites, diabolos), arts and crafts (ceramic ornaments, embroidery) and calligraphy and painting (seal-script calligraphy, landscape painting). Beyond this core, carriers differ by age: respondents aged 15–34 additionally purchase animation and game products, those aged 35–64 film and video products, and those aged 65 and over books. The pattern indicates that the product forms through which Russian consumers currently encounter Chinese culture are narrow and craft-dominated, and that digital and audio-visual formats are the natural extension for younger and middle-aged segments respectively.

Table 6. Four most purchased categories of Chinese cultural product by age band

Age band	Most purchased product categories (in descending order)
15–24	Chinese original toys; calligraphy and painting; animation and game products; arts and crafts
25–34	Chinese original toys; calligraphy and painting; animation and game products; film and video products
35–44	Chinese original toys; arts and crafts; calligraphy and painting; film and video products
45–54	Arts and crafts; Chinese original toys; calligraphy and painting; film and video products
55–64	Chinese original toys; arts and crafts; calligraphy and painting; film and video products
65 and over	Arts and crafts; Chinese original toys; calligraphy and painting; books

Source: authors' survey.

4.6 Correlation analysis

To test whether the segment differences documented above reflect systematic association rather than sampling noise, Table 7 reports Pearson correlations between the three demographic attributes and attitude scores for six symbols selected because they discriminated most clearly among segments in the cross-tabulations. All six coefficients are positive and statistically significant at the 1% level. Educational attainment is associated with attitudes towards Chinese painting ($r = 0.189$) and Chinese cuisine ($r = 0.137$), the two symbols preferred by the most highly educated respondents. Age is associated with attitudes towards porcelain ($r = 0.165$), which is liked across age bands but increasingly so among older respondents, and silk ($r = 0.117$), preferred particularly among the 35–44 group. Occupation is associated with attitudes towards the Great Wall ($r = 0.081$), favoured by students, workers, military and police personnel and the unemployed, and towards the Confucius Institute brand ($r = 0.093$), which is viewed most favourably by retirees, the group most receptive to Confucian thought.

The coefficients are modest in magnitude, as is to be expected given the coarse ordinal coding of both attributes and attitudes and the nominal character of occupation, but they are uniformly significant. The correlation results therefore corroborate the descriptive finding that age, cultural environment and occupation each shape which Chinese cultural symbols a Russian consumer is likely to like, and that the demand for Chinese cultural content in Russia is segmentable along these dimensions.

Table 7. Pearson correlations between demographic attributes and attitudes towards selected symbols (N = 1,010)

Demographic attribute	Cultural symbol	Pearson r	p (two-tailed)
Educational attainment	Chinese painting	0.189**	0.000
Educational attainment	Chinese cuisine	0.137**	0.000
Age	Porcelain	0.165**	0.000
Age	Silk	0.117**	0.000
Occupation	Great Wall	0.081**	0.010
Occupation	Confucius Institute (brand item)	0.093**	0.003

*Note: ** significant at the 1% level (two-tailed). Attitudes are scored on the six-point questionnaire scale; demographic attributes are coded as in the questionnaire. Source: authors' survey.*

5. Discussion

5.1 A layered structure of cultural demand

The single most robust result is that Russian consumers' demand for Chinese culture is layered according to the cognitive accessibility of symbols. Symbols that can be seen, tasted, smelled or touched are liked; symbols that must be read or reasoned about are met with indifference; and symbols whose aesthetic codes diverge most sharply from Russian conventions are disliked. This is the cultural discount observed at the level of individual symbols rather than aggregate trade flows [5,7]. It also refines the findings of the Beijing Normal University surveys [17,18]: the high recognition of traditional and historically imprinted symbols reported there coexists, in the Russian case, with a near-complete absence of engagement with the philosophical layer. Russian consumers' cognitive map of Chinese culture is one-sided, resting on a small set of icons and lacking the regional and ideational breadth that Chinese promoters take for granted.

This layering has a direct bearing on the design of cultural and creative products. The strategy of "going deeper"—leading with Confucian, Taoist or poetic content because it is regarded domestically as the essence of Chinese civilisation—is likely to produce neutrality or rejection unless the ideational content is first translated into a perceptual form. Conversely, the perceptual symbols that Russian consumers already like are not exhausted: they open onto internal taxonomies (types of tea, porcelain, embroidery, garden) that can carry progressively richer cultural content for the segments that seek depth.

5.2 Segmentation and the neglect of audience strata

The second result is that preferences are heterogeneous and structured by age, education and occupation in a way that maps onto three cultural appeals—newness, depth and history. The current supply of HCNY and similar products, by contrast, is largely undifferentiated: it caters to a generic demand for well-known icons and does not classify customers [8,9]. Our findings indicate that a teenager and a doctoral graduate, a worker and a professional, do not want the same product, and that a product designed for the average consumer will be too shallow for some and too generic for others. Segmentation by the four dimensions analysed here provides an operational basis for differentiated design: novel and participatory elements (cuisine, contemporary motifs) for the young; interpretively rich elements (taijiquan, garden design, painting genres) for the middle-aged and highly educated; historically anchored elements (tea culture, the Terracotta Army, silk) for older consumers; and appearance-driven, highly representative elements (the panda, the Great Wall,

regionally distinctive animals such as the Siberian tiger) for lower-education and worker segments.

5.3 The channel deficit

The third result concerns access. Russian consumers currently acquire Chinese cultural and creative products mainly as souvenirs during travel to China, and secondarily at cultural events held in Russia. The first channel serves only the minority who travel, and for whom purchase is incidental to tourism; the second depends on events whose scale and quality vary, whose products are limited in range and uneven in quality, and whose cultural messaging cannot be guaranteed. The purchased product mix (Table 6) is correspondingly narrow, dominated by handicrafts and original toys. The demand identified in Sections 4.1–4.4 therefore exceeds what the existing channels can serve. This is consistent with the aggregate finding that Chinese cultural exports to BRI countries fall short of their potential [3,4], and suggests that part of the gap is a distribution problem rather than a demand problem.

6. Conclusions and policy implications

6.1 Main conclusions

Using a survey of 1,010 Russian consumers, this paper has analysed the structure of cultural consumption demand in a major BRI partner country. Three conclusions follow. First, awareness of Chinese cultural symbols among Russian consumers is uneven and shallow: the internationally famous icons are known and liked, regional heritage and institutional symbols are largely unknown, and ideational symbols attract indifference or dislike. Demand is oriented towards concrete, sensorially accessible objects. Second, demand is segmentable: age, educational attainment (cultural environment) and occupation are each significantly associated with attitudes towards particular symbols, and the segments correspond to distinct cultural appeals for newness, depth and history. Third, channels for purchasing Chinese cultural and creative products in Russia are few and product forms narrow, so that the existing supply system neither reflects the layered structure of demand nor reaches the consumers who hold it.

6.2 Implications for cultural and creative product strategy in BRI countries

The findings translate into three lines of action for the HCNY brand and, more generally, for cultural and creative product strategy in BRI markets.

(1) Raising the recognition of less accessible symbols through perceptual translation. Symbols that are currently unknown or ideationally opaque should be promoted through targeted campaigns before, not after, products carrying them are launched, and promotion should convert ideational content into perceptual experience. Classical poetry, for instance, can be set to music and staged as musical theatre, so that the emotional content and imagery of a poem are conveyed through performance and melody even where language is a barrier. Regionally distinctive heritage such as the Potala Palace and the Hani Rice Terraces can be presented through three-dimensional puzzles or building sets that allow the consumer to reconstruct the site step by step and thereby to understand how the building or landscape came into being. Such formats promote the symbol and explain it simultaneously.

(2) Widening purchase channels. The HCNY brand itself, as a state-backed brand with recognised quality, is the natural primary channel: offline HCNY events should be systematically combined with product sales. Beyond events, an online flagship store on an official website would allow consumers to browse Chinese cultural content and purchase derived products at any time,

while offline flagship stores in densely populated Russian districts would broaden product range and visibility. Geography also offers a channel: in the border regions, products drawing on the shared or adjacent cultures of the frontier—the Mongolian morin khuur, nomadic culture, Manchu culture—can be developed and marketed locally, adding a distinctive regional channel to the national ones.

(3) Building a tiered mechanism of cultural acceptance. Products should be designed for identified segments rather than for the average consumer, so that every target group can find a product matched to its cultural appeal and no product is so generic that it lacks character. The segmentation in Section 4 supplies the template: high-recognition and participatory elements for younger and lower-education segments; interpretively rich elements for the middle-aged, the highly educated and the professional cluster; historically anchored elements for older consumers; and modern-technology elements (high-speed rail) for the small-business segment. Product forms should also be broadened beyond ceramics, fans and woodwork towards items that are both refined and useful—cosmetics, homeware, daily-use goods—and towards the digital and audio-visual carriers that younger and middle-aged consumers already buy. A graduated sequence from simple to complex, from the perceptual to the ideational, allows consumers to progress towards a deeper understanding of Chinese culture rather than confronting them with its most demanding layer at the outset.

Although derived from the Russian case, these implications generalise. The mechanisms identified here—the cultural discount operating symbol by symbol, the stratification of taste by age, education and occupation, and the dependence of realised demand on channels—are not specific to Russia. Cultural strategy in other BRI countries would benefit from the same sequence: measure symbol-level demand, segment it, translate inaccessible content into accessible forms, and build channels that reach the segments identified.

6.3 Limitations and future research

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The survey covers a single BRI country and a single year (2020), so that cross-country and temporal comparisons are not possible; the online sampling frame over-represents the educated and, although geographically broad, is not a probability sample of the Russian population. The correlation analysis uses Pearson coefficients on ordinal attitude scores and, for occupation, on a nominal variable; the coefficients are small and should be interpreted as evidence of association rather than as precise effect sizes. Future research should extend the symbol-level instrument to multiple BRI countries to test whether the layered demand structure and the segment gradients documented here vary with cultural distance, should model attitudes with ordered-response methods that treat occupation categorically and control for income and region, and should link the demand-side evidence to actual sales and trade data so that the contribution of channel deficits to the cultural trade gap can be quantified.

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