The Eclectic Chinese

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A holiday to sweep the tombs

Chinese traditionally bury the dead. However, after the enlightened communists took reign of the country, they very rationally declared that the priority for the land is for the living and not the dead. Chinese were told to cremate the dead, burials were banned as was the erection of tombs. Given this, it seemed surprising when earlier this month, the Chinese government declared Tomb-sweeping day to be a new holiday in China. Along with the Tomb-sweeping day, holidays were also declared for two other traditional festivals of Dragon Boat festival and Mid-Autumn festival. Are the Chinese re-discovering their traditions? After years of efforts to obliterate the traditional shackles, is the Chinese government now encouraging the people to celebrate their traditions? What makes it even more surprising is the fact that these holidays will replace the three day holiday observed for the May Day celebration â€“ an occasion of symbolic importance to socialism, whose ideals the Chinese government still claims to espouse. The three day May Day holiday was, in fact, used to be extended into a â€œgolden weekâ€• by adding the intervening days to the weekend (the additional holidays compensated for by working on the preceding or following weekend). Before this declaration, China observed three â€œgolden weeksâ€• in a year â three week long holidays for the Chinese New Year, the National Day in October and the May Day celebration. This has been the policy since 1999, when the Chinese government decided that the citizens must get an opportunity to spend their new wealth and in the process further boost the economy. Now China retains two of these golden weeks, but has substituted the third with three one-day holidays for traditional festivals. Rediscovering the traditions

The Chinese government, as one would expect, is governed more by practical logic than tradition or sentiment. The real reason for this change perhaps lies in the fact that the three golden weeks had started to create a mayhem by the en masse movement of millions of Chinese. The populace takes the opportunity to get out of their homes, visit their families or go for vacations. This causes an immense strain on transportation and other services, and people started complaining about the exorbitant prices, traffic snarls and poor service during these weeks. Additionally, for a country so dependent on foreign trade, it is perplexing as well as vexing for its international trade partners when they see the frenetic trade coming to an abrupt halt as often as three times a year. However, apart from the rational, there are also emotional factors guiding the change. The Chinese, with their new found wealth and prosperity, now have a reason for celebration and pride. Embracing the old traditions, and practising the associated rituals with openness and confidence is a part of that resurgence of national pride. Chinese today not only want acknowledgment for their economic success, but they also wish to be applauded for their history and traditions. Chinese have set up Confucius Institutes in 50 countries, sent their terracotta warriors for display in the British Museum - all in an attempt to demonstrate that not only is this a country of extraordinary manufacturing prowess and technology, but also has a cultural richness which deserves noticing and appreciation. Embracing the West

Not only does China seem to be rediscovering its own traditions, it seems to be embracing the ones from the West with equal gusto and enthusiasm. Christmas celebrations began early and cut-out figures of Santa Claus started appearing in shop windows of departmental stores from the middle of November. The silver bells, figures of reindeers, elves and snowmen jostle each other in almost a chaotic, almost desperate representation of the Christmas spirit. In a rousing finale, earlier this week large pictorial displays of Christmas scenes appeared in most office buildings and a Christmas tree with twinkling lights, encircled with gold paper covered pots of poinsettia embellish the entrance of every office or hotel. For a country of atheists, this celebration of a Christian festival with such enthusiasm is perhaps baffling. However, Christmas in China is not about religion, but a modern paean to consumption and fun. Masses of people throng the streets, visit bars and haunt the stores for discounted products. Chinese celebration of Christmas, is a typical example of how China embraces the West to its own advantage and adapts it to selectively pick its best from their own point of view. So no Christmas cake or plum pudding â€“ we prefer our dumplings (according to a TNS survey, Chinese consider no food in the world to be anywhere near their own) and no midnight mass â€“ religion has no part to play here. But shopping, gifting, drinking and merry making is embraced with zest and passion. The marketing challenge of understanding the Chinese consumerNeither burdened with strong traditions and rituals, nor under the blind sway of the West, Chinese are behaving in an eclectic way in deciding what to embrace and what to discard. Their decisions are based on practical logic, commerce and now also a sense of national pride. For marketers it is essential to understand how the Chinese weigh several, often contradictory, arguments and pulls to make the decision. This is as true for which festivals to celebrate as it is for which products and brands to adopt. Only keeping a hand permanently on the Chinese consumersâ€™ complex pulse can guide the marketers in the right direction.