



# When hot and noisy is good

## Chinese values of *renao* and consumption metaphors

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to extend research on metaphors of consumption to a Chinese cultural setting, specifically examining consumer thoughts related the Chinese concept of *renao* (hot and noisy).

**Design/methodology/approach** – The Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET) was used – a photo elicitation approach and semi-structured interviews that surfaced metaphors. Field observation and participative techniques were combined with the 14 interviews, in Taiwan, through a grounded theory approach that classified results in categories using the software *XSIght*.

**Findings** – Five main categories of related concepts consistently arose: food, inexpensive, crowd, marketing communication and servicescape. Respondents closely tied *renao* with consumption behavior. All five categories resulted in rich descriptions that these consumers, and possibly a wider group, associate with successful retail locations.

**Research limitations/implications** – This in-depth approach was limited to 14 respondents and two researchers living in Taiwan. Thus, both the sample and the sample frame are restricted. Although the concept of *renao* is common in all Chinese cultural settings, its exact interpretation differs in different locations, sub-cultures and marketing segments.

**Originality/value** – Consumers expressing their values though consumption is a marketing topic both studied and used in the West. The convergence of consumers' perception of self and consumption is no less important, but certainly different, for consumers in a Chinese cultural setting. Local values heavily influence Chinese consumption in Taiwan, such as the central concept of *renao*. These local values are rarely discussed in Western literature. Retailers can benefit by incorporating at least some of these metaphors, while marketing researchers can gain an expanded definition of consumer self-image and values.

**Keywords** Metaphors, China, Consumer behaviour, National cultures

**Paper type** Research paper

### Introduction

On July first, 2006, Lori and Wendy, two young Taiwanese women, stood in a line that threaded around the block (see Plate 1). The hot summer air rippled, while the line barely moved. Passersby slowed, stared and joined the line, as automobile and scooter traffic backed up. The two women slowly passed numerous retail shops as the line inched forward. Large yellow and red signs advertised sales and pre-recorded messages of "BUY-ONE-GET-ONE-FREE" blared out of battery-powered bull horns placed on the sidewalk. Wendy shouted to Lori in Mandarin, "Zhe li hen *renao*" (It is very *renao* here). The comment was a very positive one, approving of the sought out location. *Renao*!





Source: C. Warden

**Plate 1.**  
Researchers' field photos  
showing Lori and Wendy  
in a typical *renao* line

The holy grail of retailers throughout Taiwan, *renao* is a commonly understood, always sought, yet elusive social phenomenon that has deep historical roots in Chinese culture. Consumer culture's co-opting of traditional values is a phenomenon well studied in the West (Arnold *et al.*, 2001; Hirschman, 1988; Kozinets, 2002), however these findings are generally culturally specific and occasionally center on subcultures. In fact, it is this specificity that gives this work value. Yet, this approach has been generally overlooked in Asia. Researchers in Chinese cultural settings have centered on the growth of consumer culture (Wong, 2000) and shifts in advertising (Zhou and Belk, 2004) to encourage consumption, but not the role of core cultural values in modern consumer identity. This study sets out to describe how consumers in Taiwan perceive and interpret the often used concept of *renao* within the modern marketing context. Employing in-depth interviews driven by a photo elicitation-like methodology (the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET)), combined with local observation and thick description, this paper supplies a detailed description of *renao* and its close links to consumption.

#### *Renao as a value*

*Renao* is a Chinese word often translated as lively, bustling, or exciting, but none of these translations capture the meaning well. Any location with lots of activity is positively described as *renao* (DeGlopper, 1995), and highly sought out. The literal translation is hot and noisy, which also is often literally true and leads Western visitors, and inexperienced retailers, to mistaken *renao* locations as chaotic and out of control – problems to be solved. For Chinese, however, *renao* is so ordinary it is often cognitively taken for granted (Pan, 1993).

The closest Western example of a *renao* retailing setting would be consumers lining up for iPhone or Xbox releases. These spontaneous social events center around a product cult with participants sharing identification and self-expression through a product or brand (Belk, 1988; Kozinets, 2001). *Renao*, in contrast, is not product or brand specific, but allows participants to share communal values traditionally focused on family and religious rites, now refocused on a retailing context. Temple fairs and night markets are representative of traditional *renao* events that involve Chinese festivities (Pan, 1993). Yu (2004) documented the Shih-Lin night market, in Taiwan, as an archetype of *renao*, where shoppers are regularly packed shoulder to shoulder yet are attracted to the social nature of the market. While night markets and temples are still common, and even growing (Sutton, 2003), social events have been widely co-opted

by retailers, such as McDonalds that resemble temple bazaars (Wu, 1997), in an attempt to use *renao* for a retailing advantage.

*Renao* often appears in early Chinese literature, such as in the seminal *Dream of Red Chamber*, Ching Dynasty (B.C1616-B.C.1911) where it is used to positively represent activities such as parties, large gatherings of people and pleasant sounds. This aligns with Pan's (Pan, 1993) three psychologically necessary elements for *renao*: events, crowds and noise. In China, Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong fresh food markets, open in the morning and afternoon, as well as night markets, have a long tradition in Chinese society and are archetypes of *renao* locations. Literary analysis has shown the positive meaning of *renao* in classical Chinese literature (Santangelo, 2003), especially its relation to individuals gaining a feeling of social security though belonging to a social group. These traditions tangle together the retailing and social elements of everyday life.

#### *Renao in retailing*

Western-influenced retailers, such as hyper marts, find it difficult to compete in this space. Taiwan hypermarkets in 2002, including Wellcome, Auchan, Tesco, Costco and Carrefour, reported sales of US\$2.2 billion (Hsueh, 2003). During the same period, Taiwan's Ministry of Economic Affairs reported wet markets and street stalls alone (mostly selling food) produced over US\$13 billion in annual sales. What would appear to Western managers as a backward, disorganized, uncomfortable shopping experience is actually driven by *renao* and a Chinese psychology that links *renao* to signals of freshness, success and social belonging (see Plate 2). To better understand how Chinese consumers perceive *renao* and where *renao* and retailing overlap, we undertook 14 in-depth interviews combined with field observations, described next.

#### Methodology

Grounded theory incorporates qualitative data acquired through a strong local grounding (Strauss and Corbin, 1994). Categories and concepts emerge from the data elicited from respondents under study by deconstructing and then rearranging text to find linking concepts that form substantive theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). A constant comparative method is employed that compares emerging categories with the environment and the researcher's own experiences – the theory's grounding (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The current study combined field observations with a metaphor elicitation technique for interview data collection, described next.



**Plate 2.**  
Researchers' field photos  
of afternoon fresh food  
market and night market  
in Taiwan

**Source:** C. Warden

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### *Metaphor elicitation*

Metaphors reveal and shape our thoughts (Zaltman and Coulter, 1995), and have a strong relation to culture because they are acquired through socialization, where their meaning is shared within a community (Classen, 1993; Hall, 1959; Kosslyn *et al.*, 1990; Poyatos, 1993). Humans understand the surrounding world through classifications – using metaphors to actively create and shape thought (Danesi, 1990; Holstein, 1995; Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; McCracken, 1988). The ZMET method is a hybrid methodology grounded in a wide body of literature. The technique combines the use of respondent collected photographs with an in-depth guided conversation, yielding results that are more valid, more reliable and more relevant than those obtained through traditional structured interviews (Gutman, 1982; Kelly, 1963; Reynolds and Guttman, 1988). The Kelly Repertory Grid and laddering technique are employed (Zaltman, 1997) to elicit meanings with personal relevance to a topic, emphasizing subjective beliefs, attitudes, emotions, symbols and representations over any objective realities or cognitive rationales (Black, 1993).

With 80 per cent of all human communication non-verbal (Pinker, 1994), elicitation of thoughts that occur as images (Humphrey, 1992) and metaphors allows a researcher to understand difficult to verbalize thoughts (Zaltman and Coulter, 1995; Christensen and Olson, 2002; Coulter and Zaltman, 1994). Photos have long been used in ethnographic studies (Pink, 2001), allowing respondents to link their external experiences with deeper ideas through laddering, an effective method of surfacing such thoughts (Ziller, 1990). Photoelicitation, the core of the ZMET approach, permits respondents to prepare their own photographs of people, objects and environments they are familiar with, creating a sense of uniqueness and personal narrative (Heisley and Levy, 1991). The method is at once open and free of specific questions, but also structured as the interview delves deeper into respondent associations in a process similar to visual sociology and psychoanalysis (Soley, 2006).

### *Structure of ZMET interview*

The ZMET process, as used in the current study, began with a package given to each participant that included a single use camera, with 40 maximum exposures, instruction sheet, and a scenario to consider while taking photos. After a week, cameras were returned and interview times arranged and gift certificates given (approximately US\$23). The ten interview stages are summarized in (Table I). Each stage delves deeper into underlying metaphors related to *renao*, allowing respondents to use photos and ultimately to manipulate the photos to tell their own stories. Throughout the stages, distinct concepts mentioned by respondents are recorded, and explored further through laddering.

### *Sample frame*

Participants were invited on the basis of theoretical sampling (Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Christensen and Olson, 2002) related to the research topic. Respondents were all ethnic Chinese who had grown up and lived in Taiwan, including the North (Taipei) to the South (Tainan). None of the respondents had either worked or studied overseas. Ages ranged from 18 to 59, with an average age of 29. Camera and interview instructions, as well as the interviews, were in Mandarin Chinese.

The 14 volunteers were sent camera/instruction packages, with the scenario clearly printed in large Chinese text: “Your friends want go to eat dinner and find a place where there is a line of people and it looks very *renao*”. Pre-testing showed this scenario to

**Table I.**  
ZMET steps

ZMET Stage	Purpose
(1) Storytelling	Relax the respondent by giving them a chance to speak
(2) Missed images	Allow for consideration of thoughts not captured in photos
(3) Sorting task	Respondent free to establish their own major categories
(4) Construct elicitation	Surface the underlying thoughts respondents connect with <i>renao</i> -laddering
(5) Most representative image	Another opportunity to employ laddering to flesh out deeper thoughts
(6) Least representative image	Exploring what <i>renao</i> is not
(7) Sensory images	All five senses tapped to gain a wider variety of constructs
(8) Mental map	Elicited constructs are mapped showing associations among concepts
(9) Summary image	A collage representing deeper emotional metaphors related to <i>renao</i>
(10) Vignette	Allow respondent to tell a story related to <i>renao</i>

trigger familiar thoughts of *renao*, without personalizing or framing responses and without making it obvious the topic of study was *renao*. This scenario is common enough that it does not raise unusual thoughts. Although food is specifically mentioned (restaurant), the word *renao* is commonly used in Chinese dialog when describing restaurant locations. Wording in Chinese was adjusted based on feedback and observation of pre-test subjects' reactions. Interviews were conducted over a two month period in 2006.

Respondents took an average of 24 photos and interviews totalled 11 h and 49 min, with the longest interview taking almost 73 min and the shortest 38 min; average time was 50 min (Table II). Throughout the interviews, concepts were noted by the interviewer and laddering used to explore their deeper meanings. Interview recordings were transcribed and reviewed for more concepts and combined with the concepts elicited during the interview. Concepts were then grouped based on themes using categorization theory and theories of emotion (Izard, 1977). All photos, collages and mental maps were transferred to digital format and then included in the analysis.

**Table II.**  
The respondents' information and statistics of figures of interview data

Respondent	Age	Career	Photos	Interview time	Transcript words	Elicited concepts
A	36	Self-employment	26	73 m 25 s	7,030	30
B	24	Student	22	61 m 8 s	7,887	40
C	24	Student	20	58 m 22 s	4,792	35
D	18	Student	21	40 m 40 s	8,124	28
E	48	Self-employment	21	61 m 13 s	6,935	24
F	49	Housewife	40	51 m 58 s	11,385	26
G	23	Student	14	45 m 48 s	8,693	27
H	22	Student	30	50 m 54 s	6,871	26
I	28	Office worker	24	44 m 38 s	7,232	21
J	24	Student	22	57 m 21 s	9,225	40
K	26	Salesclerk	20	42 m 7 s	7,264	34
L	34	Pharmacist	20	39 m 53 s	6,431	34
M	20	Student	20	43 m 47 s	7,519	27
N	26	Nurse	28	38 m 43 s	7,670	30
Total			328	11 h 49 m 57 s	107,058	422

Categories of concepts were explored through the software package XSight, (QSR’s follow up to NUD\*IST). XSight allows multiple depth interviews and their photographs to be combined with field notes and photos in order to uncover underlying similar categories across multiple respondents. Transcription length exceeded 107,000 words, and the number of distinct concepts totalled 422.

**Results**

Respondents had no difficulty understanding the symbolic nature of the photos they were taking, often expanding on the given scenario in personal ways. The use of their own photos allowed respondents to perceive a personal stake in the process as the interviewer pursued deeper meanings and connections between concepts. During this process, the photos took on different meanings, and even some multiple or contradictory meanings. While some concepts were mentioned once or infrequently, others were brought up across respondents. Analysis in XSight resulted in five main categories of related concepts occurring across respondents: food, inexpensive, crowd, marketing communication and servicescape. Table III shows the number of respondents whose constructs were directly related to each category and the number of *in vivo* mentions directly related to the categories.

Categories are not completely mutually exclusive, nor are concepts restricted to inclusion in only one category. For example, food is often linked with *renao*, and all 14 respondents mentioned food or restaurants in the interview. Since the scenario was related to food, this is not surprising; however, respondents often used *renao* as an indicator of other aspects of food, such as a respondent who said “Queuing makes me feel the food is really delicious and that I want to go into the restaurant”. In this case, queuing and deliciousness are linked concepts. What would be normally thought of as a negative aspect is actually a strongly positive indicator. In the respondent’s mind, these two concepts fit easily together. Simultaneously, the design of a retail location may also play a role in queuing, for example making the environment hot and uncomfortable, which is mentioned along with other concepts related to the servicescape category. Herein lies the advantage of ZMET – its ability to draw out contradictory and apparently unrelated concepts that better reflect the naturalistic thought process. While queuing is a Chinese phenomenon observed by other researchers (De Mente, 2000), the ZMET approach describes how such a behavior is subjectively valued within a constellation of other values, allowing a conceptual mapping. The categories and their supporting concepts from the current study are mapped in Figure 1.

*Crowd*

Every respondent mentioned crowds in some relation to *renao*, which the concept specifically mentioned 123 times. Crowds were generally seen as an indicator of

Category	Respondents	<i>In vivo</i>
Crowd	14	123
Food	14	108
Inexpensive	10	167
Servicescape	10	112
Marketing communication	9	45

**Table III.**  
Category frequencies

something interesting, as one respondent said, “If there were many people, I would feel interested”. Concepts related to crowds fell into three categories: passive, active and involvement. Passive concepts included feelings toward a *renao* location, but at a distance. Curiosity and attraction were strong, as one respondent said, “If there are many people queuing, it catches my attention”. These concepts often led to feelings of doubt, “Is it really so good?” Actively joining a *renao* context raises numerous tensions (something the ZMET method excels at bringing out). Nine respondents expressed delight when waiting in a line for a *renao* event, “they were all talking happily while waiting”, while annoyance and depression were also mentioned, “Standing so long is annoying”. Rather than a simple judgment, these tensions were often used to contextualize the crowd, “Lines make me feel annoyed, but I still like to get in a line because I’m curious”.

In stage nine of the interview, respondents created summary images –freely cutting and arranging their photos. Summary images represent deeper emotions toward the topic, coming at the end of numerous laddering exercises. Common among this study’s respondents were summary images of openness and peacefulness, even while the concepts spoken of were *renao* locations and experiences. Typical are Respondents A and M (see Plate 3), where a feeling of comfort, belonging, and even openness is

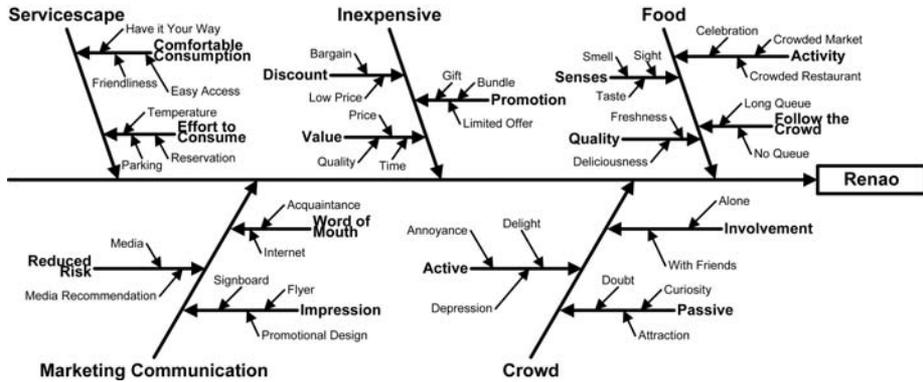


Figure 1. *Renao* categories and supporting concept relationships



Plate 3. Excerpts from Respondent A and M's summary images related to crowds

Source: C. Warden

expressed. Repeatedly, at deep psychological levels, respondents' metaphors for crowded *renao* locations were concepts like open, free and clean.

The open and peaceful metaphor is in stark contrast to the reality of *renao* locations. From field observations, the authors found typical *renao* locations to be very crowded, such as the field photos of Plate 4, where *renao* crowds have little open space. At its core, *renao* is a social behavior, drawing in more and more participants. Like a rising stock price, a *renao* location grows because of rising social expectations about the increasingly social setting. Respondents expressed two ways to join such a crowd. The preferred way was with friends, thus moving from one social group into an even larger social group. As one respondent pointed out, "Some specific food I won't eat alone – only when I go with friends". Thus, the active and passive context is highly influenced by the type of involvement –alone or with friends. The presence or absence of one's own social group mediates the tension. As one respondent pointed out, "I would never go to a *renao* restaurant and wait a long time alone. But, if I was with others, I would". Any objective valuation of crowds must be mediated by the clear contrast local consumers have in the way they value the emotions that accompany such crowd experiences.

*Categories: food*

Four subcategories of elicited concepts grouped around the main category of food: activity, follow the crowd, quality and senses. All respondents mentioned food, with 108 related concepts. Since the scenario touched on food, this is not surprising, but our respondents tended to include food in many different *renao* contexts – rarely a restaurant. *Renao* was often used to describe celebrations and crowded locations where food could be found. This aligns well with the central role food plays in Chinese society (Chang, 1977). Queues were mentioned as indicators of food quality, and respondents emphasized they preferred to follow the crowd, i.e. line up where there is a line and avoid food locations where there is no line. Senses, such as smell, were also linked to food and the level of *renao*, "The food is fresh, so their business is good" and "People walking by smell the food and then line up". Summary images commonly included food, such as in Plate 5.

The linkage between food and *renao* was commonly observed in the researchers' field work. Plate 6 includes field photos of common street market locations, where the crowd plays a role in attracting consumers. These locations typically are accompanied with strong smells and bright lights. The food metaphor is closer to an objective reality,



**Plate 4.**  
Researchers' field photos  
showing the reality of  
*renao* crowds

yet little is mentioned of the actual food type or quality. Respondents never mentioned the actual taste of food; rather, they emphasized *renao* as an indicator of a good consumption experience.

*Inexpensive*

Ten respondents exhibited concepts related to inexpensive prices, mentioning related concepts 167 times. Discount prices dominated, “He had good business, because his products were cheaper”. Bundling was specifically mentioned along with special prices. Limited offers were also mentioned in relation to a *renao* location. Two respondents in the interviews respectively said “Even though there were many people, consumers still continued to wait because they specially come here for a bargain” and “I want to queue to buy the product because it was expensive and now it is inexpensive”. Plate 7 shows excerpts from summary images, where inexpensive concepts were clearly linked to *renao*. On the left, a ten dollar offer (approximately 40 cents USD) along with a waiting number dispensing machine, are metaphors for limited offers with low prices, while on the right is a more literal representation – buy five get one free.



**Plate 5.**  
Excerpts from  
Respondent D and K's  
summary images related  
to food

**Source:** C. Warden



**Plate 6.**  
Researchers' field photos  
showing the reality of  
food in *renao* locations

**Source:** C. Warden

Field observation supported the common occurrence of sales, as seen in Plate 8. Retailers are known to take advantage of the strong link between pricing and *renao*, such as the photo on the right where 7-Eleven stock is pushed out into the street, signs of special prices are displayed, and bundle prices emphasized. The staff crowd into the street with at least one person using a bullhorn to yell out the specials.

*Servicescape*

Ten respondents exhibited concepts related to servicescape, mentioning them 112 times. Servicescape is made up of complicated environmental factors that can affect consumers' attitudes (Binter, 1992). Respondents described the servicescape in relation to *renao* in mainly two categories: comfortable consumption and effort to consume. In the first case, respondents related the enjoyable aspects of the *renao* servicescape. One respondent reported, "The staff were very friendly to our children" and another said, "the boss makes me feel very welcomed". Because *renao* locations often include small businesses, managers are also often owners, which the respondents saw as an opportunity for increased social relationship building as well as a chance to make special requests.

Respondents mentioned difficulties of joining *renao* retail locations, and while these were not negative enough to overcome the attraction, they did present the need for increased effort. Ease of parking, organization, air conditioning were all executed perfectly by department stores in Taiwan, taking their cue from Japan, and respondents contrasted this with the difficulties presented at common *renao* locations. One respondent reported on a *renao* retail location, "without air conditioning, it's hot,



Source: C. Warden

**Plate 7.**  
Excerpts from  
Respondent D and J's  
summary images related  
to inexpensive



Source: C. Warden

**Plate 8.**  
Researchers' field photos  
showing the reality of  
food in inexpensive

and with so many people there isn't even a breeze". As mentioned previously, *renao* locations have rarely developed based on city planning or even business plans. This means parking for both cars and scooters is often difficult, as one respondent pointed out, "If it isn't easy to park, you need to worry that your car will get towed". Plate 9 shows excerpts from summary images, including comfortable consumption on the left – represented by a happy feeling. An air conditioner, in the center, signals physical comfort when shopping. Parking lot photos and traffic, on the right, are metaphors for ease of access and quite literally the search for parking spaces.

Plate 10 shows field research photos where parking, even for scooters, is a common problem at *renao* locations. On the right, customers place orders and often can make special requests at *renao* locations. Open spaces and easy access to the owner are strong positives for *renao* locations. Simultaneously, such locations are non-air-conditioned and can be hot in the summer and quite cool in the winter. These contradictory emotions are intertwined in our respondents' thoughts about *renao* locations' servicescape.

*Marketing communication*

Nine respondents exhibited concepts related to marketing communication, directly mentioning the supporting concepts 45 times. The categories formed included impressions from signage, POP and flyers, word of mouth and reduced risk through media endorsements. Visitors often note the abundance of signage in Taiwan and Hong Kong streets, which respondents viewed as convenient, "A special signboard makes it easy to remember". Celebrity endorsements are commonly used in Taiwan, with stores often including large signs stating the store or chain has been on a national news channel or visited by a famous person, "If others said the store is good, it would make

**Plate 9.**  
Excerpts from  
Respondent C, I and G's  
summary images related  
to servicescape



**Source:** C. Warden

**Plate 10.**  
Researchers' field photos  
showing the reality of  
common servicescapes



**Source:** C. Warden

me want to go into it and take a look”. Media coverage was linked to *renao* locations, “After a store gets into the media, there are many people going there”. Respondents linked word of mouth to a *renao* locations, as one respondent said, “I usually try it after my colleagues have gone there and said it’s delicious”. Others mentioned how they like to tell more people about a very *renao* location, “I would introduce to others and share this information with everyone”.

This type of promotion often overlapped with the other categories, since marketing communication displays sale prices and food categories. Plate 11 shows excerpts from summary images, including celebrity endorsement and media coverage. On the right, flags promoting a special price are set out in the road. As in the previous 7-Eleven example, this movement of promotions and even product out into the street is on common attempt of retailers to spark *renao*, as passersby are forced into the promotion.

Plate 12 shows the researchers’ field photos where marketing communication is apparent. The density of the marketing communication is itself *renao*, which helps spark the feeling among consumers.

### Conclusion

Five categories represent commonly held views of what the Chinese concept *renao* means. The most interesting finding is just how closely respondents identify *renao* with commercial locations and consumption experiences. Nearly all the respondents’ photos involve consumption – from actually eating, to shopping and buying products. Chinese consumers cannot escape the market any more than their American counterparts (Kozinets, 2002). At deeper psychological levels, common metaphors appeared across respondents that described what successful *renao* subjectively means.



Source: C. Warden

**Plate 11.**  
Excerpts from  
Respondent B, H and K's  
summary images related  
to marketing  
communication



Source: C. Warden

**Plate 12.**  
Researchers' field photos  
showing the reality of  
marketing communication

In *renao* contexts, food acts as social glue that connects family and friends. Waiting in line, putting up with very crowded spaces, and enduring basic facilities only increased the social aspect of *renao* for our respondents. Queuing is a chance to socialize. Loud voices, blaring peddlers, and distorted music are invitations to join in and talk, yell, communicate. In such a location, it is simply not easy to keep to one's self. People are the key component of *renao* (Pan, 1993). Crowds attract passer byes; shifting passive behavior to active. Participating in the crowd is relationship – building behavior even though the specifics of the situation may be physically uncomfortable. Consumers often ask of a retailing location, "Is it very *renao*?" If the answer is yes, that word-of-mouth is enough to drive increased traffic.

#### *Practical meaning*

The categories found here act as metaphors for *renao*, which is itself a metaphor for positive feelings. If a consumer hears of a location with great prices, lots of food, and packed full of people, the immediate thought is of *renao*. From a practical view, however, do any of these indicators actually represent an objective quality? For example, the link between *renao* and food begs the question if long line really do indicate good quality food. The ZMET approach is completely subjective, centering on the respondent's perspective. During our field work, food stands busy one night may not be busy another night. The chain reaction effect of a line, however, was obvious. One sausage stand brand, for example, developed a long line during our research. Nearby stands lacked lines, while this stand generated waiting times of 20 min or more. When asked about quality, customers waiting in line often indicated they were unsure, but they thought it must be special (field video at: <http://ccc.qbook.tv/content/view/87/62/>). After consumption, we found consumers described the stand to be acceptable. An egg tart fad in Taiwan, during our research period, led to long lines and descriptions of very *renao* locations. Months later, such lines were gone. Objectively, the egg tarts quality had not changed, but the underlying reason for the crowds was not the egg tart, but the *renao* level. Any link between the actual product and *renao* is tenuous at best.

#### *Implications*

Arnold described how traditional American values are leveraged in Wal-Mart flyers (Arnold *et al.*, 2001), while Belk and Costa examined how American myths influence consumption (Belk and Costa, 1998), and Holt reported how American male consumers reinforced values of masculinity through consumption (Holt, 2004). Links between consumption and self are no less strong throughout Asia, however the values consumers draw on and marketers build upon, are quite different. A flat world has not replaced local values, and even globalized marketing messages are reinterpreted through local Chinese values (Zhou and Belk, 2004).

*Renao* is a core traditional value that is very much alive in the modern economy of Taiwan and most easily seen in Taiwan night markets (Yu, 2004). Beyond anthropological studies, little attention has been paid to this core Chinese value. Western retailers bring their own values to Taiwan and often assume consumers will share those values. *Renao*'s emphasis on crowding, and de-emphasis on organization, cleanliness and personal space are often antithetic to Western servicescape design values. This study's five main categories and accompanying metaphors can play a role in activating Taiwan consumer's positive feelings and encouraging consumption.



Source: C. Warden

**Plate 13.**  
Researchers' field photos  
showing cold and hot  
retailing space

Imported retail formats are not alone in sending the wrong signal to consumers. In Taiwan, real-estate developers, like their Western counterparts, have attempted to create malls and shopping districts. Some of these projects have adopted Western motifs, such as European looking streets and building facades. Signage is often standardized or minimized, with retailing space firmly organized within. The goal of these developments is an imagined high-end consumer. While such projects are not without their success, some locations in Hong Kong, Taipei and Shanghai have gained their target market segment, our field work has found many such efforts failed, and are locally referred to as cold locations (referencing their lack of *renao*). Plate 13 contrasts cold (left) and *renao* (right) retailing attempts, with the right location exhibiting at least some of the core metaphors of *renao*. While this will not guarantee success, it does send a more locally relevant signal.

It is all too easy to assume a market segment of high-end consumers have Western values. In fact, this is an ethnocentric perspective that entangles unrelated values and behaviors. Attempts to solve perceived local retail problems can result in the loss of *renao* indicators. This cuts off the link between consumer values and consumption, which exist at the unconscious level. As one manager of a large apparel retailer told us, in reference to the local retail formats, "These guys don't know what they are doing". Within a year, that retailer had left Taiwan amid slow traffic at their stores. The format they had chosen was a duplicate of their home stores, with spacious aisles, large and clear space in front of the stores, and product nicely organized within.

Wendy and Nancy felt very satisfied for the time they spent, but if a marketer had surveyed either of them about their willingness to wait in line, put up with loud noises, and push through crowded spaces, the responses would have been resoundingly negative. This project's qualitative approach has given an insight to local values that quantitative approaches would miss. For retailers, satisfying Nancy and Wendy at an intellectual level may differ greatly from an emotional and value level.

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