

Mashup Nation

BY MICHAEL IP

LANDOR ASSOCIATES

Mashup began as the artistic practice of creating a new song by mixing two or more existing, and often dramatically different, songs together — a style that has exploded in popularity in recent years because of digital technologies. Although mashup began in the music world, it has since found its way into video and fashion. Even brands are getting in on the trend.

Mashup is popular in many places, but in China it's everywhere. Disparate and conflicting influences mix in every cultural and commercial medium to create the new and distinctive. China is the mashup nation.

It makes perfect sense that China would embrace and elevate mashup the way that it has. As far as paradoxical places go, China is possibly the most striking. It's a communist country that does capitalism better than most capitalists; a global superpower with one of the lowest per capita GDPs in the world; a nation of impressive economic growth that is sadly, in turn, creating massive environmental problems; and a land where a growing sense of nationalism butts heads with an increased curiosity about individuality.

The interesting part for brands in China is how consumers — especially those in the younger generation — are not only managing, but thriving, within the context of these persistent paradoxes.

In recent years, Chinese consumers have been exposed to a sudden onslaught of intense marketing and innovation. But far from shying away from or rebelling against this sudden influx of consumer culture, Chinese consumers are embracing it, engaging with it, demanding more from it, and shaping it in their own images. In short, they are creating mashups.

The emergence and fast popularity of China's Back Dorm Boys serves as a kind of milestone. The group, which first appeared in 2005, comprises two Guangzhou Arts Institute students who posted videos of themselves lip-synching Backstreet Boys songs on YouTube. They quickly achieved global celebrity and spawned a plethora of international imitation.

The Back Dorm Boys phenomenon indicated the emergence of a new attitude among Chinese youth — they were no longer simply in awe of Western popular culture but were actually shaping it into something distinctly their own. And in the process, they captured the world's — and eventually, markets' — attention. The Back Dorm Boys signaled the end of an era when foreign brands could simply slap a Chinese name on existing products and, with some basic advertising support, succeed in the market — if, in fact, this was ever really possible at all.

While there is a lot of originality in China, in yet another realm of the mashup spectrum is the nation's adeptness at drawing on what works in the West and combining it with what works best at home. This process results in products and brands that, while similar, are truly new and different — and often more appealing to local consumers.

One commonly mimicked product is the iPhone — imitations of which are similar to, but sold for less than, the Apple-branded devices. Not only do these mashups often have superior functionality and more features than the originals, but the added attributes are also tailored to specific Chinese needs and desires.

This type of innovation is rare in the Western world but common in emerging economies. Because anyone with the proper skills and the motivation can take the initiative to create and sell an improved-upon, localized version of a popular product, evolutionary-style competition ensues: As in the natural world where only the strongest survive, only the best ideas and innovations are left in the end in China.

Innovative mashup extends well beyond the technology spectrum: One excellent example is Chinese footwear designer Kim Kiroic, who launched the high-fashion brand KIROIC in 2006. In collaboration with a Korean designer, he created a much buzzed-about shoe style that combined Western sneaker sensibilities with a Chinese preference for open-toed sandals to create something unique and on the leading edge of global trends.

Of course, there are also plenty of the blink-once-and-you'll-miss-the-difference, so-called *shanzhai*, or imitation, brands that bear striking resemblance to familiar Western ones (ever heard of sportswear manufacturer IVIKE? Or how about the fast-food chicken restaurant KFG?).

Although many of these may have started with the sole goal of tricking the customer into believing them authentic, the idea behind mixing Chinese notions with Western brands is an important one that has led to innovation and art, as well as true localization of non-Chinese brands and products.

Drawing further on the brand-identity blending trend is a mashup style that's about aesthetics. It involves taking multiple Western brand identities — especially from the luxury sector — and combining them to make something new.

For example, instead of making faux Prada bags, a knockoff designer might create a mashup of multiple Western luxury brands. The designer may borrow parts of Prada, Porsche, and Armani to create a totally new identity — a luxury designer mashup — with which to decorate and label clothes and accessories.

In the art world, mashup of Western and Chinese influences is also happening frequently. One interesting example of this comes from the Beijing-based graffiti crew, the KwanyYin Clan, which combines one of the more archetypal and traditional

Chinese art and craft forms — blue-and-white ceramics — with the Western art of graffiti to create something distinctive that draws clearly from both historical and modern craft, and across cultures.

But what does mashup mean for brands in or entering the Chinese market? Innovation in any market is rarely driven by a single trend. Opportunities lie in the intersection of multiple trends and in the combining of different cultures — and this is ubiquitous in China. Mashup multiplies a great idea's chances for success because the best aspects of many concepts are combined to create something superior. How can brands use mashup and tap into trends in the changing Chinese market?

1. Encourage consumers to “own” your brand.

Mashup, by nature, is anti-establishment. China is currently confronting the establishment of world power and is succeeding. Allow consumers to control

Mashup offers new brand opportunities in China.

rather than be controlled; the more you try to impose order, the more customers will rebel. By encouraging flexibility and manipulation of your brand, you engage in a dialogue with consumers. The brand becomes a part of the peer group.

One dynamic example of this user ownership model at work is the U.S.-based T-shirt business, Threadless. Anyone can submit a design, which is voted on by fellow customers. Designs with the most votes are produced and sold, and the winning artists are compensated.

The company's design and development work is continuous and consumer generated, and since the creators are also the buyers, failures are rare and costs are minimized. The company is more of a social network than a traditional manufacturer — a brilliant business model for targeting China's booming youth market.

2. Don't make technology an afterthought.

Technology enables mashup. By providing a place for like-minded people to come together regardless of their geography, technology allows the free flow of ideas and the ability to influence niche cultures. Websites should not be thought of simply as moving brochures — they should allow users to interact with and shape content.

In the spirit of the 2008 Beijing Olympics and before the games began, Coca-Cola invited consumers to visit its “Design the World a Coke” website to create their own artwork to decorate its iconic bottle. In addition to allowing for customization, the site encouraged people from all over the world to collaborate on artwork and even create mashups of their different designs. Without a website, this global mashup activity would have been nearly impossible.

3. Talk to the mashosphere’s main players to capitalize on trends. Talking to the creators of mashup is a straightforward and cost-effective way of understanding consumers and the culture they are creating. Consumers of all ages have their own take on mashup. Whether they are mixing formal and casual fashion to create a new style, or combining opera with dance music, mashup is being made everywhere and by all kinds of people.

While artists, designers, performers, and opinion leaders on the leading edge of cultural trends might be difficult to reach in more developed markets, in China they are still easily accessible — so talk now, and talk frequently, before this changes.

When the Back Dorm Boys captured the attention of China and then the rest of the world, they caught marketers’ eyes as well. Savvy brands recognized that these web celebrities had the power to inspire and influence consumers.

Motorola made the Back Dorm Boys its Chinese spokesperson, sponsored one of their viral videos, and, appropriately, hired them to host a lip-synching contest. Beijing-based talent agency Taihe Rye signed the Back Dorm Boys, securing them spots on TV shows and deals with brands such as Pepsi, which also featured them in its advertising.

One Pepsi campaign promoted a 2006 contest that invited customers to create their own commercials starring Asian pop superstar Jay Chou. While the Back Dorm Boys may have started off as web celebrities known worldwide for their comedic videos, they are now full-fledged Chinese stars with lucrative sponsorships deals.

4. Create stories and experiences, not products and advertising. Great brands are built on great experiences, great experiences create great stories, and great stories underlie all great brands. In our media-immediate world, what consumers tell one another about their experiences with brands is also important.

Word-of-mouth is the most powerful media today, and its reach is magnified exponentially through the internet. But it is dependent on customers

having something interesting to say to one another. For China’s consumers, not weaned on decades of traditional marketing, the need for brands to create these testimonial-inspiring stories and experiences is pronounced. In a consumer culture emerging from a mashup of Chinese and Western influences, feeling ownership over brands is crucial in attracting and retaining customers.

Both Pepsi and Nike have been especially successful at blending influences and, as a result, creating memorable, word-of-mouth-worthy experiences that resemble art and popular culture more than traditional marketing. Both have mixed quintessentially American brands with Chinese youth trends, arts, and culture and have been embraced by Chinese consumers as a result.

When Nike entered the Chinese market it stopped projecting itself as an entirely American brand. It marketed itself at China’s youth in their realm and on their terms. Nike not only targets its marketing, but it also designs new products that aren’t sold anywhere else in the world specifically to meet the needs and desires of Chinese consumers. Nike is an American brand mashing up its successful global products with China’s distinctive wants to create something especially for the Chinese consumer.

Pepsi is known globally for its viral video campaigns and other non-traditional youth-targeted marketing, and pursues this especially diligently in China. The brand has not approached mashup as a campaign or promotion but has made blending the main way it markets its beverages. The brand sponsors musicians and concerts and conducts user-generated content campaigns, calling on China’s youth consumers to participate in its marketing by submitting custom art, and even photos of themselves, to feature on its cans.

As we speak, a disparate range of influences is reshaping China. In the midst of these collisions, opportunities lie — especially if Chinese consumers are encouraged to shape and interact with brands. Empowering mashup will mean increased relevance in a market that is changing and developing more quickly than any other in history. ■



MICHAEL IP is president, greater China and Southeast Asia, based in the Hong Kong office of **Landor Associates**, where he leads Landor’s operations and provides senior-level strategic consulting. He may be reached at michael.ip@landor.com.