

**Document 19.8: Excerpts from “Growing Expenses” by Lu Rucui, in *China Today*, June 2006**

It can be taken as real that the average urban, middleclass, young Chinese adult would not be seen dead in footwear other than that bearing the Nike, Reebok or Adidas label. Personal gadgetry of no less than digital camera, handset and MP3 is also mandatory for members of this trend-conscious social sector.

The need of young people to be instantly identifiable with their peer group by virtue of garb, hairstyle and accessories is nothing new. But exorbitant price tags on the image enhancers demanded by today’s market economy generation set them apart from those of their antecedents.

**Young Brand Consumers**

Zhang Xiaoqiang is a 14-year-old student at Beijing’s Wanshoulu Middle School where, according to him, almost all his classmates ride Giant brand bicycles. Consequently he has no compunction about wheedling his mother into buying him a mountain bike from the Giant retail outlet in Beijing’s Gongzhufen. “Can’t I have this one?” he asks, plaintively, “It’s only slightly over one thousand *yuan*.” As she falters at the price, he brings the ace out of its hole: “Did I tell you my last exam results? I’ve moved up five places in my class.” Defeated by his blandishments, the boy’s mother resignedly takes out her purse.

A recent survey by Sinomonitor International of middle school students aged between 12 and 19 revealed that 42.2 percent of respondents regard famous brand commodities as the ultimate symbols of cool, confidence and taste. Another survey in April 2005 by the Social Survey Center of the Chinese Youth Daily revealed that 78 percent of the 1,150 teenagers investigated were brand devotees. A student from Beijing’s No. 154 Middle School seriously acknowledged, “If I wore an unknown domestically produced brand of trainers, my friends, who all wear Nike shoes, would not want to know me.”

Desire for costly expressions of teen chic has also infected primary school students. Qi Wanyi is an 11-year-old fifth grader at Beijing's Shangdi Experimental Primary School. In addition to textbooks and exercise books, her schoolbag also contains a cell phone, an MP3 [player] and an electric palm dictionary. "All of my classmates have an MP3 and electric dictionary, and most of them have a cell phone. My MP3 and dictionary were gifts from my parents to help me with my English, and they bought me the mobile I asked for so that they could reach me whenever they need to," she happily explains....

[School-age children] spend [their allowances and gift money] mainly on clothes, footwear, periodicals, books, Western-style fast food and movies. The frustrating aspect of their avid consumption, as far as parents are concerned, is that today's must-have item of clothing or accessory is tomorrow's cast-off. In a study of youth consumption behavior by the Guangzhou-based Guangzhou, Hong Kong and Macao Youngsters Research Institute, nearly 40 percent of respondents admitted that they generally lose interest in and discard items they have bought soon after their purchase....

[T]he famous brands and electronic toys with which parents pamper their children is, in addition to encouraging them to do well at school, a way of ensuring that they feel equal to confident among their peers. Liu is a textile worker and her husband drives a taxi. Their combined income is strictly average. Yet when their 16-year-old daughter, a first-year student at senior high school, asked her mother to buy her an international brand of cosmetics she consented without hesitation. "Her friends and classmates like to look their best when they get together at weekends and on holidays, and she would be laughed at if she couldn't compete," explains the mother. This is one example of parents being even more "face" conscious than their offspring...

Source: Lu Rucai. "Growing Expenses." *China Today*. June 2006.