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Adaptation of Russian dessert brands to the Chinese market: A sociocultural aspect

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Abstract. The deepening trade between Russia and China create opportunities for Russian dessert brands. However, their presence remains largely confined to border regions, hindered by insufficient adaptation to Chinese consumers' sociocultural characteristics. The study develops practical recommendations on forming an adaptation strategy for Russian dessert brands to the Chinese market. Methodologically, the research relies on a combination of consumer culture theory and the sociocultural approach. The study employs a mixed-method design, including narrative analysis, a consumer survey and expert interviews. The empirical evidence is sourced from three data collection waves: pilot survey (2023, $n = 60$), a verification survey (January 2025, $n = 100$), and a follow-up survey (April 2026, $n = 200$). The 2025–2026 sample totaled 300 respondents from large and medium-sized cities in China. The findings reveal the most recognizable Russian dessert brands and establish their core advantages and disadvantages from the perspective of Chinese consumers. Perceptions of foreign brands in China are shaped not only by product characteristics, but also by cultural codes, symbolic meanings, and digital trust. To successfully enter the Chinese market, exporters are advised to pursue a glocalization strategy, which includes adapting dessert products in six areas: product composition, packaging, brand image, communication, distribution channels, and consumer segmentation. A mere presence on Chinese social media does not guarantee effective product promotion and customer acquisition; to achieve this, Russian manufacturers must tailor their digital strategy to each platform individually. The research results contribute to the understanding of the adaptation mechanisms of foreign brands to the Chinese market and are of practical significance for exporters in formulating branding, packaging and sales strategies.

Keywords: branding strategy; brand perception; brand adaptation; Russian dessert products; confectionary; Chinese market; cross-cultural marketing; sociocultural approach.

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Адаптация российских десертных брендов на китайском рынке: социокультурный аспект

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Аннотация. На фоне развивающихся торгово-экономических отношений между Россией и Китаем российские десертные бренды получают новые возможности для выхода на китайский рынок. Однако их присутствие ограничено преимущественно приграничными регионами, а продвижение сдерживается недостаточной адаптацией к социокультурным особенностям китайских потребителей. Статья посвящена разработке практических рекомендаций по формированию стратегии адаптации российских десертных брендов к специфике китайского рынка. Методологической базой исследования послужили теория потребительской культуры и социокультурный подход. Методы работы включают нарративный анализ, глубинное интервью с ведущими экспертами российских кондитерских компаний (KDV Group, «Объединенные кондитеры»), а также онлайн-опрос китайских потребителей. Информационную базу составили данные трех волн анкетирования: пилотной ($n = 60$, 2023 г.), проверочной ($n = 100$, январь 2025 г.) и дополнительной ($n = 200$, апрель 2026 г.). Объединенная выборка 2025–2026 гг. включает 300 респондентов из крупных и средних городов Китая. В результате исследования выявлены наиболее узнаваемые бренды российской десертной продукции, а также установлены их основные преимущества и недостатки с точки зрения китайских потребителей. Восприятие иностранного бренда в Китае формируется не только характеристиками продукта, но и культурными кодами, символическими смыслами и «цифровым» доверием. Для успешного выхода на китайский рынок экспортерам рекомендуется придерживаться стратегии глокализации, включающей адаптацию десертной продукции по шести направлениям: состав продукта, упаковка, имидж бренда, коммуникация, каналы сбыта и сегментация потребителей. Одно лишь присутствие в китайских социальных сетях не гарантирует российским производителям эффективного продвижения продукта и привлечения клиентов – для этого они должны корректировать свою цифровую стратегию в зависимости от конкретной платформы. Результаты исследования вносят вклад в понимание механизмов адаптации иностранных брендов на китайском рынке и имеют практическую значимость для разработки брендинговых, упаковочных и сбытовых стратегий российских экспортеров.

Ключевые слова: бренд-стратегия; восприятие бренда; адаптация бренда; российские десертные продукты; кондитерские изделия; китайский рынок; кросс-культурный маркетинг; социально-культурный подход.

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INTRODUCTION

Due to the advancement of Sino-Russian relations within the framework of the “Pivot to the East” policy in 2019, the export of Russian goods to China exceeded imports for the first time since 2006. Despite oil and fuel remaining the main export goods, the export of food products is also rapidly growing. The first-ever “Made in Russia” festival was held in Shenyang (Liaoning Province) on the eve of the Chinese New Year, from January 27 to February 4, 2024. It featured more than 1,500 Russian brands (sweets, dairy products, seafood), cultural activities, workshops on Gzhel and Khokhloma, performances by Russian artists, etc. [Starodubtseva, 2020]. More than 200,000 US dollars worth of goods were sold at the fair, boosting recognition of Russian brands via the platforms Tmall and JD¹. In 2025, Shenyang hosted the second festival with support from the Russian and Liaoning governments. Beijing held an event in August, 2025 for Qixi Festival (Chinese Valentine's Day), featuring 500+ products from 40+ companies in 26 regions, tastings, performances, B2B negotiations, and live streams by Chinese bloggers². The “Made in Russia” festival aims to promote Russian goods to consumers and businesses in Northeast Asia. Due to these festivals, Russian brands are gaining recognition and Chinese consumers learn about new products. The festivals associate Russia with high-quality products and cultural richness, which increases Chinese consumer loyalty and makes Russian brands competitive in this promising market.

The middle class in China is rapidly growing and increasingly seeking to buy foreign goods, considering them tastier, healthier and of higher quality. Competition among brands for the attention of Chinese consumers is fierce and only those brands that successfully build a strong image and tailor their offerings to the sociocultural nuances of Chinese buyers can capture their attention and gain access to such a lucrative market. This expanding middle class estimated at over 400 million people represents the primary driver of demand for premium imported foods in China [Absalyamova, Gubaidullina, Petrova, 2026]. This group is not guided solely by income level, but by a specific consumption logic that combines

rationality, health awareness, family orientation, and symbolism. For middle-class consumers in China, imported food products often function as markers of safety, quality and modern lifestyle rather than as occasional indulgences only [Alekseeva, 2018]. In the dessert category, this means that purchasing decisions are shaped not merely by taste, but also by ingredient transparency, packaging credibility, country-of-origin image, online reviews, and the product's suitability for gifting or family consumption. Therefore, the adaptation of Russian dessert brands should be assessed not only through the lens of youth trends, but also through the expectations of middle-class households and young professionals.

The study aims to develop practical adaptation strategies for Russian dessert brands entering the Chinese market on the basis of an analysis of Chinese consumers' sociocultural perceptions, with a particular focus on Generation Z and the urban middle class.

To achieve this purpose, the following research objectives were formulated:

- to analyse Chinese consumer perceptions of Russian dessert brands across the dimensions of taste, safety, packaging, cultural authenticity, and status;
- to determine the barriers to adaptation faced by Russian brands in the Chinese market;
- to formulate strategic recommendations for product, packaging, branding, digital communication, and sales channel adaptation tailored to specific brands and categories.

The scientific novelty of the work lies in the following aspects. It combines consumer culture theory with a sociocultural approach to explain the perception of Russian food brands in China not only through product attributes, but also through cultural codes, symbolic meanings, and digitally mediated trust. Based on a survey conducted in 2025–2026 with 300 respondents, our study introduces a dual adaptation model (authenticity and local fit) and identifies a cognitive dissonance in consumer perception.

From 2019 to 2021, China ranked second in the structure of Russian exports of chocolate and other prepared food products containing cocoa. Russian exports of chocolate and chocolate products peaked in 2020, when the value of exports reached 127.02 million US dollars [Boyko, Miroshnichenko, 2024, p. 239]. In 2025, Russian confectionery imports to China fell by 46–47% (to 47.1 million US dollars from approximately 87.0 million in 2024),

¹ More than \$200,000 worth of Russian goods sold at China's first 'Made in Russia' fair. <https://en.sputniknews.afrika/20240130/1064846306.html>.

² Beijing to host "Made in Russia" festival and fair to facilitate export contracts. <https://tvrbrics.com/en/news/beijing-to-host-made-in-russia-festival-and-fair-to-facilitate-export-contracts/>.

reaching an eight-year low. Chocolate fell 2.4 times and sugar confectionery by 25%. In terms of chocolate supplies to China, Russia dropped from the 3rd to the 9th place, while the top-3 was occupied by Italy, Switzerland, and Belgium. The main reasons for the decline were competition from leading companies, China's increased sanitary requirements, customs barriers and food safety checks, rising costs, currency fluctuations, unstable payments, saturated demand, and Chinese consumers' preference for local flavours¹.

It is worth noting that China has entered a new era of consumption, where Chinese citizens prioritize brands over the products themselves. Generation Z (born between 1995 and 2009) has emerged as the most dynamic and influential consumer segment in China, driving branding trends across the entire marketing industry [Wang Bin, 2023]. For Chinese Gen Z consumers, purchasing cultural creative products is driven not by the product or culture itself, but by the desire to express personal identity and gain a sense of community belonging, with the way culture is presented being more important than the culture's mere existence [Wang, Yang, 2023, p. 778; Zimo Shi, 2024].

THE SOCIOCULTURAL APPROACH AND CONSUMER CULTURE THEORY IN BRAND PERCEPTION RESEARCH

The theoretical framework of this study is based on the sociocultural approach, initially mentioned by Lev Vygotsky [Vygotsky, 2001, p. 145] and further developed by Pitirim Sorokin [Sorokin, 2006]. The sociocultural theory posits that culture shapes social behaviour, while society provides a cohesive framework for understanding culture, making cultural and social concepts interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Sorokin was the first to highlight the inseparability of these concepts, asserting that individuals are continuously shaped by sociocultural dynamics. According to Sorokin, all significant categories are influenced by sociocultural factors, as meanings emerge from the human mind, which evolves solely within a sociocultural context.

The sociocultural phenomenon is also evident in the theories of Chinese sociologists, such as Fei Xiaotong's concept of "cultural consciousness" [Zhao, Fomina, 2024]. This notion emphasizes the deep connection between culture and society, asserting that society cannot exist independently of cultural phenomena, as only culture can bind people through shared, enduring values. Fei Xiaotong extends beyond Western sociocultural thought by introducing the concept of "spirit" as a crucial third element for understanding the human mind and societal dynamics [Veselova, Liu, 2018]. Sociocultural theory is especially pertinent for studying Asian societies, where cultural values are deeply ingrained and integral to social dynamics.

To enhance the sociocultural approach in the context of this research, we will address consumer culture theory proposed by Arnould and Thompson [Arnould, Thompson, 2005]. This theory posits that a successful branding strategy cannot be achieved without thoroughly understanding consumer insights, especially their sociocultural characteristics. The theory defines sociocultural characteristics as the cultural codes and sociohistorical influences that shape consumer habits of specific groups with shared social attributes. It is crucial to consider not only consumer habits, but also trends in advertising and branding. This approach aligns with contemporary postmodernist research, emphasizing the role of consumers in shaping brands, where the boundaries between consumption and production are so blurred that the phenomenon of "presumption" emerges (where consumers actively participate in creating or modifying goods and services) [Arnould et al., 2019]. Moreover, a broader context of the consumer environment must be taken into account, as the sociocultural approach has evolved from merely studying cultural aspects and societal characteristics to a more comprehensive analysis of how these concepts interact with and influence contemporary reality [Rokka, 2021].

The concept of a brand has a broad definition, encompassing various fields of study, from marketing to philosophy. As marketers assert, "consumers buy brands, not products" [Simões, Dibb, 2001]. This reflects the idea that brand perception is a crucial element of the consumer decision-making process. Scholars argue that the primary objective of any brand is to persuade consumers to purchase "non-essential" products – items that, while not necessary for survival, offer psychological or emotional benefits. Therefore, brands become irrelevant without a deep understanding of their target audience and must craft promotion strategies that resonate with the emotional needs of consumers and align with their sense of self-identity [Simões, Dibb, 2001].

Maurya and Mishra [2012] address the complexity of brand as a scientific term and consider all possible variables in its definition. A brand represents a multifaceted phenomenon, which, in some ways, functions as a quasi-image of a particular product, motivating a specific group of consumers to purchase it based on the values, associations, and emotions that the company or product embodies. The researchers highlight several key aspects of the concept of brand. Firstly, "brand as a value system" suggests that the brand influences a consumer's purchasing decisions not only through the product's tangible benefits, but also through emotional, psychological, and sometimes subconscious triggers or relevant values. Secondly, "brand as a relationship" implies that the brand engages the consumer through the product itself, personalized content and communication, both before and after the purchase.

The sociocultural aspects of brand perception are particularly relevant in the context of cross-cultural

¹ Imports of sweets from Russia to China reached an eight-year low. <https://ria.ru/20260124/kitaj-2070045680.html>. (in Russ.)

marketing, especially when exporting goods to foreign consumers. Foscht et al. [2008] argue that cultural differences between a brand's country of origin and its target audience can be a crucial factor in achieving brand loyalty in foreign markets. Their research provides compelling evidence that consumer groups from different cultures may perceive the same brand in varying ways. Cayla and Arnould [2008] further highlight the significant differences in brand perception between Western and Asian mindsets, noting that distinct cultural traditions give rise to unique value systems, which are then reflected in how brands are characterized and perceived by consumers.

The specifics of brand perception in China. The broader logic of Chinese consumption should be interpreted as structurally ambivalent rather than purely hedonistic or purely utilitarian. As Anosov [2022, pp. 564–565] shows, contemporary Chinese consumer behaviour reflects the coexistence of two value systems: on the one hand, Confucian ideas of modesty, thrift, and restraint, and, on the other, more modern and partly Westernized patterns that encourage symbolic, impulsive, and status-oriented purchases. This contradiction is especially relevant for imported food products. Consumers may seek visible quality, brand prestige, and culturally meaningful packaging, while simultaneously expecting rational pricing, moderate consumption, and practical value. For this reason, foreign dessert brands entering China should not rely on novelty alone; they must fit a consumption logic in which symbolic appeal is balanced by trust, restraint, and perceived appropriateness.

It is important to note that these sociocultural values are most prominently enacted by China's urban middle class, which is the key consumer cohort for imported confectionery. Unlike lower-income groups focused on affordability or high-net-worth individuals pursuing luxury exclusivity, the middle class seeks what is often termed "smart consumption": products that balance perceived quality, safety, cultural appeal, and reasonable price. Consumers are prioritizing services and experiences, such as travel, education, and dining out, over material goods, driven by lifestyle mindsets rather than economic necessity [Zipser et al., 2024]. The National Bureau of Statistics of China identifies three main categories of consumer expenditure: food products, tobacco and alcohol, and housing. Spending on these needs considerably exceeds expenditures on all the other categories among the eight possible ones [Kozyreva, Zhu, Smirnov, 2025, p. 570]. Russian dessert brands, positioned as authentic, natural, and moderately priced compared to Western European alternatives, align well with this emerging consumption ethos, if effectively communicated through culturally resonant narratives.

Chinese consumers are keen to preserve their Chinese identity in the era of globalization, with their consumer habits and brand perceptions still strongly shaped by cul-

tural codes. Their preferences are increasingly inclined towards local brands or foreign brands effectively adapted to their sociocultural characteristics [Rao Shuguang, Jia Xueni, 2022]. Many Chinese consumers rely on reference groups, recommendations and word-of-mouth before making purchasing decisions, and once a product is accepted by a relevant group, its diffusion can be rapid and wide-ranging [Anosov, 2022, pp. 569–570]. This observation is highly relevant to the promotion of dessert brands in contemporary China, where social proof is increasingly mediated through digital platforms such as Xiaohongshu, Douyin, and WeChat [Sun, Ly, 2023]. For Russian dessert brands, this means that market adaptation must include not only product reformulation and packaging redesign, but also systematic work with reviews, KOL/KOC communities, and platform-based trust building [Zhu, Ratasuk, 2024]. Foreign brands must localize their marketing strategies, while maintaining authenticity. This involves integrating elements of traditional Chinese culture into brand advertising, while also reflecting the cultural characteristics of the country of origin. By blending local cultural elements with foreign influences, a brand acquires "cultural significance", a quality highly valued by Chinese consumers, as it helps foster emotional connections with them [Yang Xinyan, 2023].

When it comes to foreign brands in the Chinese market, the issue of translation is also of great significance. Wu Jingjing and Lin Shengdong [2023] observe that the method of translating a brand name significantly influences its perception and should align with the intended brand message. If a foreign brand aims to emphasize its origin, the most effective approach is to use transliteration. Wu Yi and He Jiaxun [2023] argue that the perception of a foreign brand in China implies the presence of a "global identity" among consumers who prefer foreign products over local ones because they want to be part of global culture.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Two key data collection methods were employed: surveys and expert interviews. The survey of Chinese consumers was chosen as the primary method to obtain quantitative data on the perception of Russian dessert products (Appendix 1). The empirical basis of the study includes three stages of data collection:

- 1) a pilot survey conducted in 2023 ($n = 60$);
- 2) a verification survey conducted in January 2025 within a research project of Mates China ($n = 100$);
- 3) an additional survey wave conducted in April 2026 using the same questionnaire ($n = 200$).

The combined 2025–2026 dataset used for the present stage of analysis, therefore, covers 300 responses from Chinese participants. The use of an identical questionnaire across two waves ensured the comparability of the data, while increasing the analytical reliability of the findings through a larger number of observations.

The survey was conducted online via Tencent Questionnaire, a professional Chinese online platform developed by Tencent for creating, distributing, and analysing surveys.

In both survey waves, the respondent pool was predominantly composed of individuals from major and mid-tier Chinese cities, including Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Harbin, Chengdu, Hangzhou, Tianjin, Nanjing, Xi'an, Fuzhou, Chongqing, etc. Consequently, the dataset largely reflects the sentiments of urban consumers, precisely the target audience most relevant for promoting imported dessert brands via e-commerce, social commerce, and modern retail channels. While the age distribution is relatively broad, two distinct cohorts stand out:

- young consumers (18–30 years old): this group is digitally native and highly responsive to visual communication;
- mature audience (30–45+ years old): for this demographic, priority is placed on quality, authenticity, safety, and the rationality of the purchase.

The pilot stage is retained only as a preliminary exploratory reference. The main quantitative analysis is based on the combined 2025–2026 dataset ($n = 300$), which substantially improves the reliability of descriptive estimates and allows for limited inferential testing. Given the structure of the questionnaire, categorical variables were analysed using Pearson's chi-square test of independence, while mean differences between selected subgroups were assessed using independent-samples t -tests, where appropriate. These procedures were used not to claim full national representativeness, but to distinguish stable response patterns from random variation within the available sample. The revised quantitative analysis uses three levels of interpretation. First, descriptive statistics were calculated for all closed-ended questions. Second, for key categorical variables, such as awareness of counterfeit products, perceived importance of authenticity, recent purchase behaviour, and willingness to recommend, cross-tabulations were constructed by gender and broad age cohorts. Third, Pearson's chi-square test was applied to selected contingency tables in order to test whether differences between subgroups were statistically associated rather than random. In addition, independent-samples t -tests were used for comparing mean recommendation scores across selected subgroups, where a numerical recommendation scale was available. This analytical strategy strengthens the internal consistency of the findings, while remaining appropriate for a non-probability online sample.

At the same time, the authors acknowledge that the sample remains non-probabilistic and is weighted towards urban respondents from eastern and higher-tier cities. Therefore, the statistical tests are used here as instruments of internal robustness rather than as a basis for strict population-level generalization. In this sense, the results should be interpreted as analytically robust

within the surveyed dataset, while future research should validate them on a larger stratified sample across city tiers, age groups, and regional markets.

To gain a deeper understanding of how Russian dessert products are perceived in the Chinese market, in-depth interviews (Appendix 2) were conducted with several key experts, among whom the most useful were interview with:

- Andrey Naumovich, former director of KDV Group, who has extensive experience managing one of Russia's largest dessert production and export companies. The company supplies Krokant, the Russian candy most popular among Chinese consumers, to China. In China, Krokant ships at a rate of 1.5 containers per day and is available everywhere from Walmart to local stores. KDV also exports a wide range of confectionery products, including candies, wafers, cookies, caramel, marshmallows, and crackers, but has no specific leaders;
- Nikita Sokolov, an expert on promotion, marketing strategies and product adaptation for United Confectioners holding company in the Chinese market. The United Confectioners holding company actively supplies Alyonka chocolate (produced by the Krasny Oktyabr factory) and Babaevsky brand products to China. These brands are in demand due to their taste and quality, with thousands of tons sold annually through platforms like Tmall and JD.com. The company is expanding its presence, planning to localize production;
- Anastasia Tarasevich, CEO of EPINDUO with a background in strategic management and promotion of Russian products in China.

Experts were selected through purposive sampling based on three criteria: direct experience in promoting Russian food or dessert products in China, managerial responsibility for branding, sales or market entry, and at least three years of professional involvement in the Chinese market. At the same time, the expert pool is weighted towards Russian market participants, which limits the diversity of viewpoints. Future studies should include more Chinese distributors, retail buyers, and consumer-insight specialists. These interviews offered valuable perspectives on the current trends, challenges, and opportunities for Russian dessert products in China.

RESULTS

The **survey** was aimed at identifying how Chinese consumers familiar with Russian sweets perceive selected Russian dessert brands and product categories in terms of taste, packaging, trust, authenticity, and purchase intention.

The combined 2025–2026 survey dataset ($n = 300$) confirms that Chinese consumers perceive Russian dessert and food brands through a mixed but structurally consistent set of associations. Across open-ended responses, the dominant spontaneous associations were chocolate and candies. In semantic terms, Russian products were

most often described as natural, substantial, traditional, filling and authentic. At the same time, the dataset reveals recurring negative descriptors, especially too sweet, too heavy, high-calorie, old-fashioned and unclear in origin. Thus, the empirical material supports the core argument of the study: Russian dessert brands in China benefit from an authenticity premium, yet this premium is constrained by sensory mismatch and weak market communication.

The open-ended responses on verification practices show that consumers rely on a multi-layered trust mechanism rather than a single proof point. The most frequently mentioned verification methods were: checking the country of origin on the package; scanning barcodes or QR codes; consulting the official brand website; examining import labels and customs-related documentation; purchasing from official flagship stores or authorized channels; and reading peer reviews on Xiaohongshu, Douyin or other digital platforms. The prevalence of these answers indicates that authenticity in the Chinese market is digitally mediated and socially validated. In other words, a Russian dessert brand is unlikely to be trusted if its authenticity cannot be cross-checked online and confirmed through visible platform presence.

One of the most stable findings concerns the issue of counterfeit products. Clear majority of respondents (71.3%) reported having heard about counterfeit Russian goods on the Chinese market. Across both survey waves, this suggests that awareness of counterfeit Russian goods is not marginal, but mainstream among the Chinese consumers surveyed. Most respondents evaluated authenticity and actual Russian origin as either very important or rather important. In substantive terms, this means that for Chinese consumers the Russian origin claim is not merely symbolic – it is a core component of perceived value and purchase security (Fig. 1).

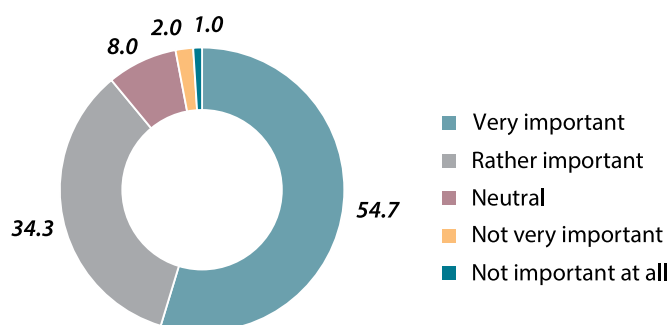


Fig. 1. Importance of authenticity and Russian origin for the Chinese consumers, %

Рис. 1. Значение аутентичности и российского происхождения товаров для китайских потребителей, %

Digital presence is perceived as an important trust signal. In both waves, the dominant response options were “very important” (31.7%) and “rather important” (44.0%). This pattern is especially relevant for imported brands, since Chinese consumers do not separate communication from credibility: a brand without active social media

accounts appears less transparent, less contemporary and less verifiable. Therefore, in the Chinese market digital communication performs not only a promotional but also a legitimizing function. WeChat, Douyin and Xiaohongshu form the core triad of information search, while Weibo plays a secondary, but still meaningful role (Fig. 2). WeChat is associated with official brand communication and practical information, Douyin with short-form recommendation content and live-stream commerce, and Xiaohongshu with peer-generated reviews, authenticity comparison, and experience-based trust formation. This confirms that Russian dessert brands entering China must build a platform-specific communication architecture instead of treating “social media” as a single undifferentiated channel. The recognition of Russian food brands in China is selective: the market is not supported by a strong, single country umbrella brand, but by several recognizable products and brands, primarily KDV/Krokant and Alyonka (Fig. 2).

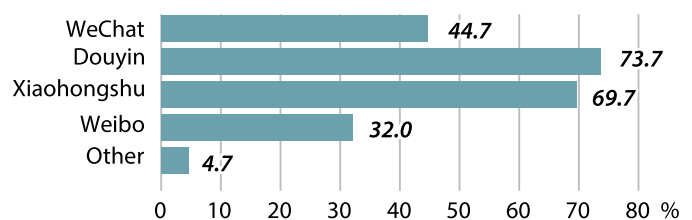


Fig. 2. Social media platforms used by respondents to search for information about Russian dessert brands

Рис. 2. Социальные медиаплатформы, используемые респондентами для поиска информации о российских десертных брендах

In both survey waves, a substantial share of respondents reported having bought Russian food products recently (57.0%), while the share of those planning to purchase them in the near future remained high (71.3%). The recommendation variable is especially important for evaluating market potential: the proportion of respondents willing to recommend Russian food products to relatives and friends is clearly larger than the proportion of those unwilling to do so. This suggests that despite the barriers identified in taste adaptation, packaging, and authenticity concerns, Russian products still retain positive social transmission potential in the Chinese market (see Table).

Expert interview. The key associative representation of Russian dessert products in China is related to their high level of sweetness that needs to be adapted to local preferences. Experts note that chocolate confectionery cannot adjust its recipes to reduce sugar content; however, other dessert products, such as ice cream, marshmallows or cookies can modify their recipes to better appeal to Chinese consumers. For instance, the adaptation of Alyonka chocolate demonstrated that chocolate products can use natural sweeteners instead of sugar or emphasize higher cocoa content relative to sugar. Chocolate consumption culture differs significantly from traditional

Respondents' answers to the questions about perception of Russian dessert brands
Ответы респондентов на вопросы о восприятии российских десертных брендов

Questions	Main recurring themes
First impression of Russian food brands	Sweet, substantial, natural, authentic, rich taste, foreign/exotic, sometimes rough or heavy
Distinctive features	Natural ingredients, fewer additives, large portions, rich flavour, high sugar, traditional and culturally marked products
Positive/negative comments	Positive: natural, tasty, substantial, authentic; negative: too sweet, too heavy, counterfeit risk, pseudo-Russian stores, poor packaging adaptation
Brands recalled	KDV/Krokant, Alyonka, Red October, Akkond, Babaevsky; many respondents failed to name a brand

desserts familiar to Chinese people. Initially, chocolate products in China were directly associated with cocoa beans, leading to challenges for United Confectioners in penetrating the Chinese market, as their products were not readily perceived as “chocolate”: “The cocoa content should be 99%” [Sokolov, personal communication, 2023]. Experts emphasize that natural ingredients should be part of the branding strategy for “healthy” dessert products, as chocolate items cannot claim to be wholesome due to their high sugar content. Moreover, Chinese consumers are highly concerned about healthy eating and scrutinize product ingredients on packaging with great care.

Chinese consumers perceive the taste of Russian desserts as unusual and exotic. Experts explain that the food culture in China is significantly different from that in Russia, making it challenging to promote Russian desserts in China without establishing a strong brand. Cultural elements in branding are highly valued by Chinese consumers, prompting some experts to recommend that Russian dessert brands incorporate aspects of Russian national culture. Cultural context is particularly fitting for Russian dessert brands with a historical background, such as Red October. Tarasevich [personal communication, 2023] highlighted that the company EPINDUO received positive feedback at its offline locations in China for integrating Russian cultural elements, including “traditional Russian costumes worn by salespeople, balalaikas, and matryoshkas at every corner”.

Regarding the target audience, experts concurred that the northern regions of China are the most loyal consumers of Russian dessert brands. This preference is attributed not only to geographic proximity, but also to the belief that sweet products provide additional energy in colder climates. Additionally, experts identified the northwest regions, such as Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia, as promising export markets due to their cultural characteristics that are more aligned with Russian dessert products. For instance, “In Xinjiang, many Turkic peoples have a tea culture that includes sweets similar to those found in Russia” [Naumovich, personal communication, 2023].

The most contentious survey results concerning packaging and portion sizes were identified by all the experts as significant drawbacks due to a lack of adaptation for the Chinese market. Experts observed that Chinese

consumers prefer smaller portions, as they typically consume desserts in more modest amounts compared to Russians. What might be eaten in a few minutes by a Russian could take a Chinese consumer a whole day or even a week to finish. Therefore, smaller portion sizes are essential for successful market entry. Additionally, packaging needs to appear upscale. For example, the attractiveness of Alyonka chocolate improved after its packaging was updated. “We started receiving many quality-related inquiries... Ultimately, we changed the packaging to something akin to Dove or Ritter Sport, with a plastic cover, and everything improved” [Sokolov, personal communication, 2023]. From an adaptation perspective, Alyonka requires packaging modernization without losing its heritage code, whereas Krokant requires differentiation between mass-market snack packaging and more high-end gift-friendly formats. For both brands, the most promising approach is hybrid packaging: preserving visible Russian origin and cultural distinctiveness while improving Chinese readability, anti-counterfeit functionality, and format suitability. This means not full Sinicization, but selective localization.

Packaging emerged in both the survey and expert interviews as one of the most actionable adaptation variables. The problem, however, is not simply that Russian packaging is “bad” in general; rather, different brands face different packaging mismatches. In the case of Alyonka, the strength of the brand lies in its iconic heritage image and immediate recognizability as a Russian product. Yet for part of the Chinese audience, especially younger consumers, the design may appear overly Soviet, old-fashioned, and insufficiently premium for gifting occasions. In the case of Krokant/KDV, the bright and recognizable design is commercially effective and highly visible on shelves, but it also risks being perceived as low-end, overly mass-market, and easy to imitate in counterfeit channels. More broadly, respondents and experts repeatedly pointed to four packaging deficits: excessive visual roughness, insufficient Chinese-language readability, lack of clear authenticity cues, and formats that are too large for Chinese snacking and gifting habits. Therefore, the packaging issue is not reducible to style alone; it concerns trust, readability, product positioning, and usage occasion simultaneously.

DISCUSSION

Since the mid-2010s, Russian confectionery exports to China have moved from a phase of rapid quantitative expansion to a more competitive and structurally complex stage. While chocolate, candies, ice cream, and other sweet products continue to attract Chinese consumers, market growth in 2025–2026 depends less on novelty and more on the ability of brands to build trust, ensure authenticity and adapt to local demand. The key constraints are no longer limited to logistics and basic market entry: they now include rising production and raw material costs, insufficient product adaptation in terms of sweetness, portion size, and packaging, weak differentiation in an increasingly crowded imported food segment and the proliferation of counterfeit or pseudo-Russian goods that undermine trust in country-of-origin claims. At the same time, Chinese Generation Z remains one of the most dynamic consumer groups, displaying strong openness to new tastes, visual formats, and digital brand narratives. However, getting access to this audience now requires much more than simple online presence. In the Chinese market of 2025–2026 e-commerce and social commerce have become not just sales channels, but core instruments of brand verification, recommendation, and community-building [Liu, Yu, Zhang, 2022]. Therefore, Russian dessert brands must combine platform distribution with active communication on Xiaohongshu, Douyin, WeChat, Tmall, and JD, as well as with clear authenticity cues and localized consumer engagement.

It is noteworthy that environmental issues affecting Chinese agriculture can provide an opportunity for Russia to export its dessert products, since Russian ingredients might be perceived as superior in terms of quality and safety compared to local Chinese ones. The less organic nature of local production could make Russian ingredients attractive to Chinese consumers. Additionally, Russian products are often priced significantly lower than their European counterparts. However, it is crucial to consider the prevalent issue of counterfeit foreign brands in China, which could pose a substantial barrier for Russian companies entering the market and seeking to establish a strong presence. While Russian products have some export potential in China, this does not guarantee that Chinese consumers are ready to make regular purchases [Khinkis, 2021].

In recent years, access to the Chinese market for a number of Russian regions and product categories has expanded, and Russian exporters have gained broader opportunities to enter Chinese digital marketplaces through cross-border e-commerce, official flagship stores, platform partnerships, and “Made in Russia” promotional infrastructure. As a result, the current challenge is no longer just exclusion from Chinese platforms, but uneven digital maturity across brands. Some exporters have already established their presence on Tmall Global, JD, Douyin Shop and related channels, while others still depend on im-

port intermediaries and lack direct digital brand control. The “Made in Russia” festivals increased short-term visibility of Russian products and strengthened the salience of Russia as a country of origin in selected Chinese cities. However, expert evidence suggests that event-based exposure alone does not create sustainable brand loyalty unless supported by product adaptation, digital communication, and stable retail presence. Russian brands remain relatively weak in the Chinese market. Chinese consumers are more brand-oriented compared to Europeans, and the taste characteristics of a dessert do not directly influence their purchase decisions. Chinese consumers tend to favour imported products over local ones when choosing between Western brands (including Russian brands) and domestic options. This preference is primarily due to the belief that local food companies do not prioritize ingredient safety as much as imported brands that often emphasize their natural origins and higher standards.

However, among all Russian dessert products imported into China, only a few truly represent the country: Krokant, Belev Pastila, Russian Tiramisu and Alyonka are the most famous Russian dessert products in China. Alyonka chocolate presents a classic case of a heritage brand navigating the complexities of a modern, international market. Its position is built upon a foundation of significant cultural equity, yet it faces distinct challenges that require strategic adaptation. The core strength of the Alyonka brand lies in its deep-rooted cultural identity. It is not merely a confectionery product, but a symbol of “traditional Russia”, carrying a high degree of cultural recognition. This historical significance fosters a perception of authenticity, positioning Alyonka as a genuine and “authentic Russian” experience for consumers. This powerful brand equity creates a natural opportunity for gift-positioning, where the chocolate is purchased not just for consumption but as a cultural souvenir or a token of Russian tradition.

The dessert consumption culture in China is relatively new and lacks deep traditions. A good option would be to consider the Chinese philosophy of “Wu Xing” when developing a marketing strategy. According to this philosophy, a sweet taste is believed to help a person fill a certain “void” in their body and soul with new, invigorating energy. This perspective on sweet products should be reflected in advertising campaigns. Therefore, it can be concluded that Russian dessert products are likely to succeed only if their branding effectively integrates with traditional Chinese culture and highlights the product's benefits. Chinese consumers require substantial motivation and a clear understanding of what the dessert represents to make a purchase.

Currently, Russian brands do not adequately address the sociocultural characteristics of Chinese consumers, presenting a significant challenge for companies striving to maintain high sales performance. The study revealed that Chinese consumers rely more heavily on reviews and

recommendations from other consumers compared to their European counterparts. This tendency stems from the collectivist nature of Chinese society, which places greater trust in unofficial recommendations and consumer opinions, coupled with a preference for online shopping. Chinese consumers also place considerable importance on packaging style and design, though this aesthetic value is somewhat secondary to taste and quality, which together are the top three priorities in the food sector. Most Chinese consumers prefer purchasing chocolate bars, particularly from established brands such as Red October. Additionally, Chinese consumers have greater trust in brands with a long history and traditional recipes, viewing them as "tried and tested". This preference underscores the Chinese emphasis on historical legacy and a conservative outlook. Therefore, a successful market strategy for Russian brands in China should combine cultural authenticity with local adaptation in flavour profile, packaging, verification mechanisms, and social media communication.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that the market prospects of Russian dessert brands in China depend not on country-of-origin effects alone, but on the ability to combine cultural authenticity with market-specific adaptation. Chinese consumers tend to associate Russian desserts with naturalness, safety, and distinctive taste, which creates a favourable entry point for branding. At the same time, several barriers remain structurally important: excessive sweetness, low readability of brand names, outdated or insufficiently localized packaging, and weak digital brand visibility.

The findings suggest that Russian dessert brands should not pursue full localization, since excessive adaptation may reduce their perceived foreign value. Instead, the most promising model is selective adaptation: preserving Russian cultural authenticity while adjusting sweetness levels, package size, visual presentation, Chinese-language descriptors, and platform-specific communication. This approach is especially relevant for two key target groups: Generation Z, which is highly responsive to visual novelty and social media discourse, and China's urban middle class, whose purchasing decisions are guided by safety, quality transparency, family orientation, and rational premium consumption.

To succeed, brands must pivot from a purely export-oriented mindset to a "glocal" strategy, that is, maintaining Russian heritage while adapting to specific Chinese consumption habits. Based on the analysis of the Chinese market environment and consumer behaviour, the following strategic framework is proposed for Russian dessert brands.

1. Product strategy: reformulation and portioning. To align with local palates and usage contexts, product development must prioritize: significantly reduce sweetness

levels to match the evolving Chinese preference for less sugary confectionery; focus on products with a superior milk-to-cocoa balance and emphasize natural ingredients, explicitly marketing the absence of artificial additives or palm oil [Ding, 2021, p. 501]; move away from bulk formats by introducing mini-portions and trial-size packs.

2. Packaging strategy: the hybrid approach. Packaging serves as the primary communication tool on the shelf. The strategy should focus on utilizing high-quality materials and smaller, gift-appropriate formats to elevate the brand above the "cheap commodity" perception. Instead of abandoning Russian identity, producers should balance it with highly readable Chinese descriptors. The "foreign" look attracts attention, but legibility ensures purchase. Anti-counterfeit labels and scannable QR codes guarantee authenticity and safety that are critical decision-making factors for Chinese consumers. Consumer behaviour in China is closely linked to prestige, social evaluation, and the desire to avoid "losing face", which makes visible and socially legible consumption especially important [Anosov, 2022, pp. 570–571]. In this context, branded imported products may function not only as utilitarian goods, but also as symbolic resources. For dessert brands, this implies that packaging should not merely protect the product, it must communicate reliability, quality, and gift-worthiness. A cheap-looking or poorly localized package may, therefore, undermine both aesthetic appeal and the product's social value in the eyes of middle-class consumers.

3. Branding strategy: authentic yet accessible. Branding efforts must build an emotional bridge between the two cultures: cultivate a brand image that combines Russian authenticity (heritage, nature, craftsmanship) with Chinese legibility. Leverage brand storytelling that highlights history and cultural symbolism without touching on political themes.

4. Communication strategy: digital-first and social proof. Marketing must occur where the consumer lives, i.e., online. It is important to pay attention to such social platform as Xiaohongshu (RED), Douyin and WeChat; activate KOLs and KOCs to generate necessary social proof; frame consumption around specific occasions, such as gifting, winter/holiday moods, and family sharing.

5. Channel strategy: diversification and control. Brands must evolve beyond simple cross-border trade and use it only as an initial testing ground. The ultimate goal is expansion into urban retail and major e-commerce platforms. It is necessary to shift towards direct brand control over distribution to protect brand equity, rather than relying solely on passive importers.

6. Segmentation strategy: targeted approaches. Distinct strategies should be applied to key consumer groups: Generation Z – target with novelty, high visual appeal, social media challenges, and trial formats; the middle class – target with assurances of safety, family-friendly utility, trusted quality and giftability. ■

Appendix 1 – Consumer survey questionnaire

Приложение 1 – Опросник потребителей российских десертных брендов

The survey was conducted in the Chinese language online via Tencent Questionnaire (腾讯问卷), a professional Chinese online platform developed by Tencent for creating, distributing, and analysing surveys.

1. How old are you?
2. What is your gender?
3. Which city do you live in?
4. When you think of Russian products, what comes to mind?
5. What was your first impression of Russian food brands?
6. What distinctive features do you think Russian food brands have?
7. Have you heard any positive or negative comments about Russian food brands? (Please write the comments you have heard in the space provided; excluding price and quality.)
8. Have you heard that there are counterfeit Russian products on the Chinese market?
9. Is it important to you that the Russian product you buy is authentic and actually produced in Russia?
10. How do you usually verify whether a product is authentic?
11. Is it important to you that a Russian brand you are interested in has and actively manages social media accounts?
12. On which social media platforms would you look for information about Russian brands?
 - WeChat
 - Weibo
 - Douyin
 - Xiaohongshu
 - Other: _____
13. When you think of Russian food brands, which brand(s) come to mind?
14. Have you bought Russian food products recently?
15. Are you planning to buy Russian food products in the near future?
16. Would you recommend Russian food products to your relatives or friends?

Appendix 2 – Semi-structured expert interview guide

Приложение 2 – Содержание полуструктурированного экспертного интервью

Interviews with leading Russian experts and practitioners on promoting Russian dessert brands in China were conducted in the Russian language.

1. In your opinion, how familiar are Chinese consumers with Russian dessert products?
2. In which regions of China are Russian dessert products most widespread?
3. In which regions of China, apart from Heilongjiang Province, do you think Russian dessert products have potential for promotion?
4. How satisfied are consumers with Russian dessert brands, and what do you think are the challenges of promoting Russian desserts in China?
5. In your opinion, has the demand for Russian dessert products increased over the past 6–7 years?
6. According to the survey results, most Chinese consumers are unfamiliar with Russian culture and still consider low prices and good quality to be the main advantages of Russian desserts. The main disadvantages of Russian dessert products are their inaccessibility and the lack of awareness among Chinese consumers. What do you think Russian dessert brands should do to increase their recognition, and what should they focus on in their branding?
7. Does your brand employ a specific branding strategy for the Chinese market?
8. The vast majority of respondents note that Russian desserts are too sweet, and some also say they are high in fat and calories. Does your brand adjust the sugar content for the Chinese market, or perhaps use language like “lower sugar” on packaging?
9. Respondents still note that they trust Russian producers when choosing ingredients and consider them high-quality and natural. Do you emphasize the quality of ingredients when promoting Russian desserts in China?
10. Some respondents also comment on the unattractive packaging. Has your brand encountered such comments? What do you think is the problem with Russian packaging?
11. The main advantage of Russian desserts, besides low price and good quality, noted by the Chinese is the large portion size. Do you emphasize the large portion size when promoting Russian dessert products in China?

12. According to the survey, 70% of respondents believe that Russian brands should remain unique and authentic, reflecting Russian culture, while 30% highlight that the brands should incorporate elements of Chinese culture for successful marketing. Do your brands emphasize their Russian origins and culture? If so, how, and is there a positive response from Chinese consumers to elements of Russian culture?
13. Do you use any elements of Chinese culture to promote your products? If so, which ones, and is there a positive response from Chinese consumers to these cultural elements?
14. Do you segment Chinese consumers for your brand? If so, into what segments do you divide them, and which are the most loyal and which are the least?
15. What do you think are the most effective ways to promote Russian dessert brands to Chinese consumers?

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