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DOI
10.1002/bse.630

Publication date
2010

Document Version
Author accepted manuscript

Published in
Business Strategy and the Environment

Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):
Kolk, A., Hong, P., & van Dolen, W. (2010). Corporate social responsibility in China: an analysis of domestic and foreign retailers' sustainability dimensions. *Business Strategy and the Environment*, *19*(5), 289-303. https://doi.org/10.1002/bse.630

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CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN CHINA
AN ANALYSIS OF DOMESTIC AND FOREIGN RETAILERS' SUSTAINABILITY DIMENSIONS

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Business Strategy and the Environment, forthcoming

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ABSTRACT

In the past decade, a sizeable body of literature has built up on the concept and characteristics of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in Western countries, where it has also been referred to as sustainability. More recently, attention has grown for CSR in emerging countries. Remarkably, China has hardly been studied so far. This paper aims to help fill this gap by considering, against this background, the CSR notion in China, through an exploration a small sample of large retailers in China, both Chinese and non-Chinese companies. The analysis of CSR/sustainability dimensions, as communicated by these large retailers in both the Chinese and English language, shows substantial differences between the Chinese and international contexts. Interestingly, the largest divergence can be found for international retailers between their Chinese and corporate attention for CSR (so home versus host settings), most notably in the case of Carrefour, and to a lesser extent, Wal-Mart. In the Chinese context, there are differences between the Chinese and international retailers as well (so domestic versus foreign firms), with the former reporting more on economic dimensions, including philanthropy, and the latter more on product responsibility – contentious labour issues and the environment receive relatively limited attention in both groups in China. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications for research and practice.

KEY WORDS

China; corporate social responsibility; retail; multinational companies; sustainability; reporting; sustainable development

CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN CHINA
AN ANALYSIS OF DOMESTIC AND FOREIGN RETAILERS' SUSTAINABILITY DIMENSIONS

INTRODUCTION

The concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR) has a relatively long history in Western countries (Carroll, 1999; Whetten et al., 2002). While CSR first consisted merely of philanthropy and subsequently concern for employee matters, in the middle of the 20th century this broadened to attention for organisations' broader task environment, initially primarily customers, distributors, suppliers and creditors, and later social and environmental issues more generally (Zenisek, 1979). Although there are different definitions of corporate social responsibility, it implies particular attention to the ethical, social and environmental implications of business. Formulated broadly, companies can be viewed as having economic responsibilities (vis-à-vis shareholders, to undertake profitable activities) but also legal, ethical, environmental and social responsibilities (vis-à-vis society, to comply with laws, to do no harm and to do good) (cf. Carroll, 1999; Whetten et al., 2002). In the European context, the comparable notion of 'sustainability' or 'triple bottom line' (triple P) (Elkington, 1997) has emerged as well to point to the need for managers to focus concurrently on People (social), Planet (environmental) and Profit (economic). In this paper, we use the CSR concept as this is most in line with that used in the context.

Public scrutiny of the first two dimensions, the environmental and social impacts of corporate activity has increased considerably in the past decade in Western countries. As a result, attempts at transparency and communications about CSR have grown likewise, for example through different types of non-financial reporting (also indicated as CSR or sustainability reporting). Various organisations has put together guidelines on what information to include in such disclosures. Most prominent in this regard has been the Global Reporting Initiative, which announced its first sustainability reporting guidelines in 1999 and the latest, third version in 2006 (GRI, 2006). This attention has been accompanied by growing corporate communications about these topics in a range of countries. Particularly in Europe and Japan, companies have become very active in publishing non-financial information, frequently following the sustainability dimensions as indicated by the GRI guidelines (Kolk, 2005; KPMG, 2006). While initially this involved mostly environmental reports, in recent years social and sometimes also economic dimensions have been added to these reports (Kolk, 2008).

Although most research on CSR has originated from, and focused on, Western countries, other countries have more recently received attention as well. This has included attention to transparency via non-financial reports and/or websites in various regions, in Asia, including Japan, but also Africa and Latin America. Examples include Araya (2005) on Latin America; Chapple and Moon (2006) on seven Asian countries (India, Indonesia, Malyasia, the Philippines, South Korea, Singapore and Thailand); Kolk (2005) on Japan; and KPMG on general developments in Asia, Latin America, Russia and Africa. Various issues of the *Journal of Corporate Citizenship* have focused on CSR in a range of emerging economies, notably the Winter and Summer 2006 issues. Although a few studies have emphasised the specificities of the emerging-economy context compared to Western countries (e.g. Logdson et al., 2006; Kraisornsuthasinee

and Swierczek, 2006), several others have argued that similarities prevail, and even that CSR is more developed in emerging economies and much closer to Western levels than generally presumed (Baskin, 2006; Muller and Kolk, 2008).

What is most noteworthy, however, is that, while Asia has been examined in various international publications, CSR in China has hardly been studied so far.[1] This paper aims to help fill this gap by considering, against this background, the CSR notion in the Chinese context, first more generally, and then empirically through an exploration of a small sample of large retailers in China. It analyses the CSR/sustainability dimensions, as communicated in both the Chinese and English language, for both Chinese and international companies. We will also compare the two sets, domestic versus foreign retailers, in the Chinese context, and put the foreign firms' attention for CSR in perspective by considering their approach at the corporate level as well, thus contrasting their home and host country settings. This is line with literature that pays attention to the difference between global and local contexts as faced by multinational companies (e.g. Prahalad and Doz, 1987; Rozenzweig and Singh, 1991). Before moving to more details about the study and the analysis, the next section will first give an overview of the peculiarities of CSR and sustainability in China.

CSR AND SUSTAINABILITY IN CHINA

Academic research attention to CSR in China has been very limited so far. In a study of 127 emerging-market companies' reported behaviour, which included 19 companies based in China, it was noted that this country is characterised by "especially low take up" of CSR (Baskin, 2006, p. 31). A 2005 report concluded that, although government pressure on companies in China to publish environmental information had increased, environmental reporting was "still uncommon" (Welford, 2005, p. 1). A much more positive note was struck in a recent study on sustainability reporting, due to the fact that in 2006 and 2007 a relatively large number of companies had started to publish reports containing CSR information, from 6 in 2005 to 18 in 2006 and 13 by May 2007 (Peiyuan et al., 2007). While this can be seen as a breakthrough, it must be noted that the total number of reporting companies is still very small – since 1999 when Shell China published the first report, in total the researchers only found 26 companies that had been engaged in it in China. This included 8 multinational enterprises (MNEs), 1 private company and 17 state-owned enterprises. It is the latter that has been the most noteworthy trend since 2006, with (central) government support and increasing media coverage as important factors, leading to growing awareness and knowledge about how to report, inter alia via various guidelines and protocols, partly translated from English (Peiyuan et al., 2007).

Nevertheless, the broader picture should be taken into account as well. A 2006 survey on attitudes of 890 companies in China, both state-owned, private and multinational, found that there was awareness and activity, but also that "most of them have mistaken ideas about CSR", including the fact that CSR is being seen as similar to charity, and as mainly a concern of large companies, not smaller ones (Qingfen, 2006, p. 11). In addition, most companies, include the large ones, consider CSR as a burden, and as a distraction for Chinese companies, which are thought to better concentrate on "building their business". More recently, the China Enterprise Survey System, which covered 4,586 companies, again showed overwhelming identification with social

responsibility, but this was seen to mostly encompass the basic responsibility to "create wealth for the society", "promote the nation's development" and even (as 68% mentioned), as generating profit for shareholders.[2] Around 70% also expected that CSR would lead to higher costs; the reputation of the brand was considered the main driver for being socially responsible.

These developments should be placed in the context of cultural notions, traditions and the current situation in China. Although there have been allegations about CSR as being part of a "foreign scheme to price China out of the cheap labour market", or as international interference more generally, in view of the fact that it originated from outside China, mainly driven by the Western anti-sweatshop campaigns (Chen, 2005), it is undeniable that awareness of environmental and social problems, including pollution, labour abuses and lack of food safety, has grown in recent years in China. Attention to CSR is increasing, and is being linked to the official objective to achieve a 'harmonious society', although it is unclear how this would work out more exactly (Yi, 2005; See, 2007). Since 2005, it has been the subject of various meetings involving government and business representatives. It has even been suggested, on the basis of media reports, that a leading member of the Chinese Communist Party called for legislation to ensure that companies would pursue CSR (Welford, 2007a). The year 2008 also saw the launch of a so-called 'red header document' for social responsibility on the part of state-owned enterprises (Ho, 2008). An internet survey in 2006 aimed at mainland China showed public awareness and support for a government CSR standard broadly defined, with concerns mainly expressed regarding monopolies and the food and medical products sectors (Ho, 2006).

Most notably when looking at environmental degradation and pollution, the underlying problem of how to combine rapid economic growth and environmental protection comes to the fore. This issue is receiving growing attention, not only in research (see for example a special issue of *Greener Management International*, Summer 2005, on this topic; cf. Welford, 2007b, 2007c), but also by Chinese citizens and government agencies at the various levels. A 2007 report, the contents of which became subject of discussion between the collaborating parties (the World Bank and Chinese government ministries), pointed at the large number of premature deaths as a result of air and water pollution (World Bank/Government of PRC, 2007). In spite of this sensitivity, however, combatting pollution has become a priority in China, with the federal government and the State Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA) trying to impose these policies on lower governments, including attempts to punish the worst offenders, for example by threatening to close down factories. In most cases, however, companies are fined, but as noted on the SEPA website,[3] this amount is just a small proportion of corporate gains, so profits generated from pollution (or with pollution as major side effect) easily counterbalance the possible costs.

In China, the environment seems to top all other problems in the area of CSR, but tends to be seen as a cost for companies at this stage of development (cf. Lin, 2006; Shan, 2006). Government officials also show awareness of the trade off that may need to be made at the macro level. The party secretary of Jiangsu, for example, acknowledged that "The measures [to protect the environment] must be strictly implemented, even if they cause a 15 percent downturn in the province's gross domestic product" (Anderlini and McGregor, 2007). This quote captures both problems in one sentence: firstly, the dilemma of how to combine economic growth and environmental protection; and secondly, how to ensure implementation of the law. Even SEPA has

difficulty ensuring environmental compliance – a 2007 case in which the agency accused a copper company of refusing access to its inspectors is just one illustration (Dickie and McGregor, 2007). The chairman of the European Union Chamber of Commerce in China noted that "In the environmental sector we see Chinese legislation that is even stricter than European law, yet implementation is sometimes non-existent" (Anderlini and Dyer, 2007).

And this is not limited to the environment: comparable situations exist in areas such as food safety and labour regulation. Following bribery scandals in mid-2007, a spokeswoman of the State Food and Drugs Administration pointed out that "China is a developing country and our supervision of food and drugs started relatively late and our foundation for this work is weak" (Dyer, 2007). Similarly, when slave-labour abuses focused attention on the need to have stronger worker protection, most emphasis was placed on the fact that (existing) laws must be implemented, and that local governments must become able to enforce legislation that has been adopted. In other words, as a representative of a multinational company interviewed by Myllyvainio and Virkkala (2006, p. 19) stated, "the law in China is an aspirational standard, as in most developing countries, not the minimal level as in most western countries". Likewise, it has been difficult, even for multinationals that have advanced auditing systems, to ensure adequate compliance with their standard (e.g. Welford, 2007d).

It must be noted, though, that with regard to labour conditions, the position of China as low-cost producing country does not make matters easier: the desire to reduce the price of labour leaves limited room for manoevre and for payment of high wages as this would remove a main driver for such outsourcing. On the other hand, some international customers of Chinese companies have begun to require consideration of labour rights and product quality, but for these Western multinationals this is a complex balance of costs and benefits, and of societal pressure in their home economies. There is a dilemma here that multinationals decide to outsource production internationally to countries such as China to reduce costs, and they might have suspected that such tremendous savings resulted from bad working conditions and very low wages, sometimes including child labour (Kolk and Van Tulder, 2002), and/or less attention to product safety and quality (cf. Frost, 2007a). Public attention in multinationals' (Western) home countries is, however, increasing pressure on the companies, questioning the legitimacy of this approach. This affects both outsourcing companies but also retailers that form a vital (last) link to the end consumer in a large number of global supply chains.

In China, influential media like China Central Television do not really engage in in-depth explorations of labour rights cases, so the public is not fully aware of such situations, let alone that they might be able to use consumer power to punish these kinds of corporate misbehaviours.[4] It is in this situation that major retailers, as 'intermediary' companies that are in close contact with consumers and the public but also sell large quantities of products produced in various parts of the world, can be important in raising CSR awareness or at least signal or reflect existing CSR perceptions in the specific setting. We thus examine the largest retailers in China, both domestic and international, on their CSR communications; this is all the more interesting since Western retailers have started to become rather active in CSR in their domestic contexts to begin with in recent years.

SAMPLE AND METHODOLOGY

As indicated in the previous section, we focused on the retail sector for the exploratory study in this paper, since it consists of important companies in direct contact with, and thus communicating to consumers, and which also have an intermediary role in (international) supply chains. Retailers, as non-manufacturing companies, do not have a very large environmental impact by themselves, which make them appropriate to investigate as they can be expected to pay attention, if any, to several dimensions of CSR. The largest retailers were chosen because CSR, if considered relevant at all in the Chinese context, has frequently been seen as a concern for large companies (cf. Qingfen, 2006). To explore how large retailers in China respond to CSR, we selected the largest four Chinese as well as international retailers active in China according to sales in 2005. We used the 2005 China's Top 100 Retailers list as published by the Ministry of Commerce to select the companies.[5]

Table 1 shows the four largest Chinese retailers (Gome, Suning, Vanguard and DaShang) as well as the four largest international ones (Carrefour, Parkson, Lotus and Wal-Mart – their countries of origin are respectively France, Malaysia, Thailand and the US).[6] For each, it includes sales, country of origin, ownership and whether they are listed companies or not. The two largest Chinese retailers in terms of sales are both specialty stores in electrical equipment and also privately owned listed companies, so in that sense relatively comparable (though Gome has a larger turnover than Suning). The other two, Vanguard and DaShang, are department stores/supermarkets with some (indirect) state ownership. Vanguard is a subsidiary of China Resources Enterprise (which is a listed company with almost 52% state ownership), DaShang is listed, with a state share of almost 19%.[7] None of the Chinese companies had overseas operations.

The foreign supermarket chains are all (still) joint ventures, which has been the traditional mode of entering the Chinese market mostly due to government regulations. This has started to change in recent years, however, when the country's entry into the World Trade Organisation ruled out constrictions on foreign retailing. This means that foreign retailers may buy shares from their Chinese partners, open exclusively-invested new stores and buy total or majority shares of well-operated companies. Lotus, for example, is currently nearly solely foreign funded. At the beginning of its entry on the Chinese market, the company was a joint venture with Chinese partners. After the regulations changed, it started an exclusive funding campaign by opening new solely funded stores and buying back shares from other partners. By 2006, it was almost 100% foreign funded except for Southwest China.[8] For the two Western companies, shareholding by Chinese partners is still substantial. Wal-Mart is a joint venture with a state-owned company (which has 35% ownership), while Carrefour has retail outlets in cooperation with different partners, of which most are state-owned as well – shares are usually in the 35-40% range. In that sense, both Western companies are relatively comparable.

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Table 1 around here

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We investigated the companies in the period June-July 2007 on their CSR/sustainability activities, focusing initially on their websites and also reports, if available. We

examined both Chinese and English language versions, if available, to check for similarities and differences. Similarly, for the international companies their Chinese as well as domestic (corporate) websites were analysed. Using the GRI (2006) sustainability (triple P) guidelines as starting point, we checked the retailers on the economic, environmental and social dimensions, with particular attention to certain aspects relevant to China's current development (including taxation, contributions to the local economy and community, supplier relations, labour practices and product responsibility). In addition, we traced secondary sources in both languages to help explain and put into context the corporate information found. This encompassed press clippings, newsletters, communications and (academic) articles in both print and electronic formats.

The analysis focused firstly on assessing CSR/sustainability dimensions on the part of Chinese and international retailers. In the framework as included in table 2, this involves respectively boxes 1 and 4. We subsequently compared the Chinese companies with the international ones in the Chinese context, as represented by the arrow between 1 and 4. Finally, the international retailers' attention to CSR in the host country China (box 4) was placed in perspective by considering their approach in the home countries as well (box 2). It should be noted that in the empirical setting of this study, the comparison home-host (1 versus 3) could not be made for the Chinese companies, as none had overseas operations. The difference between the respective home countries (1 and 2) obviously formed the starting point for the investigation. The next section will report findings.

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Table 2 around here
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FINDINGS

Table 3 gives an overview of the analysis for the four Chinese retailers, to first obtain some insight into how domestic companies pay attention to the various dimensions of CSR. Relating the findings to the characteristics mentioned above, it is noticeable that product responsibility and environmental aspects are hardly covered indeed – only the two state companies give some information about the environment. The economic impact is somewhat better covered, as two out of the four list the amounts paid for taxation (which is rather uncommon for international companies as the next table will show, cf. Fortanier and Kolk, 2007). Interestingly, all the retailers list their philanthropy activities, with each of them at least donating for disaster relief. Two out of the four occupied relatively high positions in the list of total donations in China in 2007: Suning was 29th in the list and DaShang 47th.[9]

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Table 3 around here
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Especially Suning is interesting because it refers to other activities related to the community as well (such as a volunteer programme) and the company is also listed in China's top 20 of socially responsible enterprises in 2006 and included in the country's

top 10 charity enterprises list.[10] Suning also stands out for mentioning an employment initiative for mid-aged laid-off workers for whom it is difficult to find a new job, and training for rural labourers so that they may become blue-collar workers. The other three retailers report on training more generally. In line with the meaning of its name, Vanguard emphasises the family culture, also in its respect for employees and prevention at work. Overall, however, labour issues receive only limited attention.

Peculiar is Vanguard's reference to its low-profit pork sales programme, an initiative undertaken in the light of pork prices in many Chinese cities.[11] It is also the only retailer out of the four that has an online corporate citizen section, and shows responsiveness in that sense. The retailers' websites are oriented at the Chinese market (none has operations overseas), in some cases they contain limited bilingual information; Gome has an English site but this seems to be meant for HongKong in particular.

If we compare these findings to those for the largest international retailers in China, some interesting differences can be seen (see table 4). One is the more limited attention paid to philanthropy and community activities. The two Asian companies do not mention it at all and Carrefour refers to it; only Wal-Mart seems to be rather active however. Wal-Mart China ranked 4th in the 2005 top 10 MNE Charity donations list – in the overall China donations list, which includes both domestic and foreign companies, it took the 144th place.[12] Carrefour is notably absent in these rankings, although its sales were almost twice as high as Wal-Mart in 2005. There may be a cultural dimension involved here, related to US traditions to be rather active in community spending, as six out of the 10 in the 2005 top 10 MNEs are from that country. Regardless of the precise background, it is notable that Wal-Mart ranked amongst the most popular MNEs in a survey held in mid-2006 in China (Liu, 2007).

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Table 4 around here

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This may also be due to the fact that Wal-Mart pursues local sourcing and local hiring (with almost all senior managers being local Chinese, and over 95% of merchandise bought locally). Compared to its relatively bad image in the US (where the Wal-Mart effect has become a negative term, see, for example, a special section in the *Academy of Management Perspectives* in August 2006), the China findings seem to point in another direction, perhaps (partly) due to the debate that emerged in the company's home country. More general supplier relations are mentioned by all four international retailers (this applied to three Chinese retailers). Although statements about 'win-win' and 'mutual benefits' prevail everywhere, again Carrefour and Wal-Mart are relatively extensive in their communications. In the case of Wal-Mart this was supported by an award for supplier satisfaction. Carrefour, by contrast, has been criticised on this aspect: in the 2006 Survey report on supplier satisfaction, it ranked last due its high slotting allowances and other charges.[13]

Except for Parkson, which in general scarcely reports on the CSR aspects identified, the international retailers refer to a little more environmental facets that the Chinese companies, but less to labour issues. Only Wal-Mart stands out since it was awarded as 2005 China best employer.[14] Interestingly, the company has also simultaneously been the focus of a long bottom-up campaign by the All-China

Federation of Trade Unions to set up workplace union branches – something routinely allowed (as it is a legal right) in other companies such as Carrefour (Chen, 2007). After unprecedented bottom-up actions, Wal-Mart China allowed them in their superstores. Apparently the approach followed by Wal-Mart in the US did not work in the Chinese context. No information was voluntarily disclosed on these aspects by the company.

As indicated above, none of the international retailers reports on taxation. They show, however, more awareness of product responsibility. Although after-sales services are much less often mentioned than Chinese retailers, Carrefour, Parkson and Wal-Mart pay attention to food quality and safety and consumer health. Overall, especially Wal-Mart is relatively outspoken on several CSR aspects, also in its communications, in both English and Chinese. Carrefour is less explicit; it has a society section on its website, but with only limited information on the English-language version.

To put the international retailers' attention to CSR in China in perspective, we also examined the same aspects at the corporate level, thus considering the consistency, and also whether the level is lower (or higher) when they focus on their Chinese versus their other (broad international and/or home-country) constituencies. Table 5 shows that particularly the comparisons for Carrefour and Wal-Mart are remarkable. Parkson reports even less (that is, nothing) in its home context, and the parent company of Lotus does somewhat more than in China (especially regarding philanthropy and labour welfare, and it has a CSR section in its annual report), but this divergence is considerably smaller than in the case of Wal-Mart and particularly Carrefour.

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Table 5 around here

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Interestingly, Wal-Mart does, at the corporate level, not pay attention to local sourcing, in contrast to what its Chinese location explicitly stated to do in this regard. Carrefour is the other way around: overall it is rather specific about the (large) percentages that it wants to have locally sourced, and particularly from small and medium-sized enterprises, but this has apparently not yet been implemented in China. Comparing Wal-Mart China with corporate, especially the society aspects are more extensively covered in the latter, including fair competition, anti-corruption and ethical standards, and diversity of the supplier base and workforce. The environment also seems a source of greater concern at the corporate level, as does organic food – in line with Wal-Mart's recently announced policies in these areas.

The greatest differences are, however, found in the case of Carrefour: it is far more explicit and extensive at the corporate level than in China. Carrefour corporate has a sustainability report (the term used by the company as a synonym for CSR) and gives much factual information, covering the overwhelming majority of the CSR aspects identified here. What is designated "Promoting globally responsible retailing" in a November 2006 statement on the corporate website implies that "Our global, responsible and progressive approach is organized at the Group level by the Sustainability Department and it is passed on at the level of the countries, retail banners and stores via a functional network of dedicated agents as well as by some 456,000 employees, each of whom works to promote sustainability in his or her domain".[15] Looking at our findings for Carrefour in China, this has not really filtered through there, however.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper examined CSR/sustainability dimensions as communicated by the largest Chinese as well as international retailers active in China, in both the Chinese and English language. In addition to the qualitative analysis in the preceding section, table 6 gives a quantitative overview of the results. This encompasses the number of aspects dealt with by the four Chinese retailers (Gome, Suning, Vanguard and DaShang) and the four international retailers (Carrefour, Parkson, Lotus and Wal-Mart). For the latter, it includes their operations in China as well as the corporate level, covering thus both their host and home country settings. Table 6 clearly shows that, looked purely from a numerical perspective, the two Chinese private companies have a largely comparable pattern, while particularly the partly state-owned Vanguard score higher on a few dimensions as well overall. Differences are larger, however, when we compare them to the international retailers. The two Asian companies pay less attention to CSR aspects than the two Western, and also the four Chinese, retailers.

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Table 6 around here
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Most conspicuous, as also elaborated in the section where the contents were discussed in more detail, is the divergence between the Chinese and corporate levels, especially in the case of Carrefour and, to a lesser extent, Wal-Mart. While Carrefour stands out for its CSR attention in the domestic context, Wal-Mart was notable for several aspects in China, especially concerning donations, where it ranked high in terms of community spending, the fact that is was awarded as best employer and for supplier satisfaction, and paid considerable attention to product responsibility. In the discussion of the findings, the US background of the company was considered, notably its negative reputation in its home country – to some extent reflected in China as well since it long resisted the formation of workplace union branches.

Hence, the international retailers do, to a certain degree, mirror practices at home and thus bring in some of their own habits and traditions. On the other hand, they are also locally responsive (cf. Prahalad and Doz, 1987) or, phrased differently, adapt themselves to what is more common in the specific cultural and economic contexts. In some cases, such as product responsibility, supplier relations and environmental aspects, they add additional aspects to what has been common in the Chinese context (cf. Ruud, 2002). Results from a 2006 survey revealed that Chinese respondents also thought that multinationals scored better than domestic companies with regard to aspects such as CSR, handling of customer complaints and environmental protection (Liu, 2007). A 2006 report of the ministry of commerce confirmed this better CSR by MNEs in China, which were said to have an impact on Chinese companies as well (Wei, 2006), sometimes via supply chains (cf. Jeppesen and Hansen, 2004). An example that came to the fore after the empirical study had been concluded is Wal-Mart's announcement to convene a meeting for around 1,000 Chinese suppliers to help increase their environmental performance (Birchall, 2008). Nevertheless, multinational companies have to reckon with cultural sensitivities and the fact that they are 'foreign' indeed and thus a more likely target for public scrutiny.

For Chinese companies, the challenge of finding a good balance between home and host CSR practices (and expectations targeted at foreign companies in non-Chinese settings) will become more important as well with their growing international presence; the assistant ministry of commerce even labelled CSR as "necessary for Chinese companies to compete internationally" (Yi, 2005). Some of the dilemmas have already come to the fore in the case of Chinese investments in difficult conflict areas such as Ethiopia and Sudan (cf. Dixon, 2007a; Frost, 2007b; Welford, 2007a), in the latter case linked to the 2008 Olympics as well (Dixon, 2007b). In the current set of Chinese companies, the home-host comparison (i.e. boxes 1 versus 3 in table 2) could not be made as the retailers had no operations overseas. However, further study on this topic would be very interesting.

This also applies to a consideration of the ownership structure, that is whether state owned or private and/or family-owned companies are involved. In view of the fact that CSR/sustainability reporting seems to be increasing in state-owned enterprises in particular, a more systematic inclusion of these companies would be worthwhile, also in a comparison to those with different ownership peculiarities. In the case of foreign companies, a relevant issue is whether their Chinese subsidiaries are joint ventures, and if so, what type of domestic firms they partner with. Ownership structure is a third relevant dimension that can be added to the two that were included in table 2. Differences in this respect between the various relevant sets of companies included in this paper did not seem to be extremely large, as far as that could be established given that the number of retailers we studied was very small.

More generally, it must be noted that the findings in this study are obviously based on a one-time analysis of only eight companies, so this would need to be extended and deepened before allowing further generalisation. An analysis of a larger sample, possibly covering other sectors as well, is necessary to obtain a broader insight into developments in CSR in China. Such a study would, in view of the greater amount of data available, also enable an exploration of drivers and determinants of particular CSR/sustainability disclosures. As stated in an earlier section of this paper, CSR is to some extent an emerging phenomenon in China, especially if we look at reporting and also at new developments in terms of the 2008 labour contract law and government attention for CSR. Further insights into this area could be linked to earlier research in other settings that has shed light on the impact of CSR requirements on supply chains, involving also small and medium sized companies (Luken and Stares, 2005).

The relative novelty of CSR in China also poses difficulties for research on this topic. What we discovered, for example, while preparing for this study in the beginning of 2007, was that the state-owned retailers in the set hardly communicated on CSR. By the time we actually started the empirical analysis, however, the amount of information available had increased considerably. While this is an interesting finding, it also points at the limitations because of the volatility of the information – but this is a generic characteristic of especially electronic sources. There are also limitations in terms of what is available via the internet.

Finally, also in China there seems to be growing attention to reputation and branding linked to CSR, as shown by the results of the Chinese Enterprise Survey System mentioned in the beginning of this paper. In addition, there has been a series of articles on CSR in relation to (retail) branding and to marketing and sales in China.[16] This means that retailers may, like in Western countries such as the US and UK, start taking a prominent position in the CSR debate as far as the involvement and awareness

raising amongst consumers is involved – and in influencing the whole supply chain in which they can be highly influential. On the other hand, consumers may also start influencing companies as they expect particular CSR behaviour – the pressure put on particularly foreign companies to donate to relief efforts after the 2008 earthquake in Sichuan province is a case in point. In this respect, it seems very important to consider regional differences within China, as these have come to the fore for both consumer markets (Cui and Liu, 2000) and ethical perceptions (Redfern and Crawford, 2008). To follow these developments properly, more may be needed than exploratory analyses of retailers' communications as we have done in this paper to set the stage. Other research instruments such as surveys and in-store investigations would be logical follow-up steps to shed further light on this phenomenon.

NOTES

[1] There has been some attention to elements of CSR in the international literature, including business and the environment (see e.g. *Greener Management International*, Summer 2005) and business ethics (see e.g. Ip, 2003; Lam, 2002), but not so much to the integrated notions of sustainability and CSR more generally.

[2] *ChinaCSR*, May 2007, p. 4.

[3] http://www.sepa.gov.cn/hjyw/200612/t20061213_97292.htm; http://www.sepa.gov.cn/hjyw/200612/t20061215_97391.htm (Chinese sites; last accessed 10 June 2007).

[4] We do not enter the discussion here as to whether consumers (both in Western countries and in China) would really want to exert that power, as consumer studies show that expressed willingness to pay is usually not reflected in actual purchasing behaviour. It must also be noted that revelations of abuses can also have unwanted side effects such as that (child) workers lose their jobs without being able to find comparable jobs in terms of working conditions and or wages. Cases have been documented about dismissal of children in Bangladesh who subsequently moved to prostitution (Fyfe and Jankanish, 1997, p. 87) and of the closure of a Disney OEM factory after a Hong Kong university girl reported bad employee treatment, which led to unhappy workers that lost their jobs right before Chinese New Year (see http://xnews.xintv.com/html/NEWS/SHEHUIJUJIAO/2007/02/01/403034.html; Chinese site, last accessed 10 June 2007).

[5] Available at http://scjss.mofcom.gov.cn/aarticle/a/cz/nbgz/200606/20060602420947.html (Chinese site; last accessed 9 July 2007).

[6] For the Chinese companies, the top one was not included because it is a conglomerate of four big retailers. The four international retailers ranked 10, 18, 20 and 23 on the 2005 list respectively.

[7] See respectively *Annual Report 2007* (China Resources Enterprise) (available at http://www.cre.com.hk/report.asp?lang=e) and *Annual Report 2007* (DaShang Group) (available at http://www.sse.com.cn/cs/zhs/scfw/gg/ssgs/2008-03-25/600694_2007_n.pdf), both last accessed 8 June 2008.

[8] Foreign ownership by Union Growth (subsidiary of Thailand's CPF) and CPF: nearly 100% (available at http://www.sh360.net/firm/Firm093/7038.html, last accessed 8 June 2008).

[9] See http://finance.sina.com.cn/focus/csb2007/index.shtml (Chinese site, last accessed 16 July 2007); it was organised by the China Association of Social Workers and issued through *China Philanthropy Times* (26 April 2007).

[10] See: http://www.csrchina.com/content.asp?news_viewid=456 and http://www.sclf.org/gygj/200704/t20070430_4623.htm (Chinese site); last accessed 11 July 2007. The top 20 originates from a survey conducted by Market Economy Academy of Peking

University and *Global Entrepreneur* magazine ((http://finance.qq.com/zt/2006/csr/, Chinese site, last accessed 17 July 2007).

[11] Pork prices were reported to have reached a record high (http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2007-05-22/035811865974s.shtml; Chinese site; last accessed 9 July 2007).

[12] List issued by Chinese *Forbes* magazine based on 2004 donations (http://finance.sina.com.cn/g/20050509/16081571776.shtml, Chinese site, last accessed 17 July 2007)

[13] http://www.fmcgchina.com/shownews.asp?newsid=531 (Chinese site; last accessed 15 January 2007).

[14] As also reported on: http://www.fortunechina.com/PDF/2005%20Best%20Employer%20(Chinese)%202005.11.17.pdf (Chinese; last accessed 11 July 2007).

[15] http://www.carrefour.com/cdc/responsible-commerce/our-approach/, last accessed on 17 July 2007.

[16] See various articles in ChinaCSR, May-July 2007.

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TABLES

Table 1. Retailers selected for the purpose of this study, based on sales 2005[1]

Company	**Country of origin**	**Sales (1000 RMB)**	**Listed?**	**Ownership**
Gome[2]	China	49840000	listed	private
Suning[3]	China	39718410	listed	private
Vanguard[4]	China	31299460	Not listed	partly state-owned
DaShang[5]	China	30117386	listed	partly state-owned
Carrefour[6]	France	17435800	Not listed	joint venture
Parkson[7]	Malaysia	11000000	listed	joint venture
Lotus[8]	Thailand	10060000	Not listed	joint venture
Wal-Mart[9]	US	9933700	Not listed	joint venture

Table 2. Dimensions for a comparison between domestic and foreign firms

	CSR dimensions as addressed by a firm in its …..	
	Home country	*Host country*
Type of firm		
Domestic	1	3
Foreign	2	4

[1] Available at http://scjss.mofcom.gov.cn/aarticle/a/cz/nbgz/200606/20060602420947.html (Chinese site; last accessed 9 July 2007)
[2] http://www.gome.com.cn (Chinese site; last accessed 9 July 2007)
[3] http://www.cnsuning.com (Chinese site; last accessed 9 July 2007)
[4] http://www.vanguard.com.cn (Chinese site; last accessed 9 July 2007)
[5] http://www.dsjt.com (Chinese site; last accessed 9 July 2007)
[6] http://www.carrefour.com.cn (Chinese site); corporate site http://www.carrefour.com; all last accessed 9 July 2007
[7] http://www.parkson.com.cn (Chinese site); corporate site http://www.parkson.com.my; all last accessed 9 July 2007
[8] http://www.ourlotus.com (Chinese site); corporate sites http://www.cpf.co.th and http://www.cpgroup.cn/web/index.asp (Chinese site); all last accessed 9 July 2007. At the corporate level it is noticeable that this company is mainly agro-industry and food processor.
[9] http://www.wal-martchina.com (Chinese site;); corporate site http://www.walmartstores.com; all last accessed 9 July 2007.

Table 3. CSR aspects as reported by Chinese retailers

CSR aspect		Company	Gome	Suning	Vanguard	Da Shang
		Employee compensation	Fund to reward best employee			
		Donation/com-munity spending	Donations for disaster relief	Millions of RMB for various causes; listed in China's 2007 top 10 charity enterprises list	Charity Fund; donations for disaster relief; awarded 'Charity Firm'	Disaster relief; president as Charity Entrepreneur
		Local sourcing				
		Local hiring	policy stressed			
		Taxation		Over 1 billion RMB in 2006; awarded for taxation		Over 1 billion RMB in 2006; no. 1 among retailers; AAA credit
Environmental		Recyclable materials				
		Energy conservation				Anti-waste program
		Emissions and waste			Environmental friendly check-out bag	Non-phosphor dish soap
Social	Labour	Labor/management relations	Fairness stressed		Family culture; respect for employees	
		Occupational health & safety			Awarded for accident preventive work	
		Training	Gome Management Institute	Training for rural workers	On-line training	Long-distance visual training; On-line training
		Equal opportunity		Employing mid-aged laid-off workers		
		Child labor/ forced labor				
	Society	Community		Volunteer programme; online community section	low-profit pork sales	
		Corruption				
		Fair competition				
		Supplier relations	Integrity stressed	Equality and mutual benefit	Win-win partnership	
	Product responsi bility	Consumer health & safety				
		Labelling				
		Mkt communication (eg. ad., promotion, sponsorship)			Apologized for mistake	
		After-sales service	Services section	Services section	Services section	Services section
CSR report			None	None	None, but on-line corporate citizen section	None
English website			for HK market	None, some information bilingual	None, some information bilingual	None

Table 4. CSR aspects as reported by international retailers in China

CSR aspect		**Company**	**Carrefour**	**Parkson**	**Lotus**	**Wal-Mart**
		Employee compensation	"incentive" and "fair" stressed; employee shareholding	Market standard guaranteed; employee shareholding		
		Donation/com-munity spending	Donations; disaster relief			Over 26 million RMB in about 10 years; listed in 2005 Top 10 MNE Charity Donations in China list
		Local sourcing	promised			Over 95% of merchandise
		Local hiring				99% of senior managers local Chinese
		Taxation				
Environmental		Recyclable materials				
		Energy conservation			Energy efficient bulbs for customers	Energy conservation and solar energy programmes
		Emissions and waste	Environmental friendly bags		Protect water resources	
Social	Labour	Labor/management relations		Nice working environment		Awarded as 2005 China Best Employer
		Occupational health & safety				
		Training	Carrefour China Institute			
		Equal opportunity			Equal employment	
		Child labor/ forced labor				
	Society	Community				Many charity programmes; awarded for social welfare contribution
		Corruption				
		Fair competition	Fair commercial policy			
		Supplier relations	Respect for suppliers, and treat them upright	Win-win partnership	Win-win relations	Awarded for supplier satisfaction; online supplier section
	Product responsi bility	Consumer health & safety	Quality promise; Food Safety Fund		"We care for your health" section	Food Safety section with detailed information
		Labelling				
		Mkt communication (eg. ad., promotion, sponsorship)				Can write to president through "letter to president"
		After-sales service				"Satisfaction guaranteed"
CSR report			None, but a society section	none	none	None, but a very detailed CSR section
English website			Very limited information	Same as Chinese version	Same as Chinese version	Same as Chinese version

Table 5. CSR aspects as reported by international retailers on the corporate level

CSR aspect		**Company**	**Carrefour**	**Parkson**	**CPGroup (Lotus)**	**Wal-Mart**
		Employee compensation	Employee savings plans: for group and for retirement			Average $10.51 full-time hourly wage; health plan
		Donation/com-munity spending	Carrefour International Foundation (humanitarian aid; against exclusion)		0.3 billion RMB to China; disaster relief; culture/sports	$200 million in contributions 2006; largest corporate cash-giver in the US; disaster relief
		Local sourcing	90-95% of merchandise locally sourced; special emphasis on local supplies from SMEs			
		Local hiring	Local recruitment supported			Good neighbour in community
		Taxation				$12.8 billion sales taxes+ millions property taxes (fiscal year ending 2007)
Environmental		Recyclable materials	Recyclable packaging			
		Energy conservation	Sourcing: conservation stressed; energy and resources consumption control		Alternative energy for electricity program; energy saving programme	Experimental buildings for conservation; renewable energy stories; truck fleet fuel efficiency plan
		Emissions and waste	Elimination of potentially harmful packaging; reduction of packaging weight; reducing store/logistics impact		Control process for air, water, odour and garbage	Waste News Environmental Award; waste reduction stories; packaging reduction mentioned
Social	Labour	Labor/management relations	Employee feedback system			Associate Stories section
		Occupational health & safety	Committed to guarantee safety on store site; safety training program		Employee Welfare and Safety Programme	
		Training	In 2005 69% of staff had at least one training module		Training centers in universities	
		Equal opportunity	Corporate Diversity Charter, committed not to discriminate			Equality of opportunity policy; diversity and inclusion stressed
		Child labor/ forced labor	Condemned in company agreement with Union Network International			
	Society	Community	Fight against social exclusion		Countryside construction programme	local store design; associate volunteer programme
		Corruption	Code of Ethics; anonymous ethics hotlines in certain countries			Gift or gratuity from (potential) supplier not allowed; improper payments for business sake prohibited
		Fair competition				Antitrust section in Global Statement of Ethics

		Supplier relations	Sustainable relationships; promoting supplier responsibility; local SME supplies emphasised		Farmers as business partners and to provide them with occupations	Supplier section with featured suppliers; Ethical Standards ethical sourcing programme; supplier diversity programme with minority and women
	Product responsibility	Consumer health & safety	Product Safety and Quality section with detailed information nutrition policy		Healthy diet; projects for food health	Food safety; organic and healthier food
		Labelling				
		Mkt communication (eg. ad., promotion, sponsorship)				
		After-sales service				
CSR report			Sustainability report; and much factual information		CSR section in the annual report	Relevant section but not named as CSR in annual report

Table 6. Quantitative overview of retailers' CSR communications

Category	Gome		Suning		Vanguard	DaShang	Carrefour		Parkson		Lotus		Wal-Mart	
	C		C		C	C	C	E	C	E	C	E	C	E
Economic (5)	3		2		1	2	3	4	1	0	0	1	3	4
Environmental (3)	0		0		1	2	1	3	0	0	2	2	1	2
Social – labour (5)	2		2		3	1	1	5	1	0	1	2	1	2
Social – society (4)	1		2		2	0	2	3	1	0	1	2	2	4
Social – product (4)	1		1		2	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	3	1
	7		7		9	6	8	16	3	0	5	8	10	13

C = Chinese language site aimed at China
E = English language site at corporate level (aimed at international/home country)