blurred

Is Gen Z opening the UK door to Asia and China?

And what might that mean for Asian brands?

January 2026

Introduction

A significant shift is underway in the UK consumer landscape. For the first time in a generation, Asian (primarily Chinese and Korean) culture, aesthetics and innovation are moving from niche to mainstream, particularly among Gen Z consumers who are driving a fundamental shift in what Britain buys, watches, and values.

Walk through any British city and the evidence is unmistakable. BYD electric vehicles command attention on roads once dominated by European marques. Bubble tea shops anchor high streets. Korean skincare regimens have become daily rituals.

K-Pop concert tickets sell out in minutes (and K-Pop Demon Hunters dominates the Netflix feeds of teens and pre-teens across the country). And Labubu – the quirky Thai-Chinese character – has achieved cult status, with British teens queuing for hours to secure limited-edition collectibles.

Gen Z is boosting Chinese online marketplaces: research shows 82% of British Gen Z have shopped at Chinese marketplaces Temu, Shein, TikTok Shop, and AliExpress in the past year. 23% shop there once a week. Younger people tend to have more favorable opinions of China than older people do.

And while surveys continue to report that older British consumers remain politically suspicious of China, the actual *behaviour* of those consumers suggests that they are more open to Chinese *brands* than ever. Chinese car making giant BYD, for example, says the UK has become its biggest market outside China, after sales surged by 880% compared to 2024.

This represents more than a trend. It signals – potentially – a generational recalibration of cultural influence. Younger UK consumers are engaging with Asian culture on its own terms. They appreciate Chinese aesthetics not as exotic novelty but as contemporary and aspirational. They embrace Asian innovation not despite its origin but, increasingly, because of it.

For Chinese and Asian businesses, this creates an unprecedented window of opportunity.

The UK market, long perceived as challenging territory requiring cultural compromise, is now demonstrating genuine appetite for authentic Asian brand expression.

Yet opportunity is paired with complexity. Government scrutiny around data security has intensified, particularly for technology platforms and connected devices. Political pressure regarding human rights practices creates reputational risk. Sustainability regulations, from supply chain due diligence to circular economy requirements, demand compliance that many Asian businesses find unfamiliar.

Introduction

This is where understanding context becomes commercially imperative. Success in this blurred corporate and consumer landscape requires more than great products. It requires an approach that leans into the enthusiasm of Gen Z consumers while responding clearly to the concerns of policymakers, regulators and advocacy groups.

In practice, this means demonstrating the pragmatism that is deeply rooted in Asian historical, cultural, and philosophical traditions. Rather than focus on what could be performative 'brand purpose', focus on creative execution that honours cultural authenticity. Gen Z consumers possess sophisticated cultural radars; they detect and reject superficial adaptation. They respond to brands confident in their Asian identity, whether that's design language rooted in traditional aesthetics reimagined for contemporary contexts, or innovation narratives that celebrate rather than obscure geographical origin.

To operate and sell in the UK, Asian businesses will of course need to comply with local environmental laws and demonstrate supply chain transparency. Build meaningful local partnerships. And communicate these efforts authentically, without greenwashing or oversimplification. That won't change.

But changing attitudes and the Gen Z appetite for Chinese and Asian brands and cultural trends suggests that, when it comes to corporate and brand communications and storytelling, UK consumers may be interested in hearing about *Chinese* or Asian values and ideas, such as harmony with nature, focus on traditions and intergenerational living.

The pathway forward requires balancing acts. Lean into what makes your brand distinctively Asian while understanding British consumer expectations. Embrace the creative opportunity while navigating the regulatory reality. Build cultural connections while addressing political sensitivities.

The brands that will win in this new era are those that recognise the UK market's complexity as strategic advantage rather than obstacle. They understand that Gen Z's openness creates permission for authentic Asian brand expression—but that permission must be earned through transparency, responsibility and cultural intelligence.

This is the blurred reality of modern market entry: unprecedented opportunity shadowed by significant challenge. The question for Asian businesses is not whether to engage the UK market, but whether they're prepared to engage it strategically.

Chinese and Asian brands and products are hitting the mainstream in the UK

BYD

The UK has become Chinese EV company BYD's biggest market outside China, after sales surged by 880% compared to 2024.

It has expanded its retail network from 14 to 60 dealers and brand awareness has risen from 1% in 2023 to 31%.

Images from BYD

Pop Mart > Labubu

The Labubu line of collectibles has gone viral in the UK. Pop Mart has 16 UK physical stores; demand is high, restocks are chaotic, some in-store sales were paused for safety reasons. The products sell in “blind boxes,” generating hype, resale, strong social media buzz. Celebrities (Lisa from Blackpink, Rihanna, Dua Lipa) have helped amplify visibility.

Image from Pop Mart

Bubble tea

There are around 1,400 specialist bubble tea outlets in the UK, and major franchises are expanding. The drink is especially appealing to younger customers: customisable, experiential, social-media friendly. On TikTok, #BubbleTea tops 8.3 billion views.

Photo by Malcolm Broström on Unsplash

Matcha

The powdered green tea with its distinctive earthy flavour was almost unheard of in Britain 15 years ago, but now is so popular there is a worldwide shortage. The UK matcha market generated revenue of £38.7 million last year and sales are projected to reach £77.5 million by 2030, according to Grand View Research.

Photo by Alana Harris on Unsplash

K-Beauty

A noticeable boom, especially among Gen Z. In the UK, 58% of Gen Z respondents say they bought beauty or grooming products after discovering them online, vs 34% of overall consumers. Brands such as Cosrx, Beauty of Joseon, etc., are now carried in major high street chains (Boots, Superdrug). Ingredients and aesthetic elements traditionally seen as “Asian” (snail mucin, PDRN, novel textures) are being accepted and even celebrated.

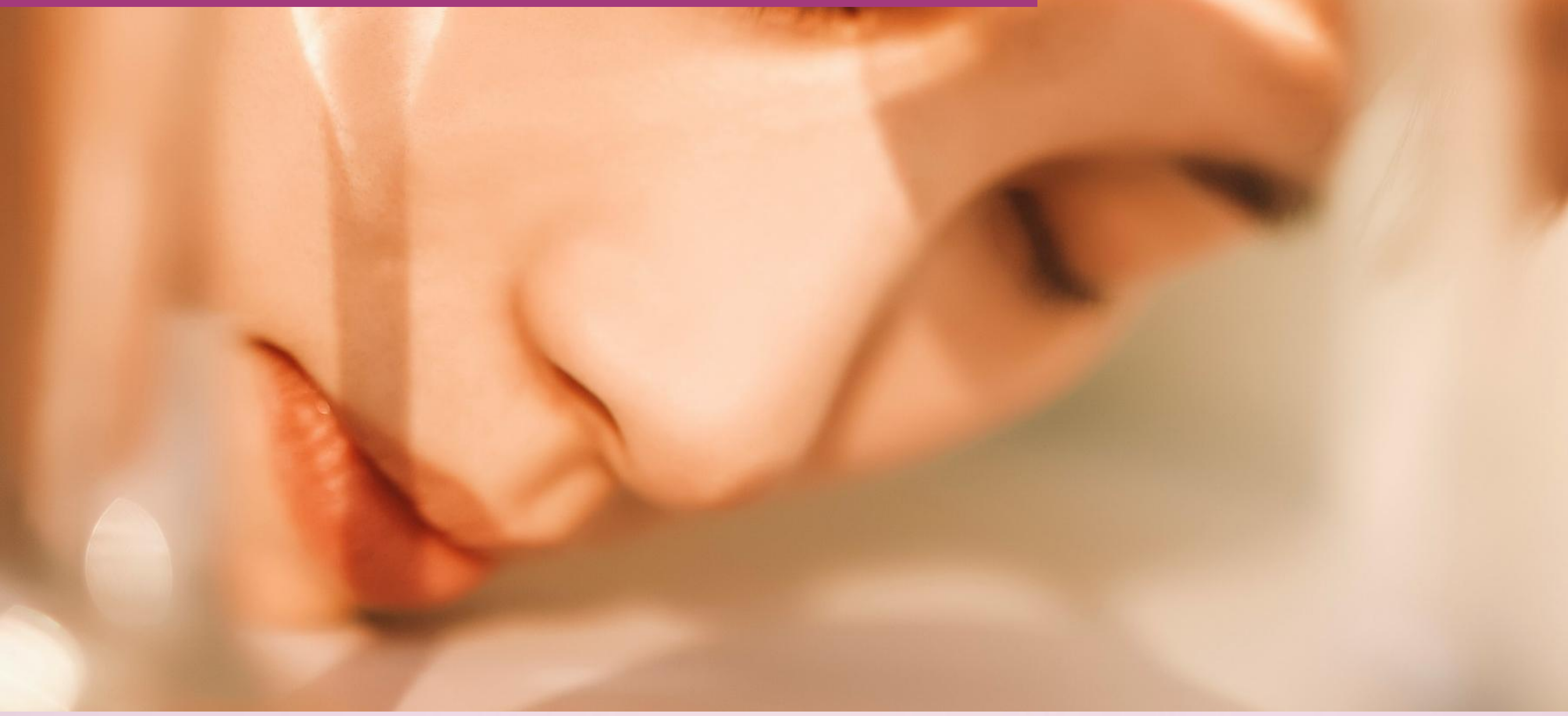


Photo by Maria Lupan on Unsplash

Report: a changing UK consumer landscape for Chinese and Asian brands

For Asian companies and brands working on UK market entry or growth, the usual assumption that British consumers are reflexively aligned with Western norms is weakening, particularly among Gen Z.

Two linked trends matter for business and cultural engagement: younger Brits are less wedded to automatic Western identity frames, and they're already voting with their wallets and attention toward Chinese platforms, aesthetics and commerce.

Why this is happening is straightforward and uncomfortable to any simple narrative. One strand is generational: younger people globally are more cosmopolitan and less attached to national narratives (YouGov finds a decline in British pride among Gen Z).

Another is behavioural: platforms and marketplaces originating in China — TikTok, Shein, Temu and others — solved convenience, price and discovery problems in ways that resonate with younger consumers' habits and budgets, building familiarity that precedes ideology.

Photo by David Kristianto on Unsplash

Also, cultural flows don’t map cleanly onto politics: music, fashion, food and online humour can create affinity independent of views on governance.

For Chinese businesses, that combination is a real commercial opportunity – but not a free pass.

The good news: there is an under-leveraged appetite for authentic Chinese identity, aesthetics and value systems.

Younger UK consumers prize novelty, authenticity and meaning; leaning into Chinese design sensibilities, storytelling rooted in local cultural motifs, or collaborations with UK creators who translate those elements can cut through.

The success of Chinese platforms shows that when form and function match user needs, cultural origin becomes an asset rather than a liability.

There are caveats. First, politics still matters. Public opinion at large remains mixed, and governments are watching Chinese tech and trade closely. Regulatory risk is real – from data-security to trade restrictions – so brands must build resilience into strategy, not treat politics as an optional externality.

Second, trust and values are the currency that convert curiosity into loyalty. Many Chinese brands have scaled rapidly on price and algorithmic discovery; sustaining long-term brand equity in the UK will depend on transparency around governance, supply chains and labour standards.

Recent regulatory and reputational headwinds around companies like Shein show how quickly commercial momentum can provoke scrutiny. Authenticity must include corporate responsibility, not just aesthetic authenticity.

Third, don't confuse cultural borrowing with cultural imperialism. The opportunity isn't to plaster generic "Chineseness" on a product and hope it sticks; it's to create 'blurred' cultural propositions that respect both source and host markets.

That means commissioning UK creatives of Chinese heritage, local language marketing that recognises British subcultures, and product localisation that honours usage patterns and regulatory norms.

The truth for brand marketers or communicators is that cultural affinity can't be assumed or engineered purely through PR. It is accrued through sustained product experiences, peer endorsement and institutional legitimacy.

The upside for Asian (and Chinese and Korean brands in particular) is clear: Brits – especially Gen Z, younger Brits – are more open to Asia and China than ever.

And the market already shows that when Asian platforms and aesthetics deliver value, they are adopted rapidly.

The risk is also clear: politics, ethics and governance can turn a commercial lead into a reputational liability overnight.

The strategic imperative is therefore dual: move fast to capitalise on shifting tastes, but move carefully with professional local guidance, combining cultural boldness with operational transparency and local legitimacy.

If Asian brands can do both, they won't just sell to a new generation in Britain; they'll help define how cultural exchange and commerce operate in the next decade.

Photo by appshunter.io on Unsplash

Conclusion

Implications and opportunities for Asian/Chinese businesses and brands in the UK

Cultural authenticity and novelty matter
Gen Z responds not just to functionality (price, quality) but to aesthetics, storytelling, identity, and "difference." Labubu's success is illustrative: it's novelty + design + scarcity + social proof that drives desire. Chinese brands can lean into design traditions, stories, or aesthetics that are distinct rather than mimicking Western brands.

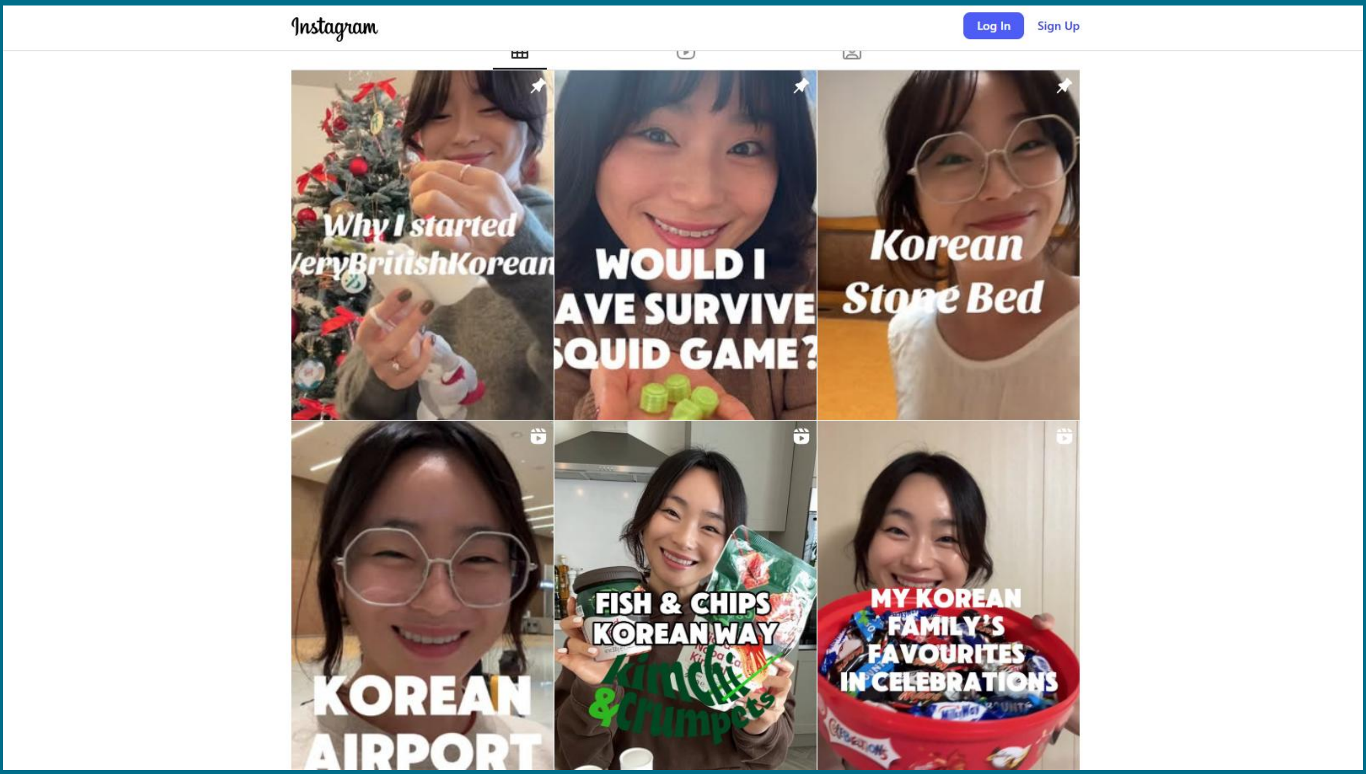
Taste for Asian origin products is growing across lifestyle categories
Whether food & drink (bubble tea), beauty (K-beauty), or automobiles (BYD), there is already traction. So entering not only through niche communities or the diaspora but aiming for broader appeal is realistic, if done sensitively.

Hybrid identity angles are effective
Products that merge Asian design or values or innovation with localised experience (taste, service, certification, regulatory compliance) will tap into younger UK consumers' openness and curiosity towards global cultures. For example, K-beauty brands have succeeded in part by getting into Boots and Superdrug (trusted local retailers), and by framing consumer experiences (skincare routines, transparency) in ways that align with Western expectations (ingredient disclosure, labelling, safety).

Credibility, transparency, ethics remain important
There is potential for political or cultural backlash (real or perceived). Brands must be proactive with matters like safety, supply chains, data, and ethics. Labubu has been under scrutiny for crowd safety and counterfeit versions; BYD must ensure regulatory compliance for emissions, EV regulations and safety. Publish accessible reporting on supply chains and data governance; engage third-party audits where appropriate to neutralise political friction.

Four ideas aimed for Asian brands targeting UK Gen Z

1. Product/design collaborations with UK creators of Chinese or Asian heritage



Partner with UK-based designers, illustrators or influencers (of Chinese or wider Asian heritage) to co-create limited-edition variants that fuse Chinese design motifs (e.g. porcelain, paper cut art, calligraphy, character design) with UK streetwear / accessories / fashion / tech.

For example for BYD: special edition colours, interior trims inspired by Chinese art; for beauty brands, packaging, visuals, or co-branded product lines.

This strategy adds authenticity and local relevance. But be careful to avoid superficiality. If collaboration is token without deeper integration, it can feel exploitative.

2. Experiential and immersive popup events

Create immersive physical experiences for Gen Z. For example, pop-ups of Labubu-style blind-box culture, virtual reality showrooms for EVs, skincare “ritual spaces”.

Use AR/Instagram filters, TikTok challenges, influencer walkthroughs. Gen Z values experience and shareability. These generate social media traction, which, as seen for Bubble Tea and Labubu, amplifies adoption.

But be sure to make activations feel unique than gimmicky.

IMAGE: applefrog on YouTube

3. Narrative around values and outcomes, not just identity

Gen Z can be disillusioned with slow change. Emphasise Chinese principles: long-term planning, investment in green tech, manufacturing innovation, even product performance. But avoid appearing propagandistic or dismissing legitimate concerns (e.g. data privacy or human rights). Transparent communication is key.

4. Localised marketing and distribution

Asian brands should act like local brands in-market: UK-friendly warranty, service, customer support; compliant with UK safety/labelling; retailer partnerships with established shops; availability in high-footfall places. For bubble tea and K-beauty, this is already working.

Doing this lowers friction for adoption, but be aware that local costs and expectations are high. Failing to meet them can damage credibility.

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