

Spécialité NRC

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Singles' Day celebrates the new religion of China's middle class - consumerism



It's the world's biggest shopping day ever.

Today, Saturday 11 November, is Singles' Day in China. By the end of the 24 hours it runs, something like \$20bn will have been spent, for it was \$17.bn last year. This makes it far bigger than all the special shopping days in the West – Black Friday, Cyber Monday, 5Amazon's Prime Day, our Boxing Day sales and so on – all put together.

If it has not come up on your radar, know that a number of British companies have joined in, using it as a platform to sell stuff to China. For example, Waitrose is selling UK-branded products such as biscuits and tea on the Alibaba website.

What makes it remarkable is not just the numbers, but its artificiality. This is an entirely 10made-up festival. The idea of there being a special day to celebrate single people was dreamt up by bachelor students at Nanjing University in 1993 as was a sort of Valentine's Day in reverse: they did not buy a present for someone else, but bought one for themselves instead. The day, which of course has a special and sadder meaning for us, was apparently chosen because 11.11 looks like four single people.

15Bachelors' Day then developed into Singles' Day, when women joined in, and then gradually was transformed into a day that might celebrate the end of bachelordom, with people buying presents for their friends and perhaps new partners instead.

The next stage in its development was thanks to the genius of Jack Ma, founder of online retail site Alibaba. In 2009 he spotted the day as a way of selling more stuff, and promoted 20it with his legendary brilliance. How? Well, part of it is the standard promotional pitch, for example hiring global celebrities to launch it. Last year it was David and Victoria Beckham on duty in Shanghai. With online shopping you don't need an extra day off to visit the shops. You stay at home and just log on.

Hamish McRae (347 words)