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# ADVERTISING CONSUMER CULTURE IN 1930s SHANGHAI

## Globalization and Localization in *Yuefenpai*

Xin Zhao and Russell W. Belk

**ABSTRACT:** China's current experiences with globalism, localism, and advertising can be informed by a consideration of earlier encounters with these forces in Shanghai of the 1930s. In this paper, we examine a popular advertising medium of the time: the poster ad, or *yuefenpai*. These ads are analyzed semiotically, with a focus on the different ways in which the global transformed and was transformed by traditional Chinese culture in Old Shanghai. Implications for the role of advertising in transforming society are also discussed.

Competing theories of globalization attempt to explain outcomes and consequences of the increasingly global flow of goods, people, information, knowledge, and images (Appadurai 1990; Berger 2002; Featherstone 1990). Homogenization theories contend that the global spread of modern capitalism will eventually lead to a homogenous world modeled after the West in general and the United States in particular, as described by various terms such as the Disneyfication, Coca-colonization, and now the Wal-Martization of the world (Bryman 1999; Friedman 2000; Lyon 2000; Ritzer 2004). However, the so-called McWorld of corporate globalization (Barber 1996) is also received differently throughout the world, produces cultural hybridization or glocalization, and faces local resistance (Hannerz 1990; Robertson 1995; Wilk 1993). Although the global processes tend to overwhelm the local (Ritzer 2004), the central problem of globalization is the tension between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization (Appadurai 1996; Ger and Belk 1996). While much can be learned from such broad generalizations about the nature and consequences of globalization, they need to be closely examined in specific aspects of the process (Ritzer and Malone 2000).

China has become the key new arena in which to examine the impact of globalism on society from a multidisciplinary perspective. However, most research on Chinese consumer culture focuses on contemporary China and regards the revolution of consumption as an entirely new phenomenon following the economic reforms of the late 1970s (see, e.g., Davis 2000). A striking parallel exists between the growing

momentum of the commercial forces in Shanghai of the 1930s and the commercialism in today's China (Benson 1996). In both cases, charges of consumerism and worshipping things foreign have arisen, and in both cases, the local has confronted or accommodated the foreign or global (Cochran 1999). Examining China's first encounter with modern advertising, Western brands, and consumer goods has much to offer to our understanding of how globalism works to transform the local through advertising. Some lessons learned at the dawn of the twentieth century may still be valuable today at the dawn of the twenty-first century.

In this paper, we use a semiotic approach to examine the global and local contention in a popular type of calendar advertising (*yuefenpai*) in Shanghai during the 1930s. In particular, we seek to address two questions: (1) how the apparent tensions between the local traditional Chinese and the emerging global consumer culture were compromised and bridged in calendar advertising; and (2) how the symbolic elements of traditional Chinese culture were transformed to promote a culture of consumption in Shanghai during the 1930s, when traditionalism was still strong. Globalism has been taken as cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism (Hannerz 1990), post-modernism and fragmentation (Firat and Venkatesh 1995), or simply as being foreign and Western (Barber 1996). Our use of the global is also in line with Zhou and Belk (2004), and emphasizes the transnational nature of values, signs, settings, and stylistic elements in advertising (e.g., the consumption ethos, Art Deco style, Western furnishings, and oil painting skills). In the sections below, our brief contextualization of 1930s Shanghai is followed by a review of current research on globalization and localization in advertising and a discussion of semiotic methodology.

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## THE INTERNATIONALIZATION OF SHANGHAI

Although there has been exchange of luxury objects between China and the world along the Spice Route, Silk Road, and various sea routes since the early era of consumption globalization between 1400 and 1800 (Adshead 1997), resistance to and the rejection of Western goods characterized most of China's encounters with the West before the twentieth century (Stearns 2001). Despite Europe's growing appetite for Chinese goods such as tea, silk, and porcelain, the only trade commodity found attractive by Chinese consumers was opium. When the Chinese banned the importation of opium, the British responded with gunboats and defeated China in the Opium War between 1839 and 1842. After it was forced to open to foreign trade in 1843, Shanghai became a paradise for foreign sojourners. Following the establishment of the first British International Settlement in 1849, the French, Russians, Americans, Italians, and Japanese quickly settled in foreign enclaves. This foreign community is said to have included nationals of no fewer than 58 countries in its heyday (Wakeman and Yeh 1992).

By the 1930s, Shanghai had become the fifth-largest city in the world and an international legend, often referred to as the "Paris of the East" and a "Paradise of Adventurers" (Lee 1999a). With this international milieu becoming increasingly attractive, the name Shanghai was nearly synonymous in China with modernity: running water, gas, electricity, telephones, and automobiles were all introduced into the city soon after they initially appeared in the West (Lee 1999b). However, Shanghai was also seen as corrupt and decadent, whereas the countryside and nature were viewed as virtuous and pure in Confucian tradition (Lu 1999). As a treaty port, the city is also the site of China's confrontations with globalization and cosmopolitanism (Lee 1999b). Although the Western presence in Shanghai was opposed in various ways, such as through boycotts of foreign goods, the coresidence of foreigners and Shanghainese had far-reaching influences on each other's daily lives, resulting in a hybrid lifestyle (Bergère 1986). "Electric fans, 1930-model Citroëns, radios, foreign-style mansions, Browning guns, cigars, perfume, high-heeled shoes, beauty parlors, 1930 Parisian summer dresses, Japanese and Swedish watches, as well as all forms of entertainment, such as dancing, bordellos, greyhound racing, Turkish baths, and films" were only part of the urban consumptionscape (Lee 1999a, pp. 4–5). Global brands such as Kodak, GE, Colgate, American Standard, and Quaker Oats dominated newspaper and magazine advertising. Even though few Chinese in Shanghai could afford to fully participate in this consumer culture, almost everyone was influenced in some way by the flood of new goods and entertainment. What happened in Shanghai gradually spread to other parts of China (Lee and Nathan 1985).

This rampant consumer culture in 1930s Shanghai did not develop overnight, however. Advertising, which missionaries introduced to China in the late nineteenth century (Wang 2000), played an important role in transforming Shanghai into a city of consumption. In addition to newspapers and magazines, billboards, neon signs, posters, radio, and movie advertisements were all prominent forms of early twentieth-century advertising in Shanghai (Lee 1999b). Other forms of promotion involved collectible cigarette cards with various subjects that were inserted in cigarette packages to boost sales and promote brand loyalty (Xu 1990), and department store displays that followed European and American trends with big plate-glass windows showcasing sumptuous arrays of merchandise (Cochran 2000). Among these, *yuefenpai* (a particular type of poster ad in the form of calendars) were the most significant and were so popular that their release was usually announced in advance in newspapers (Laing 2004). A *yuefenpai* is a vertical rectangular poster with a large central area for the advertising image and product message, and usually with a calendar on the bottom (later they became fully decorative ad posters without the calendar). These calendar ads developed in Shanghai and Hong Kong in the late 1880s. They were derived from traditional New Year Pictures used for holiday celebrations during the Chinese Lunar New Year, and reached their peak of popularity in the 1930s. They were designed to be hung in people's homes and were also found in small retail establishments, barbershops, restaurants, and theaters, as well as on buildings as a form of decorative display. Painted by artists who were exposed to both Chinese and Western cultures, *yuefenpai* tell rich stories of Chinese society in 1930s Shanghai and offer sharp contrasts between the old and the new, Eastern and Western, and Chinese traditional and the foreign exotic. They provide a unique opportunity for exploring the impact of globalization on traditional culture in a cosmopolitan metropolis with direct global and local interaction.

## THE LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

It is widely agreed that advertising is an important force in the global expansion of consumer culture (Stearns 2001). Examination of the global and local in advertising may inform broader theoretical discussions of how consumerism spreads globally and what the consequences are. In their study of print advertisements in Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, Culter, Javalgi, and White (1995) reported the overwhelming use of English in Hong Kong, with a dominance of foreign models in promoting culturally discordant sensuous appeals. Longitudinal studies have identified an increasing use of Western images such as Caucasian models and Western clothing, furnishings, and languages in Japanese advertisements (Belk and Pollay 1985a, 1985b). Mueller (1992) found that despite

the use of Western models in Japanese advertising, some Japanese traditions, such as soft-sell appeals, remained strong. Focusing on standardization versus adaptation, such studies do not fully explore the fusion of the global and the local in advertising (Belk 2003). Indeed, the cultural complexity of globalization in advertising still remains unclear (see Mazzarella 2003), especially in works on Chinese ads.

In a comparative study of print advertisements in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and China, Tse, Belk, and Zhou (1989) found a converging trend in the use of hedonistic values in the three regions, suggesting the expansion of global consumerism. Cheng and Schweitzer (1996) and Cheng (1997) confirmed that recent Chinese ads tend to emphasize symbolic appeals like those in American ads. A recent comparison (Lin 2001) found that, although individualism was more prevalent in American commercials, the use of modernity appeals was equally dominant in the two countries. A similar pattern was also observed in the study of television commercials targeted at children in China and the United States (Ji and McNeal 2001). Zhang and Shavitt (2003) suggested that it was through the Generation X market that individualism was injected into China's collectivistic culture and that the impact of advertising on traditional cultural values came largely from outside China. However, such research based on content analysis fails to address the question of *how* the global influences the local in the symbolic space of advertising. It also ignores the two-way cultural process of globalization (Belk 2003). We attempt to address these gaps by drawing on theories of semiotics (Mick 1986) and visual rhetoric (Barthes 1977; Scott 1994).

Semiotics is the science of signs and concerns the meaning-construction process (Mick 1986). It has developed from both Saussure's semiology ([1915] 1983) and Peirce's (1839–1914) semiotics (1955). Semiotics provides a rich source of tools and theories for interpreting and understanding meanings constructed by signs (Mick 1997). A sign is something that stands for something else and consists of a signifier (the physical trace or expression of the sign) and the signified (the concept or content expressed by the signifier). The signifier and the signified are related in three ways: the iconic, the indexical, and the symbolic. The iconic sign is based on resemblance between the signifier and the signified (e.g., a picture of a car is an iconic sign for a real car). An indexical sign comprises a causal relationship between the signifier and the signified (e.g., smoke as an indexical sign of fire). A symbolic sign is established by sociocultural conventions and is arbitrary (e.g., a rose signifies love).

Semiotics was introduced to marketing by Roland Barthes, and was used in particular in the visual analysis of advertising (Mick 1986). Barthes (1977), who regards the image as a system of signs governed by particular codes, examined how the advertising image constructs meanings. He demonstrates the rhetoric of images with a French ad for Panzani pasta that

shows several packets of pasta, a can of sauce, a sachet, some tomatoes, onions, peppers, and a mushroom, all of which appear to have emerged from a half-opened string bag. The linguistic message suggests a sense of *Italianness* asserted by the brand name and supported by a caption. The image connotes a return from shopping at the market, which is subject to further interpretations (e.g., fresh produce and ingredients for a carefully home-prepared dinner). The tomato, pepper, and mushroom together constitute a second connotation of *Italianness* that echos the linguistic sign by mimicking the colors of the Italian flag. All this is interpreted with the reference to French culture (i.e., what French perceive as Italian rather than what is actually Italian as perceived by Italians). Barthes's conceptualization of the structure of the image allows us to analyze advertising imagery beyond the perceived message, to decipher how the denoted sign is used to express and justify a complex connoted message. The connoted message is motivated by globalization in our study.

## METHOD

Our analysis was based on theories of semiotics and visual rhetoric (Barthes 1977; Kenney and Scott 2003; Mick 1986, 1997; Mick and Oswald 2006; Scott 1994). We seek to systematically and holistically examine the global and local contention in selected *yuefenpai* from early twentieth-century Shanghai. The *yuefenpai* in our study were collected from a variety of sources, including actual *yuefenpai*, archival CD-ROMs, and on-line galleries. Our data collection resulted in a pool of over two hundred pieces, around 20% of the total *yuefenpai* now extant. The time period of a particular piece was decided by the depicted calendar, previous literature, and the painting styles. The choice of the *yuefenpai* analyzed here was based on how conceptually interesting and rich (Mick 1986, 1997; Mick et al. 2004; Rose 2001) each piece was in revealing global and local contention in 1930s Shanghai. Such purposive sampling is not uncommon in previous research based on semiotic analysis (see Mick and Oswald 2006; Williamson 1978). Our analysis focuses on this one example; it is not meant to be representative of all advertisements of the time (Mick 1986; Rose 2001).

The interpretation of the present study is based on theories of Saussurian semiology and visual rhetoric, and both authors are experienced in semiotic analysis. The first author is a native Chinese, and the second has done extensive research on the consumer culture in China. Each author studied the pool of *yuefenpai* independently, and the findings were compared and contrasted.

To examine the dominant code of the time, we first immersed ourselves in the historical, literary, sociological, and cultural environment of the time and referred to previous literature, newspapers, and magazines of the period, such

as *Shenbao* (Shanghai news) and *Liangyou* (Good friend). We sought to develop a deep understanding of the social circumstances in which our analyzed advertisements were created. Such an endeavor not only sensitized us to the signs and styles depicted in *yuefenpai* but also provided rich intertextual support for our study.

Second, individual *yuefenpai* were closely read in relation to the sociocultural environment of 1930s Shanghai. The analysis started with denotation (what elements of the global and the local are represented) and then moved on to the layer of connotation (the styles, ideas, and symbolic values expressed through such visual and linguistic elements). Signs that were popular at the time but remote from the contemporary were identified and traced to their original source. Attention was also paid to the composition and rhetoric of images in presenting the connoted messages in the tradition of visual rhetoric (Barthes 1977; Scott 1994).

Third, *yuefenpai* were examined from a more macro perspective, in which we explored the interplay between the global and the local. In particular, we focused on how the key symbolism of Chinese tradition was transformed to promote things Western and foreign, and how the global was localized through the reconfiguration of the signs of traditional Chinese culture. We discuss its sociocultural consequences and impact on the social transition in Shanghai.

Finally, the pool of our collected *yuefenpai* was examined as a whole to identify common themes and patterns that illuminate the different ways in which the local transforms and is transformed by the global. Individual *yuefenpai* was taken as particular cases that revealed the deep and fundamental sociocultural changes of the time. The analysis proceeded through an iterative process until no new themes could be identified. The identified themes were then exemplified through the *yuefenpai* analyzed here, in which we sought to develop a broader understanding of the process of globalization.

## FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The extensive interaction between Chinese and Western culture in early twentieth-century Shanghai resulted in various hybrid images in *yuefenpai* through which the social and cultural changes of the time can be studied. A close examination of *yuefenpai* reveals a wonder world of global and local contention in 1930s Shanghai.

### Materialism and Confucianism

Traditional themes, such as scenarios from literati literature, Peking opera, and folk legends, were popular in *yuefenpai*. Stories of Buddhism, Taoism, Chinese mythology, and legendary tales were also favorites. Figure 1 is a *yuefenpai* for Hongxing medicine. It depicts a mother teaching her child to write

Chinese in a home setting typical of ancient China. In the background are a yard decorated with bamboo, simple furniture, an exterior kitchen, and storage. Only the lower-right corner depiction of the package of medicine identifies this as a more contemporary scene. The Chinese words on both sides of the picture read: “[Hongxing medicine] protects your child’s health and brings happiness to your home.” Above the picture is the name of the company and beneath it are its products.

Although the denoted messages here are clear and simple, the connoted message is more subtle and complex. Bamboo is a highly regarded symbol of nobility, elegance, and strength in traditional Chinese culture. It provides a frequent theme in Chinese literature and literati paintings. The juxtaposition of bamboo and the medicine transfers such symbolic meanings to the company and associates it with culturally desirable values (McCracken 1988; Williamson 1978). In feudal China, the population was indoctrinated with Confucian thought through various methods such as moral stories, and children were taught to write using Confucius’s works. In this ad, the Confucian principle that the mother is supposed to teach her children to write on the sand board as usually seen in this type of picture has been replaced by the company name. The joy of learning from Confucius is replaced by the pleasure of knowing the company and buying its products. Happiness is represented as coming from purchasing and possessing material goods (here, the medicine) rather than from learning Confucius’s works. The caption “Hongxing medicine brings your child happiness” reinforces and anchors the messages that consumers are led to derive from the ad (Barthes 1977). In this way, the Confucian teachings, which emphasize spiritual perfection, are challenged and subtly replaced by the culture of consumption, which extols material possessions. The original Confucian themes are distorted and inverted by commercialism, and consumption is normalized by the use of frequently seen Confucian images. The role of women is still fixed within the domestic sphere, however, where they were expected to be found at the time and in accordance with Confucian thought; only those parts of Confucian culture that would restrict the development of consumerism are subtly challenged and supplanted.

*Yuefenpai* constituted a visual discourse of being modern. They produced and stereotyped aspirational images for people to use as models to transform themselves into consumers in 1930s Shanghai. As seen in Figure 1, the image of Confucian teachings is turned into a vehicle for promoting consumption and is displaced from the altar as the normal way of life. Consumer values are thus propagated through reconstructing deep-rooted cultural significations. Later *yuefenpai* were even bolder and plainly promoted consumption without reference to Confucianism, such as one for the Indestine Cloth Company, which shows a modern-looking and happy woman standing alone, with the caption “Why is she so happy? Because she has bought Indestine.”

FIGURE 1  
*Yuefenpai* for Hongxing Medicine



FIGURE 2  
*Yuefenpai* for Sanjing Trading Firm



### Western and Traditional Ritual

Ritual symbols and advertising have been found to have mutual influences (Otnes and Scott 1996). Through depicting rituals such as weddings, *yuefenpai* mixed Western and Chinese traditions and, to some extent, shaped the cultural forms in 1930s Shanghai. Figure 2 is a *yuefenpai* for a Japanese trading company. The Japanese caption constructs a linguistic message of being foreign at the perceptual level. Such a linguistic message is supported by several connotations of the iconic messages. First, the consumption of products from the Japanese trading company is implied to be a life-transforming experience, like a wedding, toward something better. Second, a Western-style wedding and dress are presented as enjoyable and desirable, as coded by the image of a boy and a girl. Chinese language is pictorial, and the character for “good, desirable, happy” (好) is constructed by combining the characters for “girl” and “boy.” The depiction of the boy and girl is a visual metaphor

referencing the same meanings. Although the image of a boy and girl is also a wedding cliché in various cultures (as parts of the wedding rather than children of the bride and groom), here it also conveys a sense of happiness and serves to justify a Western wedding and wedding dress in a Chinese context. In Chinese tradition, the color white is usually reserved for funerals and the wedding dress is predominantly red. Western meanings of the white wedding gown as being pure are justified, however, and are made to appear desirable by the visual metaphor of being good, desirable, and happy as constructed by the visual metaphor. Such an iconic image appears innocent and noncoded, and functions to normalize the imposed meanings of a Western wedding as desirable. Were these meanings to be suggested in an explicit verbal manner, they would be much more contentious. But here they are visually implicit and unlikely to be challenged.

The boy and the girl wear rubber shoes and are dressed in fashionable Western clothing. Such non-Chinese dress is also made to appear desirable by the use of this visual metaphor

of being good and happy. The lily, plum blossom, and pine twigs are all symbols of auspiciousness in Chinese culture. In a redundant way, they help make the Western-style wedding and the color white, which are otherwise alien to Chinese consumers, appear more desirable. The image of the moon gate and the pagoda in the background further connects with a sense of wealth and good fortune. The alien and foreign are thus justified and normalized as desirable through the configuration of a local repertoire of visual signs. As seen here, the exotic is depicted not as a rupture with tradition but as supported by traditional Chinese culture. The blurring boundary of the image and the still-life quality of the composition in this *yuefenpai* also indicate a connection with the convention of studio photography in 1930s Shanghai. Studio photography at the time was popular and used blinds on the lens to create a blurring effect at the edge (Laing 2004). The explicit reference to the latest photographic technology further conveys a sense of modernity.

### Transforming Private Space

Images of homes decorated with Western-style furnishings are also common in *yuefenpai*. Such *yuefenpai* reveal private space and construct various images of ideal homes in 1930s Shanghai. Figure 3 is a *yuefenpai* for Japanese Ken-i-koc-ho-jo tablets in 1931. The background of a Western home interior is a replica of an advertisement for Karpen Furniture (see Figure 4) in (the American) *Ladies' Home Journal* of October 1928 (reproduced in Laing 2004). The idealized American home interior is followed and reconfigured a few years later in this *yuefenpai* (Figure 4) to promote a Japanese medicine. Its composition connotes a sense of wealth and social status like that conveyed by the Western oil paintings depicted in both scenes. The packaged Japanese medicine, which is positioned outside the frame on the lower left, visually links back to the product presented by the fashionable woman within the frame. Such spatial arrangement presents the medicine as a link to the upscale urban life depicted in the painting, a link that is readily available for purchase. The woman is adorned with luxury jewelry, a stylish Western hairstyle popular at the time, and a trendy dress with a big red flower on the left shoulder (a visual metaphor for a woman and also a signifier of femininity). Her exquisite makeup distances her from those who face daily strife. The woman is positioned such that she links the audience and the idealized Western home interior, which is then made to appear familiar by use of the common scene of such fashionable women in 1930s Shanghai.

The medicine is explained by borrowing terms from traditional Chinese medicine. The functions of the medicine (in treating body organs) are interpreted metaphorically using traditional Chinese medical terminology and logic (involving body orbs). In the early twentieth century, Western medicines

were introduced to China as scientific alternatives to traditional Chinese medicine (Cochran 2000). Western medicine was presented as scientific, high-tech, and able to make up for deficiencies in Chinese medicine. In 1930s Shanghai, it was closely associated with being modern, scientific, and sophisticated. Consumers of the new medicine were represented in advertising as modern and desirable, as also seen from this *yuefenpai*. With the popularity of Western medicine in urban areas, domestic medicine companies that produced indigenous Chinese medicines also packed their products in foreign-looking wrappers with names and instructions in English to create an image of being scientific and foreign (Cochran 2000). During the anti-Japanese war, a Chinese company even successfully represented its medicine, which had long been promoted as Japanese, as Chinese by linking it back to national Chinese goods via advertising (Cochran 2000).

### Celebrating Hedonism

Another type of *yuefenpai* promotes hedonistic values by featuring Western leisure activities, such as golf and ballroom dancing, and other nontraditional Chinese scenes. Figure 5 is a *yuefenpai* for Huasheng Tobacco. It shows a winner of a horse race at the Shanghai racecourse accompanied by a fashionable woman. In the background, somewhat obscured by the jockey, is the tower of the Park Hotel in Shanghai, which was the tallest building in Asia at the time. To its right are the YMCA building and the headquarters of China United Assurance Society. Such a composition has layers of connotations. First, the jockey is presented in a heroic manner and the image conveys a sense of pride associated with winning the race. Second, the image of the buildings is a visual metonym of the Bund in Shanghai. The mile-long Bund still features various architectural styles, including Roman classical, Baroque, Renaissance, European modern, and contemporary, integrated with elements of traditional Chinese design (Lu 1999, p. 110). The Bund is a microcosm of Shanghai's most developed urban landscape of the time, which was built using a similar integration of the traditional and the foreign. These Western-style buildings often featured sanitary fixtures (bathtubs and flush toilets), steel sash windows, and polished wood floors (Lu 1999). The image of such architecture in this *yuefenpai* connotes a sense of modernity, urban sophistication, and desirability. Third, the fashionable woman is wearing a *qipao* (mandarin dress), the most distinctive dress in early twentieth-century China. The *qipao* combines a European-style dress that celebrates female body figures with the *qi* robe of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), which is a long, loose, tube-shaped dress that conceals female figures (Tam 2000). The *qipao* in 1930s Shanghai signifies a departure from the obsolete past and an arrival of modernity (Tam 2000). The high-heeled shoes further confirm such a sense of being up-to-date. Fourth, the illustration is also con-

FIGURE 3  
*Yuefenpai* for Ken-i-koc-ho-jo



nected to traditional Chinese culture, as represented by the pattern of auspicious plum blossoms on the *qipao*. In Chinese culture, the plum blossom is a highly regarded flower and a symbol of courage, nobility, and elegance. It is often glorified in traditional Chinese literature and literati paintings. The red flower on the dress is also a frequently used visual metaphor for woman in *yuefenpai*, signifying femininity. The image of the Bund, the heroic representation, and the image of a trendy Chinese woman all help situate horse racing within the swirl of urban life in Shanghai and construct a sense of being modern and popular, but not necessarily foreign and exotic. At the same time, the image of the plum blossom helps maintain a connection with Chinese tradition and makes the Western leisure activity appear familiar and desirable.

In a similar way, other types of entertainment, such as musical performance, are represented in *yuefenpai* as an integrated part of daily lives in Shanghai, as seen from the one for Fengtian Tobacco in Figure 6. The fabric of the *qipao* is covered with jagged geometric designs characteristic of the then-popular

FIGURE 4  
Ad for Karpen Furniture

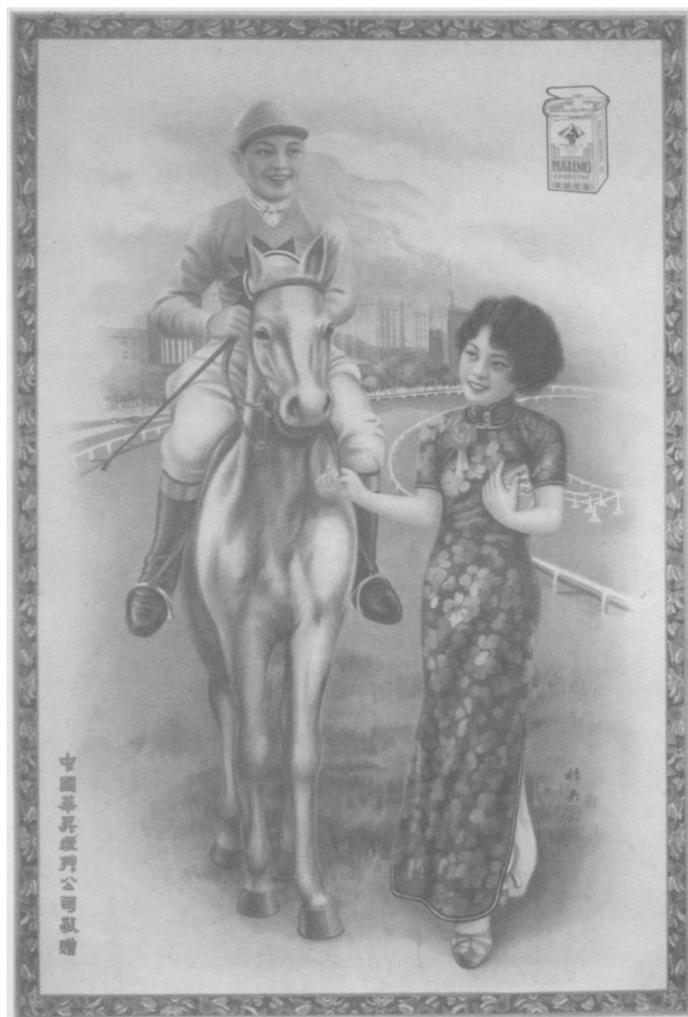


Art Deco. In 1930s Shanghai, Art Deco was a fact of life and influenced people from all walks of life, especially in foreign concessions (Lu 1999).

#### Co-opting Chinese Nationalism

The consumer culture in 1930s Shanghai played a fundamental role in defining modern Chinese nationalism, and nationalism also shaped the emerging consumer culture in Shanghai (Gerth 2003). The influx of consumer goods threatened the existing social class order, and finally led to the National Products Movement, which promoted the boycott of foreign goods, and the New Life Movement, which celebrated simple lifestyles and opposed the rising consumer culture (Benson 1999). Although it was the lifestyle created by imported consumer goods, such as toothpaste, soap, light bulbs, and electric fans, that was foreign, what was under attack in *yuefenpai* was not the embrace of Western ways of life, but the nationality of the products. Not surprisingly, domestic entrepreneurs formed the backbone of the movements. The anti-imperialist sentiments quickly fueled the marketing of "Freedom Cloth," "Patriotic Blue Cloth," and many other so-called national goods (Gerth 2003). Retail advertisers were torn between promoting the superior quality of foreign-made products and appealing to

**FIGURE 5**  
*Yuefenpai* for Huasheng Tobacco



patriotism by passing off the products that they sold as Chinese (Crow [1937] 2003). The transformation of nationalism to promote consumption can be seen clearly in Figure 7, a *yuefenpai* for Commander Cigarettes, produced by British Westminster Tobacco during the anti-Japanese war period. It depicts a well-known heroic figure in Chinese history, General Yue Fei, whose victories in defending the Southern Song dynasty against the invasion of the Jin (a nomadic kingdom in northern China) were celebrated in Chinese culture for hundreds of years. The cigarette was thus legitimized by this image and connotations associated with General Yue Fei. *Yuefenpai* like this one mark the onset of war, the decline of consumerism, and the end of the golden days of advertising in Old Shanghai.

#### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Before proceeding to further discussion, certain limitations of our study need to be acknowledged. Our analysis is grounded on theories of visual rhetoric (Barthes 1977) and semiology

**FIGURE 6**  
*Yuefenpai* for Fengtian Tobacco



(Saussure [1915] 1983). Like other sociocultural studies of advertising (Goldman 1992; Williamson 1978), our interpretation is not meant to be exhaustive of actualized meanings held by the 1930s consumers, whose readings of *yuefenpai* may have been different and more diverse. Such differences are not critical to semiological analysis, which is supported by the text and image, and aims to exemplify analytical points from a cultural perspective (McQuarrie 1989; Mick et al. 2004; Rose 2001). Also, the data analyzed in our study cannot be taken as being representative of all *yuefenpai* or other forms of advertisements in 1930s Shanghai. We seek to exemplify different ways in which the global has transformed and twisted the local to its own ends in *yuefenpai*, rather than make statistical inferences about advertisements of the time. A representative sample of *yuefenpai* is also impossible given their scarcity today.

Although our approach is historical, 1930s Shanghai is arguably not very different from today's China, where the West

is a source of both admiration and hatred, and apparent ambivalence about a Western presence in Chinese society remains (Zhou and Belk 2004). Indeed, anxiety about globalization is still prevalent in contemporary China. Global brands continue to insinuate that they are Chinese, and local brands strive to pass themselves off as global (Zhao and Belk 2002). As seen in Figure 8, a 2003 poster ad for Crest toothpaste depicts a paper-cut of the Chinese gate gods, who are believed to protect the family. The image is used as a visual metaphor for Crest, as traditional symbolism is used to sinicize the global in the *yuefenpai* discussed here. That is, the gate gods protect the teeth of the consumer and metaphorically represent the role of Crest toothpaste. Crest also makes abundant use of the color red in the ad in a further effort to sinicize the brand. The two periods share other similarities as well. The escalating consumerism and an “anything goes” atmosphere, the rapid growth of Chinese brands, the identity crisis (Zelinsky 2001) about what it means to be Chinese, and the rising nationalism and backlash against globalization are all similar factors in the two periods. Although the rate at which globalization and modernization occur have dramatically increased since the 1930s, China’s current encounter with global consumer culture may well have something to learn from Old Shanghai.

Advertisers in 1930s Shanghai actively constructed the West as being modern and advanced, and promoted Western lifestyles through the transformation of symbols of traditional Chinese culture. Before global culture could have any impact on the local, it needed to be explained and legitimized through the shared local system of representation (Hall 1997). Culture is concerned with the production and exchange of meanings (McCracken 1988). By reconfiguring significations within the local system of representation, global marketers and advertisers construct and impose culturally desirable meanings for concepts, ideas, and goods that are initially foreign, exotic, and alien to the local culture. In this process, the global is elevated and empowered by the desirable and the sacred status of the local culture. The local is commercialized, fragmented, and disenchanting. Globalization is not simply breaking with the past in a wholesale manner. Instead, it capitalizes on the local cultural system to propagate Western ideals and to avoid appearing alien.

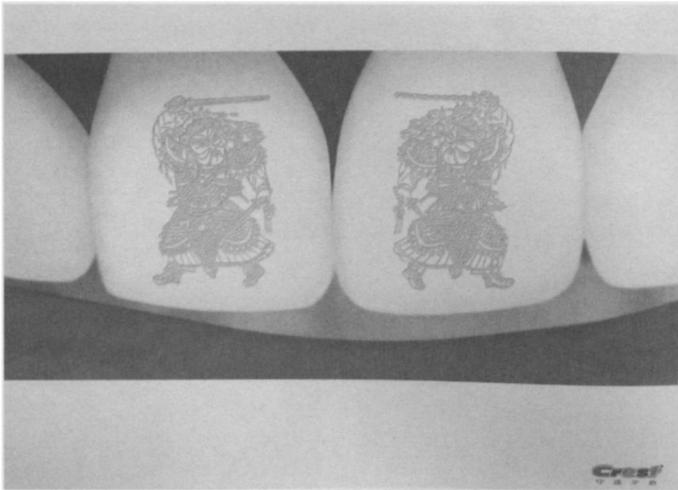
Only when the foreign ways of life are clearly explained in a more or less traditional manner, properly justified, and placed within the existing social structure as seen in the *yuefenpai* discussed here can such new lifestyles be established. Without such re-signification, the signs of global consumer culture are merely denoted signs without local referential anchorage. The connotation of such Western images would likely be articulated as merely being foreign and nonlocal. Deciphering purely global signs requires a certain level of cultural knowledge that is only available to a few. Without such cosmopolitan knowledge, the global signs cannot become meaningful in ways that

FIGURE 7  
*Yuefenpai* for British Commander Cigarettes



the coded message intends. Globalization relies on the local to reproduce itself. The tension between the global and the local at the semiotic plateau centers on the competition for the

FIGURE 8  
Crest Poster Ad 2003



control of signification. The local signification is constantly displaced, broken, reconfigured, and re-presented in advertising. Traditional signifieds may remain stable, but signifiers are dynamic and constantly substitute for each other.

This competition between the global and the local is dialogic; the local also manipulates the global to rejuvenate itself. Long-cherished values are also celebrated through global signifiers that have been justified and that connote being modern, but not necessarily foreign and alien. This can be seen from art and urban literature in 1930s Shanghai that used Western genres to promote local values (Lee 1999a). A similar pattern can also be found in the domestication of things that are originally Western in contemporary Japan (Tobin 1992). Yet the global may also be used to construct a cultural "Other" on which the local is reinforced and made clearer, as seen in various cultures today (Michaels 1988; Miller 1990; Wilk 1993). In this process, foreign goods are transformed into symbols of modernity, social status, and cosmopolitanism, and symbols of local values are reinterpreted.

Finally, research on cultural values in Chinese advertising based on content analysis also suggests a return to native values in a modern setting (e.g., Lin 2001). Native values are commonly coded through the depiction of local images (e.g., the use of old men as a veneration of age and depictions of groups of people to connect with collectivism). However, the rhetoric of image and the rich connotations of its uses are generally ignored in studies that attend only to the denotations of image. As seen in our analysis of *yuefenpai*, the image of traditional scenes is not used for the sake of celebrating traditional Chinese values, but as a vehicle for elevating global consumer culture and offering foreign goods within it. By selectively using elements of traditional culture that can be commercialized, decontextualizing them from their original settings and transforming them into a vehicle for communi-

cating consumption ideologies, the original connotations of traditional signs are replaced with consumerist values, which reestablishes the relationship between global marketers and local consumers. Such subtle connotations of advertising can be deciphered only through interpretive approaches like those employed here.

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