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The construction of a consumer population in advertising in 1920s China

ABSTRACT Advertising in early 20th-century China played a central role in turning Chinese people into consumers. Advertisements between 1921 and 1929 in Shenbao, one of the most influential newspapers ever published in China, were studied to identify discourses of gender within the overarching discourse of Chinese people as a consumer population. Four discursive formations were identified: (1) female and male as ungendered categories of the consumer population, (2) woman and man as citizens of China, (3) one happy family as a consumption unit, and (4) women as a special group of consumers.

KEY WORDS: advertising, consumer population, gender

Advertisements are not the mere promotion of products; they are historical materials that can be used to study the societies in which they are produced (Marchand, 1985). On the one hand, advertisements are social texts shaped by different interest groups, including product manufacturers, advertising agencies, artists, mass media and audience. They are the result of complex power negotiations and competition in the production environment, rather than a neutral reflection of reality. On the other hand, the omnipresence of advertising across different media makes it a powerful part of public discourse. Advertising constructs a ‘commercial realism’, which provides people with ‘a simulated slice of life’ and shapes people’s consciousness of reality and their perception of behaviors (Goffman, 1979: 15). Analyses of advertisements, therefore, provide valuable information for understanding public discourses and related power relations.

This research is about gender discourses in advertising in 1920s China. The early 20th century is a crucial time for the modernization of the advertising
industry (Berman, 1981; Jhally, 1987; Laing, 2004; Marchand, 1985; Susman, 1973; Vinikas, 1992; Williamson, 1978/2002). During the first half of the 20th century, advertising played a central role in the transformation of American culture from a producer-centered to consumer-centered culture (Susman, 1973), and served as a social guide in an increasingly complex society (Marchand, 1985).

Heavily influenced by western industrial developments, advertising in China also began its modernization at the turn of the 20th century and was a crucial cultural force in the construction and promotion of modernity (Lee, 2000). By the 1910s, the flourishing advertisements in cities, encompassing newspaper and journal advertisements, calendar posters and cards, and other advertisement items for everyday use (such as bookmarks bearing company logo), constructed a commercial image of urban living (Laing, 2004; Lean, 1995). Therefore, Chinese advertisements in the early twentieth century provide rich information for understanding commercial culture in an eastern context (Lean, 1995).

Informed by a Foucauldian thesis of governmentality, research treats advertising as a form of power as well as a governing technique in discursive formation of various social relations. How does advertising as a commercial power define ways of talking about people, women in particular, and in what ways did it construct a consumer population in early 20th-century China? This article examines how advertising used different social elements to differentiate as well as unify a consumer population during the early stage of modernity in China. How did advertising use the social concepts of individual, family, and the state were used to organize the population of consumers in advertisements? With an emphasis on gender, this study also explores the politics involved in the production of gender discourses in advertising.

In Discipline and Punish, Foucault (1977) proposed a political analysis called ‘microphysics of power’, which focused on the specifics of power relations and particular techniques and practices. Foucault argued that the development and application of disciplinary knowledge and techniques to individual behaviors was an articulation of power relations and part of the invention of modernity.

‘Microphysics of power’ was criticized for neglecting political relationships at the social level and the relationships between society and the state (Gordon, 1991). In response to this criticism, Foucault introduced governmentality – ‘a way or system of thinking about the nature of the practice of government (who can govern; what governing is; what and who is governed)’ (Gordon, 1991: 3).

Governmentality is a modern philosophy of government, possible only after the discovery of ‘population’ in the 18th century (Foucault, 1991). Population, in the Foucauldian paradigm, refers to everything within the state – all individuals, families, regions and resources across the territory and all specifics of the state (Foucault, 1991). The introduction of population into governing philosophy in the 18th century changed the structure of the state and brought the art of government into its modern form – governmentality.

In Foucauldian thesis of governmentality, the state has no institutional essence (Gordon, 1991). It exists only in the practices and techniques of power that govern the population. Government, then, is the exercise of power in every detail of political activities and the control of each and everything in the
population. Individuals, family, and other forms of government are no longer the primary forms of government, but elements of categorizing the population and techniques of arranging it (Foucault, 1991). Without denying the multiple levels of governing and the agency of the governed, the thesis of governmentality makes the microphysical and macrophysical approach a continuity (Gordon, 1991).

Power in the thesis of governmentality is 'an omnipresent dimension in human relations'. It exists in the interaction between government and the governed and in the willingness (or freedom) of each and every individual in the population to be governed (Gordon, 1991). The main concern of Foucauldian governmentality is to locate the forms of power situated within human relations and the techniques required to reach the most tenuous and individual modes of behavior. It is only in the study of the specificity of certain techniques that a history of power relations might be read.

Advertising is an economic, political and cultural phenomenon that gained social importance at the turn of the 20th century. Like punitive methods, insurance, sexuality, statistics, and other social activities, advertising may be viewed as a governing technique for the following reasons: (1) advertising defines all people with buying power as its 'governed' subjects, or as a consumer population; (2) within this overall grouping, multiple social categories (individual, family, community, state) have been used to differentiate as well as to unify the consumer population; (3) advertising also produces and conveys new forms of knowledge concerning people and their surroundings; and (4) advertising defines the 'appropriate' behaviors of the consumer population.

Advertising is also a governing technique controlled mostly by commercial forces. At the turn of the 20th century, advertising, as a modern phenomenon, played a crucial role in defining Chinese people as a new governed subject of modernity – a consumer population. Chinese people were conceptualized as a population whose primary identity was consumer. Gender, in this paradigm, became one of multiple elements for categorizing the population of consumer. Applying Foucauldian thinking outside categories of western modernity, however, risks imposing western understanding on non-western societies. The effort here is to situate the discussion within the local social context and the local signification system that exist outside the western world.

The purpose of the research is to study gender discourses in advertising’s construction of a consumer population in early 20th-century China. Treating of gender as an analytic category follows historian Joan Scott’s definition of gender as 'a primary way of signifying relationship of power' and 'a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived difference between the sexes' (1986: 1067). Gender, as a socially constructed concept, has no fixed meaning and changes across different social contexts and historical periods. Multiple representations of women are available in one culture, and different social institutions may be involved in defining gender norms. Power is articulated in the competition of gender politics (Scott, 1986).

Gender, of course, is not the only way of organizing social relations or signifying social power. It coexists with other social concepts. Postcolonial historian Ann McClintock (1995) defines gender, race, class and other social concepts as
articulated categories, which exist in and through their (intimate, reciprocal or contradictory) relationship to each other. One may locate gender within a certain historical context and apply all possible social factors to understand the life experience of women, their social status, their relationship with men and their connection to society. In this sense, gender is a window through which we may see a bigger picture of the world.

Gender as an analytical category is particularly powerful for examining social relationships in late 19th-century and early 20th-century China. During this period, China confronted foreign aggression and internal chaos. Woman had a symbolic significance in public discourse and gender was a site of negotiation and competition among different forces.

Historian Susan L. Glosser (2003) says that discussion of women’s questions and family lives in the New Culture Movement was primarily a male discourse and was closely connected to the discourses of nationalism and modernity. Inspired by the western conjugal family ideal, male New Culturalists promoted free marriage choice, companionate marriage, economic and emotional independence in the discourse of the small family (a married couple with their unmarried children). Men expected women to be educated companions and modern mothers for the nation’s future generations of strong, educated citizens (Glosser, 2003). Appeal for gender equality and reform of the family system were parts of the nationalistic movement and served the interests of men more than those of women. Through the reconstruction of gender roles and women’s rights, men articulated their frustration with their own positions in traditional society and challenged generational subordination (young people had to follow what older people said) in the Confucian family system (Glosser, 2003).

Louise Edwards, in a similar view of the symbolic importance of women in early 20th-century China, argues that Chinese women were traditionally seen as the embodiment of social morality or immorality and responsible for national salvation (2000). From the very beginning of the discussion of China’s modernization in the late 19th century, the quality of women was viewed as representative of the quality of the nation and related to China’s status in the world. Improving women’s status, partially by abolishing foot binding and promoting women’s education, was viewed as crucial to strengthen China and defeat western colonial powers. The image of the ‘new woman’ or ‘modern woman’, who was ‘politically aware, patriotic, independent, and educated’, was introduced into Chinese public discourse by intellectual reformers as an attack on Confucian China in the New Cultural Movement in the mid 1910s (Edwards, 2000). The term ‘modern woman’, which was derived from Japanese, European and US models, was less a symbol of women’s emancipation from male oppression than a political creation of the progressive intellectual class and part of the anti-colonial and nationalist discourse. Historian Tani Barlow, for example, labels the discourse of women in China as ‘nationalist universality in a masculinist discourse’ (1996: 117). In this sense, the discourse of modern woman was not only a gender-based and class-based narrative; it was also an anti-colonial narrative.

While the discussion of women was primarily a political discourse, images of women were appropriated by the commercial sector, advertising in particular,
in the late 19th century to sell goods and services. Women became the most important figure in advertising. In the 1920s and 1930s, commercial power entered and then dominated the public discourse of modern woman and modern family (Edwards, 2000; Glosser, 2003). Modern woman became a commercial figure, who was 'glamorous, fashionable, desirable, and available' (Edwards, 2000: 116). The political implication of the 'modern woman' became less important and the sexuality of modern woman became the focus. In the exploration of calendar posters in 1930s Shanghai, Francesca Dal Lago (2000) says that the 'new woman' was commercialized as a sign of 'material modernity' that could be acquired like advertised cigarettes and other goods.

Advertising not only exploited female sexuality; it also commercialized political discourses embedded in the image of the modern woman. In the study of the magazine Jiating xingqi (Family Weekly), produced by Shanghai entrepreneur You Huaigao to promote the habit of drinking milk, Glosser concluded that Shanghai entrepreneurs 'promoted a family ideal based on emerging patterns of consumption' (2003: 135). In the magazine, You recognized, encouraged, and used the small family ideal as a vehicle to rationalize urbanities' consumption habits. The message was that the small family ideal could be realized through the consumption of bottled milk. The small family ideal itself became a 'product' that entrepreneurs tried to sell. Individuals, women in particular, became consumers of such a lifestyle.

Eugenia Lean (1995), in the study of medical advertising in one of China's first modern newspapers, Shenbao, shares the conclusion that female consumers represented the rising bourgeois urban family. The medical advertisements in Shenbao featured the 'New Consumer Woman', which was far more dominant than her male counterpart, 'the Consumer Everyman'. This new consumer woman, as a housewife and mother, became the representative of the nuclear family and 'the primary buyer and icon of consumption' (Lean, 1995: 83).

Studying advertising to learn how gender, woman in particular, was talked about in early 20th-century China, was guided by the following question: what discourses related specifically to women of consumption and gender roles appeared in advertisements in Shenbao from 1921–9?

Discourse, Fairclough (1992) argues, is a signification practice. It constitutes and constructs the world through meaning and contributes to the production of systems of knowledge and belief. Discourse is not neutral and free of power relations, but in service of power (Foucault, 1978/1990). Discourse analysis is the 'discovery' of the power relations by examining discourse in its social production context. The main concern is to locate the speaker, the position and viewpoints, the associated institutions, the dissemination process and then the embedded power forms (Foucault, 1978/1990).

For this article, selected advertisements in Shenbao from 1921 to 1929 were studied. Shenbao (Shanghai Daily), published in Shanghai from April 1872 to May 1949, was one of the most influential newspapers ever published in China. Beginning with its fifth issue, Shenbao was published daily except Sunday. Initiated as a business newspaper by an English merchant, Shenbao came under Chinese ownership on 31 May 1909. In 1912, Shenbao was passed into the hands of Shih Liang-Ts'ai. Under Shih's management, Shenbao grew in size and power and
acquired the sobriquet of ‘The New York Times of China’. In its heyday, Shenbao reached a wide audience across the country. Its circulation was more than 150,000 in the mid 1910s, approximately one-thirteenth of the combined circulation of some 984 registered newspapers, according to statistics released by the Chinese Ministry of Interior at that time.

This study focused on newspaper advertisements in the 1920s. From January 1921 to January 1922, all advertisements of a quarter-page or larger were examined. From February 1922 to December 1929, only advertisements on the first day of every month were studied. Repetitive advertisements were not counted twice. Around 400 pages of advertisements were studied (sometimes more than one advertisement on the same page).

A variety of products and services appeared in the newspaper, including cigarettes, soap, medicine, facial cream, cosmetics, toothpaste, fragrance, body powder, department stores, electronic appliances, cars and trucks, tires, books, wine, bank and investment company. Table 1 is a listing of product category and product brands which appeared in the selected advertisements.

Cigarettes, medicine, soap, toothpaste and face cream were the most advertised products in Shenbao in the 1920s. Nanyang Brother was the biggest advertiser of cigarettes, and probably the biggest advertiser for Shenbao. Its advertisements featured different brands of cigarettes and changed the illustrations of advertisements regularly. The American Tobacco Company and the British American Tobacco Company were also big clients for the newspaper, with smaller size of advertisements and relatively fixed illustrations and copies. Dr William’s Pink Pill was the most visible medicine in the newspaper. Its advertisements appeared in almost every issue and usually used personal stories or testimonies to appeal to the readers. Doan’s, Colgate’s and Palmolive were the major advertisers for soap, toothpaste and face cream. They often featured women using their products in the advertisements.

**Chinese people as a consumer population**

The turn of the 19th to the 20th century is a crucial time for the development of a cultural understanding of commodity and commercial culture in Republican China (Lean, 1995). By the 1910s, the flourishing advertisements in the urban landscape had constructed a commercial image of urban living.

Featuring the consumption of commodities, these advertisements played a central part in the formation of Chinese people as consumers. They often identified people as consumers and expected potential readers to be consumers too. The discourse of Chinese people as a consumer population then, was the overarching discourse in advertising. This consumer population had an intrinsic ‘rule’: on the one hand, the primary identity of the people in this population was consumers, who presumably purchased the advertised products; on the other hand, consumption was the basic way of living, the primary means of solving problems as well as realizing dreams.

Within this overarching discourse, the primary role of a woman in advertising was a consumer, regardless of her other social roles (such as wife or mother).
Table 1. Product category and product brands in advertisements in Shenbao

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Brands</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cigarettes</td>
<td>Nanyang Brother's Tobacco Company, British American Tobacco Company, American Tobacco Company, Shanghai Dachang Tobacco Company, Shanghai United States Tobacco Company, China Tobacco Company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soap</td>
<td>Palmolive, Cuticura, Colgate's</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medicine</td>
<td>Doan's cough lozenges, Doan's eye salve, Doan's ointment, Doan's lung tonic, Dr William's pink pill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facial cream</td>
<td>Doan's face cream, Pond's vanishing cream, Sanxing Snow face cream, Xiangya Snow face cream</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cosmetics</td>
<td>Colgate's</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toothpaste</td>
<td>Doan's</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fragrance</td>
<td>Three Star Florida Water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body powder</td>
<td>The Sincere Powder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department store</td>
<td>Shanghai Huipu Company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electronic appliances</td>
<td>Westinghouse electronic appliances, Ankang electronic store</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Record player</td>
<td>Baidai Record Player Company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Car and trucks</td>
<td>Nash Motor Trucks, Cleveland Six Motor Cars, Chandler Motor Cars, Hudson Motor Car, Hupmobile Cars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tires</td>
<td>Mile Tires</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books</td>
<td>Shanghai Mainland Publishing Company, Xinhua Bookstore, Record Player (Baidai Record Player Company)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wine</td>
<td>Three Star Brandy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bank or investment company</td>
<td>Pacific Development Corporation, The China United Trading Corporation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Four ways of talking about this female population were identified in the advertisements: (1) woman and man as ungendered categories of the consumer population; (2) woman and man as citizens of China; (3) one happy family as a consumption unit; and (4) women as a special group of consumers.

**Female and male: ungendered categories of the consumer population**

In some advertisements in Shenbao, the consuming population was depicted as Nan-nü-lao-shao (male, female, young and old), which means 'everybody' or 'all' in Chinese. Women were included and constructed as female, one category of the consumer population. Except for the different names of the label, women did not have any difference from men or other groups of people. They shared the same identity and social expectation with men: they were both targets of the advertisements and were expected to purchase and consume the advertised products. In other words, men and women were ungendered categories of the consumer population.
An advertisement for Doan’s Cough Lozenges (see Figure 1) illustrates this idea. The drawing of the ad depicts a woman coughing. On the very top of the ad is an English slogan, which said ‘Stop the cough!!’. At the bottom was another part of the slogan, ‘You will – if you use’, and the English trademark of ‘Doan’s Cough Lozenges’. The copy of the ad was in Chinese and said,

Doan’s Cough Lozenges: This medicine is used to treat coughing, cracked voice, sore throat and throat infection. It can also be used to treat dry mouth and itchy throat caused by overuse of voice in speakers and singers. You only need to take one or two tablets, melt them down in your mouth and swallow them slowly. The medicine will take effect immediately. It can also help relieve the symptoms of cold, cough, problem with expectoration and difficulty of breathing. It is suitable for all patients, including male, female, young and old. The medicine is easy to use and easy to carry.

The use of both English and Chinese in advertisements was not unusual in early 20th-century China, especially for western products. Imported products were viewed as superior to domestic ones and the use of English or a western trademark implied the western origin of the products and symbolized worthiness (Lean, 1995). This advertisement for Doan’s Cough Lozenges clearly adopted the same strategy and used both English slogan and trademark to show its western origin and support the Chinese statements.

The copy of the advertisement listed various maladies including cough and sore throat and said that Doan’s Cough Lozenges could easily cure these. This type of persuasion was typical for medical advertisements in the 1920s. By the early 20th century, medical advertisements, including advertisements for nutrition-boosting remedies, miracle pills, medicinal syrups and ointments, surpassed the number of advertisements for other commercial items in China (Lean, 1995). These advertisements targeted all sorts of people and assured relief for ailments ranging from cough to various sexual diseases. Doan’s Cough Lozenges was one of them and the advertisement claimed it treated all people, ‘male, female, young and old’ the same way. The use of a coughing woman in the drawing further supported the statement that woman was part of the patients who should buy Doan’s Cough Lozenges to relieve the symptoms of cough, sore throat, and other mentioned ailments.

An intertextual reading further reveals that men and women were the same for medicine advertisers as long as they used the product. A series of advertisements for Doan’s Cough Lozenges used very similar texts with different images, some showing a woman coughing and some showing a man coughing (see Figures 1 and 2). No effort was made to differentiate men and women as different kinds of consumers. Men and women did not have any gender-specific social roles. In fact, for advertisers, men and women shared the same identity: they were patients and they suffered the same diseases; they were potential consumers of the product and they were expected to purchase the medicine to treat the ailments. In other words, woman and man are used as categories for arranging the consumer population. They did not have any gender or social difference rather than one was labeled man and the other was woman. In other words, man and woman were the same individual consumers that constituted
FIGURE 1. Doan’s Cough Lozenges (2 January 1921).
**FIGURE 2.** Doan’s Cough Lozenges (7 January, 1921).
the population. They were part of the whole consumer group who were ‘male, female, young and old’.

**Woman and man as citizen–consumer**

The discourse of women and men as citizens of China emerged in the National Goods Movement in the 1910s and 1920s. To bolster domestic industries and save the nation from destruction by foreign imperialism, the National Goods Movement began with the formation of the Association for the Promotion of Chinese National Goods in 1911 (Fraser, 1999). The National Goods Movement intensified in the 1915’s boycott of foreign goods to resist Japan’s Twenty-One Demands after World War I (Laing, 2004). In this movement, the Chinese were asked to support the nation by purchasing domestic products.

Women were critical to the movements in two ways: they were the target of criticism and the ideal of the movement at the same time. On the one hand, modern women were heavily criticized for their use of imported goods and they were pressed to change their consumption habits to fulfill their duty as Chinese citizens. On the other hand, woman was represented as an ideal nationalistic consumer, whose consumption of national goods could help the nation survive the incursions of imperialism and grow rich and strong (Gerth, 2003).

Major supporters of the movement were the manufacturers and merchants of domestic products. They exploited the ideas of the National Goods Movement and urged women in advertising to fulfill their duty as citizens of China by purchasing goods produced in China. In other words, women’s identity as citizens was recognized in the consumption of national goods. This citizen–consumer discourse was part of a larger commercial discourse of nationalism, which encouraged the boycott of foreign goods and equated the consumption of national goods with the love of country.

The Nanyang Brothers Tobacco Company was a major purveyor of the idea. A series of advertisements featured women as responsible citizens who purchased the company’s cigarettes. One advertisement on 20 February 1921 was an example of Nanyang Brothers Tobacco Company’s use of the discourse of good citizens to promote cigarettes (Figure 3). The left-hand side of the advertisement was an enlarged pack of ‘Golden Horse’ cigarettes and a young woman wearing a medal on her chest and her left hand pointing to the copy of the advertisement. The upper part of the advertisement was a prominent slogan of ‘advocacy of domestic products is the respect for personality’. The copy of the advertisement said,

The citizens of Republican China should use national goods. When you buy Chinese cigarettes, the Golden Horse cigarettes produced by the Nanyang Brothers Tobacco Company are the best choice. The cigarette’s color and taste are better than those of imported ones. Your consumption of the cigarettes shows your respect for personality.

The first sentence was the key idea of the National Goods Movement, which linked individual consumption with nationalism. It reminded readers that, as Chinese,
they should support national goods. Then the advertisement positioned its product as the best national product available. In order to convince readers, the advertisement further argued that Golden Horse cigarettes were even better than imported ones in their taste and look. This was to overcome the impression that imported goods were superior to domestic ones. At the end of the copy, the advertisement restated that in order to earn respect, one should smoke cigarettes made by the Chinese company.

The use of respect in the copy of advertisement and the drawing of a woman with medal on her chest were closely related. In the illustration, the young woman wore fashionable clothing and was depicted as a modern woman. As mentioned earlier, in the National Goods Movement modern women were criticized for their indulgence in imported goods and their lack of patriotism. Within this social context, the advertisement preached that by consuming cigarettes made by the Nanyang Brothers Tobacco Company, women could help save the country and so earn respect and become honored citizens.

Unlike the discourse of female as an ungendered category of the consumer population, the discourse of woman and man as citizen-consumer in the tobacco advertisements was gender based. In the commercial discourse of nationalism, men and women were not equal. In the advertisements, men appeared more often than women as patriotic citizens for the nation. They were depicted as fellow countrymen, as brothers who shared the disgrace and honor of the country.

A full-page advertisement for the Chinese Tobacco Company on 10 October 1921 (the national day for republican China) made it clear that the patriotic citizen was primarily a man (see Figure 4). The illustration depicted a man holding a national flag of Republican China in his right hand and a cigarette in his left hand. On the top of the advertisement was a sentence of ‘Chinese Tobacco Company Congratulates Great China on National Day’. At the bottom of the ad was the slogan: ‘Chinese people smoke Great China Cigarettes, Never forget the Great China’.

The juxtaposition of four packs of Great China cigarettes with the national flag signaled that Great China cigarettes were as important as the national flag
FIGURE 4. Nanyang Brothers Tobacco Company (20 February 1921).
and was another representative symbol for the nation. The slogan further supported this idea by telling people that they would not forget the holiday of their nation if they smoked the product. Great China cigarettes then became the commercial symbol of China. A man rather than a woman holding the national flag implied that man was the leading citizen-consumer who would save the nation and make it rich and strong.

An advertisement for the Nanyang Brothers Tobacco Company illustrated the idea (see Figure 5) that women were expected to follow the lead of male citizens in the salvation of the nation. The right-hand side of the advertisement was the title, ‘Congratulations to Republican China’s progress in all circles in the past ten years’. The right side of the advertisement followed, ‘Wish fellow Chinese people smoke national cigarettes. Chinese Nanyang Brothers Tobacco Company’. The center of the advertisement was an illustration. It depicted a long flight of steps leading to the top of a hill, where a sign of ‘progress’ was posted. Along the steps was another sign, ‘Please smoke “loving your nation” cigarettes’. A man dressed as gentry was leading the way up the hill. A woman and two other men, all dressed in plain clothes, followed. The drawing and the text together implied that smoking national cigarettes was a way to the progress and women were involved in the project toward national progress. A gender- and class-based hierarchy appeared in the project of nation building and the way toward progress: wealthy man led and the rest of his fellow Chinese (including low-class men and women) followed.

**One happy family as a consumption unit**

Unlike the previous two discourses which focused on individuals as consumers, the third discourse used the family as a consumption unit. In different advertisements, a small family rather than individuals were shown to enjoy the benefits

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**Figure 5. Nanyang Brothers Tobacco Company (1 January 1921).**
of the products as part of an urban life. The discourse of happy family as a consumption unit in advertising exploited the popular small family discourse in the New Cultural Movement. In opposition to the traditional big family that suppressed individual independence and happiness, the discourse of the small family was associated with the ideas of free marriage choice, companionate marriage, financial and emotional independence of individuals. It was the modern form of family and was represented as a symbol of progress and nationalism. Using a small family or happy couple in the advertisements, advertisers associated their products with the ideal family mode and all the positive feelings brought by the idea of small family.

In the commercial world constructed in advertising, young man, woman, sometimes with their children as a happy family, enjoyed all the pleasure, convenience and progress provided by modern capitalism. During the daytime, the family might visit the downtown business center and be amazed by the grand building of the advertised company (1 January 1927). Or the father might take the family to the park and enjoy smoking while watching his family playing (5 April 1921). The young man and woman could also take the advantage of the newly available automobile and spend their leisure time driving together (1 August 1928). At night, the happy couple might take a walk in the street lit by the advertised light bulb (1 August 1925). They could also stay home, listening to music on the advertised recorder player or reading a newspaper under the lamp powered by the Westinghouse Electric Company (11 May 1921).

By creating various social scenes in which a couple or family enjoy a happy life with the consumption of advertised products, advertising created an association between the products and a happy modern lifestyle. An advertisement by the Huacheng Tobacco Company in 1927 is an example (Figure 6). The focus of the advertisement was a traditional Chinese painting in which a couple are standing in front of a great waterfall and the man is smoking. At the bottom of the advertisement are two enlarged packs of advertised cigarettes. Occupying the left-hand side of the advertisement is a slogan saying, 'The Three Castles cigarettes have special enchantment'.

The word 'enchantment' here referred to multiple things and had multiple meanings. In the Chinese painting, the couple were enchanted by the grand view of the waterfall. By using the word 'enchantment' to describe the quality of the cigarettes, the advertisement told newspaper readers that the cigarettes had the same magic as the great waterfall and their wonderful taste would enchant the users as well. However, the Chinese painting presented a picture-perfect life. The couple's dress indicated that they were pretty wealthy. Their admiration of the great waterfall told readers that they loved traveling and could afford it, both financially and physically. In other words, this couple were young, rich, healthy and full of love of life and nature. It was an ideal lifestyle dreamt of by many urban dwellers. The juxtaposition of the painting and the cigarettes implied that smoking the Three Castles cigarettes could give you a taste of such an ideal life. In the depiction of a small family happily consuming the advertised products, advertisements treated the small family as a consumption unit. They also defined a modern way of family life and how the family should organize their everyday
FIGURE 6. Three Castle Cigarettes (1 May 1924).
living and spend their leisure time. Advertisements in Shenbao in the 1920s endorsed urban life as the legitimate way of life. The consumer population was depicted as families that lived in cities and enjoyed comforts brought by modern technologies; they appreciated the urban landscape daily and spent leisure time traveling to see the great landscape of China.

Women as a special group of consumers

In her study of Shenbao’s advertisements from 1872 to 1912, Barbara Mittler (2004) found that the construction of ‘woman consumers’ was related to certain products that dominated advertisements at the turn of the 20th century. She argued that by the 1910s, beauty, sex and procreation had become the focus of the commercial representation of women. Although the three discourses discussed earlier in this article showed alternative ways of representing women’s images, ‘woman consumer’ as a special group of consumers was still the dominant discourse of woman found in 1920s’ Shenbao. Images of the beautiful, seductive or even dangerous woman consumers were presented extensively in advertising.

One particular category of products played a central role in the construction of the woman consumer images. In the advertisements for beauty-related products, woman was depicted as modern girl who had an obsession with perfecting her physical appearance. The advertisements helped create modern girl’s deep anxiety over her look by questioning the conditions of their physical appearance. Woman was depicted as a special group of consumers with special needs. A woman’s body, including her face, teeth, her underarm, her skin, her sweat and her scent, were publicly scrutinized in the advertisements. Her anxiety over the imperfection of her looks could only be eased by resorting to the beauty products.

Advertising in the 1920s not only appealed to women’s anxiety over their looks, but also commercialized woman as an object for consumption. The beauty of woman was used to sell goods from cigarettes to snacks. The presentation of woman as an object for gazing and the close focus on her dismembered body part objectified women as a commodity for consumption. In the following analysis, two sub-discourses are discussed separately.

Sub-discourse one: female body under scrutiny

Advertisements of beauty products put the female body under constant scrutiny in both the private and public space. The self-examination of the female body was obvious in the prevalent use of mirrors in private settings. In many advertisements, a young woman was shown sitting in front of a mirror or holding a mirror in her bedroom or bathroom. She looked into the mirror closely, applying the beauty products or examining her face, skin or teeth (Figure 7). The mirror symbolized the persistent existence of public gazing for the female body. Through the self-examination of her physical appearance
in the mirror, woman was internalized the social standard of beauty and invited the public scrutiny into her private space. The presentation of mirrors in woman’s private space (bedroom and bathroom) invited public gazing into private sectors.

Advertisements for beauty products dismembered the female body by focusing on specific parts of her body. Face creams and make-up products targeted the woman’s face, fragrances and deodorizers warned the woman of her stinky body smell, hand cream focused on the hands and toothpaste scrutinized the

FIGURE 7. Pond’s Facial Cream (1 September 1922).
condition of her teeth. This dissection of the female body dehumanized woman and deprived her subjectivity as an entity with a will.

Besides the invasion of the public gaze into a woman's private domain and her body, advertising also set beauty standards and urged women to look up to the beauties in the advertisements. Simply displaying beautiful women in the advertisements served the purpose. But sometimes advertisers went one step further and put women under social pressure by comparing them to the ideal woman in the same advertisement.

In one of its advertisements, Doan's facial cream compared three women by putting them together (Figure 8). The woman closest to the reader had
perfect skin. She looked straight at the readers and put one hand under her face to draw readers' attention to it. Her body language signaled her confidence in her beauty and skin. By contrast, the two women on her left shied away from the readers by either looking down or looking to the side. Their faces were covered by freckles and they were ashamed of the imperfection when standing next to the woman with perfect skin.

The copy of the advertisement said, ‘Most of the cosmetics products on the market cover up the skin problems. Due to their poor quality, the long-term use of these products turns skin yellow. Doan’s face cream is a refined product with a nice smell. It uses good material to protect delicate skin. Upper-class women all endorse it and are happy with its effects. Use this cream over the face after washing will make the skin glow’.

Both the illustration and the copy of the advertisement invited readers to examine and compare the three women’s skin. Freckles and yellow skin were depicted as problems and causes of social shame. Women with similar skin conditions were urged to use the advertised products to avoid public humiliation while facing the woman with perfect skin. By contrast, upper-class women were viewed both as credible endorsers of the product and social exemplars for all women. By associating Doan’s face cream with upper-class women, the advertisement presented an upper-class product available for women of all classes.

In Shenbao’s advertisements, the consumption of female consumers was guided by upper-class women and regulated by men. Men with knowledge of the products were viewed as trustworthy and qualified guides for women’s shopping, even for products designed specially for women. Male doctors were the most cited authority. But sometimes even a male shop assistant was reliable enough to offer opinions. For example, a Palmolive soap (Figure 9) advertisement asked, ‘why do shop assistants and doctors both recommend Palmolive soap?’ The answer was, the advertisement followed, the male shop assistant’s (in a traditional Chinese dress) knowledge of the soap’s low price and good quality. The male doctor (in a western business suit) was capable of giving advice because of his scientific knowledge of the soap’s effectiveness in cleaning as well as beautifying.

Sub-discourse two: beautiful women as commodities

The images of a beautiful woman and the term ‘beautiful girl/woman’ or ‘beauty’ were frequently used in advertising in the early 20th century to promote various products. For example, the British American Tobacco Company ran one particular advertisement in Shenbao for many years, which featured a beautiful woman sitting on a chair and enjoying a cigarette (Figure 10). The copy of the advertisement said, ‘Beautiful women love cigarettes with light scent and smooth taste. Big-sized Haiamen cigarettes have unique aromatic smell and are loved by ladies’. It was clear that the ad targeted women specifically and the cigarettes were especially designed for women with the light taste and unique scent.

The beautiful woman in the illustration served multiple purposes: (1) she was used to overcome the social taboo associated with smoking in women, to attract
the attention of female readers, to make it easier for women to identify with her and to persuade women to share the consumption of tobacco; (2) the woman herself was for consumption. Her seductive pose and smile both invited the gaze of the public. By comparing cigarettes with her beauty, she became another attribute added to the cigarettes besides the light taste and aromatic scent.

The comparison between beautiful women and cigarettes was a common strategy used in the advertisements for tobacco companies. Beautiful women and cigarettes were depicted as desirable and related: both were beautiful objects to be appreciated, beautiful women should smoke beautiful cigarettes,
and beautiful cigarettes would enhance the beauty of women. There were many implications of such a comparison. On the one hand, the persistent use of beautiful women in advertising set physical appearance as one of the most important criteria for valuing a woman. It pressed women to follow the standard set by the advertisements and try to look and act like the idealized women in the advertisements. On the other hand, the comparison between the woman and cigarettes objectified the woman as a commodity available for public consumption.
The discourse of beautiful women for sale was blatant in the use of ‘beautiful woman’ as the brand name for products. The Nanyang Brothers Tobacco Company created a brand called ‘Beautiful Woman Cigarette’ in 1927 (e.g., 1 October 1927). The Huacheng Tobacco Company had a brand called ‘Beauty Cigarette’ around the same time. Advertisements for these two cigarettes featured a beautiful woman in the illustration and some advertisements even conveyed a sexual implication by associating the consumption of the cigarette with the consumption of the beautiful woman. Foreign products were no exception. Sun-Maid seedless raisins used ‘Beautiful Woman Raisins’ as its Chinese brand name (2 December 1922). Tiger Powder translated its brand name into ‘Beautiful Woman’ and featured one seductive woman applying powder to the armpits in the advertisement.

The scrutiny of body and the focus of beauty were exclusively for women. When a male body was featured in the advertisements,6 strength and health, rather than beauty, were the focus. For example, in an advertisement for Doan’s tonic tablets (3 March 1921), a strong half-naked Chinese man was presented as a symbol of health and strength. A similar theme appeared in another ad for Striving cigarettes (1 October 1928), in which two strong men were fighting each other. Sometimes, the male body was even used to signify the strength of the nation (11 January 1921). Though man could also be seen as an object for consumption in advertising, the social attributes of man rather than the physical appearance were the center of presentation. Rich, highly respected and knowledgeable men were used to sell the products.

The focus on woman’s physical attributes and man’s social attributes carried important social implications. They defined what was important for being a man and a woman. Man was viewed as a social being whose social status was more important than his appearance; for woman, the body and the look were the primary resources they had.

Besides the discourses of ‘female body under scrutiny’ and ‘beautiful women commodities’, female consumers were often constructed as domestic. In many advertisements, the female consumer was called; or ‘閨女’ (woman/girl/daughter in boudoir). She was also depicted as a wife serving her husband or doing household chores, and as a mother taking care of children.

**Conclusion**

The first three discourses discussed treated both woman and man as part of the same consumer population, though man and woman may have different gender roles. Multiple elements – individual, family, state, and gender – were used to categorize and arrange the consumer population. The fourth discourse, **women as a special group of consumers**, however, constructed a different consumer population. It was a female ONLY group and it treated women differently from men. It basically defined the female consumer population in terms of gender and focused on female beauty, body and domestic roles.

No matter how different they were, all four discourses were discursive knowledge produced by commercial power in its competition and negotiation.
with other social forces, such as government or intellectuals, in the process of defining social relations in a period of rapid changes. They were different 'levels of reality' that defined the governed object – Chinese people in this case – as a consumer population. As knowledge produced in early 20th century with rapid social changes of industrialization, urbanization and immigration, they may serve as reference for understanding the new middle-class consumers, who are emerging in today's China after three decades of economic and social reforms.

NOTES
1. The term 'population', says Foucauldian scholar Pasquale Pasquino, was invented in Germany by George Obrech in the early seventeenth century and came into standard use in France during the 18th century (1991: 111-7).
2. The New Culture Movement began with the publication of New Youth in 1915 and focused primarily on the pursuit of a cultural solution to strengthen and revitalize the nation after the failure of the 1911 Revolution to establish a strong modern nation-state. See Wang (1999).
3. Shanghai was China’s economic center and the biggest treaty port at the turn of the 20th century.
4. Discourses, however, are not always subservient to power. According to Foucault, 'discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it' (1978/1990: 101).
5. The information about Shenbao is cited from the bibliographical note prepared by the director (Ping-kuen Yu) of the Center for Chinese research Materials in the microfilms of Shenbao on 24 October 1969.
6. Only three advertisements featuring a man's body found in 1920s Shenbao issues were studied.

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