

Advertising in 1920s Shanghai: Globalization and Localization in the World of Calendar Advertising

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Most recently emerging research on Chinese consumption and advertising focuses on contemporary big cities in China, regardless the fact that historical research can also offer important potential for expanding our understanding of inherently dynamic consumption and advertising phenomena in current China. Prior research also tends to view globalization manifested in consumption and advertising as a fairly new phenomena emerging after the late 1970s' economic reformation. However, there is a missing part in the marketing literature: 1920s Shanghai, which at that time was the fifth biggest city in the world and very much a cosmopolitan metropolis. Chinese consumers, as represented in the increasing research on contemporary China, still find preserving their established way of life as problematic as their predecessors at the turn of last century. At the same time, advertisers found it daunting to persuade people with a long, distinguished history and tradition to change their habits of mind and living patterns. Like today global and foreign appeals didn't always work well in 1920s Shanghai. Examining China's first exposure to global advertising also shows how advertising, along with other forces, works to transform society.

In this paper, a unique form of advertising, commercial calendars are chosen for the semiotic analysis from a pool of over 150 pieces (more than 10% of those left today in the world). The emergence of commercial calendars was due to the early advertisers' failure in promoting their products with images of George Washington and Western women in China. Commercial calendars originated from traditional Chinese New Year pictures, which were used for lunar New Year celebration and decorations, and which were rich in symbolic meanings. Advertisers incorporated traditional New Year Pictures to carry not only the auspicious symbols and historic characters from traditional Chinese folklore, but also a Chinese lunar calendar and pictures of the branded goods of their sponsors. Later Yue Fen Pai are usually composed of an oblong rectangular frame as used in traditional Chinese scroll paintings, with a portrait of an idealized and modernized Chinese woman in western style decorated settings and with other symbols of modernity such as electrical appliances and airplanes. At the bottom there was a calendar and on top was printed the name of the advertiser, most often a cigarette and medicine company.

Commercial calendars were not only used by foreign advertisers to make their product appear less exotic and more friendly but also to co-opt a local identity during times of anti-foreign boycotts in China. In doing this, the products were likely to be associated with nationalistic sentiments among consumers and proved effective. Domestic merchants also used commercial calendars to promote a sense of modernity and being foreign.

Commercial calendars had far more influences on social changes. The inscription of the Western calendar institution onto the Chinese lunar calendar helped change time concepts in people's mind and are these new time concepts are regarded as a foundation of Chinese modernity. The influences of globalization are also found to manifest in the changes of dressing styles depicted in commercial calendars. The emergence of a new fashion style is analyzed as a collective rite of social passage from Chinese feudal society to a modern Republican China, as manifest in people's

clothing by the late 1920s. Prior research points out clothing changes often correlate with social changes and Gennep's theory about rite of passage seems quite applicable in this case.

Although calendar advertising invoked dramatic social changes, traditions and cultural values were not necessarily diminished, as seen in the analysis of calendar pictures. Women's roles were still depicted as fixed in homes and focused on the cultivation of children. Emphases on Chinese family values were still dominant. Furthermore, the Western oil painting techniques were adopted to promote Chinese folklore.

The discussion also indicates that modernization and globalization are not merely simple breaks with the past. The competition between the global and local forces was prominent in the material and cultural transformation of Chinese lives and manifested in calendar advertising in 1920s Shanghai, and it is still evident in present day China and contemporary advertising. In this competition, foreign goods are transformed into symbols of modernity, social status, and cosmopolitanism. Although examples from the last century clearly illustrate that to make products and advertising appear as Western as possible cannot guarantee advertising success in China, such lessons are being learned again and again in the present. Many advertisers still appear to assume that West is best and Western straightforward advertising will work the same way in China. The paper also contributes to the field by adopting semiotic theory to Chinese advertising research and historical data.

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