

Research on the Application of Commercial Advertising Elements in the Republic of China (1912-1949)

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Abstract

This study explores the integration of commercial advertising elements in the Republic of China (1912–1949), highlighting the interplay between Chinese cultural traditions and Western advertising methodologies. During this period, an influx of foreign enterprises introduced modern advertising strategies, prompting domestic brands to adopt innovative visual and rhetorical techniques to increase their competitiveness in the marketplace. By analyzing key advertising sectors—including cigarette brands, everyday consumer goods, and the iconic calendar posters—this research examines how advertising designers skillfully integrated traditional Chinese aesthetics with Western realism to produce persuasive and visually compelling advertisements. Moreover, the study investigates the strategic use of advertising slogans, typography, and imagery to influence consumer behavior. The findings reveal that advertising during this era not only served commercial objectives but also mirrored broader socio-cultural transformations, shaping the trajectory of modern Chinese advertising design.

Keywords: Commercial Advertising, Republic of China (1912–1949), Sino-Western Aesthetics, Everyday Consumer Goods, Cigarette Brands

Introduction

While inheriting China's cultural traditions and values, advertising design during the Republican era was profoundly influenced by Western theories and methodologies. Amid the continual interplay of Chinese and Western cultures, commercial advertising emerged in a variety of formats—including poster advertisements, newspaper ads, outdoor campaigns, and radio broadcasts—thus establishing itself as a form of mass communication (Ye, 2009). This study is significant for two compelling reasons: First, it illuminates how China's earliest encounters with globalization were manifested in visual culture, thereby offering historical insights for contemporary cross-cultural marketing strategies. Second, the distinctive fusion of Sino-Western aesthetics achieved during this era provides valuable case studies for understanding cultural hybridization in post-colonial contexts. While existing scholarship has

predominantly focused on the political and economic histories of the Republican period, systematic analyses of commercial visual culture remain scarce (Cong et al., 2023).

During the Republican era (1912–1949), Chinese society underwent profound transformations. With the large-scale entry of global enterprises into China, domestic firms faced considerable challenges to their survival and development (Eckhardt & Bengtsson, 2010). Meanwhile, these foreign entities introduced Western sales theories and advertising design concepts, spurring the nascent development of China's advertising industry. Within this unique context, advertising gradually evolved into a burgeoning sector. Seeking to strengthen their competitiveness, local enterprises began collaborating with advertising designers, ultimately producing a substantial body of high-quality commercial advertising work. Consequently, advertising during this period demonstrated notable diversification.

While drawing on China's rich cultural traditions and values, advertising design in the Republican era continued to be strongly influenced by Western theories and methodologies. Amid the continuous interplay between Chinese and Western cultures, commercial advertising adopted a wide array of formats—including posters, newspaper advertisements, outdoor campaigns, and radio broadcasts—thereby solidifying its role as a key form of mass communication (Armand, 2018).

This study's findings offer multidisciplinary implications, deciphering visual codes of China's early consumer revolution for historians. Most practically, the research reveals how Republican-era advertisers successfully localized foreign concepts – a challenge still faced by many multinational corporations entering China today (Liu et al., 2023).

The Advertising Design of Cigarette Brands

Early on, China's cigarette market was predominantly occupied by Western brands (Dong & Tian, 2009). In 1905, *the Nanyang Tobacco Company* was established in Hong Kong under the slogan "Chinese People Smoke Chinese Cigarettes," introducing well-known brands such as Double Happiness. This move reclaimed the Chinese cigarette market that had long been controlled by foreign companies. Soon afterward, numerous domestic brands emerged. In an effort to seize market share, Chinese cigarette companies invested substantial funds in advertising through various media channels. This intense competition between local and foreign brands significantly spurred the growth and prosperity of China's cigarette advertising industry.

During the Republican era, cigarette advertisements were markedly reflective of the prevailing social climate, often drawing on elements of traditional Chinese culture and the arts (Xing, 2019). Images of opera characters and notable historical figures were widely integrated into cigarette advertising design. For instance, the *Shanghai Hua cheng Tobacco Company* sought to boost profits by leveraging celebrity appeal in the production of its *Mei li* (meaning beautiful) brand cigarettes.



Figure 1 *Me li* cigarette

Other brands were also eager to compete. For example, the *Hardman* cigarette brand used fashionable women from the Republican era as its signature image, regularly updating the models to attract new consumers. This indicates that advertising designers of the time possessed a strong aptitude for understanding consumer psychology, breaking away from traditional Chinese cultural constraints, and skillfully incorporating trendy female imagery into their advertisements. As a result, they achieved both significant social influence and substantial economic success (Zhang, 2023).



Figure 2 the *Hardman* cigarette

In addition to simply using portraits as a visual element in cigarette advertisements, another prominent feature of cigarette brand advertising during the Republican era was the *Yue fen pai* (calendar posters). These posters blended traditional Chinese painting with Western realism, employing soft color tones that combined the delicate intricacy of Chinese ink

painting with the three-dimensional depth of Western oil painting. The result was a vibrant and highly realistic visual effect.

Women were the undisputed focal point of *Yue fen pai* advertisements. These women were often depicted with stylishly curled hair, meticulously applied makeup, and high-slit traditional *Qi Pao* dresses. They were shown playing musical instruments, singing, or simply smiling radiantly, exuding an aura of elegance and feminine charm.

Unlike cigarette packaging, which primarily focused on branding, *Yue fen pai* advertisements featured primarily scenic compositions, with ad copy subtly placed at the top or bottom edges of the image. The posters featured rich, saturated colors and remarkable attention to detail, from the intricate embroidery on the clothing to the finely crafted jewelry adorning the women. This meticulous artistry gave the advertisements a strikingly lifelike quality, creating a powerful visual impact.

Beyond cigarette advertising, *Yue fen pai* posters were widely used to promote other everyday consumer goods, such as soap, matches, and cosmetics, further cementing their role as a singularly influential advertising medium of the era.

The Advertising Design and Slogans of Everyday Consumer Goods

In addition to the widespread use of the *Yue fen pai* advertising style across various brands, the strategic crafting of advertising slogans was another significant feature of commercial advertising design during the Republican era. These slogans were widely applied in advertisements for everyday consumer goods, including bicycles, writing instruments, cosmetics, soap, food, and beverages. As the name suggests, everyday goods are items needed for daily use, and designers highlighted the unique characteristics of these products through carefully planned slogans. Unlike advertisements for cigarettes, matches, and other tobacco or alcohol-related products, which often focused on branding and imagery, advertisements for everyday goods placed greater emphasis on functionality and practicality. Consequently, to accurately convey a product's attributes, designers would prominently display product images and use bold, thick-stroked typography to underscore the key messages, making it immediately clear what the product was and what its features were.

For example, consider the *Jin long* hot water bottle. *Jin long* means gold dragon in Chinese. In its advertisement (Figure 3), the layout is divided into left and right sections. The text on the right clearly informs viewers that the product being promoted is a hot water bottle. The left section is even more intriguing; to highlight the "hot" attribute of the bottle, the designer deliberately placed the Chinese character "热" (hot) directly above it. Additionally, to emphasize the *Jin long* brand, the designer purposely incorporated an image of a dragon. Although the overall color scheme is relatively monochromatic, the stark contrast between black and white on both sides adds a rich sense of depth to the composition.



Figure 3 *Jin long* hot water bottle advertisement

Another example is a milk powder brand. The advertisement's layout is broadly divided into two sections: text on one side and a cartoon illustration of a cow on the other, with the *KLIM* milk powder can featured prominently in the center (Figure 4). A block of large text is set against a black background at the bottom, creating a clear visual focal point. By positioning the can at the center of the layout, the reader's attention is immediately drawn to the product. The surrounding text, placed above and on both sides of the can, ensures that readers quickly recognize the product itself.

Conspicuously printed on the can is the phrase *KLIM POWDERED WHOLE MILK*, which directly communicates the nature of the product (full-cream milk powder) and makes clear that it is a foreign brand. Presented in black-and-white illustration form, the can is rendered with relatively fine detail, reflecting the printing capabilities of the era and highlighting the product's reliability and quality.

On the right side, a personified cow's head injects a sense of humor and lightheartedness, guiding readers to form a positive impression of the product. At the bottom, the large black background with white text creates a striking visual contrast. By combining cartoon illustrations with straightforward copy, the advertisement embodies the hybrid Sino-Western aesthetic characteristic of the Republican period. On the one hand, it retains the explanatory, text-centric style typical of traditional Chinese advertising; on the other, it draws on Western-style illustrations and cartoon imagery.



Figure 4 KLIM milk powder brand advertisement

In soda advertising, designers leave a strong impression on consumers and stimulate their desire to purchase by focusing on the effectiveness of advertising slogans. For instance, Coca-Cola's advertisement (Figure 6) captures consumers' attention with the slogan "Delicious and refreshing, suitable for all occasions," indicating that Coca-Cola can be enjoyed during outings, sports, naps, lunches, and more. Meanwhile, in the advertising design for Golden Calf 汽水 (Figure 7), although the bottle is less recognizable than Coca-Cola's iconic shape, the designer successfully holds consumers' attention by featuring a bold advertising slogan. The slogan "American orange soda, the best beverage choice for summer" proves particularly striking and memorable.



Figure 6 Coca-Cola advertisement



Figure 7 Golden calf advertisement

During the Republican era, commercial advertisements for everyday goods not only featured inventive slogans but also paid considerable attention to typography design. The fonts, characterized by bold, varied strokes and diverse forms, were rich in artistic appeal. This

innovative approach to advertising design, combined with the use of exaggerated slogans, helped to break down the barriers of consumer unfamiliarity and detachment, allowing them to better understand and engage with the merchandise.

Conclusion

During the Republican era, advertising art in China not only showcased vivid visual effects through its use of imagery, typography, and color but also demonstrated remarkable creativity in its conceptual planning. It reflected the distinctive zeitgeist, social trends, and humanistic sensibilities of the time. By blending Eastern traditional aesthetics with Western realistic art, these advertisements achieved a unique fusion of styles. Rich in content and easily accessible to the public, they catalyzed the rapid development of China's advertising design industry and laid a solid foundation for future innovations in the field.

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