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Imagined Nationhood: Advertising Nationalism in Republican Shanghai

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In this paper, we seek to understand how advertising reflects and contributes to the construction of an imagined nationhood. We examine through a semiotic analysis how nationalism was constructed and reinterpreted in Chinese print advertising to promote consumption in Republican Shanghai (1912-1949). Shanghai at the time was world's fifth largest city with a rampant consumer culture and a highly sophisticated advertising infrastructure. The study of China's first encounter with global brands may also help to understand advertising and branding in contemporary China.

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Most research on Chinese advertising focuses on contemporary China and has ignored the country's first encounter with global brands in the Republican era (Cochran 2007; Yeh 2007; Zhao and Belk 2008). In this paper, we examine how nationalism was represented and reinterpreted to promote consumption in Republican era Shanghai (1912-1949). We seek to understand how advertising contributes to the construction of an imagined national identity from a historical perspective (Anderson 1991; Appadurai 1996; Kemper 2001; Mazzarella 2003).

Despite its hostility toward Western commodities, China was quickly inundated by the flood of foreign goods with its defeat of the 1842 Opium War (Dikotter 2007). By the 1930s, Shanghai has become the fifth largest city in the world with a rampant consumer culture. Night clubs, department stores, teahouses, theatres, amusement parks, golf courses, and dance halls constituted only part of its consumptionscape. Branded consumer goods from Japan, America, Europe, and Southeast Asia were on constant display (Chan 1999). The widespread desire for consumption was fueled by a sophisticated advertising infrastructure of billboards, radio, cinema, storytelling in teahouses, newspapers, and magazines (Crow 1937; Liang 2004). The desire for exotic commodities was also accompanied by resistance and boycotts against foreign imports (Gerth 2003). These boycotts were a part of China's broader efforts in self-strengthening, but they were quickly turned into advertising campaigns to promote Chinese manufactured goods, or "national products" (Yeh 2007). A product could be either domestic or imported, and native or foreign, depending on its perceived place of origin. A product could also be seen as either Chinese or Western, and traditional or modern, given the differences between China's past and present. Products such as Tobacco and matches could be national in the sense that they were domestically produced. At the same time, they were symbols of imperialism because cigarette smoking was an imported habit (Yeh 2007). Advertising mixed the foreign and modern with the Chinese and traditional. It was instrumental in domesticating a transformed way of everyday life in Republican Shanghai (Dikotter 2007).

Although Chinese consumers continued to embrace foreign products during the boycotts (Crow 1937; Dikotter 2007), advertising played an important role in articulating China as a modern nation state (Gerth 2003; Yeh 2000, 2007). The consumption of national goods was constructed in advertising as a fundamental part of Chinese citizenship (Gerth 2003). Nanyang Tobacco Company's ads appealed to patriotism and urged consumers to support Chinese companies rather than brands of the British American Tobacco Company. The growing awareness of China as a nation with its own national products influenced the nascent consumer culture in Shanghai. Similar to the Republican era, tensions between the global and the local, and between consumerism and nationalism are still evident in today's China. The country's continuing rise to a major power in the world is accompanied by an increasing visibility of nationalism (Hughes 2006). There is now apparent pride in Chinese brands and renewed interest in its neglected past. Yet there is irony. In Shanghai, colonial mansions are being reopened and historical landmarks are being restored. Mao-themed restaurants invoke nostalgia for the hardships and poverty of the cultural revolution. Restaurants and shops are lionized for their connections to the early 20th Century Republican era. We also discuss the historic roots of such nostalgia.

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