Adeology: Advertising As a Battlefield of Ideologies in Transitional China

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT - China has witnessed dramatic social and ideological changes since the turn of last century. As early as the 1880s when China was forced to open its market to the world, advertising began to play important roles in preparing consumers for an emerging consumer society. Till the 1920s, people in some urban areas such as Shanghai had enjoyed a prosperous consumer culture with an established advertising infrastructure and many global brands competing with each other. Happiness was represented in advertising as not from studying Confucian works as it used to be taught before but from possessing consumer goods. Merchants were removed from the lowest social strata and touted by many. China was moving from a Confucian society to a Consumer society. However, when CCP (Chinese Communist Party) took over China, advertising and consumerism were again severely criticized under communist ideology and replaced by political propaganda from public space until the economic reformation in the late 1970s. With more than twenty years of market socialization, advertising in China has entered its second AGolden Age@, and ad expenditures have reached $11 billion in 2001. Consumerism again is promoted as an important incentive to economy. China has become one of the most promising consumer societies in today's world. Though advertising has long been acknowledged as an important factor in shaping social and ideological changes, such inquiries have seldom been conducted in a Chinese context. What was the role of advertising in this dramatic ideological transition and how the ideology of consumption was established through advertising in China still remain unclear in our literature. This paper attempts to address these questions by drawing upon theories of semiotic, discursive analysis and representation.

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China has witnessed dramatic social and ideological changes since the turn of last century. As early as the 1880s when China was forced to open its market to the world, advertising began to play important roles in preparing consumers for an emerging consumer society. Till the 1920s, people in some urban areas such as Shanghai had enjoyed a prosperous consumer culture with an established advertising infrastructure and many global brands competing with each other. Happiness was represented in advertising as not from studying Confucian works as it used to be taught before but from possessing consumer goods. Merchants were removed from the lowest social strata and touted by many. China was moving from a Confucian society to a Consumer society. However, when CCP (Chinese Communist Party) took over China, advertising and consumerism were again severely criticized under communist ideology and replaced by political propaganda from public space until the economic reformation in the late 1970s. With more than twenty years of market socialization, advertising in China has entered its second “Golden Age”, and ad expenditures have reached $11 billion in 2001. Consumerism again in advertising as an important incentive to economy. China has become one of the most promising consumer societies in today’s world. Though advertising has long been acknowledged as an important factor in shaping social and ideological changes, such inquiries have seldom been conducted in a Chinese context. What was the role of advertising in this dramatic ideological transition and how the ideology of consumption was established through advertising in China still remain unclear in our literature. This paper attempts to address these questions by drawing upon theories of semiotic, discursive analysis and representation.

Current literature on Chinese advertising mostly concentrates on cultural values reflected in advertisements and compares them with those of other countries such as US. The results showed that while there was an apparent shift towards Western values, some traditional values still remained strong. Unsatisfied with the simple count of content analysis, some researchers conducted in-depth interviews with some viewers of ads, and found that Chinese consumers had different interpretations of the global images in advertising. However, advertising’s influences on social and ideological changes in transitional China have been generally ignored. Literary theory has been introduced in advertising research on Western societies and proved especially rewarding in deciphering the historically and ideological constructed meanings in advertising. Advertising has been found to be a rich source of the ideology of consumption and works by means of signification, discourse production, and representation.

Theories of semiotics, discursive analysis and representation provide the theoretical and methodological basis of this paper. Images are proposed by some as not only denoted but also connoted. When used in advertising, the denoted images are usually deprived of their original meanings and put to naturalize the cultural values associated with them. Such naturalization also has ideological effects, which serves to fix the values imposed and to maintain the status quo. As part of the commercial discourses, advertising also produces knowledge about consumption, constructs the subjectivity of consumer, and provides an easy way for consumers to become updated—purchasing the promoted products. The differences between “being modern” as a consumer and “being obsolete” as a non-consumer are also constructed in Chinese advertising through stereotyping and other representation practices.

In transitional China where the new ideology strives to replace the old, advertising provided a public arena for the transition to happen. In the case of 1920s Shanghai, it was the substitution of consumerism for Confucius; in the case of contemporary China, it is the ideology of consumption replacing communism. In both cases, the authority of the old ideology is transferred to the new, and the sacredness of the old is secularized through the commercial use in advertising. The new ideology replaces the sacred public space that used to be occupied by the old. As a visual discourse and materialized ideology, advertising in transitional China also produces the subjectivity of consumers. However, the discussion on the ideological aspects of advertising never claims that advertising alone can lead to the dramatic social changes. There are also other forces at the same time that form the discourses. Nevertheless, the ubiquity and immediacy of advertising make it among the most influential and powerful ones. The dialectic characteristics of social discourses and advertising also invoke complex reactions to advertisements in audience. Advertising needs to be re-considered as a public arena for ideological transitions and advertisers should also take into account the complexities of existing and competing ideologies besides cultural values when planning ad campaign in transitional China. This paper also contributes to the field by applying literary theories to Chinese advertising research. Limitations and future research are discussed as well.