



# ADVERTISING **AND** CHINESE SOCIETY

Impacts and Issues

Hong Cheng | Kara Chan | Editors

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## Advertising and Chinese Society

# **ADVERTISING AND CHINESE SOCIETY: IMPACTS AND ISSUES**

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## **Advertising and Chinese Society**

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## PREFACE

In 1936, Elwyn B. White (1899-1985), an American author, aptly observed in a *New Yorker* article:

Advertisers are the interpreters of our dreams . . . Like the movies, they infect the routine futility of our days with purposeful adventure. Their weapons are our weaknesses: fear, ambition, illness, pride, selfishness, desire, ignorance. And these weapons must be kept as bright as a sword. (July 11, p. 7)

Coincidentally, 50 years later, Richard W. Pollay (1986), a Canadian marketing scholar, compared advertising to a mirror—a distorted one. In a later article published in the *International Journal of Advertising*, Pollay and his collaborator Gallagher (1990) explained why the mirror is distorted:

The mirror is distorted . . . because advertising reflects only certain attitudes, behaviors and values. It models and reinforces only certain life-styles and philosophies, those that serve sellers' interests. It displays those values that are most readily linked to the available products, that are easily dramatized in advertisements, and that are most reliably responded to by consumers who see the advertisements. Advertising is, therefore, a selective reinforcement of only some behavior and values. (p. 360)

Both incisive and insightful—although not necessarily comparable to each other as figures of speech, the *sword* and *mirror* metaphors highlight “a two-way relationship [that] exists between a society and advertising” (Frith & Mueller, 2003, p. 10). As a sword, advertising does shape and influence various aspects of societies; Chinese society is no exception. While providing commercial information via advertisements, marketers “transmit values, influence behavior of both individual and value-forming institutions, and even sway national development policies” (Frith & Mueller, 2003, p. 10).

On the other hand, advertising “must comply with a public’s value system rather than running counter to it” (Frith & Mueller, 2003, p. 11). Studies have documented advertisements that reflect local cultural values are indeed more per-

suasive and effective than those ignoring them (De Mooij, 2004; Frith & Mueller, 2003; Gregory & Munch, 1997; Han & Shavitt, 1994, Taylor, Miracle & Wilson, 1997). By manipulating symbols and images, advertising conveys values that often “mirror the dominant ideological themes” in a society (Frith, 1997, p. 13). Focusing on the two-way relationship between advertising and society, this book is devoted to the examination of the interactions between advertising and Chinese society.

While China<sup>1</sup> has emerged as one of the largest global markets, Chinese advertising has grown from its “rebirth” in 1979 to “a robust child” in early 1990s (Xu, 1990) and then to a strong player in the world today. Over the 30 years, Chinese advertising billings increased at a 35% average annual rate, one of the fastest growths among all industries in the country (Zhang, 2008). In 2007, advertising turnover in China totaled 174.1 billion *yuan* (about US\$23.5 billion based on the average currency exchange rate in that year) (*A new era*, 2008). Based on its advertising spending in recent years, China has, undoubtedly, become one of the largest advertising markets in the world—specific “ranking” varies by different measures or sources (e.g., *A new era*, 2008; Madden 2006; Overview, 2006; WARC, 2009; Xin, 2006). More importantly, the momentum for a continued growth of the advertising industry in the country remains strong although “cautious optimism” reigns due to the current global economic recession (Madden, 2008, 2009).

What role is advertising playing in the economically booming China? Answers to this fundamental question are at best unclear, although researchers have tried to address it over the years. Everyone who teaches in the field of advertising knows that books—especially current ones—on advertising and society are rare, not to mention a book fully devoted to the roles of advertising in China. This book is intended, therefore, to address this gap.

Different from most advertising books, which mainly focus on how to maximize the persuasion process while minimizing its cost to advertisers, this book examines the social, psychological, legal, and ethical impact, perceived or proven, that may result from advertising. It provides readers with an understanding of the role of advertising as a form of sociocultural communication in contemporary China. The book aims at enhancing the sensitivity of those who are interested or involved in advertising in China, practitioners and researchers alike, to the social consequences of advertising in this country. Ultimately, it intends to help develop their sense of professional ethics and provide food for thought, if not solutions, for how to make advertising better for Chinese society.

Resorting to a variety of research techniques including content analysis,

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1 In this book, China refers to the Chinese mainland due to the scope and focus of the studies involved.

survey, semiotic analysis, and secondary data analysis, this book consists of 14 chapters. In Chapter 1, Hong Cheng presents a profile of the Chinese society and overviews the growth and current trends of Chinese advertising. The chapter is intended to familiarize the reader with these two key components of the book. Focusing on rising consumerism in China, Katherine T. Frith devotes Chapter 2 to an extensive and in-depth review of the rise of the middle-class market, the youth market, and the women's market in the country. She examines the implications of rising nationalism and consumer awareness for transnational marketers in China and the pivotal role culture plays in transnational advertisements targeting Chinese consumers. She also discusses how the increasing number of shoppers from the Chinese mainland help boost the Hong Kong economy. Working together, the first two chapters pave the way for the later 12 chapters in the book.

In Chapter 3, Wen-Ling Liu examines Chinese consumers' attitudes toward advertising through a survey. The author first identified Chinese youth's exposure to advertising and then pinpointed their attitudes toward advertising. According to her findings, Chinese youth spend considerable time reading magazines and newspapers and rank television as their favorite medium for advertising. Although the majority of respondents agree that advertising helps them learn new information on products, friends and colleagues have more influence on their purchase decisions. The author has also noted that the desire for adapting to a fashionable and materialistic life have influenced consumer perceptions of and attitudes toward advertising. While her survey respondents tend to have mixed feelings toward advertising, they all strongly endorse government control on advertising, especially on children's advertising.

Concerning advertising's function as a distorted mirror, John C. Schweitzer in Chapter 4 carries out a critical analysis of cultural values reflected in Chinese advertisements. Focusing on this core component of culture (Hofstede, 2001), Schweitzer first reviews five groups of cross-cultural studies on advertising: (1) those comparing one country with the United States, (2) those particularly comparing an Eastern culture with a Western culture, (3) those focusing on one selected country, (4) those devoted to countries sharing a common language or a similar culture, and (5) those comparing multiple countries. Then, he critically reviews works of some leading scholars on culture including Hall's (1976) high-context and low-context cultures and Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions, and examines their implications for studies on the cultural content of Chinese advertising. After that, he reviews major studies on cultural values reflected in Chinese advertisements in past two decades. He concludes that the growth of advertising in China has not attracted enough research attention to the cultural aspect of Chinese advertising as one might expect and calls for more studies in the future on cultural values manifest in Chinese advertising. He also recommends that future studies address the question whether Chinese and Western cultures are converging in advertisements in China and to what extent.

In Chapter 5, Nan Zhou and Russell W. Belk, have, to a significant extent, addressed from a consumer perspective the cultural convergence issue that Schweitzer raised in the prior chapter. As authors of one of the very few studies on Chinese consumers' responses to cultural appeals in advertisements, Zhou and Belk focus on upscale Chinese consumers and their responses to global and local television and print advertising. Adopting a reader response approach, they find two opposing reactions by Chinese consumers. While one side is mainly driven by the desire for global cosmopolitanism and status goods, the other side is found in a more nationalistic desire to invoke traditional Chinese values. They have noted that global advertising appeals are valued as signs or surrogates for status, cosmopolitanism, excitement, modernity, quality, technology, and beauty, but they are not replacing their Chinese consumers' strong feelings for national pride, patriotism, and other traditional Chinese values like filial loyalty, care for the family, and respect for the elderly. They also suggest that to the consumers, those global appeals may be more apt to be changed by advertising than those culturally ingrained traditional cultural appeals.

Seeing advertising as a social institution at the intersection of economic, political, social, and cultural arenas, Zhihong Gao and Sion Kim present in Chapter 6 a systematic overview of advertising law and regulation in China. Focusing on the *Advertising Law of the People's Republic of China* taking effect in early 1995, they first approached this subject from three perspectives: the ideological front of Chinese advertising regulations, the administrative front of Chinese advertising regulation, and the legislative front of Chinese advertising regulation. Then, they focused their attention on several "hot spots" in advertising law and regulation in the country: regulation on advertising for tobacco, alcohol, food, cosmetics, real estate, media, and children's advertising. In their view, advertising regulation (based on the advertising law) in China has developed into an elaborate system and will continue to expand as new issues arise. In this chapter, Gao and Kim have also elaborated on several "Chinese characteristics" of Chinese advertising regulation, which include a strong ideological dimension, an integrated approach to advertising administration and regulation, and a large degree of "stringency." Their list of "stringency" includes categorical banning of some common advertising techniques like puffery, comparative advertising, testimonials, sex appeals, and fear appeals.

Although—as Gao and Kim mentioned in Chapter 6—overt sex appeals in advertisements are banned in China, subtle sex appeals are still common. With these in mind, Fang Liu, in Chapter 7, examines the relationships between a spokesperson's gender, sex appeal and trustworthiness, and brand attitude in China. Based on an illuminating review of the influence of Confucianism on Chinese tradition in dealing with sex-related issues and through an experiment, she has found that irrespective of the gender of the spokesperson in an ad, the higher the