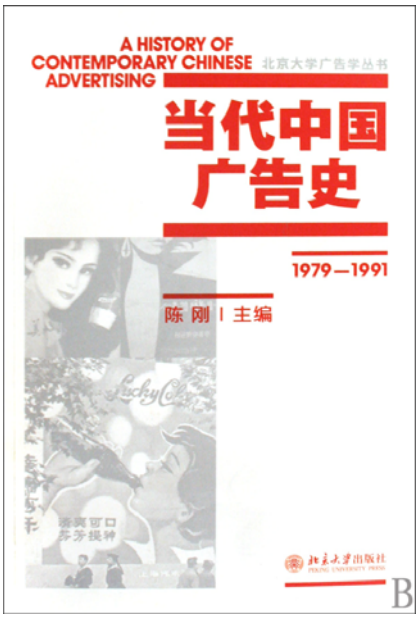
International Journal of Communication 4 (2010), Book Review 816-819 1932-8036/2010BKR0816

Gang Chen (Ed.), **A History of Contemporary Chinese Advertising, 1979–1991 [*dangdai zhongguo guanggaoshi, 1979–1991*]**, 2010, Beijing, Peking University Press, 294 pp., RMB39/US$5.75 (paperback).

Reviewed by
Weijia Wang and Jia Guo
Peking University



The 1980s of China was an era of dramatic transformation. The Chinese government put forward a series of new policies in this decade, focusing on the central tasks of economic construction, deepening economic restructuring, decentralizing financial power from state to individuals and corporations, and opening itself still wider to the outside world. The call for these economic and political reforms was accompanied by what the ideological and cultural circles advocated as "the emancipation of the mindset" and "modernization." However, after decades of economic reform, many intellectuals, faced with the negative result of marketization and commodification that they had warmly applauded, often seemed confused, angry or at a loss.

Because the 1980s was such a pivotal phase of transformation, it is imperative to review and discuss the changes in that decade. *A History of Contemporary Chinese Advertising, 1979–1991*, edited by Professor Gang Chen, profiles an exciting age that has become increasingly blurry in collective memory. This succinct and brilliant work covers all aspects of the elementary stages of the Chinese advertising industry. It reflects not only the transformation of social relations but also cultural changes in that period. Many details in this book are worthy of careful consideration in light of the problems that China is facing now.

A History of Contemporary Chinese Advertising records more than a decade of advertising history from several independent perspectives: advertisers, media, advertising companies, advertising academics, and so on. This framework is more accessible than former works on the same subject. It enables us to grasp the important issues at stake while avoiding the complexity of diachronic descriptions.

With regard to advertisers, there is a notable phenomenon in that the most influential advertisements were the "advanced" product shows presented by foreign-owned enterprises in China's initial "reform and opening up" phase. "In the name of celebrating the fall of the Gang of Four and the end of the Cultural Revolution, the commercial enterprises around the world came to China and tried to grab the market" (p. 22). Although domestic enterprises initiated China's advertising industry, national advertising companies could not compete with foreign companies in terms of enterprise scale and marketing skills. The "advanced" foreign products that were advertised mostly included staples of daily life, such as food, clothing, and home appliances.

In late 1970s and early 1980s, material goods were generally in short supply in Chinese cities. Against this background, the mysterious, beautiful, and even exotic advertisements promoting these imported products exerted great impact on the public. “Radar and Pierre Cardin became symbols for fashionable and high-level consumption goods; Coca Cola, western suits, jeans. . . . a great number of [W]estern commercial advertisements appeared on newspapers and television screens” (p. 22). Crowds of people squeezed together in front of shop windows to marvel at displays of all kinds of foreign commodities: “Just like peasants visiting an aristocratic mansion, those who stood in front almost pressed their faces to the shop windows, those who stood in the back watching on their tiptoes” (p. 24).

The impact of this foreign advertising could be described as explosive. It was not only about showcasing desired commodities but also about promoting culture and ideology. By viewing this foreign advertising, spectators entered into a particular mode of silent communication with those attractive commodities from other countries. What the commodities displayed was more than convenience, practicability, and high quality; they also presented a tangible sense of “advanced culture,” “advanced institutions,” and “advanced productive forces”—most of it from the “Western World”—to the Chinese audience. “Modernization” and the “Western World” then fused into the same concept in this unspoken dialogue between the public and the commodities that purported to represent the “good life” that everyone wants. In this peculiar era, when the Cultural Revolution had just ended, foreign advertisements promoting desired commodities provided a new impetus for the public to pursue a modern life.

In such a cultural atmosphere, having already experienced a few years of development of consumer culture, Chinese intellectuals began to “emancipate the mindset” collectively in the mid-1980s. “Humanitarianism” and “anti-feudalism,” each of which had been a cultural focus in the early part of the 1980s, would cease to be major intellectual problems. The two dichotomies, “Chinese-Western” and “traditional-modern,”—then articulated together—had become the new mainstream of thought by mid-decade. The comparison between Chinese and Western culture, the zeal for Western modern sciences, technologies, arts and philosophy, and the opinion of “total westernization” all demonstrated the power of the historical turn at the moment. Such cultural changes, as Chen has argued, cannot be understood apart from the beautiful and sophisticated commodities promoted by foreign advertisers at the time.

In recent years, many Chinese academics have reflected on the cultural consciousness of intellectuals in the 1980s, which is particularly popular in university departments of Chinese language and literature. One obvious problem is that these researchers usually spend too much time on the philosophy, art, literature, and other cultural practices of the elitist “new enlightenment” intellectuals, while ignoring changes in popular culture. The absence of advertising studies and other phenomena of mass culture would lead to a lack of understanding regarding the social and cultural background of the “new enlightenment” movement. The interesting information provided by *A History of Contemporary Chinese Advertising* reveals, on the other hand, that advertising and communication researchers can make many more contributions to these important issues. For example, *A History of Contemporary Chinese Advertising* details many oral history accounts that provide us with a basis of understanding with which to examine the dynamic process of ideological transformation.

There are still a series of very important questions left untouched when it comes to the cultural consciousness of 1980s. Freedom and independence were the most striking slogans of the Chinese cultural and political movements then, but did those intellectuals really operate independently from the state power? What role did the government play in this cultural transformation? Were the political elitists or party leaders always the enemy of the intellectuals? Chen's book gives us a nuanced record that responds to these questions.

At the end of 1979, a Panasonic window display at Wangfujing Department Store in Beijing attracted crowds of onlookers and aroused heated disputes over the introduction of western advertisements. At that time, imported modern electrical appliances and the culture they represented did not appeal to all Chinese intellectuals and officials. Controversy and criticism appeared in much of the Chinese media. Those dissatisfied by the commercial culture criticized the display as promoting a vicious and corrupt capitalist lifestyle that would be extremely harmful to Chinese youngsters. Some even pasted a poster—"downright traitorism"—to the Panasonic display window! (p. 25). These critics brought great pressure to bear on the Beijing Advertisement Company, which was in charge of the exhibition. At the end, five vice-premiers of China "saved the new foreign advertising from premature death." They stated their position and took a clear-cut stand to support this kind of advertisement (p. 26). It was really striking that a window display would have an impact at such a high level of government.

Today, mainstream intellectuals in China still view the criticism of advertising and commodity culture in the 1980s as antiquated thought that might have set back the country's progress. However, the stories in this book show the wide acceptance of this narration about a peculiar kind of developmentalism. In the Panasonic window display case, the recognition and support of high-level officials actually suppressed the underlying controversies and paved the way for the birth of China's advertising industry. This was not the only instance in which the Chinese government played a role at the time.

In 1987, at "The Third World Advertising Congress" held in Beijing, the Chinese premier delivered a written speech to the conference. The executive prime minister gave a welcome speech. Even the president of China made a surprise appearance at the opening ceremony. This dignified reception to worldwide advertisers highlighted the Chinese government's attitude toward advertising and cultural development.

As for influencing public opinion, the mass media also played an important role. With the reform policy of "decentralization of power and transfer of profit" and the opportunity to make revenue through advertising, the Chinese mass media were more than happy to strengthen the support for and communication of commercial culture.

At that time, foreign advertising campaigns promoted far more than the function of the product. They cleverly used official discourses and thinking modes, such as "emancipating the mindset," and thus appeared in Chinese society in a "politically correct" way. The advertising slogan of the Panasonic window display is rather representative: "XX household appliances present the traditional friendship between China and Japan, and help China to achieve the four modernizations and to improve the standard of living" (p. 25). These details illustrate that, under the powerful official discourse of emancipation and

modernization, the formation of social consensus is an outcome of state power and market power rather than being a natural and independent occurrence.

A History of Contemporary Chinese Advertising, 1979-1991 is the first of a three-volume publication series. A second volume that covers the period from 1992–2001 and a third volume covering 2002 to the present are to follow (p. 7). This first volume offers a rich collection and examination of historical facts, especially oral histories by hundreds of advertisers as well as by scholars who studied advertising in the 1980s. Its publication gives us a deeper understanding of contemporary advertising in China, and it allows for a more complete reflection of China in the 1980s overall.