

Compromising with Consumerism in Socialist China: Transnational Flows and Internal Tensions in 'Socialist Advertising'

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In the middle of the twentieth century, China's transnational connections flowed through the interaction of two ideologies that throughout the post-war era were at times in direct competition: consumerism and communism. In industrializing countries and their colonies, consumerism had actually begun to take hold during the first third of the twentieth century, as the spread of thousands of new consumer goods, the proliferation of discussions about them and the reorientation of social life around them had contributed to the formation of distinctive consumer cultures in urban settings around the world. But this new culture created tensions with other ideologies. Over the course of the century, ideas of nationalism, anti-imperialism, and ultimately communism were often directly opposed to new consumer lifestyles and individual consumer choices, leading governments to seek to impose limits on choice, a central pillar of consumerism, in the name of a purported higher ideology. In the early twentieth century, for instance, as the new notions of national belonging were applied to commodities, products were labelled 'national' and 'foreign,' and a nationalistic consumer culture developed around commodities themselves. Across the globe, through mass campaigns urging consumers to buy domestic products, consumption became a politicized act that brought suspicion upon—and even sanctioned attacks against—'unpatriotic' consumers who knowingly or even unwittingly bought imports.¹

¹ The *swadeshi* ('belonging to one's own country') and non-cooperation movements in India (1904–8, 1920–22) are the best-known and best-studied examples of such an application of nationality to products. Historians of late-colonial America such as A. Schlesinger. *The Colonial Merchants and the American Revolution, 1763–1776* (New York, 1957 [1918]) and T. H. Breen, "'Baubles of Britain": The American and Consumer Revolutions of the Eighteenth Century', *Past and Present*, 119 (1988) and, more recently, T. H. Breen, *American Insurgents, American Patriots: The Revolution of the People* (New York, 2010) have identified the early links between consumerism and nationalism. Such 'Buy American' campaigns are so numerous in American history that

What happened to this highly politicized and ideologically fragmented consumer culture after the communist victories in the Soviet Union, eastern Europe, and China? The case of China is instructive. At first blush, it would appear that consumerism and communism were antithetical and that once the communists took power in 1949, pre-1949 manifestations of consumerism would change in fundamental ways. In some areas, this is exactly what happened. 'Foreign products' (*yanghuo*), especially those from capitalist countries, were largely removed from the market through a combination of subtle policies designed to remove imports and, ultimately, through the nationalization of foreign and domestic manufacturers, in effect turning everything available to consumers except the odd import into ideologically acceptable products. In other words, the communists in China, much like the leaders of other newly independent nations around the world, could and did finally impose a more autarkic economic vision that ensured nationalistic consumption not only with the macroeconomic tools adopted in various market economies—namely, through tariffs, exchange controls, and outright bans—but also eventually went one step further and nationalized industry, making virtually all products available to domestic consumers 'national products.'²

there is a survey of such attempts across the entire history of the US, see D. Frank, *Buy American: The Untold Story of Economic Nationalism* (Boston, 1999) and L. Glickman *Buying Power: A History of Consumer Activism in America* (Chicago, 2009). India and America are not isolated cases. Japan, Ireland, Korea, Britain, France, Germany, Nigeria, and Spain, among other countries, also experienced similar 'buy national products movements' with varying intensity in nation-making projects from late colonial times to the present. On China's national products movement, see K. Gerth, *China Made: Consumer Culture and the Creation of the Nation* (Cambridge, MA, 2003).

² Other cases of nationalization of industry include the model Soviet Union (1917–18) and its socialist successors in Eastern Europe: Estonia (1940), Latvia (1940), Lithuania (1940), Bulgaria (1942, 1946–9), Hungary (1945–9), Yugoslavia (1944–6) as well as more limited nationalizations in Holland (1945), Austria (1946–7), and Great Britain (1946–7). Latin America also had nationalization waves around this time, including in Argentina (1946, 1963), Bolivia (1952, 1969), Guatemala (1953), Brazil (1959–60, 1962), Cuba (1959–61), Mexico (1917, 1960), Colombia (1962), Chile (1964, 1969, 1971), Peru (1968). No region of the world was exempt. Other Asian nationalization efforts include: Burma (1948, 1962), India (1953), Philippines (1954), Indonesia (1957–9, 1963–5), and Ceylon (1958, 1962). In the Middle East examples include: Iran (1951), Syria (1951, 1965), and Iraq (1957, 1961–2). And African examples include: Egypt (1956–7, 1960–2), Tunisia (1960, 1964), Guinea (1960–1), Kenya (1962–4), Algeria (1964–5), Congo (1964, 1966–7), Zambia (1964), Tanzania (1966–7), and Libya (1970).

Even as imported consumer goods largely disappeared and industry was nationalized, Communist leaders in countries such as China remained ambivalent about the consumer culture that remained. The consumerism of the pre-communist era was rarely completely vilified or discredited, and in China and throughout the socialist world, earlier forms of consumerism persisted, often despite explicit government attempts to end or limit them and, surprisingly, sometimes with government support. Recent research on eastern Europe and the Soviet Union has uncovered consumerism thriving behind the Cold War propaganda that has heretofore hidden aspects of everyday life in socialist economies.³ In line with such scholarship, an examination of the persistence of markets and consumerism in China challenges the still pervasive assumption of western Cold War scholarship that China under Maoism was a realm of pure asceticism without room for any consumer desire after 1949. Exploring the persistence of consumerism thus reveals hidden dimensions of Chinese life in the Mao era while simultaneously examining the transnational flows among socialist countries and between capitalist and socialist economies, flows that, in effect, kept consumerism alive in socialist countries such as China. At the same time, exploring the spectrum of attitudes and policies toward consumerism within such countries—ranging from acceptance or, at the very least, resignation toward consumerism to intense

³ There is a burgeoning literature on the tensions created by consumerism within socialist countries, particularly the German Democratic Republic. Helpful studies include the relevant chapters on East German advertising in Pamela E. Swett, S. Jonathan Wiesen, and Jonathan R. Zatlin (eds), *Selling Modernity: Advertising in Twentieth-Century Germany* (Durham, NC, 2007), particularly the chapters by Anne Kaminsky and Greg Castillo. And, on the uniqueness of the Yugoslav case, see Patrick Hyder Patterson, 'Truth Half Told: Finding the Perfect Pitch for Advertising and Marketing in Socialist Yugoslavia, 1950–1991', *Enterprise & Society* 4 (June 2003), 179–225. For an overview of the role of consumer politics in the (de-) legitimization of Eastern European states, especially as these states failed to keep up with the capitalist Joneses in Western Europe, see Mark Pittaway, *Eastern Europe, 1939–2000* (London, 2004). Important recent monographs on the tension between socialism and consumerism include: Jonathan R. Zatlin, *The Currency of Socialism: Money and Political Culture in East Germany* (Cambridge, 2007) and Mark Landsman, *Dictatorship and Demand: The Politics of Consumerism in East Germany* (Cambridge, MA, 2005), which is particularly useful in its exploration of the attempts by East German officials to abandon top-down 'productivist' orthodoxy in favour of consumer-driven production priorities. On the more general effort to expand Cold War analysis beyond elite politics into the realms of culture, see Patrick Major and Rana Mitter (eds), *Across the Blocs: Cold War Cultural and Social History* (London, 2004) and David Caute, *The Dancer Defects: The Struggle for Cultural Supremacy during the Cold War* (Oxford, 2003).

hostility—demonstrates that they could and did vary between countries at any given time and over time in any individual socialist state.

Initial attempts to govern Chinese consumerism

Once in power, the words and deeds of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) exactly manifested this spectrum, embracing an ongoing mix of socialist and productivist ideas, on the one hand, and capitalist and consumerist ideas, on the other, ideological compromises required by economic and political contingencies. The Communists were savvy when it came to symbolism and what halfway around the word was becoming known as ‘public relations’. ‘Liberation’ (*jiefang*), as the Communist victory over the Nationalists was labelled by the CCP and popularly called, was not simply a military campaign but an act of political communication, propaganda, or even advertising. The CCP wanted to command adherence to its agenda but also to reassure a skittish population, particularly the skilled and wealthy members that it now needed. Nowhere was this rebalancing act truer than in major cities. While the CCP had admirers among the intellectual class, it was viewed much more ambivalently and anxiously by urban capitalists, a vast population of individuals and families ranging from wealthy industrialists like textile magnate Rong Yiren to countless anonymous owner-operators of mom-and-pop shops across major cities such as Shanghai and their environs. Shanghai, in particular, was the quintessential symbol of pre-Liberation Chinese capitalism and modernity, and viewed as a bellwether for Communist policy toward cities and capitalists. If the CCP forced its way in and plundered the cities—as the Nationalist Party (*Guomindang*, (GMD)) had led the populace to expect during the Civil War (1945–9)—the new Communist government would have a much more difficult time controlling the population and winning its support, much less luring back the talent and financial resources of leading industrialists, who watched and waited from safe harbours such as British-protected Hong Kong. Tolerating bourgeois businesses, along with the bourgeois lifestyles of their proprietors, became one way to reassure this critical group.

But urban coastal capitalists also had many reasons to worry. For one, during the war against Japan, a tremendous resentment had developed toward capitalists who had collaborated with the Japanese during their occupation of most of eastern China.⁴ Mao determined that nobody who passed

⁴ Parks M. Coble, *Chinese Capitalists in Japan's New Order: The Occupied Lower Yangzi, 1937–1945* (Berkeley, 2003).

the civil war in the cities could be trusted.⁵ He had a notoriously hostile attitude toward cities and towns in general and the imperialist-dominated treaty ports in particular, especially Shanghai. Party policies periodically reflected this hostile view of cities as places to make and hide illicit wealth before Liberation. In places like the north-east province of Heilongjiang, land reform efforts of 1947 included a ‘search for hidden wealth’ or ‘chopping and digging campaign’ (*kanwa yundong*) during which the party encouraged farmers to descend on nearby cities and towns to expropriate the ‘hidden’ industrial and commercial properties of landlords.⁶

For Mao, Shanghai was emblematic of what cities in his ‘New China’ (*Xin Zhongguo*) would *not* be. As CCP policies in conquered Manchuria began to reveal, he intended to turn consumer-oriented cities—with their emphasis on class privilege and luxury consumption for the few amidst hard and exploitative labour for the many—into producer-oriented cities, cities that did not consume the nation’s resources and sap its abilities to build a wealthy and independent China but rather contributed to building it. As the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) advanced southwards, however, the Communist leadership had reason to worry that this ideological antipathy towards cities might backfire, leading to violence and plunder against merchants and landlords, as had already happened in some northern cities. Mao understood early on that he had to frame the takeover of Shanghai not as a time for retribution but an opportunity to show the benefits of Communist rule: order, discipline, frugality, and, above all, shared benefits of what he and other leaders referred to as ‘rational’ socialist economic development.⁷

Chinese Communist leaders thus saw the takeover as a defining moment, their one chance to win over sceptical segments of the population, whatever their ideological orientation. They determined that conquering PLA soldiers would become walking billboards for frugality, self-abnegation, and discipline. When the PLA’s rag-tag troops filed into Shanghai, they camped on streets rather than in confiscated private houses, symbolizing their discipline and connection with the people. As the PLA swept south with surprising speed and ease, Mao announced to his troops advancing into the Lower

⁵ O. A. Westad, *Decisive Encounters: The Chinese Civil War, 1945–1950* (Palo Alto, 2003), 210.

⁶ Bennis Wai-yip So, ‘Elites, Bureaucracy, and the Policy Process in China: A Study of the Socialist Transformation of Capitalist Industry and Commerce, 1949–56’, M.A. Thesis (University of Hong Kong, 1997), 123.

⁷ For a very helpful summary of this change in policy toward cities, see Frederic Wakeman Jr., ‘“Cleanup”: The New Order in Shanghai’, in Jeremy Brown and Paul G. Pickowicz (eds), *Dilemmas of Victory* (Cambridge, MA, 2007).

Yangzi Valley on 8 February that the next decisive challenge would be reversing the PLA's twenty-year emphasis on controlling cities from the countryside: now they would control the countryside from the cities, and Chinese military leaders must 'learn how to govern towns and cities'. The ideological compromises began immediately. In contrast to the destructiveness of the GMD, the Communist role was to *preserve* property, even that of the rich. In early June, for instance, the PLA returned to their original owners several thousand private automobiles, then the quintessential symbol of treaty-port wealth, which had been confiscated by the GMD.⁸

Yet the CCP continued to send mixed signals regarding consumerism, simultaneously promoting long-standing tropes of cities as centres of unpatriotic consumption and decadent consumerism. As with the Republican revolution of 1911, which toppled China's last dynasty and included the forced removal of men's queue hairstyles and gradual replacement of traditional clothing with western styles, the CCP represented its revolutionary politics through mandated interpretations of material culture.⁹ In contrast with traditional cultural, political, and economic elites, whose consumption set them apart from commoners, now consumption was intended to flatten socio-economic hierarchies and unite the Chinese through shared mass consumption—that is, everyone having roughly the same things, rather than an elite consumerism in which the wealthiest members of society define their uniqueness through their differentiated abilities to communicate with consumption. One of the party's stated goals was to replace bourgeois urban values with simple yet *visible* rural farmer values of undifferentiated frugality through dress and such leisure activities as the popularization of a simplified version of the rural folk dance, the *yangge*, what one foreign observer described as a 'short, prancing folk dance supposedly based on the way a coolie walks while carrying a heavy load on his shoulders'.¹⁰ In popular fashion, for young women, loose-fitting Sun Yat-sen-style cadre uniform styles and simple cotton shoes replaced body-hugging *qipaos* dresses (also known as *cheongsams*) and high heels, and boys donned PLA uniforms. More simply, red armbands, a symbol of the revolution, were adopted by those with any claim to revolutionary participation, including volunteer traffic officers. Even

⁸ Chen Zu'en et al., *Shanghai tongshi* (A history of Shanghai) (Shanghai, 1999).

⁹ Karl Gerth, *China Made*, chapter 2.

¹⁰ Edward Hunter, *Brain-washing in Red China: The Calculated Destruction of Men's Minds* (New York, 1951), 22. On the rise and rapid fall of the *yangge* dance in urban China after the CCP victory, see Chang Hung-tai, 'The Dance of Revolution: The *Yangge* in Beijing in the Early 1950s', *China Quarterly* 181 (March 2005), 82–99.

business elites in prosperous cities such as Hangzhou switched from business suits into Sun Yat-sen-style jackets.¹¹

At this stage, the CCP aimed to shift norms rather than simply enact and enforce laws. Mao Zedong understood that maintaining this ethos of patriotic limits on consumption required convincing urbanites to embrace proletarian chic, even as he feared that a desire for material comforts could destroy the government and party from within. Thus perhaps the most common trope of the first few years of Liberation might be termed a tale of urban temptation and seduction. Cities, as Mao saw them, were full of 'bad elements' lying in wait. Now simple PLA soldiers and CCP cadres, who had endured years of poverty during the Civil War, found themselves ruling over cities with restaurants, prostitutes, nightlife, movie theatres, and endless forms of entertainment available for a price. Cadres from the countryside arrived in coastal cities determined to eradicate 'degenerate' urban culture.¹² But the CCP leadership worried that urban pleasures would captivate and corrupt rural cadres, especially in the early years when party policy explicitly called for compromising with capitalists.¹³ For their part, many capitalists were anxious to introduce cadres to sensual pleasures in exchange for access and influence. In subsequent years, as some cadres did surrender to temptations, a common narrative that spread through state-sponsored media was, as one newspaper put it, that 'it was only after they came to the cities that certain cadres fell victim to the sugar-coated cannon balls of unlawful merchants'.¹⁴

Mao's response was to gradually re-engineer cities to eliminate the production of such temptations, to transform so-called 'consumer-cities' into 'producer-cities'.¹⁵ Moreover, over the course of the Civil War, even many

¹¹ James Z. Gao, *The Communist Takeover of Hangzhou: The Transformation of City and Cadre, 1949–1954* (Honolulu, 2004), 74, 79.

¹² On such policies in Hangzhou, see Gao, *The Communist Takeover of Hangzhou*, 7.

¹³ There is a long history of such fears of the corrupting influences of life in China's richest region. Fear that rural cadres would go soft when they reached relatively wealthy urban China was similar to fears of assimilation that other conquerors such as the Manchus expressed toward Chinese urban life, especially in Jiangnan.

¹⁴ *Current Background* 166:21. Less acknowledged was the negative role urban cadres played in transforming new cadres, who were often ridiculed as 'country bumpkins' for their austerity. *Survey of China Mainland Press* 254:17. Liu Suinian et al., *China's Socialist Economy: An Outline History, 1949–1984* (Beijing, 1986), 67, notes that Three-Anti's campaign was largely directed at holdovers from the era of Nationalist rule and 'a handful' of Communist cadres.

¹⁵ 'Report to the Second Plenary Session of the Seventh Central Committee of the Communist Party of China', 1949.3.5. Similarly, in 1948, *Tianjin ribao* published a widely read editorial called, 'Transform the Consumer Cities to Productive Ones',

middle-class urbanites became disillusioned by the way cities had become places for former collaborators and outsiders with Nationalist government connections to enrich themselves and lead lives of decadence and luxury at the expense of the vast majority and began to support the CCP.¹⁶ The CCP was happily surprised by the support it found among this population, particularly among students.¹⁷ Thus hostility and ambivalence toward pre-1949 consumerism had broader popular appeal beyond CCP members.

Anti-consumerist, pro-production rhetoric

Despite the well-known hostility of the CCP toward cities, perhaps it is more accurate to label this strand within the CCP 'anti-consumerist' rather than 'anti-urban'. Clearly it was these cities' earlier foreign domination under the treaty-port system and the business practices and consumer lifestyles there that revolutionary discourse attacked (rather than, say, their population density). While a cult of revolutionary asceticism had been promoted among cadres at least since Yan'an, the remote north-west communist spartan base camp during World War II and through most of the Civil War, after Liberation, such asceticism became much more pronounced, particularly with the conquest of China's major cities, when upmarket lifestyles were now actually available to them. In the early 1950s, CCP internal literature and mass media frequently invoked phrases and terms such as 'guard against the tendency to seek pleasure' (*jingti tantu xiangle*), which were especially but not exclusively directed at rural cadres now living in the cities. Other terms used to denounce consumerism included attacks on those who 'live a debauched lifestyle' (*shenghuo fuhua*) or who were 'corrupt' (*fushi*) and 'coveted the degenerate' (*tantu fubai*) and 'hankered after a life of ease and leisure' (*tantu anyi*). Revolutionary idealism and the communal commitment to national revival stood in sharp contrast to those who were labelled greedy,

which depicted cities as exploiting workers and farmers alike and as conduits for imported industrial products. Cited in Gao, *The Communist Takeover of Hangzhou*, 107, which cites Liu Shaoqi et al., *Xin minzhuzhuyi de chengshi zhengce* (New democratic urban policies) (Hong Kong, New Democracy Press), 32–3.

¹⁶ See Westad, *Decisive Encounters*, 79, which includes a description of the 1947 film, 'Nothing but a Dream' (*Tiantang chumeng*). In the film, the protagonist, a young architect, has to give his newborn son to someone who became wealthy during the Japanese occupation. See also S. Pepper, *Civil War in China: The Political Struggle 1945–1949* (2nd edn) (Lanham, MD, 1999), 155–60. On Jiang Jinguo's predatory policies and the alienation of Shanghai elites, see Westad, *Decisive Encounters*, 184 and Pepper, *Civil War in China*, 125.

¹⁷ Westad, *Decisive Encounters*, 276–7.

desirous of comfortable lives, pursued narrow self-interest, and indulged bourgeois appetites. Again and again, party rhetoric called on the Chinese to distrust their senses and the sensual, most frequently the seduction of 'sugar-coated bullets' (*tangyi paodan* or simply *tangdan*), shorthand for bourgeois comforts allegedly offered as bribes by businesspeople to cadres. Such businesspeople, it was claimed, tried to profit at the expense of others through 'hoarding and speculation' (*tunji juqi*) and attempted to collect 'huge profits' (*baoli*) through 'profiteering' (*touji daoba*). In contrast, the teleology of the revolution preached a path of sacrifice now leading to material rewards later.

Along with this emphasis on personal sacrifice and restrained consumption, party rhetoric included a simultaneous praising of collective production. In a striking analogy and continuity with what is sometimes called 'GDP worship' (GDP *chongbai*) in contemporary China, Chinese media were filled with an almost monomaniacal obsession with production wherein production seemed to be an end itself (rather than, say, symbolic of the better lifestyles it afforded). This obsession with production became a defining attribute of communism, or at least of Cold War descriptions of communist countries and their endless invocation of steel production figures, numbers of backyard furnaces, grain output, and, famously, in Mao's prediction at the start of the Great Leap Forward (1958–61) that China would surpass the United Kingdom in steel production within fifteen years.¹⁸ The party sold socialism at home and abroad through media coverage of production increases and targets surpassed, finding its logical culmination in the fabricated production numbers of the late 1950s that led to massive famines.¹⁹ This message was disseminated through countless newspaper headlines and publications such as *Ten Great Years*, which attempted to persuade 'the people' (and their allies abroad) of the economic accomplishments of New (and undoubtedly improved) China.²⁰ Debauched urban cadres and hedonistic

¹⁸ On the over-exuberance among Chinese leaders regarding the benefits of a planned economy, see R. Mitter, *A Bitter Revolution: China's Struggle with the Modern World* (Oxford, 2004), 196. Of course, this was neither unique to China nor a post-1949 phenomenon. On the pre-1949 obsession with production, see the discussion of the 1943–6 Great Production Drive in the communist base areas. Policies there included mass movement to increase production via collectives, mutual aid, household planning, and model heroes. See Donovan et al., *Chinese Communist Materials at the Bureau of Investigation Archives, Taiwan* (Ann Arbor, 1976), 76.

¹⁹ Kimberley Ens Manning and Felix Wemheuer (eds), *Eating Bitterness: New Perspectives on China's Great Leap Forward and Famine* (Vancouver, 2011).

²⁰ Guojia tongji ju, *Weida de shi nian* (published in English as *Ten Great Years*) (Beijing, 1960).

capitalist consumers were presented as the antithesis of this ideal, as vestiges of 'Old China'.²¹

Beyond rhetoric: compromising with commercial culture

And yet despite the growing chorus condemning 'excess consumption,' praising production, and attacking bourgeois lifestyles, the actual policies were another matter. Take advertising, which still appeared in Chinese newspapers and periodicals after 1949. The persistence of advertising in socialist countries remains surprising because both now and then advertising has been seen as a quintessential aspect of modern capitalism and, of course, of consumerism, which promotes the use of branded products as the means to create and communicate identity.

The oft-repeated Marxist-Leninist orthodox view of advertising, after all, was unambiguous. Advertising was 'parasitic' and a 'drain on the economy'. These same assessments were made at various times by leaders across the socialist world, from East Germany in the West to China in the East. Unsurprisingly, we do not associate 'advertising' and 'socialism' in countries such as China, particularly during periods of extreme ideological hostility to markets and material incentives to work, including most of the Mao Zedong era of the People's Republic of China, from its establishment in 1949 until the death of 'the great helmsman' in 1976. Therefore, even those familiar with this period of Chinese history may not be aware that a good deal of advertising continued to appear in China after its 'liberation' by the communists, just as advertising persisted in the Soviet Union and socialist countries of eastern Europe. Although all these avowedly socialist countries expressed similar hostile views of advertising, they also all attempted to justify advertising by distinguishing what they claimed was a distinctly 'socialist advertising' within planned economies from 'capitalist advertising', a form of advertising characterized by deceitful claims, decadent values, and relentless attempts to get people to buy by any means.²²

Furthermore, within orthodox socialist economics, capitalist advertising was viewed as a symptom of the over-production and under-consumption endemic in unplanned, irrational, consumer-oriented market economies, and to that extent unnecessary in planned, centrally controlled, and

²¹ This contrast is nicely illustrated in contemporary novels and movies such as *Morning in Shanghai* (*Shanghai de zaochen*), which was both a novel and a movie.

²² On the thin case for the development of a unique socialist advertising form in Yugoslavia, a form with significant differences with its capitalist counterparts, see Patrick Hyder Patterson, 'Truth Half Told: Finding the Perfect Pitch for Advertising and Marketing in Socialist Yugoslavia, 1950–1991', *Enterprise & Society* 4 (June 2003), 179–225.

production-oriented socialist economies.²³ Which raises another question: why bother with advertising at all? The Chinese communists had virtually completed the nationalization of private enterprises by 1956, which resulted in less competition and less economic need for manufacturers to respond directly to consumer needs and preferences and, more importantly, no need to stoke desire purposefully by creating ‘false needs’ through advertising. Production flowed from the central plan down rather than initiated by consumer desires and decisions. Seen from this perspective, advertising in a socialist country was a potentially subversive, if tacit, admission that something was wrong was the plan and even the system, which required the party to formulate elaborate justifications for the continued employment of advertising.

Yet despite this ideological hostility to advertising, as we shall see in the case of China, the shift from capitalist-style to socialist-style advertising was a gradual one, just as the shift to a socialist economy was also gradual, marked by increasing central control, most conspicuously during the Great Leap Forward at the end of the 1950s, and culminating, after a short respite, in the virulent hostility toward any form of advertising during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). Examining these changing policies toward advertising in China during the Mao era can illuminate the shared goals, strategies, and problems regarding advertising among socialist nations during the period and the ways in which the history of advertising in each country varied from one another and across time as a result of their individual cultural, political, and economic exigencies.

The tension over manifestations of market culture in general and advertising in particular grew over the course of the 1950s in China, as the country transitioned from a mixed economy with markets toward a command economy and complete state ownership. In the orthodox Soviet view that China adopted after the Revolution of 1949, advertising was a parasitic form of economic activity that wasted economic resources and was a consequence of irrational and excessive competition and the systemic need to overcome under-consumption in wage-suppressed capitalist countries. Advertising, in this view, created false needs for unnecessary or unaffordable goods, and the profits derived from publishing advertisements corrupted the media, making advertising superfluous and even dangerous in a planned economy.²⁴ Ilya Ilf and Evgeny Petrov’s famous Soviet book written after their travels through

²³ See J. Kornai, *The Socialist System: The Political Economy of Communism* (Oxford, 1992).

²⁴ Orthodox Soviet view is outlined in James Markham, ‘Is Advertising Important in the Soviet Economy?’ *Journal of Marketing* 23 (April 1964): 31–7.

Depression-era America, *The Little Golden Calf*, typifies this orthodox view of the evils of capitalistic advertising:

The American does not have to think about anything; the huge commercial concerns think for him . . . Drink Coca-Cola . . . Coca-Cola is good for the manufacturer and the country! Capitalist advertising, persistent, sensational, capable of deafening the consumer, seeks only to sell goods, to force them on the buyer by any means. Soviet commercial advertising pursues entirely different aims.²⁵

As with so many aspects of everyday life, very little is known of the early years of advertising and commercial policy under the PRC. One of the few surveys of advertising history in China provides just a brief overview, stating that by 1951, advertising policy began to tighten and cadres needed to approve advertisements. As a further sign of growing control, in 1953, at the start of the socialization of industry, approximately one hundred or so small, often family-run agencies were involved in the advertising business in Shanghai. Like other trades, these were consolidated, in this case, into five public-private agencies.²⁶ But this image of the CCP's slowly killing advertising is inaccurate; it suggests a conflict between commercial-culture-hating Communist cadres, on one side, and crypto-counter-revolutionary snake oil salesmen and other 'cunning merchants' (*jianshang*), on the other. Archival documents from the era, however, suggest a more complicated picture, one in which the party recognized the need for, or at the very least tolerated, the continued use of commercial practices seemingly at odds with the new ruling ideology.

As this evidence shows, hardline anti-consumerism was easier preached than practised. The CCP was concerned with the dangers of advertising from the start and recognized the conflict between the economic need to maintain viable businesses and the political goal of transforming urban consumer culture. One can find this same tension in the conflict between private and state newspapers. Two days before the takeover of Shanghai and three days before the re-launch of the commercial newspaper *Shenbao* (est. 1872) as the

²⁵ As quoted in Elizabeth Swayne, 'Soviet Advertising: Communism Imitates Capitalism', in C. H. Sandage and Vernon Fryburger, *The Role of Advertising* (Homewood, IL, 1960), 94.

²⁶ Liu Jialin, *Xinbian Zhongwai guanggao tongshi* (A general history of Chinese and world advertising) (Jinan, 2004), 146. Liu's point is contradicted by a list and an imprint of the chop of the sixty advertising agencies still in existence in 1956, see Shanghai Municipal Archives (hereafter, SMA) B98-1-23 (1956.1.16).

Shanghai CCP newspaper *Liberation Daily* (*Jiefang ribao*) (the successor to *Shenbao* as of 28 May 1949), the advertising department of the new newspaper issued basic rules governing advertising.²⁷ These regulations confirm some of the tell-tale signs of CCP control, including the standard cliché that all advertisements must be ‘beneficial to the nation and the people’ and that advertisements must be approved by a central department before running. The new advertising department also used CCP educational training tactics for cadres, such as ‘study sessions’ not only to discuss individual shortcomings and self-criticism, as such sessions traditionally did, but also to teach new ideas about advertising—in particular, that it was wrong to take commissions for securing new advertisements rather than having advertisers come to the newspaper themselves.²⁸

In addition to allowing—indeed soliciting—advertising, *Liberation Daily* also compromised in other ways to navigate the tension between economic and political needs, including banning advertisements that offered discounts to stimulate desire among consumers who may otherwise not need such products, though the CCP did not yet try to enforce this ban in non-party newspapers such as the Shanghai-based *Dagongbao*. Likewise, policies forbade the advertising department from accepting fees to place advertisements and on certain occasions also mandated the content of advertisements. On the eve of the formal establishment of the People’s Republic of China on 1 October 1949, for instance, *Liberation Daily* required that from 23 September until 4 October, all advertisements must explicitly celebrate the establishment of the PRC.²⁹ Such early regulations were repeated and expanded in the following decades.³⁰

The in-house advertising department at *Liberation Daily*, which its founders claimed would help people place advertisements directly rather than going through an agency, gave the CCP greater control over advertising content and profits. Internal documents of the *Liberation Daily* suggest, however, that private newspapers resisted the change to centralizing advertisement production and giving *Liberation Daily* control over all advertisements. A

²⁷ On the consolidation of the newspaper industry in Shanghai after 1949, see Ma Guangren (ed.), *Shanghai dangdai xinwen shi* (A history of contemporary news in Shanghai) (Shanghai, 2001), 13–19. This history makes early control over the press seem more centrally directed and controlled than archival documents suggest.

²⁸ SMA A73-1-19 (1949.3.25). ‘Gongzuo zongjie baogao’ (Work summary report).

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ See, e.g., SMA B123-4-556 (1959.4.17). ‘Guanyu wei dapi shengchan de yaopin bu deng xuanchuan guanggao de tongzhi’ (A notice that pharmaceutical products which have not yet been massively manufactured should not be promoted through advertisements).

competing newspaper, the *News Daily* (*Xinwen ribao*), went so far as to refuse to publish an advertisement prepared by *Liberation Daily*. Indeed, even party newspapers from other cities also refused to work with *Liberation Daily*'s in-house agency. *Dagongbao* (est. 1902), which published newspapers in Tianjin and Shanghai until 1953, when the newspapers were merged into one Tianjin edition, not only refused but also went to an outside advertising agency.

This overt resistance suggests that a half-year into its control over Shanghai, the CCP did not yet have complete and centralized control and that private businesses were not particularly attentive when it came to following government orders. Some two years later, even after the start of the intensely anti-capitalist, anti-corruption Three-Anti's, Five-Anti's Campaign (*sanfan wufan yundong*), *Liberation Daily* was still struggling to create one centralized agency to control advertising and insisting that making money was not the prime objective of advertising.³¹

Throughout this time *Liberation Daily* used both subtle as well as overt methods to influence advertising culture and the consumer culture it helped create. It charged 30–40% lower rates for advertisements for socially useful things such as cultural education, new publications, charitable work, and advertisements intended to reward soldiers with, say, special offers. Likewise, it gave 20% discounts to government organs, state enterprises, and that amorphous category of advertisers providing 'benefits to the nation and the people'.³² At the same time, *Liberation Daily* was not afraid to use state power to change market rules in its favour. To increase its reach, the newspaper was distributed not only via the old commercial networks of *Shenbao* but also via institutions now controlled by the CCP, including schools, factories, and other government-controlled work units. The huge discounts given to these institutions suggest that the newspaper's goal was clearly not to make money but rather increase circulation.³³ The newspaper

³¹ SMA A73-1-122 (1952.10.27), 'Guanyu zhengdun Shanghai ge bao guanggao gongzuo de yijian' (An opinion on the reorganizational work for all the newspaper advertising in Shanghai).

³² SMA A73-1-45 (1950.4.10). 'Benbao guanggao zhidu' (Our newspaper's advertising system).

³³ About fifty years later *Liberation Daily* (the English name for the Chinese newspaper, *Jiefang ribao*, hereafter, *JFRB*) and *People's Daily* (the English name for the Chinese newspaper *Renmin ribao*, hereafter *RMRB*) are rarely purchased at newsstands. Party newspapers rely on the subscriptions of work and school units. In other words, in the 1950s, CCP newspapers such as *JFRB* were more commercially oriented than now, with *Guangzhou ribao* the one exception that still sells well.

used state power in many smaller ways, too, such as increasing its profit margins by mandating lower discounts for newspaper wholesalers.³⁴ Clearly, *Liberation Daily*, to expand both its market and its readership, was very market savvy, which may also explain its use of advertising and, more generally, the persistence of markets.

What is to be done about advertising?

Chinese officials in charge of commerce and industry were always aware of the contradictions between commercial advertising and communism. As they formulated and re-formulated advertising policy, they explicitly sought to avoid the pre-Liberation era mode of advertising found in other market economies, such as image-based advertising using celebrities and the placement of advertisements everywhere from newspapers and radio to billboards and streetcars. Shanghai's commercial office (*shangye ju*) archives contain a lengthy discussion of whether advertising was fundamentally and irredeemably capitalist or might serve other purposes in a socialist economy. The document argues that 'socialist advertising' was not the same as the pre-1949 era's 'capitalist advertising,' which had been dominated by 'compradors [Chinese agents of foreign companies considered economic traitors], colonialism, rip-offs, and [the inefficiencies of excessive] market competition'.³⁵ While the bureaucrats drafting such documents did not always specify how to avoid the pitfalls of capitalist advertising, archival documents from local and national government offices responsible for overseeing trade and advertising repeatedly state or imply—as this document does—that it would be a big mistake to eliminate all advertising simply because of the excesses of pre-1949, Republican-era advertisements. At the heart of their justifications of socialist advertising lay the earlier experience and orthodoxy of the Soviet Union, which, as with so much else in China during the 1950s, provided a model of incorporating advertising into socialist culture. Although by the time this document was drafted in 1957, relations between the two countries had already begun to unravel after the death of Stalin in 1953, the Soviet Union still remained the nominal socialist model, or 'Older Brother' (*dage*), for China's leaders for another couple of years.³⁶

This justification of socialist advertising favourably quoted the Soviet Minister of Trade Anastas Mikoyan (1895–1978), who in 1953 defended advertising as an important part of trade, and trade as critical to the quality

³⁴ SMA A73-1-19, '1949 Faxing bu zhongjie baogao' (A summary report of the publications office).

³⁵ SMA B135-1-551 (1957), 'Shangye guanggao' (Commercial advertising).

³⁶ Ibid.

of life under socialism. Good advertising, Mikoyan insisted, increased people's understanding of a product, increased awareness of new products, and cultivated desires. That this Chinese justification of advertising included the last of these, the cultivation of desire, is a surprising endorsement to find on the eve of the Great Leap Forward, the peak of China's productivist mania immortalized in the western imagination through the ubiquitous images of backyard furnaces and production of steel at all costs, including the melting down of antiques and household woks. But the document did not acknowledge an irreconcilable contradiction between emphasizing production and endorsing consumption. The Soviet example demonstrated that consumers could in fact help drive production and that advertising, by shaping and directing consumer desires, could direct production in a more systematic way by stimulating desire for those goods the government wanted consumers to buy: 'Commercial advertisements are a part of socialist commerce that cannot be eliminated. Therefore, advertising has good prospects.'³⁷

What, then, was socialist advertising? This same Chinese document specified three different types of advertising depending on the availability of given products. For all three, desires—much like production—should be guided from above rather than directed by consumers from below. For products in short supply, the emphasis within the advertisements should be not on stimulating desire for the products but rather on how to use and maintain them and thereby extend their lifespan. Advertisements for more widely available and commonplace goods should, as with capitalist advertising, expand the market and stimulate desire. Finally, advertisements for new products should emphasize the product's quality, uses, and special characteristics.

As a result of these principles, the differences between 1950s advertisements in China and in market economies such as the United States are easily discernible. The smaller volume of advertisements in newspapers, for instance, is immediately apparent. Likewise, radio advertisements were restricted to short blocks of time. The tone of newspaper advertisements was almost the inverse of those in market economies. In contrast to the heavily didactic content of the news and articles in Chinese newspapers, which explicitly disseminated a Party line on political issues, advertisements rarely engaged in the hard sell and, when they did, as we will see below, were criticized by newspaper readers and government officials alike. As a result, the most common advertising format in socialist countries such as China included only the product brand, a basic illustration of the product, and a list of locations where the product might be available.

³⁷ SMA B135-1-551 (1957), 'Shangye guanggao' (Commercial advertising).

The *political* objectives of advertisements in socialist countries such as China were also more explicit and heavy-handed, with the inclusion of patriotic themes and the incorporation of national accomplishments.³⁸ Just as socialist realist art styles extended across socialist countries, advertising made a similar use of national achievements, like the Soviet Union's Sputnik or China's engineering accomplishments, such as the first bridges successfully built across major rivers. Likewise, as shown below, many socialist countries attempted to use advertising to popularize new socialist holidays, especially May Day (Workers' Day) and 8 March (International Women's Day) and country-specific holidays such as the anniversary of the establishment of the People's Republic of China (1 October).³⁹

To further distinguish socialist from capitalist advertising, from the earliest regulations on advertising promulgated in 1949 onward, officials intended to subdue the tone of advertisements. A key difference between capitalist and socialist advertising, the Chinese document on advertising claimed, was the emphasis of the latter on truthfulness. For example, the Bureau of Industry and Commerce (*Gongshangju*) refused to believe that any product could cure a stomach ache in five minutes and consequently forced the Shanghai manufacturer of '5 Minutes to Cure Stomach Aches' brand (*Wufen zhong*) to change its name to one that opaquely implied an hour-long cure (*Zhongpai weitong fen*).⁴⁰ Likewise, the bureau forbade the use of the common description for a children's baby food as made of 'milk and dough' (*naigao*) because it did not actually contain 'milk powder' (*naifen*). Manufacturers were instructed to call such products 'nursing infant pudding' (*ruergao*), though the name was not popularly adopted in everyday speech. In a third example, the bureau cracked down on claims that products were of 'international quality' and said that such claims in advertisements would be challenged. The regulations also tried to limit the use of advertising clichés. Advertisers were forbidden to claim that products not very widely available were 'sold everywhere', and instructed to use only sparingly the ubiquitous advertising phrase 'inexpensive but very good quality' (*jialian wumei*).⁴¹

Other socialist countries also grappled with how to use advertising. They even grappled together. In December 1957, representatives from thirteen

³⁸ 'Advertising in the Communist Press', *East Europe*, 8 (September, 1959).

³⁹ Elizabeth Swaney, 'Soviet Advertising: Communism Imitates Capitalism', in C. H. Sandage and Vernon Fryburger, *The Role of Advertising* (Homewood, Illinois: Richard D. Irwin, Inc., 1960): 96.

⁴⁰ The new name is hard to translate. It retains part of its old name, retaining some brand recognition, but dropped the '5 minute' part.

⁴¹ SMA B135-1-551 (1957), 'Shangye guanggao' (Commercial advertising).

socialist countries converged on Prague for a conference on socialist advertising.⁴² Chinese representatives at the event concluded that, as the Soviet justification had earlier argued, advertising could usefully shape preferences of the people, expand their needs, and thereby propel production. In other words, contrary to the productivist discourse so stereotypical of the Maoist era and dominating the Chinese media with endless boastings of production targets smashed, leaders at elite levels of the Chinese state were always aware that consumption could usefully be stimulated to push production and that demand could not always be assumed. There was, in short, no contradiction between advertising and socialism. The document concluded that far from banning advertising, China should expand the venues for advertising and put more advertising on trains, buses, and other public locations.⁴³ Such policies remained in place and were confirmed nearly two years later, at the height of the Great Leap Forward in August 1959, when the Ministry of Commerce (*Shangyebu*) convened a Conference on Commercial Advertising (*Shangye guanggao huiyi*) in Shanghai for representatives from the 21 Chinese cities that were officially open to foreigners. This Shanghai conference confirmed that advertisements had an important role in socialist societies as a means of introducing products and as a basic way to guide consumers.⁴⁴

Again, this is not to say advertising went unregulated. The gap between the implied unlimited supply suggested by advertisements and the actual shortages continually created tension between using advertising to increase revenues and the government's fear that stoking demand that could not be met with adequate supplies would discredit it. In 1959, during the Great Leap Forward and the accompanying massive shortages of products and food, the

⁴² Despite such efforts in socialist countries, Patterson, 'Truth Half Told', 221, concludes that anyone interesting in finding a distinctive form of socialist advertising in places such as Yugoslavia in the 1950s should look elsewhere: 'Yet beyond the verbiage, no sustained attempt to construct a consistently socialist practice of consumer persuasion can be found in these texts'. Unfortunately, other than brief mentions, there is very little discussion in the literature on the Prague Conference of Advertising Workers in Socialist Countries of 1957. Susan Reid and David Crowley (eds), *Style and socialism: modernity and material culture in post-war Eastern Europe* (Oxford, 2000), 10. See Philip Hanson, *Advertising and Socialism* (White Plains, NY, 1974), 29. According to Patterson, 'Truth Half Told', 217, China participated in the conference as well as Vietnam, North Korea, and Mongolia.

⁴³ SMA B135-1-551 (1957), 'Shangye guanggao' (Commercial advertising).

⁴⁴ See 'Tigao shangye guanggao sixiang yishu shuiping, geng hao de wei shengchan he xiaofeizhe fuwu' (Raising the ideological and artistic standards of commercial advertising to better serve production and consumers) and 'Tigao shangye guanggao shuiping' (Raising the standards of commercial advertisements). Both in *JFRB* 1959.8.4.

Ministry of Commerce (*Shangyebu*) and other departments ordered local offices to stop advertising medical products that were not locally available, explicitly stating that such advertisements undermined the government's credibility. As the order put it: 'When an order is placed for goods in a socialist country and the goods are not supplied, this has a major influence on faith in our country.'⁴⁵

Likewise, regulatory policies, even while constraining what was acceptable, could and did aid the continued use of advertising. A regulatory clarification in 1957 stated that because placing advertising had become too expensive, advertisers were skimping on the amount of copy in their advertisements and sometimes consequently made mistakes with unfortunate results, citing an example of a movie theatre advertisement that, to save space, inadvertently combined the names of two films, thereby besmirching the reputation of a scientist promoted by the Soviet state as a leader in the field of biology, Ivan Vladimirovich Michurin (1855–1935). The movie about him was entitled 'Michurin's Evolutionary Selection Process', and the name of the second film was 'Flashy without Substance'. When read together, the advertisement for these two separate films suggested that this favourite Stalin-era scientist was a fraud. To avoid such problems, advertisement costs were lowered.⁴⁶

Throughout the early years of the PRC, letters to the editor of the leading newspaper, the *People's Daily* (*Renmin ribao*), demonstrate the tension between eradicating 'bourgeois advertising techniques' and creating a new socialist advertising culture. In 1954, for instance, a reader named Zhao Qi wrote a letter criticizing Chinese advertisements for being too similar to capitalist advertisements, with too much exaggeration and too many false claims, including, worst of all, too many advertisements featuring products stores did not have in stock. This lack of sufficient supplies for advertised goods applied to both consumer and producer goods, such as industrial machines. Zhao Qi claimed, for instance, that a company in Dalian used a photo of a Soviet product to advertise its own crane, which it had not yet successfully made and therefore could not actually sell. Zhao Qi complained that these transgressions were all the more egregious because they were placed by state-owned enterprises and therefore should 'oppose these kind of

⁴⁵ SMA B123-4-556 (1959.4.17). 'Guanyu wei dapi shengchan de yaopin bu deng xuanchuan guanggao de tongzhi' (A notice that pharmaceutical products which have not yet been massively manufactured should not be promoted through advertisements).

⁴⁶ SMA A73-1-274 (1957.4.1), 'Guanyu zai baokan shang kandeng waishang guanggao yishi de buchong guiding' (Supplemental regulations regarding the placement of advertisements by foreign commercial interests in newspapers and periodicals).

bourgeois advertising techniques'.⁴⁷ In 1955, another *People's Daily* reader, Wei Baoxian, complained about the use of excessive advertising to attract customers rather than using those same resources to improve product quality. In his hometown of Jilin City, Wei counted 17 'eye-catching advertisements' down both sides of a street that were mostly for the same types of products and all put up by the same state-owned manufacturer, which were similarly advertised in over 60 Chinese cities. To make matters worse, he stated, in the summer of 1954, the state-owned company signed a contract with a Shanghai-based advertising agency, Forever Profitable (*Yongli guanggao she*), to place 257 oil-painted advertisements on walls in these cities and later in the year they signed another contract for another 265. While the reader (and ostensibly the editorial staff of newspaper publishing the letter) agreed that advertising had its place in New China, Wei thought it was wasteful to spend so much on advertising.⁴⁸

That not only government officials but Chinese readers were very aware of the potential and perhaps inevitable tensions between the political and economic ends of advertising was apparent from similar letters to the editor from almost the very beginning of Communist rule. Readers noticed that even two years after the Liberation of Shanghai the contradictory advertising policies and the resulting continuation of pre-Liberation advertising culture. In a letter to the *People's Daily*, Deng Su complained that although Shanghai had already been liberated for two years, movie and opera advertisements remained 'vulgar' (*yongsu*) and 'had a bad influence on the masses'. Among the explicit examples he provided was an advertisement from the 31 August 1951 edition of the Shanghai's *News Daily* (*Xinwen ribao*), which included a Hong Kong movie poster featuring the famous Chinese actress Li Lihua, whom Mr Deng described as 'covered in glittering jewellery' and casting 'a seductive look with her eyes'. In another example an advertisement for a Cantonese opera openly enticed readers with a story about a courtesan living in a bordello.⁴⁹

Mr Deng, like readers of the nationally distributed newspapers such as the *People's Daily* and the *Dagongbao* and local ones such as the *Beijing Daily* (*Beijing ribao*) and even of magazines and trade journals would have found

⁴⁷ Zhao Qi, 'Fandui zichan jieji de guanggao shu' (Oppose bourgeois advertising techniques), *RMRB* 1954.12.31.

⁴⁸ Wei Baoxian, 'Lin sheng riyong huaxue gongchang jiuzheng zhizuo shangpin guanggao zhong de langfei', (The waste in Jilin province's toiletry industry's advertising should be corrected) *RMRB* 1955.4.10.

⁴⁹ Deng Su, 'Shanghai xinwen ribao ying gaishan yingju guanggao', (Shanghai News Daily should improve movie and Chinese theatre advertisements) *RMRB* 1951.09.11.



Figure 1. Advertisement for Ganlu, a product for skin ailments. The advertisement was published in the CCP's own Shanghai newspaper yet ignores an order to acknowledge the establishment of the People's Republic of China, which occurred on the previous day. *Jiefang ribao* 1949.10.2.

innumerable similar examples to decry. As noted, there was nearly a seamless continuity between pre- and early post-Liberation advertising. Take, for example, an advertisement published in the *Liberation Daily* just one day after the formal declaration of the establishment of the founding of the PRC on 1 October 1949. This advertisement for Ganlu, a product for skin ailments, features an attractively buxom woman, her back arched and chest foregrounded, with curly long hair (see Figure 1).⁵⁰

During this period, there was no shortage of similar advertisements with elegantly dressed shapely women in *qipaos* with permed hair, or men in western suits with slicked-back hair.⁵¹ But perhaps the most extreme contrast between the stated ideals of the revolution and the content of an advertisement comes from *Dagongbao* (Shanghai edition) in January 1951, which features not only such a woman, but one standing at an open, full-sized

⁵⁰ *JFRB* 1949.10.2.

⁵¹ *DGB SH* 51.4.10.



Figure 2. Advertisement from the 7 January 1951 edition of the newspaper *Dagongbao* (Shanghai edition). The product and its display demonstrates a glaring compromise with the stated ideals of the Revolution.

refrigerator, choosing from amongst its packed contents during a time when only the very wealthiest Chinese had refrigerators, or had ever seen one personally (see Figure 2).⁵²

Even before Liberation, advertising throughout the Republican era (1912–49) had always been quick to incorporate the politics and the mood of the day, especially on the issue of economic nationalism and calls to get Chinese to ‘buy Chinese’ as part of the nationwide ‘buy Chinese’ National Products Movement (*guohuo yundong*), a decades-long commercial and mass campaign to link consumerism and nationalism.⁵³ This ability to incorporate the political and cultural rhetoric of the day continued after 1949, continuity perhaps nowhere

⁵² *DGB SH* 1951.1.7.

⁵³ Gerth, *China Made*.

more apparent than in cigarette advertising, by far the most prominent product advertised in the decades before and the years straight after Liberation. On the eve of the founding of the People's Republic, for instance, The Rat (*Jinshu*) cigarette brand reminded readers that 'Everyone must single-mindedly Promote Chinese national products'.⁵⁴

Advertisers faced the conflicting demands of winning not only customers but also the party-state. One way of demonstrating their allegiance to the new government and positioning themselves as allies was by incorporating political slogans. Shortly after the Liberation of Shanghai, The Brandy (*Bailandi*) brand cigarettes tried to have it both ways, seeking to balance both the new expectations and the established desires of its customers. As the advertisement informed readers, 'When reading the news in the *Liberation Daily* makes you very excited, smoking an upper-class cigarette leaves a good aftertaste' (see Figure 3).⁵⁵ That the couple pictured in the advertisement, with their foreign-inspired, bourgeois lifestyle and wealth would be neither happy about Liberation nor reading the party newspaper, which was already promoting a very different lifestyle, seemed either to have escaped the advertisers or been intended to reassure their intended audience. At the same time, the juxtaposition of the *Liberation Daily* and a self-advertised 'upper-class' (*shangdeng*) cigarette also implies that this bourgeois couple accepts the leadership of the Party by reading its official newspaper with excitement. Thus the reassurances worked both ways.

Such odd contradictions were common in the early era of Liberation. In another advertisement published in the *Liberation Daily* during the first month of the new PRC's existence, an obviously upper-class couple relaxes after work of a sort mentioned but not seen, though neither the man nor his partner appear to do manual labour (see Figure 4).⁵⁶

Although smoking was, after all, initially a habit closely associated with pre-Liberation bourgeois lifestyles, the self-interest of the cigarette companies, along with government pressure to represent post-Liberation aesthetics, meant that over the next few years, while bourgeois men and women still appeared in advertising, it was much more common to see the same products advertised with images of working-class people. For example, in a 1951 advertisement for the same brand, My Dear (*Meili*) cigarettes, workers are prominently shown unloading a truck.⁵⁷ In an advertisement for The Rat brand from the same year, the image of the post-Liberation counterpart of the

⁵⁴ *JFRB* 1949.9.28.

⁵⁵ *JFRB* 1949.6.16.

⁵⁶ *JFRB* 1949.10.26.

⁵⁷ *JFRB* 1951.3.20.



Figure 3. Advertisement for Brandy (*Bailandi*) brand cigarettes, which informs readers, 'When reading the news in the *Liberation Daily* makes you very excited, smoking an upper-class cigarette leaves a good aftertaste.' *Jiefang ribao* 1949.6.16.

bourgeois, namely a government cadre, mixes politics and commercial advertising even more explicitly, showing a cadre (identifiable though his clothing) indulging in, as the text above him reads, 'Extremely satisfying' (see Figure 5).⁵⁸

There were numerous examples of this transition toward the socialist aesthetic embodied in advertising featuring workers and the other heroes circulating in the socialist world, soldiers and farmers. A front-page

⁵⁸ *DGB-SH* 1951.2.4.



Figure 4. Advertisement for My Dear (*Meili*) brand cigarettes features an upper-class couple relaxing at home. *Jiefang ribao* 1949.10.26.

advertisement for the Red Person (*Hongren*) brand of cigarettes in 1949 offered 'Red Cigarettes for a Red People', red being the symbolic colour of the Party and the Communist Revolution and, therefore, of the new nation itself. The text also included all the usual National Product Movement slogans reflecting the prevailing autarkic economic ideology of self-reliance. In another example, The Rat ran an advertisement featuring rural (farmers) and urban (steel) workers with the lines: 'Our quality is high and prices low. We are geared toward the needs of the working masses.'⁵⁹

⁵⁹ DGB-SH 1951.7.27.



Figure 5. Advertisement for The Rat (*Jinshu*) brand cigarettes shows the shift away from using bourgeois figures toward using the most important members of society in New China: workers, peasants, soldiers, and, here, a government cadre, who is engaged in ‘12 minutes of satisfaction’. *Dagongbao* (Shanghai edition) 1951.2.24.

But this trend toward socialist aesthetics obviously was not occurring fast enough for readers such as Mr Deng Su. Nor for the editors at *People’s Daily*, who followed his letter with an editorial comment reminding newspapers of their responsibility to avoid publishing inappropriate advertisements.⁶⁰ They

⁶⁰ Deng Su, ‘Shanghai xinwen ribao ying gaishan yingju guanggao’, (Shanghai News Daily should improve movie and Chinese theatre advertisements) *RMRB* 1951.09.11.

vowed to avoid publishing any more such images themselves and to generally aim to publish 'serious' and 'authentic' advertisements rather than flippant and salacious ones.⁶¹ Clearly, though, the battle over the proper place of advertising, if any, in the new socialist society was not over, but would continue throughout the Cold War period.

Transnational flows with capitalist countries and advertisers

As the Prague Conference and the Chinese archival documents and examples above suggest, the parallels between advertising policies and justifications in China and elsewhere were not mere coincidences but reflected transnational developments in advertising between socialist countries and across the socialist-capitalist divide.⁶² But just as there was no unified socialist bloc, there was no unified policy toward advertising. Indeed, policies changed within the same country over the decades; some socialist countries became more hostile toward advertising, and others warmed to it. In the 1950s, for instance, socialist countries of eastern Europe such as Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Poland gradually allowed more advertising on their newspaper pages over the decade, while Bulgaria and Romania remained resistant.⁶³ Nonetheless, all of the socialist countries of eastern Europe continued to allow advertising. In these countries, the centrally planned dimension remained clear: the goal was to allow advertising for goods targeted by the central plan and thereby stimulate desire where needed. That is, advertising helped off-load mistakes, intended to stimulate consumption where demand was insufficient.

Similarly, advertising policies in socialist countries did not always move in the same direction along the spectrum of attitudes between tolerance and hostility mentioned earlier. Over the course of the Cold War, for instance, the Soviet Union became more open to advertising as China became less, the two opposing trends crossing when they each held window display conferences in 1959. And while China was attracted to and influenced by the policies of other socialist countries, particularly the Soviet Union, it was also sometimes hostile toward consumerism as practised in such countries. During the 1950s, as China moved from lax laws that were not easily enforced toward a highly

⁶¹ Shanghai xinwen ribao guanggao ke, 'Shanghai xinwen ribao jieshou piping' (Shanghai News Daily accepts criticism), *RMRB* 1951.10.15.

⁶² Elizabeth Swaney, 'Soviet Advertising: Communism Imitates Capitalism', in C. H. Sandage and Vernon Fryburger, *The Role of Advertising* (Homewood, Illinois, 1960): 93–103.

⁶³ 'Advertising in the Communist Press', *East Europe*, 8 (September, 1959): 31–8 (no author).

restricted use of advertising, China was not only more restrictive than other socialist countries about the types of products it allowed to be advertised but became increasingly so. Unlike many Eastern European countries, for instance, Chinese readers rarely saw advertisements for cosmetics and perfume, the quintessential middle-class female products that had become national symbols of waste and even treason as early as the Republican era because they were so often imported from imperialist countries.⁶⁴

Contradictory advertising policies existed within as well as between socialist countries, and implementing these not only allowed 'bourgeois' advertising culture to continue but also created new headaches for bureaucrats. In China, a particularly sensitive issue involved advertisements for products produced in capitalist countries. From early on, neither magazines nor newspapers in China were permitted to initiate contact with prospective advertisers or in any way solicit advertisements from abroad. At the same time, these Chinese publications were allowed to accept advertisements for ordinary commercial products but not for foreign books, magazines, or newspapers. Nor were they allowed to cite this policy but rather, if asked by prospective foreign advertisers, were instructed to 'make up an excuse such as a lack of space', in recognition that domestic advertising policy was also an issue of international relations.⁶⁵

In an effort to clarify the ambiguous regulations regarding foreign advertisements, in 1956, China's Cultural Ministry issued new rules. The archival documents associated with the release of these rules reveal concern that if China did not permit foreign companies to advertise products, it would reflect badly on China and adversely affect the country's foreign relations, as 'contact with capitalist countries was on the rise and an overly restrictive policy would damage these important relationships'. As it had done since taking power, once again, the national government compromised its expressed ideological hostility toward advertising by specifying six Shanghai-based magazines and five national newspapers that were allowed to accept advertisements: *Beijing Daily*, *Liberation Daily* (Shanghai), *Xinwen ribao* (Shanghai), *Nanfang ribao* (Guangzhou), and *Tianjin Daily*. These documents also reveal a government anxious to control foreign access to information about China. One of the odder regulations specified that newspapers send to foreign companies placing advertisements only the clippings of their

⁶⁴ On the politics of perfume and imported luxury goods in the Republican era, see Karl Gerth, *China Made*, chapter 7.

⁶⁵ SMA A73-1-274 (1957.4.1), 'Guanyu zai baokan shang kandeng waishang guanggao yishi de buchong guiding' (Supplemental regulations regarding the placement of advertisements by foreign commercial interests in newspapers and periodicals).

advertisements themselves and not the entire newspaper, which the rule stated ‘cannot be exported to capitalist countries’ even though companies routinely requested the entire edition, which was common industry practice internationally.⁶⁶ A year later, nineteen more magazines and the newspaper *Dagongbao* (by this time, only published in Tianjin and not Shanghai) were added to the list of approved newspapers.⁶⁷

This picture is made more complicated by the realization that below the superficial appearance of any policy position were opposing views among Chinese policy makers. All capitalist countries were not treated the same by policy makers. In 1957, the *Liberation Daily* sought to clarify two contradictory positions on accepting advertisements from American companies. The Foreign Trade Office did not want to allow the United States to place any advertisements, the Foreign Affairs Office took a more pragmatic position, arguing that: ‘at a time when America looked down on China’ and had imposed a trade embargo, allowing such advertisements could be ‘beneficial’. The Foreign Affairs Office argued that currying favour with American business leaders, who wanted to trade with China, might help change American foreign policy, and that such advertisements would earn the country hard currency without requiring China to allow the actual products into the country. Caught between two powerful ministries, the *Liberation Daily* asked for mediation from the Shanghai Publications Office, which oversaw newspapers, and got a clear response: ‘American merchants are absolutely forbidden from placing advertisements’.⁶⁸

Nevertheless, all the way up to the Cultural Revolution in 1966, when advertising completely disappeared, critics within and outside the government continued to accuse China of propagating a capitalist form of advertising. Despite the numerous efforts to create a socialist form of advertising, as a report written in 1960 by the Shanghai Communist Party’s Number One Commercial Bureau’s Investigative Team on Advertising Companies concluded, employees of advertising firms (by now state-run) continued capitalist advertising practices both in the forms of advertisements themselves as

⁶⁶ SMA A73-1-274 (1957.4.1), ‘Guanyu zai baokan shang kandeng waishang guanggao yishi de buchong guiding’ (Supplemental regulations regarding the placement of advertisements by foreign commercial interests in newspapers and periodicals).

⁶⁷ SMA A73-1-312 (1957.2.26), ‘Guanyu kandeng zibenzhuoyi guojia shangpin guanggao suoqu yangbao wenti de qingshi’ (Regarding the requirements for placing commercial advertisements from capitalist countries and providing samples of the newspaper).

⁶⁸ SMA A73-1-312 (1957.2.26), ‘Guanyu kandeng zibenzhuoyi guojia shangpin guanggao suoqu yangbao wenti de qingshi’ (Regarding the requirements for placing commercial advertisements from capitalist countries and providing samples of the newspaper).

well as in their business management throughout the entire first decade of Communist rule. To make more money, for instance, such companies continued to manage advertisements for products that were unavailable in the marketplace (or required ration coupons to obtain).⁶⁹ In the eyes of some, replacing consumer culture—and the business practices underlying it—with socialism would require a much more thorough attack. Clearly, China was not simply going to allow its vision of socialism to be undermined through the continued acceptance of advertising, as it had witnessed in the ‘revisionist’ socialist states of eastern Europe led by the Soviet Union.

In addition to revealing the flows across socialist countries on issues related to consumerism, China’s experience with advertising also helps further blur the previously explicit boundary between pre- and post-Liberation China as well as socialist and communist economies. As historians are now starting to appreciate, there was no abrupt shift from pre- to post-Liberation Chinese society, wherein one day China was ‘semi-colonial and semi-feudal’ and then the next was made up of new socialist persons who suddenly changed out of their accustomed wardrobes and into the unofficial uniforms of the Mao era—grey for cadres, blue for workers, and green for soldiers, and one of the three for everyone else wanting to associate with one of them.⁷⁰ Nor were the communists rebels one day in 1949 and the next day governing the whole of China, including Tibet.⁷¹ Even when in power, the CCP did not try to change everything overnight. In the early years, advertising culture followed the state mandate to focus on economic ‘recovery’. However, even when the state-mandated ‘recovery’ period came to an end with the start of the 3–5–Anti’s campaign (*Sanfan, wufan yundong*) of 1951–2, despite the virulent attacks on bourgeois culture in general and the advertising culture of the pre-Liberation era, such advertising did not completely disappear, even after private enterprise did after 1956. Viewing the shifting attitudes and policies toward consumerism in general and advertising in particular as a wide spectrum with opposing views beneath the surface orthodoxy at any one moment restores the complexity of the period for all socialist countries.

⁶⁹ SMA B123-5-137 (1960.9.21). ‘*Guanyu Shanghai shi guanggao gongsi gongzuo qingkuang de jiancha baogao*’ (An investigative report on Shanghai advertising companies’ work practices), 1960.

⁷⁰ On the continuity between the republican and communist era in clothing, see A. Finnane, *Changing Clothes in China: Fashion, History, Nation* (New York, 2008), chapter 8.

⁷¹ See Chen Jian, ‘The Chinese Communist “Liberation” of Tibet, 1949–51’, in Jeremy Brown and Paul G. Pickowicz (eds), *Dilemmas of Victory* (Cambridge, MA, 2007), 130–59.