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Thomas Boutonnet

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The Westerner in Chinese Advertisements, the Chinese in Western Advertisements: crossed views on added values.

Thomas Boutonnet

Sino-European Transcultural Encounters,
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Powerpoint Slide 1

I must right away make two points clear. First of all: I will not talk about contemporary advertising in China and its general trends, but I will just talk about these specific Chinese street advertisements or billboards involving a western reference, mostly western people, in their visual aspect. Secondly: the assumptions and conclusions I will draw about these advertisements are definitely not exclusive to them. Of course, some other forms of advertisements in China could be vehicles for the very same values and purposes that I'm going to expose here.

Powerpoint Slide 2 ("Representations...")

Since 1998, during all my visits to China, I have noticed that the representation of the Westerner (generally White) in Chinese street advertisements or billboards was often associated in one way or another with a certain idea of excellence, high quality, luxury or fashion. Similarly, the presence of a Chinese person (or Chinese references, or even oriental references, because this concept is still strongly linked to China) in Western commercials is most of the time associated with the concepts of mystery, wisdom, spirituality or eternity.

By these representations, and beyond the formal differences, one single goal is targeted: to add value to a product, by using the Other (and by exploiting ignorance of the Other, stereotypes on the Other and common ideas on the Other) to create identity: a brand identity, and therefore, the consumer's identity.

We will first see what is added, as a value, by using the representation of the Other in advertisement. And we will then see what we learn about our post-modern societies: I will show that this phenomenon contributes to and tends to reinforce the commodification of culture; and also reveals an strong trend in our contemporary societies: the omnipresence of the middle class as a new social norm.

Powerpoint Slide 3 (Part 1)

This association between the icon of the Foreigner or the White and the idea of excellence or high quality can be explained by the rise and the development of a mass consumer society in China in the early nineties. At the beginning of the twentieth century, when West was synonymous with civilization, the White was already linked to modernity in China. But the Nineties, characterized by the powerful growth of the private sector and the service industry, generalized a materialist ideal of life based on the desire to have and show. An ideal of life traditionally

represented by the United States, the American/Californian way of life, based on mass consumption, and the American Dream, qualified by Jack Solomon¹ as a *constant desire for social success and material rewards*.

Powerpoint Slide 4 (Houshi Boss Ad)

This advertisement is a perfect demonstration of my topic. Here we have a character, who can be described as a white, male adult, most probably urban, he seems to be very confident, he radiates an almost physical confidence, strengthened by the ambition we can discern in his eyes looking towards the outside the visual field (maybe towards the future) and the serenity suggested by the glasses removed from his eyes.

Powerpoint Slide 5 (“Westernity”)

The glass of alcohol close to him gives him a wise and grown dimension. And the tag line, written in a dubious English, mentions what the visual already convinces us of : *I believe myself*. Of course, all of this would be nothing without the briefcase, without the briefcase there can't be any boss. All of this forms a kind of paradigm where one can find, pell mell, mixed values such as success, confidence, manliness, and wealth, all linked to the White, a mix which can also be called Westernity (in reference to the *sinité* or Chineseness of Roland Barthes, a term he used to identify this China seen by the Westerners as a *special compound of small bells, rickshaws and opium dens*

Powerpoint Slide 6 (Beijing Hospital Ad)

In this other advertisement, for a hospital in Beijing specialized in the treatment of urinary pathologies, the slogan, *A good health is the key for a perfect home*, is illustrated by what would be a perfect home : the home of a white man, a virile man (it is tempting, besides, to think that this hospital offers manliness), and obviously radiating success, confidence and ambition, as shown by his thumb up. The icon of the white successful man is supposed to illustrate the perfection.

Powerpoint Slide 7 (“While you cannot change...”)

It is still useful to remind that advertisement has, before anything else, the purpose to stimulate and cause the act of purchasing, by associating some values and an imaginary to the product. Quoting the words of Professor James Twitchell, *While you cannot change what a product is, you can change what it means*².

The merchandise, through advertising, creates little stories of day-to-day life ; put all together end-to-end these stories form the History of the consumer. Advertisement has a legitimate inclination to put into scenery a world where consumption is a source of positive change and satisfaction, and where purchasing is the core of existence. Therefore, advertisement cannot do anything but praise the middle class, it emphasizes the middle class, contributes to creating its universe, because the middle class has the capacity of consumption. Publicizing the life of the poor, who do not have neither the power nor the intent to purchase, would be senseless. The merchandise, by means of advertising, has everything to gain by disseminating the myth of the middle class as a social accomplishment. And it reaches its goal by conveying standards, conventions which will impose the middle class as an ideal to achieve.

Powerpoint Slide 8 (“The purpose of White...”)

¹ Jack Solomon, *Masters of Desire: The Culture of American Advertising*, 1996.

² James Twitchell, *Twenty ads that shook the world*, New York, Three Rivers Press, 2000.

The consumer society, developed in the nineties, and the constitution of a middle class, have accompanied China to shift into a modernity in which accession to middle class is shown as a sign, and the goal, of a social accomplishment. The purpose of the White in these Chinese advertisements is to embody high-quality, excellence, perfection, and also a certain idea of social accomplishment, implying materialist success. The White, who has, in Chinese imaginary, already reached this ideal (most of the representations, movies, soap-operas, images, show the White in an ideal financial situation), serves this propaganda of the middle class as a social accomplishment.

Powerpoint Slide 9 (“An added value...”)

As we can see, these representations of the Westerner are carrying and adding value, an ideological value. An added value supposedly missing or lacking for the Chinese, and whose quest would be supposed to perfect an existence still unbalanced: the White way of life.

We can draw similar conclusions about the purpose of the Chinese in Western advertising. The role of the Westerner is to represent Westernity, the role of the Chinese will be to stand for Orientality, that is to say all notions and features associated to the Chinese in a vision perfectly matching the criteria of Orientalism as defined by Edward Said.

Let's take a look at these two advertisements.

Powerpoint Slide 10 (Tea set Ad : These porcelains symbolise the heritage of eternal China)

This first ad is an advertisement for a home accessories company, selling, among others things, tea sets. A very basic analysis let us find, only in the words used in the tag line, almost all the stereotypes and commonplaces about China : eternity, red colour, and the notions of symbol and heritage. We are dealing with a very basic, crude orientalism. And those stereotypes will probably help us better understand the next advertisement.

Powerpoint Slide 11 (IWC Ad : We don't know the lifetime of a IWC. But we've only existed for 140 years)

Powerpoint Slide 12 (Born 120 years ago !)

There is no rational explanation to the presence of this old person, *inevitably* Asiatic or Chinese, in this ad. The watch is not from China, its name is not linked to China by any way, and nothing in its design seems to refer to a potential Chinese aesthetic. The explanation is to be found in what this character is evoking for a Westerner: he is the iconic representation of the wise, the kung-fu Chinese master, the one who has the knowledge and hands it over to his follower. He IS, he embodies this notion of eternity, of longevity, long tradition, notions that this advertisement wants obviously associate to this watch.

Powerpoint Slide 13 (“The Westerner.....”)

The Chinese Other representation in a western advertisement involves also some values, a fullness, that the Westerner does not have yet or does not have anymore, and whose pursuit would be supposed to perfect an existence still unbalanced : the Chinese wisdom and spirituality for the Westerner. The Westerner is evolving in a society which has already reached the limits of materialism, and which is looking for a certain idea of happiness, not anymore in consumption (as we can see in China), but mostly in the joy (and therefore in the consumption) of certain values, like spirituality, escaping, free time, discovery of the Other, all of them are concepts very used in advertisements in France. Confirming the statement of French professor Genevieve Cornu,

Powerpoint Slide 14 (“Advertisement is the place...”)

saying that advertisement is *the place where are expressed the deep trends of a period, the modern concerns, myths and sensibilities*³. Advertisement, whose goal is to cause the purchase, is suggesting that a perfect and ideal life can be so only after the consumption of the product or the service which will precisely remedy to the lacks and the misbalance of your life. Because, let's not forget, and I'm still quoting professor Cornu, that *we don't buy a product but the values attached to it*. In this capacity, *the advertising image offers to see human models corresponding to the dominating social values. (...) It works thanks to a “mimetic desire” forcing us to look like the model offered. (...) Advertisement reflects the dominating ideology, stereotypes which are often very volatile and episodic.*

Powerpoint Slide 15 (Part 2)

As the French theorist Guy Debord demonstrated in his major work *Society of Spectacle*, we are living in what he calls a spectacle market economy, where to Be requires to Have and to Show.

Powerpoint Slide 16 (“We are living...”)

And, actually, the globalization, the predominance of the icon, of the image and of the representation on the real narrowed the culture to what it can be sold (that is to say, its simplified, folklorised, picturesque form, its iconic form, because they are sellable and bankable forms, and they don't need any kind of understanding). And advertising, by representing and using the Other, contributes to this commodification of cultures. Because the advertising image is often a mix of allusions and pictorial references exposed as an emblem, pieces torn off their scientific or historical contexts and carrying emotional values. It tends to short-circuit the thought and the understanding, too sophisticated, and prefers ingraining simplistic images and imagined representations in the spirits. By a negative side effect, advertising encourages to show what the Other is expected to be instead of showing what the Other is: a performative imaginary, or a *known unknown*, as exposed in Florent Villard's work about representation of China by the French tourism industry.

Powerpoint Slide 17 (“Spectacular...”)

But these advertisements also reveals a strong trend in our contemporary societies : more than a westernization of China, a often debated topic, we can observe, in terms of representation, icons and spectacle, the middleclassification of China, that is to say : the omnipresence of the middle class as a new social norm, as it can be seen in quite all other places and countries in the World nowadays. It is noticeable in China, when we see all these advertisements featuring Westerners as we just saw, because those westerners are here to represent this middle class. But it's even more noticeable when Chinese advertisements are featuring Chinese persons...

Powerpoint Slide 18 (Beijing Airport Ad)

...whose faces or behaviour seem to become “westernized”, where there are no more signs of culture, because the consumer does not have culture or does not need culture. This is exactly the meaning of this statement by Genevieve Cornu, when she says that *advertisement's image supposes a kind of cultural blur, geographical and historical imprecision, letting us evolving in a mythic imaginary*. Advertisements make the consumer believe that they are reflecting reality, while they only create a world which is making allusions to reality, where the purpose, the aim is the consumption.

Because happiness is all about consumption as this advertisement is telling us

³ Geneviève Cornu, *Sémiologie de l'image dans la publicité*, Paris, Les éditions d'organisation, 1991

Powerpoint Slide 19 (Happiness loans)

and we can see how relevant is this statement of professor Gregory Lee, when he's saying that the "necessity to give free rein to the power of imagination, to promote creativity (...) as intrinsic vector of a new art of living, is now more and more urging".

Conclusion

As a conclusion of my speech, I would sum up and say that the role of the White in Chinese ad, beyond his main purpose, reveals a "middleclassification" of our contemporary societies in terms of representations.

Powerpoint Slide 20 (Ideal Home Ad)

It reveals a kind of leveling (still going on) of living conditions, where the standard would be that of Western consumerism, and where some folk representations supposed to differentiate cultures from others would be preserved at the local level. Across these crossed views of seemingly insignificant things, we discover a deeply strong trend of our time in terms of representations and spectacle: the accession (however very restricted) to the middle class as a standard, and the preservation of the cultures in the shape of clichés and easily identifiable stereotypes as added value and wealth.

The Middle class and the end of cultural diversity are for me two faces of the same phenomenon, and we could see here an attempt to define post-modernity.

Powerpoint Slide 21 (Billeter Quote Pub Carrefour)

And I will conclude this speech by these words of Jean-François Billeter about China

"the dominating imaginary is from now on the same as elsewhere. It is likewise poor, and likewise dangerous because of this very poorness"

Powerpoint Slide 22 (Thank you)