A digital history of advertising in Modern Shanghai

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I. A visual history of advertising in Modern Shanghai

1) A historical approach of advertising based on a two-dimensional definition of advertising
• advertisement (as a visual material)
• advertising as an economic activity and commercial strategy, and a profession (advertisers, artists, advertising agencies...)

2) A visual history of advertising: focused on images and visual aspects of advertisements and other historical materials

3) A comparative history of advertising
• A « global history » of advertising: comparing Western and Chinese advertising and companies
• Focus on three case studies: three « modern » products (medicines, cigarettes, sodas) connected by health issues

4) A « modern » history of advertising in two ways
• Using advertising materials to trace the history of Modern China and Chinese modernity as a political, social, and cultural phenomenon
• Dealing with the modernity of advertising itself, the emergence and development of modern advertising (modern techniques, modern professionals and standards, modern industry...)

Is modernity a product imported from the West or invented or recreated in China? Is modernity essentially Western, Chinese, or a kind of hybrid between Western and Chinese elements? Is tradition and modernity? Are these words still accurate or do we need to replace them by more neutral concepts - such as old/ new, foreign/native, indigenous/exogenous, internal/external - or concepts able to cross and transcend these binary categories? (hybridity)

II. A history based on various sources: using Omeka and « IAO Scholar » platform to collect them and build a digital depository

1) A depository welcoming various sources:
• From various institutions: state and public archives (from government or Shanghai Municipal Council), corporate archives (companies, advertising agencies), advertising organizations or chambers of commerce, press (newspapers and illustrated magazines - Shenbao, Dianshizai Huabao), (auto)biographies or personal papers (Carl Crow), public or private collections of ads (Duke University)...

• Of various types and nature: visual or written materials, press advertising, design posters, New Year calendars (yuefenpai), paintings and works of art, other material objects (packaging, cigarette cards, bottles, collectors)

Importance of tags, keywords and categories to connect these materials

2) A normalized collection: based on the Dublin Core system

3) An organized collection: three collections according to the category of product to reflect my three case studies: medicines, cigarettes, sodas and beverages

III. Facing the paradox of historical materials

1) Main problem: the paradox of historical sources between abundance and scarcity
• Old ads and historical materials in general are abundant and scattered throughout the world
• It is difficult to locate and access the accurate materials
• Historical metadata are rare and of unequal quality

2) Solutions
• To focus on well-documented materials and reflect on the absence or scarcity of certain type of materials
• To order and hierarchize materials — focusing on the most representative and accurate ads
• To classify and build typologies of ads

Example of medicines as « hybrid products » particularly hard to define and categorize

IV. A two-legs methodology
A methodology combining a « qualitative » and a « quantitative » approach:

1) Qualitative: close reading and analysis of visual materials

2) Quantitative: distant reading — serialization: individual images are related to each other and to other historical materials and replaced in corpora and series of ads

Three functions of « serialization »:
• To reveal patterns and visual culture(s) (local, national, global?)
• To trace changes or constants (evolution)
• To build and test « models » of ads - to identify and explain « deviant » ads (modelization)