

Promoting the Foreign: Advertising of Department Stores in Republican Shanghai

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For the past 150 years, the Chinese have held an ambivalent attitude toward foreign things and people. Foreigners were simultaneously viewed as the source of threatening China's stability and stimulating its modernization. Thus, China witnessed fierce xenophobic incidents like the Boxer's Uprising while launching such ambitious state-making projects as Western-style constitutional monarchy and public education. This ambivalence showcased not just in national politics but also daily life. For example, the advocates of the 'National Products Movement,' the consumer movement prevalent in the first half of the twentieth century, urged citizens to boycott foreign goods and purchase Chinese products instead so as to eliminate foreigners' economic infringement.¹ Nevertheless, Chinese folks from both the city and country were exposed to a world of imported commodities without strong rejection.

Why did the Chinese eagerly embrace things from abroad? Many supporters of the National Products Movement accused the so-called 'modern men and women' of craving for foreign brands even though China produced

¹ Karl Gerth, *China Made: Consumer Culture and the Creation of the Nation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003).

similar things with lower prices.² Frank Dikötter addresses the issue in functional terms that for most Chinese consumers, foreign goods were desirable because they were new and useful; once similar and cheaper China-made substitutes appeared, outdated foreign goods would be discarded.³ Despite addressing different motives of Chinese interest in foreign goods, these authors assume highly rational and autonomous consumers with an ability of calculation and information collection. But consumer's decision was a complex process involved in prices, availability and knowledge of the products in which advertisers (including manufacturers and retailers) played an important role. As department stores were one of the major agents trading foreign goods, this paper will focus on advertising strategies that department stores used for communication and persuasion.

Department Stores in Shanghai

The department store emerged as a result of the Second Industrial Revolution in Europe and the United States. Since the mid-nineteenth century, manufacturing goods flooded the market, compelling retailers to develop new ways of conducting business. Among those innovations appeared the department store, which adopted such marketing strategies as intensive advertising, comfortable and open shopping spaces, and free and attentive

² This kind of rhetoric frequently appeared in the 'national products' column of *Shenbao* between 1934 and 1936.

³ Frank Dikötter, *Exotic Commodities: Modern Objects and Everyday Life in China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p. 43.

services in order to promote sales. Beginning in New York and Paris, this new type of stores gained enormous popularity and became the feature of modern cities in the world. It was the British that established the first department stores in China, among which Hall & Holtz's and Whiteaway Laidlaw were the most well-known. Hall & Holtz's began in 1843 as a small British bakery mainly catering to foreign customers. As the business grew prosperous, the managers decided to expand into a general store with multiple merchandising lines. At the turn of the century, Hall & Holtz's became a business conglomeration that not only acquired Empire Brewery and established a new woodworking factory, but also built a new emporium—one of the tallest buildings near the Bund at the time. In the early twentieth century, a new department store Whiteaway Laidlaw joined the market. Having a headquarters in Calcutta, Whiteaway Laidlaw aimed to extend its business throughout the British Empire, especially in South and Southeast Asia. In 1904, the board of directors decided to launch a branch in Shanghai, and four years later another store edifice was erected directly opposite to Hall & Holtz's.

British dominance over the business of department stores did not last too long before the Chinese joined the store war in the mid-1910s. Chinese department store owners all had plentiful experience overseas; coming from villages near Canton, they had migrated to Australia during the gold rush of the late nineteenth century, and later successfully monopolized the banana trade in the provinces of Queensland and New South Wales. While flourishing in their business, they witnessed the achievements of Western-style shopkeeping in Sydney, and decided to introduce these innovative business skills to China by

establishing a similar store in Hong Kong. Their first attempt was a tremendous success: it not only attracted more Chinese merchants to enter modern retailing, but also prompted rapid expansion of the business to other cities. Since the late 1910s, Shanghai opened grand emporia after grand emporia, among which the four major department stores (namely Sincere, Wing On, the Sun Sun, and the Sun) became the symbol of the city's prosperity and glamour.⁴

The department store was translated into Chinese as '*baihuo gongsi*', literally 'a company selling hundreds of goods.' This name does not just denote a wide variety of commodities, but also refer to plentiful sources of its stock. For instance, the British merchant William Whiteley conferred the title 'universal provider' to his store, which was transformed from a draper into a department store in 1872 and opened a separate foreign department two years later.⁵ As early as 1875, the London department store Liberty was founded to specialize in oriental goods such as Chinese blackwood stands, blue and white porcelain, and Japanese kimono.⁶

In Shanghai, department stores also impressed customers with numerous imported goods. The early stores such as Hall & Holtz's and Whiteaway Laidlaw were proud of their British identity, often proclaiming themselves as the 'center of British and American goods.' Inspired by William Whiteley's, Sincere Company put the slogan 'selling goods of the globe' (*tongban huanqiu huomin*) in

⁴ About the establishment of early department stores in Hong Kong, see Wellington K. K. Chan, "Personal Styles, Cultural Values, and Management: The Sincere and Wing On Companies in Shanghai and Hong Kong, 1900-1941," in Kerrie L. MacPherson ed., *Asian Department Stores* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1998), pp. 66-89.

⁵ Richard S. Lambert, *The Universal Provider: A Study of William Whiteley and the Rise of the London Department Store* (London: George G. Harrap & Co. Ltd., 1938), pp. 72-73.

⁶ Sarah Cheang, "Selling China: Class, Gender and Orientalism at the Department Store," *Journal of Design History* 20:1 (2007), pp. 5, 6, 11.

its advertisement. At its founding stage, Sun Sun Company set its agenda to promote national products so as to 'retrieve economic rights' (*wanhui liquan*), but it soon realized the need to include foreign goods in its stock. The Sun Sun Company openly justified its purchasing policy at its tenth anniversary:

For the past ten years, based on the conviction to promote national products and prosper our society, we have been searching for Chinese goods so as to retrieve our economic rights. Our passion for national salvation has received high praise from various circles. However, we may draw on the strength of foreign goods to offset the weakness of national products. Therefore we have been collecting daily objects widely from Europe and America.⁷

Thus, even during the period the National Products Movement spread rapidly, department stores continued selling foreign goods. Before 1931, seventy-five percent of Wing On Company's stock came from overseas.⁸ Department stores clearly carried a 'foreign' label.

Advertising the Foreign

The best way to examine the contents of department stores' commodities is to check their inventories or catalogues, yet to date I do not find those of the abovementioned stores for several reasons. First, the two British stores did not leave their records in the Shanghai Municipal Archives where I spent most of my time for the current research project. Moreover, the Chinese stores did not preserve their catalogues in their archives if they indeed printed them.

⁷ *Shenbao* Jan. 5, 1936.

⁸ Institute of Economics, Shanghai Academy of Social Science ed., *Shanghai Yongan gongsi de chansheng, fazhan han gaizao* (Shanghai: Shanghai remin chubanshe, 1980), p. 136.

Fortunately those stores frequently advertised in major newspapers of Shanghai, which provided clues of what they sold. Before analyzing the contents and meanings of these advertisements, thus, I will introduce advertising strategies of these stores.

Both British and Chinese department stores valued the power of advertising and invested a lump sum of expenditure on it. In the 1930s, Wing On Company spent about 30,000 yuan for newspaper advertisements, representing 1.5 percent of net sales,⁹ a ratio no less than that of their Western models. For instance, the New York Macy's expense of advertising accounted for 1.16-2.11 percent of total net sales between 1888 and 1902, the third largest item in operating expenses next to salaries and rents.¹⁰ The stores also engaged in many sorts of advertising, including posting bills, hanging flags in front of the stores, radio broadcasting, and so on. They not only advertised in public places, but also penetrated into other business spaces by distributing calendars and matchboxes with store information to hotels and restaurants, showing commercial slides in the theatres, and pasting posters in the bus.

Of the variety of media for advertising, newspapers were the type most commonly in use because it was a cost-effective method of raising publicity. In the late 1920s, *Shenbao*, the most influential newspaper in China, charged 1.4-2.52 yuan for each column inch of advertisement per day, depending on its placement. It was estimated that *Shenbao*'s circulation reached one hundred

⁹ Guo Guanchang, "Shanghai Yongan gongsi zhi qiyuan gi yingye xianzhuang, shang," *Xinshangye jikan* 2 (February 1936), p. 45. Guo Guanchang, "Shanghai Yongan gongsi zhi qiyuan gi yingye xianzhuang, xia," *Xinshangye jikan* 3 (May 1936), pp. 42-44.

¹⁰ Ralph M. Hower, *History of Macy's of New York, 1858-1919* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1946), pp. 258-259.

thousand.¹¹ Presumably a manufacturer could expose their product to nearly a million people all year round through the front page of *Shenbao* with an advertising expense of less than a thousand yuan.¹² According to a contemporary observer, most of the advertising budgets in business went to newspapers.¹³

Department stores also frequently advertised in various kinds of newspapers: widely circulated and respected dailies like *Shenbao* and *Xinwenbao*, tabloids catering to those who sought entertainment news such as *Xiaobao* and *Fuermosi*, and evening newspapers like *Dawanbao*. To attract foreign customers, Chinese-owned department stores also advertised in English newspapers. For instance, Sincere Company regularly advertised in the most influential English paper, *The North China Daily News*, since its grand opening in October 1917. From December 1917 to April 1918, Sincere Company advertised 57 days in that paper, roughly once every three days. In fact, department stores would advertise in any newspaper as long as its readership included potential customers, no matter what political orientations the newspapers adopted.

Figure 1 represents the frequencies of department stores' advertising in *Shenbao* between 1919 and 1936. There were two high tides of Chinese stores' advertisements throughout this period, namely 1919 and the 1930s. Sincere Company opened in October 1917 and Wing On Company joined the market in the following year. Since then, the two Chinese department stores intensively

¹¹ Ge Gongzhen, *Zhongguo baoxueshi* (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1928), pp. 234-237, 240.

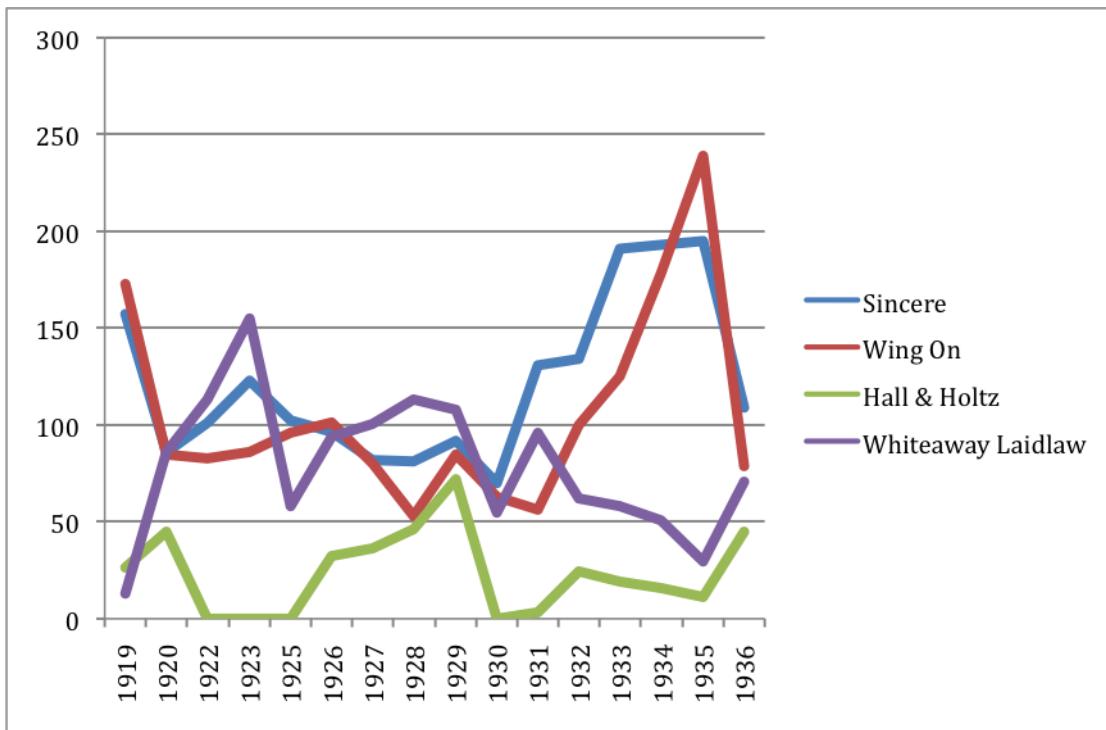
¹² According to a contemporary observer, a multiple readership of newspapers was very common, either passing old papers to different hands, or posting them on a wall where passers-by could read them. It is estimated that per copy readership ranged from ten to twenty persons. Leo Ou-fan Lee and Andrew J. Nathan, "The Beginning of Mass Culture: Journalism and Fiction in the Late Ch'ing and Beyond," David Johnson, Andrew J. Nathan and Evelyn S. Rawski eds., *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 371-372.

¹³ Ge Gongzhen, *Zhongguo baoxueshi*, p. 222.

competed in various forms of promotion, including newspaper ads. In 1919, Sincere and Wing On advertised 157 and 173 days in *Shenbao* respectively. The establishment of Chinese department stores also led the British competitors to raise their advertising budgets in Chinese media. In 1920, Whiteaway Laidlaw advertised 86 days in *Shenbao*, more than sixfold of the time than the previous year (13 days). Hall & Holtz's also almost doubled the amount of advertisement subscription of *Shenbao*, increasing from 26 days in 1919 to 45 days in 1920. Interestingly, once the market stabilized, the number of Chinese stores' advertisements declined while that of Whiteaway Laidlaw's continued to grow. The second peak time of department stores' ads appeared in the 1930s. Especially in 1935, Sincere, Wing On and Sun Sun advertised 195, 239, 277 days respectively. Hall & Holtz and Whiteaway Laidlaw, however, decreased their advertisements to 11 and 30 days. Without details of how those companies decided their marketing strategies, it was difficult to explain those stores' advertising behavior, but the international economic recession began to hit China in the mid-1930s and department stores prolonged the sales periods in order to increase turnover rates of their stock. In 1934, Wing On's sales revenue was only 9,918,238 yuan, representing 69.5% of that in 1931,¹⁴ and intensive promotion became the remedy those stores sought to cure the problem.

Figure 1 Frequencies of department stores' advertising in *Shenbao*

¹⁴ *Shanghai Yongan gongsi*, p. 123.



Different from manufacturers' advertisements that often highlighted one single product, department stores' ads showed numerous commodities. To be sure, the stores were unable to advertise all their stocks in the limited space of newspapers; thus, the products in press were highly selected and revealed the ideology department stores adhered to. In both Chinese and British stores, the products in the ads included fabric, accessory, clocks, watches, stationery, cosmetics, toys, household appliances, kitchenware, lamps, furniture, all of which were emphasized as 'manufacturing goods made by famous factories.' Not accidentally, the British department stores never advertised handmade food items even though Hall & Holtz originated from a bakery. Chinese stores advertised two types of food: imported candies and canned food exquisitely packed under foreign brands, and special local products for Chinese festivals. Except for the culture-specific items, department stores demonstrated

themselves as a world of manufacturing goods, an image often associated with ‘modern and progress.’

For this reason, the ‘world’ in department stores’ ads was limited to the industrial countries. Both Chinese and British department stores advertised their products manufactured by certain countries famous for their specialized products such as American mechanical appliances, Swiss watches, German metalwork, French and English fabrics, Dutch laces, Czech glassware, and so on. Without exception, the countries that appeared in department stores’ ads were all in Europe and America. Through the advertisements, department stores helped establish a ranking system of commodities in a global scale, and educated readers with knowledge of appraisement. In some sense, the nationality of the merchandise, just like brand name, connoted certain desirable characteristics such as quality, value and elegance. As a result, the exoticism associated with imported goods was enfolded into the notion of fashion, which was particularly true to the consumption of the products applying new foreign technology.

The primary purpose of advertisements was to sell products, but the conveyed messages were more than of brands and functions. As Gillian Dyer points out, advertisements are not merely “transparent” vehicles for communication, but they also create structures of meaning, which embody human life. In other words, advertisements “translate statements about objects into statements about types of consumer and human relationships”¹⁵—it is often the latter that catches consumers’ attention. In the advertisement of refrigerators, Whiteaway Laidlaw emphasized material advantages of the product, and introduced new concepts of modern life as well:

¹⁵ Gillian Dyer, *Advertising as Communication* (London: Methuen & Co., 1982), p. 116.

In this hot weather, food and drink are easy to go rotten. People get sick if they negligently eat and drink them. Thus, Sakesi refrigerators are necessary items for all households. They can preserve all kinds of drinks and food for long periods of time and improve hygiene, a powerful weapon that families should have.¹⁶

According to Ruth Rogaski, 'hygiene' was desirable to the Chinese not only because it represented a healthy condition in physique but also because it was used as a marker to differentiate 'clean' urban middle class from 'backward and polluted' social outcaste such as prostitutes.¹⁷ Refrigerators were portrayed as such a hygiene-related product that would promise a healthier and happier life. By purchasing a refrigerator, consumers could expect convenience (cold drinks at any time), elegance (a nice piece of decoration for the household), and health (a life free from threat of rotten food and illness). This technology-based, energy-consuming item would also change a housewife's daily routines; with a refrigerator, she could do grocery shopping less frequently and engage other responsibilities with 'extra time.' All these features promised consumers a satisfactory lifestyle often perceived as 'modernity' though the invention of household appliances did not necessarily lighten women's burdens of chores.¹⁸

In addition to products of new invention, department stores also sold things related to Western living such as tableware, lamps, tennis rackets, sportswear, sewing machines and so on. These items were promoted not simply as the vessels of materiality, but as the agent of transmitting material culture. For instance, both the Chinese and the British drank tea but they developed different manners and used different types of tea sets. By promoting Western

¹⁶ *Shenbao* July 11, 1926.

¹⁷ Ruth Rogaski, *Hygienic Modernity: Meanings of Health and Disease in Treaty-Port China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), pp. 225-233.

¹⁸ Ruth Schwartz Cowan, "The Industrial Revolution in the Home" in *The Social Shaping of Technology* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1999), pp. 289-301.

style of tea sets, department stores not only introduced foreign dietary culture but also created exotic imagination. Figure 2 was an ad of the glassware and porcelain department that Sincere Company inserted in its twenty-fifth anniversary book. Though the caption listed both Chinese and Western styles of porcelain (*zhongxi ciqi*), only the Western-style wares were illustrated. As Frank Dikötter points out, owning and using foreign objects meant an access to modern life to the Chinese.¹⁹ Mark Swislock made an interesting case of how Shanghai residents eagerly ‘tasted and demonstrated modernity’ by giving banquets at the Western-style restaurants (*fancaiguan*).²⁰ Department stores went further to cultivate consumers to host an English tea party at home and to create an exotic atmosphere of domesticity.

Figure 2 Ad of Glassware and Porcelain Department of Sincere Company



Domesticating the Foreign

¹⁹ Frank Dikotter, Exotic Commodities.

²⁰ Mark Swislocki, *Culinary Nostalgia: Regional Food Culture and the Urban Experience in Shanghai* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), pp. 97-141.

The advertisements of foreign products mentioned above often emphasized such qualities as beauty, convenience, uniqueness and fashion, which seemed to be taken as universally desirable values, but the standards of these attributes were culturally constructed. Hence, the dissemination of foreign goods needed a process of ‘domestication,’ that is, to fit them into cultural contexts even if the foreignness remained visible. Whiteaway Laidlaw particularly noted this and made great efforts to speak to its Chinese customers. As early as 1912(?), Whiteaway Laidlaw’s announced in *Shenbao* that Chinese salespersons were hired to receive Chinese customers in order to eliminate communicative barriers. A more interesting method of ‘localizing’ the company was to design a store brand of ‘Wayloo.’ Department stores were in essence an assembly of retailers and rarely involved in manufacturing. To secure the sources of merchandise and increase profits, department stores would purchase from small factories and label on store brands. To name such kinds of products, Whiteaway Laidlaw’s created a brand of ‘Wayloo,’ a transliteration of the Company’s Chinese name *hui-loo* in Shanghai dialect. The store even introduced Wayloo watches as ‘timekeepers of the east,’ representing a product specifically made for the Chinese market.²¹

In addition to adopting local dialect to establish its store brand, Whiteaway Laidlaw’s also played a leading role in popularizing and shaping Western holidays to the Chinese context, in which Christmas was particularly of interest. Even though Christianity was introduced to China centuries before, only when a critical mass of Westerners settled in the treaty ports did Christmas celebrations

²¹ *Shenbao*, January 6, 1926.

become a social event that extended beyond religious communities. As early as the 1870s, Chinese stores in the settlement joined the Christmas campaign of sales. As *North China Herald* reports:

Chinese and foreigners vie with each other their displays of the hundred and one articles of usefulness and luxury which it is considered "the thing" to purchase, and, it is to be hoped, enjoyed at Christmastide; and it is no small feature of novelty in the Settlement to notice the readiness with which the native storekeepers adapt themselves to the wants of the great Christian festival.²²

While Christmas was clearly an imported holiday, department stores turned it into a Chinese event. In December 1926, Whiteaway Laidlaw's redefined Christmas as followed:

Christmas is the so-called 'foreign Winter Solstice.' In the Christmas Eve, Western parents would buy toys, put them in the socks, and hang them on children's bedside. The next morning when children wake up, they would see them and consider them as gifts from Santa Claus. While this custom is ceremonial, it is a way to inspire children's curiosity and strengthen their faith, which also benefits the state and society. In recent years, an increasing number of Chinese follow this custom. Some say only Christians should observe this custom. It is not quite right. The reason for purchasing gifts for kith and kin is to maintain the relationship on seasonal basis, rather than to comply with rituals.²³

In this passage, Whiteaway Laidlaw's associated Christmas with Winter Solstice, which was one of the twenty-four solar terms in Chinese calendar. Chinese ways of celebrating this festival varied by regions but seldom included gift-exchanging. Since Winter Solstice was only three or four days earlier than Christmas, it was convenient for department stores to forge alleged connection of the two holidays and invent a commercial season of 'winter festival' (*dongjie*).

²² *North China Herald*, December 21, 1876.

²³ *Shenbao*, December 8, 1926.

In so doing, department stores helped develop children's worldview and retain human relationship at the expense of religiousness of Christmas.

Despite their foreignness, department stores articulated political discourse in the advertisements of imported goods. Xu Dingxin has noted that the May Fourth Movement inspired Chinese merchants to appropriate new language for business undertaking, and increasingly the brands of Chinese products carried patriotic implication. For instance, Nanyang Brothers' Cigarette Company named its products as '*aiguo*' (patriotism), '*changcheng*' (the Great Wall), '*zizyouzhong*' (Bell of Freedom), all of which expressed strong national sentiment.²⁴ Ironically department stores used similar tactics to promote foreign products. When introducing a new item, department stores had to give it a Chinese name. Sometimes they transliterated the original brand, creating terms without Chinese reference, which clearly impressed customers with novelty and exoticism. In the advertisement for French and English cloth, Whiteaway Laidlaw's deliberately used a larger font to highlight the transliterated name of each product as if these strange terms in themselves would attract customers.²⁵ At other times, however, department stores employed existing terms to translate the brands, which not only made the products easy to be remembered, but also affirmed certain values desirable to the Chinese. For example, the American stocking brand Kayser was translated as *kaixuan* or 'victory.'²⁶ Under China's social and political turmoil since the mid-nineteenth century, it was doubtless that 'victory' would be a welcome term for a brand name. What intrigued here was whose victory the name would suggest: Would it simply represent Chinese

²⁴ Xu Dingxin, "guohuo guanggao yu xiaofei wenhua," (Advertisements of national products and consumer culture), *Xueshu jikan*, no. 2 (1995), p.

²⁵ *Shenbao*, June 1, 1936.

²⁶ *Shenbao*, June 7, 1936.

wishful thinking, or consumer's individual gain of social status through conspicuous consumption, or worsened, foreigners' triumph over Chinese market? It was difficult to judge what the advertiser meant by choosing this transliterated name, but obviously 'victory' was a notion expected by both Chinese and foreigners no matter how differently they might interpret the term.

Another intriguing yet paradoxical example was Whiteaway Laidlaw's resort to the 'New Life Movement.' Officially launched in 1934, the New Life Movement was the Nationalist Party's ideological project aiming to 'revolutionize' daily life and 'revitalize' the country through a series of hygienic and behavioral reform.²⁷ Among other things, the ideologues encouraged Chinese citizens to cultivate virtues of 'self-restraint, self-sacrifice, loyalty, and obedience' as to make a strong and disciplined Chinese nation. The National Products Movement soon appropriated this notion to its agenda by condemning excessive desire for luxury goods, especially imported items.²⁸ Chinese manufacturers seized this opportunity to promote their products against their foreign competitors in light of the New Life Movement. Interestingly, Whiteaway Laidlaw's employed the same rhetoric strategy: in the advertisement of 'one-dollar goods' in 1936, the caption reads: 'Whiteaway Laidlaw's one-dollar goods are most suited for the new life, practical, economical and appropriate for citizens to purchase' (惠羅一元貨最為新生活化，最為應用，最為經濟，最合公民採購). The store also sold toothbrushes under the brand of 'new life.' For Whiteaway Laidlaw's, the significance of the New Life Movement lied probably

²⁷ Arif Dirlik, "The Ideological Foundation of the New Life Movement: A Study in Counterrevolution," *Journal of Asian Studies* 34:4 (August 1975), pp. 945-980.

²⁸ Karl Gerth, *China Made: Consumer Culture and the Creation of the Nation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), pp. 292-298.

not in the moral or ideological contents as the Nationalist conceived, but in the marketing strategy of how to create a platform for conversations between the advertisers and audience. In this sense, Whiteaway Laidlaw's perceived a host of consumers primarily concerned more about function, value and novelty than nationality of commodities.

In spite of its great efforts to accommodate the store to local culture, Whiteaway Laidlaw constantly emphasized its authentic status of a British store, making the process of domestication somewhat artificial and contrived. Wing On Company represented a different type of 'domesticating the foreign' in the sense that the store was much more profoundly embedded in Chinese culture than its British competitors. To systematically observe this process, I will analyze the advertisements of one single commodity, Conklin fountain pens. In 1891 the American Roy Conklin received his first fountain pen patent and organized the Self-Filling Fountain Pen Company in Toledo, Ohio seven years later. With successful marketing strategies, including a strong endorsement by the famous novelist Mark Twain, the Company (then renamed as "Conklin Pen Manufacturing Co.") expended rapidly and began exporting its products to Europe, South America and Asia in the 1920s.²⁹ The advertisement of Conklin pens appeared in *Shenbao* as early as December 1921, when the manufacturer first sought foreign traders and stationery shops to promote its products. In 1926, Wing On Company became the sole agent of the Conklin Co. in China and launched a series of campaign advertising Conklin pens, making the utilization of fountain pens a trendy pursuit.

²⁹ For a brief history of Conklin Pen Company, see <http://www.conklinpen.com/history.html> (retrieved on February 24, 2010).

In the early stage of Conklin's introduction to China, its advertisements highlighted special features of the products. In the very first piece, Conklin introduced itself in the following way:

Mechanical perfection explains the quality and beauty of Conklin fountain pens and automatic pencils. There are various significant features that other pens cannot compare with such as crescent self-filler—this invention is still the simplest and sturdiest filler. Other items like propelling pencils are ingeniously manufactured and user-friendly. Conklin products of fine workmanship bring pleasure in writing with their simplicity, strength and durability.³⁰

This piece foreshadowed the messages of Conklin advertisements in the following years: in 1922 Conklin advertised 23 times in *Shenbao*, with the messages emphasizing such merits as quality, beauty and reliability of the products themselves.

The style of Conklin advertisements noticeably changed after 1928 to the extent that Wing On not only devoted larger advertising space to the product, but also appealed to quite a different rhetoric to communicate with potential customers, that is, to promote new experiences. In contrast with the early ads that highlighted Conklin pens' quality and promised satisfaction in writing, subsequent ads began to package them as perfect gifts. In the ad shown in Figure 3, Santa Claus holds a fountain pen and claims, "All people praise the exquisiteness and beauty of this Conklin pen, so ladies, there is nothing better as a Christmas present than a Conklin fountain pen." Like previous ads, this piece stressed functional advantages of the products such as excellent design and workmanship, but it also implicitly promoted a new vision of a modern living based on material comfort. Particularly in the Settlement of Shanghai, Christmas

³⁰ "Conklin ad," *Shenbao* December 21, 1921.

was proclaimed a public holiday, during which many colleges and middle schools often held parties and celebrations. It was natural that Chinese stores seized the opportunity to have special promotions. The Conklin ad thus served reminded cosmopolitan women to buy gifts for the imported festival.

Figure 3 *Shenbao* December 16, 1928



Figure 4 *Shenbao* December 17, 1929



Figure 4 shows another scenario of gift-exchanging in which the caption reads, “A hero deserves a gift of a precious sword; a friend deserves a gift of a

brand-name pen.” In Chinese and other civilizations, a valuable sword was not just a weapon used for defeating enemies, but also a symbol to define a man’s status and masculinity. This ad shrewdly constructed an analogy between a sword and a pen and appropriated the symbolic representation of the former to enhance the attraction of the latter. Noteworthy is that when targeting female customers, Conklin pens were advertised as perfect gifts for their male friends, not husbands or sons, implying a new form of courtship and gender relationship. Since the late Qing period, Western notions of individualism had begun to impact Chinese youth, who strongly rebuked “traditional, uncivilized” arranged marriage. Here, the Conklin advertiser swam with the current and encouraged ladies to give fountain pens as gifts to their friends (possibly boy friends), which suggests not only the value of women’s power of decision making in consumption, but also a more open attitude toward dating and courtship that supposedly resulted in free choice of marriage.

As an invention and importation in the recent decades, Conklin ads often stressed the “spirit of advancement.” In an ad of the 1932 winter sales, Wing On Company strongly promoted six items, of which Conklin pens were highlighted with the term “advanced” (*jinbu*) three times.³¹ Another ad declared that Conklin pens were “the present to the people of the new era.”³² The Conklin co. pushed pens as a trapping of modern civilization in a context in which Chinese desperately tried to advance by acquiring Western science and technology. Since the mid-nineteenth century, China had been consistently defeated in the wars against Western powers and Japan; the threat of foreign military strength forced

³¹ “Wing On Comopany’s Winter Sales,” *Shenbao* December 22, 1932.

³² “Conklin ad,” *Shenbao* November 30, 1929.

China to adopt Western learning in order to survive. While a few scholars clearly saw the differences among the notions of “Western,” “new” and “progress,” popular advertisements tried to confuse these terms by presenting them as synonymous ideas. In the same fashion, the Conklin ads articulated a cluster of related but *de facto* distinct concepts, attaching the label of “advanced” to imported goods.

In addition to a marker of advancement, Conklin pens were portrayed as a “cultural weapon.” In the anniversary sales of 1933, Wing On intensely promoted Conklin pens with a slogan “A bomb is a sharp weapon of the war, and Conklin is the vanguard of our culture.”³³ The context of this ad was the military encroachment of Japan, which seized Manchuria to establish the puppet regime of Manchukuo on September 18, 1931, and then bombed Shanghai without warning in 1932. Since this sales period overlapped with the “918” anniversary, “national salvation” was a ready issue appropriated for commercial purposes. In the left part of Figure 5 shows a soldier carrying a bomb while right below is a Conklin pen tilted the same angle as the bomb. The parallel position of the two objects suggests that a Conklin pen could serve the purpose of defending the country as well as a bomb could.

Figure 5 *Shenbao*, September 16, 1933.

³³ “Wing On Comopany’s Fifteenth Anniversary Sales,” *Shenbao* September 16, 1933.



Besides newspaper ads, Wing On Company used other techniques to promote Conklin pens, among which creating the legend of ‘Miss Conklin’ was probably the most innovative yet controversial.³⁴ Department stores in Shanghai began employing women in 1930 as a new marketing strategy when facing increasingly rigorous commercial competition.³⁵ As a minority in the staff, saleswomen were not evenly distributed to each department, but assigned to the position that would allegedly benefit their “feminine characters” such as the toy department and stationery department—while in the former they were thought to better understand children’s psychology, in the latter they would appeal to the male-dominant clientele. The stationery department’s business increased dramatically after saleswomen joined, and the sales of Conklin particularly rose

³⁴ For the “Miss Conklin” phenomenon, see Lian Lingling, “Nuxing xiaofei yu xiaofei nuxing: yi jindai Shanghai baihuogongsi wei zhongxin” (Women’s consumption and commodifying women: perspective from department stores in modern Shanghai), in Wu Renshu, Lin Meili and Kang Bao eds., *Cong chengshi kan Zhongguo di xiandaixing* (forthcoming).

³⁵ Lian Lingling, “Zhuiqiu duli huo chongshang modeng? Jindai Shanghai nudianzhiyuan di chuxian ji qi xingxiang suozao” (Seeking independence or coveting modernity? The emergence of women clerks and the formation of their images in modern Shanghai), *Jindai Zhongguo funushi yanjiu* 14 (December 2006), pp. 1-50.

to the extent Wing On decided to set up a separate department for the brand. Later the saleswomen in the Conklin department were playfully called "Miss Conklin." Although the origin of this name was hardly identified, "Miss Conklin" was a great selling point and attracted many curious men—tabloid writers often boasted of their beauty and even gossiped about their private life.

From Conklin advertisements analyzed above, the advertiser seemed to downplay the threat from foreign goods and accentuate their utility for China's benefit instead. Figure 5 shows a variety of foreign products other than Conklin: American cosmetics, British woolen socks and cigarettes, and German oil paint, all of which appeared in the same advertisement supposed to commemorate the 'national humiliation' of September 18. Of course, department stores never went so far as to openly promote Japanese goods. In fact, immediately after Japan took over Manchuria, Chinese-owned department stores along with numerous shopkeepers declared to boycott Japanese products. Nonetheless, this incident did not stop department stores selling foreign goods; instead, the concept of 'enemy's goods' (*chou huo*) was created to distinguish from all other foreign products and thus eliminate the awkwardness. Furthermore, department stores saw 'fashion' rather than nationality as the core value of a product. As a result, Conklin began to be associated with "modernity" not just because it was a new invention against traditional writing instruments of brush or feather, but also because the advertiser imposed the newly-articulated values of mechanization, exoticism, advancement, patriotism, all of which were trendy features to redefine the consumption of Conklin as "fashion"—even flirting chic Miss Conklin would be thought fashionable. Contemporary essay and short stories revealed this kind

of “consumer mentality.” In a piece titled “Turn in Tomorrow,” for instance, the author describes the failure of Chinese higher education in which professors are late to class for more than half an hour without any reasonable excuse while students are only interested in superficial subjects like movies and women. In order to underscore the “bourgeois air” of these students, the author deliberately highlights a scene in which students use their Conklin or Parker to take notes.³⁶ The seemingly careless mention of brand-name fountain pens in fact bespoke the fashion among well-to-do college students.

Some writers even contrasted between fountain pens and brush pens to accentuate the novelty of the former. In an autobiographic essay, the author Hu Tiannong told his personal experience of using fountain pens:

Most of the time I use fountain pens to write letters or articles. It is fast and timesaving. Therefore I always use fountain pens when bending over my desk working. It also looks like the fountain pens are waiting on me. I like fountain pens very much because I have used one every day almost without exception since my young age. My dear parents often say that I should not write to them with foreign pens but with Chinese brushes instead. But I continue using fountain pens, not brush pens, to write letters. This is my old habit lasting for twenty years. It is impossible to change it overnight.³⁷

The author continued reporting his favorite pens, including one Conklin pen. This piece was categorized as “short story” (*xiao xiaoshuo*) so the story in itself was plausibly fictional; however, the author clearly described fountain pens as “fast and timesaving,” traits highly celebrated in the industrial society. He particularly underlined fountain pens’ benefits in a sharp contrast with brush pens, which in his opinion belonged to the generation of his parents, an era of the

³⁶ Sun Yuan, “Mingtian jiaojuan,” *Shenbao* December 16, 1932.

³⁷ Hu Tiannong, “Zilaishuibi,” *Ziluolan* 3:10 (1928), pp. 15-16.

past. Thus, writing in fountain pens was not just an efficient way of completing work, but a gesture of embracing fashion and the worldview of the new era.

Conclusion

In this article, I have extensively examined *Shenbao's* advertisements of department stores to see how they promoted foreign products. Despite sporadic conflicts with foreign countries in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Chinese did not reject foreign goods as a whole. Foreign products were not all that successful in the Chinese market, however, and advertising often played an important role. Sherman Cochran gives an interesting example of how British-American Tobacco Company (BAT) failed in its first attempt of promoting foreign cigarettes to China: it used exactly the same advertisements originally designed for use in the West, which depicted American landscape, historical figures such as George Washington and white women with blonde hair and blue eyes and possibly resulted in confusion among local Chinese. BAT later extensively employed Chinese artists to produce calendar-posters as advertisements,³⁸ which not only achieved commercial success but also established a genre in commercial painting. This example demonstrates how advertisements would function as a mediator, facilitating communication between producers and consumers. Although some advertisements of imported goods highlighted the

³⁸ Sherman Cochran, "Transnational Origins of Advertising in Early Twentieth-Century China," *Inventing Nanjing Road: Commercial Culture in Shanghai, 1900-1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), pp. 38-39.

features of foreign countries and provoked imaginary exoticism, they went through the process of domestication so as to make the communication plausible.