"The Fairest of Them All" Finding One's Self through Advertising

By Luding Tong

Visual culture is increasingly important in post-Mao China. Over the past two decades, higher education in America and China has seen an upsurge of interest in the study of visual culture, such as the studies of film, television, mass media, and advertising. Advertising as a college degree program did not exist in China before 1982. Since Xiamen University started the first undergraduate degree in advertising, this discipline has grown rapidly. At present, almost all the four-year universities in China have the subjects of advertising and mass media in their curricula.

dvertising has not only economic but also cultural functions. Close "readings" of advertisements in contemporary China, Lincluding their content, images, and words, reveal that advertising has a strong social, psychological, and ethical impact on Chinese society-reflecting, as well as shaping, consumers attitudes and identities. The exploration of the changing attitudes of the Chinese people toward tradition, Communist ideology, and consumption reveals that the dynamics of the advertising industry in China have helped to initiate and sustain cultural changes in China, thus providing a focal point for the study of changing cultural values in contemporary Chinese society. I believe that contemporary Chinese advertising is an ideological mirror that attempts to reflect to its audience an image of what they can (and should) become in their highest and finest realization. This ideological mirror presents certain motifs and grounds particular themes that are designed to "teach" the audience what it means to be a modern Chinese, as well as how to "sign up" for that identity.

ADVERTISING IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA

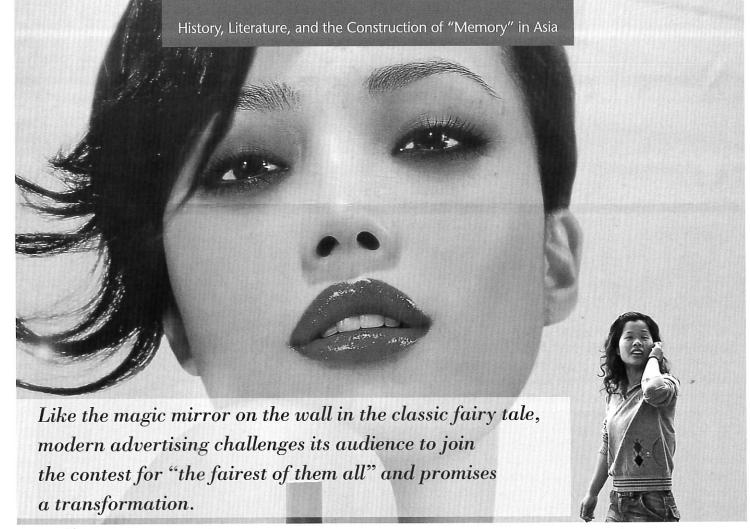
China is home to one of the world's fastest-growing advertising industries, expected to surpass Japan as the second largest in advertising spending (after the US) by the end of the decade. However, only three decades ago, many Chinese did not know what a commercial advertisement looked like, or how advertising functioned. Historically, however, commercial advertising is not new to Chinese. Banners were used for commercial purposes as far back as the Eastern Zhou Dynasty (771-221 BCE). Modern foreign advertising entered China, along with the inflow of foreign goods, with the opening of major Chinese ports to Western colonial powers in the mid-nineteenth century, and reached its high point in the 1920s and 1930s. After the Chinese Communist Party took over the nation in 1949, the Chinese government placed a ban on commercial advertising for almost thirty years, because commercial advertising was seen as a symbol of capitalism and a perversion of public communication for capitalist commercial purposes. Mao

Zedong's face—and the faces of other political leaders under Mao's regime—were printed on products. In the wake of economic reforms that began in 1979, the Chinese government increasingly saw consumerism as benefiting the country's economy. To accelerate the speed of economic development and to broaden the open-door policy, "socialist commercial advertising" was welcomed back shortly after the Party's Eleventh Party Congress in December 1978.

Today's Chinese advertising market is described by Jian Wang, author of Foreign Advertising in China, as "vibrant" and "chaotic." Advertising appears in government-controlled television and radio programs, newspapers, and magazines. Billboards with socialist slogans and other publicly displayed political propaganda images, popular during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), have been replaced by commercial advertising for foreign liquors, sports products, and luxury clothing. Portraits of political figures are used to promote tourism and sale of products at tourist centers. A huge billboard at the entrance to the Yellow Mountain Scenic Center in Anhui Province portrays Deng Xiaoping smiling and waving to tourists. At the entrance of Mao's mausoleum on Tiananmen Square, artificial flowers from admirers are collected and re-sold. Upon exiting the memorial hall, admirers zigzag their way out through vendors selling "Mao's products," from cigarette lighters to good-luck charms, Mao's "little red books," hats, and—more incongruously—T-shirts.

ADVERTISING AS A LAND OF FAIRY TALES

With the blizzard of Western-style advertising and foreign goods sweeping across China, life for the Chinese has gone through drastic changes. Foreign advertising opens up spaces for Chinese consumers to have glimpses of modern consumer goods and to invest in these goods with their own imagined ideal lifestyles. With the inflow of capitalist economic values in post-Mao economic reforms, Chinese consumers had an eye-opening experience contrasting modern society's luxury with China's poverty and backwardness. Emotions and attitudes



Young woman talking on her cell phone as she walks by a super-sized cosmetic poster. Courtesy of ImagineChina. ©2007 ImagineChina.

of men and women surge to embrace Western notions of "the good life" as China's possible alternative future. The decade of the 1990s witnessed in China a new era in which cultural changes took place. China's new elites gathered for Western food and entertainment at outdoor cafés, bistros, and boutiques on the Bund in Shanghai. These cultural outlets transmitted a foreign cachet. New elites did not hesitate to show off their newly acquired, world-famous, brand-name products, such as Armani designer clothing and Gucci eyewear.

When advertising resumed in China, the government intended it to be a vehicle of communication between customers and manufacturers. However, advertising ascribes meaning and identity not only to goods, but also to the lives of the Chinese people. With a plethora of images of beauty, freedom, and luxury, advertising presents a world of modern fairy tales. Like the magic mirror on the wall in the classic fairy tale, modern advertising challenges its audience to join the contest for "the fairest of them all" and promises a transformation. A 2006 Proctor & Gamble (P&G) television and billboard advertising for Head & Shoulders (H&S) shampoo created "The H&S metamorphosis" featuring a woman seen emerging from a cocoon and turning into a beautiful butterfly after using H&S shampoo.² With reference to ad images, Chinese consumers have found and invested new meanings in their sense of self. Drawn to the images and advertising promises of a fabulous modern world, Chinese consumers seek to become characters in the new Chinese fairy tale: emerging like butterflies from common cocoons. It is not an exaggeration to say that contemporary Chinese advertising evokes cultural change and plays a critical role in shaping contemporary Chinese consumer desires, cultural expectations, and concepts.

CHINESE YOUTH AND THE RISING INDIVIDUALISM

Advertising is generally believed to assist in creating a modern consumer culture of mass consumption and an ethic of individualism.³ In the ad-saturated environment of the past three decades in China, Communist ideology and Confucian values have been largely replaced by such Western ideas as individuality, luxury, freedom of choice of products and paths to success, and modernity. As the result of a number of factors—the Party's liberalized policies, the Internet, and a proliferation of fashion and entertainment vehicles—urban China has become "Westernized," at least in lifestyle. Western-style individualism has become "a highly aspirational character trait" among Chinese youth. 4

In the explosive growth of consumption, 400 million Chinese teenagers and young adults-aged sixteen to twenty-four-have become targeted groups for marketers. Marketing feeds on the eagerness of Chinese youth to "stand out," by associating commodities with feelings and emotions that the Chinese consumers find attractive. In the company's campaign to promote its Quarter Pounders, McDonald's aimed at creating "compelling, exciting communications" with young adults in China.⁵ P&G consciously created opportunities for young people to express themselves, as a reflection of the longings of Chinese youth for independence and freedom. Taking advantage of interactive TV technology, P&G created a Web site for its new youth-oriented Crest sub-brand called "Whitening Expression." P&G asked young people to post videos of themselves dancing with a tube of Crest in hand, and visitors to the site would vote on the best performance.6

Like American youth, Chinese youth of the post-1980 and post-1990 generations are typically trend-conscious and impulsive. Many In the ad, Zhou Xun is posed in a way that her body resembles the Chinese

character bian. The copy on the left side of the ad reads: "She is constantly changing, each time more beautiful. . . . "

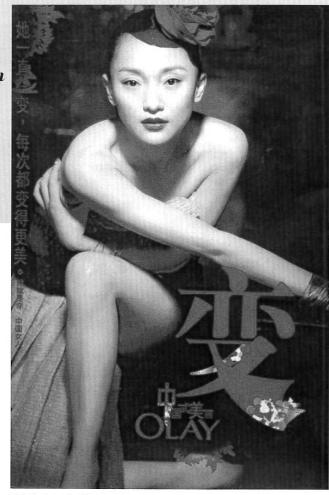
young people shop in order to explore sensations of consumption (xunzhao xiaoshou ganjue). Often, their purchase decision is based on whether they like the product (wo xihuan de, jiushi hao de). Their behavior is learned vicariously through advertising, as these highly "liberated" young generations seek individuality with increasing drive, hopes, and demands. The sense of individuality and self-consciousness of the new generations is acutely reflected in the expressions of "personal taste," "personal expression," and "personal identity" (shihe wo, zhangxian wo, wo jiu shi wo) that are popular among contemporary Chinese youth. 7 Being cool (ku) is a critical selling point for purchases by contemporary Chinese teenagers. Craving recognition, Chinese youth try different things to be distinctive, such as dying their hair and striving to set the fashion trend. Different from older generations, they often say "I" instead of "we." While their parents under Mao's regime identified themselves with Communist ideology and revolutionary causes, youth in contemporary Chinese consumer society have more need to accessorize themselves by investing meaning and individual identity in products and consumption. They ooze confidence and a sense of superiority. They want to live their own life according to their own ideas and dare to pursue success, excellence, and new things.

CHINESE WOMEN AND FEMININE BEAUTY

At the inaugural ceremony for the Olay-sponsored "Global Chinese-Style Beauty Image Bank for Charity," a three-minute video advertisement was released to the audience in the Chinese Film Museum, Beijing, on December 20, 2007. This advertising video consisted of ten clips featuring different "qualities" that constituted contemporary Chinese-style beauty. The central piece of this video advertisement was *Bian*, or Transformation, featuring China's movie superstar Zhou Xun.

The headline *bian* in the ad can be translated into English as "to change," "to become," "to transform," or "to turn into." In the ad, Zhou Xun is posed in a way that her body resembles the Chinese character bian. The copy on the left side of the ad reads: "She is constantly changing, each time more beautiful. *She is you* (emphasis in the original), Chinese woman." The background of the ad is in red, revealing an aura of authority, beauty, and warmth. The ad does not explicitly show the features of Olay products. The values of Olay, instead, are conveyed by what the movie star means to the audience—beauty and glamour. The ad intends not just to sell Olay products, but also to make an emotional appeal to Chinese women. Bian, expressed in both the ad's headline and in Zhou Xun's body posture, seeks to capture the Chinese woman's desire for the new, for change, and for a better self. Further, Zhou Xun seems to act like

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This clip, featuring China's movie superstar Zhou Xun, is from an advertising video that features qualities of contemporary Chinese-style beauty.

Wing Shya, Photographer. Courtesy of OLAY, Procter & Gamble, China.

a conjurer, looking steadily into the camera, as well as the eyes of the audience. As a signifier of beauty and glamour with magic powers, Zhou Xun challenges Chinese women and dares them to join the legion of Chinese Beauty. With the emphasized message "She is you" in the copy, the ad functions as a mirror, holding up to the Chinese women an image of ideal Chinese-style beauty, and promises a transformation of women, speaking directly to them: you will possess the same beauty as seen in the movie star. With an enhanced self-image, Chinese women will be inspired to invite the whole world to see their beauty, a spirit captured in the slogan of Olay's beauty campaign for charity, "Let the world see Chinese-style beauty."

The attitude toward women's qualities and feminine beauty has undergone significant changes over Chinese history. Under Confucian ethical codes (*renlun*), or Human Relations, women were taught to sacrifice themselves and to be filial daughters, obedient wives, and good mothers. Women were conditioned to think about others and to deny their own needs and identities, all in the name of Three Obediences and Four Virtues (*san cong si de*). Chinese women systematically were discouraged from thinking of themselves as autonomous beings. Poetry and lyrics were full of clichés in which women were described as fragile and vulnerable. Phrases such as *ruhua siyu* (as beautiful as flowers and jade), or *ruo liu fu feng* (as weak as willows in the breeze) abound. Furthermore, a woman's foot was not a "foot" but a "golden lotus" or "lotus step." 10

The humiliations that China suffered in its encounters with the Western and Japanese imperialists in the nineteenth century aroused the desire among intellectuals to recover the nation's strength and to redefine Chinese culture, which led to a nation-wide New Culture Movement in the 1910s and 1920s. 11 The issues of women's subordination, women's education, and male-female equality came to the fore in the crisis of China's socio-political life. Abandonment of foot binding and concubinage was raised as a part of the discourse of nationalism and modernism "to redeem the images of China in the eyes of the imperialist."12 In the discourse of women's liberation promoted by leftist intellectuals in the early 1920s, a new type of woman figure was created, known as New Woman. Since the New Woman figure was absent in China's past, the depiction of New Woman in the early twentieth century usually followed models of female characters in Western literature or borrowed the images of women models in advertisements, cigarette packaging, or nianhua (calendar posters). This New Woman figure was often represented as both enchanting and threatening to the Chinese masses.¹³

In post-revolutionary China, with the introduction and enforcement of the Marriage Law and the establishment of the All-China Women's Federation, women's condition and status in society had been improved. However, women's liberation was not without cost. Femininity was labeled as demonstrating "bourgeois" or "petty bourgeois" ideas. Fashion was distained. Female sexuality was identified as bourgeois ideology and repudiated in China for over forty years under Mao Zedong's regime. Under Mao's proclamations that "What men can do, women can also do" and "Women can hold up half of the sky," women were encouraged to participate in production and were expected to be activists in the nation's cause of socialist construction. Women were praised for being "iron-girl"-type labor heroines, sacrificing their femininity. Revolutionary female role models during the Cultural Revolution wore green army-style uniforms, cut their hair short, and put on a stern and serious demeanor.

In its economic reforms, post-Mao China saw an ironic turn in the practice and attitude toward Chinese women's "qualities" and feminine beauty. The images of vulnerable "golden lotuses" in pre-modern China and the "iron girls" under Mao's regime were challenged in post-Mao China by female models and posters of smiling women in advertisements, the chosen instruments of commercialism. As Chinese consumers' attitudes toward lifestyles and product brands have changed, representations of women also have changed. Images of women in ads have become stylish and seductive, as seen in other consumerist societies where advertising is used to heavily influence consumers.

This is illustrated in a diet-pill television commercial, featuring the Chinese movie star Gong Li, screened on China Central Television, China's government-controlled major television network, during its prime-time broadcast in 2002. The commercial alludes to Diego Velázquez's (1599–1660) painting *Venus at Her Mirror*. The painting draws the Goddess of Love, reclining on a cloth-covered divan with the back part of her naked body shown to the audience. With an arm supporting her head, Venus is gazing into a mirror, held up by Cupid. The focus of the painting is on her relaxed, graceful body—her idealized curves and her smooth skin tones, leaving an impression of the Goddess of Love and her body harmoniously blended with the luxurious setting. The alluring image of Venus's body in Velázquez's painting has since become the magic mirror on the wall for women to contest for the fairest body of them all.

Female sexuality was identified as bourgeois ideology and repudiated in China for over forty years under Mao Zedong's regime. . . . Women were praised for being "iron-girl" -type labor heroines, sacrificing their femininity.



Women Can Hold up Half the Sky; Surely the Face of Nature Can Be Transformed, Wang Dawei, 1975, Tianjin.

Courtesy of University of Westminster Chinese Poster Collection.

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Spanish painter Diego Rodríguez de Silva y Velázquez (1599-1660).

Venus' beauty and body are seen appropriated and applied to Gong Li's body in the diet-pill television commercial. One shot of the commercial shows Gong Li reclining on a Western-style bed in a West-

ern-style room. Gong Li's body and pose render a nice curve, similar to that of Venus, displaying feminine beauty and sexual sophistication. With a faint smile, Gong Li gazes into the bedroom's glass wall. A bottle of diet pills lies next to her. The caption on the advertisement says: "A beautiful life starts from a beautiful curve (of body)." Echoing the Velázquez painting, the diet-pill advertisement holds up to Chinese consumers an image that reflects new ways of looking at a woman's

With the introduction of Western-style commercialism, the female experience, women's personal lives, sexuality, and self-perception were more honestly examined from a more "humanistic view" beyond familial and political roles. In 1991, the magazine Zhongguo funü (Chinese Women) ran a series of articles on the subjects of what constitutes the beauty of modern women and how women should express their own feminine beauty. 16 Traditional Chinese women's "qualities" such as being soft, gentle, and reserved were once again valued as "Chinesestyle beauty." However, the images of bound feet and concubines still haunt the Chinese as reminders of the nation's backwardness and ugliness. As China is racing toward modernization, Chinese women are expected to be more than "traditional." They should be modern and "entrepreneurial." Ideal contemporary Chinese-style beauty should be good-looking, genuine, and innocent, but also intelligent and possessing modern skills. Supermodel Du Juan seems to manifest this type of beauty. She models for Louis Vuitton, Yves Saint Laurent, Roberto Cavalli, and The Gap. Her value, or "marketability"—frankly pointed out by the representatives of French Vogue and Yves Saint Lauren—is her "divine beauty," and the "mystery behind her face . . . (that) . . . recalls an ancient beauty. And at the same time . . . it is modern." 17

Economic reforms have not only had great impact on the lives of contemporary Chinese women's lifestyle choices, but also on their aspirations and sense of self. Just as the woman emerges from the cocoon to become a beautiful butterfly in P&G's "H&S metamorphosis" advertisements discussed earlier, Western consumerism has

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Curve (of body)." Courtesy of International Advertising, China.

A Beautiful Life Starts from a Beautiful

opened a new space for the Chinese woman to break free of her traditional role as mother, daughter, and wife to pursue her own profession and to enjoy being a

woman. A distinctive group of prominent entrepreneurial women is emerging, known as "Single Female Entrepreneur Elites" (danshen jingying nüxing). Women in this group are white-collar professionals. With a degree from either a first-rate domestic university or from a university abroad, most are film directors, owners of their own studios, CEOs or general managers of their own enterprises, or directors of the branches of multinational companies in China. They choose to remain single. A survey showed that about eighty-three percent of women in Beijing and Shanghai expressed understanding or approval of women who remain single or divorce and do not remarry. The percentage is as high as ninety among women with higher education.¹⁸

WILL THEY LIVE HAPPILY EVER AFTER?

However, living a beautiful life and having freedom exact a price. While commercialism has provided opportunities for contemporary Chinese women to pursue self-worth and self-esteem in their own terms, many Chinese women have been "commercialized." It is common to see young women acting as living advertisements, wearing enticing outfits to sell products, brands, and services in front of restaurants and stores. Further, women are expected to demonstrate different "qualities." As illustrated in the Olay advertising video clips, the "qualities" of contemporary Chinese-style beauty include: being visionary (fengyan guanshi), loving and selfless (zhiai wusi), ambitious and courageous (ganmeng ganxiang), modest and genuine (hanxu zhenwo), talented and capable (nenggan duoze), and gentle and tough (wairou neigang). It is not surprising that in striving to be a modern Chinese woman, women in contemporary China are expected to play multiple roles. Consequently, they are torn between the demands of tradition and modernity, and suffer a "split" self and identity confusion.

The dyed-hair, "enlightened and open" new generation, on the other hand, is not completely at ease with the collision between "what I want" and "what they expect of me," either. 19 Under enormous pressure to bring honor to the family, or guangzong yaozu (to glorify the



The award-winning public-service advertisement "Save the Children" published by Guangzhou Five-Star Advertising Company captures the gap between the wealthy and the poor.

Save the Children. Guangzhou Five-Star Advertising Company, 2005. Courtesy of China Advertising Association.

ancestors), China's "little emperors" (xiaohuangdi) are scared of being a disappointment to their families when they eventually have to face the challenge of the real world.²⁰ China today has one of the world's widest chasms between "haves" and "have-nots." The award-winning public-service advertisement "Save the Children" published by Guangzhou Five-Star Advertising Company captures the gap between the wealthy and the poor.²¹

The ad depicts a shoeshine boy shining shoes outside of a subway station in Beijing. Another boy is having his shoes polished, and the two boys are presented in the ad as doubles: they are identical, showing the same age and the same face. The legend on the ad says: "Same life, different fate." One boy appears wealthy, confident, and privileged while the other is poor, seemingly hopeless, and enduring life's hardships. Reading the advertisement metaphorically, the ad illustrates the psychology of Chinese youth in a highly competitive commercial society. The boy who is having his shoes shined presents an enviable image of wealth, privilege, and power for the boy who is shining his shoes. On the other hand, the shoeshine boy presents a fearful image for the wealthy boy—if he is not successful, he will turn into a shoeshine boy.

A typical fairy tale conclusion is "... and they all lived happily ever after." The happy-ending conclusion of the modern Chinese fairy tale, however, remains to be seen. The ad "Save the Children" seems to allude to another type of fairy tale—the Cinderella story. When the midnight clock chimes, the coach will give way to a pumpkin; the beautiful princess in elegant attire will be dressed in rags and return to scrubbing floors on her hands and knees. The "Save the Children" ad raises the question of whether the shoeshine boy can be transformed into a prince, represented by his double in the ad, or will the prince resume his identity as a shoeshine boy when the fateful hour chimes?

- 1. Jian Wang, Foreign Advertising in China: Becoming Global, Becoming Local (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 2000), 112.
- 2. Geoffery A. Fowler, "Advertising for P&G in China: It's Wash, Rinse, Don't Repeat," The Wall Street Journal, April 7, 2006, B3.
- 3. Perry Johansson, "Chinese Women and Consumer Culture: Discourse on Beauty and Identity in Advertising and Women's Magazines, 1985-1995" (PhD diss., Stockholm University, 2000), 9.
- 4. Tom Doctoroff, Billions: Selling to the New Chinese Consumer (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 99.

- 5. Gordon Fairclough, "McDonald's Marketing Chief in China Preaches On-the-Ground Experience," The Wall Street Journal, May 7, 2007, B4.
- 6. "China's Online Boom," Business Week, May 15, 2006, 46-47.
- 7. Guo Jinjin, "Da shang qingshaonian xiaofequn de xingfu banche" ("Catching the happy express train of the young and adolescent consumers"), Jiri caifu (Wealth), (5)
- 8. Shishang basha, February 2008 (Harper's Bazaar, Chinese edition), 236
- 9. The three obediences are: women's obedience to father before marriage, to husband after marriage, and to son after the death of husband. The four virtues are: women's morality, proper speech, modest manner, and diligent work. These Confucian special codes were spiritual fetters on Chinese women, governing the training of their
- 10. Meng Yue and Dai Jinghua, "Preface," in Fuchu lishi di biao (Emerging from the Surface of History) (Zhengzhou, China: Henan renmin chubanshe, 1989), 15.
- 11. In this New Culture Movement, Chinese intellectuals and activists rejected Confucianism and advocated a new outlook of cultural values including modern citizenship, and Western science and democracy.
- 12. Tani E. Barlow and Gary J. Bjorge, eds., I Myself Am a Woman: Selected Writings of Ding Ling (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 12.
- 13. See for example Pretty Flower, President of Natural Foot Society, in Chapter 15 of Feng Jicai's fiction The Three-Inch Golden Lotus, trans. by David Wakefield (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994).
- 4. The term "iron girls" emerged during the country's "Learn from Dazhai" campaign organized by Mao Zedong in the early 1960s. The campaign encouraged the Chinese people, men and women, to learn from the example of the farmers in Dazhai village, Shanxi Province, who were praised as being strong and daring to transform the face
- 5. This commercial is part of the Qumei guanggao (advertising for the beauty of a curved body), popular in China in 2000-2005. These types of advertisements later triggered criticism for their "misleading information" about diet pills that allegedly had caused "danger" to consumers' health. The commercial was banned by the government. The print of Gong Li's Qumei television commercial discussed here is included in Liu Libin, Zhongguo guanggao mengjin shi, 1979-2003 (The history of the rapid progress of Chinese advertising, 1979-2003) (Beijing: Huaxia Press, 2003), 250.
- 16. Johansson, Chinese Women and Consumer Culture, 93.
- 17. Vanessa O'Connell and Cui Rong, "Model's Chinese Looks Were an Instant Hit Everywhere but China," The Wall Street Journal, September 8, 2006, A1.
- 8. "Zhongguo shangjie jingying nüxing de danshen shenghuo" (Life of Chinese Single Female Entrepreneur Elites), an online program run by Fujian Economics and Management College, 2007.
- 19. Doctoroff, 100.
- 20. As a step toward population control, China passed a law in 1979 limiting families to one child. This policy is known as the "one-child policy." Because of the special importance of children in Chinese traditional culture, this one child receives most of the love and attention of the family, and is nicknamed xiaohuangdi—"little emperor."
- 21. The Collection of the 12th China Advertising Festival Award Winning Advertisements (Beijing: Chinese Photograph Press, 2005), 289.

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