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.

Advertising has not only economic but also cultural functions. Class “readings” of advertisements in contemporary China, including their content, images, and words, reveal that advertising has a strong social and cultural identity and political connotations within 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 the dynamics of the advertising industry in China has 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 “read” the culture for 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 (771–256 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 faced 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 a way to meet the needs of a newly prospering population. 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 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 liquor, 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 Maos mausoleum on Tiananmen Square, artificial flowers from admirers are collected and re-sold. Upon exiting the memorial hall, admirers rig the way out through vendors selling “Maos products,” from cigarette lighters to good-luck charms, Maos “little red books,” hats, and—more bizarrely—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 newly imagined ideal lifestyles. With the inflow of capital, Chinese economists 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 of men and women surged to embrace Western notions of “the good life” as China’s possible alternative future. The decade of the 1990s witnessed in China in 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 consumers and manufacturers. However, advertising articulates 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 Procter & Gamble (PG&E) television and billboard advertising for Head & Shoulders dandruff 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 campaigns to promote its Quarter Pounders, McDonald’s aimed at creating “compelling, exciting communications” with young adults in China.5 PG&E 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, PG&E created a Web site for its new youth-oriented Crest sub-brand called “Whitening Expression.” PG&E 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 (zun-zhai zhanian goujie). Often, their purchase decision is based on whether they like the product (wo xihuan de jiahuo huan 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" (wo de mei, zhangzian mei, wo jiu shi wo) that are popular among contemporary Chinese youth. Being cool (kuai) is a critical selling point for purchases by contemporary Chinese teenagers. Craving recognition, Chinese youth try different things to be distinctive, such as dyeing their hair and striving to set the fashion trends. 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 assert themselves by inventing naming and individual identity in products and consumption. They converse and enjoy 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 Scroll, 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 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 represents to the audience—beauty and glamour. The ad intends not just to sell Olay products, but also to depict the movie star appeal of 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 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 draws them to the legion of Chinese Beauty. With the emphasized message "She is you," in the copy, the ad functions as a mirror, holding up to 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 radiate the whole world to see their beauty a spirit captured in the slogans 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 (renzhong), 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 nuha zuo (as beautiful as flowers and jade), or rou liu fu cong (as weak as willows in the breeze) abound. Furthermore, a woman's foot was not a "foot" but a "golden lotus" or "lotus step."
Ideal contemporary Chinese-style beauty should be good-looking, genuine, and innocent, but also intelligent and possessing modern skills.

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.

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 of each other, bearing identical, shaming 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 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.

WILL THEY LIVE HAPPy 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 at work wearing advertisements, serving enticing outfits to sell products, brands, and services to the tourists and 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 (jiaoxing gusou), loving and selfless (zhixin xin), ambitious and courageous (gongren xiaozhi), modest and genuine (huanan zhennao), talented and capable (xiongqiong zuone), and gentle and tough (waixian weiguang). 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. Under enormous pressure to bring honor to the family, or gongzuo yaoju (to glorify the ancestor), China's "little emperors" (caishuguo) are scared of being a disappointment to their families when they eventually have to face the challenge of the real world. China today has one of the world's widest chasms between "have" 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.

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 of each other, bearing identical, shaming 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 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.

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 of each other, bearing identical, shaming 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 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.

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 of each other, bearing identical, shaming 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 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.