

“Foreigners and Chinese in a City of Advertising– Shanghai 1860s-1910s”

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Abstract

In numerous 19th-century writings explaining the functions of the newspaper to the Chinese reader, a passage from the Laozi (ch. 47) is quoted. It is argued that with the help of newspapers “without leaving one’s own house, one knows the world.” This cosmopolitanism that newspapers promise to bring to the reader is most tangible in their advertisements. In newspaper advertisements, Shanghai appears as multiethnic, multilingual, multicultural: sitting at home and browsing the pages of Shanghai newspapers, any- and everyone could know and shop the world.

This paper studies the advertising pages of the city’s newspapers as one important site where Shanghai’s many cultures interact with each other. It compares the cosmopolitan natures of advertising in Chinese (Shanghai xinbao, Shenbao and Xinwenbao) and foreign-language newspapers (North China Daily News, North China Herald and Celestial Empire). In tracing the changing nature of their advertising pages between the 1860s and 1910s, it finds that advertising only created precarious consuming bonds between the Chinese and the foreign communities in Shanghai. The advertising pages suggest that the two reading communities, Shanghailanders (the foreign readers) and Shanghaiers (the Chinese readers), led parallel lives with only partial intersections. Certain crossovers and adaptations took place, especially on the advertising pages of the Chinese-language papers, but many more separating elements could be found, notably on the advertising pages of the English-language papers. The advertisement thus appears less as a binding than a dividing factor in the formation of a Shanghai identity: it bridges but also creates ethnic, cultural and language-barriers.

Quite clearly, the advertising pages in different types of papers also show that Shanghai, a place where people could and would reinvent themselves in ways that would never have been imaginable anywhere else, was a city open predominantly on one end. The city may have been an exotic realm for both Shanghaiers and Shanghailanders, but the advertising pages only suggest that to the Shanghaiers the city offered all the “outlandish” devices of the modern *world* in full working order. To

the Shanghailanders, on the other hand, Shanghai represented almost nothing of a “magic” China. The advertising pages in his own press show that his is in many ways a distinctly colonial undertaking: bringing the world to China he would take as little as possible of China back to the world.

Evidently, the final conclusion from this reading of advertisements flies in the face of habitually repeated descriptions of China as the sleeping dragon: the paper provides ample evidence for the fact that, granted the source of Shanghai’s dynamism is indeed the interaction between foreign and Chinese cultures in the controlled environment of the concessions, this dynamism was to the Shanghairen’s—and evidently not the Shanghaileander’s—credit.