

Advertising Culture and Urban Consumer Fashions in the Ming and Qing Dynasties

Wu Jen-shu

Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica

The modern definition of ‘advertising’ is the process or method used for introducing products or services to the public and the tool used is the modern mass media. If we slightly widen our definition of advertising and discuss it from a historical perspective, we will find that in the early modern period, when modern mass media was not widespread, advertisements using various methods and tools appeared and promoted consumption. Historians in Britain have found that, in the 19th century, manufacturers created fashions to make their products more competitive and this had an important influence on economic development.

In China’s early modern period during the Ming and Qing dynasties, the industrial and commercial service industry was also highly-developed and advertising culture appeared in various forms. The first half of this paper will introduce four forms of advertising: 1. Commercial books 商業書 and encyclopedias for daily use 日用類書 2. Trademarks, brands, and trade names 3. Signs and antithetical couplets 4. Publicizing of products or services through social relationships. Advertisements, in addition to promoting the sale of goods, reflect a number of social and cultural phenomena and, also, convey information that we ignored before, in particular the strong influence advertising exerted on urban society and culture. These subjects will be discussed in the second half of the paper.

In the Ming-Qing dynasties many daily use or commercial books were published, containing knowledge about the products of various places, reminding businessmen that they could purchase these special local products locally to sell as goods or listing a certain place as an important market for general goods and suitable as a place for goods trading. Later editions were revised to include more up-to-date information. The two kinds of books mentioned above were cheap and were popular with businessmen and gentry. The object and goods knowledge within them actually had

an advertising effect, attracted customers and then influenced people's consumer concepts.

Trademarks appeared in China in the Song Dynasty and, by the Ming, using trademarks or brands to promote the sale of goods was very common. Taking the process through which late Ming craftsmen built their trademarks and brands as an example, the names of craftsmen who were renowned from the middle Ming era onwards became famous "trademarks" or "brands" in the Qing dynasty, representing a quality guarantee. Craftsmen would often carve their name on objects they made. In the Ming-Qing era, women often wore hairpins on which "Zhu Songling" was carved, which used a renowned craftsman's name as a kind of trademark.

From the late Ming period, when trademarks or brands were established by businesses, a shop or workshop would be opened in the city, giving rise to the word "trade name", the mark of the shop or workshop. Famous or long-established trade names were known as "old trade names". At this point, trademarks, brands and trade names were not separated. These trademarks, brands and trade names all had the effect of increasing market demand and promoting goods circulation. Many legal disputes over fake trademarks and trade names occurred and these were given importance by government and business associations.

Signs were a traditional advertising form that attracted customers visually and first appeared in China very early on. In terms of form, they can be divided into three types: signs using characters, signs with both pictures and characters and signs using real objects. Signs using real objects appeared because literacy levels were low, especially amongst the peasants, requiring the use of this easy-to-understand sign form. The biggest difference between Ming-Qing sign development and early dynasties was that character use was much wider. The changes from *Along The River During Qingming Festival* 清明上河圖 to Ming-Qing urban custom paintings show that signs using characters had become much more common. The reason was that the literacy rate in cities had increased and was much higher than in the countryside so city signs mostly used special use characters, with multiple character signs the mainstream in the Ming-Qing era.

The function of signs was to attract customers so shop owners in cities were very particular about sign design and signs had to match the trade name and shop front. In Beijing, shop fronts were elaborate and signs were large. Signs not only attracted customers, they were also connected to the business operation. Taking a tea shop as an example, if the shop front was elaborate, even if the shop didn't have much capital,

traveling tea traders would be willing to place their tea in it for it to sell on their behalf or give the shop credit. However, if the shop front was dark and plain, even if it had ample capital, the traders would be unwilling to let the shop sell tea on their behalf. In addition, the couplets on the door of the shop or inside were also important advertisements. Well-written couplets were effective in attracting the literati.

In the Ming-Qing era quite a few craftsmen interacted closely with and were respected by literati and officials, with some being respectfully called “mountain men 山人”. A number of literati and official wrote the biographies of these craftsmen, or wrote poems and inscriptions proclaiming their great skill which they presented to them, and this helped craftsmen become more famous. This also shows that craftsmen needed guidance and support from literati and officials to spread their name to build their reputation. Thus, the written records of the literati and officials can be seen as a kind of advertisement.

Undoubtedly, different advertising methods, whether the product information in encyclopedias for daily use and commercial books, the messages conveyed by brands, trademarks and trade names, the attention attracted by signs and couplets, and the reputation craftsmen achieved through their contacts with the literati and officials, directly or indirectly promoted consumption. However, advertisements also had other functions, which are described separately below.

In the Ming and Qing dynasties, an increasing number of local products entered the market network. The knowledge of literati and officials about these products came from geography books or local gazetteers or notes, while ordinary people acquired related knowledge through encyclopedias for daily use and commercial books. There is a record from the era of Emperor Qianlong about the famous local products of a certain place. It tells how, when people from other places visited, they would often buy the local products to take back and give their family and friends but often unwittingly bought “fake” products that had been made elsewhere. This story illustrates that local product knowledge of various places and the consumption preference of traveling traders were clearly influenced by this kind of encyclopedias for daily use and commercial book’s local product record. Through the printing of a large number of daily use and commercial books, the product knowledge within was spread like it would have been by advertising and built city consumer network knowledge, especially in big cities where a wide variety of goods could be bought.

Ming-Qing advertisements were also a tool for creating fashions. Ming-Qing advertisements shows that the industrial and commercial operators actively created

new styles, leading to the forming of fashions. This paper uses the examples of the garment and bamboo inscribing industries to illustrate how manufacturers or craftsmen created different fashions. In the Qing Dynasty, Suzhou's garment industry continually introduced and created new style garments and the shops on Yangzhou's Satin Street, from silk and satin wholesalers to small shops, also brought out new products to match the new fashions. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, bamboo inscribing styles changed from simple to novel forms, showing that new fashions were being created. It was craftsmen who created these new styles. Both the garment and bamboo inscribing industries made every effort to create new styles to improve sales and the promotion of these new style manufactured products depended on the advertising methods described above.

Another special feature of Ming-Qing industry and commerce service industry advertisements was the influence of the literati and officials. Men of letters and refined scholars attached importance to shop couplets, so some shops had couplets written by famous people, even forging them to make the shop better known and attract customers. Also, the contact between a craftsman and literati and officials not only increased the reputation of the craftsman, it also helped their manufactured products quickly become best sellers. The literati and officials network can be described as the most effective advertising channel.

Apart from emphasizing the reputation of the seller or the producer, advertisements convey a message: An advertisement that emphasized "my group" made the consumer different to other people and can be described as a kind of consumer taste. Famous trademarks, brands or trade name products came to represent consumer taste. The molding of the taste of the literati and officials was often connected to trademark and brand and the advertising modes of the industry and commerce service industry matched the cultural taste of the literati and officials. For example, in their advertisements famous prostitutes portrayed themselves as lady poets, using the cultural talents admired by the literati and officials to attract clients

The advertising culture that appeared in China's early modern history not only illustrates the development level of business and industry in the Ming and Qing dynasties, it also reflects the development of a consumer's society. Ming-Qing advertisements allow us to see the importance of cities. Historically the difference between city and countryside in China was not as pronounced as in Western Europe and there was greater continuity between cities and countryside. This does not mean that there were no differences between urban and country life. Ming-Qing

advertisements in various forms were all directed at the cities, showing that the cities were the consumer centers at the time. It can be said that “consumption” was one of the most important features of Ming-Qing “urbanity” and this was one of the most important differences between cities and countryside.

In the past, when discussing fashion innovators and promoters, researchers have focused on the literati, officials and famous prostitutes but have neglected the role of the makers of fashions. Ming-Qing advertisements show that the industrial and commercial operators actively created new styles, leading to the forming of fashions, showing that craftsmen and shop owners were actually the pushing hands behind fashions.

Ming-Qing advertising culture also shows the importance of the literati and officials. In the social structure in cities in the Ming and Qing dynasties, although the social position and even political position of businessmen had risen, literati and officials were still an important class. The literati and officials were not just the main consumers of luxury goods in the cities, their social network was also an excellent advertising network for these goods and they were also the best “spokesmen” for products because their status would give the products they purchased a tasteful and high-class image, boosting the reputation and position of famous trademarks and trade names