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**The Representation of Gender in Contemporary Chinese Television  
Advertising: An Analysis of Content, Meaning, and Production**

A thesis submitted in fulfilment  
of the requirements for the Degree of

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in  
Management Communication  
at  
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by  
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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis examines how gender is portrayed in Chinese television commercials and how these representations reflect the social and cultural contexts of their production and the institutional practices of advertising production personnel. To date, while there have been a plethora of studies on gender representation in advertising in western contexts only limited attention has been given to Chinese advertising portrayals of gender. This study, therefore, explores particular ways in which femininity and masculinity are discursively constructed, and how this process, in turn, contributes to reinforcing and/or challenging certain gender ideologies, in particular those found in Chinese Confucian culture.

The study is unique in its approach to Chinese television advertising in that it combines methods from textual analysis (quantitative content analysis, semiotic analysis and critical discourse analysis) and empirical research (interview). A sample of 679 television commercials was collected and analysed in this investigation. Content analysis was initially applied to identify recurrent patterns and characteristics of gender representation which, in turn, formed the basis for in-depth semiotic and discourse analysis. Specific signs, images, codes, discourses and myths were subsequently discussed. The study also included semi-structured interviews with 26 Chinese advertising personnel in order to understand their multiple dispositions toward gender and their actual experiences of depicting female and male characters in the creative process.

Several main findings emerged from this study. The portrayal of gender in Chinese television commercials is complex because it embodies a series of simultaneously conflicting and complementary discourses on what constitute femininity and masculinity. The results of the content analysis revealed that the representation of gender in this study's sample still remains stereotypical in terms of the different distribution of the sexes across product category, role, dress, age, credibility and voice-over. By focusing on the constructs of gender in domestic,

occupational and recreational contexts, the use of semiotic and discourse analysis revealed that Chinese television advertising not only portrays women and men in line with the significant aspects embedded in both Chinese and western patriarchal traditions, but is also constitutive of cultural shifts in gender ideologies through highlighting modern (western) values. In addition, the interview findings yielded support for the conclusions of textual analysis, demonstrating that the process of advertising production is significantly influenced by traditional and modern gender values, the restriction of advertising regulations, client expectations, and the professionals' divergent perceptions of gender and their assumptions about the audience.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<b>PAGE</b>
<b>ABSTRACT .....</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>TABLE OF CONTENTS.....</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>LIST OF TABLES .....</b>	<b>xii</b>
<b>CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
Introduction .....	1
Rationale for the study .....	2
Approaches to the study .....	5
Preview of thesis chapters .....	7
<b>CHAPTER TWO: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF GENDER AND ITS REPRESENTATION IN CHINA.....</b>	<b>10</b>
Introduction .....	10
Traditional Chinese culture, Confucianism, and gender .....	10
Confucianism: A sustained influence on Chinese culture.....	10
Confucianism: Harmony and collectivism.....	11
Gender and Confucianism.....	11
Family and gender roles in the Confucian tradition.....	13
Virtuous wife and good mother: Devotion to family .....	14
A non-western paradigm of masculinity: The ‘Wen-wu’ paradigm.....	15
The development of gender roles throughout the 20th century in China.....	17
Gendered identities during the era of western imperialism (1900-1948).....	17
The emergence of new forms of gender identity.....	19
‘Gender liberation’ in the early days of communism in China (1949- 1966).....	20
‘Gender erasure’ during the Cultural Revolution (1967-1976).....	20
Gender issues in the phase of post-socialist transformation (1977-2000).....	21

Different experiences of women and men in the reform era.....	23
Key issues for understanding gender in contemporary China .....	25
Media representations of gender .....	26
The growing impact of feminism on gender awareness.....	28
The Chinese research context.....	28
Conclusion.....	30

**CHAPTER THREE: THE CHINESE CONTEXT FOR ADVERTISING AND GENDER REPRESENTATION IN ADVERTISING ..... 32**

Introduction .....	32
The emergence of modern advertising in China .....	32
The role of advertising under socialist reformation .....	34
Advertising in the phase of post-socialist transformation.....	35
Gender representation in Chinese advertising.....	37
The public debate on gender representation in advertising.....	37
The regulatory environment for advertising .....	40
Conclusion.....	42

**CHAPTER FOUR: LITERATURE REVIEW: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON GENDER, ADVERTISING REPRESENTATION AND PRODUCTION..... 44**

Introduction .....	44
Theorising gender as socially constructed and learned .....	44
Culture and multiple expectations of femininity and masculinity .....	45
Perspectives on advertising and gender representation .....	46
Advertising as a ‘distorted’ mirror: An approach dating back to 30 years ago.....	47
Cultivation theory and (gendered) stereotyping.....	49
Gender and the use of sexual appeal in advertising.....	51
Reviewing studies of gender representation in advertising.....	54
Pioneering the study of gender representation in advertising .....	54
A quantitative approach to the use of advertising characters: Content analysis studies.....	55
Gender representation in television advertisements in western countries..	55

Content analysis studies of gender depiction in Chinese television advertising.....	59
A qualitative approach: Insights into the constitution of gender.....	63
The construction of women as domestic and subordinate.....	63
The construction of masculinity in advertising.....	67
Qualitative studies of gender role representation in Chinese advertising.....	70
Advertising production process and professional practice.....	72
Theorising the role of advertising professionals.....	73
Knowledge and subjectivities of advertising professionals.....	75
The theoretical framework for this thesis.....	76

**CHAPTER FIVE: RESEARCH DESIGN, METHODOLOGY AND METHOD ..... 78**

Introduction .....	78
The research questions .....	78
A multi-method approach to gender representation in advertising.....	79
Cultural studies and critical theory approaches .....	80
Content analysis: Identifying the manifest content of advertising.....	82
Analysis of advertising texts: Reading subtexts.....	84
Semiotic analysis: Meaning and ideology.....	85
The use of discourse analysis concepts .....	87
Foucault, discourse and knowledge .....	88
The concepts of articulation and intertextuality.....	89
Interviews: Insights into the process of production .....	90
The choice of semi-structured interviews .....	91
Methods of data collection and analysis .....	93
Selection and collection of television commercials.....	93
The content, semiotic and discourse analyses.....	95
Interviews with advertising professionals: Sample and procedure .....	99
Meaning-based translations of transcripts.....	100
Analysis of the interview transcripts.....	101
Conclusion.....	102



<b>CHAPTER SIX: CHINESE TELEVISION ADVERTISING PORTRAYALS OF MEN AND WOMEN: A CONTENT ANALYSIS .....</b>	<b>104</b>
Introduction .....	104
Content coding procedure .....	104
Variables coded.....	105
Frequency of female and male characters.....	105
Association of product types with genders .....	105
Voice-overs.....	106
Roles.....	106
Dress.....	107
Age.....	108
Credibility.....	108
Coding process .....	108
Results: Descriptive statistics.....	109
Gender and product categories.....	109
Voice-overs .....	110
Roles.....	110
Dress.....	112
Age .....	113
Credibility .....	113
Discussion of findings.....	113
Similarities with and differences from other studies.....	113
Understanding gender role representation in the Chinese context.....	115
Occupational roles.....	115
Non-occupational roles.....	117
Family setting .....	118
Gender and product categories.....	119
Females in relation to cleaning, household and beauty products.....	119
Men, alcohol, automobiles and telecommunication.....	120
A balanced distribution: Clothing and food and non-alcoholic beverages.....	121
Dress: Women’s sex appeal and men’s professional high status.....	121
Young feminine beauties and mature men.....	123
Credibility .....	124

Voice-over: The gendered vocal environment in Chinese advertising .....	125
Conclusion.....	125

**CHAPTER SEVEN: THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN AND MEN IN FAMILY CONTEXTS ..... 127**

Introduction .....	127
Representing the family through an emphasis on harmony .....	128
Images of femininity, motherhood, and domesticity .....	129
Nurturing and maternal love .....	130
Housewife: A feminine ideal of domesticity .....	135
The construction of masculinity and men in family life .....	140
Husbands and fathers: Relaxing and avoiding domestic work .....	141
Men’s involvement in domestic chores.....	145
Young couples: Challenging patriarchal gender norms .....	148
Conclusion.....	151

**CHAPTER EIGHT: THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN AND MEN IN OCCUPATIONAL ACTIVITIES ..... 153**

Introduction .....	153
Women in careers: Challenging the ideal of domestic femininity.....	154
The emphasis on feminine physical appearance .....	155
Female characters as incapable and emotional employees .....	158
The construction of subordinate femininity .....	160
Female submissiveness and servility in service-oriented jobs.....	161
‘Superwoman’: Managerial work, home and the beauty ideal .....	162
Occupational settings as an arena to construct traditional male roles.....	164
Male characters as executives and officials holding power .....	165
The perpetuation of male power in occupational settings.....	166
Masculine rituals in business-related social activities.....	170
Alternative masculine occupations: Emphasis on comradeship and hard work.....	172
Re-creation of modern successful men: Occupation and family .....	173
Conclusion.....	176

**CHAPTER NINE: THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN AND MEN IN  
LEISURE AND RECREATIONAL ACTIVITIES ..... 179**

Introduction .....	179
The construction of female advertising characters in recreational roles.....	180
The representation of women as ‘urban sophisticate’ .....	181
Home-based leisure activities: Passive and carefree.....	185
The representation of women in sports and physical activities.....	186
Leisure, femininity and the use of women as sex objects .....	189
The construction of male advertising characters in leisure activities .....	193
The role of male characters in sports and physical activities.....	193
Men in social leisure activities: Youth, fashion and romantic love .....	198
Dating in Chinese television commercials.....	199
Middle-aged and older men in leisure activities: A ‘Wen-ising’ nature .....	200
Conclusion.....	201

**CHAPTER TEN: THE ROLE OF CHINESE ADVERTISING  
PRODUCTION PERSONNEL IN GENDER REPRESENTATION ..... 204**

Introduction .....	204
Differences in creative strategies for gender representation .....	205
Influence of the client-agency relationships on advertising representation.....	208
Gender and product categories .....	210
The representation of female roles .....	213
Advertising professionals’ belief in the domestic ideal of women .....	213
Importance of female appearance: Youth and beauty .....	215
The use of women as sex objects .....	218
Advertising regulations on the use of sex appeals in China.....	220
Characteristics of modern women: Occupational roles .....	221
Refusing to ‘behave like a lady’ .....	223
The representation of male roles .....	224
A highly ‘contrived’ icon based on traditional discourse of success .....	225
Male roles within the domestic sphere.....	227
An increasing emphasis on family and emotion .....	228
The physical appearance of men .....	231

Conclusion.....	232
<b>CHAPTER ELEVEN: CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>234</b>
Introduction .....	234
Using quantitative and qualitative methods in the study of gender representation.....	234
The (re)construction of gender in Chinese television advertising .....	235
Traditional ideologies of femininity: Motherhood, domesticity, passivity and sexual objectification .....	238
Less traditional images of women: Autonomy, occupation and hedonism.....	240
Traditional expectations of the male: Power, dominance and achievement.....	242
New dimensions in the representation of men: Emotion, appearance and pleasure .....	243
The role of advertising professionals: Encoding cultural meanings .....	244
Further studies .....	246
<b>APPENDICES.....</b>	<b>247</b>
<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>251</b>

## LIST OF TABLES

### TABLE

1	Key Periods in the Development of Advertising in China.....	33
2	Semi-structured Interviews.....	98
3	Distribution of Central Characters according to Gender and Product Type in Chinese Television Commercials.....	109
4	Use of Voice-over in Chinese Television Commercials.....	110
5	Gender Role Portrayals in Chinese Television Commercials.....	110
6	Distribution of Central Characters according to Occupational Roles in Chinese Television Commercials.....	111
7	Distribution of Central Characters according to Non-occupational Roles in Chinese Television Commercials.....	111
8	Gender Roles within Family in Chinese Television Commercials.....	112
9	Distribution of Central Characters in Recreational Roles in Chinese Television Commercials.....	112
10	Percentage of Male and Female Characters Depicted in Chinese Television Commercials by Dress, Age and Credibility.....	113
11	Commercial for <i>Taitai Le</i> Chicken Seasoning.....	131
12	Commercial for MPS <i>Touran</i> Car.....	144
13	Commercial for <i>Ariel</i> Washing Powder.....	155
14	Commercial for <i>Ya Du</i> Humidifier.....	163
15	Commercial for <i>Ao Kang</i> Leather Shoes.....	167
16	Commercial for <i>Contac NT</i> Cold Cure.....	174
17	Commercial for <i>Wrigley's Doublemint</i> Chewing Gum: 'A Revolving Door'.....	182
18	Commercial for <i>Ford Mondeo</i> .....	197

# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### **Introduction**

This thesis examines the cultural representation of gender in contemporary Chinese television advertising. It uses a combination of content analysis and cultural studies to describe and analyse the ways in which gendered meanings are produced and encoded, and how this process contributes to the discursive construction of femininity and masculinity in the sociocultural context of China.

Advertising is a pervasive, political, cultural and sometimes controversial, phenomenon in modern societies (Gao, 2007a; Gong, 2007; Li, 2007; Liu, 2002; Swanson, 1997; Wang, 2000; Zhao & Shen, 1995; Zhou, Zhang, & Vertinsky, 2002). In China, it has over the past three decades functioned not merely as a tool to promote goods and services – but also as a cultural force which has not only contributed to China’s economic prosperity but also shaped personal morality and societal well-being (Gao, 2007b; O’Barr, 2007; Sun, 2006; Wang, 2000).

For many decades, there has been a growing concern about the potential impact of advertising on the formation of self-identity in western societies (Barner, 1999; Belk & Pollay, 1985; Bergh & Katz, 1999; Coltrane & Messineo, 2000; de Mooij, 2004; Harrison, 2008; Schroeder & Zwick, 2004). In particular, advertising representation has been criticised for its function in gender role socialisation, and in the perpetuation of sex discrimination and stereotyping (Bailey, 2006; Bergh & Katz, 1999; Courtney & Whipple, 1983; Frith & Mueller, 2003). Since the late 1960s, the women’s movement in the west “singled out advertising as one of society’s most disturbing cultural products” (van Zoonen, 1994, p. 67). Consequently, gender representation in advertising has provoked a substantial and ongoing debate among scholars and researchers (e.g., Carter & Weaver, 2003; Gilly, 1988; Goffman, 1979; Gunter, 1995; Hetherington & Frankie, 1967; Hetsroni, 2007; Lafky, Duffy, Steinmaus, & Berkowitz, 1996; Manstead &

McCulloch, 1981; Sapiro, Walsh, Strach, & Hennings, 2009; Winship, 2000). In considering advertising's negative effects on cognitive and moral development, all these authors argue that there is a need to understand the complex and ongoing nature of gender representation in the sociocultural context in which it exists. This need for understanding is equally true for China as for the west. However, to date little research has been conducted on the representation of gender in the Chinese media.

Since the beginning of the 20th century China has witnessed a series of remarkable upheavals and transformations in its society. Many of these changes have affected, or occurred in, the realm of gender (Brownell & Wasserstrom, 2002). In particular, the ways in which gender and its representation are constructed in China have been firmly situated within the constant tensions between the country's long-established Confucian culture and increasing western influence (Brownell & Wasserstrom, 2002). As a result, cultural meanings of femininity and masculinity in China have been (re)fashioned by an ensemble of social, economic, political and ideological forces.

The Confucian tradition comprises of an "essentially masculine value system" (Leung, 2003, p. 361) that dominated Chinese society for a period of approximately 2000 years. Since the late 19th century, traditional roles and norms ascribed to women and men have been challenged as a consequence of modernisation, consumerism, and globalisation. Consequently, as Chow (1991) argued, "the 'ground' here is neither the Chinese nor the western tradition that warrants affirmation, but the very instability upon which the dialectic between 'Chinese' and 'western' is played" (p. xi). In this context, the issue of gender representation in contemporary advertising is ripe for analysis.

### **Rationale for the study**

The research design of this study, and the decision to look at the representation of gender in Chinese advertising, stemmed from a significant and ongoing concern within public and academic debates that media texts are involved in creating and perpetuating certain discourses of gender (Carter & Weaver, 2003; Feasey, 2008; Fowles, 1996; Hopkins, 2007; Milner & Higgs, 2004). From this perspective, the

present study aims to understand the construction of gender in the sociocultural context of China by examining the ways in which cultural/national conventions legitimate and naturalise the representation of gender in television commercials and vice versa. My rationale for focusing on television lies in its popularity with the Chinese audience, as well as its economic power. In China, television has more than a billion viewers (March, 2004) and a 92% nationwide penetration (Maddox & Gong, 2005). Considered the most efficient advertising medium, television took 40% of total advertising spending in 2008 (newspapers took 29% of total advertising spend, outdoor advertising comprised about 14%, online advertising 9%, and other media such as magazines, radio and cinema less than 8%.) (Abplanalp, 2009). This study, therefore, examines how women and men in Chinese television commercials are portrayed in relation to the sociocultural contexts in which these advertisements are produced.

In recent years, the issue of gender has been a popular and controversial topic in China as a consequence of the influence of western feminism (Gaskell, Eichler, Pan, Xu, & Zhang, 2004; Wang, 2005). A series of events and study programmes such as Beijing's 1995 hosting of the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women were held to help advance women's rights in different aspects of Chinese social culture. Since 1995, a number of organisations, media practitioners, and researchers in China have raised concerns about the cultivation of stereotypical understanding of gender differences, and have called for media to demonstrate responsibility in promoting gender equality (Cheng, 2002; Li, 2005; Sun, 2006). In particular, advertising's use of images of women has attracted increasing attention and engendered significant debate (Gong, 2007; Hooper, 1998; Li, 2006; Liu, 2007). For example, it has been argued that decorative and domestic portrayals of women are detrimental to the achievement of male-female equality in China.

It is also worth noting that studies of gender and advertising in the west have been conducted on men and masculinity (Brandth, 1995; Desmarais, 2003; Frith & Mueller, 2003; Gunter, 1995; Jackson, 1994; O'Barr, 2006; Schroeder & Zwick, 2004). However, it has only been more recently that the origins and developments of male representation in China have become the topic of sustained academic



analysis (e.g., Evans, 2002; Louie, 2002; Luo & Hao, 2007; Song, 2004). This increased interest in research on gender and media outside Europe and the United States has met with concern that the use of western theories to interpret gender representation in non-western contexts may fail to fully reflect its diversity and cultural significance as well as how such representations are entwined with certain cultural values (Larson, 1998; Song, 2004). For example, Taga (2005) argued that western understanding of Chinese masculinity has often been flawed because it leads to “the notion that Chinese men are effeminate and ‘not quite real men’” (p. 138). Given this concern, and the understanding of gender as a flexible and unfixed concept (Wood, 2003), the present study derives from an interest in how women and men are portrayed in advertising and attempts to carve its own path between “both the hegemonic status of western theoretical thinking and the entrenched ways of interpretation in the field of Chinese literature” (Chow, 1991, p. xii).

Based on the theoretical assumption that production contexts are important in understanding how textual meaning is created and reinforced, this study explores the roles of Chinese advertising professionals in constructing gender representation, their cultural understandings of gender and how these impact on the creative process. As Scott (2006) explained, “the task of producing advertising itself is subject to multiple strategies, homilies, agendas and interpretations” (p. 63). Further, advertising texts do not simply “mirror realities as it is sometimes naively assumed; they constitute versions of reality in ways which depend on the social positions and interests and objectives of those who produce them” (Fairclough, 1995, p. 103). This study is, therefore, unique in its approach to Chinese television advertising in that it complements analysis of texts with research into the processes of advertising production.

These two levels of investigation – (1) a combination of content and textual analysis of 679 prime-time television advertisements, and (2) interviews with 26 advertising professionals – highlight the complex and dynamic nature of advertising in relation to gendered culture. The primary research questions for this thesis are:

How do Chinese television commercials portray gender and what cultural meanings and values are embedded in its representation?

How do Chinese advertising production personnel understand their role in relation to the cultural representation of gender in television commercials?

This study is designed to be comprehensive in the sense that multiple forms of data were used to address different, yet interrelated, perspectives regarding gender representation. Furthermore, another key feature of this study is its originality. No other research that the researcher is aware of has combined a systematic, quantitative and qualitative study of the ways in which female and male characters are portrayed in Chinese advertising. This study aims to fill the existing lacuna by examining the role played by Chinese television commercials in creating particular representations of women and men, and perpetuating, challenging and/or offering new normative and ideological framings of how women/men, female/male, feminine/masculine can be perceived, understood and/or negotiated.

### **Approaches to the study**

In order to gain an understanding of gender representation in China, the present study uses a multi-method approach which mixes several data collection methods and analytical techniques, including those which draw on both the quantitative and qualitative methods. Over the last 40 years, numerous empirical studies of gender representation in advertising have adopted quantitative content analysis (e.g., Dilevko & Harris, 1997; Furnham & Skae, 1997; Hu & Xu, 2006; Kim & Lowry, 2005; Liu & Bu, 1997). These studies make generalisations by counting different features of gender representation within a defined time period. The application of content analysis focuses on identifying the most dominant cultural values reflected in advertising messages. The present study, therefore, uses the results of content analysis to identify the essential patterns related to stereotypical and conventional representation of gender in the sample advertisements.

As Stokes (2003) argued, content analysis limits research to investigating the surface level of meaning, and fails to treat advertising as a form of cultural representation. Focusing on advertising texts and encoding practices, this study

adopts an approach similar to that taken by Leiss, Kline and Jhally (1986) which combined content and semiological analysis to investigate Chinese advertising's representation of gender. Indeed, the utility of such an analytical strategy has been demonstrated in some studies of western advertising texts (Anderson, Dewhurst, & Ling, 2006; Curry & O'Brien, 2006; Desmarais, 2003) because it is systematic while also being sensitive to layers and patterns of meaning and codes that advertisements carry (Leiss et al., 1986). However, as Leiss et al. (1986) argued, "semiology can admittedly do a better job on the single advertisement in isolation, because it is explicitly concerned with the movement of meaning within the text and between the text and the outside world" (p. 218). For this reason, subsequent in-depth textual readings of the patterns identified in the content analysis were then undertaken in order to examine how certain cultural meanings are attached to the various gender representations through specific uses of signs, images, codes, and conventions.

The study also draws on the tradition of discourse theory, and considers advertising messages as a representational practice (Hall, 1997) in which the creation of meaning is discursively shaped by cultural and institutional conditions. Here the research focuses on a production perspective, and more specifically on examining how, and to what extent, individual dispositions, the institutional ideology and cultural knowledge embedded in advertising practice might affect the representation of gender. The research agenda proposed in this study, therefore, moves away from a purely textual focus to consider the practices and perceptions of advertising professionals who are engaged in the creative process. Interviewing is used as a method for gaining insights into advertising professionals' understanding and experiences of portraying gender.

In general, the study deals with gender representation in advertising in terms of ideologies. As Desmarais (2003) argued, advertising is "ideologically invested because it is created through the ideological filter of national culture and also because it is created to support the system of consumer culture" (p. 4). In this respect, the depiction of females and males in television commercials can be seen as using images, concepts and myths to perpetuate certain ideological beliefs. Since perceptions of gender do not remain fixed in time, the ideologies which the

researcher identifies as maintaining a dominant patriarchal structure operating in China are both supported and challenged by television advertising. The study, therefore, additionally draws on the perspectives of Louis Althusser (1971) and Roland Barthes (1972) to explore how symbols are used to portray women and men in particular roles, and how this process produces ideological and mythical messages in Chinese television commercials. The final section in this chapter outlines the organisation of the thesis.

### **Preview of thesis chapters**

This thesis has been developed and written in a way that is very mindful of the need to explore the relationship between gender representations in Chinese television advertising and wider sociocultural expectations and/or understandings of gender roles. Consequently, the second chapter describes the historical development of gender issues in China during the twentieth century, highlighting different tensions which influence the representation and perception of gender in contemporary China. In doing so, the thesis outlines the major notions of gender in the Chinese Confucian tradition, including the unequal division of labour and responsibility between women and men, and female roles in a patriarchal family system. The chapter also explores the development of the “*Wen-wu*” paradigm in theorising masculine ideas, and the concepts of chaste femininity and effeminate masculinity.

Chapter 3 summarises the evolution of advertising in China, including key moments in the industry’s history, the government’s policies, and the role of advertising in the country’s economy. It also introduces sociocultural contexts for understanding advertising representation of gender in China, including the multiple perspectives and attitudes expressed by social groups, and the development of advertising regulation.

Chapter 4 examines the literature on gender and highlights its constructed nature. It provides some insights into gendered roles and meanings in relation to the constitutive nature of institutional communication. This chapter also describes and critiques different research perspectives on advertising, and reviews the findings from empirical studies which have examined gender representation in television

advertisements in both western and Chinese contexts. The final section of the chapter makes the case for the inclusion of production-based research which explores the ways in which advertising professionals are engaged in the construction of cultural meanings of gender, and the cultural, economic, and ideological underpinnings of this process.

Chapter 5 introduces the methodology for the study and explains the ontological and epistemological basis for the critical-interpretive approach taken in the research. It discusses the combination of quantitative content analysis and cultural studies approaches used in examining advertising texts, and then explains the use of interviews with advertising professionals. The chapter describes in detail the methods of data collection and analysis.

Chapters 6 to 10 present the findings of the study. Chapter 6 presents and discusses the results of a quantitative content analysis of gender representation in the sample of Chinese television advertising. The intention of this chapter is to identify recurring patterns in the portrayal of female and male characters in terms of particular roles and traits. This chapter also compares the findings with those reported in previous studies in both Chinese and western contexts.

Chapters 7, 8 and 9 present a cultural studies analysis of gender roles in Chinese television advertisements, using concepts from semiotic and discourse analysis. The researcher focuses on specific ways in which women and men are depicted in different familial, occupational, and recreational roles. These chapters identify and discuss specific codes, signs, myths, stereotypes and discourses which are used to create cultural meanings of femininity and masculinity, and which perpetuate specific ideologies in advertising representation, and in the sociocultural context of China. The chapters also explore how gender representation in Chinese television commercials contributes to legitimising, reinforcing and challenging aspects of patriarchal ideology, in particular those found in Chinese Confucian culture.

Chapter 10 focuses on the production of gendered images in the advertising industry. It outlines the findings from the interviews with Chinese advertising

professionals, and explores their role in advertising's representation of gender. Here the researcher explores different intentions, dispositions and ideologies involved in the creative process.

The final chapter, Chapter 11, draws together the conclusions from these findings and considers the theoretical implications of the study. It argues that the present study sheds light on the nature and significance of gender representation specifically in relation to culture, and differs from feminist analyses which focus primarily on representations of power between women and men. In considering the complex development of gender roles in the sociocultural context of China, it is hoped that the results of this study enrich academic knowledge by investigating how diverse constructions of femininity and masculinity are reflected and (re)produced in Chinese television advertising.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

# **A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF GENDER AND ITS REPRESENTATION IN CHINA**

### **Introduction**

This chapter provides an important background context for my research in that it reviews the cultural history development of gender in China. Throughout China's long history, the concepts of femininity, masculinity and sexuality have been (re)fashioned in complex ways through the philosophy of Confucianism, through social, cultural, and political practices, and through various institutions of which the media is just one. The long and complex cultural evolution of gender in China has contributed to the production of a multiplicity of representations and perceptions of femininity and masculinity at various times in Chinese history.

The first section of this chapter examines the Confucian tradition in relation to roles and norms it ascribed to men and women in China. It outlines how gender has been culturally constructed in China in radically different ways than it has in various western contexts – for example, Europe and America. The next section of the chapter reviews the historical transformation of gender in China through the twentieth century. It identifies the Chinese political, economic and social contexts that have had an impact on the construction of gendered roles over the course of the last 100 years. The final section of the chapter focuses on contemporary China and outlines tensions between different and competing value systems that influence how gender is 'practised' and represented in this national context at the present time.

### **Traditional Chinese culture, Confucianism, and gender**

#### ***Confucianism: A sustained influence on Chinese culture***

Confucianism has had a major influence on gender roles in Chinese culture. This philosophical system dominated the formation of Chinese civilisation from the beginning of the Zhou Dynasty (1122BC-221BC) and still plays an important role

in present day Chinese culture, despite criticism that it was both ‘backward’ and counter-revolutionary during the Mao period (1949-1976). As an orthodox value system Confucianism established moral principles and codes of conduct such as filial piety, loyalty and humaneness (Clark & Wang, 2004; Larson, 1998; Ling & Powell, 2001; Yau, 1988). In the following sections I outline the central concepts of Confucian philosophy, especially in terms of how it establishes social roles for women and men.

### ***Confucianism: Harmony and collectivism***

The Confucian tradition is *anti-individualistic* in that it does not emphasise the rights of the individual. Rather, it emphasises “interpersonal relationships”, “social orientations”, and “respect for authority” (Yau, 1988, p. 49), as well as “unity in hierarchical structure” (Leung, 2003, p. 362). It is also “contingent on the maintenance of a relationship of power dominance” (Leung, 2003, p. 362) and conceives of harmonious relationships as established through social hierarchy. For instance, as Siu and Au (1997) explained, “the senior member is accorded a wide range of prerogatives and authorities with respect to the junior. . . by rules of correct behaviour that entail both rights and responsibilities for each part” (p. 236). Relationships in the Confucian scheme are also *reciprocal* (Gunde, 2002, p. 38). For example, the obligation of parents is to love their children and the role of children in relation to parents.

### ***Gender and Confucianism***

Although various philosophies and ways of thinking (such as Daoism, Buddhism and Confucianism) have coexisted in Chinese history, gender-related values and principles have been most deeply influenced by Confucian ideology. Within this tradition, a gendered regime comprising fundamental rules shaped by the patriarchal hierarchy governed both women’s and men’s lives (Croll, 1995; Leung, 2003) where individuals’ roles in society were separated according to sex and age (Tan, Ling, & Theng, 2002). In this system, women “were subordinate to men, and young women occupied the lowest strata of the hierarchy” (Bauer, Wang, Riley, & Zhao, 1992, p. 333).



Confucianism includes 'Five Cardinal Relations', known as Wu Lun, the relationships between sovereign and minister, father and son, husband and wife, old and young people, and friend and friend (male friends) (Leung, 2003). These cardinal relations have served to control the individual and social behaviours of Chinese people. More specifically, Chinese women were bound to feudal ethics known as the 'Three Obediences' (When she is young, she follows her father, when she gets married, she follows her husband, and when her husband dies she follows her son), and the 'Four Virtues' (fidelity, physical charm, good manners, and efficiency in needlework) (Chen, 1990; Su, 1996; Su, 2003). These principles had a significant impact on the women's public and private roles and expectations of how they would 'perform gender'.

Within the Confucian cultural system there were very limited roles for women (Leung, 2003). As Li (1988) points out, "few societies in history have prescribed for women a more lowly status or treated them in a more routinely brutal way than traditional Confucian China" (p. 5). Foot binding is perhaps one of the most notorious of treatments forced upon women by Chinese Confucian culture. For centuries it was used as a mark of female modesty, gentility and virtue, restraining women's ability to venture outside of the home (Curtin, 1975). Foot binding was also promulgated as "a mark of gentle refinement and eroticism" (Hong, 1993, p. 46), which worked to satisfy "male-defined standards of beauty" (Hong, 1993, p. 45).

In the Chinese Confucian tradition, the gendered opposition of De (moral virtue) and Cai (literary talent) contributed to characterising women and men by means of different behavioural expectations, types of work and positions in the family. Under the concept of De, remaining 'inside' was perceived as the virtue of femininity (Mann & Cheng, 2001; Rofel, 1994) and, in particular, a touchstone of female chastity in terms of physical discipline and self-sacrifice (Larson, 1998; Lieberman, 1998; Theiss, 2002). In traditional Chinese culture, the notion of chastity was important to the paradigm of female sexuality and worked to define the reputation of women and families (Theiss, 2002). As Larson (1998) stated:

De had accumulated a long tradition: sequestering women in the inner quarters, a place with its own emotional and erotic culture; hiding the female body from the

“outside” world; footbinding; physical servitude to father, husband, and son; refraining from sexual relations before and after marriage; monogamy; cutting and mutilating the female body in the name of filial piety; and widow suicide (p. 128).

In this culture women were also strictly controlled in terms of marriage and sex and De developed as a physical ordeal (Larson, 1998). In contrast, Cai, which refers to “a variable content of profound lyricism, deep intellectuality, and analytical skill” (Larson, 1998, p. 2), constituted a marker of masculinity. In dynastic times, almost any man could participate in the imperial examinations (Ke Ju) in order to enter the lofty ranks of the “scholar-officials” (Gunde, 2002, p. 39) and enjoy power, prestige and wealth, while women had no right to take the exam. Indeed, Confucian ethics regarded women as unworthy or incapable of education (Leung, 2003). The examination system recruited Confucian-educated scholars for the government bureaucracy, and “persuaded rulers, elites, and commoners of the viability of the literati dream of public success and social advancement” (Elman, 2000, p. 248).

Having briefly outlined the values and norms embodied in the Chinese Confucian tradition of women and men holding different roles and unequal status, the following sections present specific characterisations of gender in terms of particular paradigms such as family and marriage, and the ‘Wen-wu’ dyad.

### ***Family and gender roles in the Confucian tradition***

In Chinese Confucian culture, family and marriage were “arranged and celebrated to underscore gender differences and to emphasise the complementary and separate responsibilities of man and woman in the conjugal relationship” (Mann, 2002, p. 98). Such family systems particularly emphasised the unity of the household through demanding “blind obedience from women of any age to the male” (Leung, 2003, p. 361). The patriarchal values system of Confucianism also impeded women by devaluing them in all aspects of their lives; for example, women were seen as “temporary members of their natal families” and “having no rights to inheritance” (Leung, 2003, p. 360).

One of the norms of Confucius – ‘Nan Shu Wai, Nü Shu Nei’ (Men are primarily outside the home; women are primarily inside the home) – resulted in women

being restricted to “relationships within the family and kin circle”, while men “could function outside the household” (Larson, 1998, p. 2). It was deemed ‘natural’ according to expectations of ‘obedience’ and ‘duty’ that women would sacrifice everything for their families. Men, in contrast, were required to be responsible for the material well-being of the family. However, although the norms for women in Confucian tradition were domestic-oriented, there were some alternative role models. One example is Hua Mulan who was a semi-mythical heroine in the 5th or 6th century AD. She masqueraded as a man and went to war to protect her family, so that her elderly father did not have to fight (Gunde, 2002). Even so, Hua Mulan’s motivations were still to serve her father and protect her family. The legend of Mulan has featured in both elite and popular cultural forms such as films, textbooks, and television series, promoting a non-traditional example for women in modern China.

***Virtuous wife and good mother: Devotion to family***

Within the Confucian tradition, while the domestic sphere of the home and family was presented as the prime environment for women and society (Gilmartin, 1994), the traditional Confucian gender concept of ‘Xian Qi Liang Mu’ (virtuous wife and good mother) formed the moral basis of womanhood (Hare-Mustin & Hare, 1986; Sin & Yau, 2001). This emphasis has not entirely disappeared in China, and tends to define women in terms of their domestic achievements and in relation to men.

The concept of ‘Xian Qi’ (virtuous wife) traditionally typified the roles fulfilled by women within a marital relationship. The duty of a virtuous wife, according to Lin (2000), focused on playing a ‘Nei Zhu’ role (internal helpmate) in her husband’s life, and remaining faithful to him. In addition, the ‘Liang Mu’ (good mother, or exemplary mother) in the Confucian tradition was conceived as providing the standards for a mother. The care of children is conventionally reserved for women (Lieberman, 1998). Under Confucian-dominated moral codes, the meaning of ‘Liang Mu’ involved not only motherly love, lifelong obligations and nurturing capacity (Leung, 2003; Lieberman, 1998), but also “the education and training of children in line with certain ethical norms from the mother’s angle” (Lin, 2000, p. 26). Barlow (1991) argued that there was no single word to

denote women in traditional Chinese culture: “there were daughters in the family (Nü), wives (Fu), and mothers (Mu)” (p. 254). As this indicates, women had no individual identity, but were named in terms of their relation to others. Therefore, the accompanying values associated with female roles and behaviours, which were gentleness, obedience, kindness, dependence, docility, pureness and modesty (Siu & Au, 1997) became other ways of naming ‘woman’. It was not until 1919 that the May Fourth Movement introduced two neologisms of ‘Funü’ and ‘Nüxing’ which can be translated as ‘woman’ (Brownell & Wasserstrom, 2002). The following section focuses on specific versions of Chinese masculinity constructed in the Confucian culture.

### ***A non-western paradigm of masculinity: The ‘Wen-wu’ paradigm***

In pre-modern Chinese society, concepts of manliness were structured around the intertwining of two ideals: ‘Wen’ and ‘Wu’. As Louie (2002) indicated, the ‘Wen-wu’ dyad was the specific preserve of men in terms of enhancing the dominance of masculine ideals. This paradigm constructs the identity of Chinese men differently from that of the western male which is “a highly sexualized notion of masculinity” (Louie, 2002, p. 13). The core meanings of ‘Wen’, according to Luo (1990), are characterised by Confucian tradition and refer particularly to literary and other cultural attainments.

Creel (1970) states that ‘Wen’ means “‘accomplished’, ‘accomplishment’ and even ‘civilisation’: all of those adornments of life that distinguish the civilised man from the untutored barbarian” (p. 67). In this respect, ‘Wen’ refers to “those genteel, refined qualities that were associated with literary and artistic pursuits of the classical scholars, and can thereby be partly analysed as a leisure-class masculine model” (Louie, 2002, p. 14). On the other hand, ‘Wu’ is characterised both by physical strength, military force and power (Luo, 1990), and by the “ability to withstand feminine charms” (Louie, 2002, p. 29). As Pulleyblank (1976) explained, ‘Wu’ embodied those virtues that “suppressed violence, gathered in arms, protected what was great, established merit, gave peace to the people, harmonised the masses and propagated wealth” (p. 70). An ideal balance of ‘Wen’ and ‘Wu’ would be seen to emphasise skill and strategy rather than violence. The ‘Wen-wu’ dyad is a key to understanding Chinese masculinity in the Confucian

social hierarchy, and has become “an analytical tool and theoretical construct for conceptualising the Chinese masculinity matrix” (Louie, 2002, p. 161). That is, the ‘Wen-wu’ paradigm theorises Chinese masculinity in such a way that either ‘Wen’ or ‘Wu’, or both, are adequately manly (Louie, 2002). However, ‘Wen’ has been considered superior to ‘Wu’, having more social power and representing the dominant masculine ideal (Louie & Edwards, 1994). Nevertheless, over recent decades and as a consequence of economic growth and western influence, Chinese masculinity has lost many of its traditional attributes (Hofstede, 1997). As Louie (2002) identified, ‘Wen’ ideas have been transformed from “being a moral and political force” to “embracing an economic component” (p. 43). Indeed, the social potency of men in contemporary China now tends to be measured in terms of wealth and material success (Chen, 2002; Song, 2004). It is these criteria that have come to guide public attitudes and perceptions towards mate selection and marriage relationship (Honig & Hershatter, 1988).

Historically, in special regard to male sexuality, the Chinese tradition validated and reinforced “frail”, “intelligent”, and “effeminate” masculinities which differ from the Occidental vision of “macho man” (Louie & Low, 2003, p. 48). The Confucian tradition emphasised control and containment and control of sexual desire and emotions (Keith, 1988). In the Chinese literary tradition, love stories between talented scholars and beautiful women (scholar-beauty romance) became a genre, and played an important role in reinforcing a traditional belief that male sexual attractiveness depended on cultural attainment (Wang, 2003). In addition, homosexuality was accepted as an alternate masculinity in traditional China (Song, 2004). In late imperial China, a male of feminised appearance (young, slim and beardless) was represented as the ideal of masculine beauty (Wu, 2003). However, with the influence of western science and Christian ethics in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Chinese began to regard the homosexual male as deviant, and consequently tolerance of male homosexuality was redefined (Hinsch, 1990).

The sections above have outlined how gender roles, relations, and characteristics were socially constructed in Chinese Confucian culture. This overview has highlighted how gender is a historically and culturally-bound concept which, in turn, creates sociocultural values and expectations. The next section of this

chapter outlines the development of women's and men's gendered roles during the modernisation of China within the 20th century, in particular after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949.

### **The development of gender roles throughout the 20th century in China**

As we have seen, under Confucianism China developed as a patriarchal society. However, a series of economic, social and political changes in 20th-century China resulted in the transformation of traditional gendered meanings and identities. This section reviews the ways in which the conception and practice of gender were reformulated and contested during specific historical periods.

#### ***Gendered identities during the era of western imperialism (1900-1948)***

In the early 1900s, Great Britain and other European nations (France, Germany and Italy), the United States, Russia and Japan scrambled for resources and strove for control of China (Forman, 1999). The encroachment of western colonialism and imperialism through military incursions, business practices and religion, resulted in significant transformations in traditional Chinese culture. In this context, some significant changes occurred in relation to gender. In particular, the Confucian models of masculinity were challenged and reconstructed in the encounter with the western powers (Huang, 2006), especially in terms of “tensions between the ideal of the warrior male and the ideal of the man of cultivation and learning” (Brownell & Wasserstrom, 2002, p. xiii). To western colonists, the plaited pigtailed of Chinese men and their frail scholarly appearance became signs of submission and impotence. Yet as Song (2004) has argued, “the stereotype that considers Chinese men inferior to western men in terms of masculinity is...a strategic construction in western imagination” (p. 10).

In 1911, the Qing dynasty collapsed and was ultimately replaced by a western-directed Chinese republic. With their nationalist concerns, Chinese intellectuals came into contact with western cultures, and advanced a series of reforms in relation to the position of women, marriage, and family (Glosser, 2002; Thakur, 1998). Gender gradually became a field of conflict in Chinese society. Under the influence of western Enlightenment traditions, women were allowed into schools that developed in opposition to the imperial dynasty (Gaskell et al., 2004). The

emergence of women intellectuals which resulted from this new system of education was an important sign that Chinese women's lives were altering (Zheng, Tao, & Shirley, 2004). In addition, Chinese women were encouraged to participate in physical activities. This shift played an important role in reconstructing the role of women, and especially challenging traditional Chinese beliefs on "the unchangeable and fragile nature of the female body" (Fan, 1997, p. 7).

In the wake of the Democratic Revolution of 1911, the status of women in China further improved (Li, 1988). The May Fourth Movement, which took place in 1919, was an anti-imperialist, cultural, political and gendered movement. During this period, Chinese intellectuals and university students strove to promote the modernisation of China, and criticised Chinese tradition through their advocating of western ideas of science and democracy (Welland, 2006, p. 945). As noted by Zheng et al. (2004) at that time, "the development of democratic thought, the deepening struggle of anti-imperialist patriotism, and the rise of a bourgeois democratic revolution propelled the women's liberation movement in China to new heights" (p. 55). As the first women's movement in China, the May Fourth Movement gained support from women intellectuals who sought the right to education, romantic love, and individual emancipation from patriarchal authority (Davin, 1975; Evans, 1992; Gilmartin, 1994; Glosser, 2002). In addition to accelerating the rise of feminism, the movement was supported by the early élites of the Chinese Communist Party as a means of serving the class struggle against the feudal gentry and patriarchal ideas in 1911 (Thakur, 1998). The Party "integrated peasant liberation and women's emancipation into a joint force to fight against the common abusers: intellectuals, landlords and the privileged class" (Leung, 2003, p. 362).

The collapse of the Chinese imperial State in 1911 also led to a political and cultural milieu in which orthodox Confucian ideals of masculinity were challenged by individuals who occupied positions at the margins of mainstream Chinese society, for example, bandits and rebels (Ownby, 2002). In late imperial China, distinct opinions existed towards bandit groups; that is, whilst Chinese authorities defined bandits and rebels as 'uncivilised' and 'heterodox', positive

images of these men were evident in the Chinese popular culture (Ownby, 2002). In many novels, bandits and rebels were characterised as embodying values such as bravery and loyalty. In order to obtain national power, both nationalists and communists cooperated with these “marginal men”, defined them as “potential revolutionaries” and “drew upon bandit symbolism in their redefinition of orthodox masculinity” (Brownell & Wasserstrom, 2002, p. 196). In this way, this version of marginalised masculinity was legitimated.

#### *The emergence of new forms of gender identity*

With the advent of the New Culture Movement (1915-1923), many Chinese intellectuals began to criticise the Confucian principles that had governed society, and particularly started to question the traditional family network (Glosser, 2002). They perceived the extended or patriarchal family as resisting imperialist encroachment, since it encouraged “dependency” and “‘buried alive’ countless numbers of young people and wasted their talents” (Glosser, 2002, p. 121). In 1920, two students – Luo Dunwei and Yi Jiayue – along with other students from Beijing University, published the journal, *Jiating Yanjiu*, in which they advocated economic, conjugal, educational, and vocational independence for men and women. They attacked the patriarchal order, and encouraged young men to search for new forms of identity (Glosser, 2002).

From the 1930s, both Chinese men and women were motivated by the policy of the Communist Party to participate in the anti-Japanese war. In 1931, the Japanese invaded Chinese coastal cities and the provinces of northeast China, and established the so-called ‘Manchukuo Government’. In this period of colonialism, Japanese cultural engagement with China had a significant impact on the traditional concept of Chinese masculinity. For example, through the introduction of Japanese training programmes of military-style calisthenics which made the first appearance of physical education in China, Chinese men experienced a significant transformation from the Confucian ideal to “a more violence-oriented masculine identity” (Zheng, 2007, p. 450). In addition, the growing popularity of modern sports (for example, soccer) contributed to new, defining components of Chinese manhood and masculinity such as fitness, discipline, and competitiveness.



### ***'Gender liberation' in the early days of communism in China (1949-1966)***

Mao's communist victory in 1949 represented a significant step in the struggle for Chinese women's emancipation. This greater freedom is illustrated in the Chinese Communist Party's aphorism: 'women can hold up half the sky' (Curtin, 1975). Based on the classical Marxist ideology that "the liberation of women follows as a natural consequence of the liberation of all classes" (Luo & Hao, 2007, p. 283), Chinese communist policies encouraged women to participate in the collective production and distribution of resources (Bian, Shu, & Logan, 2000; Gilmartin, 1994). From 1950, socialist reform in China improved women's employment rates in State-owned and collective enterprises (Tu & Chang, 2000). The State thus attempted to control gender construction through gender-equality rhetoric (Parish & Busse, 2000) by mobilising women into paid work alongside men.

Under Mao's policy, women were treated as rational beings who "would be liberated from the customs and habits of a feudal society through their participation in paid work as well as through the processes of the Marriage and Land Reforms" (Leung, 2003, p. 365). The Marriage Law, passed in 1950, ensured "a new family structure, which would release women from their abysmal existence in the feudal marriage" (Croll, 1983, p. 75); this law also "outlawed arranged...marriages and recognised monogamy based on the free choice of partner as the only legal form of marriage" (Evans, 1995, p. 359). During the post-revolutionary phase in China, a marital relationship was supposed to be based on "unanimity of political consciousness" and "harmonious sympathy of ideas and emotions" (Evans, 2002, p. 337), rather than on class and physical attraction. In this way, a husband and wife cooperated in political activities and studies, and shared responsibility for domestic tasks in daily life. In addition, the land reforms in the early 1950s allowed for land ownership by both sexes. Under these circumstances, women's status in the family was considerably improved in terms of equal rights (Adams & Winston, 1980).

### ***'Gender erasure' during the Cultural Revolution (1967-1976)***

During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) the State went even further in imposing its system of gender equality in China. In that period of social turmoil, the Confucian ideal of femininity continued to be discarded because women were

expected to be asexual and as capable as men (Andrews & Shen, 2002). A discourse of 'gender erasure' (Xingbie Muosha) articulating sameness between the sexes became highly politicised (Yang, 1999). Both men and women wore short hair and 'Mao suits', and participated in production and political activities under the same standards (Leung, 2003). Female models in Chinese media were represented as the "strong, brave, and technically-skilled 'Iron Girls'" (Wallis, 2006, p. 97), and certain themes such as love, family loyalty, and sex were regarded as "the shameful expression of a warped mind or as evidence of bourgeois individualism and detrimental to collective welfare" (Evans, 1997, p. 2). However, this 'gender revolution' and its desexualised representation, as Rowbotham (1992) stated, did not "conceptualize women as active agents of their own liberation" (as cited in Leung, 2003, p. 366), and, consequently, gender constructions remained deeply patriarchal and not driven by the women themselves.

#### ***Gender issues in the phase of post-socialist transformation (1977-2000)***

In 1978 the Chinese government embarked upon a new path towards modernisation and economic reforms with a series of dramatic changes in relation to the status and well-being of both sexes. Since then, according to Brownell and Wasserstrom (2002), there has been "a shift away from the androgynous revolutionary ideals" (p. 33) and Chinese people have "hailed the re-emergence of gender difference in dress, hair style, and self-presentation as one of the newfound freedoms of personal expression" (p. 331). The social recognition of differences between women and men can, therefore, be seen as an "ideological backlash against Maoism" (Pimentel, 2006, p. 344). However, tensions do exist around the claimed positivity of these changes for both sexes. As Robinson (1985) noted, the State policies on gender "can propel 'liberation' on one hand, but hinder it on the other" (p. 35). In this context, new women's fashions and the use of cosmetics have been understood as challenging "the politicised codes of masculinity and femininity prevalent in Maoist socialism", while at the same time shaping female roles in a way that creates "the illusion of an affluent modern China and women's emancipation" (Li, 1998, p. 87).

In the last decade, China has developed a legal system and promulgated a series of regulations to stipulate that men and women are to be treated equally. These regulations describe how the rights of women are to be protected in the political, economic, occupational and private spheres. For example, the Labour Insurance Regulations of 1984 and the Labour Prohibition Regulations of 1990 – provided standards for retirement, categories of jobs, working conditions and wages in order to establish legislation to ensure gender equality (Leung, 2003). In particular, the revised Marriage Law (2001) reiterated the equal status of husband and wife and their equal rights and responsibilities in marriage and family life (China.org.cn, 2005).

It must be understood that China has promoted equal employment opportunities between men and women partly as a strategy to improve its social and economic position. In 1995, women comprised about 44.96% (291 million) of the total workforce across a wide range of industries (Public Information, 1995). In recent years, the number of women employed has remained high in China. According to a 2005 White Paper entitled Gender Equality and Women's Development:

By the end of 2004, the number of both urban and rural women workers reached 337 million nationwide, accounting for 44.8 percent of the total employed; and the number of women workers in urban work units stood at 42.27 million, accounting for 38.1 percent of the national total (China.org.cn, 2005, n.p.).

In the reform era (1977-2000), Chinese women obtained freedom to develop their careers. It has been estimated that, by the end of 2004, women “accounted for 43.6% of the total number of professionals and technicians in state-owned enterprises and institutions” (China.org.cn, 2005, n.p.). The improvement in women's employment prospects and participation in the labour market revealed their achievements and status in social, economic and political life. In addition, parallel to the government's efforts to improve education, the elimination of illiteracy among males and females was obvious. In particular, the literacy rate among females increased from 10% in 1949 to 77.4% in 2000 (Liu & Carpenter, 2005). Along with women's greater participation in the labour force, the number of dual-earner families has increased in China (Ling & Powell, 2001).

### *Different experiences of women and men in the reform era*

Although the Chinese government tried to promote gender equality in the reform era, Chinese women and men have had different experiences within the spheres of work and family. This social situation has presented women with a dilemma. For example, in the work sphere, the progress of China's modernisation effort disadvantaged women in terms of gender division of labour, promotion, income, and pressure to withdraw from the labour force (Cheng, 1997; Edwards, 2002; Pearson, 1996).

The assignment of women and men to different levels of professional positions has been seen as a sign of gender inequality in the workplace in the last two decades of the 20th century. Whilst women were assigned to labour-intensive and low-paid work (Honig & Hershatter, 1988; Loscocco & Wang, 1992; Robinson, 1985), men tended to hold authoritative positions as managers and government officials (Adams & Winston, 1980; Li, 2001; Tao, 1990).

In the late 1990s, China underwent labour retrenchments. Two national-representative urban labour force surveys undertaken by China's National Bureau of Statistics in 1997 and 2002, which covered more than 300,000 households in China's 31 provinces and provincial equivalent municipalities, showed that the rate of employment had declined from 78.6 to 71.6% for males, and from 64.6 to 54.1% for females (Du, Yang, & Dong, 2006). The differences in labour force participation between women and men were a result of less preference for work units which included female employees who would need maternity leave and child care facilities (Hooper, 1998). Research conducted by Bauer et al. (1992) had revealed that significant gender differences in labour force participation appeared among urban employees over the age of 45. They reported that among the population aged 45 to 49, 97% of males and 75% of females were employed, while 90% of males and 43% of females who were in the age range from 50 to 54 years were employed. According to a survey conducted by the Institute of Population Studies in 1991, income levels in urban areas of China also exhibited gender bias. Working men were approximately twice as likely as their female counterparts to be in the high income group (300 RMB and above per month).

The particular experiences of participating in work settings placed women in positions subordinate to men.

Over the past 30 years of reforms, China's shift towards a market economy has seen an associated growth in unemployment which has tended to push women back into domestic roles. While there has been an improvement in Chinese women's economic independence and their status in the family (Jankowiak, 2002), they have encountered issues regarding the division of household labour. Although men have increased their participation in domestic work (Croll, 1983), women still spend much of their time on household chores (Adams & Winston, 1980; Hooper, 1998). Since the 1980s, "a wife's self-sacrificing support of her husband has been reinforced as a gender-specific requirement of the ideal of happy conjugality" in China (Evans, 2002, p. 336). A national study conducted by the Chinese All Women's Federation in 1990 reported that 72% of all respondents (female and male) agreed that "a husband's success is his wife's if she supports him" and 60% agreed that "women should avoid surpassing their husband in social status" (Chia, Allred, & Jerzak, 1997, p. 143). Consequently, this ideal of a wife being 'obedient' (Tinghua) to her husband and 'gentle and soft' (Wenrou) in her behaviour (Evans, 2002), signals significant support for a return of women to traditional roles.

The historical account of gender in China detailed above reveals two salient themes. First, throughout the twentieth century the modernisation of gender roles and the several shifts in women's social and economic roles have been dictated by a male-centred culture. Second, although Chinese culture has been influenced by western contact, the construction of gender in China has its own highly distinctive characteristics (Brownell & Wasserstrom, 2002), such as, 'gender erasure' during the Cultural Revolution. Therefore, the development of gender roles and emancipation of women in China has been controlled and guided to a large extent by the political authorities at various historical moments (Wallis, 2006). To fully understand contemporary twenty-first century gender representation and practice in China, one must then contextualise the construction of gender within the processes of national revolution, class struggles and economic reforms in China.

### **Key issues for understanding gender in contemporary China**

From the end of the twentieth century to the present, the practices that historically constructed gendered meanings have continued to affect the ways in which femininity and masculinity are perceived. It has been argued that China has entered a post-socialist phase where “new forms of discourse are to be found among the educated young, intellectuals and entrepreneurs which have given rise to the Neo-Confucian notion of the mind as the seat of consciousness, knowledge and moral judgment” (Leung, 2003, p. 372). As a result of globalisation, foreign cultural values have rapidly spread into Chinese society, and have shaped individuals’ lives, beliefs and perceptions. In China, the advent of globalisation, the rise of commercialisation, of popular and consumer culture, have brought both expected and unexpected social impacts which threaten the national culture (Wang, 2000). For example, the high value placed on individualism and money, and other new values have influenced women and men, in particular the younger generation. In this situation, conceptualising femininity, masculinity and sexuality has become more complex than ever before as these concepts are discursively constructed within tensions between the traditional and the modern, between localisation and globalisation, and between east and west.

In the current political context, China, like many other Asian countries, has reconstituted the Confucian tradition in order to protect its national identity from erosion by western modernity (Leung, 2003). The government attempts to promote Confucian values as a challenge to the pervasive ideology of capitalism (Gao, 2007a), even though it is engaged in capitalism itself. This practice has led to a ‘cultural revivalism’ discourse, which stresses the importance of traditional, cultural, family and ritual issues (McLaren, 1998). As a result, modern roles and images of gender that were established during the period of rapid economic growth have inevitably been questioned and sometimes reversed. Conventional ideas about appropriate femininities and masculinities have also resurfaced.

With the increasing growth of middle-class values in contemporary China, as well as an emphasis on the establishment of a harmonious socialist society, there has been a tendency for men to devote themselves fully to their career while their wives are again uniquely responsible for the household. In addition, studies

conducted by marketers and sociologists indicated that in the current decade “men are turning to pre-communist patriarchal traditions to reassert themselves” (Fowler, 2002, p. 40). As James Farrer, a sociologist who studies gender and market reforms in China, commented:

Under the socialist system until 10 years ago, men were given a lot of positive credit for doing things like housework and being equal with their wives. But now those values have really become a joke. If you (a man) are making the same money as your wife you are a loser (as cited in Fowler, 2002, p. 40).

This perception of the importance of male status over and above that of women has caused women and men to reassess themselves and their various roles. As is briefly outlined below, the media in China features as an important site for the representational negotiation of these roles.

### ***Media representations of gender***

In contemporary China, the media environment is, as elsewhere, influential in developing public attitudes and perceptions towards gender, and has generated social debates about gender issues. As a result of the growth of a consumer society and the penetration of western culture into China, female images have from the early 1980s been used for commercial purposes and they continue to be so used today. The fact that numerous images of beautiful and sexually appealing young women are displayed across urban spaces (Johansson, 2001) has become a significant aspect of public representation of gender and sexuality in China. This phenomenon has been subsequently perceived by the Chinese government and media as bringing negative impacts on society, such as increasing domestic violence and sexual permissiveness. Another example of the debate caused by media depictions of women came with the South Korean film *My Sassy Girl*. This film, which was hugely popular among young people in China in 2001, portrayed a male protagonist falling in love with a pretty girl. However, he gradually discovers her violent temper and capricious behaviour, and instead of rejecting her as ‘unfeminine’, he tries to please her. The film, therefore, integrated “the two seemingly contradictory concepts of love and violence into a visual presentation [of women]” (Wang & Ho, 2007, p. 623), and was criticised for seeming to provide an implicit message that “[women’s] violence is acceptable or even glamorous” (Worcester, 2002, p. 1392).

Images of movie stars and pop singers in contemporary Chinese media have also had an impact on the traditional notions of masculinity and femininity, and the (re)shaping of gendered culture. For example, Li Yunchun, a 21-year-old female student, criticised for her weak voice and boyish appearance became a national idol when she won a nationwide singing contest in 2005. Regardless of her gender unconventionality, Li Yunchun garnered the most audience votes because she represented unabashed individuality (Jakes, 2005). As this example indicates, multiple forms of femininity are being (re)produced at any one time in China's contemporary media and cultural meanings and images related to gender have become increasingly diverse.

Equally, multiple male identities have been portrayed and ideologically glorified in the Chinese media. For example, in 2004, *Nanfang Zhoumo*, a widely read government-controlled newspaper, published an article about Chinese popular personalities in China. It contained interviews with and profiles of a number of prominent men: Yang Liwei (the first Chinese astronaut), Xu Zhihong (the president of Beijing University), Zhou Xiaochuan (the governor of the People's Bank of China), and Guo Guangyun (an 'anti-corruption fighter'). These men from different fields represented a range of masculine traits and identities socially recognised and ideologically validated by the Chinese government and public. For example, the astronaut, Yan Liwei, was described as a national hero who not only presents some characteristics related to the western masculine ideal of a modern soldier (he is logical, controlled and tenacious), but also expresses the Confucian notion of filial piety to his mother (Hird, 2004). Zhou Xiaochuan's masculinity, on the other hand, was portrayed through his economic power as a bank governor and his appearance, for instance the fact that he wears expensive western suits (Hird, 2004).

In contemporary Chinese society, feminism, through its promotion of awareness of the significance of the media's role in encouraging different perceptions and ideologies of gender in China, has had an increasingly influential impact on media representation.



### ***The growing impact of feminism on gender awareness***

In China, the influence of western feminist scholarship on the development of gender consciousness has increased in recent years (Gaskell et al., 2004). Events such as Beijing's 1995 hosting of the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women and the tenth anniversary of that event have promoted gender equality in terms of the economy, professional development, media exposure and family life (China Daily, 2005, March 3; Wang, 2005). According to Wang (2005), the significance of the conference for women "has since been made more and more evident by the advances of the women's development cause worldwide" (p. 2). The conference regarded the media as an important aspect of society's communication that needs to improve the ways they depict gender (Li, 2005). The implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, adopted at the conference, stated that "violent and degrading or pornographic media products are negatively affecting women and their participation in society", and called for "the development of specific programmes designed to raise gender awareness" (Li, 2001, p. 4).

The all-China Women's Federation and other Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) have played an important role in establishing alliances with feminists outside China, and shaping Chinese women's self-perception and gender awareness. To build social consensus around the need to protect women's rights, the mass media in China have shown considerable interest in reporting on social and gender issues such as domestic violence. In turn, academics have also become increasingly interested in the significance of Chinese media representation of gender.

### ***The Chinese research context***

Since the late twentieth century, the cultural representation of gender has increasingly become a topic of academic research in China. Western and Chinese scholars alike (e.g., Brownell & Wasserstrom, 2002; Evans, 2002; Larson, 1998; Lieberman, 1998; Luo & Hao, 2007; Song, 2004; Wallis, 2006; Zhang, 2003; Zhong, 2000) have demonstrated interest in examining ways in which women and men have been discursively represented in various types of media and in Chinese

society. Most of this literature addresses the construction of femininity and masculinity from a socio-historical perspective. In particular, feminist scholars in Europe and the United States have expressed concern about the complexity of gender in China, which has helped contribute to the development of women's studies in China (Gilmartin, Hershatter, Rofel & White, 2005).

In contemporary China, research has concentrated upon the ways that femininity has been (re)configured in contradictory and ambivalent ways (e.g., Lieberman, 1998; Luo & Hao, 2007; Zhang, 2003). Some of these works focused on investigating how the traditional Confucian notions of womanhood have persisted alongside newly developing western-influenced ways of considering gender. For example, Lieberman (1998) contextualised her study in contemporary critical theory developed in the west, and examined different configurations of motherhood and gendered politics in modern Chinese literature from the 1920s and 1930s. She argued that the figure of mother is a “crucial sign profoundly and intricately implicated in the discursive battles of China’s modern period, battles fought in the names of modernity, nationhood, and revolution” (p. 4). Focusing on common maternal images such as the ‘idealized figure of love’, the ‘New Woman’, and the ‘bereaved madwoman’, she pointed out that these figures were portrayed as caring and loving but also rebellious against the patriarchal tradition and class oppression. Another recent study of images of women conducted by Luo and Hao (2007) examined the covers of the Chinese magazine, *Women of China* from 1956 to 2003. The study identified a shift from the rural to an urban location for the characters and a tendency towards greater diversity in female roles (from political figures or labourers, to diverse positions engaged in family and career) as a consequence of developing the market economy and relaxing the government’s control over people’s everyday life in China. It is clear, then, that the political and social contexts for feminine culture in China create considerable potential for the investigation of gender and its representation in this national context.

Research on masculinity in Chinese society has been the subject of increasing attention in recent years. A number of Chinese scholars (e.g. Li, 1994; Zhong, 2000) have researched the sexual identity of men, and have critically examined the country’s cultural representations of masculinity. The concept of ‘soft’

masculinity that was significant and prevalent in pre-modern Chinese society became controversial in the late twentieth century as a consequence of “the search for national potency and the influence of western conceptions of sexuality” (Wang, 2003, p. 48). The critique of traditional Chinese masculinities has been encouraged by “the internalization of the dominant western notion of masculinity” (Song, 2004, p. 9). Furthermore, in the post- Mao period (1976-78), Song (2004) argues that Chinese society was “marked by the prosperity of the feminine and the decline of the masculine (Yingsheng Yangshuai)” (p. 8). This is said to be the result of the state’s ‘abnormal’ gender equality policies during the Cultural Revolution (Zhong, 2000) which caused a ‘crisis of masculinity’. A series of ‘macho men’ created in Chinese art and movies, such as Mo Yan’s *Red Sorghum* series (Mo, 1988) and Cheng Zhongshi’s *White Deer Plain* (Chen, 1993), were additionally seen as criticising Chinese men in terms of their impotency and immaturity in society searching for ‘real men’ (Barr, 2003). This anxiety, in Song’s view (2004), “signifies Chinese intellectuals’ quest for a modern masculine identity” (p. 8). In particular, female writers in China tried to present men in various critical perspectives and articulated that “there were no real men in contemporary China” (Li, 1994, p. 159). In her book *Masculinity Besieged*, Zhong (2000) analysed a number of short stories and novels in the post-Mao era, and identified a common theme of a “male search for a more manly image of the self” (p. 71). As is evident then, how gender is represented in China is a highly complex issue, and one that scholars are identifying as an important concern for research and analysis.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has summarised the historical development of gender roles in China and has highlighted the complicated nature of this development. Throughout Chinese history, gender has been an important site of social, cultural, political and ideological struggle and change. The concepts of femininity, masculinity, and sexuality, as constructed in Chinese Confucian culture characterised gender roles and relations in strictly defined ways, and these have consistently influenced perceptions of gender in China. Other influences, which created tensions between women and men and consequently enforced certain types of gendered roles and ideologies, were the communist revolution, and the economic opening of China to

the outside world. This chapter introduced the cultural specificity of gender in China that forms an important background for this study. The next chapter moves to specifically explore the place of the advertising industry in Chinese culture and outlines previous research which has examined how this industry has represented gender in its texts.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **THE CHINESE CONTEXT FOR ADVERTISING AND GENDER REPRESENTATION IN ADVERTISING**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter outlines the development of China's advertising industry and its representation of gender. The first section reviews advertising's political links to government, its national economic significance and discusses the Chinese regulatory environment for advertising representation. The second section discusses the social context for understanding gender representation in Chinese advertising, and identifies different perspectives expressed in the public debate on the issue. The chapter provides an important contextual basis for this thesis's research examination of gender representation in Chinese television advertising.

#### **The emergence of modern advertising in China**

China has a long history of marketing communication activities. For example, daytime trade fairs, street hawking and signboards began to appear during the Western Zhou Dynasty (11th century-771 BC) (Cheng, 2000). However, as Cheng (2000) described, "although advertising in embryo emerged in China quite early, the traditional contempt for commerce and the long-standing self-contained and self-sufficient economic system in the country stunted its further growth for centuries" (p. 256). It was not until the early 20th century that advertising developed as a significant economic and cultural phenomenon.

Modern advertising in China developed along with the flow of goods and capital (Wang, 2000) as a result of trading activities with western countries between the 19th and the dawn of the 20th century. During that period, westerners introduced China to modern mass media vehicles (such as newspapers, periodicals and radio) through the promotion of scientific and technological innovation (Crow, 1937; Ge, 1964; Lethbridge, 1986; Xu, 1990), and consequently this phenomenon was an important premise for conveying advertising messages. In 1926, the first Chinese-

owned agency – The China Commercial Advertising Agency – was established in Shanghai by C. P. Ling who had received an American education in the trade (Swanson, 1990). Then, in early 20th century China, the advertising industry experienced dramatic growth in urban areas (Cheng, 2000; Wang, 2000). However, the impact of Japanese military incursion (1937-1945) when China struggled to resist Japanese takeover resulted in “an abrupt end of the advertising industry” (Swanson, 1990, p. 21) as the whole Chinese economic infrastructure crumbled. Table 1, below, outlines the key periods in the development of advertising in China.

**Table 1 Key Periods in the Development of Advertising in China**

<b>Historical Period</b>	<b>The Political Context of China</b>	<b>Developments in the Advertising Industry</b>
The early 20th century	Trading activities with, and the introduction of modern mass media, from western countries	The early emergence and growth of modern advertising
Japanese military incursion (1937-1945)	Chinese resistance to Japanese takeover	An abrupt end of advertising industry due to war with Japanese
The early days of communism in China (1949-1966)	The implementation of a central command economy instituted by the Chinese Communist Party	The revival of advertising as an ‘unnecessary’ marketing tool in the context of government control of distribution of goods
The period of the Cultural Revolution (1967-1976)	The dominance of socialist ideology	The prohibition of advertising practice
The phase of post-socialist transformation (1977 -2000)	The social transformation from a planned economy to a market economy	Advertising takes on an increasingly important role in the nation’s economic development.
The entrance of the World Trade Organisation (2001)	The opening-up of the advertising market	A favourable atmosphere is established for the development of both local and foreign advertising companies to do business in China.

### **The role of advertising under socialist reformation**

For the first few years after the establishment of the Peoples' Republic of China in 1949, advertising was revived, primarily through newspapers (Swanson, 1990). However, soon the Chinese Communist Party instituted a central command economy in which allocations of resources, supply and price were regulated by rigid central planning (Chu, 1982). In this context, the advertising industry was regarded as an unnecessary marketing tool in the country's socialist economy (Stross, 1990; Wang, 2000) especially since the Chinese communist regime "demonstrated strong antagonism toward the free market ideology and made anti-capitalism a priority on its political agenda" (Gao, 2007b, p. 3).

The Chinese government sought to redefine the role of advertising under socialism. In 1957, a Chinese delegation attended the Prague Conference of Advertising Workers of Socialist Countries, which was dominated by the theme 'socialism needs advertising' (Baudot, 1989). Two years later, the Chinese Department of Commerce held a national commercial advertising conference which created the concept of 'socialist advertising' (Swanson, 1990). This concept blended commercial publicity and political propaganda, arguing that it "must serve the purposes of production, consumption, distribution, and beautification of the urban environment, and must not only be true and artistic but also reflect policy, ideology, and cultural identity" (Wang, 2000, p. 35). In this way, advertising in China developed differently from that in western countries, blurring the boundaries between commercial advertising and propaganda. Because of its dominant socialist ideology, the government particularly exercised control over the development of foreign advertising. Foreign companies were only allowed to promote their products and services through designated state-owned advertising corporations (Bishop, 1989).

During the period of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), all advertising agencies were shut down and commercial advertising was banned in China (Semenik, Zhou & Moore, 1986; Swanson, 1997). Under the ideology of socialism, Chinese revolutionary radicals labelled advertising "a symbol of capitalism designed to deceive the masses" (Cheng, 2000, p. 258) and "a necessary evil for the capitalist countries caused by overproduction and under-consumption" (Chu, 1982, p. 40).

### **Advertising in the phase of post-socialist transformation**

After the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee, held in December 1978, the Chinese Communist Party changed its planned economy to a market economy based on modernisation (Chang, Wang & Chen, 1994; Cheng & Schweitzer, 1996; Wang & Chang, 1996). As a result, commercial advertising again became a permitted activity (Cheng, 2000) and the state gradually endorsed foreign investment in the advertising business sector. In March 1979, the Radar Watch company ran the first foreign-produced advertisement on Chinese television (Foreign investment in China's advertising, 2008). Politicians began to think more and more about advertising as playing an important role in the nation's economic wellbeing. For example, China's acting socialist premier, Wan Li, stated in 1987, during his attendance at the Beijing Third World Advertising Congress, that "advertising links production and consumption. It is an important part of the economic activities of modern society. It has become an indispensable element in the promotion of economic prosperity" (Rice, 1987, p. 4).

In the reform era (1977-2000), China became integrated into the capitalist economy (Wang, 2000), and the government began to consider several western practices suitable for China's socialist environment (Semenik et al., 1986). As China opened up its markets, many multinational companies began to carry out operations in China, and a consumer market was established. As a result, commercial advertising in China was becoming one of the country's fastest growing industries, and one which now plays an important role in supporting the Chinese economy (Swanson, 1997). The development of China's dynamic advertising market has been linked to rapid economic growth, the adoption of western promotional techniques, and the political needs of the state (Cheng, 2000; Wang, 2000). As Tse, Belk and Zhou (1989) stated, "China has evolved from an advertising vacuum to enjoying a contemporary advertising infrastructure with all modern media in use" (cited in Maddox & Gong, 2005, p. 674).

Both domestic and multinational corporations have invested heavily in advertising their products and brands to meet consumer demand in China. According to Huang (1992), gross advertising revenue in 1981 made up about 0.02% of China's



GNP. From 1981 to 1995, the Chinese advertising industry attained an annual growth of about 48% (Wang, 2000). In 1986, “China’s 6,944 advertising agencies and media units combined employed 81,130 people, generating US\$228 million in billings” (Swanson, 1990, p. 23). By the end of 1990, “the number of advertising organisations in China totalled 11,123, employing some 132,000 people, and from 1982 to 1990, national advertising expenditures grew at an average annual rate of 35.6%” (Liang & Jacobs, 1993, p. 181). In 1997, while the total advertising expenditure was \$3.6 billion (Liu, 2002), the number of advertising companies had grown to 57,024 (Wang, 2000). In order to distance itself from capitalist countries, China announced plans to establish “a socialist market economy with Chinese characteristics” (Gao, 2007b, n.p.) during the 14th Party Congress held in 1992. At the same time the Communist Party required Chinese advertising to be not only an instrument for economic development, but also a tool to shape personal morality and societal well-being, in conformity with Chinese national culture (Wang, 1996).

One of the commitments the central Chinese government made when it joined the World Trade Organisation in December of 2001 was to gradually open up its advertising market and establish a favourable atmosphere for both local and foreign companies (Financial Times Information Limited, 2004; WorldSources, Inc., 2004). As a result, many multinational advertising agencies have established a strong foothold in Chinese markets by developing joint ventures with local companies (wholly foreign-owned agencies were allowed at the end of 2005) (Zhang, 1994). It has been estimated that the country’s advertising spending had grown 40% to \$ 14.5 billion by 2003, ranking China among the top five advertising markets in the world (Madden, 2004). Snapshots International Ltd.’s marketing report (2005) showed that “Chinese advertising expenditure increased by 25.0% in value in 2004” and that “total advertising expenditure for 2004 amounted to RMB (Chinese Yuan) 193.4 billion (\$24.2billion)” (p. 3). With regard to Chinese television advertising, the report also indicated that its “revenues increased by 21.7% in value in 2004. Total revenues for 2004 amounted to RMB 30.9 billion (\$3.9 billion)” (p. 1). Recent research conducted by CTR, the top market research firm in China, showed that the country’s overall expenditure on advertisements in 2005 hit CNY (the currency of the People’s

Republic of China) 243.9 billion (\$30.5billion), which has ranked as the world's third highest advertising spend after America and Japan (Financial Times Information Limited, 2006). Following China's successful hosting of the Olympic Games, the overall advertising spend grew 21% in 2008 (Abplanalp, 2009). In early 2009, however, the global economic turbulence had significant impact on advertising and consumption. Nevertheless, China's advertising market grew 6.9% as agencies suffered a reduction in their client's marketing spending (Bender, 2010). U.K. media agency Aegis Media forecasts China "to be the world's fastest-growing advertising market in dollar terms and the only one to grow significantly in 2010 as other markets recover slowly from the slump that has badly hurt the industry and led to thousands of job losses across the sector" (Bender, 2010, n.p.).

### **Gender representation in Chinese advertising**

The development of advertising in China has been evaluated as not only bringing economic benefits, but also impacting on people's tastes and perceptions (Wang, 2000). Nowadays, Chinese people encounter a daily bombardment of advertisements promoting different products and brands across the whole range of media. These advertisements overwhelmingly rely on promotion that frames product promotion through female and male character representations, many of which have engendered significant debate.

### ***The public debate on gender representation in advertising***

Since the mid-1990s, a number of media practitioners, researchers, media experts and social workers in China (e.g. Li, 2007; Liu, 2007; Sun, 2006; Wu & Zheng, 2004; Xu, 2006; Zhu, 2007) have raised concerns about how advertising portrays women and men. Many of these representations are criticised as having negative effects on sex role socialisation, and there have been further calls for media responsibility in facilitating an environment which would work to achieve gender equality (Li, 2005; Zhu, 2007). As a result of these pressures and increased public awareness of gender issues, more and more studies have been conducted to monitor the representation of gender in advertising.

In 1995, a study conducted by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) identified extensive gender stereotyping in Chinese television advertisements (Sun,

2006). This study is significant because, although not the earliest, it was conducted at an official level. The results showed that women were predominantly depicted as avid consumers, housewives, and sex objects, while men were predominantly portrayed in occupational roles. These research findings were released to the public and provoked intense discussion. While many people expressed interest in the details of the study, some media professionals proclaimed that the advertisements should not be taken too seriously, seeing them as “no big deal” (Sun, 2006, p. 14). Researchers from CASS conducted a similar survey in late 1995 and found that “more than one third of the country’s TV ads contained elements of sex discrimination” (Sun, 2006, p. 15). In March 1996, a network called the Capital Women Journalists’ Association was established in Beijing in order to encourage women’s participation in media, and to monitor gender representation in media coverage, in particular advertising (Li, 2006).

From 2002 to the present, a number of more popular articles and reports (e.g. Cheng, 2002; Gong, 2007; Li, 2007; Sun, 2008; Wu & Zheng, 2004; Zhu, 2007) have identified the extent to which Chinese advertising continues to perpetuate stereotypical views of women in terms of a focus on their outward appearance and domestic responsibilities. These images have typically drawn heavily on conventional concepts of gender in China, raising issues of how the advertising industry contributes to the maintenance of patriarchal ideologies and sexism (Wang & Gong, 2005; Xie, 2008).

Advertisements have been of interest to researchers who study the ways in which they depict a diversity of women’s personalities and roles. However, Xu (2006) indicated that, as a result of the improvement of women’s social status and the establishment of media monitoring systems, positive changes in the depiction of women have gradually occurred in Chinese advertising, resulting in a more equal representation of gender.

In recent years, the representation of men in advertising has also attracted attention in China. Some researchers (e.g. Liu, 2007; Ouyang, 2005) indicated that in Chinese advertising a series of stereotypical traits such as career success, social status, association with idealised beautiful women, and non-participation in

domestic work were assigned to male characters. Some of these images, Liu (2007) argued, depict men in traditional ways, and have had negative impacts on the social perceptions of masculinity, family and relations between the sexes. Liu (2007) also attributed these outcomes to the fact that advertising agencies have limited knowledge about male consumers in China, and consequently assign stereotypical character traits to the male gender.

In contemporary China, there has been increasing concern about the prevalence of sexual materials in advertising. In his report, Wang (2000) commented that, with the influence of global culture, advertising in China has tended to reflect particular ideas such as romance, sex, lifestyle living, and escapism, and that this tendency encourages cultural contradictions within contemporary society. One example of increasing public concern about the effects of how advertising depicts gender is evident in a Beijing Morning News report of 6th March 2005 on the top ten sexually discriminatory advertisements as identified by the Capital Women Journalists' Association (Sun, 2006). These commercials covered a wide range of products such as automobiles, food, alcoholic beverages, and beauty care products, and used female physical attractiveness as an appeal. The primary criticism was that female characters were most frequently portrayed as sexual objects. Advertising agencies criticised for their advertisements were subsequently contacted by news media personnel, and they, in turn, made public announcements to the effect that they had no intention of discriminating against women and that their advertisements had been approved by their legal departments (Sun, 2006). Nevertheless, in 2006, as part of the Third Global Media Monitoring Project, a survey indicated that despite a steady rise in the media's employment of women, news media in China urgently needed to improve their own awareness of gender equality. The survey concluded that "a few media executives or leading media researchers are clear about what gender issues are. Even fewer are aware of how the media can promote gender equality but can also reinforce traditional male dominance in society and stereotypical bias against women" (Li, 2005, p.1). Recent studies conducted by Gong (2007) and Sun (2008) demonstrate that the use of female sexuality as an advertising strategy remains highly popular.

Given the controversy that continues to surround gender representation in Chinese advertising, some researchers (e.g. Li, 2006; Sun, 2006) have suggested that there is a need for ongoing research into these advertising representations. The following section focuses on the regulatory environment in China and its impact on the development of advertising representation.

### ***The regulatory environment for advertising***

Although the Chinese State has moved to loosen its control over advertising practices, the development of the industry remains highly regulated by government laws (Gao, 2007b). The State Administration of Industry and Commerce (SAIC) and its local branches draft and enforce advertising regulations which govern advertising content and the whole advertising industry. Other industry institutions, such as the China Advertising Association (CAA) and the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), participate in governing the industry through providing legal opinions to advertising operators and agencies (Gao, 2007a). On 17 February 1982, China announced its approval of the Provisional Regulations for Advertising Management and on 10 November 1987, the State Council proclaimed the Regulations for Advertising Management (Gao, 2007b). In 1995, the 8th National People's Congress decreed the Advertising Law of the People's Republic of China as the latest legislation governing the advertising industry. A system of advertising laws and regulations now exists in China. It aims to control the performance of advertising agencies in terms of truthfulness and conformity to socialist ethics (Swanson, 1990). As Gao (2007a) puts it, "the stringency of Chinese advertising regulation[s] can be partially attributed to the authoritarian nature and ideological roots of Chinese politics" (p. 315).

The 1995 law provides the general standards for advertising agents. It states, essentially, that all advertising content shall "be truthful, lawful and in compliance with the requirements for socialist cultural and ideological development", shall "protect the legitimate rights and interests of consumers", and shall "be conducive to the physical and mental health of the people" (The People's Congress of China, 1994, Articles, 1, 3 & 7). The development of this advertising law reflects "the experience of China in its transition from an underdeveloped socialist state to a

market economy paired with authoritarian politics” (Gao, 2007b, n.p.). In addition, some statutes in China’s advertising law of 1994 have a restrictive influence on advertising representation. For example, the use of certain materials, such as the national flag and the names of state organisations, is prohibited in advertising. To illustrate this, in late 2004, the Chinese government banned a *Nike* advertisement created by Wieden and Kennedy in which an American basketball player, LeBron James, was portrayed as winning a basketball game against a king-fu master, two Chinese women in traditional Chinese attire and a pair of dragons (White, 2004). Since these elements are traditionally considered sacred symbols, the commercial was criticised for insulting national dignity.

The law also prohibits advertising content that may “hinder social stability” or “harm the public interest”, content that may “violate sound social morals”, “information suggesting pornography, superstition, terror, violence or hideousness”, and messages that “engage in ethnic, racial, religious or sexual discrimination” (The People’s Congress of China, 1994, Articles, 4, 5, 6 & 7). A specific item related to sexual content in television advertising prohibits “nakedness below shoulder-height or 10cm above the knees” (Johansson, 1999, p. 380). On January 1, 2004, Provisional Methods on the Administration of Broadcast Advertising issued by China State Administration of Radio, Film and Television came into effect with the aim of promoting the correct orientation and normative acts of the industry (China State Administration of Radio, Film and Television, 2004). There are two specific rules dealing with the use of human models. According to Article 10, radio and television advertisements should not discriminate against women and the disabled, offer insult to women, or promote the images of uncivilised people. Under Article 11, radio and television advertisements should not broadcast obscene or sexually suggestive content, show the treatments of sexually transmitted diseases, or contain gambling, violence and crime. In addition, some self-regulatory advertising mechanisms were established in China. For example, the CAA issued Self-Regulation Rules for Advertising to Promote Spiritual Civilisation in 1997 (China Advertising Association, 1997). According to this self-regulatory code, advertising representation is required to be beneficial to women’s and children’s mental and physical health, and should reflect women’s independent status in the socialist society of China. Moreover,

advertising representation should not promote the subordination of women to men or contain images of women in bikinis or naked. For example, in 2004, a television commercial for a gum called *Qingzui* (Kiss) became the subject of controversy because it contained obvious sexual messages such as ‘do you want to feel the taste of kissing’ (Liu, Li & Cheng, 2006). In another example, an advertisement for a washing liquid called ‘Second Wife’ was banned because it reminded the viewers that polygamy was practised in prerevolutionary China (China State Administration of Industry and Commerce, 1998).

Although the implementation of various laws demonstrates government efforts to alleviate any negative effects of advertising on society, the current statutes do not provide detailed guidelines regarding the cultural content of advertising. In particular, the government’s legislation is difficult to apply or interpret in relation to complex contemporary depictions of gender. It does not clearly define, for example, what ‘subordination’ constitutes or what ‘beneficial to mental and physical health’ means within the broad social contexts. In this environment, there is merit in investigating to what extent the use of female and male characters may have been influenced by the regulations on advertising and how representations do encourage certain meanings to be attached to social-cultural understandings of gender.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has provided a brief overview of the historical development of the Chinese advertising industry and outlined the contexts for gender representation in advertising in China. The advertising industry in China has been associated with the processes of modernisation, industrialisation and globalisation. The Chinese Communist Party has, to a large extent, guided the advertising industry not only to promote economic prosperity, but also to shape societal well-being. In this sense, advertising has been used as a political tool for ideological development. The issue of gender representation in advertising has engendered public debate where various social groups have expressed different opinions, and has increased public awareness of issues related to gender equality. As an impact on the development of advertising practice, the regulatory environment in China created by government laws and regulations imposes restrictive guidelines for advertising

content and production, in particular, the cultural representation of gender. In the next chapter we move from this focus on the Chinese advertising industry and its regulation, and debate in relation to depictions of gender, to exploring the broader academic question of how gender is socially constructed, how its representation in advertising has been socially constructed, and how we need to also examine how the advertising production process plays a part in this construction. Chapter 4 will present a wide range of literature relevant to the social construction of gender, gender representation in advertising, and the advertising production process.



## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON GENDER, ADVERTISING REPRESENTATION AND PRODUCTION**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter reviews research on the cultural representation of gender in advertising. The first section briefly looks at literature that has theorised the socially constructed nature of gender and its connection to culture-specific expectations and ideologies. The second section of this chapter examines literature that has focused on the specifics of advertising and its representation of gender. It examines in detail the claimed cultural functions and effects of advertising representation drawing especially on the notions of distortion and stereotyping, and also examines such representation in terms of the use of sexual appeal. The third section of the chapter focuses on studies which have specifically investigated the use and representation of female and male characters in western and Chinese contexts, using both quantitative content analysis and qualitative textual analysis methods. This chapter then outlines studies that have attempted to theorise the process of advertising production. It also examines studies that might usefully facilitate understanding of the cultural role of advertising professionals. The chapter ends with a brief explanation of how the literature reviewed informs the theoretical framework for the thesis research.

#### **Theorising gender as socially constructed and learned**

As James and Saville-Smith (1989) stated, “individuals may be born female or male but they have to become masculine or feminine” (p. 10). From the social constructivist perspective it is argued that women and men “think and act in the ways that they do because of concepts about femininity and masculinity that they adopt from their culture” (Courtenay, 2000, p. 1385). Gender construction is also understood as involving a set of socially constructed relationships between the sexes (Aaltio & Mills, 2002; Gerson & Peiss, 1985; Hare-Mustin & Marecek,

1990; West & Zimmerman, 1991; Wood, 2003). Hence, gender could be recognised as “the ways in which sex is expressed and transformed into meaningful cultural entities” (Corrigan, 1997, p. 98). This process, as Lacey (1998) argued, is socially constituted and maintained in different discourses. Viewed in this way, gender roles are considered as a continuous process in which people learn to be masculine and feminine (Brannon, 1985; Davis, 2007; Lindsey, 1995), rather than a consequence of biological sexual differences. Because of some of the complexities and possible confusion around the uses of the terms in this thesis – ‘female’, ‘male’, ‘femininity’, and ‘masculinity’, it should be noted that ‘female’ and ‘male’ were used to refer to sex as a biological state. ‘Femininity’ and ‘masculinity’ were used to refer to the *representation* of gender as socially constructed.

### ***Culture and multiple expectations of femininity and masculinity***

Each culture has its own expectations of gendered roles and characteristics (Connell, 1995; Costa, 1994; Wood, 2003). Hofstede (1984) argued that femininity and masculinity are important dimensions of culture which reveal “the way in which a society allocates social roles to the sexes” (p. 84). Therefore, it is not surprising that gender roles and relations have been seen as one way to understand cultural differences (An & Kim, 2007). These gender differences affect how women and men perceive their own and others’ social value and roles, how they represent themselves in relation to others, and how they are encouraged to understand themselves in terms of social hierarchies. Historically, in these terms, men have almost universally been credited with greater social importance and status than women, and masculinity is culturally valued more than femininity. The gender inequalities that then result from these status differentials have been defined by Hartmann (1981) as, “a set of social relations which has a material base and in which there are hierarchical relations between men and solidarity among them which enable them to dominate women” (p. 18). Acker (1992) indicated that although gender inequality has been constantly reorganised in many national contexts, male domination has been socially maintained and embodied as the different levels of patriarchy.

While acknowledging that femininities and masculinities are not homogenous categories (Carrigan, Connell, & Lee, 1987; Cheng, 1999; Hopkins, 2006; Renold, 2004), researchers have argued that different types of womanhood and manhood may coexist within and across cultures and historical periods (Connell, 1996; Huang, 2006; Louie & Low, 2003). As Nixon (1997) explained, gender identities “are invented categories. They are the product of the cultural meanings attached to certain attributes, capacities, dispositions and forms of conduct at given historical moments” (p. 301). Furthermore, cultural expressions of femininity and masculinity are likely to vary according to class, sexuality, nationality, and age (Chafetz, 1989; Wood, 2003). Consequently, the diverse ways in which gender roles are constructed lead to the social rankings of domination and subordination.

With special regard to masculinities, Carrigan et al. (1987) introduced the term ‘hegemonic masculinity’ to explain social norms and ideals which are used to legitimise and maintain male power. However, the hegemonic configuration of masculinity, as Schoene-Harwood (2000) argued, is a myth because it “is always bound to constitute an impossible, phantasmatic ideal that ultimately no man can live up to or fulfil” (p. xii). Furthermore, Segal (1993) argued that hegemonic masculinity “gains its symbolic force and familiar status . . . from a series of hierarchical relations to what it can subordinate” (p. 635). In this respect, hegemonic masculinity requires men to embody their power against femininities and marginalised masculinities (Connell, 1995; Song, 2004). For example, in North America, specific qualities, including ‘white’, ‘middle class’, ‘physical, social and economic power’, ‘early middle-aged’, and ‘heterosexuality’, set the standards for male roles (Cheng, 1999; Connell, 1995; Segal, 1990). Therefore, it is not surprising that if masculinities in the western tradition present these norms, black and Asian men, and gays, as well as the feminine, are marginalised and considered as inferior (Connell, 1998).

### **Perspectives on advertising and gender representation**

It is widely argued that gender role socialisation plays an important role in enhancing established cultural views of gender through different forms of institutional communication (e.g., Dill & Thill, 2007; Douglas, 1994; Littlefield, 2008). Viewed in this way, the media in general, and advertising in particular,

contribute to creating, maintaining and challenging social perceptions of gender in particular ways (Cole & Daniel, 2005; Gunter, 1995). Feminists and sociologists (e.g., Carter & Weaver, 2003; Goffman, 1979; Gray & Leith, 2004; Jagger, 2001; Jones, 1994; Littlefield, 2008; Walker, 1999; Younger, Warrington, & Williams, 1999) have used gender as an analytic category for understanding the cultural representation of power relations within the media. A common feature of their studies is a focus on the ways in which the notions of femininity and masculinity are culturally symbolised, supported, and challenged. Many scholars and researchers (e.g., Belch & Belch, 2004; Berger, 2004; Cheng, 1997; Frith & Mueller, 2003; Mueller, 1996; O'Guinn, Allen & Semenick, 2000; Pollay, 1986; Wah, 2006; Wells, Burnett, & Moriarty, 2000) have argued that advertising and culture are intertwined, and that culture plays a complex role in advertising representation.

There is also an extensive literature on the practice of advertising from a marketing perspective, focusing on promotional activities and strategies (Belch & Belch, 2004; Zhang & Gelb, 1996). In this literature advertising is examined as a functional device for attracting consumers' attention and further influencing their buying behaviour (Belch & Belch, 2004). To achieve these objectives, advertising messages seek to endorse cultural values which prevail in society at large (Belk & Pollay, 1985; Harris, 1984; Pollay & Gallagher, 1990). In particular, the use of advertising characters has been regarded as helpful in conveying cultural values (McCracken, 1986; Frith & Mueller, 2003). In addition, research into the effects of culture on marketing and consumption behaviour has found that people are more likely to respond to advertisements that are congruent with their culture (Jain, 1989; Zhang & Gelb, 1996). Yet there is also a growing awareness that advertising tends to have sociological and cultural effects by way of influencing the cultural imagination, cognitions, feelings, and ultimately preferences (Fowles, 1996; Pollay, 1986; Pollay & Gallagher, 1990; Williamson, 1978).

### ***Advertising as a 'distorted' mirror: An approach dating back to 30 years ago***

In order to develop symbolic associations for products and brands, advertising messages are said to need to reflect existing social conditions that are readily understood by the intended audience (Fairfield & Johnson, 2004; Pollay, 1978;

Wah, 2006). In this regard, McCracken (1986) explained that, “advertising works as a potential method of meaning transfer by bringing the consumer good and a representation of the culturally constituted world together within the framework of a particular advertisement” (p. 74). This view positions advertising as a process of production, circulation and consumption, in which a product or brand is associated with social and personal meanings. Thus, the ways in which images, values and forms of communication are chosen and managed have impact on the construction of meaning. As a result, advertising is said to create “magical inducements and satisfaction...and thus transforms goods which had rational use-value into irrational symbols” (Elliott, Jones, Benfield, & Barlow, 1995, p. 189). Like other types of source materials, female and male characters have long been used to impose cultural meanings on products and brands (Gunter, 1995; McAllister, 2005). As Chung and Ha (2004) explained, the use of advertising characters creates a social setting for the goods and evokes emotional responses from the consumers. More specifically, gender representation, while reflecting the feminine and masculine values of a given culture in which it exists, plays an important role in conveying what products signify (Frith & Mueller, 2003; McCracken, 1986).

In arguing that certain cultural values are more likely than others to be presented and reinforced in advertising messages, Pollay (1986) stressed the distorted characteristics of commercial communication. In order to serve sellers’ interests, advertising tends to present ideal images by communicating messages about desirable roles, appearance, relationships, personality, and lifestyles (Gulas & McKeage, 2000; Holder, 1973; Pollay & Gallagher, 1990; Williamson, 1978). Interestingly, although these ideals tend to be reflected as normal and natural, they can never be fully actualised in daily life (Fowles, 1996). Millum (1975) concluded that “if advertising wished to reflect material life accurately it would need to replace pictures of elegant homes, beautiful people, and shiny automobiles with pictures of slums, unattractive people, and broken-down cars” (as cited in Belk & Pollay, 1985, p. 889).

By adopting the idea that advertising is a distorted mirror (Pollay, 1986), many scholars (e.g., Frith & Mueller, 2003; Kim & Chung, 2005; Leiss et al., 1986)

have theorised the effects of advertising in terms of its offering cultural texts about ‘the self’ and ‘the others’. This view suggests that advertising practitioners may participate in exaggerating or magnifying certain aspects of female and male characters, processes by which they aim to sell products and services through better customer association with them. In this process, particular meanings and traits of gender are drawn on and reinforced. In this sense, advertising is considered as employing highly delineated depictions of masculinity and femininity in order to generate “idealizations of one’s own gender and the opposite gender” (Fowles, 1996, p. 221).

### ***Cultivation theory and (gendered) stereotyping***

It has been widely argued that advertising not only mirrors society (in distorted ways) but also affects society (Dunn, Barban, Krugman, & Reid, 1990; Frith & Mueller, 2003; McAllister, 2005). As a social force, advertising has been not only identified as legitimating capitalism (du Gay & Pryke, 2002) but also criticised because of its potential to affect the thinking and behaviour of individuals (Bergh & Katz, 1999; Chan & Cai, 2009; Patti & Frazer, 1988). From this perspective, advertising representation plays an important role in teaching social values and shaping personal identities through portrayal of what is culturally expected (Gulas & McKeage, 2000; Williams, 1980; Zayer, 2010). This process contributes to forming behaviours and attitudes that a particular society perceives as appropriate for the sexes. It has been argued that in this way, gender representations in the media influence both children and adults in society, in terms of identity formation, self-evaluation, and social comparison (Barner, 1999; Coltrane & Messineo, 2000; Cronin, 2004; Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2006; Gunter, 1995; Smolak & Stein, 2006; Tiggemann & McGill, 2004).

Cultivation theory is useful in explaining how the media plays a role in the cultivation of attitudes and behaviours around gender roles (Bailey, 2006; Brenick, Henning, Killen, O’Connor, & Collins, 2007; Fullerton & Kendrick, 2000; Harrison, 2003; Signorielli, 1989). The approach has predominantly been used to theorise the impact of television violence (Carter & Weaver, 2003; Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Scharrer, 2005), but has also been used to develop arguments about the effects of advertising. Schooler, Ward, Merriwether, and Caruthers (2004)

argued, for example, that, “consistent representations on television construct a specific portrait of reality” (p. 38). It is claimed that, due to repeated exposure to media representations, audience members gradually accept certain understandings about ‘the nature of the world’ (Bailey, 2006; Schooler et al., 2004; Shrum, 1995; Signorielli & Morgan, 1990; Tapper, 1995; Zayer, 2010). This view reveals the potential power of television in terms of providing different role models which viewers might observe and attempt to imitate. From this perspective, television advertising is “one source of socialisation into gender role attitudes and behaviour” (Scharrer, Kim, Lin, & Liu, 2006, p. 215). Consequently, the images that audiences see of themselves in advertising may not only shape how they perceive themselves and relate to others, but also influence their perceptions of social reality more widely (Bailey, 2006; Tapper, 1995). Many researchers (e.g., Gulas & McKeage, 2000; McAllister, 2005; McGhee & Frueh, 1980; Schreiber & Boyd, 1980) have expressed interest in examining the cultivation effects of television advertising on the audience, and found that exposure to images of gender differences may contribute to reinforcing gender stereotypes.

It is argued that “because advertising is executed professionally to be pervasive and persuasive, it is therefore intrusive and impossible to avoid” (Pollay, 1986, p. 18). In this regard, a number of media theorists have come to see advertising as significantly involved in creating and perpetuating cultural stereotypes in relation to representations of various social groups (e.g., Bergh & Katz, 1999; Carter & Weaver, 2003; Dunn et al., 1990; O’Guinn et al., 2000; Prieler, 2007). Interestingly, Courtney and Whipple’s (1983) influential study described advertising stereotyping as ‘shorthand’ used to carry ideas and images. In this way, the use of stereotypes enables advertising practitioners to easily associate goods with various meanings because of the strong links to certain cultural beliefs, rather than “a universally held truth” (Frith, 1997, p.7). It is claimed that the stereotyped portrayals not only evoke widely accepted attitudes and principles (First, 1998; Lazier & Kendrick, 1993), but also as Frith and Mueller (2003) noted, stereotypes are ideologically influential because “the repetition of a stereotype naturalises it and makes it appear ‘normal’” (p. 119). In addition, some researchers (Barnet & Cavanagh, 1994; Wang, 2000; Zhang & Harwood, 2004) have specifically investigated how, if at all, advertising representations reflect values and

stereotypes in the context of globalisation. As Zhou and Belk (2004) explained, advertising practice, along with the internationalisation of economic activities and the development of modern mass media, has become more complicated in terms of its transmission of cultural values and images to diverse audiences across national boundaries. This process imposes alien values and ideas on local people and (re)construct national identities (Frith, 2003; Mueller, 1996; Szescko, 1985). It is argued that with the rise of globalisation, advertising has become a form of cultural imperialism which threatens and reshapes indigenous perceptions and representations (Barnet & Cavanagh, 1994; de Mooij, 2004; Stross, 1990).

With regard to gender stereotypes, researchers (e.g., Al-Olayan & Karande, 2000; Courtney & Lockeretz, 1971; Fowles, 1996; Furnham & Voli, 1997; Goffman, 1979; Hung & Li, 2006; Knupffer, 1998; McAllister, 2005; Milner & Higgs, 2004; Prieler, 2007) have theorised advertising representation as playing a role in conveying and encouraging rigid perceptions related to particular capabilities and characteristics of women and men. More specifically, gender stereotyping in advertising is theorised as perpetuating sexist attitudes and ideologies (Gunter, 1995; Plakoyiannaki, Mathioudaki, Dimitratos, & Zotos, 2008; Rosewarne, 2005; Royo-Vela, Aldas-Manzano, Küster, & Vila, 2008; Swim & Campbell, 2003). McAllister (1996) argued that it is damaging for audiences to be exposed to stereotypical gender representations which disregard the realities of life and which, consequently, contribute to social problems such as sexism, inequality, and prejudice.

### ***Gender and the use of sexual appeal in advertising***

One of the primary criticisms of gender representation in advertising focuses on its exploitative use of sexual imagery (e.g., Frith & Mueller, 2003; Gill, 2008; Gunter, 1995; Reichert, 2003; Reichert, Lambiase, Morgan, Carstarphen, & Zavoina, 1999; Sengupta, 2006). As a means of attracting the viewer's attention, sexual appeal is a very common component of advertising messages. Indeed, Reichert and Lambiase (2006) argued that sexual imagery in western countries has been extensively drawn into the logic of consumer culture. Many studies conducted in the US and Europe have demonstrated how women have long been portrayed as 'sex objects' and with performed 'decorative roles' in advertising



(e.g., Fullerton & Kendrick, 2000; Gill, 2008; La Tour & Henthorne, 1994; Reichert et al., 1999; Soley & Kurzbard, 1986). In particular, women's bodies are objectified through an emphasis on body parts such as legs and breasts (Frith & Mueller, 2003). A general conclusion drawn from these studies is that advertising portrays women as valued primarily on the basis of their physical attractiveness and sexual seductiveness (Arima, 2003; Baudrillard, 1990; Coltrane & Messineo, 2000). Such a characterisation may lead to negative impacts on society such as adversarial sexual beliefs and violence by men against women (Kalof, 1999; McKay & Covell, 1997).

Advertising which uses women to sell products on the basis of their sexual appeal to men has also been criticised for “producing female images that express male fantasies and reflect a male point of view” (Warlaumont, 1993, p. 26). In these terms, women are frequently portrayed in sexist stereotypical roles and as objects of the male gaze (Shields, 1990). In this way, the ideologies that define women's nature and their competencies as relied on “the physical materiality of the female body” (Reischer & Koo, 2004, p. 311) are reinforced. The concept of the ‘gaze’, originally developed within feminist film theory (Mulvey, 1975), has been drawn on to understand how gendered power relations are conveyed in advertising representation (Warlaumont, 1993). As Mulvey (1975) contended, ways of looking and being looked at are ideologically constructed around male activity and female passivity. From a feminist perspective, van Zoonen (1994) explained that women “function simultaneously as erotic objects for the male audience who can derive scopophilic pleasure from their presence, and as erotic objects for the male protagonists with whom the male audience can identify” (p. 89). In these terms, gender difference is not just a matter of differently socially constructed character traits, but also a matter of men being constructed as those who look, and women as those who are looked upon and whose task it is to make themselves attractive for the pleasure of the male onlooker (Cortese, 1999; Frith & Mueller, 2003; Kilbourne, 1999; Tiggemann & Kuring, 2004).

Nevertheless, it has been argued that since the early 1990s and as a result of women's improved economic status and criticisms of the use of female sexuality as an appeal, as well as shifts in femininity and feminism in the western world,

advertisers have modified the traditional ‘objectifying’ representation of women (Gill, 2008; Winship, 2000). This has involved a change in the sexualised representation of women from “passive, mute objects of an assumed male gaze” to “active, desiring sexual subjects who choose to present themselves in a seemingly objectified manner because it suits their (implicitly ‘liberated’) interests to do so” (Gill, 2008, p. 42). This new tendency is related to the idea of ‘empowerment’ – the construction of female sexual agency (Gill, 2003; Macdonald, 1995) – in which the notion of women’s desire and pleasure are foregrounded (Jackson, 2005). From this point of view, the use of female sexual imagery in advertising can embody the cultural power of feminism (Goldman, 1992) while simultaneously challenging traditional views of women.

While feminists have been critical of the representation of female sexuality in advertising, some researchers (e.g., Bordo, 1999; Elliott & Elliott, 2005; Frith & Mueller, 2003; Patterson & Elliott, 2002) have raised concerns about the use of sexualised images of men and its impact on the social construction of male identity. With the influence of the feminist movement and the gay liberation movement in west culture over the last 40 years, advertisers have begun to depict the male body and masculine demeanour in an ‘aesthetic’ way in order to reach the new market segmentation (Connel, 1995; Rohlinger, 2002). In this context, men are typically portrayed as narcissistic, sexual objects who are preoccupied with their physical appearance (Kimmel & Tissier-Desbordes, 1999). Such characterisation tends to ‘idealise’ the male body in the similar manner to the sexual exploitation of women, thereby challenging the traditional expectations of masculine roles, in particular those related to bodily attributes such as physical power and aesthetic ability (Nixon, 1997). Furthermore, the objectification of male bodies in advertising does not adhere strictly to Mulvey’s (1975) interpretation of the gaze which positions “the spectator as almost always male and heterosexual” (Patterson & Elliott, 2002, p. 237). As Nash (1996) explained, “recent studies of mainstream film as well as pornography suggest that looking does not produce static positions of identification, distance, voyeurism or fetishism but movement between these possible spectator positions for women and men” (p. 158). From this perspective, men are likely to be constructed as receiving an objectifying gaze rather than the ones who look. After discussed the

social effects of advertising and its representation of gender, the next sections of this chapter review studies of the use of female and male characters in advertising conducted in both western and Chinese contexts.

### **Reviewing studies of gender representation in advertising**

Numerous studies have been conducted to examine gender role representation in advertising, and have produced a body of knowledge internationally (e.g., Chi, 1999; Dominick & Rauch, 1972; Goffman, 1976; Gunter, 1995; Hooper, 1998; Hu & Xu, 2006; Hung & Li, 2006; Illergård, 2004; Kim & Lowry, 2005; Lazar, 2000; Soley & Kurzbard, 1986; Valls-Fernández & Martínez-Vicente, 2007; Williams, 2000; Winship, 2000; Zheng, 2002). These researchers have drawn on a variety of disciplines, including sociology, marketing research, feminist theory, and critical studies. The marketing literature commonly investigates the use of advertising characters using content analysis. This endeavour focuses on how advertising draws on gender-related values to sell products and services (Furnham & Farragher, 2000; Milner & Higgs, 2004; Shani, Sandler, & Long, 1992; Soley & Kurzbard, 1986; Uray & Burnaz, 2003; Wiles, Wiles, & Tjernlund, 1995). In contrast, critical studies explore the discursive construction of gender within a particular sociocultural context (Williamson, 1978). Within this tradition, most of the research focuses on symbolic representations and considers how gender roles are meaningfully characterised, and how this process, in turn, contributes to reinforcing and/or challenging particular ideologies.

### ***Pioneering the study of gender representation in advertising***

One of the first and most influential studies of gender representation in advertising is sociologist Erving Goffman's (1979) *Gender Advertisements*. He reviewed nearly 500 photographs of men, women and children in newspapers and magazines, and investigated the ways in which role modelling and power relationships between the sexes were illustrated. By analysing gesture, facial expression and posture of gender displays, Goffman (1979) identified a number of cultural stereotypes based on sets of ritualized behaviours of women and men in society. This reflects the idea that "advertisements are highly manipulated representations of recognizable or institutional scenes from 'real life'" (Cortese, 2004, p. 13). A number of studies (e.g. Belknap & Leonard, 1991; Cortese, 2004;

Klassen, Jasper & Schwartz, 1993; Masse & Rosenblum, 1988; Zeng, 2000) replicated many of Goffman's (1979) findings, offering evidence that women in advertising are portrayed as subordinate to men.

*A quantitative approach to the use of advertising characters: Content analysis studies*

Since the rise of the women's liberation movement from the 1960s, a large number of content analysis studies from different sample countries have examined the ways in which gender roles are portrayed in different advertising media. Many studies on gender in advertising have examined a single country or sociocultural context (e.g., Arima, 2003; Courtney & Lockeretz, 1971; Dilevko & Harris, 1997; Ford, Voli, Honeycutt, & Casey, 1998; Furnham & Skae, 1997; Furnham & Voli, 1997; Ibroscheva, 2007; Kim & Lowry, 2005; Milner & Higgs, 2004; Scharrer, 2004; Uray & Burnaz, 2003; Valls-Fernández & Martínez-Vicente, 2007), while some comparative studies have dealt with two or more countries (e.g., Al-Olayan & Karande, 2000; Tan et al., 2002; Wiles et al., 1995; Zhang, Srisupandit, & Cartwright, 2009). Research has been based on various media samples including print (Dilevko & Harris, 1997; Khoo & Karan, 2007; Plous & Neptune, 1997; Sullivan & O'Connor, 1988; Taylor, Landreth, & Bang, 2005; Wiles et al., 1995) and the Internet (Knupffer, 1998; Plakoyiannaki et al., 2008).

*Gender representation in television advertisements in western countries*

As television was increasingly considered to be a powerful 'socializing agent' (Berger, 2004; Bretl & Cantor, 1988; Signorelli, 1989), television advertising became an important data source in investigating the cultural representation of female and male characters. Since the 1970s, numerous content analyses of television commercials have strongly suggested that the medium perpetuates a stereotypical view in gender portrayals, presenting women in particular in conventional and demeaning ways (e.g., Craig, 1992; Dominick & Rauch, 1972; Furnham & Voli, 1989; McArthur & Resko, 1975; Nassif & Gunter, 2008; Skoric & Furnham, 2002). Female figures were more often cast in dependent, passive and subordinate roles, and unified by their common interests in beauty and the family, whereas male characters were more frequently shown in independent and

dominant roles (Allan & Coltrane, 1996; Cantor, 1990; Valls-Fernández & Martínez-Vicente, 2007).

In western television advertising, the earliest of content analysis studies of gender representation (e.g., Bretl & Cantor, 1988; McArthur & Resko, 1975; O'Donnell & O' Donnell, 1978) were increasingly concerned with the number of central characters, types of products represented by women versus those represented by men, settings, occupational portrayals, voice-overs, and character traits. Recurrent findings from all these studies are that male characters far outnumber female characters (Childs & Maher, 2003; Furnham, Babitzkow, & Ugucioni, 2000; Furnham & Bitar, 1993; Peirce & McBride, 1999) in television advertising. Men dominate voice-overs in commercials, while women are more likely to be presented visually (Bartsch, Burnett, Diller, & Rankin-Williams, 2000; Childs & Maher, 2003; Desmarais, 2003; Furnham & Voli, 1989; Knill, Pesch, Pursey, Gilpin, & Perloff, 1981; McArthur & Eisen, 1976; O'Donnell & O' Donnell, 1978; Verna, 1975). For example, in a study of 1,600 daytime and prime-time commercials from U.S. network television, Knill et al. (1981) reported that over 90% of voice-overs were male.

Numerous studies have reported that men and women were portrayed differently in terms of credibility basis in television advertisements. Indeed, when pictured with products, male figures are usually shown as knowledgeable and professional, and, therefore, act as the authority on a product. On the other hand, female figures are rarely given advertising credibility, but are more often cast as product users (Gilly, 1988; Manstead & McCulloch, 1981; Mazzella, Durkin, Cerini, & Buralli, 1992; McArthur & Resko, 1975; Neto & Pinto, 1998; Skoric & Furnham, 2002). For instance, content analysis of British television commercials conducted by Manstead and McCulloch (1981) revealed that 81.2% of women were portrayed as product users and 77.7% of men as authoritative figures. Similar findings with respect to a character's credibility basis in Australian television commercials were reported by Mazzella et al. (1992).

Studies have also commented on the limited representation of women's roles in advertising. Whilst women are more likely to appear in dependent roles, men are

more frequently depicted as autonomous and independent human beings (Bretl & Cantor, 1988; Coltrane & Adams, 1997; Furnham & Farragher, 2000; Furnham & Mak, 1999; Furnham & Skae, 1997; Skoric & Furnham, 2002). For example, Craig's (1992) content analysis of gender images in 2,209 daytime television commercials in the US found that males are more likely to be portrayed as celebrities and professionals and females as interviewers/demonstrators and parents/spouses.

Consistent with their either dependent or independent roles in advertising messages, women have historically been overrepresented as homeworkers or involved in childcare and meal preparation in family and home settings (Furnham et al., 2000; Furnham & Bitar, 1993; Furnham & Farragher, 2000; Gilly, 1988; Royo-Vela et al., 2008). In contrast, men in commercials are more frequently engaged in leisure/outdoor activities or portrayed in various locations with diverse occupations (Bretl & Cantor, 1988; Fullerton & Kendrick, 2000; Furnham & Mak, 1999; Manstead & McCulloch, 1981; Nassif & Gunter, 2008; Neto & Pinto, 1998; Valls-Fernández & Martínez-Vicente 2007; Whitelock & Jackson, 1997). With regard to gender roles within the domestic sphere, some researchers in western countries (Kaufman, 1999; Scharrer et al., 2006) examined differences in the way male and female characters interact with children and perform household tasks. For example, Kaufman (1999) discussed specific ways in which men's family roles were represented in US-based television commercials. This study revealed that men were often shown teaching, eating and playing with children, rather than caring for them. Men were often shown outside and with boys, and were less likely than women to be portrayed cooking, cleaning, washing dishes, and shopping. Kaufman (1999) thus concluded that although advertising increasingly portrayed men in family life, they still tended to "depend largely on knowledge and activities that are stereotypically male" (p. 439). Additionally, it is interesting to note that when men in commercials are pictured at home, they are frequently the recipients of women's care or labour (Allan & Coltrane, 1996). In contrast, when women are shown as members of the work force, they more often occupy a lower status than men who are shown working as craftsmen, tradesmen, operatives, or in managerial or professional positions (Coltrane & Adams, 1997; Valls-Fernández & Martínez-Vicente 2007).

In addition to their different locations and occupational portrayals, another important finding from the studies reviewed is that female characters have primarily been product representatives for domestic products or personal/beauty care products, whereas male characters have been associated with non-domestic product categories, such as financial or technical products (Bartsch et al., 2000; Caballero & Solomon, 1984; Furnham et al., 2000; Furnham & Farragher, 2000; Ganahl, Prinsen, & Netzley, 2003; Lovdal, 1989; McArthur & Resko, 1975; Nassif & Gunter, 2008; Royo-Vela et al., 2008). For example, Furnham and Skae (1997) analysed the portrayal of men and women in a sample of British television commercials and found that women were more frequently portrayed in relation to body products (35.45%) as opposed to men (10.5%). On the other hand, men (7%) were more often than women (2.1%) associated with auto/sports products.

With regard to 'reward type', studies have also found that male characters in advertisements would be associated with practical or pleasurable rewards but female characters would seek social approval (Furnham et al., 2000; Furnham, Mak, & Tanidjojo, 2000; Furnham & Skae, 1997; Manstead & McCulloch, 1981; Mazzella et al., 1992). The age of the characters in commercials has also been found to be a component of gender portrayals. Numerous studies in different international contexts have reported that women in commercials are consistently depicted as much younger than their male counterparts (Caballero & Solomon, 1984; Dominick & Rauch, 1972; Fullerton & Kendrick, 2000; Furnham et al., 2000; Ganahl, Kim, & Netzley, 2003; Gilly, 1988; Milner & Collins, 2000; Skoric & Furnham, 2002).

Although gendered stereotypes in commercials have proved highly persistent, some researchers from the US and Europe (e.g., Allan & Coltrane, 1996; Bartsch et al., 2000; Ferrante, Haynes, & Kingsley, 1988; Furnham & Farragher, 2000; Furnham & Skae, 1997; Ganahl et al., 2003; Lovdal, 1989; Schneider & Schneider, 1979) have demonstrated that gender portrayals have, in some ways, changed and there has been positive improvement in the representation of females. For example, Ferrante et al. (1988) compared depictions of females on American television advertisements with findings reported in the study conducted by

Dominick and Rauch (1972). They found more female characters were shown in a range of occupations and appeared more frequently in settings outside the home. Males were increasingly seen in the role of husband or father. Further, through analysing prime-time commercials in the 1990s, Pierracine and Schell (1995) found similar numbers of men and women in speaking roles, and more atypical than stereotyped roles for women. As Coltrane and Messineo (2000) and Pierracine and Schell (1995) concluded, changing gender roles and cultural values in society plays an important role in influencing the ways in which male and female characters are depicted although the representation is far from fully replacing the stereotypes. It is also worth noting that although the results of content analysis reveal international tendencies in gender representation, there are differences in the ways women and men are depicted from one country to another.

*Content analysis studies of gender depiction in Chinese television advertising*

Compared to research in western countries, a limited amount of research on gender role representation in advertising has been undertaken in China. However, following the Fourth World Conference on Women (1995) held in Beijing, some researchers (Han & Han, 2004; Hu & Xu, 2006; Liu & Bu, 1997; Zheng, 2002) began to investigate and monitor gender portrayals in Chinese television commercials.

Liu and Bu (1997) used content analysis to examine 1200 prime-time commercials (from 6:00 p. m. to 10:00 p.m.) in five main Chinese cities (Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenyang and Lanzhou) from August 1994 to December 1994. They found that only 5.3% of men, compared to 26.8% of women, engaged in domestic tasks such as food preparation and laundry. Males (47%) were more often shown to hold high-level business/professional roles than females were (15%). In terms of location, women were more likely than men to appear in non-occupational situations such as entertainment (30% vs. 21%) and family (51% vs. 37%). Liu and Bu (1997) also found that the majority of women were young (87%) and thin (91%), and were likely to be represented as sex objects. Additionally, the research revealed that men (71%) tended to dominate the advertisements for technological products, while women are more likely to be associated with clothing, household appliances and food/non-alcoholic beverages. Liu and Bu



(1997) also found that 77.9% of voice-overs in the commercials were male. It is worth noting that the findings reported from Liu and Bu's study were similar with those of previous studies from the US and the UK (Bretl & Cantor, 1988; Knill et al., 1981; O'Donnell & O' Donnell, 1978).

Seven years after Liu and Bu (1997), Han and Han (2004) investigated 1227 television commercials from eight China Central Television (CCTV) channels in 2003. They found significant changes in the representations of women over the period but fewer changes for men. The number of women portrayed in domestic roles decreased, and the percentages of women and men in commercials for technological products were similar. Han and Han (2004) also reported an increase in the use of female voice-overs in commercials for food, drugs and medicine, and home appliances.

By examining foreign advertisements from television, radio, newspapers and billboards in China, Wang (2000) found that one of the main motifs they contained was the promotion of modern value themes, and consequently the products were frequently associated with the elements of 'the pursuit of pleasure', 'novelty', 'technology' and 'western-ness'. Additionally, he found that Caucasian characters were used as an advertising strategy to fulfil Chinese consumers' desire to emulate western culture.

Using a selected sample rather than a random one, Zheng (2002) studied 516 award winning television advertisements from the China Advertising Festival. He found that gender was represented unevenly with 16.4% of commercials using only females, 29.4% using only males and 54% using both genders. The majority of men (47.7%) were depicted in socialising/recreational activities, while female characters were primarily featured as home workers (42.1%) and in a decorative pose (30.2%). As far as product categories were concerned, Zheng (2002) indicated that women were more likely to be depicted in commercials for cosmetics, health care products and household appliances, while men were more often associated with a wide range of products, such as food, medicine, cars, insurance and alcoholic beverages. Males (61.3%) were also significantly more likely than females (24.0%) to be shown in occupational roles. In terms of

characters' dress, Zheng (2002) found that men (50.7%) were frequently depicted in business suits and uniforms, and women (47.6%) were often portrayed wearing seductive clothing.

Recently, Hu and Xu (2006) also investigated 906 television advertisements from China Advertising Festivals (2000-2004). With regard to frequency of appearance of central characters, they found that the proportion of men (59.8%) was higher than the proportion of women (40.2%). They also indicated that the majority of women (80.2%) and men (62.8%) tended to be young, and men were more often than women portrayed as middle-aged (25.2% vs. 11.1%) and old (4.1% vs. 2.6%). Additionally, males dominated voice-overs (61.0%) and were more often than females represented as active agents (67.48% vs. 32.52%). In terms of settings, it was found that while men (25.5%) were more likely than women (16.6%) to be depicted in occupational settings, women (23.5%) were more frequently portrayed within the domestic sphere than were men (18.9%). In addition, Hu and Xu (2006) analysed the representation of gender in family roles. They indicated that females were more likely than males to be portrayed as spouses (26.3% vs. 17.5%) and partners (33.1% vs. 25.3%), and an almost equal percentage of women (15.4%) and men (16.2%) were cast in parental roles.

Comparative studies have also revealed important findings on gender representation in advertising. Two comparative studies (Cheng, 1997; Siu & Au, 1997) revealed that Chinese television advertising reinforces gender stereotypes more than its US and Singapore counterparts. By analysing the gender portrayals in 667 Chinese and US commercials, Cheng (1997) found that, in both countries, males were more often cast in occupational roles and recreational activities, whereas females were depicted in non-occupational roles and decorative situations. Male voice-overs were more often used in commercials from China and the US. In terms of age, young models, both men and women, were portrayed more often than other age groups. Furthermore, Cheng (1997) highlights the fact that Chinese males are, more frequently than their US counterparts, depicted in relaxing roles. He also reported that, due to the rigorous government regulations, women in Chinese television advertisements were portrayed as more demure and wore clothing that was less sexually suggestive than did women in US advertisements.

Therefore, Chinese advertisements relied less on sex appeal than American advertisements did. As far as male-dominant and female-dominant product categories were concerned, Cheng (1997) reported that the differences in advertising between these two countries were that, in China, commercials for clothing and cleaning products were more likely to include female characters and commercials for medicine were more likely to include male characters.

Another comparative study (Siu & Au, 1997) of the television advertising of China and Singapore showed that women in Chinese commercials were more often shown as product users and recipients of help, whereas Chinese men were presented as being authorities and providers of advice. These differences revealed a more traditional gender stereotyping in China than in Singapore. As Siu and Au (1997) explained, Singapore has a greater degree of western influence than China where traditional cultural values persist.

It is worth noting that the portrayals of males and females in Chinese television commercials remain stereotyped, and to some extent have been seen as not keeping up with the development of gender roles in the sociocultural context of China (Zheng, 2002). For example, men were more often portrayed engaged in occupational roles, whereas women were more frequently depicted in domestic settings. However, Han and Han (2004) and Hu and Xu (2006) pointed out that many Chinese advertising professionals have been aware of the improvement of women's social status, and in response depict gender roles from new angles. For example, whilst a proportion of male figures were portrayed as fulfilling familial roles and as being concerned with their physical appearance, there is an increasing trend toward depicting female characters in more varied and professional positions.

Methodologically, many studies of gender representation in advertising conducted in China used a quantitative content analysis. As Han and Han (2004) argued, these studies, however, fail to analyse in depth the subtle nature of gender representation in terms of producing cultural significance because they focus on identifying a series of recurring patterns and traits. As van Zoonen (1994) noted, content analysis which draws on "a solid theoretical framework" is interesting in

so far as it may “shed light on social and cultural matters of representation” (p. 73). However, qualitative methods have provided a more in-depth understanding of the social and cultural means of gender representation in advertising.

### *A qualitative approach: Insights into the constitution of gender*

Having reviewed the results of content analysis studies of gender representation, this section turns to provide an overview of qualitative research on the socially constructed meanings of women and men in advertising within particular sociocultural contexts. Since the late 1970s and early 1980s, a body of qualitative research on gender in advertising has emerged from a wide spectrum of disciplines, including history, sociology, and women’s studies, and many researchers have drawn on the theoretical traditions of cultural studies and critical theory (Scott, 2006). In contrast to quantitative marketing literature, advertising texts in these studies are theorised as symbolically constructed through representational systems (Desmarais, 2003; Douthwaite, 2007; Hall, 1997; Leiss et al., 1986; Roy, 1998; Williamson, 1978), and as “manifestations of an ideological discourse that structures social practices” (Montes-Armenteros, 1997, p. 131). In these terms, gender representation in advertising is understood as a signification process (Williamson, 1978) which is culturally embedded and perpetuates particular ideological roles and conventions. In line with this tradition, a number of studies (e.g., Bonney & Wilson, 1993; Ferry, 2003; Hooper, 1998; Lazar, 2000; O’Barr, 2006; Winship, 2000) used thematic and semiotic analyses to demonstrate that the ways in which women and men are depicted not only confirm traditional gender roles and solidify gender differences for commercial purposes, but also, simultaneously challenge such enduring stereotyping through subtle reframing.

### *The construction of women as domestic and subordinate*

A number of studies (e.g., Douthwaite, 2007; Illergård, 2004; Loeb, 1994; Millar, 2001; Roy, 1998; Thomsen & Sørensen, 2006; van Zoonen, 1994; Winship, 2000) examined how cultural notions of what constitutes femininity were drawn on in advertising representation. It was argued by these researchers that female roles were to a great degree articulated with a set of social expectations which tend to affirm patriarchal gender ideologies in both domestic and public spheres.

Looking at the literature on female images in advertising, one theme that emerged from the analysis was a focus on the role of women within the domestic settings (Douthwaite, 2007; Loeb, 1994; Millar, 2001; Roy, 1998; Thomsen & Sørensen, 2006). As Peiss (1988) argued, the development of western capitalist consumer culture has contributed to the social conceptualisation of gender difference by (re)fashioning middle-class women's expected roles as housewife and family caretaker. In this context, advertising has articulated cultural norms and ideals of womanhood by constructing parenthood and domesticity as essential attributes of women.

For example, by examining how women were portrayed as relating to their children in six Danish advertisements for prams, Thomsen and Sørensen (2006) found that motherhood was (re)configured in different ways, presenting specific sets of experiences and traits in various scenarios. Their analysis revealed an interaction among competing versions of maternal roles such as happy domestic mothers, smart mothers, sexy mothers and busy everyday mothers. These depictions tended to emphasize nurturing, tenderness, physical attractiveness, leisure, intelligence, happiness and/or socialisation as necessary elements of mothering. Furthermore, Thomsen and Sørensen (2006) argued that the advertisements created a mythic world of the feminine that supported the consumer's identity construction by depicting the pram as "the symbol of the coming transition into the role of motherhood" (n.p.).

In another study of advertisements for domestic products (a washing powder and a washing machine), Douthwaite (2007) indicated that the representation of women as happy housewives remained persistent. His interpretation of gendered roles was primarily based on a semiotic analysis of visual signs such as colour, facial expression, gesture, action, and physical contact between female characters and the advertised products. More importantly, Douthwaite (2007) argued that, although the advertisements continued to reinforce the myth of domestic femininity, they draw on different feminine codes. The advertisement promoting washing powder emphasised "the moral-religious dimension of the social role of the woman" (p. 294). In the advertisement, the prime use of white colour was

used to signify cleanliness and purity, and the housewife was portrayed as emitting a smile of happiness at the whiteness of the washing. This common articulation of femininity and domesticity, as Douthwaite (2007) noted, was based on a strong reference to a discourse of moral purity. In contrast, the advertisement selling a washing machine set up an environment in which the role of the housewife was articulated with her sensuous appearance. In the advertisement, the incorporation of perfume in the advertising layout (the bottle of perfume placed almost vertically in relation to the woman's nose) – a crucial signifying element – which suggested the pleasant odour of cleanliness of freshly-washed cloths.

In addition to the investigation of the domestic portrayal of women in western culture, a study conducted by Roy (1998) in India looked at how female characters were depicted in family life. By conducting a semiotic analysis of 'codes of appearance' and 'activity of female characters', Roy (1998) argued that domesticity and motherhood were the dominant ideological themes in Indian television commercials. He found that female characters were portrayed as fulfilling their responsibilities for child care and housework. In Roy's view, these images legitimated domestic toil and subservience. Furthermore, Roy (1998) argued that national context has important influence on how gender is represented in culture. He found that how Indian television commercials portrayed women's roles was intricately linked to their class and ethnic status.

Some research investigations (e.g., Dorn, 2001; Illergård, 2004; van Zoonen, 1994) have also been concerned with role portrayals of women in western advertising with respect to activities that have been traditionally defined as masculine such as occupation and career. For example, from a feminist perspective, van Zoonen (1994) analysed the representation of a flight attendant in an advertisement for Japan Air Lines in an American news magazine in order to explore how visual culture constitutes the meaning of femininity. By applying semiotics to a combination of signs such as dress code, facial expression and decorative elements, she argued that the advertisement drew on the tradition of the geishas in how the stewardess was portrayed as an obliging servant attending to the needs of male passengers. Such a characterisation, van Zoonen (1994) argued, tended to present attentiveness, compliance and forbearance as part of women's

occupational roles. Furthermore, Illergård (2004) examined the representation of gender at work in six Swedish television commercials, and argued that the women were restricted to inferior status and beauty ideals. She found female characters were depicted as secretaries who are concerned with their bodies and looks, offer smiles to get approval, and serve their male bosses. The analysis of the advertisements also revealed that the women were used as 'eye-catchers' which suggests an active male and passive female dimension in camera work. The different roles and attributes ascribed to women and men in the public sphere of work, as Illergård (2004) noted, perpetuated a system of unequal power relations between the sexes.

Researchers such as Desmarais (2003), Helstein (2003) and Dorn (2001) also examined how, and to what extent, advertising incorporated the notion of sport into the construction of femininity. By reviewing Nike women's advertising (both print advertisements and television commercials) targeted at female consumers between 1990 and 2000, Dorn (2001) identified several distinct themes which promoted specific myths of femininity in sporting contexts. His analysis revealed cultural shifts in gender representation from the notions of women as seeking self-empowerment or self-construction through athleticism to a more diverse illustration of women's personal experiences of participating in sports. In comparison with these findings, Desmarais's (2003) semiotic and discourse analysis investigation of sport imagery in both French and New Zealand television commercials revealed that women were portrayed in more stereotypical ways. He indicated that notions of cosmetic fitness and grace were emphasised as important elements associated with the construction of female involvement in sport. Therefore, the use of sport imagery in the commercials provided the viewers with an ideal of female body, reinforcing the stereotypical perception of women's value on their physical appearance.

Other studies of gender representation (e.g., Cortese, 1999; Kim & Chung, 2005; Ma, 2008; Manca & Manca, 1994) investigated the portrayal of minority women in western advertising culture. In the context of globalised economy, advertising campaigns have further developed their representations in gendered and racialised ways (Kim & Chung, 2005). This phenomenon has raised concerns about how

ethnic minority groups are romanticised and depicted as culturally inferior and alien ‘others’ (Frith & Mueller, 2003; Ma, 2008). For example, Ma’s (2008) semiotic analysis of Oriental images (including female characters, sceneries and objects) in perfume advertisements in popular western fashion magazines (such as Vogue and Elle) and websites, identified race and gender as combined to reinforce “gendered stereotypes within western patriarchal societies and racial prejudices of the west about the east” (p. 51). Ma (2008) claimed that the visual imagery of Oriental women conformed to the western visual tradition which stereotyped them as seductive objects designed to satisfy the (white) male gaze and desire. Furthermore, specific uses of signs such as the Chinese fan, umbrella, flower and stone sculpture evoked a sense of fascination with the mystical east, its traditions, and “the exotic difference of the Orient” (Ma, 2008, p. 50). In this way, the construction of Oriental women in advertising perpetuated western cultural gender and racial hierarchies.

While qualitative studies of the representation of women in advertising have been prevalent, many researchers have also used qualitative methods to investigate how men have been variously depicted in advertisements. The next section outlines the approaches taken and conclusion drawn in such research.

#### *The construction of masculinity in advertising*

The depictions of masculinity and men in western advertising have become the subject of an increasing number of qualitative studies (e.g., Brandth, 1995; Elliott & Elliott, 2005; Hanke, 1992; Hopkins, 2000; Jackson, 1994; Law, 1997; Lazar, 2000; Ourahmoune & Nyeck, 2008; Patterson & Elliott, 2002; Schroeder & Zwick, 2004; Wörsching, 2000) which have generated different and sometimes contradictory results. These researchers investigated how men are associated with certain qualities and activities, and how this process, in turn, plays a role in perpetuating and challenging particular hegemonic constructions of masculinity within different cultural contexts. It has been argued that male roles depicted in advertising tended to embody multiple discourses and ideologies of gender, rather than simply being the opposite of femininity.



Since sport is regarded as a traditionally male-dominated area in the west, several studies (e.g., Desmarais, 2003; Messner, 2002; Peter, 1994; Wörsching, 2000) shed light on the role of advertising representation in maintaining and reproducing the myth of masculine dominance. In New Zealand, Desmarais (2003) examined the role of male characters in sports imagery. He found that the traditional ideas of masculinity such as toughness, assertiveness and domination over others continued to prevail in commercials that use sports imagery in New Zealand. This finding was culturally specific, however, as French commercials tended to depict men engaging in sport situations mostly for fun and relaxation. In another study of advertisements with sports imagery in the German news magazine *Der Spiegel*, Wörsching (2000) discussed how masculine power was constructed through sporting activities which acted as a metaphor for a mental attitude of ruthless competition rather than as a purely physical activity. Such a way of conceptualising masculinity, therefore, articulated a discourse about men's disposition and power to win rather than one about their vulnerable aspects.

A body of literature on rural geography and sociology (e.g., Brandth, 1995; Campbell & Kraack, 1996; Honeyfield, 1997; Law, 1997) in western countries analysed the depictions of rural masculinities in advertising. This investigation provided some insights into how the local discourses, in particular those related to farming, played a role in constructing gendered meanings and identities. For example, Brandth (1995), in her study of tractor advertisements in Norway, used a discursive approach to investigating how changes in the nature of agricultural work were reflected in the construction of hegemonic masculine gender roles. She perceived the tractor as a sign of male farm identity, representing certain traits important to rural men such as mechanical skills. In this symbolic context, technology, control over nature and masculinity were articulated as part of a unified discourse. In the tractor advertisements, as Brandth (1995) argued, the meaning of masculinity in farming was reconstructed in new ways, presenting an ideological shift from a dirty, manual model (traditional) to a more business-like version (modern).

In addition, Law (1997) discussed how the idea of place influenced the social construction of gendered meanings by exploring associations between a

distinctive New Zealand landscape (the South Island High Country) and masculinity in the 'Southern Man' advertising campaign for Speight's beer. In the television commercials as well as the print and outdoor images, particular ensembles of visual displays (such as specific rural activities, 'unspoiled' nature, stripped-down male bodies and companion dogs) and linguistic elements (such as the Southland burr and phrases) signified 'purity' and 'hardness'. Such representations, Law (1997) argued, not only confirmed the traditionally approved traits of men in western culture such as heterosexuality, male mateship and hard physical work, but also draw on "the cultural tradition that associates nature and the rural with authenticity, and on the particular New Zealand tradition that codes the rural as masculine in contrast to the effeminate" (p. 25). In this way, the use of landscape imagery in the advertisements tended to suggest a place-specific version of manhood which might set up a regional identity for Speight's beer drinkers.

As a result of the increasing participation of men in consumption (Bocock, 1993; Mort, 1996) and the feminist movement (Smith, 2005), the representation of men in western advertising was manifested in 'new' dimensions, reproducing diverse gendered identities (Lazar, 2000; Rohlinger, 2002; Schroeder & Zwick, 2004). Consequently, the normative ideal of hegemonic masculinity was rearticulated with the established ideological assumptions in society such as 'New Man' in the 1980s (Cornwall & Lindisfarner, 1994; Rutherford, 1990) and the 'New Lad' in the 1990s (Benyon, 2004), which was advanced by consumer culture. Some advertising studies (e.g., Hopkins, 2000; Lazar, 2000; Ourahmoune & Nyeck, 2008; Schroeder & Zwick, 2004) revealed the representation of men has been reconstructed in a way that incorporates certain traits and behaviours traditionally considered appropriate for women. For example, a recent study conducted by Ourahmoune and Nyeck (2008) investigated an evolution of men's representations in French brand communication. By focusing on visual signifiers such as colour, gesture and brand signature, Ourahmoune and Nyeck (2008) analysed a number of advertisements and store visuals promoting products traditionally associated with males (alcoholic beverages and cars) and females (personal and beauty care products) in different time periods. They found that while the traditional concepts of masculinity (such as virility, competition and

physicality) continued to prevail, there were multiple versions of masculinity which displayed traditional female qualities such as emotion, parenthood, appearance and seduction.

In terms of family settings, the representation of men in advertising contributed to legitimating domesticity as an appropriate masculine attribute rather than challenging patriarchal privilege (Lazar, 2000; Millar, 2001). For example, by conducting a critical discourse analysis of linguistic and visual structures in Singapore's Family Life advertising campaign, Lazar (2000) found that the parental roles of men were invested with specific cultural meanings. They were portrayed as executors and the heads of the family, and their emotional bonding with children was constructed in terms of fun, relaxation and physical play. Such constructions of fatherhood, as Lazar (2000) argued, were indicative of the asymmetrical power relations between women and men in the advertisements where "although certain egalitarian values may be present...they are overwhelmed by a prevailing conservative discourse" (p. 396).

Since cultural differences are influential in the construction of gender, specific features of portraying women and men in advertising are evident in a particular country such as China. The following section focuses on the qualitative studies of gender roles in advertising representation within the Chinese context.

#### *Qualitative studies of gender role representation in Chinese advertising*

Qualitative studies (e.g., Desmarais, 2003; Roy, 1998; van Zoonen, 1994) conducted outside China have demonstrated that national context has an impact on particular ways in which gender is portrayed in advertising. In relation to the Chinese context very little research on gender representation has been carried out from qualitative approaches. Some researchers (e.g., Ferry, 2003; Hooper, 1998; Lu, 2005; Xie, 2008) have become interested in using qualitative and interpretive research methods to examine the ways in which cultural meanings of gender are created and reinforced in Chinese advertising. In considering the depiction of women as a signifying practice, Xie (2008) applied semiotics to the top ten sexually discriminatory advertisements which were identified by the Capital Women Journalists' Association in 2005. She argued that, within the rapid

development of consumer culture in China, there was a strong tendency for the advertisements to portray female characters in domestic roles and as ornamental objects. These characterisations tended to highlight a series of feminine qualities such as domesticity and attractiveness, and suggest the myths of women's inferiority and domesticity. Therefore, Xie (2008) concluded that the ways that the advertisements conveyed ideological meanings of femininity were heavily influenced by the tradition of male domination in Chinese culture.

By focusing on the use of sexual imagery in Chinese advertising, Johansson (1999) argued that although the representations of Chinese and western women were constructed around a male gaze, they were portrayed in different ways. He found that Chinese females were portrayed as juvenile. Their body language such as canting of heads and bodies conveyed shyness and subordination. On the other hand, western females were 'masculinised' in the way that they were portrayed as not only sexually attractive but also self-content and active. Such a representation carried connotations of power and pleasure, and suggested a form of "racial fetishism" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 74) in which "the white female body is inscribed in a larger geopolitical and historical context of Chinese-western relations" (Johansson, 1999, p. 387).

Research clearly revealed that the representations of women in Chinese advertising carry the values and conventions embedded in patriarchal ideology. Nonetheless, a study conducted by Lu (2005) noted that there have been some changes regarding gender power relations in Chinese advertising. She examined both visual and linguistic displays of women and men in the advertisements promoting household appliances, telecommunications and sports products, and found that the meaning of gender tended to be redefined from traditional expectations of the sexes. Both female and male characters tended to be shown in more diverse and innovative roles, such as women pursuing independent lives through participation in occupations and sporting activities, and men expressing their emotions and sharing household work in family life. In Lu's view, such representations involved the reversal of traditional gender roles and reduced the distinction between femininity and masculinity. In consequence, Chinese advertising reflected the ideological changes in the social perception of gender

and challenged long-established concepts of male dominance and female submission.

As this review has outlined, a large number of studies of advertising have examined gender representation in advertising through quantitative and qualitative methods. These studies all adopted a solely text-based approach, and none have been informed by an examination of the actual processes by which advertising professionals come to decisions about how to portray gender. Indeed throughout advertising research, there has been no investigation of how the creative advertising process influences gender portrayals. The following section discusses what literature there is that engages with theoretical perspectives of advertising production.

### **Advertising production process and professional practice**

The investigation of media production has been regarded, by some, as a complementary approach to understanding the meaning of a text in media and cultural studies (Johnson, 1987). A number of cultural and media studies researchers particularly during the 1970s and 1980s, have shown interest in production studies, for example, in news (Hall, 1972; Schlesinger, 1978) and television documentaries (Dornfeld, 1998; Silverstone, 1985). The rise of production studies demonstrated how marketing strategies and creative ideas are developed for commercial purposes (Spurgeon, 2004, p. 303). In particular, the process of advertising production was examined to enhance an understanding of how advertising is constituted through discursive social practices in which meaning creation is manifested in and through the working life and work roles of advertising personnel (Hackley, 2002; Kelly, Lawlor, & O'Donohoe, 2005; Rubtsova & Dowd, 2004).

In making a case for production research Thompson (1990) argues:

In creating media products, the personnel of media institutions draw upon everyday forms of culture and communication, incorporating these forms into media products and thereby reproducing, in a selective and creative way, the cultural forms of everyday life. (p. 363)

Therefore, the production-centered perspective energises the studies of how cultural texts (such as gender representation in advertising) are produced in specific ways by certain kinds of people (such as advertising professionals) under particular rules, assumptions, and conditions. The value of examining the production process, as Williams (1980) explained, is that it uncovers certain conventions and modes of communication that underlie the content and strategy of a representational practice. Hall (1972) also argued that cultural production is ideologically underpinned, and indicated that such a practice “enable[s] the signifying process to take place” (p. 61). In this respect, the moment of media production conveys meanings, which are shaped by a range of ideas, skills, professional ideologies and assumptions.

Recognising the importance of how production processes impact on media representation, the “text-centered orthodoxy” (Soar, 2000, p. 419) – i.e., the investigation of meaning production through textual analysis alone – has been criticised as failing to examine how conditions of production play a role in determining representation. A richer understanding of how and why advertising texts contain certain forms of representation would, therefore, be gained through a combined investigation of commercial cultural production and advertising textual research.

### ***Theorising the role of advertising professionals***

A theme in production studies is the focus on the cultural role played by the practitioners working within the creative industries. Advertising professionals have been described as ‘cultural intermediaries’ who use their cultural capital to create symbolic meanings for goods in society (Bourdieu, 1984; Cronin, 2004; Featherstone, 1991). Cultural intermediaries, as Bourdieu (1984) argued, “play a vanguard role in the struggles over everything concerned with the art of living, in particular, domestic life and consumption, relations between the sexes and the generations, the reproduction of the family and its values” (p. 366). They are perceived as “the shapers of tastes and the inculcators of new consumerist dispositions among the wider population” (Nixon, 2003, p. 25) through cultural production and circulation. However, some researchers (Cronin, 2004; McFall, 2002) have contested the idea that advertising production personnel play such a

role in shaping cultural tastes and behaviour. For example, arguing that advertising is not a driver of culture change, Cronin (2004) argued:

Advertising is reactive and relies on siphoning off ideas from culture – practitioners strategically raid new cultural trends they see appearing across a range of sites (fashion, art, popular music, design and television) and put selected elements of them to work in their campaigns. (p. 354).

From this point of view, advertising professionals are “not the creators of culture but the transmitters” (Bell, 1976, p. 20). In other words, they select from particular ensembles of visual, textual and auditory signs that are already active in society to create advertising messages and images (Johnson, 1987; Kelly et al., 2005).

Studies conducted by du Gay (1997), Hackley (2003b) and Miller (1997) have investigated how advertising professionals incorporate their personal experiences and other forms of cultural texts into advertising production. As an integral part of the advertising process, the professionals’ interpretation and observation of the cultural and social world become the raw material for the construction of symbolic meaning (Johnson, 1987). As Soar (2000) noted, in the context of advertising production, the professionals’ “first audience, and hence their first source for inspiration is themselves and their work” (p. 433). Interestingly, the studies conducted by Cronin (2004) and Soar (2000) revealed that advertising communicators often drew on their own experience as consumers of products and viewers of advertisements during the creative process. In these terms, advertising representation provides a rich field from which to examine how advertising professionals occupy a “dual situated positioning” of encoding and decoding cultural meaning (Kelly et al., 2005, p. 509).

In arguing that “the cultural capital so carried is channeled back around to the intermediaries en masse long before it works its way into and through the public domain” (Soar, 2000, p. 431), Shankar (1999) further suggested that advertising production is developed through the social interactions between different groups such as copywriters, art directors, clients, and consumers. Consequently, the ideas and views from these groups interweave together, and ultimately have impact on the advertising creation (Clarkin, 2005). Therefore, it is interesting to investigate

how advertising professionals produce gender representation under particular cultural and institutional conditions in relation to the promotion of products and brands. Understanding the cultural role played by advertising professionals, the following section looks at literature that discussed where they gain their inspiration for representational practices.

### ***Knowledge and subjectivities of advertising professionals***

Thompson and Haytko (1997) argued that advertising professionals possess implicit knowledge and symbolic capital in cultural discourse. It is claimed that two sets of knowledge, both formal and informal, have a significant impact on the process of advertising production. ‘Formal knowledge and expertise’ are primarily constructed through advertising research and systematic studies of consumers, markets, and consumption (Hackley, 2002; Kelly et al., 2005; Nixon, 2003). These knowledge sources are often used as a basis for developing advertising content and strategy (Mick & Buhl, 1992; Scott, 1994). With special regard to consumer culture, Hackley (2002) argued that “this knowledge mobilises advertising’s potentiality as a vehicle of cultural meaning and, in the aggregate, enables advertising as an ideological force” (p. 212). Clearly, ‘formal knowledge’ enables advertising professionals to produce meaningful messages within the culture they originate from.

In addition to ‘formal knowledge and expertise’, the habits, beliefs, and tastes of the professionals that have been considered as “informal knowledge” (Cronin, 2004, p. 354) have an impact on the content of advertisements. As Nixon (2003) argued, “the subjective dispositions of key practitioners and the meanings, values and normative assumptions written into their occupational cultures will be important in mediating the process of reading out to and connecting with consumers” (p. 5). From this perspective, the individual aspects of advertising professionals (such as cultural background, aesthetic tastes, and working experience) are inevitably brought into the daily practice of advertising production. By studying the workplace cultures in London-based advertising agencies, Nixon (2003) argued that subjective identities of male art directors and copywriters referred to particular informal information, and played an important role in influencing the content and form of advertising texts. He also identified notions of



creativity as gendered, finding that in the process of advertising representation, the creatives were engaged in an interaction of their personal lives, their knowledge and dispositions at work, and the informal work-related cultures, which had mediated the production of certain gender identities. This process was “generally bound up with conventional forms of heterosexual masculinity, though . . . a highly self-conscious sense of masculinity that was ordered through the ongoing process of self-fashioning and self-reflection that consumerist models of identity recurrently rely upon” (p. 159).

Both ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ knowledge, as Hackley (2003a) argued, is a “shared cultural repertoire” (Lien, 2003, p. 173) between advertising professionals and consumers. The creation of commercial messages is contingent on different trends, images and ideas in culture and the resources available to the professionals. As a result, advertising practice is described as “agonistic, uncertain, fluid and stressful, suggesting further that the task of producing advertising itself is subject to multiple strategies, homilies, agendas and interpretations” (Scott, 2006, p. 63). Such an understanding of the production process could make a valuable contribution to our theories of how advertising professionals represent gender. To provide a more holistic understanding of how gender is represented in advertising – beyond textual analysis alone – we can explore how advertising professionals understand how the demands of production, as well as the creative process, impact on the making of texts.

In bringing this chapter to a close, there is a need to draw together particular concepts from the literature review to identify the main theoretical propositions central to this study.

### **The theoretical framework for this thesis**

Research into gender and its representation has largely focused on western concepts of femininity and masculinity and has tended to ignore representations in non-western contexts. In China, gender roles and norms have their own characteristics, some of which conform little to dominant western ideals. Identifying ways of understanding the cultural specificity of gender representation within various practices and representations in China is important. Therefore, a

historical approach grounds my analysis, focusing attention on how femininity and masculinity have been historically constructed and on the ways in which these ideas influence representational conventions in contemporary Chinese advertising.

This thesis does argue that advertising representation plays an important role in shaping cultural meanings of gender. Viewed in this way, advertisements do not merely reflect feminine and masculine values; rather, they play a central role in constructing conceptions of femininity and masculinity. A number of content analysis studies have been conducted in western countries and China that identify consistently recurrent themes or patterns of gender representation in advertising at a manifest level. However, there is insufficient research in China that draws on qualitative methods to examine how advertising contributes to constructing particular roles as feminine and masculine and how these representations may perpetuate certain cultural ideologies. The conclusions drawn from both the quantitative and qualitative studies appear to suggest that women and men are stereotypically and unequally portrayed. A detailed study of gender representation in Chinese advertising needs to draw on conceptual understandings of values, meanings, stereotypes, and ideologies.

While numerous studies have investigated advertising representation through textual analysis of advertising content, relatively little research has been undertaken on the practice and influence of advertising professionals. There has been no consideration from a production perspective of specifically how and why particular representations of men and women are constructed in creative practices. Investigating the intentions, beliefs and experiences of the professionals, and their impact on the creative process, would facilitate an understanding of how advertising works as a representational system and signifying practice. Therefore, the present study focuses on the role of Chinese advertising professionals in their creation of symbolic meanings of gender in television commercials. The next chapter explains the methodology and specific methods of data collection and analysis used in this research.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **RESEARCH DESIGN, METHODOLOGY AND METHOD**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter outlines the epistemological foundations of this research investigation into the representation of gender in Chinese television advertising. It also explains the theoretical rationale for the methods of data collection and analysis. The first section of the chapter details the research questions and methodological stance of the thesis. In terms of the theoretical framework that underpins the investigation, this study adopts a multi-method approach to advertising research and applies elements of content analysis, semiology, and discourse analysis as well as in-depth interviews with personnel involved in the production of television advertising in China. The second section of the chapter explains the specific steps taken in the data collection phase. Here issues of reliability and validity are considered, and the methods of data analysis are described.

#### **The research questions**

The main focus of this research is to examine how Chinese television commercials create and perpetuate cultural discourses of gender in terms of unique sets of cultural values, rules, and meanings exemplified in advertising content and production. It is evident from the review of previous studies of advertising (see Chapter 4.) that, in China, there has been a lack of research on gender representation using qualitative approaches. There has also been scant research from a production perspective that offers a way to understand the production imperatives behind advertising representations. Therefore, this study addresses the following research questions:

How do Chinese television commercials portray gender and what cultural meanings and values are embedded in its representation?

How do Chinese advertising production personnel understand their role in relation to the cultural representation of gender in television commercials?

The first question primarily examines the cultural representation of gendered roles – femininity and masculinity – in Chinese television commercials in relation to the social and cultural contexts in which they were produced. Such an attempt is undertaken with consideration of both quantifiable measurements and qualitative meaning. This study explores how representations of gender might have reflected changing socio-cultural contexts such as globalisation and consumerisation in contemporary China, and also the extent to which conventional images of women and men might perpetuate.

In line with the idea that texts should be understood in relation to the context in which they are produced (Fairclough, 1992), the second research question focuses on the process of advertising production. The study thus concentrates on how production personnel understand gender within the cultural and institutional contexts of contemporary China. Via interviews the researcher explores how advertisements are ‘encoded’ (Hall, 1973) with cultural meanings of femininity and masculinity and examine how advertising professionals draw on certain beliefs, ideologies and conventions of gender representation, or even counter-convention, in order to develop ideas and images within the creative process. The next section of this chapter will now move to discuss in detail the theoretical paradigms and perspectives adopted in the investigation of these research questions.

### **A multi-method approach to gender representation in advertising**

This study used a multi-method approach which mixes several data collection methods and analytical techniques, including both quantitative and qualitative approaches. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000), quantitative inquiry is based on a systematic and objective observation of large quantities of data, emphasising a “value-free framework” (p. 8). Within this approach, many research designs lend themselves well to the description of variables and the measurement of causal relationships between such variables in terms of amount or frequency (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000). However, one weakness of

quantitative approaches is that they reduce the complexity of the natural world (Woods, 1992). They are, therefore, limited in terms of being able to understand how social experience is created and given meaning (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Consequently, this study combined both quantitative and qualitative methods, with the expectation that the latter would add richness to the understanding of how meaning is constructed in advertising texts. Methodologically, this study draws on the approaches commonly found in critical media and cultural studies research which combine methods from textual analysis (content analysis, semiotic analysis and critical discourse analysis) and empirical research (interviews). The next section outlines how cultural studies and critical theory inform the research exploration.

### **Cultural studies and critical theory approaches**

While this research does draw on a range of methodological techniques to examine the representation of gender in Chinese television advertising, the project is firmly situated within a critical-interpretative perspective (Cheney, 2000; Mumby, 2004) which is informed by cultural studies and critical theory. As Denzin and Lincoln (2000) explain, cultural studies “combines a hermeneutic focus on lived realities, a (post)structuralist critical analysis of discourses that mediate our experiences and realities, and a contextualist/realist investigation of historical, social, and political structures of power” (Saukko, 2005, p. 343). Such a framework helps researchers examine the complexity and contradictions within a culture (Grossberg, 1995; Murdock, 1995). To address such concerns, cultural studies focuses on questions of meaning, hegemony and ideology that are conveyed by texts and constructed by producers and audiences. This study explores a specific cultural activity – gender portrayal, embodied in social institutions and practices, specifically television advertising, and is concerned with ideologies and value systems associated with that representation.

Within the cultural studies tradition, a significant area of concern relates to the role of social institutions in (re)producing culture (Dahlgren, 1998). Here the media have long been a subject of investigation. Researchers examine how meanings are produced and articulated through the media practices, and how this process contributes to “the maintenance of existing power relationships,

legitimizing some ways of thinking while ignoring others or labelling them as ‘fringe’ points of view” (Priest, 1996, p. 54). To address these concerns, the critical theory paradigm was helpful as it seeks to understand issues of power and justice in a social system (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000) and explain particular versions of knowledge (Calhoun, 1995; Macey, 2000). As Cohen et al. (2000) and Lemke (1995) argued, two of the basis concerns of critical research are legitimacy and equality issues, involving the critique of the production of consciousness. Therefore, critically-minded researchers explore ways in which “conditions of social, economic, and political domination limit, distort and depreciate discourse regarding contested public issues” (McClure, 1996, p. 488), such as gender representation in advertising. This situation contributes to the process of hegemony which, as theorised by Gramsci (1971), depends on the legitimate exercise of power to create or sustain a culture of domination. This study investigates whether Chinese television advertising perpetuates, challenges, and creates new hegemonically dominant and subordinate constructions of gender.

A cultural studies project is one largely based in a broadly social constructionist framework. This paradigm has provided a framework to uncover the ways in which reality is shaped by individuals engaged in the process of interpretation (Berger & Luckman, 1967; Potter, 1996). From this perspective, reality is dependent on meanings constructed in language. As Guba (1990) argued, constructionism “intends neither to predict and control the ‘real’ world nor to transform it but to reconstruct ‘the world’ at the only point at which it exists: in the minds of constructors” (p. 27). Consequently, constructionists argue that a reality exists in and is characterised by “the relationship between human thought and the social context within which it arises” (Berger & Luckman, 1967, p. 16).

Among other features of social constructionism, there is an emphasis on the hermeneutic tradition. This approach, as Guba (1990) argued, seeks to “produce as informed and sophisticated a construction as possible” (p. 26). More specifically, the concept of ‘the hermeneutic circle’ (Gallagher, 1992; Potter, 1996; Tobin & Kincheloe, 2006) encourages researchers to “think through and clarify the conditions under which interpretation and understanding take place” and “engage in the back-and-forth of studying parts in relation to the whole and the

whole in relation to parts” (Tobin & Kincheloe, 2006, p. 131). In the hermeneutic tradition, this study tries to approach the issue of gender representation from several angles, from a quantitative and qualitative interpretive angle but also from a production perspective via the interviews of advertising professionals who create these messages.

Drawing on these cultural studies approaches, this study investigates the representation of advertising characters as a cultural practice which is situated in the specific Chinese social-historical context. Particular attention was paid to advertising texts and encoding practices. Through a combination of close textual readings and open-ended interviews, an examination of how women and men were portrayed in Chinese television commercials was facilitated. The next section discusses the theoretical perspectives on the use of quantitative content analysis. Although content analysis has been traditionally associated with positivist approaches in that it quantifies phenomenon, application of the method is used here to inform an understanding of the predominance of particular forms of gender representation in advertising which then formed the basis for the in-depth qualitative semiotic and discourse analysis.

### **Content analysis: Identifying the manifest content of advertising**

Content analysis is a method of textual or image analysis which classifies and counts phenomena in texts or visual representations (Bauer, 2000; Titscher, Meyer, Wodak, & Vetter, 2000). It is a method that focuses on manifest content in texts and researchers look for what is physically explicit. It has been employed to investigate symbolic data in what are positioned as systematic and reliable ways for the purpose of measuring variables (Kassarjian, 1977; Wimmer & Dominick, 1991). As Krippendorff (1980), an influential writer on the method, explained, content analysis is mostly concerned with “the frequency with which a symbol, idea, or subject matter occurs in a stream of messages” and how this can “be interpreted as a measure of importance, attention, or emphasis” (p. 40).

Over the past 30 years, many studies of advertising have adopted content analysis to explore the use of female and male characters in terms of particular roles and traits (e.g., Arima, 2003; Coltrane & Adams, 1997; Fullerton & Kendrick, 2000;

Gilly, 1988; Hurtz & Durkin, 1997; Kim & Lowry, 2005; Scharrer et al., 2006). The first phase of such research in effect requires a macro analysis of the manifest content of the chosen sample of commercials. The aim is to identify the frequency of certain characteristics of gender representation as well as key trends in such representation.

There is some agreement that content analysis relies on the assistance of explicit classification and procedural rules (Titscher et al., 2000). The method focuses on studying communicative content which is significantly measurable (Leiss et al., 1986). Such a sampling strategy, as Stokes (2003) explained, enables researchers to make generalisations through decoding large amounts of textual information. Therefore, the inclusion of the content analysis of large samples in research can help to “overcome the criticism that studies using qualitative approaches rely on a small number of artifacts not chosen systematically” (Alozie, 2003, p. 5).

The key tool of content analysis is an adequate underlying classification scheme with clear operational definitions and descriptions (Perreault & Leigh, 1989; Harwood & Garry, 2003). Developing a system of explicit and complete categories is crucial to analysing particular texts. To ensure a degree of precision in measurement, the operational categories should be applied to all the data (Titscher et al., 2000). During the coding process, researchers seek to examine the occurrence of variables by assigning every unit of analysis to manageable categories (Leiss et al., 1986; Stokes, 2003).

In this study, a sample of 679 Chinese television commercials was collected and analysed. Quantitative content analysis was used to categorise and compare female and male characters according to a set of variables such as ‘role’, ‘dress’, ‘age’ and ‘credibility basis’ (see Appendix A). This attempt discerned the salient features in relation to stereotypical and conventional representations of gender that emerged from the sample commercials. The implementation of content analysis in this study is explained in full detail in Chapter 6.



### **Analysis of advertising texts: Reading subtexts**

Content analysis helps researchers “make replicable and valid inferences from data to their context” (Krippendorff, 1980, p. 21). However, it is limited to investigating the surface or denotative meaning of messages (Stokes, 2003). In this regard, the method lacks the ability to capture connotative meanings which might be produced by “the place of any particular item within an entire system of language and image” (Leiss et al., 1986, p.174). Consequently, it is necessary to make inferences beyond manifest content (Krippendorff, 1980). If we are to acknowledge the complex nature of advertising as creating and containing symbolic meaning and provide a multifaceted analysis of advertising texts, content analysis needs to be combined with other methods of textual analysis.

In the research conducted for this thesis, the aim of the analysis was to focus on “the level of obvious appearances and then the underlying level of meaning” (Kellehear, 1993, p. 47). Therefore, the results of content analysis provided the essential starting point for further analysis and interpretation (Desmarais, 2003). After the identification of important manifest themes regarding gender representation in the sample commercials, the study adopted a critical-interpretive approach which, as outlined above, draws on theoretical perspectives from cultural studies and critical theory. Accordingly, gender was regarded as being socially constructed in advertising representation. This conviction led me to examine the cultural and historical meanings that have been explicitly and implicitly ascribed to gender in advertising representation, and in the socio-cultural context of China.

As Hall (1997) argues:

It is not the material world which conveys meaning: it is the language system or whatever system we are using to represent our concepts. It is social actors who use the conceptual systems of their culture and the linguistic and other representational systems to construct meaning, to make the world meaningful and to communicate about that world meaningfully to others. (p. 25)

This view suggests that the meanings of advertising texts are co-constructed by both those who create and encode them, and both the audiences which decode them. Rogers (1995) argued that the extent to which the decoded interpretation of

commercial messages matches encoded meaning depends on whether the creator and audience share similar cultural knowledge and symbolic systems.

The aim of this study is to analyse codes and conventions underlying gender representation in the contexts of cultural and institutional production. Consequently, the research used both semiotic and discursive approaches which draw on concepts from ‘Barthesian’ semiotics and ‘Foucaultian’ discourse analysis (Desmarais, 2003). The theoretical bases of these approaches will be explained in the following sections.

### **Semiotic analysis: Meaning and ideology**

Semiotics is concerned with the study of meaningful signs in cultural texts, and identifies the principles that underpin signification. It is widely used to analyse “how visual representations convey meaning” (Hall, 1997, p. 41). Derived from the work of Ferdinand de Saussure (1960), semiotics emerged out of a linguistic tradition. Arguing that language is made up of signs comprising a signifier and a signified, Saussure’s model has been applied to a wide variety of sign systems (Hall, 1997) and has made a significant contribution to the research and theorising of meaning production in media and cultural studies (Dahlgren, 1998). Many researchers (e.g., Bignell, 2002; Hodge & Kress, 1988; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1990; Mcilwain, 2007; Peirce, 1934; Setia, Osman, Abdullah, & Jusoff, 2009; Thibault, 1991; van Leeuwen, 2002) have shaped semiotics into a methodological framework for investigating photography, video and art.

It was Charles Sanders Peirce (1934) who introduced the triadic conception of the sign that is so central to semiotic theory. His ‘semiotic triangle’ theorised meaning as created and communicated through the interaction between the ‘representamen’ (the signifier), the object (the concept signified) and the interpretant (a mediating device). This understanding of the system of signification emphasised that a sign can mean something different to individuals in specific contexts (Hawkes, 1977) and that there was a specific ‘structured’ relationship of meaning between the signifier and the signified.

The notion that there was some kind of intrinsic relationship of meaning between the signifier and signified was ruptured by Roland Barthes' (1972) post-structuralist move when he argued that the relation between the signifier and signified was in fact arbitrary. Building on Saussure's sign system, Barthes (1972) elucidated the underlying rules by which the communication of meaning is made possible; that is, how visual representation takes place through two separate but linked processes – a simple denoted message and a broad, ideological theme. Accordingly, semiotic analysis includes two important levels of meaning in a sign: denotation (the actual object represented) and connotation (the meaning given to that object). The connotative meaning is dependent on the broader cultural world in which readers make sense of the representation (Hall, 1997).

Barthes (1972) also introduced the concept of myth into semiotics, which he theorised as:

...a peculiar system, in that it is constructed from a semiological chain which existed before it: it is a second-order semiological system. That which is a sign (namely the associative total of a concept and an image) in the first system, becomes a mere signifier in the second. (p. 114)

In this regard, myths function with society, representing dominant meaning patterns (Dyer, 1982). As Barthes (1972) indicated, “myth hides nothing and flaunts nothing: it distorts; myth is neither a lie nor a confession: it is an inflexion” (p. 129). From this perspective, the use of myths provides some insights into how advertising representation generates symbolic meanings.

Semiotic analysis has been widely used to examine how meaning is encoded in advertising texts (e.g., Anderson et al., 2006; Beasley & Danesi, 2002; Danesi, 2008; Descutner, Burnier, Mickunas, & Letteri, 1991; Goldman, 1992; Wernick, 1991; Williamson, 1978). The signifying practice embedded in advertisements, as Leiss et al. (1986) argued, concentrates on “the ways that different signs are organised and related to each other, both within the ad and through external references to wider belief systems” (p. 153). This view clearly emphasised interaction among the different parts of an advertisement in which meaning is formed. This meaning is also affected by how the advertising text might draw on – through what is conceptually termed ‘intertextual reference’ to other media,

cultural and symbolic representations which help give meaning to the text. As Fiske and Hartley (1990) argued, one important issue of semiotics focuses on “the way signs are combined into codes” (p. 36). In turn, van Zoonen (1994) argued that “since the codes that confer meaning on to the syntagmatic and paradigmatic combination of signs are culturally specific, signification will never be completely unambiguous or univocal” (p. 79). In order to understand specific cultural meanings attached to gender representation, it is necessary to consider both the feature of the portrayal and the circumstances of its use.

The project of semiotics, as described thus far, is closely linked to the study of ideology, its representation, and reproduction. In his essay, *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus*, Althusser (1971) theorised ideology as constituted and transmitted through signification. In this view, advertising can be seen as using images, concepts and myths that circulate in a culture and subsequently which make sense in relation to ideology. The effectiveness of advertising, as Curran, Gurevitch, and Woollacott (1982) noted, lies “in the unconscious categories through which conditions are represented and experienced” (p. 24). This process works to perpetuate – though it might also challenge – dominant ideologies in a cultural system. This study used semiotics as a tool to investigate how gender representations in Chinese television commercials generate cultural meanings through drawing on specific codes, and what ideological and mythical messages are embedded in the commercials.

### **The use of discourse analysis concepts**

This study also draws on discourse analysis which explores texts in relation to “complex structures and hierarchies of interaction and social practice and their functions in context, society and culture” (van Dijk, 1997, p. 6). Discourse analysis helps address not only an investigation of the textual elements in advertising representation, but also an examination of the social and cultural contexts in which they are produced.

According to Hall (1992), a discourse is “a group of statements which provide a language for talking about – i.e. a way of representing – a particular kind of knowledge about a topic” (p. 291). Fairclough (1992) presented a three-

dimensional methodological approach to discourse analysis, including the analysis of the text, the discursive practices of that text's production, distribution and consumption, and the social and cultural practices which shape the creation of texts. In these terms discourse analysis can assist the theorising of how advertisements, as well as any other type of texts, are both products of ideological influence, and how they perpetuate and/or challenge certain ideological discourses.

### ***Foucault, discourse and knowledge***

According to Foucault (1972), discourses are socially constitutive, and contribute to (re)producing meaning and knowledge. As Hall (1997) explained, discourse “defines and produces the objects of our knowledge. It governs the way that a topic can be meaningfully talked about and reasoned about. It also influences how ideas are put into practice and used to regulate the conduct of others” (p. 44). Rather than consisting of a single statement, discourses produce knowledge in terms of particular understandings of a problem or a phenomenon. In turn, these understandings are articulated in several statements working together to form what Foucault (1972) calls a ‘discursive formation’. In this way, discourses influence and guide particular ways that gender roles and relations are meaningfully portrayed. In line with this perspective, a growing number of research studies (e.g., Brandth, 1995; Katz, 2003; Litosseliti & Sunderland, 2002; Michelle & Weaver, 2003; Patterson & Elliott, 2002; Thornborrow, 1998) have examined gender and its representation in various media.

Based in critical social theory, discourse analysis attempts to address ‘social problems’ by examining the ways discourses legitimate or reproduce the issues of power, ideology, dominance and inequality in particular genres and contexts (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; van Dijk, 2001). As van Dijk (2001) argued, discursive practices arise out of and are ideologically shaped by power and, more specifically, the social power of institutions. In Foucault's (1991) view, power is an essential element of discourse because knowledge is both understood, and deployed, in ways that specific ideological interests are served. Accordingly, different objects are addressed in particular ways (Fairclough, 1992). In this regard, discourses function as a means of guiding the design of advertising messages, and producing particular ideological assumptions such as gender roles.

Fiske (1987) described ideologies as existing and working in the ways that definite subject positions are proposed and generated by discourse in media texts. From this perspective, discursively theorising gender representation in advertising requires an examination of how certain signifying elements are selected and positioned in order to invite the audience to occupy particular positions in their interpretation and reading.

Fairclough (1992) also argued that discourses are formed by particular contexts and histories, and in terms of social and cultural rules. He explained the foundation of textual meaning production as based on:

firstly...the available members' resources, which are effectively internalised social structures, norms and conventions, including orders of discourse...and which have been constituted through past social practice and struggle. Secondly...the specific nature of the social practice of which they are parts [which] determines what elements of members' resources are drawn upon, and how they are drawn upon. (p. 80)

This discursive meaning production can be seen as part of the process of sense making that both producers and consumers/audiences of texts are engaged in. In the creative process, advertising production personnel are influenced by certain conventions or popular discursive formations, which impact on the use of ideas and images and how they combine these in putting together the texts.

### ***The concepts of articulation and intertextuality***

In order to study the complex process of meaning making, Hall (1986) introduced the concept of articulation. This concept has been used to explain how ideology encourages people to discursively interpret social reality. As Hall (1986) explained, an "articulation" is:

the form of the connection that can make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions. It is a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute and essential for all time...The unity which matters is a linkage between that articulated discourse and the social forces with which it can, under certain historical conditions, but need not necessarily, be connected. (p. 53)

The concept of articulation enables researchers to understand how ideological elements are bound together within a discourse (Barnard-Wills, 2009; Braun,

2003; Hall, 1986; Howarth & Stavrakakis, 2000; Mumby, 2004). As Hall (1980) explained, articulations from certain privileged contexts are powerful, and may block continuous rearticulation. In other words, particular ideological elements cohere together within discourses which tend to be resistant or complicit with other practices of culture (Fairclough, 1992; Mumby, 2004). This view emphasises the importance of “historical awareness” (Foucault, 1982, p. 418) in terms of understanding and conceptualising the present circumstance – that is how powerful historical cultural discourses influence that act of contemporary discursive interpretation.

At this point it is also valuable to note that both semiotic and discourse analysis are additionally concerned with the notion of intertextuality, that is, how different texts make reference to each other and/or signs and meanings found in other cultural symbolic forms. Kristeva (1986) has written that intertextuality refers to “the insertion of history (society) into a text and of this text into history” (p. 39). This further “points to the productivity of texts, to how texts can transform prior texts and restructure existing conventions (genres, discourses) to generate new ones” (Fairclough, 1992, p. 102).

Mindful of how articulation and intertextuality are important to meaning generation in texts, this thesis has included a review of the social construction of gendered meanings and identities during specific historical periods in China (as presented in Chapter 2). The intention was that this review would help to identify “the recurrence or persistence of certain discourses” through an understanding of “where present messages are historically anchored” (Desmarais, 2003, p. 49). In the empirical analysis chapters (Chapters 7, 8 and 9) it was important to be able to make connections back to how gender has been constructed in Chinese culture over different historical periods, and to examine how the sample advertisements might, or might not make intertextual reference, and attempt to articulate meanings in relation to, these historical constructions.

### **Interviews: Insights into the process of production**

The textual analysis alone does not provide an adequate means of understanding the complex ways in which gender is constructed in advertising. Therefore, an

examination of advertising production was undertaken through interviews with advertising professionals. As Stokes (2003) noted, interviews can “provide a reinforcement of what one suspects from reading archives” (p. 27). In this regard, the focus of advertising professionals’ talk attempted to reveal not only the generally available discourses about gender, but also how the use of those discourses is shaped by both personal and professional experience.

Interviewing enhances discourse analysis by providing insights into discursive practice (text production, distribution and consumption), and social and cultural conditions of production. Hall (1992) explained that the “discursive aspect” of media production is “framed throughout by meanings and ideas: knowledge-in-use concerning the routines of production, historically defined technical skills, professional ideologies, institutional knowledge, definitions and assumptions, assumptions about the audience and so on” (p. 129). Therefore, this study conducted interviews with advertising professionals in order to delve more deeply into the questions regarding their multiple perspectives on and experiences of creative practices. The interviews were used to build a contextual picture of advertising production and generate data concerning the discursive construction of gender representation: how, and to what extent cultural values, conventions and ideologies in relation to gender were drawn on to generate symbolic meanings. Furthermore, the interviews assisted in revealing how advertising professionals vary in their attitudes toward and experiences of portraying gender. The next section discusses the rationale for the choice of in-depth interview in this research.

### **The choice of semi-structured interviews**

It is widely acknowledged that interviews, as qualitative data, can provide ‘richer’ and ‘deeper’ insights into the understanding of phenomena than do quantitative methods (Cohen et al., 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Silverman, 2001). As Gubrium and Holstein (2001) explained, interviews provide participants with opportunities to discuss their interpretation of the world in which they live, enabling researchers to explore their multiple viewpoints. Consequently, interviews can help researchers gain detailed information about the “hows of people’s lives (the constructive work involved in producing order in everyday life) as well as the traditional whats (the activities of everyday life)” (Fontana & Frey,



2000, p. 646). In considering the interpretation of advertising professionals' experiences in the creative process, this study was guided by the principles of interviewing, seeking individuals' opinions, and the meanings they brought to their work (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001; Kvale, 1996).

According to Cohen et al. (2000), a semi-structured interview has the advantage of "enabling the interviewer to ask respondents to extend, elaborate, add to, provide detail for, clarify or qualify their response..." (p. 278). Semi structured interviews do not have a rigidly set structure. Consequently, they allow the interviewers "to ask follow-up questions in response to the informant's answers and interests, to rephrase a question to get a more complete answer, or to ask for clarification of interesting points" (Priest, 1996, p. 26). Semi-structured interviews are guided by a set of open questions, which avoids "imposing any a priori categorisation that may limit the field of inquiry" (Fontana & Frey, 2000, p. 652) and which further ensures variation in responses.

Semi-structured interviews are defined as "active interactions between two (or more) people leading to negotiated, contextually based results" (Fontana & Frey, 2000, p. 646). In this interactive process, understandings of difference within and among researchers and participants arise. Hence, when interview topics are sensitive, the interviewees may give information that they think the researchers are interested in discovering, or conceal certain information (Fontana & Frey, 2000; Hansen, Cottle, Negrine, & Newbold, 1998). One way of preventing these possibilities is through the use of moderately scheduled interviews and following up with active listening (McCracken, 1988).

As Johnson (2002) indicated, in-depth interviewing involves a social and interpersonal interaction and seeks to build on intimacy between interviewers and informants. This technique requires researchers to reduce status differences associated with the traditional view of an interview and manage the relationship with interviewees (Fontana & Frey, 2000; Cohen et al., 2000). In this respect, researchers should behave in a friendly and conversational manner in order to build trust with the participants (Johnson, 2002; McCracken, 1988). In addition, it is acknowledged that increasing the involvement of the interviewer's self in

interviewing offers some form of “complementary reciprocity” which allows the researchers to express feelings, or assists the informants to answer questions (Johnson, 2002, p. 109). As Gubrium and Holstein (2001, 1997) suggested, different ‘voices’ behind interviewers and informants shape the process of interview. Therefore, informants are “constructors of knowledge in collaboration with interviewers” (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997, p. 114), rather than passive vessels containing answers.

Having outlined the methodologies that were drawn on in the research investigation for this thesis, the next section of this chapter turns to detail the specific steps taken in the data collection and analysis.

### **Methods of data collection and analysis**

This study focuses on the cultural representation of gender in television advertising in contemporary China, where ongoing internal reforms and globalisation have brought about a series of economic, cultural, political, and ideological changes. These changes have had a significant impact on values and belief systems embedded in Chinese culture and history. In this study, Beijing was selected as the primary research site for data collection. The city is the political, economic, and cultural centre of China, as well as the nation’s most important site for advertising business. All leading advertising agencies in China have set up branch offices in Beijing and its suburbs. With the rise of consumer culture, a wide variety of traditional and modern values coexist in the city. Consequently, images, identities, and ideas emerging in Beijing have become more diverse and complex than those in other cities in China. As Wang (1997) indicated, advertising in Beijing offers some indication as to the direction of advertising development in the country. It is also worth noting that Beijing represents the nation’s high levels of income, which may influence advertising content in particular ways. The next subsections look in greater detail at the techniques of recording and coding the advertisements and the interview procedures.

#### ***Selection and collection of television commercials***

In this study, a sample of prime-time commercials was collected from two major television stations in Mainland China, i.e., China Central Channel (CCTV) and

Beijing Television Station (BTV). Whilst CCTV is the only national-level network in the country, BTV is the primary local broadcast station in Beijing. Three television channels from each network were identified (CCTV 1, 2 and 3 and BTV 1, 2 and 3). They are the most popularly watched channels and target diverse audience groups around the nation. In particular, CCTV dominates the television advertising market and attracts record sales for prime-time commercial slots (Hille, 2008). Therefore, these channels were used as primary data sources for gathering the advertising sample.

Prime time was selected as a key period for data gathering because a wide general population sample watches television at this time (Gunter, 1995); for this reason, one might expect that the influence of gender representation during this time is likely to be more significant than during other time periods when fewer viewers are exposed to television's influence. The time period for prime time is defined in China as television broadcast from 5:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. In the current study, recording commercials started at 6:00 p.m. and ended at 9:00 p.m. The selected 3-hour television programmes consist of news stories, situation comedies, and entertainment programmes which attract high ratings.

Two research assistants were responsible for collecting commercials from three channels at CCTV and three channels at BTV respectively. They recorded commercials between May 2006 and June 2006 (late spring–early summer) and from October 2006 to December 2006 (late autumn–early winter). The recording tasks were continued for 30 days in each of these periods. These two periods were selected in order to minimise the effect of seasonality on product categories and advertising content (Desmarais, 2003). No important holidays or festivals fell in these two periods. Each assistant recorded commercials, Monday through Sunday, in a consecutive manner between the two channels from either CCTV or BTV. For example, day one (Monday), recorder A videotaped CCTV channel 1, while recorder B videotaped BTV channel 1. On day two (Tuesday) recorder A videotaped CCTV channel 2, while recorder B videotaped BTV channel 2. On day three (Wednesday) recorder A videotaped CCTV channel 3, while recorder B videotaped BTV channel 3, etc. The fourth day saw the beginning of the second iteration of this process, with the recording once again of CCTV1 and BTV 1.

A number of criteria were applied to help select the final sample of commercials for the research analysis. The tapes were edited to remove all movie promotions and public service announcements. Advertisements featuring infants and cartoon creatures without adult central characters were eliminated because it is difficult to make gender identity judgments on those commercials. All duplicate advertisements were eliminated as consistent with Cheng and Schweitzer (1996) and Zandpour, Chang and Catalano (1992). As a result, a total of 679 television commercials were selected for coding in this study.

### ***The content, semiotic and discourse analyses***

At the initial stage of this study, female and male characters were identified and classified according to specific categories (see Appendix A) designed to reveal the importance of the recurrent traits of gender role representation (see Chapter 6 for a complete explanation of how the content analysis was conducted). The categories included sets of variables coded for each character (such as role, dress, and age) and for each advertisement (such as product type and voice-over). The design of the categories was based on, and compared to, other studies in both western and Chinese contexts (Arima, 2003; Furnham et al., 2000; Gilly, 1988; Liu & Bu, 1997; Milner & Higgs, 2004; Zheng, 2002).

Since this study saw gender representation as a discursive practice in which particular meanings are generated and reinforced, semiotic and discourse analysis were adopted. To develop a close reading, semiotic analysis was used to investigate both linguistic and visual displays of women and men in particular roles and interactions. This process considered gender representation as constructed by particular combinations of signs which become meaningful within the culture they originate from. In this study, the researcher identified, reviewed, and described advertisements which could be exemplified as referring to the construction of femininity and masculinity. The researcher, therefore, selected commercials that demonstrate some of the key themes found in the content analysis, or reflecting changes in the portrayal of gender in Chinese advertising. These examples are examined in depth in chapters 7, 8 and 9.

As Fiske and Hartley (1990) indicated, the main focus of semiotics is on “the relationship between a sign and its meaning; and the way signs are combined into codes” (p. 36). With this guideline in mind, the researcher began to analyse particular portrayals of gender from “what is ‘objectively’ present and easily recognised or identified” to connotative meanings which “are activated by the means of conventions of codes” (Dyer, 1982, p. 128). The techniques of semiology helped to investigate the ways in which cultural and ideological meanings are attached to gender roles in Chinese television advertising. This investigation focused on how particular signs are used to produce or challenge cultural specific myths and concepts of gender.

In line with a discourse analysis perspective, this study sought to bridge the “gap” between micro-level and macro-level approaches (van Dijk, 2001, p. 354) to gender representation. Therefore, there was an interest in expanding beyond the simple textual features and explore “the way knowledge is constructed” via “rules which prescribe certain ways of talking about and exclude other ways” (Hall, 1997, pp. 45-46). These views allowed me to examine whether the current representation of gender in Chinese television advertising depends on and supports specific discourses “which operate across a variety of texts, areas of knowledge about a subject which have acquired widespread authority” (Hall, 1997, p. 42). Therefore, this study follows Fairclough’s approach (1992) of also considering how other texts might have contributed to the meaning in the text under analysis. It also highlights the importance of understanding history and cultural traditions in the study of gender representation in advertising – a central concern of this thesis. The researcher attempted to investigate how, if at all, Chinese television commercials participate in reinforcing, challenging, and/or creating particular culturally- and historically-based (hegemonic) concepts of femininity and masculinity.

It should be stated that the findings of this research analysis apply only to the time of recording (prime-time) on particular television channels (six channels selected from two major television stations in China). Television commercials, as Gunter (1995) suggested, may vary in terms of the type of television channel on which they are broadcast and the time of the day of their screening. It is possible that

selection of prime-time or day-time commercials would produce different samples due to the different demographics viewing television at these times, and this timing may influence the ways in which male and female characters are depicted. Therefore, more research is needed to collect advertisements from different television channels and time blocks.

***Interviews with advertising professionals: Sample and procedure***

In this study, the qualitative interviewing procedure (Fontana & Frey, 2000; McCracken, 1988) was used in designing and executing the interviews with Chinese advertising professionals. To collect as broad a range of opinions and insights as possible, the sample included state-owned companies, joint ventures, and privately owned companies. A list of advertising agencies with Beijing headquarters were identified in the Chinese Advertising Company Directories 2006. The researcher spent approximately 2 weeks reviewing the companies' websites in order to search for information regarding their creative team profiles, as well as the types of products being promoted and the campaigns being engaged in. To gain permission to interview advertising practitioners, 25 advertising agencies were contacted in the first instance, via letter. The letter was sent to each of these agencies, providing full details of the project and inviting them to consider whether they would be willing to participate. As a result 9 advertising agencies responded positively and interview times were subsequently arranged with these, by telephone.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted in eight advertising agencies over a period of three months. Since the aim of my interviews was to gain insights into the process of production, the sample set only included those 'creatives' who have most opportunities to influence the structure, tone and emphases of advertising. They were creative directors, copywriters, art directors, and strategic planners. As a result, a total of 26 interviews were conducted among creative team members. However, only a small proportion of advertising personnel recruited were engaged in the actual production of any of the 679 commercials analysed in the current study.

Research participants for this study were selected by the agencies themselves as a matter of courtesy. The sample consisted of 17 males and 9 females, ranging in age from 25 to 50 years old, all with more than 2 years of advertising industry experience. In terms of training, all but two interviewees had been educated at university but most of the participants had entered the profession without formal training in advertising. Two foreign creative directors formerly had 10 years' previous work experience in US advertising agencies and had worked in joint venture advertising agencies. Interviewees are listed in Table 2 below. It details the organisations where the interviewees worked, the nature of those organisations, the interviewees' roles, and their gender. General position descriptions of the participants have been given, but their anonymity is protected.

**Table 2 Semi-structured Interviews**

<b>Organisation</b>	<b>Type of Company</b>	<b>Interviewees</b>	<b>Gender</b>
Saatchi & Saatchi	Joint venture	Creative directors A and B	Male
		Producer assistant	Male
		Art director	Male
		Visualiser	Female
Grey	Joint venture	Creative director	Male
		Account executive	Female
		Strategic planner	Female
		Copy writer	Male
Beijing Guoan Advertising Corp.	State-owned	Creative director	Male
		Account executive	Female
Beijing Crystal Digital Advertising Ltd.	State-owned	Copy writers A and B	Male Female
		Art director	Male
		Account executive	Female
		Strategic planners A and B	Male Female
China Central Television Advertising Department	State-owned	Creative director	Male
		Strategic planner	Male
Beijing Future Advertising	State-owned	Creative director	Male
Beijing Oriental Friendship Advertising Co., Ltd	Privately-owned	Copy writer	Male
		Account executive	Female
		Art director	Male
		Production executive	Male
		Strategic planner	Female
Camera Media Co., Ltd	Privately-owned	Account executive	Female

The gender imbalance in recruiting participants probably reflects the inequalities that have arisen and are maintained in the advertising industry's employment patterns in China. In their studies of UK and Australian agencies, Nixon (2003) and Spurgeon (2007) indicated that men are dominant in the participation rates in the senior positions (such as creative directors) and other creative positions. On the other hand, women are more likely than men to gain access to media and account management positions. These participation rates of women and men in creative advertising practice are reflected in my sample.

In conducting the interviews with these advertising professionals a questionnaire containing 17 open-ended questions (see Appendix B) was used to guide the process. Initially, the participants were invited to talk about their roles within advertising production, as well as their perception of advertising and its use of human characters. Further, the questionnaire focused on values, meanings and ideas implicit in the process of representing men and women. This approach encouraged the participants to identify, and comment on, common images and themes in relation to gender in Chinese television commercials. The interview, therefore, attempted to understand how, and to what extent advertising professionals incorporate gendered materials into the construction of gender representation. In addition, the participants were asked to explain how they constructed different associations between gender and product category.

The nonspecific, open-ended questions were used to create 'conversations' with the interviewees. This method aimed to encourage the participants to talk freely. The basic line of questioning moved from broad questions to more specific ones. This arrangement helped cover a wide range of themes related to the research questions and objectives, and then narrow the discussion to details. The approach strove to preserve openness, being careful to minimise the influence of the researcher's beliefs and expectations, and encouraging the interviewees to set the direction of the interviews and use their own knowledge in their answers. To encourage the interviewees to actively express their ideas and opinions, the researcher used the native language of the participants (Chinese Mandarin) to conduct the interviews.



According to Denzin (1989), the gender of interviewers may influence the responses of their informants. During the interaction with the participants, the researcher tried to present himself as interested in understanding their experiences of advertising production, rather than a feminist or masculinist. To establish a relaxed environment, all interviews were conducted face-to-face at the interviewee's office or a location of his or her choice. Furthermore, the researcher answered any questions the interviewees might have, even if not directly related to the research.

Most interviews varied in length from 30 minutes to over 1 hour. Three interviews with advertising professionals from state-owned companies lasted less than 10 minutes due to interruptions. Thus these interviews were not included in the final sample of 26 interviews. Each interview was subsequently translated by myself from Chinese into English and fully transcribed in preparation for the data analysis.

#### ***Meaning-based translations of transcripts***

As with many cross-language research projects (e.g., Boyle; 1997; Esposito, 2001; MacJessie-Mbewe, 2004; Twinn, 1997), this study encountered the issues of translation and transcription that influence the validity and reliability of qualitative data analysis. As Marshall and Rossman (2006) suggested, when researchers transpose “the spoken word in one language (from a recording) into another language (a translation) and then into a text (a transcription)” (p. 110), they should realise the existence of language and culture differences. In addition, in a discussion of the complex nature of cross-language health research, Esposito (2001) positioned translation as “the transfer of meaning from a source language...to a target language” and the translator as “actually an interpreter who...processes the vocabulary and grammatical structure of the words while considering the individual situation and the overall cultural context” (p. 570). From this perspective, the current study does acknowledge the role of a researcher in capturing the meanings of the original language through the process of translation.

During the coding process, two researchers, including a doctoral student (bilingual with Chinese as a first language) and I, were simultaneously engaged in listening to the audiotapes of the interviews, translating the interviews from Chinese into English, and discussing any disagreements of over wording. In order to reduce translation errors, the researcher sought professional assistance from the staff members working in the Department of Language and Learning at the University of Waikato, discussing the differences in the grammatical structures between Chinese and English, and the phrases and idioms that were difficult to translate into English. A final review and edit of each transcript was performed by the two researchers.

### *Analysis of the interview transcripts*

The interview transcripts was analysed by using techniques based on both ‘thematic’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Owen, 1984) and ‘subject positioning’ (Fairclough, 1992) analysis. These two ways of analysing the interviews should be seen as complementary and as different levels of discourse analysis (Edley, 2001).

At the level of the text, the transcripts were read several times in order to scan for and identify recurrent themes within individual interviewees’ responses. As Kellehear (1993) indicated, a researcher using thematic analysis “is interested in a topic or set of issues and then approaches an interview or document with these issues in mind. Themes are then sought after as these emerge from the narrative of the interview or written words or behaviours” (p. 38). Such an approach enables themes to emerge from the process of inductive coding (Creswell, 2005; Priest, 1996). In this study, the themes related to the interview questions were designed to gain an understanding of how Chinese advertising professionals used gender portrayal to ‘encode’ meaningful advertisements, and examine how cultural and institutional factors might influence the process of advertising production.

Owen’s (1984) thematic analysis was adopted in this study as a means to interpret the interview transcriptions. Owen (1984) offered three criteria for identifying a theme: “recurrence of the same thread of meaning”; “repetition of key words, phrases or sentences”, and “forcefulness of vocal inflection, volume or dramatic

pauses” (p. 275). He also indicated that the method assists not only in identifying themes with individual interviewees’ responses, but also in examining common themes appearing from most interviews. This approach suggested the need to note where two or more participants talked about similar issues, in terms of both convergence and disagreement in their different accounts. Consequently, the responses to each question were initially reread with particular attention being paid to a series of possible themes which were given provisional labels. The themes were then examined to see if they could be consolidated or discarded. A representative set of excerpts corresponding to particular themes was marked, and further were presented and elaborated in the reporting of the findings.

In addition to ‘thematic analysis’, the analysis and interpretation of interview transcripts drew on a discourse analysis perspective. As Fairclough (1992) argued, subjectivity draws individuals into particular positions to produce ideological discursive formations. In this regard, Desmarais (2003) suggested that “the subject speaks through discourse and his voice should be evaluated as drawing and recreating discursive formations that determine what can and should be said from a particular position” (p. 42). Therefore, with the help of interviews, this study focused on “subjects who in some ways personify the discourse” (Hall, 1997, p. 45). Analysing advertising professionals’ accounts offered insights into the process of meaning creation, that is, how they were imbued with particular ideas of gender, and subsequently incorporated these ideas into the construction of gender representation. These, in turn, helped investigate the ways in which certain (dominant) ideologies were represented as being ‘natural’ and ‘permanent’.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has outlined the methodological design that guided the study, and presented a theoretical rationale for the multi-method approach to data collection and analysis. It has also explained the combination of content analysis, semiotic, and critical discourse analysis and production research that underpinned the research. This chapter has detailed the methods of data collection, and finally discussed the specific steps deployed in the data analysis.

The following five chapters analyse the findings and are organised around different methods of data collection and analysis. The quantitative content analysis of the recurring patterns and traits of gender representation evident in the corpus of Chinese television commercials forms the basis for Chapter 6, the first of the empirical chapters. Chapters 7, 8, and 9 draw on semiotic and discourse analysis to examine how female and male characters are portrayed in familial, occupational, and recreational roles. These chapters highlight the ways in which particular gender roles and relations are discursively constructed. Chapter 10 considers the process of advertising production as revealed through interviews. It investigates the roles played by Chinese advertising professionals in the cultural construction of gender.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **CHINESE TELEVISION ADVERTISING PORTRAYALS OF MEN AND WOMEN: A CONTENT ANALYSIS**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter presents the quantitative content analysis of the representation of male and female characters in the 679 Chinese television commercials which comprise the sample of texts in this study. The analysis identifies recurring patterns of gender role representation, and examines these in relation to actual trends in, for example, male and female participation in various sectors of Chinese society. The findings are also compared to previous quantitative studies of gender representation in advertising in both Chinese and western contexts. The aim is to examine trends in gender representation in Chinese television advertising and to provide an indication of how the sample portrays males and females in certain roles and situations.

As outlined in Chapter 5, content analysis enables researchers to investigate a large amount of data in a systematic and objective way through schemes of classification. The content of the commercials was coded according to different variables. These are explained below.

#### **Content coding procedure**

In this study, the term ‘character(s)’ in the coding of the commercials referred to the actors in Chinese television commercials. The focus on the representation of females and males in the analysis was on the central character. Central characters were defined as those who are not only involved in “on-camera appearances of at least three seconds and/or at least one line of dialogue” (Schneider & Schneider, 1979, p. 80), but who also interacted with the products and services being advertised. Furthermore, if a commercial contained a group of people, in line with the approach taken by other content analyses of this kind (e.g., Furnham et al.,

2000; McArthur & Resko, 1975) the two most prominent characters were identified for analysis.

To better understand how gender roles were discursively represented in Chinese television advertising, female and male characters were assigned to a set of variables derived from the content coding scheme developed by McArthur and Resko (1975). The categories of content analysis developed by McArthur and Resko (1975) have been frequently employed over the last 30 years and applied in studies in the United States (Bretl & Cantor, 1988), Australia (Gilly, 1988; Milner & Higgs, 2004), Portugal (Neto & Pinto, 1998; Neto & Silva, 2009), Great Britain (Furnham & Bitar, 1993; Harris & Stobart, 1986), Japan (Arima, 2003), and China (Liu & Bu, 1997; Zheng, 2002). The present study selected and assembled coding variables used in these previous studies of gender role representation, and adapted them to provide a workable framework for the sample size. The variables used are described below in more depth. Finally, as recommended by Leiss et al. (1986), all variables selected were mutually exclusive (no feature of gender representation coded for one variable could also be coded for another variable).

### ***Variables coded***

The characters were coded using five variables found in all the studies noted above: ‘frequency of male and female central characters’, ‘role’, ‘dress’, ‘age’, and ‘credibility basis’.

### *Frequency of female and male characters*

A prime concern of the content analysis was to identify the frequency of use of male and female characters in the sample, and therefore, how frequently each sex appeared. Beyond this, as is further explained below, the concern was to identify how males and females were featured in the commercials.

### *Association of product types with genders*

One of the first steps in the study was to find out whether certain product types tended to be associated with male or female characters. The promoted products were divided into a total of 13 different categories, including ‘food and non-alcoholic beverages’, ‘alcoholic beverages’, ‘personal/beauty care’, ‘household

cleaning products', 'baby products', 'household appliances/furnishings', 'automobiles/accessories/oil companies', 'personal entertainment', 'telecommunication', 'drugs/medicines', 'clothing', 'services', and 'other'. The product categories used in the content analysis were a modified version of the variables used in previous analyses of Chinese advertising (Han & Han, 2004; Liu & Bu, 1997) but were extended to include 13 categories instead of 6. This approach was taken because a greater range of product categories is identified in the current sample than in other research studies. However, categories such as 'pet food and related products' and 'institutional and public services' that have featured in content analyses of advertising in the western contexts (e.g., Gilly, 1988; Schneider & Schneider, 1979) proved irrelevant to this study. Instead two new categories were added, 'baby products' and 'telecommunication' as these were found to be significant.

#### *Voice-overs*

Voice-overs have been studied as sociocultural constructions that reinforce certain ideologies related to gender, and that promulgate gender role stereotypes in a communicative context (Desmarais, 2003; Gunter, 1995; Johnson & Young, 2002). In this study, any voice that did not originate from the characters was categorised as a 'voice-over'. As in studies by Dominick and Rauch (1972) and Gilly (1988), voice-overs were categorised as either: 'male', 'female', 'chorus' or, if there was no voice-over, as 'none'.

#### *Roles*

An important aspect of the investigation was a focus on the types of roles played by female and male characters. Using a classification scheme similar to that used by Schneider and Schneider (1979) and Gilly (1988), coders checked how men and women were portrayed in terms of whether their role was 'occupational' (depicted in working settings), 'non-occupational' (portrayed in home or outdoors settings) and 'unknown'. In cases where a central character might play more than one role in the same commercial (e.g., father and manager in an occupational role) the information was coded twice.

The 'occupational' roles were further used as an index of employment status. In line with Gilly (1988), the characters' working roles were coded into 'high level business executive' (a high-ranking official in a business), 'professional' (for example, an expert in a field such as doctor or newscaster), 'celebrity' (for example, an entertainer or professional athlete promoting a product), 'middle-level business, semi-professional' (for example, a local grocer, a sales clerk or an insurance agent), 'white-collar worker/non-professional' (for example, a model representing a service role, such as a secretarial job), 'blue-collar worker' (for example, an individual performing manual labour), and 'other'.

In terms of 'type of non-occupational role', the criteria developed by Odekerken-Schroder, de Wulf and Hofstee's (2002) were used as a guideline. The central characters were categorised according to the categories of 'family role' (a character with children or other family members in a family environment), 'recreational role' (an individual involved in a non-work leisure activity), and 'decorative role' (of a passive and non-functional nature enriching the product as an attractive stimulus). Additionally, family setting in the non-occupational roles was divided into 'domestic role' such as cooking, cleaning and childcare, and 'relaxing' such as eating and watching television (Gilly, 1988).

The 'recreational' roles were coded according to the categorisation of Bolla (1990) who examined the images of women in the leisure advertisements of two Canadian magazines. The leisure context in which any central character was engaged was classified into 'sport, exercise, and physical activities' (for example, bicycling or running), 'non-sporting social activities in public places' (for example, eating out or shopping), 'home-based activities' (for example, watching television or reading), and 'other'.

### *Dress*

Television commercials were also coded according to the way central characters were dressed. The coding of what characters wore was developed according to a classification scheme adapted from Lin (1998) and Reichert (2003). Each central character in the sample was classified according to whether he or she put on the following items: 'formal wear' (clothing suitable for business and any other



formal occasion), 'work clothes/uniform' (a set of standard clothing worn in workplaces or for organisational activities), 'casual wear' (emphasising comfort and personal expression in family life or leisure activities such as jeans, sportswear and T-shirts), 'seductive wear' (including tight clothing, suggestive and revealing clothing, and partially clad dress which might enhance sexual appeal), and 'other' (including ancient costume and alternative clothing such as Peking Opera costumes).

### *Age*

Central characters were also coded in relation to the variable of 'age'. The study conducted by Neto and Pinto (1998) was used as a guideline for classifying characters' age into three groups: 'young adult/less than 30 years', 'middle-aged/from 30 to 60 years', and 'old/more than 60 years'.

### *Credibility*

Finally, main characters' credibility was examined in terms of whether they were depicted as 'product users' or 'authorities'. According to McArthur and Resko (1975), 'authorities' are characters who know facts about the product being advertised. In the current sample, the authoritative role of central characters was identified as such if they were involved in presenting information designed to persuade viewers to buy the product.

### *Coding process*

In order to code the categories outlined above two people, including a male (myself) and a female from China, were involved in repeated viewings of the sample of commercials. The coders first trained on a set of 20 commercials which were not part of the final study. Reliability of coding was achieved by the coders viewing the commercials independently and then discussing the findings. The rest of the study's commercials were coded by both coders simultaneously. Any disagreement was resolved through review and consensus (Browne, 1998; Gilly, 1988).

## Results: Descriptive statistics

The content analysis identified an interesting distribution of central characters according to gender. In the sample of 679 television commercials, 858 central characters were identified. It was found that women comprised 57.69% of these figures (n=495), and men constituted 42.31% (n=363).

### *Gender and product categories*

The distribution of central characters according to product type also produced interestingly gendered findings. Table 3 indicates whether males and females were more likely to be used to advertise certain categories of products than others. The analysis revealed that males and females were used almost equally in commercials for food and non-alcoholic beverages (16.80% vs. 16.77%) and clothing (5.79% vs. 5.66%). However, male characters were more frequently featured in advertising for alcoholic beverages (9.37% vs. 1.61%), automobiles (11.29% vs. 3.23%), entertainment (4.68% vs. 3.64%), telecommunications (6.61% vs. 2.42%), drugs and medicines (12.12% vs. 8.69%), and services (8.54% vs. 4.65%). In contrast, women appeared much more than men in commercials for personal/beauty care products (30.30% vs. 6.61%) and baby products (2.63% vs. 0%). Females were also more frequently depicted in connection with household appliances/furnishings (12.93% vs. 8.82%), and cleaning products (4.04% vs. 2.20%).

**Table 3 Distribution of Central Characters according to Gender and Product Type in Chinese Television Commercials**

Types of Goods and Services	Women		Men	
	N	%	N	%
Food/Non-alcoholic Beverages	83	16.77%	61	16.80%
Alcoholic Beverages	8	1.61%	34	9.37%
Personal/Beauty Care	150	30.30%	24	6.61%
Cleaning Products	20	4.04%	8	2.20%
Baby Products	13	2.63%	0	0
Household Appliances/Furnishings	64	12.93%	32	8.82%
Automobiles/Accessories/Oil Companies	16	3.23%	41	11.29%
Entertainment	18	3.64%	17	4.68%
Telecommunications	12	2.42%	24	6.61%
Drugs/Medicines	43	8.69%	44	12.12%
Clothing	28	5.66%	21	5.79%
Service (Banks/Travel Agents)	23	4.65%	31	8.54%
Other	17	3.43%	26	7.16%

### *Voice-overs*

As an important aspect of gender role representation in television commercials, the use of voice-overs was also examined (see Table 4). The results indicated that male voice-overs dominated (n=403, 59.35%). In contrast, 29.90% of the voice-overs were female.

**Table 4 Use of Voice-over in Chinese Television Commercials**

<b>Voice-over</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
Male	403	59.35%
Female	203	29.90%
Chorus	44	6.48%
None	29	4.27%

### *Roles*

One of the most important variables in this study was the roles played by the central male and female figures (see Table 5). The majority of characters, regardless of gender, were involved in non-occupational roles, in other words work settings had less currency than domestic or leisure situations in Chinese advertising. In terms of gender distribution, it was found that men (n=111, 29.68%) were more frequently portrayed in occupational roles (depicted in work settings) than were women (n=91, 18.35%). In contrast, more females (74.80%, n=371) were portrayed in non-occupational roles than males were (63.90%, n=239).

**Table 5 Gender Role Portrayals in Chinese Television Commercials**

		<b>Women</b>		<b>Men</b>	
		<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Roles</b>	Occupational	91	18.35%	111	29.68%
	Non-occupational	371	74.80%	239	63.90%
	Unknown	34	6.85%	24	6.42%

A further examination of occupational roles (see Table 6) revealed differences between female and male characters in terms of employment status. Because the number of 'high-level female business executives' was relatively low in the sample, the categories of 'high-level business' and 'professional' were combined. It was found that male central characters were depicted as high-level business executives/professionals 10 times more frequently than were female central characters. Women were more likely than men, however, to be shown in mid-

level business (21.98% vs. 4.50%) and white-collar roles (31.87% vs. 10.81%). In addition, a high percentage of female (27.47%) and male (30.63%) celebrities were used in commercials, and there were slightly more male celebrities than females. This finding is directly linked to the fact that far fewer female than male sports celebrities featured in the commercials.

**Table 6 Distribution of Central Characters according to Occupational Roles in Chinese Television Commercials**

		Women		Men	
		N	%	N	%
<b>Occupational Roles</b>	High-level Business/Professional	4	4.40%	44	39.64%
	Celebrity	25	27.47%	34	30.63%
	Mid-level Business	20	21.98%	5	4.50%
	White-collar	29	31.87%	12	10.81%
	Blue-collar Labour	6	6.60%	7	6.30%
	Other	7	7.68%	9	8.11%

In terms of non-occupational roles (see Table 7), it was found that while 43.13% of women (n=160) were portrayed playing family roles, an almost equal percentage (43.10%) of men (n=103) were also cast in such roles. Male central figures (n=107, 44.77%) were, however, more likely to be represented in recreational activities compared with their female counterparts (n=144, 38.81%). It is also interesting to note that 10.51% of women (n=39) and 4.18% of men (n=10) were featured in decorative roles which relied heavily on physical appearance in order to attract the viewer's attention.

**Table 7 Distribution of Central Characters according to Non-occupational Roles in Chinese Television Commercials**

		Women		Men	
		N	%	N	%
<b>Non-occupational Roles</b>	Family	160	43.13%	103	43.10%
	Recreational	144	38.81%	107	44.77%
	Decorative	39	10.51%	10	4.18%
	Other	28	7.55%	19	7.95%

With regard to gender roles in family settings, differences did exist between male and female characters (see Table 8). It was found that a lot more women (75.63%, n=121) than men (15.53%, n=16) were portrayed performing domestic tasks, such as cooking, cleaning, and childcare. On the other hand, males (n=87, 84.47%)

were much more frequently associated with relaxing activities in a family setting than were females (n=39, 24.37%).

**Table 8 Gender Roles within Family in Chinese Television Commercials**

		Women		Men	
		N	%	N	%
<b>Family Setting</b>	Domestic Roles	121	75.63%	16	15.53%
	Relaxing	39	24.37%	87	84.47%

The classification of central characters according to recreational role also revealed gender differences for the types of leisure in which each gender participated (see Table 9). The analysis revealed that men were depicted as engaged in sport and exercise related activities, three times more frequently than women were. On the other hand, women (47.92%, n=69) were more often than men (34.58%, n=37) depicted in outdoor leisure situations that featured non-sporting social activities. Furthermore, more females (38.88%, n=56) were portrayed in home-based passive activities than males (19.63%, n=21) were.

**Table 9 Distribution of Central Characters in Recreational Roles in Chinese Television Commercials**

		Women		Men	
		N	%	N	%
<b>Recreational roles</b>	Sport, exercise, and physical activities	13	9.03%	42	39.25%
	Non-sporting social activities in public places	69	47.92%	37	34.58%
	Home-based activities	56	38.88%	21	19.63%
	Other	6	4.17%	7	6.54%

### *Dress*

In terms of the types of clothes worn by central characters (see Table 10), it was found that the greatest percentage of males (n=196, 52.41%) and females (n=236, 47.58%) fit into the 'casual dress' category. One of the major differences in this category lies in the fact that a lot more women (23.99%, n=119) than men (1.34%, n=5), were dressed seductively (tight, suggestive or revealing clothing). On the other hand, women were less likely than men to be portrayed in suit/formal wear (11.69% vs. 23.80%) and work clothes/uniform (11.29% vs. 16.58%).

### *Age*

As far as the ‘age’ of characters is concerned (see Table 10), a large proportion of characters, regardless of gender, tended to fit in the ‘under 30’ category. Female characters tended to be young – that is less than 30 years old (n=390, 78.79%), while the majority of men fitted into the 30-60 year old category (n=174, 47.93%). Fewer than 10% of men (n=26, 7.17%) and women (n=15, 3.03%) were coded in the ‘60-over’ category.

### *Credibility*

In the television commercials under analysis, males were featured as authorities on different products more often than females, while females were more likely than males to be depicted as product users. The findings show that 37.19% of male characters featured in the commercials (n=135) acted as authorities, yet only 17.78% of featured females (n=88) did so. It was found that, 58.98% of female central characters (n=292) were cast as product users, in contrast to 39.12% of their male counterparts (n=142).

**Table 10 Percentage of Male and Female Characters Depicted in Chinese Television Commercials by Dress, Age, and Credibility**

		Women		Men	
		N	%	N	%
Dress	Formal Wear	58	11.69%	89	23.80%
	Work Clothes	56	11.29%	62	16.58%
	Casual Wear	236	47.58%	196	52.41%
	Seductive Wear	119	23.99%	5	1.34%
	Other	27	5.44%	22	5.87%
Age	Under 30	390	78.79%	163	44.90%
	30-60	90	18.18%	174	47.93%
	60-over	15	3.03%	26	7.17%
Credibility	Product User	292	58.98%	142	39.12%
	Authority	88	17.78%	135	37.19%
	Both	33	6.67%	15	4.13%
	Neither	82	16.57%	71	19.56%

### **Discussion of findings**

#### *Similarities with and differences from other studies*

This study found that television commercials from China reiterate certain gender stereotypes already identified in previous studies in both western and Chinese contexts. As is consistent with findings from recent studies conducted in mainland

China (Hu & Xu, 2006; Zheng, 2002), men in this research sample were depicted in working roles more than women, who were portrayed more frequently in non-working roles. In terms of age, female characters in Chinese television commercials were portrayed as being younger than men, who were more likely to be represented as middle-aged. This finding is consistent with the results of previous studies in China (Ding & Fan, 2002; Hu & Xu, 2006; Zheng, 2002) and in other countries (Gilly, 1988; Kim & Lowry, 2005; Neto & Pinto, 1998). As many studies have found in other cultural advertising environments (Bartsch et al., 2000; Desmarais, 2003; Gilly, 1988; Furnham & Voli, 1989), male voice-overs were prevalent. One consistent tendency found in most previous studies (e.g., Furnham & Skae, 1997; Han & Han, 2004; Liu & Bu, 1997; McArthur & Resko, 1975; Neto & Pinto, 1998) was that certain product categories seemed to be attached to specific genders.

This research does, however, reveal differences from other studies of the Chinese environment in the way gender is portrayed. One of the interesting findings was that, in terms of frequency of appearance of central characters, the proportion of women in Chinese television advertising was higher than the proportion of men. This contrasts with the findings of previous research studies conducted in both China (Hu & Xu, 2006) and western countries (Furnham & Voli, 1989; Neto & Pinto, 1998) which have identified males as outnumbering their female counterparts in television commercials. This phenomenon might reflect the increasing significance of Chinese women to marketers. Sin and Yau (2001) and Tam and Tai (1998) explained that since their economic and social roles have changed, Chinese women, as approximately half of the nation's consumers, have an impact on consumption and play a significant role in purchasing decisions. In this context it is not surprising that females have become an increasingly popular focus of advertising efforts in China.

In comparison with results from previous research conducted in China (Cheng, 1997; Han & Han, 2004; Hu & Xu, 2006; Liu & Bu, 1997), male and female characters in the current sample were also shown in more diverse roles. For example, it was found that females were depicted more often than males in mid-level business and white-collar roles. These findings are not congruent with the

results of recent studies by Han and Han (2004) and Hu and Xu (2006) which found that men were more likely than women to be shown in different professional positions. Also, an almost equal number of women and men in Chinese television advertising were depicted in a family environment. This finding contrasts with Cheng's (1997) and Hu and Xu's (2006) studies, which identified men as less likely than women to be portrayed at home. In contrast to Liu and Bu's study (1997) in China, this research revealed a significant increase in the portrayal of men participating in household tasks. These representations seem to suggest at least some increased equalisation between males and females in terms of the representation of professional and familial roles.

### ***Understanding gender role representation in the Chinese context***

#### *Occupational roles*

Overall, women were less likely than men to be represented in occupational roles and, therefore, more often depicted as not employed and in non-work-related settings. Such patterns have been noted in research studies conducted in both international and Chinese contexts (e.g. Cheng, 1997; Han & Han, 2004; Tan et al., 2002). It seems that the Confucian tradition that positions males as more competent than females to fulfil the role of breadwinner maintains a strong currency in Chinese television commercials. Unlike their male counterparts, women were more often portrayed as involved in domestic activities. This association between domesticity and 'the feminine' was a common pattern, especially in the commercials for cleaning products and baby products, where the use of a hygienic liquid or diapers, for example, helped women nurture children and perform household chores.

The stereotypical representation of women found in the content analysis suggested that, despite some changes in how men are represented in television advertising, a woman's life is still depicted as firmly located within the home environment. With the establishment of the Peoples' Republic of China in 1949, women were accepted in the workforce and the population of employed women has since risen constantly. By the end of 2005, a total of 341.21 million female workers accounted for 45% of the nation's entire workforce (China Daily, 2007, May 16). Yet only 18.35% of women in the current advertising sample were portrayed in



occupational roles. Therefore, gender portrayals in Chinese television commercials can be considered conservative and as perpetuating the type of gender-based division of labour promoted by Confucian culture (Leung, 2003), and failing to reflect the reality of women's experience in contemporary China. This was equally the case in terms of how men and women were portrayed in relation to professional roles.

Different levels of professional positions between men and women in Chinese television advertising were also found. The results of this analysis support the advertising literature which identified gendered occupational boundaries within workplaces; women are not portrayed as being equal to men in terms of high-level business executive and professional positions (Gilly, 1988; Han & Han, 2004, Neto & Pinto, 1998). According to a White Paper issued by the Government of China on gender equality (2005), women's actual roles in Chinese society are quite different to this. The paper reported that in 2004 women accounted for 30.5% of the total number of senior and intermediate-level professionals in State-owned enterprises and institutions.

Female characters in Chinese television commercials were underrepresented in high status occupations which are traditionally linked to success and power and seen as essential elements of masculinity. The research sample contained 38 commercials in which male characters were typically shown wearing business suits, occupying professional positions, and displaying their intelligence, authority and charisma in the corporate world. These representations are typical of western world representations but also certainly reflect the Chinese Confucian tradition which, as Leung (2003) indicated, supports a patriarchal hierarchy in which men are positioned at the highest level and women as inferior to them in society. This conforms to the Confucian cultural idea that 'it is a virtue if a woman doesn't have ability' (Nü Ren Wu Cai Bian Shi De) (Frank, 2001). In representing these male-female dichotomies and presenting men in highly stereotypical roles, as is discussed further in Chapter 8, the sample actually bore some similarities to those masculine norms and behaviours that Brannon (1985) identified in American culture such as professional and material success.

While females were basically excluded from high status positions in their representation in the commercials, this study found that females were more often shown in mid-level employment and white-collar roles than were males. This presents a major difference from the findings in other recent studies of advertising in China (Han & Han, 2004; Hu & Xu, 2006) and reveals that, whereas in China women have long been restricted to family roles, Chinese television advertising is now more likely to portray women as independent and confident – characteristics usually found to illustrate masculine demeanours in traditional western and Chinese culture. This change in the depictions of women might be attributed to advertisers' wish to appeal to a growing class of working women in China (China.org.cn, 2005).

#### *Non-occupational roles*

In terms of non-occupational roles, the results of the content analysis revealed that men in Chinese television commercials participated in recreational activities more often than women. This finding replicates those from previous international studies (Neto & Pinto, 1998; Whitelock & Jackson, 1997), yet contradicts recent Chinese research (Han & Han, 2004; Liu & Bu, 1997) that women were more likely than men to be associated with outdoor/leisure situations. In contrast with the results of Hu and Xu's (2006) and Han and Han's (2004) studies, the current study also suggests that there was a general move towards more frequent portrayal of men and women in recreational roles. This shift might reflect a series of social transformations such as a significant increase in disposable incomes and people's changing priorities in expenditure plans, that have occurred in China since the government carried out the economic reforms in the late 1980s (Xiao, 2003). Formerly, most Chinese families tended to spend their discretionary income on housing and children's education and marriage. In recent times, however, spending on recreation and leisure activities has become a greater priority. Advertising might, therefore, not only reflect but also encourage such social change given its intention to promote the consumption of products. In doing so, as this research suggests, the advertising industry has gendered recreational activity and, in this case, emphasised it as a more masculine than feminine.

With respect to recreational roles, the findings of the present study indicated a clear difference between genders and types of leisure. In general, men were more likely than women to be depicted as enjoying or physically powerful in sporting settings, and as occupying controlling positions in adventure activities. On the other hand, women were more likely than men to be portrayed as participating in non-sporting social activities and home-based activities. In these terms, within recreational contexts links between females and relaxation, rather than females and activity, were often reinforced. In this study, the distribution of genders according to recreational roles is coherent with two earlier research investigations – one conducted by Siu and Au (1997) in China and Singapore, and the other conducted by Desmarais (2003) in France and New Zealand. In the past few decades, the Chinese government has given equal support to men and women in their professional development such as in sports (Brownell, 2000) and, as Dong (2005) points out, Chinese women have contributed significantly to the country's international sporting profile. However, Chinese television advertising representation did not reflect this and continued to perpetuate narrow concepts of sport and gender: masculine as active and feminine as passive (Hargreaves, 1994). This idea is discussed in more detail in Chapter 9.

#### *Family setting*

Male and female characters were fairly equally represented in family settings. This finding did not yield support for the previous studies conducted in both international and Chinese contexts (Cheng, 1997; Liu & Bu, 1997; Milner & Higgs, 2004; Neto & Pinto, 1998) which reported that female characters were more likely to be shown in domestic settings. Many researchers (e.g., Gilmartin, 1994; Larson, 1998; Leung, 2003; Xie, Defrain, Meredith, & Combs, 1996; Zhang & Harwood, 2004) indicated that the importance of family remains an enduring value in China. In recent years, the desire for harmony, especially a good family environment, has been emphasised by the government as a means of maintaining social stability (Han, 2008). This tendency is illustrated in the current sample that portrayed the men as performing parental or marital roles, usually with children, family and women in the domestic sphere. This provided evidence of reconstructing men as displaying the traditionally identified stereotypical female traits, thereby, challenging traditional models of masculinity.

The results of the content analysis also revealed the unequal distribution of genders in the types of family roles depicted. This finding indicates that men and women were shown as having different functions and statuses within the domestic sphere. For example, when portrayed within the family context, women often performed domestic tasks; in such depictions mothers and housewives were accordingly constructed as having concern for their children and husbands and completing household chores. This specific characterisation of women accords with a stereotypical view held by both western and Chinese cultures that suggests that women should be kind, caring, and nurturing (Hofstede, 1984; Larson, 1998; Wood, 2003). On the other hand, the men depicted in family contexts took on little domestic responsibility. As the content analysis revealed, they frequently appeared in relaxing activities (eating, watching television, for example) – almost twice as often as did the women. These findings appear to contradict what authors such as Bu and McKeen (2003) have argued about the shifting of traditional gender roles in contemporary Chinese society, especially as women tend to achieve self development, and married men tend to share domestic responsibilities. The overemphasis on women's central role in housework in the commercials reinforces stereotypical expectations that their lives are constructed around and enacted primarily within the domestic sphere.

### ***Gender and product categories***

#### *Females in relation to cleaning, household and beauty products*

In this study, product category was employed as an important variable to indicate how Chinese television advertising creates a match between certain gender segments of the population and specific product categories. Many product categories were gender-specific, mainly featuring males or females. This finding may well reflect the fact that the commercials tend to target either women or men as the purchasers and consumers of particular products.

The results of content analysis revealed frequent occurrences of women in commercials for product categories such as cleaning products, and household appliances/furnishings. In terms of baby products, the content analysis indicated that *all* central characters in such commercials were female. In these commercials,

female characters were depicted either as authorities or in a traditional role of caring mother or wife. This phenomenon has been noted in both Chinese (Cheng, 1997; Han & Han, 2004; Liu & Bu, 1997; Zheng, 2002) and western cultures over many decades (Caballero & Solomon, 1984; Courtney & Whipple, 1983; Gunter, 1995; McArthur & Resko, 1975) and clearly shows that the stereotype of women as nurturing and caring has currency not only in the western world but also in China.

Not surprisingly, given that these products are primarily targeted at and consumed by women, it was found that women appeared very frequently in commercials for personal/beauty care products. Female characters were frequently shown grooming themselves and looking after their appearance in commercials for, for example, face cream, lipstick, and shampoo – almost five times as frequently as male characters appeared in such advertising contexts. In these terms, Chinese television commercials seemed to reflect the widely accepted belief in modern society that physical beauty should be the salient attribute of women.

#### *Men, alcohol, automobiles and telecommunication*

The study found that male characters were used much more than females in commercials for ‘alcoholic beverages’. This phenomenon had already been noted in studies conducted in China (Cheng, 1997) and in western countries (Gunter, 1995; Mazella et al., 1992). Current advertising strategies for alcoholic beverages in China continue to promote men as the predominant consumers of alcohol, with male characters in these commercials more likely to be represented in scenes of socialisation with friends and business partners. Another product category for which males were frequently central characters in China was ‘automobiles and accessories’. Chinese commercials were found to primarily target males for these types of high involvement products. In doing so advertising tended to confirm the same western advertising proposition for this emerging market: that the car is a masculine object (Munro, 1998) and an extension of men’s identities (Alexander, 2003).

Commercials for ‘telecommunication’ and ‘entertainment’ were also male-dominated. The linking of male characters with these two types of products

reflected and reinforced culturally accepted notions of men as technically competent (Dilevko & Harris, 1997; Zatta, 2003). Furthermore, ‘medicines’ and ‘finance/real estate’ were also more likely to be connected with male characters. This finding is consistent with previous studies conducted in China (Cheng, 1997; Han & Han, 2004). In commercials using such strategies, men were portrayed as repositories of wisdom and knowledge with a view to establishing gender credibility for the products being advertised.

*A balanced distribution: Clothing and food and non-alcoholic beverages*

The content analysis revealed that, in commercials falling under the categories of ‘clothing’ and ‘food and non-alcoholic beverages’, males and females featured equally as central characters. Interestingly, these findings were not consistent with the previous Chinese studies conducted by Cheng (1997) and Han and Han (2004), who reported that, while women were more likely to advertise clothing, men were more often associated with food and non-alcoholic beverages. It was clear from this sample that Chinese television advertising increasingly uses male characters in the promotion of clothes. This finding is perhaps linked with an increased contemporary tendency for men to be portrayed as concerned with their appearance, a tendency that has also been noted in Chinese news reporting (China Daily, 2005, March 18). In addition, it was found that the even distribution of genders in the ‘food and non-alcoholic beverages’ category (which made up the largest percentage of the commercials) reflects the fact that, when associated in commercials with food and drinks, males and females tended to be depicted as family members or friends engaging in leisure activities. This phenomenon, however, did not reveal gender equality in advertising representation because women and men were portrayed very differently in relation to food and non-alcoholic beverages. As is discussed further in Chapter 7, in the domestic sphere, whilst women were depicted as engaged in food preparation, men were portrayed as the benefactors of their wives’ labour.

*Dress: Women’s sex appeal and men’s professional high status*

The findings indicate that there is an association between certain clothing styles and gender, though a high proportion of male and female characters were depicted in casual dress. As noted above, female characters were a lot more likely than

males to fit into the category 'seductive dress' (suggestively and partially clad). These findings are congruent with the results of previous studies in China (Cheng, 1997; Hu & Xu, 2006; Zheng, 2002) and western countries (LaTour & Henthorne, 2003; Lin, 1998; Rak & McMullen, 1987; Sullivan & O'Conner, 1988) which found that women were more likely than men to be portrayed as having sex appeal.

Studies have found that, in Chinese advertising, as elsewhere, female physical attractiveness is exploited as a marketing tool to attract and hold the viewer's attention (Hooper, 1998). Yet in China the development of this type of depiction of women has been attributed to the economic reforms and the opening of China to the outside world, in addition to "dramatic social changes, including what appeared to be a liberation of social and sexual mores" (Pei, Petula, & Lun, 2007, p. 204). However, when the sample in the current study was compared with the study by Zheng (2002), the percentage of seductively dressed women was smaller (23.99% vs. 47.6%) which is possibly due to the growing concern in China about the transgression of traditionally accepted boundaries (China Daily, 2003, November 12; Sun, 2006), and the fact that the government has tightened regulations on the commercial exploitation of female sexual appeal. Some statutes in Provisional Methods on the Administration of Broadcast Advertising issued in 2004 came into effect with the aim of governing the use of sex appeal in advertising (China State Administration of Radio, Film and Television, 2004). Nevertheless, whether in groups, or alone, female characters in this sample tended to be portrayed in decorative roles. These findings appeared to support what Hung and Li (2006) have described as the use of women as the "flower vase" (p. 13) in advertising representations.

In the sample of commercials that feature in this research, female characters were predominantly depicted as glamorous and charming, conforming to cultural ideals of beauty and used in commercials for beauty products, where the use of a certain shampoo, body wash, or fragrance was presented as making women more alluring. This strategy was also obvious in commercials for alcoholic beverages, automobiles, furniture, and entertainment, in which female characters were, as Bonney and Wilson (1983) have described, "placed as signifiers of exchange, able to stand in for the sign, 'for sale', signifying the commodity status of the product

advertised” (p. 191). Thus these representations tended to support feminist concerns that the female body is largely constructed as an object of the male gaze (Shields, 1990; Warlaumont, 1993).

In contrast, it was found that the majority of male characters were dressed more formally than were their female counterparts. This tendency is linked to the fact that the highest proportion of male characters were portrayed as high-ranking businessmen. Male characters’ clothes (suits, formal wear, and work clothes) communicated something more about their profession, social status and professional involvement in the public sphere, often displaying a masculine demeanour in business-related situations. Clearly, the presence of men in business attire, as a highly stylised prototype of the male, reflected and reinforced the conventional belief that men are career-oriented and high in self-esteem.

#### *Young feminine beauties and mature men*

Age was another apparent indicator of gender stereotyping. It was found that most characters, males and females, were depicted as being between the ages of 30 and 60 years old. Young females had much greater currency than senior females, who were virtually ignored. Female youthfulness has been used as a prominent theme in a global consumer culture (Bonney & Wilson, 1983; Fowles, 1996; Frith & Mueller, 2003). This trend has indeed been noted for almost 30 years in studies conducted in China (Cheng, 1997; Han & Han, 2004) and in western countries (Caballero & Solomon, 1984; Ganahl et al., 2003; Gilly, 1988; Schneider & Schneider, 1979). As Cooper-Chen, Leung, and Cho (1996) concluded, ageism “operating against women seems universal and long-standing” (p. 221).

As Johansson (2001) and Zhang (2000) indicated, a preference for feminine youth and beauty in contemporary Chinese society corresponds to ongoing changes in social space where fashion, sexuality, as well as gender awareness have become salient issues. The depiction of women as young, beautiful, and well-dressed, occurred across all product categories in the sample. Chinese television advertising, therefore, constructed a prevalent feminine ideal which emphasises the cultural value of feminine youth in relation to any product category. In contrast, a rather low proportion of middle-aged and older women featured as



central characters. The majority of the female characters in these age groups appeared in commercials for medicines and food and were depicted as holding knowledge about health and diet, thereby symbolising wisdom and caring. These strategies of ageist ‘gendering’ identified in Chinese television advertising could play a role in the social marginalisation of older women, showing that a woman after a certain age has much less representational and social currency in modern China.

In comparison with their female counterparts, a high proportion of older male characters were identified in the sample. This is consistent with previous studies (Gunter, 1995; Hu & Xu, 2006; Neto & Pinto, 1998) where ‘middle age’ has been identified as an important dimension for representing masculinity in advertising. In the process, certain values, such as maturity, authority and accomplishment, which are attached to this age group, are enhanced, and this may enhance the commonly presented images of older men as experts and business executives. It was also found that, although the concept of filial piety (respect for parents and ancestors) remains persistent and the old are treated with dignity in accordance with the Confucian tradition (Alozie, 2003; Sung, 2000), in Chinese television commercials, male and female characters above 60 years old were considerably underrepresented. This tendency may imply that advertisers consider older consumers as less important than those from other demographic segments in the market, or that the older or traditional association of age with wisdom is no longer considered as having currency in modern Chinese television advertising and in the wider society.

### ***Credibility***

As noted above, men were more frequently portrayed as authorities than as product users, whilst the reverse was true for women. The studies of gender representation in western countries have uncovered the ideological bias of television commercials in terms of credibility. For example, McArthur and Resko (1975) found that 84% of female characters were portrayed as product users in the US, while 70% of male characters acted as authorities. Manstead and McCulloch (1981) reported 81.2% of female characters to be product users in the UK, while male characters comprised 77.7% of authoritative figures. In contrast to these

results, the current study revealed a significant reduction in the depiction of women as product users (58.70%) and in the presentation of men as authorities (36.70%). In these terms, Chinese television commercials seem to portray gender roles in a less stereotypical manner.

### ***Voice-over: The gendered vocal environment in Chinese advertising***

As noted above male voice-overs predominated in the advertising sample analysed in this research. Male voices were used to sell a wide range of products and services (except for products exclusively for female use), and acted as signs of authority and knowledge. Most male voice-overs used an authoritative tone, in order to be convincing and credible. On the other hand, female voices with a soft, youthful tone were specifically featured in commercials for feminised products such as beauty and cleaning products. The gendering of voice-overs was yet another simple, but clear, indication of the dominance of masculine attributes in Chinese advertising.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has presented the quantitative findings of the content analysis of the use of female and male characters in Chinese television advertising. The results revealed a number of important characteristics regarding gender representation such as the specific associations of genders with product types, the particular roles assigned to female and male characters, and the different distribution of the sexes in terms of dress, age, credibility and voice-over. It is clear that, although gender equality has been promoted in China, the representation of women and men in this study's advertising sample remained stereotypical in terms of the roles played by and values attached to each gender. However, there was a tendency to depict women and men as occupying non-traditional roles in terms of family and occupation. The findings revealed a dynamic cultural mix in which both traditional and modern values were presented and reshaped in gender role representation.

The results of the content analysis, in demonstrating the stereotypical nature of gender representation in Chinese television advertising, provide a microcosm to study the ways in which femininity, masculinity and sexuality were

(re)constructed in China – albeit within the imperatives of marketing. However, due to the limited capability of content analysis to examine the meaning of messages at the denotative level, a complementary step in the analysis of gender role representation in the current study involves the use of both semiotics and discourse analysis which facilitate a closer textual reading. The content analysis results are used to identify salient characteristics of gender representation, and to guide the selection of a representative sample of television commercials. In chapters 7, 8, and 9, three major types of gender roles (familial, occupational and recreational) respectively are analysed. This additional analysis allows for the examination of a variety of codes, ideologies, conventions, and discourses which underlie the construction of femininity and masculinity in the sociocultural context of Chinese commercials.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

### **THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN AND MEN IN FAMILY CONTEXTS**

#### **Introduction**

Chapter 6, the content analysis of Chinese television commercials, identified family roles as prominently used to promote products and services in advertising. This chapter, the first of three substantive chapters which use semiotic and discourse analysis to examine the cultural representation of gender in Chinese television commercials, focuses on the subtle ways in which women and men are portrayed in family life. The chapter discusses a range of roles, relationships, and activities within family settings and how they encourage particular traits to be differently associated with and considered appropriate for women and men. The intention of the chapter is to identify the discursive meanings Chinese television commercials attribute to femininity, masculinity, and gender differences in the home.

The chapter considers the concepts of gender and family as both contextual and dynamic, and explores how these are drawn on to promote products and services. It analyses how and whether, the advertising representation of characters in family settings affirms ongoing cultural stereotypes or reflects new tendencies in representation. In these terms the chapter is also concerned with how female and male characters are depicted in accordance, or not, with fundamental principles embodied in Chinese culture and history.

Because of its focus on the depiction of family life, this chapter selects key examples as being both reflective and constitutive of domestic roles ascribed to women and men in the commercials. In particular, these examples illustrate different patterns of marital relations and parental status, which may reinforce or challenge certain social and cultural conventions. To develop a close reading of the commercials, the chapter considers particular signs, codes and myths (Barthes,

1972; Berger, 2005; Fiske & Hartley, 1990) used to (re)produce gendered meanings.

The chapter is divided into four main sections. The first part of this chapter focuses on how family life was represented as a social situation in which the notions of harmony and happiness were depicted through the use of characterisation. The second part examines particular aspects of the domestic ideal of femininity. It addresses the ways in which female characters were portrayed in two often overlapping roles: mother and housewife. The third part of the chapter explores particular aspects of the representation of masculinity and domesticity in terms of participating in relaxing activities and performing household chores. The final section of the chapter looks at the ways in which the representation of family roles in the commercials diverged from the types of roles promoted under patriarchal Confucian ideology.

### **Representing the family through an emphasis on harmony**

In this research study 31.08% of the commercials (211 out of 679) depicted family settings in the sense that they represented women and/or men engaged in parental and marital roles and kinship relations. As Xie et al. (1996) argued, “most central to Chinese culture is the value of the family as the fundamental unit of society” (p. 82). Almost all of the commercials that depicted families in this study’s sample constructed a social situation in which female and male characters interacted in harmony rather than in conflict. In this way, the products being advertised were positioned in relation to forms of family bonding in which the ideas of tenderness, romance and happiness were highlighted. This strategy was invoked for commercials promoting both local and international brands. It is not surprising that family harmony was highly emphasised because it has always been regarded as the essential model for maintaining interpersonal relations and social stability in China (Chu & Ju, 1993).

An example of the articulation of family harmony and happiness was found in a commercial for *Hai Tian* seasonings. The commercial constructed a festival occasion on which a traditional extended family (two grandparents, two parents and the only child) enjoyed a meal together at home. The shots of all family

members talking, eating and drinking together were used to signify harmony. In the background a red banner with the word 'Fu' on it was placed on the living room wall functioning as a decoration but also as an important cultural sign. Indeed, in Chinese culture, the red colour and the character 'Fu' convey auspicious meanings, in particular connoting 'Xing Fu' (happiness) and 'Hao Yun' (good luck). By using the banner as an obvious cultural signifier, the commercial clearly articulated family life with happiness and Chinese tradition.

In contrast, commercials for *X.M.B.* furniture, *Li Dushen* cold medicine, *Power Dekor* wood flooring, and *Dulux* wall paint featured a newer family structure: a nuclear family. For example, the commercial for *X.M.B.* furniture portrayed two parents and their daughter sitting together on a couch perusing a photo album. The posture of the man holding his wife and daughter close to him (his left arm around his daughter's shoulders and his right arm around his wife's waist) suggested "a symbolisation of the full set of intrafamily relations" (Goffman, 1979, p. 37). A sense of unity was therefore created. Furthermore, their smiles encapsulated a sense of happiness. In portraying the blissful life of characters, Chinese television commercials played a role in constructing an idealised expression of the family experience.

While creating expectations of domestic bliss and happiness, Chinese television commercials constructed family life as a primary site for articulating heterosexuality, parenthood, domesticity, and conjugality. Consequently, the commercials tended to construct specific subject positions for females and males, and reinforce the significance of gender differences in the domestic sphere. The following sections of this chapter focus on both traditional and progressive representations of gender roles in the domestic context.

### **Images of femininity, motherhood and domesticity**

Chinese television commercials constructed a clear connection between femininity and domestic imagery. As the results of content analysis revealed in Chapter 6, out of 160 female characters in family roles, 121 (75.63%) were involved in domestic tasks. A further breakdown of the female images that incorporated domestic tasks found that 69 (57.02%) women were portrayed as

mothers who assumed primary responsibilities for daily childcare, and 52 (42.98%) as housewives who managed household chores. Under the Confucian-based moral codes, the role of women in reproduction and other domestic achievements was particularly emphasised as the ideal of womanhood. Their commitment to family devotion was an important element of ‘feminine nature’ (Badinter, 1981; Lieberman, 1998; Lin, 2000). It, therefore, appeared that traditional concepts of gender continued to prevail in contemporary Chinese television advertising and especially so in how femininity was constructed in the two often overlapping roles of mother and housewife.

### *Nurturing and maternal love*

In portraying female characters as mothers, Chinese television commercials promoted the maternal as being an essential attribute of women and femininity. The images of mothers were attached to particular products such as daily necessities, medicine, and baby products, illustrating how mothers care about their children in a loving manner. Female characters openly displayed emotion to their children. In this sense, the advertised products were articulated with the mother-child bond. This same discursive strategy has been examined by western researchers (e.g., O’Barr, 2006; Prothero, 2006; Thomsen & Sørensen, 2006) who explored the links between the purposes of the advertised products (e.g., to promote health and hygiene) and the nurturing role of women. Viewers are often exposed to scenes in which children are happy and healthy as a consequence of their mothers’ using the advertised product to fulfil their maternal responsibilities (Prothero, 2006). In this way, the products, as Clarke (2004) argued, “become the key means through which types of mothering are constructed...the process of ‘becoming a mother’ involves simultaneity of materiality and social conceptualisation” (p. 56).

An example of this representational tendency was provided in the commercial for *Taitai Le* chicken seasoning. This commercial provided an interesting demonstration of the representation of conventional femininity and motherhood, and its contents were, therefore, explained in detail in Table 11 below. This commercial presented a concise 30 second story about how a typical Chinese mother plays an important role in her child’s growth and development. It

comprised a sequence of seven scenes, and relied on the use of intertextuality to represent the meaning of motherhood. By drawing associations between the image of the woman and other media texts, the commercial tried to evoke a feeling of a mother's unconditional love.

**Table 11 *Taitai Le* Chicken Seasoning**

Scene	Characters Featured	Summary of Action and Dialogue
1	Mother and son (Present time)	Shot of a handsome young man performing the popular Chinese hit song " <i>I Always Understand You</i> ". His mother with grey hair sits quietly in a corner of the auditorium, gazing lovingly at his performance. The song features as background music for the entire commercial.
2	Mother and son (Flashback)	The scene flashes back to the boy's childhood. The young mother, wearing an apron, takes a steaming hot dish with both hands from the kitchen. Her little son is getting ready for a meal. He is very delighted while she puts the dish on the table.
3	Mother and son (Flashback)	Shot of the mother taking her son to kindergarten by bicycle on a cold winter morning. As the child sits on the bike, the mother carefully helps him put on a cotton cap and puts his sleeves over his hands. With a tender smile on her face the mother rides against the wind and her hair is blown loose.
4	Mother and son (Flashback)	Using <i>Taitai Le</i> chicken seasoning, the mother prepares lunch for her high school son. Her son prepares to go to school in a hurry and forgets his lunchbox. She brings the lunchbox to her son, smiling as she helps him zip up his sweater before he leaves home.
5	Mother and son (Flashback)	The son attends a music class. At lunch time the son smells all the lunchboxes placed outside the classroom, and easily identifies his own lunch. When he opens his lunchbox, many classmates want to try his food.
6	Mother and son (Flashback)	At the end of the school day, the mother waits outside the classroom for her son to exit and gazes lovingly at him through the windows.
7	Mother and son (Present time)	The scene returns to the performance shown in scene 1. The mother and son gaze at each other with tears in their eyes. During the applause, the son holds flowers and walks down the stage to his mother. Sitting next to her and holding her hands, he lays his head on his mother's shoulder.



In the *Taitai Le* chicken seasoning commercial, viewers were encouraged to regard an ideal mother as one who was entirely focused on the well-being of her children. The main concern of the commercial was to emphasise the great taste of the product, but this was actually achieved through a storyline that demonstrated the value of the chicken seasoning in creating a seemingly unbreakable emotional bond between the mother and son. From this perspective, the use of the melodious highly popular and emotionally rousing Chinese hit song ‘*Dong Ni*’ (*I Always Understand You*) evoked a highly nostalgic representation of motherhood. This song is said to have become popular in China because it “offers a gratefulness rarely directly expressed by sons and daughters”, and highlights “something that many people feel but find difficult to say” (China. org. cn, 2005, November 28). It should be additionally noted that the role of mother in the commercial was played by a famous Chinese actress, Jiang Wenli, who has featured as a dutiful mother and wife in many television series. This choice inevitably assisted in evoking an emotional resonance of motherhood that the actress and her image carried in the viewers’ minds. Therefore, all the elements in the commercial contributed to creating an atmosphere that emphasised femininity and motherhood and to bringing these together in a unified discourse.

By glorifying motherhood, the commercial attempted to associate *Taitai Le* chicken seasoning with the caring nature of the mother. As a result of this semiotic transfer, good taste was made to appear interchangeable with good mothering (Roy, 1998). In the commercial, the characteristic features of tenderness and emotional bonding were evident in almost every scene. The signs of the mother’s appearance, such as her careworn face and grey hair, were rare in the sample commercials but crucial to the connotations of commitment and labour. Furthermore, femininity and unconditional enduring maternal love (Lieberman, 1998) were blended together through the signs of the mother’s action (such as her tender smile and loving gaze at the child), and the scenes of devoting her life to ensuring that the child was well dressed and well fed with delicious food. As a mother, she must be gentle and considerate, and take care of everything for her son. Such a domestic image was particularly corroborated by the use of a potent yet now very dated symbol of domesticity: an apron. The apron could be read as a signifier of tradition, and more specifically of the tradition of Chinese maternity in

which women are required to be caring and serving and to focus their loyalties on the domestic sphere (Evans, 2002; Larson, 1998). Therefore, the woman was firmly positioned as a natural caregiver.

As far as the compositional structure was concerned, the commercial primarily relied on a series of flashback scenes, which gradually exposed the viewers to a vivid recurrence of a mother's past experience of looking after her child. The last scene returned to the present day performance; a climax was set up in the commercial where the child walked almost tearfully down the stage, with applause, to express his gratitude to his mother. Such a representation not only highlighted the importance of a mother's nurturing role in the success of her son, but also seemed to imply that her silent dedication was socially approved and she deserved the applause. The role of mother depicted in the commercial was clearly related to the myth of 'Liang Mu' (good mother) that was women's highest standard of moral excellence in Chinese Confucian tradition. Such a role often constructed femininity in terms of caring, self-sacrifice, and working diligently for children's future success (Leung, 2003; Lin, 2000). An interesting aspect of the commercial was that representation of a husband/father was completely absent. This phenomenon, as Lazar (2000) noted, revealed different gender roles in terms of highlighting nurturing tasks as something women do naturally and the insignificance of men in such tasks.

The representation of maternal love and nurturing also drew on a strong code of modernity, which seemed not to be restricted to the Confucian ideal of Chinese femininity. Interestingly, female characters in the sample of commercials collected for this research were often depicted as concerned about their children's health which often became the mothers' sources of happiness and pride. However, the reshaping of their maternal role in the commercials was evident in their lively and well-groomed appearance, their knowledge of the latest childcare products, and their movement from an exclusive focus on monotonous domestic tasks to relaxing interactions with children. In these terms, the characterisation of women was to some extent different from more traditional ways of mothering.

The changing representation of mothers was particularly evident in many of the commodity commercials promoting international brands such as *Dettol*, *Safeguard*, *Pampers* and *Tide*. As Alden, Steenkamp, and Batra (1999) argued, advertising relies on a shared set of values and symbols to communicate with global consumers. Viewed in this way, motherhood, as a universal ideal of gender representation, has great symbolic significance (Leslie, 1995). Therefore, it is not surprising that the portrayal of women as mothers is used in formulating global advertising strategies to introduce new products into the Chinese market, and this process consequently becomes an ideological means to reinforce traditional stereotypes of femininity.

In a commercial for *Dettol* liquid, for example, a young mother worried about her child's growth, and reminded the viewers that the naïve nature of children may cause health issues (Roy, 1998). The accompanying visuals portrayed the son crawling on the floor, playing with building blocks, and having fun with a dog on the couch. In the commercial, the mother's first job was to protect her son from bacteria through bathing him with *Dettol*. Towards the end of the commercial the whole family had a happy time together. While held by his father, who sat on the floor, the son tenderly rested his forehead against his mother's forehead as she sat on the couch. This commercial incorporated the good mother myth (Badinter, 1981; Clarke, 2004) and the attributes which signal motherly love were reflected in her emotional attachment to the son. In addition, the mother ended the commercial by saying: "no one can protect the child except me". Her speech was one of the ways in which the woman was constructed as a good and responsible mother, implying her direct connection to an innate capacity for nurturing.

It is worth noting that although the articulation of motherhood in the *Dettol* commercial was different from that in the chicken seasoning commercial (the traditional vs. modern view of being a mother), they shared a reference to a patriarchal tradition. That is, the images of mothers connoted nurturance, affection and tenderness, and these connotations played an inevitable role in constructing the most salient feature of femininity as nurturing children. In this way, Chinese television advertising made explicit what maternal roles are expected to be enacted by women. The literature in China revealed that, throughout Chinese

history, the care of children has consistently remained one of the most desirable components of femininity (Chen, 2001; Li, 2006; Wallis, 2006; Zhang, 2003), even during the Cultural Revolution when the government encouraged women to participate in the workplace equally to men. In particular, the ‘One-Child-Family’ policy in China demands that a woman spends a lot of time on her child to ensure the health and happiness of her only progeny (Robinson, 1985). However, a more recent study (Bu & McKeen, 2003) found that young women in China tended to marry later in life and have longer careers. In such a sociocultural context, a question around the commercials is how representative they are of how women perform their roles as mothers in China today?

***Housewife: A feminine ideal of domesticity***

Apart from nurturing children, women in Chinese television commercials were typically depicted having responsibility for performing household chores. In this study’s sample, the representation of housewives selling a wide range of products such as household appliances, food/non-alcoholic beverages, and cleaning products showed women cooking, shopping, washing, and cleaning. In most cases, the underlying message was that the qualities of the advertised products facilitated housework and helped wives better serve their families. As Roy (1998) argues, such representation “trivialize[s] the drudgery involved in domestic work” (p. 123). Furthermore, the depiction of women as homemakers was a particular feature in commercials involving holiday situations and the entertainment of guests. As Liu and Bu (1997) and Mayne (2000) indicated, the overemphasis on women’s preoccupations with housework contributes to supporting a continuation of patriarchy and reinforcing gender differences.

The commercials that portrayed women in the role of housewife often reflected a traditional ideal of subservient femininity. A commercial for *Hui Yuan* beverage, for example, portrayed a family party in which a woman prepares fruit juice and brings the cups of juice from the kitchen to her husband, daughter, parents, and brother (or brother-in-law) and his wife. The graceful, obedient and subordinate traits of the woman were manifest in the scenario in which she was solely responsible for entertaining her family members who sat on a couch talking with each other. She maintained a happy smile without showing any exasperation.

Commercials for *Yi Jiaren* soya bean milk, *Lolo* almond juice, and *Meihao Shiguang* seaweed all exemplified the construction of women as assuming domestic tasks in order to facilitate other family members' leisure. By recurrently representing the role of women as serving their families, the commercials emphasised devotion as the surest source from which housewives take great happiness and satisfaction; in particular, they reinforced the Confucian ideal of women that emphasises that a woman's duty is to sacrifice her own needs for the needs of her family (Ng, Fosh, & Naylor, 2002; Sin & Yau, 2001). Such portrayals functioned to maintain support for traditional Chinese gender ideologies and patriarchal family structures.

The connection between women and food preparation was a common item in Chinese television advertising. The idea here, as Parkin (2006) contended, is based on illustrating how women show their love for and please family members through serving food. In this study's sample, almost half the commercials (17 out of 37) that used the images of housewife perpetuated a discourse on domesticity that constructed planning and cooking meals as the most prevalent task performed by women.

For example, a commercial promoting *House* curry paste illustrated how the product helped a woman fulfil her domestic duty and serve her family. In the commercial, the woman opened the door for her husband and son who had just returned home after playing a football game. Her son greeted her with a shout of "I am hungry". Here, interestingly, the son interpellated (Althusser, 1971) or 'hailed' the mother into her role as a provider for him. In this way, the woman's household role was constructed through her son's recognition that she had full responsibility for feeding him. Later in the commercial the woman, wearing an apron (again) and looking enthusiastic, was portrayed using the curry paste to make soup. She tasted the curry soup before serving it. Towards the end of the commercial, the family sat around the table to eat. While her husband and son put heaped spoons full of food into their mouths, she smiled happily. Her effort was portrayed as having contributed to the happiness and harmony of the whole family. Clearly, the commercial blended femininity and domesticity together through the visual signifiers of the woman wearing an apron, sampling a dish's flavour, and

being contented when her family members were well served. As an ideal wife, she was gracefully in charge of feeding the family – but equally subservient to their needs. Such a way of conceptualising femininity played a role in reflecting and reinforcing traditional Chinese patriarchal ideology. That is, women were completely bound by the convention that restricts them within the family and emphasises their commitment to husbands and sons.

Another commercial for *Magic Kitchen* soup seasoning constructed a situation in which the subtle tension between a young wife and her mother-in-law was articulated through domesticity. In the commercial, a married couple sat on a couch watching television when they received a call from the man's mother saying that she would visit their apartment. The wife looked nervous and prayed that she could cook some soup in the short time before her mother-in-law arrived. She used *Magic Kitchen* soup seasoning to do this. In the final shot, the mother-in-law was seated at the dining table, tasting the soup, while her son stood silently nearby. The wife was portrayed as standing in a deferential position. When the mother-in-law praised her cooking, the daughter-in-law appeared relieved and happy.

What is especially noteworthy about this commercial is the fact that different feminine subjectivities were constructed through what could be read as belonging to traditional culture. That is, while a wife was expected to be domestic-oriented and engage in hierarchal kin relationships, a mother expressed an enduring concern with her child's well-being. In order to illustrate how the *Magic Kitchen* soup seasoning worked to make cooking an easy process, the commercial portrayed the wife as successful in placating her mother-in-law. The implicit message of the commercial was that, as a qualified wife, she should be skilled in domestic crafts. The wife's flustered countenance and her deferential posture, which directly addressed the audience, suggested an asymmetric relationship with her mother-in-law. In this way, the commercial articulated a discourse of gender and domesticity that constructed femininity as suffering at the hands of domineering mothers-in-law (Roy, 1998). Forbearance, compliance and servility were suggested as characteristics of Chinese women which are taken from the long-established Confucian morality, in particular the notion of filial piety. As

Gunde (2002) noted, in traditional times, “the senior members expected respect and power”, and women “tended to look forward to old age as a time when their views would not only be respected but might become the single most powerful force within the household” (p. 177). In addition, the mother-in-law was portrayed as being matronly-looking, and ensuring her son’s and family’s well-being, even though he was independent and married. Maternal empathy and love motivated her to check up on her daughter-in-law’s domestic abilities. This is a version of femininity that makes much more sense when explored in relation to Chinese Confucian culture; that is, the emotional bonds that women establish with their children are sustained through a lifelong process (Jankowiak, 2002). In this respect, this commercial highlighted the mother’s role in the process of socialising gender inequality in the domestic sphere; she was responsible for putting her daughter-in-law’s household competence to the test.

In this study’s sample, another way in which femininity and domesticity were drawn together is the representation of female characters as modern and young housewives who not only performed household chores, but also enjoyed a certain degree of leisure and independence. This phenomenon was particularly manifested in the product category of household appliances/furnishings. In the commercials, the housewives, with the help of the advertised products, were portrayed as performing housework in an efficient way and as being more personally fulfilled. Consequently, the traditional domestic role of women was eroded by endowing women with “an idealised housewifery identity that combines images of the traditional, the leisurely, and the modern” (Hung & Li, 2006, p. 12). This changing expectation of women, as Hooper (1998) argued, has been an ideological accompaniment to the growth of the home appliance market and the popularity of middle-class values since the mid-1980s. As China has modernised in this post socialist phase, a time known as the second ‘return home’ movement of women (Evans, 2002), the social role of the non-working wife has corresponded to the country’s increasing affluence and consumer culture.

An example of this construction was a 15-second commercial for the *Optima* brand of kitchens which concentrated on how a young housewife used her *Optima* kitchen to prepare food for a party in an easy and enjoyable way. In this case, the

atmosphere that emphasised femininity and domesticity was visually and linguistically created. Interestingly, the commercial contained the visual signifiers of the woman with a happy smile, and cooking food rhythmically while dancing in a modern kitchen. She playfully shook her head and body, sprinkled flour on the board from shoulder height, threw the dough ready for use into mid-air as if she were playing with a ball, then chose goblets from the display cabinet and took a bottle of wine from the storage rack. Furthermore, the commercial created a social environment in which the woman wore a fashionable party dress to host guests. Such representation seemed to be part of a discourse that constructed Chinese femininity as not completely restrained by the traditional norms of domesticity. The fast-paced soundtrack functioned as background music, supporting the apparent sense of pleasure depicted by the visual imagery. However, a closer reading of this commercial reveals that the woman was constructed in accordance with the myth of the domestic ideal: she was primarily responsible for the domestic running of the household and happily performed these responsibilities. In the commercial, the signs related to domesticity were an apron worn by the woman and a verbal statement used to praise the advertised product. She tossed an apple in the air and said in a relaxed voice, “*Optima* cabinets make the kitchen a happy place. I love *Optima*.” Her words, together with her contented smile, clearly suggested that the domestic world of the kitchen was a sphere of women’s pleasure. In emphasising the idea that domesticity can be a happy state, the commercial continued to solidify patriarchal ideologies which encourage women to regard their primary value as based within the private sphere where they can serve the needs of others.

The construction of housewives in the sample of commercials reflected a traditional gender-based division of labour. In contemporary China, the household role for women has been a major theme which is (re)shaped and negotiated by different public discourses such as the construction of gender by the state, the growth of female unemployment (Hooper, 1998) and the late marriage of the younger generation of women (Bu & McKeen, 2003). In such a context, Chinese television advertising still highlighted the domestic function of women. More importantly, the representation of housewives has been embedded in a tension between the forces of tradition and modernity in China. By presenting female



characters as being modern while still conforming to the requirements of domesticity, television advertising played an important role in characterising the modernisation of femininity within domesticity (Pumphrey, 1987). This process has been criticised as “showing fragments of modernity” (Roy, 1998, p. 125) because the domestic role of women is discursively reinforced even when modernised. In the next section I turn to look at how men are constructed in relation to family life and the domestic sphere.

### **The construction of masculinity and men in family life**

As the results of content analysis revealed, one of the most important roles played by male characters in Chinese television commercials was related to the domestic sphere. In this study's sample, of the 374 central male characters coded in the commercials, 103 (27.54%) were portrayed in family situations. The depiction of men in family roles was used to promote a wide range of product categories such as food, cars, electronics (e.g., digital camera and liquid crystal display monitor), medicines, and cleaning products. The familial roles of men featured in one of two ways: as participating in various recreational activities (n=87) or as involved in domestic tasks, sharing some of the household responsibilities with their wives (n=16). In these terms, the commercials initially appeared to challenge the division of gender roles into the public/private dichotomy, yet they could also be read as solidifying an association between heterosexual masculinity and domestic domination. Therefore, the representation of men in relationship to women, children, and the home offered a symbolic context in which masculinity was reconstructed to some extent. This refashioning process might embody the integration of cultural discourses of gender and family that circulated in China during the last decade, for example, a social perception of modern men as having a more private life (Liu, 2008) and assuming a greater role in parenting their children (Abbott, Ming, & Meredith, 1992).

The depiction of men as emotional and caring characters involved in family life has become popular in the western media since the 1980s as a result of feminist critique of traditional forms and representations of masculinity (Lazar, 2000). This reconstruction of men was linked to the discourse of the ‘New Woman’ and regarded the stereotypically ‘feminine’ qualities (such as emotion and care) as

essential elements in defining masculinity. However, legitimating domesticity for men, as Vavrus (2002) argued, inscribed a series of contradictory concepts of masculine identity. He examined television news treatments of stay-at-home fathers over five years (1995-1999), and argued that these representations, “while offering a nominal challenge...reinscribe significant aspects of patriarchal privilege within domestic space” (Vavrus, 2002, p. 352). The following section of this chapter focuses on specific components of the discourse of legitimation that Chinese television commercials employ in their construction of men’s domestic roles.

### ***Husbands and fathers: Relaxing and avoiding domestic work***

A majority of male characters (84.47%, 87 out of 103) in the sample were portrayed as engaged in leisure activities within family settings, activities such as reading newspapers and watching television. This emphasis on leisure, rather than responsibilities for child care and household work, was an important ingredient of masculine representation in family life. When male and female characters were portrayed as spouses without children, men were often engaged in different leisure activities, and received care and labour from their wives. Such representation was evident in commercials for *Zhonghua* tooth paste, *Cereal Way* non-fried instant noodles, *Nanfang* black sesame paste, *Jingpai Jiu* (wine), *Oulin* kitchen hoods, *Shanghai Pudong* Development bank, and *E* internet navigation services. These commercials all contributed to the validation of the absence of Chinese males from household work and their dominant positions in the family hierarchy as the beneficiaries of the female domestic labour.

The specific positions of men were manifest in scenes where they were portrayed as part of family while being immersed in their own activities. For example, a scene in the commercial for *Zhong Hua* tooth paste depicted a husband snacking and watching television while his wife washed dishes. Another commercial for *Cereal Way* non-fried instant noodles depicted a situation in which a husband read a newspaper and asked his wife to prepare food for him. The visual signifiers of dressing casually, sitting leisurely in an antique rocking chair, and expecting the attention of his wife established him as a husband who derived pleasure from his family life. Such a way of constructing a domestic realm and the recreational role

of men within it profoundly marked out gender differences in the home, and perpetuated the idea of masculine authority and feminine subordination delineated by the patriarchal tradition in marriage and family life (Lai, 1995; Li, 2002; Zuo & Bian, 2001).

It is also interesting to note that several commercials depicted how men could rid themselves of the responsibilities for care of the household that supposedly block their access to leisure. These commercials often conceptualised family-related tasks as an easy activity for the men if they used the advertised products and services. A commercial for *Pudong* online banking service clearly illustrated this point. The commercial implied that the efficient qualities of the banking service took the tediousness out of mundane tasks and allowed the young husband to perform his banking in a convenient manner. In the commercial, the husband was portrayed as surfing the Internet while his wife was in the background packing for their holiday and urging him to go to the bank to pay the mortgage. He casually opened a web page and showed his wife the simplicity of banking online. Towards the end of the commercial a close-up shot depicted the husband feeling pleased with himself, looking at his wife and saying, "Let's go on our holiday". Interestingly, although the commercial showed an innovative and easy way of performing family-related tasks (routine financial activities) through the use of modern technology, it still made an effort to support and reinforce the traditional ideology in which domesticity is inappropriate to male behaviour.

The construction of the familial role of men around the idea of leisure was also evident in terms of parenthood. In the sample, 24 (27.59%) male characters were portrayed as being happy to interact with their children both inside and outside of the home. Such representation was typically used to promote cars, food and non-alcoholic beverages. In the commercials, the emphasis on fun and relaxation, rather than nurturing duties, was used to construct emotional relationships between men and their children in a way that complemented but also contrasted with the maternal roles of women. Essentially male characters were depicted as fathers who were gentle, amiable and relaxed, and enjoyed playing, eating, fishing, or going on an outing with their children.

In a commercial promoting the *Changan Benben* car, there was a scene showing a father and his son washing a car together and having fun in a water fight game. Another commercial for *Wangzai* milk drink established a relaxing setting in which an intimate relationship between a man and his son was constructed through the display of physical contact between them. In this case, the boy was portrayed as holding a can of milk and delightedly showing off his strong body to his father. He mischievously put the can on his father's head. The last scene in the commercial represented the father and his son smiling and drinking the milk while hugging each other. Here, the father's amiable personality and playful innocence were constructed to correlate with his masculinity. Interestingly, these commercials appeared to draw on the myth of fathers as adult playmates (O'Barr, 2006). This myth suggested that masculinity was articulated in terms of a playful relationship between father and child. Such representation of masculinity did, however, challenge the traditional Confucian model of the father-child relationship that was governed by the concept of filial piety. Throughout Chinese history, men, as fathers, were the head of the family, exerting high degrees of authority and keeping hierarchical distance from their children (Chao & Tseng, 2002). In these terms, fathers were not encouraged to tolerate emotional indulgence (Jankowiak, 2002); that is, they would "not typically display much closeness and affection toward children" (Chao & Tseng, 2002, p. 73). From this perspective, there appeared to be a tendency in Chinese television advertising to undermine such a traditionally conceived role of fathers and the accompanying values of obedience and respect given by children (Abbott et al., 1992).

While most of the commercials simply drew on the motifs of recreation and fun in which men fulfilled their paternal role, some commercials contained elements of traditional masculinity. For example, in a commercial for MPS *Touran* (Multi-Purpose-Sedan), a male character was portrayed as a modern father who not only enjoyed family happiness but also conformed to the traditionally acceptable norms of masculinity. As this commercial was worthy of particular consideration in terms of how it represented traditional masculinity, its contents were outlined in detail in Table 12 below.

**Table 12 MPS *Touran* Car**

<b>Scene</b>	<b>Characters Featured</b>	<b>Summary of Action and Dialogue</b>
1	A man playing the role of a father with his son	A casually dressed man drives his son to a class at a music school. As soon as the car stops, the son, carrying his violin, opens the door and jumps out of the car. The son cheerfully beckons his father to hurry up. The father smiles at his son and takes his cello out of the trunk.
2	The father and his son (Male voice-over)	In a music training room, the father and son attentively play music together. A caption is inserted into the scenes and a male voice states: “wisdom is looking beyond the surface”.
3	The father and his son	The whole family drives to a suburb. The son holds a windmill in his hand and hangs it out the window. He gladly watches it revolving at rapid speed. The car cannot drive over a narrow bridge. The father gets the bicycles out of the trunk.
4	The father, his wife, and son (Male voice-over)	The parents and their son ride their bicycles, with the windmill, attached to the stem of the son’s bike, revolving again. A caption appears and a male voice says: “wisdom and fun go together”.
5	None (Male voiceover)	The car drives home in the sunset. The male voice says: “ <i>Touran</i> is a wise choice for life”.
6	None	Logo and slogan appears.

To emphasise its application in family entertainment, the car was being sold on one level for values based around pragmatism, flexibility, and leisure. On another level, the car was promoted as a particular way to foster a bond between father and child. In this case, the father was primarily portrayed as spending time with his son through their performing music together and enjoying a family cycling outing. A connection between parenthood and masculinity was constructed through the signs of enjoyment such as a close-up shot of the father smiling at his son, and shots of them contentedly participating in collaborative music performance and riding bicycles adjacent to each other. The way in which the father expressed sentiment towards his son implied a version of a softer, more expressive masculinity. This connotation was supported by the father’s tidy appearance and taciturnity. While offering a challenge to traditional male authoritarian parenting styles (Chao & Tseng, 2002), however, the commercial appeared to reinforce significant aspects of the patriarchal Confucian culture. That is, Chinese fatherhood was defined in terms of concern with the social and moral

education of sons, and facilitating their entry into the outside world (Abbott et al., 1992; Jankowiak, 2002).

In the commercial, the way in which the figure of the father was constructed was also linked with his wisdom and talent. He was portrayed as having a typical artistic hobby and pursuing a relaxed lifestyle, and as possessing the ability to ensure his son's happiness. In this way, the commercial projected an idealised image of fathering, emphasising intelligence as a desired trait of men. In addition to the visual images, the commercial used an authoritative voice to claim: "Zhi Hui Shi Geng You Nei Han" (wisdom contains more cultural attainment and refined behaviour) and "Zhi Hui Shi Geng Duo Huan Le" (wisdom and fun go together). As these statements accompanied the visual, they served to define masculine intelligence. They acted as signifiers of different male attributes: while "Zhi Hui Shi Geng You Nei Han" fits into the Chinese Confucian tradition that is characterised by literary talent and cultural attainment, "Zhi Hui Shi Geng Duo Huan Le" seems to propagate an outlook that values enjoyable relationships as an essential part of human life. Such ideological constructs of masculinity represented the hegemonic tension that exists between the forces of the traditional and the modern. The commercial, therefore, provided male viewers with a model of fatherhood and also reminded us what types of characteristics men are expected to embody in family life.

In the television commercials, while men were portrayed as involved in family, their masculinity was clearly articulated with a discourse of parenthood. This process, however, did not simply incorporate a display of qualities traditionally associated with women such as nurturing. Instead, leisure activities were used to characterise the relations between men and children in family life. Sociologists such as Dong, Yang, and Zou (2006) have argued that this phenomenon has occurred in Chinese society more broadly, with the development of the idea that fathers play a role in developing the personalities of their children.

### ***Men's involvement in domestic chores***

Even though only a small number of male characters (n=16, 15.53%) were portrayed as engaged in household tasks such as cooking and cleaning, the way

the commercials used these portrayals was interesting. These commercials drew on cultural stereotypes of men as 'inappropriate' for and 'incompetent' at performing housework. This aspect of male characterisation was particularly highlighted by portraying men as providing their wives with temporary assistance in domestic settings, or as performing household tasks in a ridiculous manner. Therefore, the commercials set up an environment in which men were associated with products stereotypically reserved for women such as cleaning products. Such representation, however, had the potential to reinforce or challenge traditional gender roles, rather than fully eliminating them.

In the portrayal of Chinese men in the domain of domesticity, there was a discernible trend in the construction of their supportive role. For example, a commercial for *OMO* washing powder illustrated a domestic situation in which a nuclear family was engaged in housework. What was evident in the commercial was that the man and his son performed childishly, as though in a competition, and were being instructed by the woman who was in the tutelary role. Such representation was indicative of the unequal power relations between men and women in a domestic setting. Another example was a commercial for a kitchen stove where a husband was portrayed as engaged in meal preparation by way of passing kitchen utensils to his wife who was busy cooking. The visual signifiers of the husband as uninvolved and inattentive, standing behind his wife who was using the advertised stove and who was positioned in the middle of the screen and performing only the simplest of tasks, presented the husband as playing a very passive and non-challenging role in housework. In portraying the engagement of male characters in the household, commercials such as this did denotatively articulate a relationship between masculinity and domesticity. However, connotatively they actually questioned the need for men to participate in household chores and their ability to perform these chores satisfactorily.

In relation to men's participation in housework, a trend in Chinese television commercials of "poking fun at men's domestic incompetence and promoting the profession of housework" (Ferres, 1994, p. 149) was identified. A good example of this in the sample under consideration here was found in a commercial for *White Cat* dishwashing liquid. This commercial evoked a masculine code of

domesticity through its representation of an opposition between men and women engaged in household duties. The commercial depicted a young couple assigning and performing household chores after a party. The husband was shown shirking his responsibility by preemptively claiming what he perceived as the easiest tasks. In the scene where he worked to the point of sweating and feeling tired, even though he put in a lot of physical effort, his performance was awkward and inefficient. By contrast, his wife completed her chore of washing a large number of dirty dishes quickly and then sat on the couch enjoying a cup of tea. At the end of the commercial, the husband was portrayed as feeling astonished by the amount of effort his wife made and cheekily expressing his willingness to wash the dishes the next time. The commercial did not go so far as to illustrate how the couple would reallocate the housework and whether the man would wash dishes as effectively as his wife, but for the viewers, the contrasting associations between gender and housework were intended to manifest the high efficiency of the dishwashing liquid, while more thoughtful viewers might focus more on the woman's efficiency! More importantly, the commercial constructed gendered meanings of domesticity; that is, the man's unproductive behaviour and attitude towards household tasks were inappropriate in comparison to the woman's domestic expertise and practicality – supported as they were by *White Cat* dishwashing liquid. In this way, the ideology underlying the commercial was that men were not suited to domestic tasks, a perpetuation of traditional representations of masculinity.

Although examples such as the *White Cat* dishwashing liquid commercial seemed to situate household duties in the realm of the masculine, the different ways in which these were played out by the husband and wife supported the naturalising of an unequal share of household burdens. In China, as a result of women's economic independence and the promotion of gender equality by the government, married men have increasingly participated in domestic chores (Zuo & Bian, 2001). More recently, the social tendency has been to regard men who give attention to domestic tasks as displaying attractive traits of masculinity and as achieving marital happiness (Liu, 2008). However, the current examples of Chinese television commercials appeared to suggest inconsistency with this



tendency by illustrating that women still shoulder a larger share of household responsibility than men.

### **Young couples: Challenging patriarchal gender norms**

Whilst most of the commercials in the research sample constructed the familial roles of women and men in terms of confirming the Confucian concepts of gender, a few commercials (n=9) depicted marital relationships somewhat differently. In these cases young married couples were engaged in less stereotypical roles; for example, men were portrayed as henpecked husbands, or women were cast as aggressive and recalcitrant wives. These two kinds of images suggested alternative conceptions of masculinity and femininity which challenge the patriarchal ideology to some extent.

One way in which the commercials constructed the meaning of gender and family was by presenting a reverse view of traditional feminine and masculine roles. Accordingly, the consumption of products seemed to be linked to particular ideological positions of gender. For example, in the commercial for *Jin Hao* home textiles, a young woman shouted at her husband to bring her a towel as she finished her shower. The man brought the wrong brand of towel, and subsequently had it thrown in his face by the woman. The closing shot of the commercial showed the man smiling towards his wife and standing by her side as he ultimately chose the right product. This commercial cast the couple in domesticated roles that differ from those embedded in patriarchal Confucian ideology. The emphasis on the subordinate status of men was through the husband's thin and weak appearance, his servile smile, and his uncomplaining servitude to his wife. On the other hand, the commercial contained the visual signifiers of a beautiful but wilful wife with a violent temper giving commands to her husband. Interestingly, this comic representation of men has been seen in comic strips in the west as generating humour from the subversion of expected gender roles (Porter, 1998). Such a way of representing family life and gender differences perhaps reflected something of a crisis for dominant masculinity. However, it is worth noting that the roles represented in the commercial were unusual and ridiculous, and, consequently actually worked to reinforce conventional perceptions of gender roles and relations as correct.

The representation of henpecked and silent husbands was not the only way in which patriarchal gender hierarchies were challenged and masculine dominance was questioned. The involvement of a game or teasing scenario between a husband and wife was another way in which of non-traditional gender relations were constructed. For instance, in order to transfer the notions of performance and dynamism on to a car, a commercial for *Buick* HRV represented a sexually charged situation showing a young couple in the morning. They playfully tried to get the car keys off each other; whoever won would drive the car. Up in the bedroom, the woman first used feminine wiles to trick the man so that she could get hold of the key. She pretended to kiss him before pushing him onto the bed. He pursued her downstairs into the living area where they ended up on either side of the table on which the car keys sat. The man now used trickery to make the woman think he had given in to her, only to grab the key and rush out to where the car was parked. At this stage, it looked as though the man had won the struggle, but then he made a fool of himself by getting into the wrong car. The man made a gesture of surrender and handed the car keys over to the woman. Tauntingly, the woman accepted the keys and happily drove off.

Drawing heavily on notions of competition and individualism, the woman in the *Buick* HRV commercial seemed to be portrayed in terms of several masculine codes. Her aggressive, active, and playful role was juxtaposed against the quintessential view of femininity in terms of domesticity and marriage. This idea was highlighted in the way that a succession of images of the woman's fast moves were accompanied by upbeat music. In particular, a challenge to the dominant masculine culture was made clear when her role was put in perspective against that of her husband. At the moment when the man left the house with the keys in his hands, he seemed to be in full control of the situation and the woman seemed to have been defeated by his superior masculine skill. However, when he got into the wrong car, he showed himself to be rather stupid. By comparison, it is suggested that the woman was more clever. The man's ridiculous behaviour was clearly signified by clear signs such as his gesture of surrender and his wife's smirk at the end of the commercial.

A deeper analysis of this commercial revealed a sensual and intellectual tension between the young couple in terms of feminine sexual allure and unwise masculine behaviour. As a result, a particular kind of power balance in family life was constructed. In the commercial, the woman was clearly portrayed as sexually aggressive. This feminine role was constructed through using obvious signs of temptation such as her silk camisole and her tempting posture (she uses her index finger to touch her husband's lips). Interestingly, the seductive role of women depicted in the commercial asserted the power of femininity; that is, the wife used the strategy of seduction to seize a role (driving) traditionally dominated by men. In western culture, seduction was regarded as "a liberating power for women" (Baudrillard, 1990, p. 54). This view was positioned as "involved in a common struggle with feminism against the naturalised hegemony of certain patriarchal institutions and the masculinist project of rational mastery" (Goshorn, 1994, p. 258).

In portraying the aggressiveness of female characters and the fallibility of male characters, a few of the commercials appeared to explore new models of marital relationships in which women might challenge masculine power. Such constructions might have little reference to reality, but were, nonetheless, used to sell products in creative ways. What we do know from the literature is that in traditional Chinese society, married women had very little social power, and were required to be tender, moderate and humble (Larson, 1998). In particular, the references to Chinese female sexuality in everyday domestic settings as being seductive cannot be explained within the cultural tradition. However, more recent studies conducted by Wang (2005) and Wang and Ho (2007) indicated that cultural tendencies regarding gender, love and sex occurring within contemporary China have contributed to the liberation of women and the deprecation of traditional masculinity. From this perspective, the current images in Chinese television advertising of women displaying non-traditional characteristics were more likely to be driven by a cultural force rather than by a political one. This is in contrast with the State-imposed representation of gender liberation during the post revolutionary phase and the Cultural Revolution.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter examined the cultural representation of gender in family contexts in contemporary Chinese television commercials. It was found that family life was used to place products or brands in a context of happiness and tenderness. It was also found that the roles of women and men portrayed were invested with different meanings. The commercials continued to perpetuate traditional stereotypes in terms of parenthood, spouse, and housework. In this way, significant aspects of patriarchal ideology and asymmetrical gender relations have remained constant in contemporary Chinese television commercials. However, there has been a shift away from the conventional towards more modern and diverse representations of femininity and masculinity in the domestic sphere, portrayals such as happy housewives, playful fathers, and henpecked husbands.

Although women's roles have changed considerably in Chinese society, Chinese television commercials continued to construct femininity in the narrow terms of mother and homemaker. These two roles have reinforced the traditional ideologies of motherhood and domesticity which are evident in Chinese Confucian culture. Nurturing, tenderness, self-sacrifice, and inferiority were emphasised as essential attributes of women. The domestic nature of femininity was further reasserted and solidified by incorporating the notions of modernity and leisure into the representation of women as assuming responsibilities for childcare and household chores. As a result, the commercials perpetuated the idea that the woman's place is still in the home, even in a country where the Maoist Revolution over half a century ago purported to treat the genders equally in all spheres.

Unlike their female counterparts, male characters were typically portrayed as involved in family life through leisure activities. This representation challenged the division of gender roles into the public/private dichotomy while further reinforcing the patriarchal ideology that sees domesticity as an inappropriate expectation of males. When portrayed as performing household chores, men were incompetent and awkward. This idea was used to promote products stereotypically reserved for women. With the emphasis on leisure relations between men and children, the commercials appeared to challenge the traditional Confucian version of fatherhood in terms of enhancing emotional pleasure.

The next chapter, Chapter 8, focuses on the representation of women and men as engaged in occupational roles and activities in Chinese television advertising.

## **CHAPTER EIGHT**

### **THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN AND MEN IN OCCUPATIONAL ACTIVITIES**

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter the ways in which Chinese television commercials portrayed women and men as engaged in occupational roles and activities are presented and analysed. The content analysis conducted in Chapter 6 revealed that occupation was the prevalent aspect of gender role representation, and that the commercials emphasised a gender-specific division of labour. This chapter primarily focuses on specific uses of female and male characters in the workplace and business contexts with particular regard to: (1) examining how they are represented as occupying different professional positions; (2) identifying what characteristics are depicted as socially acceptable; and (3) revealing how dominant ideologies and cultural myths are (re)produced and reinforced through the representations.

This chapter offers some insights into the role of Chinese television advertising in constructing gender differences in the realm of work by analysing two common types of images: the depiction of males in high and authoritative positions, and females at relatively lower organisational levels. Both of these types of occupational role characterise office workers. Because of the small number of commercials in the sample that portrayed women and men in blue-collar roles, it is difficult to isolate specific themes in such characterisations and, therefore, these commercials are not included in the analysis.

This chapter is divided into two main sections. The first section examines, in terms of physical appearance, emotion and power relations, the representation of female characters who are involved in white-collar roles (such as secretarial jobs) and mid-level or semi-professional employment (such as salespersons or waiting staff). It also explores how femininity is (re)conceptualised through the display of women in executive positions. This section thus focuses on how the occupational

role of women is represented in terms of highlighting and mythologizing particular 'essential' aspects of women's nature on the basis of society's established gender hierarchies. The second part of the chapter discusses how the overrepresentation of men as executives and office workers embodies and perpetuates an ideal hegemonic masculinity. It also examines different versions of masculinity represented in the commercials and those which depict male characters in less authoritative positions or as engaged simultaneously in both a career and family.

### **Women in careers: Challenging the ideal of domestic femininity**

Although many female characters in the sample were portrayed in domestic roles, there was a concurrent tendency to construct femininity in relation to employment in occupational positions. It was found that about 20% (91 out of 496) of female characters that appeared in the commercials were depicted as independent and employed outside the home. The increasing representation of women in occupational roles in advertising has been argued by both eastern and western scholars (Bresnahan, Inoue, Liu, & Nishida, 2001; Hung, Li, & Belk, 2007; Jagger, 2001; Kates & Shaw-Garlock, 1999; Wiles et al., 1995) as reflective of the enhanced social freedom and professional visibility enjoyed by females in modern society. It has also been noted that, as a result of women's participation in the workplace, advertisers have become interested in females as a specific market segment with purchasing power (Tam & Tai, 1998). It is not surprising then that commercials seek to construct an independent working subject position for female viewers to identify with.

However, as indicated in Chapter 6, the content analysis identified female characters as depicted in levels of employment lower than those of their male counterparts, and they were always restricted to traditionally 'female' occupations such as clerical jobs (n=29) and service-related work (n=20). The limited range of ways in which female characters were represented at work failed to encourage viewers to imagine many of the contributions that women make within organisational contexts. To better understand the significant relationships between culture and gender, the following subsections illustrate how certain traits and

behaviours were discursively echoed by the commercials in the construction of women’s occupational roles.

***The emphasis on feminine physical appearance***

When portraying female characters as performing low-level clerical or secretarial work within office settings, the sample of television commercials always illustrated how the advertised products helped women fulfil their occupational roles. In most cases, female characters were typically portrayed as possessing youthful good looks, and/or as being concerned about their appearance. This representation emphasised female beauty as an important work-related value, and disregarded women’s personal and intellectual capabilities. Therefore, while depicting women outside of the domestic sphere, the commercials still reinforced assumptions about gender difference and inequality by iterating that women’s contribution to the work environment is limited to their physical appearance.

The notions of ‘youth’ and ‘attractiveness’ were emphasised as the foremost features associated with women in occupational settings. A 30-second-long commercial for *Ariel* washing powder (see Table 13), for example, depicted a young female secretary who encountered challenges both inside and outside her new working environment. This commercial was selected as representative of a number of commercials (n=62) that depicted women in occupational roles and reinforced sexist ideology in a way that incorporated certain qualities conventionally perceived as feminine.

**Table 13 *Ariel* Washing Powder**

<b>Scene</b>	<b>Characters Featured</b>	<b>Summary of Action and Dialogue</b>
1	A female secretary	The commercial starts with a female office worker’s first few days at a new company. She dresses in tidy clothing and heads to work in the morning. She looks in the elevator mirror to check her appearance before entering the office. A male voice-over states: “join a new environment”.
2	The female secretary and three colleagues (both male and female)	The office worker walks through the office area and sits at her desk ready to use her personal computer. Her colleagues chat about her, admiring her new clothes. The voice-over says: “manage new interpersonal relations”.
3	The female secretary	The office worker brings a pile of documents to



	and a superior (male)	her administrator's office, and receives instructions from the administrator. The voice-over states: "cope with stress".
4	The female secretary and a group of colleagues (both males and females)	There is a welcome party for new employees. Unfortunately, a chocolate cake is accidentally dropped and lands on the secretary's shirt. Her colleagues are shocked by this unexpected situation, but the secretary maintains a charming confident smile on her face.
5	The female secretary	The female character walks through a futuristic revolving water wall (suggestive of science fiction), and comes out the other side with her clean white shirt. The chocolate stain has disappeared. The voice-over states: "Ariel solves cleaning problems. It makes your clothes fresh. You would wear new clothes every day".
6	The female secretary, the superior (male), and the colleagues (both males and females)	The secretary, now wearing a clean shirt, confidently writes a report in the meeting room. Her boss and other colleagues are impressed by her.
7	None	The product icon and logo appear in the middle of the screen.

In this text *Ariel* washing powder was portrayed as contributing to the woman's career success and her ability to remain calm in the face of a potentially embarrassing work place situation. Whereas most commercials in the sample studied in this research promoted cleaning products by depicting women as fulfilling a traditional role of caring mother or dutiful housewife, this commercial did not contain any such visions of nurturing and domesticity in its representation of femininity. Rather, the female character was portrayed as participating in paid work for her own gratification. This representation was used to construct and target independent women as a commodity market. And yet, the commercial articulated appearance as a crucial part of the femininity in the occupational setting. Nowhere in the commercial was this overtly stated, but the viewer was encouraged to interpret the commercial in this way. For example, the secretary looked in the elevator mirror to check her appearance before entering the workplace and her colleagues paid attention to her clothing. Here, the mirror, as a sign, is linked to women, and reflects female preoccupations with beauty and vanity (Schroeder & Zwick, 2004). More importantly, the prime challenge the woman encountered in her new career seemed to be coping with the chocolate stain on her clothing rather than the work itself, and she derived confidence

directly from her neat appearance as a consequence of using *Ariel* washing powder. This textual reading demonstrated the extent to which the commercial drew on gender stereotypes and linked the ideas of female appearance and job competence.

In the sample of television commercials, femininity, physical appearance, and occupation were often blended together through the use of both vocal expressions and visual imagery. For example, a commercial for *Kang Shi Fu* instant noodles featured a charming young woman performing an abundance of clerical tasks. The social environment constructed by the commercial was that of stressful working conditions within an office setting, and the woman was portrayed as processing the paperwork with dedication. After an intensive working morning, she chose instant noodles as a delicious lunch to regain her energy. The vivacious image of the woman was accompanied by light, vigorous music suggestive of a sense of energy and passion. At the end of the commercial, a masculine voice-over stated: “pursue a dream of youth”. The male voice-over seemed to corroborate the idea that youthfulness is essential for a woman’s career building. The commercial appeared to be targeted at young female viewers who might see themselves as independent and energetically pursuing occupational interests.

It is also interesting to note that the commercials sometimes depicted women as objects worthy of attention as a consequence of their physical appearance in the workplace. A dominant ideological theme evident within these commercials was that in the work setting women should maintain a primary focus on their appearance. For instance, a commercial for *Zhong Hua* toothpaste portrayed a young woman office worker as upset with her stained yellow teeth. In the commercial, the use of the product was shown as the way to improve the woman’s looks, and restore her happiness and self-confidence. Towards the end of the commercial the woman, with a charming smile and beautiful teeth, attracted great attention from her (male and female) colleagues. At the manifest denotative level, the visuals represented the woman as pursuing a beautiful appearance. Clearly, using the toothpaste was presented as the secret behind her smile. However, at the latent connotative level, the commercial implied that using the product may make a woman attractive in the workplace. The scene of the woman being looked at and

admired by her colleagues became meaningful in this respect. Her pleasure and confidence were represented as deriving from being gazed at. In the commercial, this indexical cue for the primacy of outward appearance reinforced cultural standards of beauty and indoctrinated female viewers with the ideal of what is necessary in a woman's career. This phenomenon reflected what Dellinger and Williams (1997) labelled "the institutionalized workplace appearance norms" (p. 168) that women also traditionally confront when working in the west.

In this study's sample, the reiteration of women's physical appearance in occupational roles corresponds to the idea of the 'rice bowl of youth' (Qing Chun Fan) which prevails in the urban job market in contemporary China. Since the early 1990s, a range of new well-paid jobs have opened up to young women. As Zhang (2000) sees it, "young age is a kind of currency, youth is capital" (p. 138). This phenomenon has been manifested in various cultural areas (such as magazines and films) in China, and indicates "a new sexual politics" (p. 95) in the labour force. It could, therefore, be concluded that Chinese television commercials indeed are playing a part in a discourse that supports the occupational role, abilities and contribution of women while at the same time perpetuating an ideological myth built up in the last 20 years that feminine success is dependent on youth and attractiveness.

### ***Female characters as incapable and emotional employees***

Some commercials articulated women's incompetence and emotionality in occupational settings. Female characters were regularly depicted as encountering unexpected troubles (such as the accident with the chocolate cake discussed above) or as being incapable of fulfilling their occupational duties. In one version of the *Intel* dual core processor's commercial, for example, a young female character was portrayed as carrying a large pile of documents in her arms in a precarious manner, and colliding with her colleague in the office area. As a result, the papers were dropped on the floor. This representation placed the woman firmly within a situation of ineptitude, and symbolically set up a specific role model for the working woman. In the commercial, her tumbling, the astonishment of her colleagues, and the falling papers served to suggest a job-related incompetence and negligence. However, as soon as the female character relied on the *Intel* dual

core processor-based desktop computer to type the documents she appeared to be efficient and to find the work easy. The commercial explicitly relied on a gender stereotyping that defines women as inept participants in the working environment unless they avail themselves of the advertised products.

It is also worth noting that the use of female advertising characters as office workers, connected with what Betz and O'Connell (1989) have identified as a tendency to represent females as less competitive in the work place and more focused on maintaining harmonious relationships. Indeed, women in the sample of commercials collected for this research were portrayed as participating in work-related activities that involved elements of friendliness and relaxation, rather than assertiveness and competitiveness. The women and their colleagues were shown as interacting positively, in harmonious settings; the advertised products were suggested as driving factors within these happy relationships. A good example of this was found in a commercial for *Kang Shi Fu* green tea: a young female office employee was portrayed as concerned about her male colleague who seemed stressed as he worked on documents. What was evident in the commercial was that the woman observed the actions of others attentively, put a bottle of green tea carefully on the table for the male colleague, and smiled at him. Obviously, the notions of sympathy and caring were injected into the occupational role of women. Another commercial for *Tayoi* cosmetics illustrated a situation in which a female office employee supported a new colleague who was just embarking on a career. Sharing the experience of using the advertised product was presented as a way to show the women's affection and concern for one another. Once again, the connection between femininity and empathy was made explicit. The code underlying these two commercials drew on the parallel between Confucian and feminine ethics that emphasise human relationships (Li, 1994; Herr, 2003), and more specifically referred to traditional Chinese values of the feminine such as benevolence, empathy and kindness (Clark & Wang, 2004). In articulating the traditional gender traits in the occupational role of women, Chinese television advertising thus reflected and reinforced cultural expectations of femininity.

### *The construction of subordinate femininity*

At work women were quite often represented as subordinate to men. This discursive practice was evident in the commercials that featured both sexes in an office setting: men were the executives and women the secretaries. In particular, the female secretaries were depicted as dutifully and compliantly serving their male bosses. It is clear that the traditional concepts of hierarchy in the gender system (ranking men above women) continue to prevail. This phenomenon is similar to that which Stephenson, Stover, and Villamor (1997) identified in the portrayal of women in business-related commercials, and contributes to validating and reinforcing an inequality of power relations based on the different positions of subjects in the workplace.

In the advertising sample investigated in this study, female office workers were often depicted in scenes which promoted a sense of women's inferiority as embodied in their working relationships with men. In representing the boss-secretary relation, for example, several commercials suggested a discourse of gender and occupation that symbolised and characterised women as compliant, complaisant, and service-oriented participants. For instance, one scene from the commercial for *Ariel* washing power discussed above (see Table 13) portrayed the female secretary smiling obediently and receiving instructions from a severe male boss sitting behind a large desk. This representation legitimized the idea that the man has power, keeping the woman at a distance. The different demeanours constructed in such commercials fitted with Goffman's (1979) concept of 'ritualization of subordination' in his study on gender and advertising. Submissive gestures such as smiling, for example, have been analysed as "a symbolic connotation of power with the submissive member smiling more and the dominant person less" (Anderson & Imperia, 1992, p. 124). Another commercial for *Wa Haha* breakfast milk constructed a social situation in which a woman deferentially accepted an evaluation of her secretarial work from a middle-aged male manager. The woman stood up behind her desk when the manager came to talk with her. While receiving positive feedback, the woman nodded her head and said "yes" in a childish way. The scene reflected patriarchal ideology and naturalised her powerlessness within occupational fields. The emphasis on a female employee seeking recognition and approval from male authority reinforced the view that

women “occupy a disadvantaged position at work vis-à-vis men” (Alder, 2002, p. 69), and, therefore reinforced a hierarchical model between genders in terms of occupational roles.

The construction of women and femininity in relation to male authority and supervision might be read in a similar way to how a child or a junior is expected to display certain deferential behaviours and levels of respect to an elder or senior figure. This made much more sense when explored in relation to Confucian norms, especially those associated with filial piety (a range of behaviours such as obedience and loyalty) and respect for authority. Within these codes, women are clearly subservient to men. Therefore, the patriarchal ideology underlying the commercials could be approached from a traditional Chinese perspective that is embedded in the high power distance culture and “the dualistic distribution of forces between the passive, feminine principle and the active, masculine principle” (Leung, 2003, p.10). It is worth noting that, in articulating the hierarchical relationship between the sexes in modern office settings, Chinese television advertising reflected and reinforced a discourse of gender inequality that, as western feminist scholars (Glasser, 1997; Stacey, 1983) have argued, supports the notion of public patriarchy.

### ***Female submissiveness and servility in service-oriented jobs***

The construction of women’s occupational role around the idea of subordination was also evident where female characters were portrayed as engaged in service-oriented occupations. As the results of content analysis revealed in Chapter 6, more than 20 percent of women in occupational roles were cast as sales workers, waitresses, and booking clerks. This aspect of female characterisation was especially manifest in commercials for airlines, clothing stores, hotels, banks, and travel agents. The representation of women in service jobs contributed to the social expectations that, as Purcell (1996) argued, specify how “patriarchal practice determines and prescribes appropriate job incumbency” (p. 18). What was apparent from the commercials was that female ‘servants’ attended to the needs of and entertained (male) clients in a courteous, obliging and pleasant manner. Several common ingredients could be identified with these images: a young and affable woman, a uniform, and a domestic-like task. At the denotative

level, these images emphasised femininity as an explicit aspect of the job specification. At the connotative level, they carried ideological meanings that draw on and encourage “cultural assumptions that associate the nominal characteristic sex with beliefs about competence” (Arndt & Bigelow, 2005, p. 233). Here, ‘competence’ was used to describe the ability of female employees in these types of service positions to satisfy male expectations.

Those commercials that specified service and hospitality as parts of a feminine occupation clearly involved the perpetuation of traditional gender roles and characteristics. A commercial for China *MinSheng* banking, for instance, portrayed a young Chinese woman serving two male business executives in a VIP room of the bank. The commercial was aimed at investors, predominantly men. In the commercial, the woman inclined her head and body toward one businessman and stood by his side while he sat on the sofa, passing a document to him with both hands. Later, she held a teapot and poured tea into cups, assuming a deferential posture. Obviously, her friendly smile and her complaisant behaviour suggested a subordinate status as well as domestic characteristics. It is also interesting to note that the commercial constructed two different subject positions. That is, whilst the woman was portrayed as serving the needs of her male customers, the men were cast as wealthy and privileged recipients of the service. The commercial reflected and confirmed the traditionally approved model of gender differences and, in particular, male dominance in the public sphere. Servility and attentiveness were suggested characteristics of the commonly-held concept of Chinese femininity; women have traditionally been culturally encouraged to take on a role of caring for the comfort and welfare of others, in particular, males. Therefore, Chinese television commercials legitimised gender inequality in the social hierarchy that confines women to inferior job positions.

***‘Superwoman’: Managerial work, home and the beauty ideal***

Although only two commercials in the research sample featured women in significant managerial jobs, the way these commercials employed women was worthy of comment. These women were simultaneously incorporated into a juxtaposition of conflicting discourses and gender ideologies. Women were portrayed as concerned about their physical appearance, but also about their

success at work and in family life. In each role, she exposed a different self. A good example illustrating this point was a commercial for the *Ya Du* humidifier (see Table 14 below). The commercial seemed to associate the humidifier with the multiple roles of the female character.

**Table 14 *Ya Du* Humidifier**

<b>Scene</b>	<b>Characters Featured</b>	<b>Summary of Action and Dialogue</b>
1	A middle-rank and senior female official	Wearing a white business suit, the woman walks towards her office room. She directly addressed the camera with a confident smile, saying, “I have the secret of keeping skin hydrated”. She attracts great attention from her female subordinates who are checking their faces in the mirrors.
2	The female official	While the woman is perusing documents in her office room, she switches on the humidifier placed on the desk, and feels the air blowing across her face. Large potted plants are placed on the desk and around the room. She speaks to the camera: “ <i>Ya Du</i> humidifier maintains your skin moisture at any time.”
3	The female official playing the role of a mother, and her son	Inside the living room of her home, dressed casually, the woman has fun with her son on the couch. Simultaneously, the product icon appears in the lower-left corner of the screen. She tenderly rests her forehead against her child’s forehead, saying “Humidified air makes a baby comfortable.”
4	The mother and her son	The mother uses her forefinger to stroke her son’s nose, saying, “My son is healthy”.
5	None	The product logo appears.

The commercial contained visual signifiers of a successful career woman in a modern office setting. This construction of femininity articulated the ideas of independence and career pursuit, which challenged traditional stereotypes of feminine domesticity. However, the commercial did not portray the woman in the same way as the men in executive positions (as is discussed further below); that is, the concern and care of her skin at work were emphasised, rather than her professional performance and authoritative action. The shot of green and blooming plants placed inside her office was especially used as a reference to connote the notion of natural beauty. Then, later in the commercial, the woman was portrayed as having fun with her son within the domestic sphere. By illustrating this loving and tender moment, the traditional stereotype of women as



nurturing mothers became the ideological theme of the commercial. The humidifier was consequently promoted in indexical relation to the woman's responsibility for daily childcare. In portraying a woman in both career and family roles, the commercial seemed to incorporate multiple discourses and ideologies – both modern and traditional expectations of women – in the characterisation of femininity.

It could be said that the *Ya Du* humidifier commercial reinforced the myth of a 'superwoman' who shoulders the dual burden of labour participation and the household (Hooper, 1998; Jaffe & Berger, 1994). This is a representation of femininity that has been criticised for being unrealistic in western culture (Rabiner, 1990) and for acknowledging that women are capable of employed work while still placing the primary responsibility for management of the domestic sphere and child rearing on their shoulders (Clancy & Tata, 2005). This role expectation has been accepted in China over the past three decades, with a dilemma encountered by Chinese intellectual women whose domestic labour has been appreciated but whose status still does not equal men's, in spite of the Chinese state's continuing commitment to gender equality (Hooper, 1998). In accordance with this tendency, the commercial appeared to assert the balance of occupational, familial and personal demands as an appropriate expectation of Chinese femininity. After identified the conventional features associated with the depiction of women in the workplace, the next section of this chapter moves to explore how the occupational role and performance of men is characterised differently from those of their female counterparts.

### **Occupational settings as an arena to construct traditional male roles**

As was discussed in the content analysis in Chapter 6, men were most prevalently portrayed in occupational roles in commercials examined in this research. There is a long history of representing the public sphere of paid work as the arena in which men earn their status and manhood in American advertising (Coulter, 1997). It has been noted that work contributes to a major element of "men's sense of who they are" (Dyer, 1985, p. 111). In this research study, the most striking feature of men's occupational roles was a narrow approach that constructed the male as a status symbol of success and in terms of his embodiment of high rank and

authority. This approach typically showed men to be highly visible within an 'executive function' (Goffman, 1979) and actively involved in various business pursuits. In addition, it is interesting to note that representations of the macho male who performs manual labour and which have been widely mythologised in western culture were rarely found in the sample of Chinese commercials. In the occupational context, the commercials tended to disregard the values and traits manifested in relation to physical force, but instead highlighted and promoted other aspects of masculinity as having cultural currency.

The following subsections look at different coding of male roles in the workplace. The discussion focuses on how particular traits and behaviours are portrayed as the intrinsic markers of men in different occupational positions. First of all, the association between masculinity and success in administrative positions and business activities is examined. The subsequent two subsections focus on some changes in the conventional construction of masculinity by exploring the incorporation of less authoritative or less professional elements into the representation of men's working roles.

### ***Male characters as executives and officials holding power***

In the sample of commercials, it was common to find male characters depicted in scenes where they worked in an elevated position, exerting administrative control over others, and took authoritative action. Such depictions accounted for 35.14% (39 out of 111) of all characterisations of men in occupational roles. In most cases, the images of achievement, intelligence and domination over others were semiotically presented as attractive indexical attributes of manhood. This discursive strategy was employed to promote brand quality and prestige across a wide range of commercials from cars, medicines, alcoholic drinks, portable telephones, to furniture, insurance companies and banks. These commercials were all primarily targeted at men. Consequently, the commercials that represented men as high-level officials or in business activities created specific and rigid subject positions for males. That is, they encouraged male viewers to position themselves as subjects in a discourse on male superiority and to strive to live up to these stereotypical ideals.

Such a way of characterising masculinity appeared to illustrate dominant expectations of masculine culture in China and was used as a mechanism to appeal to television viewers in the promotion of products and services. Yet this type of representation did echo similar constructions of hegemonic masculine roles found in American culture – Brannon’s (1976) ‘the Big Wheel’ (a man who has the ability to obtain wealth, success and status) and ‘the Sturdy Oak’ (the male who displays confidence and self-reliance) – that adhere to traditional and conservative ideological conceptualisations of masculinity.

#### *The perpetuation of male power in occupational settings*

In the sample of commercials examined in this research, male characters were characterised according to traditional masculine codes through the presence of particular signs carried by the characters themselves as well as by the situations in which they appeared. Different visual elements, such as business attire and administrative office, worked as the key signs in the process of suggesting specific masculine characteristics in professional settings. A classic business and formal suit (black or dark blue) and white shirt seemed to mirror and confirm the male characters’ ties to their occupational identities, portraying them as socially accepted models for engaging in the corporate world. As Winner (1979) indicated, clothes incarnate culture, and clothing works as “signs linking the wearer with certain social groupings or certain specific attitudes” (p. 80). Seen in this way, the style of clothes worn by the men suggests an occupational role worthy of social status and authority. The privilege of men in the public world of work was also signalled in terms of the presentation of an office setting. In many cases, a spacious and private office with stylish furnishings, such as a modern executive desk, a cabinet full of books, and large French windows, were not mere decorative elements but were linked to the central image of the successful male. This use of setting convincingly corroborated the connotation of men’s social standing as well as accomplishment.

Some commercials also visualised the association between masculinity and power through the portrayal of men’s serious and influential demeanour in administrative positions. Male characters were portrayed as prominent figures with commanding gaze, confident facial expression, and dignified posture. These non-verbal forms

of language, as Goffman (1979) noted, invite an interpretation of power related domination. In commercials included in this study, male power was signified through specific technical codes of television images such as close-ups and high angle shots. The shots focusing on male characters' calm and dominating demeanour, and/or the illustration of men as physically taller than their subordinates evoked specific meanings related to authority and superiority. Commercials for the *Bank of Communications*, *Samsung Anyacall* mobile phones, and *IBM* all included examples of a succession of these visual images of men in executive roles. The reiteration of this representation revealed the gendered nature of authoritative structures, which resulted in the construction of culturally idealised messages.

What was apparent from the analysis of the commercials was how they played an important role in accentuating particular masculine norms and behaviours in the occupational realm. This point was well illustrated in a commercial for *Ao Kang* leather shoes which was analysed in specific detail below, and the scene by scene narrative of which was presented in Table 15.

**Table 15 *Ao Kang* Leather Shoes**

<b>Scene</b>	<b>Characters Featured</b>	<b>Summary of Action and Dialogue</b>
1	A middle-aged and a young businessman	During a negotiation, two businessmen, wearing business suits (black) and leather shoes (black), have a debate in a spacious office. The middle-aged businessman sits on a sofa. He holds a lump of sugar with his fingers and confronts the morning sunshine coming through the French windows, saying in a deep voice: "there are specific rules for success". The young businessman, with his hands clasped behind his back, stands in front of the window and gazes at the distant view. Then he walks steadily back to his seat (a close-up shot of shoes) and drops a lump of sugar into a cup of coffee, replying assertively: "the rules could be broken".
2	The two businessmen	The two men walk in a conference hall where a statue of a running man is situated and a large portrait of Napoleon riding a horse is hanging on the wall. Looking at the portrait, the old businessman states: "success comes from dreams". The young businessman confidently remarks: "dreams plus actions".
3	The two businessmen	The two men shake hands and smile as they

	and spectators	reach a consensus. While the doors to the conference hall open, they walk steadily along a red carpet together (a close-up shot of shoes). People stand on both sides of the carpet to applaud these two businessmen.
4	None	The <i>Ao Kang</i> logo and slogan appear. A male voice-over is used to state the slogan: “success needs to have feet on solid ground”.

The environment constructed by the commercial was that of a modern and spacious office, with a middle-aged and a younger man who were portrayed as possessing leadership positions and engaged in a negotiation. This 15-second spot incorporated a number of crucial signifying elements which literally highlight particular attributes ascribed to the ideal role model for men in executive positions. In this case both men were depicted as serious, self-reliant, and confident. The interaction between them was set up to involve a series of shots displaying their serious faces, elegant postures and deliberate steps, which referred to a strong code of masculinity and supremacy. In the commercial, the prime use of dark colours created symbolic meanings of calmness, style, elegance and masculine power. As Williamson (1978) argued, colours are signifiers of implicit meaning, and, therefore, they are utilised as an important technique in the production of advertising images. A significant colour that stood out in the commercial was the red of the carpet walked on by the men in their *Ao Kang* leather shoes. These colours combined to suggest something dramatic and dignified, creating a critical situation where the notions of masculinity and power were combined as a unified discourse. In this symbolic context, the display of the statue of a running man and the portrait of Napoleon made sense. They served as iconic signs which were indexical in the meanings of success and powerful aggressiveness. The commercial was also interesting because it gave the viewers a clear indication of how men’s success and authority were recognised and admired by others; that is, the last scene in the commercial represented the men walking along the carpet and receiving congratulatory applause after they had reached a consensus through the negotiation process.

The emphasis on masculine characteristics that are associated with occupational success were not only represented visually, but also linguistically through the use of very masculine voice-overs. In the commercial for *Ao Kang* leather shoes, the

conversational points made by each male character emphasised their masculine assertiveness and competitiveness, and their intonation was both deep and steady:

Middle-aged man: There are specific rules for success.

Younger man: The rules could be broken.

The middle-aged man: Success comes from dreams.

The younger man: Dreams plus actions.

With the help of the spoken word, the commercial literally told the viewers how successful men think and how they behave. This linguistic strategy encouraged a reading of the representation of masculine dominance, competitiveness, and assertiveness. It is also worth noting that the key terms ‘success’, ‘broken’ and ‘actions’ were presented more loudly than the other parts of their speech. It is argued that intonation and voice quality convey meaning (Desmarais, 2003; Laver, 1994; Pittam, 1994). From this point of view, the commercial reinforced the traditional belief that men have the natural and necessary qualities to hold and exert power.

The use of voice-overs was an important discursive strategy in Chinese television advertising and was used to construct and elevate the characterisation of males in business. For instance, in a commercial for *Septwolves* men’s clothing, vocal messages were used to illustrate specific aspects of a male leader. When the commercial portrayed the image of the man carefully considering and signing a contract with his business partners, a deep and masculine voice claimed: “Xin Bi Lun Yan (grand goals), Yan Bi Tian Gao (infinite ambitions), Shi Jie Zhi Da, Jin Zai Yan Di (the world before your eyes)”. It is interesting to note that the idiom of “Xin Bi Lu Yuan, Yan Bi Tian Gao” has been used to characterise men with great achievements in Chinese literature such as novels and short stories. The statement was obviously a signifier of convention. It, therefore, perpetuated the stereotypical view of men as worthy of respect, and attempted to make the viewers believe that these values perfectly matched the advertised product and that purchase of *Septwolves* clothing would associate the wearer with these attributes.

The elevation of masculinity in Chinese television advertising seemed to align with hegemonic discourses of gender found in western culture. However, it is worth noting that the articulation of masculinity and occupation might not only draw on the western tradition. That is, although the commercials had common characteristics in terms of involving similar signifying practices and setting up the myth of male dominance, they relied on different coding of traditional gender roles. In a commercial promoting *Nissan Cefiro* (an automobile), there was also a scene illustrating a business interaction between a middle-aged and a younger professional. They were portrayed wearing business suits, tasting tea (using a Chinese-style tea set) and having a harmonious discussion. At the manifest level, the portrayal might seem at first to be just another example of a common representation of men as having achieved professional success and, consequently, possessing social status. On reading the visual text more closely, the viewer sees that the younger man listens to the opinions expressed by the middle-aged one, and both of them behave in a modest and polite, yet dignified manner. In addition, tea culture in China involves social and business networks. In the background the viewer also sees a traditional Asian-style office furnished with antique flower vases and display stands. Thus, a sense of tradition was created. With this emphasis on tradition, the representation of the executives was specifically recognised as being contextualised in Confucian-based east Asian principles. The Confucian system has advocated rites [Li] as a basic principle in China's business etiquette (Laurence, Gao, & Paul, 1995), which is characterised by hierarchy and social harmony and regards politeness, modesty and self-effacement as the virtues of men. In these terms it is evident how traditional ideologies of Chinese masculinity were reflected and reinforced in the *Nissan Cefiro* commercial.

#### *Masculine rituals in business-related social activities*

Another interesting point about those commercials that articulated manliness and executive function to produce a culturally preferred form of masculinity was the involvement of male characters in business-related social activities. In setting up this situation, the commercials often portrayed males as the outstanding and peerless characters who appeared in a series of formal occasions such as an opening ceremony or a public speech. This characterisation of men was particularly apparent in many of the commercials for alcoholic beverages. The

commercials attempted to direct viewers' attention not only to the professional demeanours displayed by the men, but also to the respect, status and honour they were accorded in the world of business.

A commercial for *He Tao* Chinese liquor, for instance, portrayed a successful man with refined behaviour at a business banquet. Wearing a conservative business suit and tie, the man stood up from his seat at the middle of the table, and raised a wine glass in a dignified and confidently presented toast. By presenting the man's most conspicuous position (occupying the centre seat and proposing the first toast), the commercial contributed to a conventional discourse that constructs masculinity in and through professional achievement and social esteem. The ideology of masculinity underlying the commercial could make equally good and similar sense from both western and Chinese angles: self assurance, leadership, authority, and the ability to hold the attention of an audience are traits of a highly refined and culturally valued masculinity (Connell, 1998). However, other signs in the background of the commercial – the displays of a Chinese-style folding screen in the banqueting hall, as well as a waitress in cheongsam (the traditional dress for Chinese women) – suggested a reference to social customs of the Chinese tradition. The commercial was part of a discourse of masculinity and class in which individuals were depicted as behaving according to their rank and, through such behaviours, social order was maintained.

In line with the traditional Confucian view of masculinity, Chinese television commercials certainly reflected and promoted the belief that the notions of 'achievement' and 'status' were intrinsic social values of men. In these terms it could be said that advertising representations worked to discursively support social perceptions that professional settings are a male domain. Such perception is strongly linked to and reinforced by the term 'successful male' (Chenggong Renshi) that has been used as a mainstream cultural symbol, and a new model for admiration and emulation in Chinese mass media and society since the era of economic reforms (Ferry, 2003). However, it is worth noting that the social power of men in Chinese Confucian tradition was primarily associated with their genteel qualities rooted in cultural attainments and morals (Song, 2004). The representation of professional and material success as markers of masculinity is a



recent occurrence in Chinese society and one which borrows from and demonstrates the influence of western individual capitalist models of hegemonic masculinity (Louie, 2002). In utilising portrayals for the purposes of product promotion that championed such constructions of masculinity the Chinese television industry was participating in changing cultural constructions of masculinity, but also creating tensions between Chinese and western, and between traditional and modern constructions.

***Alternative masculine occupations: Emphasis on comradeship and hard work***

Some commercials examined in this study portrayed the occupational role of men in a way that was distinct from the traditional hegemonic models based on privileged positions and executive power that have been discussed above. As the results of content analysis revealed in Chapter 6, in about 10% (12 out of 111) of the portrayals of male characters in occupational roles, the men were portrayed as young, low-ranking officials in the workplace. While these characters were still presented as hard-working, the situations in which they were depicted emphasised elements of comradeship and coping with pressure, rather than power and individual competitiveness. The commercials thus recreated the way in which men engaged in less authoritative positions through identifying specific masculine characteristics and challenging traditional gendered subjectivities.

The representation of men as performing secretarial work within office settings could be seen as part of a discourse on commoradery. They were portrayed in groups, as part of male cooperation and bonding in the workplace. A particularly good example of this was a commercial for *Wei Zhi* men's attire that featured collaboration and cooperation between men in an office setting. In the commercial, a young man was portrayed as assisting his male colleague who was labouring to lift a document box onto a high bookshelf. Towards the end of the commercial these two men smiled at each other and their behaviour was admired by others. Their tacit understanding and genuine smiles, which directly addressed the camera, suggested the development of friendly and cooperative relations as a socially valuable practice among male workers. By setting up the scenes of harmony and comradeship between the characters, the commercial might play a role in modifying masculine norms and relationships in occupations.

As far as product category was concerned, the representation of young, industrious men was especially drawn on in the commercials for non-alcoholic and alcoholic beverages (n=4). In these cases male characters were represented as struggling with tough challenges and negative situations at work. The logic within these commercials was that the advertised products were presented as a means to combat the pressure of a hard day's work. A commercial for *Cactus Le Vin Blanc*, for instance, depicted a young male company employee who worked totally alone in front of a computer at night. The commercial used signs of yellow light from a reading lamp, a quiet office space, as well as crumpled paper balls, to create an atmosphere of tedium and struggle to get things right. The shots of the man frowning, thinking with his hand touching his head, and looking carefully at the computer screen were deployed to signify stress and industriousness. Towards the end of the commercial he drank a cup of *Cactus Le Vin Blanc* as a means of relaxing. After drinking, the man shouted towards the office room's window and then the glass pane shattered. This excessive representation connoted supernatural power, encouraging the viewers to transfer the meaning from the role model onto the product.

In portraying male characters as occupying white-collar positions, the commercials failed to conform to the orthodox forms of masculine behaviour such as superiority and leadership, and reframed other significant aspects of the occupational role of men such as cooperation and industriousness. As a research study conducted by *China Youth Daily* (Xinhua, 2005, May 11) revealed, work was one of the major causes of stress for Chinese young people aged between 19 and 35. It also found that a high percentage of male participants (66.5%) were under pressure from competition and high expectations of their jobs. In the commercials, the representation of masculinity was in complicit collusion with and reinforced the existing discourse in Chinese society in order to sell the products.

### ***Re-creation of modern successful men: Occupation and family***

Eight commercials in the whole sample of commercials portrayed male characters as being career-oriented, and as *simultaneously* engaged in the domestic sphere of

family. What was striking in these commercials was that men were still primarily portrayed in their successful professional capacities, and yet their domestic and parental roles were easily co-enacted. Such representation has been regarded as creating plural identities for men in western contexts (Kaufman, 1999; Lazar, 2000). It has been argued that the way in which masculinity was constructed in the public and private spheres was asymmetrical; that is, men’s career development came to be seen as enriched by their family lives (Lazar, 2000). This phenomenon contributes to reconstructing the myth of men as breadwinners. Traditionally, the needs of the family required the man to assume the primary responsibility for securing the funds necessary to support his dependents (Barrett & McIntosh, 1990; Holt & Thompson, 2004; Lewis, 2001). This ideal of masculinity, however, was challenged by a substantial rise in female participation in the labour force and an increasing involvement of men in housework and childcare (Janssens, 1997).

A similar reconstruction of masculinity in which career and family are represented as compatible aspects of a man’s life were found in the commercials featured in this research. A typical example was the commercial for *Contac NT* cold cure which portrayed a male character maintaining an energetic performance in the workplace and fulfilling his familial obligations after a hard day at work despite suffering from a cold. The commercial, the narrative of which was detailed in Table 16 below, illustrated how male dominance and privilege continued to be constructed in both public and domestic spheres.

**Table 16 *Contac NT* Cold Cure**

<b>Scene</b>	<b>Characters Featured</b>	<b>Summary of Action and Dialogue</b>
1	A man and his wife at home 7:00am-9:00am (A digital time recording appears in the lower-middle place of almost every scene).	Along with the sound of an alarm clock ringing, a middle-aged man rapidly shaves, brushes his teeth and eats breakfast. He adjusts his necktie and his wife helps him to neatly adjust his business suit. He says, “I maintain high efficiency for every minute and avoid suffering from a cold.” Then the man drives his car to the company.
2	The man and his subordinate staff at their workplace 9:00am	When the man walks through the open-plan office area, many staff members greet him with a “good morning”.

3	The man at his workplace 10:00am-15:00pm	While in his office, the man consistently peruses documents and makes phone calls energetically. This attracts the admiring gaze of his subordinates.
4	The man participating in a conference 16:00pm-17:00pm	While the wall clock hanging in the conference room shows four o'clock, all the staff members prepare to have a meeting. The man makes an enthusiastic speech at the front of the conference room.
5	The man on his way home from work 17:00pm-19:00pm	When the man leaves work after a full day he is still full of vitality. He drives through a brightly lit downtown area and buys a bouquet of flowers on his way home.
6	The man, and his daughter and wife at home 19:00pm-after	When the man enters the home, his young daughter gives him a hug and he gives the flowers to his wife.
7	None	A cartoon pill character appears to illustrate the drug's resistance to the effect of a severe cold for 12 hours.
8	The whole family	The whole family sits on the couch. While the mother pleases her daughter by drawing a picture, the father gazes at them.
9	None	The brand name, logo and slogan (take two pills per day, avoid trouble with a cold) appear. A deep male voice is used to announce the slogan.

In this commercial, the representation of the man performing his professional and domestic roles in an efficient manner was used to illustrate the product's helpfulness in maintaining long-lasting resistance to cold symptoms. This point was especially demonstrated through the digitally indicated time (in the lower-middle space of almost every scene) and a large wall clock hanging in the office, as well as the sound of an alarm clock ringing in the morning. The commercial, therefore, suggested that the man was mechanistic in structuring his daily routine. More specifically, since illness "can reduce a man's status in masculine hierarchies" (Charmaz, 1995, p. 268), the commercial seemed to imply that a 'real' man is not allowed to get sick because he should be strong and assume many responsibilities in both his public and private affairs. From a social constructionist and feminist perspective, Courtenay (2000) argued that health-related beliefs and behaviours contribute to demonstrating dominant norms of masculinity in which men are constructed as "the stronger sex" (p. 1388). Clearly, the role of the man depicted in the commercial was imposed on gendered prescriptions: men are self-reliant, not vulnerable and tough.

The commercial produced two different subject positions for male viewers. Within the context of work, the commercial again reiterated the roles and characteristics stereotypically reserved for men such as success, status, self-reliance, and endeavour. In this respect, the shots displaying the man's prominent performance, as well as the morning greeting and admiring gaze of his subordinates, became meaningful. In the domestic context, the man was also represented as the most salient figure through his economic and emotional ties to the family, and in terms of masculine dominance and female submissiveness. The commercial began with a scene of the man being accustomed to demanding the services and attention of his wife, and it ended by depicting him as a mature husband/father who was romantic, affable, and engaged in indoor leisure activities with his wife and daughter.

By representing men's success and status through both career and family life, the *Contac NT* cold cure commercial affirmed the patriarchal, heterosexual orthodoxy, and reinforced Chinese traditional belief that "equates a perfect marriage with personal self-worth and achievement" (Higgins, Zheng, Liu, & Sun, 2002, p. 77) as an ideal of successful men. Such a highly contrived image featured socially desirable traits in men, and was used to encourage male viewers to aspire to act like the role models in the commercials.

## **Conclusion**

The focus of this chapter was on the construction of femininity and masculinity in terms of their characterisation in professional positions. The television commercials' representation of women and men in occupational roles and activities continued, in many instances, to perpetuate the deep-seated patriarchal ideology of Chinese culture. The stereotypical views of gender differences were articulated in the workplace; that is, while female characters were associated with youth, attractiveness, submissiveness and servility, male characters were accredited with elevated characteristics such as power, status and achievement. By constructing the occupational roles of women and men around different work-related values, both a dichotomy and hierarchy of gender roles were constructed in

and through the representation of occupational activities in Chinese television advertising.

The representation of women in clerical and service-related work was at variance with the ideal of domestic femininity. This phenomenon, which was more complicated than a parallel with the emergence of a commercial segmentation of a market for professional women, has been influenced by China's accelerated modernization and women's independence, as well as by western trends of feminist thought. Yet, at the same time, the occupational roles of women were constructed in terms of a number of discourses around physical appearance, incompetence, and relations with colleagues and supervisors. With the emphasis on these aspects of the characterisation, the commercials merged the modern and the traditional.

In this study's sample, the reiteration of women in occupational activities was in contradistinction to the political rhetoric of China's reconstruction programs during the post-revolutionary period (1950-1977) which uphold the icon of 'the iron maiden' (Tie Gu Niang) and required Chinese women to become rigidified and desexualised model workers. In addition, the portrayals of women in managerial positions did not occur on a level footing with those of men, and involved a combination of conventional ideologies of domesticity and representation of women as objects whose greatest importance lay in their physical attractiveness to men.

The recurrent portrayal of men as fulfilling executive roles highlighted power, intelligence, and confidence as appropriately masculine. The presence of particular signs carried by the male characters, such as facial expression, dress code and professional demeanor, constructed mythic meanings of male dominance in the workplace and business contexts. Men were basically used as symbols of success. In this way, the construction of masculinity drew on codes of masculinity embedded in both Chinese and western patriarchal traditions. In the sample studied in this research, there was a minor tendency to articulate an ordinary, less authoritative version of masculinity – young male office employees – which presented the ideas of comradeship, industriousness and pressure release as

essentials for their professional identity. A very small minority of the commercials tended to present a move away from the traditional representation of men's professional success by combining their occupational and familial roles. While Chinese television commercials intertwined various discourses on what constitute the professional and working roles of men, promoting products and services on their quality, style and function was a specifically male address. Having discussed the cultural construction of gender roles and relations within the occupational realm, the next chapter identifies and examines particular ways in which women and men are depicted in recreation and leisure activities.

## **CHAPTER NINE**

### **THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN AND MEN IN LEISURE AND RECREATIONAL ACTIVITIES**

#### **Introduction**

The previous chapter focused on the portrayal of women and men within different professional positions. It not only identified a number of traditional notions of gender and relations between the sexes, but also revealed reconstructions of occupational roles such as middle-rank female professionals and young male white-collar workers. The results of the content analysis reported in Chapter 6 revealed that a third significant way of characterising gender was through leisure in the sample of Chinese television commercials. This chapter examines how female and male characters are depicted in specific types of recreation and leisure activities. In particular, it sheds light on ways in which gender and leisure are articulated in relation to multiple ideologies and competing discourses in advertising imagery.

In this chapter the term ‘recreation’ is used to define activities which bring refreshment and pleasure to individuals. Its representation is another dimension through which we are able to explore how certain expectations of gendered roles and characteristics are socially perpetuated. The chapter also attempts to draw on the findings of previous studies (e.g., Aitchison, 2003; Deem, 1986; Green, Hebron, & Woodward, 1990; Horna, 1989; Jackson, 1988; Louie, 2002; Shaw, 1985, 1994) that have emerged mainly from the disciplines of sociology, and which have shown the gendered nature of leisure participation in society. It has been argued by these earlier researchers that, due to heavy household chores and limited economic power, women encounter more constraints than men do in their access to and experience of recreational activities. Therefore, the leisure constraints for women reflect and convey the social expectations based on structured, gender-based power relations.



The quantitative information presented in the content analysis (Chapter 6) showed that gender bias was exemplified in the context of different types of leisure activities. In this respect, this chapter explores how cultural meanings of gender in the commercials were created in recreational roles to promote products and services. The chapter looks at the extent to which the portrayal of feminine and masculine recreation conveys different and competing cultural values in both public and private spheres; it also discusses how particular subject positions are generated by legitimating diverse discourses embedded in both Chinese and western contexts in the construction of gender representation. In addition, this chapter focuses on the exploitative use of female sexuality as a common component of the representation of women in recreational activities.

### **The construction of female advertising characters in recreational roles**

In the west, studies of women and leisure have identified a number of critical concerns about how culture constructs femininity in terms of socialised sex-role behaviour, female access to recreation opportunities, and gender differences in leisure participation rates (Aitchison, 2003; Bialeschki & Henderson, 1986; Green, Hebron & Woodward, 1995; Thrane, 2000). The literature suggested that women's leisure experiences are influenced by their expected social roles and characteristics. From a feminist perspective, the inequality of women in recreational activities has been associated with cultural stereotypes and patriarchal traditions (Deem, 1982). With regard to mass media coverage, researchers (Bolla, 1990; Hilliard, 1984; Koivula, 1999; Pirinen, 1997) have found over a number of decades that women are underrepresented in sports and leisure activities. For example, Bolla (1990) examined leisure advertisements in two Canadian women's magazines from 1964 to 1987, and concluded that female characters appeared "highly sedentary, often mindless, and heavily dependent on men" (p. 251). In comparison with the roles and norms established for women in western contexts, femininity in the Chinese Confucian tradition was even more strictly defined in terms of their roles in the domestic sphere, and their obligation and subordination to men (Leung, 2003; Li, 1988). Therefore, it is worth examining how, and to what extent, female roles may be culturally reconstructed through representations of recreation in a less traditional 'feminine' domain in Chinese television advertising today.

### *The representation of women as 'urban sophisticate'*

In the sample of commercials which made up this research study, the majority of images used in the commercials constructed feminine recreation within social interactional activities occurring in public places such as restaurants and shopping malls. This presentation ran counter to the Confucian ideal of the feminine where women are expected to be engaged in home-based activities. Whilst notions surrounding womanhood in the Chinese Confucian tradition are predicated upon the key concepts of 'domesticity' and 'chastity', the female characters in this study's sample of commercials were typically young, good-looking and well-dressed, and enjoying their free time outside of the home. Interestingly, this was not the first time that such an ideological nexus between the cultural co-ordinates of femininity, youth, leisure, and consumption has occurred in Chinese history (Zhang, 1994). During the 1930s, a period of western colonialism and the New Life Movement in China, the representation of the 'New Woman' which was recognised by the government and public played a role in repackaging young female identities by introducing new moral values such as self-determination and autonomy into the traditional view of personhood (Ferry, 2003). As Ferry (2003) explained, the 'New Woman' – an icon of urban modernity – was characterized by the way she opened up a public life and "was self-supporting, surrounded herself with modern (western) accoutrements such as cosmetics, new technology, frequented dance halls and coffee houses, and sought her own marriage partner" (p. 280). In some of the larger cities in China such as Shanghai, the ideal of an emancipated female in social and cultural life influenced the dress and behaviour of some urbanised women and was particularly prominent in print advertising (Ferry, 2003). After 1949, this phenomenon virtually disappeared as the Chinese Communist Party emphasised collective production and political activities. At this time, the 'Iron Maiden' – a version of a masculinised female body striving at physical labour – replaced the 'New Woman' (Johansson, 2001).

In the last decade, numerous articles (e.g., Hung & Li, 2006; Hooper, 1998; Hopkins, 2007; Johansson, 2001) have identified how a globalised consumer culture and the emergence of a middle-class culture in China have positioned women as a focal target for consumption, which in turn cultivates consumerist values and promotes new identities based on style and fashion. Many commercials

in this study reflected this sociocultural context, constructing Chinese femininity as engaged in social and recreational activities in urban public places. In this way, the commercials appeared to correspond with and highlight a series of western-oriented values such as freedom, modernity, fashion, youth and hedonism. This feature was particularly apparent in commercials for beauty products, and food and non-alcoholic beverages, where the use of the products was related to a way of living happily or a source of pleasure. However, the ways in which contemporary females were represented in leisure contexts still continued to perpetrate rather old ideas that women are not particularly physically active.

This is the case in a commercial for *Wrigley's Doublemint* chewing gum, in which a female character was shown enjoying the pleasure of socialising and singing with a group of friends in a Karaoke TV pub (see Table 17). The commercial attempted to associate the gum with recreational enjoyment in order to promote its refreshing taste.

**Table 17 *Wrigley's Doublemint* Chewing Gum: 'A Revolving Door'**

Scene	Characters Featured	Summary of Action and Dialogue
1	A young woman	A beautiful, young woman cheerfully walks into a brightly lit downtown area at night. She goes to meet her friends in a Karaoke TV pub (KTV), wearing a tank top and short skirt, and carrying a handbag.
2	The woman	While the woman is trying to enter the pub, she fails over and over again, as she is foiled by the revolving door and she becomes very annoyed.
3	The woman	Then the woman notices the words "are you really prepared?" on the <i>Doublemint</i> gum's electronic billboard which is positioned by the side of the door, and she suddenly realises the problem. She takes out a piece of gum and chews it.
4	The woman	After this, the woman finally enters the KTV pub through the revolving door, and simultaneously the charming, confident smile returns to her face. A male voice-over announces: " <i>Wrigley's Doublemint</i> gum, with the unique, minty flavor that makes you feel full of confidence and very welcome".
5	The woman and her friends	The woman sits in the middle and is surrounded by her friends. She holds the microphone, happily singing a song with her friends in the KTV room.

In this commercial, fashion and modernity were signified by various elements of the woman's physical appearance such as her stylish haircut and clothing. In the background bright night lights and large shop windows signified a sophisticated urban environment. The image of the vivacious young woman being alone and free to socialise without the need for a male partner was synchronised to cheerful music, thus constructing modern Chinese femininity as liberated and pursuing individual pleasure. The commercial initially played upon a discourse of an independent woman who has the freedom to choose her own social and recreational life. To that extent the commercial reinforced the myth of 'modern Chinese femininity' (Ferry, 2003). However, a closer reading of the commercial revealed that the portrayal was somewhat more complex than this, and actually degrading of the women's abilities as she could not complete even the simple task of going through the revolving door of the Karaoke TV pub on her own. In this way, the initial image of independence was juxtaposed with one of dependence because she was not presented as a fully capable participant in public entertainment, despite being endowed with the contemporarily desirable attributes of 'youth, beauty, and fashionable clothes'. In the commercial, the woman's helplessness was magically negated by the power of the chewing gum in that, as soon as she chewed it, doors literally and metaphorically 'opened for her'. In this context, the gum was cast as her entree into the world she desired. In addition, a male voice-over was intended to be authoritative in proclaiming the consequence for the female character of using the gum. Therefore, the commercial played a role in blending traditional images of female dependency with modern consumerist views of the 'modern woman' in order to sell products to female viewers. From a more critical perspective, the commercial set up a potential role model for women in leisure activities, yet they were reminded – somewhat ridiculously – that the 'key' to their acceptance and happiness seemed to lie in something as trivial as a piece of chewing gum.

In the same vein, there were a number of commercials that all utilised the idea that the advertised products complemented and supported women's leisure experiences. A commercial for *Cici* milk tea, for example, depicted a well-dressed and well-groomed woman reading a book whilst enjoying a hot drink in a coffee

shop on a snowy afternoon. Attractive as this scene was, the girl was then shown to be imagining herself floating in a small boat through what appeared to be a fantastic world of flowers and rivers. The tea became the key to unlock her imagination, and intensified her sense of pleasure and relaxation. Such a portrayal denoted a very private kind of pleasure: daydreaming. By creating an association between the romantic fantasy and the milk tea, the commercial constructed a mythic world of the feminine in which pleasure and personal consumption were defined as the significant aspects of women's leisure involvement.

Analysis of the commercials included in this research interestingly found that the recreational role of women was more likely to be associated with self-interested leisure shopping than with grocery shopping for the family. Products or services advertised as leisure shopping were credit cards and travel agency services. Female characters were portrayed as having typically favourite female goods such as cosmetics and clothing, and as enjoying the purchasing process. In a commercial for the *JCB* International credit card, for example, a young woman enthusiastically tried on different styles of shoes, saying, "I will take them all". In order to signify abundance and a carefree attitude, many shoes and shoe boxes were left untidily around the couch she sat on. After simply paying by credit card, the woman cheerfully held a number of shopping bags in both hands and walked out of the store. This scene was accompanied by light, cheerful music. Here, female pleasure was represented as deriving entirely from purchasing desirable goods for one's own use and indulgence, and the commercial suggested that this degree of pleasure and freedom could be assured by utilising the credit card. At the same time, the commercial could also be read as a construction of femininity around urban entertainment and individualist consumer culture.

A clear illustration of a consumption-based leisure culture in Chinese television commercials, and the articulation of femininity and hedonism within them, contributed to the image of modern urban women found in the commercials. Such a characterisation not only drew on a discourse of social autonomy within the public sphere, but also shaped female identities in terms of looks and dress. In this way, the representation of women in recreational activities and their public role as consumers appeared to be an extension of the ideology of the 1930s' 'New

Woman', constituting significant symbolic capital in contemporary China. This phenomenon, as Dai (1997) argued, reflects a crisis of Chinese cultural identity and brings the image of Chinese women closer to modern western ideals. Echoing a similar construction of western models in public places, the commercials challenged the basic principle of Confucian morality that requires women to sacrifice everything for their families, and, not-at-all unsurprisingly, were incongruent with the state-regulated gender equality notions that asserted women's status through class and political considerations during the revolutionary period (Curtin, 1975; Luo & Hao, 2007).

### ***Home-based leisure activities: Passive and carefree***

The second most common representation of feminine recreation in Chinese television commercials consisted of portraying women in home-bound activities such as watching television, reading, listening to music, and receiving visitors. The ways in which cultural meanings of gender were created appear to confirm the myth of feminine passivity in leisure (Fowles, 1996; Leath & Lumpkin, 1992). The commercials that featured women involved in in-home activities typically promoted such products as coffee, milk tea, chocolate and cosmetics, and set up an environment in which the products were part of the women's leisure experiences. In most cases, the emphasis on carefree living was represented through the use of music, very casual dress codes, and comfortable indoor settings. The commercials were evidently coherent in the sense that they constructed the gendered aspect of recreational roles.

In one of the series of *Jin Sihou* chocolate commercials, which promoted the product's 'mellow and sweet taste', a young woman was portrayed as reading while lounging on a large couch, and enjoying the pleasure of eating the chocolate. Such signs as her supine posture and her loosely fitting clothes supported the idea of relaxation in relation to consumption of chocolate. Furthermore, the notion of woman at leisure was coupled with a shot of a bright living room in the background, and the choice of pleasant music. Whilst the Confucian concept constructs femininity in terms of serving others, the commercial portrayed the woman as self-centred and self-indulgent in the way that she consumed the luxury, 'foreign' product. While still situated in the home, and physically inactive in her

leisure pursuit of reading, the woman was essentially 'modern' in that her own individual pleasure was the focus of attention in the commercial.

Femininity, women and home-based leisure activities were also articulated with a discourse of friendship. This was a particular strategy adopted in commercials for beauty products or food. The environment created by most commercials was that of an indoor setting such as a bedroom or living room, with a group of young women portrayed as being happy, convivial, and openly conversant. Signs such as talk, intimacy, smiling and laughter were used not only as key elements in the process of constructing women's friendships, but also in creating a strong atmosphere of sedentary, indulgent relaxation. For example, in a commercial for *Hazeline* shampoo that was obviously targeted at women, there was a scene of two young female characters savouring dessert on a couch in a large sunny living room while sharing the secret of maintaining well-conditioned hair. The commercial drew on typical ways in which women bond by sharing their knowledge and ideas with each other. The content of their 'friendship talk' provided a good example of 'gendering' (Green, 1998), revealing the construction of women as being concerned about their appearance. Their commenting on each other's beauty practices could be seen as a shared interest that binds them together. By creating a 'realistic' situation in which two female characters engaged in a 'credible' feminine discussion about how to get shiny hair, the commercial acted as a channel of informative communication on the topic of hair care for its female viewers. Accordingly, the commercial presented the women's mutual self-disclosure in private domestic space, perpetuating an image of females being physically inactive and focused on their looks. In essence, such representations constructed women as willing participants in an ideological discourse which regards females as primarily valuable as objects of male desire, to be looked upon, and rewarded for constructing themselves according to men's expectations of submissive femininity.

### ***The representation of women in sports and physical activities***

In this study, very few women were portrayed participating in sports and exercise (n=13 out of 144 recreational role or 9.03%). Even though the number of female characters involved in these leisure activities was small, some representations

appeared to enhance traditional feminine qualities while others challenged gender stereotypes.

Almost half of these (6 out of 13) that featured women involved in athletic activities emphasised physical attractiveness and fitness. Yet, what was presented to the viewers was that young female characters were restricted to activities, such as yoga, which are traditionally considered appropriate for women (Koivula, 1995; Matteo, 1986), and those which allow women to focus concerns about their appearance. Such representations perpetuated the idea that a trim physique is an essential part of the ideal of feminine beauty. In this way, the participation in sporting situations – in combination with the use of a product – was presented as a way to achieve a healthy and attractive body. This strategy was employed to target women, and promote appropriate female appearance and behaviour, in commercials such as those for oatmeal and body wash. The articulation of female physical traits and athletic performance in Chinese television advertising was similar to what Desmarais (2003) found about sport imagery in commercials collected from both France and New Zealand. He argued that women were portrayed to promote cosmetic fitness with the use of advertised products such as mineral water or video fitness programmes, and the subject position created for female viewers was “one of thin desirable objects who should look after their physical appearance” (p. 227). Although cultural differences are influential in each country, the similarity of the representation of women in recreational roles in China, France, and New Zealand showed a clear pattern which demonstrated an increasingly global view of femininity in television advertising to some extent.

Three commercials for instant oatmeal illustrated the food’s helpfulness in the achievement of a desirable body shape and the promotion of acceptable eating behaviour by portraying the women’s fitness and vitality when doing yoga. The commercials positioned the products in a sports discourse related to gender in the way that they presented female characters in graceful, fluent poses. As a result, instant oatmeal was highlighted as being beneficial for women engaged in gentle, physical activities. Similarly a commercial for *Olay* body wash which depicted a woman participating in a yoga class focused on the product’s ability to produce an attractive appearance, rather than on her physical performance. In the commercial,



when she extended her arms and poses, she found her skin was dry. After a scene in which she used the body wash while showering, and an accompanying female voice-over explained the benefits of the advertised product, the woman resumed her yoga exercises. Towards the end of the commercial her sleeves slipped down smoothly when she raised her arms over her head, which clearly conveyed the idea that the body wash had improved the condition of her skin. Yoga is essentially an eastern activity and one which emphasises both physical and mental control in the sporting arena. While the commercials ostensibly drew on a specific sporting context and discourse, the discourse was one that complied more fully with the Confucian concept of graceful femininity rather than with a concept of muscular athleticism in sport.

In some cases (n=7) female characters took part in outdoor physical activities such as running and travelling, and displayed attributes that have been traditionally defined as masculine. These women were portrayed in ways which suggested they were aggressive, courageous, and active. As a result, these representations challenged the conventions that women are subordinate, passive and frail (Broad, 2001; Shaw, 2001), and might empower them by providing them with a site to challenge the dominant patriarchal ideology (Henderson, 1996; McDermott, 2000).

A scene in a commercial that promoted a *Sony Ericsson* music phone, for example, represented a young woman running along the footpath in the morning. She wore a sports vest and shorts and listened to music while she was running. Her unencumbered simplified clothing and her short hair symbolically conveyed an active and athletic image. Other signs related to vitality were a sound track of her footstep, and a close-up shot of sweat on her neck. The commercial created a sense of women's physical power through entertainment and sports which is traditionally marked as a social constraint on women, thereby representing a distinct construction of normative femininity.

A commercial for *Mai Dong* sports drink offered another example of the challenging of gender role stereotyping through the representation of women's access to leisure physical activities. In order to convey values of energy and vigour, the commercial portrayed a young woman skateboarding with other male

riders in the street. Skateboarding has long been an icon of popular culture and a male dominated sport in western culture. It symbolises fun, adventure, confidence and nonconformity (Kelly, Pomerantz & Currie, 2005). In the commercial, these values were conveyed by the visual signifiers of the woman wearing skate clothes, and jumping with her skateboard in mid air. Her outstanding performance, together with her short hair and confident smile, suggested a woman competing in a masculine, physical game. Such a way of constructing femininity not only was part of a discourse on global popular culture but also significantly challenged the Confucian patriarchal ideology that regards Chinese women as passive and subordinate. The commercial, therefore, offered a potent model of feminine liberated behaviour to young female viewers.

Female characters could therefore be portrayed as completely independent from men, even within a strategy to promote products traditionally targeted at men, such as automobiles. A commercial for *Triangle* tyres exemplified this point clearly. It was based on the representation of a young woman who refused to behave like a lady as she enjoys driving a rugged all-terrain jeep. The woman was depicted as pursuing ‘masculine’ pleasure, accelerating the jeep across a field and smiling confidently. At the end of the commercial, the woman was shown touching the spare tyre placed on the back door of her jeep while stating: “the *Triangle* tyre is more reliable than men; it is my perfect travel partner”. This representation clearly rejected the socially constructed feminine stereotypes of physical, mechanical and technical helplessness, and women’s dependence on men, and thereby challenged discourses of dominant hegemonic masculinity. Whereas physical restrictions were historically regarded as markers of Chinese femininity, for example, the binding of women’s feet that made them fragile and dependent because of their inability to walk (Fan, 1997), the commercials emphasising the physical aspects of the recreational role of women seemed to challenge constraints on women, in particular those related to physical repression of the female body under patriarchal ideology.

### **Leisure, femininity and the use of women as sex objects**

Out of 144 female characters involved in leisure situations, 30 (20.83%) were portrayed wearing revealing clothing and in sexually alluring poses. These

representations seemed to be employed as a strategy to capture the audience's attention through the appeal of dress and the objectification of women's bodies. As a result of China's becoming enmeshed in global consumer culture, the commercial exploitation of female sexual attractiveness has increasingly become a significant component of gender representation in the country.

Chinese television commercials used female characters in sexually alluring poses in, for example, commercials for bedclothes and mattresses. In most cases, women were depicted in submissive poses, relaxing and wearing revealing night clothes. These commercials worked in several ways. Through their dress and their suggestive poses, the women were directly positioned as tempting objects designed to satisfy the male gaze. However, such representation seemed to be targeted at females as the potential purchasers of products. In this way, the commercial supported what Winship (2000) described as "the visual tradition of women's narcissistic pleasure in their own sexualized and semi-naked bodies" (p. 40) in the west. Goldman (1992) argued that women are invited to identify with such objectifying portrayals of women:

The spectator-buyer is meant to envy herself [sic] as she will become if she buys the product. She is meant to imagine herself transformed by the product into an object of envy for others, an envy which will then justify her loving herself (p. 113).

Repetitive exposure to the commercials, therefore, could encourage the female viewers to believe that their association with the advertised product will make them attractive to men.

In a commercial for *ISIKI* bed linen, for example, an attractive woman was portrayed as wearing a sexy, short, white nightgown, and reclining passively on a bed. Her scantily clothed body and her alluring eye contact with the camera signified a relaxed, yet sexually seductive atmosphere. This representation invited one interpretation of a passive, charming female, presumably passionate in her sexual desire, who waited for her man. As a source of men's pleasure, she was expected to be relaxed and sexually desirable. In this context, the recreational role of women was constructed almost entirely through sexuality, which transformed them into 'sexual fetishes' (Schroeder & Borgerson, 2003; Steele, 1996). In

addition, the bed referred to the idea of privacy which itself linked to notions of sexual activity. While inviting women to insert themselves as the object of a male gaze and enhancing the appeal of *ISIKI* bed linen, the commercial drew on a kind of feminine passivity and a willingness to be subordinate to male desire. For some theorists (e.g., Gill, 2008; Winship, 2000), however, this form of feminist theorising of such imagery only ever positions women as ‘victims’ of the male gaze. They argued that, as a result of the impact of feminism and the improvement of women’s economic status, advertisers in the UK changed the portrayal of female characters from one which emphasises a submission to male desire to a new emphasis on women actively seeking out their own pleasures and longings. This new feminist approach incorporates the idea of women’s sexual agency (Gill, 2003; Goldman, 1992; Winship, 2000), disrupting the conventional objectification of the female.

In contrast to the representation of female characters as passive and sexual beings, many commercials in the sample contributed to ‘empowering’ (Whelean, 1995; Winship, 2000) women by means of roles that linked their sexual power to the pleasure and liberation of public space. In many cases, women, including both Chinese and Caucasian, were depicted as heavily made up, sexually attractive, and passionate in social and leisure activities while men looked admiringly at them. This sort of representation was typical of cosmetic commercials directed at women. The implication behind the commercials was that using the products could ensure women becoming sexually appealing to heterosexual men and that the women *got what they wanted* – male attention. While constructing an active pleasurable feminine identity which is organised around both male and female sexual desire, the commercials appeared to allude to an interesting tension in the distribution of power between women and men (Desmarais, 2003). Such representations were particularly interesting in the context of Chinese culture where the traditional Chinese values and modern western ideas both interact and compete with each other.

A commercial for *Olay* skin whitening lotion, which depicted an alluring woman socialising at a party, articulated the idea that women’s sexual attractiveness was seen not only as an object of male desire but also as a source of female pleasure

deriving from participation in social leisure activities. In the commercial, the woman's sexual attractiveness was signified by her revealing low cut party clothes, teasing smile, and sinuous dancing between two male partners. Such a characterisation incorporated several features of women, which could be seen from different perspectives – activeness and liberation, and sexual explicitness and seductiveness could be viewed positively or negatively by different viewers. In order to sell the skin whitening product, the commercial portrayed a pretty, sexually attractive, socially successful young woman who pursued the 'freedom' of public space. The men at the party, on the other hand, were portrayed as giving attention to the woman and as courting her. Clearly, she was sexually appealing to the men, and her power and pleasure were represented as deriving from being the object of the male gaze. In these terms, the commercial initially seemed to play upon a visual discourse of the women's sexuality which gives them power over men. However, an older feminist argument might claim that "the male gaze is more than looking; it is controlling" (Kuhn, 1985, p. 34). Although she held liberating power, the male gaze held her. In other words, she was empowered only by being on the receiving end of an objectifying gaze. Therefore, the commercial played a role in portraying a false sense of female empowerment in public places; in effect, it was reinforcing unequal power relations in gender representation.

Nevertheless, in emphasising women's sexualised appearance and behaviour as an essential aspect of their leisure pursuits, the commercials appeared to reinforce sexist ideologies. In China, the traditional concept of 'women's moral virtue' (Lieberman, 1998; Theiss, 2002), which very much depended on the value of chastity, has consistently had an impact on the perception of female beauty. From this point of view, the commercial exploitation of female sexual imagery challenges the suppression of feminine sexuality in the patriarchal tradition of Chinese literature and art which focused on "the refined, beautiful but domesticated women" (Zhu, 1993, p. 129). During the post-revolutionary period (1950-1977), love and sexual behaviours were particularly regarded as "shamefully illicit or as a manifestation of bourgeois idealism and thus detrimental to collective welfare" (Evans, 1995, p. 358). In more recent debates, sexually explicit images have been seen as a moral threat within Chinese communist ideology (Gao, 2007a). However, the commercial use of female sexual

imagery in the current sample of television commercials showing women in leisure activities shaped gender identification in an exploitatively negative way that created subordinate subject positions for females and the dominance of male gaze. Interestingly, this phenomenon contrasted markedly with the ways in which female characters were portrayed in those commercials that featured their participation in sporting and physical activities. Clearly, then, there was a variety of recreational roles of women in Chinese television commercials, but the great tendency was to depict them in more passive ways.

### **The construction of male advertising characters in leisure activities**

Following the illustration of different ways in which female characters were portrayed in recreational roles, the analysis of how masculinity and leisure are bound together in Chinese television advertising was divided into three subsections. Each examines how male roles were meaningfully portrayed in the same three types of recreational activities as were used in analysing female roles: sports and physical activities, social leisure activities, or home-based activities. The subsection also considers how particular ideological elements cohered together, tending to be resistant or complicit with the configurations of masculinity in both Chinese and western cultures. Indeed, studies of the cultural diversity of masculinity (Louie, 2002; Luo, 1990) revealed that male power is theorised as endorsing different attributes in the Chinese and western traditions, in particular those traditions related to leisure pursuits. As noted in Chapter 2, the transformation of Chinese masculinity has evolved through the interplay between local and global forces (Hofstede, 1997). In this context, it is worth investigating how multiple codes and conventions of gender were used in the sample of television commercials to construct the recreational role of men.

### ***The role of male characters in sports and physical activities***

In this study, men were regularly represented as being physically active. Out of 107 male characters in recreational roles, 42 (39.25%) were engaged in a variety of sports and physical activities such as basketball, football, sailing, and physical training. In many cases, masculine codes that highlight male virility and power were drawn on, and this process often transferred ideas of performance and efficiency to the products being advertised. It is worth noting that the sample did

not contain any representation of men involved in the context of physical competition with others. Therefore, Chinese television commercials that depicted men in sports and physical activities appeared to favour certain cultural values over others, and construct masculinity in particular ways.

In western culture, sports and physical activities have long been an important site of initiation into manhood (Messner, 1992; Sabo, 1985). The culture of sports, as Theberge (1998) argued, reinforces gender stereotypes. In terms of advertising representation, sports have been used to promote physical prowess as an essential characteristic of men (Frith & Mueller, 2003; O'Barr, 2006). Athletic images have been regarded as a metaphor used to transfer performance, dynamism and competitiveness on to brands and products (Desmarais, 2003; Wörsching, 2000). These connotations, as Connell (1995) argued, are inevitably a sustainment of gender differences, confirming the old, patriarchal order. On the other hand, in traditional Chinese culture, as noted in Chapter 2, whilst 'Wu' was defined as an alternative version of manhood that highlights the physical, the dominant masculine culture entailed literary and artistic tastes. From this perspective, as is illustrated further below, the commercials that portrayed men involved in physical leisure activities challenged Confucian ideology and subordinated Chinese versions of masculinity by articulating the physical elements embodied in dominant western idealised masculinities.

When portraying men in sports and physical activities, Chinese television commercials tended to accentuate ideas of fun and relaxation. Sixteen out of 42 male characters (38.10%) involved in physical leisure activities illustrated this point. The inclusion of these physical activities in commercials served to signify entertainment and male friendship. A commercial for *Canon* digital cameras, for example, featured a group of men playing soccer. The scenes deployed in the commercial conveyed happiness rather than competitive performance. The *Canon* camera was presented as a means to record that enjoyable and relaxing moment. In another commercial promoting *Chivas Regal* whisky, three men were portrayed enjoying sea fishing. The ocean and floating icebergs were used as the background, and this grandiose scenery worked as a symbolic connotation of relaxation and freedom. In the commercial, the men were trying to catch a big fish

together and drank an ice-cold bottle of *Chivas Regal*. The choice of classical music also signified the pleasure of that experience. In positioning the whiskey at the centre of men's leisure activity, the commercial suggested that the way for a man to relax was by drinking alcohol. This kind of commercial used outdoor physical activities as clearly associated with male pleasure, and portrayed drinking alcohol and enjoyment as intrinsic values in the construction of Chinese masculinity and male bonding.

In this study, some commercials that promoted such products as fitness equipment and energy drinks exploited associations of male bodies with athletic performance, and of both with the advertised products. Men were portrayed as being physically strong and disciplined, and as participating in exercises and training. As a result, a discourse of sporting prowess was perpetuated in the characterisation. One typical commercial for *WNQ* fitness equipment reinforced the view of men's bodies as a site of strength and power. The commercial featured a well-built Asian man running vigorously on a treadmill and gazing straight ahead. His fast moving calves, as well as the sweat from his face and neck, presented an athletic image. Later in the commercial the man was transformed into an auto-racing driver, and his physical performance through the use of the fitness equipment was presented as driving a Formula One car. The display of power was emphasised by close-ups of a fast rotary engine and a tail pipe throwing out fire, and was accompanied by a sound track of a humming and growling noise. All these elements combined to convey the *WNQ* brand energy and dynamism. By emphasising the man's physical prowess, this commercial tapped into the myth of the macho male.

Such a way of conceptualising masculinity ran counter to the representation of men in Chinese culture which historically downplayed physicality (Song, 2004). However, the reinvention of physical masculinity has been part of the modernisation and westernisation of Chinese culture from the beginning of the twentieth century to the present. This change came about in several major phases, such as the encroachment of western colonialism and imperialism through military incursions, the promotion of the peasant-worker-soldier models under Chinese communist policies, the criticism of male impotency and the trend of 'searching for real men' in cultural production, and the increasing images of



'Hollywood macho' in Chinese martial arts films (Louie, 2002). In the commercials examined in this research, the portrayal of masculinity in sports and physical activities could be seen as a contribution to the ongoing discursive reshaping of masculinity in China, and the legitimization of male physical power in the hierarchy of masculine attributes.

Some commercials examined in this study also constructed the recreational role of men in a way that contained a discourse of mastery. Interestingly, this construction of men appeared to correspond very closely with what Strate (1992) identified as the myth of white masculinity produced in American beer advertisements which presented "images of the man's man" (p. 78). As Strate (1992) explained, "the central theme of masculine leisure activity in beer commercials . . . is challenge, risk, and mastery – mastery over nature, over technology, over others in good-natured "combat", and over oneself" (p. 81). In this way, enjoying a beer is represented as a way for the male to demonstrate his power and masculinity (Feasey, 2008; Giles, 2003).

In this study's sample of television commercials, the articulation of mastery in challenging outdoor leisure activities was not restricted to beer products. Commercials for men's clothing, alcoholic beverages, and automobiles, which were often targeted at a male audience, displayed characters in physical leisure activities and represented men's interaction with, and mastery over, the natural world. Men were typically represented as participating in adventurous outdoor activities, and overcoming obstacles and difficulties. Consequently, a number of characteristics such as virility, courage and control were highlighted. A commercial for *Ford Mondeo*, for example, portrayed a man as pursuing his pleasure by successfully taking an instant photograph of lightning whilst driving the automobile (see Table 18). The commercial not only placed the automobile firmly within the context of outdoor leisure pursuits, but also illustrated the pleasure of a specific hobby, the ability to challenge the environment, and, at a more fundamental level, reinforced an ideology of dominant masculinity, especially the male's physical and technical prowess evident while conquering natural forces.

**Table 18 *Ford Mondeo***

<b>Scene</b>	<b>Characters Featured</b>	<b>Summary of Action and Dialogue</b>
1	A middle-aged man	There is a rainstorm coming into a city, and black clouds hang over buildings. A man searches the landscape outside the car as he drives fast on a highway.
2	The man	Stopping the car, he leans out of the window and holds a camera in order to take a photo of lightning.
3	The man	Because the buildings block his shot, he has to continue driving until he finds a perfect position. He snatches a shot of lightning, with impressive focus and great skill. While he reviews the successful shot back in the car, the first raindrops begin to fall.
4	The man	The man puts the photograph into his collection of pictures of lightning displayed on a table in his office. He stands in front of large windows, gazing at the sky and is prepared for the next action.

In the commercial, an association between the mastering of nature and the recreational role of men was created through illustrating a situation where the man conquered a form of untamed nature. He had the power to take risks and capture a transient moment by himself. A succession of visual images of his vigorous action and his calm face were synchronised to rock music. All these elements contributed to creating an atmosphere that emphasised strength, power, assertiveness and self-confidence, against powerful primal forces – black clouds and thunder in the background. In the last scene, the photographs collected by the man not only provided the evidence of his creativity, but also acted as a kind of ‘trophy’ representing his mastery over nature.

By synthesising the different characteristics, such as mastery and creativity, into the representation of men and their achievement in physical leisure activities, the commercial seemed to reconstruct masculinity by means of conforming to and legitimising the hegemonic configuration of masculinity in the western tradition. Ideologically, western culture tends to place faith in the conquest and control of nature, whereas traditional Chinese culture regards the harmony between man and nature as its essence (Callicott, 1987). Viewed in this way, the commercial was oriented towards western cultural and ideological hegemony, and thereby challenged the fundamental conceptualisation of Chinese society.

### ***Men in social leisure activities: Youth, fashion and romantic love***

The previous section has illustrated how male physical power was represented in recreational roles. However, a 'softer' version of masculinity was also embodied in the construction of gender in leisure activities. Indeed, about 34.58% of male characters (n=37 out of 107 recreational role) in the present sample were depicted as relaxing and participating in social activities, such as dancing, drinking, and shopping, with their friends and partners. In such representations, notions of happiness and pleasure were often embodied by placing the products advertised at the centre of friendship or romantic love. This tendency presented consumption as an integrative part of the individual's leisure experience (Desmarais, 2003). Since the 1990s, the traditional images of men, such as the cowboy and the ruthless businessman, in the United States and Britain, have been challenged by the emergence of the 'new man' (Mort, 1996). This new version of manhood has embraced stereotypically feminine attributes as being acceptable for men. They take, for example, a positive interest in such things as fashion, and exhibit emotions, interests and pleasures. Interestingly, Chinese television commercials seemed also to reflect these changes in perceptions of acceptable and indeed socially valued forms of masculinity in the way in which they constructed men in leisure pursuits. These changing representations of Chinese men were evidence of the shifting boundaries between traditional and new versions of gender.

When portraying men involved in social leisure activities, most of the commercials engaged in the popular refashioning of masculinity. The commercials projected the men's youth, good looks and stylish casual wear. In this way, the commercials appeared to reconstruct masculinity by accentuating traditional feminine characteristics as essential elements of a masculine culture of leisure. Furthermore, the signs of popular culture, such as the many 'innovative' cultural items and places in contemporary times, were incorporated into the recreational role of men. For example, a commercial for *Pabst Blue Ribbon* beer signified male companionship and enjoyment, featuring a group of young men drinking and watching a live World Cup football match together in public. Another commercial for *Tian Shi Bo Le* potato chips that promoted 'sharing happiness with friends' depicted three young and charming men playing music in a band. Their fashionable appearance (such as clean-shaven faces, spiky hair, caps

worn backwards and brightly coloured clothes) and their leisure interests in the realm of popular culture signified 'coolness', individualism, energy and playfulness. This version of masculinity differed significantly from the normative more traditional Chinese models where, as noted earlier, men are associated with status and power in both the domestic and occupational spheres. Portrayals of masculinity such as the one in the commercials mentioned above could therefore be seen as challenging the established construct of masculinity in traditional Chinese culture.

#### *Dating in Chinese television commercials*

Another interesting finding related to the use of dating as a recreational situation in commercials. It was found that dating situations were frequently used in advertising messages promoting food and non-alcoholic beverages, in particular for western fast food retailers such as *KFC*, *Pizza Hut*, as well as *McDonald's*, in order to entice customers to try new offers. In one *Pizza Hut* commercial, a young male character had a date with his girlfriend and they enjoyed a Christmas meal together in an elaborately decorated restaurant. The environment constructed by the commercial was relaxed and romantic and the man was shown feeding his girlfriend a piece of pizza, thereby illustrating the nature of the couple's heterosexual intimacy. The commercial drew on a modern gender code not only through its incorporation of a non-Chinese festival but also in terms of romantic love. It is interesting to note that, as China is a collectivist society, interpersonal relationships embedded in Chinese culture are traditionally expected to underplay "all matters of the heart" (Hsu, 1985, p. 33). In this cultural tradition, public displays of affection are not encouraged. The approach to love is very different from that in more individualist societies, such as the United States, where "the individual's rights to free emotional expression" are emphasised (Higgins et al., 2002, p. 77). Accordingly, portrayals of romantic love are more suited to western than to Chinese culture (Hsu, 1985). In order to sell western fast food to Chinese consumers, the commercial, however, articulated masculinity within a westernised discourse where romance and love were openly displayed in a recreational situation.

As is evident, a number of the television commercials contributed to an increasing diversity in the representation of men through cultural borrowing from western values such as the valuing of youth, fashion, and hedonism. This characterisation of men conflicted with more conservative constructs of manhood based around achievement and authority in the occupational and domestic spheres, and reflected ideological shifts in the meanings of gender. The commercials appeared to be bound up with leisure-oriented consumption which has been considered as representative of the 'feminine' domain in the cultural landscape of contemporary China (as discussed above). The ideology underlying this transition of masculinity, as Yang (2006) noted, is shaped by the development of consumer culture and "cannot break away from the worship of popular culture of western or that of the Japanese/South Korean origin" (p. 177).

***Middle-aged and older men in leisure activities: A 'Wen-ising' nature***

In this study, male characters involved in home-based activities accounted for 19.63% (21 out of 107) of all images that used recreational settings. In comparison with the recurrent representation of female characters at ease in domestic settings and activities such as watching television and listening to music, only four male characters were depicted as involved in the same leisure activities. These men were typically associated with the use of technological products and services such as a DVD (digital video disc) player, an online service provider, and audio. By promoting men's interactions with new technologies for entertainment and relaxation, the commercials seemed to perpetuate the gender bias that technology is more likely to be represented as the domain of men.

On the other hand, 17 male characters were depicted as individuals or in groups engaged in some form of traditional Chinese leisure activity such as calligraphy or Chinese chess games. In line with Confucian philosophy, the men engaged in the pursuit of pleasure and relaxation as a means of exercising and enjoying their intellectual ability and artistic creativity. Interestingly, the commercials that displayed this kind of entertainment were restricted to those which promoted Chinese branded medicines and alcohol products. Moreover, the commercials did not employ women as central characters, and presented only middle-aged and older male characters. The representation of men and their respectable leisure

pursuits tended to create a perception of high value and credibility for the advertised products.

A commercial for the *Ren He* cold cure, for instance, featured a middle-aged man, who was portrayed as participating in a leisure-type situation but behaving in very elegant and professional manner in order to promote the latest cold remedy. In the commercial, the man displayed a refined performance, writing calligraphy in front of his friends. At the end of the commercial, he recommended the *Ren He* product to the friend who had sneezed violently during the calligraphic performance. Interestingly, in traditional Chinese high culture, calligraphy, which cultivates one's taste and artistic sensibility, has long been a masculine hobby. Commercials such as this one created a 'softer', more intellectual subject position for males. Signs such as a delicate calligraphy set, antique furniture, and beautiful and vigorous writing confirmed the male character's associations with tradition, and more specifically his links to the myth of 'wise sage' embedded in the Confucian ideal of 'Wen'. This ideal assumes that social power is achieved through personal cultivation and in terms of class (Louie, 2002). Having his friends around him and projecting a strong persona gave him the authority to recommend the medicine. In this way, the commercial lent credibility to the cold cure by building on the established markers of gender in Chinese Confucian tradition.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter explored specific ways in which Chinese television commercials attached cultural meanings to gender in terms of recreation and leisure activities. There was evidence of the construction of multiple versions of femininity and masculinity, creating diverse and divergent subject gendered positions in the advertising texts. On the one hand, the discourses which dominated in the commercials constructed women as being physically passive and indoors, and men as active participants in sporting activities. On the other hand, there appeared to be a *reconstruction* of gender according to a clear connection between age and contemporary values in the representation of non-sporting social activities. In the commercials, young females and males were portrayed in line with modern, western consumerism, demonstrating the importance of being popular, sophisticated, and individualistically-centred. This tendency seemed to fit with

arguments that consumerism has encouraged narcissism as a personal trait in the west.

In terms of the representation of women in recreational roles, the greater proportion of commercials reinforced the myth of feminine passivity but not necessarily a submissive passivity. In many cases their passivity involved independent acts of self-indulgence such as eating and lounging with friends. In portraying women in home-based leisure activities such commercials predominantly illustrated a relaxed atmosphere that included signs of happiness and carefree attitudes. In addition, the sexual objectification of women in recreational activities was also featured as a discursive strategy to sell products in Chinese television commercials. Here femininity was constructed in a way that depicted young women as passive objects, satisfying the male gaze, although there were representational instances of women independently, knowing and actively constructing their sexuality in assertive and empowering styles. Therefore, the commercials reinforced sexist ideologies while undermining the physical constraints on feminine sexuality in Chinese traditional culture. Although only a few of the commercials in the research sample portrayed women in sports, within these particular examples there was a significant shift in the portrayals away from associating femininity with passivity and a consequent reconstruction of feminine recreation which challenged the physical repression of the female body in Chinese Confucian culture.

The recreational role of men constructed in Chinese television commercials could be seen as embodying tensions among different versions of manhood in both Chinese and western cultures. Such a blending of aspects of a 'cultured' masculinity, drawn from elements within the Confucian culture, with some elements of a popular, contemporary portrayal of more physical western masculinities, might constitute a challenge to those traditional Chinese masculinities perpetrated throughout much of China's history. In the research sample, sports and physical activities were identified as a recurrent theme in the representation of men. This characterisation tended to legitimate physical attributes which, in western culture, were perceived as essential aspects of masculinity. Such aspects had been subordinated in the Confucian social

hierarchy, yet the television commercials did at times continue to portray men as engaged in traditional Chinese leisure activities within domestic settings. In these instances specific characteristics such as intelligence and cultural attainment were emphasised as markers of masculinity, falling in line with the dominant masculine ideal in Chinese Confucian culture.

In the next chapter, interviews with professionals are analysed to gain some insights into the construction of gender representation in the context of Chinese advertising production, and to examine the role played by the professionals in drawing on different discourses and systems of values which reflect particular aspects of each gender.



## **CHAPTER TEN**

### **THE ROLE OF CHINESE ADVERTISING PRODUCTION PERSONNEL IN GENDER REPRESENTATION**

#### **Introduction**

Chapters 7, 8 and 9 provided a combined semiotic and discourse analysis of the representation of female and male characters in Chinese television commercials and revealed how gender roles were characterised in line with specific aspects of patriarchal ideology in both domestic and public spheres. This chapter examines how Chinese advertising professionals perceive their role in the cultural construction of gender representation in and through the advertising production in which they engage. The chapter analyses the data from 26 semi-structured interviews conducted with creative directors, copywriters, art directors and strategic planners working in China's television advertising industry. As advertising production is ideologically underpinned (Kelly et al., 2005), it is a particularly rich site in which the producers occupy a mediating role in creating and drawing on certain images and ideas, in particular those related to gender, to construct symbolic meaning and utility for commodities (Featherstone, 1991). In this respect, this chapter aims to shed light on the decision making processes and imperatives (cultural, economic, institutional and social) that support particular approaches to the representation of gender in Chinese television advertising, thereby revealing a range of values, meanings, ideas and ideologies implicit in society. The analysis also explores advertising professionals' actual experiences of constructing advertising characters in their work, and their multiple dispositions toward gender and its use as a social construct in their work.

The interviews which this chapter is based on were conducted with 16 males and 9 females. One of the main purposes of the analysis of these interviews was to explore the beliefs and attitudes toward gender held by the advertising personnel that may potentially influence the production of advertising messages. However, it is worth noting in this context that many of the interviewees seemed to view the

interview questions as rather obvious and mundane because the use of gender representation for advertising promotion is such standard practice – that is, they did not necessarily see why and how gendered representation in Chinese advertising warranted considered attention, let alone academic analysis. This response suggests that to a very large extent, gendered representation is highly normalised within the advertising industry and not an issue felt to be of great concern, at least among most of this group of interviewees.

The chapter is organised into four main sections. The first section discusses specific approaches employed by Chinese advertising professionals in their portrayal of gender in advertising. The second section explores the strategies and logic used by the professionals to establish associations between gender and product categories. The final two sections of the chapter focus on the ways in which different roles and meanings are assigned to women and men by the interview participants, and how this practice is shaped by gender discourses circulating in China.

### **Differences in creative strategies for gender representation**

The most salient feature in relation to the participation of Chinese advertising professionals in the creative process was that they engage with different threads of cultural discourses about gender. Although most participants reported that advertising production should be an open-minded process, their actual experiences of depicting women and men were guided by certain conventions. Indeed, Hirota (1995) and Soar (2000) argued that advertising producers consistently utilize cultural discourses as raw material to develop commercial messages. One creative director described how advertising professionals draw on stereotyped attributes of desirable masculinity and femininity in promotional texts:

Both female and male figures are likely to be used in our advertising production but in different ways. For male characters, we often focus on “something inherent” such as their personality and charisma. We also focus on how successful they are. For women, there is more emphasis on their outward appearances in order to persuade people to purchase products.

Here, interestingly, the terms ‘something inherent’ and ‘outward appearances’ were drawn on by the interviewee in describing how distinct values and meanings

are assigned to men and women. It seemed that the interviewee draws on gender stereotypes, in particular those embodied in Chinese cultural traditions such as prestige and cultural attainment (as reviewed in Chapter 2), to portray male characters. This is a version of Chinese masculinity that is well known in terms of achievement and refined demeanour, rather than highlighting physical forces and aggressive competitiveness (Louie, 2002). By contrast, the interviewee considers physical appearance to be an important dimension of femininity, and supports and reinforces this idea through the depiction of women.

In terms of specific ways gender roles are portrayed, eight of the advertising interviewees reported that, because the patriarchal value system of Confucianism has long been established in Chinese society, they still invoked a specific set of stereotypical masculine characteristics when creating male images in advertising. One participant believed that the creative approaches based on traditional views of hegemonic masculinity could communicate well with the audience. He commented:

Although women's social status has been improving in China, male-dominant culture still remains deeply rooted. So I think men's status, power and qualities are more important elements in the representation of males in advertising than their appearance and age. Unless there is a need, we rarely think of changing those long established images, because we do not want to challenge the audience.

Here, the interviewee described how it was important in his job to identify and promote traditional masculine values and characteristics in terms of relying on the shared cultural knowledge of the audience, and these elements were pivotal to the development of ideas and images within the creative process. Certainly, such practice perpetuates traditionally dominant versions of masculinity and reinforces gender role stereotypes. However, four interviewees commented on how the improvements in Chinese women's rights and status affected the ways women were portrayed. In the words of one female Chinese advertising professional:

I think women in China have taken more power and opportunities, and they can speak and behave as equals with men in different areas. The social mores in Chinese Confucian tradition are getting weaker in modern society today. So now there is no reason not to portray women in more diversified roles and relationships.

In this account, which acknowledges a decline in the dominance of patriarchal Confucian values, the opening up of the potential for new representations of femininity is highlighted. As the interviewee understands it, the recognition of women's wider social participation in society provides new spaces for the representation of gender in more diverse and non-traditional forms. In participating in such new discursive formations, this respondent appeared to appreciate the greater range of possibilities for women, and to support the politics of gender equality, both from a personal and professional perspective.

According to 13 interviewees, conveying the notion of 'modernity' appeared to be one of the most crucial objectives underlying the representation of gender. They were convinced that the depiction of gender in advertising messages should reflect the country's contemporary situation; as one copywriter noted: "gender representation in advertising today is more creatively liberated, and is often based on what is currently happening in society". This statement indicates how gender representation in advertising mirrors contemporary culture and cultural trends. It was also clear, through nine Chinese advertising professionals' comments, that in the context of Chinese advertising, gender portrayal often consists of interactions between modern (western) and traditional values. A common wish of these participants was to blend these two sets of cultural values together in advertising imagery – though it should be noted that both remain embedded in stereotypical perceptions of male and female roles. One advertising professional commented on this tendency in the following way:

There are often two themes in the representation of advertising characters in China. One in the development of modern Chinese society and the influence of the west is that everyone seeks a better life, men strive for money and women spend money. Another thing is that traditional Chinese culture still exists, such as the thought of "men are outside the home; women are inside the home". These ideas affect advertising content, and we tried to mix the different values together.

This comment revealed how Chinese television advertising plays a role in the dynamic process of reflecting and influencing changes in cultural values, while simultaneously continuing to reinforce cultural stereotypes and sexist ideologies. An interesting point was that the gender portrayal in Chinese advertising was perceived by the production personnel as having a tendency to draw on certain

modern values, such as economic power and hedonism, brought by western materialism and capitalism. It is also worth noting that, for the interviewee, gender roles and norms derived from the Confucian tradition still influenced the production of advertising messages in contemporary China. In line with the participant's comment, it is clear that the interaction of both modern (western) and traditional (Chinese) values was considered necessary in the process of representing female and male characters. These findings support and confirm a trend already identified in Wang's study (2003) of Chinese advertising which suggests the interactions between the global and the local – two constitutive concepts in the creative execution – exist in the context of Chinese advertising. Cheng (1998) used the metaphor of the “melting pot” (p. 773) to explain the feature of Chinese advertising which “functions both to represent a new direction for society and to maintain the status quo” (Zhang & Harwood, 2004, p. 170).

#### ***Influence of the client-agency relationships on advertising representation***

Even though no specific question was asked about the role of the client in advertising production, 11 of the interviewees reported that their clients' requirements and suggestions often have a significant impact on the creative advertising process, and, more precisely, on the ways male and female characters are portrayed. As one participant stated: “Clients and their ideas are one of the most important considerations in my work. Like any other service business, advertising agencies need to satisfy their clients and develop effective campaigns”. From the participants' point of view, their advertising creativity was limited because, as one respondent stated, clients often brought “what they thought appropriate for their products” and made final decisions based on “what the advertisements should look like”. In this context, convincing clients of the appropriateness of gender representations was an essential part of their job. Creatives expressed disappointment that they had to modify their original ideas for a product advertisement in order to comply with the clients' requests:

I think it is important to think about our clients' suggestions. In most situations, they bring us their thoughts about products, target audience, gender images, and even which kinds of advertisements they like or dislike. Sometimes the clients may think the portrayals of characters do not conform to what they want, so we need to rework these ideas. Remember, advertising is a business. What we can do is to try to explain our ideas, but we cannot totally make a decision. We can only hope we achieve some consensus.

As the interviewee explained, client perceptions about appropriate representation for a product play a significant role in shaping advertising communication. Other researchers (Hackley, 1999; Kelly et al., 2005; Shankar, 1999) have also identified how advertising production was developed through the discursive interactions and negotiations of different social groups – such as the client/agency relationship – and those parties bring their own ideologies to bear upon the communication.

Some of the participants interviewed also conceded that, due to the high costs associated with television advertising, their clients tended toward conservatism and favoured familiar advertising portrayals. For instance, one interviewee, who had failed to gain a client's approval to use a plain looking girl in a telecommunications commercial, explained that the clients' stereotyped expectations of how women should feature in advertisements overrode the creative's attempt to portray gender in innovative ways. He said:

In fact, we seek new things, for example, portraying men and women in different ways. I know lots of gender portrayals in Chinese television commercials are beautiful women and businessmen, but the clients believe these images can sell products to consumers. From my perspective, I try to be more innovative. I certainly want to show my originality . . . but the ideas in my head are sometimes different from the clients'. I think the clients are accustomed to some long-established images.

From this interviewee's perspective, advertising clients and their perceptions of what sells products can limit the range of ways in which gender is represented. Here it is interesting to refer to the notion of "the asymmetrical power relationship" between advertising agencies and their clients (Cronin, 2004; Grabher, 2002; Lury & Warde, 1997; Miller, 1997). Since advertising agencies are economically dependent upon the business from their clients (Kelly et al., 2005), creativity is restricted in order to make the content of the advertising texts align with the client's often conservative and preconceived ideas about the shape the commercial should be taking. This observation reveals the complex nature of constructing gender representation, as evidenced in the accounts of the interviewees, which is constituted by the cultural tensions between modern and traditional forces in the sociocultural context of China, and in terms of the

interactions between advertising agencies and clients. The following section of this chapter examines how Chinese advertising professionals depict specific associations between gender roles and product categories.

### **Gender and product categories**

One recurring theme that emerged in all 26 interviews was that gender representations vary with the types of products advertised. There was a common perception among the interviewees that product category was an important consideration in their approach to representing women and men. As their basic guidelines for using gender images in their creative practices, 17 participants identified the ways in which females are associated with certain products and males with other products. This perception echoes the findings from the content analysis (Chapter 6) which identified how female and male characters were more likely to be used to promote certain types of products than others. One creative director, who seemed to rely heavily on a stereotyped perception of advertising characters, remarked:

Cosmetics and cleaning products should be represented by female characters because they are the primary users. The product categories, like business suits and cars, typically target male users, and are therefore associated with images of men.

Comments by the participants showed how products were perceived and constructed as highly gender-specific. This supports Gunter's (1995) argument that, in order to communicate with consumers with particular demographic characteristics, advertising practitioners reinforce stereotypical representations by way of creating 'sex-typed' products. Many studies conducted into gender representation in western countries have found similar discursive formations on 'feminine' and 'masculine' product categories (e.g., Caballero & Solomon, 1984; Furnham & Skae, 1997; Ganahl et al., 2003; Gunter, 1995; Valls-Fernández & Martínez-Vicente, 2007). Combining those studies with this study of Chinese advertising demonstrates just how globally prevalent gender stereotypes are for the purposes of product promotion and how these tend to be global rather than culturally specific.

Further insight into how different products were associated with gender representation came through advertising professionals' descriptions of both Chinese consumers' shopping behaviours and purchasing power. A common comment made by the interviewees was that gender portrayals were used to reach target segments that actually make purchasing decisions. Particularly there was a cultural belief that women were the ones who have a 'duty' to shop for daily consumer goods and household durables. The comments of one copywriter conveyed this belief:

Women are often involved in buying the daily groceries in China. This refers to their buying habits. Conventionally, women go to a local supermarket and make small daily purchases because they know what other family members want.

As this comment reveals, participants' perceptions of women and their primary responsibility for household matters drew on highly traditional gender stereotypes. Such stereotypes depict women in domestic activities that serve the demands of other family members. Yet what this research demonstrates is how Chinese advertising professionals tended to support, exploit and perpetuate this demarcation of labour in the home through their commercial representations. In one advertising professional's view this was entirely understandable. He commented:

In Chinese society, women always buy and later use those daily necessities, for example, washing powder. They have the authority to manage and distribute finance for household products shopping in their families. Gender portrayals in advertising should draw on actual models and reflect real situations because the aim of using advertising is to sell.

What is implicit in this comment is that the representation of women was unthinkingly associated with household products and the need to sell these products. However, it is worth noting that a minority of interviewees (three) believed that gender depictions in the commercials for daily necessities may have changed in contemporary China because, in the words of one participant: "today's men are beginning to share domestic duties and take part in buying commodities". This comment suggests that some Chinese advertising personnel are conscious of the role that men are beginning to take on in relation to domestic tasks, and that



this may lead them to a modification of their communicative approach to selling products.

The interviews also revealed that the depiction of male characters tended to be used in commercials for “big-ticket items” such as vehicles. This view was made evident by 14 of the interviewees. As one Chinese advertising professional said:

For commercials for expensive products, we choose a male character or a couple. In most cases, Chinese men occasionally go shopping for some commodities. But they always give their advice when buying expensive products and the final decisions are always based on their suggestions.

Here it seemed that the way that interviewees thought they should communicate was affected by their perception of men as experts on high value products and male authority in terms of spending. In the same vein, another interviewee, who held the belief that men were capable of making final decisions on the purchase of relatively high cost products, even down to the choice of a product’s colour, commented:

When advertising for a car or a house, we target male consumers. Simply speaking, in China, men would engage in the purchase process of those expensive or important goods and they always make the final decisions. A woman may have liked a white Nissan, but when she and her husband went to the store together, she listened to her husband and ended up driving a black Toyota.

Overall, the view that males and females were unequal participants in the purchasing process was supported and naturalised in the interviewees’ comments. What is strikingly evident is just how wedded the advertising professionals’ were to the gender relations in patriarchal ideology and how they participated in reinforcing and further embedding that ideology.

What is also revealing from the interviews is how participants unquestioningly presented gender stereotyping as an intuitive process. Indeed, five interviewees expressed a clear view that gender representation *is* a natural process because they used “what feels reasonable”. For example, one female participant who talked about the process of producing advertising representation referred to her conviction of women’s inability to use technology:

Males tend to be associated with technology, but there is no right or wrong answer with advertising representation. It is all about the creative people's feelings and working experience. I think that women, at least some of my friends and acquaintances, are not skilful in using high-tech products, so I prefer to choose male characters to be associated with technology products.

In this account, the interviewee indicated some flexibility in how gender might be represented, but then used his own subjective experiences to justify falling back on the use of stereotypical representations. This behaviour demonstrates some of the complexity of how advertising representations are informed by personal subjective experience, cultural ideologies and – equally ideologically informed – commercial needs to target messages towards those regarded as most likely to identify with and purchase products. In the next section, the representation of female roles is explored in more detail.

### **The representation of female roles**

Five major themes emerged from the interviews that related to particular roles and meanings assigned to women in the context of advertising production. These were (1) the domestic ideal of femininity; (2) female youth and beauty; (3) the use of women as sex objects; (4) women's occupational roles; and, (5) refusing to "behave like a lady". The analysis also reveals variation in the participants' attitudes toward and beliefs about female roles.

#### ***Advertising professionals' belief in the domestic ideal of women***

When the interviews were analysed, one prominent theme relating to cultural representation of female characters in Chinese television advertising centred on the values and morality attached to domesticity. Most participants articulated notions of family and femininity, and perceived specific values as appropriate when featuring women within domestic settings. Seventeen of the interviewees were convinced that one of the salient characteristics of women was their commitment to nurturing, and they tended to use this view to justify their stereotypical approaches in advertising communication. Here, the interview findings yielded support for the result of semiotic analysis (chapter 7) that demonstrated how the construction of femininity in Chinese television commercials drew on a strong code of maternal love and nurturing. One male Chinese advertising professional, who considered the representation of mothers as

a strategy to impose symbolic meanings on specific products and as a way of evoking the viewers' emotional responses, commented:

All people know that women love children, so it is very easy to use a mother's image to sell some products, for example, milk powder, children's clothes and disposable diapers. It is not something that we make up. We actually show how mothers use the advertised products to take good care of their children at home. There are many touching and caring scenes.

This kind of comment illustrates how participants' beliefs coincided with a long-established discourse of gender that reinforces the ideology of motherhood. Certainly, underlying motives for the representation of women as mothers became clear in developing creative ideas and strategies. It appeared that interviewees considered the maternal role to be natural for women and, mostly, it was this stereotypical view that was employed to sell child-related products. This ideology of motherhood is still bound up with traditional gendered principles in Confucian culture because, as shown in Chapter 7, care and nurturing of children have long been regarded as ideal traits of femininity in China (Leung, 2003; Zhang, 2003). The other significant point arising from the interviews was that Chinese advertising professionals talked about creating gender images with reference to a woman's role in performing domestic chores as well as serving family members. Thirteen participants found it quite acceptable to use the stereotype of housework being part of a woman's responsibility. For example, one interviewee stated:

We are in a country in which women are important in families. They are doing domestic tasks much better than men, for example, preparing dinner or washing clothes. Women have responsibilities to make other family members happy and healthy. It is true that these representations are linked to traditional Chinese culture, that is, women are primarily inside the home.

This comment clearly stressed the prevalence of the traditional concept of femininity in the Chinese context that women are primarily responsible for the domestic sphere: being a woman implies housekeeping ability and serving family members. As the results of content analysis (chapter 6) and semiotic analysis (chapter 7) revealed, female characters in Chinese television commercials were depicted participating in household tasks and fulfilling their roles as housewives. It is also worth noting that two interviewees who talked about the domestic role of women referred to this as a globally discursive phenomenon, and appeared to use

this as justification for their own essentialist depictions of women. As one of them put it:

Depicting women as cooking food and looking after children in advertising is a world-wide trend, not just in Chinese culture. This convention works through many international advertising campaigns because almost everyone is aware of the responsibilities that women should take.

As is evident from this statement the stereotypical role of women as housewives and mothers in advertising was perceived as a universal pattern rather than simply a national one. In this sense, the construction of women is embedded in and perpetuated by widespread sexist ideologies.

### ***Importance of female appearance: Youth and beauty***

When referring to depictions of women two words recurred: “young” and “beautiful”. Although many interviewees expressed the idea that women in different age groups embody diverse sets of cultural values, they revealed a strong preference for depicting young women, and femininity as associated with youthfulness. Indeed, there was a common belief among the interviewees that youth was an essential quality associated with beauty and that young attractive women were aesthetically appealing to audiences. One interviewee expressed this belief in the following way:

It is true that young women dominate the screen. I think it is because everyone likes to watch young girls. They are attractive and lovely. They could show the beautiful aspects of women. Advertising tries to represent the beautiful things, so it is a more direct way of portraying female characters in youthful and fashionable forms.

This account shows how the creative advertising process is embedded in a cultural discourse on the idealisation of female youth and beauty. In fact, such characterisation has roots in traditional Chinese paintings and poetry that used to represent their physical features (such as thinness and facial attractiveness) as essential traits of women’s beauty (Frith, Cheng, & Shaw, 2005; Jackson & Chen, 2008; Wong, 2006). In contrast to contemporary western objectification of women, these traditional Chinese depictions did not portray women in an overtly sexual manner. The representation of attractive women gradually became popular after

the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) during which the women's appearance and behaviour had been defeminised.

By emphasising the attributes and attractiveness of women's physical appearance and considering this representation to be aesthetically pleasurable for the audience, Chinese advertising professionals relied heavily on an ideological code that treats women as objects of the male gaze through the simple display of their physical appearance.

Eleven of the participants stated that they rarely considered using females older than 50 in their advertising production processes. For example, one advertising professional explained that elderly female characters would only be in commercials for drugs and medicines because "the values of older women are limited, and these values are difficult to use with promoting products". This supports and explains the content analysis presented in Chapter 5, which found that the majority of women in Chinese television advertising were portrayed as young, and that older females were underrepresented. This phenomenon was further explained by six advertising professionals who considered the portrayal of young and beautiful women as a useful strategy to communicate with female consumers. Throughout the interviews there was no uncertainty from the participants as to the efficacy of their use of female characters with attractive looks in the creative development process:

For advertising practitioners, there is no reason not to use a gorgeous model. There is a tendency that a girl of 20 years old in an advertisement may still influence a woman of 30 years old. So it doesn't matter if a mother or a girl is associated with milk or a car, she must look young and beautiful. That is why even mothers on the screen are young and beautiful.

Whilst clearly indicative of the objectification of women, this comment also reveals how ageism is also part of sexist attitudes embedded in the commercial representation of women.

For four male interviewees, portraying women simply in terms of physical attractiveness was related to having little time within the commercial to develop female characters. In order to get their messages across in a limited time, the

participants were more likely to use those female characters whose looks conform to stereotypes:

Television commercials are very short. It is impossible to put everything into a 30-second-storyline. We have to look for an effective way to convey messages. Wonderful and beautiful appearances of female models, in many cases, could be one of the most conspicuous features used to get the viewers' attention, in particular when they are exposed to hundreds of promotional messages.

However, this use of attractive female characters to hold the audience's attention during a very brief commercial has been criticised as "compressing the sales message" (Frith & Mueller, 2003, p. 119) by exaggerating or magnifying certain aspects of women. Therefore, what was implied in the interviews was that, whether intentionally or unintentionally, advertising personnel continue to perceive physical attractiveness as being more important than any other female trait, and accordingly further promote female objectification in the context of advertising production.

Unlike their male counterparts, some female advertising professionals held more critical views toward the idealisation of the female appearance in Chinese advertising and in the sociocultural context of China. Interestingly, three interviewees used the metaphor of "a flower vase" (Hung & Li, 2006, p. 13) to describe their feelings towards the pervasive use of young attractive women in decorative roles. One interviewee stated:

It is common that women in the current Chinese television commercials look like "flower vases", displaying their glamour, charm and attractiveness. This issue is also in the movies and even in car exhibitions. It is a ubiquitous creative decision as well as a problem. The female characters may have few links with the products being advertised, but the only purpose is being watched.

This type of sexual appeal clearly focused on the use of women in decorative roles, reinforcing prevailing views about 'natural' differences between women and men. As a result of the process of marketisation in China, the objectification of women has become routine in Chinese advertising in which women are supposed to be looked at and their primary value lies in their physical appearance. Interestingly, none of the interviewees who participated in this research reflected on the influence their representations of 'idealised' women in television commercials

may have on real women. This phenomenon responds to age-old social constructions of gendered roles which tell women what they should or should not be in order to gain acceptance in the eyes of others.

### *The use of women as sex objects*

Another recurring theme in the interview data, and one strongly related to the essentialising association of youth and beauty with femininity, was the way in which participants saw the representation of women as an opportunity to display sexual appeal. Comments by the interviewees revealed that the presence of sexual content, in particular sexual images of women, was a highly normalised practice. For example, one participant stated: “advertising in China is increasingly adopting sexual elements. This appeal is becoming highly visible and popular in the Chinese market”. Another participant who had 10 years of international work experience in advertising echoed this opinion from a global perspective: “women’s sexuality has become an icon of femininity in the globalised context of advertising, and China is not an exception”. Clearly, interviews revealed that the construction of women as sexually attractive and alluring was perceived as an increasingly important approach and one having a central place in contemporary Chinese advertising practice. This echoes the findings from the content analysis conducted in Chapter 6 which reported that the representation of female sexuality as an appeal has become popular in Chinese television commercials.

Interviewees from different demographic groupings expressed a range of attitudes towards representing female characters in a sexual manner. Six male participants described female characters in the current Chinese television commercials as “less sexy” than they expected, and they perceived sex as one of the most important elements in their advertising production. Interestingly, in discussion the interviewees referred to an assumption that the use of female sexuality as an appeal guarantees sales:

It is not easy to explain how sexy images of women work, but it is true that the saying ‘sex sells’ never gets old [laughs]. In modern society, women have the charms of sex, and people are attracted by their sexual appeal. People are inevitably drawn to images of sexy and attractive women, and these images somehow inspire them to buy products.

This comment shows that sexual appeal continues to be used as a marketing tool to persuade customers to buy products. The articulation of heterosexuality and femininity is widely accepted in the Chinese cultural context, and Chinese advertising professionals are subjected to the discursive formation idealising the role of women as sex objects. However, the question of whether sexual appeals increase the communication effectiveness of advertising messages and ultimately sell products remains controversial (Courtney & Whipple, 1983; LaTour, Pitts, & Snook-Luther, 1990; Reichert & Lambiase, 2006; Reichert et al., 1999; Richmond & Hartman, 1982). It is also interesting to note that, although the interviewees seemed to be confused about how the process of convincing customers in this way actually worked, they preferred to believe that this principle of using sexual appeals as advertising stimuli does work. Another male participant particularly recognised that the representation of women in his work was based on men's aesthetic needs. He stated: "men are really interested in female bodies, which meets their visual preferences". This comment provides an example of how the advertising industry supports and even participates in constructing a discursive formation that exploits women for the object of satisfying the male gaze. In western culture, this tradition has long been criticised as demeaning the role and status of women (Carter & Weaver, 2003; van Zoonen, 1994; Warlaumont, 1993). Interestingly, the participants did not construct femininity in accordance with Chinese traditional views which emphasise sex and sexuality as private issues (Larson, 1998). Instead, they seemed preoccupied with a western-influenced trend that regards sexualised appearance as the essential characteristic of women. This idea was culturally inculcated in the male interviewees.

Contrary to their male counterparts, female participants in this study expressed a more critical perception of female characters in terms of their sexual representation. One female interviewee noted that the increasing use of sexual attractiveness is a controversial issue because "it demeans women and ignores their intelligence and social contribution". Although such a consequence was not commented on by the other female interviewees, some of them were concerned that the use of female sexuality as an appeal challenged the ideal of traditional Chinese women:



Women in Chinese Confucian tradition have an ‘inner beauty’. They are moral, well-behaved and care about their homes. The opinion of female beauty is different from those western ‘sexy’ images. Some overt sexual portrayals may be not suitable for a Chinese female character because they are still considered as being harmful to society’s morals and embarrassing to mention.

Interestingly, in this interviewee’s statement we find a description of how Chinese advertising representations of women exemplify a conflict between Chinese and western stereotypes of femininity, and how the latter were perceived to be culturally inappropriate in China. This account also demonstrates how the development of gender representation has been influenced by the subjective and cultural identities of advertising personnel. The notion of “inner beauty” was drawn on in the interview when specifying the inhibited qualities of Chinese women, and illustrates fundamental moral virtues in the Chinese Confucian tradition such as “sequestering women in the inner quarters, a place with its own emotional and erotic culture” and “hiding the female body from the ‘outside’ world” (Larson, 1998, p. 128). Female advertising interviewees seemed to be well aware of this cultural tradition.

#### *Advertising regulations on the use of sex appeals in China*

When participants talked about the portrayal of female sexuality as an appeal in advertising, what was particularly evident was that 12 of the interviewees (females and males) emphasised the influence of advertising regulations and monitoring systems on their advertising practices. For most of them, the rigid censorship laws were considered to restrict the use of sex appeals in the Chinese context. Indeed, the development of advertising law in China has consistently embraced a strong ideological dimension that regards the use of explicit sexual content as a threat to morality (The People’s Congress of China, 1994). One interviewee remarked that the type of sexual content accepted in western culture is unlikely to be approved in China:

The censorship laws in China are rigorous, and the process of advertising production is regulated. Some sexy images commonly used in western countries are considered as ‘overtly naked’, ‘sexually provocative’ and even ‘pornographic’ in China. These portrayals cannot pass through the censorship because they are judged as damaging society’s morals and ethics.

Such an opinion was also expressed by another interviewee who noted: “because of the Chinese censorship many sexy portrayals and even the close-up scenes of kissing would have to be carefully used”. As Wang (2003) explained, advertising practices in China are largely controlled by the state’s media policies, and therefore serve both the state and the market. In this way, Chinese advertising regulations operate as what Boddewyn (1991) calls a “culturally defined constraint” (p. 147) which is influential in how gender is represented.

Interestingly, the representation of women as sex objects in Chinese advertising was also explained by two interviewees in terms of a tension between a cross-cultural transfer of western advertising conventions and the local censorship system:

Sometimes Chinese advertisements attempt to imitate the ideas from the west, but the semi clad portrayals and provocative poses are not allowed by the Chinese censorship laws. As a result, the sexual images of women are not as explicit as in the west nor are they based on Chinese conventional concepts of sex. I think this is a result of the conflict between the old political and cultural systems and liberating the oppression of sex since the Cultural Revolution.

The interesting point here was that the portrayal of sexually alluring women was culturally and ideologically complex in Chinese advertising discourse. This provides an example of a local-global paradox in advertising representation; that is, how advertising plays a part in changing cultural representations of women, and how advertising professionals negotiate the creative process, both between liberal and conventional regimes, and between western discourses of gender and sexuality and Chinese regulatory practices.

### ***Characteristics of modern women: Occupational roles***

One finding from the content analysis presented in Chapter 5 was a tendency to depict female characters in midlevel business and white-collar roles in Chinese television commercials. This point was clearly reflected in the interviews with 13 of the Chinese advertising professionals. The interviewees were aware of the rise of the modern working woman phenomenon in Chinese society, and appeared to incorporate this new role model into the development of their gender representations. Other studies such as Kelly et al. (2005) and Cronin (2004) have

argued that advertising producers tended to develop creative ideas by incorporating symbols associated with social and cultural trends. One participant, who discussed specific traits and values of women in occupational roles, explained how this was challenging traditional gender stereotypes in the domestic sphere and their representation, and stated:

I am sure that lots of women work outside of their homes. They could be involved in different kinds of jobs as well as men. They are independent and have freedom, as well as having a stable economic source. So there have been many television commercials showing female characters working with their colleagues in workplaces. I think the depictions of mothers and housewives are gradually decreasing and being replaced by those modern roles.

Here occupation seemed to become a discursive formation on the role of women as a way of presenting the values that are not traditionally associated with women and capturing the ideas of social freedom and modern life. Another advertising professional, who explained the rationale behind using career women in commercials for cosmetics, said:

When working on some recent commercials for cosmetics, we tried to portray female characters as white-collar workers instead of female celebrities. The idea is that we want to sell the products to those modern and independent women who not only spend time maintaining their beautiful looks but also could perform well in their jobs.

This account encapsulates the idea that advertising professionals are aware of the current discourse about gender roles in society and reflect these developing ideas in their creative work as an audience appeal strategy. Clearly, the interviewee articulated a tension between occupational role and femininity, and this was particularly considered as an alternative approach to promoting cosmetics in order to reach a specific market segment of working women. From their interviews, it seemed that advertising professionals reflected a 'new' version of Chinese femininity, and constructed subject positions in an oppositional relation to the dominant patriarchal ideology that limited women's access to work outside the home.

However, one point worth noting was that although the interviewees reinforced the value of women's involvement in a career, they tended *not* to portray women

within an occupational environment in the same light as men. This supports the findings of semiotic analysis (Chapter 8) that the professional role of women in Chinese television commercials was reshaped with certain traits traditionally considered appropriate for women. For five of the interviewees, modern women were assumed to be able to balance roles and demands imposed by both their job and their family. One interviewee stated: “nowadays the meaning of ‘women are inside the home’ has changed in China. It no longer means that women cannot have a job; now they are not totally focused on housework”. This comment demonstrates the extent to which the social transformation of women’s traditional roles and norms in the Chinese cultural context has been culturally accepted by this interviewee. Another advertising professional commented:

Probably modern society requires women to have more roles. I remember one commercial for air conditioner, showing that a woman works hard in the office and looks after other family members after work. This is believable, and includes both traditional and modern values. If a woman is portrayed as fully confined to work, I feel it is extreme and unrealistic. Some traditional feminine values are still important in advertising production.

Interestingly, the interviewee acknowledged the role of advertising in representing and reinforcing cultural values, which illustrates how additional expectations are placed on women while traditional expectations are maintained. That is, if women perform in occupational roles they are still expected to perform their domestic roles which are seen as a sign of their femininity. This was a construction of femininity based on cultural discourses that prescribe that women should work in both public and private spheres. Therefore, it is worth noting that although women in Chinese advertising have been depicted in occupational roles, gender stereotypes regarding female domestic functions were still embedded in the minds of Chinese advertising professionals.

### ***Refusing to ‘behave like a lady’***

Three of the interviewees identified how Chinese advertising had characterised femininity in terms of resistance to the traditional ideology of feminine passivity and dependence. This view was clearly conveyed in one participant’s rather generalising comment: “many female characters in Chinese advertising become active, having strong personalities. Sometimes they behave less like a lady”. He

described how, during the creative process, new roles have been assigned to women, in which an opposition to the old concepts of femininity is evident – not an approach he appeared to especially condone.

It is also interesting to note that the representation of women's roles and behaviour in this less 'feminine' manner was remarked upon in relation to representations of physical recreation. When discussing a commercial for milk on which a Chinese advertising professional had worked, one that portrayed women involved in sports, he said:

In one recent commercial for milk, I tried to use young women doing sports as central characters. It is conceived that they not only engage in female style activities, like yoga. Instead, they perform a very cool hip-hop dance, the same as men do. I think some masculine values could work well with female images.

This comment highlights the ways in which culture, and particularly popular culture, provided inspiration for new representations of women in advertising. From the interviewee's point of view, the representation of women involved in traditionally masculine activities was perceived as an important innovative approach. This was an example of how advertising producers strategically scour the terrain of popular culture for new ideas and images (Cronin, 2004). This process suggests that the conventional concepts of gender roles are becoming less fixed and distinct.

### **The representation of male roles**

The following section of this chapter discusses how Chinese advertising professionals understand particular meanings associated with the masculine within the sociocultural context of China, and examines the ways in which they develop creative ideas and discursive strategies in relation to the representation of men. Four major themes emerged from the interviews: (1) a highly 'contrived' icon based on traditional discourse of success; (2) the 'breadwinner' icon within the domestic sphere; (3) men's emotional bonds with family; and, (4) the physical appearance of men.

*A highly 'contrived' icon based on traditional discourse of success*

When asked what features were important to the representation of male characters in Chinese advertising, Chinese advertising professionals chose “success” as the most prominent quality. This view was presented by 20 of the 26 interviewees. As one creative director noted, “China is a country that features the success of men’s career and life development”. Such a way of describing Chinese culture reveals advertising professionals’ adherence to a traditional understanding of the meaning of masculinity in China. The belief that emphasises the occupational achievement and social status of men has come to dominate and inform Chinese creative advertising thinking. As the content analysis (Chapter 6) and the semiotic analysis (Chapter 8) revealed, one noticeable feature of Chinese advertising representation was the stereotypical use of male characters in terms of high-level business executives. In the interviews, the representation of successful men was considered as a discursive strategy because it seemed to accommodate unique male characteristics and convey certain symbolic meanings such as prestige. One interviewee said:

I feel the images of “successful men” occupy a large portion in Chinese television advertisements. It doesn’t matter if they wear business suits during a meeting and even dress casually in leisure clothes for some social activities, their appearances, behaviours and even facial expressions are special. Their social status could be easily recognisable, along with their self-assured, mature and positive spirit.

Such an account provides evidence of how advertising creatives heavily incorporate particular cultural ideological values attached to men into advertising imagery. This stereotypical understanding of masculinity and its association with success and status has also been identified in studies conducted in North America and Europe (e.g., Gunter, 1995; Hofstede, 1984; O’Barr, 2006).

The interviewees expressed a common perception that the notion of success was closely linked with the attributes expected of men in Chinese society. Interestingly, this perception consistently incorporated views of what successful men look like and what values they endorsed. In the words of one male advertising professional:

In this society, men pursue success, power and achievement. A typical successful man in China has a car, a house, money, a high-ranking job, and a beautiful wife.

This proves their capability in business, but it also means that they have certain tastes and status as well as enjoying a high quality of life.

The interviewee's comment reveals the masculine ideal in an urban Chinese sociocultural context. As this interviewee understood it, the concept of success, as a social judgment of men, has come to be equated with personal development, occupational achievement, and economic status. Such awareness seemed to revolve around a construction of masculinity in a capitalist society; that is, men who possess financial resources were considered successful and others who do not were considered unsuccessful. Interestingly, the portrait of successful personalities, as an emergent social class attaining wealth and social standing through business practices, has become popular in Chinese media (such as the cinema) since the country's shift towards a market economy (McGrath, 2008). Also of significance is the fact that when interviewees identified how they constructed representations of a successful male, beautiful women were automatically included as something that the urban male would have succeeded in acquiring alongside other material markers of success and ownership such as a car and house.

Three of the interviewees were critical and cynical about the role model of successful men displayed in Chinese television commercials, pointing out the representation was "unrealistic" and "artificial". For example, one advertising professional stated "the portrayal of men as being successful and career-oriented in Chinese advertising was widely adopted because a majority of Chinese viewers were still conservative". From the interviewee's point of view, audiences tended to favour traditional (patriarchal) representations. His statement clearly indicated how advertising production personnel feel the need to leave this conservatism unchallenged. In the same vein, another interviewee said:

I am not sure how many successful men in real life look like those in commercials. A considerable number of the male representations are powerful and serious but, in fact, the real successful men are different. This is about public tastes and preferences. The public accept this representation of a male regardless of whether or not it is accurate.

What is implicit in this comment is the way Chinese advertising professionals credit their audiences with having a significant impact on the representation of

male roles in the creative advertising process. The participant describes how representations may have little reference to reality, and the audience is complicit in this myth-making process. As Craig (1992) noted, advertisers attempt to construct their advertisements “in ways that reinforce the images of sex most familiar to and comfortable for their target audience” (p. 208). In order to comply with the male images that were socially recognised and accepted, Chinese advertising professionals engaged in perpetuating images of masculinity that may have little reference to reality.

### *Male roles within the domestic sphere*

Interviewees also identified how male characters are represented in terms of the role of ‘breadwinner’ in the family. This theme emerged from 11 interviews and related to how men’s role and responsibility within a family were understood in the cultural context of China. Interestingly, six participants felt that “men treat family matters as secondary to their jobs, and were unquestionably the family economic support”. This account reveals a belief that providing for the material well-being of family through work is an essential component of the masculine ideal, and reinforces seemingly universal gendered myths that a man’s sense of self-worth depends on his ability to provide the primary economic support for his family (Leung, 2003; Vigorito & Curry, 1998).

The practice of depicting men carrying out domestic tasks was not something the advertising professionals viewed favourably. This was not because it was regarded as inappropriate for men to be represented as domestic workers, but because, in the words of six participants, men are “lazy” and “incompetent at housework”. Such statements reveal how performing household chores was perceived as inappropriate within the home for men. The cultural construction that men are not as successful as women in the domestic sphere has been argued by Scharrer et al. (2006). They saw this construction as having the potential to reinforce traditional gender roles “by sending the message that men are somehow ‘naturally’ ill suited for certain types of work, and therefore those chores are best left to women” (p. 216). In the words of one female copywriter interviewed in this research:



Men do not know how to do the housework. In China, a woman is exclusively in charge of domestic jobs for her family. Many men do not care about how messy the rooms are, and they may never wash socks and pants by themselves.

Gender stereotyping – albeit one which is critical of men – lay at the heart of this comment that relied heavily on a discourse of constructing housework as a non-male function, drawing on traditional male roles in a patriarchal tradition. For the interviewee, the housework is still an area where an unequal power relationship has remained between the sexes. Another interviewee perceived that depicting males in non-traditional roles where they took on domestic responsibilities would trigger rejection from the viewers:

If men are mainly responsible for cleaning and cooking are they like housewives? I think this may not get positive feedback from the viewers. They may feel that it is funny and strange because the portrayals conflict with the idea of masculinity in traditional Chinese culture.

As this comment revealed, the representation of men as inappropriate participants in household chores convinced and was accepted by the Chinese audience. The patriarchal ideology that constructs men as playing a different role in the domestic realm than do women appears to be firmly fixed in the minds of Chinese advertising professionals.

### ***An increasing emphasis on family and emotion***

While many responses from the interviewees suggest quite conservative attitudes towards how men and women can be depicted in advertising, a significant number of participants were willing to explore new ways of using gender in promotional texts. For example, for 14 participants, inscribing significant aspects of masculinity in family life was considered a valuable strategy in advertising appeal. This viewpoint yielded support for the results of content analysis (Chapter 5) which demonstrated a significant increase over the past few years in the number of times men are portrayed fulfilling familial roles in Chinese television advertising. According to the interviews, such a representation was particularly implemented as a reflection of increasing expectations placed on Chinese men to demonstrate more rounded capabilities in their roles as husbands and fathers.

There was a common acknowledgement across the interviews that masculine identities circulating in Chinese society have shifted towards an emphasis on family life. As one interviewee put it:

Gender images in society are changing more than even before. Lots of people believe that men should take care of their families, not just do their work. In modern Chinese society, if men have good family lives and well-paid jobs, they will be considered successful.

It appeared that for the interviewee, family and career have more recently *both* become integral components of constructing the ideal of male success. This account certainly points to the complex ways in which advertising practitioners perceived the construction of masculinity in contemporary China. Such beliefs on the part of advertising professionals are significant because they may have impact upon the type and content of advertisements that get produced (Cronin, 2004), in particular creative approaches to gender representation.

Nine participants appeared to be well aware of the difference of portraying male characters in conventional and innovative ways, and developing their creative ideas with regards to the relational and emotional aspects of masculinity. Subsequently, the concept of emotional attachments with family members was introduced as an additional approach to representing males. One interviewee commented that:

Many past commercials may have shown stern and reputable men on the screen and focused on their serious expressions, almost like a sculpture. However, I think they do not necessarily have those masculine qualities, and I tried other ways, for example, a man could be part of the family, having a tender face and expressing compassion for others. These portrayals could communicate well with the audience, both male and female.

This comment not only shows how the representation of men has been modified in Chinese advertising, but also provides an instance of how advertising professionals continually play an important role in reconstructing and codifying gender. It is notable how the interviewee drew on the metaphor of a “sculpture” to describe the stereotypical representation of men, illustrating how he perceived traditional attributes in constructing unemotional and less domestic-oriented roles. Clearly, the importance of portraying men involved in family activities, as a way

to show their specific qualities of being able to be loving and emotional, was supported by Chinese advertising creatives. In the same vein, another interviewee commented:

It is believed that family life is important to a man. It is quite common for advertisers to show how men are affectionate in commercials. He spends time with his wife and child participating in leisure activities, and even shares some household duties. These kinds of images show a man's love for the whole family, giving the feelings of happiness and love.

By reiterating the interaction between men and their family members, Chinese advertisers drew on an ideological discourse that (re)asserted masculinity in terms of “the intimate emotionality of family” (Vigorito & Curry, 1998, p. 137). This creative process is a topic that has been explored within western advertising literature (Kaufman, 1999; Lazar, 2000; O’Barr, 2006). It is argued that the use of family situations in which men were portrayed as having strong family bonds contributes to setting up the scenes of happiness and harmony. However, this is a depiction of masculinity that is less familiar in the Chinese Confucian tradition where men maintain the rigid hierarchy of power relations with women and children within the family (Leung, 2003). Throughout the interviews, while realising the ongoing changes in male role models, Chinese advertising personnel seemed to support these ideas in the process of gender representation.

Participants indicated that articulating masculinity in Chinese television advertising was based on a strong reference to the notion of family, more precisely, of a father’s role in parenting. This approach was known, understood and supported by six participants. For most of them, an underlying intention of portraying men as looking after and interacting with children was to create potentially novel, emotionally charged contextual situations. The following comment is typical of the overall attitude of the interviewees:

Sometimes we use male images with strong family values, for example, the father playing with his child. This is a heart-warming scene, reflecting a father’s love. In fact, I feel that using a father with children is more likely to grasp people’s attention.

Here, it is evident that involvement in family fun activities is becoming discursively associated with and identified as proper masculine activity. The

interview revealed that the novel representation of male characters in relation to children is seen as having appeal in the Chinese market. The concept of masculinity in Chinese Confucian tradition, as Leung (2003) noted, has historically been constructed in terms of male-dominant relationships within patriarchal kinship families. It seemed that by constructing family values through the depiction of male emotions, Chinese advertisers are contributing to the evolution of new discourses of masculinity in which the Confucian ideal of male superiority within the family is being eroded because it is perceived as less effective in selling some products.

### ***The physical appearance of men***

The interviews also revealed an interesting aspect of gender representation in relation to male self-grooming rituals. The interviewees acknowledged that men are increasingly judged by their appearance. Four participants interviewed argued that “Chinese men in the modern society attached themselves to outward appearance”, and consequently “their personalities are more easily distinguished by the looks and clothes”. The influence of this change on their representational practices was mostly due to the emergence of the male beauty market in China:

Nowadays many men, especially young men, pursue perfect appearance as much as women. Many cosmetics and skin care products for men have appeared on the Chinese market. What we do is to catch up with this tendency, using more good-looking men in the commercials.

Therefore the perception that there is an increasing importance placed on the physical appearance of men influences creative strategies. This shift towards a representation of the traits traditionally used to characterise women is a challenge to traditional male roles and, provides an example of how the concept of masculinity is being reconstructed in a new consumer culture. As Patterson and Elliott (2002) noted, hegemonic masculinity adapted to recent societal changes with “the increasing feminisation of masculinities, as men are encouraged to partake in the carnival of consumption, to become concerned about their appearance...” (p. 241). Through their comments, Chinese advertising professionals were aware of this cultural tendency, and played a role in supporting it in how they represented men and promoted products to men and women.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has provided some insights into the creative practices of Chinese advertising professionals and their role in the cultural construction of gender representation. The analysis of the interviews revealed that the process of portraying women and men was embedded in the intersections of disparate forces in the sociocultural context of China. These intersecting forces included traditional and modern gender values, the restriction of advertising regulations, and client expectations. Furthermore, the participants interviewed expressed their divergent perceptions of gender and assumptions about the audience, which had a significant impact upon their creation of meaning. As a result, there were a variety of contradictory viewpoints on how gender representation worked and how gender roles were understood. Imbued with definite ideas of femininity and masculinity, Chinese advertising professionals play a role in supporting, exploiting and reinforcing multiple discourses of gender. The practitioners could be seen to perform the role of what Bourdieu (1984) and Featherstone (1991) described as “cultural intermediaries”, incorporating cultural conventions and ideologies into the advertising process, and perpetuating them through the use of gender representation.

The findings reported in this chapter demonstrated how culturally engrained gender stereotypes are embedded in the social imagination and in the individual psyche of creatives. Chinese advertising professionals have relied heavily on a range of traditional concepts of gender to develop their ideas and images; this process continues to reinforce dominant ideologies and perceived gender differences. However, the participants’ awareness of, and support for, new trends in the development of gender roles has inspired innovative ways of representing gender. In this way, Chinese advertising professionals play a role in legitimating alternative ideologies of gender, shifting from the traditional, rigidly defined notions of gender towards a more diverse range of representations.

The participants interviewed in this study had different views on the representation of women in terms of attractive looks and being depicted as sex objects. The female interviewees were more critical and negative in their responses to this construction of femininity. By contrast, the male participants

tended to perceive sexual attractiveness as a vital element in the representation of women. Such responses demonstrated their sexist understandings of gender. In addition, the analysis of the interviews showed that the institutional conditions had a significant impact on the production of advertising messages. The implementation of Chinese advertising regulations and the professionals' relations with their clients also shaped the development of gender representation.

## **CHAPTER ELEVEN**

### **CONCLUSION**

#### **Introduction**

This thesis has examined the ways in which gender was portrayed in contemporary Chinese television advertising. In an effort to understand the complex and dynamic nature of advertising in relation to the discursive construction of femininity and masculinity in the sociocultural context of China, it combined both quantitative and qualitative approaches. In identifying the cultural specificity of gender in China (Chapter 2), the study attempted to reveal how, and to what extent, Chinese television commercials articulated specific meanings and ideologies of gender in relation to its historical root in the hegemony of Confucianism and in terms of its continuous evolution throughout the process of economic, social and political transformation. In this endeavour, a critical cultural studies approach was particularly helpful as it provided a framework to explore cultural meanings in a representational practice in relation to the sociocultural context in which that representation was produced.

#### **Using quantitative and qualitative methods in the study of gender representation**

In adopting a combination of content analysis and cultural studies approaches to identify and analyse the cultural representation of gender in Chinese television advertising, the research departed from other empirical advertising studies which have been limited to a single approach, and/or which have depended solely on text-based analyses of advertising. The research blended a quantitative method with interpretive techniques in an effort to capture specific cultural and historical meanings ascribed to gender in advertising representation, and in the sociocultural context of China. Accordingly, the investigation was unique in its complementary analysis of advertising texts and interviews with advertising personnel, with the expectation that the latter would begin to contribute toward filling the lacuna of production studies in China.

This study was systematic in identifying major patterns of gender representation from a substantial advertising sample at the initial stage, then undertaking subsequent close textual readings of these patterns. By paying particular attention to advertising texts and encoding practices, the study showed gender representation in advertising as complex practice supporting, reproducing, and at times challenging a set of discourses and ideologies. Rather than simply focusing on manifest content, this study brought a critical-interpretive perspective to understanding the ways in which gender was socially constructed in advertising representation. Applying the techniques of semiology and discourse analysis shed light on the perpetuation of certain codes, conventions and ideologies underlying gender representation. The approach proved valuable as a mean of exploring how the sociocultural context of China and changing discourses on gender influenced how television advertising constructs representations of women and men.

Interviews with advertising production personnel were also conducted in order to gain insight into how advertisements are ‘encoded’ with cultural meanings of gender. By interviewing the people who produce advertising messages and by comparing their attitudes toward and experiences of portraying gender, the intentions of the producers, and the cultural and institutional constraints that might influence the creative process were identified. The interviews demonstrated that advertising production personnel play a significant role in the cultural construction of gender as a result of their use of specific strategies, ideas, and images to construct symbolic meaning. The implementation of these interviews, therefore, enabled the research investigation to gain insight into how gender is portrayed by advertisers that content and textual analyses alone were unable to reveal.

### **The (re)construction of gender in Chinese television advertising**

The representation of gender in this study’s advertising sample was ideologically complex because it articulated a number of diverse, competing and evolving discourses which, in turn, served to variously legitimise, reinforce and challenge particular concepts of femininity and masculinity. The different ways that women and men were portrayed were culturally embedded in the national context,



perpetuating certain gendered expectations. As a result, gender representation was (re)fashioned in relation to constructs of gender at various times in Chinese history, and in terms of tensions between tradition and modernity, localisation and globalisation, and east and west.

The results of the content analysis (Chapter 6) demonstrated that contemporary Chinese television advertising continued to reflect and reinforce gender stereotypes in terms of variables such as role, age, dress, product category and voice-over. In general, women were more likely than men to be portrayed as young, as assuming domestic responsibilities, and as sex objects. Youth and beauty were primarily represented as desirable attributes of women. This view was consistent with the findings of interviews with Chinese advertising professionals (Chapter 10) who adhered to the conventional use of female attractiveness to sell products. On the other hand, men were more often than women depicted as middle-aged and in occupational roles, and used to provide voice-overs. These findings, to some extent, show that advertising portrayals have not kept up with the actual development of gender roles in China's evolving sociocultural context. The findings were consistent with those of previous studies from the US and the UK in terms of perpetuating gender differences (e.g., Furnham & Skae, 1997; Kaufman, 1999; Manstead & McCulloch, 1981; Scharrer et al., 2006), and, therefore, followed a global pattern of gender representation. Although cultural stereotypes in Chinese television commercials continued to prevail, there were some positive changes in gender role representation. For example, females were depicted more often than males in mid-level business and white-collar roles, and an almost equal number of women and men were depicted in family settings.

One important finding that emerged from the content analysis was that many product categories in Chinese television commercials were gender-specific. This phenomenon had been noted in studies conducted in China (Cheng, 1997; Liu & Bu, 1997; Zheng, 2002) and in western countries (Furnham & Skae, 1997; Gunter, 1995). While female characters were primarily associated with domestic and beauty care products, male characters were typically used to promote non-domestic products. Interviews with Chinese advertising professionals revealed

that their reliance on a range of basic guidelines – embodied in a stereotypical perception of gender differences in terms of shopping behaviours, purchasing power, and use of particular products – was due to their engagement with established gender-biased ideologies in the creative process.

As became evident in this thesis through analysis of advertising texts and interviews with professionals, the roles of women and men portrayed in Chinese television commercials were invested with different meanings in a variety of contexts, and, consequently, created particular subject positions for viewers. This process was illustrated in the frequent use of conventions, stereotypes, and codes that promote traditional cultural values, affirming patriarchal lines of gender embedded in both Chinese and western contexts. As a result, views about the ‘proper’ roles of and unequal relations between the sexes were perpetuated. On the other hand, Chinese television commercials were both representative and constitutive of ideological cultural shifts related to gender. Therefore, the original contribution that this research made to the literature on advertising was to provide insights into the significance of gender representation in relation to the sociocultural context of China. The ways in which female and male characters were portrayed often comprised the reconstruction of gender roles and the endorsement of modern (western) values, to some extent challenging many traditional Chinese gender expectations.

It is also worth noting that clear demarcations in the representation of gender varied considerably by the age of central characters and across product categories. The older age groups were often portrayed in line with traditional Confucian values (such as wisdom, power, respect, maturity, mothering, and self-sacrifice), while the younger generations were more often depicted as conforming to modern, western consumerism, demonstrating the importance of being popular among their peers, and of their being preoccupied with self and attentive to their physical beauty. The older age groups appeared to project ‘the things they have already gained’ onto the advertised products. In this way, the men were typically featured in the commercials for ‘automobiles’ and ‘medicines’, whilst the women were often used to promote ‘household necessities’ and ‘baby products’. Furthermore, the younger age groups seemed to become ‘what they want to be’ in association

with the advertised products. This trend was particularly demonstrated in the portrayal of both young women and young men under the category of ‘food and non-alcoholic beverages’.

Gender representations in Chinese television advertising not only reflected the established cultural views of femininity and masculinity prevailing in the sociocultural context of China, but were also instrumental in (re)constructing gender roles and relations in distorted ways which may have a powerful influence on how both female and male viewers build their own identities or think that their identities should be. Therefore, it is not surprising that Chinese advertising production personnel selected between various discourses on gender in order to find the ‘right’ image to suit their purposes of selling products and services.

Gender representation in Chinese television advertising was a crucial realm for the negotiation and appropriation of multiple ideologies and competing discourses – not just about gender. Given the transitional nature of advertising in contemporary China, its representation was not merely a simple reflection of already existing values, ideas, behaviours and trends. Rather, the ways in which femininity and masculinity were represented drew heavily on the country’s long-established Confucian tradition, but, in addition, deliberately engaged with tensions within and across a range of commercial, cultural, social and political imperatives and contexts. In this study, advertising, as complicit within these imperatives and contexts contributed to the (re)construction of increasingly culturally diverse gendered meanings. In so doing it both perpetuated and challenged certain gendered ideological roles and concepts. While this may appear to be contradictory, the fact is that this research has uncovered many tensions at work in how advertising represents gender and how and why gender is encoded in the creative process.

***Traditional ideologies of femininity: Motherhood, domesticity, passivity and sexual objectification***

The analysis of Chinese television commercials revealed that the representation of family life was not only a strategy to place products and brands in an emotionally charged context, but also a site of constructing femininity with explicit reference

to the significant principles of patriarchy, in particular those related to Chinese Confucian culture. Although the Chinese Communist Party has purported to treat the genders equally in all spheres since the Maoist Revolution, many commercials in the current sample continued to perpetuate the expectations that the woman's place is still in the home. The cultural myths that depict motherhood and domesticity continued to prevail. In these terms, the notions of nurturing, maternal love, obedience and devotion were articulated in the representation of women looking after children, performing household chores, and serving other family members. These roles were considered by many Chinese advertising professionals to be natural for females. Their beliefs followed a cultural ideological logic prescribed by a strong discursive tradition on female subordination in the domestic sphere.

In the sample commercials, the myth of domestic femininity persisted not only in the representation of women as responsible for childcare and for housework, but also in the pursuit of pleasure and relaxation. The commercials that featured female characters involved in home-based leisure activities tended to construct a clear connection between femininity, a sedentary lifestyle and self-indulgence in relation to consumption of the advertised products (such as beauty products, non-alcoholic beverages and food). Such a way of conceptualising femininity continued to perpetuate the idea that women are supposed to be physically inactive.

It is also worth noting that many constructs of femininity in the commercials examined in this research were contradictory; that is, women were depicted as confirming a discourse about being a good and loving mother or a physically inactive participant in leisure activities, whilst being portrayed as tempting objects that satisfy the male gaze. The use of female sexuality as an appeal was illustrated in the frequent representation of women involved in both indoor and outdoor recreational activities. In these terms, femininity was constructed in a way that depicted young women as passive objects or illustrated an active pleasurable identity in empowering styles. In emphasising women's sexualized appearance and behaviour, the commercials allowed for the logic of global consumer culture while transgressing the physical constraints on women in the patriarchal tradition

of China. This construction of femininity perpetuated sexist ideologies where women are encouraged to consider their primary value as based on how appealing they are to men.

Through the interviews with advertising production personnel, it became noteworthy that there were different attitudes toward sexually explicit images. Whereas female interviewees criticised the portrayal of women's sexual attractiveness as a controversial issue, male participants aligned themselves with discursive formations that treat women as sex objects and never asked themselves any questions about the social and cultural influences their representation of the 'idealised' female may have on both women and men. Also evident from the interviews was that advertising law in China restricted the use of sexual appeals which caught advertising creatives in the middle of an ideological contradiction between a global discourse of sexual liberation and the Chinese government's regulatory practices.

#### ***Less traditional images of women: Autonomy, occupation and hedonism***

The traditional domestic role of women was challenged by drawing on codes of modernity and leisure to the point that femininity was not restricted to the rigid principles in the Confucian tradition which continues to play an important role in present day Chinese culture. This trend was illustrated by how frequently female characters were portrayed as being young and enjoying a certain degree of leisure and autonomy in the domestic sphere, and by the strong idea that domesticity could be an ideal state. These depictions reshaped older traditional Confucian portrayals of femininity in a way that emphasised the notion of modern domesticity and accompanied to China's burgeoning consumerism. While offering a challenge to the ideal of the self-denying wife and mother, however, Chinese television commercials indubitably consolidated a patriarchal ideology.

Interviews with Chinese advertising professionals clearly revealed that they were aware of the rise of women's access to work outside the home, and exploited this new role model in the development of gender representation. In the advertising texts, there was a significant increase in the portrayal of women participating in working settings which contrasted with the findings of previous studies conducted

in China (Han & Han, 2004; Hu & Xu, 2006). This phenomenon reflected a reconstruction of femininity in the public sphere. However, in that sphere women were not portrayed in the same way as men in terms of professional positions and activities. Several traits, conventionally perceived as feminine, such as physical attractiveness, empathy, inferiority and submissiveness, were frequently emphasised through the recurrent images of women involved in white-collar roles and service-oriented jobs. In this way, Chinese television commercials, while constructing an independent working subject position for female viewers, could be seen as not only perpetuating patriarchal ideologies and discourses, but also at times reshaping these discourses and even challenging them. Certainly there was evidence of much ambiguity and complexity in the gender portrayals.

In this study, a point worth noting in relation to the reconstruction of femininity was through portraying women not only with the contemporarily desirable attributes of being young, beautiful and fashionable, but also as independent and liberated in recreational activities occurring in urban public places. Accordingly, the commercials reinforced the myth of 'modern Chinese femininity' (Ferry, 2003). By illustrating a consumption-based leisure culture and highlighting a series of western-oriented values such as modernity and hedonism, the commercials appeared to present a break from the domestic ideal of women in Chinese Confucian tradition. However, in some cases, this outward image of modernity and independence was juxtaposed with a more traditional focus on female dependence, in that the female characters were still constructed as incapable of actually controlling their own modernity and independence in terms of their ability to access their desired leisure activities without some form of male assistance. This complex, and contradictory, duality, however, seemed to suit Chinese advertising personnel, as revealed in the interviews, in that they saw it as a way to successfully blend both traditional and modern gender expectations in order to sell products (to women).

In terms of recreational roles, a few of the commercials examined portrayed women as active participants in exercise and physical activities. This representation appeared to endorse attributes that have traditionally been defined as masculine such as aggressiveness, courage and activeness and, therefore,

revealed a resistance to the physical constraints imposed on women in Chinese culture. For some Chinese advertising professionals, linking femininity with physical recreation was perceived as an innovative approach.

***Traditional expectations of the male: Power, dominance and achievement***

Many commercials in this study revealed that the discursive construction of manhood remained traditional and relatively constant. This view was typically illustrated in the representation of men as involved in family life through leisure activities – rather than involved in domestic responsibilities – or as performing housework in incompetent and awkward ways. These characterisations confirmed a traditionally accepted view that men and women fulfil different roles within the domestic sphere, and perpetuated male dominance in the patriarchal culture. As revealed in their interviews, Chinese advertising professionals were engaged in the myth-making process where a discourse of the traditional gender-based division of labour was still pivotal to the production of advertising messages.

In the advertising texts, middle-aged and older men were typically portrayed in association with a symbol of success in the occupational realm. This phenomenon was embodied in the overwhelming frequency of male characters depicted as occupying high and authoritative positions, and as participating in business-related social activities. The ways men were represented invited the viewers to understand that achievement, intelligence, confidence and status were the salient features of masculine behaviour. In some cases, the virtues rooted in Chinese Confucian tradition were particularly presented, more or less explicitly, as essential elements of men's professional success, and used to promote brand quality and prestige. Through the interviews, it became even more evident how cultural notions of the successful male in occupational activities informed creative thinking, and sprang from a discursive tradition that defines social status and material achievement as norms for the social judgment of men. This approach seemed to reflect a cultural shift in the discourse of Chinese masculinity from some significant aspects in Chinese Confucian culture, such as moral force and cultural attainment (Louie, 2002), towards embracing a male ideal found in western capitalist ideology with its economic interests (Chen, 2002; Song, 2004).

A main finding that emerged from the analysis of the Chinese television commercials was that masculine power was articulated as an essential component of the depiction of men in recreational activities. This articulation frequently drew on a western hegemonic version of gender that highlights the physical; men were portrayed as participating in sports and physical activities. Since Chinese culture historically downplayed physicality, the current revaluation of the physical attributes of males could be seen as an effort to reshape masculinity in China. Although there was evidence to support the idea that Chinese commercials exhibited gender values more commonly seen in western culture rather than traditional, Confucian culture, a number of commercials in this research sample did illustrate male power in different ways. These commercials depicted middle-aged and older males in traditional Chinese leisure activities, acting as authorities promoting Chinese branded products (such as medicine and alcohol products). Specific attributes such as wisdom, maturity, creativity and cultural attainment were reiterated as significant markers carried by men. The commercials, therefore, created an intellectual version of masculinity which reinforces the dominant masculine ideal of 'Wen' in Chinese Confucian culture.

*New dimensions in the representation of men: Emotion, appearance and pleasure*

In comparison with the traditional constructs of masculinity embracing power and status, a number of commercials in this study's sample contributed to creating 'softer' versions of men by accentuating stereotypically feminine attributes as being acceptable for the male, for example, emotion, fashion and pleasure. This phenomenon demonstrated how the normative ideal of hegemonic masculinity was rearticulated with popular elements and even counter-discourses. As revealed through the analysis of both advertising texts and the interviews, the representation of men was characterised through a representation of their emotional relations with children. In the commercials, male characters were typically involved in a playful and intimate relationship between father and child. The cultural meaning of masculinity was reproduced in opposition to the traditional Confucian model of fatherhood, a style based on the authoritarian parenting style. Men who fulfilled their parental role in addition to their economic role were presented as an ideal or model of social success. This emphasis on the



relational and emotional aspects of masculinity was based on Chinese advertising professionals' understandings of the cultural shift in discourses of gender. They, therefore, drew on these specific depictions of men as a strategy for positioning the advertised products in potentially novel, emotionally charged contextual situations.

In addition to family life, Chinese television commercials seemed to reconstruct masculinity through the portrayal of young men as occupying white-collar positions in the workplace. This modification of male rituals emphasised the ideas of comradeship, cooperation, industriousness and coping with pressure, revealing a certain rejection of the traditional hegemonic models of men that are linked to privileged positions and executive power.

Interestingly, whilst there was a common perception among the interviewees that the representation of successful men was a strategy to convey unique symbolic meanings such as status and achievement, some of them seemed to depart from the use of rigid and conservative discourses on masculinity in the creative development process. This abandon followed a logic presented by the development of the global consumer culture in China. As a result, Chinese television commercials portrayed young male characters involved in intimate relationships with their friends and partners within social leisure activities. Such representation was particularly manifested in the product category of food and non-alcoholic beverages. By incorporating elements of popular culture into the recreational roles of men, the commercials to some extent reflected a tendency towards greater diversity in male roles, challenging the traditional model of Chinese masculinity perpetrated through much of China's history.

### **The role of advertising professionals: Encoding cultural meanings**

The thesis combined textual analysis of advertising content and examination of conditions of production through interviews with advertising professionals in order to understand complex ways in which gender was 'encoded' with cultural meanings. As revealed in the interviews, the process of creating advertising messages was influenced by institutional imperatives and cultural discourses that circulated within the sociocultural context of China. More precisely, Chinese

advertising professionals contributed to constructing gender representation through awareness of and negotiation with cultural, institutional, social and historical conditions in the creative process. This process was ideologically underpinned because it was framed by “a routinized and habituated professional ‘know-how’” (Hall, 1972, p. 61). In addition, many of the interviewees seemed to use gender representation as a standard ‘naturalised’ practice because they did not necessarily perceive it as an issue of any great concern in the creative development process or in terms of its wider social implications and potential impacts.

In the creative process, Chinese advertising professionals constructed gender representation in the ways that particular cultural discourses in relation to femininity and masculinity were used as raw material and provided inspiration for the production. Central to this process was the professionals’ engagement with the continual intersections of traditional and modern gender values. They not only relied on a range of culturally engrained gender stereotypes, but also sought innovative ways of characterisation and thereby supported new trends in the development of gender roles in China. Such discursive practices defined certain roles and traits as ‘natural’ for women and men.

The analysis of the interviews with Chinese advertising professionals also demonstrated that the production of gender representation was a socially constructed process which was associated with the clients’ expectations and the restriction of advertising regulations. These factors worked as the ideological and political constraints that are part of the conditions of production. In addition, the individual aspects of Chinese advertising professionals, such as their cultural identities and beliefs, were inevitably brought into the creation of commercial messages. It is evident that the professionals’ subjective understandings were deeply embedded in traditional gender ideologies, and provided guidelines for the development of ideas and images. Furthermore, because the professionals assumed audience conservatism, they were pushed to use conventional representations of gender that are easily recognized by their intended viewers.

### **Further studies**

Given the findings of this thesis, further research might focus on other media such as newspapers or magazines to determine the tendencies and patterns in gender representation discussed in this study. It is worth investigating whether, and to what extent, different media categories serve jointly to construct femininity and masculinity in contemporary Chinese society. Furthermore, Gunter (1995) argued that gender representation in television advertising vary according to different channels and time periods to viewing it. In the current study, the collection of commercials was limited in terms of focusing on the prime-time block and six television channels (CCTV and BTV). Therefore, more research is needed to collect commercials from the other channels during the daytime.

In addition, Hall's "encoding/decoding" model (1980) argued that "decodings do not follow inevitably from encodings" (p. 136); this view emphasised the active role of the audience in selecting and interpreting media material. As Moores (1993) explained, decoding is a complex process where "audience members are engaged in semiotic labour too. They bring their interpretative frameworks to bear on the message" (p. 17). From this perspective, it would be interesting to explore how the viewers of advertisements read and interpret gender representation. Previous studies conducted in western countries (e.g., Beetles & Harris, 2005; Bello, Pitts, & Etzel, 1983; Elliott, et al., 1995; Ford & LaTour, 1993; Jones, Stanaland, & Gelb, 1998; Leigh, Rethans & Whitney, 1987) have demonstrated that the use of gender representation in advertising resulted in both positive and negative reactions. While some audience research (e.g., Liu et al., 2006; Tu, 2003) on gender representation in print advertisements has been undertaken in China, there have been no empirical studies of Chinese television viewers' responses to and attitudes toward commercial content in relation to gender. Therefore, it would be valuable to look at how their identification as Chinese residents plays a part in how audiences interpret and evaluate both traditional Confucian influenced imagery and the less traditional and more global forms of gender representations that this study has identified, and examine to what extent the viewers might be complicit in myth-making processes.

## **Appendix A**

### **Coding categories for characters and commercials**

#### **Gender (What is the character's gender?)**

Male  
Female

#### **Product (What are categories of the products being associated with female and male characters?)**

Food/non-alcoholic beverages  
Alcoholic beverages  
Personal/beauty care  
Cleaning products  
Baby products  
Household appliances/furnishings  
Automobiles/accessories/oil companies  
Entertainment  
Telecommunication  
Drugs/medicines  
Clothing  
Service (banks/travel agents)  
Others=0

#### **Voice-overs (Who is the off-camera announcer?)**

Male  
Female  
Chorus  
None

#### **Role (What types of roles are female and male characters playing?)**

Occupational (being depicted in working settings)  
Non-Occupational (relating to home or outdoors settings)  
Unknown

#### **Occupational role**

High-level business (e.g., a high-ranking official in a business)  
Professional (e.g., an expert in a field)  
Celebrity (e.g., an entertainer)  
Mid-level business/semi-professional (e.g., a sales clerk or an insurance agent)  
White collar worker/non-professional (e.g., a secretarial job)  
Blue collar worker (e.g., low-level manual or production workers)  
Other

#### **Non-occupational role**

Family (a model with children or other family members in domestic settings)  
Recreational (an individual in a non-working leisure activity)

Decorative (a passive and non-functional nature enriching the product as an attractive stimulus)

Other

**Gender roles in family**

Family roles (e.g., cooking, cleaning or childcare)

Relaxing (e.g., eating, sleeping, reading or watching television)

Other

**Recreational role**

Sport, exercise, and physical activities (e.g., bicycling or running)

Non-sporting social activities in public places (e.g., eating out or shopping)

Home-based activities (e.g., watching television or reading)

Other

**Dress (What female and male characters wear?)**

Formal wear

Work clothes

Casual wear

Seductive dress

Other

**Age (Approximately what is the character's portrayed age?)**

Under 30

31-60

61-over

**Credibility**

Product user

Authority

Both

Neither

## **Appendix B**

### **Interview questions for Chinese advertising professionals**

#### **General questions**

1. Thank you for talking to me, and first of all could you tell me a little bit about yourself? How long have you been working in advertising industry? What kinds of productions are you working on? What is your role(s) in the creative advertising process?
2. Could you explain how you think advertising uses human models/characters? For example, do you think they are used in an effort to encourage certain sorts of identification/associations with the product?

#### **Creative approaches to portraying advertising characters**

3. How do you think Chinese television commercials use images of women and men? Could you explain how you use them as someone who is involved in making/producing advertisements?
4. What kind of gendered values do you think Chinese television commercials contain/promote? Which gendered values are rarely used? Why?
5. What sort of cultural values do you associate with female and male characters in the creative development process? Why?
6. How do you choose female and male characters with particular roles in advertising production? Are there any criteria and considerations?
7. Do you believe that gender stereotypes in advertising messages are more effective than the non-stereotyping portrayals?
8. Are there any cultural and social changes in relation to gender in China influence the ways in which television commercials are produced?
9. What is/are the best advertising campaign/television commercials involved gender roles you have seen? Why?
10. Is it important that gender portrayals in television commercials match the social reality?
11. If you do not mind, I'd like to ask you own perspective on gender? How do you understand gender differences? Do you think that your own cultural background effects how you use images of men/women in advertisements?

### **Choice of male and female characters and product categories**

12. Which kinds of products and services do you think are appropriate to use female values? Why? And which kinds of products and services are appropriate to use male values?
13. If you need to promote a car, who (what kind of particular character/role) is the person you think you will use? Any particular situation? Why? And if you need to promote a washing powder, who (what kind of particular character/role) is the person you think you will use? Any particular situation? Why?
14. Women and men are more likely to be used to promote certain types of products than others, for example, female-shampoo and male-car. Do you consider it dangerous to challenge an established advertising discourse?

### **Perception of Chinese audience**

15. How would you describe the attitude of Chinese viewers' attitudes and perceptions toward gendered roles?
16. Do you know what kind of female and male characters in television advertising Chinese audience want to watch?
17. Are there any particular gendered values and roles are useful for persuading Chinese audience?

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