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Advertising Liminality: Advertising As Liminal Space of Social Transformation in China

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Most research on Chinese advertising relies on content analysis and compares cultural values reflected in advertising with those of other countries. Through a semiotic approach, we focused on the political aspects of Chinese advertising, and examined the role of advertising in the country's transition to a consumer society. Our conception of advertising liminality examined the ritual of advertising during social transition and extended Sherry's cultural framework of advertising. We also contributed to our field by applying semiotic approach to the studies of Chinese advertising.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In this paper, the role of advertising in China's social transition from a communist country to a consumer society in the past two decades was examined through an interpretive semiotic approach. Most research on Chinese advertising relies on content analysis and compares cultural values reflected in advertising with other countries. Such studies failed to consider *how* social, cultural, and economic factors have influenced Chinese advertising and the role of advertising in China's ideological transition from communism to consumerism. This theoretical gap was the focus of our paper. We drew upon Turner's (1968, 1982) theory of the ritual process and Van Gennep's (1960) conception of rites of passage to address this issue.

Advertising is a system of signs synthesised from a wide range of shared cultural symbols and formulates a particular view of the world (Sherry 1987). Individual advertisement was considered to be particular rituals that reveal the larger system of culture. However, Sherry's formulation of advertising as ritual emphasises advertising's function as a means of socialization, similar to the way that cultural rituals have worked to socialise members of a particular society to its sign systems and to its established social order and hierarchy. The ritual process of advertising in society was ignored and called for further examination. Rites of passage (Van Gennep 1960) and liminality (Turner 1969) provide a theoretical lens with which to consider the rituals of advertising in Chinese society. Rites of passage are rituals accompanying an individual's change of social status or rituals associated with seasonal changes for an entire society (Van Gennep 1960). The transitional stage of rites of passage is characterised by a space and period of *ambiguity* or *liminality* that few attribute of the previous or the subsequent states. Established symbols of the proceeding stage are destroyed and reconfigured. Signs of the new social status are created. The liminal or limanlity is the setting in which new symbols, paradigms, and cultures arise (Turner 1982). Advertising in China constituted such a liminal space in which the signs and discourses of the dominant ideology of socialism were destroyed, reconfigured and represented (Hall 1997) to promote the rising ideology of consumerism.

Advertising in China was eliminated as an evil symbol of decadent capitalism for nearly two decades soon after the founding of the PRC in 1949. It was reinstated in the late 1970s as a means of glorifying communism and facilitating socialist economic reformation, in a way similar to China's political propagandas and its official art of socialist realism did (Stross 1990; Schudson 1984). Chinese advertisers took on this task by using political discourses and symbols of socialism in the promotion of consumer goods, during a time when consumption of luxury brands were still severely and publicly stigmatised in Party organs such as the *People's Daily* as evidence of decadent bourgeoisie lifestyle to be eliminated. Such seemingly

simple practice of combining acceptable symbols in commercial promotion has far-reaching implications on Chinese society. In our paper, we examined such important issues from the perspectives of cultural ritual and rites of passage. Our conception of advertising as semiotic liminal space helped to enrich our understanding of advertising's role in China's social transition to consumerism in the past twenty years.

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