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# Establishing the Modern Advertising Languages

*Patent Medicine Newspaper Advertisements in Hong Kong, 1945–1969*

Wendy Siuyi Wong

*This article traces the formation of modern advertising languages in Hong Kong when this society was developing into the industrialization stage and was experiencing steady economic growth in the period from 1945 through 1969. It argues that Hong Kong advertising culture developed under the influence of Western advertising techniques, images and ideology, which shaped the modern advertising languages of Hong Kong. Newspaper advertisements for patent medicines from Sing Tao Daily, one of the earliest newspapers in Hong Kong, formed the study sample. This article also outlines the role and contribution of patent medicine advertisements in the history of advertising in Hong Kong, where they ushered in a new era of advertising sophistication and a new collection of techniques that are still in use as advertising strategies today. The role and content of Hong Kong patent medicine advertisements were similar in many ways to those of the West, but Hong Kong did not experience the growth necessary to establish advertising until after the end of the Second World War when the society finally achieved economic stability.*

Keywords: patent medicines—advertising—consumption—material culture studies—ideology—Hong Kong

## Introduction and background

The period from the end of the Second World War through 1969 saw significant economic and industrial development in Hong Kong. This period provided a very important foundation for Hong Kong to develop its industries from its earlier entrepôt status, and also for growth in advertising and its integration with the everyday life of Hong Kong people. The data for this study are based on a diachronic sampling starting from December 1945, soon after the end of the Second World War when the newspaper resumed printing, to December 1969. Patent medicine advertisements represent the largest category of advertisements in the study sample. Y. W. Chan's<sup>1</sup> study also found that the best-represented product type in newspaper advertisements during this time period

was patent medicine. Advertisements for these products will be the focus of this analysis, which will establish the most common persuasive techniques and messages used within them. The system of translation from Chinese to English used here is based on the romanization of Cantonese, the major spoken language of the people of Hong Kong.

The blooming of patent medicine advertisements symbolizes prosperity at the dawn of an industrial society and an important step for a modern society, as studies have also found in the West. In the East, Hong Kong, a Chinese society, shows a similar pattern of development reflected in patent medicine advertisements. Hong Kong consumers first learned the language of advertising through patent medicine advertisements. Very similar analyses of Western cases have been conducted by Pasi Falk<sup>2</sup> and Thomas

Richards.<sup>3</sup> This study closely follows these and other works that discuss patent medicine advertising and its transforming role in the history of Western societies, although the Hong Kong examples were less psychologically manipulative and made less exaggerated claims than those studied in the West. This article further argues that, similar to early patent medicine advertisements in the West, those in Hong Kong focused on every conceivable problem, and addressed the basic and internalized needs of consumers, thereby acculturating consumers to the idea that problems and even potential problems could be remedied or prevented through the purchase and application of products. Before analysing the subject matter of this article, it is necessary to have a brief understanding of the historical background of Hong Kong.

The good natural harbour with its excellent geographical advantages for trade was probably the main reason why the British took over Hong Kong from China as a colony in 1841. As Yiu,<sup>4</sup> an economist specializing in Hong Kong industrial and economic development, observes, Hong Kong was mainly a free trade and entrepôt port from 1842 to 1941, a period characterized by the restricted development of industrialization. The pre-1947 period did not provide Hong Kong with the environment for industrial growth, and advertising cannot flourish without the industrialization of a society, as in the cases of Britain and America.<sup>5</sup> As Singer observes, for 'commercial advertising to emerge, larger-scale societies had to develop, with division of labor and specialists who sold their production.'<sup>6</sup> Hong Kong advertising did not experience full growth as did Shanghai before the Second World War, since such scenarios as Singer perceives were not yet current. The incipient industrial development in the 1930s provided Hong Kong with a foundation for economic recovery after the war, and is also the reason why some studies regard that period as one in which Hong Kong's 'industrial revolution' took shape.<sup>7</sup>

The development of advertising in Hong Kong before the Japanese occupation during the Second World War was very limited. Although early Hong Kong advertising benefited from talented artists such as Kwan Wai-nung from Guangdong,<sup>8</sup> Hong Kong held a less important position both in industry and in advertising than Shanghai. However, since Hong Kong was a free trade port, the period before the Second World War provided Hong Kong with a

basic economic structure as well as a political system for future development under British colonial rule. In the first two years after the Second World War, Hong Kong was recovering from the damage of the war. Then, during the period from 1947 to 1959, Hong Kong entered the industrialization stage.<sup>9</sup> In this period, Hong Kong faced two major internal changes in close connection with China which helped the territory to develop its industry and economy. They were the changeover of power in mainland China in 1949 and the embargo imposed upon China by the United Nations as a result of China's interference in the Korean War in 1951. These two changes pushed Hong Kong to develop its own industry in order to survive, rather than primarily relying on the entrepôt port trade. These changes also provided Hong Kong with two important factors for its industrial development: capital and expertise from Shanghai's entrepreneurs, and a mass population of cheap labourers.

Hong Kong in the post-war decades also experienced a dramatic increase in population. The population in 1947 was around 1.8 million, but by 1959 the population had already reached 3 million. The population continued to increase rapidly, and by 1976 it had reached 4.4 million. The economy of Hong Kong in 1953 and 1954 was in the 'take-off' stage,<sup>10</sup> according to the 'stages of economic growth' outlined by the American economist W. W. Rostow.<sup>11</sup> But sociologists such as W. S. Chow<sup>12</sup> observe that most of the families, apart from rich entrepreneurs from Shanghai, were living a poor life in the 1950s. Families still depended on 'special packages' from social welfare groups because they could not meet the basic material needs of life on their own. Studies<sup>13</sup> found that Hong Kong workers often associated their overall job satisfaction directly with their pay. Benjamin Leung offers a vivid description of the motivation of the people of Hong Kong:

Hong Kong people are dedicated to work because they are motivated by the strong desire for socio-economic advancement, because they believe that hard work and investing time and efforts in work through further studies will one day bring rewards in this land of abundant opportunities. In other words, they believe in the 'rags-to-riches' Hong Kong Dream.<sup>14</sup>

This "'rags-to-riches" Hong Kong Dream' laid the foundation for economic success. It is not difficult to

understand why Hong Kong has developed into one of the 'world's most consumption-oriented societies' in the late 1980s, as Tse, Belk and Zhou's<sup>15</sup> study has shown.

The increase in income indicates the accumulation of the consumption power of wage labourers, which was an important factor for the activities of advertising to take place. The wages of all three worker categories (unskilled, semi-skilled and skilled) remained quite stable from the early 1950s until 1962. Wages began to climb steadily and quite rapidly from 1963 onwards. By as early as 1963, the average semi-skilled labourer's daily income had increased by 46 per cent compared to a decade earlier in 1953. Labourers benefited from the rise in income with the low inflation rate throughout the 1960s. By 1971, the increase was already 110 per cent over 1963 wages.<sup>16</sup> Getting a job was no longer a problem, and the public housing estate programme started in 1954<sup>17</sup> by the government effectively provided a stable shelter for needy households. In sum, it can be claimed that the 'absolute poor' social phenomenon was vanishing during the 1950s and 1960s, and Hong Kong reached the height of its industrial growth and diversification stage in the 1970s. Advertising in newspapers, which were the most popular form of media and which had a consistent everyday connection to the people during the period from 1945 to 1969,<sup>18</sup> captures the changes from 'rags-to-riches' in the everyday life of the people. Among them, patent medicine advertisements reflect the physiological needs and satisfactions of Hong Kong people at that time the best.

### Advertising and the development of newspapers as a communication medium

The introduction of newspapers to China represented an important medium for advertising as it did in the West, since advertising provided a major source of funds for the press.<sup>19</sup> The concepts and functions of modern newspapers never appeared in Chinese official gazettes before the establishment of the first Chinese language newspaper, the *Chinese Monthly Magazine* published in Malacca in 1815 by a British missionary, Robert Morrison. The first British-run English-language newspaper that took advertisements

was the *Hong Kong Gazette* published in 1841, which merged with the *Friend of China* one year later and was renamed the *Friend of China and Hong Kong Gazette*. The newly formed newspaper was published until 1859.<sup>20</sup> Although a number of Chinese language dailies operated from the late 1880s, the appearance of *Wah Kiu Yat Po* and *Kung Sheung Daily News* published in 1925 marked the real start of the era of commercial presses with the objective of serving the community and commerce. The other two major Chinese language newspapers still published today are *Sing Tao Jih Pao* (*Sing Tao Daily*), established in 1938, and *Sing Pao*, established in 1939. *Sing Tao Daily* was founded by the Tiger Balm Oils boss, Wu Man-fu, with the promotion of his products as one of the main objectives.<sup>21</sup> It acted as a pioneer in the establishment of a new standard for the industry when it quickly gained a reputation in editorial achievement.

*Sing Tao Daily* has been a well-established Chinese-language newspaper since 1938 and is still published today. It is also the most preferred 'sample' adopted in advertising research studies such as those conducted by Chan,<sup>22</sup> Tse, Belk and Zhou,<sup>23</sup> and Sze.<sup>24</sup> Burma-born owner Wu Man-fu's idea of creating his own medium to promote the Tiger Balm tie-in products was actually inspired by another South East Asia tycoon in Singapore, Chen Ga-kan, who established *Nan Yang Shueng Po* in 1923 and made use of his newspaper to promote his own product, Bell Plastics. The introduction of such an objective in organizing a newspaper also contributed important innovations to the system of advertising in newspapers.<sup>25</sup> Newspapers were an important channel for advertising before the establishment of wireless broadcasting stations, Television Broadcasts Limited (TVB) in 1967. There is no doubt that *Sing Tao Daily* played a significant role in newspaper history as a communication and advertising medium in Hong Kong; moreover, it has gained a reputation as a model case in most academic studies of newspaper advertising in Hong Kong. Newspapers were the only mass medium to enter into the daily life of the general populace during these two decades, and *Sing Tao Daily* remained consistently one of the major papers throughout this lengthy period. Its readership consisted of common working men seeking news of daily events and practical information to help them cope with the harsh realities of daily life, rather than pleasure or entertainment.

## The meaning of patent medicines

Patent medicines were the dominant products advertised in the newspaper advertisement sample from *Sing Tao Daily* in Hong Kong in the early 1950s to 1960s. This was also found in Western societies such as England,<sup>26</sup> only much earlier at the end of the nineteenth century. As Falk states in his article on the genealogy of modern advertising '[p]atent medicines have played a central role in the history of modern advertising.'<sup>27</sup> The practice of producing 'patent medicines,' medical formulas registered in order to protect their 'secret' recipes, started in eighteenth-century England.<sup>28</sup> Patent medicines represented a wide range of remedies, most of which had little actual curative or medicinal value. Thus, they relied heavily on advertising claims and techniques for sales and popularity. As Richards states, 'patent medicines' could include:

pills, powders, unguents, salves, ointments, drops, lotions, oils, spirits, mouthwashes, medicated herbs, and healing waters. Because so many of the makers of this babel of articles applied for the protection of government patents to preserve their trade secrets, they were known as the 'patent' medicine men.<sup>29</sup>

A wide variety of patent medicines listed by Richards can also be found in the Hong Kong sample. Among the collected samples, we can categorize the Hong Kong patent medicine products advertised into baby pharmaceutical products, cough and cold preparations, eye care, Chinese medicated creams and oils, Chinese medicines, stomach-ache medicines, and tonics and vitamins. Among the advertisements found in the Chinese newspapers dating from the beginning of the century, patent medicines were not only products imported from the West but they also included traditional Chinese medicines.

Patent medicine advertisements began to see steady growth, as they had earlier in the West, with the progressive economic and social environment after 1945 in Hong Kong. As Hong Kong was in the industrialization stage from 1947 until 1959, people were generally still fighting for a living and the basic need of health. With limited income and almost no daily medical welfare provided by the government, patent medicines were one of the alternative ways that people could obtain inexpensive basic treatments for daily health care. Hospitals and doctors' offices at

this time were mainly private and expensive, so working people avoided them if at all possible. Patent medicines represented the least expensive way to provide preventive health care and to cure, or attempt to cure, minor ailments of various types. They offered some competition for the traditional Chinese herbal remedies, which were also less expensive than Western medical treatment, but which required a longer time to prepare and to achieve results compared to patent medicines.

During this period, the post-war era, patent medicine advertising in Hong Kong newspapers was in effect educating the consumers of Hong Kong about the 'fundamental choice in consumption',<sup>30</sup> meaning that the advertising techniques were becoming more sophisticated and moving further away from presenting factual and useful information about the products advertised. Both Chinese and Western patent medicines were mainly sold in stores which specialized in over-the-counter, 'ready to consume' remedies. In addition to gathering information from newspaper advertising, people learned about patent medicines through the recommendations of friends and through personal experience.

## Naming the nameless

Advertising is a form of information that is arguably useful or even necessary to a large number of people as potential consumers, and 'the standard industry defense, and indeed a powerful theoretical position can be constructed around it, based on the social benefits of information flow.'<sup>31</sup> In Hong Kong's case, the words in advertisements in the first decade after the war are on the informational level, with product and brand names the most common information to be found. As Baudrillard explains, brand is:

the principal concept of advertising, [and] summarizes well the possibilities of a 'language' of consumption . . . each product 'worthy of the name' has a brand name . . . the function of the brand name is to signal the product; its secondary function is to mobilize connotations of affect.<sup>32</sup>

The period under examination here represents concrete efforts on the part of the patent medicine sellers to improve further the association of their products with brand name. Thus, the inclusion of brand name was the most common advertising strategy during the

first phase discussed here, from 1945 to 1950. For example, Kwan Yick Health Water [1] and Watson Safety Water [2] advertisements both contain words that indicate the names of the products. The copy of both advertisements tells us that the function of both medicines is to keep children healthy and strong. Although these two similar kinds of baby pharmaceutical products may not have much difference in function, the different names or brands suggest that the two products seem different and may be purchased by different consumers for different reasons.

Using the product names was particularly important for patent medicines since, as Richards<sup>33</sup> points out, such 'medicines' were hardly any different from one another and they often claimed to have a wide range of somewhat unrelated uses. Chinese patent medicine advertisements in the Hong Kong sample provide some of the best examples to illustrate the use

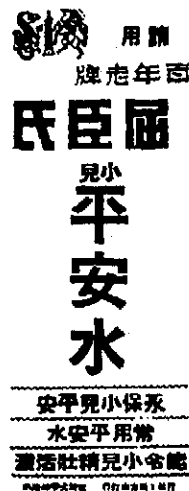


Fig 2. Watson Safety Water, *Sing Tao Daily*, 20 December 1945



Fig 1. Kwan Yick Health Water, *Sing Tao Daily*, 20 December 1945

of name in this context. Pills under different product and brand names such as Po Chai Yuen, Sap Ling Dan, Tang Sap Yee Guo Soh Yuen and Tiger Balm Pa Gwa Dan were for multiple purposes, from curing fever, coughing, headache, to general relief of physical pain. Among these Chinese medicines, medical oils and pastes were produced under a wide variety of brand names but with almost no difference from one another in the actual product and uses advertised. Although such pills or medical oils<sup>34</sup> may not have appeared much different from one other, most of them claimed some kind of secret family/business recipe or special formula that provided ample reason as to why their brand name offered something special to the consumer. In these advertisements, '[t]he brand name and frequently a picture of the package are prominent. The text is used primarily to describe the product and its benefits, characteristics, performance, or construction.'<sup>35</sup>

A number of patent medicine advertisements used a prominent brand name approach in the early stage, with a picture of the actual product becoming more common at a later stage after 1950. The 'textually oriented ads placed greatest emphasis upon language—description of the product, promises, and argument,<sup>36</sup> and these are easy to identify in the Hong Kong sample. For example, in one of the Po Chai Yuen advertisements [3] that appeared in 1946, there are twenty-two Chinese characters giving out

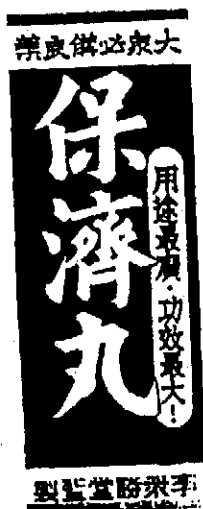


Fig 3. Po Chai Yuen, *Sing Tao Daily*, 20 December 1946

information including the name of the product, its use and effect, the manufacturer's name; Lee Chung Shing Tong Medicine Manufacturer, and finally the claim that it is essential for everyone. In such a small area of only approximately of 4.5 cm by 12.6 cm, almost every space is fully occupied.

The production method for this type of line-art advertisement was mainly the same technology used for newspaper printing. There were two sources of advertising design—one whereby artists worked directly for the newspaper, the other where local advertising agencies were employed by the advertiser. In either case the advertiser would pay for the design and production of the advertisements. Advertisements for Western products were most likely to be designed by advertising agencies, whereas those for local products such as Tiger Balm were usually designed by artists employed by the newspapers.

From about 1950, the depiction of the actual product became more frequent, playing a central role in informing consumers. In patent medicine advertisements, the picture of the product not only denoted it as a 'medicine', but also implied through the visual symbol a cure for a particular sickness. The technique of showing a visual image was effective in helping consumers to build up their own connotative interpretation and to recognize the product when purchasing. In combination with the other techni-

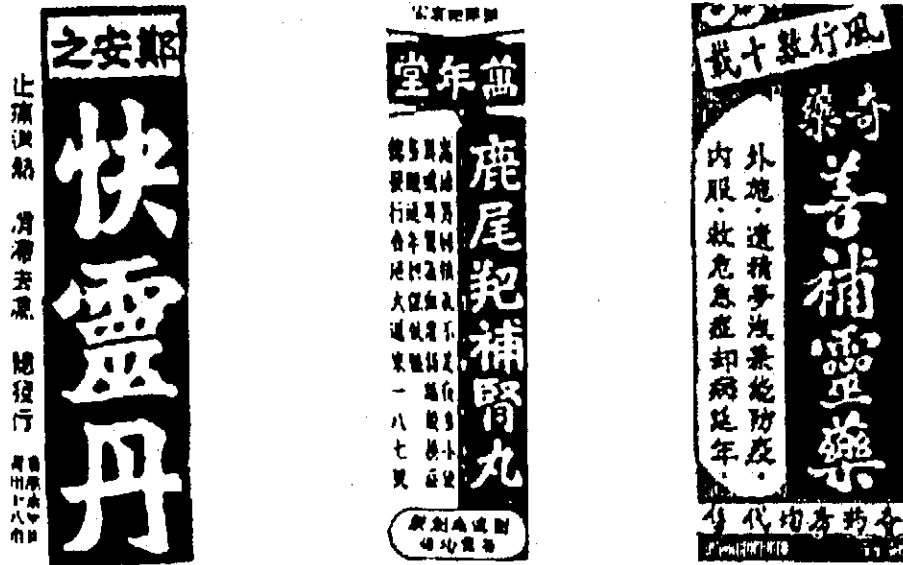
ques discussed below, the methods of brand and product identification began to build up a language of advertising in the way that it had first been created in the West.

### Identification of deficit

'Naming the nameless' product with no exact functional difference from other products was an important first step in the development of modern advertising in simple text-oriented product-information advertisements. Historically, a shift from primarily words towards a more sophisticated combination of words and images 'made possible the transformation of concrete products into representations, into complex meanings carried by words and images.'<sup>37</sup> The advertisements from 1945 to the early 1950s contain mainly 'words' that provide information such as brand names, manufacturers' names, product descriptions, and usage and purchase details [4-6]. Size was usually smaller compared with those of the later stage (from the mid-1950s to the late 1960s) as words could fit efficiently into a small space. Later on, however, patent medicine advertisements became more image-oriented. The images mainly showed the product itself [7-9], but in some cases the product users were also depicted. As a consequence, advertisements became larger with a greater variety of picture styles.

Once the element of product identification with a brand name had been achieved, the way was opened for the brand name to be used in ever more sophisticated advertising techniques, one of which was the association of the product/brand with a problem or 'deficit' that it could supposedly correct. Falk notes here that the product advertisement must identify some need or 'deficit' for the consumer, and then explain how the product will address or remedy that problem. He refers to the product as a 'complement' since it alleviates the problem or deficit and brings about 'wholeness' for the consumer.<sup>38</sup> Falk points out that consumers may not be aware of the deficit prior to seeing its description in the advertisement. Hence, the naming of the deficit can be seen as an important step as well, in effect creating a need for the product being advertised.

The goal was to legitimate bodily problems as 'deficits' that required the consumer to take action. This was accomplished through simple techniques



Figs 4-6. Words-only patent medicine advertisements, *Sing Tao Daily*, mid-1950s



Figs 7-9. Advertisements displaying the products themselves, *Sing Tao Daily*, mid-1950s

such as listing the variety of ailments that could be addressed by the product, or expressing optimism that any difficulty experienced by the consumer could be fixed or eliminated by application of the right product. This 'naming of the deficit' advertising technique can be seen in an advertisement for Tiger Balm Headache Powder from 1954, and another for Aspro Panadol from 1955. In the Tiger Balm Head-

ache Powder advertisement [10], the visual shows the head of a man wrinkling his forehead, a type of facial expression associated with being in pain. A bird that looks like a woodpecker is facing his upper left-hand side with arrows aiming towards the man. The headline reads, 'Can you stand a headache?' and the answer placed under the visual reads, 'Please take Tiger Balm Headache Powder'. Together the visual





Fig 10. Tiger Balm Headache Powder, *Sing Tao Daily*, 17 December 1954

and text provide a problem and solution at the same time. Finally, the double-line border with 'Wing On Tong', the manufacturer's name and logo, in the bottom right-hand corner creates brand identification and a corporate identity.

An Aspro Panadol advertisement from 1955 [11] takes the problem and solution presentation technique a step further by depicting each stage of the process. Radiating beams shine around a man with a smiling face who is placed in an important position in the top right-hand corner and in contrast, a man with a sad face touching his forehead is beside him. This implies a 'before and after' situation. Under the block of logo type, there is a series of eight small



Fig 11. Aspro Panadol, *Sing Tao Daily*, 23 December 1955

heads in two rows illustrating the occasions for taking the pills. The radiating beams around the pills echo the smiling man at the top. At the top left-hand corner, detailed copy gives further information to the potential consumer. This advertisement illustrates the problem and solution technique that reminds consumers that they should buy Aspro to solve the problem next time.

Patent medicine advertisements from the Hong Kong sample thus frequently adopted the strategy of identifying a 'deficit' and then offering the product advertised as the solution to that deficit. This problem-solution technique was a simple approach, but one that encouraged consumers to think of various bodily experiences as problems that matched clearly with purchasable remedies, thus training them to think about acquiring products for any deficit or problem they might experience. Added to this technique were some more sophisticated associations between products and the positive benefits that they could bring, apart from simply alleviating a physical complaint. Some of these associations were made in credible and legitimate terms, but most were either untrue, unverifiable or at the level of symbolic linkage. The following section discusses the most important of these techniques.

### The empty promise strategy

Falk and Richards both provide evidence that patent medicine advertisements made outrageous claims that could not possibly be proven or corroborated (but that were also very difficult for government regulators to disprove). Falk refers to unfounded claims as 'empty promises,' and Richards notes that patent medicine advertisers made 'absurd promises'. Advertisers wanted to make consumers believe that their products could cure a wider range of ailments more effectively than other similar products, and the claim to have the 'best' cure became a standard strategy. Although there is no evidence of outright swindles in the Hong Kong newspaper samples analysed here, there is some evidence of other misleading techniques of exaggeration and implication.

An advertisement from 1948 [12] selling powdered milk for babies features a skinny baby reaching out towards a can of 'whole milk' in an attempt to touch it, suggesting that he wants to get into the product. A sparkling light beams out from behind and gives the



Fig 12. Golden Flower Powdered Milk, *Sing Tao Daily*, 2 April 1948

can a glorified connotation. The headline reads: 'Turn the skinny kid into a plump child', implying the power of the product. On the left-hand side is a fat happy baby sitting and playing, indicating that he has been fed the whole-milk product.

Owing to the small size of advertisements in the 1950s, there are not many in the sample that used this kind of technique. Most of them were small, and individual advertisers could not afford the luxury of using advertising space to demonstrate such claims visually. On a few occasions, the photographic demonstration of a cure can be found, as in an advertisement from 1949 for Tit Fai Guo [13], a Chinese medicine 'invented' by Dr Kong Pa Chiu claiming it could cure tuberculosis. This shows the 'before and after' pictures of a patient, Yeung Si (Mrs Yeung) and a letter from her thanking Dr Kong for curing her disease by giving her the medicine. The copy text claims to what extent the medicine can cure tuberculosis rather than describing its ingredients. Typically, the advertisement did not provide any scientific evidence connecting its curative powers with any known chemical agent or process, which reflects the fact that these kinds of patent medicine advertisements were not governed by the law at that time.

As well as this straightforward approach, advertisers creatively adapted some traditional Chinese stories to deliver their promise in a conceptual way. This presentation format is especially popular in advertisements for Chinese patent medicines, such as one from



Fig 13. Tit Fai Guo, *Sing Tao Daily*, 26 August 1949

a series of Tiger Balm products. This series of Tiger Balm advertisements incorporates traditional Chinese stories that were familiar to the audience. One example from 1948 [14] shows three people in traditional costume riding a horse-drawn wagon. The text tells the historical story about So Tong Po from the Sung Dynasty. So Tong Po was a famous person working for the government, but because of a political disagreement he was sent away by the emperor to the southern part of China. The text goes on to say



Fig 14. Tiger Balm So Tong Po, *Sing Tao Daily*, 20 August 1948



Fig 15. Tiger Balm Monkey King, *Sing Tao Daily*, 23 December 1948



Fig 16. Tiger Balm Eight Goddess Cross Sea, *Sing Tao Daily*, 24 December 1949

that the climate of the south was so poor in the past, and now even though the situation has been improved, one still needs to watch out. Finally, the text says that the Tiger Balm product is the best prevention for any sickness related to weather and environment today. In other Tiger Balm advertisements, traditional Chinese stories or characters such as the Monkey King from 1948 [15] and Eight Goddess Cross Sea also from 1948 [16] use similar techniques as in the So Tong Po story, adapting to accommodate contemporary product usage.

The use of false claims is less common in the Hong Kong sample than is described in the studies from the West. This may be in part because the competition was not so fierce in the Hong Kong context, or because Chinese values mitigated against outright lies in this context. Whatever the reason, a strategy less obviously misleading than 'empty promises' was found more commonly in the Hong Kong sample. This strategy, known as 'positive register', involves making unverifiable but not explicitly stated suggestions about the product's effectiveness.

### The positive register

Advertisers sought to move beyond the matching of a remedy to a specific deficit, and they did so by

attributing various positive qualities to their products and to a life lived with such products. By simply making vague claims about emotions and physical states that could be achieved by their products, advertisers avoided making specific and falsifiable claims about their ability to address specific deficits or symptoms. Patent medicine advertising turned everyday needs and problems into reasons to purchase and apply products, holding out 'immediate gratification followed by the desire for more immediate gratification.'<sup>39</sup> Further, in some advertisements the purchase and use of patent medicines was offered as a mark of affluence.

For example, Falk<sup>40</sup> cites a product that used the slogan 'For a better tomorrow' and claimed to be beneficial for the healthy as well as the sick. Richards<sup>41</sup> even quotes examples showing how advertisers selected ordinary phenomena and made them seem like problems or signs of the early stages of sickness. Because of their use of ordinary 'symptoms' to sell preventive medicines, Richards notes that these advertisers had made an important new step in advertising history in that they had found a way to sell medically oriented products to people who were completely disease-free by convincing them that products were needed if they were to maintain their health. Falk makes the same important observation, placing emphasis on the shift from negative (deficit) to positive (well-being) in patent medicine advertising. Instead of having a sickness (deficit) that is overcome, the consumer prevents a sickness and maintains health (well-being). Thus, advertising claims to bring these attributes to consumers who use the specified products, and consumers can develop relationships of identification with the goods promised. Once the Hong Kong products had established brand-name recognition in the early text-based advertisements, they quickly became more elaborate in their visual strategies and in their associations with 'well-being' that could be obtained by the consumer through the advertised product.

Many such advertisements were for products for children and babies. The images of children are idealized, suggesting that the medicine will make children healthy and happy. An advertisement for Bayer cough syrup from 1963 [17] shows an illustration of a girl with her hair nicely combed and wearing a pretty dress, holding her favourite fashionable (at the time) black doll and consuming the cough



Fig 17. Bayer Cough Syrup, *Sing Tao Daily*, 22 December 1963

syrup. The way this little girl is dressed can be classified as affluent. The advertisement presents a kind of 'good' image in which the girl is not only consuming the product happily but also by implication enjoys the good life (with nice clothes and toys)—a way of life scarcely known to most of the readers of the newspaper who were still struggling to earn a living.

Unlike most of the Chinese medicine advertisements described above that focused primarily on product identification and filled up every inch with type and a picture of the product, this advertisement is more sophisticated and focuses the reader's attention on the affluence associated with the product. This technique was common in Western patent

medicine advertisements found in the Hong Kong sample. An advertisement for Scott's Emulsion from 1963 [18] shows a boy holding a big bottle of the product and the headline says: 'Protect your children from the harm of disease.'

A number of advertisements from the sample also use the positive register in associating the product with certain values not related to the context of usage. The most prominent of these are the 'demonstration advertisements' in which the visual inclusion of 'scientific apparatus'<sup>42</sup> was fairly common. An advertisement for the Tiger Balm product Ching Fa Shui from 1949 [19] provides the best example of the 'aid of scientific apparatus' technique in the Hong Kong sample. It depicts a factory scene and illustrates the production process for the product being advertised. Prominently featured are the machines that produce the product, including an assembly-line belt covered with a line of products that have just been completed. Similarly, an advertisement for Bat Gwa Dahn [20] also reveals the production process, with an enormous set of machine rollers dominating the foreground. A third example depicts a scientist surrounded by test tubes, funnels and beakers filled with chemicals, and the viewer can actually see the scientific process beginning with this apparatus moving left and linking with the product name, Man Gam Yau [21] as a series of tubes spells out the characters. These advertisements borrow from the Western technique of creating a scientific image to



Fig 18. Scott's Emulsion, *Sing Tao Daily*, 22 December 1963



Fig 19. Tiger Balm Ching Fa Shui, *Sing Tao Daily*, 27 March 1949



Fig 20. Tiger Balm Bat Gwa Dahn, *Sing Tao Daily*, 1 April 1949

promote the traditional Chinese medicine products. In a way, the advertisements educate the viewer to accept Western standards, that scientific production creates a valuable and reliable product.

Clearly, positive register advertisements that placed emphasis on the goods and positive connotations that could be acquired by the consumer through the product were common, and they were used in advertisements for both Western and Chinese products in the Hong Kong sample. Although the positive register advertisements usually focused on everyday life scenes and suggested an affluent family life or 'good life', others evoked connotations of Western values such as scientific efficacy through their use of both visual and text. In general, the positive register advertisements use more imagery than the ads that are simple product-identification examples. Their composition and persuasive appeal is more complex than those described in earlier sections.



Fig 21. Man Kau Yau, *Sing Tao Daily*, 14 March 1949

## Conclusion

Patent medicine advertising called attention to and successfully made real a wide range of deficits, thus opening them to the possibility of being treated or solved with patent medicine commodities. In Richards' terms, patent medicine advertising made the first important step towards 'a re-orientation of representation [of the body] around the fundamental economic dictates of capitalism.'<sup>43</sup> It became, above all else, a reason to purchase products and a site on which to apply those products. Patent medicine advertisements were particularly important in the history of advertising in Hong Kong, as they were in the West, because they represented the primary site on which the techniques of modern advertising were developed and first tried out.

In this study, I have emphasized the ways in which Western techniques were borrowed and used, not only when the products advertised were Western, but also in the case of Chinese remedies. I argue that during this period consumers in Hong Kong were being trained through various advertisement types to understand the Western modern advertising language. Patent medicine advertising in particular contributed elements related to the internal, physical and direct needs of the people. The advertisements used the techniques of product-identification and brand association, naming of deficits, assertion of false claims, and finally the implicit or explicit attribution of goods as the natural benefits of product use, which was achieved through the volume and variety of patent medicine advertisements focusing consumer attention on positive images and values.

Thus, these patent medicines mark the beginning of the concept of consumption for the purpose of retaining the basic need of health and gaining physiological satisfaction when Hong Kong entered the industrial phase in the 1950s. In this study, attention has been drawn to the ways in which products could enhance productivity or reduce unpleasantness, heightening individual consciousness of products as a means towards personal satisfaction. This acculturation to the modern language of advertising prepared the ground for consumers to accept Western consumer cultural values in the future. Investigations of textual analysis of advertising should be continued in order to document further the relationship between

the history of advertising and the cultural transformation of Hong Kong.

Wendy Siuyi Wong  
Hong Kong Baptist University  
Hong Kong, China

## Notes

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- 2 P. Falk, *The Consuming Body*, Sage, 1994.
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- 4 M. K. Yiu, 'The history of industrial development in Hong Kong', in Wang Kan-mu (ed.), *Hong Kong History: New Perspectives* (in Chinese), vol. 2, Joint Publishing, 1997, pp. 593-615.
- 5 See R. Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940*, University of California Press, 1985; Richards, op. cit.; J. Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America*, Basic Books, 1994.
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- 7 See Yiu, op. cit.; M. Turner, *Made in Hong Kong: A History of Export Design in Hong Kong, 1900-1960*, Urban Council, 1988.
- 8 Turner, op. cit.
- 9 Yiu, op. cit.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 W. W. Rostow, *The Process of Economic Growth*, 2nd edn., Clarendon Press, 1960.
- 12 W. S. Chow, *Witness the Fifty Years in Hong Kong* (in Chinese), Ming Pao Publishing, 1997.
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- 14 B. K. P. Leung, *Perspectives on Hong Kong Society*, Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 60.
- 15 D. Tse, R. W. Belk & N. Zhou, 'Becoming a consumer society: a longitudinal and cross-cultural content analysis of print ads from Hong Kong, the People's Republic of China, and Taiwan', *Journal of Consumer Research*, 15 March 1989, pp. 457-72.
- 16 Yiu, op. cit.
- 17 The Shek Kip Mei fire on Christmas day of 1953 caused 60,000 people to become homeless overnight. The incident forced the Hong Kong government to change its non-interference policy over housing issues. The first 'low-cost housing estate' was built in 1954 in Shep Kei Mei and also marked the beginning of the long-term public housing plan of the government.
- 18 Television was first available for household use in 1957 through wired transmission service by Rediffusion Television Limited (RTV), but did not gain much popularity for several years. During the first few years, television was available only through subscription, which required monthly payment for the service. Wired subscriptions grew steadily through the early years. Television only reached an affluent class of people who could afford to pay for the subscription. The first wireless station, Hong Kong Television Broadcasts (TVB), was established in November 1967, and its popularity grew so rapidly that television took over the role of dominant advertising medium by 1970, when household penetration of television reached nearly 50 per cent.
- 19 W. Leiss, S. Kline & S. Jhally, *Social Communication in Advertising: Persons, Products and Images of Well-being*, Routledge, 1990, 2nd edn.
- 20 See G. Z. Ge, *History of Chinese Newspapers* (in Chinese), Joint Publishing, 1955, 3rd edn.; S. N. Lee, 'English and Chinese newspapers in Hong Kong,' in Wang Kan-mu (ed.), *Hong Kong History: New Perspectives* (in Chinese), vol. 2, Joint Publishing, 1997, pp. 493-533.
- 21 See Lee, op. cit.; Chan, op. cit.
- 22 Chan, op. cit.
- 23 Tse, Belk & Zhou, op. cit.
- 24 M. H. Sze, 'Mass culture and consumption life,' in Wang Kan-mu (ed.), op. cit., pp. 593-615.
- 25 Chan, op. cit.
- 26 Richards, op. cit.; Lears, op. cit.
- 27 Falk, op. cit., p. 162.
- 28 Richards, op. cit.
- 29 Ibid., p. 170.
- 30 R. Williams, 'Advertising: the magic system', in *Problems in Materialism and Culture: Selected Essays*, Verso, 1980, pp. 170-95.
- 31 Leiss, Kline & Jhally, op. cit., p. 40.
- 32 J. Baudrillard, *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, Polity Press, 1988, p. 17.
- 33 Richards, op. cit.
- 34 According to some studies on the history of Chinese medicine manufacturers, some, such as Chan Lee Chai's Medicine Manufactory, the oldest of its kind, can be traced back at least 300 years. The production of ready-to-use Chinese medicine pills and oils was started for the convenience of people when travelling. It became more popular from the mid-nineteenth century, and Chinese patent medicine advertisements were also the main advertising category in newspapers in the Chinese mainland before the Second World War. Brand names such as Wong Lo Kat Medical Tea were initially set up in 1840 in Guangzhou, and Pun Ko Sau started as a trademark in 1929. So the initial production date of some Chinese patent medicines can be traced back before the Second World War.
- 35 Leiss, Kline & Jhally, op. cit. p. 240.

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36 Ibid.

37 Falk, *op. cit.*, p. 151.

38 Ibid.

39 Richards, *op. cit.*, p. 203.

40 Falk, *op. cit.*

41 Richards, *op. cit.*

42 Ibid., p. 240.

43 Ibid., p. 195.