PUBLIC SERVICE ADVERTISING IN CHINA:
SOCIAL MARKETING IN THE MAKING

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Abstract

This paper discussed the relationship between public service advertising (hereafter, PSA) and social marketing, reviewed the past and the present situations of PSA in China, and examined some representative samples from a recent national PSA campaign in the country. PSA has been used as an alternative for traditional propaganda in the country during the last 15 years or so. Still in its infancy, PSA in China is facing various challenges, particularly the lack of funding, legal protection, and quality.

Introduction

Since advertising came back to life in China in 1979, shortly after the country reopened its doors to the outside world, it has experienced sustained growth for more than two decades. As a natural and indispensable component of a market economy (Rotzoll and Haefner 1996) experimented in the socialist China (Cheng 1996, 2000), it has received great attention and gained broad interest from advertising researchers. However, little attention has ever been given to how advertising functions as a social marketing tool, which has mushroomed in the country during the last 15 years or so.

This paper is designed to fill in this gap. It will overview the brief history of public service advertising—the most popular form of social marketing—in China, examine the roles PSA has been playing in the country, and conduct a semiotic analysis of several representative Chinese print PSAs.

Literature Review

Public Service Advertising and Social Marketing

Regarded as a positive way of using advertising, PSA "communicates a message on behalf of some good cause such as stopping drunk driving ... or preventing child abuse" (Wells, Burnett, and Moriarty 2000, p. 8). Mainly used by companies, government agencies, and nonprofit organizations, PSAs are usually created for free by advertising professionals, with space and time often donated by the media.

Since PSA is the most common and popular way of doing social marketing, a thorough discussion of PSA would be impossible without a mention of the social marketing, which has been, in fact, a major intellectual source for PSA. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, marketing researchers, led by the "Northwestern School" in the United States (Elliott 1991), began to search for possible applications of commercial marketing beyond its traditional confines (Kotler and Levy 1969; Kotler and Zaltman 1971). The focus of such endeavors was on "adapting marketing mindsets, processes, and concepts to a wide range of nonprofit enterprises, initially universities, performing arts organizations, and hospitals" (Andreasen 1997, p. 3). It is often used as "a strategy for translating scientific findings ... into education and action programs adopted from methodologies of commercial marketing" (Manoff 1985, p. 36). In its formative years, social marketing was overwhelmingly focused on two health problems—contraceptive use and high blood pressure.

For more than three decades, the perception that "marketing constitutes a proven and potentially very powerful technology for bringing about socially desirable behaviors" has been a major intellectual momentum for the growth of what is often called "the social marketing movement" today. This movement has helped establish "social marketing as a distinct subdiscipline within the general field of academic marketing" (Andreasen 1997, p. 3).

Although once and again marketing researchers have attempted to make it clear that social marketing "is a much larger idea than social advertising" (Kotler and Zaltman 1971, p. 5) and should involve more than the design and use of mass media campaigns (Young 1988-1989), social advertising as a major social marketing format has been evident and dominant in practice (Stead and Hastings 1997).

Under the influence of social marketing research, social marketing theory began to take shape in the early 1970s. Mainly concerned with promoting socially valuable information, social marketing theory has been regarded as a logical extension of the persuasion theories and diffusion theory in mass communication studies. But this theory is essentially source-dominated, assuming the existence of "a benign information provider who is seeing to bring about useful, beneficial social change" (Baren and Davis 2000, p. 291). With the theory, social marketing campaigns are more often than not tailored to situations where elite sources in a given country are able to dominate elements of the larger social system.

PSA's Growth in China

The renaissance of commercial advertising in China did not occur until 1979. So, as an extension of commercial advertising, PSA in the country is understandably much more recent when compared with its counterpart in North
America, West Europe, and Japan. The first PSA in China was aired in 1986 by Guiyang Television Station in southwest China, advocating water conservation. On October 26, 1987, the China Central Television Station (hereafter, CCTV) launched a brief program called "Advertise Broadly," solely devoted to PSA. "Opening a brand new page in the PSA history in China," this program has broadcast an estimated total of more than 1,000 PSAs (He and Tian, 1998).

Nevertheless, PSA did not become truly popular in China until the mid-1990s. In 1996, the State Administration of Industry and Commerce (hereafter, SAIC), the governmental body that oversees the advertising industry in China, and China's Central Socialist Ethical Construction Committee jointly launched and organized the first nationwide PSA campaign on the revival of traditional Chinese values (Su 2000). September 1996 was even named a PSA Month. The government ordered numerous PSAs on the media that year as the Party officials saw a slide in social values (The Associated Press 1996). PSA was also believed to help establish a better image for the advertising industry in the country as advertisers had been criticized for often making outlandish claims. The month-long campaign issued a total of 16,860 PSAs, including 4,582 on television, 2,749 on radio, 4,123 in newspapers and magazines, and about 5,000 on outdoor billboards (Xinhua News Agency 1996).

It was estimated that more than 70,000 PSAs were published or aired in China between 1996 and 1999. In addition, telephone booths, bus booths, bus bodies, transport tickets, phone cards, and stamps all became PSA venues (He 1997). Themes of these PSAs varied from eulogizing teachers' contributions to society to encouraging appropriate home education for children, from combating excessive drinking to advocating safe driving, and from emphasizing appropriate utilization of natural resources to stressing wildlife conservation. But so far, we have not seen any public service banner advertisements on either Chinese government's or Chinese media organizations' Web sites. In fact, since 1996, SAIC has recommended themes for national PSA campaigns and issued awards to outstanding pieces on a yearly basis. The recommended themes for the past few years were shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Themes of National PSA Campaigns in China (1996-2000)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Promoting the revival of traditional Chinese values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Eulogizing the Chinese nation's unremitting efforts to make itself stronger and celebrating the return of Hong Kong to its motherland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Encouraging laid-off workers from state-owned enterprises to start afresh and glorifying the heroic spirits demonstrated in anti-flood campaigns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Celebrating the 50th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China and the return of Macao to its motherland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Promoting an optimistic outlook on life and advocating environmental protection and natural resources conservation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Hui 1999; Su 1999; Su 2000

As mass media in China are state-owned, it is not difficult for the government to secure free airtime and space on a voluntary basis. Some media organizations have routinely designated space or time to carry PSAs. However, production funding is mainly channeled from private sectors. Most of these campaigns are created, free of charge, by commercial advertising agencies, as a fulfillment of social responsibility. Over the years, more and more private enterprises are willing to provide financial support, seeing PSA as an effective way to promote corporate images (Su 2000).

Recently, Hong Kong tycoon Li Ka-shing, for example, sponsored the shooting of 40 episodes of 60-second PSAs in China, based on a theme that "knowledge changes one's fate." Featuring real-life examples of ordinary Chinese citizens who had changed their life through learning, these movie-like commercials were broadcast on CCTV between early 1999 and 2000.

**Chinese PSA's Characteristics**

First and foremost, PSA has emerged as an alternative means for the promotion of dominant ideology in China. It is not difficult to find a close link between what the central government emphasizes and what PSA campaigns promote. For example, Chinese President Jiang Zemin and Premier Zhu Rongji called for major improvements in the nation's family planning, resources management, and environmental protection at the Third Session of the Ninth National People's Congress held in March 2000 (Xinhua News Agency 2000). SAIC immediately responded by recommending such themes as optimistic outlook on life, environmental protection, and natural resources conservation for the national PSA campaigns in the current year (Su 2000).

Compared with the simplistic and patriarchal political propaganda campaigns in the old days, PSAs in China tend to be much subtler and more symbolic. Creativity and artistry are called for in the transformation of familiar concepts into eye-catching advertising campaigns with vivid visuals, dramatic sounds, and artistic presentations. Unlike the traditional government propaganda, usually dull and impersonal, PSAs
also tend to gain the audience's empathy, especially when handling current thorny social issues. About 600,000 workers, for example, were laid off from state-owned enterprises in China between 1997 and 1998, as a result of a crucial move in tandem with the central government's strenuous efforts to invigorate these loss-ridden enterprises. A PSA titled "My Father" portrayed a son's testimonial of his father's courage to face the difficult situation. The voice-over went, "My father, a down-to-earth good guy, is optimistic, full of wisdom and self-confidence. He has been laid off, but he is going to take a new path in life. In my heart, he is a real strong man." The ending left room for audience's imagination: The father might need to learn a new skill, apply for a new job, or take an early retirement. "What really matters here is not the final outcome but the positive attitude to accept what cannot be changed and the courage to try a new life" (Li and Qian 1999, p. 86).

Another feature of Chinese PSA is seasonality. PSA campaigns in the country often tie in with national holidays and special events throughout a calendar year. Patriotic themes would occur for the National Day (October 1) and the Army Day (August 1). A 1996 award-winning PSA campaign was titled "Festivals." It featured a series of three television commercials that tackled, respectively, three social phenomena during the Chinese New Year season. Other national holidays used for PSA campaigns include the Teachers Day, Seniors Day, Non-smoking Day, Anti-drug Day, Environmental Protection Day, Love-your-eyes Day, and AIDS Day (Yang 1999).

The third characteristic of PSA in China is its limited geographic reach. As most of the campaigns are focused on issues and problems in urban areas, particularly major cities, rural areas of the country have received little attention. In fact, it is sometimes this less affluent segment of the audience who has a greater need for such information as AIDS prevention and family planning.

**PSA's Functions in China**

While commercial advertising is supposed to contribute to the material civilization in China, PSA is intended to help with the "socialist spiritual civilization" (Wang 1999b). It is even called "the highest form of advertising" by SAIC, the advertising regulating body in the country (Kors 1997, p. 8). In a nutshell, "spiritual civilization," a decadelong political jargon in China, refers to, among other things, the love for the motherland, loyalty to the Party, care for fellow citizens, diligence and honesty at work, and concern for the environment (Poole 1996). Articles on PSA published in *China Advertising*, a leading monthly trade magazine for advertising industry in the country, from 1997 to 2000 mentioned the following functions for PSA:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Source</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Offering correct courses for actions to current social problems</td>
<td>Song 1997</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advocating actions that serve the welfare of the majority or the longterm</td>
<td>Song 1997; Wang 1999b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>benefits of the society</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raising the moral standard by establishing an optimistic outlook on life</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educating the public on health and hygiene issues</td>
<td>Song 1997; Su 2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eulogizing the Party's achievements, facilitating political stability,</td>
<td>Wang 1999a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and promoting social development</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increasing advertisers, advertising agencies, and media practitioners'</td>
<td>Wang 1999b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sense of social responsibility and their willingness to contribute to</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>public services, and improving the advertising industry's public image</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Case Study: A Semiotic Analysis of Chinese PSAs**

In this section, a semiotic analysis is conducted in the examination of four selected Chinese newspaper PSAs from 1997. First, let us give a brief review of semiotic analysis. Originated from linguistics and from literary and cultural analysis, semiotics is a qualitative research method for examining textual material by focusing on signs—more accurately, on a "system of signs." Williamson (1978) made great strides in "oppositional decoding" by defining a sign as "a thing—whether object, word, or picture—which has a particular meaning to a person or group of people" (p. 17). A sign within a system of meaning may be divided into two components: "the signifier" and "the signified." The signifier is the material vehicle of meaning; the signified is its meaning. The signifier is its concrete dimension; the signified is its abstract side.

The most enlightening part in Williamson's (1978) writing is her discussion on the notions of denotation and connotation. According to her, denotation is "the work of signification performed within a sign as it were: it is the process whereby a signifier 'means'—denotes—a specific signified." By connotation, she refers to "a similar process but one where the signifier is itself the denoting sign: the sign in its totality points to something else." She termed that "something else" a "Referent System" (p. 99). To illustrate her notions, Williamson (1978) took Catherine Deneuve, a French actress and fashion model, for example. As she put it, "Catherine Deneuve is signified by a photography, but 'she' in turn becomes a signifier: for wealthy—chic-Frenchness" (p. 100). This process of analysis can be diagramed as follows:
Figure 1. Williamson's Semiotic Analysis Formula

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Signifier</th>
<th>Signified</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Image)</td>
<td>Catherine Deneuve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i.e., PHOTO</td>
<td>DENOTES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Catherine Deneuve</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Williamson 1978, p. 100

It is apparent that the major strength of semiotic analysis lies in its sensitivity "to the different, layered levels of meaning in advertising—considered as a text designed to be read by people in specific historical and cultural contexts" (Leiss, Kline, and Jhally 1990, p. 225). Seemingly competing with content analysis, semiotic analysis has been used complementarily in advertising research. Successful examples include the works of Dyer (1992), Frith (1990), Leiss, Kline and Jhally (1990), Leymore (1975), and Williamson (1978), to name but a few. In the following, Williamson's formula will be applied in our semiotic analysis of Chinese PSA samples.

In 1997, following SAIC's recommendation, a PSA campaign titled "Our Unremitting Efforts for Miracles" was carried out nationwide. This campaign was by no means accidental because 1997 was a special year to China. Among other things, the return of Hong Kong to its motherland in that year was a historic event that received worldwide attention. It became a golden opportunity for Beijing to eulogize its achievements and promote such ideas as "self-esteem," "self-confidence," "self-strengthening," and "self-reliance" (He and Tian 1998, p. 8). For years, the slide of such values among some Chinese citizens was believed by the central leadership to be an ultimate cause for many social problems in the country after its reopening to the rest of the world in the late 1970s.

A total of 430 PSAs, including 223 in print media, 125 on television, and 72 on radio, was submitted to SAIC for 110 awards it gave (He and Tian 1998). Four print PSA samples were selected here to give a rough idea of Chinese PSA in general and this campaign in particular. Centered on the "Unremitting Efforts for Miracles," these four PSAs have two things in common: They all used comparison and contrast as a major communication strategy; each pair of comparison and contrast is completed by two objects, which symbolize the past and the present, respectively.

In PSA #1 (Figure 2) designed by Beijing Advertising Corporation, there is a picture of a five-jin food coupon and a picture of a bag of high-quality wheat flour, a staple food in China. The two signifiers—namely, the two pictures—clearly present two signifieds (food coupon and flour bag), which in turn both denote food. In the meantime, the food coupon and the flour bag connote the dramatic economic changes China has witnessed during the last 20 years or so.

Figure 2. From Food Coupon to Quality Wheat Flour (PSA #1)

From 1949 when the People's Republic of China was founded to the early 1990s, food coupons were issued monthly by the government to urban dwellers because of limited food supplies in the country. In addition to currency, food coupons were required during those years to purchase any kinds of food, from wheat flour to rice and from cookies to crackers. Based on one's age and occupation, the amount of food allocated—by the means of food coupons—varied. There was no gender difference in terms of food coupon allocations. What was more, in many areas, a rigid proportion for the types of foods one could purchase was also determined by the government-run grain shops. For example, in some areas, one had to purchase 70% of corn or sorghum flour but no more than 30% of wheat flour with the food coupons. So, in those years, wheat flour meant "good stuff"—tasty food—to Chinese citizens. But since the early 1990s, food coupons are no longer needed for purchasing food. People can buy as much food as they want and whatever types of food they would like to.

To highlight the message PSA #1 is intended to convey, a headline in a quotation format was used between the pictures of the food coupon and the flour bag: "Chinese, we must rely on ourselves." It is evident that this snapshot of the change in average Chinese citizens' life

1 Jin was a Chinese unit of weight used in the mainland from 1949 (when the People's Republic of China was founded) to the mid-1980s. One Jin was equal to .5 kilogram or 1.1 pound.
quality well supports the self-reliance theme of the 1997 PSA campaign.

PSA #2 (Figure 3), designed by Jiangsu International Advertising Corporation, resorted to the same communication strategy used in PSA #1. On the left side of the advertisement were four drawings: on the right side were eight ones. The first group of drawings portrays four objects—a bicycle, a wristwatch, a sewing machine, and a radio set. The second group of drawings stands for the operational keys on eight electronic devices (left to right and top down in PSA #2): color television, washing machine, stereo, refrigerator, microwave, air-conditioner, telephone, and VCD (video compact disk). The first group of signs denotes what was called in the 1970s the "big four"—something that many Chinese citizens, particularly the newly-weds, would dream of in those years. Again, more often than not, special coupons were needed to purchase three (bicycle, wristwatch, and sewing machine) of the "big four." On the contrary, the second group of signs denotes eight electronic devices getting more and more popular and common in Chinese households in the late 1990s. As a collective signifier itself, the "big four" represents the simple and hard life the average Chinese citizens lived in the 1970s whereas the "small eight," as another collective signifier itself, is a snapshot of the life quality many average Chinese citizens could enjoy in the late 1990s. The headline in this PSA summarizes, "Big pieces, small keys: evidence of the tremendous changes in our life."

Figure 3. From "Big Four" to "Small Eight" (PSA #2)

While PSAs #1 and #2 reflect the changes of average citizens’ daily life over the last 20 years or so, PSA #3 (Figure 4) portrays the changes in China’s overall strength in a longer time span. Created by the Advertising Department of Yunnan Daily in southwest China, PSA #3 also resorts to comparison and contrast. In the advertisement, a drawing signifies a nail standing on its head while a picture shows a rocket standing in a space center ready for a launch into the sky. The text in the PSA explains, "A century ago, the old civilization in the East had to call this simple object a 'foreign nail' because she was unable to produce it." Another line in this PSA goes, "Today, we make unremitting efforts to make our nation stronger, striding toward the modernization of tomorrow."

Figure 4. From "Foreign Nail" to "Home-made Rocket" (PSA #3)

Many of the elderly in China still hold the painful memories of the days when the names of so many simple daily necessities had to add a "prefix" called "yang" in Chinese, meaning "foreign." Other common examples were candles and matches. On the contrary, the rocket symbolizes the capability of today’s China, which often competes with the world’s most advanced countries in space technology. This fact is always used by the Chinese government as a "selling point" for its modernization drive and as a stimulus for a sense of national pride among average Chinese citizens.

Figure 5. One Chopstick vs. a Bunch of Chopsticks (PSA #4)
While PSAs #1, #2, and #3 promote the idea of self-reliance and self-strengthening by comparing the changes between the past and the present, some 1997 PSAs pinpoint the values essential for such changes. For example, in PSA #4 (Figure 5) that originally occurred in Jiaozuo Daily, a regional newspaper in northeast China, chopsticks are used to illustrate one of these values. On the top of the advertisement was one chopstick, alone and broken. At the bottom of the advertisement was a whole bunch of chopsticks tied together. As signifiers themselves, these chopsticks concisely and vividly retell a popular old Chinese fable, and more important, highlight "unity," a highly valued idea in the Chinese culture: A single chopstick can be easily broken, whereas a bunch of them staying together will not. The lines in the PSA help make clear the fable's implication for today: "This is not merely an old fable;" "It is easy to break one single chopstick;" "The unity of the 56 nationalities [in China] is an unbreakable Chinese spirit."

From the above four examples, three points have emerged about the newspaper PSAs in China. First, they tend to use visuals, drawings and photos alike, to signify some abstract ideas. One or two lines of text are often used to clinch the point intended to convey in a PSA.

Second, all objects portrayed in these PSAs are so China-specific that they are all very meaningful and symbolic to Chinese readers. Those who are familiar with China's recent changes and Chinese culture should be able to identify the meanings embodied in the PSAs.

Most important of all, these PSAs suggest that Chinese mass media have begun to resort to the marketing tool for the promotion of "social ethics" as well as for propaganda campaigns. It is evident in the PSA samples that nationalism (the Chinese equivalent for it would be "patriotism") is strongly promoted as an orthodox ideology. Since China reopened in the late 1970s, how Chinese citizens "should" look at today's China has always been a challenge to the government and to its mass media. Many citizens, especially the younger generation, tend to slight their own country by holding the view that "the moon in the West is rounder than the one in China." So, the government attempts, via its mass media, to remind the people of how much China has changed over the years. With those hard facts carried in PSAs, the government intends to instill "self-esteem" and patriotism in its citizens.

**Discussion**

As we can see from the above analysis, PSA in China has been used as an alternative for traditional propaganda in the country during the last 15 years or so. It is most likely that this significant extension from the fast-growing commercial advertising in China will continue to grow in the years to come. A specific goal some Chinese advertising personnel have talked about is to increase PSA output to 10% of the advertising total in the country (He and Tian 1998). With its soft-sell appeals and other marketing strategies, PSA is believed to be more effective than the simplistic and patriarchal propaganda and could play a positive role in national consensus building and in addressing a variety of issues with broad public concerns. Still in its infancy, however, PSA in China is also facing various challenges.

First is the danger of turning PSA back into propaganda. Some Chinese advertising personnel have noted that PSA should be differentiated from propaganda. So, they called for the prevention of PSA from being filled with political slogans and cliches (Ding 1998).

Next, as we reviewed in the literature of this study, both social marketing and mass communication researchers have criticized the source dominance in PSA, which tends to treat the audience either as victims or students who need either protection or education from government and media. Based on our observation, this is still a weakness prevailing in Chinese PSA today. A more recent thinking in social marketing research urges PSA to treat people as information managers, able to make sensible judgments and decisions based on the comprehensive information provided by PSA. One way to "empower" the audience is to know what they really think and what they really need. So, it would be helpful if systematic public opinion surveys could be conducted to identify individuals' needs and to track various types of communication effects that PSA may or may not produce.

China does not have an independent government department coordinating the funding, creation, and dissemination of messages on public concerns. Currently, SAIC plays a dual role of initiating as well as overseeing PSA in the country. When a conflict of interests occurs, the overseeing role often supercedes the initiating one. In December 1999, for example, a PSA aired by CCTV was banned a few days after its initial broadcast because it depicted a cartoon prophylactic battling sexually transmitted diseases and HIV. This PSA was determined as illegal by SAIC (Su 2000). This example also illustrates another challenge PSA has to face when tapping into socially sensitive issues, that is, the lack of proper legal protection. The Advertising Law of People's Republic of China enforced since February 1, 1995 is focused on commercial advertising, without taking PSA into consideration. It prohibits any advertisements for sex-related products, including the PSA on safe sex.

Finally, as the production and distribution of PSA in China largely rely on resources from private companies, it is constantly under the influences of commercial interests. Some advertisers insisted the PSAs they sponsored include or suggest their corporate identities, brand names, product packages or even key selling messages. Such practice could seriously contaminate PSA's non-profit-making nature (Hui 1999). What is more, the resources from business entities are volatile and unreliable. Lack of funding is considered as a major hindrance for PSA's further growth in China (He 1997). Some advertising industry personnel suggested that public funding from local and state governments under the budget of "propaganda items" be used to fuel PSA campaigns (Wang 1999a).
References

(in Chinese; translated into English by the authors)


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