

Do Women Still Hold Up Half the Sky? Portrayal of Women in Chinese Advertising: 1980-2001

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“Women can hold up half the sky” was a popular slogan in China in 1970’s. The slogan reflects the belief of Chinese socialists that men and women are completely equal, both physically and mentally. In 1979, China changed its socialist economic system into a more capitalistic market economy. As a result of this transformation, those selling goods had to compete for buyers. Consequently, advertising, which was relatively unknown in China, began to take hold. This paper explores the impact of magazine advertising in China on the image and portrayal of women within Chinese society over a 20 year period, 1980-2001. This time-frame is significant because it marks the beginning of China’s capitalist economic experiment up to the point that China is accepted into the World Trade Organization (WTO). This 20 year period is long enough to measure trends and evaluate changes in Chinese society and represents an important first stage in China’s participation in the international market economy. The 581 ads, evaluated in this study, indicate that women’s role portrayal in Chinese advertising has changed over the 20 year time-frame from that of an equal partner to men to a more westernized image of women as objects of beauty and sexual desire.

INTRODUCTION

In 1979, the improbable happened: China introduced a capitalist market system into its socialist planned economy. As a result, a number of social and economic changes occurred in Chinese society. Particularly impressive has been the double-digit economic growth experienced over the past three decades, far outpacing growth in western developed countries. But with economic growth has come a liberalization of social mores and a concern that Westernization is changing the underlying belief systems upon which society operates (Cui and Yang, 2009). These concerns regarding liberalization are particularly evident in relation to advertising where the use of sex appeal is prevalent due to “the increasing presence of Western popular culture” (Cui and Yang, 2009). These changing attitudes and mores regarding sexuality raise concerns about the roles of men and women in society and how they will be viewed by others.

Chinese culture is strongly rooted in Confucianism, a belief system that subjugates the “me” to the “we” and has a strong respect for authority. Under this system, the social construction of gender has historically embodied a sexual division of power that institutionalizes male sexual dominance and female sexual submission (Chow et al., 2004). Traditionally, this meant that Chinese women were regarded as dependent upon men and their place was within the family (Chow et al., 2004). Women’s roles changed dramatically when the communist party promised to make women *equal* partners. Under Mao, “the liberation of women was always tied in with the liberation of the nation” (Brownell, 2000), and a popular Chinese saying during this time was “women hold up half the sky,” indicating that women and men were viewed as equal partners in the development of the nation state. Thus, Chinese women began the “long march” from the Confucian notion of women as inferior to men, to Chairman Mao’s definition of women as male-equals (Gil and Anderson, 1999). This equality manifested itself in men and women performing the same jobs and even dressing alike to reinforce the sameness of the two sexes (China Briefing, 2000, p. 212).

The role of women in Chinese society is heavily influenced by two factors: political ideology and economic development. Political discourse, formulated and enforced by the government, is accepted by the vast majority of the Chinese people and functions as social and ideological control (Lu, 1999). Ideological purity is enforced by the media which is under the strict control of the government. Access to other opinions has been thwarted through laws and practice. This control has been most recently demonstrated through the denial of access to internet sites that the government feels might undermine its teachings and principles. Because the state was the sole arbiter of what was acceptable behavior, the image of the Communist woman as an equal partner in society was not challenged by other, conflicting images.

However, the advent of economic reform opened Chinese culture to more influences from western countries and has the potential to not only change how business is done but also how the people view themselves and each other as a result of images presented in advertising. Prior to the early 1980s, product advertising essentially did not exist in China. The introduction of advertising in the new marketing economy meant that the state’s portrayal of Chinese culture and the relationship between the sexes could be challenged. How significant and long term such challenges may be has yet to be determined. So, it seems that the two factors above may have contradictory effects on the role of Chinese women in society in the future. A strongly controlled and managed political ideology that prescribes equality of the sexes in all ways of life may conflict with a more open approach to economic development which allows for the use of more westernized marketing approaches in the selling of goods and services. This conflict may be particularly relevant in the images of the sexes portrayed in product advertising.

A logical question to ask, at this point in China’s development, is, ‘do women still hold up half the sky’ or have competitive practices, particularly western-style advertising, introduced negative portrayals of women that demean their position in society? This study attempts to answer that question by tracking the portrayal of woman and their roles in society, as reflected in magazine advertisements, during a critical period in China’s development: 1980-2001. This period reflects the time between the beginning of the economic liberalization process and China’s entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO). During this period, China became not only an economic juggernaut but a more accepted member of the international community, culminating in its membership in the WTO.

This study contributes to the literature in several ways. First, by using longitudinal data, the study answers the questions of whether the role and portrayal of women changed during China’s economic liberalization process, and if so, in what way? Second, it examines gender role change during a unique period of China’s history, allowing for the investigation of how gender advertising is affected by cultural and economic changes and providing insight regarding gender stereotyping and its progression. Finally, the study extends previous studies regarding advertising in China, providing a clearer and more complete picture of women’s role portrayal in that country and providing valuable information for public-policy makers, marketing practitioners and advertisers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Above and beyond serving as a vehicle for promoting and selling products, advertising has been used by researchers to analyze a culture's aspirations, values, and belief systems (Pollay and Gallagher 1990; Courtney and Whipple 1983; Biswas et al, 1992). A look at how women have been portrayed in advertisements gives us a sense of their role as viewed by the overall society.

U.S. Ad Portrayal of Women

Most studies dealing with women's role in society as defined through mass media have looked at the U.S. market because of its consumption-driven economy and its heavy marketing orientation. A seminal study in this field was a 1971 study by Courtney and Lockeretz which found four stereotypes of women depicted in U.S. magazine advertisements: 1) women's place is in the home; 2) women do not make important decisions or do important things; 3) women are dependent on and need men's protection; and 4) women are seen by men as primarily sexual objects.

Subsequent studies found similar results related to women's subservient, tangential, or decorative roles as portrayed in advertising (Courtney and Whipple 1983, Connell 1987; Kang 1997). In many instances women were seen as someone who was valuable only in terms of their relationship to others, either as mother (Patterson et al. 2009; Gilly 1988; Pingree et al. 1976) or wife (Patterson et al. 2009; Coltrane and Adams 1997).

There was some change beginning in the 1980s due to women's increasing job presence and political activism on the part of women's organizations. During this period, Bretl and Cantor (1988) found that women appeared equally with men as central characters in advertisements, although women tended to be placed more in domestic settings. Lazier (1993) and Hovland et al. (2005) indicated a decreased emphasis on gender stereotyping in mass media presentations. However, even though there were some indications of positive progress, Koernig and Granitz (2006) still found that women were more likely to be depicted in traditional roles.

International Ad Portrayal of Women

Studies of women's role in other western cultures tracked U.S. findings. Wiles et al. (1995) found that more than 90% of U.S., Swedish, and Dutch ads showed women outside the work environment. Milner and Higgs (2004) examined TV ads in Australia and found, surprisingly, that heavily traditional role portrayals for women were becoming more, rather than less, pronounced. Patterson et al. (2009) documented the heightened awareness of negative female stereotyping in Ireland.

Several studies, done in Eastern cultures, showed similar female role depictions. Ford et al. (1998) found that Japanese women tended to be portrayed as younger, more appearance-conscious, and in more sexist roles compared to men. However, the study also found that women and men were just as likely to be depicted positively in the ads. Razzouk et al. (2003) study of Thai magazine advertising showed that females were seen primarily as sex objects compared to other roles such as professional, housewife, or dependent.

Siu and Au (1997) concluded that Asian societies such as Singapore and China tend to use sexual stereotyping in their ads while Cui and Yang (2009) saw women in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand primarily depicted in traditional roles in those countries' advertising. Ford et al. (1998) pointed out that across international gender literature, women tend to be portrayed as younger and more concerned with physical attractiveness than men and tend to be seen promoting products of a lesser value.

In a meta-analysis of 64 research studies related to gender role portrayals in TV and radio ads from 1975 to 2007, Eisend (2010) found that gender stereotyping exists but has been declining over the years. Eisend found that stereotyping was more prevalent in the area of occupational status.

Chinese Ad Portrayal of Women

Studies of mass media portrayal of women in China are sparse and do not have the luxury of a significant time frame to make comparisons and draw conclusions. Many Chinese studies are of ads in

Hong Kong which, arguably, given its history, could be considered to be more a part of Western culture than part of Chinese culture.

Furnham and Mak (1999) reported that Hong Kong women were more often portrayed in the home than in a professional setting and were seen in dependent roles. In a comparison of Hong Kong and Australian ads, Lai Man So (2004) found that women took on sexier roles in Hong Kong than in Australia.

In analyzing TV commercials in China and the U.S., Cheng (1997) found that ads in both places reinforced typical stereotypes of women being in the home and serving a decorative function, but Cheng concluded that Chinese ads were more stereotypic than U.S. ads. In a study of subway ads in China, Cheng and Wan (2005) found women were portrayed in more traditional, non occupational roles than men and tended to be younger and more sexual. However, Hung and Li's (2006) research on Chinese magazine ads indicated that advertisers embraced a full spectrum of women's roles in China – from homemaker and mother to sophisticated career woman.

Hong (2005) found that Chinese magazines had significantly increased the portrayal of nudity in their ads since the early 1980s. However, Hong (2005) and Paek and Nelson (2007) indicated that such portrayals were conservative compared to western images of female nudity.

The research studies available generally indicate that female role portrayal in Chinese advertising mirror the portrayal of women in other countries with a more mature advertising history. These findings support Belk's suggestion (1988) that a developing culture acquires hedonistic consumption behaviors more rapidly than western society. The scarcity of research related to portrayal of women in Chinese advertising makes this study particularly relevant for researchers interested in the Chinese market.

HYPOTHESES

This study addresses nine hypotheses related to the role of women in advertising in Chinese mass market magazines from 1980-2001. These hypotheses relate to the overall theory that Chinese advertisements during that time frame will mirror trends associated with western advertising (Eisend 2009). Given that previous studies have suggested that women's images are more likely to appear in advertising for all products, but especially for women's products (Plakoyiannaki and Zoto 2009; Siu and Au 1997), it is hypothesized that:

H₁: More females than males would appear in Chinese advertisements.

H₂: The use of females in Chinese advertisements would increase over time.

This study classified ads on the basis of Venkatesan and Losco's (1975) female role portrayal categories as follows: 1) relationship roles – shows intimate relationship between men and women; 2) beauty or sex attraction roles – shows women as sex objects or as young and inactive stereotypes; and 3) women as authority figure roles – shows women having knowledge or expertise in a specific field or as a decision-maker. Given previous studies which show that women in western societies have tended to be portrayed in ads more often as sex objects than as authority figures (Plakoyiannaki and Zoto 2009), it is hypothesized that:

H₃: Females will be portrayed over time more as beauty or sex objects than as part of a relationship or in a position of authority.

A central figure's age is an important indicator of physical beauty in western ads with younger models, particularly female models, used to portray sex appeal (Eisend 2009; Hovland et al 2005). Lin (2001) also suggested that a modern youth appeal had been increasingly used in Chinese advertisements. In terms of age, this study classified advertising models into three age groups: young (< 30 year-old), middle age (30-50 year-old), and older (>50 year-old). Based on previous findings, we hypothesized:

H_{4(a)}: There would be an increasing use of young models in Chinese advertisements over time.

H_{4(b)}: Female models are likely to be younger than male models used in advertising.

Displays of nudity tend to sexualize those being portrayed. While nudity (partial or whole) has been a staple of western advertising, nudity in Chinese advertising is relatively new and benign. Hovland et al (2005) suggested that the level of nudity expressed in advertisements is a valuable indicator to understanding the changing images of Asian women. This study used four categories to categorize nudity: nudity shown in whole body, in 1/2 body, 1/4 body or 1/8 body. Based on western practice we hypothesize:

H_{5(a)}: There would be an increasing use of nudity in Chinese advertisements over years.

H_{5(b)}: Nudity would be used more with female models than male models.

Product type is an important indicator for both consumption activities and gender role behavior (Eisend 2009). Comparing the product type and the product user helps us understand consumer preferences and (un)equal sharing of power in household decision-making (Eisend 2009). This study categorized two major product types: functional products or psychological products. Functional products combine primarily tangible benefits (something that can be felt or tasted, for example) with intangible, symbolic aspects, such as taste that reminds one of childhood and grandma's house. While psychological benefits, including health, beauty, and entertainment, are viewed as primarily intangible in nature (evoking feelings or emotions, for example) with some tangible aspects, such as cosmetics and concert tickets (Stafford et al. 2003). In the 1980s, utilitarian values dominated Chinese advertising as most Chinese mainly consumed functional products (Tse et al. 1989). However, as social expectations and living standards rose, a more extravagant lifestyle became an emerging theme in Chinese advertising (Hung and Li 2006). Additionally, Stafford et al. (2003) suggested that males are more likely to associate with products containing functional benefits, while females are more likely to associate with products containing psychological benefits. Thus,

H_{6(a)}: Psychological products would appeal more than functional products over the years.

H_{6(b)}: Female are more likely to be associated with psychological products than males.

METHODOLOGY

This study used content analysis of half-page ads appearing in six popular Chinese magazines from 1980 – 2001, a period which reflects the beginnings of Chinese economic changes up to its entry into the World Trade Organization. In 1977, Hal Kassarian introduced content analysis methodology to consumer research; content analysis of print and television ads has been used extensively in tracking the portrayal of women in society and has been determined to be an effective measure for identifying and measuring female role orientations (Kolbe and Burnett, 1991; Krippendorff, 2004). In addition, content analysis has been used to investigate social trends, consumer value, and information availability (Belk and Pollay 1985; Tse et al. 1989). Our research has two goals: first, from a historical perspective, to trace the evolution in the use and application of women in advertising from 1980-2001 and to analyze the thematic domains that dominate Chinese advertisements during this time. Our study also used a historical-cultural analysis to aid in interpreting the data since it allows us to draw meaning from advertising over time (Gross and Sheth 1989).

Following the work of Gross and Sheth (1989), magazine ads were selected as the sampling frame because of the characteristics of ad content and accessibility. Television and newspaper advertising were not chosen because advertising on television was rare and newspaper advertising was primarily politically-oriented during this period. Magazines used in the study included two Chinese general population magazines (*Eight Hours* and *Golden Age*), two Chinese female-oriented magazines (*Women*

and *Chinese Women*), and two Chinese male-oriented magazines (*Sports* and *Science 24 hours*). The criteria for magazine selection were length of existence (none with an origin later than 1978), national coverage, and circulation. All of the selected magazines are well-known with over a million in readership. The study found 1,350 ads appearing in those magazines; the sample was narrowed down to 581 ads on the basis of: (1) eliminating duplicate ads; and (2) using ads with male and/or female images in the ads [i.e., ads without human models were removed from consideration].

Data were coded by two independent raters. At first, a subset of 50 ads was used as a test case and later removed from the study. Inter-rater reliability for the practice set was 91.7%. After the initial training, raters then coded the 581 ads used in the study. Since the number of chance agreements required for Cohen's Kappa is generally unknown (Kolbe and Burnett 1991), inter-judge reliability was calculated. Of the items included in the study, inter-coder reliability ranged from 81.2% to 93.4%, and coders resolved their disagreements through discussion.

FINDINGS

An analysis of the 581 ads resulted in support for seven of the nine hypotheses.

Chi-square analysis was first used to determine whether there is a significant difference between gender portrayal (male versus female). The results (Table 1) show that there are more female images (67.1%) used than male images, and the difference is significant ($p < 0.001$). A more detailed analysis indicated that female images were heavily used each year from 1980 to 2001 (Table 2), with the percentage of female image use varying from 66% to 100%. To further understand whether the target audience of each magazine influenced whether more or less females were used, we tested for that. The results suggested that females were used more across all three magazine types [magazines for men, magazines for women, and general magazines] (see Table 3). Even for the magazines primarily targeting male consumers, the use of female images is slightly more ($N = 44$) than the use of male images ($N=41$). However, there was no clear pattern for the increasing or decreasing use of female models. As the literature shows, at the very beginning of Chinese advertising (e.g. 1980, 1982, and 1983), female images were used exclusively (100%). All images were of attractive, if not beautiful, Chinese women. Thus, hypothesis 1 is supported, and hypothesis 2 is not supported.

Hypothesis 3 tests how female roles were portrayed over the years. According to Table 4 (below), the leading theme for female role portrayal was sexual attraction (58.5%). This is also supported in the literature, with attraction being the dominant characteristic of women portrayed in Chinese advertising. Figure 1 shows the trend of the portrayal during the period of study. The results suggest that though the portrayal of women as objects of beauty or sexual attraction fluctuates over the years, overall it is increasing. Thus, hypothesis 3 is supported.

TABLE 1
CHI-SQUARE ANALYSIS OF MALE AND FEMALE IMAGES

	male	female	both sexes	Total
No. of Ads	118	390	73	581
% of Ads	20.3%	67.1%	12.6%	100.0%
<i>Chi-Square: 303.783, DF=2, P<0.0001</i>				

TABLE 2
FREQUENCIES OF WOMEN PORTRAYED (BY YEAR)

Year	No. of Ads with Women Images	% of the Year
1980	6	100%
1981	12	81%
1982	5	100%
1983	4	100%
1984	6	88%
1985	11	86%
1986	13	82%
1987	9	92%
1988	22	88%
1989	18	74%
1990	15	84%
1991	14	74%
1992	17	83%
1993	15	79%
1994	21	93%
1995	9	69%
1996	25	79%
1997	28	77%
1998	25	86%
1999	38	80%
2000	40	66%
2001	37	76%
Total	390	80%

TABLE 3
MAGAZINE TYPE AND GENDER ROLE PORTRAYAL

		Gender Portrayed			Total	
		male	female	both sex		
Magazine Type	General	Count	40	177	28	245
		% within Mag Type	16.3%	72.2%	11.4%	100.0%
		% of Total	6.9%	30.5%	4.8%	42.2%
	Women's	Count	37	169	21	227
		% within Mag Type	16.3%	74.4%	9.3%	100.0%
		% of Total	6.4%	29.1%	3.6%	39.1%
	Men's	Count	41	44	24	109
		% within Mag Type	37.6%	40.4%	22.0%	100.0%
		% of Total	7.1%	7.6%	4.1%	18.8%
Total	Count	118	390	73	581	
	% within Mag Type	20.3%	67.1%	12.6%	100.0%	
	% of Total	20.3%	67.1%	12.6%	100.0%	

TABLE 4
FREQUENCIES OF FEMALE GENDER ROLES PORTRAYAL

	No. of Ads	% of Ads
depict a relationship	43	7.4%
depict sexual attraction	340	58.5%
depict authority	97	16.7%

FIGURE 1
ROLE PORTRAYAL OVER 20 YEARS

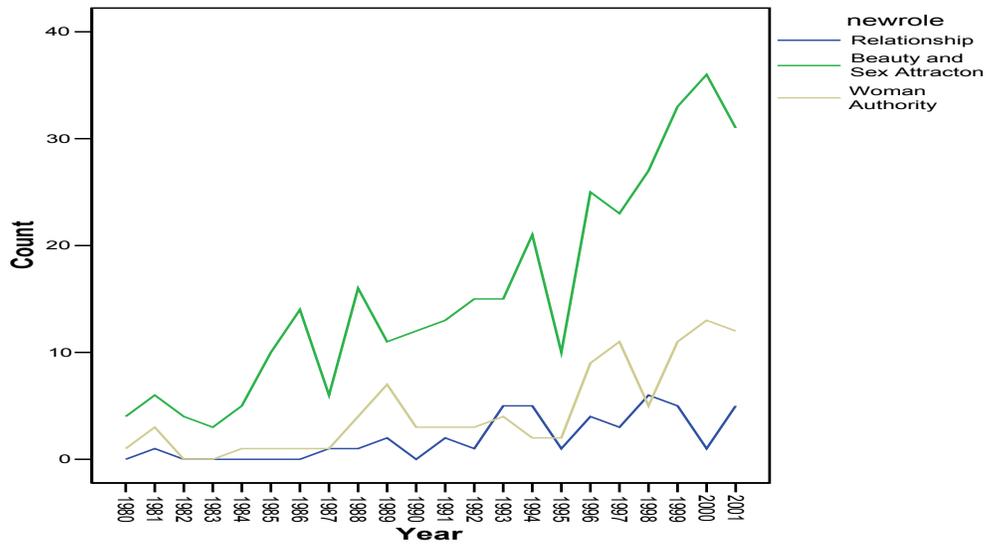
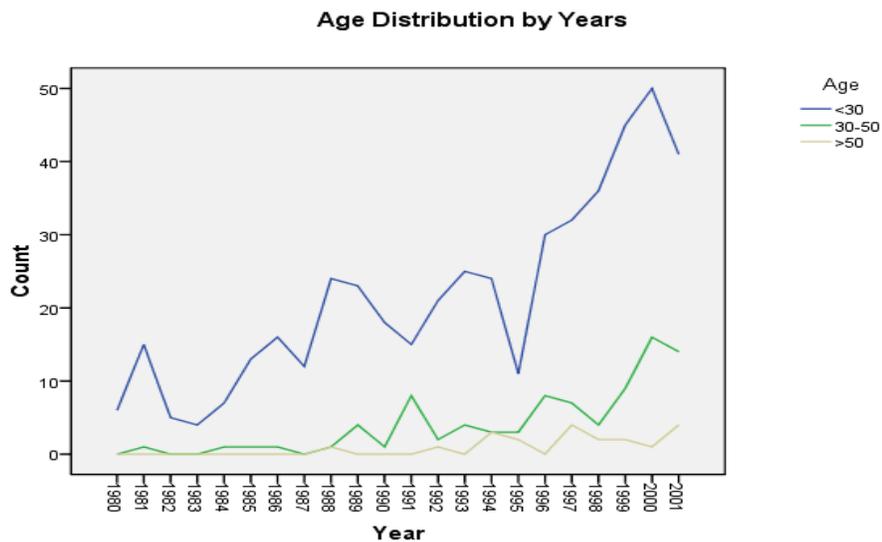


FIGURE 2
AGE USED IN GENDER ROLE PORTRAYAL OVER YEARS



We further tested how age was portrayed in Chinese magazines. In order to focus on more female images, we excluded the images of teenagers or those younger than teens. Chi-square analysis was used to test the importance of age and nudity in gender role portrayal. According to Figure 2, youth is a dominate theme, as most models used were under age 30. This is supported by the literature, where youth is a key element in international advertising. This trend is consistent throughout the study and Hypothesis 4(a) is supported.

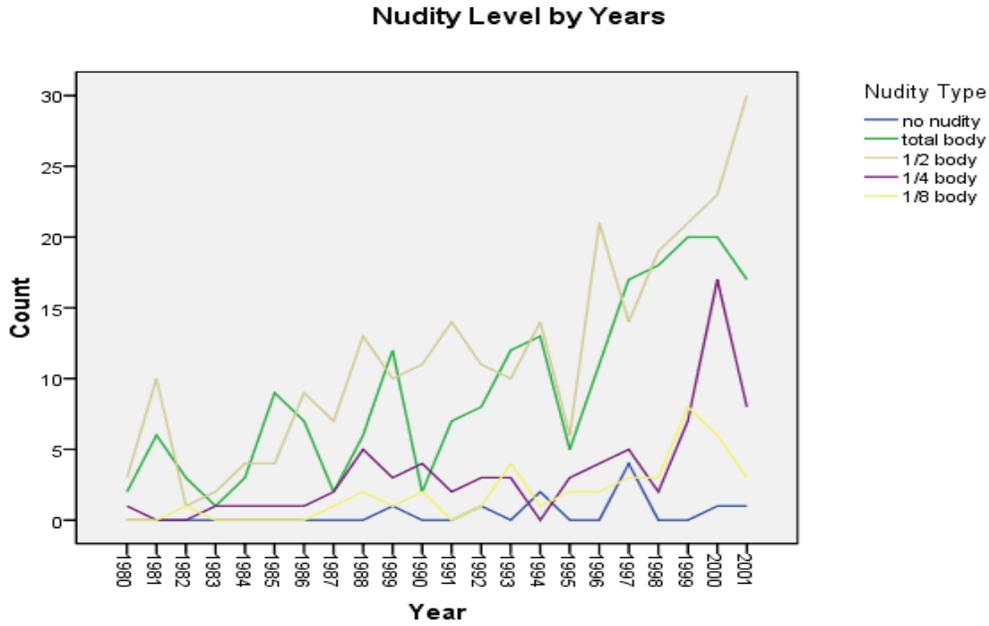
To determine age differences for male and female models, we used cross-tab analysis (Tables 5). Results show that young women are most likely to be used as there were 58.1% of young female images used over the past 20 years and an equal use of younger to older male images. Hypothesis 4(b) is supported ($X^2= 167.85$, $df=6$, $P<0.01$).).

TABLE 5
PERCENTAGE OF AGE USED IN GENDER ROLE PORTRAYAL

		Gender Portrayed			Total	
		male	female	both sex		
Age	Teens	Count	16	30	15	61
		% within age	26.2%	49.2%	24.6%	100.0%
		% of Total	2.8%	5.2%	2.6%	10.5%
	20 -30	Count	42	332	38	412
		% within age	10.2%	80.6%	9.2%	100.0%
		% of Total	7.2%	57.1%	6.5%	70.9%
	30-50	Count	53	25	10	88
		% within age	60.2%	28.4%	11.4%	100.0%
		% of Total	9.1%	4.3%	1.7%	15.1%
	>50	Count	7	3	10	20
		% within age	35.0%	15.0%	50.0%	100.0%
		% of Total	1.2%	0.5%	1.7%	3.4%
Total	Count	118	390	73	581	
	% within age	20.3%	67.1%	12.6%	100.0%	
	% of Total	20.3%	67.1%	12.6%	100.0%	

Figure 3 above shows how nudity was used over the years. Generally speaking, nudity use has increased during the time frame of the study, particularly as it relates to full or half body nudity. Based on figure 3, H5(a) is supported. We further tested whether the display of nudity was different between males and females. It was determined that nudity was more likely to be used with a female body than a male body (see Table 6). The chi-square test also indicates that the differences between the sexes regarding the use of nudity ($X^2=19.97$, $df=8$, $P<0.01$) was significant. Consequently, H5(b) is supported.

**FIGURE 3
USE OF NUDITY ON MODEL OVER YEARS**

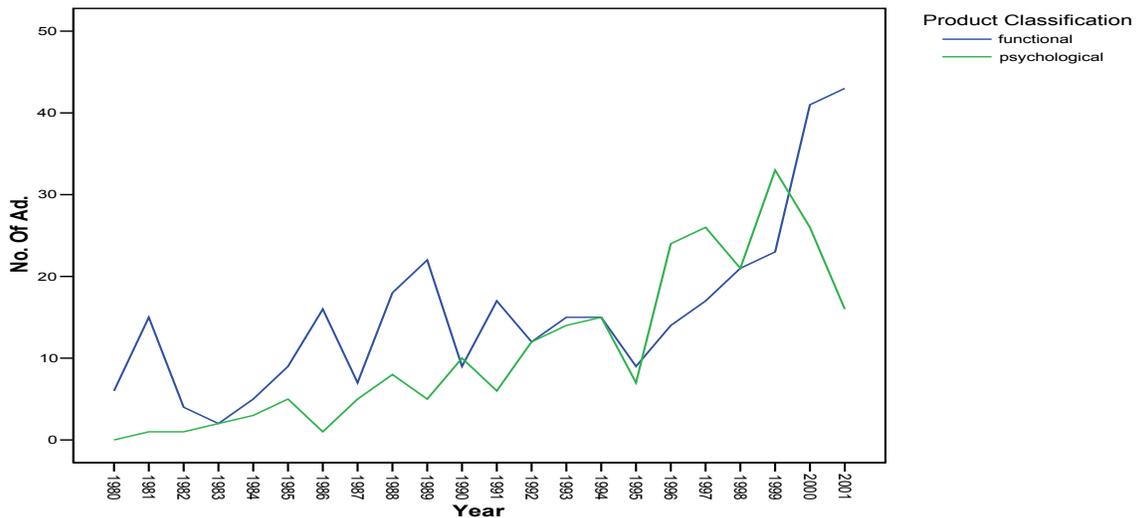


**TABLE 6
NUDITY TYPE/GENDER PORTRAYAL CROSSTAB**

	Gender Portrayal			Total
	Male	female	both sex	
no nudity	2	6	2	10
total body	35	130	36	201
1/2 body	57	168	32	257
1/4 body	19	52	2	73
1/8 body	5	34	1	40
Total	118	390	73	581

The last hypothesis tested how functional and psychological products were applied in gender role portrayal. First, we tested the presentation of functional and psychological products over the years. Findings from Figure 4 suggest that although psychological products were increasingly advertised over the years, functional products still dominated the advertising during this time frame. We further linked the product type and the product users (Table 7, below). It is interesting to see that functional products are more used in advertising than psychological products if the targeted consumers are male (57.1%); however, psychological products are more widely used to advertise to female consumers (65.6%). In addition, functional products (71.9%) dominated the advertising if both male and female consumers were represented. Thus, H6(a) is not supported, while H6(b) is supported.

FIGURE 4
FUNCTIONAL PRODUCTS VERSUS PSYCHOLOGICAL PRODUCTS OVER 20 YEARS



CONCLUSIONS

This study represents an initial effort in exploring gender role portrayal in Chinese advertising over 20 years of dynamic change in China, 1980-2001. First, the results offer support for a strong presence of females in China’s advertising with female images more heavily used than male images for all periods of time (1980-2001). However, those female images very clearly mirrored the roles of female models in western advertising, with females portrayed as beautiful, alluring figures or objects of desire. Second, youth became an important theme in China’s advertising, with increasing use of young female models during the period under study. This attraction to youth is an important development since Chinese society has historically revered the elderly among them, and is a further indication of the impact of western ideals since youth is strongly favored in western societies. Third, nudity became more prevalent when China opened to the Western world in the 1980s, and nudity was more likely to be seen with female models. These results substantiate other studies of Chinese advertisements during this time frame (Hong, 2005; Jin, 2006). In addition, the prevalence of nudity indicated in this and other studies is supported by actions taken by the Chinese government in 2007 banning such practices in advertising (Wang, 2007). Finally, advertisers tend to use female models for psychological products and male models for functional products. These results reflect some western advertising practices where women are used to promote more trivial or less valued products (Ford et al, 1998).

Overall, the results illustrate a China that has become more integrated into the fabric of the international community as reflected in the images and messages presented in its advertising. These images and messages have specifically impacted women and their role in society. In some ways women have benefitted from the changes, allowing them to discard the “masculinized women” image of the pre liberalization period (Hung and Li 2006) and to embrace their femininity. However, China, a country which promoted equality of the sexes pre 1980, seems to have adopted over the 20 period of the study many of the images of western women which emphasize physical attractiveness and sexuality over substantive roles in society.

TABLE 7
PRODUCT USER/PRODUCT CLASSIFICATION CROSTAB

			Product Classification		Total
			functional	psychological	
Product User: <i>men</i>	Count	16	12	28	
	% within Product User	57.1%	42.9%	100.0%	
	% within Product Classification	4.7%	5.0%	4.8%	
<i>women</i>	Count	63	120	183	
	% within Product User	34.4%	65.6%	100.0%	
	% within Product Classification	18.5%	49.8%	31.5%	
<i>child</i>	Count	2	8	10	
	% within Product User	20.0%	80.0%	100.0%	
	% within Product Classification	.6%	3.3%	1.7%	
<i>both sexes</i>	Count	259	101	360	
	% within Product User	71.9%	28.1%	100.0%	
	% within Product Classification	76.2%	41.9%	62.0%	
Total	Count	340	241	581	
	% within Product User	58.5%	41.5%	100.0%	
	% within Product Classification	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

IMPLICATIONS

This study provides insight for academicians and practitioners who desire a more clear understanding of the evolution of gender role portrayal in China's advertising during a critical period of economic and social development, 1980-2001. This insight should allow for better evaluation and planning related to the portrayal of gender and product characteristics in China. As China's position in the world economy further evolves, particularly as it carves out an important role in the WTO, further studies should determine whether representations of females in Chinese advertising change again to reflect the developing sensitivity in Western societies regarding negative gender role stereotyping.

This study also contributes to the discussion of whether gender stereotyping in advertising molds or mirrors gender-related values in our society. Some studies would argue that "advertising does not reflect the significant advancement of the gender equality movement in many societies" while others suggest that "role portrayals in commercials are more representative of contemporary women," and that "gender role stereotyping in advertisement has declined" (Eisand, 2010). This study adds to the ongoing discussion of that issue and raises the question as to whether current representations of females in Chinese advertising are true representations of how females are viewed by society at large.

An important question in this study is: can women still hold up half the sky? Current advertising practices related to women in China seem to reflect a change from that of an equal partner to men [holding half of the sky] to a more westernized image of women as objects of beauty and sexual desire. The changes indicate that, as China has migrated towards a more consumer-oriented society, marketers tended to adopt the Western ideal of role portrayal in Chinese advertisements. However, given that Chinese women's past encompassed different experiences and expectations associated with their role in society, their roles in the future may not be so easily circumscribed. Their past roles reflecting independence, collective morality, and determination (Hung et al. 2007) may allow them to combine the best of both representations.

How gender roles evolve and how the society responds to that evolution are important issues for advertisers. It seems premature at this point to assume that Chinese consumers will respond the same as western consumers have to advertising messages, given the differences in cultures. Consequently, more studies will be needed to determine if the evidence of westernization contained in this study and others is deep-rooted or if it is a short term adjustment during a period of unparalleled change.

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