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Cultural Values and Advertising: A Study on Individualism and Collectivism reflected in Chinese and American Cola Advertisement

In today’s wave of economic globalization, an increasing number of US-based multinational companies are trying to set up business in the Chinese market. One of the most difficult problems American companies will face is how to sets up a popular enterprise image in China, which related closely to corporate advertising strategy. Carolyn A. Lin, professor of Cleveland State University, conducted a study examining several pairs of opposing cultural values reflected in U.S. and Chinese advertising appeals. In this paper, my analysis will focus on individualism and collectivism by discussing the different advertising strategies Coca-Cola Company are used in China and America.

With more than 15 brands of beverage choices for Chinese consumers and products sold 150 million bottles per day in China, Coca-Cola Company is out of doubt that has been hugely successful in Chinese campaign advertising. Coca-Cola company spends billions of dollars per year and has adopted a full range of social media advertising promotion to keep their products welcomed. Television commercial is one of the most important parts in all-around advertisements. In the following we will compare two different videos for Chinese and American, both in the background of family. As pointed out by Lin (2001), Chinese commercials employing group consensus appeals more than U.S. commercials do, we will be easy to find individualism and collectivism cultural values reflected in these two videos. The video for Chinese begins with a man in the overseas and calling her mother to inform that he cannot return home. Then, the screen is switched into a restaurant, the man sitting in low spirits. But when he is given a can of Cola, everything is changed. A golden boy and a jade girl jump out of Cola, and they bring the man back to his family, with a super bottle of Cola in man’s hand. Then a big family sit around table to enjoy their dinner, all having big smile on the face. In the last frame, there is a bottle of Cola and a tagline “把我带回家，欢欢喜过春节”，which translated as“take me back home, and happy enjoy the Spring Festival”. The video for American tells a story about a pair of brothers and the elder brother always teases his younger brother. For example, the elder one will hit his brother’s cap when the younger one is playing video games. But when the younger boy is bullied for cola he has, the elder brother helps him and rob back the cola. The story ends up with the scene that the younger boy drinks cola with a happy smile and a tagline jumps into screen “taste the feelings”.

The two videos I described above are both in soft-sell appeal, which means emphasizing human emotional sentiments over clear-cut product-related appeals. Although this does not reflect Lin’ viewpoint that the American advertisements tend to use hard-sell appeals whereas Chinese advertisements tend to use soft-sell appeals, the emotions conveyed by two videos show the collectivism appeals in China and individualism appeals in America. The video for Chinese lay stress on family reunion, whereas the video for American focus on brotherhood. Chinese collectivism in the family will be embodied in the emphasize on blood relations. In the video for Chinese when the son calls her mother, screens flash alternately that the mother happy expression to receive phone call from son, the son’s guilty expression and the mother’s disappointed expression. The atmosphere is emotional, and the actors interpret the blood bond between children and parents true to life. With regards to the scene of family union, Chinese will naturally associate the scene of three generation sitting around a table with typical harmonious family relationship. In contrast, the video for American has nothing to do with children-parents relationship, which is most valued by Chinese in family relationship. In Chinese cultural values the individual is considered as a part of collective and is expected to have the qualities like filial piety, united and friendly. However, as Lin said in his study, identity is conceived of as individualized in U.S. society, which explain the different characters in two videos. American value individuality and pursue the personality. The teasing behavior of elder brother seems unfriend, but it turns out to be a special way to show love for her younger brother. This reflects a cool fashion among young American which is totally different from Chinese cultural values. And there is a plot in the video that the ownership of cola varies from young brother to bully people because of the weakness and finally returns to younger brother because of elder brother’s strength. This reflects that in U.S. society power and competition is valued, while Chinese more tend to be comity and cooperative. In another aspect, the elements and background the two videos choose is also different.

The video for America has nothing to do with tradition and just tell stories in the background of daily life. However, in video for Chinese, the elements golden boy and jade girl are related to Chinese tradition which represent luck in Chinese tradition and are common symbols in the Spring Festival. Besides, home coming is also a traditional topic in Chinese art history. The reflection of tradition corresponds well with the Chinese cultural values for strong culture identity is one of the forms of Chinese collectivism.

To make our analysis more integrated, in the following two Olympic posters will be analyzed. Chinese poster is full of passion. In the left part the famous athlete Liu Xiang is hurdling and in the right part a crowd of people were cheering and the man in the front seems exciting, with a Cola in hand. The cola is placed in the center of picture and very notable. At the bottom there is a slogan reading “中国节拍一起响”,which translates as “China beats together”. This advertisement implies that drinking Cola means cheering for Olympics. It is trying to associate Cola with national proud and which is also one of the forms of Chinese collectivism. The American poster is in a total different style. Four young people sit against the wall to relax and photo was taken from directly above and we can only show people’s hair, except a girl lifts her face to drink water. Although the people in the posters are also famous athletes, it obvious the poster focus less on their identities as athletes, which is opposite to Chinese poster. People in American poster is causal and relaxed, and they all strong and powerful. It gives an inkling to people------ if I drink Cola, I can be as strong as the athletes. From above we can find two different motivation the posters contain: for Chinese, I drink Cola because I love my country; for American, I drink Cola because I want to be strong. The logic behind the two posters correspond to Lin’s conclusion that Chines advertisements stress collectivism while American advertisements stress individualism.

Collectivism and individualism are respectively leading cultural values in China and America. According to Lin, the core culture values remain stable despite the emergence of more contemporary interpretation. From the Cola advertisements, we can find China attach more importance to collectivism in aspect of family, tradition, culture identity and country proud. In contrast, American values individualism more such as personality, strength, and competition.