Embodiment and Subjectivity of an Advertising Post in 1935

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In the middle of the dark yellow frame, two women in qipao are playing golf in an advertising poster for a Shanghai soap company in 1935.[[1]](#footnote-1) The Chinese brand of the soap was “Yushuang Bai”, which is the name of a famous opera actress in Shanghai in 1930s. However, the English brand of this soap, “Victoria”, was from Europe, and the manufacture factory was from Japan.[[2]](#footnote-2) This poster perfectly recreates the image of women and unveils the multicultural society in modern Shanghai. Therefore, this paper will discuss these women and their clothes, and indicate how elements in this advertisement embody the identities about women in Shanghai.

This poster was made in the first decade of the Republic of China. Influenced by the Western lifestyles and ideas, clothing changed and complicated styles were replaced after the 1911 Revolution which ended Manchu rule. With most fashion and global trade taking place in Shang, Shanghai became the place which bred the new development of Chinese dresses including qipao. Moreover, Shanghai was experiencing an economic growth at that time. Subsequently, Shanghai gradually became the center of industry with its unique industrial advantages and treaty port.[[3]](#footnote-3) During that time under unstable political climate, Shanghai was known as Asia’s preeminent metropolis where East and West culture collided and fused.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Qipao, the iconic garment by which Chinese women are still known throughout the world, is the symbol of the evolution of the modernization in China. Besides, the emergence of qipao was also an evolution of the Chinese fashion and opening up. In 1930s, qipao was considered as a daring style, elegantly revealing the shape of a woman’s bewitching figure. The young lady in the right of the poster wore red qipao with serried flowers design. As the famous portrayal of fashion in 1930s, this fashion-conscious lady qipao’s hemlines dropped to the ankle, and side slits reached right up to the thigh. These styles depicted a woman slender legs dimly as never before, and accentuated a modern Shanghai woman’s confidence of her beauty and projecting herself. The miss in the right of the poster wore a similar slim fitting qipao in pure white with inwrought lace. The white clothes and her clean and tender skin were the best advertisement of the cosmetic soap. Before the era of the Republic of China, the forms of aesthetic expression were veiled. In comparison to the Chinese clothes in the past which were exquisite and dazzling, qipao focused on the conciseness value, which emphasized revealing the elegance of women themselves and the freedom of expression.[[5]](#footnote-5) The collision of Chinese and Western culture promoted the birth of qipao which is the successful union of Chinese style and Western tailoring, as well as the spirit for showing glamour as a female.[[6]](#footnote-6)

As an advertisement, the text in the poster is significant. In 1930s, movies and operas were famous in Shanghai, so branding Yushuang Bai who was the most eminent opera actress in Shanghai in 1930s in the right text would attract the audience especially who were frenetic fans of Yushuang. Besides, the Japanese manufacture shown in the left text would guarantee the high quality of soap since at that time, since Japan almost monopolized the cosmic soap market with advanced production technology in Shanghai.[[7]](#footnote-7) It was also common to include English in the poster during that time especially for the advertisement for high grade commodities targeting the middle and upper level class people despite the boycott promotion in 1930s. [[8]](#footnote-8)

The Western elements in this poster were the best evidence for the profound influence of Western countries, leading to vital changes for lifestyles in Shanghai as well as in the whole China. It was a new era of freedom for women who could wear and do whatever they wanted. As the position of women in Shanghai in 1930s was continuously rising, two young ladies in the poster could have their own time and space to play golf, which is still considered as a western noble sport. Moreover, ladies in the poster showed a big picture of women in Shanghai in 1935. The film industry in Shanghai was prosperous, and women at that time admired movie stars eagerly. Therefore, like ladies in the poster, women favored the wavy hair, arched eyebrows, and coy looks.[[9]](#footnote-9) People could clearly see the high-heeled shoes the woman wore, which were introduced from the Western and totally different from Manchu shoes, highlighting the high and slim shape of figure. With series of new modern style attires integrating Chinese and Western fashion, these women were provocative and accentuated the femininity.

At first glance, this poster demonstrates the international business of producing and selling soap in Shanghai, revealing the internationalism intensely. More broadly, this poster speaks to the larger sociocultural collision of Western and China in Shanghai. The promotion of female identities, and the freedom and enthusiasm of projecting women‘s own beauty were expedited by the Western open thoughts, leading to the rapid evolution of communication, aesthetic appreciation, lifestyles, and identities.

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1. Garrett, Valery. Chinese dress: from the Qing dynasty to the present. (Tuttle Publishing, 2012), 148. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Victoria Soap is a Swedish family run company that was founded in 1905 in Helsingborg Sweden. <https://www.victoriasoap.se/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Zurndorfer, Harriet T. "Imperialism, globalization, and the soap/suds industry in Republican China (1912-37): the case of Unilever and the Chinese consumer." (2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Minick, Scott, and Ping Jiao. Chinese graphic design in the twentieth century. (Thames and

   Hudson, 2010), 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Roberts, Claire, ed. Evolution & Revolution: Chinese Dress, 1700s-1990s. (Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, 1997), 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Garrett, Valery. 147 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Zurndorfer. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The paradox between boycott in 1930s and the striking text of Japanese factory is important to acknowledge. However, a deeper analysis of this element is beyond the purview of this project. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Garrett. 147. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)