

# **The Framed Female Image: A Pictorial Semiotic Analysis of Classic Shanghai Calendar Posters of the 1910's-1930's**

## **Abstract**

The present study conducts a pictorial semiotic analysis of the female image in Classic Shanghai Calendar Posters of the 1910's-1930's. First of all, we review Roland Barthes' and Göran Sonesson's theoretical perspectives towards pictorial semiotics and then propose four essentials to distinguish the features of pictorial texts, especially those of print advertisements. These four essentials are types of code, goals, media and textuality. Furthermore, we find the Calendar Posters' "textuality," the configuration of both linguistic text and pictures that produces meanings, is in the pattern of that pictorial meanings are restrained by linguistic text, and the core visual sign of this genre is "the framed female image." At last, the present study explores different layers of the significances of the two major signs—"the frame" and "the female image." According to the analysis, from prostitutes to movie actresses, there had been dramatic changes of female characters in the posters due to the invading capitalism accompanied by economic growth and western modern culture. The female image in these Calendar Posters represents no longer an object of desire for male gaze as those in common commercial posters depicted by Goffman, Buker or Page. In fact, the significances of the female image go far beyond the frame of feudalization and tradition, signifying the consumers' expectation of a better future, and this "better future" will be achieved by a healthy, well-educated and independent fine woman. "The female image" signifies beyond "the frame." The female image of Classic Shanghai Calendar Posters subverts the patriarchy embedded in Chinese feudalistic tradition and Western capitalism, and it finally reserves a precious moment of revisiting Chinese women history from the perspective of pictorial semiotics.

**Keywords:** Classic Shanghai Calendar Posters, female image, frame, pictorial semiotics

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## **Introduction**

In the early twentieth century, an era of capitalistic colonialism began. Western powers invaded China in predominant forces. Meanwhile, China was undergoing a tremendous social, economic, and cultural transformation due to the industrialization, business trust, and mass production accompanied by Western powers. Commercial advertisements thus grew rapidly in order to stimulate consumption. Classic Shanghai Calendar Posters are exactly one of the results of the Western business invasion of China. "Calendar Poster," regarded as the origin of Chinese modern commercial advertisement, is a trinity of painting, calendar and advertisement (Chiang, 1994; Chuo, 1993; Chaou, 2002).<sup>1</sup>

According to modern business logics, no matter in visual or linguistic messages, "product" should always be the focus of an ad, whereas on Classic Shanghai Calendar Posters, during the period of 1910's-1930's, products were seldom placed at the focus but at the marginal frames or corners. What attracts the consumers' attention are the various and gesturing Chinese women at the center of the Calendar Posters. That is to say, "female image" as the theme is the most significant feature of Classic Shanghai Calendar Posters (Chuo, 1993; Wang, 1997).

This study aims to analyze the female image in Classic Shanghai Calendar Posters and to explore the signifying process and sign system, so as to understand how and what the female gender role was reflected by these posters in the contemporary social-cultural context. From the perspectives of Shanghai's urbanism of that period, advertisers' influence, and the characteristics of consumers, this study also tries to explain what sort of ideology and value system were re-presented by the posters. Besides, through theoretical discussion of the existent pictorial semiotics and the features of the target text, this study demonstrates an example of pictorial semiotic analysis, in the sense of pertinence, which can be appropriated to the future studies on the print advertisements containing both pictorial and linguistic

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<sup>1</sup> Po-tang Chuo argues that there was no official name for these posters and some of the posters in later period did not necessarily include calendars. Chuo thus suggests they merely be named as "Commercial Posters." However, from the social, historical and aesthetical perspectives, "Commercial Posters" cannot convey fully the significance of these posters as the derivation of Chinese modern advertisements and their unique visual expression. Therefore, this study prefers "Classic Shanghai Calendar Posters" as named by Yeng-fong Chiang, an important collector of these posters.

messages. Finally, this study hopes to offer an interdisciplinary research model to the fields of semiotics, feminism, and advertising and sheds light on the scholarship of textual analysis and advertising culture.

## **Development of Semiotics and Pictorial Semiotics**

American pragmatist Charles Sanders Peirce and Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure are the two founders of modern semiotics. Almost at the same time, though apart by the Atlantic, Peirce initiated his theory of signs as semiotics, while Saussure named it semiology. Based on notes taken from Saussure's lectures, his students edited *Course in General Linguistics* and published it in 1915. As for Peirce, eight-volumed *Collected Papers* recording most of his notions was published some years after his death.

“A science that studies the life of signs within society is conceivable; it would be a part of social psychology and consequently of general psychology; I shall call it semiology (from the Greek semeion 'sign'). Semiology would show what constitutes signs, what laws govern them,” Saussure defines (Saussure, 1966: 16). Accordingly, a sign contains two elements, the signifier and the signified; and the link between them generates meanings. However, the relation between the signifier and the signified is by no means natural but arbitrary. The link is sustained only by the common practice within a certain cultural context. It is more than obvious that between the signifier and the signified, there is not a natural link but in fact, an artificial one. Derived from this understanding of signs, French Structuralists develop methodologies like Structuralistic approach toward Myth (e. g. Levi-Strauss, 1963), Structuralist Poetics (e. g. Jakobson, 1971), and Narratology (e. g. Genette, 1972). Scholars apply Saussure's linguistic methods, examining texts from the aspect of the syntagmatic and the paradigmatic relations, to reduce a text into some basic elements in the sense of Structuralism and to elucidate the effect caused by every single element and their combination. In short, they explore the structure and operation of language use in a text as a sign system (Sun, 2005a & 2005b).

Peirce categorizes signs into three types: iconic sign, indexical sign and symbolical sign. This typology explains how the sign refers to its object. The iconic sign is related to its object by a quality of its own, like in the cases of portrait, sculpture and onomatopoeia. The indexical sign, by real connection, causality mostly, is related to its object. A sign of smoke means fire is a typical example of the index. As for the symbolical one, it is related to its object by a habit or rule, namely conventional, for its interpretant. Language is a perfect example for the symbolic signs (Peirce, 1931-1958).

Italian semiotician Umberto Eco indicates that Peirce's definition of sign, avoiding any emphasis on its artificial or communicative quality, helps to remove the materialism and the utilitarianism from Saussure's theory which presupposes sign as the very medium of human expression and communication. Eco furthermore adopts Danish linguist Louis Hjelmslev's opinions about sign, separating the contents of sign, the signifier and the signified, from the referent that is outside of the sign itself. He prefers discussing the "sign function" than merely the "sign," in which the relation between the expression and the content can be fully described (Eco, 1976).

This discussion of the relation between the expression and the content is especially important for pictorial semiotic studies, because the relation between the signifier and the signified is not always arbitrary as Saussure asserts. That is to say, the link between the signifier and the signified is not necessarily artificial and the break between them is not that obvious for most of the pictorial signs, the icons. This type of sign has a feature that the relation between the signifier and the signified, or the sign function in terms of Eco, is based on similarity, likeness and semblance. As Swedish scholar Göran Sonesson points out, people tend to "see" the pictorial sign (icon) "into" its actual expression, although the icon also contain signifier/signified (and of course the break within) like verbal languages (Sonesson, 1992). Thus, it is critical to reflect on the pertinence of applying linguistic semiotics to pictorial sign studies. To adjust and rethink the research principles and steps becomes necessary.

Pictorial semiotics is to study pictures as vehicles to convey meanings, which is different from semiotics that aims at language only. It focuses on the material, structure and signifying process of pictures. Scholars, either revising linguistic approach or innovating new theoretical models, devotes themselves to the study of pictorial semiotics.

Roland Barthes in his "Rhetoric of the Image" points out that the composition of an image is a signifying complex, and especially in the photography, "the denoted image naturalizes the symbolic message . . . [and] innocents the semantic artifice of connotation" (Barthes, 1977: 45). Barthes' keen observation on pictorial sign reveals and depicts the significant features of image in terms of pictorial semiotics. As in his analysis of Pazani, a colorful print advertisement of pasta, he defines three messages in the pictorial text: linguistic message, coded iconic message, and non-coded iconic message. Nevertheless, he clarifies the two functions of the linguistic message with regard to the (two fold) iconic message: "anchorage"—"the text *directs* the reader through the signifieds of image . . . remote-contrl[ing] him towards a meaning chosen in advance"; "relay"—"text . . . and image stand in

a complementary relation . . . and the unity of the message is realized at [the] level of the story” (Barthes, 1977: 39-40).

Barthes’ “Rhetoric of the Image” is a cornerstone of pictorial semiotics, establishing the primary model and research steps toward the study of image. With his theoretic basis of linguistics, he pays more attention to how the content and the referent are linked to the ideology in the real world.

The same trace of linguistic methodology can be found in Eco’s pictorial semiotics. He regards the signifying process of image as the one of idioms. At first, he tries to reduce the image into some basic elements, and names the smallest unit “iconeme” as a parallel to Saussure’s “phoneme,” the smallest contrastive unit in the sound system of a language that does not carry any meaning, in order to perform the structural analysis on image. However, it is impossible for the small units in an image to mean nothing. For instance, when a pure single color represents the smallest unit, it still carries meanings in different cultures (Eco, 1976 & 1977).

Besides Saussurean semiotics, there are other methodologies adopted or adjusted to study the image. René Lindekens discusses the issue of conventionality and double articulation by blending Hjelmslevian semiotics, Greimas school, phenomenology, experimental psychology of perception from Gestalt school (Lindekens, 1971 & 1976). Later on, Jean-Marie Floch and Felix Thürlemann, applying Greimas’ theory, illustrate the double layer of signification in the picture: iconic and plastic levels, in order to explain how the concrete or the abstract concepts are transmitted by the picture. Floch, applying structural semiotics, further argues that pictorial signification exists and exercises in the structure of binary opposition (Floch, 1984 & 1986a & 1986b; Thürlemann, 1982 & 1990).

Other than linguistics and structuralism, there are also Liege School, so-called Group  $\mu$  and Quebec School contributing ideas to the field of pictorial semiotics. Group  $\mu$  uses the classification of figures in the classic rhetoric to analyze image and combines theories of mathematics to establish their “general rhetoric.” They treat figure as a deviation from the norm, and figures often stand as redundancy as what Greimas calls isotopy. They also probe into issues of iconic and plastic levels brought up by Floch and Thürlemann. They assert the existence of the iconico-plastic figures in the plastic level actually results from the function of redundancy. Given that a blue man in a comic that is supposed to be in the plastic level and carrying abstract meanings, the abstract meaning of “blue man” will be produced only because the redundancy/isotopy of “man,” as a norm, that can generate the “blue man” as a deviation (Group  $\mu$ , 1979 & 1992).

Fernande Saint-Martin, a leading figure of Quebec School, reckons that the image is by all means a visual product serving the visual perception selectively and can be efficiently analyzable according to six variables: color/tonality, texture, dimension/quantity, implantation into the plane, orientation/vectorality, and frontiers/contours generating shapes (Saint-Martin, 1987 & 1989 & 1990). Other members of Quebec School, like Marie Carani and Michael O'Toole, also offer their criticism on Greimasian approach and suggest some analytical tools for the pictorial semiotics. They challenge Group  $\mu$ 's applying binary opposition to visual sign system, redefine the representation, modal and composition of the image and suggest a interdisciplinary effort in the future studies of image, including perceptual psychology, philosophical and phenomenological theories of perception, etc (Carani, 1988; O'Toole, 1994).

Works of different schools and scholars provide various theoretical and analytical models to study image. However, as mentioned above, from language to image, semioticians encounter the problem of pertinence when applying linguistic methodology to the study of image. Nevertheless, although the image is the target object of pictorial semiotics, its essential material and signifying system are still different whenever the composition of the object changes. It is still difficult to assert that there is a single theory or an analytical model suitable for all kinds of pictorial texts. Advertisements are different from pictures, not only because of the material element (photography or watercolor) but also because of the communication intention (commercial or aesthetical expression). Therefore, the dichotomous development of the pictorial semiotics, i. e. the semiotics of publicity and the semiotics of visual art, becomes inevitable. Actually, more and more scholars admit the necessity of adjusting and theorizing analytical tools for every individual visual object. Then there will not be too much emphasis on appropriating pertinent theory and methodology to different types of advertisements (print ad, TV commercial or classified ad) according to their own characteristics and social context.

## **The Semiotics of Advertising and Female Images**

Barthes establishes the core concepts and steps of semiotic approach for the advertising in his "Rhetoric of the Image" (Barthes, 1977). Later on, based on the heritage from Barthes, Ron Beasley and Marcel Danesi publish *Persuasive Signs: The Semiotics of Advertising*, attempting to elucidate various aspects of advertising, including brand naming, package, logo creation and copywriting (Beasley & Danesi, 2002).

Beasley and Danesi especially pay attention to how the text of advertisement produces certain meanings and layers of connotation by using Biblical stories or Greek mythology.

They fully explore Barthes's concept of mythologizing and point out the signification of the ad is closely related to the convention and the social context. The form (signifier) and the meaning (signified) of visual sign are linked at the first moment of its appearance to its interpreters in certain context and will immediately become a new sign waiting to be interpreted, and the process may go on and on. This is the "connotative chain" representing how the meaning of image expands and increases as different connotations. Take "apple" as an example. For most of the Western audience, a picture of an apple, first of all, signifies the concept of the fruit "apple" and then, almost simultaneously will bestow the symbolism rooted in Genesis, forbidden sex or forbidden knowledge (Beasley & Danesi, 2002). However, given that the sign "apple" appears in different cultures, the same symbolism (apple=forbidden sex or forbidden knowledge) will not occur to the audience so easily.

The more abundant meanings the connotative chain will produce, the more audience the ad will attract, as Beasley and Danesi find. However, more audience does not necessarily mean more buyers. Advertising is to persuade. The naturalization of visual sign is to blur the break between the signifier and the signified and so to make people believe what they are made to see in the ad. The persuasive power lies in the ad design that helps to fix the meaning (what the advertiser wants to convey to the audience), instead of that creates more layers of connotation.

Thus, reviewing from semiotics to pictorial semiotics, and finally to the pictorial semiotics of advertising, this study benefits from the previous scholars and find that a pictorial semiotic approach to the advertising is, in short, to observe the interior and the exterior elements of the ads structurally. Material and texture in general belong to the interior, context and effect, the exterior.

Then, it is time to move a step further to take a look at the female image in the advertising. According to Jib Fowles, "gender" as a sign, especially represented by the female image, is the most popular sign used in ads, and its re-presentation is also a major concern for the academic (Fowles, 1996). Erving Goffman, an American sociologist, tries to decipher the gender relations embedded in the ads by analyzing the gesture, pose and facial expression of female models (Goffman, 1979). Later on, Nancy Signorielli, Douglas McLeod and Elaine Healy's research on the female image in music video confirmed Goffman's findings (Signorielli & et al, 1994). The female characters are designed to be the desired object of male gaze. Moreover, gender stereotypes are duplicated continuously in different categories of ads (Browne, 1998). "Beautiful" and "sexy" are the essential qualities of the female image portrayed in ads.

As for feminist studies on the female image in ads, they are more likely to pursue an ideological interpretation than to conduct a structural (or even semiotic) analysis of the image itself. They point out the re-presentation of the female image in ads is indeed a mean of the social control of patriarchy (Rakow, 1992; Buker, 1996; Page, 2005). Although “power feminism,” may argue that new generation’s confident exhibition of female body becomes a self-empowerment of women, it is still hard to alter the conventional and core concepts of beauty, sexiness and femininity passed down from the previous generations (Fowles, 1996; Gorman, 2005). The similar conclusion can be found in Asian culture. Tomiko Kodama, a Japanese semiotician, finds that the female image in a real estate ad serves to reinforce the stereotype of Japanese woman, dependent and motherly, in order to sustain the group-ness, peace and order in Japanese society (Kodama, 1991).

Most of the studies on the female image in the advertising incline to put more emphasis on the social, cultural or even political effects brought out by the ads and the sexual discrimination reflected by the ads. That is to say, these studies pay more attention to “the exterior” elements than “the interior” ones as defined by the present paper. Sociologists find the ads are mirroring real life in terms of gender relation; feminists’ discourse hardly reaches beyond the objectified female body. They simply reveal the truth that what the advertisers request is to sell products; provoking controversy or challenging the value system of the mainstream will be the last choice for them to attract and persuade consumers. This “prone-to-exterior” methodology of the female image study often leads to a research report of the status quo. Academic roars, in this case, cannot scare away the advertisers with the vested interest in capitalism and patriarchy.

After all, a strategic move, slightly toward the “interior” of the female image study, becomes important, because the “interior” (semiotic or structural) approach may help to discover the subversive power lying beneath the surface of the text. The analysis of the image-text’s material and texture provides the opportunity to find the clue of that the text is not totally subordinate to the context. Text and context are actually in a dialectical relation promising the multi-interpretation of the ads. Hence, the female image in ads will not always be condemned politically incorrect, and the feminists can empower rather than criticize the female image in ads finally to challenge the status quo.

Classic Shanghai Calendar Posters shall serve as a perfect target for this adjusted pictorial semiotic and feminist approach to the female image study for its historical background and unique features of the commercial design.



## Classic Shanghai Calendar Posters: History and Style

Advertising business in Shanghai began in the early twentieth century and flourished in 1930s, a glowing era of Shanghai culture (Li, 2003). At the very beginning, calendar posters were imported to Shanghai by Western traders and then widely adopted by Chinese businessmen as a gift attached to products. These posters are the earliest form of commercial posters and ads in modern China. The naming of “Calendar Posters” (*yue fen pai guang gau hua*) comes from the juxtaposition of paintings and calendars. More than seventy percent of the collected posters of now show that female characters are the theme and the focus of the paintings (Wang, 1997). Diverse female characters include Peking opera actor (e. g. Lan-fang Mei), movie actress (e. g. Ling-yu Juan and Li-hua Li), fictional heroines in dramas or novels (e. g. Dai-yu Lin in *Dream of the Red Chamber*) and fashion models. Their facial expression, clothing and the background of the painting all reflect the most trendy fashion, decoration and culture in the contemporary Shanghai (Chiang, 1994; Chaou, 2002). The image of the product that should be at the visual center is on the contrary placed on the margin frames. This is the feature that makes these posters exclusive and a special genre in advertising.

At first, women were not the sole theme of the calendar posters. Western traders introduced to China not only the paintings with women but also those with knights, landscape, still life and even religious stories. However, they found Chinese consumers are not interested in these subjects and gradually sense the need of localization. Chinese landscape paintings, folklores, festival icons and traditional dramas all had been themes of the early posters. Finally, the calendar posters depicting beautiful women and modern life style became the most popular genre of the ad posters in Shanghai, a shining and rising modern city in China. Also because of the pragmatic function of calendars (usually with both the western and lunar ones), customers used to hang the poster for a whole year. Beautiful modern women calendar posters turned to be a part of daily life, a practical but also appealing home deco item, and thus the effect of the publicity had been highly increased (Chiang, 1994).

According to Yeng-fong Chiang, a collector of calendar posters, besides Western ad design, the other origin of the posters is the Chinese traditional woodcut. In fact, women in western dresses appearing in the calendar posters are the inevitable result from a semi-colonized city life in Shanghai. Citizens admire the fashion and modern culture introduced by the Westerners. She also points out that the large circulation of ad posters is simply because paintings are easier for people (of different classes) to understand than words on newspapers. These posters even get so popular to be exported to the overseas Chinese societies in Singapore and Malaysia (Chiang, 1994).

In late 1930's, the technique of photography was greatly improved, and then the newly developed photomechanical process replaced the paintings. Meanwhile, economic slump occurred due to the Sino-Japanese War and the Chinese civil war. After 1949, certain numbers of the calendar posters still had circulated for a short period but soon deteriorated since ads, representing capitalism, was severely attacked especially during the Cultural Revolution.<sup>2</sup> Artists and painters were denounced and condemned in the movement of abolishing the "Four Olds" (Wang, 1994). These beautiful women calendar posters gradually become history and have been collected as Classic Shanghai Calendar Posters (CSCP) till now.

Painters of CSCP are indebted to Yo-ju Wu, a famous folk customs painter in late Ch'ing Dynasty, and the traditional Chinese "court lady" paintings (Chiang, 1994). Wu's realistic style of paintings used to be published on *Tienshihchai Huabao* portraying the daily lives of common people and also introducing Western novelties to the local people.<sup>3</sup> Wu's delicate lines, strokes and merging modernity and tradition in paintings allegedly bring new life to Chinese folk customs paintings (Wu & et al, 2005). Another influence of Wu is his paintings collected as *Haishang Baiyentu* (translated as "Shanghai Ladies" by the authors); most of the paintings are about the family life of married women and their children (Wu & et al, 2005). Following artists often applied Wu's techniques and the subject matter to the calendar posters.

Chinese court lady paintings achieved maturity after Han Dynasty and since then the style of the female image in Chinese paintings was officially established (Liu & Chang, 2003). The content of court lady paintings mainly aimed at teaching women about virtues (chastity and obedience) and social responsibilities (weaving and reproducing). Of course, the aesthetic and entertaining purposes cannot be excluded. However, women's talents to be writers or power to be fighters are seldom illustrated in the traditional court lady paintings because of "a woman without talents is therefore virtuous," a concept deeply rooted in Chinese feudalistic society.

Although CSCP and court lady paintings both use women as the major visual sign in the composition, their motives are quite different. The former is to create a visual stimulation to the (male) watchers or consumers and to achieve almost an immediate purpose of selling

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<sup>2</sup> In the short period after 1949, the advertisers substituted modest farmer and laborer women for modern urban fashion women in order to meet the preference of Chinese communists' ideology.

<sup>3</sup> In May 1884, *Tienshihchai Huabao* was at first delivered as an eight-paged attachment to the subscribers of *Shenbao* (a daily Chinese newspaper published in Shenghai), and later sold

products (Sun, 2003). Comparatively, the theme of the latter is often didactic and moral (Yi, 2005). Certainly, it can be argued that as long as the female image is designed by male artists and for male watchers, the lack of the female individuality and subjectivity is an obvious phenomenon of both the CSCP and court lady paintings, no matter they are modern commercials or ancient arts. However, this expected and even predictable interpretation is exactly the result of the “prone-to-exterior” feminist analysis of the female image regardless of its material, motive or features of composition.

Therefore, a strategic shift of methodology is a necessity in order to avoid the presupposed idea of the “objectified female body,” an ideological trap into which feminists used to fall, while studying the female image. This study will take CSCP as the target text and propose a pictorial semiotic analytical model to study the female image on the color print advertisement with linguistic and iconic messages in the early twentieth century.

### **Features of the Print Advertisement and CSCP**

This study shares the same opinion rendered by Sonesson that pictorial semiotic analysis should pay more attention to the features of the target text (Sonesson, 1993). The four viewpoints—“rules of construction,” “effects which they intend to produce,” “the channels through which pictures circulate,” “the nature of the configuration”—Sonesson proposes to differentiate the features of various pictorial texts pave the way for applying pictorial semiotics to the advertising studies (Sonesson, 1993). As mentioned above, this study concludes the previous pictorial semiotics of advertising as a structural analysis of the exterior and the interior elements of ads. From the perspective of structural semiotics, “the channels” and “the effects” of the pictures actually belong to the exterior level, “rules of construction” and “the configuration,” the interior, as suggested by this study.

Moreover, Sonesson’s terms like “the channels” and “the effects” can be understood as “media” and “goals” of communication of the ads, whereas the “rules of construction” and “the configuration” can be “types of code” and “textuality” of the composition of the ads.<sup>4</sup>

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as a magazine. *Tienshihchai Huabao* stopped publishing in 1898, accumulating up to four thousand paintings in fourteen years.

<sup>4</sup> Although this study agrees with Sonesson’s idea of differentiating the features of pictorial texts as the first and the most important step of pictorial semiotics, it still finds that Sonesson’s definition of these four viewpoints are more like an announcement of departing from the linguistic tradition of semiotics than a practical analytical model can be applied to the study of image. Therefore, this study directly appropriates the four terms often used by Mass Communication scholars in order to efficiently theorize them and establish a research model.

This study finds that these four essentials can depict the features of different kinds of advertisement and help to efficiently complete a structural semiotic observation of the ads.

In the case of CSCP, a color print advertisement with not only the pictures but also the linguistic messages, its “goals” are obviously to attract the audience and sell products, and its “media” belong to the category of print advertisement. As for its “types of code,” they include (1) color painting of female characters, products and background in a realistic style;<sup>5</sup> (2) stylish rectangular frames; (3) the company name and products in traditional Chinese or Western characters; (4) Western and lunar calendars on two sides or at the bottom of the poster. In short, iconic messages and linguistic messages are juxtaposed on the posters.

“Textuality” is a particular way of constituting a text as a text generates meanings. It is like “figures of speech” in rhetoric consisting of certain structure or rules. In advertising, the image of product can be placed together with or replaced by another object on the screen in order to create the effect of simile or metaphor (Forceville, 1996). Both the visual and the linguistic signs have their own textuality; nevertheless, there is also textuality lying between them, which is described as “anchorage” and “relay” by Barthes, i. e. the “intertextuality” of the iconic and the linguistic message. Then, what is the textuality of CSCP?

CSCP is consisted of the iconic and linguistic signs. Pictures are mostly vertical framed; names of the products and company, slogans and calendars are blended into the design of margin areas and frames, as showed in Figure 1 and Figure 2.<sup>6</sup>

Given that there are no frames around the picture, products and linguistic messages are placed at the marginal part of the poster as in Figure 3. Or even when the products appears in the picture, they still need the linguistic message on the frames to make clear the brand name and the copywriting as in Figure 4.

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<sup>5</sup> The distinctive and popular technique of CSCP painters, *tsapitantsaihuafa*, a fusion of fusain and watercolor on paper, was first used by Man-tuo Cheng in 1910's. This technique specializes in the description of facial features and the modulation of skin color.

<sup>6</sup> The target texts of this study are selected from the collections of Yeng-fong Chiang (from Taiwan) and Po-tang Chuo (from Hong Kong). Yi-wen Wang's research indicates there are around one thousand plates of CSCP left now since 1949 (Wang, 1997). Chiang's collection had reached up to six hundred pieces when she published *Lao yue fen guang gao pai*. In 2006, Chiang told the authors of this study the number of her collection was already more than one thousand. Comparatively, Chiang prefers modern and fashion women posters, while Chuo's collection shows the diversity in terms of subject matter and periodization.



Fig 1 Hatamen Cigarette (Chiang, 1994)



Fig 2 Toa Tobacco (Chiang, 1994)



Fig 3 Jintan (Chiang, 1994)



Fig 4 Insecticidal Incense (Chiang, 1994)

Visually, the picture is framed, and expressively, its signifying meanings are limited by the linguistic message (product and company names). That is to say, from the perspectives of visual effect and signifying process, the framed image and the limited signification

simultaneously happen on the plate of CSCP. This structure of framed image meeting the goal of selling products is exactly the typical “textuality” of CSCP—a picture (iconic message) is framed (limited) by words (linguistic message).

This type of textuality may remind us of Barthes’ notions about “anchorage” and “relay” in *Rhetoric of Image* (1977). However, the female image in CSCP seldom creates implication, connotation or symbolism after the anchorage and the relay functioned by the linguistic message. Opposite to Barthes’ case of Pazani, the connection between the iconic message (female image) and the linguistic message (frame) of CSCP is very weak. A picture (a woman) can always be replaced by another picture (another woman) without influencing the communication goal of publicity. In other words, Barthes’ analytic model is not efficient for the study of CSCP, because the clear fissure between picture and words cancels the possible function of anchorage and relay, and thus hinders the possible interpretation of the image. On the other hand, through the process of clarifying the features of the pictorial text, the most important structural semiotic elements of CSCP, “the (female) image” and “the (linguistic) frame,” reveal, and so does the fissure between them.

Based on the four essentials to distinguish the features of pictorial texts, this study finds CSCP, as a genre, has the feature in terms of textuality that image (meaning) is framed (limited) by words. Its presentation of the visual sign is structured as “the framed female image.” Therefore, “the frame” and “the female image” are the most important signs in CSCP.

Artists created the beautiful women paintings to be bought by merchandisers and then framed by products, firm name, and calendars. The technique of duplicate plate even multiplies the circulation of the poster. Indeed, this manufacturing process of CSCP, from visual arts to commercials, seems to tell the story of Chinese social transformation, from feudalism to capitalism, re-presented as in the structure of “pictorial sign/woman/arts framed by linguistic sign/product/capitalism.”

Is “the framed female image” the icon of the era signifying Shanghai in the period of 1910’s - 1930’s? Were women as well as Shanghai, the early modern city in China, actually restricted by some power as on the layout of the posters? Or does the specific textuality of CSCP, an ostensive fissure between “the frame” and “the female image,” actually imply an embedded instability of signification and interpretation? Then, the signifying process and the signification of “the frame” and “the female image” of CSCP within the context of 1910’s - 1930’s shall be further examined.

## Frame: Besides Women

Women may always be eye-catching and the focus of the posters, but the frame is the essential element to define CSCP, a picture as a poster. Without the frame, these beautiful women pictures are merely color portraits that may not necessarily be valued as art pieces, not to mention commercials. When the women pictures are framed, they immediately become gifts, practical home deco items, and one-year-long lasting commercial posters. But what are the contents of “the frame”? What cultural significance can be decoded from “the frame” as one of the essential signs of CSCP?

From the viewpoint of art design, most of CSCP are vertical framed and the pattern of the frame includes both Chinese and Western styles. There are often product names, company names, slogans, and calendars merged into the frame. The juxtaposition of Chinese and Western characters is actually the manifestation of a mixed culture that blends Chinese and Western, traditional and modern components into Shanghai society. “The frame,” in the narrow sense, means the composition of art design and a technique to confine the visual realm. In the broad sense, “the frame” signifies the multi-cultures hidden in its contents. Besides the visual signs, the linguistic signs especially indicate the dimension, Shanghai, the Paris of the East, in the early twentieth century. In other words, “the frame” symbolizes a limitation of signification and a confinement of the tempo-spatial and cultural context of the poster as in Figure 5.



Fig 5 British American Tobacco (Wu & et al, 1994)

This “British American Tobacco” (BAT) poster in 1916 can be a perfect example to see how Shanghai in the preliminarily modern China is illustrated and depicted by the “the frame.” Although the poster belongs to the earlier stage of CSCP, the frame style of this poster is rather typical and standard: calendars on the sides, products and company names on the top and the bottom. Some posters of the later years may not have calendars attached (e. g. “Indanthrene Cloth” or “The Palmolive Company” posters) (Chiang, 1994; Wu & et al, 1994). The style and arrangement of the frame remain almost the same (Chuo, 1993).

The style of the picture in the BAT poster is under the influence of Renaissance portraits. The human figure is against the background of perspective scenery. The picture is firmly framed mostly by linguistic message. Calendars are placed on two sides, one as “Western Calendar 1915-1916” on the left hand side, the other as “Republic of China 4<sup>th</sup> year, Lunar Calendar year of Yi Mao” on the right hand side. Both calendars are put in Chinese characters. The company name “British American Tobacco” in Chinese is on the top of the poster, and various kinds of cigarette pack, “The Three Castles,” “Atlas,” “Peacock,” “Pin Head,” and “Pirate” are painted at the bottom.

The opposed Western and lunar calendars though stands for the clues of Western culture in daily life, the use of Chinese characters and the Chinese style of calendar layout imply that Western calendar is actually subordinate to Chinese lunar calendar. Since the opening of Five-Treaty-Ports and English Concessions in 1843, Western culture had been introduced to Shanghai for quite a while by 1916. However, people still lived their lives according to the lunar calendar as in the agricultural society. It indicates that, at that time, during the period of World War One, the life in Shanghai was still economically agricultural and ideologically feudalistic.

The company name in Chinese helps people who do not know any foreign language to figure out what kind of product is promoted. Nevertheless, the co-existing Chinese and Western characters prove that Shanghai people are used to foreign objects and exotic cultures in their daily life. Since 1845, following the English, the Western powers began to establish concessions in Shanghai. “Countries within the country” became an idiosyncratic phenomenon of Shanghai. After 1890, mass production and capitalism resulted from the Industrial Revolution and the idea of stimulating consumption by means of advertising had already rooted in Shanghai. British American Tobacco introduced the first offset printing machine to China and initiated the circulation of numerous color printing pictures in 1911. Henceforth, Shanghai was framed by the capitalism from the West. In the mean time, Shanghai, though still agricultural, was surrounded by Western culture and Western commodity.



Thus, colonialism and capitalism as well as Chinese tradition and feudalism build “the frame” around “the female image” of CSCP. As moving onward to a modern society, Shanghai cultural and social context was so depicted, in spite of that “the female image” in 1916 was a foot-bound Chinese woman.

## **Women: Beyond the Frame**

“A woman without talents is therefore virtuous.” Traditionally in Chinese feudalistic society, attending husband and raising children are women’s major responsibilities. Women are not allowed to show up in public. In 1903, the first law concerning women education, “Kindergarten and Family Education Law” (*monyangyuan yu chiatingchiaoyu changcheng*), was announced by the Ch’ing government. It stated that women should stay home learning *Filial Obedience Book for Women* (nyu shiaoching), *Four Books for Women* (nyu seshu), and *Biography of Virtuous Women* (lieh nyu chuang) or some necessary knowledge about home economy. Women’s going to school was officially banned because it conflicts to the traditional idea of “telling the difference between men and women [by literacy]” in China. Furthermore, it would encourage a woman to choose her own husband regardless of parents’ opinions. Till 1907, “Women Elementary School Law” emphasized that all the courses should not violate the convention of Chinese virtues and courtesy. The educational goal was to turn women students to be “quiet, tender, diligent” future wives and to keep them away from wild and vulgar customs. Women students could not go to the same school with men and had no right for the higher education. Shanghai might be one of the earliest modernized and westernized cities in China. The Episcopal Church established Bridgman Memorial School for Girls in Shanghai, 1850. However, the first woman student was not accepted by Private Tatung College until 1916 (Chronology of Shanghai Women Editorial Council, 2000).

Then, in this conservative and feudalistic social context, who is the displayed foot-bound woman painted in the BAT poster? Who is this “Chinese beauty” chosen by the Western advertiser to replace Western women, knights, landscape, still life and Biblical stories for the reason of localization? She is definitely not an ordinary daughter or housewife whose appearance in public is forbidden. Her costume, on the other hand, implies she is not a westernized woman. In the tempo-spatial context, it is very possible she is a famous prostitute who is used to show herself in public, and the public reckons her exhibition common and unoffended.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> A research on the costume and fashion of late Ch’ing Dynasty indicates that the costumes of women in CSCP and of the famous prostitutes are quite alike (Juan, 2002).

From some photographs of Shanghai in the same period, the study finds a picture of Ping-shiang Li, a famous poet prostitute, whose facial features, costume, and pose are similar to the woman in the BAT poster.



Fig 6 Ping-shian Li (Shuch, 1996)

The style of displaying the female image in two pictures is identical. Both the photographer and the painter arrange the same items for the portraits, such as flowers in hand, bonsais and splendor clothing. The same aesthetic choice confirms that the female image adopted by the Western advertiser is based on the value of local and popular culture. Even though the woman in BAT poster may not be Li, it is obvious this popular female figure is not a fine daughter or a virtuous housewife praised officially by the mainstream China. Subversively, this popular female image represents the culture and the value system identified by the Shanghai people.

In 1898, *Tienshihchai Huabao* printed a “Skirts Party” (*ch’unch’aitahui*) covering Shanghai mayor’s wife invited both Chinese and foreign upper ladies for the establishment of a Shanghai women school. Attendees include wives of foreign ambassadors and lawyers, sisters of the church, wives of Chinese officers, and a courtesan of a pharmaceutical businessman (Yieh, 1998). In 1903, an American missionary, Gilbert Reid restarted the International Institute of China in Shanghai. Not only the socialites but also some famous prostitutes attended at the inauguration. “Prostitutes appear as socialites and celebrities in public is unique in Shanghai” (Yieh, 1998: 144). Actually, in late Ch’ing Dynasty, high-class

prostitutes are “the first group of working girls in Chinese society. They are few women who can show up in public and therefore are responsible for the public relations” (Hsu, 1998: 120). Tabloids in Shanghai often treated these prostitutes as celebrities and gossiped the fashion of their costumes and writings. Shiang-ping Li, the poet prostitute, used to be described as a modern Ch’ing-chao Li (a famous woman poet in Soong Dynasty) and praised as a wonderful woman with writing talent (Hershatter, 1997). That is to say, these educated, economically independent, and out-going women had already found their position in the popular culture, and their popularity and charm is exactly the reason why the Western advertisers would choose them as models in CSCP. The female image in CSCP is the evidence of a powerful female subjectivity transgressing the conservative and moral frames built by the patriarchy and feudalistic tradition. During 1910’s, women in Shanghai, a setting of the mixed Chinese and Western cultures, a transitional state between feudalism and capitalism, gradually seized the power and became aggressive. The traditional belief, “women without talents are therefore virtuous,” was finally overturned in the popular culture, because of the opportunity offered by the capitalism from the West.

Hence, the female image of BAT in 1916 is no longer merely a foot-bound, feudalism-and-capitalism-framed, and conservative Chinese woman. This female image signifies the subjectivity that possesses the subversive power and ready to grow beyond the frame. Soon, after the May Fourth Movement in 1919, women were allowed to enter the university (Wu, 1998).

Besides prostitutes, there were also some cross-dressing Peking Opera actors (e. g. Lan-fang Mei) played as models for CSCP in 1910’s. However, the advertisers adopted cross-dressing models are mostly Chinese companies. It implies that Chinese businessmen’s idea about the female image was comparatively old-fashioned. They still followed the sexist tradition of cross-dressing actors in drama. Still, in the eyes of the scholar-officials (*shihtafu*) of Chinese feudalistic tradition, cross-dressing actors as well as prostitutes are to serve and satisfy men’s desire. Chinese and Western advertisers’ using cross-dressing actors and prostitutes as models of CSCP, on the other hand, indicates that most of the target consumers were still male during the period in China.

The rapid growth of economy and market made people think different. The female image of CSCP had been through a great change because of people’s different taste and value judgment since 1920’s. The costumes in “Tai Woo Dispensary” poster in 1924 and “Lin Wen

Yen Perfume” poster in 1927 altered to be high heel shoes, reformed cheongsam blouse, pleated skirt, and curly hair as in Figure 7 and Figure 8.<sup>8</sup>



Fig 7 Tai Woo Dispensary (Wu & et al, 1994)



Fig 8 Lin Wen Yen Perfume (Wu & et al,1994)

According to these two posters, the hand fan should be a trendy ornament for ladies at that time. Furthermore, in the “Lin Wen Yen Perfume” poster, there are more than landscape or flowers around the woman in the picture. The Chinese fashionable woman (in a reformed cheongsam and high heel shoes) leaning against a bookshelf becomes the visual center of the commercial advertisement for the target female consumers. The juxtaposition of a woman and books ought to be a popular image especially for those women who are capable of purchasing the product. The poster implies that buying the perfume means to identify with the intellectual and fashionable kind of woman as painted in the picture. Buying the product and then becoming the woman in the poster is the consumer’s psychology responding to the female image.

After May Fourth Movement, Shanghai society experienced even more radical changes in 1920’s. Foot binding, prostitution, and concubinage were all considered as outdated feudalistic customs by the intellectuals. The image of high-class prostitutes gradually disappeared from CSCP, retreated from the popular culture, and eventually faded away

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<sup>8</sup> The first department store in Shanghai opened in 1917 and the first beauty parlor specialized in perming started in 1922 (Wu, 1998).

against the background of the growing numbers of college women and the flourishing film and entertainment business (Hershatter, 1997). Meanwhile, Li, the poet prostitute, retired and started an art studio (Shieh, 1996). Movie stars acted as college women holding books (for example, the series of “Indanthrene Cloth”), as sporty women, nature-loving energetic women, or modern housewives enjoying the Western style of life were becoming the new female image on CSCP in 1930’s.



Fig 9 Stomach-ache Pills (Wu & et al,1994)



Fig 10 Great Eastern Dispensary (Chiang, 1994)

In Figure 9, the woman of the “Stomach-ache Pills” poster in 1931 was never again shy and reserved. Although the model is still a Chinese woman, her costume and jewelry are obviously westernized. Her gesture and facial expression reveal self-confidence. The background of the picture is a living room in western style. The fireplace, chandelier, sofas, and the portrait of the host all together create a luxury, spectacular and vogueish atmosphere. Besides the ideal modern family life, CSCP of the 1930’s also depicted women in the magnificent dancing ballrooms, such as “Wusi Maolun Silk and Satin Shop” and “Insecticidal Incense” posters (Chiang, 1994). Dazzling, slim fit cutting, half back and side slit cheongsams and the gorgeous dancing hall illuminated the luxury and hedonic Shanghai at that time.

In Figure 10, the picture of a young lady in a boat is one of the famous sports series of CSCP during its meridian period. Swimming, tennis, horse riding, golf, biking or even flying planes, women joined all kinds of sports and outdoor activities. The female image of CSCP

in 1930's was not thin-narrow-shouldered and no longer languid and fragile. Women were healthy, strong and sporty in the posters. Even the male artist of "Great Eastern Dispensary" poster might draw the half-covered breasts on purpose and this demonstration of female body might not be acceptable for every consumer. It cannot be denied that the consumers' attitude toward female body had been changed dramatically within a decade.

Besides reflecting the daily life and popular culture, the female image of CSCP offers an opportunity to understand the value system and the aesthetic judgment of the era (Chen, 2004). Especially when more and more women become capable of purchasing products, the advertisers dare not use those images may offend female consumers. Westernized objects imply the modernization; splendid decorations suggest luxury life style; strong and healthy body signifies self-confidence and independence. These elements of CSCP in 1930's enriched the imagination of a better future life for the audience. Neither subordinate to men nor the passive and weak second sex were women in the meantime. Confident, aggressive and active Shanghai women were popular and admired as a visiting writer from Taiwan recounted:

[Shanghai women are] much more active than Taiwan women. They deliver speeches in public and participate in patriotic activities and women's rights movements. They are talented both in writing and fighting. They are women warriors (Hsu, 1998: 214-215).

Shanghai is a women's world. They are like Persephone bringing the real spring to Shanghai. On the streets or around the corners, lonely and dull it would be if without women (Hsu, 1998: 243-244).

## **Conclusion**

The development of the female image of Classic Shanghai Calendar Posters illustrates that women's obtaining economic independence seems synchronal to the awakening of female subjectivity. Previous feminist studies often treat the female image of Classic Shanghai Calendar Posters as an evidence of commodified and objectified female body in commercials (Shen, 1999 & 2006). However, after the pictorial semiotic analysis conducted by the present study, it is revealed that the female image in the posters is not merely an object of consumption and desire. The four essentials of pictorial semiotic analysis of the print advertisements—"media," "goals," "types of code," and "textuality"—as proposed by the study, help to clarify the features of the target text and to elaborate the signifying process of both the linguistic and pictorial signs, "the frame" and "the female image." The evolution of

the posters enounces a new discourse about the transformation of modern China (Li, 2000). Paradoxically, because of the invading capitalism and the free market economy, Chinese women could gain the chance to work and to be independent. During the period of 1910's - 1930's, Shanghai women gradually obtained the supreme women's rights ever in Chinese history. They were financially, spiritually and physically liberated as shown in the posters. "The female image" signifies beyond "the frame." The female image of Classic Shanghai Calendar Posters subverts the patriarchy embedded in Chinese feudalistic tradition and Western capitalism, and finally, it reserves a precious moment of revisiting Chinese women history from the perspective of pictorial semiotics.

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