

Cultural Appropriation, Design, and Gender in Calendar Posters in China (1912-1949)

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This three image-essay looks at how depictions of modern woman were central in advertising designs and imported products in the context of gender, identity, and design in early twentieth-century China. The adaptation of Euro-American concepts, linked to modernisation in local contexts resulted in both the production of hybrid poster designs to promote merchandise, they embody gender fluid design. This essay uses three specific images to situate objects, image and context, before highlighting specific elements contained within each as examples of mid-century gender narratives.

#design

#modern woman

#poster

#advertisement

#consumerism







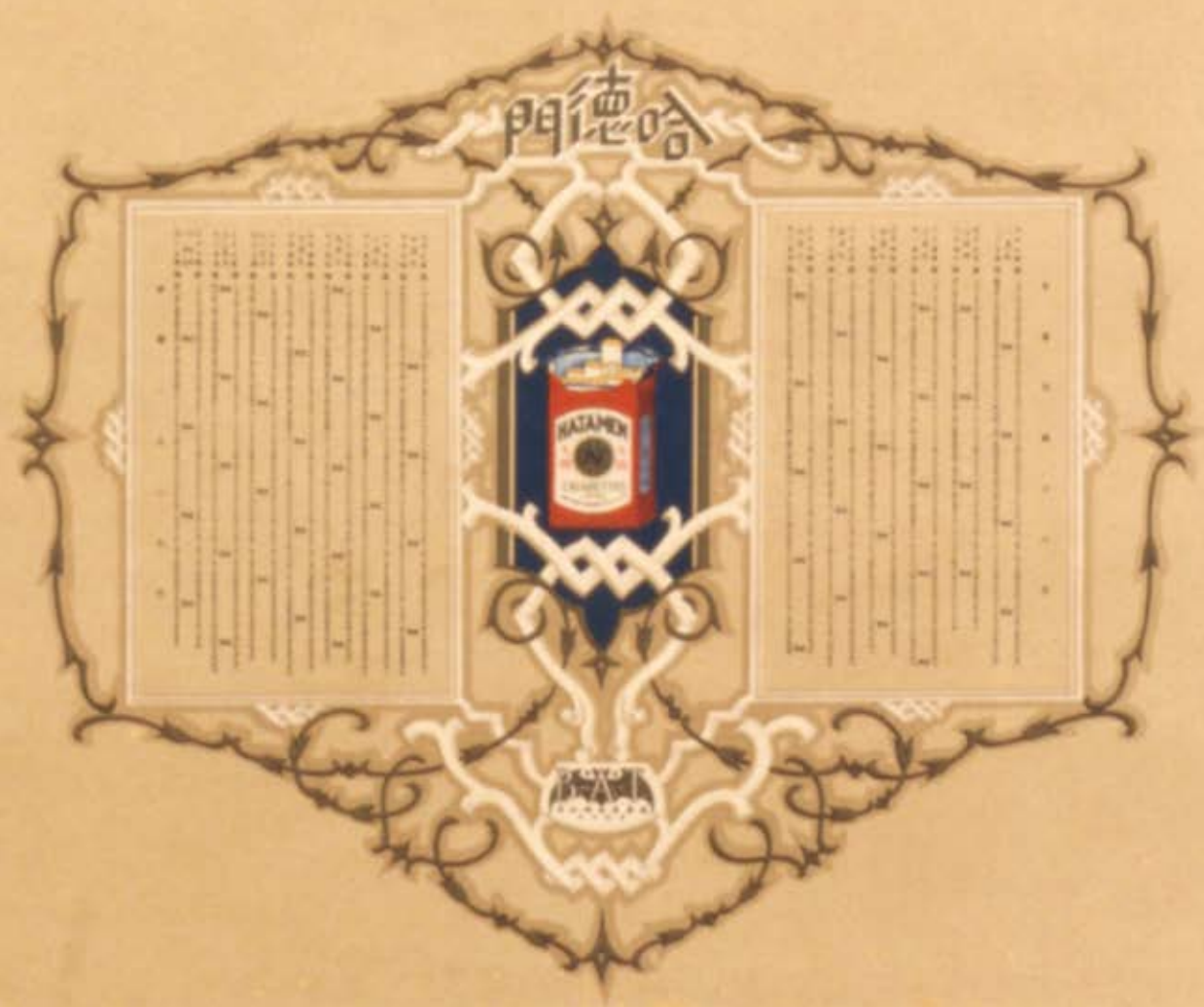


Figure 1 (page 69): Hang Zhiying/Zhiying Studio – Calendar Poster for Fengtian Sino-Russian Tobacco, 1920-30s. Source: Fukuoka Asian Art Museum

Figure 2 (pages 70-71): Hang Zhiying/Zhiying Studio – Calendar Poster for Fengtian Sino-Russian Tobacco, 1920-30s. Source: Fukuoka Asian Art Museum.

Figure 3 (this and opposite page): Hu Boxiang – Calendar Poster for British American Tobacco Co., 1929. Source: Fukuoka Asian Art Museum

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In early twentieth-century China, images of women became instrumental in familiarizing foreign products to local consumers and in the formation of the modern Chinese lifestyle. The pictures illustrated here are advertising posters (also known as calendar posters because of their initial inclusion in calendars) employing depictions of attractive and fashionable women to introduce novel products to consumers. Female representation became entwined in the process of modernisation in which foreign products were acquainted through local designs. In Hang Zhiying's "Calendar Poster for Fengtian Sino-Russian Tobacco" (1920-30s) (fig. 1), a young woman is featured in a Chinese-style dress with a luxurious fur-collar coat and white gloves. Her hybrid style shows that her thoroughly modern fashion combines the indigenous and the foreign. Many poster designs of the period bear traditional elements such as a traditionally designed garden or interior settings to avoid appearing too exotic. The model poses in a Chinese garden, featuring slender bamboo and traditional architecture with advertised cigarette packages placed underneath the poetic image. Adaptation of Euro-American concepts of modernism in local contexts resulted in hybrid poster designs and the promoted merchandise became broadly accepted.

At the same time, new and Western designs were part of the composition, impressing consumers with a modern lifestyle that fulfilled a fantasy of progress. In Hang Zhiying's "Calendar Poster for Fengtian Sino-Russian Tobacco" (1920-30s) (fig. 2), a woman in a study is portrayed with a cigarette package on the desk. She is in the act of smoking, which was deemed undesirable because loose women and prostitutes were known to be avid smokers. By placing the model in a Western-style study, it bettered the negative perception of women smoking, eased the mind of female smokers and associated smoking with intelligential activities. Her awkward posture points to the practice of employing male models

to dress up as women because no decent ladies would take on a modelling job that was deemed dubious. The stiffness in rendering (she appears to have two left feet) indicates the painter's lack of training in regard to rendering human figures. A framed landscape on the right and a photograph of an indistinct subject on the desk emphasise the role of representation in daily life.

The most fascinating advertising poster, however, is Hu Boxiang's "Calendar Poster for British American Tobacco Co." (1929) (fig. 3) that positions the delicate woman arranging flowers in the centre of the composition, which illustrates "leisure time", stated in the two characters in the middle of the stylised Chinese cloud-patterned design on top with the typical characters for "Happy New Year". The cigarette package (accompanied by a calendar on each side) is almost a second-thought placed near the bottom of the poster. The beauty of the woman and the flowers are sufficient to promote the product and remind us of Wei Yong's (1643-1654) discussion in *Yuerong Bian (Delight in Adornment)*, emphasising that a beautiful woman's house without flowers (or gardens) can never be completed:

A beauty is a flower's "true self" (zhenshen) and a flower captures a beauty's momentary image. They understand each other's language, seek each other's laughter, and care for each other with mutual affection. Flowers not only please a beauty's eyes, but also enhance her appearance. (Hung 1997, 324)

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Bio

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