

Advertising to the sleeping giant — on its own terms

Advertising, like other business sectors, has welcomed China's changed attitude to the West with open arms and the expectation of profitable cooperation. But a sober look at advertising in China today indicates that the Western adman will not be able simply to transpose his brand advertising and consumerism on a country so vastly different in economic, cultural and philosophical terms.

Text and photographs by Sam Passow

SINCE ascending to Spower four years ago, China's vice-premier Deng Xiaoping has managed to awaken the "sleeping giant", and reading the newspapers these days, it's very easy to get the impression that business in China has been accelerating so fast that it is only natural that Western countries and companies are licking their lips at what they perceive as the vast untapped market of nearly a billion consumers.

The Chinese and their publicists are fond of painting word pictures in poetic, if not unrealistic language such as "the total atmosphere is now one of rejoicing, hope and determination to build a better and more prosperous country".

Yet despite the constant stream of official and unofficial visitors trampling the now thread-bare red carpet at Beijing Airport, few deals have actually been agreed.

While there is little doubt that the Chinese are planning to develop their economy, they will do so on their own terms. And advertising, as we know it is not really one of them.

There are three essential differences between our two cultures which become blatantly apparent the moment one actually visits China:

1) The Chinese concept of time is very different from ours. They insist on doing everything in their own time. So even a simple decision can take as long as two years.

2) Western enthusiasm and efficiency does not impress them, and the concept of productivity is almost non-existent.

3) The four modernisations (industry, agriculture,

education and science, defence) make little allowance for consumerism.

THIS is readily apparent as one walks through and looks at the outdoor advertisements in the Guangzhou (Canton) Memorial Park for the Martyrs — their version of The Domain.

Designed by E-Hai Arts Publishing House, one of Guangzhou's leading ad agencies, the posters depict mining extractor fans, audio-visual projectors for schools, and tyres (yet there are almost no private cars in China).

As school children and old people stroll through the lush



The Bank at Guangzhou airport. In March, China began following American Express, Visa and Mastercharge credit cards. At the moment, one can only use them either at the airport to draw foreign currency or at the Friendship shops, which are also state controlled. It is interesting to note, that in travelling around the world, this is the only place outside an official American Express office that one is allowed to draw cash on a personal cheque using the card as a guarantee. But China needs as much foreign currency as it can get, and it seems they will do almost anything to help the foreigner spend it.

gardens of the park they come across signs for pills and pots and pans, but they are worded in an indisputable oriental manner:

"The Guangzhou 1st Aluminium products factory. They guarantee quality, welcomes orders, delivers in due time. The factory makes 52 centimetre plates, 18-26 centimetre pots and pans and other different size utensils made by aluminium." There then follows the address and phone number of the factory.

"Scarlet pills for coughing. Very good for this kind of disease. It is made by the Guangzhou No 9 Chinese Medicine factory." Followed by address and phone number of the factory.

Hardly the scintillating copy that comes out of the crass commercial combines of JWT or the George Patterson agency.

Talking to Chinese businessmen, who invariably are government buyers or organisers of state run factories, one realises that the little advertising that one sees in the country is purely propaganda to make the masses aware of the changes taking place in the country, and a chance to recognise some of the products and services that are being used to achieve the four modernisations.

China may be a nation of nearly a billion people, but few are either free to choose what they want and even fewer have the means to buy it.

This is why the Western

stimulus and response premise of advertising is so alien to the Chinese.

As one walks through the streets of any Chinese city (and much of what one sees looks like it has sprung right out of a Pearl Buck novel or the Hollywood set of the 1940s Clark Gable classic "China Seas"), it slowly begins to dawn on you that this country has, in fact, been almost totally isolated from the Western world for the 25 years of Mao's regime.

In those same 25 years, Western society transformed from the piston-driven propeller plane to the moon lander. It exchanged the Golden Age of Radio for a push-button video environment.

Yet when the Chinese talk about technology, they are once again using their own peculiar dictionary. They are not talking about lasers and microchips, they are talking about petrol-driven generators and tractors. The West's hardware of the '50s.

This isn't to say that sometime in the future, much of this might not change.

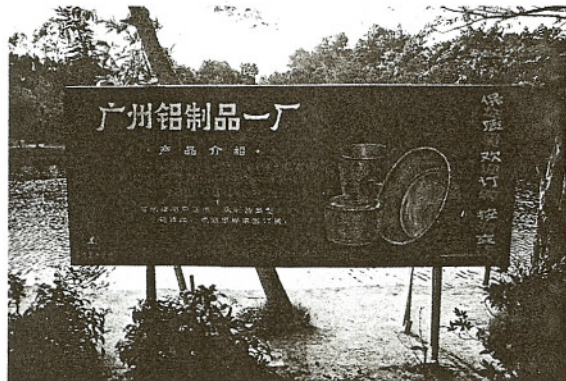
But I'm sure that those who visit China will walk away with a much more sober and realistic assessment of any long-term business associations and advertising potential than those who rely on the foreign pages of their local papers for their market research.

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Sam Passow is an American financial journalist who visited China last year.



Ad for tyres which says: "Turn your old tyres into new ones, the factory has a long history of qualified skill and good service. They work on all kinds of tyres, with cheap prices, quick delivery and good quality". At the bottom, name of factory, the Ghangzhou 7th Tyre Factory, address and phone number of firm.



Ad for pots and pans which says "The Ghangzhou 1st Aluminium products factory. They guarantee quality, welcomes orders, delivers in due time. The factory makes 52 centimetre plates, 18-26 centimetre pots and pans and other different size utensils made by aluminium." Address of firm and phone number.