

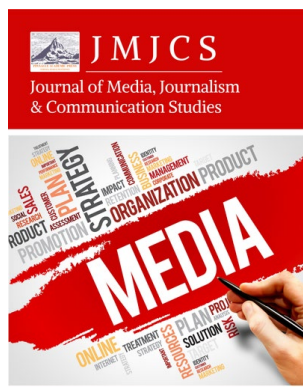
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# Decoding the Visual Language of Brand Advertising in Republican China – A Case Study of the Advertisements on Nanjing Museum's Republican Street

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Received: 30 April 2025

Revised: 06 May 2025

Accepted: 31 May 2025

Published: 06 June 2025



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**Abstract:** Serving as vital tools of cultural communication, advertisements reflect and embody the social ethos and prevailing values of the periods in which they are created. This paper focuses specifically on the advertisements showcased at Nanjing Museum's Republican Street, using them as a case study to explore the distinctive characteristics of brand advertising during the Republic of China era. By conducting an in-depth analysis of key visual elements — including textual content, imagery, and symbolic motifs — it identifies and examines fundamental features such as font styles, color schemes, graphic components, and overarching thematic messages. Furthermore, the study investigates the complex interplay between these advertising characteristics and the broader social environment of the time, considering factors such as economic conditions, cultural movements, and shifts in lifestyle. Through this approach, the research offers a unique and insightful lens for understanding the social and cultural traits that defined the Republic of China period.

**Keywords:** brand advertising; visual language; Nanjing Museum; Republican Street; social environment

## 1. Introduction

The Republic of China period was characterized by profound and far-reaching transformations that fundamentally reshaped the nation's political structures, economic systems, and cultural landscapes. Amidst this dynamic historical backdrop, brand advertising emerged as an essential and influential component of the evolving commercial culture. Advertising during this era went beyond the mere function of promoting products; it developed into a distinctive symbolic system that not only displayed goods but also captured and reflected the intricate complexities and subtle nuances of the contemporary social milieu [1]. A striking illustration of this can be found in the Republican Street exhibit at the Nanjing Museum, where painstakingly restored authentic scenes showcase a diverse and rich collection of representative advertisements from the Republican era (Figure 1). This research concentrates on dissecting the visual elements and embedded messages within these advertisements, investigating their interaction with the surrounding social environment and the ways in which they reveal prevailing societal conditions and attitudes. Through this detailed analysis, the study aims to deepen our understanding of the social and cultural characteristics that defined the Republic of China period, offering valuable insights into how commercial visuals functioned as mirrors of broader societal transformations.



**Figure 1.** The "Republic of China Street" Exhibition at the Nanjing Museum.

## **2. Overview of Advertisements on Nanjing Museum's Republican Street**

Nanjing Museum's Republican Street provides an authentic and immersive recreation of the streetscape from the Republican era, with meticulous care devoted to faithfully restoring the architectural styles, shop layouts, and overall urban environment that were characteristic of that historical period. This vivid and detailed reconstruction showcases a diverse and extensive array of shops and businesses, representing a broad spectrum of industries and well-known brands. It spans from traditional handicraft stores, which embody the rich artisanal heritage and craftsmanship of the time, to modern department stores that stand as symbols of the emergence, expansion, and modernization of commercial practices. Beyond retail shops, the street also encompasses a variety of dining establishments, entertainment venues, as well as cultural and educational institutions, collectively providing a comprehensive and nuanced snapshot of the multifaceted commercial and social life that flourished during this dynamic era. The advertisements displayed throughout this carefully curated environment are crafted from a wide range of materials — including wood, paper, and metal — and created using diverse artistic techniques such as hand-drawing and various printing methods. This rich diversity in media and production approaches vividly illustrates the hybrid media ecology that was typical of the Republican period [2]. Strategically positioned at shop entrances, affixed to walls, and scattered throughout bustling commercial districts, these advertisements effectively immerse visitors in the lively, vibrant, and dynamic atmosphere of commerce and everyday urban life during the Republic of China era.

## **3. Characteristics of Brand Advertising Visual Language in the Republic of China Period**

### *3.1. Sino-Western Fusion in Font Styles*

Advertisements from the Republic of China period exhibited a captivating synthesis of traditional Chinese calligraphic styles — such as the elegant Songti and the more flowing Kaiti — blended seamlessly with Western-inspired geometric typefaces. This artistic fusion was emblematic of the cultural hybridity and bold aesthetic experimentation that defined the era's visual culture. A particularly striking example can be seen in the advertisements for "Yong'an Tang", where the designers thoughtfully maintained the fundamental structural integrity and harmonious balance intrinsic to Chinese characters, while simultaneously incorporating fluid, curved lines and simplified stroke patterns that introduced a fresh sense of modernity. This innovative design approach not only enhanced the

overall visual appeal of the advertisements but also improved legibility, effectively bridging the gap between traditional calligraphic artistry and emerging graphic design trends. Notably, the stylistic strategies pioneered in these Republican-era advertisements exerted a lasting influence, later informing and inspiring the design language of contemporary product packaging. This enduring legacy highlights how the visual culture of the Republic of China period continues to shape and enrich modern commercial art practices [3].

### *3.2. Striking Color Combinations*

Color usage in Republican-era advertisements was carefully and strategically employed to capture consumer attention and convey specific symbolic meanings. Among the most popular color pairings were red and yellow, hues deeply rooted in Chinese cultural symbolism as representations of prosperity, happiness, and good fortune. These vibrant colors were especially prevalent in advertisements for food products and clothing brands, where they aimed to evoke feelings of warmth and celebration, thereby appealing directly to consumers' desires for abundance and well-being. On the other hand, combinations such as blue and white were commonly used by more formal sectors like banks and medical institutions. These cooler tones conveyed a sense of calmness, trustworthiness, and professionalism, qualities essential for institutions handling sensitive financial and health matters. A notable example is the Bank of China, whose advertisements frequently adopted the blue-and-white color scheme to project a stable and reliable image. This visual strategy played a significant role in bolstering consumer confidence in the bank's financial services, reinforcing its reputation as a trustworthy institution during a time of social and economic flux.

### *3.3. Diverse Graphic Elements*

Advertisements during the Republic of China period displayed a remarkably diverse and richly layered assortment of graphic elements, skillfully blending both traditional Chinese motifs and Western artistic influences. Traditional auspicious patterns, such as dragons and phoenixes, were prominently featured, embodying deeply ingrained aesthetic values and cultural aspirations cherished by the populace. These motifs not only carried symbolic meanings of power, prosperity, and harmony but also served as a visual connection to longstanding Chinese cultural heritage. Concurrently, Western-style graphic motifs — including geometric shapes, floral designs, and human figures — gained increasing prominence within advertisement designs. Geometric shapes were often employed to highlight themes of modernity, structure, precision, and order, making them especially favored in advertisements promoting industrial products and fashionable brands seeking to convey a contemporary, forward-looking image. Floral patterns symbolized natural beauty, grace, and elegance, frequently associated with products in the cosmetics and food industries, thereby appealing to consumers' desires for refinement and quality. Human figures, typically depicting well-known social celebrities or idealized representations of consumers, were strategically integrated to leverage their social influence and charisma, effectively capturing attention and fostering emotional engagement with potential buyers. This eclectic combination of graphic styles not only enriched the overall visual appeal and artistic sophistication of advertisements but also vividly reflected the cultural hybridity and dynamic fusion of East and West that characterized the era's complex social and cultural landscape.

### *3.4. Life-Related Thematic Content*

Advertisement themes during the Republic of China period predominantly focused on addressing people's everyday life needs as well as capturing the social hotspots and trends of the time. These advertisements spanned a broad spectrum of products, including essential daily necessities such as food, clothing, and household items, often emphasizing qualities like product reliability, superior craftsmanship, and practical usefulness. Beyond

simply promoting products, many ads actively introduced and advocated emerging consumption concepts that reflected the evolving tastes and values of society, such as the importance of healthy living and the growing appeal of fashion trends. Medical advertisements, for example, placed strong emphasis on health and physical fitness, aligning closely with the national ethos of "strengthening the nation" that was widely promoted during this era. Travel advertisements highlighted popular scenic spots and tourist destinations, signaling not only significant improvements in living standards but also a rising demand for spiritual enrichment and leisure activities. Simultaneously, cultural and educational advertisements stressed the value of knowledge acquisition and lifelong learning, catering to a societal emphasis on education and the collective aspiration for modernization and progress. Together, these thematic focuses reveal a society in transition, with advertising both reflecting and shaping the shifting priorities and lifestyles of the Republic of China period.

#### **4. Relationship between Advertising Visual Language and the Social Environment of the Republic of China Period**

##### *4.1. Reflection of Economic Development Levels*

The quality, scale, and volume of advertisements during the Republican era clearly mirrored the levels of regional and industrial economic development. In thriving commercial districts situated within economically advanced cities such as Shanghai and Nanjing, advertisements were notable for their superior craftsmanship, sophisticated design, and visually impactful presentation, effectively embodying the vibrant economic vitality and commercial dynamism of these urban hubs. In stark contrast, advertisements in less developed regions tended to be simpler in design and fewer in number, reflecting the comparatively limited economic activity and commercial resources available there. From an industrial standpoint, rapidly growing sectors like manufacturing and finance demonstrated a strong commitment to advertising, investing heavily in promotional campaigns that utilized modern formats and cutting-edge techniques to expand their market presence and build brand recognition. Conversely, more traditional industries, including handicrafts and agriculture, faced increasing pressures from market competition and accordingly began to integrate contemporary advertising ideas and methods into their marketing strategies. This gradual adaptation enabled them to remain competitive within an evolving commercial environment shaped by modernization and changing consumer expectations.

##### *4.2. Convergence of Cultural Trends*

The Republic of China period was characterized by intense cultural collisions and integrations, particularly between deeply rooted traditional Chinese elements and the rising influence of Western ideas and aesthetics. This dynamic interplay is vividly reflected in the visual language adopted by advertisements during that era. Many advertisements showcased a creative and skillful fusion of classical Chinese poetry alongside English trademarks, effectively blending China's profound literary heritage with the growing presence and impact of Western commercial culture [4]. Beyond the textual integration, the graphic patterns found in these advertisements frequently combined Western painting techniques — such as the use of perspective, shading, and realism — with traditional Chinese artistic styles known for their delicate brushwork, symbolic motifs, and emphasis on balance and harmony. This harmonious visual synthesis not only appealed to the diverse tastes and aesthetic preferences of the contemporary audience but also stood as a powerful symbol of the cultural hybridity and inclusiveness that defined the Republic of China period. The advertisements produced during this time thus represented a distinctive and nuanced fusion, encapsulating the complexities of a society navigating the delicate balance between honoring its longstanding traditions and embracing the rapid modernization and globalization that were reshaping its cultural landscape [5,6].



#### *4.3. Evolution and Guidance of Consumption Concepts*

Consumption concepts underwent significant and far-reaching changes during the Republic of China period, with advertisements serving a dual purpose: they both reflected the prevailing consumer attitudes of the time and actively influenced the emergence of new consumption trends. Taking cosmetic advertisements as a representative example, there was a noticeable evolution from an initial focus on practical and functional claims — such as skin care benefits and product efficacy — to a more sophisticated emphasis on emotional appeals centered around ideals of beauty, confidence, and personal expression [1]. In the earlier stages, advertisements predominantly highlighted aspects such as product practicality, affordability, and cost-effectiveness, which directly catered to the immediate needs and financial considerations of consumers. However, as the social environment progressed and consumer sophistication increased, advertisements gradually shifted their focus toward promoting superior product quality, cultivating distinctive brand images, and emphasizing the emotional and symbolic value attached to consumption. This transition aligned closely with the public's growing pursuit of fashion, leisure, and enhanced lifestyle experiences. A particularly vivid illustration of this shift can be found in cosmetics advertising, where the narrative moved away from simply promoting the functional benefits of skin care products toward featuring images of beautiful, confident women who embodied modern ideals of self-assurance and style. This change not only introduced and reinforced new consumption concepts but also played a pivotal role in driving the upgrading of the market and elevating consumer expectations in the Republic of China era [7].

#### *4.4. Reflection of Social Lifestyle*

Advertisements during the Republic of China period functioned as vivid and dynamic mirrors reflecting the contemporary social lifestyles and the emergence of new trends. For example, car advertisements prominently highlighted the growing prevalence and adoption of modern transportation methods, signaling profound changes in daily routines, mobility patterns, and the overall pace of life. At the same time, advertisements promoting entertainment venues such as cinemas, ballrooms, and theaters illustrated the rich diversity of leisure cultures that were developing, catering to evolving social needs and preferences. These ads offer a revealing glimpse into the urban spiritual life of the era and demonstrate how social interactions and recreational activities were transforming. Beyond these specific examples, the depiction of everyday life scenes within advertisements also captured subtle yet important shifts in interpersonal relationships, social behaviors, and community engagements, reflecting the vibrancy and complexity of social life during that time. Collectively, these visual narratives serve as invaluable cultural documents, providing deep insights into the social fabric, lifestyle changes, and cultural dynamics that shaped the Republic of China period, thereby greatly enriching our historical understanding of its social life.

### **5. Conclusion**

The advertisements displayed along Nanjing Museum's Republican Street stand as vivid and insightful microcosms of brand advertising during the Republic of China era. Their visual language features — including distinctive font styles, carefully chosen color schemes, intricate graphic motifs, and thoughtfully crafted thematic content — were intricately shaped not only by underlying commercial objectives but also by a broad spectrum of social factors prevalent at the time. These advertisements functioned as both reflections of and active participants in the social environment, engaging with multifaceted aspects such as regional economic development, ongoing cultural evolution, shifting consumption behaviors, and transformations in everyday lifestyles. Through the diverse and richly layered visual elements they employed, these advertisements reveal how brand ad-

vertising served as a dynamic and influential cultural force — facilitating the dissemination and blending of various cultural influences, shaping public perception and aesthetic preferences, and offering invaluable insights into the complex social and cultural fabric of the Republic of China period. Consequently, this research holds substantial theoretical and practical significance, contributing to a more profound understanding of the historical evolution of advertising, uncovering rich cultural resources embedded within commercial art, and providing meaningful guidance for contemporary advertising practices as well as strategies in cultural communication.

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