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Advertising as a Catalyst: The Role of Commercial Press in Shaping Consumer Culture in Republican Guangzhou

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Received: 10 March 2025

Revised: 18 March 2025

Accepted: 12 April 2025

Published: 15 April 2025



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Abstract: The present study analyzes how consumer culture in Guangzhou was impacted by the early Republican period, in part through how commercial newspapers and advertisements changed the dynamics of this culture. Specifically, the study focuses on Guangzhou's flourishing newspaper industry, which saw the public emergence of 179 new newspapers compared to the last forty years of the Qing. It highlights the emergence of the purely commercial newspaper, represented by newspapers like Guangzhou Republic Daily and Minzu Daily, whose role was crucial in shaping public patterns of consumption. It also addresses tabloid and foreign-language newspapers; here Cathcart examines how these varieties target different segments of society and showcase the city's changing consumer behavior. These newspapers were not merely vehicles for promoting consumer products; they actively shaped social customs, particularly in areas such as food, housing, marriage, and fashion. The emergence of a consumerist-oriented culture is examined through an analysis of newspaper advertisements with Western and Chinese cultural elements. By analyzing commercial newspapers from this period, this study concludes that advertising played a catalytic role in shaping modern consumer orientation in Guangzhou, illustrating the involvement of the commercial press in the city's social and economic transformations.

Keywords: commercial newspapers; consumer culture; advertising; early Republican Guangzhou; social transformation

1. Introduction

In recent years, significant achievements have been made in the study of Chinese media history. However, research on regional media history has relatively lagged behind. While some scholars have begun to focus on the history of newspapers and periodicals in cities such as Shanghai and Tianjin, research specifically addressing the history of newspapers in Republican Guangzhou remains limited. This is an area that warrants further exploration [1].

Since modern times, Guangzhou has been one of the most important centers of media and communication in China. It was the birthplace of several significant milestones in Chinese media history, including China's first English-language newspaper, *Guangzhou Record*; the first Chinese-language newspaper, *Dong-Xi Yang Kao Mei Yue Tong Ji Chuan*; the first Chinese-language weekly, *Zhong-Wai Xin Wen Qi Ri Lu*; the first lithographed Chinese newspaper, *Ge Guo Xiao Xi*; and the first lithographed Chinese daily, *Shu Bao*. From the early 20th century to the 1950s, nearly a hundred different newspapers and periodicals were founded in Guangzhou, highlighting the city's dominance as a commercial hub and its crucial role in China's modern political transformations [2].

In particular, during the Republican period, commercial newspapers in Guangzhou played a catalytic role in shaping consumer culture through advertising [3]. The advertisements in these commercial newspapers not only stimulated the growth of consumerism but also contributed to the formation of civic culture and the transformation of consumption patterns. A deeper investigation into the role of commercial newspapers, especially their influence on consumer culture in Guangzhou, will provide valuable historical insights for the city's current efforts to build itself as a national center and a major commercial metropolis. Furthermore, such research will offer significant guidance for the development of Guangzhou's contemporary newspaper industry and the integration of media practices.

2. Literature Review

The role of commercial press in shaping consumer culture has long been a significant topic in media and cultural studies, particularly in the context of modernizing societies. In the early 20th century, the rapid development of global consumer capitalism coincided with the rise of advertising as a central element in media. In China, commercial newspapers during the Republican era played a key role in promoting consumer culture, especially in modernized cities like Guangzhou.

Research on early Chinese commercial press typically highlights the dual function of these publications: as tools for disseminating political ideologies and as media for promoting consumer goods and lifestyles. The rise of advertising in Guangzhou's commercial press reflects the city's position as a hub of modernization and economic development, with newspapers becoming key vehicles for advertising targeting the growing urban middle class [4]. The advertisements in these publications not only introduced new consumer products but also shaped social norms and aspirations related to consumption [5].

Primary research on Guangzhou's commercial press and its influence on consumer culture is limited, although existing studies have examined the commercial press in areas like Shanghai and Beijing [6]. This gap highlights the necessity for a comprehensive study of how Guangzhou's commercial press facilitated the transformation of consumer habits through advertisements, and promoted the formation of modern urban consumer culture in Republican China. This article attempts to construct a chronological framework, based on existing academic research, to explore the evolution of Guangzhou's commercial press under the Republican era. This study examines the development of the commercial press across four historical periods: the late Qing Dynasty (including the Xinhai Revolution), the early Republican period, the Japanese occupation period, and the late Republican period. A key focus is the intricate relationship between the commercial press, consumer culture, the evolution of the commodity economy, social transformation, and the construction of Guangzhou's urban image.

In this paper, the "commercial press" refers to the nonpartisan nonpolitical and academic non-governmental publications serving the general public, which are based on the market-oriented commercial focus. Additionally, while some newspapers, especially political ones were meant more as propaganda outlets, they did deliver news to a broad audience, thus, newspapers will also be included in this study.

3. Xinhai Revolution Period: Commercial Press and the Flourishing of Consumer Culture in Guangzhou

Since the late Qing Dynasty, Guangzhou's newspaper industry has experienced significant growth. According to the catalog of newspapers in the Guangdong Provincial Zhongshan Library, between 1900 and 1911, 87 newspapers were established in Guangzhou. These newspapers were not only abundant but also diverse in content, widely disseminating commercial information and social news, and almost all featured dedicated advertising sections, providing an excellent platform for promoting business and consumption culture.

During and around the time of the Xinhai Revolution, several influential commercial newspapers were published in Guangzhou, including Shubao, Qunbao, Guangbao, Lingnan Daily, Guomindao Daily, Zhongxi Daily, Twentieth Century Daily, Guangdong Baihua Daily, Zhonghua Daily, Nanyue Daily, Pingmin Daily, Kebao, Renquan Bao, Tianmin Bao, Zhongyuan Bao, 72 Trades Commercial Newspaper, and Current Affairs Illustrated among others. Among these, Shubao, Guangbao, Zhongxi Daily, Qunbao, Pingmin Daily, and Current Affairs Illustrated were particularly influential.

Shubao, founded in 1884, was China's first lithographed daily newspaper, with four pages: the first and second pages covered domestic and international news and commentary, the third page featured translated articles from foreign publications, and the fourth page was dedicated to advertisements. The newspaper had four wholesale distribution points, selling at a price of one Chinese silver dollar per month, with a subscription offering a full year's worth of issues for five Chinese dollars, including delivery fees [7].

Guangbao, founded in 1886, had a wide distribution network. In addition to its local distribution in Guangzhou, it had multiple distribution points in Foshan, Dongguan, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Macau, Vietnam, the United States, the Philippines, and other overseas locations. It became a highly influential newspaper abroad. Zhongxi Daily had six distribution points in Guangzhou and several dozen agents in Shanghai, Hong Kong, Macau, and other cities. Although these newspapers were distributed abroad, their primary readership remained in Guangzhou, with content mainly focused on local social news, commercial information, and advertisements.

The development of commercial press greatly facilitated the flourishing of consumer culture, with the abundant advertising pages serving as a microcosm of this trend. For example, 72 Trades Commercial Newspaper dedicated more than half of its pages to commercial advertisements; Tianqu Bao and Youyi Bao focused extensively on news related to local restaurants and entertainment venues, presenting the typical style of entertainment newspapers; Current Affairs Illustrated and Shangqi Huabao were visually rich and colorful, excelling in social news. These commercial newspapers greatly enriched the cultural life of the public, enhancing their consumption level and taste. From the information published, we gain insights into the consumer habits and culture of Guangzhou's population during this period.

After the Qing Dynasty's reform and the abolishment of the imperial examination system, Western-style clothing became increasingly popular among Guangzhou's citizens as a fashion trend, as evidenced by newspaper reports and advertisements from that time. In 1907, Current Affairs Illustrated ran an advertisement stating that the Shixing Company, located on Hui'ai Street in Guangzhou, had branches in locations such as Shibafu, where they offered a variety of Western-style garments, along with locally produced Hu-bei silk fabrics [8]. Western medicines and health products also became popular in Guangzhou, with local doctors beginning to manufacture Western-style products such as brain tonic pills and self-blood tonics. For example, the renowned Guangzhou doctor Liang Peiji developed a phosphorus-based brain tonic, which was widely advertised in commercial newspapers and medical journals like Guanghua Medical Journal, claiming it could enhance vitality and prolong life [9]. Health products became fashionable among the middle and upper classes in Guangzhou, and advertisements in Nanyue Daily in 1910 regularly filled more than two pages with such promotions.

The newspapers also reflected the relatively advanced cultural and educational consumption in Guangzhou at the time. The prosperity of the newspaper industry was itself a reflection of cultural consumption, but also notable was the thriving book publishing industry in Guangzhou, second only to Beijing and Suzhou in China. For example, the Cheng Tian Ge Bookstore in Guangzhou used lithographic printing technology to produce various types of books, including documents, maps, genealogies, and more [10]. New-style bookstores appeared on Guangzhou's streets, offering a wide variety of books at affordable prices, satisfying the diverse reading interests of the public. For instance, the

Baoyunlou Bookstore advertised books like *The Officialdom Revealed* and *The Secret History of Modern China* at prices affordable to the average reader [11]. After the abolition of the imperial examination system, new-style schools flourished, and textbooks were published in abundance. Guangzhou's publishing industry greatly promoted the cultural and educational consumption level of the local population.

At this time, commercial newspapers not only contributed to the enhancement of consumer culture in society, but also became cultural commodities that reached households across the city. The affordability of newspapers played an important role in enabling the general public to access them. The average annual subscription for each newspaper was less than eight yuan. For instance, *Shangqi Huabao* was priced at 0.35 silver dollars within the city and 0.4 silver dollars for distribution to nearby provinces, with subscriptions abroad costing 0.7 silver dollars per issue. *Yangcheng Daily* was priced at 0.15 wen per single copy and 0.5 wen for additional pages. Officially-backed commercial newspapers were also reasonably priced. For example, *Agriculture and Commerce Daily* (later renamed *Guangdong Quanyi Daily*) was a bi-weekly publication, costing one yuan for an annual subscription in the city and 1.2 yuan in surrounding provinces. Since advertising revenue covered production costs, subscription fees remained relatively low, which in turn contributed to the prosperity of the newspaper industry and heightened public enthusiasm for reading. Newspaper consumption occupied a significant place in the cultural consumption of Guangzhou's population, a form of intellectual consumption closely tied to the era of enlightenment, information exchange, and the growing commodity economy in the wake of the Xinhai Revolution.

4. Early Republic of China Period: Transformations in Citizen Consumption Concepts and Consumer Culture through Newspapers and Advertisements

In the 27 years since the founding of the Republic of China in 1912 to the fall of Guangzhou in 1939, despite many changes and setbacks in the newspaper industry, the newspaper industry in Guangzhou rose steadily to a considerable height. It outshone the late Qing period, in scope and quality. Statistics reported 179 new papers launched in this period of unprecedented activity, an average of 6.6 new papers a year, which outstripped the late Qing average of 3.9 a year.

Between 1911 and 1934, Guangzhou published 619 periodicals, including internal publications. Among them were a number of journals which had official or political ties such as *Guangzhou Republic Daily*, *China Daily*, *Guangzhou Daily*, *Minzu Daily*, *Zhongshan Daily*, as well as some democratic publications established by Guo Moruo, Xia Yan and others, for example, *Jiu Wang Daily*. In addition to these, several prominent literary magazines emerged, including *Literary Life*, *Chinese Poetry Circle*, *Literary Forum*, *Literary Front*, and *Literary Magazine*.

Small-scale commercial newspapers became much more common in Guangzhou than during the Xinhai Revolution. Others were eager to get in on the newspaper boom, too, with some launching multiple newspapers. For example, the Far East Company founded by Li Zhiming was famous for its four newspapers: *Newspaper*, *Express*, *True Republic News*, and *New Guohua News*, all of which were influential. Wang Zemin's Huiyuan Company published *Guohua News* and *Yuehua News*, both of which were the most-widely circulated commercial newspapers in Guangzhou. Two other major commercial papers were *Tiansheng Daily* and *Guangdong Daily*, published by Nanyang Tobacco Company and the British-American Tobacco Company respectively. These predominantly non-political newspapers operated independently of government and political influence, focusing primarily on market dynamics and commercial enterprises. They adhered closely to journalistic principles, achieving high levels of readability and information transfer, and played a huge part in the rise of consumer culture.

Tabloid newspapers, known for their playful use of language, flourished alongside the growing consumer culture. There were many tabloids like *Zhen News*, *Jing News*,

Xiao Luotian, Red Rose, Compass, White Peony, Roar, Hua Hua, Xiao Nanqiang, White Gold, Sherlock Holmes, Dadao Guan, Lingxing, etc. occurred sporadically in the streets of Guangzhou.

The years in which Tian Yi Luo published the articles recorded the rise of many foreign-language newspapers in Guangzhou, including Canton Daily Sun, Canton Times, Canton Gazette and Canton Truth. 1923 Guangzhou Daily (Japanese Newspaper) Further a number of church affiliated papers were started, although their reach was rather limited.

Newspapers in Guangzhou during this period played a significant social role and had a strong influence on public opinion. The newspaper industry was competitive, and each newspaper fought for as many readers as possible to lead the potential market consumption and profit. For example, the Guangzhou Republic Daily, which ran from 1923 to 1936, offers rich documentation of social life and economic activity in Guangzhou and brought news about current events to city residents. Reading between the lines of its news reports and advertisements, it is possible to learn about the shift in consumer culture taking place among Guangzhou citizens in this period.

First, weddings are amongst the big family events that also represent the general consumption level and cultural traditions in society. In 1929, the Guangzhou Civil Affairs Bureau conducted an investigation on the cost of weddings in an attempt to promote thriftiness, the Guangzhou Republic Daily reported. Ticket prices for weddings range from several hundred to several thousand yuan, and some families go into debt because of wedding expenses in the wind. For example, the fees incurred by a typical lower-class wedding ceremony included two large lanterns, a music band, a box of sweet-scented candles, and a bridal sedan chair.

The groom's side spent around 300 yuan on expenses, excluding the betrothal gift; the bride's side spent nearly 240 yuan on items like jewelry, goods, and the wedding banquet.

In Guangzhou, where the saying goes, "Food in Guangzhou", the food culture was very developed. "In Chenzhou Society, when they entertain guests, Chen Tang Restaurant is a high-end place." The food scene in Guangzhou was extremely diverse and ever-changing. Signature dishes from major restaurants like Daxinyuan and Xiyuan drew in wealthy diners, but these establishments were out of reach for regular citizens. However, Guangzhou's tea culture, especially the one pot and two pieces snack culture, was open to all classes.

For example, the Zhejiang Weekly Review carried an advertisement for Mingzhu Tea House that featured signature dim sum, including chicken buns, fried shrimp dumplings, and lotus seed paste cakes, enjoyed by people from all walks of life.

In this period, Guangzhou Republic Daily, as one of the major commercial newspapers at that time, vividly described urban commodity economy and social life in Guangzhou in 1920s and 1930s. These newspapers vividly captured the profound changes in citizens' cultural and consumer psychology, reshaping their perspectives on daily consumption. Guangzhou's consumer culture in this period reflected a blend of Eastern and Western influences, while maintaining strong local characteristics. It was closely tied to the city's cultural, economic, and social development within the broader context of a turbulent era.

5. Late Republican Period: A Glimpse into Guangzhou's Booming Medicine, Real Estate, and Sino-Hong Kong Trade through Newspaper Advertisements

The later Republican period includes both the period of Japanese occupation of China, as well as the period including the surrender of Japan in 1945 and liberation of Guangzhou in 1949.

In Guangzhou, a number of newspapers were launched during the Japanese occupation, including Guangdong Xunbao (Guangdong news), Minsheng Daily, Zhongshan

Daily, Gongzheng Bao, Yuejiang Daily, Shishi Daily, Business News, Commercial Intelligence, Engineering Monthly, Guangdong Financial Monthly, and Guangdong Commercial Union Bulletin published by the Guangdong branch of the National Commercial Control Association. From 1939 to late 1945, Zhongshan Daily was the official newspaper of the Japanese-controlled Guangdong provincial government, and Minsheng Daily was a newspaper run first by the puppet Guangdong Provincial Public Security Maintenance Association and then by the puppet provincial government. Although these publications were not particularly known for their literary quality, their supplementary sections and urban news played a role in shaping and reflecting the evolving consumer economy and culture. The third section of Guangdong Xunbao, for instance, placed an emphasis on social news that was relevant to street life and frequently carried serialized novels, local customs, essays, travel diaries, excitatory gossip and the like. At its birth, "Economic Intelligence" was a column introduced by Zhongshan Daily, which published the price of commodities and commercial activities of the five cities in Guangzhou and surrounding cities, which contributed to the trade circulation and urban consumption. Its supplement part was even more diverse, a section that included "Daily Talk" as part of the "Huanghua" supplement, where it often published travelogues, movie and theater reviews, celebrity gossips and the daily life sharing of the people of Guangzhou. Minsheng Daily specialized in local social news marriage, homicide and gossip and its supplements published amusing anecdotes and travel journals, as well as "silver screen intelligence" news about movie and theater stars. Other newspapers wrote about the market trends, consumption philosophy and cultural supplements. For example, Shishi Daily had an "Economic" column to observe and analyze the economic policy in the puppet regime, and it reported detailed reports on the price of consumer goods in Guangzhou and surrounding areas, such as flour, cotton yarn, marine products, etc., and also provided some consumption guidance for the market. Its supplements often offered fashionable lectures, movie schedules and beyond. Gongzheng Bao included sections like "Lifestyle Sketches", "Situational Investigations" and "Public Service Mailbox" and Qunsheng Daily covered economic news, business trends and culture sports stories which had great influence on the public consumption culture.

Business News and Commercial Intelligence were started in 1944. There were two professional economic newspapers, which had similar daily formats of four pages, with two economic sections containing not only the news but also stock trends and price lists for primary commodities including oil, salt, rice, sugar, cotton, medicinal herbs, industrial materials, groceries, matches and toothpaste. They offered real-time prices in major commercial centers in Guangzhou, as well as transport routes and details, it was rich in service-oriented content. These newspapers reflected the capitalist economy and consumer culture that evolved under Japanese rule in Guangzhou. Their supplements, ranging from Business News's "Miscellaneous Stalls", and Commercial Intelligence's "Big Happiness" and "Silver Crystal" sections also reflected the diverse and even pathological consumption trends of the era.

In 1945, following the surrender of Japan, Zhongshan Daily was renamed Guangyue Bao, and it continued publication. At the same time, the Nationalist Party's Guangzhou Branch assumed control of Gongzheng Bao and renamed it Guangzhou Daily. Many other newspapers, such as Guangdong Xunbao and Minsheng Bao were forced to shut down. A short-lived privately owned newspaper, China Daily, was published for a single month as well. The CCP's Guangdong Party organization then moved the Chenbao, which had been based in Shaoguan, to Guangzhou, where it was renamed Guangzhou Morning News. It was noted for speedy, accurate coverage of politics and current events, with a focus on social news and consumer affairs. Largely featuring lists of market prices, it became popular among businesspeople, with a peak circulation of 30,000 copies, on its way to becoming one of the most influential newspapers in the city. The supplements from the Guangzhou Morning News were brief, funny, and widely available, traversing the sometimes-fine line between education and entertainment. In addition, a patriotic newspaper

with contributions from various political factions, including communists was also established during the civil war-Daily Forum (later adjusted to United Daily, the predecessor of today's Guangzhou Daily).

Seventy-Two Trades Commercial Newspaper is one of the commercial newspapers in Guangzhou during the late Republican period and has the longest duration among them which is able to respond to the consumption culture of citizens in Guangzhou. It was founded on September 15, 1906, under the name Guangdong Seventy-Two Trades Commercial Newspaper, and its publication was suspended from April 1938 due to the war, only to return on October 1, 1945, before discontinuing again on March 31, 1947. The paper was eight pages, daily publication, and had more than half of its content for advertisements. The most well-known advertisements were for medicines, and they were sometimes even hyperbolic with ascribing curative powers to a variety of so-called "miracle cures". For instance, an ad for "Zhu Zhongxing's Medicinal Water" purporting to be a panacea claimed the medicine was appropriate for everyone, including women, children and pregnant women, and was effective against all diseases. These exaggerated medical ads were reflective of Guangzhou's distorted consumer culture at the time, revealing the public's demand for health products.

In third place were real estate advertisements, for the most part for private rental and sale properties, which were published in the classified ad sections. These transactions were widespread, reflecting the real estate boom of the late Republican period. The majority of real estate advertisements were for commercial residences, highlighting Guangzhou's pivotal status as a commercial nucleus within South China. The paper also featured columns that announced the departure dates of international mail ships and schedules of the ships on route to Hong Kong for its exports, which highlighted the frequent trade exchanges between the two cities. This psychologically reinforced consumer beliefs and contributed to the flourishing consumer market in Guangzhou.

Seventy-Two Trades Commercial Newspaper, which was first established in 1906, continued to document the economic landscape of Guangzhou even in the post-war period. It, for example, published an article on Nov. 1, 1945, quoting an American businessman, who expressed optimism about the possibilities for industrial development in China after the war. This article recognized the longstanding problem of China exporting raw materials and importing finished goods but predicted a bright future for Chinese industry and labor force.

On April 25, 1946, Seventy-Two Trades Commercial Newspaper published an article about lack of rice in Guangzhou and explained how much rice price soaring. The piece chronicled the twenty-nine-fold increase in price since the victory—one that had ballooned to stratospheric heights, implying devastating effects on the people's daily life. Such reports were indicative of the harsh economic environment confronting citizens during this period.

Overall, this newspaper encapsulated the consumer culture of Guangzhou in the late Republican period and demonstrated the role of the commercial press in shaping consumers' consumption behaviors. Nonetheless, such newspapers as Seventy-Two Trades Commercial Newspaper also recorded the disintegration of Guangzhou's consumer culture in the late Republican period by looking externally and internally toward wars and economic decline.

6. Conclusion

To sum up, this study emphasizes the centrality of commercial newspapers to the consumer culture of Republican-era Guangzhou, with advertising being a primary force behind this trajectory. Through an examination of the relationship between commercial press activities and consumer behaviors, this article highlights the role of these newspapers as both disseminators of commercial knowledge and key players in shaping readers'

decisions, practices and preferences. Guangzhou's commercial newspapers greatly impacted the consumption trends of local people, and their extensive coverage and advertisements related to consumer goods, food, housing, fashion, and lifestyle, introduced new consumer teaching materials and facilitated the consumer-oriented and commercialized local culture.

This study has revealed that commercial press advertising played a crucial role in shaping Guangzhou's consumer culture, facilitating its adaptation to the rapid economic and social changes of the time. Beyond promoting products, advertisements also appropriated from western culture to craft public perceptions about fashion and quality, individuality. This phenomenon was particularly evident in marriage-related news, restaurant advertisements, apartment rentals, and the commodification of luxury lifestyles, which reflected the fusion of Western and Chinese social norms and the evolving ideals of modern consumer life, which showcased the fusion of Western and Chinese social mores, and the softening of ideals of modern consumer life. Along with coverage of the commercial news, these advertisements reflected an evolving urban consumer culture and served as a guide to the emerging lifestyle of the middle classes.

Moreover, this study shows that commercial newspapers had an even greater impact than economic and product information. By documenting idealized consumer environments shaped by emerging trends, they created a space for the development of new consumption behaviors, they created a space for the growth of new consumption behaviors and in doing so, sparked the emergent development of a consumer culture intricately connected with the broader fiscal and social shifts of urban centers. This transformation became increasingly pronounced after the Xinhai Revolution, as the proliferation of commercial newspapers coincided with Guangzhou's rapid modernization and economic growth.

Even though historical sources from the period of Japanese occupation are limited, this paper can help us demonstrate how advertising from commercial press mediated consumerism and consumption culture within the city of Guangzhou during that period. Future research could explore the socio-political aspects of advertising during this period and employ modern analytical tools, including content analysis and big data approaches, to assess the long-term impact of early advertisements on Guangzhou's consumer culture.

Overall, this study provides new insights into the relationships between commercial media and consumer culture, and a historical perspective on how advertising in the commercial press shaped the modern consumer landscape of Republican Guangzhou.

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