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TEACHING CHINESE LANGUAGE AND CULTURE THROUGH CHINESE COMMERCIALS

In an era of globalization, it has become increasingly important for people in the field of international business to be well versed in both global economics and intercultural communications (Stone and Rubenfeld 429). As indicated by World Trade Organization statistics from 2006 (WTO), China was the third largest importing and exporting country of merchandise, the third largest exporting partner and the fifth largest importing partner of the United States in 2005. Given the importance of international trade relationships between the United States and China, it is critical for American business people to know the Chinese language and understand the Chinese culture and market. This article aims to promote the use of commercials in order to help American students reach these goals. The first part focuses on the importance of Chinese commercials in the instruction of beginning Chinese, and the second part illustrates the possible application of commercials from both linguistic and cultural perspectives. The final part provides basic pedagogical principles for the selection and use of commercials in the classroom.

I

In the last few decades, foreign language teaching in the USA has been evolving toward a communicative approach, which emphasizes communication and real-life situations. The teaching of Chinese, however, continues to focus on “teaching and testing the linguistic features, such as grammatical structures and lexical items” (Hendrickson 197). This cognitive approach is further reflected in the content of commonly used Chinese textbooks. Dictated by the goal of linguistic proficiency, textbooks are often dominated by grammar explanations and mechanical drills that contain few exercises that aim to “elicit the exchange of new information about the real world” (Joiner 237). Moreover, with an emphasis on grammatical accuracy, these textbooks fail to incorporate non-verbal aspects of language acquisition, in particular cultural contexts in which a language functions and transmits information.

As a result, monotonous drills intimidate many students and professionals who express an interest in Chinese; on the other hand, those who have taken Chinese for years nevertheless experience culture shock upon their arrival in

China. Language classes have done little to prepare them for the “real China,” one that differs dramatically from their “imagined China” either as a communist country with an iron-fist government that keeps its citizens political prisoners or as an artistic country with everyone possessing poetry-writing skills (Gao 39–40).

To develop students’ ability to express themselves in Chinese and communicate with Chinese interlocutors in the real world, it is essential to provide students with input in contexts that are linguistically accurate and culturally appropriate (Hendrickson 197). Chinese commercials, thus, become an excellent medium to help students acquire linguistic skills and to promote their cross-cultural understandings.

Commercials are authentic materials; they are “not designed solely for classroom use but rather for native speakers” (Cummins 412). As such, commercials “make linguistic input more comprehensible by embedding it in a context of extralinguistic cultural cues that assures the transmission of meaning even when complete grammatical and lexical decoding is not likely to be achieved” (Cicccone 205). Commercials have advantages over other media such as radio, newspapers, magazines, or movies. They provide “current spoken language, which is often reinforced by repetitions and musical tunes as well as visual slogans on the screen. Recorded commercials can be played back and stopped to suit the individual pedagogical needs” (Lawrence 836). Finally, because of their short length, they are easily integrated into a class, bring in refreshing alternatives to usual classroom activities, and introduce elements of another society to students.

Despite these potential benefits, commercials have not been as widely used in Chinese classes as in classes of other languages such as French, German, Spanish, or Russian. This may have to do with the difference, or rather the uniqueness, of Chinese as a non-Western language. According to the US State Department’s Foreign Service Institute, the average English speaker requires 2,200 class hours to reach proficiency in Chinese, more than three times the amount of time needed to master French or Spanish (see Ramzy). In other words, most American classes in Chinese at the elementary and intermediate levels equal classes in French or Spanish at the elementary level. It is no wonder that while commercials have become an important part of class activities in other commonly taught languages at the intermediate or more advanced levels, they are seen as too difficult for students in most Chinese language classes.

Experts have found, however, that not using authentic materials at the beginning level “may make student difficulty a self-fulfilling prophecy, because

the lack of early exposure to anything other than contrived speech increases students' later frustration and retards their acquisition of the language" (Cicccone 204). Early exposure to authentic spoken language by native speakers is particularly important for students of Chinese. Precisely because China is so different from the United States in both language and culture, American students cannot draw on the phonology, semantics, or sentence structure of their mother tongue while listening to Chinese, nor are they capable of finding hints from nonlinguistic signals such as body language or tone of voice, as they often do for a European language. Commercials, on the other hand, can help students "develop the processing skills that make possible the manipulation and ultimate decoding of meaningful language" (Cicccone 205).

II

Katherine Lawrence summarizes the role of television commercials in the teaching of foreign languages on two levels, the denotative and the connotative. According to her, the denotative level "refers to the actual product advertised and encompasses the phonological and morphological content, the vocabulary and grammar structures" (836). The connotative level, on the other hand, "includes the symbolic reading of the product advertised and the emotive qualities it elicits in a specific cultural and semiotic environment" (836). In the following, I will use two examples to illustrate how television commercials help students acquire linguistic skills and give them insights into Chinese culture and society.

DENOTATIVE LEVEL

As Rick Altman points out, students in a foreign language classroom "tend to adopt the accents of [. . .] the teacher and fellow students, with perhaps a minor contribution from the voices on language-audiotapes" (11). Commercials, however, give students opportunities to listen to the target language that is uttered by native speakers, which is not grammatically sequenced, and, unlike the voices on language-audiotapes, at a normal speed. This authentic input helps students to recognize and produce proper oral sounds. Commercials are also valuable resources for vocabulary review and learning because they not only place familiar vocabulary into different contexts and word combinations, but the wide variety of products advertised in the commercials also introduce a rich source of new vocabulary in a particular semantic context. Moreover, since commercials often contain the most commonly used grammatical forms, sentence structures and daily expressions, they are well suited for the reinforcement of these linguistic aspects in language instruction.

In 2007, Coca-Cola Company released a TV commercial for the Chinese New Year in mainland China.¹ The commercial cartoon features a panda living in a zoo abroad. Among the panda's visitors on the Chinese New Year day is a Chinese family with two children. The little girl asks her father if the panda would also like to go home and celebrate the Chinese New Year. Her mother says, "We will also go home now and celebrate the New Year (我们也要回家过年了)." The panda follows the family of four to their home. Through the window, he watches them eating dinner at the table and grows homesick. While sentimental music plays on the soundtrack, the viewer watches the dispirited panda walk toward the ocean. A Coke can rolls over and stops at his feet. The moment the panda picks up the can, magic happens. A Chinese boy and a Chinese girl suddenly appear. They look at the sad panda and ask, "What happened (怎么啦)?" "I would like to go home and celebrate the Chinese New Year (我想回家过年)," the panda says. "No problem, we'll take you home! (没问题, 我们带你回家!)" In an instant, the panda stands in front of its family in China, "Mom, I am back (妈妈, 我回来了)!" With Coca-Cola bottles, cans, and umbrellas scattered on the family's dining room table, on the beach, and at the end, it is not difficult for American students to figure out the product advertised.

American students viewing Chinese TV commercials are often surprised by the great number of American and European products advertised. These products raise students' awareness of China's dynamic role in the global economy and correct some students' misconceptions of China as only a poetic and secluded society.

From the phonological perspective, commercials about imported products offer good pronunciation exercises. In China, the names of these products are translated into Chinese according to their English pronunciation; at the same time, the Chinese translation tries to give these names a meaning that matches the function or suggests the benefits of the products. The Chinese name for Coca-Cola, for instance, is 可口可乐 (pronounced as *ke ko ke le*). While sharing a phonological similarity with its English equivalent, the Chinese translation for Coca-Cola also means "delicious and delightful," indicating the effect that Coke has on its consumers. In addition, the three characters in Coca-Cola's Chinese name remind students of their respective use in different vocabulary combinations, such as 可是, 快乐, and the presence of the radical "口" in many Chinese characters they have learned, such as 吃, 叫, 做, 照.

¹ The commercial can be seen on *YouTube* at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iy4PqT1Pm6M>.

This commercial can be used in an elementary Chinese class in the second half of the first semester or at the beginning of the second semester, when students have learned vocabulary items like 爸爸, 妈妈, 中国, 再见, or 回家, as well as the phrase 我想 (“I would like to”). After the first or second screening of the 2007 Coca-Cola commercial, most students can recognize many of these words. Some of them are able to pick up the repeated phrase, “I would like to go home . . .” (我想回家 . . .). In addition, since the commercial offers a vivid context for the usage of 回家 and 回来, it answers many students’ question, why “go home” in Chinese is 回家, instead of 去家, a literal translation of “go home” that does not exist in Chinese, and helps them figure out how to differentiate the usage of the two words.

This commercial also provides a good occasion to introduce the new items, 熊猫, 过年/过春节, and 怎么啦. At the end of the class, role plays can be arranged so that students act out the commercial, or come up with new scenarios, in order to reinforce the vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structure of the commercial in a specific context.

CONNOTATIVE LEVEL

Despite the importance of language, Edward T. and Mildred Reed Hall point out that “Communications experts estimate that 90 percent or more of all communication is conveyed by means other than language, in a culture’s *nonverbal* messages. These messages are taken for granted and transmitted more or less unconsciously” (xiv). In other words, language proficiency alone does little to facilitate effective communications if one is unaware of the nonverbal and “situation-specific” codes of another culture. The understanding of Chinese culture on the connotative level is, therefore, essential to American students learning Chinese.

Among the key concepts that Hall and Hall provide to “unlock the doors to a foreign country” (179), context sheds special light on the cultural differences between China and the United States. Context refers to “the fact that when people communicate, they take for granted how much the listener knows about the subject under discussion” (184). According to Edward Hall (*Hidden Differences*), American culture is low in cultural context, i.e., the listener knows little and must be told practically everything. In high context cultures like China, the listener is already in a context and does not need to be told very much. The difference in context has an impact on commercials produced in the two countries. While American commercials are filled with expressive and straightforward product information, their Chinese counterparts are much more indirect and subtle. They do not tell much about the

product, but aim more at evoking a mood and creating an atmosphere in order to induce the viewer to buy. If American commercials are like newspaper headlines (Hall and Hall 168), attracting the viewer's attention with highly focused information, the Chinese ones are more similar to long and lyric poems designed to touch the viewer's heart.

For American students who are used to commercials with short, expressive and often humorous presentations (Hall and Hall 168), it is often confusing to watch Chinese commercials. Even if they can understand the verbal message in a commercial, they still have difficulty discerning what product is being advertised. Nonverbal messages such as background information and historical context are crucial to allow American students to understand Chinese commercials.

A very successful commercial that has influenced millions of Chinese viewers from different generations is produced by a Chinese supplement company. It starts with black-and-white movie-like images showing a young couple with a boy and a girl having a meal at a table. The next shot is a close-up of the boy eating fried eggs with great enjoyment from a bowl in his hands. The voice-over reveals that he is, in fact, looking back at his childhood when he was that boy eating his birthday meal: "I really wished I had a birthday everyday. It seemed to me that my father never celebrated his birthday. Almost all the fathers know their sons' birthday, but how many sons know their father's birthday?" With the camera traveling slowly through a typically small Chinese town from an older time, the time flies by. In the next shot, the viewer sees the grown-up young man and an old man while hearing the voice-over, "Dad, I remembered your birthday." The commercial ends with a message about the actual product advertised: "supplement tablets made from turtles by Yangshengtang Company, they are the best gifts for our fathers."

It is not easy for American students to understand such a commercial produced for a high-context society, one which omits cultural and historical information that is self-evident for Chinese viewers. Since the turtle symbolizes longevity in China and many Eastern-Asian countries, the name of the product itself implies to the Chinese viewers the tablet's function: to contribute to people's health and well-being. Instead of telling the viewers what they already know, the commercial uses a "soft sell" approach (Hall, *Hidden Differences* 139). It tells a birthday story and encapsulates a historical change that Chinese viewers have experienced in the last few decades, a change from an isolated and poor agricultural society where the Chinese struggled to feed their families, when eggs were rare commodities and luxuries available only

to children at their birthdays, to an economically more stable society where people have the financial resources to purchase food supplements and take care of their regimen. By drawing on this common past and on the Chinese tradition of filial piety, the commercial elicits a sympathetic chord not only toward the voice-over narrator and his story, but also toward the product he advertises.² An American student would not know the cultural and historical context without class discussions that center on the commercial and the product.

Another aspect in the commercial that is important for American students to observe is body language. Throughout the commercial, there are no kisses or hugs, or even eye contact. When the grown-up son is seen with his father together, he does not look into his father's eyes, but at his gray hair. This is something particular to, or paradoxical about, the Chinese and people of many other Eastern-Asian countries. They have no problem enduring crowds in public and tolerating limited personal space, but "try to avoid accidental touching and guard against any sign of spatial intimacy" (Hall, *Hidden Differences* 48), even within the family. The lack of spatial intimacy, however, does not mean lack of love. Rather, love is indicated in a more subtle way. As shown in the commercial, it is revealed by remembering the father's birthday and giving him the turtle supplement tablets to wish him health and longevity.

The unspoken rule about interpersonal space is essential for American students to be aware of. They need to learn to pay more attention to nonverbal language while watching commercials or films. Once in China, they would then become more conscious of their own body language, so as not to offend any Chinese colleagues and friends, and they would not think of themselves as unpopular or unloved because the Chinese do not touch or hug them.

This commercial can be introduced into the Chinese class in the first semester, right after the word 生日 ("birthday") is taught in class. Students can talk about birthdays in Chinese and discuss the product advertised in the commercial and its social and historical background in English. Centered on the question "What do you think is the product advertised and why," students will have a chance to check their knowledge and assumptions about China and learn more about its history and culture.

² While it may look odd to American students that many Chinese sons/children do not remember their fathers'/parents' birthday, it is not something exceptional in China. It is rather a legacy of the harsh circumstances of the past, whereas birthday celebrations have become increasingly popular among the younger generations because of the improved economy.

III

How, then, does one make commercials work effectively in the classroom? In order to implement commercials successfully in Chinese classes, particularly those on the elementary level, great care must be given to selecting materials, defining tasks required of the learning, and preparing students for these tasks. The following are three basic principles covering pedagogy using video:

- (1) Commercials should be selected on a linguistic basis. As I have shown by the examples above, a commercial that is to be implemented in the teaching of a textbook unit should share some vocabulary and grammatical structure contained in that unit or previous units. This way, students will use a common base as they move toward the unknown.
- (2) Commercials need to be integrated into the curriculum (Hedderich 17). Instead of seeing commercials as supplemental materials, they should become an integral part of a unit. "This implies that there should be extensive previewing, viewing and post-viewing activities. Oral, written and, if possible, reading tasks should be given to students before and after the viewing" (Hedderich 17). For every minute of video shown in first- and second-year classes, ten minutes of activities are recommended.
- (3) It is essential to tell students that it is nearly impossible and also unnecessary to understand every word (Hedderich 17). The key cognitive principle that has been agreed upon is to connect the known to the not yet known. Particularly useful are two types of activities: "those that make learners conscious of what they may already know that will be pertinent to the videos and those that provide essential background information that they may be lacking" (Ciccone 207).

When using Chinese commercials in elementary classes, cultural discussions will have to be carried out in English rather than Chinese. Such discussions will present a great opportunity for students to learn about Chinese tradition, history, and culture, satisfy their intellectual curiosity, and prepare them for future trips to China.

CONCLUSION

Chinese commercials are valuable resources in students' language acquisition and their development of cultural awareness. They expose students to authentic, currently spoken Chinese and provide them with both linguistic and intellectual material. To be successfully implemented in the language classroom, commercials have to be carefully selected according to the stu-

dents' linguistic level and treated thoroughly in class. This, however, does not mean that students have to understand everything in a commercial. On the contrary, watching commercials should become an occasion for students to develop processing skills that enable them to navigate through messages and decode language in a context.

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