

# Message Strategies of Chinese Award-Winning Print Advertisements

## A Longitudinal Analysis Using Taylor's Six-Segment Message Strategy Wheel

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### Abstract

This study analyzes the content of 2,598 award-winning print advertisements from the China Advertising Festival website from 1982 to 2009. The results indicate that ration and sensory strategies are the two leading message strategies of Chinese award-winning print advertisements. Message strategies of Chinese advertising manifested a general shift from an informational approach (transmission view of communication) to a transformational approach (ritual view) during the study period. The study also finds a relationship between message strategies and product categories.

**Keywords:** *Chinese advertising, Taylor's six-segment message strategy wheel, content analysis, and longitudinal study*

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### Introduction

With a population of 1.4 billion and rapid economic growth, China has become a lucrative market (Lin, 2001; Zhang, 2004; Chan & Chan, 2005). In 2007, China's gross national product (GNP) reached 25,148.3 billion yuan (around \$3,500 billion), and a variety of companies from more than 100 countries invested about 67 billion yuan (around \$10 billion) into the Chinese market (China Statistical Book, 2008). Advertising is considered to be an effective way to reach Chinese consumers. Since 1979 when advertising came back to the Chinese market after the Cultural Revolution, advertising has become one of the fastest growing industries in China with an annual growth rate from 25% to 50% (Cheng, 1994; Chan, 1995; Chan & Chan, 2005). According to the CTR Market Research Company (Hu, 2010), advertising expenditure in China reached \$74 billion in 2009.

In line with the fast growth of Chinese advertising industry, a large volume of research has been conducted to investigate Chinese advertising from different perspectives. Based on a twenty-year review, Sin, Ho, and So (2000) found that advertising research on mainland China concentrated on four aspects: advertising environment, advertising content, advertising practices and effectiveness, and attitude toward advertising. Although previous research on Chinese advertising has covered a variety of topics, only a few studies (Tai, 1997; Yin, 1998; Zhou & Belk, 2004; Li, Li & Zhao, 2009) have focused on advertising message strategy. Message strategy is the guiding policy for a company or institution's promotional efforts (Taylor, 1999). It deals with "what to say" and it is the strategic framework for developing advertising messages, directing advertising tactics, and guiding message executions.

Three studies on advertising strategy (Tai, 1997; Yin, 1998; Zhou & Belk, 2004) examined message strategy from the perspective of standardization or localization. Whether to standardize advertising worldwide or to adapt it to the specific needs of each market is a strategic consideration for international marketing communications. While the findings of the three studies provide useful information for global marketers' advertising practice in China, the strategic consideration of standardization and localization oversimplifies the complexity of advertising strategies. Thus, examining Chinese advertising with a multi-

dimensional message strategy framework may enrich our understanding of message strategy choices in Chinese markets as well as our understanding of the nature of Chinese advertising. These three studies focused on advertising strategies in a specific period of time without considering the historical contexts and possible longitudinal transitions. As a cultural product, advertising is shaped by social dynamics and changes on one hand; on the other, advertising also constantly reflects and reinforces those societal transformations (Pollay, 1986). Therefore, tracing the historical change of advertising strategy may provide insight into the characteristics of Chinese advertising and the societal change in different historical periods. Finally, research suggests that product categories moderate cultural values and information content of advertising (Cheng, 1994; Cheng & Schweitzer, 1996; Zhang, 2008; Rice & Lu, 1988; Chan, 1995; Chan & Chan, 2005). However, the relationship between advertising message strategy and product categories remains unknown. For an advertising campaign to be successful in a market, congruence between product categories and advertising message strategies must be achieved. Clarifying the relationship between product categories and advertising message strategies of Chinese advertising may offer additional insight for marketers.

The purpose of this research is to identify the dominant message strategies of Chinese advertising, to track the historical change of message strategies, and to ascertain the relationship between message strategy and product category by examining Chinese award-winning print advertisements with Taylor's six-segment message strategy wheel.

## Literature review

### Content of advertising

Several content analyses have been conducted to identify the cultural values manifested in advertising (Cheng, 1994; Cheng & Schweitzer, 1996; Cheng, 1997; Lin, 2001; Ji & McNeal, 2001; Zhang & Shavitt, 2003; Zhang, 2004; Zhang, 2008). Other studies have investigated the information content of Chinese advertisements (Rice & Lu, 1988; Chan, 1995; Chan & Chan, 2005). Still others have focused on visual strategies (Zhou, Zhou & Xue, 2005), nudity strategy (Paek & Nelson, 2007), and a specific product category (Zhou, Yau & Lin, 1997). Generally, those studies have suggested a shift from information-based advertising to emotion-based advertising.

A main area of content analysis of Chinese advertising has been the identification of cultural values. In a longitudinal study, Cheng (1994) analyzed 572 Chinese magazine advertisements, 192 from 1982 and 380 from 1992, and found that "modernity," "quality," and "technology" were the dominant cultural values manifested in Chinese magazines in both periods. The results also indicated that while utilitarian values decreased from 1982 to 1992, emotional and symbolic values increased during the same years. Later, Cheng (1998) replicated his study by analyzing 483 Chinese TV commercials from 1990 and 1995. Results confirmed his previous study by showing that "modernity," "technology," and "youth" predominate in Chinese advertising in the 1990s, and the dominance of "quality" in 1990 was superseded by "tradition" in 1995. Similar to the previous study, symbolic values occurred more frequently in 1995 than 1990. In addition, since both Eastern and Western cultural values were present in the ads, the study suggests that contemporary Chinese advertising is not only a "distorted mirror" but a "melting pot" of cultural values. In a more recent study, Zhang and Harwood (2004) analyzed 496 TV commercials broadcast in three Chinese TV stations and uncovered the prevalence of utilitarian values and the coexistence of both traditional and modern values in the world of Chinese advertising.

The identification and verification of the cultural values of Chinese advertising has also been investigated in cross cultural contexts by comparing Chinese advertising to U.S. advertising. Cheng and Schweitzer (1996) conducted a content analysis of 1,105 TV commercials from China and the U.S.A. and found that while U.S. commercials tended to use both symbolic and utilitarian values, Chinese commercials resorted more often to symbolic ones. They also found that cultural values depicted in Chinese commercials were moderated by product category and product origin. In another cross cultural study, Lin (2001) compared Chinese TV commercials with U.S. TV commercials regarding advertising appeals and cultural values. The findings indicate that hard sell and product merit are U.S. style commercial appeals. By contrast,

Chinese advertisers tended to base their marketing strategy on creating desire for the product through image and emotional appeals.

Several studies have been conducted to explore the cultural values of advertising to a specific group of people (Ji & McNeal, 2001; Zhang & Shavitt, 2003; Zhang, 2008). By analyzing Chinese children's commercials and those of the U.S.A., Ji and McNeal (2001) found that compared to US commercials, Chinese children's commercials to a great extent reflected China's traditional culture values and its social and economic conditions. In order to examine the existing theoretical frameworks in a new context, Zhang and Shavitt (2003) analyzed both magazine advertisements and TV commercials targeting Chinese Generation X. Results indicated that both modernity and individualism values predominated in advertising targeting Chinese Generation X. Compared to magazine advertisements, TV commercials demonstrated more collectivism and traditional values. In a more recent study, Zhang (2008) investigated 141 TV commercials featuring older adults and identified three dominant value themes: health/life, product effectiveness, and family, reflecting Chinese people's mixed view of aging. In summary, these studies suggest that while the dominant cultural values of Chinese advertising remain relatively stable, variations exist among different periods, media, product categories, and generational cohorts.

Another area of Chinese advertising research has been the examination of information content (Rice & Lu, 1988; Chan, 1995; Chan & Chan, 2005). As the first large scale content analysis of Chinese advertising, Rice and Lu (1988) analyzed 472 magazine advertisements gathered from 349 Chinese magazines during the summer of 1987. The results suggested that Chinese magazine advertisements were high in information level, and product or service availability was the most common cue. Information levels varied among magazine types and product categories. Utilizing the same framework, Chan (1995) investigated the information content in TV commercials of Hong Kong and those of China mainland. More than half of the commercials of Hong Kong and China mainland were identified as informative; the four most frequently occurring cues were performance, quality, availability, and components; different product categories had different information levels; and, information content was mainly determined by types of product advertised and not dependent on characteristics of commercials. In 2002, Chan (2005) replicated her study by analyzing 386 Chinese television commercials. To a large extent, the updated study confirmed the findings of the previous research except that Chinese TV commercials became less informative.

In addition to the two main research areas, other content analysis research has investigated a variety of topics, such as visual strategies (Zhou, Zhou & Xue, 2005), nudity strategy (Paek & Nelson, 2007), and a specific product category (Zhou, Yau & Lin, 1997). Zhou et al. (2005) compared the visuals of U.S. and those of Chinese television commercials within the framework of high context versus low-context cultures and individualistic versus collectivistic societies. They found that US ads presented more complete visual stories, fewer visuals of tradition and history, and more group images than Chinese ads did. In another cross cultural study, Paek and Nelson (2007) analyzed magazine advertisements and TV commercials of five countries and revealed that Chinese advertising employed very low levels of nudity, reflecting Chinese consumers' conservative attitude toward nudity. To understand Chinese culture from a different perspective, Zhou et al. (1997) conducted a longitudinal content analysis of 3790 personal ads for single people from 1984 to 1995. The results indicated that several values and practices ingrained in Chinese culture, such as "heightism," were strongly reflected in Chinese advertisements. Meanwhile, while the emphasis on "money" attributes was persistent, "love" attributes and emotional attractiveness showed a significant proportional increase for both self-description and partner description in the ads.

## **Advertising strategy**

Only a few studies have been conducted to examine advertising strategy in China (Tai, 1997; Yin, 1998; Zhou & Belk, 2004; Li, Li & Zhao, 2009). By studying multinational advertising in four Asian countries, Tai (1997) revealed that country of origin influenced the level of standardization. Additionally, more and more multinational advertising agencies and executives preferred to adopt a localized advertising strategy in their advertising practice in the Asian market. Yin (1998) examined how international corporations advertised in China and found that a strategy integrating standardized and localized elements was the predominant strategy. Zhou and Belk (2004) applied a reader-response approach to examine Chinese consumers' readings of the global and local appeals. Their findings revealed Chinese consumers' mixed response toward the global and local appeals. They desired global appeals for modernity values; they

preferred local appeals for their nationalism considerations. Recently, Li et al. (2009) investigated creative, placement, and budget strategies of internet advertising by Eastern and Western multinationals. For creative strategy, they found that individualist appeals were used widely by both Eastern and Western multinationals. In addition, Eastern multinationals preferred to use emotional appeals, and Western multinationals preferred rational appeals.

In summary, although previous studies of Chinese advertising have covered a wide range of topics, only limited research has been conducted to investigate advertising message strategy. Message strategy plays a key role in the advertising process. Attention to message strategy in Chinese advertising can generate insights for marketers and advertising professionals.

## Method

### Research questions

No research to date has investigated Chinese advertising with a multi-dimensional message strategy framework. In addition, the examination of advertising message strategy in Chinese advertising is within a single timeframe and pays no attention to the possible relations between strategy and product categories. In order to fill these research gaps, four research questions are proposed. Research question one is designed to identify the dominant message strategies of Chinese advertising. Research questions two and three are proposed to check historical changes of message strategy of Chinese advertising. The Q2 is designed to examine the changes of message strategy year by year, whereas the Q3 is developed to investigate the general trend by categorizing the advertisements into two broad periods. The first period is from 1982 to 2001 and the second one is from 2002 to 2009.

The year of 2001 is a reasonable cut-off point because it is, first of all, the mid-point of the sixteen China advertising festivals: eight festivals were held before 2001 and the others were held after 2001. In addition, in terms of economic, social, political changes, and international activities, the development of modern China can also be divided into these two periods ([www.people.com.cn](http://www.people.com.cn)). The first period is the Deng Xiaoping/Jiang Zemin era, from 1982-2001, characterized by internal social structure restoration, in-party political stabilization as well as re-establishing international relationship with the western world. The second one is the Hu Jintao/Wen Jiabao era, from 2002-present. Hu assumed presidency right after the turn of the 21st century. Under Hu's regime, China has many new opportunities in terms of economic development. Furthermore, China entered the WTO in 2001. It is not only a momentous event to influence the economic growth of China but also an important force to shape Chinese contemporary culture. With international trade increase, Chinese consumers have the opportunity to access a variety of foreign products. Meanwhile, Western values also penetrate into Chinese society along with the products. As a culturally defined product, advertising may reflect the cultural changes through different message strategies. Therefore, it is worthwhile to compare the advertising message strategies in these two periods to reveal the possible cultural transformations. Finally, research question four is developed to ascertain the relationship between message strategies and product categories.

**RQ1:** What is/are the most often used strategy/strategies of Chinese award-winning print advertisements?

**RQ2:** Do message strategies differ from year to year? If message strategies change annually, how do they change?

**RQ3:** Do message strategies differ in the two historical periods? If message strategies vary in these two periods, how do they change?

**RQ4:** What relationship exists between message strategy and product categories?

### Theoretical model for analysis

Taylor's six-segment message strategy wheel was used as the primary theoretical framework for examining Chinese award-winning advertisements. This framework has been applied in different contexts for analyzing message contents, for example, viral advertising (Golan & Zaidner, 2008), political communication (Cunningham & Jenner, 2003), public service advertising (Lancaster, 2010), cross-cultural research (Lee, Nam & Wang, 2001; Wolburg & Venger, 2009), and web-based campaigns (Kim, McMillan & Hwang, 2005).

Taylor's six-segment message strategy wheel was based on his extensive review of previous research on communication, economics, and advertising literature. The theoretical foundations of his strategy model include James Carey's (1975) cultural approach to communication, Kotler's (1965) summary of social science literature, Vaughn's (1986) FCB Grid, and message strategy typologies developed by Frazer (1983) and by Laskey, Day, and Crask (1989).

Taylor's model is valuable for two reasons (Kim, McMillan & Hwang, 2005): First, the model integrates consumers' purchase behavior and advertising decision-making. It can be applied to different media as well as to different marketing communication efforts. Second, the model offers sophisticated reasoning for identification of sub-segments and pays attention to both informational and transformational advertisements.

Taylor's model (1999) divides message strategies into two overarching views of communication: transmission and ritual. Within each view three segments are identified respectively by the importance that consumers attach to a product, organization, or service (Taylor, 2005). Within the transmission, or informational view, three segments were identified: Ration, Acute Need, and Routine. In the Ration segment, consumers are assumed to be rational and deliberative individuals. The role of advertising is to inform and persuade. In the Acute Need segment, consumers purchase behaviors are constrained by limited time. The role of advertising is to build brand familiarity and recognition. In the Routine segment, consumers make initial purchase decision by rational buying motives and repeat purchase habitually. The role of advertising is to serve as a cue to instigate initial buying and as a reminder for repeated buying.

Within the ritual, or transformational view, three segments were identified: Ego, Social, and Sensory. In the Ego segment, consumers' emotional needs are fulfilled by products that are ego-related. The role of advertising is to show how the product, company, or service fits within the consumer's definition of who he is. In the Social segment, consumers' emotional needs are fulfilled by products that are visible to others. The role of advertising is to create the appropriate social situations to transform the product into the appropriate emotion. In the Sensory segment, consumers are pleased by products based on any of the five senses: taste, sight, hearing, touch, or smell. The role of advertising is to transform the product into a "moment of pleasure."

## Sample

A total of 2,598 award-winning print advertisements collected from the China Advertising Festival website were content-analyzed. The China Advertising Festival is authorized by the State Administration of Industry and Commerce of P. R. China and hosted by China Advertising Association. It is the largest and most influential national event in China's advertising industry. Originally named "National Excellent Ad Works Exhibition," the China Advertising Festival was first held in Beijing in 1982. In 2000, it was renamed "China Advertising Festival" (CAF) and in 2008 CAF became the "China International Advertising Festival (CAIF). Between 1982 and 2009, sixteen festivals were held in fourteen different cities. Participants in the festivals include international and local advertising agencies, Chinese media, companies, corporations, members of the China Advertising Association, college students majoring in advertising and designing, and advertising fans. Judges of the China Advertising Festival are famous advertising practitioners selected from international and local advertising agencies as well as well-known advertising scholars from academia.

The sample ads span 28 years from the 1:st China Advertising Festivals in 1982 to the most recent one in 2009. Since the number of award-winning advertisements of the earlier festivals was relatively small (7 in 1982, 75 in 1989, 87 in 1992, and 169 in 1995), all the award-winning advertisements were selected for the first four festivals. From the 5:th China Advertising Festival in 1998, the number of the award-

winning advertisements skyrocketed to hundreds per festival. Therefore, from the year of 1998 on, only gold, silver, and bronze award-winning advertisements were gathered and analyzed. The analysis unit was either a single advertisement or a series of advertisements. Usually, the same message strategy was designed for a series of advertisements. Thus, a series of advertisements was treated as one analysis unit regardless of the number of single advertisements it covered. Finally, a total number of 2,284 analysis units were generated.

## Coding

Taylor's six-segment message strategy wheel was used for coding. Product categories were based on the product classification of the 16:th festival including 13 different product categories. Two Chinese graduate students studying in a U. S. southeastern university were recruited as coders. After one week of intensive training, they independently coded about 10% of the total ads ( $n = 200$ ) randomly selected from the sample to examine message strategies and identify product categories. Intercoder reliability of message strategy was .84 (Cohen's kappa = .84) and that of product categories was .92 (Cohen's kappa = .92). The discrepancies were reconciled by discussion. In the second stage, the two coders independently coded the remaining advertisements by the message strategy wheel and sixteen product categories. Intercoder reliability of message strategy was .81 (Cohen's kappa = .81) and that of product categories was .88 (Cohen's kappa = .88).

## Results

RQ1 asked what the most often used strategy/strategies is/are. As shown in Table 1, the sensory strategy was the most frequently employed strategy of Chinese award-winning print advertisements (43.5%,  $n = 993$ ), followed by the ration strategy (35.4%,  $n = 809$ ). The social (10.0%,  $n = 229$ ) and the ego strategies (7.4%,  $n = 168$ ) were applied less often, and the routine (1.8%,  $n = 42$ ), and acute need (1.9%,  $n = 43$ ) were the least used strategies.

*Table 1: Message strategy of Chinese award-winning print advertisements*

Strategy	Number (n)	Percent (%)
Ration	809	35.4
Acute Need	43	1.9
Routine	42	1.8
Sensory	993	43.5
Social	229	10.0
Ego	168	7.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>2284</b>	<b>100</b>

RQ2 asked whether or not message strategies change in different years. Table 2 shows the number and percentage of six message strategies that were utilized in different years. The results suggested that message strategies of Chinese award-winning print advertisements do vary from year to year (Chi-square = 552.66,  $df. = 75$ ,  $P < .001$ ). For example, the ration strategy was used most often in 1992 (60.9%,  $n = 53$ ), 1998 (58.3%,  $n = 35$ ), and 1982 (57.1%,  $n = 4$ ). Although generally the acute need strategy was rarely used throughout the years, it had its most usage in 2002 (8.5%,  $n = 10$ ) and 2005 (6.6%,  $n = 9$ ). Similarly, the routine strategy was presented most frequently in 2002 (10.3%,  $n = 14$ ) and 2003 (7.0%,  $n$

= 9). As a dominant message strategy, the sensory strategy was used more often than any other strategy in 2004 (69.5%,  $n = 73$ ), 2006 (63.4%,  $n = 85$ ), and 2003 (60.2%,  $n = 77$ ). The social strategy was shown more often in 1992 (20.8%,  $n = 18$ ) and 1995 (18.3%,  $n = 31$ ). Finally, the ego strategy was used most frequently in 2008 (20.7%,  $n = 30$ ).

*Table 2: Message strategy distribution in different years*

	<b>Ration</b>	<b>Acute Need</b>	<b>Routine</b>	<b>Sensory</b>	<b>Social</b>	<b>Ego</b>	<b>Total</b>
1982	4 57.1%	0 0%	0 0%	1 14.3%	1 14.3%	1 14.3%	7 100%
1989	33 27.6%	0 0%	2 2.7%	30 40.0%	8 10.7%	2 2.7%	75 100%
1992	53 60.9%	0 0%	2 2.3%	12 13.8%	18 20.8%	2 2.3%	87 100%
1995	89 52.7%	0 0%	3 1.8%	40 23.7%	31 18.3%	6 3.6%	169 100%
1998	35 58.3%	0 0%	1 1.7%	13 21.7.2%	9 15.0%	2 3.3%	60 100%
1999	197 49.6%	0 0%	2 .5%	145 36.5%	44 11.1%	9 2.3%	397 100%
2000	157 47.6%	3 .9%	5 1.5%	146 44.2%	10 3.0%	9 2.7%	330 100%
2001	27 32.1%	1 1.2%	1 1.2%	39 46.4%	10 11.9%	6 7.1%	84 100%
2002	26 19.1%	9 6.6%	14 10.3%	56 41.2%	18 13.2%	13 9.6%	136 100%
2003	13 10.2%	5 3.9%	9 7.0%	77 60.2%	9 7.0%	15 11.7%	128 100%
2004	21 20.0%	2 1.9%	1 1.0%	73 69.5%	5 4.8%	3 2.9%	105 100%
2005	37 31.6%	10 8.5%	0 0%	41 35.0%	13 11.1%	16 13.7%	117 100%
2006	23 17.2%	1 .7%	0 0%	85 63.4%	10 7.5%	15 11.2%	134 100%
2007	40 23.3%	5 2.9%	1 .6%	93 54.1%	13 7.6%	20 11.6%	172 100%
2008	29 20.0%	5 3.4%	1 .7%	65 44.8%	15 10.3%	30 20.7%	145

2009	25 18.1%	2 1.4%	0 0%	77 55.8%	15 10.9%	19 13.8%	138
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Note: Chi-square = 552.66, *df.* = 75, *P* < .001

RQ3 asked whether or not message strategies differ in the two historical periods. Table 3 displays the different usage of six message strategies in these two periods. The results indicated that the applications of different message strategies varied between the first (1982 to 2001) and second (2002 to 2009) periods (Chi-square = 280.78, *df.* = 5, *P* < .001). Compared to the first period, the usage of the ration strategy greatly decreased (1:st period: 49.2%, *n* = 595; 2:nd period: 19.9%, *n* = 214), while the usage of the sensory (1:st period: 35.2%, *n* = 426; 2:nd period: 52.7%, *n* = 567) and ego strategies (1:st period: 3.1%, *n* = 37; 2:nd period: 12.2%, *n* = 131) dramatically increased in the second period.

Table 3: Message strategy change in two periods

	Ration	Acute Need	Routine	Sensory	Social	Ego	Total
1982-2001	595 49.2%	4 .3%	16 1.3%	426 35.2%	131 10.8%	37 3.1%	1209 100%
2002-2009	214 19.9%	39 3.6%	26 2.4%	567 52.7%	98 9.1%	131 12.2%	1075 52.7
Total	809 35.4%	43 1.9%	42 1.8%	993 43.5%	229 10.0%	168 7.4%	2284 100%

Note: Chi-square = 280.78, *df.* = 5, *P* < .001

RQ 4 asked what relationship exists between message strategy and product categories. Table 4 showed how different message strategies were utilized in different product categories. The results suggested that the majority of the product categories were promoted either by rational claims or sensory appeals. However, variations did exist among different product categories. For instance, for office and school supplies the ration strategy was the leading strategy (65.9%, *n* = 27). Compared to other product categories, medical equipment and drug advertisements seemed to use the acute need strategy more often (8.8%, *n* = 13); family and personal products (59.3%, *n* = 83) and food and drink products (57.8%, *n* = 119) preferred sensory strategy; medical equipment and drug advertisements also employed more social claims (15.0%, *n* = 22), and clothing and accessory advertisements presented the ego strategy more frequently (26.9%, *n* = 14).

Table 4: Message strategy distribution in different product categories

	Ration	Acute Need	Routine	Sensory	Social	Ego	Total
Corporation/Brand Image	64 25.7%	9 3.6%	10 4.0%	116 46.6%	29 11.6%	21 8.4%	249 100%
Household and Electronic Appliance	62 41.9%	1 .7%	2 1.4%	65 43.9%	9 6.1%	9 6.1%	148 100%
Food and Drink	41	1	6	119	23	16	206

	19.9%	.5%	2.9%	57.8%	11.2%	7.8%	100%
Family and Personal Care	21 15.0%	4 2.9%	6 4.3%	83 59.3%	8 5.7%	18 12.9%	140 100%
Office and School Supplier	27 65.9%	0 0%	0 0%	7 17.8%	4 9.8%	3 7.3%	41 100%
Communication and Device	65 48.5%	8 6.0%	6 4.5%	29 21.6%	16 11.9%	10 7.5%	134 100%
Medical Equipment and Drug	47 32.0%	13 8.8%	2 1.4%	58 39.5%	22 15.0%	5 3.4%	147 100%
Real Estate, Furniture, and Decoration Materials	85 49.7%	0 0%	1 .6%	46 26.9%	12 7.0%	27 15.8%	171 100%
Transportation and Facility	56 45.5%	0 0%	0 0%	51 41.5%	5 4.1%	11 8.9%	123 100%
Clothing and Accessory	5 9.6%	0 0%	1 1.9%	25 48.1%	7 13.5%	14 26.9%	52 100%
Commercial Service	86 41.3%	4 1.9%	5 2.4%	68 32.7%	29 13.9%	16 7.7%	208 100%
Public Service	179 36.4%	2 .4%	1 .2%	248 50.4%	50 10.2%	12 2.4%	492 100%
Other	71 40.1%	1 .6%	2 1.2%	78 45.1%	16 8.7%	6 3.5%	173 100%
Total	809 35.4%	43 1.9%	42 1.8%	993 43.5%	229 10.0%	168 7.4%	2284 100%

*Chi-square = 341.58, df. = 75, P < .001*

## Discussion

Ration and sensory approaches were the two leading strategies in Chinese award-winning print advertisements. Different appeals were used within each approach. Within the ration strategy segment, one appeal was to emphasize the economic value of advertised products, companies, or services. For example, a bronze award-winning advertisement in 2002 for a mobile phone service provider used a well-known scenario adapted from a famous historical novel to describe the low price of its service. A gold award-winning advertisement for Volkswagen in 1998 emphasized its free service for customers.

A second appeal within ration strategy highlighted factual information. The facts could be presented by either texts or visuals. An example of the former was a set of advertisements for Daikin Corporate, which won the gold award in 2007. There were four advertisements and each presented a true story of employers in the Daikin Company. Another example was also a gold award winning advertisement for public service in 2007, which featured three distinct scientists who have the same names as Chinese athletic celebrities: Liu Xiang, Ding Junhui, and Yao Ming. Factual information could also be demonstrated by visuals. A silver award winning advertisement in 2004 for public service encouraged the public to help disabled

people by simply showing pictures of blind people. A silver award winning advertisement in 1999 for shoe cream demonstrated its superior quality by showing the pictures of a pair of shoes before and after using the product.

The third appeal of ration strategy was to emphasize the logical process of thinking. For instance, a silver award-winning advertisement for public service in 2007 showed a razor blade to warn people not to drive after drinking. When first looking at it, people may not be able to find the association between the razor blade and driving a car after drinking. But after examining the razor blade more carefully, people could detect that the shapes inside the razor are the combination of a car and a bottle, which makes the correlation naturally and expresses the message in a creative way.

Within the sensory strategy segment, two sub-segments were identified. One segment was to display sensory stimulation or pleasure directly. For example, a silver award-winning advertisement for Olay facial cream in 2003 displayed the silky skin of the character to show its excellent function. A bronze award-winning advertisement for M&M in 2001 showed several happy moments when people eat M&M chocolates. Another sub-segment of sensory strategy was to demonstrate sensory stimulation or pleasure indirectly or to utilize the technique of synesthesia. A gold award-winning advertisement for a supermarket in 2004 showed a vegetable garden with the gate of a supermarket to signify freshness of its products. Another gold award-winning advertisement for a music download website of the same year used bowls and pans as earphones to transfer the sense of taste to the sense of hearing.

These results should be interpreted within the cultural values of and in the context of contemporary Chinese society. Advertising has been considered as a cultural product and “distorted mirror” (Pollay, 1986). The prevalent applications of “Ration” and “Sensory” message strategies confirmed previous research findings that China is a “melting pot” of Eastern and Western values (Cheng & Schweitzer, 1996). Traditionally, Chinese culture was influenced deeply by Confucianism. Under Confucianism’s tenets, thrift is an important value (Hofstede, 2001). It encourages Chinese people to be future oriented and to balance income and expenditure. Therefore, in order to match with Chinese consumers’ cultural orientation, the ration strategy is a natural choice. However, with globalization, Western values such as materialism and hedonism have gradually penetrated into Chinese people’s daily life (Chan, Zhang & Wang, 2006). Under materialism and hedonism ideologies, people are encouraged to spend more money to satisfy their various needs and enjoy the moments of pleasure. The widespread usage of sensory strategy, on the one hand, promotes those Western values, and on the other hand, adapts to the value change of Chinese consumers.

The sample advertisements of this study span a period of twenty eight years, which offers an opportunity to track the historical change of message strategy in the Chinese advertising industry. The results suggest that although the main strategies remain relatively stable, small variations exist from year to year. Especially when investigated in the two historical periods, advertising message strategies of Chinese advertising manifest a general shift from the transmission side to the ritual side. These results support previous research that Chinese consumers prefer emotional appeals to informational ones with more exposures to advertising (Chan, 1995, 2005). The sharp increase in the usage of ego strategy in the second period also signals the emerging individualism in Chinese society. Previous research suggested that individualism was gradually valued by Chinese people, especially among the young generations (Zhang & Shavitt, 2003), and individualist appeals were widely used in Chinese internet advertising (Li et al., 2009).

Finally, the results revealed the relationship between the message strategy and product categories. Although the pattern of message strategies distribution among different product categories was not clear, some product categories seemed to prefer certain message strategies. For example, the ration strategy was used mostly for office and school supplier product category; the acute need strategy appeared more in medical equipment and drug advertisements; the sensory strategy was predominant in family and personal care product advertisements, and food and drink advertisements; the social strategy was used frequently to promote medical equipment and drug products and communication device products; and, the ego strategy was applied more often to sell clothing and accessories. These findings suggested the possible associations between product category and message strategy, which provides a valuable reference for advertising professionals to choose an appropriate message strategy to fit a specific product category.

Western advertising professional who are trying to appeal to Chinese customers will find that what may appear to be “intuitive” in Western culture may not be true in Chinese culture. For example, in Western advertising a rational approach would be considered most appropriate for medical equipment and drugs and household appliances. The Chinese culture more often uses sensory strategy.

## Implications

The study has both theoretical and practical implications. For theoretical implications, the study expands previous research on Chinese advertising by investigating Chinese advertisements with a multi-dimensional message strategy framework. The two-mode (rational vs. sensory) structure of message strategy uncovered in this study not only demonstrates the advertising strategic choices in the context of China, but also signifies the complexity of Chinese cultural values. By examining Chinese award-winning advertisements in a twenty-eight-year period, this study offers valuable insights into the historical dynamics and changes of message strategy in the context of modern China. In addition, the study also sheds light on the possible relationships between product categories and message strategies. Findings from this study suggest that for a certain product category, a specific message strategy is a more appropriate choice. Future research may verify these associations using a variety of data sources and analyzing with more advanced statistical techniques.

For practical implications, the two-mode strategic structure provides a guiding approach for international marketers who are eager to communicate with Chinese consumers. In order to reach the mass market, it seems safe to use either rational or sensory appeals. However, within the broad strategic framework, variations among product categories and the fit between message strategies and product categories should also be carefully considered. Finally, since the strategy message has shifted from the transmission side to the ritual side, the transformational strategies, especially the ego strategy should be employed more in advertising in order to better communicate with Chinese consumers.

## Limitations and future research

The results of this study are based on the award-winning print advertisements of the China Advertising Festivals. Even though these advertisements covered a wide range of product categories and some of them were employed in the real world, they may not represent the composition of everyday advertisements. Future research should collect advertisements from daily life to enhance the validity. Further, only print ads were investigated in this study. The results may be restricted to print media. Future research could replicate this research in other media to see if there is any difference. Finally, only one strategic framework is used in this study. Future research could consider integrating different typologies of message strategy to better understand the strategic structure of Chinese advertising. By the same token, future research could examine the tactics and appeals to gain more insights into advertising practice in the context of China.

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## Appendix

### Selected samples of Chinese award-winning advertisements

#### *Gold award, 1998, Volkswagen. Message strategy: Ration – economic value*







**Bronze award, 2001, M&M. Message strategy: Sensory – Direct sensory pleasure**



A



B

A  
奖项：铜奖  
作品号：B03-2  
作品名称：麦提莎巧克力 银牙露  
广告客户：香港爱莎食品公司  
参赛单位：达美高广告 北京分公司  
创意人：黄国雄 陈文殊

B  
奖项：铜奖  
作品号：B03-2  
作品名称：麦提莎巧克力 海狗露  
广告客户：香港爱莎食品公司  
参赛单位：达美高广告 北京分公司  
创意人：黄国雄 陈文殊

## Gold award, 2004, Carrefour supermarket. Message strategy – Indirect sensory pleasure



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