

Calendar Posters and the Business Rivalry in the Modern Chinese Tobacco Industry, 1920s–30s

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Advertising calendars were first created at the end of the 19th century and became phenomenally popular in the 1920s. Market players in emerging industries including tobacco, pharmaceuticals, cosmetics, insurance and food extensively used them to expand their sales channels. Illustrations with the elements of advertising, art and a calendar were extremely well received and even spread to Chinese communities overseas.

British American Tobacco Co. tried to take every opportunity to force its major competitor Nanyang Brothers Tobacco Co, Ltd. out of the Chinese market and dominate it. To this end, the former invested an enormous amount of money. In the 1920s and 1930s, the two were in an intense advertising war, desperately trying to outperform each other. Amid this competition, illustrators of advertising calendars did their best to draw consumer attention and created innovative images of modern girls. Image advertisements are different from other types in that they mainly consist of illustrations, not text. Thus, illustrators made the most of their creativity to attract consumers. Following the trend of the time, they came up with illustrations of various types of women — playing a sport, smoking, posing sexily, and so on. The images express illustrators' artistic creativity and what companies wanted in advertisements to win a competition. This suggests that images of modern girls were fully commercialized.

Advertising calendars have not really been studied. Even though visual materials have been attracting the interest of scholars lately, most studies are on art history, visual culture, modernity in Chinese society, the image of Chinese women, and the identity of women. This paper will discuss how the influence of the competition in the tobacco industry on the development of advertising calendars affected the creation of various images of modern girls, based on 284 advertising calendars for tobacco companies collected through different routes.

Keywords : advertising calendar, modern girl, advertising competition, British American Tobacco Co., Nanyang Brothers Tobacco Co, Ltd.