

Views on the expansion of Japanese printing companies into China and the production of commercial posters in the pre-World War II period

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This paper will examine the development and characteristics of posters in pre-World War II China, with emphasis on interactions between the Japanese and Chinese printing industries and comparisons of Japanese and Chinese posters produced in the same period.

Many people would think that posters with Chinese characters and women in Chinese outfits were made in China. But Japanese printing companies quickly entered the Chinese market and started to produce posters for Chinese consumers in the 1900s. A close look at such posters that have remained to date reveal that they were initially made in Japan by Japanese companies.

Upon the outbreak of the First World War, Western companies withdrew from China to be replaced by Japanese counterparts. The resulting strong economy of Japan encouraged many companies to expand into China. These companies placed great importance on advertising tactics to survive business competition, boosting demand for advertising. Under this situation, the number of Japanese printing companies that entered the Chinese market and produced posters for Chinese audiences increased.

In particular, Osaka-based Seihan Printing Co., Ltd. made a substantial profit. Having established a foothold in China by doing business with the Nanyang Brothers' Tobacco Company, the firm opened a Shanghai office in the mid-1910s, set up a massive factory in the 1920s, and began to produce posters and labels for famous domestic and international companies in China. Nevertheless, it did not merely focus on profits. It hosted poster-drawing contests and actively used an artist from Shanghai named Zhou Baisheng, who won an award in one of them. The company also taught state-of-the-art engraving and printing techniques to Chinese students studying in Japan.

As the poster-making environment in China improved, Japanese companies moved their production bases there. The spread of offset printers and photoengraving techniques in the 1930s increased demand for poster production and new business opportunities. This was when China's poster culture flourished.

Comparisons of Chinese and Japanese commercial posters produced during this time revealed profound differences in size, choice of people to feature and style of expression. But commonalities can also be found. By the 1930s, Seihan Printing Co., Ltd. had expanded into China, and Chinese artists had an opportunity to see Japanese posters. Thus, Japanese influence is observed in many posters produced by Chinese artists at that time.

Not many empirical studies on Chinese posters produced before World War II have been conducted, unlike the situation for Japanese ones, even though Japanese and Chinese printing and advertising industries had a close relationship. The two countries need to work together to review past studies and materials to make progress in research in this area.