

# Chinese and American female images – Comparing TV advertisement in 2010, 2015 and 2020

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**Abstract:** As a prominent part of study, female image in the mass media serve as a dimension that worth studying. The purpose of the project is to compare female images on TV commercials between China and the United States in 2010, 2015 and 2020 in a cross-cultural view. Research contains 125 American advertisements and 76 Chinese advertisements as 2 samples to represent the countries. Partly based on Bem Sex Role Inventory, the code table includes 6 sections: appearance, age, and occupation, dimension of product, occasion and personality. Both China and the US are in a transitional period from tradition to modernity, but manifested in different forms.

**Keywords:** gender role, advertisement, intercultural comparison, stereotype.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Woman appearance in commercials

Advertising, as a mass media, has not only been the main tool for disseminating commercial information, but also for exchanging social ideas and influencing public opinion as well. Among all kinds of studies about this important media, some study incisively notice the female image in commercials and include it in academic research. Research that combines advertisements with female images originated from the United States, and then it becomes an enduring hot topic in academic researches globally, which plays a prominent part in gender study. The study of female image has a nearly 50-year history; it originated from the United States. Courtney and Lockeretz (1971) can be regarded as the first study in content analysis of advertisement that indicated that American magazine advertisements shaped female as domestic women who were unwise and dependent on men when making decisions. <sup>[1]</sup> McArthur and Resko (1975) analyzed on American TV programs and drew a conclusion that according to the stereotypical appearances, men usually independently appeared in workplace as product experts, while women were portrayed as user in domestic scenes. <sup>[2]</sup> This study laid a solid foundation for subsequent studies. Hawkins and Coney (1976) focus on social consequences of stereotype in advertising. <sup>[3]</sup> Tuchman (1978) found that female image on the mass media in the United States was mainly made up with 2 parts: in the kitchen and domesticity. <sup>[4]</sup> After discussing the 400 advertisements, people believed that the images of women in the advertisements were distorted. (Goffman, 1979) He also mentioned that some certain behaviors as lying on the bed or floor could enhance the missing image. <sup>[5]</sup> Since 1980s, female image study in advertisements developed a lot in Europe, and then it was introduced in Asia and has gone globally. Van Zoolen (1994) regarded advertisements as a point that deserved focusing on when it came to gender image reappearance in the media. <sup>[6]</sup> Simultaneously, it has been fully developing in various forms, for instance, intercultural comparison. Among multiple countries, similar conclusions reached in researches that despite the nation and culture, stereotypes that distort female image commonly appear in diverse advertisements. Chinese studies emerged after 1995 in which Fourth World Women Conference held in Beijing, Liu & Bu (1997) illustrated that about 1/3 commercials in China showed stereotypical values. <sup>[7]</sup> Han & Han (2003) made a comparison with Liu & Bu's project and drew a conclusion that stereotypes declined in quantity while the male right of speech decreased. <sup>[7,8]</sup> Tong (2003) thought that although the connotation of femininity has gradually changed a lot, it was still made up with several stable dimensions: domestic, childcare, tender, and dependence on male. <sup>[9]</sup> Ding (2009) indicated that typical images were widely used in Chinese commercial: shine boxes and good wives and mothers. <sup>[10]</sup> Objectification and sexism were also mentioned in the academic study. Erchull (2013) argues that female image tended to be symbolized as sexual attraction by using nudity images and suggestive words. <sup>[11]</sup> Still, stereotype was widely exposed in advertisements from reviewing current studies (Grau & Zotos, 2016). <sup>[12]</sup> Wu (2019) took the commercials around Super Bowl as samples and drew a conclusion that

there is an increasingly tendency for masculinity and femininity to merge in American female image.<sup>[13]</sup>

### **1.2 Gender theory**

As to the gender and stereotypes, Gayle Rubin (1976) firstly proposed the concept "gender". It emphasizes on social environment that shape the human's words and deeds in gender that is opposed to the concept of sex.<sup>[14]</sup> According to the gender theory, male shows more extraversion while female tends to be astringent in a long-term patriarchal society, which resulted in the stereotypical values in gender roles. Researches derived from female life status that contains gender role, identity and antiquated ideas of chastity and marriage. Unger and Rhoda Kesler (1979) advocated the redefinition of gender rather than sex should be mentioned for those characteristics culturally considered appropriate to males and females.<sup>[15]</sup> After the concept was brought forward, it's introduced into many other interdisciplinary studies. Goffman (1979) heavily illustrated discussion of the ways in which men and women are portrayed in advertisements is presented.<sup>[5]</sup> Judith Lorber (1994) argued that gender is a wholly product of socialization from the view of sociology.<sup>[16]</sup> Since 1990s, gender has been introduced in Chinese academic study. Stereotypes used to be a term in the publishing industry, Ashmore and Del Boca mentioned in gender studies (1979). It mainly referred to thoughts that contained gender role, characteristics and behavior in human mind.<sup>[17]</sup> In 1984, the distribution of women and men in social roles was regarded as the resource of gender stereotype. (Eagly, Alice H, Steffen, Valerie J)<sup>[18]</sup> In the same year, Deaux and Lewis focused on structure of gender stereotyped, including 4 types: personality, physiological characteristics, role behavior and career status. Some study figured out that as time goes by, the degree of stereotype in the commercials decreasingly appears. (Mager & Helgeson, 2011)<sup>[19,20]</sup>

To illustrate, researchers tried to put forward some concrete portrays of gender roles. Bem (1974) put forward "Bem Sex Role Inventory" as a description of sex role that is a model tool for testing personality in the gender view, which is often used for personal character assessment.<sup>[21]</sup> 70 words used for describing a person are divided into 3 types: masculinity, femininity and neutral, which refer to characters and status that social culture constructs in human mind. For instance, male tends to be athletic and ambitious while female shows more delicate and tender sides. Concerns on the validity resulted from some studies on this inventory. Holt and Ellis (1998) reappraised on the validity and figure out that it still worked in general.<sup>[22]</sup> Qin and Gao(2014) indicated that this inventory also applies to Asian people.<sup>[23]</sup>

Cultural factors are also involved in the perspective. With the development in gender image study, cultural elements have been included into consideration. It has become a common sense that stereotypes have intercultural differences, (Nelson & Paek, 2005).<sup>[24]</sup> For example, it turns out that stereotypes in Islamic States were worse than England due to the strict legal restrictions in Islamic States (Nassif & Gunter, 2008)<sup>[25]</sup>. Nelson and Paek (2005) also argued that when it came to nudity, sexual contents in China are lower than in the United States and European countries.<sup>[24]</sup> The proportion that women as housewives appear in TV commercials in China is lower than in the United States and European countries, but it is too arbitrary to judge the stereotypical degree among those countries. (Cai, 2018)<sup>[14]</sup>

### **1.3 Research purpose**

Our research problem focused on the analysis of the difference between Chinese and American female images in TV advertisements from 2010, 2015, and 2020. While we were trying to find out whether or not the variations actually exist and more specifically how they are distinct or similar from one another. In order to create representative samples, we narrowed the advertisements samples down to two big events which both contain holiday tinge respectively in China and the United States. The advertisement sample we aimed in China is around the Spring Festival Gala; those in the US are aired in between the Super Bowl game. Both of these two samples gathered a large number of viewers in both countries and, not surprisingly, the cost for commercials is millions of dollars. Coding table is necessary in the content analysis. It includes 6 sections: female image appearance, age occupation, dimensions of product, occasion and personality. 125 American advertisements and 76 Chinese advertisements are involved in the research. From the research, China and the US are both in a period of integration of traditional stereotypes and modern identities, but they manifested in different ways in a cross-cultural background.

## **2. Methodology**

As a regular tool of content analysis, code table is widely used in the academic paper. Partly based on Bem Sex Role Inventory<sup>[21]</sup>, our code table includes 6 sections: appearance, age, and occupation, dimension of product, occasion and personality, including 76 Chinese and 125 American commercials. 2 coders participated in the coding progress. The reliability based on Holsti Formula is 0.93, which is relatively reliable.

Table1 results of woman appearance about 76 Chinese and 125 US commercials

		Frequency		Rate	
		Chinese	American	Chinese	American
<b>Total sample</b>	2010	23	34	30.2%	27.2%
	2015	26	42	34.2%	33.6%
	2020	27	49	35.6%	39.2%
<b>Appearance</b>	Appearance	47	89	61.8%	71.2%
	Disappearance	26	36	38.2%	28.8%
<b>Age</b>	Child	18	6	38.2%	7%
	Teenager	3	10	6.4%	11.2%
	20-29	30	60	63.8%	67.4%
	30-39	20	37	42.6%	41.6%
	40-49	3	15	6.4%	16.9%
	Elderly	7	13	14.9%	14.6%
	Of all above	3	/	6.4%	0
<b>Occupation</b>	White-collar	7	9	14.9%	10.1%
	Housewife	3	9	6.4%	10.1%
	Athlete	1	2	2.1%	2.2%
	Actress	9	6	19.1%	6.7%
	Blue-collar	5	4	10.6%	4.5%
	Else	0	25	0	28.1%
	Unknown	24	52	51.1%	58.4%
<b>Dimension Of Product</b>	Clothes	1	3	2.1%	3.4%
	Skin Body	3	1	6.4%	1.1%
	Automobile	1	2	2.1%	2.2%
	Food	4	11	8.5%	12.4%
	Beverage	10	15	21.2%	16.9%
	Hygiene product	0	10	0	11.2%
	Communication	3	3	6.4%	3.4%
	Internet Service	13	19	27.7%	21.3%
	Finance	4	3	8.5%	3.4%
	Electronics	3	3	6.4%	3.4%
	Entertainment	0	6	0	7%
	Appliance	5	0	10.6%	0
	<b>Occasion</b>	Domestic	20	26	42.6%
Workplace		12	31	25.5%	34.8%
Outdoor		24	49	51.1%	55.1%
Multiple		13	17	27.7%	19.1%
<b>Personality</b>		Cute	15	10	31.9%
	Shameful	0	1	0	1.1%
	Sentient	29	17	61.7%	19.1%
	Admired	5	4	10.6%	4.5%
	Faithful	0	11	0	7.9%
	Womanly	21	25	44.7%	28.1%
	Sensitive	2	2	4.5%	2.2%
	Considerate	8	7	17%	7.9%
	Sympathetic	0	1	0	1.1%
	Delicate	8	10	17%	11.2%
	Soft-Spoken	6	3	12.8%	3.4%
	Tender	12	18	25.5%	20.2%
	Childish	5	7	10.6%	7.9%
	Independent	9	31	19.1%	34.8%
	Athletic	3	17	6.4%	19.1%
	Emulous	10	30	21.3%	33.7%
	Leadership	2	11	4.3%	12.4%
	Adventurous	3	20	6.4%	22.5%
	Decisive	1	11	2.1%	12.4%
	Ambitious	6	7	12.8%	7.9%
Egotistical	0	11	0	12.4%	

### 3. Discussion

According to the table 1 above, over 60% (China 63.8%; the US 67.4%) are 20-30 year young women; while over 40% (China 42.6%; the US 41.6%) are around 30-40 years old. It seems that age distributions in both 2 countries are subject to the so-called rules of “golden customers”, which refers to women around 20-40 years. This group is usually recognized as the main force of consumption, which have the most consumer desire and purchasing power. Another popular hypothesis that women of this age are symbolized objects to attract their target audience might explain this phenomenon. Usually these symbolized objects are connected with sex. Also, children in Chinese commercials reach up to 38.2% appearance rate, but they seldom appear in American TV advertisements.

Half of advertisements construct situations that convey women’s occupation. From occupation table, Chinese white-collar is higher than American (China, 14.9%; the US, 10.1%), as well as blue-collar (China 10.6%; the US 4.5%), while the ratio of housewives is reversed (China, 6.4%; the US, 10.1%). This tendency agrees with the employment rate comparison in 2 countries.

Things become quite different when it comes to the occasion. In general, as a reflection of reality, women have gradually moved towards diverse scenes from a monistic image imprisoned in domestic situation. Both 2 countries have over 50% outdoor occasions (China, 51.1%; the US, 55.1%). But domestic occasions (China, 42.6%; the US, 29.2%) seems appear more than workplace (China, 25.5%; the US, 34.8%) in China compared with America. Absolutely, it is contrary to the occupation category. It is worth mentioning that in the cases that women appear in domestic scenes, they are getting rid of the single role of labor force and becoming the master of domestic life.

The personality category has 21 items. According to Bem Sex Role Inventory, basically, the former of the 13 items refer to femininity, while the latter of 8 items refer to masculinity. Among these items, compared with Chinese, American female image show more masculinity and less femininity. Only in the 3 out of 13 femininity items: shameful (China: 0; the US 1.1%), faithful (China, 0; the US, 7.9%), sympathetic (China, 0; the US, 1.1%), Chinese female image is lower than American. On the contrary, women in American commercials serve as a more masculine symbol than Chinese with more independence and aggression. Except the item of ambitious (China, 12.8%; the US 7.9%), among the remaining masculine items, the percentage of American women is higher than that of Chinese women. But in overall situation, definitely, the dual opposite gender role in the past has been broken, instead, female image in TV commercials become diverse, including both masculinity and femininity, whether in both of 2 countries. To a certain degree, it is reflection in advertising dimension that repositioning of gender roles in social awareness. Brisk advertisers truthfully record resistances to stereotypical values.

### 4. Conclusion

Goffman in 《Gender Advertisements》 indicated that commercials reflected on female real life, including status and characteristics.<sup>[5]</sup> The feature of advertising requires that it has to present what it inclined to express in a way a majority of the public accept. Thus, it’s easy to seek out that intercultural female image in commercials could serve as a true portrayal of life to a certain degree. From the code table and discussion above, we can draw some brief conclusions that in intercultural perspective, China and the US both in a transitional period from tradition to modernity. The power of stereotypes and breakthroughs are manifested in varying degrees. Progress and limitations between 2 countries are also presented in different forms.

As for gender qualities, although each country has its own focus, female images are manifested in both masculine and feminine ways, stereotyped values that woman should appear with puniness and submissiveness are partly replaced by independence and ambition, especially in their career life. The feminine temperament moves towards so-called masculinity, which implies that women themselves have begun to identify themselves with diversified positions. And across the cultural backgrounds, Chinese female tend to be more feminine that is closer to “shine box and a good wife wise mother” stereotypes as gender theory agrees.

When it comes to gender roles, in space, women appear in multiple occasions; while in occupation, they are free from the shackles of single domestic scenes and moving to various careers, even respectable social roles as athletes and actress. More workers appear in Chinese commercials as white-collar and blue-collar with housewives more in the US. Behind this lies a common expectation between women themselves and media industry that women should break away from low-value domestic labor force to the economic status of self-reliance. But there is an absolutely inverse tendency that Chinese has more

worker scenes in percentage while less workplace scenes, which is precisely contrary to the United States. It might need further study to figure out the reason.

Some limitations still exist in this study. For instance, as a sports program, the Super Bowl represents sportsmanship. Therefore, products that are relevant to athletics as well as power might be run more than other programs. And Spring Festival Gala is a program emphasizing on family reunion. Thus, more domestic situations in commercials around the Gala might appear. Also, the setting of code table may lead to deviation of the consequences, according to previous study. Furthermore, still we could not demonstrate whether these commercials are in tune with the public. Questionnaire is necessary when it comes to seek out attitudes towards these advertisements.

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