Advertisements in Shenbao, one of the largest and most influential commercial newspapers in Republican Shanghai, have attracted much scholarly attention. Scholars have studied this material from diverse perspectives, attempting to understand the roles advertising played in this newspaper and what conceptual and socio-cultural phenomena were mirrored in these ads. Important new findings have emerged in recent scholarship on this topic. Wang Runian’s monograph provides a comprehensive discussion of the cultural meaning of Shenbao advertising. He argues that the advertisements in Shenbao are evidence of the pervasiveness of consumerism in modern China. The ads promoted a hedonistic worldview, defined new gender roles, and shaped nationalistic and individual identities.  

Other scholars have echoed or supplemented this argument. Some have used the advertisements to demonstrate the spread of new ideas, the formation of new knowledge, and the shaping of new role models. For example, pen ads were used to examine the relationship between writing and identity building. Soap ads reflected the rise of the modern idea of hygiene and the introduction of new smells. Ads for clothes, daily necessities, and cosmetics helped to establish new ideals of the “modern girl,” “modern housewife,” and “ideal woman.” However, these ads did not necessarily make up a completely new

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world, but rather a world combining elements from China and the West, the new and the old, with “multiplicities in time, space, language, and imagery.” For example, many advertisements juxtaposed images of China and the West in a fictional fashion “just as the city juxtaposed them in reality.”

Medical advertising in Shenbao in particular shows this tendency toward juxtaposition. Shenbao carried a wide variety of medical advertisements that created new knowledge of the human body by combining Chinese and Western elements. The medicines being advertised were basically of two types: all-purpose medicines claiming to cure all diseases, and medicine to cure specific diseases concerning, chiefly, the shen 腎 (kidney), xue 血 (blood) and nao 腦 (brain). Pharmaceutical companies in China skillfully utilized knowledge from both Western and Chinese medical traditions to promote their products, contributing to the establishment of a new narrative about the human body. This narrative had a far-flung influence in China beginning in the late Qing. Its importance may have exceeded the impact of “professional” medical knowledge circulated through professional medical journals and institutions. Practically speaking, this hybrid medical discourse effectively changed the image of both Chinese and Western medicine and increased their market value.

Recent studies have further deepened our understanding of medical advertisements and their cultural context. For example, Sherman Cochran’s Chinese Medicine Men shows how economic globalization affected Chinese medical markets. He suggests two distinct ways consumer culture developed, a “top-down process of homogenization” and a “bottom-up process of localization.” Local entrepreneurs acted as brokers positioned between the two processes. The brokers transformed foreign goods into “domestic” goods and introduced new Western products to small inland towns and Chinese communities in South-East Asia. He emphasizes that medical advertisements played

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