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Frith, Katherine Toland

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**Advertising In Asia :
Trends And Images**

by

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TRENDS AND IMAGES**

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**Katherine T. Frith
Senior Fulbright Lecturer
Institute Technology Bandung
Bandung, Indonesia**

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past twenty years there has been a tremendous growth in transnational advertising in Asia. As the Far Eastern Economic Review points out, a number of trends are combining to fuel the advertising industry's rapid growth in this region:

1. Strong economic growth in both Northeast and Southeast Asia is creating affluent middle-class populations;
2. Market-opening measures are allowing foreign investment in service industries, including advertising;
3. Currency appreciation in Korea and Taiwan has brought down the price of imported goods;
4. Multinational consumer product giants like Unilever, Colgate-Palmolive, and Procter & Gamble encourage the entry of the advertising agencies which serve their accounts.
5. Government policies in some countries around the region are turning towards promoting domestic consumption. These policies also benefit the involvement of the TNAAs.

As the advertising industry in the ASEAN region has grown there has been a tendency to look to the West for standards of professionalism and advertising practices. This process has not only resulted in a borrowing of ideas, technologies and styles from the West but has also in many ways hampered the growth of a truly "Asian style of advertising".

Advertising is a complex mixture of art and science and in many ways the explanations given in most of the marketing and advertising textbooks are overly simplistic. These, essentially western based textbooks, teach that advertising is an outgrowth of marketing and that it works in a linear fashion. These books tell us that advertising is effective if it first, identifies the

target audience, then refines the product, communicates the products benefits etc. Seldom, however, is the word culture used in explaining how advertising works but I think that culture is the most important factor in understanding how advertising works.

Advertising acts like a mirror. It works by reflecting culture to the consumer. In most ads, the product is not featured on its own. Think about it. How many of you would bother to look at a magazine page with a can of milk all by itself on the page? The product must become part of a cultural story. It is the cultural story that we look at as we leaf through magazines, or as we watch TV.

A recent poll of Indonesians found that the favorite television advertisement of about 80% of the people polled was the "I Love the Blue of Indonesia" commercial. This commercial features about 50 seconds of music and beautiful shots of the culture and lifestyle of Indonesia. Only in the last frame do we see the advertiser's name (Bentoel, a cigarette company). And we never even see a cigarette (the product). The cigarette company has hopped a free ride on some beautiful slices of culture!

So if, in fact, this is how advertising works, by hopping a free ride on a cultural story then the old method advanced by the marketing scholars of identifying target audience, determining communication objective etc. is hardly enough to explain advertising. We need new tools to help us understand culture if we are to understand advertising. We need to use the tools that have been developed by the art critics, that is semiotics.

SEMIOTICS

The method I use to analyze the cultural stories in advertisements is called semiotics. Semiotics is the general theory of "signs" and a sign is defined as "anything taken by social convention to represent something else.

Let's take a look at some of the signs or symbols in an ordinary ad. This is an ad for powdered milk but in order to make sense out of this ad one must first understand the cultural story and the signs and symbols being used.

When we analyze an advertisement by studying the signs and symbols we are "doing" semiotic work. But in order to understand the signs and symbols of any culture one must first study the culture and the cultural values inherent in that society because the symbols used by art directors and copywriters are often culture specific.

Today, the majority of my talk is about the communication and cultural differences between the West and Non-Western cultures. Now obviously, with the advent of global communications we will see more and more that the world is becoming one. However, there are distinct differences in culture and communication between the East and West and I would like to discuss some of these.

In the West our communication is based on principles laid down during the early civilizations of the Greeks and Roman. In Asia we find very different philosophies and traditions that have guided culture and communication.

In the West the philosophies of the Greek and Romans have influenced our political and economic theories as well as our

communication principles. In addition, our culture is based on Judeo/Christian principles and has been strongly influenced by science and capitalism.

<u>WEST</u>	<u>EAST</u>
Greeks	Hinduism
Romans	Buddhism
Judeo/Christianity	Confucianism
Science	Islam
Capitalism	Christianity

If we look at the seminal works in the field of communication we can see that in the West we trace our roots back to Aristotole and his work called The Rules of Rhetoric. In this work Aristotole laid down his theory of how human communication works, He broke down the communication process into its component parts:

the communicator

the message

the receiver

According to Aristotole the objective of all communication was to persuade. Two thousand years later, when communications became a field of academic study in the U.S., we can still find the same basic theory being used. In modern textbooks on advertising as communication we still see this reductionist, linear view of

communications:

Source----Message----Channel-----Receiver-----and Feedback

Today the purpose of communication in the West is essentially to transmit information.

The attitudes, philosophies and traditions that have influenced communication in the East differ greatly from those in the West. Unlike the individualistic, egalitarian, democratic and liberal traditions of Western economic and political theory, many Asian societies value, communal, autocratic, hierarchical and conservative traditions that emphasize social harmony and meeting one's duties and obligations to the collective (whether that be the family, the community or the nation). The most important aspect of communication, in the East is:

The Maintenance of Social Harmony

The traditions that have been most important in shaping Eastern thought and philosophies of communication are Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucism, Islam and Christianity. In Indonesia, Pancasila, the national ideology, is actually derived from quite ancient roots. The word Pancasila is actually Sanskrit, it was passed into Javanese and then into modern Bahasa Indonesian. The principles that Pancasila incorporates are also quite ancient and are aimed first and foremost at maintaining social harmony.

In terms of communication, Pancasila affects everything In Indonesia from interpersonal communication, to the press to advertising. While in the West the purpose of advertising as

communication is merely to transmission product information to the consumer, in Indonesia advertising is expected to not only sell products but also to contribute to nation building.

Advertising, like the press in Indonesia, is very much shaped by the cultural values inherent in Pancasila. This results in a number of very distinct differences in the way we practice advertising. Because transmission is the main objective of communication in the West, direct communication is the norm. In advertising we say what we mean. However, in countries like Indonesia communication is more indirect. Yes is not always yes and no is not always no.

In addition to being more direct, advertising in the West has less social constraints on it. We have no policies like SARA that guide our communication. However, in Indonesia, the maintenance of social harmony in regards to communication has resulted in a national commitment not to offend. This unofficial policy, known as SARA stands for Suku (ethnic groups), Agama (Religious) issues, Ras (race) and Antar-golongan (Inter or ethnic group) issues or conflicts. Discussing issues that involve these four subjects is essentially taboo because in a country with at least 400 ethnic groups, five national religions, at least four racial groups any public discussion could possibly inflame a situation or lead to political instability. For the sake of harmony the government asks both the press and the population to restrain from public debate on these issues. When I watched a reel of "The Best Ads from Around the World" with my students, one of the commercials showed nuns

in a French monastery and I remember my students telling me that that wouldn't be acceptable in Indonesia.

DIFFERING CULTURAL VALUES

In addition to differing communication styles, there are also distinct cultural differences between the East and West. The same differences in history, geography and philosophy have resulted in quite different shared belief systems between East and West. I define culture as, "A system of shared beliefs". The Western Liberal world view of man, society and the societal arrangements, including politics, economic and human rights is not universally shared. Unlike, the individualistic, democratic, egalitarian and liberal tradition of Western political and communication theory, most Eastern societies value their consensual and communal traditions and emphasize duties to the collective and social harmony. At a conference on ASEAN press system held in Jakarta in 1988, the representatives in their final report, asserted that the regional press system is "premised on an understanding of holistic man, both rational and emotional and of man in his cultural context, rooted in his understanding of community authority and religion or spiritual belief."

The expression of the differing "shared belief" systems is evidenced by a set of cultural values that is essentially quite different in the east and the West. I would like to go over these now one by one and then show how these values become expressed in the mass media products such as advertising. These values are:

<u>WESTERN</u>	<u>NON-WESTERN</u>
Individualism	Collectivism
Technology	Tradition
Monochronic Time	Polychronic Time
Direct Discourse	Indirect Discourse
Competition	Collaboration

Individualism

Individualism, like many of our Western cultural values has its roots in Greek philosophy. Democritus, a Greek philosopher first came up with the atomic theory that divided the universe up into knowable, individual pieces of matter but this concept or world view has influenced Western scientific and political thought for centuries. Scientific thought uses reductionist thinking to attempt to know how things work by studying the parts that make up the whole.

In terms of political theory, the Framers of the American Republic used Democritus' principles when designing the American republic. Thomas Jefferson saw the individual as the basic building block of society. Today, in the United States, individualism has become a highly developed national ethos. In advertising we can see the norm tends to be the use of a single, decontextualized individual. In terms of appeal we find that advertising in the US sell products by telling the reader "This

product is good for you." In addition to advertising, as I will show later, we can also see this strong belief in individualism expressed in government policy and press practices.

In the East collectivism is a highly developed ethos. A person's identity in Asian countries is often tied to family and ethnic roots. In advertising we see expressions of collectivism. Models tend to be shown with a family or in friendship groups and the product is sold by telling the consumer "this product is good for your family."

TECHNOLOGY AND TRADITION

Another area where there are distinct cultural differences is in the way in which technology is valued. In the West we tend to think that all problems have a technological solution. Also, that "Technology Improves Life." We can see this evidenced in advertising. For example, in the U.S. if a person is overweight the solution to this problem is to buy a new machine. In Indonesia I notice that the solution to being overweight is to try a traditional product like jamu. In the stores they sell "Slimming Tea" for fat people.

In Asian countries where centuries old traditional knowledge has been preserved there is a tendency to mix the old with the new. I think that in the West we tend to look forward to science and technology rather than looking back.

DIFFERING PERCEPTIONS OF TIME

To a North American, time is a tangible commodity that can

be bought, sold, saved, spent and wasted. When I asked my students in Malaysia, what time represented, they said, "time is a gift from God."

Edward Hall has described the distinction between what he calls monochronic and polychronic time. Western cultures like the United States tend to be monochronic. They emphasize schedules, punctuality, and the precise reckoning of time. Polychronic cultures like those of Southeast Asia, tend to emphasize "the completion of transactions and the involvements of people rather than a rigid adherence to the clock."

In advertising from the West we might see more appeals for products that "save you time" or "ways to spend your time." In the East we would see a more philosophic view of time. In government policy we might expect more impatience from the West. A need to see things implemented faster. While in the East we would see a more polychronic perception of how fast things can be implemented.

MANAGING NATURE OR NURTURING NATURE

There is a distinctly different conception of nature between the East and West. In the United States, one basic assumption is that nature and the environment should be controlled for human convenience. In general, this philosophy asserts that:

"If a river overflows its banks and destroys homes and crops, dam it up or change its course; if a mountain stands in the way of convenient travel between two points, slice off the top of the mountain or tunnel through it. To most North Americans the expression to 'move a mountain' is not a metaphor symbolizing the impossible but rather an optimistic challenge based on past experience.

(Ferraro, 1990)

This "mastery over nature" orientation is inherent in Western technological development and it is interesting to note that this development model is starting to be criticized by many developing countries as environmentally unfriendly. Nature in the West is seen as needing "development".

In Shintoism, the religion of Japan, nature is considered divine. Shintoism is an animist religion that celebrates the divinity in all things including building, stones and trees. However, while this might be a bit extreme, there is tradition of reverence for nature in all countries in Asia that to some degree is being obscured in the rush to develop. Actually, the word development is a euphemism, because it always involves some destruction of nature. I have a slide of one ad from a Korean corporation that talks about helping to "develop the natural resources" of Siberia and it shows huge trees being chopped down.

COLLABORATION OR COMPETITION

Another distinct difference between the Western and Non-Westerns countries is in the differing attitudes toward collaboration and competition. Perhaps as an extension of the value of collectivism, within Eastern cultures there is a strong belief in collaboration. In Indonesia and maybe Malaysia, this is known as gotong-royong. When I first came to Indonesia, it was during the rainy season and as I watched TV I saw a big bus that had been traveling along a road during a rain storm and it had slipped off the road and gotten stuck in the mud. So, about fifty of the neighboring villagers had come out and literally

picked up the bus and put it back on the road. I can assure you that if my car gets stuck in the mud in Pennsylvania, that my neighbors will not run out of their houses and lift my car out of the mud. I had better call a tow truck! While there was a period in the U.S. when a form of gotong-royong was apparent, today it is not very common. Perhaps, because in the West we are now an advanced capitalist country, the expression of competition is more common than gotong-royong. We can see this competition expressed in advertisements for everything from soft drinks to shoes.

CONCLUSION

There are marketing professors who say that the communication and cultural differences between East and West are shrinking and that people who live in urban areas all over the world people have essentially the same lifestyle.

While I think that differences between cultures is shrinking I also think that the developing countries, particularly those in Southeast Asia are starting to try and protect their traditional values. I have become quite interested in the growing voice of discontent toward Western values and lifestyles that is emerging from Southeast Asia.

In the past the developing countries of Southeast Asia have looked West for ideas on how to develop. In the process they borrowed not only ideas, and technologies but also the cultural values that were inherent in those ideas and technologies. In terms of advertising, there has been a borrowing of symbols and

communication styles from the West.

Now, however, I think that we are beginning to see a strong united voice developing from Southeast Asia that is highly critical of some of the cultural values of the West. Already we can see in terms of press policy, human rights policy, trademark and individual property rights, that there is becoming a single shared voice from Southeast Asia. Shaky still, but the voice is emerging.

I also think that in the future we will begin to see the development of a truly "Asian style of advertising" that integrates Eastern communication values and principles and a lot less of the borrowing of symbols and speech patterns from the West that have been so widely criticized by consumer groups as cultural imperialism.