



## **Discovering the Variances in Language and Culture: A Comparison of Chinese and English Language Advertisements**

**T'ng Cheah Kiu Choon\* and Lee Siew Chin**

*School of Languages and Linguistics, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities,  
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia*

### **ABSTRACT**

Language and images used in advertisements, other than the dissemination of information, are more likely to reveal the cultural identity embedded in the advertisements. It is believed that the Chinese Language emphasises rhythmic use while the English Language is more likely to be more simple and direct. An added factor is the presence of Chinese culture, which tends towards collectivism and the allusion of the concept of auspiciousness, as opposed to the Western emphasis on individualism. As a result, advertising language in Chinese advertisements tends towards retaining the language's oriental traditional values, while the anglicised version of the same advertisement often highlights personal accomplishments. This study examined two sets (a total of four advertisements) of the same advertisements published in both Chinese and English Language newspapers, magazines or 'business information' booklets in Malaysia; where the same pictures and backgrounds are retained. The findings indicate that the Chinese version tends to convey extra information and that these advertisements tend to embed more values that are traditional and cultural in comparison to their English counterparts.

*Keywords:* Advertising discourse, cultural identity, cultural representation, language and culture, social representation, image symbolism

### **ARTICLE INFO**

*Article history:*

Received: 21 September 2015

Accepted: 15 January 2016

*E-mail addresses:*

[alfred@ukm.edu.my](mailto:alfred@ukm.edu.my) (T'ng Cheah Kiu Choon),

[leesiew@ukm.edu.my](mailto:leesiew@ukm.edu.my) (Lee Siew Chin)

\* Corresponding author

### **INTRODUCTION**

Language (including text) is a national medium for the expression of emotion, this is beyond doubt. Cao (1992: 130) argues that each nation has its own unique understanding and expression of the world in addition to its own philosophical ideas. In other words, language is equivalent to

the ideological characterisation of a nation. Businesses promoting their products use language to convey information to their customers. Consumers or customers often learn through advertising language to get what they need. As a result, commercial activities focus on the most 'attractive' the language in order to persuade or move consumers to buy, using language to inform and attract customers. In addition, "products bought and sold hinges on the promotion of ideals, images and lifestyles in discourse – linguistic, visual or otherwise" (Aiello & Thurlow, 2006: 149). Therefore, these activities are steeped in values that form the socio-cultural backbone of each community, and the language that mediates the activities of tend to embed these cultural values.

Language is the core content of advertising, and social and cultural influences control and confine the advertising language and its expression. In other words, advertising language involves social-cultural values. This infers that the language used in advertising will not only convey information about the product, but also a certain degree of culture or cultural values, philosophy or philosophical concepts to the users (Chen & Ding, 2006). The activities involved in advertising are, therefore, symbolic and thus ideological, both representing and reproducing systems of belief and power (Fairclough, 1999; Van Leeuwen, 2002).

Thus Wang and Zhang (2002: 5) have debated: "In terms of thinking, behavior characteristics and aspects of life, what are the differences between advertisements

using Chinese language and those using English advertisements?" In advertising products to a Chinese readership, for example, their explanation is the relation between the Chinese Language and its ancient civilisation. However, in multi-ethnic countries such as Malaysia and Singapore, where pluralism in language as a policy is being practised, people find it easier to understand expressions in which different languages and language sense are used, compared to in regions that are monolingual (Zhou, 2009). This is because advertisements use visual artifacts that materialise, organise, communicate, store and pass on knowledge (Yin, 2009). In doing so, they are objectified within the Malaysian social group and thus, enable mutual and shared "readings" (Raab, 2008).

People who travel to Malaysia will certainly find a lot of public information given in four languages, namely, Malay (the national language), English (Malaysia's second official language), Chinese (mother tongue of the second largest ethnic group in Malaysia, that is, the Chinese community) and Tamil (the common language of the Indian community of Malaysia). This is specifically found in commercial advertising materials (leaflets, television broadcast or newspapers). The media are prepared to use different languages in advertising the same product to cater for Malaysia's multi-ethnic readership. As Chinese Malaysians basically understand Chinese and/or English, many print media produce "one advertisement in two languages." They even go to the extent of using a single publicity concept

to suit the different religious backgrounds that make up the ethnic Chinese group. Hence, this paper looks at the discourse or the language that is actively functioning within the social context, where the ethnic Chinese figures in its society, and its culture is prevalent. Therefore, in terms of exploring advertisements targetted largely at Chinese readers, both the text and non-linguistic elements form the context of the study.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Language can be seen as a representation of social action and interaction: people interacting together in real social situations (Fairclough, 1995). Fairclough looked into ways in which language deals with ideology. As Fairclough put it, it is “language as social practice determined by social structures” (2001: 14). In terms of social practice Fairclough gave three features:

*Firstly, that language is a part of society, and not somehow external to it. Secondly, that language is a social process. And thirdly, that language is a socially conditioned process, conditioned that is by other (non-linguistic) parts of society.* (pp. 18-19)

Cook (2001) delineated the parameters of an advertisement as being made up of:

- the substance – the physical material which carries or relays the text;
- the paralinguage – meaningful behaviour that accompanies language such as non-verbals (in speech) and

choice of typeface and letter sizes (in writing);

- the situation – the properties and relations of objects and people in the vicinity of the text, as perceived by the participants;
- the co-text – text which precedes or follows;
- intertext – associated text(s) that affect(s) their interpretation;
- participants – addressers, addressees and receivers; and
- function – what the text is intended to do.

An advertisement is thus a construction of multiple and alternative voices. Both Goddard (2002) and Cook (2001) agreed that often the very core of communication in an advertisement comes from images alone, particularly images that are more metaphorical (Durand, 1987; Kaplan, 1992) than literal in nature. Visuals in advertisements serve to create, maintain, transmit and defend particular forms of practice, and the particular forms of knowledge – particularly cultural norms and beliefs that underpin them (Meyer et al., 2013). In advertisements, images have become an elementary mode for the construction, maintenance and transformation of meaning (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001; Raab, 2008).

Language too can be seen as an act of construction (Hall, 1980). Hence, meaning is achieved through associative relations, using systems of connotations or semiotics. Social meaning is constructed through the

signs and sign systems that are known to man to define himself, his reality and the world around him. Culture provides the signs and mechanisms to accomplish this. For instance, colour codes have been regulated in certain domains, like traffic signs (Wu, 2000). Similarly colours as signifiers have their role and relevance in constructing social reality, as in Chinese society, which highly regards red as an auspicious colour.

In cultural studies, according to Stuart Hall (1973) media messages are decoded or interpreted in different ways depending on an individual's cultural background, economic standing, and personal experiences. Hall postulates that media audiences decode messages based on their own social contexts. For example, since advertisements tend to have multiple layers of meaning, the audience decodes or extracts the meaning of a message into terms that they are able to understand. In other words, decoding is about understanding what someone already knows based on the information given throughout the message being received.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The approach to the study was qualitative and subjective because the interpretation of the data draws from the writers' cultural knowledge. Although subjectivity may tend towards biasness, many researchers have suggested the use of subjectivity and drawing on one's inner experience in order to better understand the subject of a study (Rennie, 1994; Schneider, 1999). Patton (1990) also pointed out that taking a

neutral stance tends to keep the researchers at a distance from the subject. Hence, the advertisements in this study were purposely selected based on the writers' knowledge of the Chinese culture.

Two pairs of advertisements of a same product in print advertisements in both the English and Chinese Language (making it a total of four ads) were selected. These advertisements were selected from newspapers or magazines, or 'business information' booklets. The selection was based on the assumption that since the advertisements were meant for a particular target readership, they therefore were constructed using the shared cultural beliefs and practices of that readership. The advertisements were selected with the intention of illustrating how the elements of culture are embedded and how in the process of producing an advertisement meant to refer to either Chinese cultural beliefs and practices using the English Language, certain innate cultural elements tended to be lost because of the lack of those elements in the English Language. The number selected for the study, although small, was sufficient for the purpose of this study to allow for a rich description and comparison of the variances in drawing out Chinese cultural values.

In order to compare the differences in discourse between the Chinese and English Language versions, the paired advertisements selected carried the same semiotic images and background. In these advertisements, the same ideological concept was used; in terms of staging of

the message – the layout, format, graphics, colours – the only difference was the written language. One basic assumption was that advertisements were first drafted in English, then translated into Chinese. Differences in terms of cultural content and meanings are identified by looking at the language choice in both versions of the advertisements.

In this study two types of domains were selected for the study: housing and food. The rationale for this choice lay in the way the Chinese cultural aspects were depicted through both the texts and the semiotic activities. In analysing the language of the advertisements, this paper adopted an eclectic mix of several analytical frameworks in the study of the selected advertisements. Firstly, by adopting semiotic analysis, the study looked at the non-linguistic activities that provide meaning to the advertisements. To add to the richness of this study, the study also focussed on the act of active interpretation – how meaning is generated in the process of interpretation i.e. what existing knowledge readers bring to the advertisement and what inferences they make from it (Chen & Feng, 2008). The inferences involve drawing on the readers' own existing knowledge rather than on what is explicit in the advertisement. This indirectly means that the advertisements also rely on psychological appeal in terms of how readers interpret the advertisements based on their socio-cultural background, what innate beliefs and knowledge they bring to their interpretation. One interesting fact about Malaysian readers is that the cultural mores of the Chinese ethnic group

may also be shared by other ethnic groups due to the multi-ethnicity of the readership – especially the readership for the English language advertisements.

## ANALYSIS

### *Culture as a Psychological Appeal*

Psychological appeal created by advertisements relies on visual and linguistic elements to influence the readers' subconscious mind and emotions. It does this by implying that doing what is suggested (in the case of advertising, buying the product or service) will satisfy a subconscious desire.

The Chinese Language versions of the advertisements tend to stress or embed traditional values intrinsic to the Chinese culture to elicit collective feelings directed to the product advertised. These external and internal factors are bound to have an effect on the language choice in advertising in Chinese. In fact, any advertising language reflecting the social and cultural values makes it easily understandable and acceptable for people, which will eventually promote the products advertised. Therefore, print advertisements that appeared in the Malaysian Chinese community inevitably reflected various aspects of Chinese social and cultural characteristics as psychological appeal.

The Chinese emphasises collectivism: to them, gift giving is an essential part of politeness towards others. Their beliefs also extend to colours and numbers – red is considered a colour of celebration and is considered lucky or fortunate where else

white, gray and black are 'funeral colours'. In contrast, Western culture tends to emphasise individualism, independence and self-reliance in terms of seeking worldly happiness as a life goal. It also emphasises the individual's right to personal freedom. Hence, the English Language version of the advertisements often focusses on individual accomplishment. This is one of the major differences between advertisements that are produced for an English-speaking versus a Chinese-speaking reader.

Often, the majority of advertising agencies in Malaysia conceive and produce an English Language version of the advertisement, then have it 'translated' into a Chinese version. Print advertisements have layout considerations; for example, the forum area provides space for creativity. With this concern, the English version predominates; the location of images, the text size and layout are pre-determined. The images, text size and the layout are not changed in the Chinese version. Only the linguistic sense is changed using Chinese words. In terms of the physical space of the advert, Chinese characters are dense in meaning and can express emotions within a limited area with ease because each Chinese word is a character with one sound. In other words, it is foreseeable that the same amount of space can allow for more Chinese words. This feature is reflected in the summary of the classification analysed in the table below. It should be noted that the 'classification' is an attempt to facilitate the analysis of data compilation. As a result,

there are two major aspects in the difference between the English Language version and the Chinese one: one is that the Chinese text is richer with information; the other is that the advertisement as a whole is culturally more dense than the message depicted in the English version (see Table 1).

#### *Density of Information*

The Chinese version of the advertisements tends to be more dense in its information than the English version, using more modifiers and descriptive phrases or idiomatic terms. Table 1 shows the comparison of two advertisements. Words or sentences in the Chinese version marked in italics are the differences compared to the English version. The last column with the (+) symbol indicates additions in the Chinese version, while the (-) symbol represents exclusion from the Chinese version.

In the two Cirrus advertisements (see Figure 1), the English version (1a) uses the words "Live without borders" and the sub-heading reads, "Here the view is different, and the space liberating, no matter how you look at it." Here, the focus tends to be on the individual and his sense of individuality, which translates into his sense of freedom – spatial, physical and mental. By contrast, the Chinese version (1b) uses the following words:

优质 生活无极限

*(Yōu zhī shēnghuó wú jíxiàn)*

*(Living) with excellent quality) Live without borders*



Table. 1  
*Comparison of Information between the Two Versions in Advertisements*

No.	Advertisement Type and Brand	English Version Source: The Star	Chinese Version Source: Sin Chew Daily	*Addition/Exclusion
1	Housing Cirrus房屋发展商 Cirrus fang wu fa zhan shang  Cirrus Housing Developer	Live without borders  Here the view is different, and the space liberating, no matter how you look at it	优质 生活无极限 Yōu zhí shēnghuó wú jíxiàn (Living) with excellent quality Live without borders  超然景致 广阔舒适空间 Chāorán jǐngzhì guǎngkuò shūshì kōngjiān Superb view and the space liberating 悠然自得 任意悠游 Yōuránzìdé rènyì yōuyóu you can live freely and comfortably Do according to your heart's content	(+)优质 excellent quality  (+)优质 excellent quality (+)超然景致 super view (+)悠然自得 you can live freely and comfortably (+)任意悠游 Do according to your heart's content (-) no matter how you look at it
2	Food – (Groundnuts) 手标花生 Shou biao hua sheng	May every step bring you abundance of wealth, good health and a taste of success	步步高陞 财运到 Bùbù gāoshēng Cáiyùn dào Go higher and higher with each step, Good luck / wealth / success will arrive  今年一定胜往年 Jīnnián yīdìng shèng wǎngnián This year will definitely surpass the previous year	(+)步步高陞 (idiom) to climb step by step; to rise steadily; on the up and up  (+)今年一定胜往年 (poetic couplet) This year will definitely surpass the previous year

Note. The English version is used as the yardstick to indicate meanings that are added or excluded

超然景致 广阔舒适空间

*(Chāorán jǐngzhì guǎngkuò shūshì kōngjiān)*

*(with) superb view and the space liberating*

悠然自得 任意悠游

*(Yōuránzìdé rènyì yōuyóu)*

*(where) you can live freely and comfortably (Doing according to your heart's content).*

In brief, the Chinese version states “a quality of life without limits,” which is equivalent in meaning to the English version, “Live without borders.” However, the sub-theme of the English text reads, “Here the view is different, and the space liberating, no matter how you look at it,” which differs from the “superb view, living leisurely and comfortable space.” This is what is meant if the text is translated directly from the Chinese version. The Chinese version also has additional information that translates as “you can live freely and comfortably (Doing according to your heart’s content).” The emphasis in the Chinese version attaches the element of *quality of life*, which is intrinsic to Chinese beliefs, thinking and attitudes regarding spatial and physical setting and environment i.e. that the place of living should be comfortable, with ample space for relaxing. All of this is equated with living well and in luxury. Quality here also includes that which can be seen with the eyes – a beautiful view.

### Cultural Values

The Chinese understanding of the world is encapsulated in the philosophical concept of neatness and symmetry. Various disciplines including architecture and art reflect this characteristic of being “neatly symmetrical objective characteristics.” The Chinese Language, including that used in the advertising front, as a mediator for culture, of course, also exhibits this feature (Chang, 1995; Yang, 1999). Chinese advertising frequently applies couplets or the four-word format, standing out as a neat and symmetrical paradigm (Wang & Meng, 2000) such as “quality first, credit first”, a very neat symmetry, in line with the Chinese habit of expression and appreciation. In addition, many Chinese advertising texts have a neat and well-proportioned structure (Zhang, 1993) in a catchy advertising verse as illustrated in an advertisement for groundnuts (see Figure 2).



Figure 1: The Cirrus advertisement. 1a: English version 1b: Chinese version. (Source: The Star, 2009 September) (Source: Sin Chew Daily, 2009 September)



Figure 2: Advertisement for groundnuts. 2a English version 2b Chinese version. (Source: The Star, 2010 January) (Source: Sin Chew Daily, 2010 January)



The advertisement, timed for the Chinese New Year, is worded to retain the symmetrical rhetoric peculiar to Chinese culture. The advertisement intended to persuade readers to buy groundnuts is phrased in a seven-word couplet, which starts with an idiomatic saying (see Figure 2b):

步步高陞财运到;

*(Bùbù gāoshēng Cáiyùn dào)*

“Wealth rises higher and higher,”

今年一定胜往年

*(Jīnnián yīdìng shèng wǎngnián)*

“this year will definitely surpass previous year”

Semiotically using tiger-paw prints to represent the year of the tiger in the Chinese zodiac calendar, in the Chinese version it is creatively placed on an onward and upward movement across the advertisement frame to give the symbolical meaning of “climbing higher and higher.” The words 步步高陞财运到 are also made up of a four-word idiom 步步高陞 (*Bùbù gāoshēng*), meaning “Go higher and higher with each step;” and the phrase 财运到 (*Cáiyùn dào*), which translates as “*Good luck / wealth / success will arrive (in the future).*” The second part of the couplet, 今年一定胜往年 (*Jīnnián yīdìng shèng wǎngnián*), which has the meaning, “This year will definitely surpass the previous year,” is not mentioned in the English version.

The English version is limited to English orthographic conventions. It is

written horizontally therefore, the paw print has to move horizontally upwards to portray a sense of rising. The English sense of the advertisement, “May every step bring you an abundance of wealth, good health and the taste of success,” and the horizontal movement of the paw prints can only convey a ‘step by step’ movement (see 2a) compared to the semiotic sense of soaring ‘higher and higher’ depicted by the Chinese version that is aided by the Chinese orthographic convention, is written in a vertical manner, thus giving a sense of vertical upward movement (see 2b). Chinese culture is embedded within every Chinese character whereas the English lexis has limitations. However, to increase the number of words in the English version would spoil the conciseness necessary for an advertisement slogan. Hence, the essence of the Chinese culture is either enhanced (as in 2b) or limited (as in 2a) by a language’s orthographic conventions.

In the semiotic sense, to the Chinese people, red is a traditional colour that represents happiness, beauty, success and good fortune. Red signifies good luck, celebration, happiness, joy, vitality, long life ([http://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/Chinese\\_Customs/colours.htm](http://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/Chinese_Customs/colours.htm)). Therefore, to produce an advertisement meant for a festive occasion, the colour red would be present in any aspect, either as the background colour seen in the groundnut advertisement (Figure 2), or in the colour of the product (the packaging of the groundnuts) to express auspiciousness. In addition, the colour used for the tiger’s

paw print is gold and the text is yellow, both of which culturally signify good luck. According to experts in Chinese culture, the use of yellow as a colour is symbolic, indicating prestige and heroism. Gold represents completeness and wealth ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Color\\_in\\_Chinese\\_culture](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Color_in_Chinese_culture)). Both versions of the advertisement apply the use of these two colours. Thus, in the semiotic sense, colour application, whether as background, or in the print, has implications in a cultural sense.

## CONCLUSION

The influence of culture in Chinese and English advertising language is multifaceted. Malaysian and Western advertising concepts also reflect different aspects of the various features of Chinese and Western cultures. The results of the analysis show how Chinese and Western culture permeate the language used in advertisements. In order to persuade, it has to be accepted by the reader; hence, the emphasis is on the known cultural mores, beliefs and needs to prompt the reader to buy the products advertised. The results of this study also show that the use of culturally dense language with its accompanying images has a different focus on different target buyers; readers of the English version would refer to values modified with a fusion of westernised thinking while readers of the Chinese version would wholly apply the Chinese sense of the words and their underlying

meanings into their interpretation of the advertisement.

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