From Schenectady to Shanghai: Dr Williams' Pink Pills for Pale People and the hybrid pathways of Chinese modernity¹

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I don't suppose there is a proprietary medicine manufacturer of importance in any part of the world who has not, at one time or another, encouraged his imagination to play with the idea of the prosperous business he might build up, and the wealth he might accumulate, if he could, by some means, convince a reasonable number of Chinese of the efficiency of his remedies.²

Pills on the move

The American folk-singer Pete Seeger tells a story about a girl who falls ill and is prescribed Dr Johnson's Pink Pills for Pale People by the doctor. Her father makes up a silly song for her while on the phone and is overheard by the inquisitive telephone wire, which replicates and disseminates the song to all its 'friends' until the communications infrastructure becomes so noisy that no one can hold a proper conversation. The government eventually cuts down the telephone poles and wires, throwing them overboard far from shore. In the watery depths, however, the wires continue to resonate with the sounds of the song:

*Pink pills for pale people,
Pink pills for pale people.
Pink pills, pink pills,
Pink pills for pale people.
Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!*³

The story takes its inspiration from a widely distributed patent medicine called Dr Williams' Pink Pills for Pale People. Though Seeger turns it into a fable about the white noise of commercialism in modern society, the tale also suggests the ubiquity and pervasiveness of the product to which it alludes.

In real life, Dr Williams' Pink Pills for Pale People never languished in the sea but made it across several oceans. This chapter examines advertisements for the product in Chinese-language publications in Shanghai during the early twentieth century, comparing them to English-language advertisements printed in Shanghai, England, and the United States. Much like the telephone poles that refuse to be silenced, the long advertising history of Dr Williams' Pink Pills in Shanghai represents survival against the odds. In marked contrast to the endlessly repetitive underwater song that Seeger describes in his story, however, Dr Williams' Pharmaceutical Company created a range of culturally adaptive approaches to selling their product. Other Western brands in Shanghai favoured one of two marketing strategies: dropping their product unchanged into the new environment or attempting to fashion a market for new tastes. In contrast, the advertisements for Dr Williams' Pink Pills insisted on the particularities of their specific product while evoking a familiar psychical world for their Chinese consumers. Taking the extensive history of the pills into account thus complicates the accepted narrative of advertising as the major driving force of urban modernity in Shanghai and offers a more nuanced account of the way hybridity – not only cultural, but also temporal – was strategically mobilised to articulate a distinctly Chinese vision of twentieth-century society.⁴

Studies of advertising content in this historical and geographical setting have tended to focus on the development during this period of a multivalent visual culture that promoted an aspirational or fictive reality. Tani Barlow claims that the 'sexy girl iconography' in 1920s and 1930s Shanghai presents 'the fantasy of modern social life in the colonial modern arena' even through products as mundane as insect repellent.⁵ In *Selling Happiness*, Ellen Johnston Laing similarly argues for the role of calendar posters in transforming the visual culture of Shanghai and normalising Western-style art for the Chinese public.⁶ Along the same lines, Weipin Tsai contends that advertising in the newspaper *Shenbao* helped to produce the idealised image of the housewife as at once 'consumer, domestic, and patriot' in the new vision of liberated

femininity that emerged after the 1915 New Culture Movement.⁷ Even in case studies in which the advertising medium consists primarily of text, emphasis is placed on the construction of an ideological position: Susan Glosser's study of the Shanghai Dairy Association's marketing campaign for milk, for example, tracks how a product originally 'so foreign as to be literally indigestible' for most Chinese was recast 'as the key to China's success in the evolutionary struggle to survive'.⁸ Such scholarly accounts frequently align modernity in China with Westernisation and progressiveness in ways that diminish the role of internal forces in influencing the social, economic, and ideological shifts that took place in China in the decades following the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1912. While historians such as Samuel Y. Liang and Marie-Claire Bergère have identified the need for more nuanced accounts of Shanghai and Chinese modernity, their works do not focus on advertising culture as an important site of cultural confluence.⁹

The case study of Dr Williams' Pink Pills for Pale People advertisements in Shanghai suggests that modernity in China emerged through a more complex negotiation between old and new, local and global, rather than arriving as a fully fledged cultural export from the West. These widely popular pills were marketed in Chinese-language publications in Shanghai from at least 1913 to 1941, and from even earlier in the *North China Herald*, an English-language newspaper that was also based in the city. While these Shanghai advertisements employed the cutting-edge strategies of representation of the time, this progressiveness belies other aspects of the Pink Pills story, most notably its sustained reputation as backwards and outdated in the West. The forgotten Chinese afterlife of this derided patent pills opens up an alternate version of global modernity that develops along hybrid cultural and temporal pathways. Beyond calling into question the sequential connotations implicit in the language of modernity, the deeply site-specific sense of the modern self that emerges in this case study of early twentieth-century China suggests the need to decentralise the role of the West in the historical narrative of modernity. One localised modernity implies the existence of others, each unique in its configuration.

A chequered history

A discussion of the history of Dr Williams' Pink Pills for Pale People helps to contextualise the inroads it made in Shanghai. Formulated in

Figure 10.1 Dr Williams' Pink Pills for Pale People.

Canada by Dr William Frederick Jackson in 1886, the pills quickly spread to the United States.¹⁰ Following the company's relocation from Ontario to Schenectady, New York, Dr Williams' Pink Pills were marketed extensively in England and around the world. By the early twentieth century, the product had been advertised in more than eighty countries.¹¹ A 1907 advertisement, for instance, listed branch offices in 'Rockville, Ont., London, Eng., Paris, France, Sidney [*sic*], N.S.W., Cape Town, South Africa, Bombay, India, Rio Janeiro, Brazil, Mexico City, Mex.'¹² George Fulford, who 'purchased Jackson's patent for the paltry sum of \$53.01' in 1890,¹³ reportedly amassed a fortune of over £1.6 million after just sixteen years of marketing the pills.¹⁴ Though it had become an object of contempt and a symbol of quackery in England

and North America by the early twentieth century, the company existed until 1989.¹⁵

According to an 1899 *Illustrated London News* advertisement, Dr Williams' Pink Pills could cure a vast range of ills: anaemia, consumption, scrofula, rickets, fits, chronic erysipelas, bronchitis, lumbago, rheumatism, rheumatic gout, sciatica, eczema, paralysis, locomotor ataxy, neuralgia, St Vitus's Dance, and nervous headache.¹⁶ This list of purported uses was not exhaustive, since other advertisements emphasised different sets of ailments. Another *Illustrated London News* advertisement from 1898, for example, claimed to have healed an ex-Royal Marines sergeant who had 'suffered more than most men in a lifetime' from myriad afflictions, among them 'disease of the lungs' and 'giddiness of the head'.¹⁷ In short, Pink Pills were sold as a cure-all drug, adaptive to longtime medical concerns such as rickets as well as the proliferation of nineteenth-century anxieties about nervous systems gone awry.

Given these untempered claims to miraculous power, the actual efficacy of the pills should come as little surprise. Even as early as 1897, the brand had been dogged with accusations that its contents included harmful ingredients such as 'impure carbonate of iron, with a little arsenic, green copperas, and pearl ash'.¹⁸ In March of 1902, the British publication *The Chemist and Druggist* published a virulent attack on Dr Williams' Pink Pills in the form of a coroner's inquest into the death of an unnamed cabdriver in an article appearing right before a piece entitled 'The Week's Poisonings'.¹⁹ The results from pharmaceutical tests are less lurid, though not by much. Table 10.1 gives the results of a series of lab tests, reflecting the changes in the ingredients of the pills over the years.

In short, only the first formula seems wholly innocuous. Ferrous sulphate, listed as 'exsiccated iron sulphate' and 'iron sulphate' through the years, is an iron supplement.²⁰ According to the National Institutes of Health, however, the 80.99 milligrams present in the 1961 formula is nearly double what is now considered the tolerable upper intake level for adults, undermining the relative harmlessness of the caffeine and Vitamin B₁ (thiamine hydrochloride) it also contains.²¹ The 1935 formula, which contains significantly smaller ferrous sulphate quantities, also contains manganese dioxide, used today in pyrotechnics and as a 'depolarizer in dry cell batteries', as well as copper sulphate, which

TABLE 10.1 Contents of Dr Williams' Pink Pills for Pale People

Formula, 1905		Formula, 1935		Formula, 1961	
Powdered liquorice	45.16%	Excipients	38.68%	Iron sulphate (exsiccated)	70.40%
Iron sulphate (exsiccated)	24.19%	Iron sulphate	26.66%	Caffeine citrate	28.17%
		Sodium carbonate	26.66%		
		Extract of gentian	3.33%	Manganese sulphate	0.01%
Anhydrous potassium carbonate	21.29%	Powdered aloes	2.66%		
		Manganese dioxide	1.77%	Copper sulphate	0.01%
Sugar	6.45%	Zinc phosphide	0.16%	Thiamine hydrochloride	0.01%
Magnesia	2.90%	Copper sulphate	0.08%		

Source: P. G. Homan, B. Hudson, and R. C. Rowe, *Popular Medicines: An Illustrated History* (London/Chicago: Pharmaceutical Press, 2008), 141–2.

Note: In the source, the formulas for the three years are each given in different units ('grains' in 1905, percentages in 1935, and milligrams in 1961) and have been standardised and listed in descending order in this table.

is toxic when ingested and used as a textile mordant and wood preservative.²² In contrast, the earliest formula combined potassium carbonate and magnesia, both food additives, with a sugar- and liquorice-heavy mixture. While safe enough, this combination gives new force to the 1897 advertisement declaring, 'These are not like pills; they are like sweets.'²³

In North America and Britain, the public tide had turned definitely against Dr Williams' Pink Pills by the first two decades of the twentieth century. Perhaps influenced by the many scathing pieces appearing in professional medical journals, the United States government seized large quantities of the pills in 1915 on grounds that the company had made 'false and fraudulent claims.'²⁴ While US advertisements subsequently worded their declarations more conservatively, the company was accused of continuing to make outrageous assertions in international advertisements over which the United States government held no jurisdiction.²⁵

The divergence in advertising strategy across global markets was both more and less extreme than contemporary critics asserted, depending on the region being considered. In most foreign countries, Pink Pills advertisements aligned closely with their counterparts in England and the United States. However, the marketing of the pills in Shanghai – and in China more widely – presents an anomaly that suggests highly localised efforts to promote the products.

Foreign opportunities

While Dr Williams' Pharmaceutical Company sold its products in many global markets, its marketing history in Shanghai offers an unusual case in terms of timing, scale, and audience-specific strategy. Most foreign advertisements for the company appeared in the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth. This turn-of-the-century period roughly coincides with the company's heyday in North America and England but predates the widespread circulation of Pink Pills advertisements in Shanghai by several decades. For instance, in South Africa, the company trademarked the name by 1893 and was circulating advertisements in local publications such as the *Mafeking Mail and Protectorate Guardian* soon after.²⁶

Additionally, the company generally focused on English-speaking audiences in these foreign territories, even in dual-language publications. While the South Africa-based *Mafeking Mail and Protectorate Guardian* was published in both English and Afrikaans, Dr Williams' advertisements only appeared in the English sections. The same was the case with the *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, a Bengali and English newspaper published in Calcutta. Many of these English advertisements were taken directly from Anglo-American publications and cited testimonies from England or the United States rather than drawing from a local customer base.

There were some foreign-language advertisements, but they were the exception rather than the rule. Between 1906 and 1907, three different Zulu advertisements for Dr Williams' Pink Pills ran in *Ilanga lase Natal*, a Cape Town-based newspaper that was the first Zulu newspaper. However, no more appeared in the publication thereafter. Spanish-language advertisements appeared on a greater scale around the turn of the century in a few South American publications, such as *El Comercio*

in Peru and *Mercurio de Valparaiso* in Chile, but still in relatively limited numbers.²⁷ In comparison, as will be further discussed, the marketing of the pills in China established a scale of distribution and level of cultural tailoring that made it unique even within the global history of the company.

The belated but dramatic flourishing of Dr Williams' Pink Pills for Pale People in Shanghai suggests that the company's products can be read, in more ways than one, as holdovers from a bygone time. This interpretation even appeared in some contemporary accounts, including that of the North Carolinian agriculturalist and travel writer Clarence Hamilton Poe. After travelling through Asia from 1910 to 1911, Poe wrote angrily about a time in Shanghai when he discovered an advertisement for Dr Williams' Pink Pills for Pale People on the back of a religious newspaper. He interpreted this as a prime example of Western avarice preying on Chinese ignorance and vehemently criticised opportunists for 'coining the poor Chinaman's substantial shekels' using 'American patent medicines discredited at home by the growing intelligence of our people'.²⁸

Poe's picture of the Chinese people trailing behind Americans in an ignorant past is undoubtedly problematic, part of a long Western tradition of mapping evolutionary progress onto cultural difference. More importantly within the context of this study, however, his comments situate the advertisements as temporally displaced. In Poe's reading, despite the contents of the patent medicine having been established as outmoded and inert, it continues to function as an active agent by 'coining' and conning Chinese citizens.

This case study seeks to examine the counterintuitive and continued pertinence of Dr Williams' Pink Pills in Shanghai long after the brand's obsolescence in other parts of the world. Advertisements for the pills in Shanghai combined hallmarks of their marketing in other parts of the world with a customised blend of references to longstanding healing traditions as well as modern Chinese culture. Questions of medical efficacy aside, these advertisements resist a linear and Western-centric account of modernity. Contemporary Chinese commentators anthropomorphically located the contributions of the West in the two figures of 'Mr Science' and 'Mr Democracy'. However, the study of modernity in early twentieth-century Shanghai must also account for 'Dr Williams' as a Western import that disrupts the narrative of unidirectional progress and influence. Instead, the extensive body of advertising for Dr

Williams' Pink Pills in Shanghai represents an archive of complex and occasionally contradictory negotiations of self and society during the first decades of the twentieth century in relation both to the outside world and to the past.

Pills for all people

In their initial encounters with Dr Williams' Pink Pills for Pale People, Chinese consumers would probably have been less mystified than by unfamiliar products like deodorant, powdered milk, or even porridge oats, which entered the market around the same time. A 1923 Quaker Oats advertisement had to assure consumers that it could be 'used in the same way as rice' (效用如米).²⁹ In contrast, the *wan* (丸) or pill form of medication dates back several centuries in China. Traditionally, a variety of medicinal powders were bound with water and honey, creating a round ball that was then covered with a protective wax coating.³⁰ Though there is no indication that Dr Williams' Medical Company revised the familiar 'ovoid' shape of its Pink Pills, they took other steps to ensure that their brand and product were appropriate for the intended audience.³¹ In Chinese, 'Dr Williams' Pink Pills for Pale People' was translated as *Weilianshi Dayisheng Hongse Buwan* (韋廉士大醫生紅色補丸), or 'Doctor Weilianshi Red Supplement Pills'. Alliteration abandoned, the pink pills became red in name, a colour with greater cultural resonance and existing precedence in traditional medicine packaging.³² During the Qing Dynasty, for instance, an apothecary company called He Ming Xing Tang (何明性堂) produced detoxifying *hong wan* (紅丸) or 'red pills' that appear to have been widely distributed.³³ Moreover, this Chinese name dropped the reference to being 'for Pale People' present in the English. Instead, the roundabout allusion to a sickly complexion was replaced in Chinese with an explicit declaration of the pills as *bu* (補), adopting the language of bodily nourishment and strengthening central to Chinese medicine.³⁴ In English advertisements for Dr Williams' Pink Pills, the frequent references to impure blood likely derived from the vestiges of belief in humoral theory.³⁵ Translated into the terms of Chinese corporal understanding, this was depicted as *xueqi chongying* (血氣充盈): sluggishness or thickness of the blood from problems with the circulation of *qi* (氣).³⁶ Incidentally, as a purported panacea, Dr Williams' Pink Pills were in a good position to fit the symptom-based rather than disease-based approach central to

traditional Chinese medical treatment.³⁷ Sherman Cochran has argued, using the British-American Tobacco Company as his subject, that 'the transmission of culture was not simply a matter of an American business unilaterally exporting to China advertising that had been invented in America.'³⁸ In drawing on a long history of Chinese medicine, Dr Williams' Pharmaceutical Company fashioned implied lines of cultural transmission that ran not only between different places but also different times. On many levels, then, the Shanghai advertisements carefully situated the product as simultaneously new and known.

Available evidence suggests that Dr Williams' Pink Pills was a widely available and increasingly established product in Shanghai. While consumers always had the option of contacting the company directly with their orders, in the mid-1920s, the advertisements went from declaring that the pills could also be procured 'wherever Western medicines were sold' (凡經西藥者均有出售) to announcing that they were available 'at all pharmacies' (各藥局均有), a significantly wider claim.³⁹ By 1941, advertisements sent customers directly to the National Department of Health (國民政府衛生署) for their pills, suggesting integration into official distribution channels.⁴⁰ Given the beleaguered reputation of Pink Pills in North America and England, surely no one could have predicted the stamp of approval that Dr Williams' Pharmaceutical Company appears to have received in Shanghai from a governmental organisation whose focus on establishing public health and sanitation standards has been seen as a main component of developing modernity in China. The success of the product was particularly remarkable in the immediate wake of the New Culture and May Fourth Movements of the mid-1910s and 1920s, which reacted against both traditional Chinese culture and anything suggesting excessive imperialist influence, leading to a growing enthusiasm for *aiguo huo* (愛國貨), or patriotic products.⁴¹ As a foreign product that had been familiarised through the form of traditional Chinese medicine, Dr Williams' Pink Pills should have been doubly pressured. It seems, however, that the pills' hybrid identity functioned as a strength rather than a liability.

Anatomy of an advertisement

For the most part, the complex cultural mixture underlying Chinese-language advertisements for Dr Williams' Pink Pills for Pale People

were coded through a highly consistent set of content and formatting tropes. This happened despite the fact that they appeared in publications with a diverse range of orientations and intended audiences, including *Shenbao* (申報/Shanghai News), *Liang You Hua Bao* (良友畫報/The Young Companion), *Funü Zazhi* (婦女雜誌/Ladies' Magazine), and *Funü Shibao* (婦女時報/Women's Eastern Times). Excepting a few runs in *Liang You Hua Bao* in 1925, these advertisements tended not to be repeated within the same publication, suggesting that Dr Williams' Pharmaceutical Company had the financial means to hire a large staff to source and design new variations on their established patterns of layout and narration.

Chinese advertisements for the Pink Pills made use of personal testimonies as their main rhetorical technique, a practice that derived from overseas. In England and the United States, the earliest advertisements for the pills had sought to create an aura of objectivity around personal testimonies, framed in pseudo-investigative style. One *Ladies' Home Journal* advertisement, for example, had the following heading:

*An Illinois Miracle: A Case of Deep Interest to Women Everywhere: Saved Through a Casual Glance at a Newspaper – Weak, Pale, and in a Deplorable Condition when Relief Came – A Remarkable Narrative Carefully Investigated by a Dubuque Times Reporter.*⁴²

Other English-language advertisements for the Pink Pills in China replicate this textual encounter (i.e., 'a casual glance at a newspaper') that apparently brings about the 'Illinois miracle' mentioned above. For instance, the *North China Herald* of 18 January 1913 includes a two-column advertisement that narrates one Señora F. Palacio's recovery after 'a pamphlet telling of the many cures Dr Williams' Pink Pills have wrought' fortuitously arrives in her husband's post-box.⁴³ These advertisements emphasised authority derived from documentation (pamphlets, newspaper) or genre (investigative journalism) in order to legitimise their claims to the consumer.

In Chinese advertisements, this testimonial strategy was taken much further and given a slightly different focus. Antonia Finnane identifies a *Shenbao* advertisement from 1913 as featuring Madame Liu Pan, a Shanghaiese sewing machine instructor.⁴⁴ Another *Shenbao* advertisement, which ran in April of 1915, includes two testimonies, one from Mr Cui Xiwu (崔錫鴻君), a clerk in the executive department of the

Ou-lu Company, and another by Mr Zhao Shaoqin (招少琴君) from the Guangdong Da Gong Bao news agency (Figure 10.2).⁴⁵ Advertisements for Pink Pills for Pale People in *Funü Shibao* included testimonies from 'the wife of Mr Ding Zhenzhi' (丁振之君之夫人) and 'the wife of Mr Liu Zhengxing' (劉振興君之夫人).⁴⁶ These lengthy personal testimonies were accompanied by woodcut portraits of the individuals. Explicitly labeled as *yǔzhào* (玉照), or formal portraits, these images contributed to the cultural and personal specificity of the advertisements, particularly when compared to English-language advertisements that often used more generic imagery. Furthermore, with very few exceptions, the Chinese advertisements for Pink Pills always included a drawing of the packaging, most likely for promoting brand recognition, though this was often not included in advertisements in North America or England. In contrast to Chinese advertisements for companies like British American Tobacco, which initially featured 'illustrations to German fairy tales ... American landscapes and American heroes like George Washington and Abraham Lincoln', Dr Williams' Pharmaceutical Company appears to have been early in adopting audience-specific advertising techniques in the Chinese market.⁴⁷

Consequently, despite their heavy emphasis on text, Pink Pills advertisements in Shanghai tended to emphasise personal connection rather than written authority. A 1923 *Shenbao* advertisement, for example, alludes to a large populace who has 'confidence [in their product] from personal experience or the experiences of friends' (由其自己之經驗或由其友人之閱歷確知).⁴⁸ Similarly, multiple testimonials in *Liang You Hua Bao* refer to a friend (友人) who recommended the medicine to the sick man or woman.⁴⁹ Despite the obvious ironies of medium, the transference of knowledge was framed as happening not between text and person but between one person and another. This emphasis of word-of-mouth connection can be interpreted as a means of evoking the *guanxi* (關係), or interpersonal relationships, central to Chinese culture. This nuance marked a way in which the advertisements for Dr Williams' Pink Pills were more sophisticated than those for competing medicines, such as Sanatogen Tonic, which focused more directly on the product's properties.⁵⁰

Framing the advertisement as a discourse among friends, family, and fellow Chinese nationals, moreover, may have allowed Dr Williams'

報申三期星日四廿月三年四國民華中

在廣東又有六曲韋廉士大醫生紅色補丸

韋廉士大醫生紅色補丸乃是寰球惟一之聖藥能使身體衰弱者復原有力量無論先天不足或後天有損均可轉弱為強治愈者已盈千累萬矣其故無他蓋是丸能清血補血並所生稠紅之新血運行全體使受損之腦筋與各臟腑復生新力以補其身體之虧乏而得康強之樂焉

請觀廣東二紳士之來函其一係中年一係少年是也粵路公司董事局書記員崔錫鴻君來書云僕稟賦素弱幼年已覺血氣不足弱冠而後因用心過度虧損愈甚近年以來偶用心力即覺神思昏亂頭目眩暈服藥調治未見痊可試服韋廉士大醫生紅色補丸未及匝月而所患種種苦惱竟銷滅於無形

廣東大公報帳房招少琴君來函云余患腰脊疼痛有時如圓後起時雙目忽然昏花有如天翻地覆胃口不開百藥罔效試服韋廉士大醫生紅色補丸身體復原精神倍增眼光驟能視遠矣

韋廉士大醫生紅色補丸所造之新血曾經治愈 房事無能 氣溫骨痛 腎風酸楚 胃不消化 皮膚諸恙 以及婦科各症均見奇功也凡懸售西藥者均有出售或直向四川路八十四號韋廉士大醫生藥局函購亦可每一瓶英洋一元五角每六瓶英洋八元郵力一概在內

韋廉士大醫生紅色補丸

廣州大公報

招少琴玉照

頭痛與面上瘰 點極有功效且 清導丸藥性和 平出自天然可 向商店購用每 瓶小洋六角或 寄郵票六角至 上海四川路八 十四號韋廉士 大醫生藥局即班 回件

口氣臭穢否 如有之只須用 清導丸在一夜 之間洗滌淨盡 矣此丸通利大 便平肝降火治 頭痛與面上瘰 點極有功效且 清導丸藥性和 平出自天然可 向商店購用每 瓶小洋六角或 寄郵票六角至 上海四川路八 十四號韋廉士 大醫生藥局即班 回件

光潤唐丸

廿千生里醫八千蓬寓金臨藥精

九一第對德十一路虹日等藥

白一面藥二百二日全座藥

丸濁白止立

效平角每

塔和保北館路二上情元膠瓶

12 臨太香里畫馬海潤不科川

(根斷愈包)

藥痛氣胃心

首上元大斯此一痛難胃無此

省海小瓶根瓶瓶到若氣論何見

林瓶瓶一水止此十之痛何見

林瓶瓶三元不後分道及理效

之藥角中再包馬症症遠心極

北 牛飲愈上香藥年肝遠

榮番月山口虹

做黃藥炸夜宵本日售增

首虹路先諸本由妙所賣點五公同

順口外生 女妙做增夜宵本加

安三餘臨界者屋珍味客元水東

密二無諸請用飯祇三東東每

西昌不位後日半黃角洋茶客

(寶秘陽壯)

丹子種元培

首上兩虛神功等精後凡敗此

省海一請百效登天患神丹

東廣一資信立服元失先壯十

藥場試世見丹固國天防分

有之有且數不周不症

每副精分服是實效

Figure 10.2 1915 Shenbao advertisement for Dr Williams' Pink Pills featuring testimonies from Mr Cui Xiwu (top) and Mr Zhao Shaoqin (bottom), 3 April 1915.

Pharmaceutical Company to circumvent anti-foreign sentiment by minimising the cross-cultural origins of their product. While the May Fourth movement of 1919 catalysed resistance to traditional Confucian values and rejected the veneration of the elderly, the emphasis in the media of the late 1920s that a modern housewife must also be a 'mother of good citizens' meant that a good deal of attention remained on the nuclear family, though now shifted to the younger generations.⁵¹ The trend of pairing Pink Pills with other Dr Williams Pharmaceutical Company products in advertisements after the 1930s likely reflects this trend, particularly as Baby's Own Tablets were often the secondary product of choice. A *Liang You Hua Bao* issue in 1933, for instance, included an advertisement for both the Pink Pills and Baby's Own Tablets entitled 'The whole family of Mr. Wu Jinjing' (吳俊卿先生闔府), featuring a couple with their four children.⁵² While the English-language advertisements for Dr Williams' Pharmaceutical Company hewed closely to the portraits of solitary suffering that seemed particularly symptomatic of the Western experience of modernity, these Chinese advertisements drew a wider orbit around the company's various products and the people who used them.

At the same time, these gestures towards new values were countered in the advertisements by features more closely associated with the traditional. Linguistically, the Chinese used in these advertisements appears not to be in *baihua* (白話), or the vernacular register that was gaining traction in writing during this time. Instead, Classical Chinese phrasing and textual markers give a formal inflection to the language. The previously mentioned 1923 *Shenbao* advertisement described its wisdom as 'coming from personal experience or those of friends' (由其自己之經驗或由其友人之閱歷), employing *zhi* (之) as a possessive marker. Similarly, *ye* (也) appears with some regularity at the end of sentences for emphasis, as do compressed four-word phrases. These features, along with highly formal diction throughout the body of these advertisements, suggest Classical language registers.

Similarly, while women were sometimes portrayed progressively as nation-building mothers, at other times they were shuffled out of the limelight, as in the case of a 1929 *Liang You Hua Bao* advertisement that includes a testimony about the wife of a certain Mr Fung.⁵³ In the text, he speaks on her behalf and refers to her using the phrase *neizhi*

(内子), a traditional term for ‘wife’ that men used when addressing outsiders, literally translating to ‘the one inside’. Moreover, the Chinese advertisements appear not to target women, as the various English-language advertisements for Dr Williams’ Pink Pills seemed to do. Barbara Mittler notes that advertisements directed toward women in *Shenbao* frequently used punctuation marks within the text – a newer writing style influenced by Western practices.⁵⁴ However the Chinese Pink Pills advertisements that have been found are written in continuous text blocks without punctuation, following the assumption in most traditional forms of Chinese writing – much akin to the practice of *scriptio continua* in Classical Latin and Greek – that the educated and predominantly male reader will automatically recognise clausal and sentence breaks without the need for spaces and punctuation. The media and advertising culture of early twentieth-century Shanghai certainly offered women a new prominence in the public sphere. Such visual prominence did not necessarily equal progressiveness, however, but could just as easily be employed to re-affirm rather than reform the old.

Tailored and culturally adept, the advertisements for Dr Williams’ Pink Pills for Pale People in Shanghai represented extended and groundbreaking efforts by a Western company to inhabit the social and cultural world of its new audience. As the advertisements themselves show, however, this world was itself one of conflicting forces. The company’s linguistic and cultural touchpoints often drew heavily on traditional visions of language, gender, medicine, and authority, even as the product’s prominent commercialisation and implied association with the National Department of Health suggested that the company sought to push against many of these same traditional structures in order to take advantage of new systems for mass marketing and distribution.

Where she stands

One of the most striking illustrations of the complex position given to the Chinese subjects featured in advertising for Dr Williams’ Pharmaceutical Company products appears not in newspaper advertising, which has been the main focus of this chapter, but in a 1922 *yuefēnpái* (月份牌), a type of calendar poster that served as a major medium

Figure 10.3 Dr Williams' yuefenpai poster designed by Hang Zhiying, 1922.

for advertisement in China during the early twentieth century (Figure 10.3). Designed by Chinese artist Hang Zhiying, this poster includes a prominent image of the Pink Pills for Pale People packaging, along with smaller inset images of two other products from Dr Williams' Pharmaceutical Company: Baby's Own Tablets, the infant supplement mentioned above, and Pinkette's, a laxative. In the image itself, a woman dressed in blue patterned silk stands next to a little girl in a Western-style pink outfit with a matching bow in her hair and Mary-Jane shoes. The woman appears to be wearing black silk stockings, which became popular among Chinese women during the 'sudden flurry of interest in Western fashions' following the 1911 Revolution.⁵⁵ She leans on an iron fence wrought with a Chinese-style design, but this fence is linked to an arbour of wisteria growing on a Western-style trellis. Thus, the picture ties together imagery from a wide range of origins, reflecting the cultural fluidity that was central to the lifestyles of Shanghai's privileged classes.

At the same time, this poster contains many hallmarks of the text-heavy print advertisements discussed earlier. The colophon text to the upper right of the image declares, 'To keep your family safe and healthy, you must be prepared with the world-renowned medicines of Dr Williams' (卻保安康居家需備天下馳名韋廉士醫生各種靈藥). The word used for 'medicines', interestingly, is *lingyao* (靈藥). While *ling* can mean 'highly effective', it also has connotations of the spiritual or magical. Another translation of *lingyao* could be 'miraculous cure', which would seem closer in emphasis to the *xiandan* (仙丹) or mystical elixirs of Chinese folklore than to Western medicine and scientific progress. Moreover, the image is not left to speak for itself, which may be wise considering that the woman portrayed looks fairly frail. Instead, it contains far more text than appears on the usual calendar girl poster, which sometimes includes only the brand name and company details. Located at the bottom of the calendar and in the two inset boxes at the top, these blocks of text anchor the calendar and prevent it from being a solely visual advertisement. The font is far too small to be taken in from a distance, and thus it forces the close reading encounter that was central to the early English advertisements of Dr Williams' Pink Pills for Pale People discussed earlier. Just as the clothing and surrounding of the figures in the advertisement reflect a complicated mixture of influences, the woman's stance seems

to reflect the same ambiguous poise. Does she stand on her own two Western-shod feet, bolstered by the strength given to her by the packet of Pink Pills in her left hand? Or does her weight actually fall on a symbol of tradition, the elaborately wrought red fence? The semiotic space of this *yuefenpai* resists easy decoding, its sense of modernity signalled more through its fluid integration of varied cultural points of reference than in the fact that it is a Western product she clasps in her hand.

While the colourful, rich imagery of the *yuefenpai* stands out against the stark, black-and-white newspaper advertisements that were the main medium for Pink Pills advertisements, the indeterminacy of the calendar poster is highly characteristic of the brand's resistance to clean geographical and teleological narratives about cultural influence and historical progress. Spanning several decades, the advertisements for Dr Williams' Pink Pills in Shanghai clearly demonstrate how the transmission of a Western product resulted in the creation of culturally hybrid modes of expression and self-identification, producing a deftly accommodating visual and linguistic vocabulary. While excoriated and dismissed in Northern America and England, the product's counterintuitive survival in Shanghai seemed to lend truth – psychologically, if not medically – to its dubious claims of being everything to everyone. Moreover, the dexterous blend of cultural references found in these advertisements illuminate varied, oftentimes frictional forces that produced change and moulded selves in early twentieth-century Shanghai. In particular, for a port city that had been home to a significant foreign presence since the Opium Wars of the previous century, it is critical to emphasise that this hybridity represented not only inter-cultural but also intra-cultural confluences. The inhabitants of Shanghai could choose between an array of possibilities for self-definition, between being oriented toward the future and influenced by the past, between being conclusively 'Western' and adaptively 'Shanghaiese'. In revealing the interwoven pathways of cultural influence defining early twentieth-century Shanghai, the unlikely revitalisation of Dr Williams' Pink Pills for Pale People in the international marketplace also demonstrates the need to recognise how socio-cultural changes taking place around the globe in this period produced heterogenous and localised versions of modernity that differed markedly from its emergence in the West. The marketers examined in this chapter figured this out and generated a

rich body of work in response; it is now time for scholars to follow their lead.

Notes

- 1 I am grateful to Pär Cassel and David Porter for their comments on earlier versions of this chapter.
- 2 C. Crow, 'Pills for the Ills of China', in *Four Hundred Million Customers* (New York/London: 1937), 202.
- 3 P. Seeger and P. Dubois Jacobs, 'Pink Pills for Pale People', in *Pete Seeger's Storytelling Book* (San Diego/New York/London: Harcourt, 2000), 48.
- 4 Shanghai functioned as the centre for publishing and cultural production in Republican-era China (1912–49), a period coinciding with the time-frame covered here. This was true for publishing in both Chinese and English. As a result, a discussion of cultural production in China during this period, including the history of advertising, inevitably focuses on Shanghai. While the city is often seen as the locus of shifts and trends taking place in the nation more widely during this time, Shanghai's cultural influence permeated the nation's other provinces and cities to differing degrees. Thus, I have attempted to restrict my argument to Shanghai.
- 5 T. Barlow, 'Buying in: Advertising and the Sexy Modern Girl Icon in Shanghai in the 1920s and 1930s', in A. E. Weinbaum et al. (eds), *The Modern Girl around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization* (Durham, NC/London: Duke University Press, 2008), 288–319 (p. 289).
- 6 E. J. Laing, *Selling Happiness: Calendar Posters and Visual Culture in Early Twentieth-Century Shanghai* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), 1, 3.
- 7 W. Tsai, *Reading Shenbao: Nationalism, Consumerism and Individuality in China, 1919–37* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 73.
- 8 S. Glosser, 'Milk for Health, Milk for Profit: Shanghai's Chinese Dairy Industry under Japanese Occupation', in S. Cochran (ed.), *Inventing Nanjing Road: Commercial Culture in Shanghai, 1900–1945* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 207–33 (pp. 207, 209).
- 9 See Liang, *Mapping Modernity in Shanghai: Space, Gender, and Visual Culture in the Sojourner's City, 1853–98* (London: Routledge, 2010) and M.-C. Bergère, *Shanghai: China's Gateway to Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).
- 10 Though the history of the pills makes it clear that they were named after the inventor's given name, even in late nineteenth-century advertisements, the product name is given as 'Dr Williams' Pink Pills for Pale People', punctuated as if based on a surname.

- 11 'Cool Things – Pink Pills for Pale People', Kansas Historical Society, n.d., www.kshs.org/kansapedia/pink-pills-for-pale-people/10240. Accessed 28 November 2016.
- 12 'W.T. Hanson Co. v. Collier et. Al', *The New York Supplement: Containing the Decisions of the Supreme and Lower Courts of Record of New York State*. June 3–July 15, 1907, vol. 104 (St Paul, MN: West Publishing Co., 1907), 792.
- 13 P. G. Homan, B. Hudson, and R. C. Rowe, *Popular Medicines: An Illustrated History* (London/Chicago: Pharmaceutical Press, 2008), 138.
- 14 L. Loeb, 'Doctors and patent medicines in modern Britain: professionalism and consumerism', *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies*, 33:3 (Autumn, 2001), 404–25 (p. 418 n.).
- 15 Homan et al., *Popular Medicines*, 142.
- 16 *Illustrated London News* 3118 (21 January 1899), 107.
- 17 *Illustrated London News* 3107 (5 November 1898), 685.
- 18 Australasian Medical Association, 'Public Health', *The Australasian Medical Gazette* (20 August 1897), 416.
- 19 'Mr. Braxton Hicks on Nostrums', *The Chemist and Druggist*, 60 (March 1902), 330.
- 20 United States Pharmacopeial Convention, *Food Chemicals Codex*, 7th edn (Rockville, MD: United States Pharmacopeial Convention, 2010), 402.
- 21 'Iron', *National Institutes of Health*, 7 December 2018, <https://ods.od.nih.gov/factsheets/Iron-HealthProfessional/>. Accessed 25 January 2019.
- 22 R. J. Lewis, Sr, *Hawley's Condensed Chemical Dictionary*, 15th edn (Chichester: Wiley, 2007), 336.
- 23 *Illustrated London News* 3107 (5 November 1898), 685.
- 24 American Medical Association, 'The propaganda for reform', *JAMA: Journal of the American Medical Association* (10 November 1917), 1638.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 1637–8. Many British and American writers complained that the lack of direct legislation in England meant that patent medicine companies could continue making exaggerated claims.
- 26 A. F. Russell and P. S. Twentyman-Jones, 'Dr Williams Medicine Co. vs. Alexander', *Cases Decided in the Supreme Court of the Cape of Good Hope During the Year 1905*, vol. 22 (Cape Town: J. C. Juta & Co., 1907), 589.
- 27 These foreign-language advertisements did employ testimonies from local residents, but no artwork. As I will later discuss, visual images formed a central component of Chinese-language advertisements for Dr Williams' Pink Pills for Pale People.
- 28 C. H. Poe, *Where Half the World is Waking Up* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1912), 135–6.
- 29 *Shenbao* 188 (26 February 1923), 1006.

- 30 S. Go, *Hong Kong Apothecary: A Visual History of Chinese Medicine Packaging* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2003), 33.
- 31 The descriptive word comes from Homan et al., *Popular Medicines*, 140.
- 32 Go, *Hong Kong Apothecary*, 38. The other two colours are yellow and black.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 35.
- 34 Dropping the phrase 'for Pale People' from the product name feels like a curious choice within a contemporary Chinese – and indeed broadly Asian – marketing context, in which beauty products often promise to *mei bai*, or beautify and whiten the skin. These associations of paleness with beauty and virtue run deep in East Asian history. 'In ancient China, Japan, and Korea', writes Lori L. Tharps, 'pale skin – besides being a prerequisite for beauty – was an indicator of elevated economic status for both men and women. In other words, dark skin was the marker of the peasant class, whose work kept them outdoors toiling under a hot sun.' However, within the original Anglo-American cultural context of Dr Williams' Pink Pills for Pale People, paleness was meant as shorthand for signifying illness. The largely iron-based pills were supposed to restore the flush of good health to the consumer. This misalignment of values was likely the reason why the Chinese translation of the product name made no mention of skin tone. See L. L. Tharps, *Same Family, Different Colors: Confronting Colorism in America's Diverse Families* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2016), 98.
- 35 See, as an example of this, *Illustrated London News* 3118 (January 1899), 107.
- 36 This language appears, for instance, in an advertisement in *Liang You Hua Bao* 5 (15 June 1926), 18.
- 37 Go, *Hong Kong Apothecary*, 8.
- 38 S. Cochran, 'Transnational Origins of Advertising in Early Twentieth-Century China', in S. Cochran (ed.), *Inventing Nanjing Road* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 60.
- 39 See, for instance, *Shenbao* 133 (3 April 1915), 423 for an example of the former and *Liang You Hua Bao* 34 (January 1929), 36 for an example of the latter.
- 40 See *Liang You Hua Bao* 167 (June 1941), 27.
- 41 Bergère, *Shanghai: China's Gateway to Modernity*, 163.
- 42 *Ladies' Home Journal* 10:4 (March 1893), 35.
- 43 *North China Herald* (18 January 1913), 208.
- 44 A. Finnane, 'The Fashion Industry in Shanghai', in A. Finnane (ed.), *Changing Clothes in China: Fashion, History, Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 101–38 (p. 118).
- 45 *Shenbao* 380 (April 1915), 133.
- 46 See *Funü Shibao* 4 (1911), 6 and *Funü Shibao* 6 (1912), 6.

- 47 Laing, *Selling Happiness*, 30.
- 48 *Shenbao* 659 (February 1923), 188.
- 49 *Liang You Hua Bao* 5 (15 June 1926), 18; *Liang You Hua Bao* 34 (January 1929), 36.
- 50 Advertisements for these, for instance, appear in *Shenbao* 210 (1 March 1925), 8.
- 51 Tsai, *Reading Shenbao*, 101.
- 52 *Liang You Hua Bao* 74 (29 February 1933), n.p.
- 53 *Liang You Hua Bao* 34 (January 1929), 36.
- 54 B. Mittler, *A Newspaper for China?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2004), 262–3.
- 55 Finnane, *Changing Clothes in China*, 97.