CHINESE FEMINISTS AND ADVERTISEMENTS:

IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION THROUGH MEDIA CONSUMPTION

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Identity Construction through Media Consumption

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Certificate of Originality

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Francesca Olivotti

In memory of my Father,

Maurizio Olivotti (1945-2016)

Abstract:

This dissertation offers an ethnographic account of how a group of young Chinese women who identify themselves as feminists perceive the portrayal of females in advertisements. While previous studies privileged advertisements' content, by counting, dissecting, and analyzing the images in all possible ways, my original contribution to knowledge lies in an approach that aims at giving voice directly to a specific community of audiences who self-defines its own identity, and by doing so constantly negotiates the meaning of this membership. The goal of this dissertation is to explore the meaning that advertisements have for young, urban, Chinese feminists, and how they utilize these meanings to create spaces of resistance to gendered expectations of life course from the people around them: family members, teachers or Professors, and friends. The topics discussed in the thesis have all emerged from the discussions with my informants, and include: the portrayal of family roles in ads, and the ambivalent attitude towards traditional familial ties and feminist activism; the links between feminist activism and advertising strategies; and the analysis of female images as they emerged from the dialogic exchanges amongst us. The findings show that advertisements are instrumental in shaping their identity as feminists, which is constantly negotiated with the mediated effects of ads on the one hand and of traditional culture on the other hand. Their identity as feminists is thus in a constant process of becoming, and the role of advertisements in this process is crucial, because it offers images to which they can resist and learn from at the same time.

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1. Introduction

It was a cold late autumn afternoon in Shanghai, and I had just finished attending a focus group session run by a marketing research agency I had gotten in touch with prior to the beginning of my fieldwork, to conduct a preliminary study and decide how to address my topic. They had agreed to allow me to attend the gathering due to my interest in Chinese women's attitudes towards advertising, and in general to help me with the research.

The session was centered on women's consumption choices, and it targeted specifically wealthy women with high purchasing power, able to buy luxury brands' products. It was very interesting to see how the women who participated were keen to open up to strangers, telling them not only about why they would have liked to own certain products, but also relating these choices to their personal stories: "I am very attached to my Rolex because my Dad gave it to me as a birthday present when I turned 18" said one, showing the watch to the others. Another woman explained how much effort she had put in saving the money to buy her first Gucci bag, and how attached she was to it due to the financial effort required. The session lasted for two days, eight hour each day. At the end, they had formed groups and had become friends. They had something in common: they were young, rich women, willing to spend their money on anything that made them feel glamorous and beautiful.

However, I was left with an uneasy feeling after this two day focus group. I had enjoyed the meeting, and had met with interesting women and researchers carrying out their studies on behalf of several famous global brands. Yet, I felt that I did not have anything in common with the women interviewed; and the feeling of not sharing any idea or belief with them filled me with a feeling of anxiety: if I wanted to write an ethnography about women and ads in China, how would I ever be able to "go native" with them, or even only understand their ideas?

When my fieldwork officially began, two months later (in January 2015) something happened which changed entirely my view on the research topic I wanted to study. I became friends with a group of women interested in feminist issues, and who gathered periodically with other friends to discuss a vast array of social issues that women in China had to deal with. I became passionate about their views and positions, which

challenged mainstream ideas about women's role in society, and eventually decided to delimit my study to how Chinese feminists perceive the female image in ads. The growing interest in feminism in China was in the later months boosted by the arrest of a group of feminists known as the Feminist Five, which triggered the interest of both academic and non-academic commentators (Wang, 2015). The circumstances in which I found myself during the months spent in Shanghai allowed me to look at a small but growing group of women with which I shared interests and views, and this thesis is the product of these exchanges and dialogues, that look at consumer culture with a critical eye, but also allowing for proposals and ideas on how the female image can be better portrayed.

The link between feminism and consumer culture has been postulated in "the West" as the "postfeminist" turn, or in other words as a "joyous liberation from the ideological shackles of a hopelessly outdated feminist movement" (Gamble, 2004, p. 44), which is based on the assumption that women now "can have it all: a career, motherhood, beauty, and a great sex life" (p. 51). This idea that women are now empowered enough to "have it all" – if they wish – finds an actual representation across the media, and of course also in advertisements.

Baudrillard (2006) defines advertising as part of the system of objects, in which it "[p]lays an integral part not merely because it relates to consumption, but also because it itself becomes an object to be consumed" (p. 164). Consuming advertisements is inevitable, and happens every day to each and all of us. By making use of stereotypes to create needs in the consumer, and by placing these needs inside ideal worlds in which anyone would dream to live, ads function as simulations of reality, using Baudrillard's terminology. This alternative world where women are empowered, has been appropriated by postfeminists, who argue that feminism is no longer needed by virtue of all the achievements of second wave feminists. Yet, as I argue throughout the thesis, Chinese feminist activists do not share the perception that all the major and most urgent issues of women have been solved, and are instead highly critical of the female image in today's advertisements, rejecting not only "Western" postfeminist views of society, but also giving voice to a new wave of feminism rooted in their everyday life experiences.

My main argument is that Chinese women build their identity as feminists through a constant negotiation of different sets of values and beliefs that they are entangled in. The pressures of a consumer society that bombards them through the media with messages and images that show them how they should act, be, and look like on the one hand; and on the other hand their feminist ideals and beliefs, that push them in the opposite direction, and pressure them to see the former set of values as misleading and dangerous. In between these two forces, the traditional Chinese values of patriarchal supremacy and male's superiority that want them obedient, submissive and respectful; and against which it is harder to fight, and which therefore generate ambivalences and ambiguities in their relationship with family members and peers.

The thesis focuses on the role of advertisements in the identity formation of young Chinese urban feminists. My goal is to explore the meaning that ads have for these women, and how they utilize the meanings of these images to create spaces of resistance to gendered expectations of life course from the people around them: family members, teachers or Professors, and friends. These spaces of resistance represent a safe place where they can explore alternative ideas of femininity and question mainstream models that they are shown by the media.

I furthermore look at how feminism exerts a pull on the minds of young and highly educated Chinese women who decide to embrace activism, but who also keep a critical eye towards practices of active political engagement, because of the general stigma that surrounds protests, especially if these are organized by women. As such, feminism represents for them a site of desire, as well as a site of transgression and rebellion, or a tactic to cope with the tensions created by the aforementioned forces.

The main question that I address throughout the thesis is: how do Chinese women who live in Shanghai and define themselves as feminists interpret and perceive the female image in advertisements? It is crucial to address four definitions at the outset: the meanings of "Chinese women" (the individuals); "Shanghai" (the place); "feminists" (the identity); and "female image" (the objects).

1.1.1. Chinese women

The individuals treated in this thesis were predominantly highly educated university students or early graduates living in Shanghai, between the ages of 18 and 28. Three

of the participants were university Professors between the ages of 37 and 40, and two of them were men interested in feminist issues. Moreover, four of the total number of participants were people working in the advertising industry, and none showed any interest in feminism nor in feminist activism. The ages of the advertisers were between 26 and 31. Thus, the non-feminist individuals as well as the Professors who were interviewed for this research increased the median age of the participants to 26-years-old, but restricting the calculation only to the women whom I consider the protagonists of this research, that is, the young feminists, their median age was of 22.5. This positions the study also within the research area of Chinese youths.

Traditionally, Chinese youths have been associated with the political movements of the twentieth century: the 1911 Republican Revolution, the May Fourth 1919 Movement, the anti-Japanese protests of the 1940s; and even the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) was led by the red guards, who were young students (Cockain, 2012; Luo, 2004). As Cockain (2012) points out, in the official discourses, this traditional image has shifted from a positive perception of Chinese youths as a part of the population actively engaged in the creation of China's future, to recent negative definitions such as "without thought for the future, mankind or motherland; distant to the Party; doubting of socialism" (p. 2). These simplified, and often contradictory portrayals have been dominating both Western and Chinese scholarships, and as Cockain underlines are "frequently misleading […], stereotypical, two-dimensional, simplified shots of China" (p.3). As I show in the following pages, these young women's engagement and interest is never clear cut and simple, but rather a process of complicated negotiations and strategic appropriations of certain aspects of the feminist identity over others, that they actively choose to deploy in order to cope with social pressures.

1.1.2. Shanghai

Up to the 19th century Shanghai was a relatively small city in an economically vibrant area of China. It suddenly transformed itself into the most important port city in China upon the imposition of the foreign powers, and more precisely the British, the French, and later on the Americans, which established their "concessions". These were small enclaves where foreigners enjoyed extraterritorial jurisdiction, which transformed the city into a *de facto* colony.

The city's urban growth during the late 19th and early 20th century allowed a fast process of industrialization to take place. Parallel to its economic growth, also the media industry, and the advertising industry, began to flourish, providing not only a rich landscape of media images, but also allowing the appropriation of foreign elements into the idea of a Chinese modernity. Thus, Shanghai became not only the symbol of the Chinese urban modernization, but also the emblematic synonym of a Chinese form of cosmopolitanism (Abbas, 2000).

The first kinds of advertisements which used beautiful women to convey images which were meaningful at that time (modernity on top of all) were those used in calendar posters (*yuefenpai*) (Laing, 2004). Here the women were portrayed as a close approximation of a Western realistic style, which differed from the traditional Chinese pictorial style. Zhao and Belk (2008) point out that there is a striking parallel between Shanghai's commercial culture of the first decades of the twentieth century and today's, and precisely in the growth and entwinement between local and global consumption forces. Yang (2002) also argues that this new connection between new and old Shanghai, as well as other links that connect the city to Taiwan, overseas and so on, encapsulate "the transformation of the imaginary taking place in Shanghai today" (p. 193).

Shanghai is therefore the place where the creative industries have turned the city itself into a spectacle of modernity by appropriating elements of "the foreign" and "the local", and creating the idea of the cosmopolitan, the urban, the rich. This urban space is the field where the whole action takes place, but it not only sets the geographic boundaries that delimit the space of the research, it is also a non-specific term that refers to a generic symbol of China's modernity. It can be read as the use of the term "the West" that also appears throughout the text to refer to a non-generic symbol of what is non-Asian and considered as "first world", and as such often inaccurately used by myself and the informants alike.

Another important aspect of Shanghai as the geographic space is that its presence underlies each moment where the encounters with the informants are narrated, and is an omnipresent background that is there even when it is not. Even when spatial descriptions are not narrated, they lurk in the background, and they contribute to the identification process in which the women are involved. For instance, several women

who were Shanghai natives felt as "Shanghainese" first, and Chinese only in the second place. At the same time, other informants who had moved to Shanghai from elsewhere felt their non-Shanghainess as a feature of their identity in that city. Pride of being Shanghainese and prejudice against Shanghai's stereotypes put Shanghai at the center of the stage, in that the whole research project would have not been possible in another Chinese city.

1.1.3. Feminists

Despite the growth of interest in feminism that I mentioned above, the proportion of self-defined feminists in Shanghai is certainly smaller than the overall female population. Furthermore, the self-definition of "feminist" is not embraced without difficulties as I argue in the following chapters, and many of the women who appear throughout the dissertation make clear distinctions among various concepts like "being a feminist", "being an activist", "being interested in feminism", "being interested in women's issues", and many other different nuances of the term "feminist". I thus use the term "feminist" here as an umbrella term that covers all the different positions that each woman had. When specifically referring to one woman's position, I make clear how she used the term for herself and in relation to her own idea of what "being a feminist" means. This choice is not only the consequence of the need to simplify the terminology, but is mainly used to underline the process of identification that I call "becoming a feminist". As I argue in the final chapters, their feminist identity is not fixed and immutable, but rather a process of their human development, and as such undergoes several changes and phases.

It is also important to underline the fact that the terms used for "feminism" and "feminist" are two in Chinese: *nüquanzhuyi* 女权主义 (and *nüquanzhuyizhe* 女权主义者 for "feminist") and *nüxingzhuyi* 女性主义 (and *nüxingzhuyizhe* 女性主义者 for "feminist"). Both can be translated in English with the word "feminism" that I use throughout the text, but the difference between the two terms is not merely linguistic. The preference for either term also underlines a deeper distinction between two different understandings of its intrinsic meaning. While *nüquanzhuyi* stresses women's "power" (*quan*), and is perceived as a "man-hating he-woman hungry for power" type of feminist (Ko & Wang, 2006, p. 463), or in other cases as an appropriation of a term that could be valid in the West but not necessarily in China;

the latter could be instead re-translated into feminine-ism, which is a much softer and less threatening term, generally preferred by Chinese women (Ko & Wang, 2006). Since the rise of the new feminist movement in 2012, led by activists such as the feminist five mentioned above, the term *nüquanzhuyi* has re-entered the public discourse, opening up to new appropriations of the word that place Chinese feminists in a central position, rather than at a marginal one in relation to "Western" discourses of postfeminist achievements.

1.1.4. The female image

The subject of my conversations with my informants was the portrayal of women in advertisements. The advertisements that we looked at, or that they had chosen to discuss with me were either taken from popular magazines (such as Elle, Vogue, Cosmopolitan, all in their Chinese language versions) or billboard ads that they had seen in the streets, or in subway stations. Only a few had selected to talk about video commercials. This was not a very popular choice because, as many women told me, they do not usually watch TV, which is generally considered an outdated practice, mainly for middle-aged or older people. Therefore, all the videos selected were video clips from the internet, or videos that appear in subway stations.

Generally, before our meetings I asked them to pay attention to which ads they liked or disliked the most, and to take these images (or pictures, or links to videos) to our meetings so that we could discuss the reasons for their choices. Moreover, when walking with them along the streets, I asked them questions about images that we could see on billboards, and especially in subway stations, where huge screens constantly show several videos portraying women as the protagonists of the ads.

By using ethnographic techniques (participant observation, interview recording, translations, descriptive details of the interactions) my objective was to overcome the obstacles pointed out by Nightingale (1993) in an essay where she criticizes the use of ethnographic processes in audience studies because – as she argues – they are often separated from rigorous anthropological reflections, and "fail to offer a satisfying critique of popular culture" (p. 157). She invokes instead the use of discourse analysis techniques combined with ethnography in order to innovate within the realm of cultural studies. However, as I outline below, the encoding/decoding of a text combined with qualitative methods (such as interviews) would only provide a

monologic portrayal of social reality, whereas my ambition is to give voice to the women and turn them into protagonists of the findings.

1.2. Theoretical orientations

Algan (2009) points out that today the media are placed within important transformations that take place in society as well as in other cultural aspects of the mediated world. The unique ways in which the media are utilized by (often non-Western) people "correspond to new and changing struggles, realities, and larger economic, political and social structures that shape everyday life and identities" (p. 7). The female image in advertisements thus, contributes to the formation of my informants' identities as feminists, and is used both to build their identity and to dismantle the power that the images exert over them.

Western second wave feminism has historically been highly critical of advertising and of the female objectification that pervades the globalized visual landscape. Yet, despite the efforts of notable feminists (e.g. Betty Friedan, 1963; Naomi Wolf, 1990; Jean Kilbourne, 1999) who have widely written about the (wrongful) relationship between advertising and women's portrayal, second wave feminism has failed to give voices to non-Western (non-white and/or non-middle class) social realities where women find themselves entangled in similar, yet profoundly different issues that arise from the aforementioned relationship.

Challenging Eurocentric assumptions of womanhood as a unique life experience that transcends boundaries, I apply instead an intersectional approach to feminist research that contests the Westernizing and globalizing view of the relation between women and visual culture, and instead takes into account the cultural, racial, gendered, political and social specificities of Chinese women, all aspects that contribute to shape the identity of the feminists involved in the study. Moreover, by taking into account the identity formation of Chinese feminists through advertising consumption, I contend that this identity is fractured and fragmented into various different discourses where it is relevant to analyze the subject's own history and the various articulations that convey her identity. As Hall put it in an interview with Grossberg "a theory of articulation is both a way of understanding how ideological elements come, under certain conditions, to cohere together within a discourse, and a way of asking how they do or do not become articulated, at specific conjunctures, to certain political

subjects" (Grossberg, 1986, p. 53). In this sense I define the identity of these young, urban, Chinese feminists as "nomadic", meaning that it is not fixed, but rather mutable and as such needs to be analyzed. Furthermore, apart from being many, identities are also variously interconnected and mutually constituted (Moore, 2007), which in turn causes contradictions and ambivalences, ambiguities and conflicts not only among different individuals in a social context, but also within these individuals (Kondo, 1990).

The relation between visuality and identity is made of a dialectical relationship between what we see and how others see us. This relationship in today's hyperreal mediated society relies heavily on a kind of visuality that is global in scope, but also local in character (Shih, 2007). Despite the influence of cultural studies theorists such as Hall, McRobbie, and Morley, the need to inscribe the research within a China-specific framework allowed me to make use of dialogic strategies of analysis. These are rooted in what has been termed as Bakhtin's dialogism (although the Russian literary critic never directly used this term in his writings) (Holquist, 2002). As Holquist (2002) points out, when meaning is created through a relation between two bodies (either physical bodies or bodies conceived as ideas) "the position of the observer is fundamental" (p. 21). The observer, for Bakhtin, is also an "active participant" (p.21) in the simultaneous events that characterize dialogism, and therefore "reality is always experienced, not just perceived" (p.21). The importance of the position of the observer in the setting is in its role as narrator, in other words as the filter through which what happens is first experienced and then transposed into text, and therefore there is not only one possible analysis, but rather multiple ways in which an event can be experienced and narrated. The author who applies dialogic strategies treats the "other" not only as an "other", but also as a "self", when giving him or her the "status of an 'I'" (p. 34), thus creating a polyphony of voices, which is not only an aesthetic device, but that carries also an "intransigently pluralist" (p. 35) political stance.

1.3. Research methodology

This dissertation is based on an ethnographic methodological approach to audience research. The main data was gathered during a fieldwork that I conducted in Shanghai between the beginning of January and the end of July 2015. Following my return to

Hong Kong I kept in touch with my informants via online social media such as WeChat (a popular app used in China to chat online), also meeting new informants, mainly through popular WeChat groups such as *nüquan zhisheng* 女权之声 (the voice of women's power), and thus prolonging the data gathering until April 2016. Other virtual field sites include Facebook, that despite being inaccessible from mainland China, is often used through VPN software that allows to connect to censored websites. Ironically, the All China Women's Federation (ACWF), official mouthpiece of the CCP for what concerns women's issues, is particularly active on Facebook, posting several daily articles on Chinese women's condition. However, these are almost always in English, and therefore are not directed at the Chinese audience.

The main ethnographic methods that I employed are interviews with my informants, which usually took place at coffee shops or inside their university's buildings. Another method through which I was able to gain useful data was that of the focus groups, that I term in the dissertation as "workshops", because this is the word that I used to advertise them. These workshops called the attention of women involved in feminist activism, and this is when the shift in my approach (which originally was intended at studying "Chinese women" writ large) occurred. Those who were coming to the workshops, and later to my individual interviews, were providing interesting insights and points of view on my topic, and I decided to delimit the study to "Chinese feminists".

During the fieldwork I kept a daily journal where I included both detailed descriptions of the people, the transcriptions of the interviews, the descriptions of the settings and anything that I deemed relevant. I also included photographs, and made drawings, to capture the moments that would have otherwise gone lost. I also included in the fieldnotes my personal feelings during the days, to remember how those might have influenced a particular understanding of the words of the informants, and to take my own personal mood into account when analyzing those moments.

Throughout the dissertation I have used pseudonyms in order to protect the privacy of the women whom I mention in the text. However, I have deemed important to give them invented names, because, as pointed out by Kondo (1990) "I consider it theoretically/politically/rhetorically important to allow [them] to have names, to

become particular beings with particular idiosyncrasies [that] readers could follow through the course of the book" (p. 46).

1.4.   Outline of the study

The opening chapter is an up to date review of the literature covering the study of the female image in advertisements in Western countries and later on in China. The importance of reviewing Western literature on this topic lies in its influence in the later evolution of the advertising industry in China, especially since the 1978 reforms, but also prior to what is known as the Maoist era (1949-1976). The chapter opens with a historical overview of the development of advertising in China. Then, I outline the key features of global and local influences in shaping China's modern woman as it appears in ads. I continue by looking in greater detail at China's "consumer revolution" (Croll, 2006, p. 29) and its links with other contemporary sociocultural aspects. I then review the existing literature on the entwinement between gender and advertisements, since the first studies on the topic by American scholars, to more recent cross-cultural studies that look at the links among different societies' advertising industries. I then focus on the literature that specifically deals with the Chinese advertising industry and its gendered constructions, analyzing also the diverse array of discourses and their transformations across the past three decades. The critique of the female image in Chinese advertisements has not only been a topic of interest for Western scholars, but has also been analyzed by Chinese ones, who write mainly in Chinese for Chinese academic circles. I also include these publications in my review, in order to consider also discourses and debates that are currently going on in China on the same issues, and that are often times neglected by Western scholarship.

Taking as a starting point the critique of the female image in ads, I then look at the evolution of the feminist movement in China, in order to understand the role of activism in the making of the female image. I include here the work of activists and scholars who have dedicated their career to improving the female image in the media (e.g. Liu Bohong, Feng Yuan, Bu Wei).

In the last section of this chapter, I explain in greater detail the theoretical framework that has guided my research, and through which I have analyzed the data that I collected. In particular, I include the works of Hobart (1996, 2000, 2001) and Bakhtin (1981, 1986) explaining their crucial role in my framing of the audience approach that

I apply. Moreover, I include the works of postcolonial feminists (Alcoff, 1988; Gajjala, 2004; Mohanty, 1988; Parameswaran, 2001) that helped me to frame my feminist understanding of the topics included in the later sections. The overall goal of this chapter is not only to provide an overview and background information, or to position the dissertation within the current debates in cultural studies, but also to establish a theoretical framework which, following Bakhtin's dialogism as well as postcolonial feminist orientations, gives voice to positions often considered marginal.

In the third chapter I explain in detail the methodological approach that I apply in the dissertation. I give detailed accounts of the field where my study was conducted, that is, Shanghai, and I explain what role the city had for me as a researcher and for my informants. I also provide visual images of the city and of its "advertising landscape".

Moreover, I also provide detailed information regarding the informants and the encounters, as well as my relationship with them. I explain how I met them and I briefly outline their profile. I continue by explaining what kinds of ethnographic practices I applied, and how I structured my focus groups and interviews. I also explain in detail issues regarding language, translations in and from Chinese/Italian/English, as well as exploring the ethical implications of conducting a study that aims at a feminist approach. I then provide self-accounts of my own position in the field, in order to include a self-reflexive examination of my role as an Italian researcher in China. The goal of self-reflection is to describe the difficulties that researchers who study foreign cultures encounter when having to describe "the other". Even when the ultimate goal is to give voice to these women, the risks of generating an unwitting source of further oppression is present, because the narrator of the stories is ultimately the researcher herself. The objective is then to make clear the limits of the validity of the study, and to position myself as another subject of the story, despite my privileged position.

The fourth chapter, *Ambivalence towards the family, being a feminist whilst abiding by family rules* is a description of how the informants perceive the woman in ads when playing family roles, and how they use this image for their identity formation as both feminists and family members. I first provide a review of studies dealing with the family in the Chinese context, in order to provide a background for what I mean with "traditional family rules" in China. Then, I narrate my exchanges with young

feminists who decided to talk about this topic, and about the role of women in contemporary Chinese families. I contend that the identity of these young feminists is the product of a complex negotiation between their feminist ideas on the one hand, and the wish to be obedient daughters (and later on wives and mothers) for their families. This ambiguity does not limit their feminist identity, in fact it is a key feature of their set of values, and an important part of the process through which they become feminists.

The fifth chapter, *Discussing ads from the feminist activist's perspective*, is a description of the entwinement between feminist activism and advertising. Although advertisements and feminism have always been considered as antithetical, feminists also make use of "advertising techniques" when spreading their ideas. The question that I therefore ask in this chapter is: can there be a feminist advertising? When advertisers create their campaigns, how much effort do they put in trying to convey a more "feminist" image of women? I argue here that despite some efforts (such as the famous *Dove* campaigns for "real beauty") feminists are reluctant to embrace these as "feminist advertisements", because of the superficial treatment of women's issues, which might be useful to provide a better image of women, but that has nothing to do with "feminism". I outline in this chapter three different "paths" that feminist activism can take when dealing with ads. It can be completely against ads; it can use advertisers' strategies to convey its core messages; and feminists can consume specific products that symbolize their dissent as activists (what I term as "commodified dissent"). On the other hand, advertising can also take three different directions. It can completely overlook women's issues; it can borrow features from women-related discourses in order to sell more; and it can use feminists' discourses for its purposes (what I term as "corporatist feminism").

In the sixth chapter, *Collaborative analyses of advertisements*, I narrate the ads' analyses conducted in collaboration with my informants. Based on their descriptions, I have divided the ads into three categories: beauty ideals, strong and powerful women, and women as objects. The aim of this chapter is to go beyond the current discourse and content analyses that take into account the female image from the researcher's point of view only; but also to go beyond mere audience studies, where the researcher still represents the authority when describing the group he or she researches. Although I admit that my role as the writer and narrator inevitably

positions me in a non-equal relationship with the informants, the aim of this chapter is to give voice to these women and to their thoughts placing myself as a mere narrator of events created by them. My position here is therefore often that of a learner, whilst they represent the authority when explaining concepts of traditional images. In other occasions I explain to them aspects of consumer culture which they may not be aware of. This constant interchanging position between teacher and learner is the thread that holds the chapter together, providing vivid descriptions of the women's thoughts.

Finally, in the conclusion, I tie together my key findings making comments on the meanings that I have inferred from these. I provide answers to the research question outlined in this introduction, highlighting the study's limitations and providing directions for further research. The aim of this conclusive chapter is to highlight the unifying thread that links the three previous chapters together, and that validates my study.

2. Literature Review

Advertising is a form of media communication whose goal is to sell a product or a service. Its relevance is based on its embeddedness in our everyday lives because it is "environmental in nature, persistently encountered, and involuntarily experienced" (Pollay, 1986, p. 18). Therefore, it is also a "carrier of various more or less contemporary myths" (McRury, 2009, p. 1), and as such reflects well contemporary societies' popular cultures, lifestyles, and all the consequent stereotypes that arise from these. Advertising is also "puzzling" (Berger, 2011, p. 7) because it is difficult to find incontrovertible reasons as to how and why it works.

Consumer behavior tries to understand the reasons that influence our selection of certain products or services over others (De Mooij, 2010), as well as the roles and links between globalization and local cultures within a certain society that may (or may not) allow an ad to be effective. Given its pervasiveness and insistence, and its effectiveness despite its repetitiveness, the existing literature on the effects of advertising or on the critique of its role in contemporary capitalist societies abounds.

Guanggao 广告 is the Chinese word for "advertising". It literally means "to inform the wide (audience)". Its history can be traced back to ancient times. Some scholars (Cheng, 1997a, 2009) argue that the first forms of advertising in China appeared during the Zhou dynasty (11th century-771 B.C.), although at that time the main form of advertising was the display of goods by hawkers at fairs (Cheng, 2009, p. 26). Later on, during the Tang dynasty (618-907 A.D.) banners and decorated signboards began to be used as a way to attract people's attention towards consumption choices. Other scholars (Wang, 2010) quote instead the *Book of Odes* (1027-476 B.C.) as the first document that narrates the birth of Chinese advertising: poems referring to street peddlers playing instruments to attract people's attention towards the candies they sold. These were all proto forms of advertising, however. It was only with the introduction of printing methods, which can be traced back to the Song dynasty (960-1127) that printed ads, in a form similar – yet still not equal – to the form we know today, first appeared in China (Cheng, 2009). During the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties, poetic forms of advertising (rhyming couplets) were used to attract people's attention (Wang, 2010).

The first modern concept of advertising, which comprises a copyrighted logo, was made by a needle shop owned by the Liu family in Jinan, during the Northern Song dynasty (960-1127) (Cheng, 1997a; Wang, 2010; You, 2004).

After the First Opium War (1839-1842) foreign trade became a significant part of the relationship between China and other countries. The consequent growth in the flow of goods from abroad had great impact on the Chinese society of that era; and allowed foreigners to introduce to China the modern concept of mass media (Cheng, 1997a; Wang, 1997). The 1930s have been defined as "the golden age for advertising in China" (Cheng, 1997, p. 256; Xu, 1990, p. xxi). At that time Shanghai was the center of advertising, with 20 agencies running during the decade, transforming the city into the heart of Chinese advertising (Cheng, 1997a). At the end of the 19th century the relationship with the foreigners became complicated by the fact that Chinese newspapers were inviting Chinese consumers to boycott foreign goods in favor of Chinese ones, in order to respond to the semi-colonial state in which they were forced by the foreign powers (Huang, 2003).

Between the late Qing period and the beginning of the Republican era (1912-1949), the most modern kinds of ads were those for British and American cigarette brands, which had their factories in the outskirts of Shanghai, what is now the futuristic Pudong area, as well as in other cities of China, such as Harbin, Tianjin, and Hankou (You, 2004). The most famous of these brands was "Pirate", whose name in China was translated with the word *qiangdao* 强盗 ("bandit", "robber"). This however, did not seem quite appropriate for the morals of the Chinese audience, and was soon changed into *laodao* 老刀 ("old sword") (You, 2004, p. 36). Other regular advertised brands in the 1920s and 1930s were "Pyramid" (for handkerchiefs), "Westinghouse Refrigerators", "Eversharp pens" (Xu, 1990, pp. 49–52).

In the following period, several advertising agencies started to flourish in China, but the most successful agencies were still situated in Shanghai. These were the so called Big Four: the China Commercial Advertising Agency (CCAA); the American Carl Crow Inc.; the British Millington Ltd., the Consolidated National Advertising Company (Cheng, 2009, p. 27; Wang, 2000, p. 27). Shanghai was not the only city where advertising agencies were flourishing, however. Also Beijing, Chongqing, and Guangzhou hosted a few agencies (Cheng, 2009; Xu, 1990). As Xu (1990) points out,

although the advertising techniques were first introduced by foreigners, these were embraced by the Chinese and soon became part of the indigenous way of doing ads. For example, Lin Zhenbin, who had been educated in the USA, upon his return to China had started working in the China Publicity Company, becoming what is known as the Chinese father of advertising (Cheng, 2009; Xu, 1990).

Advertising's golden age was short lived, however, because the Second World War and the Civil War between Communists and Nationalists (1927-1949) drew the country into an endless period of conflict. During this period, although some space was still reserved to advertisements in a few newspapers of Chongqing and Yan'an, the restrictions imposed by wartime influenced the amount of ads featured in the media of the late 1930s and throughout the 1940s (Cheng, 2009).

Upon the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, China became a socialist state, which no longer needed advertising to promote consumption, a practice considered as a symbol of the petit-bourgeoisie of foreign capitalist societies. However, as Chu (1982) points out, the pragmatic leaders of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) knew that advertising – as well as other socio-economic forms derived from capitalist societies – should, at least initially, be tolerated for the sake of the nation, although, as mentioned by Cheng (1996, p. 77) only Chinese advertising was allowed, leaving out any kind of foreign participation. Thus, up until 1966 – the year when the Cultural Revolution broke out – advertisements were still featured across several media (magazines, newspapers, street billboards), except the radio, considered by the Communist leaders as "too important to allow commercials" (Chu, 1982, p. 41). After this initial tolerance, favored also by the 1957 conference on Advertising Workers in Socialist Countries, held in Prague (Cheng, 1996; Wang, 2000), Chinese advertising faced its worst period during the Cultural Revolution, when it completely disappeared from any media, because it was considered by Mao himself a "societal waste, not adding any value to commodities" (Cheng, 1996, p. 78), and an evil of capitalist societies, caused by "overproduction and under consumption" (Chu, 1982, p. 40). During this period the only forms of advertising allowed were the political propaganda posters, whilst commercial forms completely fell into oblivion (Wang, 2000, p. 35).

Gao (2007) divides the post-Cultural Revolution era of advertising into four periods, each one characterized by the beginning of political or economic watershed:

1) 1979-1983 (the period when the economic reforms were introduced);
2) 1984-1991 (the introduction of the dual track system that included both market and planned economy);
3) 1992-2000 (Deng Xiaoping's Southern Tour after which market economy is considered as the dominant economic system in China);
4) 2001-Today (China's admission to the World Trade Organization).

A general pattern true for the whole period taken into account is the dramatic increase in advertising, due to the exceptional economic growth experienced by China during the last 37 years. This has deeply transformed Chinese consumers' behavior, leading China towards a mass-market oriented space, in which advertising occupies the central position (Frith, 2009). Whilst in 1979 there were a dozen advertising companies in China, by 2001 there were 78,339 (Gao, 2003). During the first phase (1979-1983) the advertising market was dominated by state-owned companies, with extremely little participation by foreign companies. Moreover, only appointed advertising companies were allowed to exist, and had to follow specific regulations (So, 2002). During the second period (1984-1991) and the third one (1992-2000) advertising saw a dramatic increase, as well as a much liberal policy implemented by the CCP. However, the government's control over advertising practices was still tight up until the early 2000s, with specific restrictions regarding creativity in ads (So, 2002).

The official reintroduction of advertising occurred with the publication of an article on Shanghai's *Wenhui Daily* titled "Restoring the good name of advertising" (*Wei guanggao zhengming* 为广告证明) , published on 14 January 1979 (Gao, 2003; Stross, 1990; Sun, 2005). Following this article several ads started to appear on newspapers across China (Stross, 1990; Sun, 2005). In 1987 Wan Li, then China's Prime Minister, stated: "Advertising links production and consumption. It is an important part of the economic activities of modern society, and has become an indispensable element in the promotion of economic prosperity" (Wang, 2000, p. 41). Moreover, the open door policy allowed foreign firms to entry the advertising market during the 1980s. China's encounter with global advertising allowed Chinese

consumers to receive glimpses of foreign goods and lifestyle, and pushing towards the aforementioned consumer revolution (Croll, 2006, p. 29). Although the foreign influence in Third World advertising settings has been termed as "Madison Avenue Imperialism" (Schiller, 1971), which imposes Coca-Colonization or McDonaldization of the world; other scholars (Wang, 2000) have focused on the hybridity of the final product. Pieterse (1995) for example, has pointed out that globalization has pushed toward the creation of counterculture movements that indigenize Western elements, rather than focusing on the Westernization of local ones.

In this chapter I first review the existing scholarly work on the different values (local and global) that advertising conveys through ads in China, in order to understand the impact of advertising techniques on a relatively young pseudo-capitalist society, and on its rising consumer population.

In the following section I look at the literature that has critiqued the role of women in ads, both within Euro-American contexts and more specifically in China. I include works by foreign authors, and by Chinese authors who write in English and/or in Chinese, in order to give voice to an often neglected part of the literature written by Chinese scholars and directed at Chinese audiences. The aim of this section is to look at the different debates on women's role that are influenced by specific socio-political discourses carried out in China.

In the final section of this chapter, I review the growing literature on Chinese feminist activism, which has encountered a new birth since its revival led by a young cohort of Chinese women whose actions are having a huge impact on women at home and abroad, and whose thoughts on the portrayal of women in ads are at the core of this dissertation.

2.1.   Local vs. global values in advertisements

There has been in the last decades a growing interest in the study of how advertisers use and convey cultural values of certain non-Western countries when creating an advertisement (Chan & Cheng, 2002; Cheng, 1996, 1997; Frith & Sengupta, 1991; Hong, Muderrisoglu, & Zinkhan, 1987; Lin, 2001; Y. B. Zhang & Harwood, 2004; Zhou & Belk, 2004). The idea is that despite a tendency towards globalization, there is in fact a careful balance between the use of global and local values within ads, because only a careful consideration of cultural cues within a specific society can lead

a campaign to be effective. Schweitzer (2009) groups cross-cultural research in advertising into five different clusters. 1) Studies comparing the USA with European countries; 2) Studies comparing "Eastern" and "Western" cultures; 3) Studies on one selected country; 4) Studies that look at cultural values manifest in advertisements from different countries that share a common language (e.g. USA and UK, Mainland China and Taiwan); 5) Studies that look at several countries (pp. 85-87).

Pollay (1983) developed a framework used to measure cultural values in advertisements. He first defined values as the "properties of objects, individuals, or communities that make them good, worthy or respectable" (p. 72). The priorities that we, as individuals or as groups, attach to certain attitudes that we value as important to ourselves and others, allow us to build a system of values, where we hierarchically position them according to what we deem more or less relevant. He argues that values become manifest in advertisements in "every way possible" (p. 74), and they should respect the following criteria: 1) be relevant and rich; 2) be analytically flexible; 3) be reliable (pp. 78-79).

Following Pollay's work, several scholars began to look at the values manifest in advertisements of non-Western countries (Chan & Cheng, 2002). Cheng and Schweitzer (1996) found that while there are some values portrayed in ads that are common to both the USA and China, such as modernity and youth, Chinese values used in ads refer to family, technology, and tradition, whereas American ads reflect enjoyment, individualism and economy. Lin (2001) reaches similar conclusions. She compares the cultural values reflected in Chinese and American television commercials, emphasizing how traditional values that belong to the ancient Confucian ideological system play a relevant role in Chinese ads. For example, "veneration for the elderly" (p. 91) or "group consensus appeal" (p 91) in contrast to American ads valuing instead individualism as one of the USA's core values.

The comparative perspective, that usually takes one "Oriental" society and compares it to the USA, understood as the standard for the "West" or the "First World" when it comes to the advertising industry, has produced a considerable bulk of scholarly research regarding also other East Asian countries, namely Japan and Korea. According to Schweitzer (2009) the study of Japanese advertisements was particularly popular in the 1980s and early 1990s because of its economic boom, whereas in the

1990s the attention shifted to Korea (p. 86). For instance, Belk and Pollay (1985) compare American and Japanese advertisements, concluding that despite a tendency towards an Americanization of Japanese ads, the deeply rooted Japanese cultural values still affect the industry. Belk and Bryce (1986) argue that back in the 1980s there was a convergence in the amount of materialism shown in Japanese and American ads (p. 571). Similarly, Lin (1993) argues that between Japanese and American ads there are indeed "certain commonalities in each advertising approach" (p. 46) due to a common ground, that is, transcultural materialism.

Cho et al. (1999) compare Korean and US television commercials trying to distance themselves from the often used Hofstede model to evaluate national cultural dimensions (De Mooij & Hofstede, 2010; Hofstede, 1980). Hofstede's paradigm includes, among others, contrasting values such as "collectivism/individualism" or "masculinity/femininity" (Hofstede, 1980). Cho et al. (1999) then conclude that a "framework based on key cultural dimensions can provide a baseline for monitoring […] shifts" (p. 70) in values within non-Western cultures, where Hofstede's model has proved not to always work. Miracle et al. (1992) compare advertising strategies in TV commercials from Korea and the USA. They look at how early, how often and for how long the brand is shown in the commercial in both countries, taking into account Hofstede's cultural paradigm to identify the reasons for any difference between the two countries. They conclude that cultural differences are indeed relevant and should be taken into account by American companies wanting to advertise in Korean markets (p. 15).

Zhang (2014) argues that cultural values are probably the most often studied topic in transnational advertising research, and content analysis is the most used method (p. 273). It all began with the scholarly debate over localization vs. standardization that has mainly served the ad industry to better frame its arguments with its international clients outside Euro-American markets. According to Levitt (1993) globalization along with the advancement of technology, have caused advertising and marketing to become standardized across cultures. Therefore, in his seminal article *The Globalization of Cultures*, he prompts marketers and advertisers to think of the market as one huge global, standardized space. This position was challenged by other scholars (Frith & Mueller, 2010; Wind, 1986). For instance, the individualist values expressed by the famous American Marlboro cow-boy, that has entered the American

collective consciousness as a symbol of America itself, would have not been a successful advertising campaign in Asian contexts, given the Asian preference for groups, rather than individuals (Frith & Frith, 1990; Frith & Mueller, 2010; Frith & Sengupta, 1991).

Since the 1990s the Chinese advertising landscape grew in popularity among scholars interested in how values are reflected in ads. Rice and Lu (1988) conducted the first content analysis of ads included in Chinese magazines, a decade after the introduction of the economic reforms, that officially allowed the re-emergence of advertising in China. They argue that Chinese ads were rather detailed in content information in comparison to Western countries' ads. McIntyre and Wei (1998) conducted another longitudinal study of the changes in values, this time twenty years after the introduction of the economic reforms, concluding that there had been an increasing diversification in values since the early advertising campaigns of the late 1970s. This diversification reflected the social and political changes that China had been experiencing during those two decades, leading to a path towards Westernization, albeit this tendency was not "a sweeping, linear swing" (p. 37).

Cheng (1994) conducted a content analysis of over 500 Chinese advertisements in order to identify the most common values used to appeal to the Chinese population. He identified modernity, technology and quality as the three main values portrayed in the previous decade. Almost a decade later, Zhang and Shavitt (2003) conducted another content analysis of around 400 ads in search for the cultural values appealing to the younger generations of Chinese consumers. They conclude that modernity and individualism predominate in Chinese ads included in magazines targeting the Chinese X-Generation, whereas tradition and collectivism predominate in TV commercials, whose audience is larger and indistinct. They underline the distinction between a mass market on the one hand, predominantly made of people who still embrace Confucian values of collectivism, humbleness and moderateness (p. 24), and a growing younger market on the other hand, whose values converge with those traditionally assigned to Western countries. They conclude that the Chinese market should not be treated as one single market where traditional values still hold valid, but it should be segmented into several sub-markets, each taking into account the enormous diversities existing within the single country.

Emery and Tian (2010) combine Hofstede's cultural values paradigm with advertising appeals, to compare the effects of advertising in China and in the USA. In their conclusions they underline the importance of not letting old stereotypes drive the strategies of marketers who target the Chinese market, because consumers' values change rapidly in comparison to cultural values, thus Hofstede's paradigm may be too broad when planning an advertising campaign (p. 55-56).

Schweitzer (2009) argues that in order to understand what "Chinese values" are, one should understand Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism (p. 96). He argues that mong the three, however, Confucianism is the philosophy that has dominated the Chinese way of thinking for over 2,000 years, and even Chinese communism owes its specificity to the Confucian philosophical tradition. Confucianism militated in favor of a highly hierarchical society, based on the relationships among its members, and in favor of a collectivist society. Daoism was based on the harmonious balance between *yin* and *yang*, the elements present in every aspect of life. Collectivism, hierarchical relationships, and harmony, are then linked to concepts such as *guanxi* and *mianzi*. The first refers to the connections that each individual has with other members of society, and the latter refers to the concept of "face", such as "losing face" or "giving face" (pp. 97-98). Zhang and Harwood (2004) however, found that many Confucian values, such as sincerity, humility and patience (p. 167) were not prevalent in the ads they analyzed, despite being highly valued by the Chinese population. They explain this contradiction by arguing that advertising creates needs that did not exist before: for instance, while Confucianism professes to be content with one's position and owned goods, advertising pushes the individual to do and buy more. Therefore, advertising creates utopian worlds that need not to be sought because we all know that they are unreal, yet despite this, we still find pleasure in viewing such images (Manca & Manca, 1994).

What emerges is therefore a landscape of new consumers who live their lives according to traditional values, but who are influenced by a Westernization due to globalization of culture and production, and to a new consumerism that is affecting the entire Chinese population, albeit at different levels and with a different intensity.

2.2.   Chinese consumers

The early years of the reform era – the 1980s – were characterized by a "consumer revolution" (Croll, 2006, p. 29), or a "love affair" (Keane, Fung, & Moran, 2007, p. 165) between China and consumerism, that is, the rapid escalation in consumption, a change in people's habits and lifestyle, and the development of a new phase for the demand, pushed by Deng Xiaoping himself, who referred to consumption as "the motor of production" (Croll, 2006, p. 30). Endorsed by the Party-State, the increasing consumption was understood as the growth in the demand of Western goods: for instance the spread of McDonald's and other fast foods in urban China (Yan, 2000), or the new trend in bridal gowns that imitated Western fashion (Gillette, 2000), to name just two practices "borrowed" from Western countries. However, as Latham (2006a) points out, China's opening up to the global economy has not only meant a new growth in consumption of global goods, but also a deeper "reconceptualization of Chinese society and of the Chinese population" (p. 13). This rethinking of China has been understood in terms of a newly acquired aspiration towards "commodification, individualism, self-interest, and utility" (p. 13).

The new globalized Chinese urban culture, supported by consumption, and endorsed by the media and by the State alike, has therefore been the focus of a considerable amount of scholarly research during the past three decades. For instance, Tang (1996) explores the features of the – back then – emergent urban cultures of Guangzhou and Shanghai, that seemed to him like "caricatures of modern metropolises in the West" (p. 109). The grotesque aspects that characterized these cities included the high-rises, the beltways, the huge billboards that "aggressively demand consumers' attention" (p. 109), the loud karaoke bars, and a general distasteful "pride of being indifferent and anonymous" (p. 109). Barmé (1999) underlines how the "moneymaking mania" (p. 150) of the 1990s had an impact on China's street culture: new bookstalls selling porn magazines, cinemas screening Hong Kong and Taiwan movies, and video-game parlors started to appear between the 1980s and 1990s, and have been shaping what he defines as a "burgeoning petit-bourgeois consumer culture" (p. 150).

Consumption has been analyzed by different authors considering a vast array of different links between it and other sociocultural aspects of contemporary urban China. For instance, Latham (2006b) looks at the correlation between consumption and the transforming Chinese media; Cartier (2008) looks at diamond consumption in

Shanghai amongst the new rich; Sun (2008) analyzes household consumption practices of Beijing's new wealthy population, who hires maids to take care of their homes. Davis and Sensenbrenner (2000) look at the consumption of products for children in Shanghai at the turn of the century, when almost no child in the city had a sibling, due to the strict implementation of the one child policy since the end of the 1970s. Yang (2011) looks at the growth of China's beauty economy, and the new forms of consumption of beauty products or plastic surgery. Similarly, Evans (2006) explores the link between fashion and consumption in contemporary China. She argues that in the early 1980s the "exaggerated sweet femininity" (p.173) of the woman represented as an emblem of consumer culture, had emerged as a response to the extremely tight years of the Maoist rule. She argues that the fashionable female consumer throughout the 1980s and 1990s meant both the success of China in the market economy, and "the assertion of Chinese national identity at a time when consumption of the West was *de rigueur*" (p. 180). Tian and Dong (2011) on the other hand, challenge the assumption that Chinese consumers pursue a Westernized consumption lifestyle by emulating "the West", due to an "envy of expatriates" (p. 23). They argue instead that global goods are appropriated and transformed into hybridized forms of glocal products, in order to respond to local needs. The consumer culture that derives from the use of glocal values in advertisements, has produced what is today's advertising landscape in China. Fung (2009a) has looked at the karaoke consumption in Shenzhen in order to understand the sociocultural implications for young and less young people who express through these practices "their own lifestyle, attitudes, and values" (p. 45). Elsewhere, Fung (2009b) looks at the interplay between consumer culture and youths in China, specifically focusing on the role of fandom and fan communities for the generations of young Chinese who are searching for their own identity and gender values (p. 286).

Finally, the cultural consequences of the explosion of consumerism have been analyzed in terms of their gendered implications by McLaren (1998), who argues that since the inception of the economic reforms, there has been in China a revival of the Confucian tradition that wants women to be the "major carriers of a reconstituted 'tradition' based on a combination of Chinese radical theory and Confucianism" (p. 214).

2.3.   Gender in advertisements

Initially focusing mainly on American popular culture, the existing studies about women's portrayal in ads fall into three categories, based on the methodology used (Duffy, 1994). These are: content analyses; audience-centered studies; and critical analyses (p. 7). Wolin (2003) conducted a review of academic studies on the topic (from the 1970s until 2002) and divided the articles and books analyzed into (1) the type of study (content analyses; conceptual analyses; empirical analyses); (2) the topic (gender role stereotyping; gender brand positioning; gender differences in advertisement responses; spokesperson gender effects; selectivity hypotheses findings). Her study is a synthesis of what has been written in the three decades taken into account, and aims at being "unbiased" and "comprehensive" (p. 3). Through her thorough review, her findings suggest that throughout the thirty-two years taken into account there has been an improvement in how women appear (albeit only a "slight" one) although she also suggests that controversies related to different gender perceptions and responses still exist.

However, not all the studies' findings come to the same conclusion. Ferguson, Kreshel and Tinkham (1990) conducted a content analysis on *Ms.* magazine's ads collected in the period of its first fifteen years of publication (1973-1987) and their findings point out that women have increasingly been portrayed as sex objects. They admit "in defense of *Ms*." (p. 48) that the notion of what is "sexist" might have changed over time, and therefore an image considered "sexist" in the 1970s, such as, for instance, a naked woman taking a shower, might not have been considered so negatively fifteen years later. Despite this, they believe that the portrayal of women has been inconsistent with the magazine's policy regarding sexist advertising.

The pioneering work of Betty Friedan (1963) prompted the flourishing of academic studies – during the following decade – that critically engaged with advertising portrayals of women. These, due to the prominent role of American popular culture, were generally conducted in the USA, and looked at advertisements with the specific purpose of unveiling gender discriminations. For instance, Courtney and Lockeretz (1971) content analyzed over two hundred advertisements searching for stereotypical images. The ads were included in magazines directed at both men and women, and as their findings suggest, ads "very rarely showed women in working roles" (p. 93). The low percentage of women interpreting female workers in ads (12%) did not match the

actual reality of those years, when women in the USA represented 33% of the workforce (Courtney & Lockeretz, 1971). A few years later, Courtney and Whipple (1974) use four previous studies conducted between 1971 and 1973 to assess whether there had been any change or improvement in the portrayal of women in advertisements over the period analyzed, particularly focusing on TV commercials, because until then the critique of the female portrayal had been limited to magazine advertisements, with only those four studies looking at TV commercials. They found correlations between gender roles stereotypes and the time of the day that the ad was shown, as well as correlations between the occupational role and the gender of the actors. Similarly to Courtney and Lockeretz (1971), they conclude that ads did not represent the actual transformations that had been occurring in the American society of that era. The final sentence of their study prefigures a dark period for the role of women in ads: "television commercials are not getting better, but may be getting worse" (p. 117). Interestingly, Wagner and Banos (1973) found that in the 20 month period following the publication of Courtney and Lockeretz's study, the percentage of advertisements portraying women in working roles increased considerably, leading to a "substantial improvement in emphasizing women's expanding role as working members of society in a relatively short period of time" (p. 214).

At the end of the 1970s Erving Goffman published his *Gender Advertisements* (Goffman, 1979) in which he analyzes the stereotypical portrayal of women in ads as the product of rituals borrowed from social situations. He provides over 500 examples of advertisements that he classifies according to the gender behavior that they convey (e.g. "the ritualization of subordination" p. 40; "function ranking" p. 32; "the family" p. 37). Goffman's work inspired other scholarly research that revisited his methodological approach in the analysis of ads (Bell & Milic, 2002; Kang, 1997; Smith, 1996). Using Goffman's visual method analysis, Kang (1997) found the same amount of gender sexism across the period analyzed (1979-1991). Bell and Milic (2002) combined Goffman's identified dimensions with Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996) semiotic analysis framework. Their findings show a persistent tendency towards an unequal portrayal of women and in their relation with men in advertisements.

Another set of scholarly publications looks instead at the positive changes in gender portrayals in ads, that is, with the aim of emphasizing a constant albeit slow shift

towards a higher degree of equal portrayals. Venkatesan and Losco (1975) found an overall decline in the sexual objectification of women during the decade under scrutiny. Nonetheless, they classify women's portrayal as falling into one of the following three categories: 1) women as sexual objects; 2) women as beautiful fore/back grounds; 3) women dependent on men. Another example is the work of Klassen, Jasper and Schwartz (1993), who look at different kinds of magazines to understand the gendered portrayals shown. The three magazines chosen are *Ms.*, *Playboy*, and *Newsweek*. As one would expect, the three magazines showed extremely different portrayals, but the interesting finding is that during the 1970s and 1980s, although the number of ads portraying women in traditional poses was still higher than the number of men, the tendency to portray women and men in "equality poses" (p. 36) had been steadily increasing. Soley and Kurzbard (1986) conducted a content analysis of sexual portrayals in magazine ads in the 1964-1984 period. They found that although the percentage of advertisements showing explicit sexual content had not increased during the two decades analyzed, the actual number of ads showing sexual content had grown considerably, with female models being more prone to be portrayed in sexually overt poses.

Furnham and Paltzer (2010) reviewed 30 studies on men and women's portrayal in TV commercials published since 2000, grouping them by continents, and classifying each group as either First World (which includes Europe, America, and Australia) "dominated by individualistic values and sensitive to sexual inequality" (p. 217); Second World (which includes a wide range of countries, but most of all belong to Asia), where collectivistic values are predominant; and finally Africa, where all the countries are generally considered as Third World, and which are very conservative in terms of gender and sexual representations. Their findings show that regardless of the continent, there still exists a tendency to portray women more visually, and men more as voice overs, reinforcing the idea that women are objects to be gazed at, while men are the authorized voices.

Peterson and Kerin (1977) look at the use of eroticism in advertisements, focusing on what effects nudity in ads causes to men and women. Their findings show that regardless of respondents' gender, nudity "consistently elicited the least favorable evaluations of ads" (p. 61). While gender representations have usually been explored in relation to the female image, Elliott and Elliott (2005) look instead at male

representations in advertising. The excessive and unrealistic idealization of the female body also appears to be true for men's representations, which also portray men as sex objects. The authors used a reader-response approach based on in depth interviews, asking men aged between 18 and 31 to understand their reactions to the male naked body. Their findings show a high degree of homophobia, sexual stereotyping and, contrary to women's anxiety, "most of the male interviewees gave the impression that they were reasonably happy with the way they looked" (p. 12). Schroeder and Zwick (2004) also looked at how the male image can generate consumption choices based on identification processes. They analyze several printed advertisements and discuss the role of the "inverted gaze" (p. 26) in constructing men's role as consumers. As mentioned above, content analysis is the main tool used to draw conclusions on the representation of gender in advertisements. However, Schroeder and Borgerson (1998) use instead an art-centered approach to look at contemporary gendered advertisements. Borrowing their tools of analysis from Goffman's photo-centered approach to the study of gender, they consider non-verbal and symbolic meanings included in the representation of men and women in ads.

Abel, deBruin and Nowak (2010) have edited a book in which each chapter deals with a theme related to the female representation in advertisements. In the context of a highly problematic way of representing women not "how they actually are, but how society thinks they should be" (p. 21) the problems that emerge from the chapters are clearly not only related to the Euro American world, but they also include Japan (Darling-Wolf, 2010), Turkey (Isik, 2010) and Indonesia (Sushartami, 2010).

2.4.   The portrayal of women in Chinese advertisements

The economic reforms that prompted the re-emergence of advertising, also brought along several advertising strategies that had long been forgotten, such as the traditional female stereotyping. The existing literature on the female portrayal in Chinese ads generally agrees over the overwhelming presence of stereotyped gender roles, which very often do not reflect reality and instead simply reinforce the typical Asian (and Confucian) idea of "men are outside, women are at home" (*nan wai, nü nei*) which means that men have to work and women have to take care of the household (Hooper, 1998; Johansson, 2001; Liu & Bu, 1997). Moreover, women are portrayed in ads by emphasizing preconceived notions of gender roles that recall the

traditional concept of *nanzun nübei* (respect the man, discriminate the woman) (Liu and Bu, p. 24).

After the 4th UN Conference, in 1995, an article written by Huang Mei appeared on "Women of China" (*Zhongguo funü bao*). Huang drew on one of the areas of concern which were highlighted during the conference – the relationship between women and the media – and she wrote that women in the Chinese media were shown as objects of males' gaze and desires, rather than portrayed during their everyday activities or during their leisure time with their peers (as quoted in Liu and Bu, 1997, p. 46). The interest in the connection between women and the media became a research theme upon the introduction of the Beijing Platform for Action after the Fourth UN Conference on Women. One of the objectives of the Platform was that of acting as monitors of the female image in the media, because it recognized its crucial role in shaping women's position in society. As point 33 of the Platform (1995) states:

> The media have a great potential to promote the advancement of women and the equality of women and men by portraying women and men in a non-stereotypical, diverse and balanced manner, and by respecting the dignity and worth of the human person ("Platform for Action," 1995).

Despite these efforts, the advertising industry still shows a preference for traditional stereotypes that do not reflect Chinese women's changes. The dominant representations since China's opening-up to the world and the appropriation of a market economy have been tied to pre-Maoist gender stereotypes, and public spaces have been replete of images of "beautiful and sexually appealing young women" (Evans, 2002, p. 341). Evans (2002) defines these change in the portrayal of women as follows: "[e]legant, slender, gentle, young, urban women have replaced the images of the collective-spirited cotton picker and the sturdy militia-woman of the previous decades" (Evans, 2002, p. 341).

The deep changes in women's role in society have in turn prompted a re-mapping of the female image in the media, that mirror society and influence it at the same time. Ye, Ashley-Coutleur and Gaumer (2012) analyzed the changes in women's portrayal in ads during the two decades between 1980 and 2001. Starting from the famous Chinese slogan of the 1970s "Women hold up half the sky" (p. 67) (*funü neng ding ban bian tian*) – which referred to the complete equality between men and women that

was imposed by law during Maoism – the authors wanted to test whether women are still considered as equal as men, after the influence of two decades of Western commercial culture. Their findings show that the number of women portrayed in ads has increased, and that ads now heavily mirror western models. This has allowed China to be more integrated in the international community, pushing women to liberate themselves from the masculinized images of the 1960s and 1970s on the one hand, and to "embrace their femininity" (p. 77) on the other hand. The return to femininity however, should not necessarily be read as an aspect borrowed from the West. As Ferry (2003) points out, consumption has been used to remap the Chinese identity balancing it with the influence of globalization. Therefore, nostalgic images of the 1930s Shanghainese women have returned into the advertising landscape, providing an image where the local and national, as well as the transnational are blurred together into the image of a modern Chinese woman. Moreover, Ferry notes, the influences from abroad are not limited to the West, but are instead very strong those aspects that Chinese advertising borrows from other Asian cultures, especially Korean and Japanese, and their modes of representation of beauty and of the modern woman. Thus it is not just a matter of Asia/West binary, but other important factors today shape women's portrayal in the media (p. 284).

Cheng and Wan (2008) rephrase the famous slogan quoted above into "holding up half of the 'ground'" (p. 11) to refer to their study of subway advertisements in Beijing and Shanghai. The reason why they limit their study to women in subway ads is because this kind of advertising at the beginning of the 2000s had experienced the fastest growth in comparison to other types of outdoor advertisements in China (p. 11). The results of their content analysis show that subway advertising mainly targets young female consumers, and therefore ads for personal care or cosmetic products are predominant. In order to grab young women's attention, these ads resort to common stereotypes, such as those regarding working roles, family, and seductiveness (p. 25).

The reintroduction of femininity thanks to the economic reforms has also been studied by Hooper (1998) who defines the new use of femininity as the recreation of the images of the Chinese flower vase (p. 169). The author, who had lived in China in the 1970s, remembers the absence of the exploitation of sex for commercial purposes, and highlights the clear shift from "being virtually asexual to obviously female" (p. 171). Besides female glamour, also housewifery has slowly been reintroduced into the

visual landscape of Chinese ads depicting women. Hooper therefore argues that both these images – the flower vase and the housewife – have led to a homogenization of consumer culture where China-specific elements have been mixed together with Western modes of representation.

Johansson (2001) explores the image of the modern Chinese woman in consumer culture through the analysis of several advertisements included in two official women's magazines. He argues that the modern Chinese woman is the product of a co-construction made by the beauty industry on the one hand – which emphasizes physical features related to beauty – and by the Communist leadership on the other hand, which assigns to the word "Chinese" the "essentialised idea of an Oriental femininity" (p. 95). While the first period after the re-introduction of advertising was characterized by "shy-looking, amateurish Asian models" (p. 119) the portrayal soon changed into images infused by Western-style values, even showing Caucasian women as models. The answer to what Johansson defines as a combination of a "contradictory relationship between 'traditional' and 'modern'" (p. 120) in how women are portrayed, is for him in a consumer culture that appropriates the discourses of advertising and indigenizes the most symbolic messages in order to convey a specifically Chinese national identity. Elsewhere, Johansson (1998) looks more in depth at the phenomenon of Caucasian models in Chinese advertisements. He explores the meaning of white skin and large breasts in the Chinese advertisements of the 1990s, and at the indigenization of global Western-style consumer culture values. The ancient beauty ideal of white skin that is well represented by an old saying that goes: *yi bai zhe san chou* ("a white skin can overshadow three ugly qualities"), and that still holds valid in contemporary China, as also shown by the huge amount of ads that sell whitening creams and body lotions. Johannsson argues that white skin is now not only the beauty and class marker that was in the past, but it is also an ethnic and cultural one, in the new globalized consumer culture (p. 68). Breast enhancers are instead seen as a liberation from Confucian values of chastity and morality, and evoke a Western style liberation through clear semiotic constructions: e.g. the use of the garden of Eve to convey the naturalness of a large breast. Johansson (1998) concludes that these beauty ideals either pre-date Western influences or are re-interpreted to fulfill indigenous expectations regarding female beauty.

The hybrid feature of Chinese females in ads is also explored by Wu and Chung (2011), who look at the binary distinction between traditional and modern, and how prominently a hybrid version between the two features across ads in Mainland China as compared to Hong Kong. Their findings show that, contrary to what has generally been said about the female image in ads (e.g. Cheng, 1997; Cheng & Wan, 2008), modern representations are more frequent than traditional ones, especially in Mainland China, i.e. more women are portrayed in occupational tasks rather than performing family roles, and express directly their thoughts and opinions (pp. 191-192). Despite this, these hybrid forms mix a modern image with highly traditional features, such as collective morality, softness, chastity, determination, and hard work (p. 192). Finally, they also criticize the binary opposition global/local in that it has oversimplified the intricate process entailed in the construction of the modern Chinese woman in ads.

Contemporary consumer culture has reached China relatively recently, and this novelty has triggered the interest of researchers interested in the abovementioned comparison between local and global appeals. For example, Cheng (1997) compares gender representations in Chinese and US TV commercials. In his findings he shows that in both countries women were underrepresented in advertisements as compared to men, and men were portrayed in more occupational roles than women. Despite the high value attributed in China to the "veneration for the elderly", Cheng found that young models (both men and women) featured prominently across ads. The only relevant difference that he found between the two countries is the difference between male-dominant and female-dominant products (p. 313). For instance, clothing appeared to be a female-dominant product in China, but a male-dominant one in the USA. Hung, Li, and Belk (2007) also explored the link between global and local appeals in Chinese ads. They looked at the glocal understandings of the new woman in Chinese ads through a reader-response approach. The authors wanted to go beyond the simplistic approach localization vs. standardization, and in order to understand the highly nuanced diversification of values conveyed in ads, they conducted two separate studies. In the first one, they propose a hypothesized typology of modern Chinese woman, and verify its appearance through a content analysis. In the second one they assessed their analysis through a reader-response approach that entailed interviews with women. In relation to the first study, they identified four types of roles that

women appear to interpret in ads: flower vase, cultured nurturer, urban sophisticate, and strong woman (p. 1038). Urban sophisticate and flower vase were the roles mostly featured, appearing in 43.5% and 28.1% respectively (p. 1041). In the second part of the study, they analyzed the interpretation strategies of a group of informants, dividing the interpretations into "perceived localness"; "perceived otherness"; and "creolization" (pp. 1044-1046).

Feng and Karan (2011) content analyzed several local and international magazines sold in China, to understand how the female portrayal had been influencing the portrayal of women's roles. According to their findings, the stereotypical portrayal is more common in international magazines rather than in local ones, with local magazines including more discussions and a broader scope (p. 39). They also argue that the modern woman is the product of the combination of rising consumption forces on the one hand, and of the government's gender ideology that wants the modern Chinese woman as "pursuing her career and participating in the social life" (p. 41).

Tani Barlow (2008) looks at the construction of the Chinese modern girl in the Shanghai advertisements of the 1920s and 1930s. She looks at the creation of a "prototypical Shanghai sexy modern girl icon" (p. 289) in advertisements that fuse together "erotic pleasure, imaginary use values, and the experience of being a subject" (p. 289). Barlow argues that being modern at that time meant sharing an idea about self and society that evoked progress and the feeling of belonging to "the family of advanced nations" (p. 313), and all this was conveyed through images of women in ads such as those for Colgate, Ponds, and Sunlight soap (p. 296).

Huang and Lowry (2012) conducted a study on an under researched topic in the realm of gender and ads in China: nudity. The above mentioned previous studies (Johansson, 1998, 1999) conducted in the mid and late 1990s, argue that the Chinese naked body has been quasi absent in Chinese advertisements. However, in ancient times nudity and sexual intercourse were not a taboo, and during the pre-Maoist era sexually-oriented advertising was present and direct consequence of Western influence. However, in the 1949-1979 phase nudity and sexual advertising disappeared, but since the reform era it became prominent again. The authors analyzed over 2,000 ads with sexually explicit content, with the aim of understanding how race, gender, and

consumer culture interact and change the perceptions about the naked body. They conclude that nudity is a recurrent feature used to sell more, which leads to an objectified portrayal of women. However, contrary to Johansson (1999), who argued that the Western female body was used as a fetish, they found that the Chinese naked body has proved to be more effective than the use of Western naked females (p. 448).

Hong Ji (2009) conducted a content analysis of female images in the Chinese versions of *Cosmopolitan* and of male images in the Chinese version of *Esquire*; and compared them to the US versions of both magazines, in order to verify whether the two presented consistent images of women and men. The findings show that while female images were localized according to Chinese values of femininity and beauty, the male images in *Esquire* were consistent with the American version of the magazine. Besides this point, Hong also found similarities and differences in the portrayal, but what he notes is a general "glocal strategy" (p. 241) that leads gender images be dynamic and in continuous transformation influenced by value changes and social norms (p. 242).

Contrary to the tendency to compare China with a Western society, Yu, Park and Sun (2015) conducted a cross cultural analysis of cosmetic advertisements between China and Korea. The aim of their study was to understand the differences in the beauty ideals between the two countries. Their results show that Korean beauty ideals are penetrating the Chinese market, thanks to the increasing popularity of Korean models in China. Their findings show that Chinese advertisers use Western beauty ideals more often than their Korean counterparts, and in general Chinese ads tend to be more product-oriented than Korean ones, which are more "emotional […] with symbolic images and little text" (p. 700).

Moreover, given the growing importance of the Asian market for advertisers, Siu and Au (1997) compare the female image in television commercials from China and Singapore. While the majority of comparative studies usually look at divergences and convergences between one "First World" country and a "Third World" counterpart, this particular study looks at two societies that share a similar cultural background, despite having extremely different histories in what pertains their relationship with Western influences and market economy (p. 236). Their findings show many similarities, but also important differences. While the overall stereotypes were

confirmed – e.g. females portrayed as product users, while men showing authority over the product; male voiceover prevalence over the female one – traditional sex-role stereotyping was apparently higher in Chinese commercials than in Singaporean ones (p. 240).

Other than the often used content analysis, also other more qualitative methodologies are sometimes used to understand gender portrayals. For instance, Shao et al. (2014) interviewed advertising practitioners working in Beijing's leading advertising agencies (e.g. Saatchi & Saatchi, Grey, Beijing Guo'an Advertising Corporation) to understand how those individuals working in the ad industry conceptualize gender. They argue that their representation of gender is guided both by local as well as global (Western) influences that form the stereotypical portrayal of men and women. Their interviewees claimed that advertising is a mirror of reality rather than its distortion (p. 344) and that their representations were "simply reflecting culture" (p. 344).

Finally, another example of a non-quantitative study is Notar's (1994) anthropological approach to the study of women in ads. She narrates her return to China in the early 1990s, following a few years of absence, during which she suddenly noticed how the advertising landscape had profoundly changed. She decided to keep track of gender ads shown in television and categorize them according to what they sold, the age and gender of the characters. Based on her empirical observation she identifies two different female models that were offered to the viewer at that time: the "sexy young thing" (p. 31), and "the good wife, wise mother" (p. 32). She then analyzed three different editorials on advertising included in the women's magazine *Zhongguo funü bao* (中国妇女报) that give different views on the proliferation of the female image in Chinese ads: the first one is absolutely against ads, the second one accepts them only as unreal simulations of reality – or as some sort of works of art (p. 35) – and the third one sees ads as having a liberating power on Chinese women. Notar questions the positions in favor of advertising, but she admits that her doubts arise from her Western perspective. She then presents the thoughts of three young women on consumption in post-Maoist China. She concludes that Chinese women's feelings leave her "with an uneasy feeling of temporal trouble, for they seem to focus only on short-term resistances" (p. 42).

2.5. Beyond the local vs. global discourse

Apart from the studies that look at local and global influences in gender advertisements, other studies have looked at different aspects that connect gender and ads. The most thorough and comprehensive studies on the female image in Chinese ads conducted in Chinese are Bu's (2006) review of the studies on the female image during the decade 1995-2005; and Liu and Bu's (1997) research report on the female image in TV commercials. Liu Bohong and Bu Wei (1997) wrote an article with the intent to quantify how many ads were discriminating against women. They analyzed over one thousand TV commercials aired across China in the second half of 1994, and concluded that around one third portrayed women as mere sex objects. Men, on the other hand, were portrayed as having the complete hegemony over technical skills and abilities (*keji zhuanye baquan*) whereas women's value was limited to their appearance, their (young) age and their bodies. Moreover, the relationships between both sexes were based on the kindness and obedience of the woman, who, by acting this way, obtained from men love, care, financial support and guidance (p. 55). Almost ten years after the publication of this article, Liu Bohong (2006) returned on the same topic to see whether there had been an improvement during those nine years in the portrayal of the female image. She argues that despite considerable progress made in society for the attainment of equality between men and women, ads still tend to reproduce outdated stereotypes regarding men and women. Thus, they do not reflect reality (p. 24).

Li Xuefeng (2003) highlights the paradox that despite creativity is seen as one of the fundamental features of the advertising industry, women are usually portrayed following specific recurrent types (*leixing*) and characteristics (*tedian*) (p. 110). These are: the young and beautiful woman (1); the sexy woman (2); the joyful and transforming woman (3) and lastly the stereotyped skills that she possesses. The reason why these types are created is that they are shaped from a male perspective that does not take into account women's rich complexity, and instead prefers to oversimplify postures, gestures, gazes and so on (p. 111). Therefore, ads are "male-centred" (*yi nanxing wei zhongxing*) (p. 112) because they are created by men, and although the images shown in ads are mostly unattainable, many women wish to get as close as possible to them, and this in turn fuels advertisers' inspirations to keep doing their work in this direction. The tendency to turn women into objects for the

pleasure of men is also highlighted in Zhou (2001), where she underlines the ubiquitous presence of young women, as if young would equal beautiful (*sihu nianqing jiu shi mei*) (p. 5).

Ai (2009) argues that since the introduction of the research on women's portrayal in the Chinese media, the tendency to raise the attention of women's consciousness on their portrayal from a feminist point of view has entered into conflict with the Chinese ideology of the so called "harmonious society" (*hexie shehui*) (p. 86). She argues that Western feminist theory has been applied mechanically to Chinese contexts in which it was completely inappropriate, due to the specificities of its history and of the development of women's movements in China. She follows instead the harmonious society framework, that regards harmony between all the elements of society – including men and women – as the basis for a peaceful coexistence. Feminists should abandon their idea that society is governed by patriarchal forces, and establish a new cultural point of view that takes into account a new "harmonious critical model" (p. 88). The concept of harmonious society is also analyzed in relation to advertisements by Xu and Hu (2006). They argue instead that the advertising industry should promote the harmonious society principles in order to construct an idea of gender roles that promotes harmony. The same concept of harmonious society in ads is also used by Hu (2008) to criticize the current gender images in advertisements. Contrary to Ai's (2009) criticism of the feminist approach, Hu and Xu (2006; 2008) use the concept of harmonious society to criticize gender portrayals, showing a link with feminist approaches to the portrayal of the female image in ads. Therefore, for them the problem of the female image lies in advertisers' attitudes, because they discriminate women by using stereotypical images that belong to the past.

Li (2007) applies instead a Foucauldian framework that analyzes the female image in ads as a structural model of human beings, and ultimately to look at how the re-emergence of femininity in the post-Mao era has not brought to Chinese women an improvement in their status, on the contrary, the mass media and the new consumption forces have worked together towards the opposite direction. Similarly, Guo and Liu (2016) apply Barthes' semiotic approach, as well as the American psychologists Bandurra's behaviorist approach, to argue that since advertising can promote changes in people's behaviors, more ads like Procter and Gamble's "Like a Girl" are needed, because they not only reach the purpose of the industry (to sell the

advertised product) but they also fulfill the important task of taking a positive action that fulfills the social responsibility of the industry.

Dai (2014) takes as example three different advertisements, and she analyzes the symbolic meaning of the female body within these ads. She looks at three different ads portraying the female body: a Uniqlo ad showing four half-naked women; a Dior ad depicting two women whose bodies are fused together in an image that conveys a sensual meaning; and a collage by Neuf Music, showing a man, a woman, and an electric guitar. Dai argues that the semiotic value of the naked body in the first image is in the beauty ideal conveyed by a slender naked female body (p. 5). The female body becomes then an element that serves the purpose of attracting the consumer's attention on the one hand, and creating a symbol of appreciation on the other hand. The current advertising industry however, portrays a paradoxical image that wants women to be creative and unique, and yet this portrayal clashes with the image of common women, who are still deeply influenced by traditional discourses.

Pan (2006) identifies four patterns according to which females are portrayed in Chinese ads: 1) Females' external appearance (according to beauty ideals); 2) Sex objects; 3) Secondary occupational roles and weak positions vis-à-vis men; 4) In the family. This classification is consistent with other studies quoted above, however Pan underlines the fact that despite some general improvement that the feminist movement in China has obtained – for instance thanks to the efforts of the Global Media Monitoring Project, an initiative that contributes to observe women's portrayal in the media, advocating for its improvement – these debates have remained only within academia, resulting in a high unawareness of the general public of what is being debated (p. 83). As Zhang (2007) also points out, practitioners cannot neglect the voices of critics, thus the industry's self-regulation as well as government's supervision and social monitoring are necessary to work towards higher levels of equality in ads (p. 26).

Li (2006) looks at several stereotypes portrayed in the advertising industry: "women inside the home" (*nüzhunei*) (p. 115), which responds to the traditional Chinese patriarchal ideology – and wants women portrayed as good wives and mothers – and women portrayed as consumers, where women appear as economically dependent on men. These images respond to an old patriarchal system that has been fused together

with consumer culture, and that has had great impact on women themselves. The author looks at the effects of the modern Chinese woman proposed by the advertising industry on young university students. She argues that women's position in university is extremely weak vis-à-vis her male counterpart. This issue leads women to disavow an active role in society, with their only aim being that of finding an "enviable husband" (p. 117). Their personal opinions are constructed through the interaction of popular culture on the one hand, and traditional culture on the other hand. As a consequence, the stereotype of the good wife and mother still holds valid in today's China, and the advertising industry is one of the main promoters of this image.

Finally, Chan et al. (2014) analyzed how young Chinese consumers perceived gendered images in ads. The purpose of their study was to examine how effective ads are based on the different type of female image they provide; and what implications this had for changing values about gender (p. 9). They selected a group of over 200 informants (youths aged 17-21 from Changchun, in Jilin province) to whom they provided six sets of questionnaires, each with a specific version of female model – cute, sporty, career, housewife, and gorgeous – (p.13). Their results show that females have a more favorable attitude towards the female image in ads than men, and as a consequence, advertisers can have the approval of women if the advertisement features females (p. 18).

2.6. Chinese feminism since the reform era

The inception of women's studies in China has gone through a different path from that of the Euro American world. As Zhang (2010) points out, while in the West women's studies as a discipline has transitioned "from the street to the campus, from the movement to the academy" (p. 9), in China women's studies has emerged from the acknowledgement of a convergence between women's problems and gender theory, derived from the West (p. 9).

However, the interest for women's issues was not born during the post-Maoist era, but in fact dates back to the Republican period, when activists' efforts to obtain women's suffrage led Chinese women to develop "a clear feminist agenda" (Edwards, 2008, p. 9). The efforts of these movements were soon dismissed by the CCP as "bourgeois feminism" (Wang, 2005b, p. 543), and replaced by what has been termed as "State

feminism" (Wang, 2005b), represented by its mouthpiece, the All China Women's Federation.

Women's studies as a field of research emerged in China the 1980s, along with the already mentioned economic reforms. During that decade, Chinese women were facing concrete issues, for instance they were experiencing difficulties in obtaining jobs, and at the same time were being laid-off from jobs at state-owned factories (Min, 1999; Zhang, 2010). Chinese scholars thus began to analyze these social issues from a women's point of view. At the same time, the ACWF felt that it should lead the engagement in finding solutions to the most urgent problems, calling for a national conference on theoretical research on women (which was held in 1984) (Wang, 2005a). The debates that emerged during this conference, and during the second one held in 1986, highlighted the need of *funü xue* 妇女学 (women's studies) on the one hand, but on the other hand also led to the emerging perception by many participants in the conference that due to the absence of such discipline in the Marxist classics, its introduction would generate a hegemonic influence of Western studies, and would lead to a "bourgeois feminism" (Wang, 2005a, p. 119).

Against this background, where the ACWF had been organizing groups on women's issues, and where Chinese scholars and intellectuals had been exchanging ideas with other feminists worldwide, women's studies transformed itself during the mid- 1980s from a research field that interested individuals, to organized collaborative groups. This was possible thanks to the establishment of the Women's Studies Research Center in Zhengzhou University, founded by Li Xiaojiang, the pioneer of Chinese women's studies (Du, 2001). In the mid-1980s Li Xiaojiang referred to women's reaction against the negative aspects of the reform era as an awakening (*juexing*) from the period in which equality had been established from above (Milwertz, 2002, p. 13). The introduction of the market economy had led to huge opportunities, but also to huge problems for gender relations, that came to be debated in the media, leading to discussions on how to find "alternative 'ways out for women'" (p. 15).

As Lin et al. (1998) point out, the mainstream of women's studies in China was considered Marxist in "political and strategic sense" (p. 111). However, from within this tradition a new trend which resists "gender-blind Marxism" (Fung, 2000, p. 154; C. Lin et al., 1998, p. 112) emerged. This has in turn allowed a "revolt against

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artificial sameness" (p. 111) to develop, along with "a sidelight fetishism, aided by commercial forces, of an equally artificial 'femininity'" (p. 112) (see Chapter 5).

The period between 1993 and the 4th UN Conference on Women marks a second stage in the development of women's studies (Du, 2001). In 1993 China began to prepare the 4th UN Conference on Women, establishing a series of women's centers across the country, which included women leaders of Party organizations; women leaders of unions; scholars in social sciences disciplines; and retired women Professors (p. 240). The Conference allowed the concept of "gender" to enter the discourse regarding women in China, breaking with the Marxist tradition of blind equality between men and women. From an institutional point of view, the Conference endorsed the legitimacy of NGOs, independently from the ACWF, which started to define itself as an NGO (Angeloff, 2012). Therefore, several groups were born in view of the preparation of the Conference, e.g. "East Meets West Feminist Translation Group", "The Beijing Sisters", "The Association for Promoting Rural Women in Development" (Milwertz, 2002, pp. 18–19).

Wang and Zhang (2010) highlight the importance of the conference in introducing global feminist concepts in China, and in transforming the ACWF. The result of the Conference was an unprecedented rise in the attention to women's issues, and an impetus to the development of women's studies as a discipline inside and outside the academic world. Due to its historical itinerary and to the entwinement with Western feminism, the wave of Chinese feminism that developed during the 1980s and 1990s has been defined by Edwards (2010) as "inherently transnational and implicitly global" (p. 53) although these ties with international feminism were sometimes impossible to maintain. This difficult relationship with international feminism was only partly due to China's semi-colonial past, because even after the introduction of the open-door policy the relationship with the West has often been problematic: the engagement with the world has been hampered by nationalist discourses carried out by the Party-State (p. 66).

The need to indigenize the concept of feminism has been a way to "respond to the seeming hegemonic power of western theories" (Xu, 2009, p. 197). Xu (2009) argues that nationalism has played a role in making intellectuals suspicious of foreign thought as a means to cultural imperialism: "one can even speak of a suppressed

superiority complex: one often has the impression that China, a great world civilization, ought to make an independent contribution to world scholarship" (p. 208). This quest for an "independent contribution" has led Chinese women scholars to be reluctant to engage with transnational women's movements. For instance, Li and Zhang (1994) underline the specificity of Chinese feminism by arguing that despite the inevitable ties that link it with Western feminist philosophy, yet Chinese women do not use the term *feminist* to describe their activities, but prefer terms such as "[f]eminology, which rarely implies Western feminist theory" (p. 148). The specificities of Chinese scholars on the direction that the movement ought to take were initially driven by the need to reject the de-sexed image of women that was prevalent during Maoism. What scholars developed was an essentialized theory on women as inherently different from men, that was also connected with a neo-Marxist critique of the CCP (Wang, 2005a). Contemporary women writers gained popularity by narrating the process of re-acquiring their lost femininity, and the discourse of femininity as detached from class became also popular throughout the 1980s and 1990s (Jiang et al., 2006). This indigenous version of feminism has been analyzed also by Schaffer and Song (2007) who argue that in China there is a "Chinese-style feminism" (p. 20) that abjures the Eurocentric term "feminist" because it suggests an opposition between men and women, rather than a complementarity between the two sexes (p. 20).

Du and Zheng (2005) have written of a stagnancy (p. 184) of women's studies in the decade after the Beijing Conference, which was due to the predominance of Marxist theory, the only theory that many women scholars in China had been educated in. Moreover, they "have found it easier to apply the Marxist viewpoint on women in their analysis. Even for those scholars who have some idea of the theoretical developments outside China, their lack of a critical awareness of the tools of deconstruction, has led them towards 'being scientific and objective' as their academic target" (p. 185). The difficulties experienced after the end of the state-sponsored and gender-blind feminism imposed by Maoism, and with Western notions of feminism that Chinese feminist scholars have not felt appropriate to analyze their own specificities, young activists who engage either in academic and research based experiences or in NGOs' related activism, have had to deal with an "ambiguous past" (Liu, Huang, & Ma, 2015, p. 12). Liu, Huang and Ma (2015) argue that in today's

China, activists do not place themselves in relation to China's past, because it is perceived as an obstacle to a complete emancipation from all kinds of oppression. They also argue that for Chinese activists, globalization is a natural part of their lives, whereas indigenization and originality are harder to achieve. While this could be interpreted as an on-going form of colonialism, in fact those feminists (within and outside the academic world) who are aware of power inequalities within transnational debates, engage with these issues critically.

In this context, the interest of Chinese feminist activists for the female representation in the media owes its theoretical underpinnings not only to Western feminism, but also, and more importantly, to a rejection of gender de-sexed image that circulated during Maoism – the so-called "iron girls" or *tie guniang* – who were heroines of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) era, as well as a "sign of the ideology that 'men and women are the same'" (Jin, 2006). Therefore, feminist activists have contested this image, but drawing on specifically Chinese notions of femininity, women, and gender relations that arise from this historical development.

2.7. Feminist activism and the media

Fung (2000) suggests that the accommodation of feminism within the Asian cultural tradition has created various ideological conflicts. He argues that the role of popular culture could serve as the source to spread feminist values in the Asian context (p. 155). The keys to render feminist culture popular in Asia are the following: by strategically promoting a feminist commodity; by becoming publicly accessible; and by matching the public majority's ideology (p. 156). In Asia, the penetration of foreign cultural values has created new forms of gratification that can be outlined as a hybridized ideology, where traditional patriarchal values intertwine with Western values. However, if gender equality could be achieved simply by an exposure to feminist popular culture representations, feminists' goals could be achieved simply through media consumption, but, as Fung suggests, this appears not to be the case (p. 157) (see Chapter 5).

The inception and rapid development of women's studies in China prompted the birth of feminist engagements with the media. In 1994 a new TV program began a formal broadcasting: *Ban bian tian* (Half the Sky) whose goals were to show the underrepresented category of women in television. This is not to say that before *Ban*

bian tian women did not have dedicated TV programs, but instead that these were, as Shou (2004) points out, "not substantially different from such non-women's programs as soap operas, programs on household management and fashion" (p. 262). As pointed out by both Shou (2004) and Bu (2004), the main responsibilities that media who treat women have are: (1) to help women understand their value and empower them; (2) to influence social consciousness on the validity of gender equality; (3) and to influence policy makers in the same direction. Shou Yuanjun (2004), as one of the creators of the program, wants to underline the media's pedagogic and educational purposes: she explains that in 1997 two feminist scholars were invited to *Ban bian tian* (she does not provide the names) to show their research findings on women's representations in advertisements. They referred that in the advertising industry women were represented using outdated stereotypes, and through patterns that aimed at reflecting men's superiority. This study was hardly criticized by the writers-directors of the program, who argued that the statements were unfounded, and a large debate originated from this issue. One year later, the program writers-directors and producers were invited to participate in a gender training course, and apparently understood the importance of how women are portrayed in the media, and acquired the skills to realize when a misrepresentation had been enacted (Shou, 2004, p. 270).

The Beijing Conference also allowed the Women's Media Watch Network (*Funü chuanmei jiance wangluo*) to be established, in 1996 (Cai, Feng, & Guo, 2001) (see Chapter 5). The WMWN is an influential NGO that organizes a series of activities to advocate for the improvement of female representations in the media. Its main goal is to view "the media with a gender perspective" (p. 209) and to "create a favorable social and cultural space for the development of gender equality" (p. 209). The media have a crucial role in promoting activists' organizations and work. As Milwertz and Bu (2008) point out, one fourth of NGO activists in China work for newspapers, radio, television or other media outlets where they can "exploit their employment position in order to promote the social movement agenda in the non-disruptive mode of action adopted by non-governmental women's organizing in China" (p. 132). In addition to the WMWN, Milwertz and Bu (2008) also describe the relevant role of the Network for Combating Domestic Violence, a website whose purpose is to spread awareness and raise women's consciousness on domestic violence problems. Elsewhere, Milwertz and Bu (2009) argue that what they term "oppositional gender knowledge"

(p. 228) is disseminated in China, where the media are tightly controlled by the Party-State, by legitimizing feminist concerns through media performances (they provide two examples: a public meeting that used political theatre, and a documentary drama) (p. 241). Along with the already mentioned NGOs and networks, other important initiatives that connected activism and the media were born in the decade following the Beijing Conference. For instance, in 2004 the Media and Gender Research Institute was established in Beijing, at the Communication University of China; and in 2005 the UNESCO nominated a Chair of Media and Gender within the same university (Liu, Zeng, & Zhang, 2007).

In a context in which the female image is highly debated both inside academia and within activists' circles, the current wave of young feminists relies on the empirical work of elder NGO activists mentioned above, but contrary to them, it is influenced by globalizing media images that resonate with the widespread critique against the post-feminist understanding that "women can have it all", as I debate in Chapter 5. This recently acquired transnational perspective should not be read as the final acceptance of international influences into a China-specific feminism, but rather as the natural consequence of a globalizing process allowed by ICTs, and the flow of people from and to China, that has naturally fostered a broader perspective on feminist readings of media images.

2.8. Theoretical Framework: The Chinese feminist identity through ads

The existing literature on women in ads, and in particular on Chinese women in ads, has been dominated by content analyses and other case studies (e.g. Cheng, 1997; Frith, Shaw, & Cheng, 2005; Hung & Li, 2006) that despite providing interesting insights on the current image of the "modern Chinese woman" (e.g. Evans, 2000; Hooper, 1998; Johansson, 2001) fall short of probing deeply into women's own perceptions of this image; and make instead assumptions on market segments, clearly focusing on marketing strategies aimed at advertisers, rather than on women's self-perceptions that lead to identity constructions through ads' interpretations. Even those studies that do not belong to this category, and that take into account gender perceptions (e.g. Chan et al., 2014; Hung et al., 2007) remain too faithful to already existing categories and images (e.g. the flower vase, the housewife, the nurturer) without allowing the women they study to fully and freely express their beliefs.

In order to present an original contribution to the already existing literature on the female image in Chinese advertisements, I adopt a theoretical approach that instead of interpreting the various arrays of female images that circulate in China, begins from an ethnographic attention to everyday practices of advertisements' consumption among young Chinese feminists, in order to understand how they construct their identity as feminists through the sharing of a set of certain values, beliefs, and general attitudes towards the advertising landscape. To achieve this goal, I have privileged the dialogic exchanges with the informants that I draw from Bakhtin's framework on the importance of dialogue as opposed to monologue (Holquist, 2002) (see Chapter 6). The overarching framework that I employ draws from Hobart's (1996, 2001) epistemological approach to the study of how people engage with the media (and in particular with advertisements) that places the people with whom the ethnographer engages at the center of the research process, giving to them not only a voice in the final product of the research, but positioning the researched as producers of knowledge and of identity. As Fung (2002) points out, identity and culture are a way of life that can be traced back not only within the influences of external forces (the ads), but that is also "brought into being through the subjects' own participation" (p. 322), that is, through their sharing of periodic routines through which their identity is pieced together, or in other words, through a "feminist way of life". The women's identity is then studied here as a set of practices that "involve both domination and resistance, which are multifaceted and multi-layered" (p. 323). Therefore, the approach that I propose aims at bridging the academic world that produced discourses on "the modern Chinese woman" or on "the female image in Chinese ads" with a non-academic milieu, through a theory of practice that is grounded in a collaborative project between these two apparently distant worlds.

Hobart (2000) argues that while cultural studies are highly recommended to those researchers interested in the processes of commodification, consumerism, and popular culture that have been going on in Asia and in other continents, the issue with cultural studies is that it remains highly theoretical, and has not led to the emergence of ethnographic inquiries into the role of the mass media in the everyday lives of people. As Hobart (2000, p. 8) puts it

> cultural studies always runs the risk of degenerating into
> a   hermetic,   textual   exercise   for   metropolitan

intellectuals. Crucially, it threatens to become an elitist game, which ignores the critical thinking of those whose culture it is to begin with.

For this reason, despite owing my methodological approach to important cultural studies scholars (Ang, 1985; Hall, 1980; Morley, 1992; Radway, 1991) my interest is not in a feminist informed interpretation of the female image through the readings that the feminist informants provided, but in the role that this image has in shaping these peoples' identity. What ultimately interests me is how young urban Chinese feminists employ ads to construct an identity that is constantly opposed to and fascinated by mainstream images of femininity. Thus, what I engage with are the feminists' practices of advertisements' consumption, or in other words the activity through which their agency emerges. As Hobart (2001) points out, activity and agency should not be confused (p. 218). Although the women consume ads (the activity), their agency as feminists (and their identity formation) does not arise from this particular practice, but rather from a vast array of practices of which the consumption of ads is only one aspect.

Elsewhere, Hobart (1996) has underlined that originally ethnography had the problem that its accounts were monologic. On the one hand it endorsed the "authoritative voice of the ethnographer" (p. 1) and on the other hand it shadowed the "polyvocal reality of social life" (p. 1). From this critique a new way of doing ethnography emerged: one that included the voices of the people studied within the text, and by doing so it "authorized" (p. 1) the natives. However, Hobart (1996) points out that in both cases the presence of the ethnographer – who decides how to frame concepts and which voices to quiet at which times – is the ultimate product of the ethnographic research. As he puts it:

> Our thinking is already third order. And our note-writing in the field – our textualizing if you insist – is already fourth order. Which makes our monographs at least fifth order and 'culture' a concept so 'meta-' in its removal from any possible social action that it is best not thought about at all. (Hobart, 1996, p. 5).

To find a way out of this paradigm that imposes the researcher's interpretation over the researched way of looking at the world, my way of looking at the practices of the audiences implies as starting point the observation of how these practices appear in their "publicly observable processes" (Couldry, 2010, p. 41), instead of reading them

as if they were cultural texts (Hobart, 1996). Cultural analysis, in Hobart's (2000) view has reiterated hierarchical differences in knowledge between the researcher and the researched. He asks (p. 30):

> What sort of post-colonial period are we in, if people are being made if anything more dependent upon Americans and Europeans for knowledge and understanding about themselves?

What he advocates for is, then, a "radical metaphysical critique" (p. 46), meaning that he wants to draw attention to the practices through which all the people involved in the study think about themselves "as significantly and inherently different" (p. 43) The radical metaphysical critique that Hobart invokes is a "critical presuppositional rethinking of a 'hegemonic text' of media studies" (Hobart, 2005, p. 26), in the sense that the anthropologist's goal is to understand the "presuppositions that motivate such thinking and acting, and so to appreciate how other people explain, represent, and mediate events and actions" (p. 27). Hobart constructs his argument against Clifford Geertz's strong culturalism that is, according to Hobart (2005), only supplementary, because it appears as "strapped onto" (p. 27) other "hard" aspects: economy, politics and so on. If we consider ethnography as a practice, its value lies in the acknowledgement that the ethnographer is positioned in between two "partly incommensurable discourses – the analyst's world, as academic and cultural subject, and the understandings, arguments and working presuppositions of the subjects of study" (Hobart, 2006, p. 497). The ethnographic understanding as such involves (p. 497):

> appreciating how people judge and comment on their own practices, while simultaneously analyzing the circumstances under which such practices occur, employing current academic criteria. This understanding is critical in the strong sense that is not only critical of the object of study, but of the practices and categories of the knowing subject, the analyst's own. It is in this encounter that the ethnographer is confronted by the Eurocentrism of her own thinking and presuppositions. It follows that, if research is not simply to reiterate hegemony, such cultural translation must be dialogic, again in the strong sense that academic presuppositions and practice themselves are continually called into question and interrogated through the dialogue.

Following Bakhtin's (1981, 1986) dialogic imagination, the exchanges that take place within the ethnographic inquiry replace tendencies of speaking on behalf of others, but are instead aimed at speaking *to* and *with* the others (Alcoff, 1991). For this continuous exchange, I define the identity that emerges from my observations as a feminist collective identity that is continuously negotiated and revised (Rupp & Taylor, 1999) by the producers of this form of knowledge. The feminist identity, as understood in this thesis, is not ready-made, but constructed through long – and often uneasy – processes of negotiation and learning from others' experiences. As Rupp and Taylor (1999) summarize, the collective feminist identity is characterized by three aspects:

> 1) the creation of boundaries; 2) the development of consciousness of the group's distinct and shared disadvantages; 3) the politicization of everyday life, embodied in symbols and actions that connect the members of the group and link their everyday experiences to larger social injustices (p. 365).

To better frame the meanings valuable to the community of practice (see Chapter 6) that I analyze, my feminist audience research ethnography (see Chapter 3) resonates with postcolonial feminists' ways of doing media ethnographies (e.g. Gajjala, 2004; Parameswaran, 2001) (see Chapters 4 and 5). My theoretical orientation, in this sense, sustains Teng's (1996) argument that the Euro-American academy has constructed for a long time a discourse on the traditional and modern Chinese woman that neglects women's own experiences and voices by placing categories that may be valid elsewhere, but not necessarily for Chinese women.

Mohanty (1988) strongly criticized Western feminists' assumptions about their discourses and practices as being the norm, and thus taking their own experiences and theoretical claims as the primary referent of analysis of the so-called Third World women (p. 62). Mohanty (2003) argues against a monolithic idea of patriarchy that is valid across cultures, eras, and geographic boundaries. This, in her view (p. 19):

> [L]eads to the construction of a similarly reductive and homogenous notion of what I call the 'Third World difference', that stable, ahistorical something that apparently oppresses most in not all the women in these countries.

Therefore, the ultimate theoretical aim of my thesis is to provide the dialogic exchanges among the participants (including myself), and to offer the women's own understandings of the female image, that are constructed upon various influences (global, local, traditional, modern and so on) and which deserve attention because they are grounded in their everyday practices as women and as feminists.

Through this approach, the feminist identity as it emerges through their understanding of the advertisements they analyze, is neither the result of their "free will", nor is it determined by outer social norms – be it a feminist norm or a non-feminist one – but it is rather the product of the interplay between the norm and their agency. As Bourdieu (1977, p. 169) explains:

> The dominated classes have an interest in pushing back the limits of the *doxa* and exposing the arbitrariness of the taken for granted; the dominant classes have an interest in defending the integrity of the *doxa* or, short of this, of establishing in its place the necessarily imperfect substitute, orthodoxy.

When the *doxa*, that is, all the undiscussed and undisputed assumptions about how society is, come to be questioned, the women perform their shared identity as dominated classes in order to push back the limits of what is deemed acceptable. This in turn raises the question of the crucial role of feminist agency and the conscious awareness about the choices we make. As Alcoff (1988, p. 434) points out:

> When women become feminists the crucial thing that has occurred is not that they have learned any new facts about the world, but that they have come to view those facts from a different position, from their own position as subjects.

It is by virtue of this newly acquired position that the women whom I discuss in this thesis deploy their agency and construct their identity through the constant negotiations between the social world as it apparently is – or the orthodoxy in Bourdieu's terminology – and their own ways of resisting to this social world and of fighting back.

3. Methodologies

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the majority of studies that deal with portrayals in advertisements use content analysis as their methodological underpinning (Zhang, 2014, p. 279). This is true both in Western contexts and for studies that look at non-Western societies. Content analysis, which is not a strictly quantitative methodology, but can be used by qualitative researchers to interpret meanings (Drisko, 2015) has therefore been the basic methodology used to infer the risks inherent in stereotypical portrayals of women in ads, as shown in the literature review. However, the main limitation that content analysis poses is that of overlooking the broader context by categorizing the aspects of an advertisement (images, poses, meanings) according to presupposed assumptions made by the researcher. Moreover, content analysis, despite having been undoubtedly useful in unveiling hidden meanings that have been trying to persuade men and women to buy products or services, it however fails to explain the reasons behind those meanings, offering a mere count of what ads show, and from this, inferring broader assumptions about society.

The aim of this dissertation is therefore to move beyond a simple hypothesis-deductive approach that looks at the product (the advertisement); and to understand instead how the audiences engage with the images they are constantly bombarded with, analyzing how they negotiate meanings and use them to create spaces of resistance, or "spaces of their own" (Yang, 1999) that affect their everyday lives and identities. For this reason I have used a media ethnographic approach that borrows from the audience studies tradition of cultural studies scholars (e.g. Ang, 1985, 1991; Hall, 1996; Morley, 1992; Radway, 1991). Media ethnography can be defined as

> [a] type of media investigation that focuses on media uses as part of people's everyday lives and that applies the researcher's observation of and informal interaction with his and her informants as a major methodological tool (Schrøder, Drotner, Kline, & Murray, 2003, p. 58).

As Jensen (2002) notes, the interest in how people decode mediated meanings has led to include media works in empirical studies, and to "insist that cultural artefacts can have several meanings, and may have no one core meaning" (p. 162). Thus, the traditional stream of scholarly research that has developed around the decoding of advertisements (e.g. Goffman, 1979; Williamson, 1978; Berger, 2011; Goldman, 1992) is here linked to a reader-response approach that gives voice to the informants, and

allows them to decode the advertisement that they see in what Jensen (2002) defines as "hermeneutics of suspicion" (p. 162), meaning that audiences look at advertisements from an oppositional point of view, positioning themselves against the dominant meaning conveyed by the encoder (i.e. the advertiser).

Jensen (1987) elsewhere points out that "it is in the interplay between communication system and the audience that the meanings that could be said to have effects come to be" (p. 22). The nexus between the medium and the audience is therefore crucial to understand how the social reality of the informants is constructed by themselves. The convergence between social sciences and a humanistic approach to social research, has led to the development of media ethnography that, as Ang (1991) points out, is neither qualitative nor quantitative, but it rather assumes a completely different epistemology that allows the researcher to look at how audiencehood makes use of its fragmentary social world (p. 164).

Although Jensen (2002) criticizes the use of ethnography in media research as a "tendency […] to describe assorted qualitative methodologies, including interviewing, as the equivalent of 'ethnography'" (p. 165), its use has constantly grown since the first studies by Morley (1980, 1992). The self-reflexivity of media ethnographers has led them to acknowledge the limitations of its validity, and the difference between media ethnography and reception studies lies in the personal involvement of the researcher in the research process. In this involvement lies the anthropological turn in reception studies that allows to shift from simply acknowledging how informants decode mediated messages, to *engaging* with them in the construction of the meaning.

Taking this participation in the women's activist engagement as a starting point, my ethnography is colored with feminist tones that transform my audience research account into a feminist ethnography, meaning that my shared desire to understand the meanings behind those images took me directly into the discussions and exchanges with the informants, positioning me as one of them, but also allowing me to learn from them their beliefs and ideas. This process of learning and sharing is one of the main features of my narration: all the participants learn from each other and teach each other what it means to read advertisements as a feminist, and what it ultimately means to be a feminist, revealing their identity and its processes of construction through the shared experiences.

As Thornham (2000) points out, feminist ethnographic audience research has had, since its initial stages of development, a very different set of preoccupations from those that its founders (e.g. Morley and Hall) showed initially. Studies such as Hobson's *Crossroads; The Drama of a Soap Opera* (1982) were the first to use a feminist ethnography to study audiences, or to look at the encoding/decoding paradigm to understand how they were received by audiences made of women. Hobson's findings showed that for these women viewing soap operas was a "space within which to negotiate their own subjectivity and positioning as women" (Thornham, 2000, p. 104). After Hobson's study, other women started approaching audience ethnography from a feminist point of view (e.g. Radway, Ang, Brown). The common thread of their audience studies is in the framing of the women who take part of their research as active agents who engage in media practices not as passive receivers of encoded messages, but as thinking individuals who reframe the message – or decode it – offering different perspectives. In this sense, the feminists who took part in my research utilized the encoded messages to create a set of beliefs (in favor or against the message) that constructed and reinforced their feminist identity.

In order to engage in my audience ethnography, I relied on a wide range of qualitative methods traditionally used in anthropology: participant observation, informal and unstructured interviews, focus groups and group discussions, which I describe in greater detail below (see section 3.3). I therefore spent 6 continuous months in Shanghai (January-August 2015), although another field trip was conducted before the "official" beginning of the fieldwork (in November 2014), as narrated on page 1. Although during these two trips I engaged in different interactions, these preliminary data was crucial to understand which group of women I was keener to look at. Apart from my encounters with the women whom I mention throughout the thesis, I also participated in online exchanges and debates on WeChat groups, conducting a participant observation of the feminists' online interactions, and how these are connected to their offline activism. This method was conducted throughout the period of the fieldwork, and carried on upon my return to Hong Kong, until approximately April 2016. The purpose of my ethnographic approach was to understand my participants' daily lives and personal characteristics, with the ultimate aim to understand them better as women and as feminists, therefore providing more nuanced portrayals of them and of their thoughts and experiences. For this reason, my

activities with them did not only include conversations on the actual representation of women in ads, but ranged from their own lives and experiences (their relationships with their friends, families, each other's lived experiences, and how these have influenced who were are today). For instance, we often met for lunch or coffees, especially in the areas were they preferred to stay, near their university, or near their workplace. They showed me the city, and they helped me with my own troubles as a foreigner in China (with my landlord, with the bills to pay and so on). Overall, I met with them around 3-4 times a week, depending on their own schedule. The encounters were not very often one-to-one, since I always invited them to bring friends, therefore we were generally small groups of 2-3 people. However, when we were in larger groups, I often had one-to-one conversations with each of them separately, although others sometimes liked to join. We did not always mention my research project on ads, although this was usually the presentation they made to their friends when introducing me to them. Very often our exchanges were made of questions they were interested in asking me, especially in reference to women's treatment in Italy. I noticed that they had very little knowledge about this, and they generally perceived women as better treated almost anywhere as compared to China. They were therefore very surprised to learn that women in Italy face similar problems as women in China, if not worse, especially in relation to domestic violence and sexual harassment.

During the months I spent in Shanghai I wrote daily fieldnotes in order to record not only the encounters and exchanges, but also my daily routine in the city. The fieldnotes therefore contain both extensive and detailed descriptions of people, images (advertisements), and places, following a traditional anthropological approach that aims at collecting meticulously the data (Mauss, 2007, p. 13); as well as other more personal accounts that included reflections and ideas for the research. Moreover, whenever possible – for instance during the focus groups – I recorded the discussions and took photos or made short videos. The practice of photo and video recording was helpful when having to rethink about the discussions, or listen again to some exchanges, especially whenever I had language issues with Chinese only speakers. Other fieldwork materials that I collected include printed advertisements from magazines, videos from the Internet, and other photos or files that I exchanged with my informants by email or via WeChat.

Upon realizing that the data had been repeating itself thematically, I decided to end the collection and proceeded with the coding and analysis of the data which, as Schrøder et al. (2003) point out, "is often felt as an anticlimax to being in the field" (p. 97). After transcribing the interviews, I scanned and numbered all the images that were mentioned or used by the informants for their descriptions and discussions.

I started the coding process by identifying the type and content of the material (i.e. the fieldnotes, the transcribed interviews, and the visual material). The coding procedures were carried out according to the classification of the materials first, and then of the content. The content of the data was coded following Schrøder et al. (2003, p. 98) according to topical coding procedures and analytical coding ones. The former refers to the occurrences in the text regarding the people, the settings, the interactions and so on, that I selected depending upon the etic or emic perspective. The latter refers instead to the coding of "concepts, beliefs and themes" (p. 98). In general, the choice of an ethnographic approach was made because it naturally "lends itself to feminist methods" (Ward Gailey, 1998, p. 203). While social science research in general, and ethnography in particular have been perceived as male-dominated paradigms (DeVault, 1999; Oakley, 1981), and have thus generated concerns about their role in perpetuating oppression on the women who are object of research, this awareness has also generated strategic tools to manage the "contradiction" (Armstead, 1995, p. 627; DeVault, 1999, p. 59; Oakley, 1981, p. 30; Stacey, 1988, p. 22;) of using a male-paradigm to conduct research from a feminist standpoint. However, as Wheatley (1994) points out, these contradictions are not only inherent to feminist research, but are "*ethical* and *epistemological* in character" (p. 406). In order to construct an effective toolbox that would comply with my theoretical framework, that is, with the commitment to an emphasis on a dialogic construction of the social interaction between informants and researcher, and that would yield to an ethical ethnography (see section 3.5.), I privilege in my methods an approach that acknowledges the partiality of any ethnography as such (Clifford, 1986) but that commits to provide an account of the women who participated in my research that abides by my personal feminist sensibility.

3.1. The field: Shanghai and its commercial culture

At the beginning of the 19th century Shanghai was a prosperous city developed along the Huangpu River. However, compared to other cities in the same region, such as Suzhou or Yangzhou, it was still a relatively small town. Its fortune changed after the end of the First Opium War (1839-1842) when the Treaty of Nanjing (1843) established that it should become an open port, and as a consequence both the British and the French, later followed by other Western communities, settled in the city, and allowed it to flourish into a hybrid metropolis made of cosmopolitan, materialistic and consumerist features (Abbas, 2000; Liang, 2010; Zhao & Belk, 2008), which by the 1930s had become the fifth biggest city in the world (Belk and Zhao, 2012, p. 141). As Liang (2010) notes, despite the existence of foreign settlements in the city, the juxtaposition of Western and Chinese styles in architecture signified the dichotomy between modernity and tradition, economic growth and decadence. Belk and Zhao (2008) point out that for the Confucian tradition, the countryside was considered the place of virtue, as opposed to the city, perceived as depraved and foreign (p. 222). Therefore, Shanghai's modernity caused social criticism among Chinese intellectuals, but despite this, its own inherent contradictions where precisely the features that constituted its uniqueness (Liang, 2010, p. 11).

Shanghai of the late 19th century can be considered as a "laboratory stage" (Hay, 2007, p. 95) where the future of Chinese advertising was first experimented, albeit with the limited technological resources of those times. In the 1850s both Chinese and foreign photographers worked in Shanghai, mainly for advertisers who published their ads in *Shenbao* (Shanghai's most famous Chinese-language newspaper). Moreover, as Hay (2007) points out, modern advertising in China emerged in cities with a higher presence of foreigners, where a hybrid commercial culture was allowed to grow.

Besides the opposition between the countryside and the city, Wei (1987) also points out the separation between groups of individuals: the foreign community on the one hand, and the Chinese community on the other hand. The foreigners were known as "Shanghailanders", whereas the indigenous population as "Shanghainese" (p. 104). This separation did not mean that the two communities did not cooperate: they worked together when needed– although often in competition – but they otherwise stayed separate during their leisure time, preferring each the company of the people with whom they shared the same linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Wei, 1987).

Shanghai's hybridity is also one of its current features: a city proud of its modernity and cosmopolitanism, while also indulging in nostalgic sentiments of the enchanting atmosphere of the 1920s and 1930s. When describing the creation of the "sexy modern girl icon" (p. 293) in 1920s Shanghai, Tani Barlow (2008) points out that it was the product of the cooperative work of foreign and local advertisers, who met regularly in the city to learn "the science of advertising" (p. 291).

What makes a commercial culture specifically distinct from high culture, mass culture, and from popular culture are precisely its urbanity, its detachment from morality, and its profanity:

> Unlike high culture, commercial culture is thoroughly secular; it lacks strong moral and religious overtones. Unlike popular culture, commercial culture is distinctly urban; it originates in cities, not in the countryside. And unlike mass culture, commercial culture has locally oriented means of expression, not fully standardized mass media (Cochran, 1999, p. 3)

Cochran (1999) argues that despite the transnational origins of advertising, when imported to China, and specifically to Shanghai, the need to adapt to local taste pushed advertisers to "invent" (p. 40) Chinese images: this is how the *yuefenpai* women were born. *Yuefenpai*, a Chinese commercial and art form, were calendars that often featured women advertising objects, usually tobacco products which – as mentioned in Chapter 2 – were the first foreign product to be advertised in China. *Yuefenpai* posters became extremely popular, marking a "significant turning point in the history of Chinese commercial art" (p. 45). The role of the British-American Tobacco Company was crucial in creating what Cochran (1999, p. 47) defines as "tie-ins" in Shanghai's visual culture: by posting billboards across the city, and by buying advertising spaces on newspapers, ships, rickshaws, restaurant, opera houses and even amusement parks, the tobacco sellers were able to create a "dense network of visual images for persuading consumers to identify its cigarettes with other pleasures and sources of excitement along Nanjing Road" (p. 48). Zhao and Belk (2012) have underlined that the main goal of the *yuefenpai* images was to "show the latest fashions in Qipao, with changing hemlines, differing slit lengths, differing designs, and increasingly form-fitting and figure-displaying departures from the Qi gowns of the Ming dynasty" (p. 148). In other words, these images promoted the liberated female that the Republican revolution had produced: freed from foot-binding and with newly

acquired possibilities to travel and enjoy her free time at hotels and restaurants (p. 148).

Barlow (2008) points out that the main challenge faced by the advertising practitioners of the early Republican Shanghai was that of shifting from advertising wholesale commodities to that of targeting an emergent professional middle class. While initially the main goal of advertisements had been to show the product and its virtues, it later became a means through which images could show an "educative mise-en-scène" (p. 293) of a modern girl enjoying a product of domestic use.

While these accounts tie Shanghai's history to a well rooted commercial culture, the Shanghai of the early 21st century was a city "rushing to reinvent itself economically" (Wasserstrom, 2009, p. 109) whose greatest wish was to represent a "distinctive 'spirit' and a 'special modernity'" (p. 110). The re-emergence of Shanghai's cultural tradition in the post-Maoist era allowed the resurgence of its "old commercial spirit" (Lu, 2002, p. 169), which in turn also triggered a general feeling of nostalgia for the pre-Communist period, which, as Lu (2002) notes, is not negative towards the present, but it celebrates it (p. 170). While nostalgic images of *yuefenpai* models are still very popular in Shanghai – with posters, postcards, and beauty care products celebrating the old Shanghainese woman – another set of images which do not look back at the city's past appear as juxtaposed to the former set. Thus, in Shanghai, the celebration of the old version of the modern woman (Ferry, 2003) appears as separate from the contemporary version of the modern woman, albeit the latter owes its specificity to the former (see Chapter 4). This juxtaposition, which Liang (2010) has noted in the city's architectural style, signified in its semi-colonial era the dichotomy between modernity and tradition, economic growth and decadence. Nowadays, the juxtaposed style is the main source of a commercial culture that is global and Chinese at the same time. The advertising industry appears embedded in a new city landscape which is at once attached to the past and contemporary. Wang and Yang (2010) recall the city's past architectural appearance, and analyze the changes occurred from the 1980s onwards. They explain how the advertising industry has contributed to the change in the city landscape, not only through the huge billboard posters visible now in every street and which shape an "outside" landscape of the city, but also by promoting an indoor image of Shanghai through the images portrayed in these ads.

Global and Chinese at the same time, and with a deeply rooted commercial culture, Shanghai is the perfect field to study the role of advertisements and in China. I landed in the city in early January 2015, when the weather was still very cold, especially for someone used to Hong Kong's warm winters. The city appeared at first as unfriendly and its population hard to decipher. Despite this, a feature that I soon appreciated was that everyone addressed me in Mandarin, giving for granted that I could speak the language. I thought this would be a great chance to improve my language skills and

Figure 1North Zhongshan Road, Shanghai

maybe even learn some words in Shanghainese dialect. As soon as I arrived in the city I started looking for a place to stay, and after some time in a youth hostel, I eventually found a small studio apartment in Zhongshan Road (Figure 1), in the north-western part of the city, in front of the East China Normal University, where I would spend the following months, until early August 2015. My window faced a construction site that started its operations

every day very early in the morning (at around 6 am), while the lines 3 and 4 of the subway – which for a long section ride on the surface – woke me up every day at around 5 am (Figure 2 shows a photo of my bedroom in Shanghai).
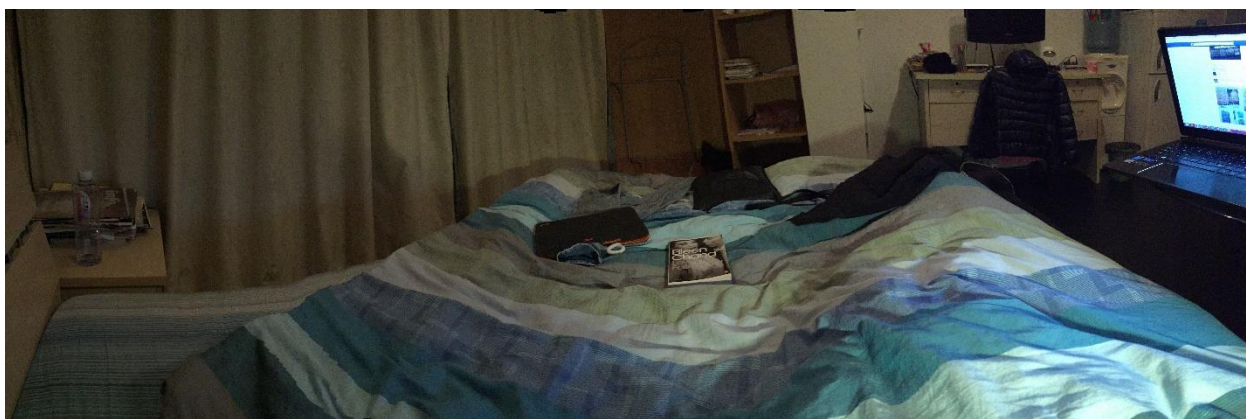
Figure 2. My bedroom

Despite these initial difficulties, to which I soon got used, I felt that Shanghai was indeed the right place to be for my research. I started taking pictures of advertisements in order to create a sort of archive of its current commercial culture (e.g. Figures 3, 4, 5, and 6). The women who appeared in the images that – finally – I was able to observe, were similar to those I had been reading about before the beginning of my fieldwork. Yet, the predominant Chinese female image was that of the family member (the wife, the mother, the daughter and so on) and this was noted also by my informants, who decided to talk about the image of women as family members in several of our encounters (see Chapter 4).

Figure 3. Billboard from Line 3

Figure 4. Billboard from Line 3

Figure 5. Billboard from Line 4

The re-introduction of gender difference into China's commercial culture had prompted in the 1980s and 1990s what Yang (1999) defined as the "commodification of gender difference and sexuality" (p. 47), but in 2015 what I was experiencing was a rather anachronistic image of Chinese women portrayed predominantly as housewives, mothers, or daughters (e.g. Figures 5 and 6), thus I felt that my perceptions resonated more with McLaren's (1998) conceptualization of "cultural revivalism", which was supported also by the ACWF, whose efforts in the past years have been to urge Chinese women to get married and create a family (Hong Fincher, 2014). The visual landscape I was immersed in showed women in traditional roles, albeit disguising their appearance under a modern, global, and cosmopolitan façade.

I was also experiencing the existence of the two different and juxtaposed Shanghais mentioned above: one for the rich, urban, sophisticated, cosmopolitan Chinese and expats; and another city for the lower classes: old retired ladies, the workers in front of my building who lived in ugly shacks inside the construction site, and a tribe of migrant workers from the countryside who enjoyed their free time in the neighborhood's restaurants drinking beer and eating crayfish. My area was between these two cities: it shared with the first type some features – the presence of the university, the presence of two huge malls nearby which symbolized the modernity and spending potential of its population – but also a general sense of decadence that I

felt in the small alleys nearby, and inside my own building, where the lazy guards had nothing to do except smoking cigarettes and watching TV.

Figure 7. My front door

Moving from one area to another of these two Shanghais for my meetings with my friends, I could experience the feeling of being displaced between two worlds that were culturally, rather than geographically, extremely distant. The people who populated these "two cities" seemed incompatible to me, at least limited to those I have had the chance to meet. After a night out with a group of old Italian friends I wrote in my fieldnotes:

> I can't believe how different they are from my world: they know nothing about the "other" Shanghai that is also part of the city: they live between Huaihai Road and Hengshan Road and that's it. How can your world be so small? How can you show such little curiosity towards something completely different? (12 April 2015)

This thought hides the scorn for these people for not wanting to see an undesirable – from their point of view – part of the city; but reading these lines after a year, I now believe that their way of life in the city should not be judged as shallow, because the presence of "two Shanghais in one" has been one of this city's main features since its imposition as a global metropolis at the end of the 19th century, and Shanghai itself has made pride of this co-existence of two separate and often mutually unintelligible worlds. Moreover, although this is possibly a feature common to many growing urban areas in China, where migration from other parts of the country, as well as new

foreign communities, have created separate enclaves inside the cities, Shanghai owes its separation to a semi-colonial past that has become its current trademark, and a paradoxical characteristic of a city whose past is perceived as its future (Abbas, 2000, p. 780). Belk and Zhao (2012) have pointed out that also in old times Shanghai was not simply a modern city, but a carrier of significant elements blending old and new features. This characteristic positioned the city in a liminal space which, as also noted by Dong (2001) was "half oriental, half occidental, half land, half water […]. The strange fruit of a forced union between East and West" (p. 2).

The actual space within Shanghai where the encounters took place encompasses both "Shanghais" and was chosen for different reasons. As explained later on in this chapter, the first area where the research occurred is located in the South-West outskirts of the city, in Songjiang district, where a new neighborhood was built, which hosts the university town. Several universities have built buildings, dorms, and some of their faculties in this new suburbs, and those informants who were university students lived there. This means that their relationship with Shanghai is very different from those young locals who live in the city center or in other neighborhoods, and who experience Shanghai in a completely different way. The second space was that located across North Zhongshan Road, where I had rented my small studio apartment.

Figure 8. Map of Shanghai. The red circles show the areas where the meetings usually occurred. Source: http://www.china-mike.com/china-travel-tips/tourist-maps/shanghai/

This space includes the East China Normal University, the Global Harbor Mall (mentioned in Chapter 4) and the nearby coffee shops. The third area is represented by the Nüshu Kongjian (see Chapter 4) a space where Shanghai's feminists gather. The fourth space is situated near the Shanghai Library, where many students – especially local Shanghainese students – spent their study sessions, and therefore, for convenience we would meet in the surrounding areas (Figure 8 shows the four areas on a map of Shanghai). As already mentioned, the informants who lived only in the Songjiang district, had rarely the chance to move to other areas, for distance and time reasons. This made them experience the city in a very limited way: their idea of the spatial boundaries of "Shanghai" was also far more limited, especially when compared to those youngsters who lived in the heart of the city and who have less problems travelling from one part to another of Shanghai. Despite this, inside the Songjiang university town, the women were free to experience their life independently from their parents, and thus it was a "feminist hub" that despite being separate from the rest of the city, allowed them to constantly exchange ideas and learn from each other.

3.2. The participants: young feminists living in Shanghai[1]

Around half of the women who decided to participate in my research were recruited among university students interested in feminism and/or who already considered themselves as feminist activists. Their interest was fostered inside the university faculty where almost all of them studied (in a department of Sociology, although some were Law students and others were studying International Relations) by one of their teachers, a young associate Professor who taught classes in gender studies, and whom I call in the thesis "Professor Zhang". During our first meeting, Professor Zhang told me that she is not allowed to teach a course whose name has any reference to the word "gender". Therefore, officially her courses have general names such as "Social Theories", in which she dedicates a few lessons to explain the main ideas of the most famous feminist philosophers.

As I perceived while talking with her students alone, she is highly regarded by them, who respect her knowledge and admire her teaching style. Her popularity among students, as well as her interest in women's issues, push her to organize workshops,

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[1] See Appendix for a short biographic account of each participant.

meetings, or other unofficial gatherings with those students interested in feminism, in order to explore in greater detail what spaces for action they have. The role of Professor Zhang, as I perceived it, is that of bridging feminism and activists, allowing her students to engage in feminist actions (see Chapter 5).

Since the interest in feminism arose in them from the classes they took, and only those highly interested in the topic followed the teacher for extra classes in the afternoon, the women whom I met through Professor Zhang were all extremely cultured and also very smart. They spoke English fluently, and similarly to my interest in their thoughts, they were also interested in me, and in my research project and in my own perspective as a foreigner. This allowed a mutual exchanged that enriched everyone and proved the possibilities of dialogic processes of learning by constructing through exchange (see Chapter 6).

This first group of women shared the same cultural background and had similar ages (the undergraduates were between 18-19 and the Master's students were between 21 and 23), but they came from different areas of China, although the majority were local Shanghainese. Some, like Wenwen who was born and raised in Guangxi, came from rather remote areas of the country, whereas others, such as Ma Yin and Cao Qing, were Shanghai natives. The difference between the local women and those coming from elsewhere was evident only when discussing specifically about it, otherwise they all shared similar interests and had similar tastes. A distinct feature of the locals was that they were all, with no exception, only children, while usually those from other provinces had one or more siblings.

As mentioned in the Introduction, the participants' definition of feminism and of being a feminist is highly variable, depending on their specific personal stories, characteristics, and personalities. While "gender equality" is a common feature of their definition of why feminism should exist (e.g. Xu Ling used the phrase "[feminism means that] women and men should have the same opportunities" *nüxing yinggai yu nanxing you pingdeng de jihui*); others define feminism as women's active participation in promoting this equality (e.g. Ting Ling defined the feminism as "the need to fight for gender equality"), highlighting the need of feminists' public protests and demonstrations. They believe that women should be more aware of their role in society, which too often is conceived by women themselves as subaltern, and they

should discuss ways to help improve their opportunities. The reasons why feminism is perceived by them as important in shaping women's identity is because they feel that women encounter everyday issues without being aware of how these negatively affect their own lives.

The identification with feminism is directly connected with their feminist practices (see Chapter 6), that is, through their discussion groups and meetings, which happen online and offline alike. For example, they regularly hold meetings in the university dormitory, where they discuss facts that happen daily. I was told by Xu Ling that Ma Yin often organizes these meetings, inviting (or not inviting) her friends. While these meetings may touch upon several topics, they are always closely related to women in (Chinese) society, and their purpose is to become aware of how any issue related to women, or to the relationship between men and women, can be improved through a feminist way of looking at social issues. Another example of these gatherings is well represented by the Nüshu kongjian meetings (see Chapter 4), where women are publicly invited (through a dedicated Weibo page) to take part in meetings where the discussions are generated by specific events, such as film screenings, book readings, or other types of open events. For instance, in January 2016 a public lecture on the book "Leftover women" by Hong Fincher was held at the Nüshu kongjian, attracting several women in their late twenties.

Overall, the youths that I met during my 7 months in Shanghai were very distant from those describe as consumers ready to spend money in a new lifestyle that they obsessively pursue in order to be fashionable; nor were they young citizens constantly seduced by consumerism (Clark, 2012; Croll, 2006). Instead, they rejected consumerism as a means to emerge in society, and they were rather skeptical about what was generally perceived as "fashionable". Although they were not certainly immune from consumerism and from the influences of advertising or fashion, what I wish to underline here is their deep critical attitude towards mass consumption and its trends. They were also different to descriptions such as Xi's (2006), who defines the major life goals of the Chinese youth as showing "clearly their practical value orientation towards a powerful country, happy family and successful career" (p. 84). Instead, as Rosen (2009) points out, the Chinese youths are "far from unified in their belief systems or behaviors" (p. 360). Moreover, he adds, in the past they were often attacked by the media, and portrayed as

> [t]he 'me-generation', criticized for being 'reliant and rebellious, cynical and pragmatic, self-centered and equally obsessed' as well as 'China's first generation of couch potatoes, addicts of online games, patrons of fast food chains, and loyal audiences of Hollywood movies'" (*Beijing Review*, 28 February, 2009, as quoted in Rosen, 2009, p. 360).

As Cockain (2012) also notes, Chinese youths are often portrayed as a "set of caricatures" (p. 4): for instance the tyrannical Little Emperor inside the family, or the passive "automaton unable to think critically" (p. 4) when at school. However, as I show in the following chapters, the young women who are the protagonists of my research should not be labelled too easily as internationalist critics of China in "naïve pro-Western outlook" (Rosen, 2009, p. 361) nor as aiming at a "happy and harmonious family and a successful career" (Xi, 2006, p. 6). Their thoughts were far more complicated, each of them had her own set of beliefs and attitudes, and it would be diminishing for them to be labelled with general definitions. However, throughout the following chapters I find a common thread to explain their ambivalences and contradictions, and to theorize their attitude towards commercial culture in general and ads in particular not as the product of a simple rejection of the current female image in ads, nor of a total acceptance. The women who took part in this research should instead be considered as engaging in a process of constructing a personal hybrid identity that, as explained by Weber (2002, p. 348), contains in itself both individualistic and collectivistic values:

> ambition and progress, change, wealth, and materialism within a foundational framework of Chinese or collectivist values of filial piety, responsibility, harmony, and sacrifice for pragmatic purposes relating to personal, business, educational, and social goals.

The aim of my methodological approach is thus to describe the nuances and subtle strategies that they use to cope with the difficulties of their everyday lives as women, students, daughters and so on. These women are possibly not representatives of Chinese youth writ large, nor of Chinese women considered in general, but they represent a number of individuals who are acquiring a growing relevance not only in China, but also for other feminist movements in Asia and around the world. As mentioned in the introduction, their actions are reported beyond China's geographic limits, and their movement is having a great impact worldwide. This in turn pushes

more women to become interested in feminism, and to inquire into their own set of beliefs and question them.

The second group of feminists who accepted to take part in the research were the women whom I met at the Nüshu kongjian (See Chapter 4). The link between the two groups was a young man, named throughout the thesis as Feng, one of Professor Zhang's students, who was also interested in feminism, and who participated in some group meetings, although he was reluctant to speak because, as he once said "I'm not a woman". I encouraged him to take part in the discussions nonetheless, and he once invited another of his male friends to our meetings. Their interest in feminism and in the female portrayal in Chinese ads meant to me that the feminist movement in China is also able to reach men, and thus to speak a large audience of people considered reluctant to listen to women's needs.

When Feng and I first met, we exchanged our WeChat accounts, and he later introduced me to Ting Ling, a 28-year-old woman who organized several of my activities, and who in turn introduced me to her friends. This second group of informants was characterized by a slightly older age (26-30). Moreover, all the women in this group are already working in different industries, and showed a more mature way of engaging with women's representations in advertisements: they are currently facing pressure from their families to get married and have children, and they feel that although they have more opportunities as compared to their parents, they are distant to them, and less willing to please them and show obedience than the younger group of interviewees.

Bergstrom (2012) points out that the one-child policy "has irrevocably changed the dynamics of both the group and the individual in China and has shaken up the politics of gender" (p. 68). Being a Shanghainese (or a non-local Chinese living in Shanghai), and belonging to the middle or upper-middle classes, with a higher education background, the possibility to travel abroad, and being able to speak two or three languages, are all factors that contribute to increase these women's "value in society, their girl power if you will" (Bergstrom, 2012, p. 68).

As already mentioned, not all the informants were Shanghai natives, and their relationship with the city was complicated by various factors such as nostalgic sentiments for their hometowns, that were far-away but nonetheless perceived as

"home", coexisting with a general perception of Shanghai as the place where they were allowed more freedom, but also somehow alien and extraneous. The non-Shanghainese women came from Guizhou, Sichuan, Guangdong, and Guangxi. Benedict Anderson (1991) elaborated the notion of the imagined community as a means through which national identity, and nationalism, comes into being. In this sense the mediated images portrayed in the advertisements that the women had selected functioned as the repository of the image of a general "Chinese woman", but the way in which Chineseness appears through the eyes of the informants was colored by their feeling part and not part of Shanghai at the same time.

Finally, I would also like to explain how I was able to get in touch with the women who work as advertisers and to explain how I use their experiences in the thesis. At first I was interested in conducting an ethnography within an advertising agency. However, gaining access to that field was eventually an almost impossible goal to achieve, despite some initial successes in getting in touch with advertising agencies and people working in that environment. Later on, however, I was denied this possibility, but I was nonetheless able to interview several advertisers and to discuss with them my interests. I used those interviews to counterbalance the feminists' views, in the sense that I often asked questions to the advertisers that had been directly (and even rhetorically) coming up during my encounters with the feminists, in order to understand their perspective, and to provide some answers. I therefore view their perspective as crucial in framing my argument, in that their voices are what Bourdieu (1977) terms as orthodoxy (see p. 56); and the construction of the feminists' identity goes precisely through the process of counteracting the advertisers' power with their own practices.

3.3. Practices of media ethnography

Gillespie and Cornish (2014) point out that if we understand method as an "inflexible procedure" (p. 437) put in practice with the goal of obtaining a finding from specifically collected data, then such methodological approach is not compatible with dialogism. Dialogism is based on the assumption that meanings are co-constructed through the exchange of utterances, and based upon the anticipation of the interlocutors' understanding (Bakhtin, 1981). Mayerfeld Bell (1998) points out that if

we understand culture as dialogue, we can analyze its creativity as a topic of social research:

> Culture in this view is the conversations we have and which we expect to have with various people in various places at various times; it is also the conversations we have which we did not expect with these various people in these various places, at these various times (p. 52).

This perception of culture as a series of fortuitous events that are often predictable but often not so much, is inevitably based on an exchange. Moreover, although what the speaker means may not be the same as what the hearer understands, they depend on each other for the construction of the dialogue (p. 53). Based on this inevitably "flawed" procedure of dialogic construction, I decided to adopt several strategic tools to foster the dialogue among all the informants and with me.

The first methodological device that I chose was that of the focus groups, in order to allow themes and conversations to arise and take different directions according to the informants' knowledge, understanding of the topic, and personal interests. I called these focus groups "workshops" when advertising them through my key informants (Professor Zhang, Feng, and Ting Ling). The choice of the word "workshop" was made for two important reasons, that I frame within the feminist methodological practices that I aim for. Firstly, the word workshop implies a hands-on practical experience where the participants are required to create something, which in my case was a "feminist informed reading of advertisements". Secondly, because the word "focus group" although being widely acknowledged among anyone aware of social research methods (as were many of my informants) it refers to a group interview where a researcher asks questions, and the researched answer back. Instead, my approach was aimed at a dialogicality where meanings are constructed through an interactive work (Grossen, 2010, p. 7) among all the participants. Thus, in order to avoid false expectations on what the focus group would entail, I decided to call it workshop, hoping this would also attract more feminists interested in the topic.

The structure of the workshop was not rigid, aiming instead at taking any direction the flow of conversation would allow. Yet, in order to prompt analytical stimuli for conversations, I usually followed a structure based on games, quizzes, or collages

(Figure 9), for which the informants were asked to cooperate with each other in the creation of advertisements, or in the critique of already existing ones (see Chapter 6).

Based on their preferences, I devoted more or less time to any specific activity, completely skipping those that did not prompt any particular reaction or interest. The workshops were very useful instruments of data collection, but more importantly, they allowed their set of beliefs to emerge, because when having to negotiate with other feminists in the group discussions, they were able to change their perspectives according to a shared identity. For instance, when I asked one group to select an object that "women need" and perform an ideal advertisement to promote that object, one of them initially insisted that she thought women deemed important to have bags or clothes. Then a discussion began among all the informants on whether the advertisement should be based on something that women "*really* need" or on something that "they think they need" (see Chapter 4).

The workshops were also important to allow the women to get to know me in a setting in which they could feel among their peers. After the workshops, many women approached me to inquire into my own experience, life, or personal interests. They asked me about my home country and how women were treated in Italy and in Europe in general. These exchanges allowed us to build further interest in each other, and to organize other meetings in which to continue our dialogues. Therefore, I also conducted unstructured interviews during which I was able to get to know them on a deeper level. Many women explained their anxieties and fears about being a woman or a feminist in China today, and some showed their reluctance towards activism, due to the stigmatization of activism in the mainstream media, as already mentioned in the introduction. Besides these personal accounts, during our meetings we would also

discuss specific advertisements' meanings. I would ask them to select the ads beforehand and explain the reason why they had selected those. Then, following a traditional decoding practice borrowed from the cultural studies scholarship, we would construct together the meaning that each part of the advertisement had (see Chapter 6).

The interviews lasted around one or two hours each, and were recorded if the circumstances allowed it (for instance if we were sitting at a coffee shop I would ask to record the interview with my phone, but if we were having a conversation while walking along the streets, this would not be recorded). The interviews would sometimes be conducted with one informant only, but often also with two informants. The results were quite different: in the first case the conversations would be rather personal, while in the second case the same negotiating strategies that occurred during the workshops would be again repeated during the interview in couples. For example, when I interviewed Ma Yin and Xu Ling, two old friends who had known each other since they were children, Ma Yin – who is extremely self-confident as compared to Xu Ling – took over the conversation on feminism and activism, trying to impose her thought on the less confident friend. However, when I met Xu Ling alone, she was able to give extremely detailed definitions and explanations on both feminism and advertisements' meanings. This aspect reveals the importance of conducting multi-methodological research, and multiple meetings with the informants, in order to constantly triangulate results and verify their applicability.

As mentioned above, I sat every evening at my computer to write the fieldnotes related to the day, or to the day before. The fieldnotes were an important part of the research process, because they helped me to rethink not only about what had happened during a specific day's interview or encounter, but they also helped me understand in greater detail how I was feeling about that person on that day. The fieldnotes were not only typewritten, I also had notebooks where I would write and draw. I consider this part of the research as the "imaginative logic of discovery" (Taussig, 2011, p. xi), that is, when I as a researcher for the first time came into contact with the data I collected, and a way of getting to know the outer world I was observing. The overall process of fieldnote taking was conducted through different moments, each leading to a different kind of text. Following Clifford (1990) I call these types of fieldnotes inscription, transcription, and description (p. 51). For

instance, while the participants were chatting or discussing among each other I would often jot down some bullet points as reminders of what had been said. This fieldnote type is the inscription, which records "a moment of abstraction (or distraction) when a participant-observer jots down a mnemonic word or phrase to fix an observation or to recall what someone had just said" (p. 51). Another fieldnote type was that of the transcription: re-writing, when at home, the scenes and conversations as I could recall them. Finally, the description, which involved a "turning away from dialogue and observation toward a separate place of writing, a place for reflection, analysis and interpretation" (p. 52).

As Wolf (1990) notes, only re-looking at the fieldnotes carefully and some time after the end of the actual fieldwork, do all the "bits and pieces" (p. 346) come to make sense together, and is the ethnographer able to find a thread that connects the events that have happened. For this reason, the process of fieldnote writing, despite being at some time tedious because, as I often have written in my own fieldnotes "today nothing interesting seems to have happened", is in fact a crucial phase of the research process. Mixing personal feelings to apparently more "objective" descriptions, the fieldnotes represent my presence in the field: filtered through my own personal considerations and stylistic choices, they are my take on what happened in the field.

The commitment to a rigorous application of traditional ethnographic methods, is not aimed at obtaining an "objective" portrayal of my informants; it does, however, stress a commitment to embrace the partiality of the accounts narrated, while always maintaining the awareness that I am accountable for what I write and say about the people I research. As stressed by Hobart (2006) it is in the encounter between other people's practices and the researcher's own practices and categories that the researcher is confronted with her own Eurocentrism (p. 497). Therefore, if the goal of research is "not simply to reiterate hegemony, such cultural translation must be dialogic, again in the strong sense that academic presuppositions and practice themselves are continually called into question an interrogated through the dialogue" (p. 497). Following this, the fieldnotes represent the place where the academic dialogue between myself as a researcher in dialogue with other academics, and myself as a woman in dialogue with other women occurred.

3.4. Languages and translation

The linguistic exchanges with my informants were conducted mainly in English and Mandarin (henceforth defines as Chinese). The use of either language was based on the personal preference of each woman, although my ability to speak English is higher than my ability with Chinese. I nonetheless always let the women choose which language to address me in, in order to let them feel at ease with me even when having to use Chinese with a non-native speaker. As Mead (1939) observed, the phrase "*using* the native language" (p. 196) is preferable to the verb *speaking*, because speaking emphasizes the virtuosity of the act, rather than the fact "that a language is a tool, not a feather in one's cap" (p. 196). Moreover, the ethnographer should be focused on the act of listening, and not on expressing "complicated ideas of his own which will muddle and distort the natives' accounts" (p. 196). This is not to say that I do not attach importance to the act of knowing Chinese for my research. On the contrary, I was trained in Chinese language for several years prior to my PhD studies, and my decision to embark on a fieldwork which would necessarily entail the need to know how to speak, read, listen and often even write in Chinese (as many email exchanges and all the WeChat exchanges were always only in Chinese) was also made precisely because of this prior knowledge of the language and culture of the place I aimed to study. However, due to communication reasons, language skills, and personal preference, I did not force the informants to speak English, and they never forced me to speak Chinese, rather the communication flow tended autonomously towards which language would allow the conversation to be smooth and mutually understandable.

Moreover, they very often deliberately chose to speak in English during our meetings, possibly to practice the language with a foreigner, or simply because they thought it would make the understanding and exchange easier for me. The younger women could all speak English fluently, whereas in the older group there were differences in English language ability that were due to specific circumstances: for instance, Ting Ling had studied in the USA, thus her English was excellent, whereas Chen Yulin could not speak any English, although she could read and she was able to understand some spoken words. Therefore, we would negotiate the language selection based on each other's ability. Whenever the exchanges were among themselves only, such as during the workshops, they almost always selected to speak in Chinese, and since I

recorded the workshops, these were occasions for me to listen and learn words and expressions without interrupting to ask the meaning of something that had been said.

All the data I collected throughout my fieldwork appears therefore written in three different languages: English, Chinese, and Italian (my native language). Although the majority of my fieldnotes were written in English, in order to keep a level of consistency with the academic world I was in dialogue with (see section above), I would some other times prefer to write in my own language, especially the most personal notes taken in a diary style. For these reasons, these three languages are always lurking in the background, and are transposed as translations into English of the other two languages utilized. Moreover, the translation does not only entail language itself as an entity disconnected from the world, but it should also be consistent with the culture of origin and make sense to the language-culture of arrival. Translations, therefore, are not only translations from one language to another, but are translations from one cultural background to another.

There is also another level of translation, a kind that could be termed sociological: that which entails the transposition of the informants' way of looking at an issue into a vocabulary whose terminology is valid in the academic world. In other words, the translation has different levels: from Chinese to English, and from English to Academic English. As Kothari (2016) puts it: "Sociologically speaking, I was miles away from those on whose behalf I was choosing to speak […]. Language and anthropology intertwine to make fuzzy the distinction between 'translation proper' and translation as an act of telling lives" (p. 47).

Talal Asad (1986) raises the issue of the existing inequality among languages, meaning that the languages of the worlds that are object of study by anthropologists are far more affected by English (the dominant language in academia) than the opposite. Therefore, while Chinese feminists have had to think of a way to translate the word "feminism" into Chinese, and have come up with different translations (see Chapter 1), English-speaking feminists have never been affected by Chinese language structure or words in general. This creates a hierarchical division between "primitive languages" and "strong languages" (p. 158) that reiterates a hegemonic relationship between the researcher and the researched. Moreover, as Crapanzano (1986) notes, the ethnographer produces the text that will be then translated, contrary to the

translator who works on an already existing text. Yet, due to academic conventions and the need to write my thesis in English, I was compelled to translate all the fieldnotes and transcriptions into English, possibly leaving out cultural and sociological aspects that would have been interesting and valuable in the language they were originally said or written in.

The translation strategies that I adopted were selected taking into consideration the above mentioned issues, as well as my position in the field as a researcher (see section 3.5). As Sturge (1997) points out, the strategy when translating cultures should not be that of a "fixation on faithfulness to a fetishized source text" (p. 23), and the aim of the text is not to be a pure "reflection of the original" (p. 23). What I aim for in relating my encounters and the exchanges among the people who intervene, is therefore to reproduce the atmosphere of those moments, providing accounts of what was said that are linguistically translated from the original, but with attention to the polyvocality of the various *positions*, rather than that of the various mere languages. As Churchill (2005) puts it, ethnography "is a process of empathetically entering the psychic space of other human beings and, to the extent possible, translating the actions of those subjects by way of seeing the world from their point of view" (p. 5). The goal of the ethnographer-translator is then that of entering the world of the informant and by doing so to "discover words in the second language which convey the subtle intentions of those used in the first language" (p. 5). As DeVault (1999) points out, "researchers must develop methods of listening around and beyond the words" (p. 66); similarly, these words should be translated by the ethnographer around and beyond their actual form, but always from the informants' standpoint.

3.5. Positionality and ethical considerations

As a researcher in the field, my own position – meaning my set of values, beliefs, cultural background, and so on – are crucial elements in shaping the form of this dissertation, and more in general of my understanding of the topic, and on the consequent choices that I make as I give shape to this thesis. Recognizing my position in the field is an important step in any feminist (or even in non-feminist) academic research, because it is a way of acknowledging the limitations of the study, but also a way of exploring the opportunities that taking action, despite the difficulties, provides. As Kim England (1994, p. 81) suggests:

> [P]art of the feminist project has been to dismantle the smokescreen surrounding the canons of neopositivist research – impartiality and objectivist neutrality – which supposedly prevent the researcher from contaminating the data (and presumably, vice versa).

As mentioned above, I am an Italian woman, and at the time when the fieldwork was carried out I was 30-years-old. I have always had a great interest in both Chinese language and culture and in women's position in society. As an Italian woman I have always felt a great disparity of treatment in my own society between men and women, and prior to the beginning of my PhD studies, I was interested in understanding whether Chinese women felt the same about their society, which for such a long time had imposed by law equality between men and women. During my first trip to China, in 2006, and throughout the following decade, I could see a highly consumerist society, in which advertisements were perpetuating not only an outdated image of women, but one that relied heavily on pre-Communist, and even pre-Republican values of obedience and submission to men. Following this personal interest, I decided to study these images, and to ask women themselves what their ideas were. Did they agree with me? Or were they happy with those images? With these questions in mind, I began my fieldwork, and I began interviewing women about their thoughts. This preliminary data corroborated the postfeminist turn that has been theorized for other Western societies (e.g. McRobbie, 2004). However, when I met the feminist informants, all my pre-existing beliefs were suddenly challenged by a group of young women with whom I felt a lot in common. I am a woman like them, and I share with them a feminist view of society, yet like them I was also caught in my own ambivalences and contradictions (see Chapter 4). However, my academic goal, and my different ethnicity, as well as my life experience were very different from those of the majority. As Alcoff (1991) points out, the criteria that establish group identity are not obvious: "on what basis can we justify a decision to demarcate groups and define membership in one rather than another?" (p. 8). Was I more entitled to speak on behalf of my informants by virtue of my self-identification as a feminist? Or because I am myself a woman? Or is Feng, the young feminist man who participated in a few workshops, entitled to gather with us because of his sharing with the women his national or ethnic identity? Since no solution easily prospects, I believe researchers should recognize the inherent hierarchical relation with their informants, regardless of the similarities or shared understandings, while striving to collaborate with them in

order to contribute to enhance the possibilities of research "within and also potentially outside the immediate scope of the research project" (Vanner, 2015, p. 3). Mohanty (2003) argues that "sisterhood cannot be assumed on the basis of gender; it must be forged into concrete historical and political practice and analysis" (p. 24). For this reason excluding the men on the basis of their gender, or including myself on the same basis would have led to a portrayal of the Chinese women whom I present here that assumed their universality, while neglecting instead their inner complexities caused by their class, ethnic, local contradictions.

Moreover, Rey Chow (1993) warns about the risks that self-identification with those whose voices we seldom hear cause to them. What she terms as "self-subalternization" (p. 13) is a practice through which academics ensure their authority and power, while proclaiming their intentions to "vindicate the subalterns" (p. 14). Another risk of essentializing identity and social position is that it can lead to place members of a minority group (in my case, Chinese feminists) as representatives of an entire culture (Darling - Wolf, 2004, p. 37) (see section 3.6.). As Moores (1993) accurately points out, if we are "truly committed to a 'critical' perspective, then it is important for us to turn the same critical light back on ourselves, examining the interpersonal dynamics of fieldwork, and the production of academic knowledge" (p. 62).

These ethical dilemmas all point out the vulnerability of the research participants as they risk of being turned into objects of study for academic purposes. Kirsch (1999) points out that often academics withhold their real thoughts about their informants until the end of the fieldwork. First, they gain their trust, and then when it comes to writing the actual research, they become highly critical of the same people they previously "seduced" (p. 27). As Ann Oakley (1981, p. 33) puts it:

> The motif of successful interviewing is 'be friendly but not too friendly'. […] interviewing necessitates the manipulation of interviewees as objects of study/sources of data, but this can only be achieved via a certain amount of humane treatment.

Trust, therefore, proceeds along with vulnerability. Following Oakley's criticism of the "conventional interviewing recipe" (p. 41) and in order to avoid a betrayal of my participants' trust, I always discussed with them openly about any personal divergence that I had, and I was always very honest about my different perceptions,

that were due to my lack of knowledge about certain issues, rather than by assumptions about their incorrectness. By doing so, we established a dialogue through which I was able to understand their point of view, and mitigate my judgements, and also to recognize my own limits. I never needed to encourage them to ask questions back, because our encounters were never set up as "interviews", but rather as conversations. Moreover, their curiosity towards me was as high as my curiosity towards them, leading to rich exchanges and fruitful conversations. I always made clear that none of the personal information that would allow to identify them would be disclosed in the thesis, and that I would not include anything that they did not want me to say about them, or about what they were saying during the interviews. By doing so, the atmosphere created was always relaxed and friendly, which enabled the talks to be spontaneous and casual, although for this reason not less valid. In fact, the absence of any rehearsal or preparation made their words honest and trustworthy.

3.6. Validity

The most common idea behind the validity of a qualitative research, and therefore also of an ethnographic approach, is that a positivist method that aims at discovering the truth by applying a well-crafted methodology is not appropriate (Hammersley, 1992a). As Maxwell (1992, p. 282) points out:

> any account of validity in qualitative research, in order to be productive, should begin with an understanding of how qualitative researchers think about and deal with validity in their actual practice.

In order to provide descriptions of my interviews, focus groups, and any other exchange that I had with the women who took part in my research that can be considered valid, I provide accurate and thorough descriptions of such encounters, portraying not only the words that the women used, but also the circumstances of the encounters, the background, the emotions that I could perceive in their way of relating their stories. Following Maxwell's (1992) categorization of validity in qualitative research, besides this "descriptive validity" (p. 285), I also ensured the validity of my accounts by establishing theoretically sound descriptions that are directly dependent upon the descriptive validity, and that were triangulated through the collection of further data (such as the interviews following the workshops).

Symbolic interactionist approaches aim at a co-construction of the validity that as such is always the product of a negotiation between the participants in the research process. However, as Belgrave and Smith (1995) point out, "different interpretations of any social phenomenon are always possible (p. 85). If the validity of the claims that the social researcher makes are based on the generalizability of her findings (Hammersley, 1992b), to what extent can we generalize any social phenomenon?

My research does not aim at impartiality, nor at portraying an image of the Chinese feminist valid across time and space, but at giving voice to the young women whom I met, precisely because of my position in the field. As Mohanty (1988) explains, when referring to non-Western women, the risk – by both Western and non-Western scholars – is that of assuming that all women share the same goals, interests or ways of seeing the world. Academics are those authorized to develop theories that are based on others' thoughts, and through these ideas, to speak on behalf of them (Alcoff, 1991). Although this might mean a risk of betrayal of their voices, silence would result in indifference, and therefore in an even worse betrayal. Alcoff (1991) notes that the issue of speaking on behalf of others is connected to the problem of representation, and given that in the aftermath of the recognition that positivist neutrality can no longer be sustained (p. 12), the validity of our claims lies in our commitment not to truth, but to being accountable for what we claim.

What makes the data we collect valid is not therefore the inherent truth of the claims we make based on other people's words, but the richness of the insights that we gain from our conversations, or our observations in the field. What I strived for throughout the duration of my fieldwork and during the whole process of data collection, was rather to obtain data that could be validated by the informants themselves, thus through the dialogical theoretical framework that my research is based upon.

3.7.   Storytelling: from fieldnotes to text

As Van Maanen (1988) accurately points out, "[t]he narrative and rhetorical conventions assumed by a writer also shape the ethnography" (p. 5). For this reason, the choices that the ethnographer makes in terms of narrative style – for instance the metaphors, the use of plain speaking, semantics, textual organization and so on (p. 5) – are all markers of stylistic preferences that not only contribute to shaping the

readability of the text, but that hold also a deeper significance in relation to the position that the researcher has as an ethnographer towards her participants.

A careful reflection on the practices of ethnography as the actual transposition from fieldnotes to text are also necessary. As Hobart (2010, p. 57) suggests:

> If we are to live in a postcolonial world, it is unacceptable to assume a priori that the practices of the researcher are of such a different and superior order that they can, or should, not be critically questioned or considered in relation to those of the subjects of research.

Moreover, even Malinowski (2002) noted that there can be a distance between the data collected during the fieldwork as it appears before the ethnographer, and the later elaboration of the accounts into a written text (p.3):

> In Ethnography, the distance is often enormous between the brute material of information—as it is presented to the student in his own observations, in native statement, in the kaleidoscope of tribal life— and the final authoritative presentation of the results.

As I came to notice during the writing of the chapters that follow, one's style is not selectively picked among various possibilities, but emerges instead from one's own cultural background, theoretical orientation, and generally speaking from one's own personal experience as a reader of ethnographies as well. If we consider ethnography as the knot that joins culture and fieldwork (Van Maanen, 1988), the text that the ethnographer produces is the result of a careful meditation and balance between anecdote and theory, each one dependent on the other, and linked by the control that the writer has over the text and the data, so that the knot appears as firm and tight.

How we present the data in our writings depends then on the final outcome that we want to achieve. This does not mean that our accounts are made up, but that we present them in a convincing way both for the reader, and for the academic circles that we are in dialogue with. Geertz (1980) defines the blurring of genres as a "reconfiguration of social thought" (p. 165), and the continuous use of analogies that sociologists borrow from other disciplines, he argues, has made it difficult to inscribe authors in one specific discipline. Brettell (1997) however, points out that when talking about women and women's lives, the boundaries among genres are quite distinct. She argues that while biography is the narration of one's life, autobiography

is the account of one's life written by oneself. Moreover, life history is yet something else: "one person's life as told to another, the researcher" (p. 224). As mentioned above, when dealing with other people's lives and stories, ethical considerations are to be made, and when transposing into text these accounts the stylistic narration is inevitably very personal.

Prior to my departure, I was convinced that the choice of a style of narration that tended towards auto-ethnography would be too self-absorbed, inaccurate, and to some extent even unprofessional. Given that I wanted to offer Chinese feminists' descriptions and understandings, why would I have to include my own? As I began to write this thesis however, I realized how important *my* presence was in describing *them*, precisely because of the dialogues through which we came to know and understand each other. The questions regarding style of narration are therefore not only related to ethical issues, but are also linked to the credibility and validity of the text discussed in the previous section. As Hastrup (1992, p. 115) points out:

> Addressing the question of how to write ethnography is not solely a matter of experimentation with style, it is also a rediscovery of the world. […] The authorial craft must be applied with care for the narrative to be convincing as ethnography, that is.

Atkinson (1990) refers to "authoritative texts" (p. 55), that is, ethnographies that are not merely naïve accounts of a certain culture, but that either explicitly or more implicitly "[l]ay claim to a particular status and a particular sort of attitude on the part of the reader" (p. 55). This is what, in part at least, distinguishes an ethnography from fiction, or from other kinds of accounts. Therefore, my approach to the written text resonates with Van Maanen's (1988) confessional tales, that is, those ethnographic texts that try to "demystify fieldwork or participant observation by showing how the technique is practiced in the field" (p. 73). Following this style, the "I" as a narrator appears clearly throughout the text as if it was another participant with her own beliefs and uncertainties, trying to figure out her own identity as a feminist. Another feature of the confessional tale, as explained by Van Maanen, is the constant "intimacy established with the readers" (p. 75), and a devotion to giving lengthy explanations of how the "fieldwork odyssey was accomplished" (p. 75), as this section, as well as the entire third chapter, has shown.

4. Ambivalence towards the family: being a feminist whilst abiding by family rules

-What's the most important thing in your life?
-My family
-And in the life of a Chinese woman in general?
-The family.
-And for a Chinese feminist?
-The family.
                    Wenwen, 19 years old, Chinese feminist

Wenwen is an undergraduate student who lives in Shanghai. She is originally from Guangxi province, in Southwest China. Wenwen defines herself as a "feminist", yet some of her views about the notion of family are tied to those familial – hierarchical – relations that are part of traditional Confucian China. Thus, her accounts raise questions in general about the nexus between Chinese feminism and the importance of "tradition" in China; and in particular about the relation between young urban feminists and their own family.

In this chapter, I explore the meanings of various images of Chinese families that circulate in the Chinese advertising landscape, and which constitute an iconography for the imagination of "the good Chinese family". With the support of my informants' interpretations of ads and TV commercials selected by them, I inquire into the role of the family in the lives of women who define themselves as feminists, and I explore the meanings of their ideas about how the family is portrayed in Chinese advertisements. Moreover, I also include two interviews with two different women who work in advertising agencies, in order to have another perspective on how women are portrayed as family members. The different positions are then analyzed against post-feminist discourses of empowerment, in order to understand how Chinese feminists position themselves in relation to this discourse.

In ancient times, the traditional Chinese family was constituted by a patriarchal system where the male was the unquestionable head of the household. Apart from being defined as "patriarchal", the ancient Chinese family has also been acknowledged as being "patrilineal and patrilocal" (Ebrey, 2003; Johnson, 1983; Leung, 2003; Raymo, Park, Xie, & Yeung, 2015) in a society where only men were entitled to inherit property (Chao, 1983; Greenhalgh, 1985). Although social class, wealth, and other factors might have influenced the ties among female and male members inside the family (Freedman, 1961); as well as women's decision power in

the household (Ebrey, 2003; Stacey, 1975), women were nonetheless considered as inferior members vis-à-vis their male counterparts.

Upon the Communist takeover (1949), women notably began to be considered as those "holding up half the sky". Significantly, the first act of legislation implemented in Communist China was the Marriage Law (1950) (Davis, 2014) through which the state ideology allowed a shift in focus from the notion of family, understood in terms of "the self", to the notion of state, understood in terms of "the collective" (Leung, 2003); leading to the replacement of traditional Chinese Confucian discourses about the family with the Maoist version of the previous order, or in other words, leading to the creation of a "family of the State" (Baker, 1979, p. 213). Consequently, as Barlow (1994) points out, by repositioning the woman inside the *guojia* (state), the Revolution repositioned the woman inside the *jiating* (home), in what Barlow defines as a "synecdochic process of exchange" (p. 271) between State and family.

Advertising was banned throughout the whole Maoist period (1949-1976) (Cheng, 1996, 1997), yet images of women were highly prominent in the propaganda posters typical of those years, and were used to enhance the Party's image. Lu and Devenish (2005) have noted that these posters concealed women's oppression during Maoism under the façade of gender equality, because family roles in the posters were uniquely featured by women, whereas working roles were featured both by men and women, reinforcing de facto the pre-liberation mentality that women are those who take care of the household. Women's personal ambitions and goals appeared as secondary in the propaganda posters, and what offered them full satisfaction was to take on the responsibilities of the domestic life.

As already mentioned in section 2.1, by the 1980s the industry was solidly back in place, and began relying on what was understood as "Chinese values" to sell its products (Chan & Cheng, 2002; Cheng, 1997; Cheng & Patwardhan, 2010). It appeared clear to the revitalized advertising industry that there was a void to fill for the notion of "modern Chinese woman". Thus, old traditions and values began to interact with modern expectations, which wanted the modern Chinese woman to be "smart, independent, knowledgeable, and one who could plan and enjoy her life" (Hung & Li, 2006, p. 10). Public visual spaces that allowed the "commodification" of women's bodies became ubiquitous (Bailey, 2012), and the modern Chinese woman

was now expected to show sensuality, luxury, individualism, modernity, elegance, and glamour (Bailey, 2012; Evans, 2000, 2002; Johansson, 2001).

Despite these modernizing tendencies, in the mid-1990s in Chinese TV commercials men were still portrayed more in occupational roles than women (Cheng, 1997), and in the early 2000s ads in China tended to make heavy use of traditional stereotypes which imagine women as housewives fulfilling family duties (Cheng & Wan, 2008). For example, ads typically featured women using, or simply gazing at household appliances, implying a clear link between women and housework (Hooper, 1998). This allowed women to indulge in a double fantasy: on the one hand they could identify with the modern and technological world of household appliances, while on the other hand, they were also able to identify themselves with an "[i]dealized middle class housewifery that combines images of the traditional, the leisurely, and the modern" (Hung & Li, 2006, p. 12).

Given the imagery context, constantly evolving, yet anchored in tradition, how do Chinese feminists living in the most consumerist city in China resist and negotiate the influence of these images both on their lives, and on their feminist identity? In this chapter I analyze three different stories. In the first story, I narrate my encounter with a group of women at a teahouse near Zhongshan Park, where the role of the woman as a family member took a relevant part of our conversation, and where their reaction against traditional ideas of family came out more prominently. In the second story, I relate the point of view of two advertisers on how women as family members are portrayed in the industry, and I argue that their position is influenced by globalizing post-feminist discourses that eventually impact also the feminists whom I interviewed. Finally, I look at the personal accounts related to the families of some feminist informants, and I analyze the tensions between their feminist identity and their wish to abide by traditional family norms as a product of the influence of post-feminism. I contend that the paradox inherent in being against traditional familial norms while wishing to make their families proud of their achievements, should be seen as a marker of a kind of feminism that erodes clear-cut distinctions between a supposedly "Confucian tradition" and "Western(ized) modernity", but that engages with both tradition and modernity to be more effective and to allow these women to make sense of their identity as "modern Chinese feminists".

As a consequence, Chinese feminists are influenced by global discourses on feminism and post-feminism, especially regarding images of women in media contexts as I shall demonstrate, but have developed a unique "wave" of indigenous activism that has its roots in Chinese traditions, while engaging with "the West" at the same time. Moreover, due to the particular historical and social circumstances of contemporary China, Chinese feminism in the PRC has been able to reinvent itself in a way that Western feminism has not, and as such has it has shown a potential to assert its own specific "Chineseness" within the context of the global circulation of ideas.

4.1.   Organizing a workshop at the Nüshu kongjian

I found out that there is a place where women interested in feminism gather to discuss compelling issues regarding their role in society. One of my friends, Feng, had mentioned it during our meetings, and I thought it would be an interesting place to meet new women wishing to become informants for my research, and more in general to make friends. This place is a teahouse and bookstore, named "Nüshu kongjian" (女树空间). The name is generally translated in English as "Women Tree Bookstore", although this translation hides in fact much more about the meaning of the word "*nüshu*" in Chinese. It is, in fact, a pun referring to a homophonous word that means "women's script" or "women's writing" (女书). *Nüshu* was an ancient and secret written language used for hundreds of years by Chinese women living in Hunan province (Lo, 2012). In ancient China women were denied access to education, but those living in the rural areas of Jianyong county, in Hunan, were able to learn and develop a script to which only they could have access (Liu, 2004). Through these writings women were able to seek support and share their grievances. The Nüshu Kongjian's name is not written as "women's script", but by using the homophonous word "tree", resulting in "Women's Tree Bookstore". "Why didn't you just call it *nüshu* [women's script]?" – I asked one of the women who runs the place – "Because the tree has deep roots, and we want to reach all other women deeply inside" she replied.

I met Ting Ling in mid-April at the Nüshu Kongjian. She told me she runs the place along with other friends. They organize talks, events, group discussions and anybody can just walk in and participate in any activity. I waited for her in the small alley, and as soon as she arrived, she asked me to remove my shoes, and walked me in. The teahouse is in a small Shanghainese traditional house, close to Zhongshan Park. Ting Ling is very proud of the place, because she knows that foreigners interested in Chinese culture are fond of these remnants of Chinese architecture, that remind them that China, and in particular Shanghai, is not only skyscrapers and tall buildings. I was in fact wondering more about the rental prices, and how these young women managed to pay for all the fees. I wondered whether some of them were actually living in the place. Nobody was in fact there when we arrived, and nobody came along during my visit. There were, however, signs of life: dirty mugs in the sink, about ten pairs of apparently mismatched flip-flops, and books everywhere. I asked Ting Ling if there was anybody living there, and she said that some women stay over for the night sometimes. "Who pays for the fees?" – I asked – "We share" she replied.

Figure 11. The Nüshu kongjian

We spoke in English, and hers was excellent, with perhaps a slight American accent. She seemed very confident, and this confidence shined through her way of speaking. She told me that she had studied in the USA, then went back to China and has recently started working in an advertising agency in Shanghai. This was an interesting news that I was not aware of before meeting her. She is an insider of both the worlds I wanted to study, and she seemed as surprised as I was to learn that my research dealt in particular with advertising.

> [Francesca]: Let's organize a group discussion with the women who usually come here. I usually call these discussions workshops: women are asked to create ads, watch TV commercials together, and talk about their thoughts on how the industry portrays them. I think it would be interesting if you participated as well, because you could give us your perspective as an "insider" in the world of ads, and also reveal us more about how ads work, like the process to create them.

> [Ting Ling]: Yes, sure. I'll advertise the workshop on our Weibo page. Tonight send me more information on WeChat about what they need to prepare for the workshop (like readings..) and I'll post the ad on our page.

That night I sent her the information she needed and the day after a post appeared on the teahouse's Weibo page:

> 周日(4/26)日早上 10:30-12:00，香港理工大学博士 Francesca 将在女树空间为她的博士论文做一次工作坊，招募 5 位女权主义者，聊聊"广告中的女性形象"。参与者需携带至少一则自己感兴趣的女性广告 (杂志，海报，视频皆可~)，期间还会穿插一些游戏，讨论。感兴趣者请私信。 (http://www.weibo.com/nvshuchina?from=page_100505_profile&wvr=6&mod=like)

> *On Sunday morning (April 26) from 10:30 to 12:00, Francesca, a PhD student from The Hong Kong Polytechnic University will come to our Nüshu Space to organize a workshop for her PhD thesis. We need to recruit 5 feminist participants wishing to discuss about "the female image in ads". The participants should bring at least one advertisement (from a magazine, a billboard poster, a video etc.) and together we will have several games and discussions. Those wishing to participate please send a text.*

When I arrived that day, they were all already waiting for me, and I felt somehow embarrassed for being late for the workshop that I was supposed to be in charge of. It

Figure 12. The Nushu kongjian

was sunny outside, so I asked them to move to the outside area and they all agreed.

There were five people in total: apart from Ting Ling, also Chen Yulin, Luo Ying, Cao Qing and Yu Jiang decided to join the group discussion. They have very different backgrounds, and all of them had different reasons as to why they wished to join the workshop. Chen Yulin was at that time a 40-year-old university Professor, a rather "famous" name among feminists, she has published articles on the role of Chinese women in society from a feminist perspective. Luo Ying was 26, she holds a Master's degree in Linguistics, and her views on ads are highly influenced by her studies. Cao Qing was the youngest, only 20 years old, she was an undergraduate student in Advertising. Finally, Yu Jiang is a man interested in feminism.

4.2. Women in the kitchen

The outside sitting area, which was cozy and bright, seemed perfect for the atmosphere I wanted to create: not that of a formal interview, but rather a nice chat over interesting topics. They had prepared tea and snacks, which were lying on the table, surrounded by dusty cushions and old newspapers piling on a bench.

Figure 13. Nüshu kongjian. Outside sitting area

Luo Ying arrived about twenty minutes late, but joined the conversation without problems, as if she knew what we had just been discussing. She told me that she wanted to show me a few advertisements that she thought were interesting. In preparation for our meeting she had kept her eyes opened to see whether there were any ads that might have been interesting to discuss together, and she had started paying attention to the images surrounding her when taking the subway, when watching TV, or reading magazines.

She then began browsing the pictures on her phone until she found the ones she had taken to show me. The first ad was a picture of a billboard poster taken in the subway. It was an advertisement for a famous soy sauce: *Liuyue xian*. It featured a woman and a little girl (the daughter, in the intentions of the advertiser) standing next to each other, holding a wooden fork vertically in front of their chests, with both hands, in a position that reminded me of the statues of two Buddhist warriors, with the forks as their swords. The woman and the little girl were both dressed with the same clothes: a white shirt and a purple apron with big colorful drop shaped patterns drawn on it. The same colorful pattern was the background against which the two were leaning.

Luo Ying gave me her interpretation of the advertisement, and used the implied meaning of the ad to provide an interpretation of the female role in contemporary Chinese society, and of how this is portrayed by the advertising industry:

> So this is the Mom and the daughter, and it's always mother and daughter, every time we talk about [something that goes on in the] kitchen. It's such a lack of imagination. And then it's more interesting: it uses a comparing sentence: "in [the] workplace if you've got a ten thousand likes from your competitors, [it] cannot compare with one like from your daughter. So it's like trying to withdraw women from the workplace to the kitchen, they want to lock them in the kitchen and throw away [the key]. Like even if you get a lot of achievements in the workplace, it cannot compare with that. It's just using a comparing thing!

In the meantime, more women arrived at the teahouse, some of them sat with us, other went inside to have tea and chat with others. At our table, some of the participants were listening to Luo Ying's words, while others were discussing with the newcomers. Luo Ying felt that this topic was compelling, so she turned towards the others and repeated her point of view in Chinese, so as to raise their attention and include them in the conversation. She then went on in English, but switching to Chinese from time to time:

> I think they [the advertisers] are trying to make the women who are housewives and the women in the workplace as opposed to each other. I don't think they are opposed to each other. It tries to rank women. It always puts them in these two communities [housewives or workers], it's like you have to make a

choice between them. But as far as I know all women
are kind of in between: they need to face two different
wars at the same time.

Ting Ling was listening carefully and then said that she believed that what influences a modern Chinese woman, aside from her family and peer pressure, is the "public moral value system, and the media", whereas Chinese feminists are more influenced by their own personal experience and their knowledge: "education and feminist knowledge, like literature or articles about feminism". Thus, she believes that as a feminist Luo Ying is able to decode the messages in an advertisement such as the soy sauce ad, in a different and more nuanced way than the average Chinese woman. Moreover, she added: "in poverty areas the family is more influential", thus these ads constitute a different narrative for different Chinese women. Luo Ying then said:

On the one hand I feel this [the image portrayed in the
ad] is very ridiculous, but on the other hand you can see
women's anxiety about balancing these roles, [it's a
problem we have] talked about [for] decades, and still,
why are these ads still comparing these things?

Luo Ying felt that the comparison between the housewife-mother and the woman working outside the house, and the implied preference for the former, is an image that belongs to the past, so why do advertisers still indulge in these images?

Luo Ying then showed us another image from the same campaign. This time, the ad featured a young professional holding a frying pan in her left hand, while her right hand was lying on her hip, and her left knee was slightly bent. Goffman (1979) points out that the bent knee is an extremely common feature in gendered images in advertisements, and its use stands for the message that the woman is "on the ready in the current social situation" (p. 45). Luo Ying had decoded not only the ads' content, but the whole campaign's meanings. She said: "Here they try to target another type of woman, they try to categorize women, but we can't be categorized as either something or something else. One can be aggressive with a cute look or the other way round".

Figure 15. Liuyue Xian Advertisement. Source: http://www.cnfmg.com/indexphp/Article/view/id/26747

Finally, the third picture that Luo Ying showed me targeted yet another "category" of women: the sexy, urban sophisticate, who should be, according to the catchphrase, more interested in impressing her lover with her cooking skills, rather than 10,000 strangers with her stunning beauty. Luo Ying said: "here the woman has the planets surrounding her, she is like the center of the universe. It is a powerful image, they want to show that she is important, but her only achievement is that she cooked the broccoli for her husband!" We all laughed when Luo Ying said this.

Figure 16. Liuyue Xian Advertisement. Source: http://www.cnfmg.com/index.php/Article/view/id/26747

An article appeared on chinanews.com in late January 2015 (*Liu Yue Xian yanyi jiangyou jie shizhuang xiu xin chu zhuyi jie qian deng shang huojia*, 2015) commenting on the campaign. The author explains that three different artists have worked on three different aprons that women could wear when cooking for the forthcoming Chinese Spring Festival. The goal of Liuyue xian with these ads was to go against the traditional idea that women in the kitchen are old and ugly ("yellow

faces" in the original, *xia chu jiu shi huang lian*), but that also young, sexy, and modern women can take on the cooking duties in view of the Chinese New Year event. Liu and Wei (1997) specifically address the role of the apron in Chinese advertisements. They note that it is not only a signifier for "housewife", but it also serves to support the myth it propagates (of the "virtuous housewife") among the viewers, concealing its hidden power structures (*Yincang zai mei ge mi si houmian de quanli jiegou*) (p. 47) because it relies on the shared immediately available meaning that a woman wearing an apron is a housewife.

The feminist position demonstrates the huge gap between advertisers and feminists, as well as the impossibility for advertisers to think of the "modern Chinese woman" in terms that differ from tradition (women in the kitchen). I thought I should interview an advertiser in order to understand their point of view, and to understand why the advertising industry seemed so distant from these other women that I was encountering.

4.3.   The creatives' points of view

At the workshop that day, Cao Qing had given me one of her Professors' contacts. She said that this Professor, Tang, would have been able to put me in touch with people working in the industry. I contacted her on WeChat, and I told her about my project. I told her that I was interested in hearing the perspective of people who are working in the industry, to add the point of view of the insiders to my analysis. Tang put me in touch with a few of her former students who are now working in the advertising industry, in various roles. All of them are in their late twenties or early thirties, and have already had a few years of experience in the industry. Thanks to Tang, I met Anqi. She was 31 years old when we first met. She was born and raised in Shanghai as an only child. During our first meeting she told me that she was working as a freelancer for various agencies, but when we met again a few weeks later she had found a stable job in an ad agency. Prior to our first meeting she sent me by email her portfolio, a sort of resume containing all her work and personal information.

I wanted to know from her what she thought about the visual proliferation of images that my feminist friends thought of as demeaning. Did she share the same feelings? What did she think of the female image? And how would she answer to Luo Ying's questions regarding the boring repetitiveness of ads that tell us "the same old stories"?

When I first met Anqi, it was early June 2015. I had given her an appointment in front of the Shanghai Library subway station. She introduced herself to another woman, a foreigner waiting for someone else, but as soon as I realized the mistake, I reached her and told her that I was the one she was looking for. She said she was sorry for her poor English. I told her she could speak in Chinese, although mine was possibly worse than her English, but I reassured her saying that the language would not be a problem. We went to a coffee shop near the library that goes by the Orwellian name "1984 bookstore". We ordered something to drink and I asked her to talk about the most successful ad campaign she had contributed to create. She said: "Definitely the Midea campaign for house appliances". She showed me on her iPad the commercials that made the campaign. She said that this was a big campaign, because the commercials were shown during Chinese New Year's Eve, when every Chinese person is watching TV. She explained that it was something as important as the American Super bowl in terms of size of the audience watching TV at the same time.

Each commercial was set in a different Chinese city, where people speak different dialects. One was set in Shanghai, and featured a woman and her daughter discussing over the possibility of using a microwave to steam crab meat. Figure 17 shows an image from Anqi's portfolio.

Figure 17. Midea Campaign, Shanghai commercial. (Photo credit: Anqi, 2015)

Anqi told me that in the commercial the mother tells the daughter that steaming crab meat is good. She explained that "crab meat" and "son in law" are homophonous in Shanghainese dialect, thus, "by praising the microwave's steaming option, the mother was at the same time praising her son in law". This reminded me of Luo Ying's disapproval about showing women in the kitchen, therefore I asked Anqi to tell me more about the reason behind the choice of a woman and her daughter as those who

take care of the food, but at the same time praising the son in law, which seemed incongruous. She said:

> [Anqi]: This is what works. If you try to make it different, like men cooking and women working it just…it doesn't work. This is what people want to see because this is what people like.
> [Francesca]: What if you tried something different? Like something people are not used to see. For example, the man cooking. It would surprise the people, but maybe it would work precisely because it's not what everybody does.
> [Anqi]: No, no, that's impossible. It wouldn't work.
> [Francesca]: So Chinese ads will never show men cooking?
> [Anqi]: Oh, maybe if the ad shows a pregnant woman, then it can feature the man washing veggies and the woman next to him. Like if he is helping her, but only in this case, not cooking.

I later met another advertiser, Bai Ling. She is the only advertiser whom I did not meet thanks to Tang. I simply sent several emails to various advertising agencies that had offices in Shanghai, and hoped that at least one would reply. Indeed, only one, out of around ten, replied to my email, Bai Ling's boss (the person to whom I had originally sent the email) saying that he would pass me Bai Ling's contact, and that I could arrange a meeting with her. He said that she is the person in charge of "the female image", so she would be able to give me the information I was looking for. Bai Ling invited me to have lunch with her near her office, on a weekday in late June. Compared to Anqi, she seemed more like the personification of the advertiser that I had in my mind: self-confident, fashionable, "westernized", and relatively wealthy. She holds a Master's degree from an American university, where she studied Communication, and she has been working as a "planner" for three years in the current advertising agency where she is working. Her work consists in organizing focus groups with women to understand what they want to see in ads, and then she passes this information to the creatives, who craft the ad based on the focus groups' findings.

I asked her about the female role in ads that deal with "the family", and she said: "there is no such thing as 'men outside the home, women inside' (*nanwai nünei*) anymore, that is an outdated image that has nothing to do with the image of the modern Chinese woman". I then showed her a commercial that contradicted her

theory, and she said that ads such as this target a specific category of women, such as middle-aged women. She said that ads now want to "empower" women, although her idea of "empowerment" seemed a very particular one to me, one that had nothing to do with feminist empowerment, at least the "empowerment" that other feminists had mentioned to me during our encounters:

> The ads that I prefer are those from the internet, like those for e-commerce sites (Alibaba, Taobao…) because they are changing the market. There is an ad that shows that on this e-commerce site a woman can send a "notification" to her boyfriend to tell him what gift she wants, so that he can't get it wrong. This is a great power that now women have. Before, they just had to accept what the boyfriend bought for them, now they can choose.

The idea that women gain power from the ability to choose the gifts they want to receive from their boyfriends is a singular idea of "empowerment" and "choice" that, I believe, is profoundly influenced by global post-feminist discourses on women's achievements in society.

4.4. Feminism and post-feminism in the Chinese media

The tension between the advertisers' point of view and Luo Ying's, is emblematic of a general tension between feminism and non-feminism, to put it simple. When directly asked whether she was a feminist, Anqi had very clear ideas about why she did not need to be a feminist, and why in general feminism is a relic of the past.

> [Francesca]: Do you think you're a feminist?
> [Anqi]: Feminist? No.
> [Francesca]: What do you think about feminism?
> [Anqi]: I don't think women in China need feminism.
> [Francesca]: Why not?
> [Anqi]: Because we can do whatever we want. We can have the job we like, we are free to choose the life that we want. We don't need feminism. Feminism is about complaining for what women don't have, but I don't think that there is anything missing in my life.

This position contrasts with what Andrea Press (2011) found when interviewing women working in a top-selling women's magazine: all of them "overtly defined themselves as feminists" (p. 111). Yet, as she notes, they accepted as "[n]ormal and unchangeable" (p. 111) the female image that is portrayed in this magazines, sharing

with Anqi the idea that a different portrayal would simply not work. Anqi's dismissal of feminism is probably due to the highly political impact of the new wave of Chinese feminism that has emerged since 2012, and that has seen young Chinese feminists engaged in political protests. Activists' protests are considered "dangerous" for China's stability, and are consequently highly stigmatized by the mainstream media, eventually impacting on people like Anqi.

Anqi's position, as well as Bai Ling's, is however not that of an "anti-feminist", but rather that of a "post-feminist". Post-feminism was first formulated as the product of a backlash against feminism (Faludi, 1992) paradoxically relying on the assumption that second wave feminism's battles have already been won (McRobbie, 2009). Anqi's ideas are indeed not unusual among young, highly educated, working women from Western countries, but, as Luo (2012) points out, post-feminist analyses have seldom been applied to non-Western societies (see as an exception Chen, 2016).

Angela McRobbie (2004, 2009) has looked at the impact of popular culture in the complexification of feminism, which has in turn led the word "feminism" to be seen as an unwanted term, equated to instances of hatred against men. She takes as example the movie *Bridget Jones' Diary*, where the protagonist is a modern woman who, "[d]espite feminism, wants to pursue dreams of romance, find a suitable husband, get married and have children" (p. 12). This complexification is termed post-feminism, and is described by McRobbie as a "double entanglement" (2004, p. 256, 2009, pp. 12–13), where neo-conservative values related to women and family, coexist along with a liberalization of choice in family and kinship relations. As Munford and Waters (2014) note, then, the "post-" in post-feminism, is in fact a signifier of a "pre-" feminism era, that has been appropriated by media cultures, and has become a lens through which popular culture is looked at, when it deals with women's issues.

The relationship between feminism and housewifery has also been a problematic one. Second wave feminists in the 1960s and 1970s have dismissed the housewife role, defining it as demeaning. One of the core arguments of Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* (1963) was that women would be liberated by working outside the home. Similarly, Ann Oakley (1974) points out the fact that all women share the experience of being housewives, and since working inside the home as housewives goes against

self-actualization (p. 222), thus the role of the housewife should be abolished. Another paradigmatic text for second wave feminism that defines the role of the housewife as an obstacle for women's independence is Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*, where the author clearly states that "a woman's work within the home gives her no autonomy; it is not directly useful to society, it does not open out on the future, it produces nothing" (p. 475). Similarly, in *The Female Eunuch* (1970), Greer pairs housewives with slaves, and defines them as the antithesis of liberated women.

Many of these considerations have later been criticized by other feminists, especially postcolonial and black feminists. For example, bell hooks (1984) notes that despite the urge to stop being housewives, in fact, at the time when *The Feminine Mystique* was written, women were already working outside the home, although probably not those women Friedan was specifically addressing (middle-class and white), but the working condition had not brought them any liberation whatsoever. While Friedan's description of women and femininity can appear as excessively monolithic, and centered on the white middle-class American housewife, *The Feminine Mystique* has indeed had the general merit of pointing at the role of mainstream media in the perpetuation of stereotypical portraits of gender roles, where women are shown as "housewives, mothers, and brainless consumers interested only in pleasing the men in their lives" (Farrell, 1998, p. 21). This definition matches very well the goal of the Midea commercial described by Anqi. Fu's analysis (2003) of the role of the housewife in Chinese ads also echoes this second wave feminist understanding: for Fu housewifery, as described by ads, is nothing more than a "happiness trap" (*xingfu de xianjing*) (p. 57) based on biological determinism. He adds that even when women are portrayed as working outside the home, the roles they undertake are only those deemed appropriate for their gender, thus contributing to an "extension of the housewife role" (*jiating zhufu zhe yi jiaose de yanshen*) (p. 57).

The image of the woman as member of the family is haunted by a "postfeminist mystique" (Munford & Waters, 2014, p. 10) that works because it utilizes the anachronistic image of the housewife that was proper of a previous era, and that makes use of nostalgia for "the virtuous wife and good mother" (Ferry, 2003, p. 284) as a signifier. As McDonald (1995) puts it, post-feminism is a sort of "accommodation" (p. 74) between two "old enemies" (ibid.), feminism and advertising. It is a form of more "acceptable" feminism, because it denies the need of

it, and it moves from the fact that women now have *choices*. This resonates with Anqi's words, when she says that she does not need feminism because now all women have the possibility to choose the lives they want to live.

Also other young feminists whom I met in Shanghai struggle with the need to voice their grievances on the one hand, while on the other hand they share the perception that after all life is not that bad for them, as it may have been for their parents or grandparents. Thornham and Feng (2010) draw a comparison between the loss of the feminist position in China, and the influence of post-feminist discourses that come from Western popular culture. They too, underline how their informants (young university students) noted a divide between them (born in the late 1980s) and the previous generations: "*They* [were] in a communist society… but we are the first generation in the new China" (p. 198, emphasis in the original). This commonality with Western post-feminist discourse, should therefore be further contextualized with China's specific historical circumstances. As Liu (2014) also notes, there is a complex entanglement between modernity and Chinese tradition, and public discourses that emerge from the media emphasize the stories of women who "have achieved mobility through self-determination" (p. 21). Anqi is possibly one of these women, and her achievements have an influence also on feminists, despite their different perceptions about the female representation as members of the family in advertisements.

While there is a growing body of literature that deals with the spread of post-feminism in Western countries (Arthurs, 2003; Gill, 2003, 2008, McRobbie, 2004, 2009; Press, 2011; Tasker & Negra, 2007) scant attention has been paid to it in wider, cultural, and transnational context that go beyond the so called "West" (with a few exceptions, such as, for example: Dosekun, 2015; Lazar, 2006; Thornham & Feng, 2010). In the Chinese context, one notable exception is Wei Luo's study on the impact of post-feminism on the Chinese image of the "modern" woman as portrayed by fashion magazines (Luo, 2012). Luo has argued that the image of the "modern Chinese woman" is the product of a post-feminist discourse that serves however a different purpose from that of the Western post-feminist female image. While in the West post-feminist discourses have been paired with a "detachment from second wave feminism" (p. 91) that assumes that women have already obtained the main demands they formerly had, in China it stands for "privileged, educated, Han, middle-to-upper-class women" (p. 103).

Post-feminism is in fact a global phenomenon because it relies on global discourses of femininity that have been circulating due to the pervasiveness of international media industries (Lazar, 2006). Lazar (2006) argues that the difference with the Western form of post-feminism is due to an array of glocal articulations that make it effective also elsewhere. The local aspect in the glocal is however fading away: when I asked my informants to identify the ethnicity of several models in magazine ads by just looking at their bodies (covering the models' faces) they could not identify the model's ethnicity only by her body, clothes, skin color (despite some awkward attempts). The homogenization of the post-feminist woman now transcends ethnic or racial boundaries. Butler (2013) points out that the discursive formation of post-feminist women in the American media does not exclude women of color, but it positions them within the white, middle-class, heterosexual hegemonic paradigm that post-feminism professes. Similarly, it can be argued that the discursive strategies employed within the Chinese post-feminist media context do not exclude women who are not "privileged, educated, Han, middle-to-upper-class" as Luo (2012) defines the modern Chinese (post-feminist) woman, but it includes also those who are outside that paradigm through a "commodification of otherness" (Butler, 2013, p. 50; Springer, 2007, p. 252), reinforcing the idea that feminism is not needed anymore.

4.5.   Combining feminism and tradition in identity formation

The impact of global post-feminist discourses is made apparent in the Chinese media context through images of "empowered" women. For instance, Ting Ling had selected for the workshop a commercial for Nike which she liked because, as she put it: "it shows a strong woman who runs and practices sports every day. It's not the typical image of femininity". Far from implying that the Nike commercial was "feminist", what Ting Ling meant is that it showed a "differently modern" image of femininity, that is not necessarily meant to be glamorous and sexy. These images, that show a form of empowerment that can take, for instance, the form of body empowerment (through sport activities) or technological empowerment (women who are able users of modern technologies) smartly convey the idea that "women now have it all", which is the symbolic catchphrase representing post-feminist discourses. This in turn raises doubts on the real need for activism and feminism to deal with images in the mass media; and doubts on whether the female image is after all indeed portrayed in demeaning ways in ads. However, as the feminist informants whom I interviewed

demonstrated, the argument is not that simple. Chinese tradition and modernity converse with each other, appealing to different sentiments, and targeting different sectors of society.

As mentioned above, for the young feminists I interviewed in Shanghai, the family was one of the most important parts of their lives. Despite their remonstrance against the image of the woman in the kitchen, these young women tend to generally abide by the social norms imposed by the traditional kinship system, and their desire for equality in role portrayals in advertisements clashes with their desire to be considered "good daughters", as well as future "good wives", by their parents and family members in general.

A few weeks after one of the workshops, I met Ma Yin, an undergraduate student, at a Coffee Shop near her campus. She came with another friend, Xu Ling, 19 years old. Xu Ling wanted to come because Ma Yin had told her about my research, and Xu also wanted to participate. Xu Ling seemed nervous and shy, whereas Ma Yin appeared confident, probably because she already knew me. I asked them about their relationship with their family members.

> [Ma Yin]: I am an only child. I was born in Shanghai.
> [Author]: What do you like to do in your spare time?
> [Ma Yin]: I like reading many books about feminism, I also like to play the piano. But not because my parents forced me to learn, I like to play because when I was little I insisted that I wanted a piano because I like Wagner very much, and my parents told me they would buy me one if my grades where high.
> [Author]: What about you? [To Xu Ling]
> [Xu Ling]: I don't know [smiles]. I like to go out with friends, I listen to music…
> [Author]: Are you an only child too?
> [Xu Ling]: Yes. This is very common in Shanghai.
> [Author]: How about your parents? What do they think about your interest in feminism?
> [Xu Ling]: They are very nice, they think it's ok, but I don't have to get in trouble. At the beginning they didn't want me to participate in these things, but they didn't know much about feminism. Many people think feminism is something dangerous. But now they know I don't do anything wrong, so they let me do it.
> [Ma Yin]: Yes, people think that as a feminist you hate men. We don't hate men. We just think that men and

women should be treated equally. That is what feminism says. But many people think it's against men.

[Author]: So your family supports your interest in feminism?

[Ma Yin]: They don't like it, but they are ok with that. They don't know much about it, though. I don't talk to them very often about my personal life and interests. They didn't go to any university, I am more educated than them, so they think that I am very smart. They trust me if I do something.

[Xu Ling]: My parents don't take me very seriously. I told them more about my interest in feminism when they were worried, but when they understood, they just thought it's something for young girls, that this interest will end soon.

The two women were entangled between the desire to conform to socio-familial norms, and the practice of strategies of resistance against those norms. They sought their parents' understanding and approval, while at the same time discussing how to change gendered structures that endorse inequality in society in their group discussions with their peers. As Engebretsen (2014) points out in reference to the symbolic meaning underlying fake marriages (*jiahun*) that Chinese lesbians perform in contemporary China, the desire for normativity "relies on a national, heteronormative culture of Chineseness, which is increasingly being facilitated by a growing market-oriented consumer society" (p. 81). In this context, marriage as an institution, and the family in general, remain at the core of the "subject formation and social status production" (p. 81). Unable to resist to that normativity that wants them married soon and with a family, they enact their resistance to those norms by engaging in a dialogue with them, rather than rejecting them completely. Through this dialogue, they create alternative feminist discourses that use that imagery. For example, as shown in figure 18, the "blood brides", a group of feminists who protest against violence on women by performing their resistance dressed in bridal gowns.

Figure 18. Bridal gowns. Source: https://sexismclassviolence.wordpress.com/2015/04/09/the-five-chinese-feminists/

As Luo Ying put it during the focus group discussion, "why do we always have to choose?". Indeed, they can be good mothers *and* "good feminists", combining the traditional writs of normalcy with the voicing of their grievances and the feminist identity implied within those grievances.

A month later, I met another young woman who had agreed to meet me, Wenwen, 19-years-old, she was born and raised in Guangxi, but has recently moved to Shanghai to pursue her studies. She had only recently become interested in feminism, and she felt that her interest was problematic, because she had conflicting sentiments toward what, according to her, feminism prescribed:

> I don't know if I'm a feminist. I agree with some aspects like that a woman should have the same rights as men: she should choose the job she wants to have. But at the same time I also feel that I want to get married, have children and have a stable life, like a more traditional lifestyle. So I don't know if I really like feminism.

Sometimes this self-criticism gets entangled in other issues of gender and society, and abiding by the rules is what prevails, at least apparently and temporarily. For example, Yan, 20-years-old, a Shanghai native, felt she had deceived her parents because they had found out that she was having a lesbian relationship with a woman working at her Mother's company:

> They found out because my Mom read my messages
> and emails when I was not in front of the computer. She
> was very angry, but my Father didn't say anything. This
> is his way of reacting. Then they asked me to choose
> between this person and them, my family. I chose my
> family. They are the most important people in my life.
> The other woman then left the company because she
> had lost her face.

Yan had the feeling that she could regain her parents' trust by showing them that she could obtain other important achievements in her life:

> Now I'm preparing my TOEFL test and later I'll take
> the LSATS so that I can go to the USA and go to law
> school there. If I achieve this, they will probably be
> very happy, because I will have a good job, earn enough
> money to take care of them when they are old.

The need for my informants to abide by social norms emphasizes an ambivalent relationship both with their feminist identity and with their idea of family. However, their identification with the goals of feminism emerges as a "suture point" (Hall 1996, 5) between what "makes" them feminists and their own subjectivity as women and as members of the family. They feel a double belonging to two different communities: on the one hand that of the feminist circles and groups they actively participate in, on the other hand that of their families. This sense of belonging is not exclusionary, and it is malleable and interchangeable, although not unproblematic for some of them, as the examples above show. Thus, instead of directly defying their family's expectations, they oscillate between embracing these expectations when at home, and resisting to them when among other feminists. The resistance, however, does not imply a rejection of the rules of normalcy, but a combination of transgression and compliance which is the product of a process of "becoming feminists".

Budgeon (2003) defines the perception that young women have of the failure of feminism as a "recurring problem that continues to bring to bear questions regarding the relative success or failure of second wave feminism" (p. 157). The recurring problem, however, is still the misconception that second wave feminism is the "gold standard" of feminism, against which any feminism, even indigenous feminisms in Asian societies, are compared. By doing so, second wave feminists detach themselves from the reality that surrounds them, and neglect the existence of feminisms such as the new Chinese wave that has begun in 2012, and which is a form of

"intersectionality in practice" (Valentine, 2007, p. 14) where identification with the feminist subject position is a constant process of doing and undoing due to the particular circumstances in a woman's life. As Lewis (2002) points out

> The fixities of racial, national-cultural or religious identities can now be enhanced or entirely replaced by infinitely rearrangeable ensembles of meaning […] A subject need not be confined. Just as there are infinite choices in a capitalist economy, so there are infinite opportunities for identity creation (p. 347).

In many ways, what is emerging is a strong political movement of Chinese feminists who are politically engaged with the issues that they believe are an obstacle to their self-assertion as women in society, which reveals a stark difference between the Chinese socio-political space in which they find themselves, and the dominant discourses on "feminism" that come from the West. Given the dominance of familial normalcy and kinship norms, Western feminist influence would have no meaning for these women, and for this reason they have found their own feminist identity as Chinese women by engaging in a construction of their identity that stems both from tradition and from (global) modernity.

4.6. Summary

In this chapter I have analyzed the position that Chinese feminists in Shanghai have in relation to the female image in ads that portray the woman in "family" roles. The findings show that Chinese feminists in Shanghai are not satisfied with the overwhelming number of ads that underline the role of women as those who take care of the household. This image is perceived as outdated and as one which does not reflect the real current situation of Chinese women.

Furthermore, I have counterbalanced their analyses with those of two advertisers who do not define themselves as feminists, and I have argued that the role of women as family members in Chinese ads is profoundly influenced by post-feminist discourses of women as empowered members of society. This hegemonic discourse, that combines ancient traditions with post-feminist influences from the West, has a deep repercussion also on feminist activists, who find themselves entangled in the ambivalent position of having to comply with the social expectations of their family members, while also having to comply with their feminist peers' expectations.

I have argued that this oscillation between tradition and modernity is the product of a process of construction of their feminist identity that allows them to engage with both modernity and tradition without excluding neither of both, but selecting either traditional instances or modern ones in order to make sense of their role as feminists in contemporary China.

To conclude, while the influence of post-feminism in the Chinese media can be seen as a product of globalizing images of beauty, the effect that these images have on the various viewers are different according to the cultural, social, and historical circumstances where these images appear. While in Western countries post-feminist discourses have produced a rejection of feminism by young women (Budgeon, 2003), in China they have created ties among them and have allowed critical awareness regarding women's role in a growing market economy to emerge.

5. Discussing ads from the feminist activist's perspective

The women (and men) I met during my fieldwork in Shanghai all shared a deep interest in women's issues. They all felt the need to discuss, share opinions, and in general "learn" more about women's condition in China and abroad, and about how these conditions can be improved through a feminist approach, that is, by taking into consideration women's needs. One could define their group discussions and encounters as the product of a sort of "activism", although they did not have a common view on the role of activism and activists, and although some of them had a certain reluctance to define themselves as "activists". Despite this reluctance, their main concern when discussing ads' meanings was nonetheless always to give a feminist-oriented interpretation of the advertisement, emphasizing the importance of this aspect both in their lives and as a bond with their group peers.

In a study on feminist activist groups in China, Milwertz (2003) identifies two types of women's activism: a government endorsed, top-down activism; and another type of activism made of organizations that stem from individuals' initiative. The latter groups are defined as "popular" (p. 632), in contrast both with NGOs' activism and with the All China Women's Federation's (although it should be noted that the ACWF is also defined by the CCP as an NGO). These "popular activist groups" started blossoming after the beginning of the reforms that have turned China into a market-oriented economy. At that time, the social impact of the new economy was so relevant that in the 1980s urban and educated women began spontaneously gathering in small scale groups, organizing small conferences or conducting research on gender issues (Milwertz, 2003; Wang, 2009).

As already mentioned in section 2.6, women's activism in China is in fact nothing new. Women's issues were a major concern in the majority of the social initiatives carried out throughout the 20th century (Judd, 2002; Liu, Karl, & Ko, 2013). Already during the late 1910s, and specifically during the May 4th era, the "cultural renaissance" of those years gave a new impetus to the women's cause, resulting in public discussions through articles on the then famous newspapers *China Weekly Review*, and *New Youth*, which included articles on women's issues: marriage arrangement, concubinage, birth control, free love, etc. (Croll, 1978). China's social aspects were experiencing profound changes, and women's newly acquired life conditions were considered essential for the transition into a modern country.

Later on, one of the main concerns of the CCP during the revolutionary campaigns that took place before the end of the war between Communists and Nationalists (in the period between 1948 and 1949) was to mobilize both women and the youth, following the belief that in order to obtain the final victory, China would need the support of mass organizations, which would provide a sense of identity and belonging that, as Davin (1976) points out, "makes people give of their best" (p. 53). In contrast to the above mentioned "popular activist groups", these organizations served the purpose of working as connecting channels which linked the Party to the masses in a downward direction, passing through the cadres; and also upwards from the masses to the Party, in the opposite direction. As one of these mass organizations, the ACWF was founded on 3 April, 1949, and as their English language website states:

> [The ACWF] is a mass organization that unites Chinese women of all ethnic groups and from all walks of life, and strives for their liberation and development. The mission of ACWF is to represent and uphold women's rights and interests, and to promote equality between women and men. ("All China Women's Federation").

Croll (2001) points out that there is a temptation to establish a clear cut dichotomy between those organizations that stem from above, like the ACWF, and those that demand change from below; or between old and new platforms used to share opinions, thoughts and the like (p. 35). However, the ACWF itself has undergone profound changes in its organization, which have transformed it from a Party-State oriented mass organization, to a gender rights demanding group. In fact, when asked this question, my interviewees had a variety of different opinions which generally ranged from the admission of the real need of the ACWF as a platform to discuss social policies regarding women, to more skeptical views about its autonomy. This diversity is however a distinctive aspect of the ACWF itself, which hosts among its members women who hold different positions, but who share a common interest in promoting gender equality.

The ACWF publishes *Women of China*, the only women's magazine available in English across China (Luo & Hao, 2007). It is an "[o]fficial tool used to publicize the achievements of Chinese women, and to promote the gender ideology of the CCP to the world" (p. 286). Despite the highly propagandistic goals of *Women of China*, and the efforts of the Party-State to show only "positive images of women" (Li, 2014, p. 522), several scholars and activists who write columns for the magazine are highly

critical of how the media in China today portray the female image (e.g. Liu & Bu, 1997). Thus, the ACWF, as well as all those officially set up networks that work under the umbrella name of "NGOs" should not be seen as the Party-State mouthpiece, or as opposed to spontaneously created groups of women who gather to discuss about women's issues, but rather as constantly evolving "women's associations", where its members have a varied range of ideas and positions, but that all work to benefit Chinese women's lives. For instance, the "Women's Media Watch Network" (*funü chuanmei jiance wangluo*) is a group created in 1995 by a group of journalists of the newspaper China Women's News (*Zhongguo funü bao*) published by the ACWF before the UN's 4th World Conference on Women. The aim of the network was to discuss and reflect upon the female portrayal in the media (Cai et al., 2001). Before 1995 the entwinement between gender and the media was not a major concern for Chinese researchers. However, since the inception of the Women's Media Watch Network, media studies in China have acquired a gender consciousness, and articles and studies on the relationship between the two have been proliferating (e.g., Bu, 1996; Bu & Liu, 1999; Feng, 1998). Given this rise of consciousness regarding the role and portrayal of the female image in the Chinese media among official as well as unofficial activist groups, what are these groups' proposals on how the female image should be portrayed?

While in the previous chapter I looked at the formation of the feminist identity through the reading of ads, and at how this identity acquires a certain shape thanks to – and despite – familial constraints, in this chapter I look at the entanglement between feminist activism and advertising. By analyzing how activism can take the form of positive attitudes towards females' images in ads, I inquire into the issue of how activists can appropriate discourses and strategies utilized by the advertising industry, and by doing so construct the ideal feminist who lives immersed in the 21st century's consumer culture.

The aim of my inquiry is to understand if there can be a feminist-informed advertising industry. Not all the ads' readings and analyses conducted by the women who took part in my research were critical and negative, in fact many women chose to identify positive images of women in advertisements. By drawing on these "positive images", I contend that advertising can incorporate feminism in its communication strategies, and I define this as a "corporatist feminism". Moreover, I also argue that feminists can

appropriate advertisers' discourses to spread their message, and I define this as the "commodification of dissent". I begin my analysis by narrating two interviews that will help to define a plausible profile of the young Chinese feminist activist, and the meaning of being a feminist in China today. After having identified "who is an activist", I narrate the story of a "good advertisement" performed by the informants, and I inquire into the meaning of positive images of women in ads. I will then again turn to the advertisers' point of view, in order to understand whether a feminist advertising industry is a paradoxical statement. Finally, I theorize my argument based on my findings, providing an answer to the question "can there be a feminist advertising?". In other words, I want to understand whether there can be a solution to an apparent contradiction in terms.

5.1.   Who is a feminist?

Until a few years ago I thought I had quite clear ideas about what feminism and feminists thought of the advertising industry. I had read books and articles on the topic, and I was quite confident about the negative impact that advertising had had on women's self-confidence as well as on gender relations at large. For instance, Naomi Wolf (2002) had defined the portrayal of women's exteriority in the media as the perpetration of a "beauty myth", emphasizing the consequences of the media on women's lives as a kind of punishment for women. Prior to her analysis, Betty Friedan's famous *Feminine Mystique*, in the early 1960s, had already looked at the demeaning portrayal of women in ads. More recently, Jean Kilbourne (1999) has emphasized the link between ads and teenagers' issues, such as eating disorders, low self-esteem, and addictions.

With all the set of "knowledge" that I had gathered in the previous years, I then went to Shanghai with somewhat clear ideas about what women thought, and about feminism and feminists, both in the so called "West" and in China; and more importantly, I thought I already knew what sort of data I would be able to gather during the months of fieldwork. One thing that I was overlooking at that time was the possibility that I would obtain "positive" opinions about the female portrayal, or that images that I had interpreted as "negative" would be interpreted with positive enthusiasm by other women, and that they would support their opinions with insightful explanations.

I was once sitting at a coffee shop in the Songjiang district of Shanghai, on a rainy day in late May, chatting with Xu Ling about the meaning of feminism. I told her that during our previous meetings we had talked a lot about advertisements and images, and today I wanted to talk instead about feminism, and why she was so interested in the topic. "What is feminism for you?" – I asked – "People think that women are first of all women, but instead I think that they are first and foremost 'people'"[2]. I asked her to give an example of this discrimination, and she went on to say:

> For example, when referring to a driver, if she is a woman we say 'a female driver'. Although there is no gender distinction in the idea of driving a car, we need to say that a woman is a *female* driver, because the standard idea is that a driver is a man. I think that gender cannot be used to set a standard; and having this awareness means to be a feminist.

The issue of sexism in language has been debated extensively in feminist circles worldwide, and some feminists have argued in favor of "gender neutralization" (Mills, 2008, p. 85) although in some languages – such as English and even Chinese – gender neutralization is ineffective, because nouns are not inherently gendered, and nonetheless they are always perceived as male-related, like in Xu Ling's example. For her, understanding and acknowledging this as an issue was an important part of her "becoming a feminist".

In March, a couple of months earlier, five young feminists where imprisoned, so I wanted to understand how other young feminists felt about activism, and what it meant to be a feminist in China today, where they could be imprisoned for protesting against issues such as violence against women. Regarding activism, Xu Ling added:

> Activism means to fight for gender equality, so we need people who organize these protests and raise the awareness of others. Maybe not everyone will become an activist eventually, but even discussing these issues at home, with your family, or in the university with your friends, means you are doing something good, something positive. I admire those five activists, because they were very courageous, and probably I wouldn't dare to go out in the streets and protest, but they inspired me to understand more about feminism.

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[2] The original phrase in Chinese was: 在被认为是'女人'之前，应选被认为是'人', in which Xu Ling wanted to emphasize that women are considered "female persons" (the literal translation of the characters *nüren*), but that they should be considered instead first as "persons" (*ren*).

In the 1980s the official women's organizations were made of women who occupied medium to high level positions, such as factory managers, senior professionals, or intellectuals (Judd, 2002, p. 159), thus they were in a privileged position if compared to women in the countryside, or even to poor urban women. Now however, activism is perceived as something that anyone can embrace, although the related consequences can be extremely serious. In fact, in another interview with Ma Yin, on the same topic as the interview with Xu Ling, I asked her about activism, and she had very different opinions about the role of feminist activism in China:

> Activism is dangerous, it can put you in trouble. I know that the women who were put in jail didn't do anything bad, but I think that what they do is actually harmful to all of us, even if done with the best intentions. If you start shouting in the street all the men will start thinking that you are crazy, that you are against men, that you hate them. So in the end the whole movement is harmed by a group of five people who feel the need to protest.

I could understand both positions, and I could understand also why Ma Yin had a more "conservative" position, whereas Xu Ling had a deeper "progressive" inclination. Whilst Ma Yin was the "perfect daughter", and "perfect student"; Xu Ling was more of a rebel, although the two friends complemented each other, and thus got along very well, and had been friends since they were teenagers (they first met in high school, and have since been studying together and sharing life experiences).

When I met Professor Zhang at the coffee shop near the Global Harbor, I asked her the same question about the role of activism and especially in relation to the ACWF. She said:

> We need the ACWF, even if we don't always like what it does or what it says, we need their support and their help for the women's cause. I don't always agree with them, of course! But I think that some major campaigns that the ACWF has advocated for since its foundation, have led to major changes or improvements in women's lives, so I think that we need them, as an official voice that talks in favor of women.

The contrast between what Milwertz (2003) defined as "popular activism" and the more official form of activism, represented by the ACWF, did not appear as a divisive element inside the women's movement in general. In other words, every "activist" – be it "popular" or "official" – had her own position regarding both the ACWF and the

role of activism. What did exist, however, was a distinction between the word "activist" and "feminist". While the former was generally used to refer to women who actively participated in protests – that eventually lead to legal consequences – the latter was used in reference to a more theoretical and "detached" interest in the improvement of women's condition in China. In spite of her definition of feminism as "fighting for gender equality", and despite defining herself as a feminist, Xu Ling would never dream of *fighting* for gender equality.

As Hsiung and Wong (1998) point out, Chinese women have not had a static position vis-à-vis the CCP throughout history, as several sinologists have argued (e.g., Barlow, 1994; Zito & Barlow, 1994), but have instead "actively negotiated their position" (p. 473) in relation to the Party-State. By underlining the dialectical approach to the relationship with the CCP, what Hsiung and Wong emphasize is ultimately Chinese women's agency in relation to the state's power. Through their agency they are able to negotiate the meanings of official and less official feminist circles, instead of being passive receptors of policy makers.

Figure 19. "Action of abolishing Custody and Education". Postcard by Nüquan zhi sheng group.

Figure 20. "Bald sisters". Postcard by the Media Monitor for Women Network and Gender Equality Advocacy and Action Network

When I first met a group of young feminists at their university campus, I noticed on the big table around which we were sitting a set of postcards depicting activists and their actions:

Figure 19 portrays a feminist activist who holds in her hands several letters sent to various government departments asking to disclose the current situation regarding "Custody and Education", and specifically requesting the government to abolish it. This explanation is written on the back of the postcard.

In August 2012 a group of four young feminists shaved their heads to protest against the unfair treatment of female university students who, when seeking admission to some courses, are required to score higher points than their male counterparts. To support them, more feminists shaved their heads in protest (Figure 20). However, the Ministry of Education explained that this discriminatory policy was implemented in order to "protect national interest" (this explanation is also written on the back of the postcard).

These, as well as other postcards that were left on the table, not only helped the young feminist to become acquainted with what "being an activist" meant, but they also helped to portray activists' actions as small everyday things that anyone can do. Other pictures showed activists as "normal" university students, identical to the women I was talking to. Thus, an important part of the process of "becoming a feminist" implies learning from what other feminists are doing, and sharing experiences. By showing familiar pictures, these women are instructed on how to become feminists and to overcome the obstacles imposed on them either by the family or by external forces (the media, the public discourse, other friends or Professors, and so on).

Figure 21. "The song of women's rights". Postcard by the Nuquan zhi sheng

For example, figure 21 shows a young woman on a subway in China, performing "The song of women's rights" to protest against sexual violence and sexual discrimination (this explanation appears on the back of the postcard). Other young women can easily identify with her, and understand her struggles, and then join other feminist groups.

Figure 22 is an even more emblematic example. A group of university graduates dressed in their gowns, hold posters protesting against unequal treatment at work.

Figure 22. "Supporting Ju Cao". Postcard by the Nuquan zhi sheng

At the end of December 2013 the first case on sexual discrimination at work succeeded to come to trial. The women portrayed in figure 22 appeared in court dressed in their bachelor's gowns to support the litigant, Ju Cao.

Mansbridge (1995) argues that the feminist identity is something that is "usually achieved, not given" (p. 29). When feminists work together, by reading what other feminists have read, and by acting in the same way as other feminists, the feminist identity is reinforced. For example, many of the women whom I met share their opinions and thoughts on dedicated WeChat groups. I followed two of these groups during my stay in Shanghai, and later as I returned to Hong Kong I kept track of their discussions. Here, they feel free to talk about a huge range of topics, which varies from the discussion of local and global news, to the stigma attached to women in society. For instance, on 9 March 2016, a user posted a link to a page where a short

video of a group of 5 women sing together a feminist song, and the accompanying message at one point reads:

> Listen to this group of women proudly claiming to be women. Women do not need to be defined, we must define ourselves. Shout "I am a woman and I am proud", and let the stigma go to hell (*lai ting ting zhe qun nvren wei he jiao'ao de zichen "funu"ba. Nvren bu xuyao bei dingyi, women yao ziji dingyi, dasheng de hanchu "wo shi funv, wo jiao'ao", rang wuming jiangui qu ba*). (http://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MzI3ODE3MTg1O Q==&mid=418882055&idx=1&sn=23c7c4ecb1179175 d8e21334d7b1bc1a&mpshare=1&scene=5&srcid=0309 Qo3BoR7nQovWXrjof38I#rd)

Through their messages and discussions, they also invite other participants to join offline activities. For example, a woman posted an ad in March 2016 on the group saying that she was an activist from Guangzhou, and that she was going to participate in an event where women had been invited to discuss the causes and consequences of sexual harassment. She invited anyone interested to participate, providing a flyer of the event.

The main aims of these feminist forms of "advertising" are not only to invite women to take part in activists' demonstration, but to help spread their "feminist message" even beyond the women included in the group. Each day new people join these groups, and share their stories. Although there is a call for participation in offline events, not all the participants take part in them, preferring to share their stories online with other women, rather than organizing protests. Another popular form of taking part in protests without engaging in activities that would be considered illegal by the authorities is to share videos or images through which they share their goals. The main aims of these forms of protest are to raise the awareness on social issues such as, for instance, female students' discrimination, sexual harassment, and discrimination in the workplace.

5.2. Feminist advertisements. A contradiction in terms?

Despite being strongly criticized by feminists, advertising entails several successfully proven techniques that have also been appropriated by feminist activists. Although the phrase "feminist advertisements" might seem as an "unlikely combination" (Talbot,

2000b, p. 177), in fact feminist media projects have been making use of advertising strategies for their purposes.

In the West feminist media outlets have existed since the inception of the famous American magazine *Ms.* back in the 1960s. However, the relationship between *Ms.* and traditional forms of advertising was at that time a controversial one. Farrell (1995) defines *Ms.* magazine and its ads as a "postmodern bricolage" (p. 54), where the coexistence of articles and readers' letters on feminist issues on the one hand, and of ads endorsing mainstream images of females on the other hand, represented an attempt to create a "feminist tool" (p. 54) that utilized the same categories and resources of any other corporate capitalist organization. *Ms.*, in other words, pushed women into what has been defined as "career feminism" (Ferree & Hess, 2000, p. 50): a kind of activism that prompts women to pursue their career goals despite social obstacles. Busby and Leichty (1993) argue however, that even "nontraditional women's magazines" (p. 249) such as *Ms.* had made an increasing use of sexist images of women in ads in the decades between the 1960s and the 1990s. Thus, the appropriation of mainstream advertising techniques even in feminist oriented magazines emphasizes the existing ambivalence in how advertisements can be perceived by the researcher, the editor, and the readers. Images can have several readings, but the ultimate reason why they appear in the magazine is to sell.

Zobl, Reitsamer and Grunangerl (2012) underline how the appropriation of advertising techniques by feminist activists is used as a powerful tool to raise awareness on specific gender issues. For instance, activists may create posters or magazine "ads" where collage images that are taken from mainstream magazines that show beautiful women are juxtaposed to provocative phrases such as "Boring meaningless crap. How many skinny airbrushed models can you stand?" (figure 23) (Zobl et al., 2012, p. 33). These techniques allow the creative part of advertising techniques to emerge, while engaging in actions that are not market-driven, and that they believe are for a right cause.
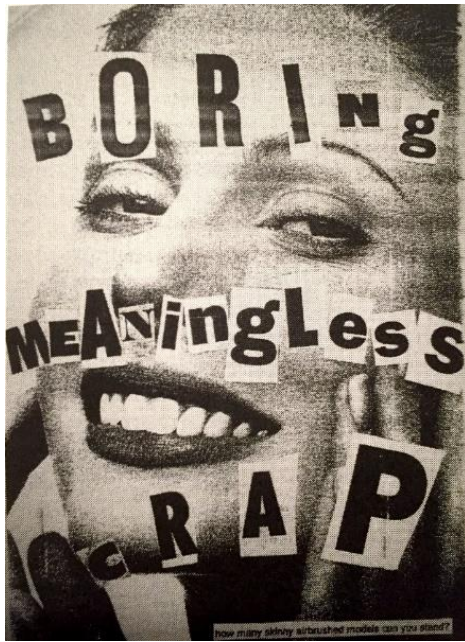
Figure 23. "Collage in the Riot Grrrl London zine, issue 3, 2003" (Source: Zobl et al., 2012, p. 33)

As Wang (2009) points out, since the Tiananmen incidents in 1989, spontaneously created feminist networks in China have been putting their effort in "mainstreaming gender" (p. 102), rather than focusing on studying women's problems in a period of transition towards the market economy, which was the previous main feature of women's organizations. The aims of these efforts have been to create venues for participatory action that should be non-hierarchical (Cai et al., 2001; Z. Wang, 2009) as opposed to the center-periphery, top-down structures, typical of all Chinese organizations and institutions (Cai et al., 2001, p. 213). Therefore, spaces for action such as the above mentioned Women's Media Watch Network, that is part of the Capital Women Journalists' Association (*Shoudu nü xinwen gongzuozhe xiehui*), is made of journalists, researchers and media practitioners, and has a horizontal structure. In other words, there is no "director" but everybody is simply called "coordinator" (Cai et al., 2001, p. 213).

At the founding meeting of the network, a short sketch named "Sunday Advertisements" (*guanggao zhong de xingqitian*) was performed by researchers Tong Wei, Guo Yanqiu and Cai Yiping, who were already members of the Network. It featured a family dispute that highlighted the sexist stereotypes of advertisements (Cai et al., 2001, p. 214). This performance was very successful, and after attending it, many women decided to join the Media Watch Network. Following this example,

when I organized the first workshop in March, I asked my participants to think of a commercial that they would have liked to see on TV. Surprisingly (because I had not mentioned the "Sunday advertisements" to them), they also decided to perform family roles.

I required them to discuss together and think of one product or service that they believed Chinese women need in their lives, and then to enact the commercial. Upon deciding to create a commercial for condoms because, as Wenwen put it: "I think women should feel ok when buying condoms, and when carrying them around. For the Chinese culture it is very bad if a woman carries condoms, it's shameful", they then assigned themselves the roles, and started acting. The participants were: Feng (the only male, who played the "Father"), Huiwen, who played the wife, and Ruili, 19 years old, decided to be the doctor. Finally, Wenwen played the role of the young daughter, whereas Ma Yin, who was also there, decided not to take part in the "play".

> [Wenwen, the daughter]: Daddy I have a boyfriend and I want to have sex with him.
> [Feng, the Father]: You want to have sex with your boyfriend? You should buy the pill to protect yourself.
> [Huiwen, the Mother]: Condoms are much better for women! The pill can't protect from AIDS. Let's go see the doctor.
> [Ruili, the Doctor]: Why do you want to buy condoms? That's for men!
> [Huiwen, the Mother]: No! It's ok if women want to buy condoms!!!

Significantly, these young feminists had chosen a family setting for their short but meaningful performance. This underlines the importance of "the family" in their lives, as mentioned in the previous chapter. Moreover, Huiwen, the "Mother", played the role of the wisest and most knowledgeable family member: although Wenwen goes to her father to tell him about her decision to start having sex with her boyfriend, the mother is the one who takes her to the doctor and argues with the doctor when she seems surprised that two women want to buy condoms.

I asked them: "Why did you choose to frame the commercial as 'the pill vs. the condom'?"

> [Ma Yin]: In China is very common to see commercials for the pill, but it's very rare to see commercials for condoms. To take the pill is ok if you are a woman, so

these commercials show women who are very happy to take the pill.

[Huiwen]: But actually the condom is safer. It can protect you from AIDS, the pill can't.

[Author]: Why did you choose the "family" setting?

[Feng]: Because usually in the family these things are not discussed, so maybe showing this, people can change.

[Ma Yin]: Yes, people can change because the media show them how to act. If you show that the girls speak with their parents about sexual issues, people can start acting that way.

Their choice to portray a "feminist commercial" representing what women would need to see allows them to challenge traditional culture that believes it is "shameful" for a woman to carry condoms. This choice was innovative, and it directly defied the normative family guidelines of how a "good woman" or "good daughter" should act.

Gunnarsson-Payne (2012) argues that the mode of delivery of a feminist political message varies from strictly textual forms, such as newspapers, magazines, flyers, and so on, to more performative ones. In this case, the medium form (a performance of a TV commercial) was suggested by the researcher, but the choice of enacting a political message was entirely made by the informants. In fact, I was not expecting a "feminist advertisement" when I asked them to choose a product that they thought Chinese women would need. However, the awareness of the abundance of ads that tell women what to wear, what to eat, and how to look, made them reflect on something that women are not aware that they indeed need. In contrast to mainstream media, that make use of what has been defined as an "arbolic" (or tree-like) system, alternative media make use of rhizomatic or nonlinear and de-centralized systems to spread their content (Bailey, Cammaert, & Carpentier, 2008, p. 29; Gunnarsson Payne, 2012, p. 62). Similarly, the new Chinese feminist movement uses unpredictable and rhizomatic connections to make its political battles. Thus, street performances, WeChat groups, and performances like the one I attended, are all "alternative media forms" that connect feminists, and enhance their political message by borrowing from "mainstream media forms", but applying to them non-hierarchical structures. Moreover, these forms of feminist activism whose purpose is to raise the awareness on everyday life issues for Chinese women, allow the activists to craft for themselves participatory spaces open to everyone who has experimented injustice in their life. There are no specific "requirements" needed to take part in these discussion groups or

activists' performances, only the interest in "making something good for society", as Huiwen told me, when I asked her how she became interested in feminism.

5.3. The "good" advertisement

Apart from "the feminist" advertisement that the young women created together, many of them showed me what they thought were "positive" images of women in ads, and sometimes in the media in general. For instance, Cao Qing, the young feminist who is majoring in Advertising, showed me several commercials that she liked because they portrayed positive images of women. One of these was the famous "Like a girl" commercial, that went viral on the Internet in the second half of 2014 (Nudd, 2015). The commercial shows several girls and women who reflect on the meaning of the phrase "being like a girl", and redefine it as a strength, rather than a weakness. Cao Qing told me that she liked it because its focus is on raising the self-awareness on the strengths of women. She then added:

> Since it's a "public service ad", it doesn't include any commercial reference to the product itself, so its aim is in the power to communicate the message (which was indeed ultimately achieved). This ad also shows that the female image is not only wrongfully perceived by the general audience, but also that this influences women themselves, and allows the persistence of a feeling of not being good enough at what they do.

The positive aspect of this ad is, according to Cao Qing, in its ability to unveil power structures that exist in society, showing women how they can turn their apparent weaknesses into strengths. Thus, what ads have been accused of doing throughout the 20th century: being hidden persuaders of unaware audiences (Packard, 1957) suddenly gets overturned, and the underlying message is that men think that women are weak, but in fact they are not, and advertisements are going to show this novel message to their audiences.

Contrary to many other women, as a student in the field, Cao Qing was extremely aware of the variety of ads that existed across various media, and being a very open and talkative person, she was happy to share her viewpoint and explain how young women in China experience ads' messages. Along the lines of the previous "positive ad", another series of ads that Cao Qing also showed me those for Sofi's women's sanitary napkins. We watched them together, and I asked her why had she selected

those. They seemed to me like the antithesis of "the good ad" in that they supported the idea of the weak woman that the P&G ad that she had previously shown me was trying to condemn. Cao Qing explained:

> The Sofi commercial with the playful rabbit uses soft colors, it shows the green grass, it also uses yellow and purple. The featured girl uses an exquisite makeup, hairstyle as well as a nice clothing style. All this has simply nothing to do with the product itself (the sanitary napkins), but it doesn't matter, because the targeted audience is one that already knows what Sofi is about. This commercial is actually advertising an app for the smartphone, and its purpose is to create a sense of community through the interaction of those who use Sofi's products. If we compare this commercial to that one of 2003, we can see an evolution in its style. Now the products are promoted by idols such as Angelababy, Ariel Lin, and Angela Zhang[3], who have become Sofi's spokespersons. Now, the issue that we should discuss is then: when an ad is broadcast, what kind of image do we want to see, the image that we wish was real, the real image, or a highly commercialized image?

Cao Qing did not specifically admire the ad in itself for the message it conveyed, but she recognized the ability of the advertiser in taking advantage of the popularity of the three actresses and in creating what is, in Cao Qing's words "a sense of community". The importance of the sense of community was also highlighted by another young woman I met towards the end of my fieldwork, Zhu Yin. She was only 18 years old when we first met, and I asked her to look at several images on a popular magazine and to tell me which ones she liked. She chose an ad for Valentino's 2015 Spring-Summer collection (figure 24): "I like this one because it shows the importance of friendship among women, and of being together. When women are together they are stronger, and they can obtain anything they want".

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[3] Angelababy (1989) is a Chinese actress, born in Shanghai but raised in Hong Kong. Ariel Lin (1982) is a Taiwanese actress. Angela Zhang (1982) is a Taiwanese actress and singer. The three are extremely famous in "greater China", and are teenagers' idols.

Figure 24. Valentino, 2015 Spring-Summer collection. Source:
http://ajslifebook.com/valentinio-ss-2015/

The importance of "community" and of "being together" was once again highlighted
by another informant, Ting Ling, who praised the women who appear in a Japanese
TV series called *Mondainoaru Restaurant* ("A Restaurant with Many Problems").
The TV series narrates the story of a group of seven women who have experienced
various kinds of failures in their lives, and then decide to open a restaurant together to
fight against those men who once had made their lives miserable. Ting Ling showed
me the series poster (figure 25).

Figure 25. Mondainoaru Restaurant. Source: http://asianwiki.com/A_Restaurant_With_Many_Problems

She then also added:

> This is very famous in China; we watch it online. I love this series because it shows how women can be powerful if they get together to fight injustice. It shows you that by getting together you are stronger, and you can get anywhere. And I also like their looks, they are not very "feminine", like they have short hair, and have a masculine look. They are different from the beauty standards we normally see on TV.

She showed me the series trailer, to help me understand better what she meant, and I noticed that the producers were specifically targeting a kind of audience like that of my feminist friends. On the screen, after just one second, the words "Sexual harassment" appear, immediately followed by the words "Power harassment". The series is about women who "have lost their place in life" as the screen tells the viewer, and they fight "VS. devious ruthless men", thus "let the fierce, delicious battle between women and men begin!" concludes the trailer[4].

What these ads have in common – possibly sometimes unwittingly, like for the Valentino advertisement – is that they target an audience made of women who do not represent the majority, but who are a strong and powerful minority that needs to be conquered. Instead of trying to push this minority towards mainstream advertising, advertisers move towards this niche, and create specific spaces for them where they can enjoy what makes them feel part of their "community" or "group".

5.4.   "Good" and "effective" advertisements

Advertisers were not doing everything wrong, apparently; at least for the women I was interviewing. However, there was a widespread belief among my informants that what was going on in the advertising industry was not enough. I wanted to understand what advertisers thought about this, and I asked Lin, a young woman who works as a freelance creative for several agencies, if she wanted to share some thoughts with me. She came to the appointment with her boyfriend. They were both 26 years old at the time of the interview. They had started dating when they were university students in Advertising. Lin's boyfriend, Lei, was not working in the industry anymore; he had

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[4] The video is available online at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O2tcy1DmEhA.

found a job in a foreign company, and was working as a consultant for them. We went to a coffee shop, and later to a restaurant to have dinner together because they wanted me to taste some original Shanghainese food.

I asked them what they thought of the advertising industry in general, and of its latest changes and evolution in the Chinese specific context. Lin said that the improvement had been great, in that whilst originally the Chinese advertising industry tended to focus too much on the product, now you could see more "stories" going on in TVC (television commercials). The presence of more intricate plots was obviously something appealing for those who had studied in order to work as creatives, but what kind of stories were they telling? "Who decides the story to tell?" – I asked – and Lin said:

> The client has the power over the whole process. It really depends on how much money the client has. If the firm can afford to have a famous actress (maybe even a foreign one) of course the whole commercial will be more effective, but if the budget is low, then you have to work with what the client gives you: what is his philosophy? What kind of women or men is the client trying to sell to? In general I would say that the client has the last word, so it's the client who decides what story you are telling and to what kind of viewers.

There was a tone of grievance in her voice while she was telling me this. As if the creative was not really allowed to be "creative". I asked both Lin and Lei to tell me more about the relationship between the creative (or the advertising agency in general) and the firm (the "client" for them). Lei repeated the fact already mentioned by his girlfriend that the client always gets the last word on your work, although of course the creative can propose more original stories, based on the research or based on what the client wants, but if the client does not like the final product, then the ad agency has no power whatsoever. During an interview Anqi, who is also a creative, she also had the same ideas about the relationship between client and advertiser: the client wants to have the last word, but lacks the real and deep knowledge of the market, thus obstructing the advertiser's work.

The relationship between advertisers and firms is indeed a thorny one. Halinen (1997) identifies three different possible types of interaction between the ad agency and the client: 1) cooperative; 2) competitive; 3) command (p. 36). The cooperative

interaction entails a mutual research for cooperation, in the pursue of a common interest (p. 37) and is certainly the most desirable type of relationship. The competitive relationship is established when both parties rely on a market-driven orientation, seeking self-interest opportunities rather than cooperation (p.37). Finally, the command relationship implies an imbalanced perception of the forces that the ad agency holds vis-à-vis the client, or vice-versa. Moreover, research has revealed that ad agencies tend to avoid the appraisal of the reasons behind the loss of a client, blaming the client's inefficiency or different marketing strategies, making advertising agencies "insensitive to signals of client dissatisfaction" (Doyle, Jens, & Michell, 1980, p. 23).

During the interview with Bai Ling, she explained how different marketing strategies that are valid in the West may not have the same positive effect in Asia, or in China specifically, this is why the firm is sometimes reluctant to accept innovative or original stories. She made the example of the famous Dove marketing campaign for "real beauty" (figure 26):

> This campaign doesn't work in China because of a difference in Chinese culture. Chinese women all believe that any woman can be a beautiful woman, as long as she takes care of her physical appearance. So the message that Dove wants to convey doesn't work here. Dove wants all women to believe that they are beautiful indeed, but Chinese women have a different idea of beauty: beauty means taking care of your hair, your skin, your physical look. Anyone who does that is beautiful.
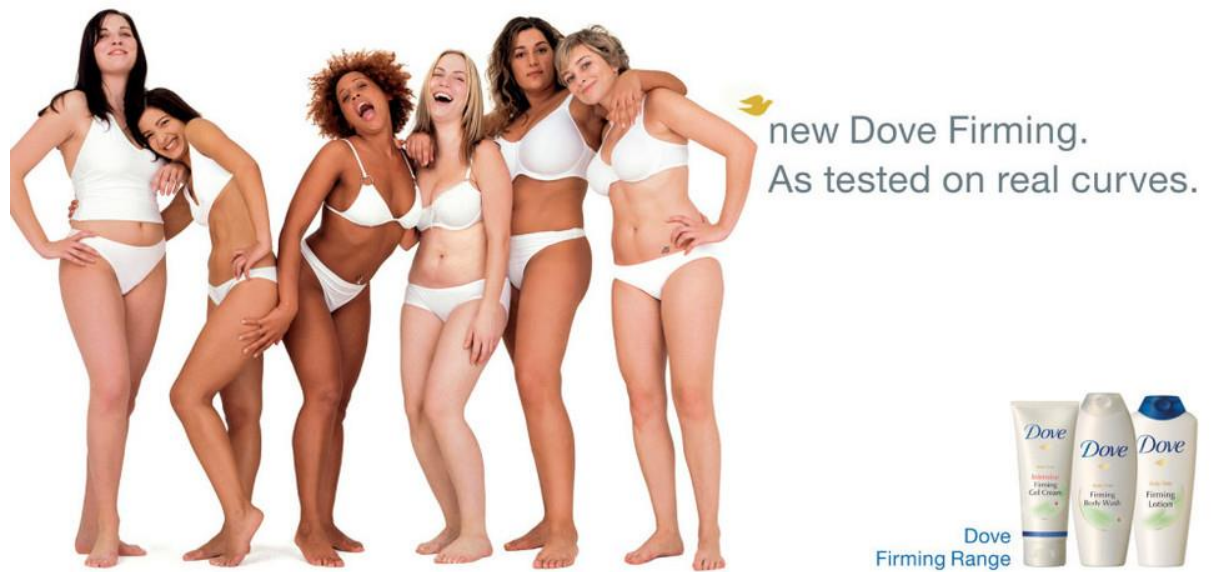
Figure 26. Dove's Real Beauty Campaign ad. Source: http://endormedia.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/dove_real_curves-1024x512.jpg

Bai Ling's could be a possible interpretation of the reasons why initially Dove's famous campaign did not reach out to Chinese women. However, in relation to Dove's Real Beauty campaign, Bush (2009) points out that when the firm was conducting its research in preparation for the campaign, Chinese women consumers always checked the boxes for "fat" or "fat and ugly" when asked their opinions about the "normal" models that Dove's campaign featured. Similarly, Chiu, Ip and Silverman (2012) noted that Dove's Real Beauty campaign was not well received in China when it first appeared because the women portrayed were perceived as "overweight and unattractive" (p. 3). However, in the Chinese context one of the most effective marketing strategies is to adopt a "test-and-learn approach" (p. 3). Thus, after the Real Beauty campaign's initial failure, Dove changed its marketing strategy: it started a partnership with *Ugly Wudi*, the Chinese version of *Ugly Betty*, intertwining the Real Beauty message with the already popular TV series. This strategy resulted in a big success, allowing Dove to grow by 21% in the Chinese market during the following year (p. 3).

Although the women I was chatting were interested in feminism, and thus are not representative of "Chinese young urban women" as a whole category, they showed original thought, creativity, and communication abilities that I could not perceive in the advertisers, or that probably the creatives were not "allowed" to portray.

Advertisers insisted on the idea that a "good advertisement" would not be an "effective advertisement", and that it would be a risk to invest in campaigns such as the P&G and Dove's, at least in the Chinese context. The feminists I interviewed felt instead the need to see advertisements that helped the general audience to overcome stereotypes and prejudices. During their performance, the small group of feminists who enacted what I defined above as a "feminist commercial" specifically told me that ads have the power to influence people, and if this influence is used well, it could change the way we perceive women, men, and gender relations in general.

Advertising agencies and their clients are not interested in changing society, but in utilizing already embedded images and stereotypes to sell their products. This is why Cao Qing, when describing P&G's commercial called it a "public service advertisement" (*gongyi guanggao* 公益广告) whose purpose was not to sell, but to create a brand image that appropriates feminist ideals. Johnston and Taylor (2008) have discussed this peculiar marketing strategy, defining it as "corporate appropriation of social movements" (p. 943). They compare Dove's Real Beauty campaign with the actions of a fat-feminist activist group called "Pretty, Porky, and Pissed Off" (p. 941). Both Dove and PPPO challenged beauty ideals through their actions, but whilst Dove used a market oriented approach (that ultimately aims at making profit), PPPO members utilized street protests and public space actions to voice their discontent. Moreover, Dove's campaign aims at creating a feminist consumer by showing the potential of each woman, but its strategy is problematic because it avoids addressing the inequalities that women face in terms of race, class, religion and so on (p. 960). Similarly, while during our discussion meetings, the informants and I addressed issues in the visual portrayals of females in ads looking for counter-hegemonic ways of portraying the young, modern and Chinese woman; P&G and Dove's appropriation of feminist discourses does not – despite its efforts – ultimately challenge hegemonic ideals of beauty, nor of the feminine image in general, because it simply shows "normal" women happy of being "normal", without engaging with the psychological anxieties caused by the hegemonic beauty ideal proposed by mainstream media outlets.

5.5. "Corporatist feminism" and "commodified dissent"

These women are young, they live in a big and cosmopolitan city such as Shanghai, and they are feminists. This last aspect of their identity exists despite the large number of influences that come from the media, the establishment, and from their family members or friends who share the idea that being a feminist is "dangerous", "wrong", "bad", "it means to hate men", "will put you in trouble" or other phrases and adjectives that I collected during the time I spent in Shanghai. Their feminist identity is then rounded off and they come to terms with these opposing influences. In other words, this young cohort of feminists is made of a group of privileged women who have "time, space, money and intellectual energies to risk potential displeasure of their peers, parents and teachers" (Edwards, 2008, p. 207).

At the same time, however, the media, the establishment, the ACWF and so on, have to come to terms with them, because they represent growing minority of Chinese urban women. Coming to terms, for both advertisers and feminists, does not mean to renounce their core ideas, which – put simply – for the ad industry are to make profits and to sell goods on behalf of their clients, and for feminists are to advocate for gender equality and equal treatment for men and women. The product of this process that forces feminists and advertisers to come to terms with one another, is what I define as "corporatist feminism" for advertisers, and "commodified dissent" for feminists. The first definition is borrowed from the above mentioned work of Johnston and Taylor (2008) and the second one is borrowed from Frank and Weiland (1997).

When discussing the feminist identity of young urban Chinese women, it should be noted that the impact of consumer culture is nowadays greater than the impact of feminist theories, therefore their identity as feminists is infused with and filtered through consumer culture, and their self is ultimately constructed not only against consumer culture, but also through it (Rice, 2014). As Edwards (2008) points out, the economic reforms prompted a wealth growth in China, and although they did not create a "USA-style political system" (p. 201), they did change the relationship between the society and the state (Edwards, 2008; Saich, 2000). The growth of an individualistic society that is no longer perceived as dangerous or "bourgeois" in a negative way, has allowed urban and well-educated Chinese women to co-opt the term "feminist" and to use it as a non-conformity label (Edwards, 2008, p. 211) rather

than an ideological one. The commodification of these young feminists' dissent stems from the total integration of consumer culture components into Chinese women's everyday life. As Mayfair Yang (1999) states "makeup, clothing, and fashion industries have become crucial components of the Chinese economy, and integral to the media and consumer industries" (p. 49). Therefore, their dissent is commodified in the sense that "feminism" becomes a framework that provides women with a set of tools that they use to give form to their dissent. This form can take the shape of actions, such as those portrayed in the postcards, or of discussion groups during which their identity is further reinforced. Ultimately, "feminism" is a label that shares commonalities with a brand. This brand, however, is not passively received by them, but constructed through constant negotiations: when Ma Yin refuses to take part in collective demonstrations, she is selecting her own way of being a feminist, and constructing her feminist identity not by means of loyalty to an ideology, but through her personal choice of what her idea of feminism is, and her agency can then be read as the product of the process of individualization of Chinese society. Contrary to the former state-feminist discourse that implied handing down to women their deserved equality, the "feminist awakening" (Yang, 1999, p. 63) has produced gendered perspectives that stem from women's "own lived experiences" (p. 63).

As Vanderbilt (1997) points out in reference to the American consumer culture's long history, we "identify our place in society through advertising" (p. 133). This means that advertising and our identity constantly interact and borrow from each other pieces that allow us to think of ourselves as "feminists", "women", "Shanghainese" and so on. Thus, the advertising industry takes advantage of feminists' form of dissent, and supplies identity images that match feminists' need and longing for a consumer culture of their own. In other words, advertisers push towards a liberal feminist discourse where "liberation [can be achieved] through self-indulgence" (Douglas, 1995, p. 250). This is how brands such as Dove and P&G find a space into feminists' choices as consumers, and represent examples of "corporatist feminism". As Talbot (2000b) observes, advertising is a "male enclave, but it knows about feminism" (p. 187). Consumer research has included gender behavior in its agenda (Stern & Holbrook, 1994), and as a consequence feminism can also be considered as a "pattern of consumption" (p. 187).

5.6. Summary

In this chapter I explored the intricate link between feminist activism and advertising among young Chinese feminists. While this complicated relationship has been perceived by scholars – with few exceptions – as an impossible one, my findings reveal that there are commonalities in the ways activists and advertisers communicate their messages, although the basic reasons that guide this communication, as well as the eventual outcomes, are often in collision, despite the similarities.

To sum up my argument, feminist activism can take three different paths. It can be against advertising; it can borrow communication features from advertising; and it can be completely infused with consumer culture. The first case is exemplified by the scholarly literature's standpoint: fierce attacks against advertising, which is generally perceived as negative, harmful, and demeaning. The second case can be exemplified by the young feminists' performance of a "feminist advertisement" described above, where the women selected to advertise the need for Chinese women to buy condoms, and used advertisers' strategies to convey their message. Finally, the third case is represented by what I define as "commodified dissent". This can take the form of specific consumer choices that stem from the belief that they represent the feminist dissent. For instance, when Ting Ling decides to watch the Japanese TV series *Mondainoaru Restaurant*, she is making a specific feminist choice through which she wants to express her dissent, and be labelled as a feminist. This is a part of that process that I named "becoming a feminist", where part of her identity is constructed through consumer culture.

However, also advertisement can take three different directions. They can completely overlook feminist discourses and rely on traditionally used demeaning images of women; they can borrow from feminist discourses; and they can use what I defined as "corporatist feminist" discourses. The examples for the first case are ubiquitous, and not only in the Chinese media. As for the second case, the examples can be found in what scholars have defined as "post-feminist" images, and can be exemplified in the Sofi or Valentino advertisements mentioned above. Finally, an example for the third type is in the Dove's campaign for real beauty, where brand loyalty is sought through the appropriation of feminist discourses.

6. Dialogic analyses of advertisements

In the Introduction, I already mentioned that the initial aim of my ethnography was not to specifically study how feminists interpreted the female image in ads. With this initial aim in mind, I began collecting data by meeting women through my personal connections in the city. I started collecting these comments that I was receiving on the female image in ads, and these were generally positive, since women were not only generally content with the female stereotyping, but they also showed their ambitions to resemble those stereotypes. For instance, during one of these exchanges, a woman showed me an advertisement for the famous French brand Chanel (fig. 27), and explained the reasons why she had chosen it.
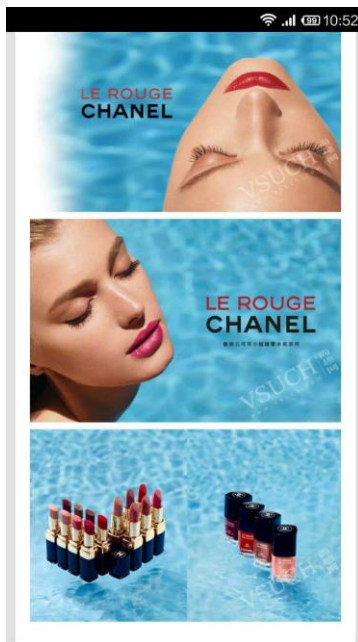
Figure 27. Chanel ad

She said:

> This ad is from 2 years ago. In China, the TV commercial only showed the last part, when the woman comes out from the water, it's really amazing. It makes me feel that if I go to the swimming pool I should definitely wear this lipstick, it's beautiful.

She also commented on the importance of this brand for Chinese women:

> Many Chinese women like Chanel, because Chanel's ads are not only beautiful, but they are also very

targeted, they're about modern women who want to feel different. For instance, the Chanel ad that I like [she is referring here to another commercial she had shown me, also for Chanel] is a story that naturally makes me feel all the glamour [of this brand]. The ad wants to fascinate people, so that the women will buy it. There's another Chanel's perfume ad that also all my girlfriends like, because it makes them feel glamorous. They all want to feel like that.

When my focus later shifted towards feminists' interpretation of ads, I started receiving different kinds of comments on specific ads, and another way of interpreting their meanings and their influence on women. When I showed to Yin this image, and told her what this other woman had thought about it, she said: "many women in China believe what these ads tell them, and they want to be like these women". I asked her whether she wanted to be like any woman in the ads she had chosen to show me and she said: "I don't want to be like anyone. I just want to be myself, and I want people to respect this". The insistence on being proud of their identity both as feminists, and as women – who do not need to change anything in their looks or behaviors – was also pointed out in many exchanges that went beyond the analyses of ads. For instance, after the first workshop with the university students, I sat outside with them talking about each other. They insisted on the importance of acting as one pleases, and how this appears as disruptive of Chinese traditional behavior expected by others around them. Ma Yin told me:

My Mom says that I'm not feminine enough, but I don't care about being girly. She wants me to dress more 'as a girl', but I prefer to dress like this. She says I look like a tomboy, and she says that being a tomboy is even worse than being a lesbian. She wouldn't mind if I was lesbian, as long as I don't look like a boy.

During the interviews that I conducted with them, I asked them to analyze the female image in several magazine advertisements in order to understand what they actually thought of how women are portrayed in ads. By looking at the images in a different, and more attentive way than usually, they were able to decode the advertiser's intentions, and to see ads from a different perspective. This practice allowed them to build a critical eye towards the images that they are constantly bombarded with, and at the same time allowed them to reflect on what it means to look at the images "as a

feminist". By giving voice to their own readings, my ultimate intention was to avoid giving overinterpretations. As Hobart (1996, p. 8) put it:

> Interpretation in anthropology is the trivial business of textualizing and placing our interpretations upon other people's practices. Instead I am concerned with analyzing how other people explained and talked about the practices in which they were engaged in terms of their own presuppositions.

Berger (2011) identifies six different ways in which the same advertisement can be analyzed. These include: the semiotic analysis, the psychoanalytic theory analysis, the sociological analysis; the historical analysis; the political analysis; and the myth/ritual analysis (pp. 154-155). Other authors (Bauer, 2000; Gill, 2000; Leach, 2000) focus instead on the relevance and validity of different analytical approaches when analyzing text and images, such as the "classical content analysis" (Bauer, 2000, p. 131), or discourse analysis, that was prompted by a "turn to language" (Gill, 2000, p. 172) across various disciplines.

The women who analyzed the advertisements with me used a mix of all these frameworks and methods, freely borrowing from any approach that would have allowed them to express their thoughts. None of these methods were explained by me, nor prompted by my questions, and thus they were used without a specific awareness or knowledge of methodological approaches.

As Jensen (2002) points out, prior to the origins of what can be called media research, the analyses of communication and its effects were dominated by rhetorical and aesthetic traditions: "from Aristotle's rhetoric, via Kantian aesthetics and nineteenth century hermeneutics, to semiotics – all of which continue to inform contemporary communication theory" (p. 157). Qualitative inquiries into media research have been generally based on "decodings" (p.162), that is, on how the message and its meaning(s) are understood and shared by the recipients. In his study of how British audiences decode television programs' meanings, Morley (1992) used an ethnographic and focus group methodological approach that allowed his informants to provide a reading of the images they were shown. Yet, the ultimate analysis of the reasons behind the thoughts and their processes was made by Morley himself. What he did therefore, was to provide an analysis of their analysis, rather than allowing approaches where informants and researcher are positioned at the same level of

understanding and decoding. As Morley himself points out: "[w]e are telling stories about the stories which our respondents have chosen to tell us" (p. 173). This issue has been a long lasting one for anthropologists (Geertz, 1994; Hobart, 1996) and Morley (1992) believes that a solution is to be found in Geertz's "thick" ethnographies, that he defines as "descriptions of inherently dubious data" (p. 173). Given that all the data collected is then inherently dubious, and its validity is at the very least partial (Clifford, 1986), the approach that I utilize is aimed at seeking a collaboration between informant and researcher, not for the sake of "truth", but rather to *represent* the informants' thoughts, rather than merely *interpreting* them. Hobart (1996) points out that traditional ethnography was an act of description about a culture defined as "other". These accounts were, however, monologic, in that they "privileged the authoritative voice of the ethnographer and silenced the polyvocal reality of social life" (p. 3). Hobart proposes instead a framework based on *practice*, understood as "certain recognized means of acting upon the world and upon humans for the purpose of producing a definite outcome" (p. 6). Thus, by looking at the practices of young Chinese feminists within their communities, I propose a framework that engages in dialogic exchanges with them to build the analyses of the ads that we looked at.

Ien Ang (1991) argues that using ethnography to conduct audience studies is neither a qualitative nor a quantitative methodology, because the occurrence of situations in which we find ourselves being audiences cannot be defined within closed and bounded moments of our everyday lives, but rather as a "proliferating chain of situations" (p. 135). Thus, the participant observation should be conducted by analyzing the situation in which the participant is the recipient of the message. When we see an advertisement on the subway on our way to the office or to school, this particular situation positions us as a specific kind of recipient who will receive and interpret the ad in a given way that is (also) caused by this situation. In other words, the act of being a recipient is embedded in everyday life duties and moments, that should be taken into account as factors influencing how the message is received. This is why asking the informant his or her opinion on an advertisement is not enough: one should watch and read ads with them.

The relevance of ethnographic media research is not only in the importance placed in the recipients, but also in inquiring into their role as agents: they are not just "subjects

of other's knowledge" (Hobart, 2001, p. 5) but they use their practices to reflect upon their own lives, thus building their identity as feminists and feeling part of a community based on practice.

In this chapter, I first begin by explaining how their identity is built based on their belonging to a community of practice. I then continue by proposing new "categories" of females in ads based on the informants' own perceptions, opening to a reframing of old categories available in the current literature. I then narrate a selection of ads' analyses conducted in collaboration with my informants. These images were selected directly by the informants while browsing magazines available at any coffee shop, or that I had previously bought with them at convenience stores in Shanghai. Finally, I inquire into how the different influences of consumer culture on the one hand, and of feminism on the other hand, all participate in the creation of a new Chinese feminist identity that I define as "nomadic" in the sense that it is articulated through different and constantly changing positions, that all contribute to its building.

6.1. Identity and communities of practice

Francesca: What do you look at when you look at an ad?
Xu Ling: I look at how the woman is dressed.
Xiao Feng: I look at her hair and makeup. And also at the music if it's a commercial.
Ting Ling: I try to guess what the [advertised] product is.

I always began with this question my interviews with all the informants. They gave several answers, but the ones quoted above summarize the main and more relevant parts of the advertisement – or of the women in the advertisement – that grabs their attention, and push them to keep watching. The phases that they go through when they are shown an advertisement generally include: 1) looking at elements that reflected culturally relevant beauty ideals; 2) trying to understand the product that wants to be advertised through the images; 3) trying to understand if there is an intertextual reference in the images or if the text can be analyzed from another perspective. The latter phase does not occur every time they see an advertisement, but only when they find it particularly interesting or worthy of further attention.

Taking these phases as a starting point to choose which ads to analyze, I generally showed them ads that we had bought together at convenience stores, or that we found in the coffee shops where we were meeting. During the preparation of the workshops,

I had to buy several magazines, but because of the huge amount of ads included in these magazines, I also had hundreds of pictures to use – and sometimes re-use – with my informants. The magazines we bought included: Cosmopolitan, Bazaar, Elle, Vogue, and Marie Claire, all in their Chinese versions, and the Chinese magazine Yueji (Self). The reason for the prevalence of English version of foreign magazines was mainly due to the personal preference of the women who bought the magazines with me, probably due to the abundance of ads in these international magazines when compared to other Asian ones. The advertisements were all the same across the different magazines, providing numerous repetitions that I was able to use during different interviews. The informants then selected the images that they wished to analyze, and started making comments. I replied to these comments with my point of view, and we constructed together an interpretation of the advertisement, based on their ideas and on our exchange. I also asked the informants during the focus group discussions and during the individual interviews to group the images together based on common thematic features. Based on the categories that they created I then identified three thematic clusters: beauty ideals, power/strength, and the objectification of women, which group together several "sub-themes" that they identified.

The aim of this chapter is to look at the analyses of advertisements conducted by Chinese feminists in order to understand how their identity as feminists emerges within their communities of practice. I borrow this term from Wenger (1998) who looks at how identity is built within a community by negotiating the meanings that our membership to this specific community entails. Identity is, for Wenger, a "pivot between the social and the individual, so that each can be talked about in terms of the other" (p. 145). Therefore, the idea of feminists who analyze ads within their "communities of practice" is useful to understand how they as individuals build and enhance their "feminist identity" by reading advertisements according to their membership to this community. Advertisements become here a way to assess how Chinese feminists evaluate their position in life.

By framing the young activists as members of a community of practice, I also want to highlight the learning process implied in their membership, which is also at the core of Wenger's theoretical framework. Put simple, I argue that in order to obtain their membership to the community of feminists, they need to undergo learning processes

that arise from their way of interpreting advertisements. This learning process is the product of dialogic exchanges with their peers and with others, in occasions during which clashes, contradictions, doubts and questions allow their identity to emerge.

Reader-response theories question the idea that media meanings are not simply passed on from the producer to the viewer, and scholars in this discipline argue instead that a meaning is always negotiated and constructed through an interactive process with the text (Aitken, Gray, & Robert, 2008; Ang, 1985; McQuarrie & Mick, 1999; Radway, 1988; Scott, 1994a, 1994b). Furthermore, this negotiation depends also on mutual engagement and shared repertoires that allow them to feel part of a community positioned within a broader social reality (Wenger, 1998). Their membership to a community that has traditionally been hostile to advertising, positions them as antagonists to the messages proposed by the ad industry. Thus, their readings are "oppositional" in relation to the advertisers' intended message. The idea of "oppositional codes" had already been introduced by Stuart Hall (1980) in an essay where he criticizes the linear structural process embedded in the acts of encoding and decoding media messages. Codes can be decoded in three ways according to Hall. 1) From a dominant and hegemonic position; 2) From a negotiated position; 3) As an oppositional code (pp. 136-138). An oppositional code is, for Hall, "one of the most significant political moments […] when events which are normally signified and decoded in a negotiated way begin to be given an oppositional reading" (p. 138). This way of looking at audiences does not challenge the assumption that the media message could be persuasive for the receiver, but introduces the concept that a simple behavioral analysis of stimulus-response is not enough to explain the reasons of the effects of a media message on the recipient: also social, cultural and political circumstances should be taken into account (Aitken et al., 2008).

The feminists whom I interviewed provided interpretations of ads that began as negotiated decodings and became, through the analytical process, oppositional decodings. This process was due to their willingness to show their ability to understand the encoders' hegemonic message, while also being able to overturn it and read it in the larger oppositional debate of "the media" vs. "women".

As Hobart (2001) argues, too often the subjects of academic accounts are constructions made by élites (political, economic, academic and so on) that give for

granted the inability of people, when seen as masses, to reflect critically "on the conditions under which they live"(p. 4). However, the women's engagements with media practices are indeed subtle, sophisticated and worthy of attention. This way of engaging with audience research in dialogic ways is based on the assumption that the "intellectual practices of academics, market researchers and the people being studied necessarily overlap, engage with and affect one another" (Hobart, 2001, p. 5). For this reason, my voice engages with that of the women interviewed, asking questions, clarifications, and explaining things unknown to them when necessary. This process of mutual learning is what builds and fortifies their identity through the activity of reading the ads.

6.2.   From category identification to cluster individuation

When conducting the workshops, I gave to the participants all the images that I had gathered for the workshop activities (over 300). I divided them into small groups of two or three people each, and asked them to group together images that had something in common. I gave them complete freedom to identify common features among the images, because I was interested in seeing not only to which aspects they would give more importance (physical features, style, advertised product), but also how they negotiated together which images to include in each group. This allowed me to inquire not only into how they perceive ads, but also into which role their position as feminists plays when negotiating meanings among their peers.

The existing literature on female portrayals in the Chinese advertising industry already contains several image categorizations, as already mentioned in section 2.4. For instance, Hooper (1998) inquires into the entwinement between Confucian traditions and the female image as "flower vase" or "housewife" (p. 167). Furthermore, Hung and Li (2006) identify through a content analysis four categories: the nurturer, the strong woman, the urban sophisticate, and the already mentioned flower vase. Although these categories arise from the researchers' careful observations and analyses, my intent here is to move beyond a researcher-based analysis, and include the women's own perceptions. Therefore, the women I interviewed identified several categories that are worth mentioning, in order to include their often neglected points of view in the process of analysis. For instance, they identified several categories that are related to beauty: young and fresh teenage

girls (age-related images); traditional East-Asian beauty (beauty related to ethnicity). Other categories referred instead to difference and alternative ways of life: untraditional, Western-style. Finally, other categories, such as "sexy" or "too sexy", referred to an objectification of the female body for the purpose of the male's gaze. Figures 28-33 include some examples of the groups they identified during the first workshop.

Figure 28. Wild and modern & Sexy

Figure 29. Teenage girls, young and fresh

Figure 30. Oriental beauty

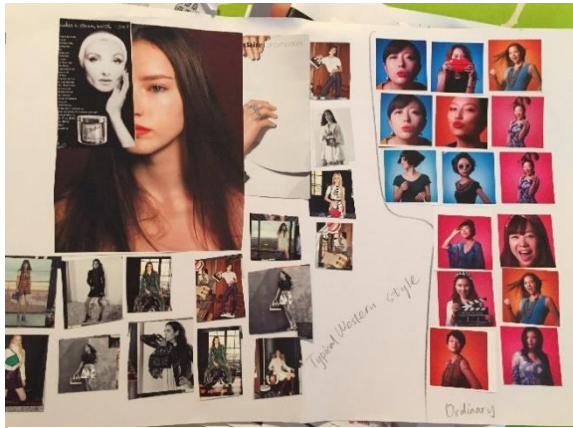*Figure 31. Traditional East Asian beauty*

Figure 32. Traditional Western style

Figure 33. Untraditional

We then discussed together which meanings they attributed to the categories, and why they had decided to group them in such way. This helped me to clarify and identify the thematic clusters in which their categories can be grouped. During our individual interviews we then inquired into the meaning of specific advertisements, and constructed ads' analysis in greater detail.

6.3.   Communal practices of a community of practice

The groups I joined (the university group and the women's discussion group at the Nüshu Kongjian) pre-existed my arrival, meaning that the women periodically gather together to discuss women's roles and problems in society. For instance, as already mentioned in Chapter 3, at the Nüshu Kongjian, the women invite scholars and activists to discuss issues such as "the leftover women", or they organize events such as the "writing classes" (*xiezuo ban – shuochu ni de gushi*) in which they are invited to write and tell their personal involvement as women in society. Quoting Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929), they argue that women need spaces of their

own in order to write about their experiences as women, and the Nushu kongjian represents this safe place where they can experience exchanges among other women.

Similarly, the feminists who gather in the university, also share the need to create spaces of their own where they can truly and freely talk about their experiences as women in society, and the difficulties that they experience. They usually organize these meetings through WeChat groups, and they gather approximately once a week. The topics of these discussions include personal stories, and how these relate to everyday issues for women. For instance, Xu Ling told me that she discussed with her friends her own awareness on the double standard that males and females receive in school. When she was a child, she was constantly told by her teachers that boys were smarter than girls, and even though this was not explicitly said as such, the examples she gave were quite clear:

> Whenever they did something good, they were always praised as if they were the smartest kids on earth. Whenever a girl did something good, she didn't receive any kind words. It was as if they deserved those words, and we didn't.

When she told her friends about this, they all had similar experiences to tell each other. Through these personal exchanges, that often arise from painful experiences, they learn how to see injustice towards women, and they acquire better tools to resist against these. In this sense, therefore, they fit into Wenger et al.'s (2002) definition of a "community of practice" as a "[g]roup of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, p. 4).

The categories that the women identified together were the product of debates and discussions within their groups and also among different groups. For organizational purposes related to my workshops, I set up several "games" during which they were divided in different groups of 2-3 people (with 2-3 groups in total). The images I gave them, however, all came from one "batch" of pictures that I had been collecting over the months from other informants and from the magazines I had been working with. Therefore, whenever they picked a picture from within this big bulk, they quickly glanced at it and analyzed whether it was appropriate for the categories they had identified, or whether it would have instead been more appropriate in a category identified by another group, or even whether it would have been better to create a new

category. They discussed together and decided where to include each picture. Moreover, they also discussed the names that they assigned to each category. It is interesting to note that they always discussed in Chinese, but the names they assigned to the categories were always in English, probably because they thought this would have helped me with my later analyses.

These debates and discussions are at the core of their feminist practices, and are those features that make their groups discussions the discussions of a community of practice. In their debates about the roles of advertising in their lives, they used the images to discuss broader issues about how women are treated in society, and what they can do to change this. They not only discussed images that they disliked, but also images that they liked, and people that they respect.

For instance, some of them showed me images of women (politicians, businesswomen) who had had a positive effect on them, because they saw them as respectable and serious (e.g. figures 34 and 35).

Figure 34. Liuqi showing female models she likes

Figure 35. Mei Ling showing a female model she appreciates

When they discussed both positive and negative images during the group discussions, they engaged in debates together, talking about their choices and explaining why they agreed or disagreed with each other. For instance, figure 34 shows Mei Ling explaining to all of us why she thought that the businesswoman portrayed in the picture is a positive example for her. Upon her speech, other women reacted saying that being rich and successful does not necessarily mean that one is a positive example for other women. Through this debate, they came to understand each other's position and thoughts, and they negotiated meanings (or "being a successful woman", "being a feminist"), and by so doing they decoded and interpreted not only the ads' meanings but also the meanings of the feminist identity.

These discussions represent a practical way of "doing feminism" for these women, and an empirical phase through which they put in practice theories that they have read or learned in school, or heard from other friends. Therefore, it is crucial in their personal development as feminists, because they represent a "training" phase in which they undergo transformations passing from theory to practice.

6.4.   Beauty ideals

During the interview with Xiao Feng, a 22-year-old Shanghai native student in Political Science, I asked her if she wanted to analyze some ads with me. She agreed to give me her opinions and we started by looking at a set of pictures to choose from.

> Francesca: Choose the ones that you think are more interesting.
>
> Xiao Feng (while browsing the images): Ok, but I'm not sure if I can say many things about these pictures.
>
> F: Don't worry, we can look at them together, and try to figure out what they mean, besides the actual product that they want us to buy, of course. What we need to understand is if there is something that advertisers use to push us to buy the product. For example: the colors, the setting, the object, anything that you think means something.
>
> XF: Ok, let's try. Seems exiting, like trying to see if they are deceiving us.

Xiao Feng picked a few close-ups: two blonde Western women, and two Asian women. Each was an example of a stereotyped beauty ideal valid across cultures. She started analyzing the image portraying one of the two blonde women (figure 36) and said:

Figure 36. Blonde beauty

> XF: This is an example of a very beautiful woman: her skin is perfectly white, her eyes are blue, and she looks like an angel. Maybe they want us to think that she is an angel, because you can see the feathers around her neck, they're like an angel's wings. She is very serious, and looks straight into the camera, but if you look at her eyes and stare at her for a while it looks like she wants to cry. She is sad. Why would they put a sad woman to advertise their product?
>
> F: Yes, I hadn't noticed the fact that her eyes are shining so much that it looks like if she is about to cry. What do you think about the colors?
>
> XF: I think the colors are very bright and luminous, I think this is because they want us to think that she is an angel, but a very sad one (laughs).
>
> F: Do you like her?

XF: She is beautiful, but I don't want to be like her, because I don't care about being beautiful, I just want to be myself, I like the way I am.
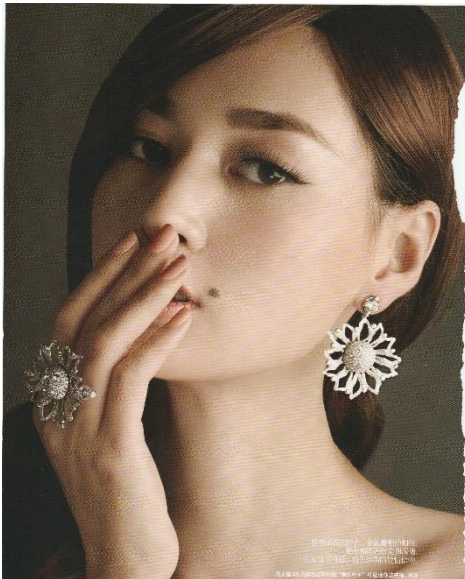
F: I think they want to show us an ideal of beauty, but one that nobody can reach. The fact that she is so serious might also mean they want us to believe that she is a sort of goddess, or an angel, like you said, but she makes me feel bad because I'm not as pretty as she is.

XF: Maybe that's because you are a foreigner, so you can identify with her more than me. I don't think this image makes a Chinese woman feel bad, because a Chinese woman doesn't want to look like a foreigner (laughs).

Figure 37. Chow Tai Fook's "Chinese beauty"

Chinese women just want to be beautiful their way. Of course I think that she is beautiful, but I don't care about being like her.

F: That's true, but advertisers want to make us feel like we will never be like the women in the images, because if we think we can, then there is no reason to buy the thing they are showing us.

Applying Hall's (1980) framework to Xiao Feng's analysis, it can be argued that the hegemonic or dominant message that the advertiser shows us is the ideal of (Western) beauty. On a second level, Xiao Feng was able to negotiate this meaning: she knows the advertiser's intentions, but she challenges the dominant discourse on beauty by virtue of her ability to understand it. Finally, on the third level, she overturns the message by disliking the image because it shows idealistic and unreachable images of beauty unattainable by any woman. Eventually, the image of a beautiful woman becomes an "ugly" image because it could cause damage to the self-esteem of other female viewers.

Xiao Feng made a different case for the image showing an Asian woman. This image provided more elements of analysis, as well as a written text in the lower part of the picture that read "The union of love and diamonds, symbol of mutual dependence, joyful and deep affection for mutual protection and joy, has brought an indestructible

and timeless love token. 85th anniversary of Chow Tai Fook, special edition diamond 'the guardian of love'. Red carpet model wearing ring and earrings" (figure 37).

XF: This woman is also very beautiful, but you can notice a big difference with the blonde and foreign woman. She is Asian, and you can see that she is beautiful but in a different way…I don't know how to explain, but her hand covers her mouth, and she is not facing directly the camera, her head is slightly turned, but she looks straight into your eyes. She is more expressive than the foreign woman I think, more sensual also. This is sexier, but also more Chinese.

F: Why do you think the hand over the mouth is a "Chinese gesture"?

XF: Maybe it's just to show the ring (laughs). I think that if a woman covers her mouth she wants to cover one of the sexy parts of her body, but because she is covering the mouth, then this is also more sexy, because you can only imagine how the mouth is. Also I think that her hands are beautiful, so it's a way to show another part of the body that is very sexy.

F: What about the mole?

XF: Oh, I don't like that one! Is very big and very visible. But even if she has this imperfection on her face, you can still say she is beautiful.

F: And what about the advertised product?

XF: This is an ad for a jewelry brand. I think that it's maybe for middle age women, because I think the earring and the ring are very big, and also very expensive, so only older women can have these.

F: Do you think this ad is to push women to buy the diamond jewels?

XF: I think this is for women to ask their boyfriends or husbands to buy the jewels. It says that these diamonds are for the exchange of deep love, so I think that the advertisement is for the men, not for the women! And also she is very sexy, so the man would stop and look at the picture.

F: I agree with you. Besides, I think that these jewels are not the typical gift that a man would give to her fiancé as engagement presents. They are just a gift for a special occasion, but not engagement rings. Who would buy such expensive jewels on an ordinary occasion? Only extremely rich people, so this ad I think is really directed at very rich Chinese men or women who want to show off their wealth.

XF: Many people in China now are very rich, they can afford to buy even very expensive jewels. But I wouldn't want men to buy something like this for me: it's just to show off, like you said. I think that when I

have a boyfriend and he gives me an engagement ring, if it's this ring I would say "no!" (laughs).

F: What do you think about the colors? You chose two very different pictures: one is very bright, but this one is quite dark.

XF: Yes, the colors here are darker, but I think this is to show the glowing diamonds, to make a contrast. I think the previous advertisement was for a skin product, so it needed to show very shiny and bright skin. This one is for the diamond, so it can use the contrast of the dark surrounding to make the diamonds shine more. But I think that the advertisers' decision to use a Chinese model in this ad is "better", because the Chinese woman who looks at her can identify with her, and in the other picture the foreign model is better because they have lighter skin, so it's better to use a foreigner to make the image more authentic.

By stating that the hand covering the mouth plays a sexual role, Xiao Feng was able to put in practice an extra-textual ability to identify generic conventions and underlying moral codes (Zhou & Belk, 2004, p. 66) of the genre of ads, as well as those moral codes that are embedded in other genres, but that are appropriated by advertisers. The implied comparison between the "foreign woman" and the Asian woman was also read according to Chinese conventional ideas of beauty (e.g. the woman's bright skin seen as a beauty marker). Furthermore, although the advertisement promotes a special edition of jewels that identifies the diamond as "the guardian of love", it should be noted that the woman is wearing the ring in her right hand, and in the middle finger, thus, as I mentioned also during the interview with Xiao Feng, this ad is probably for already married couples. Also other cues allow the viewer to understand that the woman is not wearing engagement jewelry (its shape and size are not those generally used for engagement rings, she is also wearing an earring whose shape is the same as the ring's) yet the image is targeting a male audience. This was clear to Xiao Feng because she saw a sexual reference in the hand covering the mouth, and because of the text that clearly states the link between diamonds and love.

Xiao Feng's idea of beauty reflects Chinese ancient beauty ideals that are still valid today. She praised the blonde woman's pale skin, and she appraised the elegant gesture of the Asian woman as an inexplicable element that conveyed her beauty ("I don't know how to explain..."). As Frith, Shaw and Cheng (2005) argue, despite the

influence of globalization and the general tendency toward standardized advertising campaigns, in what they call "Confucian cultures" (p. 1) women are still expected to be portrayed according to traditional cultural norms. For this reason, undressed models or women in excessively sexy poses are deemed not appropriate for Asian women, and are often played by Caucasians, despite a growth in nudity ads portraying Asian women (Huang & Lowry, 2012).

When I interviewed Cao Qing and asked her to choose among several images those that she wanted to analyze, she also selected an image advertising jewels. The Tiffany advertisement (figure 38) offered many interesting elements to analyze:

Francesca: What's going on in the scene?
Cao Qing: The couple just got married. I can tell because she is wearing a wedding dress and he's wearing the tuxedo. The picture was taken in the place where they are celebrating: you see the wine bottle here [pointing at the lower right hand side corner in the photo]. This is an intimate moment between this couple. They are having fun, maybe they are drunk, and he is holding her flowers with the left hand and holds her waist with the right hand. She has her wrist on her shoulder. They are on a nice terrace with many skyscrapers around, so it's a big city. Maybe New York?
F: Nice, you noticed many things.
CQ: Yes, I think that the advertisers want to show that with Tiffany jewelry you can have a classy, posh wedding. They are not only wearing a wedding ring, but she is also wearing other jewelry: a bracelet and earrings. I also think the photo is in black and white because it's more romantic. I think that there is this whole idea of romanticism that they want you to believe in: a wedding must be romantic. I don't think that a wedding should be romantic if you don't want it to be romantic. It can also be simple and be nice as well.

Figure 38. Tiffany couple

F: I agree that they want to show ideas of romantic love, but I also think that this wedding is rather simple: her dress and her jewelry are not excessive, I think they

want to show a classy as well as simple wedding and couple.

CQ: I also think that this is very different from a Chinese traditional wedding, but this ad wants us to think that we should also get married like foreign couples. Now everyone wants to get married in a white gown, it has become the new norm. The media are setting a new standard of how a woman should be like: in the kitchen, during her wedding, at work…Advertising is powerful because it can change the way you think of yourself and of the important things in your life: your marriage, your family relationships, your spare time.

F: Do you mean that women now have different moral values in China because of ads?

CQ: I think that the most important values are still the same: your parents want you to get married, you want to finish your studies, get a good job, get a husband, have children and stuff like that, but the ways in which we are now "required" to do it are slightly different from the past. I don't mean that the past was easier, because economic development always brings positive things, but I mean that these influences have changed the way we think of ourselves in terms of beauty for example. Like the image we saw before [the ad for the soy sauce mentioned in the previous chapter] you can see that they create stereotypes that must be followed: a woman with short hair is a business woman, a woman with long hair is sexy. This is what I don't like: they tell you how to look like if you want to be someone: then you are influenced by this and you start thinking that you really need to look like that if you want to be that kind of person.

Cao Qing chose the Tiffany couple to explain the importance of getting married in China, something that I will return to below, but it should also be added that pre or post marital photoshoots are a lucrative industry in today's China. Her critique of the emulation of Western-style weddings is a critique against this popular practice seen as pretentious. In an article on China's wedding photo industry, Hannah Lawrence interviews Chinese women who have done the photoshoots with their future husbands. One of them says: "those who choose not to [do the pre-marital photoshoots] are very special people, you know, headstrong" (Lawrence, 2015).

What we think of beauty and its ideals depends on the culture where we belong. As Grey (2002) points out in reference to Western standards of beauty, the Euro-

American beauty imposes an ideal of beautiful woman that borrows from Nordic images of blonde, blue-eyed and white skinned women. Beauty, across cultures, is then reduced to physical appearance that omits "moral, ethical, and cultural attainments" (p. 52). Moreover, this strong influence was guiding my own perceptions when looking at those images, and what I was thinking of "beauty" was also the product of my own cultural and moral set of values. How these two women engaged with ideas of beauty, sexuality, and stereotypes, not only highlights a level of consciousness on stereotypical images, but it also underlines a deeply rooted way of perceiving beauty that differed from mine, but which as well as mine reflected a pattern that can be traced back to ancient times and is still valid today.

6.5. Strong and powerful women

The idea that ads can empower women was a quite popular one among some of the people I was interviewing, especially for those who had a special interest in advertising, even though they self-labelled themselves as "feminists", and shared the idea that the two positions were opposed to each other. Ting Ling, for instance, believed that ads can show women as capable of doing unthinkable things, and thus they not only have a "positive" effect – as explained in the previous chapter – but they belong to a different "stream" of ads, used to target non-mainstream women (of which she felt part). Cao Qing, on the other hand, treated these images as mere stereotypes whose final purpose was to sell more, and she did not see any difference between ads that infantilized women by showing them as completely dependent on their husbands, and ads that supposedly empowered them. It was a simple advertising strategy that ad agencies had learned from social changes in China. It was a subtler way of selling identity.

During an interview with Ling Mei, 23 years old, a Shanghai native, she decided to analyze with me an ad for Pandora jewels (figure 39) that she believed was interesting because it showed the capability of the portrayed woman to create "something".

> Ling Mei: I want to say something about this one
> because I like what it says here: 'My Story, My Design'.
> I think it's interesting because this woman seems strong
> and she can create her own design: she has the power to

Figure 39. Pandora's independent woman

do what she wants. I think this is the message they want us to remember.

Francesca: Yes, I think so too. This brand, Pandora, is famous because they sell the bracelets and the beads separately, so you can create a bracelet only with the beads you like. This is why it says "my story, my design", because they want to underline that this is something that the woman can create according to her own style.

LM: Yes, but I think it goes beyond that. I mean, they really want to use this special feature of the brand (that I didn't know about) to show a strong woman who can make her own choices. She is not dependent on others (her husband, her father…) she wears what she likes. Also, if you look at her in general (I mean, apart from the Pandora jewels) you see that she is very confident. I think she has a good job, she makes a lot of money, she is a bit "aggressive", but not in a bad way, just because she looks confident […].

F: So you mean this is a "good ad"?

LM: I don't know if it's good or bad. I think that they want us to think that we can be independent and buy the jewels that we like. They are colorful, they are young and stylish, I think this is a very good [effective] ad, but I mean that the advertisers were very clever and they know that women in China today have power to make purchasing choices, much more than in the past. This is very effective for the company.

Despite Ling Mei's confidence in an advertising industry that has understood that women are not only husband-dependent consumers, none of the advertisements chosen by her, nor by other informants who shared this idea with her, portrayed Chinese models in strong or powerful attitudes. For instance, Yin, 19-years-old, appreciated ad advertisement for Dolce & Gabbana, showing three old women (figure 40). She said that this advertisement "finally shows that old women can be cool. They are very funny, but I mean that they are 'cute'. I think this is a way to show that even older women have the power to be beautiful in their own way, and that they can buy whatever they fancy". Ads make sense in different ways, but in ways that are always

consistent with the culture were they appear. On the same ad, however, Ma Yin said that she thought it was "rude, because you can see their legs and knees, they are quite ugly. They want to laugh about them. It's ridiculous".

Figure 40. D&G's old Sicilian women

Another feminist friend posted on her Facebook page an advertisement that has become viral in China in April 2016: a commercial for the Skii cosmetics brand, touching upon the issue of "leftover women"[5]. The commercial shows several middle-class, beautiful, successful Shanghainese women who are facing the dramatic consequences of being "leftovers", or in other words "unmarried women". Their parents appear in the commercial and stigmatize their behavior by describing it as "selfish", "stubborn", and "picky". These women reply to the interviewer by saying that they have not yet married because they are awaiting the real love of their lives, instead of simply picking someone chosen by their parents for his suitability. The commercial ends in the famous People's Park in Shanghai, where every Sunday morning hundreds of parents gather to "advertise" their daughters' physical and intellectual characteristics, hoping to find a suitable match. Here, the protagonists of the commercial have left some messages for their relatives in which they explain that they will not get married unless they find someone whom they really and truly love. Xian, a 30-year-old PhD student, commented on the commercial by strongly criticizing the supposed ability of this commercial to empower "leftover women" in China [English text in the original]:

> Who is qualified to become a leftover woman? This ad
> shows the unified image of leftover women: the middle

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[5] The commercial is available online at: https://youtu.be/irfd74z52Cw.

class, white-collar, successful, urban woman. It is understandable this kind of woman is the target of Skii and since they pay for this commercial ad, it is their say to focus on their target and mobilize them through such seemingly empowering act. I don't deny that the representations of these Chinese women could be real and/or moving to a lot of Chinese women, it could be very empowering for some, and it could therefore be a win-win strategy for both consumers and the company. However, what I strongly sense is the exclusion of more women, who are not in that privilege position, including myself. In the end of the ad, these leftover women speak out by "occupying" the people's park with their fabulous photos with the words they want to tell their parents. I don't know if that could be called "empowering" or "speaking out", as parents' reconciliation with their daughters is on the condition that "my daughter is beautiful", "my daughter is successful." Who could be a leftover woman? Only those beautiful and successful? How about those women not beautiful, successful, not working in a cosmopolitan city with a decent job? How about the working class women who is also independent and don't want to get married? Who are they? I find this "beautiful and successful" rhetoric very disturbing. Not only does it cover up the class parameter, but also a tricky denial of women's autonomy. I myself have been struggling over this rhetoric for years. I am certainly not successful, ordinary looking and every time in the family gatherings when I am pressured for marriage, I found myself in the dilemma that only by exaggerating my success as in earning some money and going abroad, etc., could I be justified that I am independent and I could be excused for not getting married for now. Although I fully support myself financially, working in another city on my own and even give money back to my family, I don't consider [myself] as "independent" and I need to be extra successful to compensate my not getting marriage. If you need to compensate your singleness with being beautiful and/or successful, you are not truly free. I am not using the perspective of class to erase the possible feminist connotations of this ad, but to bring the focus on how truly subverting and empowering this ad could be for women in China, if the left women's speaking out in the ad is to challenge the marriage and re-claim women's autonomy? […]

The ad foregrounds the discourse of true love and romanticism, as if the majority of left-over women were too desperately romantic and into true love so that they got left over. I do admit that I am a sceptic on love and

marriage, but many leftover women around me, is simply dedicated to other things rather than love and marriage. I and quite a few left-over women that I know only want to invest the time and energy on ourselves, to improve ourselves and to enjoy our own life. Instead of contributing our time to family, we focus more on career, on our hobby and on other cause, as feminist into women's issues, as an NGOer into different civil rights. It is not about true love or romantic story, but about our choice and our agency in what we want to do and want to become. True, a leftover woman is probably constrained by the love-marriage-family continuum, but more essentially, she is constrained by the equation: women=sacrifice=no autonomy=no alternative=no-self (it is probably true for both women and men in China). The condemnations in the ad from the parents are: you could not be that selfish; you could not be that cruel. I myself have often been condemned by the relatives and my parents as "too selfish" as not to get married, as I don't take my family into consideration. Isn't that the true subversion of the left-over woman - in reclaiming their autonomy over their body and their life? Then I guess, I prefer to see in the ad that I am proudly selfish as a leftover woman, rather than I want to find the true love as a left-over woman.

The idea that the image of a strong woman empowers the viewers goes back to the topic treated in the previous chapter, where these kinds of advertisements are analyzed as "positive" images. Yet, here the analysis goes slightly further: not only do these ads lack the ability of truly empowering women – because they leave out many aspects of Chinese women's lives, such as working conditions and familial ties – but they even romanticize the idea of empowerment, ultimately generating another set of myths, as Xian points out:

> [A]s a leftover woman in mainland China and under the familial pressure of marriage for nearly 7 years, I really don't like this ad, for I think it is simplifying a very complicated problem in China with the intersection of political, social, cultural and generational changes on women, marriage and family. Most importantly, I think it is another ad producing myths on leftover women.

As Hong Fincher (2014) argues, the stigmatization of "leftover" women has had a powerful effect on urban Chinese women, undermining their confidence and rushing them into marriage. Paradoxically, the campaign underlining the stigma against "leftover" women has been supported by the ACWF, contributing in fact to

"bolstering males' supremacy" (p. 18). Croll (1983) – more than 30 years ago – had already underlined the difficulties for young urban women to comply with the traditional views on marriage, and had noted that free-choice marriage, despite being popular in cities such as Shanghai, was generally facilitated by parents and relatives (p. 77). Xian's outburst against the commercial is the product of the pressures of her family on the one hand, and of a set of new "myths" that are creating a new "anti-leftover rhetoric" on the other hand. She does not deny the possibility of this ad of "emancipating" some viewers, but she feels that it is not the solution to the general stigma against "leftover" women, especially given that the reasons for women to not marry are explained in simplistic terms ("they are waiting for the real love").

6.6. Women as objects

The objectification of women has been one of the main arguments treated in the literature that deals with the critique of advertising (Gill, 2003; Reichert, LaTour, Lambiase, & Adkins, 2007; Szymanski, Moffitt, & Carr, 2010; Zimmerman & Dahlberg, 2008). The female objectification has implications even on self-perceptions regarding the female body (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) that push women to internalize the gaze of the observer, producing shame and anxiety as well as other consequences on their self-esteem (Lavine, Sweeney, & Wagner, 1999).

The words "object" and "thing" were very frequently used by the women I interviewed to describe several advertisements they disliked. For instance, Xu Ling said that the Prada advertisement (figure 41) "shows a woman lying on a bed, she is like an object. She touches herself with her left hand. To me, it is as if she was touching an object". She then went on to describe the ad:
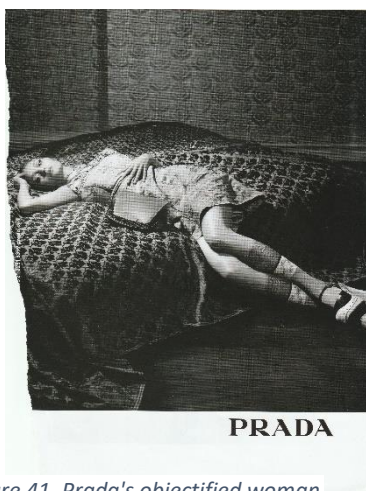
Figure 41. Prada's objectified woman

[XL]: I am not sure if this ad is for the bag, or maybe the dress. I can't tell, because it's really not about the things they show (and want to sell). It's maybe more about the woman, the model. She is dressed awkwardly: the Chinese-style dress does not match the shoes and those socks are honestly horrible. I don't know who would ever buy this stuff [laughs].

The photo is in black and white, and we can't even tell the colors of the bag, the dress, the shoes and the other stuff that they are probably advertising.

[F]: What do you think about the setting?

[XL]: The setting is very dark, but there is a light on her body. They want to make her stand out. The walls have flower stamps as decorations, and the bed linen also seems to have floral decoration. Also her dress has Chinese-style floral decorations, so maybe that's why the rest is also floral.

[F]: What about the woman?

[XL]: I think she wants the viewer to think that she is relaxing or about to fall asleep. She is very sexy and beautiful. She has her ankles crossed, and is holding her head with her right hand. I think she wants to make us think that she will sleep.

[F]: Why did you say that she is like an object?

[XL]: Because she looks like her bag: thrown on the bed. She is nothing more than her bag on the bed for the advertisers!

Zhu Yin described the I.T advertisement (figure 41) using similar words:

[ZY]: Her body is objectified […]. She is made of 4 pieces. Her upper body is broken down into pieces. This makes her look like a robot. Her eyes are also strange: she does not look straight into the camera, but she is looking somewhere else, I can't tell where exactly. She wants to say "hi!" with her right hand probably, but I don't know who she is waving to. This is a horrible way to show a woman. Women are not things made of pieces! This is the worst ad I've ever seen.

[F]: Yes, it seems harmless, but if you look at it carefully you can see that the things that you're saying are quite right, actually. You see her necklace? It says "ground zero". What do you think it means?

[ZY]: I don't know about this, but that part is the only non-yellow accessory, so maybe it has another meaning, but I'm not sure.

Zhu Yin again used the word "object" and "objectification" to talk about the Clarins advertisement (figure 42) that shows a woman from the back while she is facing the seashore and holding a red cloth with her right hand.
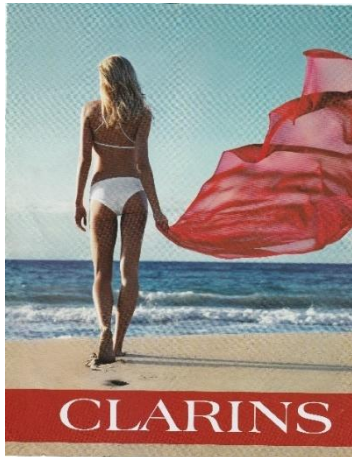
Figure 42. I.T. robot woman

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[ZY]: Oh, this one is just about her body! I can't even see her face! Ridiculous! Women for these people are just nice bodies to use like if they were objects.
[F]: Do you know this brand, Clarins?
[ZY]: No.
[F]: It's a French brand that sells cosmetics. Body lotions, sunscreens, and things like that. I think this is for a sunscreen, because she's on the seashore.
[Z]: I didn't even know that. Ads don't show information about the products anymore. That's because we already know about all of them, but when we don't know about a brand, then it doesn't matter, because we can still recognize them when we go to a shopping mall, and then remember the name there.

Figure 43. Clarins objectified woman

Advertisements that have appeared in China during the past century (excluding the Maoist era) have always made large use of objectification devices. As Ferry (2003) points out, in Shanghai during the 1930s all the images that appeared showed "[t]he female body as an object of the gaze, a simulacra of female identity that masked the real social agent, which was not the consumer, but the producer" (p. 283).

Johansson (1998) refers to the objectification of the (white) female body as the transformation of the Western woman into a fetish for the (Chinese) male's gaze. While it is true that the images picked by my informants when wanting to emphasize the objectification of the woman in the advertisement showed indeed only white women, Johansson's argument appears as outdated in the contemporary and highly globalized Shanghainese advertising scene, in which objectified women appear regardless of their ethnicity. Most of all, however, with the only exception of ideas related to beauty, where the informants were clearly aware of different stereotypes, none of them mentioned ethnicity as a marker for other kinds of meanings.

Similarly, Frith, Shaw, and Cheng (2005) argue that while Western feminist scholarship has always highlighted the objectification of women in their advertising industry, the same is not exact for Asian advertisements. The authors argue that the influence of the Confucian culture in Asia has been so pervasive, that women in Asian advertisements tend to be portrayed in submissive ways that belong to the Chinese "tradition". Again, while this may be true for ads related to the stereotype of the

housewife (where the Chinese ethnicity plays a major role in the identification process), elsewhere, such as for the "strong" woman and the "beautiful" woman, the stereotypical rhetorical tools are unrelated to their ethnicity, at least in the eyes of the viewers.

Finally, as Megan Ferry (2003) suggests, the ads of 1930s Shanghai that portrayed what the author defines as "the New woman" (p. 281), were shaped according to an identity which "reflected the urban participation in an international consumer economy […] that delighted in the objectification of the Chinese woman, but was at the same time wary of her social and political participation" (p. 281). This is also true for what concerns the difference between the two categories of "the strong woman" and the "woman as object": while the strong woman appeals more to the feminist viewer, her social and political participation are nonetheless clouded by her transformation into a symbol, a stereotype, that does not take into account the differences among all Chinese women, as pointed out by Xian in her comment on the Skii advertisement.

6.7.   A nomadic identity

Hobson (2006) has contested, in her study of soap opera viewers, Hall's (1980) negotiated and oppositional theory of interpretations, in that according to her a negotiated reading is always an oppositional one, because when negotiating a meaning one always choses an oppositional perspective, thus an "oppositional" reading as such is only a redundancy of the negotiated reading. When interpreting the meaning of an advertisement, the feminists who took part in my research were reading the images through a feminist lens, clearly searching for the meanings through which they could voice their aversion to women's representation. This shared oppositional reading was constructed through their feeling of belonging to a feminist community.

The feminist community, understood as a community of practice is. The young activists fit in this definition, and their expertise in the analysis of ads not only enhanced their way of perceiving media messages, but also contributed to the building of their identity as feminists, through the exchange process that derived from the encounters (with me alone, or with me and other feminists during the focus groups).

Moreover, the exchanges prompted what Bakhtin (1986) calls "an active-dialogic understanding (disagreement/agreement)" (p.159) because the symbolic meaning of the images was constructed through a dialogic exchange. Bakhtin (1986) argues that the "[c]ontextual meaning (of an image or symbol) can only be revealed with the aid of another meaning (of a symbol or image)" (p. 160). Although Bakhtin's remarks refer to literary theory, his concept of dialogic construction of meaning can be applied to anthropological investigations (Herold, 2000). Despite being against participant observation (Herold, 2000), Bakhtin's idea of entering into a culture without renouncing one's own beliefs, is what fosters the dialogic process. In this sense, my way of looking at the advertisements from a different, and often contrasting perspective to that of my informants, is what allowed the meaning making process, as well as the identification with the community of practice.

Despite being part of a community of practice, their identity as individuals is not erased in favor of a broader "feminist identity" that prevails over their beliefs and positions. They learn to be feminists through the interactions with other feminists, and at the same time this learning process helps them to position themselves within the broader context of activism. The different positions or points of view on the different advertisements reflect the non-fixity of their identity. Here I want to propose the idea that their identity is constantly changing, but not necessarily radicalizing in a feminist orientation. For this reason, I use the phrase "nomadic identity", meaning that it is an identity that changes according to the circumstances and the personal stage of their human development. Their identity is nomadic because, as pointed out by Grossberg (1987) "an individual position [...] is actually mobilely situated in a fluid context [...]. It is not merely that individuality is fragmented, but rather that it functions as, and is articulated of, a nomadic wandering through ever changing positions and apparatuses" (p. 38).

In defining what role agency plays in the nomadic identity of these feminists, I borrow again from Grossberg's (1986) and Hall's (1983) understanding of agency as the consequence of a set of social, political and "contradictory struggles" (p. 65) – as already mentioned in Chapter 4, when I define their identity as "ambivalent" – and of a set of experiences and interests that they not only share, but also embrace. As Radway's (1988) states: "I have been wondering whether it might not be more fruitful to start with the habits and practices of everyday life as they are actively,

discontinuously, even contradictorily pieced together by historical subjects themselves as they move nomadically via disparate associations and relations to day to day existence" (p. 366). Following this suggestion, I actively participated in the everyday lives of these women, and only through these participant observation, the anthropological core of ethnography, was I able to perceive their identity as the product of a diverse array of pieces that are not always perfectly matching with each other, but that reflect their current subjectivity as urban, feminist, women.

6.8. Summary

In this chapter I have provided examples of advertisement analyses conducted by the informants based on an exchange process with the researcher or with other informants. The aim of this exchange was to look at how their membership to a community of practice allows them to build their feminist identity through a learning process that begins with their membership to the feminist community. I have termed this learning process, or exchange, as "dialogic analysis of advertisements", where the meaning making process was the product of the exchange between the informants and me.

In other words, their broadly shared understanding of how the female image is portrayed in ads allows to look at their interpretations as valid for and within the community where they belong. The themes that I thus identified, along with their support, were "beauty ideals", "strength", and "objectification". These three clusters include several definitions or ways of looking at the theme. For instance: when during the focus groups they grouped together several stereotypical ideals of beauty, I in turn grouped them together in a larger cluster that contains them all (e.g. "Asian beauty", "Western beauty", and "youth beauty" are all contained within the "beauty ideals" cluster).

During the discussions, several important themes emerged: the anxiety that they and their peers feel when watching images with which they are not able to identify; or the anger that emerges when they feel that the industry is not more inclusive of different, alternative, but equally valuable and valid images of women. Even when the industry does make an effort to portray difference, such as the positive image of the leftover women, or in general, the "strong" woman mentioned above and elsewhere, the informants were still reluctant to define such ads as positive or inclusive.

This constant conflict between their views and the advertising industry's portrayal of women, once again allowed me to inquire into their identity. This time I looked at how their feminist identity is underpinned by shared beliefs that depend on the context of the situations that occur. Therefore, I have termed this identity as "nomadic", meaning that is not only context-dependent, but as such is also mutable and un-fixed.

7. Conclusions

This thesis has offered an account of how a group of young women variously self-identified as feminists read, understand, and decode the female portrayal of women in advertisements. Moreover, the thesis has presented the links between these women's readings of ads, and the construction of their feminist identity. The methodology used for the inquiry was an ethnographic approach, that included participant observation, supplemented by ethnographic interviews and focus groups. The goal of this thesis was to challenge the pre-existing scholarly literature on the female portrayal in Chinese ads, which neglects women's own perceptions, thoughts and understanding, providing ready-made categories that serve the purpose of the advertising industry, rather than giving voice to women. For this reason, this thesis' contribution to knowledge lies in an approach that aims at allowing women to describe the female image in ads in their own terms, and through their own voices.

This thesis does not present a clear definition of what the feminist identity is, nor does it show in an absolute way how Chinese feminists in Shanghai identify with the feminist movement. It offers instead a case study of a group of women who engage in feminist activities, and who are currently negotiating changing gendered discourses on the Chinese woman that have been going on since the beginning of the reform era. This thesis shows their efforts to piece together global, local, and hybrid understandings of what being a woman and being a feminist means, through the mediated portrayal that advertisements offer them.

What I presented in this thesis was a portrayal of these *practices* of "piecing together" these discourses with these women's own understanding of feminism, and in relation to "the family" (Chapter 4); "feminist activism" (Chapter 5); and "gendered images of females" (Chapter 6). The thread connecting these three chapter was the quest for a feminist way in how ads are read and perceived. The three themes have therefore emerged from the dialogues, meetings and encounters with my informants; and the specific choice of these three topics emerged from their own voices and dialogues among themselves and with me.

Had this thesis focused on the demeaning portrayal of women in Chinese ads, it would have overlooked the great ability that the interviewed women have shown to possess in order to decode and confront these images and their meanings, as well as

their ability to offer proposals of alternative forms of advertisements that they believe would be more appropriate to portray the diversity of Chinese women. What my accounts show are therefore the endless possibilities that Chinese feminists have today to engage in debates about women's portrayals, and actively counteract those messages that they disagree with, or that according to them do not show a full picture of the variously nuanced possibilities that "being a woman" in China today means.

Throughout the thesis I have argued that my attempt was not to provide an image of the Chinese feminist valid across time and space, and I have done this for two main reasons. First, because the fragmentary nature of their identity makes it difficult if not impossible to provide a specific profile of the Chinese feminist; and secondly because their attitude towards the ads we looked at together was never neither the result of their self-identification as feminists only, nor the result of the power that commercial culture has over them only. It was rather the interplay between these two forces that produced what I call the feminist identity. Moreover, most of these women are still trying to find a balance between this identity and the gendered expectations of other people around them, who are generally critical of any act of political participation. It is this tension between what is expected from them, and what they do to counteract these expectations that produces a space of resistance in which they can envision a feminist identity.

In this final chapter I first provide an overview of my major findings, and use these to provide an answer to the initial research question. I then specify what implications my study has in scholarly research debates about women in ads in China. I then explain the limitations of my study, and finally I provide directions for future research.

7.1. How do Chinese feminists interpret the female image in advertisements?

The research question that guided my analysis had the purpose of connecting the feminist identity and the interpretation of advertisements. I wanted to understand how a self-identification as a feminist allowed the women to interpret ads in a specific way. Yet, I found that the self-identification as feminists was not something given for granted, and many women had diverse opinions and positions. This, however, did not prevent my research to look at how they framed their identity, and how it changed over time or through participation and experience with activism, and also thanks to

my workshops and activities. Therefore, this thesis has shown the emerging diversity in the identity of the feminists who have taken part in the research: women who are trying to understand their position as feminists and as women in society. This diversity, which is what characterizes their identity and that I have termed as "fragmentary", should not however overshadow the various commonalities that these women share, and that have allowed me to frame their practices as those of a community. This point is crucial, because it is the only extent to which my analysis can be generalizable: there is a common understanding among these women on several issues that push them to see the female portrayal in ads as imperfect. Moreover, it is within the boundaries of these commonalities that the feminist identity for the purpose of my research is inscribed, and can be read throughout the thesis. I shall list them and comment on them in greater detail:

1. **The lack of diversity**. This was the first and main aspect that came out from the discussions. The women I interviewed perceived the female image as overly stereotyped, and completely unrelated to real life women in China. Interestingly, this was also the main complaint that the first critics of the female portrayal in ads had in the early 1970s in the USA (e.g. Courtney & Lockeretz, 1971; Courtney & Whipple, 1974). During our discussions, the women who took part in my research strongly criticized the ways in which advertisements neglect large proportions of women who do not comply with mainstream ideas of beauty, social roles, and so on. They did not feel represented by these advertisements, and they perceived the images as trying to impose models, rather than mirroring the emerging diversity that I mention above. In this respect, advertisements fail their expectations, and do not take into account how portraying diversity can lead to enrichment, rather than sale losses. The advertisers whom I interviewed on the other hand, were firmly convinced that any departure from the way in which ads should be done would lead to failure. Therefore, this tendency leads to a vicious cycle by means of which women will still be portrayed through only a few stereotypical images.

2. **The tendency to use reassuring stereotypes**. This is directly related to the previous point, although it describes more specifically the kinds of stereotypes that are more popular in ads, and why they are problematic. I defined the stereotypes as "reassuring" because they portray gender roles that have always

belonged to women, thus reinforcing the idea that women are either mothers, or daughters, or wives. The image of a mother with her child, the commercial that shows the wife discussing with her own mother about what to prepare for dinner to the husband, are just two examples of images that reassure the viewer about the immutable essence of gender roles. And even when ads portray businesswomen or women who work in general, they always follow specific scripts that reassure the viewer on who s/he is viewing. While ads do this for real and concrete reasons: the easiness to identify the role of a character in an advertisement leads to an easier and faster decoding, thus reaching the goal of the advertiser; they are nonetheless perceived by feminists as problematic because they endorse the need to limit the diversity of real life women. The feminists I interviewed are convinced of the great potential of advertising in providing role models to men and women, thus their frustration for an overly simplified portrayal comes from the acknowledgement of all the things in favor of women that could be achieved through advertising.

3. **A shared positive attitude towards consumer culture**. The solution to the above mentioned issues that Chinese feminists see in ads is not a return to an ad-free society like that of the Maoist era. They are not against consumer culture or advertising in general, they are positive towards its role in society in spreading ideas about gender, although they criticize the way in which ads portray genders. They are interested in advertising's strategies precisely because they know that they somehow work, and they re-use advertisers' strategies when having to spread their own feminist ideas. There is, in fact, a space where advertising and feminism could find a common ground and where they can dialogue. A proof of this are the growing ads that portray real life beauty (e.g. the Dove campaign) or "real" women in their everyday activities. Yet, these ads can still be improved in the message they convey and most of all the way in which they convey their messages, but they are indeed a starting point for the beginning of a fruitful dialogue. In other words, there could be a feminist advertising, but to be defined as such it should first engage with real life feminists.

The three points mentioned above are a general conclusion to the whole research, and serve the purpose of answering the research question set out at the beginning of the

thesis. However, each chapter explored a specific topic, and had its own research question and themes. In Chapter 4, I inquired into the possibilities that women in Shanghai have to resist and negotiate images of the woman as a family member in ads. In this chapter I conclude that despite being entangled in two apparently opposed discourses – the desire to conform to socio familial norms on the one hand, and the aspiration to resist and confront these norms on the other hand – they utilize this tension to build their specific identity, which is then precisely the product of this ambivalence, and does not contradict neither their feminist stances, nor their family's expectations.

In Chapter 5, I looked at the possibility for the advertising industry and the feminist movement – traditionally opposed to each other – to work on a common ground by drawing on images that feminists considered "positive". I conclude here that while some feminists – generally inside academic circles – are indeed completely against any form of commercial advertising, others – generally activists – acknowledge its great communicative power. Some others then, engage in specific consumer choices to manifest their dissent as feminists (what I term as "commodified dissent"). Advertisements, on the other hand, can completely neglect feminists' interests, or they can borrow from feminist discourses (e.g. those ads promoting post-feminist discourses); or they can even draw from feminist standpoints and create what I term as "commodified dissent" (e.g. Dove's campaign for "real beauty").

In Chapter 6, I looked at how feminists decode the images proposed by the advertising industry following a set of common practices, that allowed me to inscribe these within a "feminist way of looking at ads", and thus proposing a framework for the feminist identity. I conclude in this chapter that their identity as individuals is never erased in favor of a broader feminist identity. Therefore, their identity is never fixed or standardized according to specific feminist parameters, but is rather in constant re-organization and re-framing. For this reason, I define their identity as "nomadic", meaning that it is unstable and shifts according to their everyday lives and experiences.

The conclusions are therefore informed by the three points provided above, and are as such related to the theoretical approach that I used. The main achievement of my thesis is therefore that of giving voice to a neglected part of society that has usually

little voice in scholarly research concerning consumer culture. While studies on Chinese feminists do exist (e.g. Wang 2015; Fung, 2000) and are relevant and exhaustive in their aims, they do not engage with women's practices and engagement beyond academic circles or NGO's activities. In this sense my research is timely and relevant, precisely because of its engagement with a growing importance of advertising and consumer culture (both in global and local terms) in today's China. Through this thesis I have let the voices of these women speak dialogically, and I have given importance to their interpretations and to them as an existing group of women in Chinese society. This implies that my thesis' major contribution is, in conclusion, to go beyond the academic debates on these women, giving them the academic relevance they deserve.

7.2. Implications

As stated in Chapter 2.8., the greater need for an engagement with audiences pushed me to inquire into women's thoughts regarding the female portrayal in advertisements. The majority of the existing studies deal in fact with the images themselves, without taking into account people's reflections and interpretations. Therefore, by drawing on Hobart's (2001) approach to advertising research, my aim was to place these women's voices at the same level as that of "experts" in the fields of advertising studies, feminist theory, and cultural studies. The implications of this approach are twofold: while on the one hand they may be helpful for advertisers to better target this growing group of women (through what I term in Chapter 5.5. as "corporatist feminism"), they reveal to feminist scholars that there are several ways of "practicing feminism", and that even if these women do not follow an "orthodox" approach to feminism, they are indeed reshaping what it means to be a feminist in China today. They are constantly engaging with consumer culture, criticizing it, but not rejecting it as a mere product of capitalist forces, but rather as a means through which society, and women's role in it, can and should be improved. In this sense, my thesis should be positioned within the intersecting disciplines of advertising research, cultural studies and feminist studies, and the theoretical – as well as methodological – dialogue that I am engaging in pertains to these fields. Specifically, I use methods borrowed from cultural studies (audience ethnography) to engage with advertising research studies, and to make claims that have direct consequences on feminist studies, as mentioned above. This multi-layered and multi-faceted approach, ultimately aims at expanding the

perspective on how identity is never fixed, but nomadic, as explained in the previous chapter.

Advertising research in China has been conducted from several perspectives and for various purposes. As mentioned already in the literature review, these perspectives include, to mention a few: for marketing and advertising strategies' improvement – especially in relation to the local-global dichotomy – (e.g. Belk et al., 1985; Chan and Cheng, 2002; Cheng, 2009); from a sociohistorical perspective (e.g. Barlow, 2008; Liu and Bu, 1997); or from a feminist perspective (e.g. Bu, 2006; Cai et al, 2001). This thesis is one of the first studies that uses audience ethnography and its tools of analysis to inquire into women's own perceptions of the female image in advertisements in the Chinese context.

This approach has implications in the realms of audience studies, advertising studies, and of Chinese studies. While previous approaches overlooked the audience's potential in the active participation to advertising strategies, through my approach the entwinement between participants and advertising industry can generate a collaboration among the various people involved, in order to produce cooperative ads that include the diversity mentioned above.

As for audience studies, this thesis reveals that a greater participation of the researcher in the research process is desirable to better portray the informants' perception of the messages conveyed through the media. Only through constant participation, involvement, and self-reflexivity can the researcher provide a better portrayal of her informants and their thoughts. Finally, as for Chinese studies, my thesis underlines the importance of acknowledging the voices of the people we study and of their own discourses and beliefs, without interpreting them through our own (distorted) lenses, but allowing their voices to emerge and to guide our analyses.

7.3. Limitations and further research

The main limitations to my research findings are due to methodological constraints. First, the relatively short period of time that I was able to spend in Shanghai, limits the extent to which my findings are generalizable and still valid today, several months after the end of my fieldwork. In several occasions throughout the thesis I have used the expression "becoming a feminist" to identify the transitory nature of these

women's commitment to feminist activism. Further research could focus on this aspect, and follow these women's identity construction throughout a longer period in their lives, to understand how their feminist identity develops, and which kinds of transformations it undergoes. In other words, it would be important to verify whether these women *have become feminists* or not; and whether this has changed their perceptions of the female image in ads.

Due to the lack of previous scholarly research publications that use audience ethnography to study advertisements' reception in China, my findings can be triangulated and compared only with other existing qualitative studies (e.g. Thornam and Feng, 2010; Chan, Leung and Liu, 2014; Fung, 2002), that use similar, yet still different approaches to this research, or that focus on quite different topics. It would be therefore interesting to conduct other audience ethnographies in feminist circles in China, and use these to corroborate my findings.

Finally, the choice of one single city as the main field site in which to conduct my ethnography, necessarily overlooks the impact of the feminist movement in other areas of China, and does not mention the great importance of links among different groups in other cities, for example the links with activists and NGOs in Guangzhou and Beijing, two important hubs for the Chinese feminist movement. Therefore, further research could use a multi-sited fieldwork approach, to understand whether within China itself there are different perceptions on the portrayal of women, based on different understandings of advertising, consumer culture, and feminist activism. In this sense, it would also be important to conduct a comparative research that looks at Greater China, and compares how the female image in ads is perceived by Chinese, Hongkongese, and Taiwanese, or overseas Chinese feminist activists.

Appendix. Profile of Participants

Zhang. 37-year-old associate Professor. Unmarried, she lives alone in a flat situated in the Putuo district. She organizes feminist activities such as unofficial gatherings to discuss women's issues with her students. Highly regarded by her students, she was a key informant in my study, as she put me in contact with the majority of my informants.

Feng. 22-year-old male student, originally from Guangdong province. At the time of the events narrated he was about to graduate with a Bachelor's degree in Sociology. He is currently pursuing a Master's degree in a university in Hong Kong. He was another key informant, as he helped me organize my workshops and put me in touch with the group of the feminists from the Nüshu kongjian.

Ling Mei. 23-years-old Shanghai native. At the time of the fieldwork she had recently graduated with an MA, and was still searching for a job. Her interest in feminism had grown in her since she was in school and would not tolerate the unequal treatment of boys and girls by the teachers.

Liuqi. 19- years-old Shanghainese, she was an undergraduate student in Law at the time of the fieldwork. She was interested in the female image in advertisements because she thought it had an impact on young women, thus through her participation in the research she wanted to understand how to spread the message to her non-feminist friends.

Chen Yulin. 40-year-old Professor, interested in queer studies and feminism. Through her interventions during the workshops she allowed the participants to reflect on the positive aspects of showing the naked female body, as a symbol of sexual liberation.

Cao Qing. 20-year-old student in Advertising in a prestigious university. She feels that there is a problematic relationship between her feminist identity and her studies in Advertising, yet she likes the creative part of making ads, and thinks she could implement a way of making ads that respects women.

Ting Ling. 28-year-old advertiser and feminist. Similarly to Cao Qing, she also believes that ads could be more respectful of the female image. Although she works as an advertiser, I recruited her as a feminist, and I learned that she worked in an

agency only after our first encounter. She studied in the USA and then moved back to China, where she helps run the Nüshu kongjian with other feminist friends.

Luo Ying. 26-year-old Shanghainese woman. She has a Master's degree in Linguistics and is very passionate about the female image in advertisements. She believes women are depicted in old fashioned ways and would like to change this by means of raising women's consciousness through active participation.

Xu Ling. 18-year-old Shanghai native and only child. She is currently studying to obtain a BA degree. She is Ma Yin's old friend: they are very attached to each other, although they have very different personalities: Xu Ling is very shy, whereas Ma Yin is self-confident and straightforward.

Ma Yin. 19-year-old Shanghai native. Like her friend Xu Ling, she is also an only child, born and raised in Shanghai. Ma Yin has always been a very good student; she is currently pursuing a Bachelor's degree in Political Science. She likes to gather with her friends to discuss women's issues in Chinese society, but is reluctant to define herself as an activist, because she fears this would entail negative meanings and drive away the sympathies of teachers and family members.

Wenwen. 19-year-old BA student from Guangxi province, in South-West China. She defines herself as a feminist, although she feels this may contradict her views of the familial relationships. Her interest in feminist activist has been growing since she met her friends inside the university, and she gathers with them regularly to discuss issues regarding women's condition in contemporary China.

Huiwen. 19-year-old BA student born and raised in Shanghai. She believes that feminist activism can improve society, but she thinks that feminists should first make clear that they are not against men, and that they only want to improve women's condition, but not at the expense of other people.

Ruili. 19-year-old BA student. She has become interested in feminism thanks to one of her friends, who invited her to join the group discussions. She is interested in understanding more about feminism before she can really decide whether she is a feminist or not.

Zhu Yin. 18-year-old BA student. She is originally from Guangdong province, where her mother and brother are currently living. Her father works for an oil company and

therefore lives for large part of the year in the Middle-East. She describes her family as very open-minded: she says that she first became interested in feminism thanks to her mother.

Xiao Feng. 22-year-old Shanghai native. She is a student in Political Science. She believes that she became interested in feminism because as a child she experienced gender discrimination by her teachers in school. She says that these experiences that generally seem small, are those that can raise women's awareness about discrimination.

Mei Ling. 19-year-old Shanghai native. She is currently pursuing a BA in Law. She is very curious about foreign countries, and was interested in the degree of acceptance of feminists abroad. She believes that in foreign countries women have more freedom because they are granted the right to speak and protest.

Xian. 30-year-old PhD student from Guangdong province. She is a very passionate activist. Her main interest is in the relationship between feminist activism and *lala* (lesbian) activism. She works as a translator from and to English and Chinese of feminist websites and Weibo/Facebook pages through which activists engage with the outside world.

Yu Jiang. 24-year-old man from Sichuan province. He was interested in learning more about feminism and in understanding how women perceive the female image in ads.

Anqi. 31-year-old woman born and raised in Shanghai. She works as a copywriter for an advertising agency, although when we first met she was working as a free-lancer. She is very passionate about her job, and dislikes feminism because she thinks it only spreads hatred between men and women.

Bai Ling. 27-year-old Shanghainese woman who works in an advertising agency. Her job is to conduct preliminary research with women through focus groups and interviews in order to understand what women want.

Lin and **Lei**. 26-year-old couple, they are both Shanghai native advertisers. She works free-lance for several companies, while he gave up the advertising career despite his studies. He is very friendly and is passionate about anything "foreign" (music, movies, books). She is shy but has clear ideas about the industry and women's portrayal, and

despite her boyfriend's attempts to reply on her behalf to my questions, she always managed to convey her point of view.

Tang. She was one of Cao Qing's Professor in the Advertising courses. She is very friendly and put me in touch with almost all the advertisers I managed to talk to (except Bai Ling). She is extremely appreciated by her former students who consider her as one of the best teachers they have ever had.

Yan. 20-year-old Shanghai native. She identifies both as a feminist and as a *lala* (lesbian). She is an only child who lives in Shanghai with her parents and her grandmother. She loves them and respects them deeply, although they have had various arguments when they discovered that she loves other women.

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