

Fiona Hackney explores Chinese graphic design
Graphic Margins



A new exhibition at the Design Museum, *Chinese Graphic Design In The 20th Century*, explores the evolving role of women as portrayed through magazines and advertising campaigns. It is more successful, however, in demonstrating graphic design's role as a barometer of political, social and economic change. In particular, it exposes the tensions experienced by a largely feudal society attempting to reconcile Western influence with Chinese traditions and to forge its own contemporary cultural identity.

Western influence centred on the urban business community of Shanghai, where 23 distinct foreign nationalities lived within the boundaries of the international settlement. They imported their own advertisements and, as popular interest in Western lifestyles and social values developed, corresponding companies sprang up supplying cosmetics, tobacco and ready-to-wear clothing. Much of the accompanying increase in advertising was targeted at women.

A new consumer class of women with expendable incomes emerged for the first time in China as private industry drew women into the workforce. The Chinese 'new woman' was prey to a barrage of images, usually wrought in the sophisticated gloss of Western art deco (the 'Shanghai style'), and consumer goods. These promised to define her as independent and active, enjoying

sports and fashionable clothes.

The new literature and specialised magazines for women explored new possibilities for them outside the home. They contributed to a demise in traditional Confucian values; by the 20s footbinding had become a thing of the past in the cities and in 1934 the Women's Commercial and Savings Bank opened in Shanghai.

Despite such progress, advertising appeared content to mythologise women, particularly rural women, as symbols of a solitary inner strength, suffering personal sacrifice with stoic dignity. This is not to say that women did not perform tasks such as farming or mining equally as well as men, nor to undermine the reality of their self-sacrifice.

It seems naive, however, to suggest without additional evidence, as does the book accompanying this exhibition, that the cultural revolution was any more rooted in the reality of women's lives and the choices available to them, than was the earlier Western-inspired advertising.

Somewhere between the Westernised 'Shanghai style' images of 'woman as consumer', celebrated here by the Design Museum, and the symbolic equality of cultural revolutionary graphics, women's experience has slipped from the stage of public representation - their images merely tacked on to a study of the struggle between two more 'serious' competing ideologies. •