

Madmen in Shanghai: The China Commercial Advertising Agency (CCAA) and the birth of professional advertising in modern China

Introduction

In 1926, the China Commercial Advertising Agency (CCCA) adopted the phrase "Service and progress" as its motto. This motto epitomized the very mission of advertising as a new field of expertise, as it appeared in Shanghai in the early 20th century. As the major business and publishing center in China, Shanghai emerged as the cradle for professional advertising in the 1920s. As a treaty port open to foreign influences, it was also a place of daily encounters and intermingling between Chinese and foreign cultures. In addition, the city has left a rich documentation (press advertisements and articles, commercial handbooks and directories, municipal archives and street photographs) that allows for both a distant and close study of advertising professionals, their relationships and networks in modern Shanghai, and beyond.

My research suggests that professional organizations played but a minor role in organizing the advertising business in China. Contrary to the United States, professional advertising in China did not draw on self-regulation and never reached a high level of organization. Instead, Chinese independent agencies emerged as the primary engines for the development of professional advertising in modern China. In contrast with "quack" brokers, integrated agencies functioned as commercial enterprises, each of them with a unique identity, offering a broad range of services to their clients. By contrast with in-house departments that focused on a single line, their expertise covered a wide array of products. Independent agencies multiplied in Shanghai after WWI (SLIDE 2). While foreign firms dominated the field until the late 1920s, Chinese agencies rapidly grew during the Nanjing Decade (1927-1937), and eventually took the lead after WWII (SLIDE 3).

In order to better embody the development of professional advertising in Shanghai, I will present a case study of the first major Chinese agency, the China Commercial Advertising Agency (CCAA) founded in Shanghai in 1926, and its founder/manager C.P. Ling (1896-1964) (SLIDE 4).

Founded in 1926, CCAA was one of the first and the leading Chinese agencies that survived the Sino-Japanese war and even endured until today, allowing for a **long-term study** of advertising practices in China. Moreover, as its founder and manager C.P. Ling was trained in the United States, CCAA provides an intriguing case for observing the **transfer of U.S. business practices in China**. C.P. Ling himself was representative of the **new Chinese business elite** that emerged during the transitional period of the late Qing-early Republican China. Although I could not access CCAA's archives for this research, the company is **richly documented** in the Shanghai Municipal Archives and the local press. For all these reasons, CCAA offers an ideal case to re-embody the social history of advertising in China.

This study rests on three main sources:

- The **Shanghai Municipal Archives** contains a series of **five surveys** made by the Shanghai Commercial & Savings Banks between 1929 and 1939, and an audit produced in 1932 by the New-York-based accounting firm Haskins & Sells.
- It also includes a **promotional booklet published in 1936 by CCAA** for its tenth anniversary. 28 This booklet contains laudatory articles that praised C.P. Ling for his success, analytical articles that presented the situation of advertising in China, a list of CCAA's clients and associates in China and abroad, and a map of its branch offices. According to contemporary reviews, the purpose of the booklet was two-fold, namely to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the founding of CCAA and to record an important milestone in the history of the progress of modern advertising in China.
- Last, I have relied on **articles published in the local press**, mostly the *North China Herald*, the *China Press/Weekly Review*, and the *South China Morning Post*.

1. The China Commercial Advertising Agency (CCAA): the first modern Chinese advertising agency (1926)

CCAA was established in Shanghai in 1926, at a time when people were not “advertising- minded” and the field was still dominated by foreigners. After unfruitful efforts with the Chinese government to secure a legal status as an incorporated and limited liability company, C.P. Ling eventually resolved to make CCAA his private business, designated as “C.P. Ling, sole proprietors” in 1928. CCAA’s primary goal was to make advertising more efficient through the work of professional agencies: “More Effective Advertising and Better Agency Work in China”, claimed C.P. Ling in an article published in the China Press Weekly Review in 1929. Ling proudly displayed his motto “Service and Progress” in the 1936 tenth anniversary booklet. By integrating these terms in his motto, C.P. Ling consciously appropriated the two core values of the nascent profession, as if his company itself embodied the new professional standards. CCAA’s logotype featured a Chinese gate, highlighting the Chinese origin of the company, and possibly expressing both solidity and openness (SLIDE 6).

CCAA specialized in press advertising, building strong ties with one of the two leading Chinese newspapers in Shanghai, the *Xinwenbao*. In 1934, CCAA published a *Publishers’ Directory* that provided one of the most complete lists of newspapers and periodicals published in the main cities of China, arranged by provinces, with their estimated circulation and advertising value. While these estimates may be disputed, business circles at the time universally praised the compilation as a reference guide for every advertiser and publisher in China. In order to improve its printing capacity, particularly for high-quality color printing, C.P. Ling founded the **Pagoda Printing Company in 1935**. As I shall elaborate later, CCAA’s publishing activity probably stemmed from C.P. Ling’s personal experience as a general manager of the China Publicity Company, affiliated with the Commercial Press. Although it specialized in printed media, CCAA indirectly **engaged in outdoor advertising through its association with an American firm, the Acme Advertising Agency**. Acme owned dozens of billboards in the streets of Shanghai in the 1920s. It was specifically in charge of advertising on the tramway cars in circulation in the Chinese municipality.

After its founding, CCAA engaged in a spectacular **process of expansion**. With only one clerk to assist C.P. Ling in 1926, CCAA relied on sixty employees in 1936 – more than three times the average staff of mainstream agencies in Shanghai (SLIDE 7). Starting with **only 5 clients and 18 products in 1926**, CCAA reached **more than a hundred accounts** (90% of which were multinational companies) and promoted almost **two hundred brands** ten years later. The list includes world leading firms in various industrial branches: Bakerite Company, Ford Motors Exports Company, Wrigley’s Gum, Quaker Oats, Colgate, Gillette, Listerine, Asia Realty Company,

RCA Victor, Eastman Kodak, or Parker Pen. Moreover, CCAA was in charge of planning advertising campaigns for two major firms in Shanghai, the Shanghai Power Company and the China Omnibus Company. C.P. Ling also worked for the Chinese Government, designing the campaign for the Chinese Athletic Games held in Nanking in October 1933. For the Ministry of transportation, CCAA also planned a campaign in favor of the construction of the national railway system in 1936.

As a result, **CCAA's income rose** from \$1,921 in 1926 to \$700,000 in 1937. Its profits increased from \$-1,811 in 1926 to more than \$55,000 in 1931, and its capital multiplied tenfold during the same decade (from \$10,000 to \$150,000 in 1936) (SLIDE 8). CCAA's tenth anniversary in September 1936 marked a climax in the history of firm. The celebration ceremony gathered more than a hundred important guests (clients, associates, friends and other personalities close to C.P. Ling). The cocktail party at the prestigious Park Hotel was widely publicized in the local press.

C.P. Ling established his first office in the heart of the International Settlement, on Museum Road. In need for more space in 1928, he moved to Hongkong Road, close to the office of Acme Advertising. Spatial proximity both reflected and fostered collaboration between the two associates. Beyond Shanghai, **CCAA's national network covered the entire territory of China** (SLIDE 9). However, one should take this map with caution. Drawn after CCAA's promotional booklet, we have no way to know whether the dots actually referred to branch offices, or whether they just pointed to local contacts with no legal status and physical base. Despite possible exaggeration, CCAA expanded far beyond China through its **global networks of clients and associates** (SLIDE 10). Reflecting C.P. Ling's biographical itinerary (see below), **most of these were located in the United States.**

With great acumen, and possibly caution that the Sino-Japanese war (1937-1945) might endanger his business, C.P. Ling decided to move his headquarters from Shanghai to **Hong Kong in 1938**. However, CCAA remained very active in Shanghai. This move probably helped the company to weather the economic crises that gripped the Shanghai economy in 1934 and the aftermath of the war. After C.P. Ling relocated his headquarters from Shanghai to Hong Kong in 1938, we lack precise evidence about its continuance. It seems that the firm pursued its expansion until its merger with the leading American agency McCann-Erickson in 1963. 37 CCAA still exists today under the name of Ling-McCann, Hong Kong, with C.P. Ling's youngest son Ronnie Ling as general manager. The firm is a member of the Association of Accredited Advertising of Hong Kong (HK4As) and received an award in 2014.

As CCAA's founder and manager for almost fifty years, C.P. Ling strongly shaped his company. So in the following and last section, I will trace his life course, and to try to investigate why this businessman was representative of the new Chinese elite that emerged in early Republican China.

2. C.P. Ling: a pioneering advertising agent within a new Chinese global elite

C.P. Ling (Lin Zhenbin 林振彬) was born in Fuzhou in 1896 (SLIDE 12). He started his education at the Anglo-Chinese College in Fuzhou. In 1911, he passed the Imperial Examination for the Boxer Indemnity and was admitted to study at Qinghua University in Beijing. After graduating from the Government school in 1912, he was sent as the first Chinese student to Rochester University, New York. In 1919, he received his MA Degree from Columbia University and joined the School of Business at Columbia and New York University. He specialized in business and advertising, two emerging disciplines that very few institutions in United States and Europe taught at the time. But beyond specialization, Ling developed a broader interest in social sciences, particularly economics, sociology and psychology. By studying human psychology, many practitioners at the time believed that they would better understand the consumers' desires. Applying the principles of psychology to advertising would make it more efficient. Several handbooks published in the 1920-1940s and translated in Chinese were specifically devoted to the relation between psychology and advertising. When he returned to China in 1922, Ling was fully versed in these fields and definitely in the vanguard of advertising expertise.

Upon his return, Ling was appointed as **general manager of the China Publicity Company** in Hankou, a subsidiary company of the leading publisher, the Commercial Press. He resigned in 1926 to start his own company in Shanghai, the China Commercial Advertising Agency (CC AA). In the following decade Ling seems to have been extremely successful in both his professional and personal life. As discussed above, his business rapidly expanded between 1926 and 1936. In 1928, he married Annie Tong, the daughter of an influential sharebroker in Shanghai. More than three hundred guests attended their Western-style wedding ceremony at the Majestic Hotel in Shanghai, most of them members to the upper ranks of the city luminaries. The Lings were well-known socialites who regularly entertained with parties, cocktails and receptions to honor their most important guests, clients and foreign visitors, such as the American Ford officials in 1931, two German motorists on a world tour in 1933, or the Australian artist Neville Barker freshly recruited in 1936. These events were highly publicized in the local press, contributing to shape the public image of a business man whose personal and professional life intimately intermingled, and who did not hesitate to advertise his private face. In 1932, he posed aside his Ford on a photograph illustrating a press article that also served as an advertisement for his American client (SLIDE 13).

These articles, however, portrayed none other than an ambitious businessman eager to manage his public image and reputation. In the absence of personal papers, we know little about Ling's daily activities and personal life. In 1930, the local press reported that he went on a business trip to conduct a personal investigation on the business conditions in Hong Kong, Guangdong and other cities in South China. At a time when there was no school specifically devoted to the study of advertising in China, C.P. Ling was one of the first professionals to teach a course on advertising to the business students at the University of Shanghai. He frequently invited foreign experts to

address his class, such as Filsinger, who appealed to the Chinese students' national feelings and foresaw a bright future for China's youth, or Trainor, a representative of the Australian pharmaceutical firm Nicholas, manufacturer of *Aspro*.⁴⁵ Ling was well-acquainted in Shanghai, China and beyond. By 1919, he had been the first Chinese to be elected to the Phi Beta Kappa, the highest scholastic honor society in the United States. As a student in the United States, he became active in the work of the China International Famine Relief Committee, during which he came in contact with President Harding and the future president Herbert Hoover. He later became member of the most selective clubs in Shanghai: Advertising Club of China, Shanghai Bankers' Club, American University Club, Pan Pacific Association, Royal Asiatic Society, International Recreation Club, Chinese Jockey Club, Taiping Scholar Fellowship. He also engaged in charity activities. In 1956, he donated several times to the Hongkong Society for the Protection of Children.

After the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese war in 1937, he returned to New York to renew old friendship and business contacts. Back to Hong Kong in 1938, he continued to run his company with his two sons, William as general manager, and Ronnie, as assistant manager. C.P. Ling remained on the board of directors until his death at the Canossa Hospital in Hong Kong in 1964, at the age of seventy-two years old. To sum up, Lin Zhenbin was representative of the new Chinese business elite that emerged in the early Republican China. Trained in the United States, he received a Western education and led a Western way of life. However, he remained faithful to his native country and eager to adapt his foreign background to his own culture and fellow countrymen. He was probably forced to leave China by the Sino-Japanese war and the advent of the People's Republic of China in 1949. In a word, C.P. Ling appeared as a Western-minded businessman with Chinese sentiments.

Conclusion

This presentation contributes to a social history of advertising, with particular attention to the individuals and institutions involved in this new field of expertise. My research suggests that professional organizations played but a minor role in organizing the advertising business in China. In order to better demonstrate how independent agencies eventually emerged as the main engines for developing professional advertising in early Republican China, I have presented a case study of the first and leading Chinese agencies, the China Commercial Advertising Agency (CCAA).

Founded in 1926, CCAA was one of the first and the leading Chinese agencies that survived the war and even endured until today, allowing for a long-term study of advertising practices in China. As its founder and manager C.P. Ling was trained in the United States, CCAA provides an intriguing case for investigating how Chinese agencies appropriated American cutting-edge methods and adapted them to the specific needs of the Chinese market. As a Western-minded businessman with a Chinese heart, CCAA's founder and manager C.P. Ling himself was representative of the new Chinese elites that emerged in the early Republican China. Beyond individual cases, I would like to end by insisting on the **crucial need for combining press advertisements with business and archival materials**, in order to develop a genuine social history of advertising in modern China, that departs from mainstream cultural studies focused on commercial discourses in the Chinese press.