

Chapter 18

The Impact of Shop Window Design on the Development of Modern Time Visual Merchandising in China

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Abstract The establishment of China's shop window design industry is based on its unique historic opportunity and background. Its emergence has refashioned the manner of traditional visual merchandising which makes too much use of the shop signs. The development of design style covers the importation of the western design and the domestic innovation of design in China. In the first half of the twentieth century, the shop window design reached its first developmental climax. The concepts and modalities of China's modern time visual merchandising have been developing in tandem with the birth of shop window design industry. And this has contributed to the ceaseless progress of China's commercial civilization.

Keywords Visual merchandising • Birth of shop window design industry • China in modern times

Introduction

In the 1840s, the industrialized countries in the west had finally achieved the mass production of transparent glass, which had realized shop-owners' dream of displaying commodities in the shop windows so as to attract consumers. This has contributed to the fast improvement and development of visual merchandising concepts. China's shop window design industry during the modern times possesses its own unique development history and has as always exerted influences upon the dissemination and application of visual merchandising concepts throughout the commercial activities of the country.

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Relationship Between Visual Merchandising and Shop Window Design

As a special terminology, visual merchandising has been universally adopted in the current commercial activities. In this trade, “VMD” has been frequently used to stand for the term directly. Visual merchandising aims to maximize commercial interests, combining demonstration, visual display techniques and commodity marketing philosophy (Tony Morgan 2008). Although the idea has just made its debut in recent years, the application of visual merchandising concepts in commercial activities has existed for quite a long time. Thanks to their features for staging display, shop windows play a key role in the success of visual merchandising. Regarding the shop windows as fixed areas, shop window design seeks to arrange the commodities in practical and artistic ways so as to facilitate consumers’ appreciation and reference of the goods. Its function lies in boosting the purchasing desire of consumers and raising market sales. As a result, shop window design is viewed as a crucial method in commercial visual merchandising strategies (Wen-jie Pan 2011).

Traditional Mode of Visual Merchandising in China

The formalities of commercialism determine the corresponding modes of visual merchandising. Prior to the introduction of a vast number of overseas commodities into China, old-style shops possessed no shop windows. The traditional shop promotions were dominated by a decorated signboard called “the shop sign” (Xiao-jian Shu 2011). In terms of visual merchandising, “the shop sign” is regarded as combination of “signboard” and “front cover”. The shop sign is usually set on the shop façade or in its front. The sign can be suspended, inlaid or bricked up. The shop’s “front cover” makes use of vivid visuals, bright colors, exaggerated decorations or its unique symbols to display the design or words featuring the store (Xing-gong Wang 1994). It creates a powerful visual impact. The shop sign constitutes a major device in the traditional competition of visual merchandising. But it remained quite difficult to display the tangible commodities outside the shop. On one hand, it was due to the shortage of commodities and product varieties. Upon seeing “the shop sign”, customers became aware of the major commodities sold in the shop. On the other hand, glass had not been used widely so that outside display of commodities is devoid of necessary security.

Positive Effects of China's Shop Window Design on Visual Merchandising

Negative Effects of Overseas Shop Window Design on Visual Merchandising

The need for shop window design stems from the emergence of department stores where a greater variety of goods are sold. In the later period of nineteenth century, foreign-funded department stores began to emerge in Shanghai. Ever since the later period of Qing dynasty, four foreign-funded departments stores such as Whiteaway, Laidlaw & Co., Ltd., Hall, Haltz & Co., Ltd., Weeks & Co., Ltd., Lane, Crawford & Co., Ltd. moved to the Bund area of Nanjing road. They are called the “Four Major Companies in the Early Period”. The most prestigious one is the world-renowned English-owned department store – Whiteaway, Laidlaw & Co., Ltd. Established in London in 1882, the company set to construct its high-rise headquarters over a land area in the northeast of the crossroad between Nanjing road and Sichuan road in December 1904. The company entrusted the building design to architect Scott of Morrison Matheson. The ground floor of the building is a shopping mall with large French windows used for goods display. The “Four Major Companies” followed the uniform style of display design adopted across the world. So the earliest shop window design in China was graced with the international style but devoid of any Chinese elements. At that time, the major function of shop windows was to show off the glamour of the foreign-funded companies. The commodities on display had nothing to do with the majority of Chinese people. The costumes and especially the models in display had become a hot topic during that time. Ever since the establishment of foreign-funded department stores, they had always adopted the marketing principle of selling upper scale goods catered for foreigners living in China. Being confronted with the accelerating consumption ability in Shanghai during the early period of twentieth century and the ever increasing middle class, they failed to grasp the consumption capacity and mentality of Chinese people, though they enlarged their market later. And they simply followed the visual merchandising strategies in the west, which included the design of shop windows. Consequently, their leading position in the commercial realm had been gradually supplanted (Figs. 18.1 and 18.2).

Domestic Shop Window Design Industry Paying Attention to Visual Merchandising

The birth of China's shop window design industry stems from the development of its domestic retail industry. During the early twentieth century, the capital of overseas Chinese investors began to flow into Shanghai from Hong Kong and Guangzhou. And it had brought about a period of prosperity in Shanghai. On the 20th of October 1917, Sincere Co., Ltd. first set up its business. The company building takes on a baroque style. The façade is arranged according to the classical three sections. The ground floor is surrounded by an arcade veranda with built-in

Fig. 18.1 Western civilization in shop windows of Shanghai (by Austria painter Schiff)



Fig. 18.2 Westernized shop window design of Whiteaway, Laidlaw & Co., Ltd.



Fig. 18.3 Sincere Co., Ltd.



Fig. 18.4 “Single display” and “Multiple display” shop window

shop windows (Kikuchi Toshio 2012). Sincere Co., Ltd. is the first large-scale international department store run by Chinese in Shanghai. It designed the earliest shop window advertisement in China. Shop window design during this period was dominated by “single display” featuring one type of commodities and “multiple display” featuring a variety of commodities. Crepe paper, color paper and cloth strips were the popular decorations. And the design is devoted to commodity display. The usual design is to construct a crepe paper backdrop for the commodity. The more complex design, for example, is to festoon the shop window with cloth strips. The mapping of strips serves to attract customers and set off the commodity (Figs. 18.3 and 18.4).

Upon entering into the 1930s, Shanghai had become the Number One Metropolis in the Far East. Its modernization and internationalization surpassed Hong Kong and Tokyo. Not only was Shanghai the political enter of China, but it also became the

cultural center, leading the whole country in industry and commerce, finance and security, international trade and municipal developments (Feng Li 2010). With the birth of shop window design industry, the brand new visual merchandising method greatly boosted the retail sale of the time. All businesses invested significantly in shop window construction and design. As the “Four Leading Companies” (Sincere Co., Ltd., Wing On Co., Ltd., Sun Sun Co., Ltd., and Da Sun Co., Ltd.) frequently received commodity catalogues together with introductions about shop window design and costumes for display while they were importing goods from overseas. Adopting overseas design, these domestic companies took into great consideration the aesthetic standards of Chinese people and managed to create the traditional Shanghai style for shop window design, which was rich in unique local features.

Flourishing Shop Window Design Industry Promoting Competition in Visual Merchandising

Making use of shop windows to conduct commercial competitions demonstrates how visual merchandising promotes commercial progress. It is the importance attached by domestic department stores to visual merchandising that ushered in a development climax for the modern time retail business in China. Wing On Co., Ltd. department store had made the most important contribution to the modern time shop window design in China. Opening in 1918, the company specialized in about 10,000 varieties of commodities. With a façade covered with tiny pebble mingled cement, the shop windows were installed with huge imported panes, which set the precedent for shop window design in Shanghai. The shop façade was decorated with Roman columns, which bestowed it with an ambience of renaissance. They were the first one to bring about “the situational” shop window display, using the shop window to tell a story. The shop window display would be rearranged according to different seasons. This had constituted a characteristic attraction along Nanjing road. Shortly before the Mid-autumn Festival, the shop window design would focus on the story of the “Legend of Chang Er, the Moon Goddess”. On the background of the shop window was a big full moon towards which Chang Er, the Moon Goddess, flew gracefully. All kinds of moon-cakes were displayed behind the window (Qi-wen Xu 1934). Drawing on the festive atmosphere, the design aimed at arousing people’s wish for family reunion. In this way, it intended to promote the sale of commodities. Influenced by the foreign culture in the concession areas, quite a few fashionable people in Shanghai began to celebrate Christmas. It became very popular for senior relatives to bring gifts to their minors. Several weeks before Christmas, the company would place in the middle of the shop window a gorgeously dressed Santa Claus with white hair and beard. Surrounding him were all kinds of toys. By changing the shop window design in different festivals, the company aimed at gaining the markets for foreigners and those overseas Chinese who had adopted the way of life in the foreign country. During the winter time, the shop window would display a snow scene. The snow flakes were made of cotton. They fluttered in the air with the aid of machine power, creating a snowing scene. This has become the first dynamic shop window display in China (Guan-chang



Fig. 18.5 Wing On Co., Ltd.'s shop window displaying the shirts of "SMART"

Guo 1936). In 1934 when Da Sun Co., Ltd. was set up, it invited the famous American architect John Graham (1873–1955) as its adviser who was reputed for his design of department stores. He believed that shop windows were the most valuable features for advertising, suggesting that the ground floor should be circled with continuously connected shop windows. Responding to the smoothness of the internal walls, the outside window façade would fit quite well with the internal design. Graham's advice was adopted by the company. Eighteen shop windows were installed around the ground floor, making the company the one with the largest number of shop windows and the largest shop window space in China (Fig. 18.5).

More and more companies begin to regard shop windows as the best platform for the publicity of the company image and the commodities. Passing by the shop windows, busy pedestrians are able to see the commodities promoted by the company. Good shop window design can lead customers into the shop (Guan-nan Liu 2007). In terms of space, shop windows provide the department stores with a great extension of marketing area. Because shop windows will not close when the stores close, they maximally extend the marketing time for the commodities. It is fair to say that shop windows have become strategic tactic for "magnifying time and space" in the visual merchandising competitions among stores. During the early period of the People's Republic of China, Qi-wen Xu, an expert in visual merchandising, pointed out: "whenever I approach various department stores, grand shop window advertisements always come into my sight. They are designed in such a beautiful way that I become quite reluctant to leave. At the very beginning, there is no wish for purchase. By and by, I become absorbed in the display when a purchasing desire wells up in my heart. Driven by the desire, few people will never enter and bargain unless one carries not a single penny. And this has yielded many successful purchases." (Qi-wen Xu 1934) His words demonstrate the positive function of visual merchandising in commercial promotions. The "Four Major Companies" are located along Nanjing road. The four bosses are all from Xiang Shang. They are engaged in the same business in Shanghai. The fierce competitions among them have produced many interesting stories of



Fig. 18.6 Nanjing road with busy transportation and shop windows on both sides in the 1930s

business wars. The shop windows became the most direct channel to conduct competitions. Various companies constantly updated their shop window design, furnishing Nanjing road with beautiful decorations. Overseas media called it “the most global and culturally diverse avenue in the world” (Tian Li 2010). During the heydays of the “Four Major Companies” in the 1920s and 1930s, shop window displays became part of the street scene. People in Shanghai regarded window shopping as a goal-oriented activity. Department stores had become a must for travelers from outside the city to visit. According to a Tour Guide in Shanghai published in 1935, the department stores on Nanjing road always topped the list of visits on the first day. And the shop windows provided the travelers with the first impression of modern Shanghai (Zong-fu Sun 1935). At that time, the evolution of shop window design in Shanghai’s department stores largely followed the trend of the western countries. But it lagged behind them for about two decades. From then on the overseas expertise on shop window design began to enter into China and had become a major inspiration for the shop window design of the “Four Major Companies”. For example, in order to make reference, Wing On Co., Ltd. had subscribed to some foreign magazines such as *Look*, *Life* and *Window Display*. With the aim of gaining more market share, they even interchanged design staff with Hong Kong Wing On Co., Ltd. so as to bring about more creative ideas and cater to customers’ demands for visual aesthetics (Fig. 18.6).

Conclusion

The establishment of shop window design industry in China is different from western countries. It is dependent upon China’s unique history of modern time development. The business prosperity brought about by the competitions of shop

window design demonstrates the universal applicability of visual merchandising. The commercial progress does not merely depend upon shop window design. Nevertheless, all successful retailers cannot afford to ignore shop window design. At the same time, the development of retailing industry has enhanced the progress of shop window design. Historically, commercial prosperity has always been accompanied with excellent shop window design. Up till now, visual merchandising has always been regarded as the barometer of retailing industry. Businesses have attached more importance to its functions in commercial activities.

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