CULTURAL VARIATION IN THE VISUAL ASPECTS OF TELEVISION COMMERCIALS: COMPARING THE USE AND EFFECT OF FIELD INFORMATION IN CHINESE AND US TELEVISION COMMERCIALS

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CULTURAL VARIATION IN THE VISUAL ASPECTS OF TELEVISION COMMERCIALS: COMPARING THE USE AND EFFECT OF FIELD INFORMATION IN CHINESE AND US TELEVISION COMMERCIALS

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ABSTRACT

Cross-cultural psychology literature demonstrates cultural variation in visual perception patterns and field information\(^1\) inclusion in static visual designs between Chinese and American cultures. This study attempts to empirically investigate whether such variation exists in these two cultures’ video images such as television commercials, and whether the commercials customized to cultural preference are more effective than others as previous research suggests. The research results correspond to previous claims about the visual design patterns in Chinese and American cultures, based on which suggestions for cinematic practice are provided. This research contends that variation in information inclusion and exclusion rules manifests differences in the ideology systems and “terministic screens” of the two cultures.

\(^1\) Field refers to the environment/situation where objects (including characters) are located and an event happens. Field information in a picture includes all the information about the environment and the relationship among the characters and focal objects. In this sense, field is the whole picture. The opposite of field is the focal objects detached from the field.
DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my grandparents and my parents for loving and supporting me whoever I am.
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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Cultural Difference in Communication

Since Edward T. Hall, the founder of the intercultural communication field, created the paradigm of high-context vs. low-context culture in his influential book *Beyond Culture* (Hall), East Asian and Western cultures have been classified as high-context and low-context because of their distinct dependence on context during communication. In East Asian countries, such as China, people tend to highly rely on the conversational context to understand each other. When talking about something that is on their mind, they are often implicit about what they really want and talk around the point, expecting their partners to figure out their intention (Hall, 113). On the contrary, in Western countries, such as the United States, people tend to focus more on the subject of matter. They are often more explicit and specific about their interest with their partners, instead of making a conversation a puzzle game.

An essential difference between Chinese high-context culture and American low-context culture is their dependence on the “context.” In a conversation, “context” can be the understanding of what has been said and what has been previously agreed on related and unrelated to the topic of interest between the communicators. It can also refer to the socially constructed criteria of what is appropriate and what is inappropriate in a situation. High-context individuals are likely to holistically interpret each other’s message based on all these kinds of contextual information, whereas people from low-context cultures tend
to understand a message based on the most relevant part of contextual information, independent of the larger context.

This difference has also been found in the patterns of visual communication between East Asians and Americans. Psychology experiments (Ji et al., Masuda & Nisbett, Chua et al. and Hedden et al.) suggest that East Asians tend to rely on the field information to perceive the object in it when viewing a visual scene. For instance, Ji and his colleagues found that Chinese, Korean and Japanese are more dependent on the surroundings than European Americans in judging the position of a central object in the setting (Ji et al. 950) Besides, eye-tracking experiments that capture and record eye movement indicate Chinese tend to look at the background of a picture sooner and longer than European Americans. For instance, when looking at a picture of a tiger in a jungle, Chinese participants were found to look at the jungle first and for longer than Americans. They also made more saccades (rapid eye movements from one location to the next) between the jungle background and the focal object tiger. Americans, however, looked at the tiger sooner and fixated on it for longer (Chua et al. 12632).

These studies indicate that the visual perception patterns of East Asians and Americans are similar to their verbal communication styles. East Asians are dependent on the field information when perceiving a visual image, similar to their dependence on conversational context when interpreting a message. Americans, in contrast, are relatively independent of the context in both verbal and visual communication. They are more interested in hearing and seeing the subject of matter instead of the things around it, and they tend to interpret a message or a visual image context-independently. This is why Western document designer consider any decoration details or non-data visual elements
are not redundant and should be removed (Tufte and Nielson). As a result, in cross-cultural cognition literature, Americans are considered as “field-independent” or “object-focused” and East Asians are considered to be “field-dependent” in visual perception (Boduroglu, Shah & Nisbett; Chua, Boland & Nisbett; Ji, Peng & Nisbett; Kitayama, Duffy, Kawamura & Larsen; Masuda, Gonzalez, Kwan & Nisbett; Masuda & Nisbett; Nisbett, Peng, Choi & Norenzayan; Nisbett; Nisbett & Masuda; Nisbett & Miyamoto).

The impact of cultural variation in verbal communication has been widely discussed in contrastive rhetoric, information design and other professional communication research. However, consequences of the cultural difference in visual perception have rarely been addressed in this field. This thesis attempts to investigate whether Chinese and American viewers’ visual perceptions differ when watching television commercials and how visual designs should adapt to this cultural difference.

Cultural Difference in Visual Design

Previous research demonstrates the visual perceptual preferences between Chinese and Americans are reflected in static images, such as ancient paintings, contemporary drawings and photographs and graphic illustration in professional documents. Specifically, East Asian landscape paintings, portraits and photographs tend to depict the background field, such as mountains, rivers and room settings, in their entirety by adopting wide views and high angles. The subjects, however, occupy a relatively small part of the picture. This style is defined as “context-inclusive” for its inclusiveness of field information. In Western ones, the views are narrower and the
angles are lower, leaving most of the space to the subjects in the center of the image. Thus, this style is considered as “object-focused” (Masuda et al. 1272).

These findings of the ancient and contemporary visual images suggest that cultural variation in visual perception is consistent in visual images. However, most of the images are still pictures, and few research has investigated the proportion of field and object information in video images, such as television commercials. It is not clear in literature whether the proportion of field and object information is culturally different between Chinese and American television commercials, and whether two cultures' viewers perceive them in different patterns. This thesis attempts to investigate these two questions by comparing the Chinese and American television commercials of three transnational brands, Coca-Cola, McDonald’s and OLAY\(^2\). Specifically, Study 1 (Chapter Four) will compare the proportion of field information in the selected Chinese and US commercial samples, and Study 2 (Chapter Five) will investigate whether Chinese viewers are field-dependent while US viewers are object-focused as literature suggests. Results correspond to previous findings, indicating that Chinese commercials include more field information than US versions, and Chinese viewers memorized more background items than objects in the foreground while Americans did better in recalling foreground information. Based on the results, suggestions of how to adapt to the cultural variation in visual perception between Chinese and American audiences are offered to international advertisers.

\(^2\) Coca-Cola, McDonald’s and OLAY were selected because of their considerable advertising amount in Asian market, further explained in Chapter 4.
Research Design and Thesis Structure

This research looks at the proportion of background elements compared to foreground elements in television commercials and the elements Chinese and American viewers tend to notice or ignore after viewing the commercials. These two questions will be addressed through two studies respectively. Study 1 (The Use of Field Information in Television Commercials) investigates and compares the proportion of background information in Chinese and American commercials. Cinematic aspects of seventy-four Chinese and US Coca-Cola, McDonald’s and OLAY commercials were analyzed to determine whether Chinese commercials are context-inclusive and US commercials are object-focused as suggested by literature on still visual displays. Results show that in the Chinese commercials field information occupies a larger percentage of the screen than object information in the foreground, indicating that Chinese commercials are context-inclusive. In the US commercials, to the contrary, the percentage of field information to object information is smaller than that in the Chinese commercials. Thus, previous findings of cultural variation in still visual images are supported in video images: Chinese commercials tend to be context-inclusive, whereas US commercials tend to be object-focused.

Study 2 (The Effect of Field Information in Television Commercials) attempted to investigate what elements Chinese and American viewers tend to notice or ignore after viewing the commercials. Two identical surveys were conducted in 55 Chinese students at Peking University and 62 American students at Clemson University separately. They first watched six commercials selected from the samples in Study 1, and they filled out a questionnaire asking which country’s versions made more sense, which were more
appealing and which were more persuasive. Then, 15 of the Chinese participants and 17 of the American participants volunteered for follow-up interviews. They were asked which items they could memorize from the commercials. After data filtration, 52 survey responses from the Chinese participants and 60 survey responses from the American participants were included in research results. All the 15 interview responses from the Chinese participants and 16 interview responses from the American participants were analyzed to reveal the location of items Chinese and American viewers are likely to notice. Results indicate that Chinese and American viewers have better impressions of the commercials that match their visual perception patterns, and they have different strongpoint in terms of recalling visual elements.

Based on the results of Study 1 and Study 2, the conclusion chapter (Chapter Five) contends that Chinese viewers are more dependent on field information when viewing a commercial and they find the context-inclusive commercials making more sense, more appealing and more persuasive. On the other hand, American viewers focus more on the objects in the foreground and they find object-focused commercials more to their liking.

In response to these cultural variations in perceptual pattern and advertisement preference, suggestions for international advertisers are offered at the end.

The main contents of each following chapter are summarized as below:

Chapter Two “Theory and Methodology” recapitulates previous research on cultural variation between East Asian and Western cultures in visual perception and visual displays. This chapter reveals that the proportions of field information in video images and viewers’ responses to videos with different percentage of field information have never been addressed in literature. This thesis research will discuss these two issues
in Chinese and US television commercials within brands. This chapter raises two research questions in response to those two issues:

**RQ1:** Do the Chinese television commercials contain more field information than the US counterparts?

**RQ2:** Do Chinese audiences perceive and recall field information better than US audiences?

Chapter Three deals with the content and results of Study 1. It first explains how commercials are selected and how the proportion of field information is measured. Based on the measurement results, this chapter tries to reveal the visual styles of Chinese and American commercials.

Chapter Four reports on the procedures and results of the surveys and interviews in Study 2. It explains how participants are recruited and how some of them are eliminated. Based on participants’ responses, this chapter discusses Chinese and American viewers’ preferences on two countries’ commercials and their performance of recalling background and foreground visual elements.

Chapter Five “Conclusion and Discussion” concludes the findings of commercial analyses, surveys and interviews and offers suggestions about how to customize the visual aspects of television commercials towards the perceptual preferences of East Asian and Western audiences. This chapter emphasizes the importance of audience’s culture-coded “terministic screen” in cinematic practice.
Practical Meaning of This Research

Economic globalization has brought many brands, such as Coca-Cola, McDonald’s and OLAY, to consumers in different international markets whose members have distinctive values, customs, preferences and expectations. Faced with this audience diversity, transnational companies need to know how to appeal to them through advertisements. Past research has found Chinese and American audiences generally favor commercials reflecting their cultural values and social norms, and they show a greater interest in purchasing these products, suggesting culturally customized commercials are more effective than standardized commercial versions (Cho et al.; Lin; Zhou et al.; Zhou and Russell). Since cross-cultural psychologists reveal cultural variation in visual perception between Chinese and Americans, researchers may also need to investigate their visual preference on television commercials. This study looks into cinematic aspects

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3 Standardized commercials are products of standardized advertising strategy that refers to applying identical or almost identical commercials to multiple countries. The commercials may have minor differences in visuals, music or script, but their major scenarios are the same. For example, Coca-Cola broadcasted a commercial named “Happy Factory,” which fantasizes a small world inside of an automatic selling machine. When a coin comes in, the residents work together to make a Coke. The Chinese version and American version are almost identical, except for the person who inserts the coin. The Chinese figures a Chinese guy and the American version figures a Caucasian guy. (Chinese version: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x_2kD5FwV48; American version: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NwCn-D5xFdc) These two commercials are considered as standardized commercials and the act of broadcasting them in relevant countries is called standardized advertising.
of television commercials and develops visual strategies for international advertisers to adapt to the visual perception patterns of Chinese and American audiences.

**Institutional Review Board (IRB) Application**

This study required IRB approval. An application for exemption certification to Clemson University IRB included an application form, an informational letter, an oral recruitment script, a blank questionnaire, a list of interview questions and Letter of Support from the research site at Peking University (see Appendix A). The protocol was validated by the Chair of the Clemson University IRB using exempt review procedures, and approval was given on December 18, 2008 (seen in Appendix B; protocol number: # IRB2008-385).
CHAPTER TWO
THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

Visual Design

Visual display is a composition of image elements that are organized in a carefully planned order in the interest of achieving a rhetorical purpose, that is, to provide information, to provoke emotions and eventually to stimulate actions. For example, a movie poster carefully arranges image elements in its background and foreground, such as people, trees, buildings and furniture and so on, to show audiences what the movie is about and who the stars are. More importantly, it tries to convince the audiences that the movie is worth watching and they should go to see it.

Compared to paintings and other artistic visuals, a visual design usually has a clearer purpose. A painting may deliver a message whose meaning is implicit and/or can be interpreted in multiple ways. In professional communication, however, visual designs are supposed to express an explicit meaning in a way that audience can easily understand. Advertising is a good example of this kind of visual design where message and purpose are clear—to make audience remember and ultimately buy the products. Thus, for advertising, it is particularly important that the audience understand and remember the commercials. This requires advertising designers to arrange image elements in a way that fits the audience’ perception patterns.

Psychologists have found that East Asians and Westerners perceive visuals in different ways (Boduroglu, Shah & Nisbett; Chua, Boland & Nisbett; Ji, Peng & Nisbett; Kitayama, Duffy, Kawamura & Larsen; Masuda, Gonzalez, Kwan & Nisbett; Masuda &

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4 Perception pattern here refers to the regular order people perceive visual information.
Nisbett, Peng, Choi & Norenzayan; Nisbett & Masuda; Nisbett & Miyamoto). If that is the case, advertising designers will need to customize the visual aspects of their commercials accordingly. This chapter reviews literature on cultural variation in visual perception, and develops a discussion about how to design visuals for audiences from different cultures. First of all, I will compare two conventional approaches to visual design in the field of professional communication. Second, I will review recent findings about culture and visual perception by psychologists. Third, I will bring these communication and psychology theories together to discuss the relations between culture and visual design.

**Approaches to Visual Design**

In the field of professional communication, there are two major approaches to visual design: a global approach and a culture-focused approach. The global approach is characterized by attempts “to invent an objective, universal visual language or to define such a language through perceptual principles and empirical research” (Kostelnick 182). It is based on the assumption of Gestalt psychology that human’s eyes and brains work in the same way across cultures (184). As a result, visual displays can work regardless of cultural boundary, and thus the notion of a universal visual design is possible. For instance, Tufte argues that the design of statistical graphics is a universal matter—like mathematics—and is not tied to the unique features of a particular language. In contrast, the culture-focused approach holds that “perceptual responses lack universality because visual information processing is also guided by what we learn and experience, not just the way our eyes and brains work” (185). Its advocates believe that culturally specified visual
designs are not only possible but also desirable, each of which “projects (however dramatically or slightly) a different cultural nuance” (184).

These two approaches encompass different ways of understanding the nature of design, its purposes and the ways in which users respond to it. The global approach largely reflects a modernist view that design should “bridge culture and make information accessible to all” (189). Thus, it is reasonable to emphasize the similarity in cognition for the purpose of bringing global audiences together. The culture-focused approach, on the other hand, is in the alliance with postmodernism for it values “pluralism, complexity and diversity” (189). It considers visual communication as a social act that is closely tied to cultural context (183). Thus, adapting design to cultural conventions of local community is necessary; otherwise, communication will lose its cultural sensitivity.

Many famous modernist scholars favor the global approach, such as Edward Tufte who asserted that “principles of information design are universal—like mathematics—and are not tied to unique features of a particular language or culture” in Envisioning Information (Tufte 10). Similarly here, William Horton contended that if we rely on images shared by all and avoid details that confuse or offend, graphics could be a universal language that is independent of verbal language and of culture (Horton 682). On the other hand, the culture-focused approach has been gaining popularity among postmodernist and social constructionist researchers. Ben Barton and Marthalee Barton, for example, argued for matching forms with specific communities of users, or at least configuring the representation so it allows flexible and inclusive interpretations (Kostelnick 184). Kaushiki Maitra and Dixie Goswami suggested visual design principles
are culturally different and readers from different cultures have different standards for evaluation and comprehension of information design (Maitra and Goswami 202).

I argue that there is some truth in both of these two approaches. By assuming the similarity in cognitive perception across cultures, the global approach enables information communication across cultures, which is especially important in the age of globalization. However, ignoring cultural variation is problematic, because communication cannot be culture-free or context free. As a product of social mediation, visual language has to be modified by historical and living environments that are culturally different. In fact, recent psychology studies reveal that even the way eye and brain perceive and process visual information is different between East Asians and Westerners. Here, I am going to review four research findings.

Culture and Visual Perception

Through years of ethnographic investigation in Japan, Edward Hall contends in his book *Beyond Culture* that “the natural act of thinking is greatly modified by culture” (Hall 9). The way people perceive and interpret visual images cannot avoid being influenced by their cultural background. Cross-cultural perception studies suggest that East Asians are likely to view visuals in a “field-dependent” manner, relying on the surroundings to give meaning to the position of an object (including person) (Nisbett & Miyamoto 467). They also experience more difficulty than Westerners in tasks that require the ability of separating the focal object from the field (Ji *et al.*; Hedden *et al.*). In contrast, Westerners tend to be “field-independent”, or called “object-focused,” meaning that they focus more on the focal object independently from the context in which it is
embedded (Nisbett and Miyamoto 467). Compared with East Asians, Westerners appear to perform better in the tasks involving separation of an object from its context (Ji et al.; Hedden et al.).

These systematic distinctions in visual perception have been supported by a variety of experimental studies, such as Ji et al., Masuda & Nisbett, Chua et al. and Hedden et al. described below.

(1) Field-Dependence:

In 2000, Ji and his colleagues conducted Rod-and-Frame Test (RFT) between East Asians (Chinese, Korean and Japanese) and European Americans to examine how much each country’s participants rely on the field to judge an object in it. A RFT experiment involves an apparatus, composed by a long box with a rotating rod at the end (Fig. 2.1). The orientation of the frame round the rod can be changed independently of the rod. When the rod and frame were rotating at different speeds, participants were asked to look down into the box and judge when the rod was vertical. This task was to examine the ability of excluding the focal object (rod) from its field (frame). If a person can make accurate judgments regarding the verticality of the rod embedded in the rotating frame, it means he/she is low at “field-dependence” during visual perception. The fewer errors a person makes, the less field-dependent he/she is.
The result was that Americans spent less time and made fewer mistakes than East Asians, indicating they are less field-dependent than East Asians (Ji et al. 951). Ji et al. explained that was because “Americans are more accustomed to analysis of a focal object in the environment and to orienting the self in relation to the object,” while East Asians are not so used to this visual perceptual pattern (952). They are much better at judging the degree of association between arbitrary figures that have been presented in various combinations (950). This study indicates that East Asians are field-dependent and Americans are object-focused when perceiving a moving item in a defined space. But what this research suggests is the difference in the ability of separating focal objects from the environment. It is not clear what causes this difference. Do American and Chinese tend to look at different parts of a visual scene? Or do they see the same picture but they
tend to forget certain visual information when performing a task? Chua et al. addressed these questions through a lab experiment.

(2) Eye Movement

In 2005, Chua and his colleagues demonstrate that East Asians actually tend to allocate their attention on the background, whereas Westerners are looking at the foreground longer. During the experiment, they presented Caucasian Americans and Chinese participants with pictures of a focal object (e.g. a tiger) placed on a background (e.g. the jungle). Participants rated how much they liked each picture, and their eye movements were tracked for three seconds. Compared with the Chinese participants, Americans looked at the focal object sooner and fixated for longer on it. Chinese subjects made more saccades (rapid eye movements from one location to the next) both in general, and in particular to the background. Results suggest that while viewing a picture, Americans are more attentive to focal objects, whereas Chinese are inclined to attend to field and the relationship between objects and field (Chua et al 12632). As a result, when looking at the same image, Chinese and American may see different pictures and generate different impressions. Masuda and Nisbett’s research in the next year confirmed this contention.
(3) Change Blindness:

In 2006, Masuda and Nisbett conducted a change blindness\(^5\) test at the University of Michigan. The experiment indicates that Japanese and Americans tend to notice different information when viewing the same pictures in a short time. The researchers prepared 30 pairs of color images of realistic industrial scenes: an airport, a construction site, a town, a farm, and a harbor. Each image contained focal objects (e.g., foregrounded machines) as well as contextual elements (e.g., background buildings). In each pair of images, there occurred only one change, which was either a change in focal object information (e.g., focal vehicle’s color) or a change in contextual information (e.g., changes in the location of clouds), seen in Fig. 2.2. Each image was presented for 560 milliseconds (0.56 second) with a blank field of 80 milliseconds (0.08 second) between pairs. The participants’ task was to view quick alternations of a pair of images and to identify the differences between the first and second images, and they were asked to press a key when they recognized the change and later to report it orally.

\(^5\) Change blindness is the idea that humans often miss large changes to our visual world from one view to the next. We are often not able to see large changes which appear to be perfectly obvious to somebody who knows what is going to happen.
Fig. 2.2 Examples of Field and Object Changes in Industrial Scenes (Masuda & Nisbett 384)
(Field change: the color of the truck in Picture A has been changed in Picture A'. Object change: the location of sidewalk at the left bottom area in Picture B has been changed in Picture B'.)

Consistent with previous findings, Japanese participants were found to detect changes in context information more rapidly than did American participants, and they detected “far more context changes than object changes” (Masuda and Nisbett 392). Americans, by contrast, detected more object changes than Japanese,” and they noticed object changes more rapidly than changes in context information” (392). There was no

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6 In this research, “contextual information” is the same as field information, referring to the elements in the field, defining the environment and relationship between environment and objects.
difference in how rapidly the two groups detected changes in object information (392). Within such short time spans, it is highly possible that viewers are only able to notice the details in part of each picture and their perception habits decide which part they see first. Thus, the cultural variation in change blindness suggests East Asians and Westerners allocate their attentions differently: the former tends to see the field first and the latter is likely to see the object first.

(4) Brain Activity:

Most recently, in 2008, Hedden and his colleagues demonstrated that such cultural variation in visual attention distribution was traceable in neural activities through a functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) study. An fMRI test can scan brain activity and locate the activated regions. The location of activation is an indicator of the usage of certain brain function. For instance, prefrontal and parietal areas are known to support sustained attentional control. If these areas are activated, it means the person is trying hard to concentrate on accomplishing the task. Greater the activation is, harder the person is trying. If these areas are not activated, it means the task is relatively easy and the person does not have to give much effort.

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7 Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) is one of the most recently developed forms of neural imaging technology. It measures the changing blood flow that is related to neural activity in the brain or spinal cord of humans or other animals. It occupied a dominant position in the brain mapping field due to its relatively low invasiveness, absence of radiation exposure and relatively wide availability.
During the experiment, participants were shown a series line and box combinations (Fig. 2.3) to make judgments regarding the line lengths by following two versions of instruction separately: absolute instruction and relative instruction. Specifically, the absolute instruction asked participants to judge whether the current line inside of the box matched the previous line, regardless of the size of the accompanying box. This task can examine the ability of excluding object from the field. If Americans are object-focused viewers as previous studies suggested, they should be good at this task and they would not have to try hard to accomplish it, while the task should be more difficult for East Asians whose visual perception were suggested to be field-dependent (Hedden et al. 12). Thus, the absolute task should be a culturally nonpreferred task for
East Asians. On the other hand, the relative task asked participants to judge whether the current box and line combination matched the proportional scaling of the preceding combination. As this task requires participants to perceive the focal object within in the field, it would be easier for East Asians and harder for Americans, if previous findings are true. Thus, it is considered as a culturally-nonpreferred task for Americans.

Ten East Asians and 10 Americans underwent the fMRI test while performing the two tasks. The fMRI results revealed that when doing their culturally nonpreferred tasks, both groups showed greater activation in prefrontal and parietal brain areas that were known to support sustained attentional control (Hedden et al. 14). This finding, again, demonstrated that East Asians are accustomed to field-dependent pattern of attention, whereas Americans are inclined to be object-focused.

Overall, these four studies have maintained each other’s assertion about cultural variation in visual perception pattern. With this knowledge, researchers cannot help wonder whether the same variation exist in visual displays of the two cultures. Out of this curiosity, Masuda and his colleagues (2009) conducted a relatively large-scale comparative analysis on East Asian and Western ancient paintings that were typically considered as masterpieces in the two cultures. They also investigated how contemporary East Asians and Americans draw landscape pictures and take portrait photographs. Their finding suggested that traditional East Asian art has a relatively larger amount of field information than Western culture, and this difference has been maintained by contemporary members of these two communities. In the following section, I am going to give a detailed review on the researches that suggest cultural variation in visual display, including Masuda et al.’s.
As visual image is the representation of the interpretation of the world, the way people perceive and process visual reality should have impact on visual products in the past and present.

(1) Ancient Painting Style

Through a comparative study on 1391 ancient paintings of East Asian and Western cultures\(^8\) from the 15\(^{th}\) through 19\(^{th}\) centuries. Masuda \textit{et al.} revealed cultural differences in perspective and construct. They found that the average locations of horizon in East Asian landscape pictures were significantly higher than that of Western ones. Asian paintings tend to depict landscape with a “bird’s eye view” that place artist’s standpoint in the sky, while Western artists typically fix their viewpoint at the same level as the subject of the work (Masuda \textit{et al.} 1262). Such unrealistically high horizon enables artists to portray the fields in their entirety, such as “mountains, rivers, and other objects,

\(^8\) Masuda \textit{et al.} did not specify which countries’ paintings were studied. They explained their research subjects were selected from the “digital images accessible on the web sites of major museums in the United States and East Asia: “We chose to analyze 731 Western paintings collected by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in New York City, and 660 East Asian paintings collected by four major museums in East Asia (Tokyo National Museum, Tokyo, Japan; Kyoto National Museum, Kyoto, Japan; the National Museum of Seoul, Korea; and the National Palace Museum, Taipei, Taiwan). Museums were selected according to their size and the quality of their collections. We considered these paintings representative of each culture because they were produced by renowned artists and have had wide exposure (Masuda \textit{et al.} 1263).
including people” (1272). In Western paintings, however, the relatively low perspective only allows part of the field to be seen and depicted. As a result, the East Asian paintings tend to include a larger amount of information about the field than the Western ones.

In addition, East Asian portraiture has also been found to contain more portray of field than Western portraiture. Generally, Western portraits tend to distinguish the figures from the ground by making them salient. Thus, their models often occupy a major fraction of the space (1263). According to Masuda et al., this tendency is observable during the periods of Renaissance (e.g., Da Vinci’s Mona Lisa, Raphael’s Portrait of Agnolo Dom), Baroque (e.g., Rubens’s Portrait of Susanna Fourment), and Rococo (Flagonard’s A Young Girl Reading, David’s Portrait of Madame Récamier) (1263) (Fig. 2.5). In Asian portraits, however, the size of the model is relatively small, “as if the model is embedded in an important background scene” (1263). The open space is often filled with much visual information such as a mattress, a folding screen and a window shadow (1263). As a result, the ratio of the size of the model’s face to the size of the entire visual field is substantially smaller in East Asian than in Western portraits. This finding suggests that East Asian painters deemphasize the focal object (model) as measured by overall area than Western painters (1264). Such difference again demonstrates East Asians’ special interests in field information.
Fig. 2.4 Examples of ancient Asian and European landscape paintings

(NOTE: The left one is *Mountain Studio in Early Summer*, by Chinese artist Ju Jie, Ming Dynasty, dated 1578, currently stored in Tokyo National Museum, Tokyo, Japan. The right one is *Wheat Fields*, by Dutch artist Jacob van Ruisdael, dated 1670, currently stored in The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, US)

(2) Contemporary Artistic Style

Similar cultural variation has also been found in the landscape drawings and portrait photographs by contemporary East Asians and Americans. Pictures in Fig. 2.6 are the examples of landscape pictures drawn by American and East Asian participants (The first four pictures (A-D) were drawn by American participants. The last four pictures (E-H) were drawn by East Asian participants) during Masuda et al.’s research. Participants were asked to draw a landscape picture that included at least a house, a tree, a river, a
person and a horizon, within five minutes. They were also told to feel free to include additional objects.

From the examples in Fig. 2.6, we can see that contemporary Asians seem to have inherited the artistic conventions of high-located viewpoint from ancient arts. Their pictures were drawn from the top of far away mountains. In contrast, American students’ works were like done from a viewpoint on the level of the ground. We can also see that Asian participants drew more objects than Americans, such as buildings, trees, people, weeds, clouds, and puffs of smoke. The statistic results indicated that the average location of horizon drawn by East Asians was 19% higher in the picture plane than those drawn by Americans. East Asians’ drawings were also found to include 74% more contextual objects than those Americans’.

After this picture-drawing task, the same group of participants was invited to another task that investigates their photograph taking styles. During the task, they were asked to take four portraits of a model: a photograph of the model sitting on a sofa in the laboratory, a photograph of the model standing against a wall, a photograph of the model sitting on a chair in the atrium of the building, and a photograph of the model standing in the atrium (1266). Pictures in Fig. 2.7 are the examples of participants’ works (The left picture was taken by an American participant. The right picture was taken by an East Asian participant).

From Fig. 2.7, we can clearly see that the size of model’s face in the East Asian participant’s photograph is much smaller than that in the American participant’s work. Statistic analysis showed that East Asians composed photographs in which the model was only 35% as large as the model in photographs produced by Americans
(NOTE: The first four pictures (A-D) were drawn by American participants. The last four pictures (E-H) were drawn by East Asian participants) (Masuda et al. 1267)
Fig. 2.7 Examples of photographs taken by American and East Asian participants

(NOTE: The left picture was taken by an American participant. The right picture was taken by an East Asian participant) (Masuda et al. 1268)

Overall, the findings of the picture-drawing and photograph-taking tasks showed that cultural variation in visual perception is consistent in visual displays in the past and present. East Asians tend to understand an object within its field environment, and they have developed the tradition of drawing pictures from an unrealistically high viewpoint to include as many background items as the paper allows. This style was concluded as “context-inclusive” by Masuda et al (2009), meaning the abundance of field information. To the contrary, Americans are more interested in the attributes of the focal object, rather than the background. In their portrait paintings and photographs, they tend to emphasize the model by zooming on his/her face, leaving limited space to the background depiction.
This style is called “object-focused,” meaning concentrating on focal objects (Masuda et al.).

This is a meaningful conclusion for cross-cultural visual studies in the sense that it confirms the consistency across perception pattern and visual display style. Accordingly, what we have known about visual perception is applicable to visual presentations. Since East Asians tend to see visual images contextually, they are also likely to produce visuals that incorporate a great deal of context. This principle should also be suitable to other visual forms, such as television commercial. In the next chapter, I am going to discuss television commercials as a form of visual display, and the meaning of cultural variation in visual perception to its design.

Methodology

As the literature demonstrates, the proportions of field information in East Asian and Western images are different. East Asian paintings, drawing and photographs tend to use wider views and higher angels than Western ones. As a result, background elements are depicted more completely in East Asian images than Western ones. Therefore, East Asian visual displays are considered to be “context-inclusive” (Masuda et al. 1264). Western visual displays, however, are considered to be “object-focused” because foregrounded objects take up relatively larger percentages than East Asian versions. This research will investigate whether this cultural variation is true in video images, such as television commercials. Study 1 will calculate and compare the proportion of field information in 74 Chinese and US commercials of three influential transnational brands, Coca-Cola, McDonald’s and OLAY of Procter & Gamble.
Previous research also indicates that East Asian and American viewers have different visual perception patterns when viewing still images. East Asians tend to view visuals in field-independently (Nisbett & Miyamoto). They are alert to visual changes in a picture’s background, and “blind” to the changes in the foreground (Masuda and Nisbett). Westerners, however, are inclined to be “field-independent”, or called “object-focused,” meaning that they focus more on the focal object independently from the context in which it is embedded (Nisbett and Miyamoto). Compared to East Asians, Westerners are better at detecting changes in a picture’s foreground, and they are relatively “blind” to changes in the background (Masuda and Nisbett). This research aims to investigate whether this cultural variation applies to Chinese and American viewers when they look at video images and whether they will have different impressions of commercials with high and low field information capacities. Study 2 investigates these two questions through questionnaire surveys that inquire Chinese and Americans’ impressions and follow-up interviews that examine their ability of recalling background and foreground visual items.

Study 1

Previous cross-culture advertising studies focused on how commercials adapt to customs, cultural values and social norms through content analyses. Cultural variation has been found in selling appeals, time orientation, product comparison and so on (Mueller 57; Lin 89; Zhou et al. 115). But few studies have applied the findings of cultural difference in perception and design conventions to examine the use of field information
in East Asian and Western television commercials. Study 1 aims to fill the gap by answering Research Question 1 (RQ1):

RQ1: Do the Chinese television commercials contain more field information than the US counterparts?

Consistent with previous research, “field information” refers to the visual cues describing the environment/situation and the relationship between the focal object (including characters) and the environment. Thus, it basically includes all the visual elements defining where the object is oriented and what the object does within its place. Its opposite is “object-focused information,” defining what the object is. To investigate the use of field information, this research establishes three measures, that is, frequency of scene switching, the ratios of busy shots to blank shots and long shots to close shots. A high level of each measure indicates a heavy use of field information. As previous research suggests East Asian visuals are context-inclusive whereas Western visuals are object-focused; thus, Chinese commercials are likely to have higher levels of the three measures than the US versions. Definitions of each measure are explained as below.

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9 Any visual cues count as field information, regardless of their relevance to other cues. For instance, a shot may contain visual cues that are seemingly unrelated to the environment, such as a motorcycle placed in a library. The motorcycle is a piece of field information, though it does not seem to be related to the library setting, since the audience has a strong tendency to believe what they see in a picture as “natural” and “realistic.” They try to understand it until they are given a reason to doubt its reliability (Finnegan 141). In other words, an audience is inclined to put every visual cue together and try to make sense out of them. As a result, the interpretation varies from person to person.
Frequency of Scene Switching

Scene is a complete unit of plot action incorporating one or more shots; the setting of that action (Barsam 414). A scene is the field/environment where an object (including characters) is placed and an event happens, so all field information is included. A commercial switching among more scenes contains more field information than a version switching among less ones within the same time span. For example, a McDonald’s commercial may show a person enjoying his/her chicken sandwich in McDonald’s restaurant, while another one may show a person holding a sandwich walks down a street, gets on a bus, steps in his/her office and starts a day. If both commercials are 30 seconds long, which is a regular length for commercials, the latter one would be considered to have more field information than the former one.

Ratio of Busy Shots to Blank Shots

The busyness of shots indicates the abundance of field information/contextual information that includes all the visual cues describing the environment or situation and the relationship between an object and the environment. A shot is busy when the screen is filled with visual cues. According to the percentage of blank space, each single shot in the commercials is rated as a busy, moderate or blank shot (the criteria are explained in the method section in Chapter Three). The higher the ratio of busy shots to blank shots a commercial has, the more field information it contains.

Ratio of Long Shots to Close Shots

A long shot is one “that provides a wide-angle view [that] enables the viewer to delineate relative proportions with regard to various elements in a scene: their sizes,
shapes, and placement” (Beaver 218), whereas a close shot “provides a limited, magnified view of a character or an object in a scene” (Beaver 70). In other words, a long shot provides a wider view than a close shot. In a long shot, the focal object is relatively small, leaving large space to the field. It enables audience to see various elements in the background, such as trees, mountains, buildings or cars. In contrast, the focal object takes large part of the screen, while the field is left a smaller part. Thus, a long shot contains more field information than does a close shot. Even if there is nothing in the background, a long shot of a scene still includes more field information than a close shot of the same scene. That’s because showing a blank background enables audience to see an object as isolated, whereas a close shot does not express whether there is anything in the surroundings; in turn it does not provide as much information about the relationship between the object and the environment as a long shot of the same scene.

For instance, the left picture in Fig. 2.8 is a screenshot of a long shot scene from the OLAY US commercial Body Ribbon and the right one is a zoom-in picture of the same scene. Their backgrounds are almost blank except for a few bubbles and ribbons. The long shot provides much information about where the woman is and what surrounds her—the woman is deep underwater with no one swimming around and her lower body is wrapped in pink ribbons. From the close shot on the right, readers can also tell the woman is in water, but they are not able to see how deep in water she is, whether she has any companions and whether she is naked. Thus, a long shot provides more information about the field than a close shot, and a commercial with high ratio of long shots to close shots contains a large amount of field information.
Collecting Television Commercials

According to Advertising Age’s 21st Annual Global Marketers report, Procter & Gamble occupied the spot of No. 1 from 2001 to 2006, with an investment of $8.52 billion in global media, $3.53 billion spent in the US and $1.77 billion spent in Asia in 2006 (“21st Annual Global Marketers”). In the same year, Coca-Cola ranked 12th in worldwide media with $1.89 billion, 27th in the U. S. with $487 million, and 8th in Asian media with $444 million, and McDonald’s ranked 17th worldwide with $1.61 billion, 33rd in the U. S. with $487 million, and 12th in Asia with $301 million (“21st Annual Global Marketers”). As an advertising giant, P&G has 100 brands within the US market and 295 in the worldwide market, ranging from baby and child care products to prestige fragrances. OLAY, one of its skin care product lines, entered the Chinese market in 1989 as one of the first brands allowed after the government opened its door to international companies. With a market share of 13.4% among Chinese skin care products, OLAY is also one of the most influential and profitable brands for P&G (Wang, par. 3). Therefore,
Coca-Cola, McDonald’s and OLAY are chosen to be the representatives of transnational advertisers in this study.

To select the specific television commercials used in this study, advertisements were collected from Google Video Search and YouTube.com on March 8, 9 and 10, 2009, using the terms *Coca-Cola commercials, McDonald’s commercials, and OLAY commercials*. Of the many video results, most were duplicate copies of the same versions, while some were 20 or 30 years old. These duplicate and outdated copies were eliminated. Only commercials that aired in the last 10 years and that appear in the first 500 Google Video and YouTube hits were selected.

Seventy-four Chinese and US television commercials were chosen, including 15 Chinese and 15 US Coca-Cola advertisements, 12 Chinese and 12 US McDonald’s advertisements, and 10 Chinese and 10 US OLAY advertisements. The Chinese and US commercials averaged about are 36 seconds in length and each contained about 20 shots. (The commercials can be viewed on the CD). Each shot in every commercial was analyzed for the Frequency of Scene Switching, the ratios of busy shots to blank shots, and the number of long shots compared to close shots.

**Study 2**

Study 2 attempts to address the other two questions about the effect of field information on Chinese and US audiences. Will the context-inclusive commercials work better for Chinese audience than for US audience? Will Chinese audience be able to recall more field information than US audience?
As literature suggests, East Asians are dependent on field information when perceiving still images, whereas Westerners tend to allocate their attention on focal objects. Specifically, East Asians rest their eyes at the focal object and the background longer than Westerners, especially on the background (Chua et al. 12632). They are better at detecting the changes in the background than are Westerners, and they are as good as Westerners at detecting the changes in the foreground where the focal object is located (Masuda and Nisbett 392). Additionally, they are so used to depending on field information that they even experience more difficulty isolating the object from the environment in comparison with Westerners (Ji et al. 950). To the contrary, Westerners look at focal objects sooner and longer than the background (Chua et al. 12632). They detect object changes more rapidly than changes in the background (Masuda and Nisbett 392). And they are better at tasks that require the separation of an object from its context (Ji et al. 949).

Therefore, East Asians appear to be field-dependent during visual perception whereas Westerners are object-focused. However, these findings have yet to be applied to video advertisements which bring a fluid and moving experience in comparison with static images, expanding perception research to a new genre. Do East Asians depend on field information more than foregrounded object when perceiving a commercial? Do Westerners focus their attention on the object other than the field? Can they even recall more of the information they are used to looking at? These curiosities are combined into Research Question 2 (RQ2):

**RQ2:** Do Chinese audiences perceive and recall field information better than US audiences?
If Chinese audiences perceive field information better than US audiences, they should find the context-inclusive commercials work better than the object-focused versions. Moreover, if the result of Study 1 suggests Chinese commercials contain more field information than their US counterparts, the Chinese versions are likely to have better effects on Chinese audiences than on US audiences, while the US versions are inclined to have better effects on US audiences than Chinese audiences. Here “better effect” refers to “making more sense” (clarity), “appearing more appealing” (appeal) and “being more persuasive” (persuasiveness). In other words, if a commercial is found to make more sense, appear more appealing or be more persuasive than another, it has a better effect on the audience. As Chinese audiences are field-dependent during visual perception, they are likely to find that the commercials with context-inclusivity are better than the object-focused ones. In contrast, US audiences may respond to the object-focused versions more positively.
CHAPTER THREE

STUDY 1: THE USE OF FIELD INFORMATION IN TELEVISION COMMERCIALS

Study 1 investigates the use of field information in Chinese and US television commercials to answer the first research question: Do Chinese television commercials contain more field information than US television commercials? The amount of field information will be measured in terms of frequency of scene switching, the ratio of busy shots to blank shots, and the ratio of long shots to close shots. Criteria of each measurement are explained as below.

Measurement Criteria

Criteria for Scene Switching

Television commercials usually contain more than one scene. The camera is likely to move among multiple scenes--streets, restaurants, homes, vehicles--and a scene “switch” is counted when the background changes from one to another, such as from Paris to China, from a playground to a stadium, and from a living room to a dining room. A character moving from a chair to a couch in the same room is not counted as a “switch” because the scene (i.e., background) did not change. The frequency of scene switching was determined by dividing the number of switches by the number of seconds in the commercial.
Criteria for Busy and Blank Shots

A busy shot is one filled with visual cues in the background and foreground leaving little open space. This research classifies shots into three categories, busy, moderate, and blank shots, based on the percentage of “open space” as seen in Table 3.1:

The first picture has buildings, people, and a decorated archway (pailou) and only about 10% open space in the upper right hand corner. In the second picture, the waterfall and the pool takes up about 40% of the screen, making it a “moderate” shot. The third picture is a “blank” shot because the white wall creates open that occupies more than 60% of the screen. To ensure the validity of this classification system, two graduate students were shown the examples, and they all agreed with the researcher’s categorization of the images as busy, moderate and blank shots.
Table 3.1 Criteria of Busy, Moderate and Blank Shots

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Shots</th>
<th>Blank Space</th>
<th>Image Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A Busy Shot</td>
<td>Less than 30%</td>
<td><img src="image1" alt="Busy Shot Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Moderate Shot</td>
<td>30-60%</td>
<td><img src="image2" alt=" Moderate Shot Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Blank Shot</td>
<td>More than 60%</td>
<td><img src="image3" alt="Blank Shot Image" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Criteria for Long Shots and Close Shots

In cinematography, a shot is “one uninterrupted run of the camera” (Barsam 414). It can be “as short or as long as the director wants, but it cannot exceed the length of the film stock in the camera” (414). Shots are generally categorized into long shots, close shots and medium shots, as illustrated in Figure 5, and the ratio of long shots to close shots of a commercial is determined by dividing the number of long shots by the number of close shots in it.

A Long Shot

A long shot shows “the full human body, usually filling the frame, and some of its surroundings” (Barsam 409). A long shot becomes “an extreme long shot” when it is photographed “far enough away from the subject that the subject is too small to be recognized, except through the context we see, which usually includes a wide view of the location, as well as general background information” (407). In this study, shots ranging from a full body shot to an extreme long shot are categorized as long shots (see Fig. 3.1).

A Close Shot

A close shot (or close-up) shows “a part of the body filling the frame--traditionally a face, but possibly a hand, eye or mouth” (Barsam 405). There are two types of close shots: extreme close shots and medium close shots. A medium close shot is half way between a medium shot and a close shot. It covers the subject’s head and shoulders. An extreme close shot refers to a shot tightly framed around part of the subject, such as the eyes. In this study, medium close shots, regular close shots and extreme close
shots are all counted as “close shots,” or in other words, shots covering up to as much as the subject’s head and shoulders are categorized as close shots (see Fig. 3.1).

**A Medium Shot**

A medium shot “falls somewhere between a close-up shot and a long shot” (Beaver 227). A medium shot can be further broken down into medium long shots and medium close shots. A medium close shot is a shot that shows “a character from the middle of the chest to the top of the head” (Barsam 410). A medium long shot refers to a shot that shows “a character from the knees up and includes most of a person’s body” (410). A medium shot is a shot showing “the human body, usually from the waist up” (410). In this study, a medium shot is counted if the shot is between a full body shot and a shot covering the head and shoulders (see Fig. 3.1).
Fig. 3.1 Criteria for Long Shots, Medium Shots and Close Shots

Result Analysis

Frequency of Scene Switching

Chart 3.1 Average Frequencies of Scene Switching in the Chinese and US Television Commercials (TVCs)
In Chart 3.1, “average frequency” refers to the average number of scene switches that occurred in 37 Chinese and 37 US commercials. The “frequency” equals the total scene switches divided by the total seconds of the commercials. A higher frequency indicates a more extensive use of field information. The results show that Chinese television commercials switch scenes more frequently than US commercials. The Coca-Cola commercials switch scenes about 80% more frequently than US commercials. The Frequency of Scene Switching in Chinese McDonald’s commercials is 40% higher than in the US commercials. The Frequency of Scene Switching in Chinese OLAY commercials is 10% higher than the US versions.

As scenes switch more quickly, the Chinese commercials appear to include more discrete places than the US commercials on average. For example, the third Chinese Coca-Cola commercial, *Red all over China*, shows a giant roll of red carpet is pushed by people with Coca-Cola in their pockets. The carpet rolls over six places within 30 seconds: a business district, a corner of a historical complex, a snow-capped mountain, a giant panda sanctuary, Shanghai and a road lined with coconut trees (see Fig. 3.4 to Fig. 3.9). “Red” represents excitement and popularity, usually used in festivals. In this commercial, it is a metaphor for the Beijing Olympic Games, inferring Chinese people are excited about the game and they are powered by Coca-Cola. By switching scenes that frequently, the commercial provided a wide view to the environment context and presented that Coca-Cola’s influence along with Olympics has reached every place of the country, from city to sanctuary, from snow-capped mountain to coconut tree-lined road. By doing so, the commercial tried to inform audiences the company’s positive image and nationwide recognition.
Screenshots from the Third Coca-Cola Chinese Commercial *Red all over China*

Fig. 3.2

Fig. 3.3

Fig. 3.4

Fig. 3.5

Fig. 3.6

Fig. 3.7

Fig. 3.8

Fig. 3.9
US commercials, however, tend to focus on the products and the people while telling the story in fewer scenes. Eight of the 15 US Coca-Cola commercials looked at in this study only switched scenes once. The first US Coca-Cola commercial, for instance, featured Bill Gates who was working late in his office (Fig. 3.10). He wanted to buy a Coke from a vending machine, but he did not have enough change (Fig. 3.12). So he walked down the hallway asking loudly “Hello, anybody got some change for a Coke? I will pay you back!” (Fig. 3.14) The commercial has only one scene switch, from his office to the hallway, thereby directing the audience’s attention to the product by limiting the complexity in scenes.
Screenshots from the First Coca-Cola US Commercial *Bill Gates and Coca-Cola*

Fig. 3.10

Fig. 3.11

Fig. 3.12

Fig. 3.13

Fig. 3.14
Ratio of Busy Shots to Blank Shots

Chart 3.2 Means of Busy, Moderate and Blank Shots in Chinese and US Coca-Cola Television Commercials (TVCs)

As Chart 3.2 shows, the Chinese commercials contain more busy shots and fewer blank shots than the US commercials. The means of busy shots in the Chinese Coca-Cola, McDonald’s and OLAY commercials were 3.1 times, 0.74 times and 12.5 times more than in the corresponding US commercials. Blank shots in the US commercials were 0.34
times (Coca-Cola), 3.92 times (McDonald’s), and 1.52 times (OLAY) more common than in the Chinese commercials respectively. There is no significant difference in the means of moderate shots between the two countries.

Chart 3.3 Ratios of Busy Shots to Blank Shots in Chinese and US Television Commercials (TVCs)

This chart shows Chinese commercials have more busy shots than blank shots. Specifically, the busy shots appeared 2.5 times more frequently than blanks shots in the Coca-Cola commercials, 2.75 times more frequently in the McDonald’s commercials and 1.59 times more frequently in the OLAY commercials. US television commercials, however, have fewer busy shots than blank shots. The busy shots were 45% of the blanks shot in the Coca-Cola commercials, 32% in the McDonald’s ones, and only 5% in the OLAY ones. The ratio of long shots to close shots in Chinese commercials is obviously
higher than that in the US counterparts. The difference in the ratios of busy shots to blank shots between Chinese and US commercials suggests Chinese commercials have more field information than US commercials. Typically, in Chinese commercials there were more people in the foreground and more items in the background than in the US commercials. For instance, the seventh Chinese McDonald’s commercial included five scenes: the sun rising (Fig. 3.15), people waking up in bed (Fig. 3.16), people on a bus (Figs. 3.17 and Fig. 3.18), staff preparing food (Fig. 3.19), and people having breakfast at a McDonald’s (Fig. 3.20). In that commercial, 30% of the shots were busy shots, while only 10% were blank shots. Scenes were filled with field information that indicated the context, such as time, weather and the relationships among characters.

US commercials, in contrast, tend to keep the shots clean so that viewers can focus their attention on the focal object and not be distracted by the field information. For example, the 10\textsuperscript{th} US McDonald’s also advertises breakfast but uses blank shots more often than busy shots. The athletes are exercising alone in broad spaces (Fig. 3.21-Fig. 3.28), and each of them says a time between six and seven o’clock when they get up to work in pursuit of success. And they claim they have McDonald’s chicken biscuits for breakfast, suggesting strong and hardworking people should eat McDonald’s breakfast. Most of the shots have plain backgrounds, so that viewers will see the characters first, remember what they are doing and what they say easily.
Screenshots from the Seventh McDonald’s Chinese Commercial *McDonald’s Breakfast*

Fig. 3.15

Fig. 3.16

Fig. 3.17

Fig. 3.18

Fig. 3.19

Fig. 3.20
Screenshots from the Tenth McDonald’s US Commercial *Chicken for Breakfast*
In most of the blank shots, there was only one character in the foreground and nothing in the background, thereby limiting the context and relationship between the actors and the environment. The person with/without the sandwich is the focal object. Audiences, in turn, pay more attention to the product rather than the field.

Ratio of Long Shots to Close Shots

Chart 3.4 The Means of Long, Medium and Close Shots in the Chinese and US Television Commercials (TVCs)
Chart 3.4 indicates that Chinese Coca-Cola and McDonald’s commercials contain more long and medium shots and fewer close shots than the US versions. The mean of long shots in the Chinese Coca-Cola commercials was 117% of that in the US versions, while the use of close shots was only 63.7% of that in the US commercials. The mean of long shots in the Chinese McDonald’s commercials was 122.6% of that in the US versions, and the use of close shots was 27.6% of that in the US commercials. But there was no such significant difference between OLAY Chinese and US commercials.

Chart 3.5 Ratios of Long to Close Shots in Chinese and US Television Commercials (TVCs)

This Chart shows that the ratio of long shots to close shots in the Chinese commercials is higher than that in the US commercials. The Chinese commercials appear to provide more field information than the US commercials by putting the objects (including characters) in a larger field. The results also reveal the ratio in OLAY Chinese
commercials (0.53) is similar to that in the US versions (0.5). For example, the 10th Chinese commercial and the 6th US commercial are advertising different products but their use of long shots and close shots are almost the same. The Chinese version contains 15 shots, of which 13.3% are long and 46.7% are close. Of the 12 shots in the US commercial, 16.7% of them are long and 41.7% are close. As Fig. 3.29 and Fig. 3.30 showed, two commercials opened with a long shot and a medium shot indicating the location of the character. They used close shots of a woman applying cream. The product was then presented along with its name. Both commercials end with OLAY’s signature ending shot, a medium or close shot of the actor smiling. The product was identified again before the end. One reason the Chinese and US commercials are similar may be because of the properties of the products. As a skin care brand, OLAY’s commercials have to use many close shots to present the product’s effect on skin, and long shots are not necessary after the location is clarified in the first few seconds. In the commercials of two other brands, the ratio of long shots to close shots in Chinese versions remains higher than that in US versions.
Fig. 3.29 Screen Shots of the Tenth OLAY Chinese Commercial
Study 1 investigated the proportion of field information in terms of three cinematic techniques. The results demonstrate that Chinese television commercials tend to switch scenes more frequently, use busy shots and long shots more extensively than US commercials in comparison with blank shots and close shots. As these three measures indicate the amount of field information, the results suggest Chinese commercials contain more field information than US counterparts. The results also appear to suggest Chinese commercials tend to focus on presenting the context and clarifying the relationships.
between object and the environments, whereas US commercials emphasize the properties of products. In other words, Chinese commercials are context-inclusive and US commercials are object-focused, corresponding to the design conventions in still images, such as painting, photographs and graphic illustrations.
CHAPTER FOUR

STUDY 2: THE EFFECT OF FIELD INFORMATION IN TELEVISION COMMERCIALS

Study 2 attempts to investigate the effect of field information in television commercials, and address the second research question: Do Chinese audiences perceive and recall field information better than US audiences? A questionnaire survey was conducted at Peking University and Clemson University. Participants were asked to fill out a questionnaire after viewing six selected Chinese and US commercials.

Methodology

Participant Recruitment

Participants were selected based on their membership in one “cultural community.” They need to be either Chinese or American. In the questionnaire, participants were asked for their nationality and the number of years they lived in China and US. At Clemson University, 62 students participated in the survey. One of them was an international student and had only been US for one year. His questionnaire response was dropped off from the survey. After the survey, participants who volunteered for a follow-up interview were also asked to recall the story in each commercial. One set of the questionnaire and interview responses from Clemson participants was eliminated from results because they were not usable. At the end, 60 copies of questionnaire responses from American students were analyzed. At Peking University, 55 Chinese students participated in the survey. None of them were international students, but three of them
did not complete their questionnaire. So those three copies of questionnaire were taken out.

Selecting Commercials

Three pairs of Chinese and US commercials with similar themes were selected for this study. They are the second Coca-Cola Chinese commercial *Bring Me Home* and the third Coca-Cola US commercial *Christmas Coca-Cola Truck*, the seventh McDonald’s Chinese commercial *McDonald’s Breakfast* and the ninth McDonald’s US commercial *Chicken for Breakfast*, the third OLAY Chinese commercial *Moisture Body Wash* and the first OLAY US commercial *Ribbon Body Wash*.

The products figured in each pair of the commercials are the same, which makes the commercials comparable and participants are less likely to report the commercials’ effectiveness based on their preference to the products. The Chinese commercials were subtitled in English. All the commercials were posted on a blog beforehand (http://jin-thesis.blogspot.com/). When conducting the surveys, the blog was pulled up and the commercials were played one at a time for the participants before they filled out the questionnaires.
Fig. 4.1 *Bring Me Home*

Fig. 4.2 *Christmas Coca-Cola Truck*

Fig. 4.3 *McDonald’s Breakfast*

Fig. 4.4 *Chicken for Breakfast*

Fig. 4.5 *Moisture Body Wash*

Fig. 4.6 *Ribbon Body Wash*
The Research Setting at Peking University

Because there is no Institutional Review Board in Peking University, the researcher was directed to the School of Journalism and Communication at Peking University to request approval to conduct the survey in a class. After receiving the Letter of Support (Appendix A), the first survey was conducted in a class of 55 students from the school. The class was Introduction to Broadcasting (Journalism 452) and most of the students were sophomores majoring in Journalism or Broadcasting. After the survey, 15 students volunteered for a follow-up interview, in which two questions were asked: What items did you see in each commercial?

In this question, “items” includes anything in the commercials. By asking this question, the interview aims to investigate whether the Chinese participants noticed more items in the field and whether US participants were attracted to focal objects as previous researches have suggested. The number of times background and foreground items being mentioned were tabulated and compared between the two groups of participants.

The Research Setting at Clemson University

At Clemson University, four classes participated in the survey, which included 18 students from Visual Communication (English 332), 36 students from two sections of Accelerated Composition (English 103), and eight students from Public Relations Writing (English 496). 62 students initially participated in the survey. The participants from the first three classes were shown the same six commercials and asked to fill out the same questionnaire used at Peking University. Three students from Visual Communication initially volunteered to complete follow-up surveys, and two students from Visual
Communication and five students from Accelerated Composition took the surveys in the researcher’s office. These participants viewed the commercials a second time because several passed between their initial viewing and the time they returned for the follow-up interview. The Public Relations Writing students were recruited by the instructor via email. Students interested in the research were invited to the researcher’s office where they watched the six commercials, filled out the questionnaire, and answered the interview questions.

**Survey Result Analysis**

The survey analysis shows that most of the Chinese participants responded to the Chinese commercials more positively than the US versions (seen in Chart 4.1). The responses to the first survey question “which version makes more sense” indicate Chinese participants’ most obvious preference to the Chinese commercials than the US versions. 86.54% of the participants reported the Chinese commercials made more sense, which is more than 6 times of the participants who chose the US versions over Chinese versions. 55.77% of the participants reported the Chinese versions were more appealing, versus 44.23% of them who reported the US were more appealing. 71.15% of the participants reported the Chinese version were more persuasive, while 28.85% of them reported the US versions were more persuasive. Chinese participants’ preference to the Chinese commercials in terms of appeal is less significant than the other two probably because the foreign culture represented the US versions helped catching eyes. In general, the results show Chinese commercials were more effective on the Chinese viewers than the US versions.
Chart 4.1 Perceived Clarity, Appeal and Persuasive in Chinese Participants

Chart 4.2 Perceived Clarity, Appeal and Persuasive in American Participants
Meanwhile, most of the American participants found their country’s commercials had higher level of clarity, appeal and persuasiveness than the Chinese versions (seen in Chart 4.2). 72.41% of the participants reported the US commercials made more sense, which is about 2.6 times of the participants who chose the Chinese versions. 79.31% of the participants voted for the US commercials in term of appeal, 3.8 times of those who chose the Chinese versions. 58.62% of the participants reported the US commercials to be more persuasive and 41.38% of them chose the Chinese versions. Interestingly, the foreign cultural elements in the Chinese commercials seem not to be as appealing to the American audience as the US commercials to the Chinese audience.

Interview Result Analysis

After the survey, 15 of the Chinese participants and 18 of the American participants volunteered for follow-up interviews. All 15 of the Chinese participants’ responses and 17 of the responses given by the American participants were usable and put into the analysis. During the interviews, the participants were asked to recall the items shown in each commercial, that is, Coca-Cola Chinese and US versions, McDonald’s Chinese and US versions and OLAY Chinese and US versions. The purpose of the interviews is to investigate cultural variation in attention allocation suggested in literature that Chinese audiences are more attentive to background than to foreground, while US audiences are more attentive to foreground than to background.
Memorizing Coca-Cola Commercials

Generally, Chinese participants recalled a little more background items (locations, furniture, weather and Christmas lights) than foreground items (characters, objects and products) in Coca-Cola Chinese and US commercials. For instance, when asked what they remember in the Chinese Coca-Cola commercial *Bring Me Home*, they mentioned the cities of Paris and China 7 times, the locations of the restaurant, home and dinner table 37 times and details like dumplings and forks that were on the dinner table 11 times. Thus, they memorized background items 55 times in total, and each of them recalled background items 3.67 times on average. In other words, each Chinese participant recalled 3.67 items in the Chinese commercial’s background.

Chart 4.3 Times of Background Items in Coca-Cola Chinese and US Commercials Being Recalled by Chinese and American Participants
When American participants were asked to recall visual elements from the same commercial, they mentioned those background items less than did Chinese participants. They reported the cities of Paris and China 7 times, the locations of restaurant, home and dinner table 35 times and background details of dumplings and fork 5 times—47 times in total. Each of them memorized background items 2.76 times on average. Thus, American participants recalled fewer background items from Chinese commercials than Chinese participants. They also recalled fewer background items from US commercials (1.41 times) than Chinese (2.6 times) (seen in Chart 4.3).

Chart 4.4 Times of Background and Foreground Items in Coca-Cola Chinese and US Commercials Being Recalled by Chinese and American Participants

Chart 4.4 compares the times of background and foreground items being recalled by Chinese and American participants from Coca-Cola Chinese and US commercials.
From the chart, we can see that Chinese viewers recalled more background items than Americans again when they talked about US Coca-Cola commercial. But they were not able to recall as many foreground items from either the Chinese commercial or the US commercial as American. Each of the Chinese viewers reported 3.6 items from Chinese commercial’s foreground on average, such as Xiang Liu and his parents, two animated children characters and Coke, while each of the Americans reported 3.88 of these 4 objects. In other words, the American viewers were more alert to the information in foreground. American participants also performed better in the task of recalling foreground items in the US commercial than did Chinese participants. We can see that American viewers were able to see and memorize foreground items in video advertisement regardless of commercials’ nationalities, and Chinese viewers are better at recalling items in the commercial’s background than Americans. Similar findings are reflected in the results of other two brands’ commercials.

Memorizing McDonald’s & OLAY’s Chinese and US Commercials

The results of recalling McDonald’s and OLAY’s commercials were consistent with what we found in the case of memorizing Coca-Cola’s commercials. As shown in Chart 4.5 below, each Chinese viewer mentioned where the stories happened in McDonald’s commercials such as McDonald’s kitchen, restaurant, bedroom, bus and office, 3.27 times on average, which is more than Americans who only reported those background elements 2.44 times on average. In addition, Americans also showed a higher capability of recalling visual elements in foreground in comparison with Chinese viewers.
Chart 4.5 Numbers of Background and Foreground Items in McDonald’s Commercials

Being Recalled by Chinese and American Participants

Chart 4.6 Numbers of Background and Foreground Items in OLAY Commercials

Recalled by Chinese and American Participants
When asked to memorize what they see in the McDonald’s Chinese and US commercials, American viewers tend to see and recall more foregrounded items such as women characters, products, and ribbons wrapped around the character’s body than Chinese viewers, but the background elements they reported were fewer than the information provided by the Chinese participants, as shown in Chart 4.6.

This Chart revealed the similar results as Chart 4.5 Chinese participants memorized slightly more background items and fewer foreground items than Americans when recalling both the Chinese and US commercials. This consistency indicates Chinese audiences are more capable of perceiving and recalling information in the field, whereas US audiences are better at capturing the focal objects. The means of reported background and foreground items in Charts 4.4-4.6 are added respectively, as presented in Chart 4.7 below.

Chart 4.7 Times of Background and Foreground Items Recalled by Each Participant
Each Chinese participant recalled 13.13 background items and 12.6 foreground items from the six commercials, while each American participant memorized 8.65 background items and 14.06 foreground items. Obviously, Chinese participants recalled more background items than foreground items, and American participants recalled more foreground items than background items. Additionally, Chinese participants recalled more background items than American participants, but they recalled fewer foreground items.

The results correspond to the studies of Nisbett et al. claiming that East Asians pay more attention to the contextual information in pictures than Westerners. Therefore, in Chinese culture, given more contextual information in the commercials, the audiences are better at perceiving and memorizing items in the background as the visual clues of the relationship between characters and environments. American audiences, by contrast, pay more attention to the objects in the foreground at the expense of contextual information in the background. Therefore, when watching television commercials, Chinese audiences appear to be field-dependent, whereas US audiences are object-focused.

Other Findings

During the interview, the American audiences described the visual aspects of Chinese commercials to be “busy” or “distracting.” Five out of the 17 American participants mentioned the reason why they thought the US OLAY commercial was clearer was because the Chinese version had too much things going on. As a result, they had difficulty concentrating on the properties of the product. Two of the American
participants reported the Chinese versions “talked too much,” and they tried so hard to keep up with the subtitles that they missed some of the visual parts.

However, none of the Chinese participants complained the visual complicatedness of the Chinese versions. Three of them mentioned they preferred the Chinese OLAY commercial mainly because the background scenes were more “beautiful” and “inspiring” than the US versions. These feedbacks suggest that East Asian audiences do appreciate the relatively complex shots in the context-inclusive commercials, while the Western audiences are more used to the succinct styles.

The interviews also revealed that respondents tended to interpret television commercials in different ways. When they missed some details, they made up stories by themselves and still managed to understand the commercials. For instance, most of American students did not know who the two animated characters (Golden Boy and Jade Girl)\textsuperscript{10} were (seen in Fig. 4.7) and they were confused about how a Coke brought the hero from Paris to his home in China. That is the major reason why most of them chose the US Coca-Cola commercial for making more sense other than the Chinese version. However, regardless of the lack of background knowledge, American participants got the message from the commercial that Coca-Cola was the drink for party and it reminded people of family reunion on holidays. These findings suggest cultural experience is important but not crucial for accurate understanding. Visual language is “culture-free” to some extent, but commercials are clearer for those who have relevant background knowledge.

\textsuperscript{10} Golden Boy and Jade Maiden (金童玉女) are the boy and girl attendants of fairies in traditional Chinese tales. They are like the Santa Claus of Chinese New Year, representing the arrival of the holiday.
On the other hand, none of the Chinese participants reported to be confused by the US Coca-Cola commercial because they did know who Santa Claus was or why he was associated with Coca-Cola (seen in Fig. 4.8). That is because the character of Santa Claus has been brought to East Asia through various print and electronic media. And Chinese tend to expose themselves to Western media more frequently than Americans expose themselves to Eastern media as revealed by Chart 4.1. The survey showed that Chinese participants had lived in Western countries for 0.3 year on average, while the American students lived in Eastern countries for 0 year. As a result, Chinese participants were relatively familiar with the characters in the Coca-Cola US commercial, whereas American counterparts were not equally familiar with the context of the Chinese version.
In summary, Study 2 addressed the second research question by comparing the survey and interview responses from the Chinese and American participants. The results indicate that Chinese viewers perceive and recall field information better than US audiences. In other words, Chinese are field-dependent and Americans are object-focused when interpreting television commercials, which is consistent with psychological findings of East Asian and Westerner’s perception patterns.
CHAPTER FIVE
CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Findings of this research indicate that the visual design convention in television commercials is different between Chinese and American cultures. Chinese commercials appear to be field-inclusive, including field items in their entirety, whereas American commercials are object-focused, excluding irrelevant field items. Additionally, when viewing a commercial, Chinese tended to remember more field items than Americans. The commercials they find effective generally switch scenes relatively frequently, and have little open space and wide views. Americans, by contrast, performed better at recalling focal objects than Chinese. They like commercials that emphasize the features of focal objects by placing them in plain background. These findings correspond to the systematic differences in the design convention and visual perception between two cultures suggested by previous research, and they expand previous research on cultural variation in static images to video images.

This research corresponds to the notion of social perspective that “communication is inextricably bound up in the culture of a particular society” (Faigley 236). As social constructionists contend, there is no immediate knowledge of reality and it is through social interaction in a community that people decide what becomes knowledge and what becomes discourse conventions (Thralls & Blyler). From this perspective, verbal and visual communication is a social act and the conventions should vary from culture to culture. For instance, Maitra and Goswami revealed that Japanese and American readers have developed different document design models that emphasize different communicative features value. American design model values “simplicity, clarity and
directness” (201), indicating that only the most relevant information should be included. To the contrary, Japanese document designers pursue “aesthetics and ambiguity” (201). As explained by the Japanese executive, the purpose of his firm’s annual reports was to “present the company’s image with a visually attractive document so that the reader would form a good impression of the company” (200). As a result, the report contains many pictures that are not connected to the company in a prominent position. However, American readers were confused by the overuse of “flashy” pictures and they found “the purpose of the document was not clear to them until they reached the last two pages of the document” (201).

Similar results have also been found by a case study on Chinese and American manuals. In the study, Wang compared the use of graphics in instruction manuals for small household electronic appliances, such as ventilators, table fans and coffee makers. She found the illustrations in Chinese manuals convey information that is more than what a user needs to operate the device (Wang 559). For instance, the manual of ventilator contains layouts, rated voltage, rated frequency and rated input power and other technical data, as shown in Fig 5.1. Those data are needed by maintenance personnel but not so helpful in guiding customers to use the machine. In contrast, American manuals seem more simple and direct. Instead of showing product structure, illustrations include task-related information only, such as graphics of how to add water to a coffeemaker and which button to push to make it work as shown in Fig. 5.2.
Fig. 5.1 Graphics in the Manual for the Jiexiang Ventilator (Wang 556)

**How to Use**

Before first use, wash the Permanent Filter. Pour one full mug/cup of cold tap water into the Water Reservoir and follow brewing instructions below.

- **NOTE:** The coffee markers on the Permanent Filter represent approximately 2 tablespoons of coffee grounds. Cone-shaped paper filters are available in department or specialty stores as Melitta® size #1 filters.

**Figures A and C**

Pour one full mug/cup of cold tap water (up to 13 oz.) into the Water Reservoir. (Figure A)

Close the Lid. Place your mug/cup on the Cup Rest directly under the Filter Basket opening. Push down and release the On Switch. The On Light will glow. (Figure C)

The Coffee Brewer and On Light will turn off when the brewing cycle is completed. Allow the coffee to finish dripping from the unit before removing your mug or cup.

**Figures A, B, and C**

Place either the Permanent Filter or a one-cup cone-shaped paper filter inside the Filter Basket. (Figure B)

Add approximately 2 3/4 tablespoons coffee for 10 oz. of water and 1 tablespoon coffee for 5 oz. of water. (Also more or less coffee depending on individual taste.)

**NOTE:** There will be slightly less coffee in your mug/cup than the amount of water added as the grounds absorb some of the liquid.

Fig. 5.2 Graphics in the Manual for the Black & Decker Coffeemaker (Wang 556)
In the case of manual design, the task-related information can be considered as the focal object in a picture, the central subject of the instruction, while technical data like wiring layout are the field information in a picture, not immediately related to task performing but helpful for a comprehensive understanding about the whole situation. From a Western perspective, visual designs should only include the most important information and make it salient in images. Otherwise, viewers may be as confused as the American participants who read the Japanese annual report. Viewers may not be able to catch the main point of the visual image because they are distracted by field information that is not most relevant to the subject of matter. On the other hand, Eastern design model considers field information important as well and it should be included. Professional designs may use visually pleasant images to create a good atmosphere and to show artistic skills of the designer.

**Culture and Terministic Screen**

To produce audience-oriented visuals, it is important for designers to know the design conventions of the reader community and how to perform these conventions. As Burke argues in his famous book *Language as Symbolic Action*, our knowledge of reality does not directly come from reality but from a projection of reality through “terministic screen.” We have to rely on encyclopedias, atlases, and other assorted reference guides to learn the world beyond our immediate sense experience. The language the authors chose to use is by no mean objective. It is supposed to direct attention to particular parts of reality rather than others. “Terministic screen” is the set of symbols that we choose to use to describe reality and the screen through which we see the reality. As a result, what we see is not the reality itself, but its reflected, selected and deflected version.
Similarly, what we see from visual images is also a projection through terministic screen that is framed by long-term collective construction in cultural community. Photographers can take different pictures of the same object by using different angles and frames. Their cinematography choices are influenced by their cultural orientation about which element is significant enough to be included and which element should be excluded from the screen. As Masuda and Nisbett’s research demonstrates, East Asians tend to use wider and higher angle than Westerners to include more background items in the picture, directing viewers’ attention to the field rather than the focal object. Field-dependent viewers may find these visuals more comfortable and understandable because their attention is directed to the places they intended to look at. Object-focused viewers may become confused and frustrated because it is harder for them to see the information they are most interested in.

As Maitra and Goswami contend, Western design principles emphasize simplicity, clarity and directness. This is well illustrated by Tufte and Nielsen. In *The Visual Display of Quantitative Information*, Tufte argues that a large share of ink on a graphic should present data-information because that is the content of subject. Thus, designers should maximize data-ink ratio by erasing non-data-ink and redundant data-ink within reason. Visual elements that do not tell viewers anything new, such as interior decoration of graphics, are considered as “chart junk” and should be deleted. Similarly, Neilsen in his *Designing Web Usability: The Practice of Simplicity*, contends that “simplicity should be the goal of page design” (Nielsen 97). He assumes that “users are rarely on a site to enjoy the design” but to learn the solid information (97). Therefore, a website should only
include “screen real estate” of interest to users, and all other information should be minimized.

The object-focused style of American commercials corresponds to these design principles. Producers assume viewers are most interested in knowing the matter of subject and field information is not as important as the focal object. The field information in Chinese commercials will probably be considered as redundant and unnecessary by Tufte and Nielsen. But from an Eastern perspective, field information is necessary, because it enables viewers to capture the subtle relation between an object and the environment, and this knowledge helps them to understand what the object is and what it can do. This field-inclusive style is valued because it manifests the emphasis on context in high-context culture.

If not consider the financial factors, commercials that match the local design model and cultural values should be most effective. Many transnational companies, such as Coca-Cola, McDonald’s and OLAY, have been adapting their commercials to local cultures. Though promoting the same products, they use localized commercials for each specific cultural market. For China and other collectivistic cultures, they create television commercials telling stories that happened in local. The commercials appear to have busier visuals, longer shots and more frequent setting switching. For the US and other individualistic cultures, the visual of the commercials contain blanker visuals, closer shots, and the scene setting does not change that frequently. Moreover, the advertisers tend to employ the local celebrities as their spokespersons, such as Xiang Liu and Ming Yao in Coca-Cola Chinese commercials. As the results suggest, audiences tend to respond to these localized versions more positively.
Suggestions for Cinematography Practice

Based on the findings of culturally specific perceptual habits and expectations, this research provides a few recommendations for international advertisers to produce commercials that match the design conventions of Chinese and American audiences. When producing commercials for Chinese audience who are suggested to be dependent on field information in visual perception, designers need to pay extra attention to the inclusion and arrangement of background items. They may need to switch background scenes properly and use long shots to define the location of focal objects, and they can place visual cues that are associated with messages in the background because the audience is likely to look at that part. There are also a few things designers should avoid. Since the audience is used to context-inclusive visual displays, designers should try not to stay in one scene throughout a commercial, not to leave the background blank, not to have too many blank shots, and not to make mistakes in the background.

When designing commercials for object-focused American audience, designers need to direct the audience’s attention to the focal objects by restricting the use of field information. Specifically, they may use close shots to present details about the product, try to keep the foreground organized and keep the background clean to avoid distracting the audience. Meanwhile, designers also need to avoid switching scenes too frequently, putting too many things in the background and using too many long shots.

Moreover, we should also see that the cultural orientation does not necessarily apply to every individual. There are Chinese audiences who favor the clarity of the object-focused commercials, and US audiences who appreciate the beauty of ambiguity.
of field-inclusive ones. In other words, there are field-dependent Americans and object-focused Chinese. The categorization of design convention between East Asian and Western culture indicates the general tendency, and it does not necessarily apply to everyone. As paralogic hermeneutic scholars contends, people are able to understand discourse from other communities though lacking of cultural experiences. Being a member of a community and internalizing the communal language are not the prior requirements. Understanding arises directly out of communicative interaction regardless of discourse conventions held by the communities (Thralls and Blyler 23). Audiences can make up the story by themselves if they did not understand some visual cues. For instance, during the interview, American participants did not know who the animated boy and girls were, but they figured out the point of the commercial was Coca-Cola can bring you home.

**Ideology of Inclusion and Exclusion**

According to Barton and Barton, visuals not only embody cultural and disciplinary conventions, but also reflect designers’ ideology. They compare maps to collages. The rules of inclusion and exclusion determine what is significant enough to be mapped and what is not. This selective signification of visual information helps to sustain power relations by legitimating certain meaning systems and delegitimizing other. The act of privileging is intended to be concealed from the readers because maps are also taken as natural, rather than conventional information.

From this perspective, the inclusion and exclusion of field information in Chinese and American commercials represent different views on the significance of context in the
ideological systems of two cultures. A major distinction between high-context and low-context cultures is the degree of reliance on the contextual information in reasoning and interpretation. Chinese tend to think holistically, concentrating on “the context or field as a whole, including attention to relationships between a focal object and the field, and the preference for explaining and predicting events on the basis of such relationships” (293). Americans’ cognition pattern was classified as analytic thought, “involving detachment of the object from its context, a tendency to focus on attributes of the object in order to assign it to categories, and a preference for using rules about the categories to explain and predict the object’s behavior. Inferences rest in part on the practice of decontextualizing structure from content, the use of formal logic, and avoidance of contradiction” (293).

Nisbett and Masuda traced these differences back to the civilizations of ancient China and Greece, the centers of East Asian and Western cultures. In ancient China, large scale agricultural economies required extensive social collaboration (Nisbett and Masuda 11169). The Chinese were inclined to believe that substantial cooperation with neighbors was necessary to “carry out economic activities in an effective way,” which is especially true of the rice agriculture common in the south of China (Nisbett et al. 303). Thus, their central goal was to maintain the harmony within their groups rather than demonstrating each member’s uniqueness. Their overall political organization was also complex and hierarchical. The emperors and bureaucracy were “ever-present controlling factors in the lives of individual Chinese” (303). Thus, the Chinese tended to assume an embracing attitude to the social environment and they were orientated to be more alert to contexts and relationships.
In this collectivistic society, groups rather than individuals were considered the basic element, meaning individuals functioned as part of a loosely knit group, such as a family or a village, and they were primarily defined by various social roles within the groups. Their behavior was guided by the expectations of these roles as codified in their moral philosophy, Confucianism, an elaboration of the obligations between different roles, such as emperor and subject, parent and child, husband and wife, older brother and younger brother, and between friend and friend (Nisbett et al. 292). This social construct is parallel in their intellectual thought patterns, for example in science where the ancient Chinese held the view that the world was “a collection of overlapping and interpenetrating stuffs or substances” (293). As this analysis suggests, the ancient Chinese tended to think from an overall perspective, believing that “parts exist only with wholes, to which they have inseparable relations” (Munro 17).

The ancient Greeks provide a contrast to the Chinese, in part because their economy was not completely dependent on agriculture. Consisting of mountains descending to the sea, the Greek landscape was more suited to herding, fishing and trading than to large-scale farming. The Greeks worked with fewer people, and the size of their social network was smaller than that of the Chinese. The sea also provided “an escape route for dissidents” (Nisbett et al. 303) who chose to leave rather than become part of the society. In that sense, the Greeks lived in a less social complex environment with more freedom than the Chinese.

This individualistic culture enabled the Greeks to develop a strong “sense of personal agency” (Nisbett et al. 292), and the voice from individuals received more attention than the Chinese. Unlike in ancient China, the Greek citizens were allowed to
debate in public, even against the emperor, expressing their opinions based on their personal interests. In fact, the Athenians believed their state was a union of individuals free to develop their own potentials (Hamilton 144). The citizens were granted the right to vote on public affairs, and they conceived of the concepts of democracy and freedom. They were inclined to see “the world as a collection of discrete objects which could be categorized by reference to some subset of universal properties that characterized the object” (Nisbett et al. 293). They believed everything can be specified, analyzed and even predicted according to certain rules which can be revealed through empirical or theoretical studies. The Greeks might have the debate about whether the world should be understood as waves or particles, but the Chinese seem never to have had any doubt about the continuous nature of matter (Needham 1).

Researchers believed that East Asians and Westerners had been trained to think in holistic and analytic ways since early age during baby-and-mother communication in contemporary time. They found that when American mothers played with their children, they tended to focus their attention on objects and their attributes (“see the truck; it has nice wheels”), so their children were likely to notice the feature of objects first. Japanese mothers tended to make comments on the correlations among toys, players and surroundings, emphasizing feelings and relationships (“when you throw your truck, the wall says, ‘ouch’”). As a result, Japanese were trained to see connections between an object and its context (Fernald and Morikawa 650).

Again, as Hall said in Beyond Culture: “the natural act of thinking is greatly modified by culture” (Hall 9), distinctions in social structure have led people to think in different ways. Agricultural collectivistic society has enabled East Asians to view the
world holistically, understanding an event and the situation as a whole. Westerners from non-agricultural (hunting, herding and trading) individualistic societies tend to see things analytically, isolating objects from the context. Their family education also inclines their thinking patterns to corresponding styles, so that they can fit in their societies. Holistic and analytic socio-cognitions would, in turn, support their economies and reinforce their social structures respectively. Therefore, holistic thinkers will become more holistic, and analytic thinkers will probably become more analytic over time.

As the cultural variation of field-dependent and object-focused roots in Chinese and American ideologies, it is likely to be seen in all communication forms. This study identifies one set of difference in visual communication convention in commercials. Future researchers may continue to investigate conventional differences in other visual forms, such as films and websites. Additionally, as design convention is a result of different cultural experience, it would be interesting to investigate the convention in mixed cultural communities, such as Asian American. Their convention may appear to be a mixture of high-context and low-context cultures. But it may also be more high-context than Chinese, because immigrants sometimes try so hard to sustain their cultural heritage that they may overdo the traditions.

The Last Word

In closing, this study has been an attempt to show the importance of taking audience’s “culture-coded” terministic screen or screens into account when producing cinematic, or other visual designs. Failure to do so may result in the message being deflected and even rejected by the audience. The global approach to visual design argued
by Tufte and others is only workable to the extent of making information accessible. To make information enter the audience’s hearts and minds, however, designers have to thoroughly understand the audience’s culture, their specific terministic screen, and “speak” their visual language.
APPENDICES
Appendix A

Letter of Support from Peking University

Letter of Support

We give permission to Jin Liu to conduct her survey entitled “Are Visuals Culturally Different? A Cross-Cultural Study of the Visual Strategies in the Chinese and US Television Commercials for 3 Transnational Brands” in the class(es) of School of Journalism and Communication.

We are aware of the survey’s purpose and content as follows:

- The purpose of this research is examine whether the localized TV commercials work better for the targeted audience, compared with the versions made for the audience in another country.

- 50 participants will watch 6 TV commercials of Coca-Cola, McDonald and OLAY which have been aired in China and US. After viewing the ads, they will be asked to fill out a questionnaire concerning the effectiveness of the ads. Then 15 randomly selected participants will be interviewed with 2 questions, and their oral responses will be recorded.

- The amount of time required for participation will be limited to 15 minutes.

We are aware that the participants’ privacy will be well protected through the following efforts:

- No identification information will be asked during the survey;
- The collected responses will not be exposed to the public, and they will only be used for academic research purposes.

School of Journalism and Communication
Peking University
December 12, 2008
Appendix B

IRB Approval Letter from Clemson University


1 message

Thu, Dec 18, 2008 at 1:54 PM

Rebecca Alley <RALLEY@exchange.clemson.edu>
To: Joseph Sample <JSAMPLE@exchange.clemson.edu>, jliu@clemson.edu

Dear Dr. Sample and Jin,

The Chair of the Clemson University Institutional Review Board (IRB) validated the protocol identified above using Exempt review procedures and a determination was made on December 18, 2008, that the proposed activities involving human participants qualify as Exempt from continuing review under Category B2, based on the Federal Regulations (45 CFR 46). You may begin this study.

Please remember that no change in this research protocol can be initiated without prior review by the IRB. Any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects, complications, and/or any adverse events must be reported to the Office of Research Compliance (ORC) immediately. You are requested to notify the ORC when your study is completed or terminated.

Attached are documents developed by Clemson University regarding the responsibilities of Principal Investigators and Research Team Members. Please be sure these are distributed to all appropriate parties.

Good luck with your study and please feel free to contact us if you have any questions. Please use the IRB number and title in all communications regarding this study.

Sincerely,

Becca

Rebecca L. Alley, J.D.
IRB Coordinator
Office of Research Compliance
Clemson University
Appendix C

Oral Recruitment Script

IRB application # IRB2008-385

Are Visuals Culturally Different?
A Cross-Cultural Study of the Visual Strategies in the Chinese and US Television Commercials for 3 Transnational Brands

Oral Recruitment Script

Hello everyone,

I’m Jin Liu, a second year student in Master of Arts in Professional Communication program at Clemson University. I am now working on my thesis, which is a cross-cultural study on the visual strategies in the TV commercials of 3 transnational brands, Coca-Cola, McDonald’s and Olay. More specifically, I investigate the visual differences and effectiveness of the Chinese commercial versions and the US versions.

Here I would like to invite you to participate in a survey for my thesis research. You will watch 6 short TV commercials first, and then fill out a questionnaire with multiple choice questions. After you fill out the questionnaires, I will randomly select 15-20 students to ask two simple questions. Your oral responses will be recorded for my analysis.

The survey will take about 10-15 minutes. No personal identification will be required. And the information you provide will only be used for academic research. Neither of your textual nor oral responses will be exposed to the public.

If you do feel comfortable to take this survey, please notify me before we begin. Your choices will be fully respected. If you have any questions or concerns after the survey, please feel free to contact me. My contact information is attached to the Information Letter you just received.

Thank you very much!
Appendix D

Survey Information Letter

Information Concerning Participation in a Research Study
Clemson University

Are Visuals Culturally Different?

Description of the research and your participation

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Jin Liu, a second year graduate student in MAPC program at English Department. The purpose of this research is examine whether the localized TV commercials work better for the targeted audience, compared with the versions made for the audience in another country.

You will watch 6 TV commercials of Coca-Cola, McDonald and OLAY which have been aired in China and US. After viewing the ads, you will be asked to fill out a questionnaire concerning the effectiveness of the ads on you.

The amount of time required for your participation will be limited to 15 minutes.

Risks and discomforts

There are no known risks associated with this research, since the TV commercials are from our daily life. Additionally, they should be comfortable to be seen, for they have gone through the examination of the TV censorship systems of China and US. And the questionnaire will not ask any sensitive questions.

Potential benefits

This research may help us to understand how the advertisements work to make you believe something and buy their products.

Protection of confidentiality

We will do everything we can to protect your privacy. You will not be asked to provide any individual identification information, and your identity will not be revealed in any publication that might result from this study.

Voluntary participation

Your participation in this research study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate and you may withdraw your consent to participate at any time. You will not be penalized in any way should you decide not to participate or to withdraw from this study.

Contact information

If you have any questions or concerns about this study or if any problems arise, please contact Jin Liu at Clemson University at jliu@clemson.edu; Phone: 864-633-9708, or Dr. Joseph Sample, the Principal Investigator at jsample@clemson.edu; Phone: 864-656-5418. If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Clemson University Office of Research Compliance at 864.656.6460.

Nov., 2008.
Appendix E

English Version Survey

A Questionnaire for a TV Commercial Study

Thank you for participating in this study. You will watch 6 television commercials, 3 from China and 3 from the US. The commercials were produced by Coca-Cola, McDonald’s and OLAY. Please fill out the following questions after viewing the commercials. This survey will take approximately 15 minutes to complete.

Your identification information will not be required, and your responses will not be released to the public for any commercial uses. For more detailed description of this research, please refer to the Information Letter attached with this questionnaire.

Gender: □ Male □ Female
Age: ________ years old
If American citizen: Years living in the United States: ________ years.
If Chinese citizen: Years living in China: ________ years.

1. How often do you purchase these products?
   a. Coca-Cola
      □ □ □ □ Never Occasionally Regularly Frequently
   b. McDonald’s
      □ □ □ □ Never Occasionally Regularly Frequently
   c. OLAY
      □ □ □ □ Never Occasionally Regularly Frequently

2. How often do you watch television?
   □ □ □ □ Never Occasionally Regularly Frequently
3. Which commercial version, China or US, makes more sense to you?

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>US versions</th>
<th>Chinese versions</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Coca-Cola</td>
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<td>McDonald’s</td>
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<td>Olay</td>
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4. Which commercial version, China or US, did you find to be more appealing?

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<tr>
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<th>US versions</th>
<th>Chinese versions</th>
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<td>Olay</td>
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5. Which commercial version, China or US, makes you more feel like purchasing the products?

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<th>US versions</th>
<th>Chinese versions</th>
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<td>Coca-Cola</td>
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<td>McDonald’s</td>
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<td>Olay</td>
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6. Do you have any thoughts you would like to share about the commercials?

*Thank you again for volunteering this survey. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact the co-investigator: Jin Liu at jliu@clemson.edu.*
Appendix F

Chinese Version Survey

No. ___

电视广告调查中文版问卷

Thank you for participating in this study. You will watch 6 television commercials, 3 from China and 3 from the US. The commercials were produced by Coca-Cola, McDonald’s and Olay. Please fill out the following questions after viewing the commercials. This survey will take approximately 15 minutes to complete. Your identification information will not be required, and your responses will not be released to the public for any commercial uses. For more detailed description of this research, please refer to the Information Letter attached with this questionnaire.

性别:  □ 男  □ 女

年龄: ______ 岁

在中国居住的时间: ______ 年

在西方国家居住的时间: ______ 年

1. 您购买以下产品的频率是?
   a. 可口可乐
      □ 从不  □ 偶尔  □ 有规律地  □ 经常
   b. 麦当劳
      □ 从不  □ 偶尔  □ 有规律地  □ 经常
   c. 玉兰油
      □ 从不  □ 偶尔  □ 有规律地  □ 经常

2. 您看电视的频率是?
   □ 从不  □ 偶尔  □ 有规律地  □ 经常

3. 您接触西方媒体的频率是？（包括西方的报纸，杂志，网站，电视，电影和电脑游戏等）
   □ 从不  □ 偶尔  □ 有规律地  □ 经常
4. 中国和美国两个广告版本，哪个版本您看得更明白？

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<th>中国版</th>
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5. 您觉得哪个版本更有吸引力？

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6. 您觉得哪个版本更有效地激发了您的购买欲？

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<td>玉兰油</td>
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7. 您对这些广告有什么其他想法或见解吗？

Thank you again for volunteering this survey. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact the co-investigator: Jin Liu at jliu@clemson.edu or principal investigator Dr. Joseph Sample at jsample@clemson.edu.
Appendix G

Tabulated Results of Study 1

Table A.1 Numbers of busy, moderate and blank shot in Coca-Cola US and Chinese TVCs

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Table A.2 Numbers of busy, moderate and blank shot in McDonald’s US and Chinese TVCs

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|-----|---------|-------|------|------|------|-------|-------|---------|-------|------|------|------|
| 1   | 16      | 4     | 1    | 0    | 3     | 1   | 30    | 21   | 0    | 21   | 0     | 1   | 30    | 21   | 0    | 21   | 0     |
| 2   | 22      | 20    | 2    | 17   | 1     | 2   | 15    | 10   | 1    | 7    | 2     | 2   | 15    | 10   | 1    | 7    | 2     |
| 3   | 60      | 42    | 2    | 38   | 2     | 3   | 30    | 12   | 5    | 5    | 2     | 3   | 30    | 12   | 5    | 5    | 2     |
| 4   | 28      | 17    | 2    | 11   | 4     | 4   | 20    | 14   | 5    | 8    | 1     | 4   | 20    | 14   | 5    | 8    | 1     |
| 5   | 30      | 12    | 0    | 8    | 4     | 5   | 30    | 20   | 3    | 17   | 0     | 5   | 30    | 20   | 3    | 17   | 0     |
| 6   | 30      | 18    | 4    | 9    | 5     | 6   | 45    | 16   | 0    | 14   | 2     | 6   | 45    | 16   | 0    | 14   | 2     |
| 7   | 60      | 34    | 0    | 16   | 18    | 7   | 30    | 6    | 24   | 0     | 7   | 30    | 6    | 24   | 0     | 7     |
| 8   | 30      | 21    | 0    | 17   | 4     | 8   | 30    | 26   | 2    | 24   | 0     | 8   | 30    | 26   | 2    | 24   | 0     |
| 9   | 30      | 29    | 0    | 18   | 11    | 9   | 30    | 34   | 2    | 32   | 0     | 9   | 30    | 34   | 2    | 32   | 0     |
| 10  | 30      | 21    | 0    | 14   | 7     | 10  | 30    | 12   | 2    | 10   | 0     | 10  | 30    | 12   | 2    | 10   | 0     |
| 11  | 60      | 31    | 3    | 28   | 0     | 11  | 30    | 27   | 2    | 25   | 0     | 11  | 30    | 27   | 2    | 25   | 0     |
| 12  | 30      | 26    | 5    | 21   | 0     | 12  | 60    | 21   | 5    | 13   | 3     | 12  | 60    | 21   | 5    | 13   | 3     |
| Tot. | 426     | 275   | 19   | 197  | 59    | Tot. | 380   | 243  | 33   | 200  | 10    | Tot. | 380   | 243  | 33   | 200  | 10    |
| Mean | 35.5    | 22.92 | 1.58 | 16.42 | 4.92 | Mean | 31.67 | 20.25 | 2.75 | 16.67 | 0.83 |
Table A.3 Numbers of busy, moderate and blank shots in OLAY US and Chinese TVCs

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Table A.5 Numbers of long, medium and close shots in McDonald’s US and Chinese TVCs

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Appendix H

The Links of the 74 Television Commercials

Coca-Cola Chinese commercials:

1. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tVMvWXUkAiM
2. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Ith7KvAESI
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Appendix I

Storyboards of the Commercials Selected for Study 2

- Coca-Cola US Version:

  Christmas Coca-Cola Truck Commercial (30 seconds long)

  For the commercial, please refer to the CD coming long with this thesis, or go to http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a7DdtuiYZIk

  A boy rang the bell to notify the whole town that Christmas truck was coming.

  People in the neighborhood and the boy left home and ran after the truck.

  The boy ran through woods to chase the Coca-Cola truck.
People got together in the street to see the truck light up the Christmas night when it passed by.

As the boy reached the street, he almost missed the truck, but he was pleased to see an animated smile of the Santa Claus at the back of the truck.
• Coca-Cola Chinese Version:

*Bring Me Home* (45 seconds long)

For the commercial, please refer to the CD coming long with this thesis, or go to
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=73PiJKNI6fM

Right before Chinese New Year, Xiang, a famous athlete called his family from Paris and told his mother that he couldn’t make it home for the holiday.

He went to a Chinese restaurant that showed a dish of dumplings with a ice tea and a Coke at the front door.

Xiang appeared disappointed when the dish turned out to be a few over fried dumplings coming with a fork instead of chopstick.
At this moment, a Coke was brought to the table. Some light circles appeared around the can when he drank from it.

Two animated children characters, known as the boy and girl attendants of fairies, came out of the can and sat beside the table with Xiang.

Xiang asked them “why are you guys here?” and they answered “we are here to bring you home!” Next second, the boy and the girl opened a magical door that lead him right home.

When Xiang walked in with Coke in hand, it was a big surprise to his family. And he just made the time for dinner.
After hugging his parents, Xiang said “nothing feels better than going home.”

Xiang and his family started the dinner together, and the boy and girl stepped out. Then come the product Coke, the logo of Coca-Cola and the slogan “Bring me home. Have a happy Chinese New Year!”

- McDonald’s US Version

  Chicken for Breakfast, 2008 (30 seconds long)

  For the commercial, please refer to the CD coming long with this thesis, or go to http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fb4whVJa86A

Athletes from various domains: swimming, boxing and bicycle riding

Scripts: (A female swimmer) “You gonna to get up pretty early if you truly want to succeed.”

  (A male boxer): “Five fifteen.”

  (Two male bicycle riders): “Six o’clock.”
Athletes from various domains: Ping Pong, volleyball and race

Scripts: (A Korean female ping pong player): “Six fifteen
(Two female volleyball players): “Before it’s too late.”
(A female runner): “If you want chicken for breakfast.”

Voice over: Introducing McDonald’s new southern style chicken biscuit for breakfast.
Scripts: (Two female volleyball players): “Perfectly seasoned.”
(A male boxer): “Juicy all white meat.”

Scripts: (A male soccer player): “A grand new taste for breakfast.”
Voice over: serves that warm and fluffy homemade tasty biscuit.

Scripts: (A female runner): “Chicken for breakfast.”
(A male boxer): “this is the new gold standard.”
Appears McDonald’s logo and slogan “I’m lovin’ it”.

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At the end, appear the logo of Olympic Games and the title of “proud partner.”

- McDonald’s Chinese Version

  McDonald’s Breakfast (30 seconds long)

  For the commercial, please refer to the CD coming long with this thesis, or go to http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dgeu547bzKc

  Sun rises. Morning comes. A person exercises.

  Eggs get prepared. Coffee is made. A woman wakes up in bed beside her partner.

  Egg layers are made. A man in suit wakes up in bus, while burger meat is being prepared.
A young man in white shirt wakes up in chair as a McDonald’s worker is preparing.

A girl with glasses wakes up in bus when eggs are cooked. Another girl stretches in bed.

Chicken biscuits are cooked in deep fryer. A young man wakes up on office desk. A McDonald’s waitress services food to a customer.

A male office worker has McDonald’s breakfast. Various McDonald’s breakfast food is exhibited. At the end, the logos of McDonald’s and Beijing Olympic were shown to tell it is a support of the game.

- **OLAY US Version**

  *OLAY Ribbon Body Wash* (15 seconds long)
For the commercial, please refer to the CD coming long with this thesis, or go to http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5bajBQXNMeY

Story: a woman with pink silk ribbon around her body dances under water.
Voice over: *lingering in the deep end of moisture,*

Voice over: *Only OLAY’s ribbon body wash is extreme with the cream ribbon*

Voice over: *The moisture lasts from one shower to the next.*
OLAY Chinese Version

*OLAY Body Wash* (30 seconds long)

For the commercial, please refer to the CD coming long with this thesis, or go to http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L1qNp2cmkC4

Storyboard 6

*Story: a woman, actually a famous actress in China, was a shower in a waterfall.*

*Music: soft and slow music*

*Voice over: In torrid summer, I want my skin to keep moisturized.*

*Voice over: OLAY new moisture body wash...*

*Voice over: inherits three powers from water, cleansing, purifying and moistening.*
Voice over: Taking a shower...

Voice over: makes your skin look and feel so tender and moisturized.

Voice over: OLAY new moisture body wash just comes out.
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