

# The Visual Rhetoric Practices of Pharmaceutical Advertisements in Republican-Era Newspapers: An Examination Based on The Eastern Times (1921-1939)

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## Abstract

As visual historical materials reflecting socio-cultural changes, pharmaceutical advertisements in modern newspapers possess unique research value. This study focuses on the text-image pharmaceutical advertisements in The Eastern Times from 1921 to 1939. Drawing on visual rhetoric theory and adopting the constructed week sampling method, it analyzes the construction strategies of their visual discourse and their socio-cultural implications. The findings reveal that the advertisements formed a comprehensive visual persuasion system: they used metaphor and metonymy to establish perceptions of drug efficacy, framed health within an ethical domestic sphere, and drove consumption via emotional strategies. These practices also participated in shaping social conceptions, manifested in the daily translation of medical knowledge, the symbolic consumption of national identity, and the visual production of the “New Woman” image. The research demonstrates that pharmaceutical advertisements in The Eastern Times were not merely commercial vehicles but also crucial visual texts for observing the transformations in conceptions of the body, nation, and gender during the Republican era.

## Keywords

Visual Rhetoric; The Eastern Times; Pharmaceutical Advertisements; Republican Era.

## 1. Introduction

In the 1920s and 1930s, alongside a period of temporary political unification in China, Shanghai's newspaper industry achieved unprecedented prosperity. Among these publications, The Eastern Times was regarded as one of the “Big Three” dailies—forming a tripartite balance of influence with Shen Bao (Shanghai News) and Xin Wen Bao (The Sin Wan Pao). Based on changes in ownership, scholars generally divide the history of The Eastern Times into two periods: the management under Di Baoxian (1904–1921) and under Huang Bohui (1921–1939). During Huang's tenure, the newspaper invested heavily in purchasing relatively advanced color rotary printing presses, improved the layout of pictorial advertisements, and dedicated special sections to advertising. This resulted in numerous advertisements that combined aesthetic appeal with visual impact, among which text-image pharmaceutical advertisements constituted the vast majority. These clear and vivid images have thus become excellent primary sources for studying newspaper advertising in the Republican era.

Scholarly attention to The Eastern Times under Huang Bohui has primarily focused on adjustments in its journalistic operations, treating it as a significant node in Chinese press history that illustrates how its innovations propelled the development of modern newspaper practices. Other studies have taken a more micro-level approach, investigating changes in content, personnel, and their subsequent social impact. In terms of advertising research, scholars have mainly treated advertisements as empirical materials reflecting the overall social

landscape of Republican Shanghai, exploring their embedded cultural values and social significance.

This study takes the numerous text-image pharmaceutical advertisements in *The Eastern Times* during Huang Bohui's period as its sample. It aims to systematically analyze the strategic construction of their visual discourse and to explore how these visual texts conveyed and shaped specific social conceptions. To manage the large sample size, the research employs the constructed week sampling method, selecting 14 days each year to form two synthetic weeks. This approach seeks to reflect the overall characteristics of advertisements from this period as comprehensively as feasible.

## 2. Literature Review on Visual Rhetoric Theory

The term "rhetoric" originates from ancient Greece and Rome, referring to the art of enhancing persuasiveness in discourse to achieve an optimal expressive effect, as well as a skillful method and capacity for using language. Emerging from this tradition, visual rhetoric is a burgeoning academic field that takes visual texts as its primary object of study. Roland Barthes first proposed the concept of "the rhetoric of the image." He identified the core issues of visual rhetoric as "how does meaning enter the image?" and "where does it end?", thereby emphasizing the symbolic dimension of images [1]. Visual rhetoric is a practice and method that focuses on visual text forms, aiming to achieve persuasion, dialogue, and communication through the strategic use of visual texts and the strategic construction of visual discourse [2]. As a methodology for studying visual texts, scholar Liu Tao notes that the distinctive "problem domains" of visual rhetoric, compared to other research paradigms, are manifested in five aspects: the problem of rhetorical language, rhetorical effect, rhetorical communication, rhetorical strategy, and rhetorical criticism [3]. This framework provides a clear analytical path—moving from the surface-level composition of signs to deeper rhetorical intentions and socio-cultural implications.

Building on the analytical path offered by visual rhetoric theory, this study focuses on two core problem domains: rhetorical strategy and rhetorical criticism. Through a detailed analysis of the visual rhetorical language in the samples, it strives to reveal how *The Eastern Times* pharmaceutical advertisements achieved persuasion through strategic semiotic operations and to elucidate the values and socio-cultural implications embedded within these visual practices.

## 3. Visual Rhetorical Strategies: The Persuasive Path from Semiotic Operation to Value Construction

An inductive analysis of the sampled text-image advertisements (nearly 1,200 items) reveals the following patterns: from the perspective of character scenes, images featuring adult males as the main subject appeared with relatively high frequency (approximately 400 images) and often occupied the visual center. In terms of product function, advertisements were primarily divided into two categories: those treating specific diseases (e.g., colds, syphilis) and those promoting nourishment and bodily strengthening (e.g., replenishing qi (vital energy), nourishing blood). This distribution provides a quantitative basis for the subsequent analysis.

The generation of meaning in visual rhetoric is deeply embedded within an image's "rhetorical structure" and is realized through specific rhetorical strategies. The persuasive power of pharmaceutical advertisements relied on a series of visual rhetorical designs closely aligned with target audiences and product characteristics. These designs followed an identifiable operational logic: first, establishing an intuitive understanding of drug efficacy through metaphor and metonymy; next, embedding the product into family-ethical narratives through framing; and finally, mobilizing emotions to achieve psychological motivation. From the

meticulous operation of signs to the gradual construction of values, this entire set of strategies formed the logical circuit through which the advertisements completed visual persuasion.

### 3.1. Metaphor and Metonymy: The Visual Construction and Perceptual Guidance of Drug Efficacy

In The Eastern Times pharmaceutical advertisements, metaphor and metonymy served as key visual rhetorical strategies, jointly shaping consumers' cognitive approaches to drug efficacy. Although both are rhetorical operations, they influence the audience's visual interpretation through different mechanisms: metaphor stimulates association through cross-domain similarity, while metonymy evokes identification by leveraging inherent connections within lived experience.

Metaphor transforms ineffable drug efficacy into perceivable bodily experience by establishing a relationship of similarity between the target (tenor) and source (vehicle). In the most frequently appearing images of adult males, advertisements often employed the metaphor of "powerful conquest" to construct imaginaries of curative effect. For example, a September 1935 advertisement titled "Respectfully Presenting an Ancient Prescription for Kidney and Brain Diseases" featured a black silhouette of a muscular man subduing a struggling bull with his bare hands. This image did not depict a real scene but constituted a powerful visual metaphor: the medicine's efficacy was presented as the complete mastery over primal force. The abstract therapeutic effect was thus transformed into a "triumph of strength" with which male audiences could easily resonate, echoing a widespread desire for bodily control.

In contrast to the creative association of metaphor, metonymy focuses on invoking pre-existing referential relationships from everyday experience. The visual representation of the diseased body in advertisements constitutes a typical metonymic sign. For instance, an advertisement for "Dowan's Secretly Prepared Kidney Protection Pills" from the same year depicted a man in a long gown, hand on his lower back, his face showing distress. Another advertisement for a lung-nourishing syrup showed a woman leaning on a table, bent over while covering a cough. These figures did not refer to specific individuals but, through the commonsense link between sickly postures and specific ailments, metonymically represented the entire afflicted group. Viewers could naturally associate the action of holding the lower back with the common bodily experience of kidney discomfort. Metonymy thus reinforced the perceived reality of the disease while delineating a clear scope of application for the medicine.

### 3.2. Framing: The "Harmonious Family" as a Consumption Vision

Frames are cognitive structures through which we understand the world, and they are also actively constructed in visual texts. Visual framing involves the use of visual elements in media practices to reinforce specific cognitive schemas for either communicators or audiences. A visual frame is a mode of cognition meticulously manufactured through established visual rhetorical means. Its analysis requires examining both the macro-level principles of frame selection and production and the micro-level principles of frame encoding and representation [4].

In The Eastern Times pharmaceutical advertisements, the "harmonious family" was a core frame meticulously selected and encoded, serving particularly the marketing of nourishing tonics within domestic scenarios. At the micro level, family members were assigned distinct role scripts within the visual narrative: fathers were often constructed as "scientific managers of health." For example, a May 1935 advertisement titled "On the Beginning of Summer (Lixia), Have You Weighed Your Child?" depicted a father intently weighing his child. This scene transformed a traditional solar term custom into a ritual of data-driven health monitoring, thereby linking the father figure with modern paternal concepts like "rational measurement" and "growth management." Mothers were typically encoded as the "nexus of offspring health."

In a contemporaneous advertisement for the blood-nourishing tonic “Livamin,” a haggard-looking mother held a frail child, with the copy “Anemic mother, weak child” directly stating the causal link. Here, the mother’s blood quality was positioned as the fundamental source of the child’s health, endowing treatment targeted at her with a moral imperative to maintain the family’s foundation.

At the macro level, the deep operational logic of this frame lay in the ethicization of health issues within the familial sphere. By positioning the family as the core narrative field, it transformed individual bodily discomfort into anxiety about failing familial role responsibilities. The “harmony” it presupposed was an ideal modern family tableau, achievable only through sustained health vigilance and consumption. It was through these meticulously orchestrated visual strategies that “the family” itself became a potent visual argument.

### **3.3. Emotion: The Visual Mobilization and Transformation of Fear and Hope**

“Emotion” holds a pivotal position in rhetoric. Classical rhetoric, profoundly influenced by Aristotle, focused on how language achieves persuasion and emphasized three main appeals: ethos (character), pathos (emotion), and logos (reason). Aristotle’s conception of pathos encompassed both arousing the audience’s emotions and prompting them to take action through that arousal [5].

In visual rhetoric, appeals to emotion have similarly become a key strategy. In the studied advertisements, pathos was crucial for persuasive effect, primarily mobilizing two contrasting emotions: fear of bodily crisis or moral transgression, and hope for future family happiness and physical well-being.

Appeals to fear were often realized through the visual presentation of bodily crisis or moral breach. For instance, an October 1938 advertisement for gonorrhoea directly depicted a nearly nude female figure, head bowed in shame—a representation that clearly breached the visual norms of the time. Such extreme visual representations aimed for greater impact, attempting to provoke intense shame and health anxiety in viewers, thereby positioning the medicine as an urgent solution to both social stigma and physiological risk.

In contrast, the evocation of hope typically relied on visually weaving an ideal family order. The same newspaper issue featured an adult tonic advertisement showing three generations of a family sitting together contentedly, and a children’s health product ad depicting a mother watching peacefully over her sleeping child. Consumers, immersed in these warm, familial scenes, would naturally be influenced by the pleasant atmosphere, generating expectations for domestic happiness while unconsciously associating the advertised products with this positive outcome.

## **4. From Persuasive Grammar to Cultural Script: Conceptual Construction in Pharmaceutical Advertisements**

Visual rhetoric analysis seeks not only to reveal a text’s internal persuasive mechanisms but also to understand how it functions as a social practice, participating in the production of meaning within a specific historical context.

### **4.1. The Visual Translation of Health Knowledge: The Popularization and Commodification of Scientific Discourse**

The Eastern Times pharmaceutical advertisements featured numerous health products and specialized medicines, frequently employing Western biomedical concepts like “vitamin,” “hormone,” and “enzyme.” For example, a March 1939 advertisement for a gastrointestinal medicine asserted, “Gastrointestinal weakness is the most prevalent disease in contemporary society, mostly arising from an extreme deficiency of vitamins,” and claimed the product

contained “various nutrient-rich preparations such as vitamins, hormones, enzymes, etc.” The accompanying image was a silhouette of the human digestive tract. Proceeding from a modern physiological perspective, this advertisement offered a specific (though not entirely accurate by today’s standards) etiology and treatment. Nevertheless, the everyday use of these specialized terms facilitated the popularization of health knowledge among the public. This text-image strategy translated abstract biochemical concepts into intuitive bodily diagrams and clear functional promises, thereby advancing the daily translation and commodification of scientific discourse while promoting the product.

scientific discourse while promoting the product.

#### **4.2. The Visual Mobilization of National Identity: The Symbolic Consumption of Patriotism**

Against the backdrop of the deepening national crisis in the 1930s, patriotism became a potent social current. The Eastern Times advertisements keenly captured and utilized this sentiment, encoding it into consumable symbols. For example, a May 1935 advertisement for “Min Dan” prominently displayed the phrases “Purely National Product” and “All-Season Good Medicine” at the top of the layout. Here, the term “National Product” (Guohuo), through its salient visual placement, transcended mere product description to become a core symbol uniting national identity and collective emotion. Purchasing and using national products was thus constructed as an everyday act of expressing patriotic stance and practicing identity—a form of symbolic consumption.

#### **4.3. The Visual Shaping of Gender Conceptions: The Production and Discipline of the “New Woman” Image**

Following the May Fourth New Culture Movement (a major intellectual and cultural movement in the 1910s–1920s advocating modernization and women’s liberation), the dissemination of women’s liberation ideologies influenced the portrayal of female roles in commercial advertisements. Pharmaceutical ads targeting women gradually shifted focus from the traditional pains and private troubles of childbirth to presenting healthy, proper demeanors within domestic settings. For instance, a May 1933 advertisement for a postpartum nourishment product depicted a serene mother in a bright, tidy interior, holding a peacefully sleeping infant. Her relaxed posture and the child’s tranquil state created an atmosphere of familial fulfillment. By displaying this ideal outcome, the image guided viewers to establish a direct association with the product, shaping visual norms for ideal femininity and family life. Women became visual subjects of health management and domestic aesthetics. Such images affirmed women’s value beyond reproduction, yet simultaneously bound this “new” value to a standardized, consumption-dependent visual template. The “New Woman” image was thus both an emancipatory visual expression and a set of visual guidelines imbued with consumerist discipline.

### **5. Conclusion**

This study, taking The Eastern Times pharmaceutical advertisements as a case study and employing visual rhetoric theory, has systematically analyzed how their text-image combinations achieved persuasion through strategic semiotic operations. The advertisements established intuitive perceptions of drug efficacy via metaphor and metonymy, framed health within an ethical domestic sphere, and mobilized emotions of fear and hope to drive consumption. These interconnected techniques constituted a relatively complete visual persuasion system tailored to contemporary consumer psychology.

Furthermore, these advertisements served as important media for disseminating and shaping era-specific conceptions. They translated Western medical concepts into the basis for daily

health management; symbolically linked national identity with “national product” consumption, allowing patriotism to be practiced through market behavior; and responded to—while reshaping—conceptions of women’s roles, partially decoupling female bodies and value from the traditional reproductive framework. As such, The Eastern Times pharmaceutical advertisements provide a valuable window into the social, ideological, and cultural transformations of the Republican era. Studying them deepens our understanding of everyday life and consumer culture during that period. The visual rhetorical strategies they contain remain instructive for contemporary communication practices.

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