

Advertising in Taisho Era Japan

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Aleksandra Mozgunova. ADVERTISING IN TAISHO ERA JAPAN

<https://doi.org/10.60055/phl.2024.45.95-106>

Abstract. Advertising messages of the Taisho era on one hand reflected the life of the new middle class in a rapidly changing urban world and on the other hand influenced the public consciousness by offering appropriate to the era images and behaviours. Advertising was a guide to the “brave new world”, advertising posters and texts enlightened the masses, telling the consumer about their options. Under the influence of advertising, the culture of mass consumption was formed. Advertising gives symbolic significance to ordinary things, creates new communicative patterns, ideals, standards. The diachronic analysis of advertising messages of the Taisho era helps us trace the mutual influence of advertising and the processes taking place in society and this is the principal value of the research.

The object of the study is advertising of the Taisho era. The main aim is to reveal the impact of the advertising to consumer and society of this period using content analysis methods. The author comes to conclusion that the advertising of the Taisho era became an entertainment genre; the value of all sorts of elements of suggestive impact and interactivity increased during the Taisho era. The development of graphic design of Japanese advertising in the XX century passed similar stages in comparison with the development of advertising design in Western countries. The Japanese advertising has features inherent in the discourse of the modern and postmodern era. Meanwhile, the content of advertising messages has national and cultural specificity.

Keywords: Japanese advertisement, Taisho era, postmodern era

Александра Мозгунова. РЕКЛАМАТА ПРЕЗ ПЕРИОДА ТАЙШО В ЯПОНИЯ

Резюме. Рекламните послания през периода Тайшо, от една страна, отразявали живота на новата средна класа сред бързо променящия се градски пейзаж, докато, от друга, влияели на общественото съзнание, като предлагали уместни за епохата образи и начин на поведение. Рекламата се е разглеждала като пътеводител за „прекрасния нов свят“, рекламните плакати и текстово съдържание просвещавали масите, показвайки на

потребителя какъв избор има. Под влиянието на рекламата се оформила културата на масовото потребление. Рекламата придава символично значение на напълно обикновени неща, създава нови комуникативни модели, образци и стандарти. Диахронният анализ на рекламните послания през периода Тайшо ни помага да проследим взаимното влияние на рекламата и процесите в обществото, което е и същината на това изследване.

Обект на изследването е рекламата през периода Тайшо. Основната цел е да се разкрие въздействието на рекламата върху потребителя и обществото през този период чрез използването на методи за анализ на съдържанието. Авторът достига до заключението, че рекламата през периода Тайшо се е превърнала в развлекателен жанр с нарастването на стойността на най-разнообразни елементи с подтикващо въздействие и интерактивност. Развитието на графичния дизайн на японската реклама през XX в. минава през подобни етапи като развитието на рекламния дизайн в западните държави. Японската реклама споделя черти, присъщи на модерната и постмодерната епоха. В същото време рекламните послания съдържат национална и културна специфика.

Ключови думи: японска реклама, период Тайшо, постмодерна епоха

Research/Научно изследване

Advertisement is considered to be a distorted mirror of our world (Pollay 1986: 18). Using common appeals on one hand, it is also influenced by cultural, social patterns of the country where it was created. The great effect of the advertisement has been studied by philosophers, marketing specialists, linguists, sociologists and other scientists: advertising can not only stimulate consuming process, but change consumers' habits. This article dwells upon the advertisement of the Taisho period in Japan – a time of development of consumption society, visual design and social and economic changes. All these processes were caught by the advertisement, but were they influenced or accelerated by advertisement? Content analysis of the advertisement and diachronic research of the Taisho era history can help to find out the cultural role of advertising during this period. The study is based on an analysis of historical events that took place during the Taisho era and advertising products (posters, signs, newspaper and magazine advertisements) of the period that are presented on the website of The Ad Museum Tokyo, as well as scholarly articles from the advertising research journal Ad Studies.

Taisho era is noteworthy because it is the period of Japanese Modernity (taisho modanizumu), during which the foundations of modern Japanese mass culture were laid through a synthesis of national tradition and foreign borrowings. Liberalisation in politics, culture, society, education, which were named Taisho Democracy, gave a powerful impetus to the development of mass society, as well as the development of mass production, which significantly influenced the change in the principles of advertising campaigns. The foundations of consumer culture in Japan began to take

shape. It was during this period that features close to modern advertising appeared: allegorical, appealing to emotions rather than logic; henceforth advertising sells dreams, images.

Before we start the description of the Taisho era and its' advertising we should give a brief description of the advertising in earlier periods.

In the Edo era (1603–1867), the typical advertising medium was signboards made of various materials and attracting attention with their shape and colourfulness. Signboards were covered with gold foil, lacquer, etc. Mostly advertising was visual, signboards had an object or object-symbolic character. In the early 18th century, a type of printed handout advertising hikifuda (advertising leaflets) flourished: they contained information about products and prices, functions and advantages of products. At a later stage, they even included entertaining stories about the properties of the products, as well as colourful images. In the Edo period, printed, visual advertising also took a leap forward with the development of woodblock prints: the prints fulfilled functions similar to those of a modern poster or billboard. Edo advertising texts were detailed, narrative in nature, and resembled a story. At first, newspaper advertisements took up no more than 1/3 of a page, but in the early 20th century texts began to be supplemented with images, more and more attention was paid to the design, there are advertising messages that take up a whole page.

The Meiji era (1868–1912) saw the emergence of indirect advertising – mass advertising without direct contact with the target audience, presented in newspapers and specialised magazines. The first advertisements of the Meiji era were also „readable“ advertisements, informing the consumer about technical innovations such as the telephone, or telling about the work of banks and businesses. Gradually, new texts emerged that became the prototype of modern texts: catchy, simple and concise, characterised by directness and boldness, replacing the long descriptive narrative. Meiji-era headlines were characterised by exaggeration of the merits of the product and the manufacturer, and pompousness. In addition to the black-and-white hikifuda leaflets that flourished in the early 18th century, colourful ebira leaflets became widespread in the Meiji period. The development of printing allowed them to be produced in large print runs and even placed on signboards. Ad posters depict girls in kimono against the background of ‘technical innovations’: telephone, steamboat, etc. The development of mass production in the Meiji era, however, made it possible to create them in large print runs and even place them on signs. However, the development of mass production in the Taisho era brought further changes in advertising.

The Taisho era (1912–1926), the second half of which was the interval between the two world wars, was marked by significant development of Japanese culture, including mass culture (Yamaki 2006: 159). The emergence of leisure time, which facilitated creation of cultural forms of spending it, created a favourable ground for this process. This period was highlighted by the liberalisation of the political process in pre-war Japan. The change to the first party government was an important

stage in development of the Japanese political system. Until the end of World War I, Japan's position on the international stage as a 'great power' was being consolidated in competition with other players, as well as the collapse of the old system of global world order, which resulted in the World War. On the other hand, the world crisis that broke out in the late 1920s exposed the country's structural problems and hit its economy hard, making social contradictions worse and contributing to the radicalisation of the political space. In the early 1930s, Japan embarked on a path of military expansion, changing its development paradigm.

The First World War gave a strong impetus to industrialisation and production, particularly in the development of industries such as pharmaceuticals. By the end of World War I, Japan was able to consolidate its financial position and a period of economic prosperity began. Development of industry was largely due to the reduction of imports: the government encouraged and supported domestic production. At the same time, competition of goods on the domestic market forced manufacturers to pay considerable attention not only to quality, but also to advertising (Tsuganesawa 2006: 12).

It is an interesting fact, that political propaganda posters first appeared in 1929. Unlike the Showa era, the Taisho era, which began with World War I, saw virtually no propaganda advertising – it was created later and mostly copied the Western posters (Tajima 2020). And during World War II, there was a decline in commercial advertising, which fulfilled the role of social advertising.

During the Taisho period, consumer culture and urban lifestyles were formed in Japan, the increase and modernisation of production and the rise of the economy became noticeable. The development of mass society in Japan falls on 10–20 years of the 20th century. The foundations of modern consumer culture were laid at the same time. This era was determined by formation of consumer standards, diversification of values, spread of ideas of liberalism, democracy, women's freedom and attention to social problems, development of the model of individualistic society, the origins of which lie in the West (Tsuganesawa 2006: 12).

Department stores, which appeared in the end of the Meiji era (1868–1912) and flourished in the early 20th century, became guides to the world of consumption and cultural life, serving as a link between producer and consumer. For example, in 1914 Mitsukoshi published a specialized magazine, Mitsukoshi Times, which included interesting articles and stories, as well as information on new products and an order form, thus expanding its consumer base to the whole country (Tsuchiya 2006: 20).

The commodification of culture is taking place. It is not enough for goods to be functional; the 'cultural' component is put on a par with utilitarianism and novelty. Art and culture are becoming part of everyday life of the masses. This trend finds its reflection in the advertisement for the Mitsukoshi department store chain "Today – the Imperial Theatre, tomorrow – Mitsukoshi" (1916) (Ad studies 2006a: 5). At the Tokyo Peace Memorial Exhibition, 1922, "cultural housing" was presented, the

layout of which was strikingly different from the traditional Japanese house, and represented an example of the coveted Western lifestyle: a bedroom, a living room and a children's room. Advertising dictates new trends, new stereotypes, which are picked up by the consumer and objectified through the demand for goods and services (Ad studies 2006a: 5).

In 1905, the Mitsukoshi Department Store established a fashion research laboratory, and in 1909 organized a children's goods research laboratory. In 1911, Mitsukoshi Department Store's specialised magazines, which advertised and distributed information about the department store and its range of products, presented a project for a brand new lifestyle "in touch with the department store", accompanied by the slogan "New fashion originates in Mitsukoshi" (Tsuganesawa 2006: 12). In 1909, Mitsukoshi was one of the first companies to open an artistic advertising department, employ professional artists, and train graphic designers to develop original designs for the department store's advertising, including Art Nouveau posters being among the most popular (Nakajima 2006: 21)

Such an active advertising policy made the company a talking point. During the 1914 Tokyo Taisho Exhibition, the Mitsukoshi Department Store organized information stands and souvenir sales, using a city transport map as the wrapping paper. The new Renaissance-style department store building, which opened the same year, was impressive in its splendor and technology, with elevators and Japan's first escalators. Such innovations caused excitement and became the subject of debate. So, step-by-step, department stores became new landmarks of the city and centers of mass cultural entertainment not only for the city dwellers but also for the suburbs ones (Tsuganesawa 2006: 13).

The Taisho era witnessed a dramatic increase in the concentration of population in large cities such as Tokyo and Osaka, and development of suburbanisation. During this period, as a result of industrialisation and economic growth a new layer of white-collar workers emerged, whose thirst for entertainment and amusement grew stronger: sports, opera and theatre, cinema and music records, and travel became part of everyday life, bringing new aesthetic elements into it (Tsuganesawa 2006: 15–16). In fact, it was these urban middle class of lawyers, journalists, professors, clerks – well-educated and well-to-do people, who were the main carriers of liberal ideas and demanded the democratisation of society and the establishment of basic political and civil liberties. American influence, reflected in middle-class lifestyles and mass media, began to create a new popular culture in Japan.

In addition, industrialisation led to the development of a blue-collar working class that actively demanded better working conditions. At the same time, trade union movements were gaining momentum, and the intensification of social contradictions led to an increase in the number of demonstrations. There was a politicisation of society, mainly the urban population, the growth of individualism and the spread of constitutionalist ideas.

Urbanisation and concentration of heavy and chemical industries in cities worsened the environment and exposed the problem of housing shortages. Representatives of upper and middle classes actively moved to the suburbs. This situation promoted the development of urban transport, especially private railways, as well as new ways of spending leisure time: zoological and botanical gardens, amusement parks, cinemas, dance halls and cafes, etc. were created (Tsuganesawa 2006: 16). Advertising played an active role in terms of ‘educating’ the consumer by communicating information to the public about their options and new life-style standards.

The Taisho era was a ‘reading era’: large-scale advertisements featuring books, one-yen books (*en-bon*), magazines, and dictionaries (e.g., *Kaizosya’s Compendium of Modern Japanese Literature* (1926), *Inoue’s English-Japanese-Chinese Dictionary* (1923, *Shiseido Publishers*), etc.) were prominent in the pages of newspapers (Ad studies 2006a: 6). In addition, music records and hand-held cameras (1922 *Konishi Publishers*) were presented to the attention of readers (Ad studies 2006b: 31–32).

The advent of offset printing and colour phototype in 1914 opened up a wide range of opportunities for advertising artists, helping them create bright, colourful, attractive posters (Tsuchiya 2006: 20). This period saw a shift from the ‘readable advertising’ (Higuchi, Satō 2010: 47–67) of the Meiji era to the ‘viewable’ advertising: the emphasis shifts to the visual component of the advertising message, with the arrangement of text and images subject to the whim and imagination of the author. Artists begin to experiment with foreshortening, colour, and scale (Ad studies 2006a: 9).

In Taisho-era advertising, the main role is played by the image: one can see posters with the company name and a short advertising slogan, or only the company logo, so that the text only clarifies the idea expressed by the visuals and guides the consumer’s thinking. An ad for Lion toothpaste in a newspaper (1924) depicts a woman in a kimono standing on the shore of a lake against a waterfall and a single inscription: “Lion Toothpaste”. The text in this case plays a purely referential function and should not interfere with the enjoyment of the high-quality image, but only clarify what product we are talking about and that this particular product will make you feel refreshingly cool (Ad studies 2006b: 33). Advertising images create an ideal picture of a man of the new age, and by operating with allusions and visual metaphors, show the consumer the modern lifestyle to which he should henceforth aspire: for example, the *Teikoku Denki* light bulb poster (1926) depicts a modern, wealthy Japanese family (indicated by European clothing and furnishings): father and daughter admiring the mother, who is showing off herself in the light of the lamps.

At first, commercial circles enlisted the help of artists to create advertising posters, but little by little professional graphic designers set off to design advertising layouts for businesses.

In the late Taisho and early Showa eras (1926–1989), the creation of advertisements was no longer just an element of applied art, but developed into a self-sufficient profession. Many manufacturers realize the value of quality advertising in increasing

sales. In 1925, designer Sugiura Hisui established the Nananinsha Association, which was engaged in design and creation of advertising projects. Many Japanese artists travelled to Europe and the United States, getting familiar with the work of their Western colleagues and contemporary artistic trends (Ad studies 2006a: 9).

In particular, the art nouveau trend had a great influence on advertising posters of the Taisho era: 'airy', frivolous young ladies dressed in a Western manner replaced cute Japanese women in traditional kimonos. The pose becomes freer, the image itself becomes more expressive and sensual, and the calm and serious expression on the face of traditional models is replaced by a mysterious smile. On the advertising posters of Mitsukoshi and Hoshi Seiyaku by Sugiura Hisui in the Art Nouveau style, one can see the image of a woman with a burning torch raised above her head. According to the author – this image is a symbol of women's freedom. The posters are decorated with curved lines and the theme of flora and fauna in the ornamentation (Nakajima 2006: 22; Tsuganesawa 2006: 13).

The Japanese artistic image was influenced by Expressionism, Art Deco and the Russian avant-garde, the expressiveness of which was taken up later by the Showa artists of the pre-war period. Takehisa Yumeji, in particular, often depicted beautiful women of his time and domestic scenes. His images are influenced by the Italian Expressionist Amedeo Modigliani and Art Nouveau artists (Nakajima 2006: 23).

In addition, the graphic design of print advertising in the 1920s developed under the influence of the Bauhaus trend that emerged in Germany. The Bauhaus school was attended by architects and designers of the early 1920s of the 20th Takehiko Mizutani, Iwao and Michiko Yamawaki, who later raised a constellation of graphic artists and designers (Yusaku Kamekura and others) (Nakajima 2006: 21–23).

It should be noted that Japanese artists did not just copy Western advertising posters in the Japanese style, but creatively reinterpreted the works of European masters within the established cultural tradition, developing their own vision and understanding of Art Nouveau.

In their work on advertising posters, artists used ready-made communicative structures that can be perceived as a kind of language or a certain code: they were household items, elements of style, etc. Thanks to the creation of its own special language based on elements of various semiotic systems, advertising turns into a conventional sign expressing a certain idea. The very goods presented in advertising become identifying signs, for example, a system of marking social status (Baudrillard 1986). This feature of the advertising message is especially clear in the postmodern era, but its roots go back to the early 20th century.

Taisho advertising combined the main tendencies of the bygone Edo period (1603–1868) – humour and elegant language – with the Taisho period itself, which adopted Western styles of fine art and attached great importance to the visual image. However, the image did not play a dominant role in the advertising message. The images themselves, representing complex units of meaning, can be broken

down into individual signs and interpreted in one way or another depending on the context in which they are placed. A harmoniously chosen combination of visual image and text allowed to clarify and enrich the iconic seme, fixing a specific meaning to the image (Nakajima 2006: 25).

In the Meiji era, advertising texts were often long product messages written by the shopkeeper himself or short stories written in high style by writers of *gesaku* (narrative fiction) (Yamaki 2006: 263). In the Taisho era, however, the main importance was placed on the advertising slogan, a catchy expression that could attract the reader's attention and be hereby remembered. Thus, the craft of ad copywriting became step by step a separate profession (Ad studies 2006a: 9).

One of the most spectacular examples of modernist advertising is the work of Toshiro Kataoka, who revolutionised advertising texts by introducing an element of entertainment. His advertising messages are characterised by boldness, humour, caricature, provocativeness and unexpected parallels, richness of syllable (Ad studies 2006a: 9–10). Besides, in his works text and visual component actively complement each other, actualising a certain component of meaning and creating a lively attractive image. The slogans for the advertisements of Smoka tooth powder and toothpaste manufacturer were decorated with black-and-white sketches corresponding to the advertising text, for example: the slogans “Smoka's spirit will crush blackness and keep whiteness” and “Smoka's craftsmanship – Nicotine cannot be withheld” were illustrated with images of warriors; “Fire is not dangerous – neither for rice, nor for teeth! But if you lose control, it will turn black! Both rice and teeth” was accompanied by an image of a woman cooking food on fire (Yamaki 2006: 171).

An event such as the Great Kanto Earthquake (1923) could not help but influence Japanese mass culture and advertising in particular. In newspapers such as *The Tokyo Nichi Nichi Shimbun*, up to half of the space was devoted to advertising, which became an information resource. Advertisements informed about the status of industry and companies, changes in sales outlets, opening and stopping the business, opening and closing time of shops, and essential goods, thus providing up-to-date information in a timely manner. In general, this sad event rather contributed to the spread of advertising.

The practical ideas and straightforward slogans of the early Taisho era are replaced by poetic references at the end of the period, with advertisements appealing to people's feelings and everyday needs. For example, in an advertisement for Calpis, the phrase “A nourishing drink” is replaced by the slogan “In 1 glass of Calpis you will find the taste of first love” (1924) (Ad studies 2006a: 7). Advertising texts still abound with detailed information about goods and services, but it is the richness and colourfulness of language and humour that become the distinctive features of advertising of this period. The producers of goods emphasise not only the quality of goods and the reliability of the manufacturer, but also try to entertain and interest the buyer, to find a common language with him (Higuchi, Sato 2010).

The Lait cosmetics advertisement (1925) used traditional images of Kabuki actresses and courtesans, meeting all the established notions of beauty and echoing Edo-era prints. Meanwhile, Club Cosmetics' advertisements departed from the accepted standard of beauty, attracting the public's attention with a new aesthetic taste: the company's face was two women who embodied girls from European high society and the idea of natural human beauty (Tsuganesawa 2006: 14).

Japanese commercial advertising in general is characterised by the use of indirect advertising and a soft approach. Such advertising avoids openly directing action to the consumer and direct imperatives, using soft verbs, suggesting and prompting, but not instructing; it does not appeal to logic, but uses emotional approach, selling a dream, a mood to create a positive image of the brand or product (Wells, Moriarty, Burnett 2006: 736). The widespread use of female characters in Japanese advertising avoids openly imposing influence and creates the illusion of free choice: a woman, who, as a rule, is in a subordinate position in relation to a man, cannot act as an authoritative person whose opinion should be listened to – it is as if she offers the goods, leaving it to the buyer to take further actions (choice of goods).

The idea postulated in the advertisement should evoke a certain emotional response that extends to the product itself, so that the consumer's reaction will be based on feelings and attitudes. Thus, the advertising series of cosmetics by Kazoku Kurabu "Family Club" uses metonymy with the function of identification "well-appointed/prosperous home", "happy family" = "Club cosmetics" and a female image that acquires antonomasic meaning in the advertisement. Thus, we get a chain of meanings, familiar in its form to the modern buyer: "every caring skillful housewife uses cosmetics – to be like that you need to buy Club cosmetics" (Tsuganesawa 2006: 14). A similar indirect imperative is present in the advertisement of the goods of the manufacturer of Chinese phytotherapeutic substances Tsumura "In a shining house – [there are tinctures of] Tujoto. Only your care makes the house bright or gloomy".

On the other hand, the progressive change of the social status of women is noteworthy – this trend was picked up in the advertising of goods and services and presented as ultra-modern. In 1922, approximately 3.5 million of Japan's 27 million women were middle class. The number of working women increased. Also in the 1920s and 1930s the phenomenon of *modan garu* "modern girl" appeared: a girl of new, European views, fashionable, self-reliant, independent. The images of such girls can often be seen in advertisements for a variety of goods, alcohol and tobacco products of the Taisho and early Showa eras. *Modan garu* was not a passive consumer, as many people believed her to be; on the contrary, she was a creator of new goods, services and habits (Garaeva 2020: 100).

The creators of Moriei chocolate (1926) and Platon German fountain pens (1922) used images of women dressed in fashionable European clothes to emphasise the idea of novelty and quality and to reinforce the associative chain "this modern product makes you modern and stylish" (Ad studies 2006b: 32). If we analyse

advertising from the Taisho era, we can see the prevalence of images and slogans that appeal to a female audience (Ad studies 2006a: 7). In this era, the female audience is actively involved not only in consumption, but also in social processes. Thus, in the Taisho era, women's universities were opened, the Japanese feminist movement developed, women declared their right to participate in elections and public life, and tried on such professions as nurse, doctor, pharmacist, teacher, translator, telephonist, typist, seamstress, saleswoman, waitress, and later magazine editor, beautician, actress, and others. Writers and poetesses in their works rethink the relationship between man and woman, the very essence of being woman.

Another remarkable industry and its advertisement is alcohol. The Western-style alcohol manufacturers, along with cosmetics manufacturers, were the standard-bearers of the Westernisation of life. They have changed the mainstream of their beer posters and newspaper advertisements, especially after the Great Kanto Earthquake, to design that mainly aimed at housewives. At the beginning people became familiar with beer in beer halls and cafés, the ads showed beautiful Japanese women with bottles and glasses in restaurants. The beer industry has changed from the men's beverage of the past, towards a beer to be enjoyed at home by married couples. For example, Kirin Brewery Company depicts the new lifestyle of the salaryman's family, with images of the joy of drinking with the young wife in the bath at the end of the day ("A day's pleasure, a family's harmony" (Kirin 1924)). The strategy of westernisation through advertising was promoted in many areas of household goods. The advertising for these foodstuffs included catch-phrases such as 'beer', 'whiskey', 'wine' and other Western liquors, soft drinks and were often of high quality, with elaborate catchphrases and visual design.

Conclusion

Probably, in the period of formation of cultural paradigm of modernism, advertising still appeals to stable preferences, standardised notions of beauty, familiar codes and signs. On the other hand, changes in social life, shift from the accepted models and filling traditional genres with new content, combining elements of Western and traditional art clothe the usual moves in a new form.

In addition, advertising messages are stepwise taking on a completely new gist of "mass consumption", which emerged in response to the development of mass production, requiring constant, ever-increasing demand – thus, not only the signifier but also the signified is changing.

The 20th century saw a shift from purely informational to persuasive and emotional advertising. It still fulfils the role of 'educator', but now by demonstrating to the consumer his new opportunities, modern lifestyle; in the process of development and increase in production, when it becomes more and more difficult to find qualitative differences between products, the accents in advertising are shifted to

artistic images, feelings – advertising represents a profile, a dream; it becomes an entertainment genre, where all kinds of elements of suggestive influence and interactivity are more and more appreciated.

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