

The Battle of the Billboards

ALONG with its rapid "Americanization" in many other respects, Shanghai seems to have contracted a major case of "billboarditis." When this plague of paper-pasting reached its climax in the United States several years ago, it finally was recognized by the more intelligent communities as constituting a really dangerous menace to the beauty and tranquility of their cities. Public opinion definitely moved against it. Today the model American metropolis has strict rules against the erection of signboards within certain areas. Some of the more advanced districts even forbid the hanging of projecting signs in the populous business streets and a few of the prouder towns have eliminated extravagant displays altogether.

When billboards first were introduced in the interior of China by a Japanese patent medicine concern the Chinese manifested a most hostile attitude toward them. In a number of villages demonstrations of wrath took the form of great mass meetings, where the more offensive advertising boards publicly were burned. For some time this resentment succeeded in keeping the bill posters from plastering their slogans on the portals of the sacred places, but lately they have become bolder. Today one frequently is greeted with the spectacle of a devout Chinese burning prayers in a thousand-year-old brazier, glistening beneath a blue tiled temple roof over which flames some placard bearing the legend of a patent medicine, or enumerating the merits of the latest model of the "Wessex Twin Six."

Such an incongruity may be seen in Shanghai, at the flank of the ancient Bubbling Well, where stands

the temple of the Goddess of Mercy. For a city of three million people, Shanghai is notoriously destitute of those sanctums of worship which in most big cities furnish some evidence of moral atmosphere. But the gods of the Chinese seem to have avoided the city of Hu. The Bubbling Well temple has been, and remains, practically the only symbol of spiritual China in this city which holds more sons of Han than any other. It is a kind of last stronghold of the gods. And now it is defaced and rapidly being obliterated by the high walls of outdoor advertising. At present the casual passer-by might cross and recross the shadow of this ancient place of worship a dozen times, yet be oblivious that behind the great mass of bilious yellows and greens and other sickly pigments wasted upon the tin billboards, there struggles the slowly languishing soul of China.

The billboard "racket" has won many proselytes in Shanghai. Besides the hierarchy of advertising potentates who rule the choicer locations, there are dozens of "free-lancers." The latter, with little capital of their own, go forth and make contracts with the lot owners, and then, on the basis of these, solicit the business of the short-sighted merchants who promiscuously employ this primitive means of broadcasting their wares. Competition for display space is becoming increasingly keen, a prominent outdoor advertising agent tells us. Not only is there "legitimate" counter-bidding between "recognized advertising authorities," but nowadays one must meet the outrageous offers made by "irresponsible persons" such as the independent operators we mentioned. "What the outdoor advertising industry needs," this

gentleman naively informed us, "is to combine and get a monopoly on this business, so that any advertiser who wants to use billboards will have to deal exclusively with recognized agents, or else be refused the use of the best locations, which are controlled by them!"

It is only natural that he should feel thus, as indeed it is only natural that he recommends to all his clients that they spend the bulk of their appropriations in advertising on his billboards. For observe that the agent may realize anywhere from 30 per cent to 100 per cent as his billboard advertising commission, depending upon his own astuteness, while the most he can hope for from the more reputable journals and newspapers, is but 15 per cent, which often is given to him grudgingly, here in Shanghai, because of the small service he renders.

Then too, this agent proceeded to confess to us, it is not so difficult to get more money out of a client for billboard advertising. By playing on his vanity, a curious string that is in the instrument of even an intelligent man's psychology, the agent easily makes a satisfied billboard customer of his client. The simple device is to discover the route he takes to and from his business and then merely proceed to place the first sign where the advertiser is sure to see it, and glory in all the ugliness of his name in gargantuan display.

Another nice feature of the board is that it is not expected to produce results. It has no coupons attached, no "key letters" soliciting inquiries, can make no timely offers and therefore is relieved of the burden that most newspaper advertising is required to carry—that of bringing in the names of prospects who may be followed up for business. So the "billboardian" knows that his position is secure. His frets are minimized. He ceases to worry over the query that disturbs the sleep of many a publication's advertising manager, "It's pretty,—but can you show me business actually developed?" If one of his clients forgets the etiquette of the game and does make such an interrogation, the agent merely assures him, with calm dignity, that the billboard is not meant to bring in traceable business. Ah, no, he says, it wields its influence in a manner far subtler and grander than that!

Other than the freak, the bizarre, or the sometimes fairly artistic signs that one occasionally notices

with interest sufficient to merit their having been erected, we often wonder if there is any real value in what are termed in the United States "the unsightlies." Certainly nobody can prove it, if there is. Perhaps that in itself is the real reason why these unlovely blots continue to mar the landscape. In practically all other forms of advertising the unbending business truth applies: a thing must be proved helpful, or it is assumed to be worthless. Somehow, whether from man's mere vanity, or a lingering confidence in that earlier vague, undefined faith in publicity, regardless of the medium, billboard advertising seems to have sidestepped that test. Yet it is significant that in America great advertisers are spending smaller percentages of their appropriations for billboards and concentrating it in the surer, less offensive mediums such as newspapers, magazines, direct mail, radio, etc.

In Shanghai, where advertising still is passing through the early phenomena of evolution, there is naturally a lack of the perspective and that background of experience which has caused leading advertisers in more advanced cities to abandon gradually the use of billboards. There was a time in the not-distant past when the International Settlement and the French Concession here stood out against the bill-board agents and either prohibited this form of advertising or placed such a high tax on it that the number of signs was negligible. But in recent years the bars have been let down and no section of the city, particularly the International Settlement, is sacred against the ubiquitous advertising sign. Apparently the S. M. C. is not unaware of the rapid increase in what it refers to as "advertising hoardings," for in a recent bulletin it recommended a new levy of "from Tls. 0.10 to Tls. 5. per square foot of advertising per annum," from the occupier of any building having signs boards. However, there seems to be little hope of any actual prohibition, but some day the advertisers themselves may wake up to the fact that the public's unfavorable reactions to the ugliness and incongruity of these futile signs, particularly among people living in communities marred by the monstrosities, more than offsets any doubtful good effects they may have. About that time, then, when the advertisers begin to divert their money into more efficacious channels, they will discover that China is much like any other market, and responds just as readily to well directed advertising.