Creativity as Branding: An Analysis of FHM China’s Innovative Editorial Strategy

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Abstract

An examination of FHM China and interviews with Chinese magazine journalists reveal the importance of creative editorial principles in Chinese consumer magazines. Launched in 2004, the men’s magazine FHM China has become highly profitable by relying on both circulation and advertising, as opposed to other high-end consumer magazines in China, which rely solely on advertising revenue. In addition, FHM China built a brand profile in just three years and is thus considered a major creative and cultural success. The magazine’s accomplishments are due in part to editors strategically positioning the publication in the men’s magazine market and implementing an editorial strategy of serving your readers. For the FHM China model, content is king.

Keywords: China, FHM China, localization, magazines, men’s magazines

Introduction

During the last 20 years, leading international consumer publications such as Elle and Vogue have entered China’s glossy, high-end magazine market. Today, more than 50 foreign publications exist in mainland China. Chinese and international publishers compete vigorously in one of the world’s most important and dynamic economies.

As a cultural product, magazines reflect the interconnection between culture and economy in the Western world (Cave, 2000; Moeran, 2006). Magazines are a recent cultural product that did not evolve naturally in China, where the development of the press—and magazines in particular—was interrupted by the National Internal War and the Cultural Revolution of the 20th century. After the liberalization of the media in

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the 1990s, the concept of magazines as a cultural product was transferred to China\(^1\) (B. Zhang,\(^2\) personal communication, July 7, 2006). During the economic liberalization, the Chinese press has been moving from being politically centered to being economically centered, from being a privileged branch of the authoritarian state system to being an industry with “private interests within the economic system” (Hu, 2003, paragraph 9), and from a state monopoly to a diversified, fragmented structure.

It is difficult to categorize Chinese periodicals in a particular niche, such as fashion magazine, women’s magazine, or men’s magazine, because until recently, none of the glossy, high-end consumer magazines tailored content to their audience. For the last 20 years, high-quality Chinese consumer magazines were in great demand by the rapidly expanding middle and upper classes seeking to enhance their identity and quality of life with luxury goods (Luxury consumption in China, 2010) and glossy magazines stuffed with advertisements. The editors of high-end, glossy consumer magazines, therefore, focused on the portrayal of a nouveau lifestyle. They competed with each other in a market determined by readers’ lifestyle, consumption habits, occupation, and income. These factors were often in sharp contrast to the luxury goods presented in both the stories and ads of these high-end magazines and by the publication’s price, which was usually 20 CNY (nearly US$3) per issue. By contrast, daily Chinese newspapers cost only 1 CNY or 2 CNY per issue, which was less than ten percent of the price of a glossy consumer magazine (Lee, 2007).

But such a quandary is hardly new worldwide. British publishers faced similar problems in the 1980s (Ballaster, 1991), when many companies believed that consumerism shaped people’s lifestyle. Similarly, Chinese publishers today might believe that the concept of “lifestyle” better interprets their editorial goals and thus limits their reporting boundaries (Guo, 2010).

In the Chinese context, “lifestyle” refers to a fashionable or desirable attitude displayed through consumerism and the pursuit of a higher standard of living and good taste that distinguishes someone from the ordinary population. Thus, for many media industries in China, the idea of lifestyle can produce a sustained sense of consumption and expand consumer culture (Guo, 2008), so they must satisfy advertisers and other business sectors, such as public relation companies. In addition, the media content of magazines suggests a disinterest in segmenting readership by gender or other categories, thus allowing for a broad target readership.

The undeveloped magazine market was the impetus behind the Chinese launches of *Vogue* and *FHM* in 2004. As Hartley and Montgomery (2007) concluded, “*Vogue* and

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\(1\) Unless stated otherwise, all references to the magazine market refer to mainland China.

\(2\) Bohai Zhang was president of the China Periodicals Association from 2004 to 2008.
its competitors are there to assist in the tricky business of bringing innovation (the fashion value of novelty) into convergence with imitation (the market value of replication)” (pp. 7–8). Although the two magazines were launched in the same month, they filled different niches: fashion (Vogue) and men’s lifestyle (FHM) in the Chinese magazine industry. Although China’s publishing market was technically closed to foreign publications before 2004, many international magazines were allowed to circulate, subject to partnerships with local publishers, strict licensing, and content guidelines. The Chinese government viewed foreign-licensed magazines as pilot projects to bring national media up to international standards and signal an “open policy.” The government, therefore, allowed these magazines more freedom in their content and business practices. In addition, China’s economic reform policy needed the media to advocate consumerism, and consumer magazines were chosen for this task.

This article looks into the success of one of these magazines—FHM China—by examining how its editorial principles relate to its market success, as well as the practical implications of the FHM China model.

**Literature Review**

*China’s magazine industry*

Of the 59 Chinese editions of foreign magazines published in 2008, 23 were consumer magazines (Sun, 2008). After China joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, foreign publishers began to enter the Chinese market, either by publishing a Chinese-language edition of the parent magazine or by licensing the brand and content to Chinese counterparts. Chinese magazines that had access to the resources of foreign magazine partners, including mature business models and training programs for magazine professionals, replicated these high-quality publications (B. Zhang, personal communication, July 7, 2006).

International magazines experienced relative success in China because of the low levels of competition (Li, 2007; B. Zhang, personal communication, December 12, 2006). Many combined a minimum of content produced or edited locally with local advertisements or advertorials. This is partly because most international Chinese magazine partners had not set up long-term business plans for the Chinese media market.

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3 To avoid confusion, the author refers to the magazine as FHM China instead of NanRen Zhuang, the Chinese name of the FHM Chinese edition. FHM (For Him Magazine) was not an established brand before being introduced in China, and it is not well known by Chinese readers. Accordingly, FHM China uses the Chinese characters 男人装 instead of the FHM logo on the cover, so Chinese consumers might consider NanRen Zhuang a local brand.
This media market is often subject to unclear and changeable government policies concerning foreign businesses in response to the rapidly changing nature of China’s economy and society.

In terms of business models, magazines in China can be classified as circulation-driven or advertisement-driven. Circulation-driven models aim for low-income readers, while those that rely on advertising target higher-income readers, such as wealthy urban youth or the newly emergent middle class (Anemonedream, 2008; Lin, 2007; Ma, 2007). In 2007 only one in four periodicals relied on the circulation-driven model, with fewer than half making a profit (Wei, 2007). These statistics help explain the impetus for most local and international glossy magazines to crowd into the lifestyle and female fashion categories before 2005 because they are advertisement-driven and target higher-income readers.

Nevertheless, since the 1990s international magazines have experienced business success as a result of the burgeoning consumer culture, original high-quality content that is not simply translated from non-Chinese magazines, and advanced business models in a market with few competitors (Ma, 2007). In addition, the proliferation of international magazines in China is linked to two other key factors: the relatively low cost of production and the diversity of cooperative models, such as content licensing and co-partnership models (Lin, 2007). Although current GAPP (General Administration of Press and Publication, Republic of China) regulations stipulate that at least 50 percent of the content of fashion magazines must be locally produced, official documents do not indicate any penalties for reducing locally produced content below that level. In short, the instability of the Chinese government’s policy toward the media industry and the rapidly changing magazine market hinder the development of long-term business plans, and thus the Chinese magazine industry works at a low standard of development. For example, the Chinese market is full of glossy lifestyle magazines that feature foreign lifestyles and Caucasian models, but they lack local fashion or domestic content (P. Li, personal communication, November 16, 2006).

It is also important to consider the nuances within this shifting industry. By understanding circulation, revenue, readership, and distribution, one can better grasp the new paradigm of the Chinese lifestyle magazine.

Circulation

Over the past three decades, China has experienced a steady increase in the number of magazines but a steady decrease in the number of newspapers (Yu, 2008).

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4 Xiaqiang Zhang is a freelance researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.
5 Pin Li is a professor at the Beijing Institute of Graphic Communication and director of the China Periodical Research Institution in Beijing.
These figures might reflect a slight softening of the government’s tight control over the number of magazines sold in China.

The vast majority of Chinese magazines are still owned and run by government-funded institutions. Each institution usually produces several titles. Only 59 out of 9,468 magazines are cooperative models that have foreign ownership involvement (Sun, 2008).

From 1978 to 2006 (the most recent GAPP figures), the number of periodicals increased more than ten times—from 930 in 1978 to 9,468 in 2006 (Liu, 2008). Of those 9,468 titles, 3,200 were business-to-business periodicals, 3,500 were scientific journals, and 1,200 were consumer magazines. The remaining were direct mail. Of the 8,282 magazine titles published in 2003, 3,151 were monthlies, 2,857 were bimonthlies, and 2,230 were quarterlies (China Periodicals Association, 2007). The total number of print magazines circulated in 2005 was 2.758 billion copies, with consumer magazines accounting for 13.19 percent. The types of consumer magazines broke down as follows: culture and arts (40.83%), entertainment and leisure (29.94%), lifestyle and living (19.59%), and social and financial (9.64%) (China Periodicals Association, 2007).

Revenue

According to industry estimates, roughly two-thirds of all magazines in China lost money from 2003 to 2005 (Yu, 2005). In 2003 circulation revenue was estimated at 12.3 billion CNY (roughly US$1.8 billion), advertisement revenue at 2.3 billion CNY (roughly US$0.3 billion) (Yu, 2005). Although advertising revenue increased 60.2 percent in 2003, it accounted for only 3.3 percent of the total advertising sales revenue of the media industry in China, which was about 68 billion CNY (roughly US$10.1 billion) (Yu, 2005). In 2004 the revenue of magazine advertising decreased 17 percent (Wei, 2007), but in 2005 it increased 17.5 percent (Yao & Zhang, 2006). These figures show the volatility of the magazine advertising market in China.

In 2005 the gross advertising revenue of lifestyle and fashion magazines was 2.3 billion CNY (roughly US$0.34 billion), or 40 percent of the total magazine advertising market in China. More than 9,000 national magazines shared the remaining 60 percent of this revenue (Yao & Zhang, 2006).

Two significant factors appear to drive consumer psychology in China. First, Chinese readers prefer to buy glossy fashion magazines with many pages, emphasizing “the thicker, the better,” according to a Chinese NetEase survey (2007). This is likely a byproduct of the hefty price of these magazines. From a business perspective, the publishers of Chinese glossy magazines want a thick magazine to demonstrate their ability to attract advertisers. Examples of such “big books” in China include the 20th

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6 Using an exchange rate of US$1=6.7 CNY as of July 2010.
anniversary edition of *Elle* (September 2008), which counted 1,000 pages, and the 23rd anniversary edition of *Trends Bazaar* (October 2009), which had 950 pages. As Rohn (2010) noted:

The fact that Chinese editions are printed on higher quality paper than their Western counterparts, and, also higher than domestic magazines, is rooted in the fact that this is what Chinese readers expect from Western magazine brands as they see the Western brands as status symbols. (p. 245)

The second factor that drives consumer psychology is that international magazine publishers and their Chinese partners regard Western brands as vehicles for attracting multinational advertisers. The ratio of advertising revenue to circulation revenue of the most popular consumer titles in China’s magazine market is 75:25, which is the highest in the world (Huang, 2008). Thus, magazines that have translation and copyright agreements with foreign companies have purchased most of the advertising space, leaving only a fraction for local Chinese magazines.

**Readership**

According to a 2003 survey in “The Report on TV Audiences in China,” 23.1 million people in China spent an average of 46 minutes every day reading magazines (Yu, 2005). The typical magazine reader was female, mature (from 24 to 35 years old), a university graduate, and active, with a higher-than-average income (Yu, 2005). The literate person in China read an average of 7.4 magazines per year. About 68 percent of urban residents read magazines—compared with only 32 percent in rural areas (Yu, 2005). The emphasis on adult women, teenagers, and children is apparent in the number of Chinese consumer magazine titles available for these three audiences. (See Table 1.)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
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<tr>
<td>Gender and Age of Readers of Chinese Consumer Magazines in 2007 (n=260)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Magazine titles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29% (75)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Source: China Periodicals Association, 2007

Readers’ preferences (based on sales figures) indicate a strong liking for leisure activities. (See Table 2.)
Among business-to-business magazines, readers’ preferences reflect the importance of manufacturing and engineering in China’s burgeoning economic development. (See Table 3.)

**Table 2**

Breakdown of Chinese Consumer Magazines by Category in 2007 (n=184)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classification</th>
<th>Titles</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Health care and sports</td>
<td>28% (51)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home living</td>
<td>26% (48)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Computer</td>
<td>15% (28)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Travel</td>
<td>15% (27)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Auto</td>
<td>11% (21)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Food</td>
<td>3% (5)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pets</td>
<td>2% (4)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Source: China Periodicals Association, 2007

**Table 3**

Breakdown of Chinese Business-to-Business Magazines by Category in 2007 (n=2831)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Titles</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing and engineering</td>
<td>40.76% (1154)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Medical</td>
<td>16.32% (462)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture, farming, and fishing</td>
<td>14.52% (411)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Economy</td>
<td>7.21% (204)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer, Internet, and communication</td>
<td>7.06% (200)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation</td>
<td>5.48% (155)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management</td>
<td>3.50% (99)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finance</td>
<td>2.40% (68)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service trades</td>
<td>1.41% (40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accounting</td>
<td>1.34% (38)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: China Periodicals Association, 2007
Distribution

Distribution figures for 2007 reveal that only one in four periodicals relied on the circulation-driven model, of which less than half were profitable (Wei, 2007). Most Chinese magazines have traditionally relied on the post office as their primary distributor for both subscriptions and retail sales (Lin, 2007). Post office branches, many of which have retail display counters with magazines for sale, also accept subscription orders from their customers and remit the payment less their distributor’s commission of between 40 percent and 50 percent. (Li, personal communication, July 22, 2008).

WTO-mandated reforms are bringing long-awaited diversification and new players into the distribution business and shrinking the dominant role of the post office. Chinese magazine publishers are beginning to benefit from competition in the distribution sector. At the same time, the rapid development of the Chinese economy has spurred the growth of a better educated, high-income demographic, leading to an increase in magazines’ core readership. The market economy has stimulated the news media to become privatized, more commercial, and fiercely competitive (Borton, 2004).

The development of Chinese periodicals is less than 30 years old and very immature compared with Western periodicals, which have been evolving for more than 200 years (B. Zhang, personal communication, December 12, 2006). Consequently, many magazine professionals place great expectations on cooperative models with Western brands to achieve success in China.

However, media critic Wei (2007) criticized the advertisers in Chinese magazines for focusing on a few high-end, glossy consumer magazines with international partners. The top ten high-end, glossy magazines total more than 100 million CNY (nearly US$15 million) in advertising revenue, but less than a hundred thousand copies per month each in circulation (X. Zhang, personal communication, August 28, 2009). This shows that the Chinese periodicals market is far from being fully developed because consumer magazine publishers must choose either a domestic brand with high circulation but low advertising revenue, or co-operating with an international brand with low circulation but high advertising revenue. To succeed, Chinese publishers must quickly find their own model for developing magazines and reaching the international market. The 2004 launch of FHM China is a valuable example of how a now-popular title met these challenges.

Men’s magazines in China

The World Magazine Trends 2004/2005 Handbook (FIPP, 2006) defines men’s magazines as publications with editorial and advertising aimed almost entirely at male readers. The handbook heralds “significant” growth for China’s male magazine sector, compared with “stagnant” markets in neighboring countries, such as Japan and Korea (p. 68).
In April 2004 the British magazine publisher EMAP began a partnership with Trends Media Group to launch the FHM Chinese edition. Trends Media Group is the largest publisher of Chinese consumer magazines, with a portfolio of 15 magazines; 13 of them have foreign counterparts (About Trends, 2010).

In addition, four new men’s lifestyle and entertainment magazines, including Maxim and Magnazine, were also launched in 2003 and 2004 (Godfrey, 2004b). The new competitors extended the boundaries of content by including topics such as sex—similar to how British magazine publishers successfully expanded this niche in the 1990s (Gill, 2003). The topic of sex was used subtly, however, because of editors’ self-censorship and cultural differences in China. Media researchers criticized these Chinese editions for projecting unattainable lifestyle goals and not being in synch with Chinese men’s taste (X. Zhang, personal communication, May 17, 2007).

To understand this criticism, one must consider the Chinese male demographic. Traditionally, male readers were attracted primarily to news or technology magazines, so the new, high-end men’s magazines found themselves in an awkward position: If they used sex as their main editorial goal, their white-collar target audience might be interested in the content but ashamed to buy the magazines because it is considered improper in Chinese culture (Wang & Ding, 2010). In addition, the readers appeared reluctant to change their loyalty from the traditional trade and professional publications, such as financial and computer periodicals. Hence, China’s high-end men’s magazine market experienced a slow start. By 2004, 20 publications were classified as men’s magazines (China Periodicals Association, 2004). So the question raised was whether a men’s lifestyle magazine could succeed in China.

This study examines FHM China, a magazine owned by Trends Media Group, the largest national consumer magazine firm in China. By 2005, a year after the magazine’s launch, FHM had 500,000 readers, making it the top-selling Chinese consumer magazine (Lailaiv, 2008; Sliver, 2008). In 2006 FHM China won acclaim as “The 1st Grand Ceremony of Creative China—The most creative daily product.” This competition was sponsored by SINA, the largest Internet content provider in China. Clearly, FHM China has filled a void in the Chinese men’s consumer magazine market and begun a new era of men’s magazines. “FHM China has proved the best example of how to translate the classic FHM values—funny, sexy, useful—into a more conservative culture” (Mooney, 2005, paragraph 6).

In light of such accolades, this research examines FHM China’s editorial and financial success by attempting to answer two questions:

1. How do FHM China’s editorial principles relate to its market success?
2. What are the practical implications in China of the FHM China model?
Method

To examine FHM China’s editorial principles, market success, and practical implications, the researcher conducted interviews in Beijing from 2006 to 2009 with Jacky Jin (ShouMa), the deputy publisher and editor of FHM China; other publishers in China; media professionals working at international lifestyle magazines in China; and media critics in Beijing. Through these interviews, the researcher sought to understand the editorial ideology and various levels of autonomy at FHM China and within the consumer magazine market in China.

Based on the experiences of other scholars (Jackson, Stevenson, & Brooks, 2001; Moeran, 2006), the researcher combined elements of qualitative methods—qualitative data analysis and in-depth interviews. As with most ethnographic approaches to research, various forms of in-depth interviews and participant observations were employed to characterize and delineate the data gathering. Semi-structured interviews and open-ended questions allowed for a range of responses and enabled the participants to interpret each question in their own way.

Interviews, government regulations, and policy treatments served as primary sources. Data extracted from publications, academic literature, magazine content, and weblogs were used as secondary sources. These were crosschecked with data gathered from primary sources. The primary data were collected from October 2006 to February 2007. Additional data, such as academic publications and magazine content, were collected from March 2007 to March 2010. Since Moeran (2006) argued that researchers can use their own judgment and experiences to interpret the truth and therefore avoid “unconsciously, subconsciously or consciously presenting a rather more glowing picture of that unattainable truth” (p. 727), the researcher also considered her own 12 years of work experience in print media. This included time as both journalist and media manager in China. Finally, the researcher translated the research interviews from Chinese into English.

One limitation of this study is that the researcher did not apply other methods, such as focus groups of FHM China readers to examine their likes and dislikes. In addition, content analyses could provide another way to analyze FHM China’s editorial mission and practices. Expanding the study to 2010 would provide insight into the editorial goals of FHM China over time and the changes initiated by editors.

Analysis

FHM China’s editorial principles and market success

After three years of tough competition, FHM China was the most successful men’s magazine in terms of circulation, selling nearly 500,000 copies per month in 2007.
These numbers can be considered even more impressive given its cover price of US$2.60 in a country where a daily newspaper costs just 1/20th of that price (Lee, 2007). By the third quarter of 2009, FHM China was the top-selling men’s magazine in China. It had captured 22.09 percent of the men’s market, followed by Esquire (13 percent) and Men’s Health (11.27 percent), both of which are also owned by Trends Media Group (Wang & Ding, 2010).

One key to FHM’s success may be the nuanced messages within its pages that have made the magazine culturally acceptable. According to Jacky Jin, FHM China’s deputy publisher and editor, “Sex, which is so crucial to a men’s magazine, has to be peddled softly and indirectly,” so he “pushes the boundary ever so gently and elbows into more room for content maneuvering” (Jin, 2006, p. 9). For example, the April 2004 issue featured actress Zhao Wei as the first cover girl, with the accompanying headline “Zhao Wei, Opium of the Youth.” The picture showed a big black dog (a male) being tamely led by Zhao Wei (a female), “which implies a humorous take on maleness” (Jin, 2007b, paragraph 8).

The creators of FHM China did not want the magazine to be seen only for its sexual appeal. They emphasized the publication’s four guiding principles: to be real, funny, sexy and useful (Godfrey, 2004b). By contrast, the guiding principles of the British version were funny, sexy, useful, and relevant (FHM magazine, n.d.). The obvious difference was the order of editorial goals: In the Chinese version of FHM, “real and funny” were the main targets, while in the British edition “funny and sexy” came first.

While these word choices might seem small, they were culturally significant. According to Jin (Quoted in Lee, 2007), “That’s our slogan, listed in the order of importance” (paragraph 35). He emphasized that “sexy” comes third, not first. Unlike the parent British magazine, “sexy” was not transferred directly to the Chinese edition because of cultural differences. For example, the editors of FHM China did not use any indecent photos, jokes, or words from the FHM British version or other international versions. Instead, FHM China photographed Chinese models or film stars in a lighthearted way and used cartoons to present fashion styles. Lee (2008) referred to this editorial style as “Nanren zhuang, or giving expression to the individualistic, hedonistic and pleasure-seeking attitude” (p. 10). “Funny” was another of FHM China’s editorial goals. It also attracted target readers and helped make the magazine successful.

But “funny” was only part of the editorial equation. The magazine’s ideology and editorial goals also played an important role. Before joining Trends Media Group, Jin was a freelance magazine writer known for his contributions to fashion and consumer magazines. In 2002 Liu Jiang, one of the founders of Trends Media Group (the other being Wu Hong), invited Jin to launch Men’s Health China as editor-in-chief. In this venture Jin partnered with Hearst International, the parent company of Men’s Health.
Through this experience, he came to understand the give-and-take involved in launching a Chinese edition of an international magazine with a mature business model and high standards (J. Jin, personal communication, January 13, 2007). “Although we had a very strong team of cooperating partners with Hearst and International Data Group (a U.S. technology media, events, and research group), they were not inflexible and only asked that we transmit the soul of Men’s Health into China. We were free to create a Chinese localized Men’s Health” (J. Jin, personal communication, January 13, 2007). During the three years Jin was involved with Men’s Health, it became the most successful men’s health magazine in China. During this period, Jin said he found his editorial ideology: “To absorb essentials from other successes and find the unique niche through creativity and serving a target readership.” (J. Jin, personal communication, May 17, 2007).

When Trends Media Group joined EMAP to launch FHM China, Jin was selected to serve as deputy publisher and editor. EMAP held a “Working Together” training program that introduced FHM’s editorial and business models and its organization culture. Before the training, EMAP’s International Copyright Department asked Jin to answer questions, such as

What do you think has made FHM so successful so far; How do you aim to make it as successful for China; How can you get under the skin of your local readers and make a product that they cannot resist each month; What will be impossible for you to do with the Chinese edition of FHM; What will have to be adapted and how; How much local material compared to international should there be; Making FHM funny is very important and very difficult, how will you do that. (Jin, 2006, p. 143)

Answering these questions gave Jin an opportunity to consider the core elements of his future work with FHM China.

In addition, Jin and publisher Liu Jiang considered a lesson from FHM Taiwan, which emphasized sex. Although this ingredient led to high circulation, the magazine lost credibility with advertisers. “Sex is a knife which has two edges. You may use it to attract readership, to sell well, but luxury brands will think you are yellow or low-standard publications and don’t value your readership, so that you lose your advertising market” (Jin, 2006, p. 26). It was then that Jin selected “funny” as the core element of FHM China’s editorial philosophy. He borrowed the U.S. term “metrosexual” to define the target readers, whom he also called the “New Yuppies” of China (J. Jin, personal communication, May 17, 2007).

Of the five men’s magazines that entered the Chinese market in 2004, the most visible were Mangazine and Maxim. Mangazine, published by the Nanfang Newspaper
Group, was an all-Chinese effort at a men’s magazine. It featured lengthy articles “about local rich people, entertainers, and sports stars, as well as fashion advice and some articles imported from foreign publications” (Godfrey, 2004a, paragraph 6). Maxim, a joint venture with South China Morning Post in Hong Kong, featured sex and eroticism portrayed through pop stars’ gossip and entertainment news.

Facing this market, Jin (2006) decided to distinguish FHM China from the competitors by adapting four guiding principles: to be real, funny, sexy and useful. In his book Fashion: The Instigating Behind the Curtain, Jin (2006) described the men’s magazine industry in China:

It is visible that men’s magazines have a homogeneous tendency which forms the readership, contents and styles. All of them are generally interesting topics, talking about everything, being very careful on “sex,” and trying to show the reflection onto the “public highway” of mainstream culture. (pp. 151–152)

For Jin, the most important goal of FHM China was to be funny. Success did not stem from erotic photos but from the creative thought behind the editorial content. “This is why we have 20%–30% female readers, and they really appreciate our ‘funny’ value in a lifestyle magazine. From these intelligent women’s point of view, this is the core of life and fashion as well” (J. Jin, personal communication, May 17, 2007).

Other editors echoed this sentiment. “FHM China created a new standard for female mate choice: those men, presented by FHM China, seemingly not like the men at home but, in fact, real, interesting, rich in heart, with a sense of responsibility,” said former FHM’s executive editor, Wang Xiaofeng (Quoted in Gao, 2006, paragraph 11). Even editors from other Chinese magazines appeared to respect FHM’s unconventional goals. According to Hu Xiao, an editor for Trends Cosmopolitan, “FHM is humorous rather than vulgar or erotic. It teaches you how to relax rather than how to be stylish and successful” (Quoted in Gan, 2005, paragraph 5). As media analyst Goldkorn (2004) observed, “FHM China contains cartoons, visual jokes and adolescent eye candy aplenty…. It’s a fun read despite being comparatively tame” (paragraph 7).

The magazine’s creators articulated their cultural independence by breaking with the content and goals of their Western counterpart. Wang Yanlin, another FHM China editor, explained why FHM China did not simply copy the editorial essentials of the parent magazine: “There’s no unconditional sole resource in the world. For the co-operated magazines, the resource may be real, but holding the real resource does not mean getting the essential content. Only the technique of editorial philosophy can solve the problem of resource” (Quoted in Wang, 2007, paragraphs 22–24).

As executive editor of FHM China in 2006 and 2007, Wang Xiaofeng insisted
that up to 90 percent of the magazine’s content be produced locally and be less racy than other versions of the magazine. “Sex is an appealing topic to guys. But we choose not to follow our western counterparts when dealing with some pictures and sex-related topics” (Lad mags in China, 2006, paragraph 17). Similarly, Jin said his editorial goals were “illumined by Scott, the editor of FHM US, who advocated creating content that makes all readers feel comfortable” (Jin, 2006, p. 165). The resulting goal for FHM China became “Use ‘Fun + Sagacity’ as an angle, based on the content locally and inherit the success from Cargo’s editorial ideology,” such as make the man more clever” (Jin, 2006, pp. 55–56) and FHM’s “exclusive experience of self-enhancement” (Jin, 2006, p. 187).

Practical implications of the FHM China model

The evolution of FHM China’s editorial mission is important to the Chinese magazine industry for two main reasons. First, it introduced the concept of “Content is king” to the Chinese consumer magazine industry. The entry of international magazines brought negative elements, including the belief that only a global brand can help Chinese magazines succeed. This led to a homogeneous tendency in which lifestyle magazines crowded the market with similar content and target readers. The editor’s task was not to tailor content for readers but to provide a platform for advertisers.

When considering whether content or advertising is king in such an immature market, social responsibility is often neglected. If the audience is regarded as mere consumers of goods to whom the advertisers wish to sell, service to readers might be forgotten. However, FHM China implemented a model that reminds magazine industry professionals of the importance of content. Because of this, FHM China achieved a historical goal by having the magazine’s staff create most of the content locally rather than simply translating stories from the parent magazines.

Some online forums and Trends Media Group’s own Internet forum discussed the question of “Why does FHM China attract you?” The online responses included the following: “I am a female reader, but I really like to read FHM China rather than women’s or fashion magazines…; because it has more interesting articles with humor, and is not like other fashion magazines, which only depict dull daydreams” (BBS, 2008, paragraph 13). Such feedback indicated that readers responded to Jin’s vision. According to Jin, “This is our strategy in facing the competition. I imagine that the magazine is a person, but I prefer that ‘he’ is a normal person who has his own desire, something he does not know, something he is not able to do” (Quoted in Yin, 2006, paragraph 25). Throughout the editorial process, Jin requested that his editorial team “keep up with the news” and have “creativity and superb editing skills” (Jin, 2006, p. 91). Here, creativity

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referred to original ideas, not clinging to old ways or always seeking changes.

*FHM* China editors said they frequently used humor to cover different topics. For example, the “Letters” column (2007) declared: “If a person doesn’t write a letter to the magazine, we don’t know what kind of things he does in his life” (p. 2). By using a sarcastic voice, the magazine encouraged the reader to join the activity. Rather than being offended, the reader was attracted to the magazine’s sassy personality. *FHM* China became known for its “fresh editing model, unique point of view, sharp discussion, and funny content style, which been accepted by the market” (Li, 2006, paragraph 1).

*FHM* China represents a successful model for Chinese publishers of consumer magazines to consider when establishing their place in the global market. It could be argued that the creativity of Chinese publishers has been strangled in an attempt to be successful through a joint-venture model in an immature market. Such reliance on international partners may produce a chilling effect on the creation of home-grown brands and editorial ideology. Future research should consider the Chinese consumer magazine in the global media environment, as Chinese publishers cannot avoid competition when they enter the international marketplace.

**Conclusion**

In 2008 nearly all the main publication groups in mainland China launched men’s magazines in search of a slice of the market, including “Bazaar Man’s Style of Trends, *Mr Modern* from Hachette Filipacchi, *L’officiel Hommes* by L’officiel,8 *HisLife* from SEEC Media,9 and *Leon* from Rayli.”10 In October 2009 the Chinese version of *GQ*, Condé Nast’s most successful men’s magazine, debuted in Beijing (Wang & Ding, 2010).

Being successful in the market is the main task of all magazine publishers. The current research illustrates how a Chinese consumer magazine, specifically *FHM* China, can fill the content lacunae and gain success in the market. It also suggests that scholars continue looking at Chinese consumer magazines in the global media environment, as Chinese publishers cannot avoid international competition when they establish themselves globally, especially with the “going abroad” media strategy the Chinese government launched in 2009.

In the case of *FHM* China, Jin used creativity to gain more editorial freedom from both commercial pressure and the international parent magazine firm EMAP. Bohai

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8 *L’officiel* is a French magazine brand.
9 SEEC, is a famous consumer magazine publisher in China, with several American joint partners, including Time Warner, which authorized the Chinese version of *Sports Illustrated* in 2006.
10 *Leon’s* parent magazine is in Japan.
Zhang (personal communication, May 17, 2007) pointed out the value of such autonomy:

There are two things the cooperative magazine publishers need to bear in mind: One is that the practice of the editor should be divided from the business operation in China. This is different from the model that Western magazine publishers operated. Second, Chinese magazine participators can always learn from their Western partners, but they should build their own localized brand in the very near future so the market would not be dominated by international brands and content, which lack domestic competition and local news for the Chinese.

Although Chinese lifestyle magazines rely heavily on advertising, in the case of FHM China, editorial independence was increasingly important in this overexploited market. One of the reasons for this increase is that some Chinese magazine professionals realized that satisfied readers were more important than satisfied advertisers. Thus, editorial autonomy, creativity, and local branding helped the magazine achieve market success as well as the trust and loyalty of domestic readers. By using humor as a fresh editorial principle, FHM China not only branded its own identity but also demonstrated that Chinese publishers can achieve business success in both the local and global markets.

**References**


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