Iwaya Matsuhei and the Tobacco Advertising Wars of Meiji Japan

ELIZABETH DORN LUBLIN
Associate Professor
History

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During the second half of the 19th century, use of mass media revolutionized advertising in Japan. Merchants and manufacturers took advantage of newly created newspapers and magazines as well as lithographic technology and more aggressively tried to sell their goods. Iwaya Matsuhei quickly gained a reputation as one of the most innovative and strategic of advertisers. To hawk his cigarettes, he branded them with the name “tengu,” a term historically used for magical red goblins characterized by long noses. Not only did images of the goblins appear on cigarette cartons, match boxes, posters, signboards, and newspaper advertisements, but virtually all things related to his business made use of the color red, from the jackets Iwaya wore, to the advertising wagon he rode, to the walls of some of his stores. Iwaya’s efforts to corner the cigarette market with such schemes elicited a strong response from Murai Kichibei, his top competitor, and the two ultimately embarked on a vicious advertising war in the 1890s. In her talk, Lublin will explore this battle, the tactics Iwaya and Murai used, and their impact on the advertising industry in Japan at the turn of the century.

Elizabeth Dorn Lublin is an Associate Professor and Director of Undergraduate Studies in the Department of History at Wayne State. Her first book examined the reform activism and political engagement of the middle-class members of the Japan Woman’s Christian Temperance Union during the Meiji period (1868-1912). Her current book project is titled “King Tobacco in Meiji Japan” and is a study of the tobacco industry, cigarette advertising, state regulation, and anti-smoking activism during that same period.