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China's Nation and Product branding in New York's Times Square in the Post-Beijing Olympics Era

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Abstract

This paper compares and contrasts how the Chinese government brands China and how Chinese advertisers market their products in the United States after the Beijing Olympics. I focus on China's publicity campaign in 2011, and various Chinese companies' outdoor ads in New York's Times Square. New York City (NYC) is a quintessential symbol of global capitalism and modernity in China's imagination. I situate the analysis in the broader context of China's public diplomacy in terms of neoliberal economics, the dialectics of nationalism and cosmopolitanism, and the gendered advertising culture in China. The article ends by discussing implications of these campaigns and the challenges that China and Chinese companies face when attempting to go global.

Contributor Note

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Introduction

China has invested heavily in increasing its comprehensive power since it joined the World Trade Organization in 2001. Despite China's increasing attraction thanks to its economic development, global aid, and cultural exchange programs, the country still faces tremendous challenges in increasing its global image. China is still predominantly perceived in a negative way in the West generally and in the United States specifically (deLisle 2008; Kurlantzick 2007; Li 2011, 2012; Li 2009; Wang 2010).

The 2008 Beijing Olympics provided a huge opportunity for China to improve its soft power and global attraction. When China was preparing for the Olympics, the country launched a series of publicity campaigns. For example, Beijing produced many promotional films with English subtitles and voiceovers and distributed them through cultural exchange centers or Chinese embassies / consulates worldwide and over the Internet. However, Beijing's celebration of its achievements encountered tremendous resistance, which was reflected, for example, in the contentious global torch relay and a controversy over an Olympic-themed rose float in Pasadena, California (Li 2011, 2012). Environmentalists, human rights advocates and Chinese dissidents made concerted efforts to battle Beijing's publicity campaigns. After the Beijing Olympics, China channeled more media, cultural and financial resources to enhance its global image, which was often called 'the broad publicity campaign' (大外宣). The initiative was led by the State Council Information Office (SCIO) aiming to comprehensively raise China's global influence.

In the last few decades, China has prioritized its relationship with the United States. While Chinese image was somewhat positive in the United States after the two countries normalized their relations in 1979, the U.S. perception of China has been predominantly negative since China's crackdown on the Tiananmen Square movement in 1989

(Gallup 2019). After the Beijing Olympics, China intensified its publicity efforts in the United States. For example, in 2009, a 30-second television commercial on 'Made-in-China' products was aired on CNN for six weeks, aiming to change people's perception of Chinese products. In 2011, China launched a high-profile publicity campaign in Times Square in New York City (NYC). While there was no data about how the 2011 campaign shaped New Yorkers' perception of China, Chinese media gave it a lot of celebratory coverage. Many Chinese companies also started to advertise their brands in NYC after this official publicity campaign.

In this paper, I compare and contrast how the Chinese government brands China and how Chinese corporate advertisers market their products in NYC. I focus on China's publicity campaign in 2011 and examine how Chinese companies use outdoor ads to market their products in Times Square. This venue is particularly significant because NYC is a quintessential symbol of global capitalism and modernity in China's imagination. I orientate my analysis in terms of the broader context of China's public diplomacy in the current neoliberal environment, the dialectics of nationalism and cosmopolitanism, and the gendered advertising culture in China. The article ends by discussing the implications of these campaigns and challenges that China and Chinese companies face in the process of globalization.

While it is significant to compare and contrast China's nation branding and product branding, little research has been conducted in this area. The case study of Chinese advertising in NYC enables us to analyze differences and similarities in the ad strategies used by the Chinese government and companies and how these strategies reflect China's neoliberal commercial culture in relation to structural opportunities and challenges.

Nation Branding and Product Branding in the Neoliberal Context

Over the last few decades, neoliberalism has taken roots in China. Neoliberal ideology dictates privatization, market deregulation, and, more importantly, the application of market logic to social, political and cultural arenas. Based on neoliberal logic, many countries have marketed themselves and their cities as brands to attract tourists, trade and foreign investments. For example, the United Kingdom launched its 'GREAT Britain' campaign in 2012 and partnered with the public and private sectors to showcase its universities, research, technology and creative industries as well as innovation and entrepreneurship to 'inspire the world and encourage people to visit, do business, invest and study' there.¹

Nation branding is especially an important venture for transitional countries (Anholt 2005; Szondi 2007). Fan defines nation branding as the application of 'branding and marketing communication techniques to promote a nation's image' (Fan 2006, 6), and distinguishes two forms of nation branding: product-country image for sales and exports, and destination branding for tourism and trade. Marsh argues that nation branding is 'a contingent, relational phenomenon that communicates new notions of national and cultural identity in the current context of economic globalization' (Marsh 2016, 3023). Nation branding is a multifaceted phenomenon that involves communication with internal and external audiences, aiming to produce tangible and intangible benefits often summarized as soft power (Li & Marsh 2016; Nye 2004).

Ultimately, nation branding is about how a nation responds to challenges and opportunities posed by neoliberal globalization. It is a discursive process that requires nations to constantly respond to

changing social, political, economic and cultural conditions. Transnational promotional experts have touted nation branding as a solution to such problems as 'economy development, democratic communication, and especially national visibility and legitimacy amid the multiple global flows of late modernity' (Aronczyk 2013: 3). Nation branding engages with product branding strategies, forms private and public partnerships, and makes and remakes complex dimensions of national identity into a few simplified traits. In doing so, the nation speaks to both national and international audiences, hoping to achieve a coherent narrative similar to a highly controlled corporate brand. Nation branding can employ a wider range of resources (such as landscape, people, history, culture, language and economy) to produce emotional connections with fluid audiences (Fan 2006).

In contrast, product branding has well-defined audiences and uses evidence-based, symbolic, and emotional persuasion techniques (Fan 2006). Similarly, product branding is about creating mental associations in target consumers by using images, symbols, icons, shared myths and other information so that the target consumers will be aware of, consider, purchase, be loyal to and advocate for the product.

Product branding and nation branding are interdependent and mutually influence each other. The term 'corporate diplomacy' is used to refer to how brands can enhance a country's soft power and scholars view companies as playing an important role in a country's public diplomacy (Wang 2006; White 2015). A favorable nation brand can have a positive influence on product brand and vice versa. In business literature, a country's influence on product branding, often called the 'country of origin effect', depends on a number of factors, including product category and economic development of the country

¹ This is the U.K.'s most ambitious promotional campaign. See the website at: <http://www.greatbritaincampaign.com>

(Andéhn, Nordin & Nilsson 2016). Scholars argue that consumers may use a country's image to infer product quality since consumers often face difficulties in knowing true product quality (Han 1989; Huber & McCann 1982). However, despite China's rapid economic development, Chinese brands struggle to enter premium categories and are generally associated with low price and low quality.

In the last few decades, the Chinese government has spent much effort promoting Chinese products and brands (Huang 2019). For example, in the 1980s and 1990s, Beijing issued policies and regulations to protect trademarks and created the award of 'Famous Trademarks' as a way to incentivize and reward well-known brands (Li 2016). Since 2000, the Chinese government has developed a more comprehensive branding strategy, relating corporate brands to China's soft power. Consequently, China implemented policies and provided official support to Chinese brands and branding effort. For example, on May 10, 2014, President Xi Jinping stated that '[China should] be pushed to transform from Made in China to Created in China, from [focusing on] Chinese speed to [focusing on] Chinese quality and from Chinese manufacturing to Chinese branding', and China's premier Li Keqiang has also on various occasions stressed the importance of building well-known Chinese brands ('Fazhan Gaige Wei' 2017). In June 2016, China's State Council issued a policy titled 'Ideas about Using the Leading Role of Brands and Pushing to upgrade the Supply-Demand Structure', which requested government agencies to take measures to enhance competitiveness of Chinese enterprises and provide an environment conducive to Chinese brands, industry innovation and creativity (General Office of the State Council 2016). The document also proposed the creation of an annual 'China Brand Day', which was subsequently approved, marking May 10, 2017 the first 'China Brand Day'. Since then, various ministry-level, provincial and local government agencies have participated in

promoting 'China Brand Day' and Chinese brands. In response, China Central Television (CCTV) also began promoting its 'China Brands Plan' as an advertising vehicle to address declining advertising revenues (Huang 2019). Ad professionals in China also promoted that product branding is part of nation branding that enhances China's soft power and global influence (Li 2016).

Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism in China

China's nation branding and product branding are often characterized by nationalism and cosmopolitanism (Li 2016). Nationalist advertising appropriates past and present national and cultural symbols and heroes, myths and events to construct a history of continuous patriotism (Li 2008). Such an ad practice is strongly connected with rising nationalism in China since the 1990s when Beijing attempted to use nationalism to unify the nation (Li 2019). Two simultaneous tropes are often used in constructing nationalism: China as a victim at the hands of foreign powers and China as a victor thanks to the Chinese Communist Party (Gries 2004). Celebrating Chinese products' success in a foreign land also contributes to China's national pride. Inevitably, branding China and Chinese products in the U.S. involves the evocation of a national identity.

While people often view nationalism as distinct from cosmopolitanism, Chinese culture has long cultivated a cosmopolitanism that transcends geographic boundaries. Confucianism, Daoism, Marxism and even neoliberalism – each of which is influential in China – all incorporate elements of transnational ideals. China's particularistic worldview on nation and race only developed after China's traumatic encounter with the imperial West after the Opium War (Levenson 1969). Increasing global information flows mean that China has access to cosmopolitan ideals. Indeed, Chinese advertisers regularly use foreign models, icons, myths and ideas to sell products in China.

Gender also plays an important role in promoting China's global image. For example, during the Beijing Olympics, Chinese cheerleaders and Olympic misses were meticulously trained so that they could embody both traditional values and modernity (Li 2011). In such a matter, an Orientalistic understanding of gendered culture may be reinforced through inscribing onto binarism such as tradition vs. modernity, collectivism vs. individualism, and Oriental femininity vs. Western masculinity.

Methods

Materials used in this essay include publicity ads, news reports, and online discussions in both English and Chinese. As for corporate ads, I searched on Google Chinese terms '中国广告' (Chinese ad) and '纽约时代广场' (New York's Times Square) on September 16, 2019 and obtained 8.8 million results. Since 'Times Square' is sometimes translated into '时报广场', I also searched this term in combination with 'Chinese ad' and obtained 4.9 million results. On September 23, 2019, I conducted the same search on Baidu and obtained 4.82 million and 2.02 million results. I read the first ten pages of each Google and Baidu search results, totaling 40 pages. I also analyzed ad images of many brands. When analyzing these materials, I focused on the discourse of media reports and symbolic meanings of the visuals. Since Chinese advertisers were predominantly interested in how their ads were reported in Chinese media, I paid particular attention to Chinese media coverage.

Why New York City? Why Recently?

Since China started its economic reforms in 1978, the United States has occupied a special place in Chinese imagination. American economic power, democratic structures, and technological capacity have attracted millions of Chinese to work and study there, making the U.S. the most popular

destination for Chinese students and immigrants. NYC particularly means modernity and global capitalism. Thanks to Madison Avenue, NYC quintessentially symbolizes trends in advertising and consumer culture in America and globally.

The United States and NYC also represent the American dream for immigrants. In 1991, a novel titled *Beijingers in New York* depicting the experienced of a Chinese couple – their work, family life, struggle, success and failure – was published in China and became the best seller of that year, with more than 100,000 copies sold. The novel portrays NYC as a battlefield for the bravest. The book was later adapted into a 25-episode TV series aired in 1994 on CCTV – China's only national TV network – and the popular show won many national awards. The hero made a widely circulated remark, 'if you love someone, send him/her to New York [City] because it is heaven; if you hate someone, send him/her to New York [City] because it is hell'. The metaphor of heaven and hell suggests that only the bravest will survive and dare to 'engage in the new gold rush'. Despite official conflicts and a 'love-hate' relationship between China and the United States, Chinese people from the 1980s to early 2000s generally associated America with freedom, democracy, advanced technology and innovation. Even the portrayal of the United States in Chinese media in 2008-2010 during the global recession included many positive ideas such as 'fair play with minor skirmishes', diversity, freedom, democracy science and technological advancements (Zhou, Chen & Wu 2012).

Chinese companies attempt to associate themselves with global influence and power through forging links with NYC. Chinese media calls Times Square 'the global crossroad' because of its ubiquitous outdoor ads and global travelers. Ad agencies claim that Times Square has an average 300,000 daily travelers and provides a wonderful opportunity for Chinese brands to be exposed to the world (Zhang 2019).

Chinese companies started to advertise their products in Times Square in the late 1990s. In 1994, Chinese brand 999 Pharmacy rented a billboard at the intersection of the 7th Avenue and the 48th Street and marketed its Wei-Tai '999' Capsule, marking the first time a Chinese brand advertised in Times Square ('Sanjiu Weitai Keli' 2014). The product was then unavailable in the United States, and the ad mainly aimed to influence Chinese consumers at home. Such an ad practice is often called 'chukou zhuan neixiao', a well-known business practice in the export industry in the 1980s and 1990s when export products originally manufactured for foreign markets were eventually sold in China for various reasons². Export products generally had better quality than products made for domestic consumption and enjoyed a higher status among Chinese consumers. This term was later used to refer to a marketing strategy that Chinese companies used that involved using foreign symbols, sponsoring foreign sports teams and placing ads in a foreign location, with the ultimate purpose of influencing Chinese consumers (Li 2008, 2016). For example, in the late 1990s Chinese appliance brand Haier published a series of print ads touting its success in Australia, Germany and America, aiming to use these locations to endorse its product quality and celebrate Haier as a symbol of national pride. Chinese sportswear brand Li Ning also used a similar strategy that incorporated Western models and French Gymnastic team sponsorship to engineer a cosmopolitan image even though the company mainly sold products in China. Chinese companies used such a strategy mainly because:

- (1) *foreign brands were generally viewed as having high quality and Chinese brands were forced to make their own brands more cosmopolitan;*
- (2) *Chinese brands had little experience and resources to compete with foreign*

² Because of China's subsidy policies that supported the export industry, export companies did not pay value-added tax or negative tax. Companies in the export industry could have high profit margins than domestic companies.

brands in China;

(3) *Chinese brands, especially small brands, often took an opportunistic approach and conducted viral marketing to get some competitive edge.*

In addition, Chinese brands also copied each other's ad strategies, thus popularizing the ad practice.

Analysis of China's External Publicity Campaigns

As discussed previously, China faced tremendous difficulties in improving its global image prior to the Beijing Olympics. Since earned publicity was hard to obtain, paid media was the only feasible option. Beijing decided to produce a publicity ad coordinated by the State Council Information Office (SCIO). 12 ad agencies were initially invited to pitch and Chinese ad agency Meiko won the business. After trying five versions, a 30-second commercial was finally approved and produced in four months. Predominantly using existing footages, the ad features the color red, traditional culture symbols such as Peking Opera, Yangtze River and the Great Wall and concludes with a little girl lighting a match as symbolizing hope for the future after the country experienced a devastating earthquake in Sichuan. Starting from August 6, two days before the Beijing Olympics, BBC and CNN aired the commercial for about two months (Deng 2011). The ad, however, was rarely noticed by Chinese or Western media largely because global attention focused on the Beijing Olympics.

After the Beijing Olympics, more efforts were taken to battle China's negative image. Again, advertising was chosen as a tool. In 2009, the Ministry of Commerce and four Chinese trade associations sponsored a 30-second TV

However, some products made for foreign markets may not pass tests, and ended up being sold in the Chinese market. These products were generally viewed as having better quality than products made for domestic consumers.

commercial.³ The ad stresses a recurring theme that Chinese products – such as shoes, fridges, MP3 players and clothing – are ‘made in cooperation with the world’. Most people featured in this commercial are Westerners or Western-looking, reinforcing Western superiority. The commercial also reinforces gender stereotypes: while women are associated with shopping, modeling and cooking, men are with physical exercise, business travels and technology. The ad was aired on CNN, and International Asia TV channels for six weeks starting from late December 2009, costing millions of dollars. Although this ad gained some positive coverage in Chinese media, foreign media rarely covered it (Li 2010).⁴

It was against such a background that Chinese government agencies launched a publicity campaign in NYC in 2011. SCIO again was in charge. Three ad agencies (one multinational and two Chinese agencies) and a media organization were invited for the pitch. Lowes & Partners (L&P, 灵狮广告) won the bid. L&P had a foreign origin but was then majority owned by the Chinese side. Directed by well-known film producer Gao Xiaolong, the ad campaign was officially launched before Chinese president Hu Jintao’s official visit to the United States in January 2011. The campaign included two parts: one was a publicity ad called *People* aired on billboard-size screens on New York’s Broadway from mid-January to February; the other was a 17-minute video – called *View Angle* – that gives a more in-depth portrayal of China.⁵ The *View Angle* opens with China’s successful space travel in 2003, and portrays multifaceted dimensions of Chinese society. The two questions addressed in the documentary include: ‘who are the Chinese? What makes us who we are?’ With English voiceovers and

³ The link of the commercial is:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Dk6247P184>

⁴ For more information, see Li (2010, Jan. 19), Analysis of the recent made-in-China campaign. The China Beat. Available:
<http://www.thechinabeat.org/?p=1379>.

subtitles, the video was mainly used by Chinese embassies/consulates to entertain foreign guests.

I will only focus on the publicity ad called *People* because only this ad was publicly aired in New York’s Times Square. Three versions were produced: one version of 60 seconds, and two of 30 seconds⁶. The ad ran every four minutes for 20 hours daily, totaling about 8,000 times. This essay analyzes the 60-second version as it is more comprehensive. The ad consists of static images and includes 22 shots and 13 themes. It opens with the theme called ‘stunning Chinese beauty’, featuring five female entertainment stars, including Zhang Ziyi, Zhou Xun, Yang Liping, Fan Bingbing, and Zhang Zilin (See Image 1, below).



Image 1. The Opening Shot of Chinese Publicity Ad Featuring Chinese Celebrities (Source: [YouTube](#))

It is followed by talented Chinese specialized in a wide range of professions such as art, sports, academic research, modeling, entertainment industry and space exploration. The final scene shows numerous smiley faces transforming into the Chinese character ‘中国’ (China). Altogether, 59 people are featured in the ad, including 51 well-known Chinese such as martial-arts movie

⁵ Here is the link to *View Angle*:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KI2YHvz7blQ>

⁶ The publicity ad has three versions: a 60-second commercial (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VbTzRpjt_4g) and two versions of 30 seconds (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=570LHTMwoMw>).

star Jackie Chan, basketball player Yao Ming, astronaut Yang Liwei, pianists Lang Lang and Li Yundi, well-known actresses as well as eight 'ordinary' people (Huang 2012).

Distinctive Features of the Ad

The ad has some distinctive features. First, the representation is gendered: one third of people featured (20 out of 39) are female while two thirds (39 out of 59) are male, suggesting male's dominant role and female subordination in Chinese society (Huang 2012). Similar to the 'made in China' ad, men are celebrated for their achievements and are engaged in careers such as space travel, science and technologies and business entrepreneurship while women featured are predominantly celebrities such as actresses, supermodels and TV hosts. These women are from entertainment and media industries, which are broadly viewed as belonging to the 'beauty economy'. Only four women in the ad are based on their characters or achievements, including two well-known athletes (Ping-Pong player Deng Yaping and volleyball player Lang Ping) and two CCTV '2009 People Who Have Moved China Award' recipients (a rural school teacher and a Uighur woman who raised 19 orphans). While men are fully dressed, wearing business suits, sports clothing or shirts, most women expose a lot of skin and are mostly wearing gowns, flowery dresses and skirts often against a flowery background. Not only were flowery images used to represent beautiful women as flowers in traditional society: women are still treated as flower vases in social and political life in China.

Chinese women are supposed to embody a globalized China and embody 'national exemplars' of Chinese civilization and 'tradition within modernity' to the outside world (Duara, 1998; 2000). The Chinese state and global capital interact to construct, judge and evaluate the bodies of Chinese women, leading to the production of new tropes of femininity while simultaneously perpetuating existing gender politics. The selective

representation privileges middle-class and upper middle-class women who enjoy global mobility while rural women with no access to global resources are invisible. Thus, the represented Chinese femininity celebrates China's official ideology of neoliberal markets and conformity with global heterosexual normative standards while suppressing undesirable rural presence. Such a cosmopolitanism involves two aspects, according to Lisa Rofel (2007, 11), '(1) a self-conscious transcendence of locality posited as a universal transcendence, accomplished through the formation of a consumer identity; and a domestication of cosmopolitanism by way of renegotiating China's place in the world'. Chinese women thus embody 'cosmopolitanism of Chinese characteristics' and widely accepted standards of beauty associated with Western heterosexual norms. Such representations imply self-Orientalization that intentionally produces irreconcilable differences between the Orient and Occident (Said 1978).

Second, the ad was criticized as elitist by including 51 people of enormous power and money while only eight so-called 'ordinary people' are included (Huang 2012). The ad implied that China's success was impossible without the elites' enormous contributions while ordinary people were marginalized. Given that the ad claimed to represent a 'true' China, many Chinese, especially Internet users, questioned how sports, entertainment celebrities and movie stars could represent a true China. The commercial juxtaposes past socialist model workers with present celebrities and sports players in the neoliberal economy. Model workers and individuals are from the CCTV's list of '2009 People Who Moved China Award'. Lin Hao, the youngest hero who survived the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake, and a police officer were also included. These model workers, risk-taking individuals and heroes were included to represent extraordinary quality of ordinary Chinese.

Third, the ad attempts to mix elements of the West and the East. Ad producer Xiaolong Gao

stressed that he attempted to include both Chinese and foreign (read: Western) elements. Gao pointed out that the background of the static images included Chinese words and calligraphy, well-known paintings of the Italian Renaissance era, Greek temples and China's National Stadium (called Bird's Nest) built for the Olympics. Gao paid meticulous attention to details in the representations. For example, he intentionally enlarged images of Greek temples and only showed the Bird's Nest after Greek temples to pay respect to other cultures (Xie & Wang 2011).

By featuring people from different background (citizens of Hong Kong, minorities, celebrities, model workers, sports players, and heroes), the ad redefines the geographical and cultural boundary of Chineseness. To a large extent, the ad celebrates material success as a cosmopolitan ambition. This is consistent with pragmatism that China has promoted in the last three decades. The ad celebrates China's single-minded pursuit of economic supremacy and glosses over inequality, injustice, corruption and other problems.

The women (and some men) featured in these films have already achieved some global recognition through participating in Hollywood film industry, global sports, and other global venues. Thus, these people embody China's success and become instruments for China's future. Indeed, people involved in producing the ad viewed the use of actual people to represent China as progressive since China often used clichés such as Peking Opera, the Great Wall and other traditional symbols in promotional films (Xie & Wang 2011).

Interestingly, Chinese audiences and media had a heated debate on whether these people could truly represent China. A salient question was whether these people had foreign citizenships. The debate was not new, but instead continued the discussion surrounding the release of the propaganda film *The Founding of a Party* (translated into English as *Beginning of the Great Revival*) that

celebrated the 90th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 2009. Many actors and actresses who played communist revolutionaries were later found to have acquired foreign citizenships. The discussion showed public anxiety about defining national and cultural boundary in a global age when citizens could immigrate to other countries. It also showed the limitations and irony of didactic propaganda that relied on media celebrities with global fame. Many Chinese celebrities/entertainers had already obtained foreign citizenship while still basing their careers in China. The debate had a lot to do with public skepticism of nationalist performance engineered by government agencies.

A related debate was how recognizable these celebrities and sports players were to U.S. and global viewers. Many people suspected that ordinary Americans could not recognize them and that featuring them in the ad was meaningless. Ad planner Zhu Youguang conducted an online interview with Netease. Zhu stated that including foreign nationals did not bother him 'since they are all Chinese'. He pointed out that there was a gap between 'the political idea of the state and that of the people' (Zhu 2011), stressing cultural Chineseness over a political identity confined within national boundary.

Despite or because of the controversy, the campaign attracted a lot of media coverage in Chinese media while gaining some coverage in foreign media. After the publicity ad, Xinhua News Agency recognized the business and political potential of placing ads in NYC and signed a contract with Sherwood outdoor Advertising, renting a billboard for more than six year, paying an estimated monthly fee of 300,000 to 400,000 USD (Yin & Lin 2011). The rental arrangement later facilitated more publicity ads from more than 30 Chinese cities including Chengdu, Shanghai, Suzhou, Wuhan and Quanzhou to advertise in NYC. Chinese companies also followed suit and promoted products at Times Square.

Advertising Chinese Brands in New York's Times Square

The types of companies that placed their ads at Times Square reflected the changing business environment and media ambience in China. Initially, large Chinese corporations aiming to expand overseas – such as Wuliangye, Gree and Haier – advertised their products. In 2014 and 2015, a number of Chinese Internet and ecommerce companies such as Alibaba, Jingdong, Weibo and Momo were listed for Initial Product Offering at Nasdaq and these companies used billboards in NYC to promote their businesses. Chinese media often gave immediate coverage to such news because their business presence satisfied a public fantasy about Chinese companies conquering the world. Going global was promoted in China in the past few decades. Being present in NYC was often equated with financial capacity and symbolic power. This was especially true in the Chinese market where there was severe competition, companies came and went and consumers generally did not have much knowledge about established brands. Chinese companies have to use extraordinary means to promote their image and products to consumers. However, many Chinese companies and individuals later learned that advertising in NYC did not require substantial investment. Consequently, an increasing number of unknown small businesses swarmed to New York since 2016 to 'show their presence' and 'strategically use the popularity' of NYC in their marketing campaign; Internet celebrities also started to appear on ads there (Ma 2018).

Characteristics of These Corporate Ads

These corporate ads have distinctive patterns. First, the majority of them intended to generate goodwill among Chinese consumers in China even though some advertisers intended to raise name recognition among cosmopolitan passersby. As an indicator, most of the ads predominantly or exclusively

used the Chinese language. Thus, derivative communication in Chinese media became essential. The publicity in Chinese media included paid and earned media. For example, after Wuliangye's ads appeared in New York in 2011, the news immediately appeared over the Chinese Internet. Fenghuang Caijing (2011) published a series of reports titled 'How beautiful is Wuliangye when it is advertised in the United States?'. The forum included an introductory section of Times Square, essays discussing why Wuliangye's ad was a significant move, commentaries on the ad and Wuliangye's responses, related reports from other sources, and an online survey about readers' opinions. The forum featured essays titled 'The Chinese Image at the Crossroad of the Word: Understanding China by Looking up at the Billboard' and 'Can Wuliangye Follow the Path of Coca Cola?'. These essays suggested that Wuliangye embodied Chinese culture. After media revealed that Wuliangye spent about 400,000 dollars on media buying, critics debated whether the money was wisely spent. Wuliangye defended its ad strategy and argued that the company intended to expand business overseas and promote Chinese wine culture globally.

Chinese media coverage often used phrases such as 'the ads represent the confidence and influence of Chinese brands' and '[these ads] generate national pride and praise' ('Niuyue Shidai Guangchang' 2018). The term '强势登陆时代广场' (powerful landing on Times Square) was a cliché used Chinese news releases. For example, liquor brand Guizhou Maodai advertised its product on February 15, 2018 (the Eve of the Chinese New Year) and wished consumers 'Happy Chinese New Year'. A report by Guizhou TV (2018) stated, 'Chinese brand was showcased in New York's Times Square and Spoke on Behalf of Chinese Brands'. A 3-minute video was later published online titled 'The ad of Chinese brand Maotai landed on a big screen in New York's Times Square. How marvelous,

my Chinese Motai'.⁷ The video juxtaposed New York skylines, large crowds of people of all races and the image of the ad.

Second, most brands used Chinese words in their ads. Even if English was used sometimes, the English font was much smaller, suggesting that Chinese consumers, or at least Chinese-speaking consumers, were the target. Many ads focusing on communicating specific Chinese cultural symbols, such as the color red and symbols of special occasions (e.g. China's National Day, the Chinese Spring Festival, the Moon Festival or the New Year). Some brands used the ad opportunity in conjunction with other events. For example, a Ningbo-based clothing brand Taiping Niao aired a video before the 2018 Chinese Spring Festival as a precursor of its participation in the New York Fashion Show. Other brands used publicity to raise brand awareness for financial purposes. For example, a Chinese online art auction website HiHey.com, founded in 2011, placed an ad for a week after launching its Series A funding from three Chinese banks and the plan was to raise 100 million U.S. dollars (HIHEY 2014). In a way, these ads aimed to speak to investors, consumers and even government officials back at home.

Third, Chinese advertisers often engaged in group buying to leverage collective bargaining power and make their presence more newsworthy. For example, on February 10, 2018 before the Chinese New Year, 10 Chinese Internet companies including Netease, Xunfei, Youku and Ctrip placed ads on the Nasdaq billboard and wished viewers Happy Chinese New Year (Ma 2018). Yajun Bi, founder and president of Huanshang Taolue, a communication company co-founded in 2005 with the Management World magazine owned by the Development Research Center of the State Council, organized group ad buying for Chinese brands three times at Times Square. In 2015, Bi organized 66 Chinese companies to place their ads in NYC

⁷ The link of the video is here:
<https://v.qq.com/x/page/r05565ffebl.html>

on China's National Day. In 2016 and 2017 during the Chinese Spring Festival, he organized 100 advertisers who collectively advertised their brands in NYC. The company's website claims that the company makes ads into news and uses news to showcase brands.⁸ These ads were later repackaged as news reports to attract attention, using phrases such as '[the brands] showcased in NYC and conquered the Crossroad of the World' or 'the brands have become popular across the globe'. According to Bi, 'the purpose is pretty obvious; it is to use the reputation and status of Times Square to endorse products'. Bi continued, 'These enterprises do not really aim to influence the audiences in New York or generate more overseas revenues, [but rather] the ads' symbolic values are larger than material benefits' (Ma 2018).

Fourth, timing ad placement with domestic policies or official events became important. On May 10, 2019, the third anniversary of China Brand Day, 30 Chinese brands were collectively showcased at Times Square. The brands included well-established brands with global presence and emerging brands alleging to go global. According to the organizer, the group buying 'aimed to use commercial communication to support China's official publicity effort and vice versa so that the world can appreciate the attraction of China's business and culture' (Shichang Xinxi Bao 2019).

Ad placement was strategically timed to Chinese holidays and political events. This is true for both political and corporate ads. As discussed before, the 2011 publicity ad was timed to welcome Hu Jintao's official visit to the United States. When President Xi Jinping visited the United States in September 2015, outdoor billboards in NYC welcomed President Xi and expressed appreciation for his leadership. After Trump was elected president of the United States in 2016, the previous mentioned Yajun Bi organized 100

⁸ See its website:
(<http://www.hsmrt.com/about.html>) claiming that (把广告做成新闻, 用新闻彰显品牌)

Chinese companies and published an ad wishing Trump 'Happy Chinese New Year' (See Image 2). This example showed how Chinese companies used the same ad tactic in the Chinese market in NYC. After all, maintaining good relations with government officials is important for any businesses in China. By helping to maintain a symbolic good relationship with a U.S. president, these Chinese companies also hoped to gain political, economic and symbolic resources back at home.



Image 2. 100 Chinese Companies Wishing Trump and American People Happy Chinese New Year (Source: [Finance Sina](#))

Fifth, rising media rates in China were a major reason behind Chinese advertising in New York. In the past two decades, advertising prices in China experienced exponential increase (Li 2016). Small brands faced great challenges in placing their ads on national TV. As a result, small brands often used flexible media buying, either shortening the length of exposure or placing ads in undesirable time. Brokers of outdoor ads in NYC also used a flexible strategy to deal with small- to medium-sized Chinese clients. Many ads of Chinese brands often ranged from five seconds to longer versions. According to an agency, the cheapest option was a five-second ad display shown 20 times for a total of 7000 Yuan (approximately \$110 USD), with each second costing only 70 Yuan (approximately \$11 USD); another option was a 30-second video shown 40 times for 62,000 Yuan (approximately 10,000 USD, costing only

51.6 Yuan (approximately \$8 USD) a second ('Niuyue Shidai Guangchang' 2018).

According to Guanghai Dong, group account director of Millward Brown, the monthly cost of media placement at Times Square was around \$100,000 USD, and billboards of better locations could range from \$300,000 to \$400,000USD for longer terms (from a week to a month), and ads during the New Year were more expensive (Ma 2018). To save costs, many companies chose a five-second ad display shown only once, with photographers stationed to capture the precious moment for derivative communication in China. Some ad agencies even offered a photography service. Due to such flexibility, an online news article claimed 'advertising [in New York] is not as expensive as you expect' (Meiri Jingji Xinwen 2018).

Sixth, Global and Chinese ad agents worked together to provide services to clients. Some Chinese companies already built the ad infrastructure. As mentioned previously, in August 2011, Xinhua Yinglang, a company owned by China's state news agency Xinhua News Agency, signed a rental contract for a billboard to provide service to Chinese government agencies and advertisers. In March 2012, Dalian-based outdoor ad agency Vastitude Media (国域无疆) obtained the operating rights of a billboard for five years and named it 'the Chinese Red Board'. In February 2014, Chinese communication company BlueFocus signed a long-term rental contract with Clear Channel Outdoor for a billboard to serve Chinese clients. Chinese clients reportedly favored the Nasdaq billboard because it provided a better angle for photography despite having fewer passersby around. Foreign agencies were also engaged in the business. For example, PR Newswire entered China in 2002 and helped Chinese clients advertise on the Reuters building. Only two weeks in advance was needed for an ad placement (Ma 2018). The agency could distribute press releases about ads to more than 400 foreign media, but Chinese clients often chose to only distribute press releases to Chinese media.

Last, there is little research about the effectiveness of such an ad practice. Small and medium-sized companies in China often rely on instincts to place ads and many companies emulate others when trying new ad tactics (Li 2016). However, with an increasing number of emulators, the value of advertising in NYC has rapidly declined. For example, a media report in 2018 criticized such an ad practice and mocked that 'Chinese brands pretend to be in New York' (Ma 2018). Because of the ongoing trade war between the U.S. and China, China has developed negative perception of the United States. Chinese brands are now less willing to advertise in NYC. Indeed, in May 2019, an important media platform Huxiu published an essay titled 'Chinese companies no longer have blind trust in New York's Times Square' (Zhang 2019). Rising nationalism in China will also require Chinese companies to reevaluate their ad choices.

Discussion and Conclusion

The analysis suggests that Chinese government agencies and corporations converged to exploit New York's Times Square as a strategic space to do image advertising. While the 2011 Chinese publicity ad used English language and somewhat intended to communicate with foreign audiences, Chinese companies predominantly used Chinese language and were mostly interested in derivative communication at home.

Chinese companies attempted to transfer the symbolism of Times Square as a cosmopolitan space to their own products. Media reports pointed out that such a tactic was similar to advertising on CCTV and using the People's Hall of China for corporate events in the 1980s and 1990s. CCTV and the People's Hall often invoked official connectivity and prestige in the minds of Chinese consumers. Chinese advertisers desired to associate their brands with these outlets because the association implied high

product quality, official endorsement and the political connections of the companies and managers. These are strategic resources for companies' success in the Chinese market, where personal relations play a significant role. As a high context culture, implicit codes are interpreted as implying important meanings in China (De Mooij 2018). The overuse of official outlets and CCTV made these vehicles lose their aura since Chinese consume understood these outlets are paid or rented. Companies thus turned to symbolic global locations such as NYC to create a halo effect. Small e-businesses and Internet celebrities with small budget were especially likely to use unconventional promotional methods to gain instant fame. However, such a gimmick can only work when it is novel and when audiences have little knowledge about American society. With more Chinese advertisers advertising their products in NYC, the likelihood of awing Chinese consumers dramatically decreased. Indeed, media reports discussed how Chinese companies had 'messed up' (玩坏) Times Square as an ad location (Morlee 2018).

The ad practice also suggests that Chinese government agencies and companies lack symbolic and cultural resources to globalize or gain tractions in the United States. While China has made achievements economically, Beijing still faces tremendous challenges in increasing global soft power, cultural influence and leadership. Chinese companies also face an image issue and Chinese brands are often associated with low quality and cheap price. However, advertising in NYC cannot produce a truly cosmopolitan image. Instead, Chinese brands should take gradual steps to improve product quality and user experience for long-term success.

China's nation branding and corporate branding are interdependent not only because the state and the corporate world cannot be separated in China, but also because consumers infer product quality based on the product origin (Han 1989; Huber & McCann 1982). While nation branding may provide political and cultural resources that

support image branding of Chinese companies, the predominant negative perception of China may also be hurdles for Chinese companies to expand in the U.S. and globally.

Publicity and corporate ads aimed to provide a simplistic and highly controlled view of Chinese identity and Chinese brands. The image aimed to balance between Western modernity and Chinese tradition, and nationalism and cosmopolitanism. In doing so, many of these ads also engaged with self-Orientalization that highlighted the distinction of Chineseness.

The advertising attempts by Chinese government agencies and companies also suggest China's desire to become cosmopolitan and integrate with the world politically, economically and culturally. However, with new generations of Chinese citizens who are becoming more assertive and confident in Chinese culture and identity, the way that China interacts with the world may change dramatically. Rising nationalism and increasing tensions between the United States and China make the manufactured cosmopolitanism less desirable. There is also the possibility that China will be more inward looking. Advertising in NYC may be viewed as increasingly ineffective in generating goodwill among Chinese citizens and consumers.

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