



The visual politics of Brand China: Exceptional history and speculative future

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Abstract

As a global power, China is a provocative case study for nation branding practitioners and scholars. It is mired in a contested process of global image-making animated by Western media headlines, often negative ones, which draw the ire of the country's Foreign Ministry and its ripostes. Into the fray are also self-representations, or nation branding moments, that disseminate idealized visions of the country. This paper dissects two such promotional events: an art exhibit and a science fiction blockbuster through visual and narrative analysis. It considers how cultural diplomacy, political ideology, and visibility coalesce to engender images of the nation, punctuated by the country's prized cultural values and global political yearnings. Rather than examining official branding campaigns, this study is grounded in the liminal space of popular culture where there is state oversight, and yet, also some creative freedom. The findings point to two time-related themes and visual strategies that showcase the country through its distinct dynastic past and through anticipatory spectacles of its hoped-for future. These serve as a harbinger of nationalistic visions to come. An understanding of this time-sensibility and visibility of Brand China yields a keener sense of how the country reinforces itself as a global leader.

Keywords Nation branding · China · Cultural diplomacy · Cultural nationalism · Science fiction · National image

Introduction

China is a headache-inducing case study for nation branding. Like all countries, it is forever evolving and best understood in situ within many contexts and through a variety of representations. Consequently, the mandate of nation branding consultants to formulate a consistency of message and images for such a country-client seems an insurmountable task. And yet, no other country needs branding flair and reputation management more than China as it is perennially mired a contest over its global image. As the country accumulates power internationally, be it economically or politically, it naturally attracts more attention and recognition, drawing scrutiny from Western media and public discourses, as well as intensifying the nation, or at least a conceptual version of it, in the popular imagination. This visibility has become more pronounced, as the country's image is battered by the legacy as the site where the COVID-19 pandemic

first emerged. Moreover, it is the object of critique in the Western media due to its rule in Xinjiang, Tibet and Hong Kong. China's own riposte to negative headlines is equally noteworthy. In this era of antagonistic geopolitical relationships between it and Western powers, the expression "wolf-warrior diplomacy" has gained traction as a characterization of Chinese Foreign Ministry's new assertive style (The Economist 2020; Huang 2021). Within China, officials, including the Chinese President Xi Jinping himself, have often emphasized the need to strengthen the country's international communication to gain more discursive power and influence over global public opinion. Speaking at a collective study session of the Politburo last year, Xi reiterated the necessity to build an international discourse power that would match China's "comprehensive national strength and international status." The country must strive "to improve the influence of international communication, the appeal of Chinese culture, an affinity with Chinese image, the persuasive power of Chinese discourse and the guidance of international public opinion," he stated. Later in the speech, he also called for the creation of "a credible, lovely and respectable image of China" (Xinhuanet 2021).

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Against this backdrop and beyond the daily geopolitical wrangling, one factor in the realm of global media images and visualizations is China's own moments of self-representation and the crafting of its own international identity and narratives. For a country that is becoming bolder in articulating its own values and identity against the West, its process of molding a suitable and cohesive image befitting its ascent becomes an insightful case for nation branding. The practice adds a fresh set of dynamics to explore China's global presence and its international communication strategies which have been conceptualized earlier through public diplomacy (Hartig 2014, 2016; Zhang 2008) and soft power (Nye 2005, 2012; Kurlantzick 2007; Li 2011; Breslin 2011; Lee 2016; Zhu et al. 2020). Nation branding brings to these discussions a new way of describing and interpreting the complexity of China's global image construction.

To better understand this process, this article asks: how does the country wish to appear on the global stage and through what kinds of visual images and supporting discourse? What national ideals and values are being embodied by these representations and what are some competing images? Out of what domestic contexts have they emerged and through what forms of visual strategies have they thrived? Analyzing China through the practice of nation branding crystallizes these tactics of national image creation and projection, but pivotally, it also highlights another dimension of the country's own perception of its influence and status, as well as its response to the challenge of global image management. The recent academic corpus on China's nation branding efforts remains divergent, for example, with emphasis on a single event, such as the Olympics (Puppin 2021) and the COVID-19 pandemic (Lee 2021), or through particular domains such as social media (He et al. 2020), sports (Li and Feng 2021), the Belt and Road Initiative (Zhang et al. 2020), and intellectual property rights (Yang 2016), or in a specific country, for instance Britain (Wu et al. 2021). This article takes an interdisciplinary approach and engages with these existing debates on three fronts: first, it shifts the attention of analysis to two alternative objects of study; second, it amplifies an often-elided, if not taken-for-granted, relationship to time that is a prominent feature of the country's nation brand style. And finally, it examines how this recourse to time is expressed through visual images and visual strategies that depict the country's ancient past and its technologically advanced future, both of which boost China's nation brand.

Concerning the first front, this investigation accentuates the political and the cultural components of nation branding rather than its economic and marketing calculus. While nation branding is often driven by the logic of a desired economic and material outcomes, the concept also embodies other cultural components such as cultural stereotypes, cultural policies, national identity and national characteristics;

it could also have a role in cross-cultural communications (Fan 2006). This article traces a longer line of reasoning that embeds China's nation branding rationale within the context of the country's instrumentalization of its culture for diplomacy and within the rise of its cultural sector. It broadens the scope of study and examines the issue of nation branding through two alternative moments of branding efforts. Rather than looking at conscious and official campaigns, for example a state-run tourism campaign, this study explores the in-between space of popular culture where there is state oversight, and yet, some creative freedom and contingency to create an imaginary China and popularized images of its cultural identity and traditions.

This shift is helpful because China's rich ancient history has often confined the conceptualization of its nation brand through promotional activities of the country as a tourist destination. Discussions on nation branding are then conducted through place branding and destination branding motivations (see, for example, Fan 2014). Within this paradigm, the emphasis is on strategies of promotion and the drive for profitability. Both the issues of efficacy and the role of branding consultants are prioritized, focusing on the failures or successes of such often top-down campaigns. But as a nation brand is "inherently a complex, multifaceted construct" (Lee 2020, p. 2), it is productive to widen the investigation and track the heterogeneity of Brand China, especially since previous studies have already focused on official events like the aforementioned 2008 Olympics Games in Beijing, the World Expo in Shanghai 2010, national image films and the promotion of Confucius Institutes (Berkowitz et al. 2007; Paradise 2009; Manzenreiter 2010; Wallis and Balsamo 2016; Barr 2012).

The two moments presented here are the international art exhibition "Continuum—Generation by Generation," which was staged in the China Pavilion at the 2017 Venice Biennale, and the Chinese science fiction blockbuster, *The Wandering Earth* (2019). They help to establish a wide range of visual images that bolsters Brand China. These two moments are not the traditional mega nation branding events, but both are explicit narratives of the nation, embedded within them emphatic discourses of national identity and cultural values. Both also circulated outside China and reached global audiences, and as such, they serve as tools of nation branding and convivial diplomacy to reach external spectators. They are also sponsored and affiliated with the state, and on that note, should be considered as external propaganda events that must not deviate from the state's ideology. And yet, they highlight the complex and precarious process of nation branding in that they also implicate willing or unwilling co-creators such as art curators, artists and professionals from the country's science fiction industry, further underscoring how the nation brand is stylized through a blending of imagination, national myths and fiction. Taking these two



different activities into consideration, this article strengthens the baseline knowledge on China's relationship with nation branding and documents a more comprehensive understanding of Brand China.

The second front builds on the first. It is precisely by looking outside formal nation branding projects that the significance of time also emerges. Within the two case studies lie exemplary engineering of its national image through temporal dimensions; there is a time-mindfulness which impacts the country's self-representations. How the country projects itself in time—through a cross-current of the past and the future—reveals the evolving process of representing “China.” If other countries are often eager to be represented as “modern, progressive and authentic” within the context of nation branding (Valaskivi 2016, p. xviii), China reverses in the opposite direction by evoking its dynastic past. China tends to amplify its traditional culture as its key nation branding asset. But as the second case study will show, this persistent backward glance will be challenged with the rise of Chinese science fiction.

The third and final front is related to the issues of visuality, which is understood here as the multiple ways through which vision is constructed (Rose 2016). Ali (2018, p. 456) has also echoed this by stating, “Visuality indicates that the ways in which we see, what we see, how it is seen and how we are enabled or constrained in seeing are always culturally constructed.” In nation branding terms, a visual analysis would examine such constructions and demonstrate how nation brands, such as Brand China, rest on a system of visual armatures, or a “visual iconography of logos, slogans and symbols” (Aronczyk 2008, p. 44). Consider another and earlier statement by Xi which described China's desired national images:

China should be portrayed as a civilized country featuring rich history, ethnic unity and cultural diversity, and as an Oriental power with good government, developed economy, cultural prosperity, national unity and beautiful mountains and rivers (quoted by People's Daily Online 2014).

Besides the reference to China's landscape, such rhetoric is sustained by abstract concepts, including other desired descriptions of the country as “open, amicable, promising and vibrant” (quoted by Xinhua in People's Daily Online 2014). These must be reified by visual images in any branding campaigns. Therefore, what are the visual associations and objects that are a part of the constructions of “China” and how are they being regurgitated to aid the country's brand image? This process of image construction must be dissected to identify the ways the country is being seen. And as Noh has argued (2020, p. 865), “it is critical to note here the importance of image cultures in nation branding strategies, precisely because images retain polysemic, interpretive

flexibility, yet retain enough structure to create cohesive, discernible patterns.”

This article suggests that an understanding of this tripartite relationship—heterogeneous nation branding expressions, temporality and visuality—is vital to grasp Brand China. It also argues that an emerging and alternative strategy of branding China through the visual association of a technologically superior future, as will be demonstrated through the science fiction movie, both challenges and reconfigures the country's conventional self-image constructed through its ancient history. This latter strategy should excite nation branding consultants as it could become a blueprint for new campaigns.

Brand China, powered by cultural capital

Nation branding intersects with several professional fields, from the economic-driven practices such as export promotion and investment attraction to the realm of cultural exchanges and tourism. As a field of academic research, it also encroaches on many subjects such as foreign and public diplomacy, nationalism, nation building, and state propaganda; it is also linked to cultural diplomacy and soft power (see Dinnie 2016; Gienow-Hecht 2019 for overviews; Anholt 2007). Because the concept foregrounds the nation as the object of study, it calls for an analysis that enfolds representations of China within the context of its nationalism. The concept of nationalism has multiple definitions and applications within Chinese modern history and debates. Its usage here refers to *aiguo zhuyi*, translated as patriotism, which according to Bislev and Li (2014), describes the popular nationalism and the loyalty to the Chinese nation that have circulated in the country in recent years. This nationalism has been aided by a cultural rejuvenation inspired by the country's long and continuous history and its imperial past. Repeated ad nauseam, the all-purpose statement of “5000 years of ancient history” has become an invocation that rolls off the tongues of pride-filled Chinese nationals, from senior officials to taxi drivers. It is the abbreviation of ideological constructions that magnifies the country's history, culture, and traditions to solidify its sense of exceptionalism; it is channeled for a nationalism that reverberates with a new Chinese power and self-confidence in recent decades (Kayser 2019). Moreover, it is also being retooled for domestic party legitimation as a part of the CCP's broader campaign to garner popular legitimacy. As Zeng (2014, p. 111) puts it: “[...] the CCP's various discourse have been moving toward Chinese traditions in order to co-opt and integrate them into its own agenda.” For Barr (2012, p. 81), nation branding exercises are linked to the multiple mechanisms of nation building, “to instill loyalty to the Party



brand and strengthen Beijing's own legitimacy, among both its domestic population and international audience."

This past-consciousness will be examined more closely in the first case study. For now, it is important to note that there is a broader historical and institutional backdrop against which Brand China and the government's international communication practices must be understood, in particular how they are underpinned by the rhetoric of a culturally exceptional China and its past traditions. Already back in 2006, Cai Wu, the then director of the Information Office of the State Council and later the Minister of Culture between 2008 and 2014, outlined the objectives of the country's foreign propaganda, with one of them being "to win understanding and win the hearts and minds of the people." Furthermore, he highlighted the role of culture: "With culture as the carrier, we will promote foreign exchanges and cultural propaganda, display the broad and profound charm of Chinese culture, subtly exert influence, and enhance the world's objective and comprehensive understanding and friendship with China" (2006, page number unavailable). In the ensuing years, the significance of cultural soft power, whether it is for the task of nation branding or as a part of national economic development, was solidified. This aim was also included in the country's so-called "going out" policy along with the media industry (Keane and Zhang 2017; Hu and Ji 2012). Specifically, in 2011, a decision was adopted at the Sixth Plenary Session of the 17th Central Committee on October 18 that called for the acceleration of the development of the cultural industry which could become "a pillar industry" of the national economy. In the same document, the party was described as having "always attached great importance to the use of culture to lead the way forward..." The statement went on to warn that "... the task of safeguarding national cultural security is more arduous, and the requirements to enhance national cultural soft power and the international influence of Chinese culture are more urgent" (Gov.cn 2011, page number unavailable). This effort to build the country's national image and disseminate "the charm of Chinese culture" has continued unabatedly in Xi's era. As he stressed in the aforementioned 2014 speech, with phrases that have by now become trite: "The stories of China should be well told, voices of China well spread, and characteristics of China well explained" (People's Daily Online 2014).

But what kinds of stories need to be told and through what visual imagery? According to a study gauging the global public's response to China's nation branding campaigns (He et al. 2020, p. 13), "ancient China has been regarded highly by the international society and its civilization is well recognize." However, international audiences are less interested in modern Chinese culture or are neutral toward it (He et al. 2020). Expediently, the country's unique history and cultural traditions, as well as the magnification of it within branding efforts, also align with the justification of nation

branding. Kapur (2013, p. 22) states that nation branding "represents a shift in orientation toward the nation, which is now imagined as a commodity to be marketed to global capital ..." The necessity of the practice has been partly justified through a shift toward the globalization-driven "competitive identity" (Anholt 2007), which consequently has put more emphasis on economic growth, trade, and cultural capital. A distinct national identity, along with culture, is viewed as being capable of adding the competitive edge, in what might be seen as "an outward-oriented continuation of geopolitics by other means" (Browning and De Oliveira 2017, p. 483).

As brand experts and scholars have stated, one of the significant tasks of the practice is to distill from a wide range of national narratives "a particular version of national identity" and "a distinctive image"—at the expense of others (Aronczyk 2008, p. 42). This has been referred to as a "brand essence," or a "core idea," underscoring the process of nation branding as one that reduces the developments of national histories, narratives and attributes to a form of essentialism (Aronczyk 2008, p. 52). Additionally, this brand characteristic should have differentiating value to distinguish the branded country against competing nations (Fan 2006). Nation branding, therefore, is a process of self-distinction and self-differentiation. The two branding moments will trace this entanglement between cultural capital and nation branding, demonstrating how key Chinese cultural values, themes, and visual icons are exacerbated to achieve self-distinguishment.

Methods

The study is steered by a qualitative research process, and it presents two branding moments as case studies that are descriptive and explanatory. Case studies are chosen because they are effective and relevant when providing "an extensive and in-depth description" of a complex social phenomena within its real-life context, and at the same time, seeking to retain its "holistic and meaningful characteristics" (Yin 2009, p. 4). The case studies can encompass different sources of evidence documenting Brand China, thus scrutinizing it from multiple angles which will converge and collaborate on how an ascending power builds and manages its image. Moreover, the aim is to expand the range of cultural expressions which jointly shape the nation brand. Therefore, from the outset, two contrasting cases are selected to illustrate different visual and narrative strategies associated explicitly with the theme of time-mindfulness, which stages a resurrection of the past and a projection of the future. For the Venice Biennale, the 2017 edition of the China Pavilion is chosen rather than other recent editions due to its noteworthy and explicit accents on past traditions and its recalibrated visual images and discourses about China's ancient culture



and cultural exceptionalism. This is a paradigmatic case that fixes its people and national imagery through a time-consciousness that informs its nation brand (Chao 2019). This case study serves as a foil for the film, which contains an emerging visualization strategy depicting a China in future. Several other recent Chinese films involving a futuristic China were also considered for analysis, for example, *Shanghai Fortress* (2019). However, *The Wandering Earth* is chosen due to its nationalistic themes and its emphasis on Chinese values which also connect directly with strategies for nation branding. Taken together, these comparative cases show variations and yet complementing conclusions for the predicted purpose of a theoretical replication and analytic generalization (Yin 2009; Schwandt and Gates 2018; Spencer 2011).

Additionally, given that the focus is on visual images, it is important to deploy more granular methods to interpret such materials. This article follows the methodological strategies outlined by Rose (2016) that tackle the interpretation of visual materials from four potential sites: production, image, circulation, and audiencing. However, this study focuses primarily on the second site of image, in keeping with the task of advancing visual analysis in nation branding research. Consequently, this results in attentive readings of the contents of the art exhibition and of the film. This visual interpretation is further grounded in the three modalities as identified by Rose (2016): technological, compositional, and social. Elements of these three interrelated modalities generate the dataset, or the corpus, to be examined.

The first modality of technology addresses the technical equipment and tools that are introduced to produce the image. For example, the analysis of the movie will touch on the issue of cinematic special effects. The second modality covers the compositional qualities. Since this article is scrutinizing two very different media, it takes careful stock of the medium specificity of each object when addressing composition. The art exhibit will be analyzed as a collection of images and objects that jointly achieved a certain “expressive content” (Rose 2016, p. 79) and an affect of time which evoke China’s longevity as a marker of its civilizational superiority. For the film, the compositional discussion includes the *mise-en-scène* and montage. Cinematic images are also interpreted with the support of theoretical concepts from visual studies. The third and final modality relates to the social, which embeds an image within an ecosystem of economics, politics, social concerns, institutions, and practices which inform its appearance and function (Rose 2016). In view of this social modality, the art exhibit and the film are discussed, precisely, against the prominent backdrop of nation branding to advance how both events are implicated in the constructions of China.

Finally, to understand these constructions, one last layer of methodological consideration has been added: discourse

analysis. This is needed to investigate how visual images are shaped by the aforementioned ecosystem, and in a relay fashion, how they also “help to shape and reproduce social meanings and forms of knowledge” (Tonkiss 2018, p. 478). The following sections identify key themes, cultural emphases, and visual symbols which are mobilized to produce meanings about Brand China and to differentiate it from other countries. Once again, medium specificity is necessary. For the art exhibit, this discourse analysis is based on multiple site visits to document the textual technologies that construct the imagery of China. These include labels and captions of artifacts, in situ wall texts, exhibition catalogues, curatorial statements, and conceptual unities of artworks. For the film, discursive elements of plot and characters are connected to the geopolitical context of China’s global ascendancy and its future.

The next section presents the first case study which underscores the theme of time in the formation of China’s global perception, examining how a hallowing of the past gains currency and becomes a visual and narrative orientational device that guides nation branding.

Art diplomacy: curating the past

To see how China’s history and its past take on positive connotations of value and engage in the production of a unique brand and cultural power, one only needs to turn to the national China Pavilion at the 2017 Venice Biennale. Introducing the theme of “Continuum—Generation by Generation,” the China Pavilion sought to showcase Chinese art at one of the world’s most famous venues for exhibiting contemporary art. Not only did this national pavilion’s own theme responded to the overall exhibition theme of “Viva Arte Viva,” the concept of continuity was also the discursive foundation to highlight an ancient civilization, demonstrating how the specters of pastness have both esthetic and nation branding use-value and how they can be harnessed for image enhancement on the global stage.

This main theme of “continuum” was reinforced by the Chinese concept of *bu xi*, translated as ceaselessly and unrelentingly, as a conceptual anchor. While *bu xi* on its own might only suggest a banal motivating force or spirit of perseverance, it was elevated to a collective national level, with its meanings expanded loftily to accentuate the notions of time and the relationships between the present and the past, and specifically in the Chinese context, the country’s distinct history. According to the exhibit, the concept of *bu xi* implies “unbroken energetic transmission; and a generative life force that survives through resilience and adaptability to the vicissitudes of history and fate. These virtues have been a core aspect of Chinese civilizational ontology since ancient times” (Wall Text, “Continuum” 2017). Crucially,





Fig. 1 A general view of The China Pavilion at the 2017 La Biennale di Venezia, 57. Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte. Source and copyright: Jenifer Chao

this *bu xi* takes on an essentialist quality as it is a part of a “Chinese cultural gene” which “has given rise over the generations to powerful creative work that resonates with an esthetic, philosophical and cosmological continuity ...” (Wall Text, “Continuum” 2017).

As one of the country’s best-known contemporary artists himself, the curator Qiu Zhijie has traced here a narrative of a unique, long and continuous historical past—in contrast to other civilizations and history-deficient nations—that enables generational continuity and collective endeavoring. Not just a theoretical conceptualization, *bu xi*, on a practical level, suggests that each generation of artists is supposedly imbued with “a historical consciousness” to carry on an artistic legacy, advancing this communal endeavor across time. Putting this *bu xi* and the spirit of continuum to work into esthetic and visual practices means connecting Chinese contemporary art and Chinese traditions, specifically folk arts. Consequently, the pavilion featured the works of four artists who were differentiated as two folk art masters, Yao Huifen and Wang Tianwen, and two contemporary artists, Wu Jian’an and Tang Nannan. Besides presenting their individual pieces, these four artists also collaborated and created new works for the show. According to Qiu, this combination of folk art and contemporary art sought to underscore that Chinese art is rooted in folk culture. As a result, traditional arts such as embroidery, puppetry and paper cutting were prominently displayed in the pavilion (Fig. 1).

An earlier analysis of the exhibit has detailed its esthetic elements (Chao 2019), but more relevant to the discussion here is the visual emphasis on folk culture which reflects the domain’s own current importance as a part of China’s intangible cultural heritage and its instrumentalization for nation branding. As Wang (2021, p. 6) sees it, while it was

once considered “feudal and superstitious and excluded from Chinese cultural history, folk culture is now cherished as national treasure.” But relocating Chinese traditions to the international stage that is the Venice Biennale means recalibrating a strategy of cultural revitalization at home into an exercise in art and cultural diplomacy to create a positive image internationally. And here is where China was able to maximize nation branding’s process of differentiation and distinction to clearly distinguish itself through a past-orientation—traditions, culture and cultural identity—couching them in an essentialist framing.

The exhibit, where art, culture and (artist) identity were fused, was embroiled in this process of nation branding in several ways. Curator Qiu showcased Chinese traditions and accentuated the relationship between the present and the past through two paintings from the Song Dynasty: *Skeleton Fantasy Show* by Li Song (1190–1230) and *Twelve Images of Water Surging* by Ma Yuan (c. 1160/65–1225). Rearticulations of these two works dominated the pavilion, either explicitly or implicitly through similar themes and images. These Song-dynasty works, for example, were dutifully recreated by Yao’s Suzhou embroidery. Tang’s multiple works, including videos and ink-on-paper, featured waves, oceans, seas and home, echoing Ma’s earlier meditations on human emotions and philosophy (Fig. 2). And as if responding directly to Xi’s earlier command to promote the country’s “beautiful mountains and rivers,” Qiu included other works, for example Wu Jian’an’s paper-cut collages of mountain ranges in *The Birth of the Galaxy*, to fortify the sub-theme of “Mountain and Ocean.” More likely, this sub-theme has to do with the country’s landscape paintings which have become the potent and stereotypical visual symbols of China’s enduring history and refined culture.

This return to the past was also sustained by classical texts and multiple tales from Chinese mythology referenced in the exhibition catalogues, wall texts and object labels, all serving as temporal markers to maintain that much prized aura of age which characterizes the country’s history and a people endowed supposedly with an exceptional culture and equipped with Confucian wisdom. All of this became valuable capital in nation branding. In this way, history and the past were actualized, with their emotional and visual traces permeating the pavilion. Here, traditions and the art of the past were reactivated to meet the nation’s present objectives—to cultivate a distinct and compelling nation brand—by functioning as thematic anchors and visual symbols.

But if Qiu’s constellation of visual signifiers and the extra-exhibition discursive materials seemed eclectic and decontextualized, if not ambiguous, it was understandable in view of the global limelight at stake. After all, here was a moment for the country to assert a national imagery with a gravitas that is equaled to its rising. And this is where *bu xi* gained its elevated utility. More than just exemplifying the



Fig. 2 Tang Nannan, *Oblivious Ocean 20* (2014). Ink on paper. 74.5 cm × 145 cm × 4. The China Pavilion, 2017 La Biennale di Venezia, 57. Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte. Source and Copyright: Tang Nannan. Permission granted



proverbial practice of artistic collaborations and intertextuality, the signification *bu xi* also constructs an enduring and distinctive people with a collective conquering spirit that persists through the generations. On display were images of continuity and of artistic inheritances, but also *bu xi* as a distinct “Chinese” civilizational characteristic. According to Qiu (2017, p. 75),

This kind of overlaying discourse and echoing of folk art and fine art, new art and traditional art, will create an energy field of ‘*Bu Xi*’. This is completely different from the Western way of individual creation. This is the secret of Chinese art and Chinese civilization passing from one generation to the next for thousands of years...

Note that Qiu differentiates the Chinese approach from that of the West. This theme of Chinese collectivism versus Western individualism is also one of the premises on which to assertively distinguish Chinese culture from others and one of the features of the nation brand. It is a magnification of difference. Visual images of traditional cultural roots are also reclaimed not to embrace cultural heterogeneity (Wang 2015), but to suggest an essentialist, overriding, and possibly, unifying (branding) identity. In China’s case, the country has identified and aggrandized this nation branding strength in contradistinction to other nations with consistency.

Rather than being negatively valued as the opposite of modernity, its past is constructed to be a visual marker of cultural superiority and as the wellspring of an essential Chineseness, both of which are serviceable for domestic and international image-making objectives. These threads of continuity have allowed Qiu to formulate visions of the past that are beneficial to the country’s current branding demands.

But while this past-oriented pathos and associated images have been pivotal to the formation of the global imaginary of China and its nation brand, they veil other equally valid visual features, narratives, stylization, and trends that are

flourishing in China. All of them might deliver dissimilar and novel representations of the country. What might such representations look like? And could this pastness be abandoned for a sensitivity toward a different temporality? Might forward-looking visions situated within an anticipatory mode be an alternative? There is, indeed, an increasingly popular future-oriented articulation of the nation brand that merits analysis. China’s pastness is also being complemented simultaneously by imaginaries of the future through the ever-expanding genre of science fiction movies.

How to save the planet? With Chinese characteristics

If China was ensconced in the spirit, textures, and images of unfading traditions in Venice, the blockbuster science fiction movie *The Wandering Earth* thrusts the country headlong into the future in a speculative and a spectacle-driven science fiction extravaganza. This colossus of a movie is not a refiguration of the past, but more akin to what Currie has called a “fictional flashforward that conjoins a ‘present’ moment to a future one” (2006, p. 6). In it we see China in an “anticipatory mode of being” (Currie 2006, p. 6) propelled by a constellation of signifiers and symbols of the future and reveling in technological progress and innovation. In this imagined world, China is not constructed through its ancientness; instead, it must consider humanity’s fate and secure a fictional earth’s survival. Through the movie, visualizations of the country—the building blocks of the nation brand—finally get a timely makeover.

The movie was first shown domestically and then circulated globally through Netflix. The movie grossed \$700 million in cinemas, but mostly in China (The Economist 2019), succeeding commercially as one of the top grossing movies in Chinese box office. One reviewer panned it as being “borderline unwatchable” (Ehrlich 2019), but it enjoyed positive viewers’ satisfaction at home (Zhang 2019). It can be seen



as a form of self-construction, if not self-prophecy, in that the science fiction genre emphasizes the “technologically advanced future” (Paik 2010, p. 3), which is the same horizon that China strives toward, ambitiously envisioning and cultivating itself as a global superpower in technology and innovation by 2049, starting already with its “Made in China 2025” program to secure global dominance in targeted technologies, including aviation and space equipment (Zenglein and Holzmann 2019). Historically, the genre itself has often been appropriated for political projects in China (Gaffric 2019; Hua 2015). Unsurprisingly, then, its current global rise also makes its instrumentalization inevitable, being now placed “at the forefront of a nationalist project both inside and outside China” (Gaffric 2019, p. 22).

How the movie’s narrative and visuals can be understood as a nation branding moment occurs on two fronts. First, there is the storyline infused with political ideology that stages China’s global leadership and portrays the country as a benevolent force. Second, the movie’s temporal dimension of a future time and its esthetic touch lessens the expectations of visualizing China and its nation brand through familiarized images. These visual elements are understood as a counterpoint to the nation branding framing in Venice, disrupting the established codes of legibility and intelligibility with which China is often perceived. Although criticism of science fiction movies often centers around the genre’s over reliance on special effects to drive the plot, in the context of this film, the overpowering special effects and the production designs actually have an added utility, one to underscore an image of a country excelling in the present cinematically through the professionalization of its film industry.

Trumpeted as the country’s first big-budget science fiction epic (Kokas 2019), the movie is adapted from a novella of the same name, in Chinese *Liulang diqiu*, by the internationally fêted Chinese science fiction writer Liu Cixin, also famous for *The Three-Body Problem*, *Santi*, the first book of a trilogy.¹ And like many adaptations, the movie’s plot belies the richer and dystopic feel of the original story, which also touches on the pathos of post-apocalypse loneliness and human relations. The movie muddles Liu’s original story of “a post-national, post-familial, and even post-human world” (Zhu 2020, p. 1) to prioritize the nation and nationalism. The film’s plot takes place in the future when the sun is degenerating and is predicted to cause a cataclysmic explosion that would engulf the earth. With the planet facing obliteration, a global rescue mission is launched to secure its

people’s survival. Ten thousand “earth engines” are erected all over the world that generate enough force to propel the earth out of the solar system to find a new home some 4.3 light years away, and this project has united the countries of the world into what is known as the new political order of United Earth Government (UEG). And until earth arrives in its new home, humans had already escaped earth’s deep-frozen surface to underground cities where life continues to pullulate. Inserted into this main narrative on the cosmic level is the familial story between the Chinese astronaut Liu Peiqiang, (played by the actor/director Wu Jing from the two extremely popular nationalistic Chinese films *Wolf Warrior 1 and 2*) who has been stationed in the Navigation Platform of the International Space Station, and his estranged son Liu Qi, a mechanic trainee, on earth. As the movie progresses, the earth faces imminent catastrophe as it glides too closely to Jupiter and the task of saving the planet ultimately falls on the Liu father-and-son duo, along with a small motley crew of plucky Chinese rescue workers and engineers.

During this world-saving mission, viewers are exposed to a heavy dose of Chinese values such as commitments to the collective wellbeing over individualism, generational continuity, familial devotion and an unwavering Chinese spirit to survive. In this way, the spirit of *bu xi*, which the China Pavilion at the Venice Biennale proclaimed, has found a fresh reiteration as an inextinguishable Chinese national spirit that confronts the threat of annihilation and still overcomes. The theme of self-sacrifice, as interconnected with collectivism, is also evident as several of the Chinese characters sacrificed their own lives to save others. And should viewers fail to detect this theme, the elder Liu, in the finale of the movie, pilots the space station, with its 300,000 tons of fuel, toward Jupiter to trigger a colossal blast with shockwaves that propel earth away from Jupiter, saving the planet but relinquishing his own life.

If one thinks of nation branding as moments of self-display, the final moments of *The Wandering Earth* intimate how China envisages itself in the international community—it would go it alone if needed. This is underscored by the elder Liu who defies the UEG and acts on his own in that grand gesture of heroic self-sacrifice. The story of *The Wandering Earth* is not so much about dystopian visions of an environmentally damaged earth, its ideological thrust is that of Chinese leadership and solutions. A heightened sense of nationalism is fueled by the timeless Chinese values of *bu xi* and collectivism, bolstered by its people’s modern scientific expertise and ingenuity. The country is explicitly positioned to lead the international community, thus branding itself not just as a respect-worthy cultural behemoth, but also as a political leader.

Looking beyond the political ideology, the movie serves as a nation branding opportunity in another way, becoming an advertising moment for its future technological

¹ Liu’s global renown and his influence on Chinese science fiction, or even on Chinese literature, fall outside the scope of this article. For that line of inquiry, see Li and Isaacson (2019), Gaffric (2019), and Hua (2015).



Fig. 3 A screenshot from Netflix featuring the icy world and earth engines in *The Wandering Earth* (2019). Copyright belongs to the original holder China Film Co., Ltd. No infringement is intended



Fig. 4 A screenshot from Netflix highlighting the spectacles of explosion and destruction in *The Wandering Earth* (2019). Copyright belongs to the original holder China Film Co., Ltd. No infringement is intended



dominance. Its visual esthetic of science fiction and visions of an anticipatory future provide an alternative visualization of China. Staying true to a blockbuster spectacle, the movie's succession of fast-paced cuts offers visual and visceral thrills that seem to override any other considerations. The film underlines three interwoven visual dynamics which all tied to the workings of the spectacle and the sublime: first, a post-apocalyptic landscape; second, disaster movie esthetic (Mathias 2020); and third, the technological spectacle (Redmond 2017). These phenomenal visual elements dominate the film, often overshadowing the plot or the embedded Chinese values.

In terms of the landscape, the movie provides limited geographical, as well as cultural markers. Besides the Chinese actors and the Mandarin Chinese that is being spoken there are only a few popular and iconic visual symbols of China and Chineseness in the movie.² The national flag does appear, and in the scenes of the surviving inhabitants' life underground, there are a few quick moments feature people playing mahjong and a lion dance performance. Above ground, the landscape is disconnected to the past and the present. It exists in a post-apocalyptic state, with the earth's surface carpeted in snow and ice. Exterior scenes of the

barren earth through long shots are enveloped in a hazy icy fog and snow drifts (Fig. 3). Watching this all-pervasive metallic upper world, viewers are often denied those much prized cultural and heritage Chinese landmarks; in this fictional frozen world, China is shorn of many of its valued visual markers of differences. A visual estrangement through spatial disruptions has occurred. Its own exceptional history—as often seen through tangible heritage sites and traditional materials—is buried in their icy tomb in the upper world.

Animating this landscape are the looming disasters. *The Wandering Earth's* post-apocalyptic world is dominated by the familiar cinematic imagery of violent blasts and demolition: trucks careen to escape massive explosions; gigantic plumes of smoke and ash are spewed. Frames after frames are crowded with torrential rains of fire sparks; concrete slabs and metal scaffolding are plummeting to earth (Fig. 4). In a discussion of disaster cinema, Mathias (2020, p. 12) has mobilized the experience of the sublime (via Burke and Kant) to explore the disaster movie's receptive core which is identified as being located within "... visceral images that agitate the spectator in a sensorily and affectively intense manner." Redmond (2017, p. 44), meanwhile, argues that in a science fiction spectacle, "the very forces of a special effect and the powers of digital photography enable awesome creations, movements and encounters to be created and gazed at." Entranced by this world of intense visual

² On Netflix, viewers have audio options of English and Spanish, besides the original Chinese.



fireworks, viewers also see formidable forms of spectacles associated with science fiction, including those akin to the technological spectacle (Redmond 2017). Unlike science fiction novels which can offer a more intricate contemplation on science, their movie adaptations provide something different. They offer what Sontag (1965, p. 44) has called a “sensuous elaboration,” which in this case is situated within visual encounters with the earth engines, the interiors of the massive transporter trucks, which the younger Liu drives, and the Navigation Platform of the International Space Station where the elder Liu is stationed. These settings, often seen through medium shots, all feature the familiar images of a technology-centric world. From the rudimentary objects of scanners and modems to the slightly more advanced items of robotic arms and AI, this world glows with metallic objects radiating and whirring. This technophilia contrasts with favored and stereotypical images of China’s dynastic past, but it resonates with the country’s ambitions of excelling in science, innovation, and technology and heralds their fulfillment. The science fictional imaginary, including the immense panoramas of outer space, is thus instrumentalized to affirm national aspirations and aid nation branding.

With all these elements coalescing, *The Wandering Earth* reveals a visual break with the China Pavilion in Venice. Brand China’s articulation now encompasses a broader temporal scope and a different visual stylization: future-looking, speculative, if not prophetic. Science fiction’s setting frees spectators from the constraints of the present and the past. More than the state ideology that is embedded in the movie, this future time and the setting, the latter of which often becomes a major character in science fictions (Jones 2003), govern one’s visuality through the film’s post-apocalypse landscape and spectacles of disasters, technology and the outer space. These fictional scenes are the familiar, if not banal, elements of science fiction blockbusters. The movie allows global viewers to recognize China and Chinese bodies through a well-known cinematic genre with its established visual esthetic and strategies, enabling a banalization and familiarization of the country in the global imaginary. This fresh acquaintance is a disruption that circumvents some of the hegemonic visual and cultural signposts on which the country relies so heavily. From this, China’s nation branding imaginations and ambitions can embrace new possibilities through popular representations of futurity.

Conclusion: China of the present

Although the two case studies presented in this study possess their particular esthetic specificities, and while they are located in different cultural fields, their juxtaposition does yield cross-case observations for analytic generalization, with a broader application to elucidate the

variations of Brand China. They have illuminated what visual images, cultural values, and characteristics China wishes to trumpet globally as a part of its nation brand; they have also exhibited the visual and discursive constructions at work and the accretion of mandated meanings for the country’s self-image. For China, a strategy of a past-future bifurcation is in operation as it promotes its history and its pre-empted globe-saving responsibilities. Two temporal orientations are working in tandem: an art exhibition that seizes on the country’s branding advantage to situate itself in an exceptional past and traditions versus a film that accelerates the nation into the future, publicizing alternative visions of the country through an anticipatory mode. Furthermore, through *The Wandering Earth*, emerging narrative and visual techniques have been detected and probed as tactics for future nation branding projects. Brand China is no longer temporally stable; its futuristic environment and fictional time have initiated a necessary, if not welcoming, visual shift. The former signals a break with physical traces of the past, and the latter affirms the country’s zeitgeist of innovation and technology, which is also visually displayed in the flourishing capabilities of its cinematic special effects beyond the movie screen. With the continuing popularity of Chinese science fiction, this future-oriented visual strategy might become even more prominent.

However, in terms of the actual practice and implementation of the brand image, this past–future duality also must accommodate the present, both in terms of current global politics and branding efforts. Writing in the summer of 2022, one wonders how China’s friendship and strategic partnership with Russia, whose invasion of Ukraine has drawn wide condemnation, will impact its own global reputation and image in the long term? More generally, in a post-COVID era of antagonistic geopolitical relationships between China and Western powers, the country’s earlier well-known slogans, for example, “peaceful rise,” “a community with a shared future for mankind,” and “One World, One Dream,” all sound quaint, if not incongruous. They are now also complemented by the legacy of COVID-related anti-China sentiments and the initial references to the pandemic through labels of the “Wuhan virus” or the “Chinese virus.” How will Brand China find its footing and court a more skeptical, if not hostile, international public? What discursive and visual special effects are needed to elevate the country’s likeability? The common expression “there is no *time* to lose” is now apt for its global image management. Finding its bearing through temporal dimensions, be it its treasured past or its aspired world-saving future, the country’s nation brand will have to make agile and multidirectional temporal shifts to recalibrate itself.



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