

INTERVENTION

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Historical imaginaries, historic urban branding, and the local state in China: rejuvenation discourse, manufactured heritage and simulacrascapes

Andrew Malcolm Law* 

Abstract

This intervention examines the extant literature on historical imaginaries and historic urban branding in China. It suggests that while research in this field has increasingly moved away from an economic (or an implicit neo-Marxist) model, there is still a lack of research on the role of broader *cultural and state led discourses of nationalism* in the construction of historic urban imaginaries and historic urban branding within Chinese cities. In unpacking one nationalistic discourse a – narrative of rejuvenation – this article argues that more needs to be done to examine the role of these themes in the construction of historical imaginaries at the level of the local state (including related state networks of developers, retailers, tourist officials, town planners, architects, and designers). It is suggested that an analysis of these discourses and imaginaries is important if we are: 1) to appreciate the role of these themes in the construction and/or the reconfiguration of existing or emerging historic brands within Chinese cities; 2) to comprehend the construction of ‘authorised heritage discourses’ (AHDs) practices and materialities at the level of the local state; 3) to understand the politics of the past (including the uses of history, memory, nostalgia, and heritage) at the level of the local state; 4) to be aware of the way in which these themes inform the preservation, conservation, and/or the demolition of heritage space at the level of the local state; 5) to recognise the manufacture of ‘heritage’ or simulacrascapes within Chinese cities.

Keywords Rejuvenation, Historical urban imaginaries, Historical urban branding, Built heritage, Simulacrascapes

*Correspondence:

Andrew Malcolm Law
andrew.law@newcastle.ac.uk
School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape, Newcastle University,
Newcastle, UK



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1 Introduction

Historical imaginaries¹ and historical urban (or city based) branding² are a global phenomenon (see MacDonald 2009; Guzijan 2021; de Jong and Lu 2022; Shedid and Hefnawy 2022). Coalitions of developers, the local state, and a whole network of urban actors – including realtors, planners, urban designers, heritage specialists, conservationists, tourist agents and local businesses – can come together to construct, support, and maintain a specific historical urban imaginary and/or an associated historical urban brand. Within China, investigations into historical imaginaries and historical urban branding are particularly thought-provoking (see Pan 2004; Law 2012; Yang 2016; Law and Qin 2018; Zhu 2017, Zhu and Yang 2018; and Law 2020). One burgeoning strand of research in this field has been associated with work on Shanghai and particularly

investigators have unpacked the way in which local historical imaginaries (and nostalgia) relating to the 1920s and 1930s are tied up with the branding and theming of the city (Zhang 2000; Lu 2002; Pan 2004; Wu 2006; Ren 2008; Janson and Lagerkvist 2009; Law 2012). As I have discussed elsewhere, often imaginaries relating to colonial and republican Shanghai (in the 1920s and the 1930s) have been associated with themes relating to decadence, cosmopolitanism and futureority (see Law 2012). Though, recently scholars such as Den Hartog and González Martínez (2022) have pointed to alternative forms of historic imaginaries and branding in the city; indeed, although they do not address issues of historic urban branding head on, Den Hartog and González Martínez (2022) analyse the emergence of new forms of historic urban theming indirectly through ‘the use of heritage in urban redevelopment’ (Den Hartog and González Martínez 2022, 1).³

Alongside this work, another significant strand of research has examined historical imaginaries and historical urban branding in the northwest City of Xi’an. Here, a substantial number of scholars have explored the role of Han and Tang dynastic urban branding in the theming of the city (Feighery 2008, 2011; Rothschild, Alon, and Fetscherin 2012; Yang 2016; Zhu 2017; Dunne 2018; Zhu and Yang 2018; Cheung 2019; Law 2020; Wang and Feng 2021). Importantly, as this research has demonstrated, Han and Tang branding in Xi’an is so powerful it has affected the actual material landscapes of the city – in the form of theme parks, shopping malls, tourist attractions and new types of high-end real estate. However, while the work on Shanghai and Xi’an has attracted a lot of academic attention, several scholars have also

¹ Here by using the term ‘historical imaginaries’ I am referring to a series of writings that have emerged in the humanities and the social sciences (particularly in urban studies) in recent years; specifically, these writings draw upon a range of concepts that are overlapping including ideas of spatial and/or urban imaginaries. Indeed, Bonakdar and Audirac define urban imaginaries in terms of the ‘ways a city is imagined through an assemblage of representations of place and symbolic narratives disseminated through the media’ (Bonakdar and Audirac 2021: 2). Likewise, Greenberg has defined the idea of urban imaginaries in terms of ‘... a coherent, historically based ensemble of representations drawn from the architecture and street plans of the city, the art produced by its residents, and the images of and discourse on the city as seen, heard, or read in movies, on television, in magazines, and other forms of mass media (Greenberg 2000, 228).’

However, when I am using the expression historical imaginaries, I want to separate my use of the term from discussions of the city alone. In this respect, I am drawn to the writing of scholars who have written about the uses of the past more broadly. Thus, in his book *The Historic Imaginary. Politics of History in Fascist Italy*, Claudio Fogu describes the idea of historical imaginaries in terms of a:

“relational field and an inventory of images, which ... maybe be best visualised as akin to a ‘medieval bestiary’ – a never ending collection of mental and represented creatures irreducible to either reality or fantasy and revealing instead the rhetorical codes that underlie the combinatory operations of our historical imagination (Fogu 2003, 11).”

Moreover, in her work on Xi’an, Geographer Yang Yang has discussed the idea of a cultural imaginary (again through a historical-cultural lens) in terms of the idea of an assemblage (Yang 2016); thus, Yang argues that: ‘Assemblage is viewed here as a process of arranging, organising, and combining different actors, resources, and procedures’ (Yang 2016, 116). In this regard, when talking about the idea of a historical imaginary, I am referring to its casual use in the literature on Chinese historical imaginaries and historical urban branding; however, I am also defining the idea of a historical urban imaginary in terms of the literature discussed here. In my own conception, a historical urban imaginary is an assemblage of discursive and material features, that draws ideas and fantasies of history together with human and non-human entities, including landscapes, architecture, and built heritage.

² It is important to note that within the literature, some scholars talk about historical urban branding in terms of specific areas within cities, whereas some authors refer to the idea of a master brand or a broadly recognisable brand for the city as a whole. In this regard, when I use the term historical urban branding in this text, I am referring to both city-based imaginaries (i.e. a recognisable common brand for the whole city) and site specific branding that might work with or against the dominant brand (or favoured historical urban imaginary) within a city.

³ Unpacking these trends then, Den Hartog and González Martínez (2022) analyse two redevelopment areas known as the Jing An Kerry centre – that includes the former residence of Mao Zedong – and the Greenland Bund Centre also known as Dongjiadu Financial City. As Den Hartog and González Martínez effectively demonstrate, these two redevelopment spaces carry with them specific historical signifiers which refer to ‘(a) Shanghai as birthplace of Communism, identified with the residence of Mao Zedong in Jing An Kerry Centre; (b) Shanghai’s cosmopolitanism represented by the St. Francis Xavier Church in Dongjiadu; and (c) Shanghai’s ancestral entrepreneurialism represented by the Shang Chuan Huiguan (Merchant’s Guild) in Dongjiadu’ (Den Hartog and González Martínez 2022, 2). Thus, while Den Hartog and González Martínez’s study repeats some of the themes discussed earlier by scholars on the branding of Shanghai – i.e., that Shanghai is branded through economic and cosmopolitan themes (see Law 2020) – their work also adds to the literature; indeed, firstly rather than an explicit 1920s and 1930s nostalgic Shanghai brand, Den Hartog and González Martínez, suggest that what is being marketed within these developments is something much older; thus with reference to the Shang Chuan Huiguan (Merchant’s Guild) in Dongjiadu, Den Hartog and González Martínez refer to a narrative of entrepreneurialism bound up with the ‘merchant guilds of wholesale traders in Shanghai’ during the Qing period (Den Hartog and González Martínez 2022, 2). Likewise, the discussion of the Jing An Kerry Centre is important because it speaks to different historical imaginaries which are tied to Mao Zedong and ‘the birth of Communism in China’ (Den Hartog and González Martínez 2022, 4).

conducted some singular (but important) studies on the historical imaginaries (and the historical urban branding) of other Chinese cities. These studies include: Broudehoux's research into the branding of Beijing (Broudehoux 2004); Huppatz, Chan and de Seta and Olivotti's research into nostalgia in Hong Kong⁴ (Huppatz 2009; Chan 2015; de Seta and Olivotti 2016); Zhao's study of the historic branding of Dali City (Zhao 2015); my own study with Qin on the historical branding of Hankou in Wuhan (Law and Qin 2018); my own project with Veldpaus on nostalgic imaginaries in Shanghai, Macau, and Gulangyu Island (near Xiamen) (Law and Veldpaus 2017); Wang's investigation of the city branding of Jiangmen in Guangdong Province (Wang 2017) and Liu's study of the city branding of Ningbo (Liu 2020). Undoubtedly, then, historic and heritage based urban branding in Chinese cities has become increasingly commonplace, and in response to these trends Zhu (2017) has noted that the rebranding of Chinese cities through historic themes and/or 'ancient historic credentials' has taken place in a number of urban sites that has seen Hangzhou 'linked to the Southern Song (1127–1279); Beijing to the Qing dynasty (1644–1912); Nanjing to a string of failed dynasties and governments; and Luoyang to the Wei-Jin period' (Zhu 2017, 183).

2 Theoretical approaches to historic urban branding and urban imaginaries in China

However, while the extant literature demonstrates that historical imaginaries (and their associated forms of urban branding) are now ubiquitous in China, interpretations of these phenomena are quite varied. In one strand of research, scholars have explored the role of local economic strategies in the construction of historical imaginaries and historical urban brands; specifically in this field, Qin and I (Law and Qin 2018; Law 2020) have argued that historic urban brands are often selected because they speak to the idea of 'deep' economic and cosmopolitan roots in a city. By making, these claims we have argued that history (as well as memory, nostalgia, and heritage) is used to increase the *economic attractiveness* of a city. Moreover, by 'attractiveness', Qin and I have suggested that the use of history, nostalgia, and indeed local heritage, is critical to enticing domestic investment (both private and state led investment), foreign direct investment (FDI), tourists, and the real estate industry.⁵ However, economic

incentives alone are not the only explanations for historical imaginaries or the historic urban branding of Chinese cities. Alongside these theories, other investigators have sought to look for broader *cultural narratives* in the construction of local historic urban brands (Zhang 2000; Pan 2004; Broudehoux 2004; Wu 2006; Ren 2008; Jansson and Lagerkvist 2009; Law 2012). Principally, through a historical-cultural approach, some scholars have suggested that in some instances historic branding in places like Shanghai represents broader local desires for a sense of 'modernity' and a certain nostalgia for the future. Thus, in his essay 'Shanghai Nostalgia: Post-revolutionary Allegories in Wang Anyi's Literary Production in the 1990s', Zhang argues that:

Indeed, contemporary Shanghai nostalgia emerges with the postsocialist urban consumer masses and their obsession with searching for a classical moment of Chinese bourgeois modernity, whose feudal and colonial birthmarks are now indistinguishably mingled with commercial logos and signs. As a commercially viable fashion in China's newfound mass cultural industry and an emotional valorization of the semiautonomous intellectual discourses in the 1990s, nostalgia can be considered as a sentimental Chinese response to a global ideology, whose singularity lies precisely in its homesick longing for a futurological utopia hinged on some earlier or more classical phase of world capitalism, on something Shanghai once was or at least could have been. In the Chinese context, the last trend seeks to replace the incomplete, unsettled, and open-ended project of Chinese modernity with an empathic projection of the present onto the larger constellation of historical ages... (Zhang 2000, 355–356)

Similarly, Wu (2006) has written:

In the renewed effort to connect China to the worldly process of modernisation again, old Shanghai becomes a possible mirror image for a future China. The nostalgia caressing of a once-existing modernity drives home the following questions: Was there an internal drive to modernity in China? Did semi-colonial Shanghai offer an indigenous example of modernization? (Wu 2006, 367).⁶

⁴ This research is based on investigations into designer and commercial nostalgia as well as research into social media. In this regard, this work has not investigated historical city or urban branding specifically; nevertheless, nostalgia in Hong Kong does fit with the theme of historical urban imaginaries and as a result I have included this research here.

⁵ Elsewhere I have also implied that the use of history in this way may be a form urban development modelling (Law 2020).

⁶ Likewise, Jansson and Lagerkvist write:

"In order to turn this increasingly global city into a leading commercial hub of East Asia, planners and politicians, commercial interests and entrepreneurs have jointly encapsulated the city by employing a Shanghai nostalgia for the Golden Age of the 1920s and 30 s (Pan 2004) and by calling for a retroactive future gaze, reminiscent of the inter-war era, planners and policy makers create a hyper-real sense of futurity, inclusive of futures past and futures never fulfilled (Jansson and Lagerkvist 2009, 43)."

Here then, the historic branding of Shanghai does not simply reflect the economic desires of the local government and its associated growth coalitions, rather, as Zhang contends, the rise of Shanghai nostalgia (and the urban theming associated with it) has emerged from local consumerist desires for another economic and political future—one framed within ‘Chinese bourgeois modernity’ (Zhang 2000).

Yet, while these interlocutors cite popular cultural-consumerist yearning for an alternative historical trajectory, (or a ‘bourgeois modernity’ that never happened), other researchers have pointed to the role of nationalism and nationalistic discourses in the construction of historical urban imaginaries and historic urban branding. An early examination of these ideas can be found in the work Anne-Marie Broudehoux and her monograph *The Making and Selling of Post-Mao Beijing* (2004); as Broudehoux argues the construction of city image – including historical narratives⁷ – is very much based on wider cultural issues around ideas of face and self-image in China; indeed, as Broudehoux claims the ‘concept of face provides fundamental insights into the widespread pre-occupation with self-perception and deep concern for outside opinion which have long characterised China’ (Broudehoux 2004, 29). Drawing upon the ideas of the Anthropologist Susan Brownell, Broudehoux contends that ideas of ‘the face of China as a nation’ can also be related to the face or image of Beijing as a city (Broudehoux 2004, 29–30). Furthermore, in discussing these ideas, Broudehoux notes that the authorities are now:

whipping up nationalist fervour and promoting patriotism as the new hegemonic discourse, inscribing it in the urban environment as part of recent image construction efforts. Contemporary image making thus seeks to raise patriotic sentiments among the Chinese population and to secure people’s allegiance to the Party by promising major social benefits (Broudehoux 2004, 39).⁸

Investigating the northwest Chinese city of Xi’an, (as well as economic factors), Yang, (2016), Zhu (2017), and Zhu and Yang, (2018) point to the role of ‘nation building’ (and nationalism more broadly) (Yang 2016, 126; Zhu 2017, 182, 183; Zhu and Yang 2018) as a key driver in the construction of historical imaginaries and the historic urban branding of the city. Indeed, Zhu gives precedence to the role of nationalism as a major force in the construction of the

heritage of Xi’an and particularly, he notes that the ‘story of Xi’an is an example of Chinese local level efforts to implement nationalism through defining and legitimising heritage production and consumption and show case it for both the domestic and the international tourism market’ (Zhu 2017, 189). Unpacking these discourses of nationalism in detail, Zhu discusses the importance of the idea of the ‘Chinese Dream’ and notions of national self-confidence and social stability; thus, in a conversation with a local scholar (in Xi’an), Zhu highlights the following comment:

In recent years we have almost forgotten our past, focusing only on economic development. Thanks to heritage we can reconnect with Chang’an and its exchange with Central Asia and Europe. Such effort also facilitates our national goal of revitalising the traditional Chinese worldview of tianxia that we are the centre of the world (Zhu, quoting an anonymous scholar; Zhu 2017, 185–185)

Alongside the work of Yang (2016) and Zhu (2017), other researchers including Dunne (2018) and Cheung (2019) have pointed to the role of nationalist narratives and indeed discourses of *rejuvenation* within Xi’an. Thus, in a short commentary, Dunne mentions that state discourses of rejuvenation are tied up with the idea that ‘China’s past greatness’ can also serve as a ‘roadmap for the future’ and a ‘basis for future power and success’ (Dunne 2018). As Dunne suggests ‘the trend of looking to the past for the future aspirations of development is also evident in individual cities in modern China’ (Dunne 2018). In discussing Xi’an, Dunne argues that ‘Modern development initiatives in Xi’an draw on references of the historical power of the city. Indeed, the very project of forging a modern metropolis is embedded in the cultural memory of Xi’an as the great cosmopolitan capital of the Tang dynasty’ (Dunne 2018). In much greater depth, Cheung unpacks the relationship between broader rejuvenation discourses (and associated narratives of the Chinese Dream) and the heritage of Xi’an. In her anthropological monograph entitled *Where the Past meets the future, The politics of Heritage in Xi’an*, Cheung contends that.

In order to pursue the ‘China dream,’ the national government has since 2013, emphasised both heritage and modern development. Whereas the heritage development reminds its citizens and visitors of the glorious past of the nation, the modernisation progress keeps China’s place as one of the world’s top political and economic leaders. The twining of heritage and development can be seen in a series of multi-national economic development plans, such as the revitalisation of the land and sea Silk Roads, that emphasise trading and economic exchange as the face and drivers

⁷ Broudehoux talks about the links between the uses of the past and the construction of nationalism in Chapter 3 of her monograph.

⁸ Arguably this position and its suggestion that branding may encourage party allegiance also speaks to theories of governance.

of both culture and development (Cheung 2019, 233).

As Cheung asserts, Xi'an's heritage and modernisation reflects, 'the political economy of the whole nation. The city's policies reflect the goal of the national government. Since Xi'an served as the eastern end of the ancient Silk Road, it fits the political pursuit of national rejuvenation' (Cheung 2019, 234). Moreover, it is also noteworthy that within these nationalistic narratives, investigators have pointed to the importance of sub-discourses of governance. As can be seen in the work of Broudehoux (2004) and Zhu (2017), (see also Law 2012) as well as encouraging nationalistic sentiments, historical imaginaries are also based on encouraging party allegiance, social stability and the 'enhancement of confidence in social progress' (Zhu 2017, 183).⁹

3 A closer look at discourses of rejuvenation and the 'Chinese dream'

Reflecting on the extant literature, Broudehoux (2004), Yang (2016), Zhu (2017), Dunne (2018), and Cheung's (2019) work is important because it breaks with an *ideographic ontology*¹⁰ for a more discursive and/or an assemblage approach; indeed, the works of them connect broader national discourses (and broader nationalist discourses of remembering) with local historical imaginaries and the politics of the past.¹¹ However, while their works have enriched current discussions, arguably more could be done to unpack the role of nationalist discourses within the construction of historic urban imaginaries and historic urban brands. Thus, although Zhu (2017), Dunne (2018), and Cheung (2019) rightly mention the importance of the Chinese Dream and ideas of rejuvenation, they do less well to interrogate the history of these ideas and other forms of nation building.

⁹ Interestingly, Zhu notes that:

"China has moved into a new stage of modernization as which President Xi Jinping has framed along the 'Chinese Dream'. The slogan of the 'Chinese Dream' identifies social stability as a priority. Such political rhetoric describes the goals of the Chinese nation; more importantly, the 'dream' invites the participation of all Chinese, whatever their interests. To build up a harmonious dream, heritage is deployed and often manipulated to create imaginaries that refer to a refurbished but splendid past; such imaginaries of the utopian past facilitate the reaffirmation of people's social identity and enhancement of confidence in social progress. (Zhu 2017, 183)."

¹⁰ By ideographic ontology I am referring to the treatment of historical imaginaries and historical urban branding as a local hermetic geographical phenomenon. Such an ideographic approach therefore contrasts with post-structuralist approaches that problematise the idea of scale and the notion of hermetically bounded locales.

¹¹ Arguably, Yang's analysis is the strongest here. Indeed, in drawing upon the work of Yúdice (2003) and assemblage theory, Yang explores 'the role of the Chinese state at both central and local scales' (Yang 2016, 116). Moreover, Yang looks at the way that non-Chinese actors and non-Chinese discourses such as those of UNESCO play an indirect role in the construction of the historical urban imaginaries of Xi'an (see Yang 2016, 125–126).

In response to this gap in the literature, in this short intervention I shall contend that more might be done to look at the *genealogy* of a discourse of national rejuvenation and an associated narrative of the 'Chinese Dream' (Foucault 1984). Moreover, as I shall argue an examination of a discourse (or discourses) of national rejuvenation is important because it is also connected to broader narratives of nostalgia that look back to a vague idea of an 'ancient' and/or an 'imperial' Chinese past that is being (or needs to be) revived again (Yu 2009; Elliot 2012; Wang 2012; Callahan 2013; Schell and Delury 2013; Bhattacharya 2019; Fong 2020; Carrai 2021). In this regard, as I shall suggest, 'rejuvenation' discourse is an important site of critical analysis in that tells us much about the way in which the Chinese state inspires feelings and *affects* of optimism, nostalgia, and pride in Chinese subjects. Thus as well as a tool of nationalism, arguably a discourse of rejuvenation is also a mode of *affectual governance* (see Law 2014).

Moreover, in the writing that follows, I also want to argue that research into rejuvenation discourses is important if we to understand the way *existing* and *emerging* local historical imaginaries (and local historic urban branding) are being constructed in Chinese cities. Thus, in the last sections of this intervention I propose several research questions to serve as a prompt for further investigation. As I will suggest, a stronger understanding of the role of rejuvenation discourse (and its sub-discourses) within the construction of historical imaginaries, raises important questions around how state-led remembering takes place in China at different scales. Moreover, an understanding of the flow of memorial discourse between the different levels of the state (and related state actors) also affords us the opportunity to interrogate the ways in which central and local state discourses (and broader political and economic concerns) might reinforce and/or collide with one another.

4 Outline

The rest of this intervention is structured through 5 sections. In the next section, Sect. 5, I shall historically investigate the emergence of a discourse of rejuvenation within the self-strengthening movements of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911). Sect. 6 examines sub-narratives within this discourse, including nostalgic Chinese historiographies, and in this section I attend to the role of Ancient and Imperial narratives – especially an imaginary of the Tang dynasty – in the construction of rejuvenation discourses. In Sections 7 and 8, I argue that more needs to be done to understand the way rejuvenation discourses may collide with the historical urban imaginaries and urban theming (or historical urban marketisation) of the local state (and its associated networks of actors). In

the last section of this article, (sections 9) I propose that rejuvenation discourse may also play a prominent role in the construction of material heritage within Chinese cities. Furthermore, I suggest that in the absence of actual heritage space, – chiefly archaeological heritage – in some instances the local state might turn to *simulacrascapas*¹² and/or faux or ersatz heritage space.

5 The history of rejuvenation discourse

Deliberations on the idea of a discourse of national rejuvenation have featured prominently in the work of academic commentators since the early 2000s (Yan 2001; Elliot 2012; Wang 2012; Schell and Delury 2013; Fong 2020; Stevens 2021). Scholars have contended that discourses of national rejuvenation have their roots in the Qing dynasty (1636–1912) and China’s self-strengthening movements (see Schell and Delury 2013; Stevens 2021). Specifically, an initiator of the self-strengthening movement was the Qing dynasty scholar Feng Guifen (1809–1874). As Schell and Delury have noted, in the 1860s Feng Guifen hoped for a ‘mid dynastic revival’ of the Qing dynasty (Schell and Delury 2013, 386). As well as Feng, a language of reinvigoration (*zhenxing*, 振兴) also appears within the discourse of Revolutionary leader Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925) (Schell and Delury 2013, 386). Notably in 1894, Sun formed the Xingzhonghui (Revive China Society) in Honolulu (Hawaii), whose charter stressed ‘the danger China faced, threatened as it was by foreign ambitions and the weakness and incompetence of the Manchu government’ (Bergère 1998, 50). Importantly, the charter also suggested that ‘courageous men’ should “give new life” to the country’ (Bergère 1998, 50). However, discourses of national revival and reinvigoration did not end with Feng Guifen or Sun Yat-sen (Yan 2001; Wang 2012). Indeed, political scientist Xuetong Yan writes that ‘the Chinese elite, no matter whether nationalists or communists, has called upon the Chinese people to fight for national rejuvenation. The slogan of “rejuvenation of China” (*zhenxing zhonghua*) was started by Sun Yatsen but it was continued by Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, and Jiang Zemin’ (Yan 2001, 34). In his monograph *Never Forget National Humiliation* (2012) Wang asserts that, at the end of the Cultural Revolution, (1966–1976) ‘Invigorating China’ (*zhenxing zhonghua*) was adopted as a slogan by premier Deng Xiaoping (1904–1997) and a post-Maoist CCP eager to build a vision that people could support.

When General Secretary Jiang Zemin (1926–2022) took power, the term ‘invigoration’ (*zhenxing*) was replaced with the term ‘rejuvenation’ (*fxing*) along with the phrase ‘the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation’ (*zhonghua minzu de weida fxing*) (cited by Wang 2012, 129). Wang has claimed that this shift in phraseology was important because it allowed Jiang to reawaken ‘in people the memory of China as a central power in the world and emphasised that his party’s work was to restore China to that former position and glory’ (Wang 2012, 129). Importantly, at several events during his leadership, Jiang emphasised ideas of China’s rejuvenation; in his speech to celebrate the 80th anniversary of the CCP (on the 1st of July 2001 in Beijing), Jiang discussed the end of China’s national humiliation and the importance of a new era of rejuvenation:

All endeavours by the Chinese people for the 100 years from the mid-20th to the mid-21st century are [SIC] for the purpose of making our motherland strong, the people prosperous and the nation immensely rejuvenated. Our Party has led the entire Chinese people in carrying forward this historic cause for 50 years and made tremendous progress, and it will successfully attain the objective through hard work in the coming 50 years (Jiang 2001).

In his own analysis of CCP rhetoric, Elliot (2012) unpacks several discursive signifiers that have featured regularly in the political speeches of Chinese state actors in the last 20 years; these signifiers include the idea of *shengshi* 盛世, [prosperous age] *fxing*, 復興 [revival or recovery]¹³ and *juqi* 崛起, [rise]. Critically, Elliot states that the word ‘*fxing*’ was ‘rarely seen in Party propaganda before 1990’ (Elliot 2012, np.); specifically, the signifier *fxing* came into ‘vogue after its use in the title of a television series, called “The Road to Revival” (*fxing zhi lu* 复兴之路), which premiered on CCTV in October 2007 to coincide with the Seventeenth National Party Congress’ (Elliot 2012, np.). In conducting a content-based analysis of Chinese books published from 1900 to 2010, (and internet searches) Elliot suggests that the word *fxing* has become ‘firmly ensconced in media use, with very wide application in cultural, social, and political spheres’ (Elliot 2012, np.). As Elliot contends, the word *fxing* appeared regularly in the speeches of Hu Jintao (Elliot 2012, np.). In his report, at the 17th party congress, (2007), references to rejuvenation emerged several times in Hu’s speech, including one prominent discussion of the remaining importance of Marxism to China and the CCP:

¹² Here by simulacrascapas I am drawn to Bianca Bosker’s idea of ‘residential communities [or urban landscapes] in China that model themselves on historical Occidental prototypes’ (Bosker, Knapp, and Ruan 2013, 21); however, where Bosker talks about these simulacrascapas in terms of Occidental signifiers, I would argue that simulacrascapas in China are also increasingly constructed through historical imaginaries of the ancient and imperial Chinese past.

¹³ We translate the word *fxing* to refer to the idea of rejuvenation as well.

The Party has been constantly adapting Marxism to conditions in China, and adhering to and enriching its own basic theory, line, program and experience. Socialism and Marxism have shown great vitality on Chinese soil, brought more benefits to the people, and enabled the Chinese nation to catch up with the trend of the times in great strides and see the bright future of national rejuvenation (Hu 2007).

Over the past decade, ideas of rejuvenation have become emboldened once again through the notion of the ‘Chinese Dream’ that refers to the ‘revival of the great Chinese nation’ (中華民族的偉大復興) (Fong 2020, 150).¹⁴ While we shall talk about these ideas in more detail below, nevertheless, it can be suggested here that the discourse of the Chinese Dream is a successor to the long-standing rejuvenation narrative we have so far outlined.

6 Rejuvenation, nostalgia, global power, and heritage (back to the future)!

In unpacking the genealogy of the rejuvenation discourse, academics have also pointed to the role of memory and nostalgia within these narratives (Yu 2009; Callahan 2013; Bhattacharya 2019; Carrai 2021; Fong 2020). In her discussion of Chinese scholars and intellectuals around the Gregorian millennium, (the year 2000) Yu connects notions of national rejuvenation to a nostalgic historiography (Yu 2009, 44). For Chinese scholars, as Yu explains, ideas of national rejuvenation are connected to the belief that China is on the brink of a new ‘Axial age’ in world history which ‘refers to the high civilisation of a nation or a culture during a historical epoch’ (Yu 2009, 44). Thus, within these discourses, the first Axial Age refers to a period in the ‘first millennium’ between 800 and 200BC in China, Greece, India and the Near East; the second Axial age which is said to have happened in the ‘second millennium’ (although we are not given the dates of this millennial period) denotes an era from the ‘eighteenth century to the twentieth century in Euro-America in the form of western enlightenment modernity’ (Yu 2009, 45); and finally, the third Axial Age raises the idea that with the turn of the Gregorian millennium (i.e. in the year 2000AD), China will return to the spirit or glory of its older civilisation in the first Axial Age. As Yu suggests, for Chinese intellectuals the new millennium bought about a wish for China’s second ‘Axial Age’ (Yu 2009, 45).

But rather than resting in the intellectual scholarly realm alone, Yu contends that state led media has

also reinforced these narratives. In a media event that took place on the eve of the year 2000 – an event entitled Meeting the Year 2000 – Yu comments that the millennium gala was ‘infused with emotionally charged images and narratives about an ancient China as the “central kingdom” at the turn of the first and second millennia’ (Yu 2009, 47). Moreover, as Yu proposes, these nationalistic narratives of nostalgia were ‘expressed in the quintessential representation of China as the great dragon culture and through the invocation of Xi’an and Kaifeng at their peaks during the Tang dynasty (tenth century) and the Song dynasty (eleventh century) respectively’ (Yu 2009, 47). As Yu points out, the televised millennial celebrations drew upon Tang and Song imaginaries that allowed viewers to ‘experience a reimagined glory’ and to ‘consume the premodern in a postmodern fashion’ (Yu 2009, 48). Yu states that:

The reification of the past in Xi’an was represented in the recreation of a Tang style grand welcome ceremony on New Year’s Eve 1999. This ceremony resembled imperial welcome ceremony to foreign traders and visitors who came along the Silk Road to pay tribute to the ‘Central Kingdom’ and its emperors. The reification of the past in Kaifeng was realised through the recreation of bustling street scenes as shown in the famous [Song dynasty] scroll ‘Riverside scene at the Qingming Festival’ (Yu 2009, 48).

Following on from these discussions, in recent years, one commentator has singled out the role of *Tang dynasty-based narratives* within rejuvenation discourses (and ideas of the Chia Dream). In his essay ‘Imagining the Future from History: The Tang Dynasty and the “Chinese Dream”’ Victor K Fong has argued that state narratives celebrating the Tang dynasty predate the present. Indeed, as Fong contends the ‘Tang’s glorious achievements inspired Chinese leaders of later imperial and Republican times to dream and pursue’ (Fong 2020, 151). Lately, as Fong suggests ‘the Tang is still regarded as the most glorious time in Chinese history and is therefore significant in the discourse on the “Chinese Dream”’ (Fong 2020, 151). As Fong indicates, for the CCP, the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation means that China should be rejuvenated in the image of the Tang dynasty, an era represented by ideas of strength and benevolence (Fong 2020, 165). In contemporary Chinese media, Fong asserts that the ‘Tang has been conspicuous’ in ‘official narratives of the Chinese dream’ including discourses relating to territory, state expansion growth and global influence (Fong 2020, 165). As Fong claims, ‘magnificent Tang images have also inspired PRC policies and projects that seek to restore its global influence, such as the Belt and Road Initiative

¹⁴ Schell and Delury have suggested that the idea of the Chinese Dream has its origins in a visit by Xi Jinping to an exhibition called the Road to Rejuvenation (*fu xing zhi lu*) at the National Museum of China in 2012 (Schell and Delury 2013, 387).

(BRI)' (Fong 2020, 166). However, where Fong highlights the Tang period as a well delineated time frame of state nostalgia, other commentators have talked about nostalgic state led imaginaries in broader terms. Thus, while acknowledging the importance of the Tang era in state discourse, Callahan points to the role of a wider imaginary of China's ancient and imperial past as a site for building futurological rejuvenation narratives. Consequently, Callahan notes that:

Chinese futurologists look to the past to explain their objectives. 'Confucian futures studies' should be an oxymoron since the classics gaze back to an ancient golden age rather than to a future utopia. Yet, noted scholars are now looking to the past to plan China's future and the world's future, combining ancient texts for ideas to guide the Chinese century: Under Heaven (tianxia), Great Harmony (datong), and the Kingly Way (wangdao).¹⁵ China's current rise to global power, they tell us, is not without precedent; it's actually the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation to its 'natural place' at the center of the world (Callahan 2013, 9–10).

Supporting Callahan's ideas, Carrai (2021) has discussed Xi Jinping's rhetoric of the 'Chinese Dream of Great Rejuvenation' which draws upon a 'historical repository... grounded on China's five thousand years of glorious history (*huihuang shengshi* 辉煌盛世), when China was a leading power during the Qin, Han, Tang, Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, and on the development of an autochthonous civilisation, expressed, for instance, in the Confucian tradition' (Carrai 2021, 16); in unpacking these narratives, and drawing upon Ford (2015), Carrai suggests that these nostalgic discourses are based upon a critique of the 'spiritual pollution' emerging from the west (Carrai 2021, 16; quoting Ford 2015); indeed, as Carrai suggests 'the diversity of historical memories and nostalgia used by [the] Chinese leadership also helps in creating deviant historical frames that destabilize master progressive narratives of the West. In such narratives, China is not only at the center – as it had been in past millennia before the West hegemony dominated – but it also leads humankind in a trajectory of progress' (Carrai 2021, 16). Importantly, then, in destabilising western

narratives and in advancing alternative historical discourses of progress the CCP legitimises itself.

Yet, whether the rejuvenation discourse valorises the Tang dynasty or a broader ancient and/or imperial language of the Chinese past, arguably the use of the past in the construction of rejuvenation discourses has several themes in common; indeed, these discourses are underpinned by a national mythology or narrative that suggests that China (viewed as a homogeneous cultural and ethnic entity) was once great before it faced a period of humiliation,¹⁶ an era of struggle and now an era of rejuvenation (an era in which the nation will be able to recover its 'real' or 'authentic' historical cultural legacy and/or 'cultural civilisation').¹⁷

7 Rejuvenation discourse and historical imaginaries (and historical urban branding): a call for further research?

So far then, in this intervention we have explored the history and genealogy of a discourse of rejuvenation in China. In addition, we have also examined the way in which this discourse is entwined with broader imaginaries and narratives of nostalgia relating to the ancient and/or the imperial world. However, as we have stated above, while Yang (2016), Zhu (2017), Dunne (2018), and Cheung (2019) have loosely connected these discourses to the city of Xi'an, arguably more could be done to unpack the role of rejuvenation discourses in the construction of local historical imaginaries and related issues of historic urban branding in Chinese cities. In the sections that now follow; I shall suggest a few theoretical avenues from which we might begin to understand the role that rejuvenation discourses could play in the construction of local historical imaginaries and historic urban branding.

8 Rejuvenation discourse and the local state (and its related growth coalitions)?

In examining the links between rejuvenation discourse and the construction of local state historical imaginaries, we might begin with a stronger understanding of the way these narratives drive, interact, or even come into tension, with local historical branding and/or local urban memory. Indeed, as Zhu, Dunne and Cheung's work implies, it may well be the case that in

¹⁵ The idea of the Kingly Way or *wangdao* can be traced to the ideas of Mencius (372–289 BCE) and Xunzi (313–238 BCE). As Ip has argued the idea of *wangdao* 'was articulated alongside another salient idea *ren zheng* (benevolent government)' (Ip 2013, 123); moreover, as Ip has suggested both *wangdao* and *renzheng* 'were conceived as the right way of ruling a country and stand at the core of the Confucian political ideal and vision which exhorts that politics should be practised in accordance with virtues (*de*) (*wei zheng yi de*)' (Ip 2013, 123).

¹⁶ Humiliation history refers to both state and non-state led discourses that 'proposes that from the Opium Wars of the 1840s to the Japanese Invasion of the mainland between 1937 and 1945, the Chinese nation and the Chinese people have been subject to a series of historic humiliations' (Law 2014, 165).

¹⁷ Interestingly, Carrai talks about these themes in terms of the ideas of a chosen trauma, a chosen glory and a narrative of chosen amnesia (see Carrai 2021).

some cities rejuvenation discourse drives, assimilates and/or reinforces local state urban narratives (such as in Xi'an). However, in other cities, rejuvenation discourses may fit less well, or may even clash with *existing or emerging* local historical urban brands and cherished urban memories supported by the local state. Indeed, in some instances these clashes or tensions might become explicit if local officials are supporting a particular historical imaginary for economic reasons.

In addition, another immediate problem with the discourse of rejuvenation is that it prioritises a 'remote' or 'distant' past,¹⁸ rather than a 'recent' past¹⁹ (for a broader discussion of these ideas see Zhu 2020). Thus, although the valorisation of the distant past fits well with cities such as Xi'an, the promotion of the distant past in cities such as Shanghai or Xiamen (which have been associated with Colonial and Republican historical imaginaries and heritage) might be more problematic²⁰. Another problem with the celebration of a 'remote' or 'distant' past is that local government officials (and indeed the wider public) may have strong feelings about a recent period in history (or local collective memory) because of its connections with sensitive, difficult, and possibly even traumatic histories and heritage. Thus, for example, the city of Nanjing is associated with the 1937 massacre and as a result, the prioritisation of 'remote' pasts may sit uncomfortably with city officials and the local public who are keen to conserve memories of the 'recent past'.

In this regard, and reflecting on these issues, researchers within the fields of memory and heritage studies might ask the following questions:

- 1) How are broader central state narratives of rejuvenation (and humiliation) received by the local state in China?
- 2) Do rejuvenation narratives drive (whether explicitly or implicitly – perhaps even unconsciously) local state initiatives in the production of collective memory, interpretations of the past and historic urban branding?
- 3) How might rejuvenation narratives effect or reconfigure existing and/or emerging historic urban themes or brands advanced by the local state?
- 4) How might tensions or even clashes emerge when rejuvenation discourses encounter established or

developing local historic imaginaries, collective memories, and urban brands?

- 5) Moreover, as a corollary to the question above, how might economic drivers collide, or even clash with, rejuvenation discourse in the construction (or reconfiguration) of existing or emerging historical urban imaginaries/brands?
- 6) And finally, in seeking to appease, (or perhaps even reject), rejuvenation narratives in the construction of local historical imaginaries, how might local state officials reconcile the memorial wants and needs of various stakeholders – (including central state officials, regional state officials, developers, urban planners, tourist officials, and the local public etc.)?

9 Rejuvenation discourse and the construction of urban heritage space – simulacrascapes

Lastly, the role of rejuvenation discourse within the local state may also have a prominent part to play in the construction of *material heritage space* in Chinese cities. Indeed, given that rejuvenation discourse is often concerned with remote or distant pasts, we might ask *how* local state officials and their urban development networks (or growth coalitions) seek to make links with the 'distant pasts' of their own cities. Specifically, these issues become interesting when we evaluate a Chinese city in terms of its *actual existing* archaeological heritage; and furthermore, these matters become especially provocative when the available archaeological heritage of a Chinese city is scant. For example, in discussing the heritage of Xi'an, Linda Rui Feng (a scholar of Chinese cultural history) has argued that:

Although any visitor to modern Xi'an will be reminded of its ties to the Tang capital, other than two brick pagodas renovated in later eras – the Large Goose and Small Goose Pagoda – few traces remain of Tang-dynasty Chang'an. In contrast to imperial capitals close to our time, such as Beijing from the Ming and Qing dynasties, our most comprehensive knowledge of the morphological features of Tang Chang'an comes from archaeological reconstructions and transmitted texts (Feng 2015, 3–4).

Indeed, as my own research has demonstrated,²¹ Xi'an is awash with simulacrascapes and consumable brandscapes that reference the 'glories' of the Han and Tang dynasty.

¹⁸ Here by the idea of a remote or distant past, I am referring to imaginaries of the past from the ancient and/or the imperial Chinese world.

¹⁹ Here by the recent past, I am referring to imaginaries of the past from the late Qing era and the twentieth century right up to the present.

²⁰ In Shanghai or Xiamen, by recent I am referring to the Colonial and Republican eras of these cities.

²¹ Since 2013, I have worked with a series of scholars (including Alastair Bonnett, Yang Li, Yang Yang and Qianqian Qin) to investigate the historical urban imaginaries and historical urban branding of the northwest Chinese city of Xi'an. We have interviewed different social communities within the city and there have been 3 main periods of fieldwork in 2013, 2016 and 2019.



Fig. 1 A billboard for the Great Tang All Day Mall in the Qujiang District of Xi'an, 2016 (Source: the author)



Fig. 2 An image of the shopping area to the south of the Giant Wild Goose Pagoda, 2019 (Source: the author)



Fig. 3 The Tang Hua beer and barbecue stall on the grounds of the Xi'an Garden hotel, 2013 (Source: the author)

Some of the most striking of these simulacrascapes can be found in the Qujiang district (to the south east of the walled city) where the Qujiang district government have

constructed immense shopping malls and/or Han and Tang dynasty-based theme parks – see my images below (Figs. 1, 2 and 3).

However, rather than Xi'an alone, a number of scholars and journalistic commentators have pointed to the emergence of a number of manmade (or artificial) heritage landscapes in several Chinese cities. Indeed, Carol Ludwig and Yi-wen Wang have looked at the way in which two theme parks (or towns) in Hangzhou and Kaifeng have been marketed through imaginaries of the Song dynasty (Ludwig and Wang 2020). In relation to these two parks, Ludwig and Wang propose that as a result of a lack of any 'physical relics of the past' local authorities have drawn upon a famous 'historical panoramic scroll "Along the River during the Qingming Festival", attributed to an otherwise unknown painter Zhang Zeduan (fl. early twelfth century)' (Ludwig and Wang 2020, 158; 151). Importantly, as Ludwig and Wang contend, the scroll whose authenticity also remains in doubt (see Ludwig and Wang 2020, 158–159), has become a source of inspiration for local authorities who have sought to reconstruct 'the Song Dynasty townscape portrayed on the historical scroll' (Ludwig and Wang 2020, 158). However, Ludwig and Wang also note that the:

Long temporal distance between the Song Dynasty and the present leaves no physical remnants, historical records or shared memories of this particular period of the past, thereby providing ample room for disseminating a sanitised narrative based on Han Chinese identity and an imagined homogeneous national community (Ludwig and Wang 2020, 162).

In addition to these examples, commentators have also discussed the construction of the 'historic' cityscapes of Datong (in Shanxi province) whose recent urban transformation has been described as spectacular (Su 2020). Indeed, as Yuan Ren has noted, in 2008 Datong's mayor Geng Yangbo 'set out to restore its glorious history: to resurrect the old city of Datong' (Ren 2014); thus, as Su observes, the regeneration of old Datong seems to have involved the reconstruction of its Ming-era walls and 'their countless towers' and 'the reconstruction of Prince Dai's Residence, a stately complex that was first built during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644)' (Su 2020). Although this author strongly rejects academic sneering around simulacrascapes,²² nevertheless questions remain as to

²² In many respects, this author agrees with Bosker when she states that 'Western and Chinese intellectuals alike... reject these themed communities as "kitsch," "fake," "temporary," or "unimaginative and cliché."' (Bosker, Knapp, and Ruan 2013, 3); like Bosker, I would argue that Simulacrascapes are indicative of something much more profound and sociologically rooted within Chinese society and culture.

how Chinese people outside of the local government perceive these landscapes.

Reflecting on these issues, I would like to end this article with several further research questions that are worthy of our attention:

- 1) How do discourses of rejuvenation effect existing and emerging 'historic' landscapes or 'historic' brandscapes of Chinese cities?
- 2) Do discourses of rejuvenation encourage local state officials to survey their own cities and regions for 'historically distant' material heritage?
- 3) Or are local state officials driven more by economic incentives (such as the rebuilding of cities for touristic reasons) in the construction of new forms of 'historic' (or heritage) space within Chinese cities?
- 4) Fourthly, in the absence of actual material heritage, are state officials drawn to the idea of simulacrascapes and/or faux heritage space?
- 5) Fifth, how do local communities feel about these material landscapes and their 'historical associations'?
- 6) And six, if there are differences between government actors, developers and community responses to these new developments (particularly the construction of historical simulacrascapes) how are disputes between various stakeholders resolved at the local level?

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Availability of data and materials

I confirm that guidelines on respondent consent have been met. My University, Newcastle University has granted ethical approval for some of the data used in this project (relating to Xi'an). Newcastle University; University ethics committee Ref: 24,064/2022.

As it stands the data for this manuscript cannot be publicly shared because of issues of anonymity. However, the authors will gladly discuss the data set in detail if contacted and copies of transcripts can be sent to the editors of this journal on request.

Declarations

Competing interests

The author declare that they have no competing interests.

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