

Georgia State University

ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University

---

Communication Faculty Publications

Department of Communication

---

2008

## Branding Chinese Products: Between Nationalism and Transnationalism

Hongmei Li

Georgia State University, hongmei.li9@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/communication\\_facpub](https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/communication_facpub)



Part of the [Communication Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Li, H. (2008). Branding Chinese products: Between nationalism and transnationalism. *International Journal of Communication*, 2, 1125-1163. Available at <http://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/126/237>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Communication at ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Communication Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@gsu.edu](mailto:scholarworks@gsu.edu).

## **Branding Chinese Products: Between Nationalism and Transnationalism<sup>1</sup>**

HONGMEI LI

Georgia State University

This paper examines how Chinese advertisers include concepts of both nationalism and transnationalism in recent Chinese advertisements. I situate my research in the context of China's search for modernity, and its historical and contemporary relations with the West. I argue that the marketing of nationalism and transnationalism represents contradictory concepts of China as a nation and a state. It also symbolizes China's deep anxiety and ambivalence toward its own tradition and global capitalism. On one hand, Chinese advertisers sell nationalism by celebrating Chinese history, contemporary events, and Chinese lineage. On the other hand, Chinese advertisers use Western symbols and values to elevate the status of advertised products. Chinese advertisers also sell a hybrid form of nationalism and transnationalism in an attempt to reconcile 'Chineseness' with global capitalism. To some extent, nationalism and transnationalism emerge as competing sites for ideas about China as a nation and a state in a globalized world characterized by unequal power relations between China and the West.

Models for understanding the relationship of advertising to national identity historically focus on the selling of patriotism in a landscape of industrial and global capitalism. In the United States, for instance, the equation of brands with patriotism has been a strategy since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and there had been a common practice to fuse nationalism, consumption and citizenship (McGovern, 2006). In addition to American consumer society analyzed by scholars such as Richard Fox (1983), Jackson Lears (1983, 1993), William Leach (1993), and Roland Marchand (1985), the United States since the mid-20<sup>th</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper is a small part of my dissertation entitled *Advertising and Consumption in Post-Mao China*, which was completed at University of Southern California in December 2006. I would like to thank Marita Sturken, my dissertation chair, and my committee members Larry Gross, Richard Baum and Stanley Rosen for their tremendous support. Laurie Duthie gave me many valuable ideas on how to revise the paper. Michael Bruner, Xu Wu and Alessandra Raengo provided useful comments. I also want to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and suggestions.

Hongmei Li: [hongmei.li9@gmail.com](mailto:hongmei.li9@gmail.com)

Date submitted: 2007-04-25

century has also been described as a "consumers' republic," where civic-minded citizens and social policies are replaced by consumer citizens and practices of consumption (Cohen, 2003). In the weeks after the 9/11, not only did the U.S. President George W. Bush urge citizens to consume as a civic duty, but also numerous campaigns capitalized on patriotism and linked spending to nationalism and American brands to national pride. Consumption, to some extent, becomes a basis of "a reconstituted modern citizenship" (McGovern, 2006, p. 5). However, in a nation such as China, in which capitalism has emerged through a different hybrid model that is characterized by a decentralized economy and a centralized one-party political system, the selling of nationalism and transnationalism takes on different meanings. The broader question is: how does advertising function as a site for different ideas about the Chinese nation, its relation with the imagined West in its search for modernity, and China's response to globalization?

This paper analyzes how contemporary Chinese advertisers sell nationalism and transnationalism and how these strategies indicate China's ambivalent engagement with modernity through an in-depth examination of recent advertisements, in particular, TV commercials and print ads created by Chinese advertising agencies. I chose to study Chinese ads because Chinese advertisers and their agencies are competing with their often more powerful Western counterparts in China. Chinese advertisers and their advertising agencies claim to represent more "genuine" Chinese feelings and values. Thus, their ads provide insight into how Chinese advertisers manufacture 'Chineseness' by appealing to imagined values, dreams, and aspirations of consumers in an increasingly globalized Chinese market. First, I briefly review advertising research in China. Second, I analyze how Chinese advertisers sell nationalism and transnationalism. Third, I examine the selling of a hybrid form of nationalism and transnationalism as a response to the complicated and contradictory processes of globalization. This article predominantly uses an interpretative analysis approach. I analyze the ads as texts, supplemented by interview data, others' research and participant observations. I aim to examine these ads as evidence of the conflicting concepts of nation observed in modern China. The paper will not address the quantitative and historical dimensions of nationalism and transnationalism but rather to provide a nuanced understanding of the negotiation between the two concepts in the context of China's emergent capitalism.

Chinese advertising is an important field to study China's ambivalent relationship with the West in China's drive toward modernity. Chinese modernity begins with China's semi-colonial history that started with the Opium War (1840-1842) when the British army defeated the Qing Dynasty. The period from the Opium War to the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 is often called China's century of humiliation (*bainian qurushi*), an era of a weak Qing Dynasty followed by a republic torn apart by civil wars and invasion by Japan. In the republican era, most scholars of the New Cultural Movement advocated China's complete Westernization as a way to save China. While the West was associated with modernity, progress, and the future, China was often equated with feudalism, backwardness, and the past. The Chinese generally view the establishment of the PRC in 1949 as the beginning of an independent China. Indeed, the Chinese Communist Party propagates its role in Chinese liberation and independence as its most important legacy (Gries, 2004). However, the first few decades of the Communist rule was also an era of Chinese isolationism from the West. The open-door policies started by Deng Xiaoping in 1978 aimed to develop Chinese economy and globally situate China. Deng emphasized China's modernizations of industry, agriculture, national defense, and science and technology. The current regime continues Deng's version of modernity measured by material development. Indeed, Chinese modernity

has been predominantly conceptualized and measured by material development from the Nationalist government to the current Communist regime (Gillette, 2000).

In its search for modernity, China reflects an ambivalent attitude toward the West. On one hand, Chinese society worships and attempts to emulate Western civilization and culture, largely because of Western achievements in material abundance, science and technological advancement, and modern institutions. On the other hand, China harbors a deep resentment toward the West because of its semi-colonial history. China's development has thus been characterized by a craze for Westernization at some points, xenophobia at other times, and a hybrid of both at present. Since the 1990s, the Chinese government has attempted to de-Westernize China by introducing the national authority and restoring Chinese tradition (Lin & Galikowski, 1999). Many scholars, some supported by the government, have also called for the revival of Chinese cultural tradition and "spiritual heritage" as part of China's drive toward modernity.

Chinese advertising is an important site for understanding different responses to cultural globalizations. Globalization, as "a powerful transformative force" and a dynamic process (Held et al., 1999), is characterized by an increasing interconnectivity and disconnectivity (Giddens, 1990; Castells, 1996; Held et al., 1999). It provides opportunities for the formation of new identities that are not necessarily related to stable national territories (Morley & Robins, 1995; Appadurai, 1996; Castells, 1996). Transnationalism, nationalism, and the convergence of the two can be understood as responses to the three modes of cultural globalizations that are often conceptualized as cultural homogenization (e.g., Dorfman & Mattelart, 1984; Schiller, 1996, 1998), heterogenization (e.g., Fejes, 1981; Canclini, 1990; Straubhaar, 1991; Martin-Barbero, 1993; Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1997; Giddens, 1999), and hybridity (Bhabha, 1994; Kraidy, 2002). While nationalism, as identification with the nation, can be viewed as an obstacle and resistance to globalization, transnationalism celebrates the commonality that transcends national boundaries. Nationalism and transnationalism are not mutually exclusive concepts, but rather they can complement each other in that transnationalism can be an extension of nationalism and nationalism can be expressed in the rhetoric of "hierarchical universality" (Duara, 2003, p. 4).

Most ads analyzed in this article come from *Zhongguo Guanggao Zuopin Nianjian* of 2000-2003 (*Yearbooks of Chinese Advertisements 2000-2003*). Ads included in the *Yearbooks* were published or broadcast in China from 1997 to 2002, a period when Chinese advertising experienced dramatic changes. The ads were submitted by advertising agencies or advertisers and evaluated by a committee of media experts and academics for the inclusion in the publications. Arguably, the ads can be viewed as representative of upscale Chinese ads in terms of their creativity, trend-setting styles, and social influence for that period.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> I selected the ads after carefully viewing thousands of ads collected in *Zhongguo Guanggao Zuopin Nianjian* (*Yearbooks of Chinese Advertisements*) from 2000 to 2003. The ads included in the four volumes of yearbooks were published or broadcast in China from 1997 to 2002. Each volume has more than 400 ads. The ads in each volume were collected by *the International Advertising*, the Communication School of Beijing Broadcasting University (the current Communication University of China), and the International Advertising Institute. All ads were submitted by the advertising agencies

### ***Advertising Research in China***

It is commonplace to state that advertising sells products as well as meanings about our identities and existence. Advertising not only reflects many of the desires of the society in which it operates, but also helps to shape social values, preferences, attitudes, and even behaviors of consumers (Jhally, 1987; Pollay & Gallagher, 1990). Through advertising, an object may lose any real connection with its practical utility, and be reduced to a signifier of abstract and changing qualities that make products worth purchasing for consumption (Jhally, 1987, p. 11). Products are granted social and emotional meanings through reification (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001), a process in which products are awarded magical power that promises to make consumers more patriotic, desirable, sexy, human, young, and beautiful. While Chinese advertisers sell various values, such as individualism, family, heterosexual love, happiness and coolness, one of the most prominent themes is the selling of nationalism and transnationalism.

Previous research on Chinese advertising, however, demonstrates the largely pragmatic purposes of advertising. Popular magazines and advertising conferences are often venues for disseminating such research. Chinese advertising scholars are also active participants in advertising forums, and some are board members on various advertising award committees. Market researchers have also conducted various studies on Chinese advertising and consumption. Many articles have been published in journals such as the *International Journal of Advertising Research*, the *Journal of Advertising Research*, and the *Journal of Marketing*. Jing Wang and Jian (Jay) Wang are among the very few overseas scholars who have critically analyzed Chinese advertising and consumer culture. Jing Wang's seminal book *Brand New China* (2008) studies the advertising and branding strategies of the corporate sector in contemporary China. However, Jing Wang studies advertising in China from the vantage point of global brands and transnational advertising. Her primary data come from her internship experience at the transnational advertising agency Ogilvy & Mather, Beijing in 2002 and 2004, and she predominantly uses Western marketing concepts to understand marketing and branding in China. Jing Wang asserts that there is a weakening link between consumerism and nationalism when describing the synergy between Chinese and foreign ad agencies and the crossover of Chinese and foreign brands. Researchers (e.g., Jian Wang, 2006; Jian Wang & Z. Wang, 2007; Li, 2006, 2007), however, have documented a rise in consumer nationalism in contemporary China. The call for boycott of Japanese goods in 2005 (Shirk, 2007) and the recent call

---

or advertisers to an editorial committee composed of academics, media, and advertising practitioners. The committee then made decisions about whether an ad should be included in the yearbook for a given year based on the listed criteria. For example, *Yearbook 2000* listed the following three selection criteria: "1) works are created originally by the submitting units or individuals; 2) works do not include any content that violates Chinese advertising laws; 3) and works must have very good quality." *Yearbook 2000* further stated, "The *Yearbook* aims to reflect an overall picture of Chinese ads in a given year, and thus the editorial committee chooses ads that represent certain styles or certain product categories. And some ads are selected because of their social influences." Such selection criteria were consistently stated in other three yearbooks, even though their wording varied. Because the editorial committee promised to give free copies to 500 advertisers in China, advertising agencies and advertisers were motivated to submit attractive ads to boost their images.

for boycott of Carrefour, a French retailer in China, are just two of many cases that bear witness to consumer nationalism in China. While Jian Wang (2000) examines only foreign advertising in his dissertation, his recent study (2005) focuses on factors contributing to consumer nationalism from the perspective of multinational corporations in terms of how they can manage nationalistic consumption in a global marketplace. He also studies consumers' expression of nationalism in several cases that involve multinational corporations in China (Wang, 2006; J. Wang & Z. Wang, 2007). This article examines how Chinese marketers construct a more nationalistic consumer base in China through their advertising campaigns, and can be viewed as complementary to Jing Wang and Jian Wang's studies that stress either multinational advertising agencies or multinational corporations. This article also contributes to the analysis of the tension between a mentality of particularity and a yearning for universalism in China's engagement with global capitalism.

### ***Selling Nationalism in Chinese Advertising***

Even though nationalism has multiple meanings, it is often understood as a form of collective identification with a nation, which is often defined as a group of people who share a common origin, ancestry, language, religion, and geography. Nationalism consists of "a sense of belonging to the nation, a sense of security, a feeling of national pride and an attachment to the nation" (He & Guo, 2000). A distinction is often made between the nation, the nation-state, and nationalism (e.g., Gellner, 1983; Giddens, 1985; Anderson, 1991; Duara, 1993). Some scholars (e.g., Gellner, 1964, 1983; Anderson, 1991; Duara, 1993, 1997) highlight the imaginary aspect of the three concepts and stress that nationalism precedes the formation of the nation-state. Anderson (1991, p. 3) defines the nation as "an imagined political community □ and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign."

Chinese nationalism should also be understood as a dynamic process that involves the negotiation of different notions about the Chinese nation, which has been complicated by the historical relationship between China and the West. Duara (1993) argues that nationalism should be best viewed as a relational identity, a site of competing representations and discourses that are constantly shifting. The formation of national identity involves the processes of selection, reorganization, and recreation of historical materials that serve current purposes. Duara states (1993, p. 9), "what we call nationalism is more appropriately a relationship between a constantly changing Self and Other, rather than a pristine subject gathering self-awareness in a manner similar to the evolution of a species."

Research on Chinese nationalism in the cultural domain remains underdeveloped, however. Many studies on Chinese nationalism (e.g., He & Guo, 2000; Zhao, 2000; Hughes, 2006; Shirk, 2007) focus on the state or official nationalism. Generally speaking, state and official nationalism in China is often reactive to internal and external pressures and instrumental to the Communist regime (He & Guo, 2000; Zhao, 2000; Zhang, 2001; Gerth, 2003; Shirk 2007). Thus, two faces have characterized China's dealing with international affairs: the responsible rational side and the irrational reactive side (Shirk, 2007). Gries (2004) argues that nationalism in 20<sup>th</sup> century China is a combination of a victory narrative against imperialism, and a victimization narrative attributed to foreign powers. These two narratives work together to create a Chinese national consciousness toward the West. However, if we examine Chinese nationalism in the economic and cultural domains, we see more proactive nationalism, striving for the

development of Chinese national economy and culture (Zhang, 2001). Indeed, since the 1990s, Chinese scholars have called for the revival of Chinese tradition and the establishment for an alternative modernity (Lin & Galikowski, 1999).

He & Guo (2000) contend that Chinese identity can be understood from four perspectives: Chinese identity as the statist and socialist identity; Chinese identity as belonging to the Han nationality living in the PRC, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macao; Chinese identity as belonging to all citizens of the PRC, regardless of their nationalities; Chinese identity as a cultural identity and all people who speak Chinese and share Chinese culture are considered Chinese.

The following sections analyze how Chinese advertisers sell nationalism. The analysis does not aim to provide an exhaustive list, but rather focuses on important strategies that help to explain the tension, anxiety, and contradictions of how China is understood as a nation in its search for modernity.

### ***Selling Nationalism through Using China's History of Anti-imperialism and Heroics***

The promotion of nationalism in China is about the reconstruction and reinforcement of traditional images, symbols, rituals, myths, and customs during a time when China searches for its national identity in an increasingly globalized world. Chinese ads sell nationalism through Chinese symbols, images, rituals, historical heroes, and China's anti-imperialist history, to create a narrative of patriotism, loyalty, and national glory. In this section, I analyze campaigns of three Chinese advertisers to see the intertwining of nationalism with China's history and its search for modernity.

In July 2000, Top Corporation (*tuopu jituan*), a Chinese software company based in Yunnan, launched an ad campaign for *Chinese.com*, a newly established Web site. *Chinese.com* viewed itself competing with Chinese portals including *Sohu*, *Sina*, and *Netease* that targeted mainland Chinese citizens, and thus positioned itself as a site for global Chinese by establishing an umbrella alliance that included Chinese Web sites throughout the world.<sup>3</sup> The campaign, created by Guangdong Advertising Agency, aimed to produce the brand recognition in the shortest period of time with the lowest investment. On July 3, 2000, when *Chinese.com* was launched, it held press conferences in Beijing, Shanghai, Chengdu, and Guangzhou with the slogan "Chinese *zhan qilai le*" (the Chinese have stood up) and the news was covered by CCTV in its prime news times. The word "Chinese" has a double meaning: it refers to the Web site and Chinese people. English language assumes a special importance for this company. The company uses 'Tuopu' as its Chinese name and 'Top' as its English name. 'Tuopu' is the phonetic translation of 'Top' as if it had an international origin. Also, in naming the Web site, the Chinese name *yanhuang zaixian* was placed in a much small font than its English name *Chinese.com*. While the company appropriates Chinese history and national pride as naturally more representative of China, it is paradoxical that they use *Chinese.com* instead of its Chinese equivalents *zhongguoren.com* or *huaren.com*. Indeed, this Web site was rarely known for its Chinese name before it was shut down in 2007.

---

<sup>3</sup> *Sina* had already established Web sites targeting the Chinese in North America, Hong Kong, and Taiwan by 1999.

The selling of nationalism was an obvious strategy from the very beginning. The slogan, “[the] Chinese have stood up,” is a famous announcement made by Mao Zedong in his speech on Sept. 21, 1949 at the First Political Consultation Meeting of the Chinese People, and it was declared to the world on Oct. 1 when Mao Zedong announced the founding of the PRC on the Tiananmen Rostrum. Mao’s announcement has been endlessly circulated in Chinese media as a denouncement of Western imperialism. In conjunction with China’s history of anti-imperialism, the ads implicitly construct the ‘Chineseness’ in contrast with the Western Other. Interestingly, *Chinese.com* seemingly claims to be more Chinese than portal sites that primarily target Chinese mainlanders such as *Sohu*, *Netease*, and the mainland version of *Sina*. ‘Chineseness’ centered on mainland China and global Chinese converge into one. In addition to its slogan “Chinese has stood up,” it also sells the slogan “our name, our net.” Its two prominent ads use the image of the Chinese dragon, and five arrows that resemble the Chinese national flag, to make the connection between this Web site and China as a nation. (See Figures 1 and 2.)

**Figure 1.** *Chinese.com* Ad: The Dragon.





Figure 2. Chinese.com Ad: The Arrow Head.



After the first wave of marketing, it immediately placed another “explosive” ad that uses the image of the womb of a pregnant woman symbolized by a fattened @ sign. Its slogan “let us make it [Chinese.com] big together” (*rang wo men yiqi yuda*) reinforces China as a gendered nation that fits the cultural framing of “mother China.” Its sexual connotation also caused much discussion on Chinese media such as *Chinese Youth Daily* and *IT Executive World Report*, and on the Internet. All-China Women’s Federation and All-China Youth Federation also participated in the discussion. The ad copy reads,

Yesterday, descendants of *Yan* and *Huang* Emperors were famous for the “four inventions!” Today, the Chinese Web site alliance Chinese.com sets sail, [and] again allows descendants of *Yan* and *Huang* to stand up erect in the world! Tomorrow, Chinese people of the entire world will connect hearts and join hands to establish [our] own beautiful homes together!!! Everyday, www.Chinese.com is expecting you. (See Figure 3.)

Figure 3. Chinese.com Ad: A Pregnant Woman.



Legend claims that Chinese people are all offspring of *Yan* and *Huang* Emperors. Terms in Chinese language like "*Yan Huang zisun*" (descents of *Yan* and *Huang*), "*Hua Xia minzu*" (race or nation of *Hua* and *Xia*), "*Zhonghua minzu*" (the Chinese race or nation), and "*zu guo*" (the ancestor's country), carry strongly favorable connotations and an implicit Han-centric view of China as a nation (Dikotter, 1996; see also Sautman, 1997). The "four inventions" refer to the Chinese inventions of paper, the compass, gunpowder, and printing technology that greatly contributed to human civilization. The ads' reference to China's glorious past and implication of the current backwardness of China's Internet technologies, suggest a bright future for China.

The advertiser also engaged in a nationwide campaign named "red express," inviting Chinese Web sites to be part of the alliance. Red, a color that is associated with happiness in traditional Chinese culture, the national flag of PRC and the Chinese Communist Party, is consistently used in the marketing campaigns. Within four months, approximately 1,000 Web sites became members of *Chinese.com* and its stock was listed publicly.<sup>4</sup>

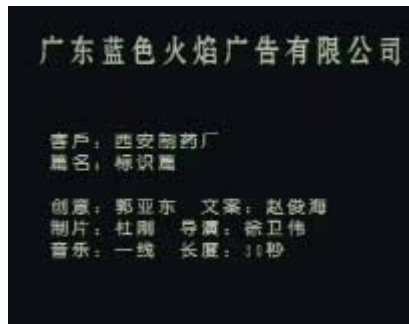
With an obvious purpose to earn quick money and produce strategic advantage within a short time, *Chinese.com* sold a pastiche of cultural symbols of the past and the Internet age of the present through selecting, reorganizing, and recreating Chinese history. *Chinese.com* attempts to include and commodify global 'Chineseness' into its narrative as if all Chinese shared such a nationalistic dream. For various reasons, *Chinese.com* was shut down and sold to a Hong Konger for 810,000 Euros in 2007.<sup>5</sup>

While *Chinese.com* ads construct Chinese nationalism without explicitly referencing Westerners, a commercial of Chenliji Kidney-Strengthening Pills, created by the Guangzhou Lanse Huoyan Advertising Firm, uses a staged shadowboxing competition between a foreigner and a Chinese man to illustrate the effect of Chenliji pills in strengthening one's kidneys. Many Chinese spectators watch the competition between the Chinese and the foreigner and shout, "Beat, beat." The competition scenes are in shaded colors which suggest an historical component to the event. The commercial ends with a color scene, where a Chinese man in a business suit and tie holds a bottle of Chenliji and announces, "Healthy waist, healthy kidneys, good *kungfu*." (See Video Clip 1.)

---

<sup>4</sup> See Guangdong Advertising Agency, "Branding stories of *Chinese.com* (Yanhuang zaixian pinpai gushi)." Available: <http://bbs.icxo.com/viewthread.php?tid=73&extra=page%3D1>, accessed March 3, 2008.

<sup>5</sup> See, "This year's auction that shakes Internet domain: *Chinese.com* and its past and present (Jinnian zhendong yumingjie de paimai: *Chinese.com* jiqi qianshi jinsheng)." Available <http://chinait.com.cn/blogs/chinait/archive/2007/11/18/1712.aspx>, accessed March 25, 2008.



Click [QuickTime](#) to view  
video clip in QuickTime (mov) format.

Click [here](#) to download entire movie.

### **Video Clip 1:** A Commercial of Chenliji Kidney-Strengthening Pills.

The ad agency stated that staged competition between foreigners and the Chinese were commonly seen in the Republic of China (1912-1949), and so it used this theme to "stir up national pride." The white man, with a brief close-up, is knocked down, while the Chinese man stands proudly. The ad thus conveys the idea that Chenliji literally protects and strengthens one's kidneys and also figuratively protects Chinese men, the Chinese, and the Chinese nation. The temporal shift from history to the present stresses the product's historical linkage and its contemporary relevance.

It is a common trope in Chinese ethnic and national pride to pit the foreigner against the Chinese in a culturally Chinese activity. Popular competition for foreigners to sing Chinese songs on TV is just one example. Putting the non-Chinese figure in the Chinese cultural context, which has a sub-narrative that Chinese culture is superior for its amazing arts and long tradition, reaffirms the superiority of China as a nation, if not of the Chinese as a people. Ads such as Chenliji also portray a strong desire among Chinese advertisers to appropriate and redress the history between China and the West. The two fighters embody two contrasting forces: China and the West. Since China has not known the West as a culturally varied place for an extended period of time, the imagined West is still the ghostly white Other, always an undefined and ever-changing opponent and suppressor. The Republican period of China was also an essential time for the formation of Chinese national identity (Duara, 1993, 1997; Gerth, 2003). Such nationalism is a mixture of Chinese victimization and victory narratives (Gries, 2004). Precisely because of Chinese victimization at the hands of foreign powers, summarized as the 100 years of humiliations, Chinese victories appear more heroic. Thus, both the *Chinese.com* and Chenliji ads reinforce a history of patriotism and heroics. However, also notable is that the foreigner is present only in the shadows, which to some degree, dilutes the Chinese victory.

Chinese advertisers have numerous materials to construct a narrative of Chinese patriotism because of China's long history. Some even use legends and heroes from ancient China that have little resemblance with the modern Chinese state. Ancient legends are often linked with contemporary tales in such a way that an unchanging Chinese history of loyalty to the state is produced. For example, a producer of Ao Ni Honey Locust, a Chinese hair product, placed a series of ads that portray Ao Ni as a Chinese product (*guo huo*). It heavily invested in a 1997 commercial before the Hong Kong turnover to

China. The commercial, created by Guo-An Advertising Agency, incorporates historic heroes and events like Su Wu working as a shepherd in exile in the Han Dynasty (206 BC-220AD), Guan Tianpei knocking at a clock as a signal to start firing at the British army in the Opium War (1839-1842), and brave Chinese soldiers on horseback fighting against Japanese soldiers, and so on.<sup>6</sup> An innocent Chinese boy and the Great Wall are shown at the end of the commercial. A voiceover and the subtitle read, "In a moment of talk and laughter, powerful enemies are blown out like ashes and extinguished like smoke."<sup>7</sup> The commercial ends with a disembodied male voiceover, "The Great Wall will never fall down. Chinese products should be self-strengthening."

The commercial's use of historic figures and events conveys a sense of unchanging loyalty and patriotism in China's civilization. Su Wu working as a shepherd is a quintessential example of Chinese loyalty to the Han Dynasty, in particular, and China in general. Guan Tianpei, who was killed by the British army in the Opium War, conveys an unconditional devotion to both the Qing Dynasty and China. Ao Ni is made into a product of national pride through association with these historical images.

The tagline "The Great Wall will never fall down. National products should be self-strengthening." on a red flag connotes confidence, power, and strength, qualities that Chinese enterprises badly need to compete with foreign products. Nationalism becomes a selling point precisely because Ao Ni had to compete with foreign hair products. In the sector of hair products, in addition to the market share of Unilever and Japanese product Sofina, Procter & Gamble's products in the late 1990s had 60% of the market share in China; thus, the living space of Chinese products was dramatically squeezed.<sup>8</sup> This commercial is a continuity of Ao Ni's previous ad slogan "black hair, Chinese national product" (*hei toufa, zhongguo huo*). However, it deviates from its previous strategy that focused on its plant ingredients. It is unusual for a beauty product ad to be gendered male, even though Ao Ni is a hair product for men and women. This commercial provides an interesting contrast with the pregnant woman in the *Chinese.com* ad

---

<sup>6</sup> Su Wu (143 BC-60 BC), a diplomat in the Han Dynasty of China, was imprisoned during his official trip to Xiongnu. The king of Xiongnu tried everything to allure him to betray Han, but nothing shook his iron will. The king of Xiongnu thus sent him into exile in an uninhabited area at North Sea (the current Lake Baikal area). He stayed there as a shepherd for over a decade with no human company. He was finally rescued by Chinese diplomats and returned to the Han court. The term Su Wu Mu Yang (Su Wu working as a shepherd) in Chinese language often refers to one's integrity and loyalty to one's country when one is enticed by power and wealth. Guan Tianpei (1781-1841) was a famous Chinese military commander who fought against the British army in the Opium War. He fought to death on Feb. 26, 1841 when the British army was attacking Humen. The name of Guan Tianpei thus conveys patriotism and loyalty to China.

<sup>7</sup> These two lines come from Su Shi's *Ci* "Chibi Huaigu" (Recalling the Past at Chi Bi). *Ci* is a particular type of poetry originating in the Tang Dynasty (618-907) and fully developed in the Song Dynasty (960-1279). It has fixed numbers of lines and words with strict rules about tonal patterns and rhyme schemes.

<sup>8</sup> See, "Tebie baodao: Zhongzhi baojie" (A special report: The end of Procter & Gamble). *Sina.com*. 18 May 2000. First published by *Xinxi Shibao Ying Zhoukan*.  
< <http://finance.sina.com.cn/view/market/2000-05-18/33138.html>>, accessed May 20, 2006.

previously discussed (strong versus nurturing). Such a male gendered ad strategy is also consistent with the Chinese government's push since the late 1990s for "famous national brands." In a sense, there is always the possibility to portray China as a nurturing mother or a powerful father able to defend his or her sons and daughters.

Chinese advertisers have made the Great Wall *the* symbol of national pride in an orthodox sense even though it is also viewed as a symbol of suffering for Chinese laborers in the past. The latter was how the Great Wall was portrayed in *He Shang (River Elegy)*, an enormously influential Chinese TV program broadcast in China in 1988, which was later banned by the Chinese government. The placement of the Ao Ni commercial was strategically set at a time just before the Hong Kong turnover to China in 1997, an event that symbolizes the Chinese triumph over British colonialism. The commercial also appeared on CCTV 2 right after the U.S. bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade in 1999 that caused nationwide anti-American demonstrations in China.<sup>9</sup>

Representing patriotic Chinese heroes in Chinese advertising reflects the effort of Chinese neo-nationalists to construct a nationalistic Chinese history (Lin & Galikowski, 1999). Chinese advertisers can use nationalism because the Chinese market has been shaped by years of patriotic education that provides the soil for nationalism (Hughes, 2006). Hughes (2006) provides a detailed analysis of how the Chinese regime has, at various times, manufactured and shaped different discourses of nationalism and especially patriotism in the last few decades. Patriotic education, with historical humiliation as a recurring theme, is typically closely linked with nationalism and national pride. To some extent, patriotism emerges as a banner that can unite different Chinese ideologies (Zhao, 2000; Hughes, 2006). Chinese advertisers are quick to employ the patriotic theme. Indeed, patriotism is one of the major themes in TV commercials, according to Zhang and Harwood's (2004) analysis of major themes in Chinese TV commercials broadcast on CCTV during a two-week period in 2000.

### ***Celebrating Current Chinese Achievements***

Chinese advertisers also sell nationalism through celebration of China's current achievements, such as China's entry into the WTO, Beijing's successful bidding of the 2008 Olympic Games, China's launch of the space shuttle in 2003, and other accomplishments. For example, Meng Niu, a milk brand from Inner Mongolia, conducted a three-stage advertising campaign centered on the successful launch of the Chinese space shuttle No. 5 in 2003. The campaign first used outdoor billboards and bus shuttle ads with the slogan, "Raise your right hand, cheer for China." The ads feature a boy, a young man, a young woman, and an elderly woman, all wearing space outfits with their right hands raised as if they were shouldering the Temple of Heaven, a 15<sup>th</sup> century shrine located in the southeast part of Beijing. The ads stated, "Meng Niu Milk cheers for the Chinese airspace cause." The raised right hands symbolized that Chinese citizens, male and female, old and young, are determined to support China's airspace exploration and that the Chinese are shouldering the future of China through carrying its tradition. The celebratory tone is restrained then because the ads were issued before the launch of the space shuttle. According to

---

<sup>9</sup> See, "Ao-Ni, zou hao!" (Ao-Ni, way to go). *China Economic Network*.  
< <http://old.cenet.ccer.edu.cn/mba/anlisudi/MBAanli33.htm>>, accessed May 19, 2006.

the advertising agency, the ads use “cheer for China” rather than “celebrate the launch of the space shuttle” as a hedge measure to contain “uncontrollable factors [of unsuccessful launch].”<sup>10</sup> (See Figure 4.)

After the successful launch of China’s space shuttle, the advertiser bombarded consumers with outdoor billboards, double-deck shuttle body ads, and store displays. Again, the ads featured the four models, with the headline stating, “Meng Niu Milk, strengthen the Chinese. Specialized milk for the Chinese spaceflight.” Meng Niu also placed TV commercials featuring happy Chinese families. Chinese families are thus made a part of the national cause, uniting individual Chinese and the Chinese nation. The ad campaign resembled Tang ads in the United States as the drink of astronauts when the first American landed on the moon in 1969.

**Figure 4:** Outdoor Billboards of Mengniu Milk (First Stage).



Indeed, the celebration of China often blurs the line between the Chinese regime and Chinese citizens as if what is significant for China were necessarily beneficial to all Chinese citizens. In particular, the Beijing Olympics has often been celebrated as an event that enhances the well-being of the Chinese government, the Chinese nation and all Chinese citizens. The association of the Olympics with happiness and success is a common theme in Chinese media. Juxtaposition of the Olympics with other Chinese achievements further glorifies China. For example, a commercial of Xinhua Insurance Company celebrates

<sup>10</sup> See A Pei Ke Si Advertising Agency, “Cheer for China.” In Mu Hong and Li Wenlong (Ed). *Advertising cases: Integrated cases* (in Chinese) (Beijing: Renmin Daxue Chubanshe, 2005), p. 416.

a variety of Chinese national events as if these events were the most significant in the daily lives of ordinary Chinese. The commercial starts with a tranquil morning. Chinese citizens of various backgrounds talk with others or to themselves:

An elderly man:	There are so many good things this year.
Another elderly man:	[I have] heard that our country will enter the world ( <i>ru shi</i> ). <sup>11</sup>
A boy:	Grandpa, that is called the WTO.
A Barber:	What a football team! This year we have hope for the World Cup.
A young woman:	[Our] Olympic bidding has been successful.
An elderly woman:	Tomorrow is our National Day. We should all fly our national flag.
Voiceover:	Wish our motherland prosperity and riches forever.
An old Man:	When our small families have become rich and prosperous, how can the big family not?

Caption: Wish our motherland an everlasting prosperity and more richness. (See Video Clip 2.)



Click **QuickTime** to view  
video clip in QuickTime (mov) format.

Click **here** to download entire movie.

**Video Clip 2:** A Commercial of Xinhua Insurance Company Celebrating China.

The commercial presents an optimistic picture of China. Using words of ordinary Chinese (*lao baixing*), old and young, male and female, the commercial mixes all significant events worth celebrating. China is "our China" and "our motherland." The ownership of China means that Chinese development is at stake for everyone with the same level of significance. All the characters are common Chinese that can often be found in the street. This commercial makes a forced connection between the state and an individual as if what is significant for China would be significant for every Chinese citizen. Chinese patriotism is implied as glue that holds the country together. The WTO, the Olympic Games, the World Cup, and the National Day have thus obtained a national significance and a daily relevance.

<sup>11</sup> *Ru shi*, whose literal translation is "entering the world," is a shortened expression of "entering the WTO."

In the ad, China is a collective large family of numerous Chinese families. In Chinese language, the word "country" consists of *guo* (state) and *jia* (family). *Guo*, as an ambiguous term, can also refer to the nation state, the government, "the land," and "the nation." A popular saying, "you have family only when you have the state" (*you guo cai you jia*) indicates that the state and the family are often fused. While China still has a collectivistic tradition that emphasizes the state before the family, this commercial reverses the idea by stating that when small families become prosperous, the large family will become rich. This reversal gives a sense of newness, but the newness is contained in the hegemonic idea that the ultimate goal of the Chinese family is to enrich the country. To some extent, the celebration of China also implies China's denial of the perceived threat to its national sovereignty in the process of globalization. Though China's entry into the WTO means the weakening of the nation state in some aspects, official discourses celebrate the WTO as essential for China's modernity. The integration with the world capitalist system thus becomes a part of the Chinese nationalist cause.

*Promoting the Chinese Heart in a Foreign Country*

Chinese nationalism not only means that the Chinese should love China while in the country, but also means they should continue to love China while abroad. The key to such nationalism is to keep the Chinese heart in a foreign country. For example, a popular song of the 1980s entitled "My Chinese Heart" by the Hong Kong singer Zhang Mingmin says:

The rivers and mountains only appear in my dreams.  
 I have not touched my ancestors' land for ages,  
 But my Chinese heart will never change.  
 Although I am wearing foreign costumes,  
 My heart is still Chinese.  
 My ancestors have already ironed a Chinese imprint on me.  
 The Changjiang River, the Great Wall, the Huang Mountain and the  
 Huanghe River,  
 Weigh a thousand pieces of gold in my heart.

+++

My blood is surging with the sound of China.  
 Even being born in another land will not change my Chinese heart.

In this commercial, 'Chineseness' means emotional connections (even in dreams) to Chinese land and culture. Most importantly, it means the Chinese heart. The Chinese heart is forever connected to the Chinese center, i.e., mainland China, no matter where the Chinese are or where they were born. The Huanghe River, as the birthplace of Chinese civilization, and the Changjiang River, the Huang Mountain, and the Great Wall, as symbols of either Chinese scenery or Chinese diligence, create what Wang Gungwu (1993) and others call the "Cultural China" that invariably links Chinese migrants (*youzi*) to the nation.



A commercial of Confucius Mansion Wine (Kong Fu Jia Jiu), for example, sells such a Chinese heart. Liu Huan, a Chinese popular singer, travels to perform in the United States. He receives a bottle of Confucius Mansion Wine from his wife. The lyrics go, "One cup of Confucius Mansion Wine. Songs of tens of miles away expect [your] return, Confucius Mansion." Liu's wife writes him a note stating, "Huan, I wish your performance a great success. We bring you a bottle of Confucius Mansion Wine, and expect you to return home as early as possible. Your Wife." The ad also portrays Liu as an international singer, who is applauded in China as well as in the United States. Liu is surrounded by admiring white people, who kiss him, take his picture, and shake hands with him. (See Video Clip 3.)



Click **QuickTime** to view  
video clip in QuickTime (mov) format.

Click **here** to download entire movie.

**Video Clip 3:** A Commercial of Confucius Mansion Wine Featuring Liu Huan.

This commercial suggests that despite his great success in the United States, Liu still misses his Chinese home. Liu's wife represents Mother China and the entire Chinese culture. When Liu sentimentally accepts the Confucius Mansion Wine, he is accepting Chinese culture and the nurturing that China extends to migrating sons and daughters (*youzi*). By implying Liu's Chinese heart and the benefits that come from being Chinese, the commercial suggests that Chinese people wish to be accepted and appreciated by the international community in general and the United States in particular. In addition, it emphasizes that the Chinese who have achieved international fame should still be rooted in Chinese culture. In some sense, this commercial reflects the perceived challenges for Chinese identity in a global context. Essentializing the Chinese heart is one way to contain such a challenge. Successful transnational Chinese still *need* to prove and maintain their 'Chineseness' in order to be fully appreciated at home. Placing Liu in the United States, the commercial also allows the product to gain an international aura without losing its Chinese roots. The United States is used to represent the quintessential advanced Western country to which China aspires. Gries (2004, p. 35) says, ". . . the West is central to the construction of Chinese identity; it has become China's alter ego . . ." and "As the sole superpower of the post-Cold War world, America symbolizes the West for China and for many of the rest of the non-Western world." By portraying the brand loyalty of a Chinese celebrity in the United States, the advertised product has achieved an aura of supreme quality and an image of modernity without having to include images of other Western countries. The practice of using the United States, in particular, and the West in general, as the Other to define whatever is considered "distinctively 'Chinese'" has been a "deeply rooted practice" in China (Chen, 1996,

p. 39). The happenings of the West are constructed in tandem with China to create a relational dynamic between 'Chineseness' and 'Westernness.'

Selling nationalism in Chinese advertising thus contributes to the larger discourse of Chinese nationalism and Chinese identity. It implies what is allowed and what is not acceptable. Bauman (1995) argues that nationalism is an instrument of the elites' hegemony over the masses. Nationalism shares the following characteristics: ". . . belonging as the only right, loyalty as the supreme duty; dignity as basking in collective glory; self-interest as partaking of collective welfare" (p. 147). In this sense, nationalism is a controlling mechanism and ideology that limits the choices of Chinese consumers.

### ***Selling Transnationalism in Chinese Advertising***

While it is common to view nationalism and transnationalism as bipolar ideas, Duara (1993, 1997) argues that all nationalists also hold transnational ideals. Chinese culture has long contained a component of transnationalism, which can be seen in the Confucian, Marxist and neoliberal ideologies. Chinese Confucianism promotes Chinese nation as a "culture nation" and any non-Chinese who possesses knowledge of Chinese civilization and Han rituals should be considered Chinese (Duara, 1997). Joseph Levenson (1969), a renowned Sinologist, pointed out that moral values and high culture of Chinese Confucian elites aimed for the morals and values of universalistic civilization. Only after China encountered repeated defeats since the Opium War did China begin to adopt a more particularistic world view about China as a nation and a state, and the Chinese as a race. For the current regime, Mao Zedong, the founder of the PRC, also created the "Third World" theory and was often viewed as attempting to export revolution to other countries. To some extent, Mao's version of universalism can still find resonance in contemporary Chinese society.

As a cultural production, transnationalism can be understood in terms of "third space," "hybridity," "creolization," "third culture," bricolage and pastiche. Transnationalism is not only about flows of material and nonmaterial goods, but also about imaginings. Appadurai (1996) conceptualizes global cultural processes in terms of five scapes, each stressing a different flow along which population, media, technologies, finance, and ideology travel across national boundaries. Mass media in particular provide resources for self-imagining. The five scapes imply that current cultural landscapes should not be treated as fixed, and that there are possibilities for creating communities of imagination and cultural identities outside the conventionally conceived stable national identity.

Chinese advertising offers an ideal space to study transnational imaginings because it has been under global influence in the past few decades. Chinese advertisers have constantly emulated practices of transnational advertisers. Indeed, transnational advertising agencies and advertisers have played the role of a teacher in the Chinese advertising industry (Li, 2006). There has also been a strong worship for Western materialism largely due to the predominant ideology of developmentalism in China (Wang, 2003). To some degree, Western culture symbols in China have functioned as what Pierre Bourdieu (1984, p. 291) called "symbolic capital" that is associated with "an image of respectability and honorability." The following sections examine how Chinese advertisers sell transnationalism, and explain the implications with a particular emphasis on the unequal power relations between China and the West. While

transnationalism is sometimes equated with cosmopolitanism, this article also includes the use of Western symbols because, by invoking the West, the Chinese ads engage in the exercise of transnational imagination.

*Marketing Contrived 'Westernness' through Western Models and Symbols*

In Chinese advertising, Western cultural symbols serve to elevate the social status of an advertised product, and foreignness is associated with prestige in consumption (Schein, 2001, p. 292). Chinese advertisers often appropriate 'Westernness' in two ways: One is to contrive linkages of their products with the West through appropriating Western symbols, including Western languages, Western models, European-style architecture, sculpture, and famous tourist sites such as the Seine River, the [Arc de Triomphe](#), the [Louvre Museum](#), the Château de Versailles, the [Eiffel Tower](#), Cambridge, Paris, and Rome. Another way is to sell values associated with Western modernity, such as individualism, freedom, newness, and pleasure. Indeed, modern values such as newness and individualism are among the top values sold in Chinese commercials (Zhang & Harwood, 2004). As a result of increasing flows enabled by communication technologies, Western images have become ubiquitous in Chinese media, and Chinese advertisers use these symbols to sell an imagined West as a totally different world to which Chinese consumers should aspire.

One strategy that Chinese advertisers often use is to give Chinese products exotic names. Products that target the rising middle class especially tend to have foreign-sounding names. For example, real estate projects in large Chinese cities have been named the Vancouver Forest, the Victoria Harbor, Yosemite, the Laguna Garden, the California Garden, and so on. Using exotic names is especially common in Chinese clothing brands. *Xinming Wanbao*, an influential newspaper in Shanghai, published an article inquiring why many Chinese brands use foreign names.<sup>12</sup> According to this article, over half of the 200 leading Chinese clothing brands have used foreign sounding names. In Shanghai's main popular shopping stores, over 80% of clothing brands have used exotic names. For example, Youngor (雅戈尔 in Chinese), romon (罗蒙 in Chinese), Jodoll (乔顿 in Chinese), Aige (艾格 in Chinese), Captaino (凯普狄诺 in Chinese), Metersbonwe (美特斯邦威 in Chinese), Rouse (洛兹 in Chinese), Casablanca (卡莎布兰卡 in Chinese), and Semir (森马 in Chinese) all sound exotic to ordinary Chinese. Such brands use both names of Roman letters and Chinese characters. The name of Roman letters consists of actual foreign words, with English as predominant, or contrived words, or *Pinyin* that sound foreign. The Chinese names are phonetic translations of foreign names that use characters in strange combinations, which make them sound exotic. Even Haier, the top Chinese appliance company, sounds foreign. Haier might be the English homonym higher. A survey cited in the above mentioned news report finds that 53.3% of Chinese consumers have a tendency to purchase clothing brands with a foreign image if they can afford to, and that only 16.7% prefer Chinese brands. Such a tendency is more obvious among young consumers. In addition, some

---

<sup>12</sup> See "Why do Chinese clothing brands use 'foreign names' to promote themselves?" (*Guochan fuzhuang weihe jie yangming 'yangming'?*), *Xinmin Wanbao*, March 2, 2006.

clothing brands use foreign names because they plan to enter the international market. The clothing brands that use foreign names often sell at a relatively higher price, which implies that 'foreignness' can be transformed into economic capital.

There has also been a tendency for Chinese producers to make false claims of their Western origins. The fabrication of Western origin became so prevalent in China that Chinese media, including CCTV, have started to reveal false claims of Chinese products about their foreign origins. For example, Oudian Floor Board, a Chinese product claiming to have been produced in Germany with a history of more than 100 years, was revealed in 2006 by CCTV as being actually produced in Jiling Province and branded in Beijing with only six years of history. The scandal caused sensational media coverage in China, and a dramatic decline in sales of Oudian.<sup>13</sup>

In order to claim a foreign origin, Chinese producers often attempt to register their products in foreign countries, especially European countries. These companies later register their products in China as foreign brands, even though their production and design are all done in China. They do not shy from boasting any of their Western connections in their marketing campaigns. For example, Captaino, a brand made and designed in China, advertises on its Web site that this brand was imported into China in 1998 from Italy. In reality, a woman from Shanghai who worked for Cartelo, the Crocodile of Singapore, founded the brand. She claimed to have established a joint venture with Mauro Mazzocchi, founder of a little-known Italian brand by the name of Gammatex. However, from all available sources, the brand was managed and run entirely by the Chinese partner, which indicates that Gammatex only plays a minimal role in the company. Having a foreign partner gives a company symbolic capital; joint venture status also allows the company to enjoy more tax privileges than domestic companies in China.<sup>14</sup> Captaino uses an alligator logo, almost identical to Lacoste (France), IZOD (America), Cartelo (Singapore), or Crocodile (Hong Kong). This indicates that copying is prevalent in the Chinese branding process. It is also possible that Captaino is a misspelling of Captain. Its Web site introduces the products with sentimental poetry and manufactured 'Italianness':<sup>15</sup>

The tide of the Adriatic Sea, sends Captaino's ship from faraway places. Captaino's ship brings the Italian spring wind! Probably because of the historical sediment of the Renaissance, Italians love beauty so much. Probably because Michelangelo so successfully

<sup>13</sup> Yang Fei, "Zaoyu meiti baoli, Oudian diban si bu mingmu" (Suffering media violence, the Oudian floor board died a bitter death). < <http://blog.sina.com.cn/u/1196010701>>, accessed May 31, 2006.

<sup>14</sup> According to "The Income Tax Law of the People's Republic of China for Enterprises with Foreign Investment and Foreign Enterprises" (*ZhongHua Renmin Gongheguo Waishang Touzi Qiye he Waiguo Qiye Suodeshui Fa*) effective July 1, 1991, foreign enterprises and joint ventures enjoy more favorable income tax treatments than Chinese firms with no foreign capital. In contrast to Chinese enterprises' 33% of income tax, enterprises with foreign capital enjoy an income tax rate as low as 15%. Foreign firms of production nature scheduled to operate no less than 10 years also enjoy exemption of income tax for the first two years, and a 50% reduction of yearly income tax in the third to fifth years, starting from the year when they begin to make profits.

<sup>15</sup> See, Captaino's Web site at <http://www.captaino.online.sh.cn/>, accessed June 12, 2005.

created David without any precedent, David has become a symbol of male beauty. . . . There comes Captaino. It brings in real male beauty. It is the blueprint of a successful man.

The models on its Web site are all Western in appearance, with European-style architecture visible in the background of some print ads. (See Figure 5.)

Captaino sells its contrived Italian origin as if the product were connected to the Renaissance, Michelangelo, and the entire Italian culture. The 'Italianness' becomes so central to the construction of Captaino's identity that the ads avoid any connections with Chinese symbols. By using European models and connecting with Italian history, Captaino aims to sell its "real male beauty" and its cultured taste.

**Figure 5:** Foreign models of CAPTAINO on its Web site (<http://www.captaino.online.sh.cn/>)



It is very common and even trendy for Chinese producers to manufacture the foreignness of their products by appropriating foreign models, European architecture, and other symbols. Western models have become a common feature in Chinese advertising. Many foreigners have done modeling work for Chinese products and many underwear ads are using white models.<sup>16</sup> Ads for technology-related products have a particular tendency to use Western symbols and models. Western models in Chinese ads often occupy prominent places while Chinese models take up marginalized positions if they are positioned

<sup>16</sup> Laurie Duthie, a researcher on Chinese consumer culture, brought this point to my attention.

together. While Western models do not utter a single word in commercials, they are there to ascribe prestige and modernity to Chinese products.<sup>17</sup>

The mere presence of Western models implies the desirability and quality of the products, largely due to the attraction of Western modernity in China. For example, a commercial of Eenor Western suits features a Western man wearing an Eenor classics suit with a shirt and a tie, who is standing next to a luxury car in a corridor lined with sculptures and columns. With Italian opera as the background music, this commercial juxtaposes sculptures, car, close-ups of the thoughtful-looking European model, and other scenes. The voiceover states, "let the thought have wings. Thought creates fortune. Eenor weighs more than one thousand pounds of gold."<sup>18</sup> The last scene features the name of "EENOR classics" with four Chinese characters "Yi Nuo Xifu" below. (See Video Clip 4.)



Click **QuickTime** to view  
video clip in QuickTime (mov) format.

Click **here** to download entire movie.

**Video Clip 4:** A Commercial of Eenor Western Suits Featuring Western Symbols.

The commercial represents an imagined West through the European model, sculptures, European-style architecture, and Italian operas that stand for high-brow European culture. Its exotic Chinese name

<sup>17</sup> For example, Chao Shi Yang Fu, a Chinese brand, uses three foreign models, including two whites and one black. The few Chinese models fade into the background, while the two whites are placed in prominent places. The foreign models do not speak any word in the commercial, but rather pose in a way that suggests the clothing is "men's classic" and that they are "classic men" according to the creative description of the commercial (*Yearbook of Chinese Advertisements 2002*, p. 337). In a famous Wu Liang Ye wine commercial, smiling Chinese women in traditional dresses, married couples, Tibetans, a white man, and others flash past. Young women in blue flowery tops, businessmen in Western suits, a husband and wife of a rural place, and a foreigner all hold the box of Wu Liang Ye Wine in front of their chests, showing that people of the entire world are connected through Wu Liang Ye Wine. The white man does not utter a word either. (*Yearbook of Chinese Advertisements 2001*, p. 273)

<sup>18</sup> The Chinese characters of Eenor are "Yi Nuo," which also means "one promise." This voiceover also has the meaning that "one promise weighs more than one thousand pounds of gold."

"*Yi Nuo Xifu*" appears as the translation of its foreign name "Eenor Classics," as if it were of West origin. Chinese consumers without much knowledge about clothing brands cannot determine whether Eenor Classics is a Chinese brand or a foreign brand. The deliberate creation of such confusion implies the desirability of Westernness. The Western model is a consumer of the brand and is consumed by Chinese viewers. The portrayal of a handsome European man, who is assumed to have taste and be successful, awards Eenor his own taste, social status, and the symbol of success.

Among educated Chinese, Italian opera, Greek sculpture, and French literature represent high culture. Many Chinese tourists have traveled to European countries. Italy and France are among the most popular destinations for Chinese tourists. Even middle-class Chinese consumers who have never traveled to the West have knowledge about Western countries through media exposure. This commercial strategically chooses well-known Western elements. Only through representing the obvious can Chinese consumers link the advertised products to the West. Luxury Western products such as Italian shoes, Swiss watches, and German automobiles have long been advertised in China as symbols of success. Many Chinese consumers also identify with such a position.<sup>19</sup>

The use of foreign models is also gendered. The examples above are all of men. When foreign women are used, they are often used for products such as skin whiteners, breast implants, luxury spas, bras and undergarments. As portrayed in these ads, women are generally disembodied and characterized in a life of luxury. Such ads often focus on the part that is considered beautiful, such as white skin, large breasts, and display the female body in ways that would be considered inappropriate for a Chinese woman of proper upbringing. In contrast, white men used are business men and are depicted in association with technology, science, cars, and sports, and other themes that imply an authoritative position.

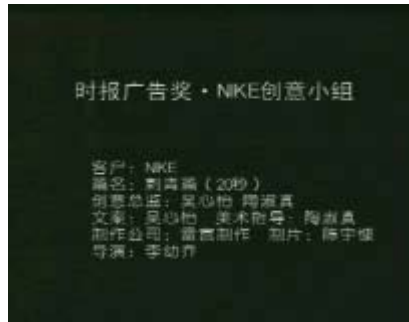
#### *Selling Modern Western Values*

Another way to sell transnationalism is to sell Western values in the Chinese market. Values such as freedom, individualism, happiness, mobility, and pleasure are especially appealing among young Chinese consumers. Such values require a disconnection with locality. For example, Voit, a small Chinese shoe brand established in 1996 by Hua Feng Shoe Company, placed a commercial that starts with a radio program in English. The camera then switches to a middle-aged Western policeman awed by a Chinese basketball player shooting a ball high up into the sky surrounded by towering buildings. The caption reads in English, "Why?" Then, the camera switches to the shoes of the Chinese player, with a close-up of "Voit." The Chinese player catches the ball, and the caption reads, "Who?" The Chinese is then shown playing basketball on the street. He is nimbly moving among cars, with American rap music as the background.

---

<sup>19</sup> For example, a 23-year-old woman who was working as an account executive in a Chinese advertising agency stated in our casual conversation in June 2005 that if a man did not have a pair of shoes from Italy, a Swiss watch, and a German car, the man was a failure. According to her, failure is related to consumption rather than career and production. Having the capacity to purchase Italian consumer goods has become a symbol of success. Such a view is typical among Chinese consumers.

The caption reads in English, "It's Voit." The caption and voiceover then state in Chinese, "Voit basketball shoes, unlimited freedom." (See video clip 5.)



Click **QuickTime** to view  
video clip in QuickTime (mov) format.

Click **here** to download entire movie.

**Video Clip 5:** A Commercial of Voit Shoes.

English is predominantly used in this commercial, which conveys a sense of 'foreignness' and globality. The language used in this commercial is short and simple so that Chinese consumers with middle-school education can understand it.<sup>20</sup> Even if the target audiences do not understand English, they at least recognize that these words are not Chinese. The towering buildings and other cues suggest that the commercial is set in an urban place of a foreign country, which conveys cosmopolitanism and street culture. This commercial is seemingly influenced by Nike commercials that sell street culture. To an unsuspecting consumer, it is very difficult to tell whether the product is a Chinese or a foreign brand. It deliberately reveals little information about its origin.<sup>21</sup> If Voit can be mistaken for a transnational brand, it might earn more profits because transnational brands generally sell at higher prices in China.

This commercial also sells the idea of "unlimited freedom" that allows the wearer to "buck tradition" — weaving in and out of traffic with a basketball because he "does not follow rule," or care much about getting run over. It's a Chinese child, skillfully navigating the foreign world and being so good that foreigners in authority don't even stop him. The commercial is similar to the Mentos ads in the United States with young people doing crazy things — getting into a limousine that is not theirs and then stepping out on to Hollywood red carpet and pretending that they are famous. It is the celebration of the "me" generation.

Many Chinese ads have promised consumers endless freedom, unfettered dreams, individual choice, lifestyle, and individualism. In its 2001-2002 campaign, China Mobile uses the slogan "Connect

<sup>20</sup> English is taught in all middle schools in China.

<sup>21</sup> Voit was a Chinese brand created in 1996 by Hua Feng Shoes, a Chinese company in Fujian Province, which was established in 1993.



with freedom, unlimited possibilities," which explicitly sells the concept of freedom. It celebrates the unlimited possibilities of connecting to the Internet through a cell phone, without questioning the limited content that Chinese consumers can access, due to regulations implemented by the Chinese government to block and filter Web sites. These values are sold precisely because they are desired in a society that does not provide unlimited personal choices. Individual rights are still constrained by the institutions of the patriarchic family, the authoritative school, the workplace, and the state.

Chinese ads also sell the pursuit of pleasure and individual happiness, which has become a common theme that challenges the dominant traditional Chinese values of saving and producing. These ads also celebrate individualism that often comes simultaneously with modernity. Most often, individual happiness is also linked with a pursuit of collective pleasure. For example, Bu Bu Gao electronics, when selling its home theatre equipment, uses the tagline, "I have the autonomy to decide on my own brilliance (*wo de jingcai, wo zuo zhu*)."<sup>1</sup> China Mobile M-Zone promotes the slogan, "Let's play together (*yiqi wan ba*)."<sup>2</sup> Haizhu Beer advocates, "It is good as long as you are happy. It is none of your business (*gaoxing jiu hao, ni guan wo shenme*)."<sup>3</sup> Auldey digital camera sells the slogan, "Youthful is playful."<sup>4</sup> Li Quan Beer sold the lyrics, "You are happy. I am happy. Happy Li Quan, happy hearts (*ni kaixin, wo kai xin, huanle liquan huanle xin*)."<sup>5</sup> Xurisheng drink promotes the following lyric: "Everyday, I act as my own guide. What I should do, I will know. It is good to enjoy myself." The selling of individual pleasure is not unlike the McDonald's slogan, "I'm lovin' it" (or *wo jiu xihuan* in Chinese). Selling individual choices and happiness is associated with tensions and anxieties in modern society where traditional bonds erode and consumers have to constantly seek for self-fulfillment. As borrowed concepts from the West, notions such as individualism, self-fulfillment, and freedom connote a sense of foreignness and cosmopolitanism. While seemingly contradictory, individuals and collectivity are often juxtaposed as if both can coexist without tensions.

In short, the appropriation of 'Westernness' partially reflects China's lack of confidence in its place in global capitalism. While Western modernity allows Western products to enjoy an image of progress, Chinese products have often been associated with rusticity and backwardness for various reasons. These reasons include China's century long defeats at the hands of foreigners, the latecomer status of the Chinese in global capitalist market, repeated experience of shoddy Chinese products and the marketing strategies of foreign products. Chinese producers thus feel obliged to borrow and affiliate with modern Western elements in order to appear modern. The mere mention of foreign things can connote taste, cultural capital and imagining. An account director from Taiwan, who works in a Japanese ad firm in Beijing, stated in my interview with him (Aug. 16, 2005):

I think this [the appropriation of foreign elements] has something to do with the confidence of our nation. After all, the living environment in foreign countries [read, industrialized Western countries] is very progressive. . . . Their quality of living is better. Many products were developed in foreign countries and had become trendy before being exported to Mainland China or Taiwan. . . . For the same product, there is a big difference in price between foreign and Chinese brands, which further produces the worship and blind faith in foreign things. Of course, it has something to do with brand [qualities]. After all, foreign brands have a history of over 100 years.

His words indicate a common view among Chinese advertising practitioners that the West is generally associated with progress and China's future. It is not surprising that Chinese producers of technological products make special efforts to manufacture a Western image for their products. While Western products are assumed to have high quality and taste, Chinese products have to work hard to achieve these standards. Chinese companies thus feel forced to have their products endorsed by foreigners. The selling strategies of Chinese products also reflect an unequal power relation between China and the West. The endorsement of Western superiority allows these ads to further produce and reproduce such unequal power relations.

It must be noted that in Chinese advertising, European symbols and American symbols are sold quite differently. European symbols, such as Paris, Cambridge, and Rome, have been encoded with meanings of everlasting attractions that connote history, romance, taste, arts, culture, aristocracy, and nobility. This is evident in the Eenor commercial. American symbols are often associated with technological advancement, individualism, freedom, and fun, as has been shown in the Voit ad. The using of Western symbols and values does not necessitate the exclusion of Chinese symbols, but rather it means the juxtaposition of transnational and Chinese icons and values, which is further explained in the following section.

### ***The Convergence of Nationalism and Transnationalism***

Chinese advertising juxtaposes foreign and Chinese cultural symbols, often positioned as a celebration of universal humanity through the meeting between the East and the West. Chinese advertising also sells dreams of common humanity and the desire for Chinese people to be recognized in the global market.

#### *Marketing Dreams about the Grand Unity and Universal Humanity*

Chinese ads sell dreams about the grand unity and universal humanity. For example, a commercial of China Mobile, China's largest telecommunications wireless service operator, uses children of various ethnicities and the lyric "My Dream" adapted from Beethoven's Symphonies No. 9 "Chorale" as a mantra. The commercial starts with a Chinese boy singing under a red wall of a Chinese royal court. He expresses his hope of knowing the world and is joined by children representing other areas of the world. The commercial includes a Chinese in San Francisco, an African American boy in New York, Islander boys with boats and seashell horn, Egyptian girls with pots on their heads, an Indian girl, a French girl in beret with violins, and a child dressed in a traditionally Saudi Arabian headscarf. The advertisement also features children ice skating and a child drumming. Various cultural symbols flash past including the Great Wall of China, the Eiffel Tower, towering urban buildings, and children swimming in a blue ocean, with all children looking toward the sky to dream about other parts of the world. The commercial then shows that all smiling children gather together and run toward the Great Wall, with a quick flash of the Chinese Temple of Heaven. The last scene is shot from above, with all children looking at the camera hand-in-hand from below. The lyrics run,

Can I tell you, the hope in my heart? Listen to my voice flying, to faraway places. Ah . . .  
 . I want to know what the tide spray is like on the other side of the sea. I want to meet  
 the same curious look just like mine. Let me walk to your corner. Let me hold your  
 hands, my friends on the other side of the world. Do you have the same sound of  
 heartbeat as I do? Can you push open a window for me? In the future we will not have  
 unfamiliarity any more. . . . Just like this, please hold my hands. Just like this.

Then comes a disembodied male voiceover, "Communication starts from the heart. China Mobile." (See Video Clip 6.)



Click **QuickTime** to view  
 video clip in QuickTime (mov) format.

Click **here** to download entire movie.

**Video Clip 6:** A China Mobile Commercial Portraying Universal Humanity.

This ad simultaneously expresses transnationalism and nationalism. On one hand, it sells the notion that children of the world have a common desire to know each other and they will one day gather together, and create a harmonious world. The idea of harmony is especially important in the Chinese model of nationhood. It aims not only to present China as a peaceful nation that can live in harmony with its neighboring countries, but also to project a different ideal of society that can transcend language, cultural, class and racial boundaries. The emphasis on the Chinese boy singing clearly puts China in a leadership position of the world harmony. The red scarf on the singing boy is significant to many Chinese because it represents childhood as well as nationalism that we are taught as children -- somewhat similar to the Pledge of Allegiance for Americans. On the other hand, such a harmonious world is created only when all kids are running on the Great Wall, and toward the Temple of Heaven as if they were all worshippers of Chinese culture. The image toward the end is fuzzy and the camera is positioned in a particular way to hide the fact that all kids at the Temple are Chinese, but they are dressed up in an exotic fashion, with girls in beret and boys in Middle Eastern head scarves. The commercial is thus about China constructing the other cultures in order to project its role in world harmony. Even though the target audiences are Chinese consumers, the commercial expresses hope for a global harmony. The universal dream of connecting the world is to be accomplished through Chinese culture and especially through China Mobile. In this commercial what is national is made universal, which resonates with the often-heard saying in China that "what is national is what is universal." This saying not only implies nationalism as a universal

phenomenon, but also legitimizes nationalism in China as if Chinese culture would one day become a unifying factor for the entire world.

Many Chinese ads have mixed Chinese and foreign elements, and Chinese and foreign models to convey commercial messages such as "the entire world is one family," "sports has no foreignness or 'Chineseness'," and "in my eye, there is no national boundary," to name a few.<sup>22</sup> In these ads, the grand unity of the world (*tianxia datong*) echoes an influential belief in Confucianism, which "advocated that there was not a way but *the way* of understanding the world" (Pusey, 1983, p. 234, emphasis original). For example, in his *Da Tongshu*, Kang Youwei (a prominent Confucian scholar in the Qing Dynasty) made a plan for world unity and for an ideal society where all people would live in harmony. He considered *ren* (compassion, love, or benevolence) as the main factor that would resolve world problems. Duara (1993, 1997) points out that universalistic assertions in Confucianism often cover the compromise when Chinese culture encounters other cultures. It is interesting that proposals of the Grand Unity often happen in transitional China. In Kang Youwei's time, China was repeatedly defeated by Western powers. Many Chinese scholars thus blamed Chinese culture for China's weakness. Contemporary China is rapidly integrating itself with the capitalist world system. As a rising power, China has started to re-claim its cultural tradition and its rightful place in the world. Marketing such universal claims is thus associated with the resumed confidence of China. Rather than turning inward, Chinese corporations have turned outward and begun to exploit the world market literally and symbolically. It is, therefore, not surprising to see that selling dreams have become a common theme in Chinese advertising: dreams of knowing the world, of being known to and appreciated by the world, of flying high, and of becoming the world center again. As China starts to embrace the world, it also opens its landscape to foreigners. The following section discusses how Chinese advertisers celebrate the meeting of the East and the West through the portrayal of Westerners traveling in China.

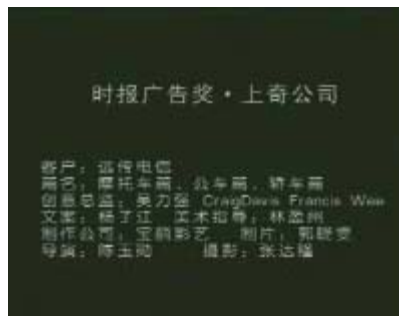
#### *The Chinese Landscape Endorsed by Western Tourists*

Chinese advertisers feature foreign tourists travelling in China to showcase the grandeur of Chinese land and the development of Chinese economy. For example, an award-winning commercial of China Unicom features an older Western backpacker travelling in China. The commercial starts with him riding a horse on a muddy road lined with poplar trees. The man talks over his cell phone with his friend in English, "I am having fun. I am a Chinese cowboy." He is then depicted with a group of Chinese children

---

<sup>22</sup> For example, a commercial of Wondial telephone, a Chinese brand, created by Guangzhou Meikai Advertising Agency, features not only Chinese-style temple, gate, children, Chinese model, but also one blonde, one white male model with the background in Versailles and New York, an Egyptian female with a crown in Cairo, and an Arabian man standing near a cliff. All these people are making the gesture of talking over the phone. The lyric runs, "Let us strike the hopeful clock. Many expectations lie in the heart. Let the world find no loneliness. Happiness blooms like flowers." A disembodied male voice then states, "A faraway place is close by. The entire world is one family. Wondial telephone." This commercial expresses the wish that the world should be one place linked by the Wondial telephone.

on a country road. Scenes flash past such as red curtains, traditional art of paper cutting, and an old Chinese man driving a flock of sheep. The man is then shown singing a Chinese opera near a red wall, riding a bicycle and speaking to his friend over the cell phone, "I am king of China. I am coming." He enters a Chinese temple, plays shuttlecock with a few Chinese, watches a Peking Opera and is shown wearing a traditional Chinese long gown. Again, he speaks into his cell phone, "It's so beautiful and classic here!" After he is back on the street, he encounters scenes of modern buildings, speeding cars, and urban Chinese people walking on the street. He says over the cell phone in English, "I am confused. Where am I? New York? Shanghai!" He is then shown walking in a rice field, where Chinese farmers are transplanting rice seedlings. He then dances with exotically dressed women of ethnic minorities in Yunnan. Again, he speaks over his cell phone in English, "It's beautiful anyway. China, a fantastic place to be!" The caption reads in both Chinese and English, "Enjoy it anytime, anywhere!" (See Video Clip 7.)



Click **QuickTime** to view

video clip in QuickTime (mov) format.

Click **here** to download entire movie.

**Video Clip 7:** A China Unicom Commercial Featuring a Western Backpacker in China.

This ad implicitly sells Chinese nationalism by sketching the idealistic Chinese culture and landscape. Without a particular storyline, the commercial jumbles concepts together, and scans the vast landscape of China, ancient and contemporary cultures, urban and rural places, and the mainstream Han and the minority cultures, to showcase the vastness of the Chinese landscape, its rich cultures and its mixture of tradition and modernity. China is portrayed as a harmonious society that has attractions, historical and contemporary, rural and urban, traditional and modern, and royal and ordinary. The tourist is having fun all over China. He not only enjoys China as a tourist, but also as someone who is evaluating and judging Chinese culture and development. He constantly announces over his cell phone and claims China to be "beautiful," "classic," and "fantastic." Kaviraj (1992) writes, nationalism involves a "relentless project of enumeration — the endless counting of its citizens, territories, resources. . . . It counts, it appears, every conceivable quantifiable thing." Gries also argues that "Enumerating 'China' — its vast geographic and demographic size — has long been central to the modern Chinese nationalist project of creating the psychological strength necessary to mobilize the Chinese people" (2004, p. 80). This commercial celebrates the idea that all Chinese share the common empty time and space. Chinese development and traditional culture are made more meaningful because a Western tourist appreciates them. Shanghai is made more meaningful when the tourist asserts that Shanghai is just like New York.

New York captures the Chinese imagination and the ["where am I"] also implies that foreigners do not expect Shanghai to be incredibly modern, as a way to praise China's development.

The fact that a foreign tourist can freely travel in China also suggests Chinese development and openness to the West. The Western tourist symbolizes the West on the road. The West is traveling to meet the East and the West is completely conquered and awed. The endorsement from the Western tourist not only shows universal attractions of Chinese culture, but also implies the lack of confidence for China Unicom to claim the values of Chinese culture for its own sake. Cultural Critic Fredric Jameson (1993, p. 31) commented in an interview, "The First World does not have to know the Third World, while it is quite obvious that it is impossible for the Third World not to be aware of the First World." This commercial suggests such awareness as well as a wishful thinking that people of the First World will eventually appreciate China more because of its modern development and traditional culture.

#### *Chinese Products Reaching Out to the World*

While China Mobile and China Unicom ads invite Westerners in, ads of other Chinese products sell their success in reaching out to the West. Haier, for example, has conducted various campaigns featuring how foreign media reports have praised its world quality and how eager foreign retailers want to carry its products. Its many commercials imply that Haier is now in a superior position compared with foreign retailers because it has the power to grant licenses to them. Many Haier commercials also proudly announce "Haier, made in China," as another way to assert that "the Chinese have stood up."

Haier constantly sells its international reputation in the Chinese market as a means to assure consumers of its product quality. As established, in the Chinese market foreign products are often viewed as having higher status and better quality. Chinese producers have to prove their product quality to Chinese consumers. Thus, Chinese producers that have achieved international success often sell this success back home. For example, a series of print ads of Haier in the late 1990s publicized its extraordinary success in foreign countries. The countries that Haier chose are all developed Western countries. The ads show Haier's large sales numbers and successful development in Australia, Germany and America. The ad about Australia portrays two koalas up on a Haier fridge. The ad copy reads, "The Australian national treasure koala gives Haier a warm hug." The ad about the U.S. claims that the height of Haier fridge sold in America surpasses 2,500 Empire State buildings of New York. A picture of the Empire State Building is placed next to a wall made of Haier refrigerators. To make sure that Chinese consumers understand the visual cues, the ad copy explains, "The Empire State Building is located in New York. [It] is a famous building in America." In the ad about Germany, the headline states, "Haier Fridge in Germany made its counterparts genuinely convinced [of its quality]." A picture of the Cologne Cathedral is placed next to a wall made of Haier fridges, in addition to a flying flag of Haier. The ad copy reads, "The Haier flag is flying high at the Cologne Bridge over the Rhine River together with national flags of the European Union." (See Figure 6.)

The ads give the impression of an overwhelming embrace of Haier in Western countries. The Australian koala, the Empire State Building in New York and the Cologne Cathedral are tourist symbols of the three countries. The ad about Germany further claims that the German counterparts are convinced by

the good quality of Haier because German electronic products are viewed in China as having supreme quality. The mention of the flag of Haier flying high at the Cologne Bridge together with national flags of the European implies that Haier has achieved an extraordinary reputation and is thus a symbol of national pride. The messages about its acceptance in the foreign market give Haier a transnational as well as a nationalistic image, as if Haier is now conquering foreign lands on behalf of all Chinese. In this way, the ad stresses Haier's cosmopolitanism and nationalism.

**Figure 6:** Three Print ads of Haier Regarding its Presence in Australia, the U.S. and Germany (Yearbook of Chinese Advertisements, 2000, p. 129).



### ***Conclusion***

Through my analysis of contemporary Chinese ads, I have argued that Chinese advertising sells concepts of nationalism and transnationalism as a means to speak to the new Chinese consumers. The marketing of transnationalism and nationalism suggests the complicated and contradictory understandings of China as a nation, and of the emergent global capitalism in China. Such understandings can only be grasped when ads created by Chinese agencies are analyzed. This is because Chinese agencies have fewer burdens to utilize themes of tradition and modernity, as well as China and the West. They are also more free to cater to the values of the emergent middle-class consumers in China. Analyzing ads for multinational corporations often leads to the conclusion that there is a weakening link between nationalism and consumerism and a predominant tendency for hybridity and crossover (J. Wang, 2008). However, my analysis indicates that nationalism, transnationalism and hybridity are simultaneous processes facing Chinese consumers. This demonstrates the complexity of Chinese society and the difficulty facing researchers trying to understand China. While China is yearning for modernity, Chinese tradition is still deeply rooted and kept alive in daily practices, and thus, it is insufficient to only look at foreign advertising in China as representative of the current state and the future development of Chinese ads.

While Chinese corporations can sell crude nationalism, multinational corporations and their ad agencies are less likely to take this approach because they intend to appeal to the widest possible audiences throughout the world. When transnational corporations incorporate local elements, they often avoid making foreign brands too localized. Ad campaigns of multinational corporations in China often either aim to maintain their foreign aura or balance their foreignness and local connections (Li, 2006). At the same time, Chinese advertisers are more likely to appropriate China's anti-imperialism history, and assert and essentialize their 'Chineseness' with less risk than multinational corporations because the latter still run the risk of being viewed as pawns of cultural and economic imperialism. This article thus provides an understanding about how nationalism is produced and sold as a social phenomenon in China. When selling transnationalism, Chinese ads often invoke the West as a form of transnational imagination, which speaks about the challenge that Chinese advertisers face in global capitalism. Nevertheless, the fundamental narratives behind the ads are still elite-dominated and modernity-oriented, regardless of whether they market nationalism, transnationalism, or the convergence of the two. Both transnationalism and nationalism should be viewed as inseparable, sometimes opposing and sometimes complementary, processes of globalization in the context of China's search for modernity. They are social constructions substantiated by material cultures and communication technologies. The ads provide particular ways of understanding what it means to be Chinese in an increasingly globalized world. This article also adds to Jian Wang's research by showing how Chinese consumers are exposed to ads incorporating both nationalistic and cosmopolitan concepts.

The representations of 'Chineseness' and transnationalism in Chinese ads simultaneously reflect China's ambivalence toward its tradition and the West, and its assertiveness and diffidence in global economy. On one hand, rapid economic development of China has made Chinese producers more assertive in claiming their Chinese identity in relation to the West. Chinese marketers are very active in



producing and selling 'Chineseness' centered on mainland China, and extends to the Chinese residing in other countries. Chinese marketers select, utilize, and reorganize China's past history, in particular its anti-foreign history, in relation to the Western Other in order to construct an unchanging history of patriotism. China is portrayed as a strong father, a nurturing mother, a victor, a victim, a unique entity and a global unifier. 'Chineseness' is about the past glory and its future role in transcending global differences. On the other hand, there remains a pervasive idea of viewing Chinese culture and tradition as backward and incompatible with modernity. The West is largely viewed as representing progress and modernity, and China is positioned in opposition. The use of foreign models to endorse Chinese products implies that China still needs Westerners to endorse its modern development. Chinese producers use European-style architecture and well-known tourist sites to symbolize taste and social status in an attempt to obtain modern images. To some extent, selling transnationalism demonstrates a deep desire of Chinese producers, in particular, and Chinese society, in general, to be accepted and celebrated by the international community. Consequently, the Eurocentric model of modernity allows Western companies to enjoy privileges that companies of any other continents do not have in China.<sup>23</sup> While American symbols are often portrayed in Chinese advertising as representing individualism, fun and progress, European symbols are often described as representing nobility, taste and high culture. And both European and American symbols and values are generally portrayed as more desirable than Chinese symbols.

Manuel Castells (1996) says that the most important question to ask regarding the construction of identities is "how, from what, by whom, and for what?" In Chinese advertising, the actors constructing Chinese identity through advertising are for-profit Chinese producers and their agencies. These agents are situated in a transitional Chinese society that is moving toward a global market. 'Chineseness' and foreignness are just marketing strategies for Chinese producers and their agencies to compete with their transnational counterparts in China. While Chinese producers often position themselves as enjoying privilege in marketing nationalism in China, foreign marketers have also begun to capitalize on Chinese national pride. McDonald's recent marketing campaign, for example, stresses its support for the Chinese Olympic team, with a slogan "wo jiu xihua zhongguo ying" [I am loving it when China wins] (Tschang, 2008). This example further suggests that nationalism, as a selling strategy, is always fluid.

China is struggling with the projection, self-perception, and external perception of its identity. Chinese ads are essentially pastiche and bricolage of different symbols and cultures. Chinese producers sell the strategies working at that particular moment. Since Chinese advertisers rarely conduct systematic focus groups or consumer testing, what is considered effective advertising strategy is often the result of guesswork.

Kuan-Hsing Chen (1996), Professor of Tsinghua University in Taiwan, argues that there is not much difference between transnational capital and the nation states because transnational capital in most cases is the guiding force of nation states. Chinese producers sell nationalism in an attempt to cultivate a

---

<sup>23</sup> While Japanese products are generally viewed in China as modern, they have achieved this status precisely because Japan's close emulation after the West since the Meiji Reform in 1868. While some Korean products, such as Samsung, enjoy popularity in China, they are still considered less desirable than Western products.

nationalistic market so that they can increase profits. Nationalism in this sense is merely, "an internal unifying project to assert a stronger voice and a larger share" in the global capital market (Chen, 1996).

The portrayal of nationalism and transnationalism in Chinese ads further symbolizes the ideological construction of Chinese consumer culture. In essence, consumer culture in China is a middle-class phenomenon. Middle-class consumers in China are sometimes described as "small people with big dreams."<sup>24</sup> The marketing of transnationalism, to some extent, reflects a deep anxiety of middle-class Chinese toward globalization. It also partially fulfills the dream of middle-class Chinese to reach out to the world. They long to be identified with the transnational, but simultaneously harbor their hope of grasping something certain in the changing Chinese society. Consumer nationalism, a response to the inability for the nation-state to function as the natural unit of globalized production, expresses and reflects the anxiety and tensions toward the uncertainties of the nation-state in the context of an increasing global production and consumption.

The marketing of nationalism and transnationalism in China also demonstrates the contradictions of globalization in China. Nationalism and transnationalism constitute different modes of thinking about China as a nation in global capitalism. While the former views China as a fixed entity with an outreach to the global Chinese, the latter concerns a celebration of world commonality. As Held and his colleagues (1999, p. 14) contend, "globalization pulls and pushes societies in opposing directions; it fragments as it integrates, engenders cooperation as well as conflict, and universalizes while it particularizes." Transnationalism and nationalism become the sites that manifest such contradictory global forces in China.

Some ideas about future research: It would be important to study how other emergent economies such as India, Brazil and Mexico deal with issues of tradition and modernity, the local and the global, the national and transnational and the contradictions and complexities of advertising symbols and daily consumption. It is necessary to understand how Eurocentric modernity functions in consumer practices and how an alternative modernity might be produced when the power relation between the West and the developing world is still unequal. The fundamental issue is about national identity and its commodification in global capitalism. Methodologically, it is still important to analyze ads socially, to interview ad professionals and advertisers, to survey consumers and to conduct participant observations regarding meanings of daily consumptions.

---

<sup>24</sup> See J. Walter Thompson, "Xiaofeizhe dongcha, celue, chuangyi" (Consumer insight, strategy and creative ideas), *International Advertising*, 2005 (2) Special Issue, pp. 2-3.

**References**

- Anderson, B. (1991). *Imagined communities*. Verso.
- Appadurai, A. (1996). *Modernity at large*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Bauman, Z. (1995). Searching for a center that holds. In M. Featherstone, S. Lash and R. Robertson (Eds.), *Global modernities*. London: Sage Publications.
- Bhabha, H. (1994). *The location of culture*. New York: Routledge.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. Trans. by Richard Nice. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Canclini, N. G. (2001). *Consumers and citizens: Globalization and multicultural conflicts*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Castells, M. (1996). *The power of identity*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell publishing.
- Chen, K. (1996). Not yet the postcolonial era. The (super) nation-state and transnationalism of cultural studies. Response to Ang and Stratton. *Cultural Studies*, 10 (1), pp. 37-70.
- Cohen, L. (2003). *A consumers' republic: The politics of mass consumption in postwar America*. New York: Knopf.
- Dikotter, F. (1996, Winter). Culture, "race" and nation: The formation of national identity in twentieth century China. *Journal of International Affairs [online]*, 49 (2), 590-605.
- Dorfman, A., & Mattelart, A. (1984). *How to read Donald Duck: Imperialist ideology in the Disney comic* (2nd Edition). International General.
- Duara, P. (1993, July). De-constructing the Chinese nation. *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, 30, pp. 1-26.
- Duara, P. (1997). Transnationalism and the predicament of sovereignty: China, 1900-1945. *The American Historical Review*, 102 (4), pp. 1030-1051.
- Fejes, F. (1981). Media imperialism: An assessment. *Media, Culture and Society*, 3, pp. 281-289.
- Fox, R. W., & Lears, T. J. J. (Eds.). (1983). *The culture of consumption: Critical essays in American History, 1880-1980*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Gellner, E. (1964). *Thought and change*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson.

- Gellner, E. (1983). *Nations and nationalism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Gerth, K. (2003). *China made: Consumer culture and the creation of the nation*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press.
- Giddens, A. (1985). *The nation-state and violence*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Giddens, A. (1990) *The consequences of modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and self-identity: Self and society in the late modern age*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Giddens, A. (1999). Comment: the 1999 Reith lecture. New world without end, *Observer*, April 11.
- Gillette, M. B. (2000). *Between Mecca and Beijing: Modernization and consumption among Urban Chinese Muslims*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Gries, P. H. (2004). *China's new nationalism: Pride, politics, and diplomacy*. University of California Press.
- He, B. & Guo, Y. (2000). *Nationalism, national identity and democratization in China*. Aldershot, Brookfield USA: Ashgate.
- Held, D., McGrew, A., Goldblatt, D., & Perraton, J. (1999). *Global transformations: Politics, economics and culture*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Hughes, C. R. (2006). *Chinese nationalism in the global Era*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Jameson, F. (1993). Interviewed by Sara Danius and Stefan Jonsson. *Res Publica* 24, December
- Jhally, S. (1987). *The codes of advertising: Fetishism and the political economy of meaning in the consumer society*. New York: St. Martin's.
- Kaviraj, S. (1992). The imaginary institution of India. In P. Chatterjee and G. Pandley (eds), *Subaltern studies VII: Writings on South Asian history and society*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kraidy, M. M. (2002). Hybridity in cultural globalization. *Communication Theory*. Aug, pp. 316-339.
- Leach, W. (1993). *Land of desire*. New York: Pantheon.
- Lears, J. (1994). *Fables of abundance: A cultural history of advertising in America*. New York: Basic Books
- Levenson, J. (1969). *Modern China and its Confucian fate*. University of California Press.

- Li, H. (2006). *Advertising and consumption in China: Between the local and the global*. Dissertation, University of Southern California.
- Li, H. (2007). Marketing Japanese products in the context of Chinese nationalism. *National Communication Association*, Nov. 15-18, Chicago.
- Lin, M., & Galikowski, M. (1999). *The search for modernity: Chinese intellectuals and cultural discourse in the post-Mao era*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Marchand, R. (1985). *Advertising the American dream: Making way for modernity, 1920-1940*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Martin-Barbero, J. (1993). The methods: From media to mediations. *Modernization and Mass Mediation in Latin America*, 187-245.
- McGovern, C. F. (2006). *Sold American: Consumption and citizenship, 1890-1945*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Morley, D., & Robins, K. (1995). *Spaces of identity*. London: Routledge.
- Nie, Y. et al. (2003). Kuaguo Guanggao Gongsi de Benduhua Celue Tanta (Discussions on the localization strategies of international advertising agencies). *International Advertising*, 9, pp.12-25. Beijing, China: International Advertising Press.
- Nonini, D. M., & Ong, A. (1997). Chinese transnationalism as an alternative modernity. In A. Ong and D. Nonini (Eds.), *Ungrounded empires*, pp. 3-33. New York: Routledge.
- Ong, A. (1997). Chinese modernities: Narratives of nation and capitalism. In A. Ong and D. Nonini (Eds.), *Ungrounded empires*, pp. 171-202. New York: Routledge.
- Pollay, R., & Gallagher, K. (1990). Advertising and cultural values: Reflections in the distorted mirror. *International Journal of Advertising*, 9, pp. 359-372.
- Pusey, J. R. (1983). *China and Charles Darwin*. Harvard University Press.
- Sautman, B. (1997). Racial nationalism and China's external behavior. *World Affairs (Washington, D.C.)*, 16, pp. 78-95.
- Schein, L. (2001). Chinese consumerism and the politics of envy: Cargo in the 1990s. In X. Zhang (Ed.), *Whither China?* Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Schiller, H. (1996). *Information inequality*. New York: Routledge.

- Schiller, H. (1998). Striving for communication dominance. In D. Thissu (ed.), *Electronic Empires*. London: Arnold.
- Shirk, S. (2007). *China: Fragile superpower*. Oxford University Press.
- Sreberny-Mohammadi, A. (1996). Globalization, communication and transnational civil society: Introduction. In S. Braman and A. Sreberny-Mohammadi (ed.), *Globalization, communication and transnational civil society*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Straubhaar, J. (1991). Beyond media imperialism: Asymmetrical interdependence and cultural proximity. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 8, pp. 29-38
- Sturken, M. & Cartwright, L. (2001). *Practices of looking*. Oxford University Press.
- Tschang, C.-C. (2008, May 28). Olympic sponsors cheer the home team. *Business Week*, special report.
- Wang, G. (1991). *The Chineseness of China*. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press.
- Wang, H. (2003). *China's new order*. Edited by Theodore Hutters. Harvard University Press.
- Wang, G. (1993). Greater China and the Chinese overseas. *The China Quarterly*, Dec., 136, pp. 926-948.
- Wang, J. (2000). *Foreign advertising in China*. Iowa State University Press.
- Wang, J. (2005). Consumer nationalism and corporate reputation management in the global era. *Corporate Communications*, 2005, 10 (3), pp. 223-239.
- Wang, J. (2006). The politics of goods: A case study of consumer nationalism and media discourse in Contemporary China. *Asian Journal of Communication*, 16 (2), June, pp. 187-206.
- Wang, J., & Wang, Z. (2007). The political symbolism of Business. *Journal of Communication Management*, 2007, 11 (2), pp. 134-149.
- Wang, J. (2008). *Brand new China: Advertising, media, and commercial culture*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Zhang, Y., & Harwood, J. (2004, Mar). Modernization and tradition in an age of globalization: Cultural values in Chinese TV commercials. *Journal of Communication*, 54 (1), pp. 156-172.
- Zhang, X. (2001). The Making of the post-Tiananmen intellectual field: A critical overview. In X. Zhang (Ed.), *Whither China? Intellectual politics in contemporary China*, pp. 1-75. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Zhao, S. (2000). Chinese nationalism and its international orientations. *Political Science Quarterly*, 115 (1), pp. 1-33.