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## Place-Branding of China as a Site for Tourist Exploration: Through the Dichotomy of Eastern and Western Representations

The incessant development and implementation of technological devices in the everyday lives of global citizens have come to foster an online environment where individuals are increasingly being shown or sold commodities. Accordingly, in addition to objects, people and places are being transformed into commodities, with smartphone users and ordinary individuals taking up the position of consumer citizens, who perform and serve the purpose of sustaining capitalism and the neoliberal agenda (Relph para 3). Subsequently, the facilitation and prevalence of online advertising and marketing, coupled with the Internet's capability of connecting individuals to others on a global scale, has caused online networks to be a sphere for selling and branding places – specifically in the interest of gaining economic growth through tourism. The slogans, ideologies, and imagery associated with areas that are being sold as, essentially, products are crucial sites for critical analysis as the nature of constructing a place and its brand often correlate to how the location is conceptualized by mass populations (Robinson Module 6). Furthermore, these images and principles that are sold and affiliated with a nation's place-branding can come to influence one's perception of the local inhabitants in the location and how a nation's society and cultural heritage are conceptualized on a transnational scale. Johnathan Bratt discusses the nature of place-branding for tourist enterprise, stating, "tourism places stimulate an imaginary construction of reality that allows tourists to begin their attempts to understand that place. Tourism promotion, in other words, is a means through which sites acquire significance, both as travel destinations and as places more generally" (para 4). Correspondingly, the characteristics associated with a location due to the framework of its place branding and tourism marketing define and delineate the nuanced minutiae of a location's culture and community; in essence, what is featured or illustrated in association with a site is what the government and its privatized institutions deem to be an asset to gaining and profiting off of their homeland. With that said, throughout my work, I aim to analyze and highlight the ways in which place-branding and the commerce of place commodification in the tourism industry has promoted the emergence of stereotypic and erroneous marketing tactics that bind the locations

advertised to the limitations of their branding – specifically, employing the example of place-branding and tourist promotional material for the country of China. While exploring my topic and facilitating my analysis, I will be utilizing examples of Chinese place branding and its utilization of cultural mythology in advertising, coupled with the influence of tourist reviews and the impact of social media as a site for travel recommendations and lastly, the depiction of Chinese heritage, culture, and, climate in Western media as a potential deterrent or a site for generating prejudice against Chinese travel. Overall, the promotional materials employed by Chinese tourist agencies, social media users, and fictionalized Western portrayals of China reaffirm the ideology that illustrative marketing and place-branding serve as a way to legitimize further aspects of a nation, such as collective identity, cultural practices, and societal hegemony; all of which enables and perpetuates the commodification of the location as a vessel for serving governmental and institutional interests.

Historically, the climate of the tourism industry in China has been stable; however, due to the political and economic developments in the country within the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, there have been lapses and heightened periods of touristic expansion and capital (Bratt 29). Following 1978, China's policies were reformed, and thus tourist-based advertising and place-branding were employed to facilitate economic growth by profiting off traveller's dollars (Bratt 30). Tourism is harmoniously "inscriptive and performative" as it can be utilized to represent and illustrate locations and nations through mythology and fictional or cultural narratives (Decosta et al. 158). The mythology employed in Chinese tourism place-branding falls within the nation's heritage and cultural origins. For example, Decosta et al. discuss the "archaic" Chinese myths that their place-branding promotes to attract attention and profit from tourist excursions, stating that "The significance of shared symbols and ethnic myths are powerful, as they conceptualize a notion of homeland...the forms, narratives, and symbols chosen to project these myths through heritage tourism, and the audience they target, thus shape the stories they represent to have a profound impact on the cultural significance of their texts." (163-164). Indeed, when researching the advertisements and place-branding employed by the Chinese tourist ministry for international travel, I found that very few traditional advertisements were used, and instead, the images of ancient temples, architecture, markets, and centers for

traditional cultural and religious rituals were used with little to no text as a way to attract individuals to travel to the nation. In Figure 1 below, there is a depiction of a tourist advertisement for those who want to visit China.

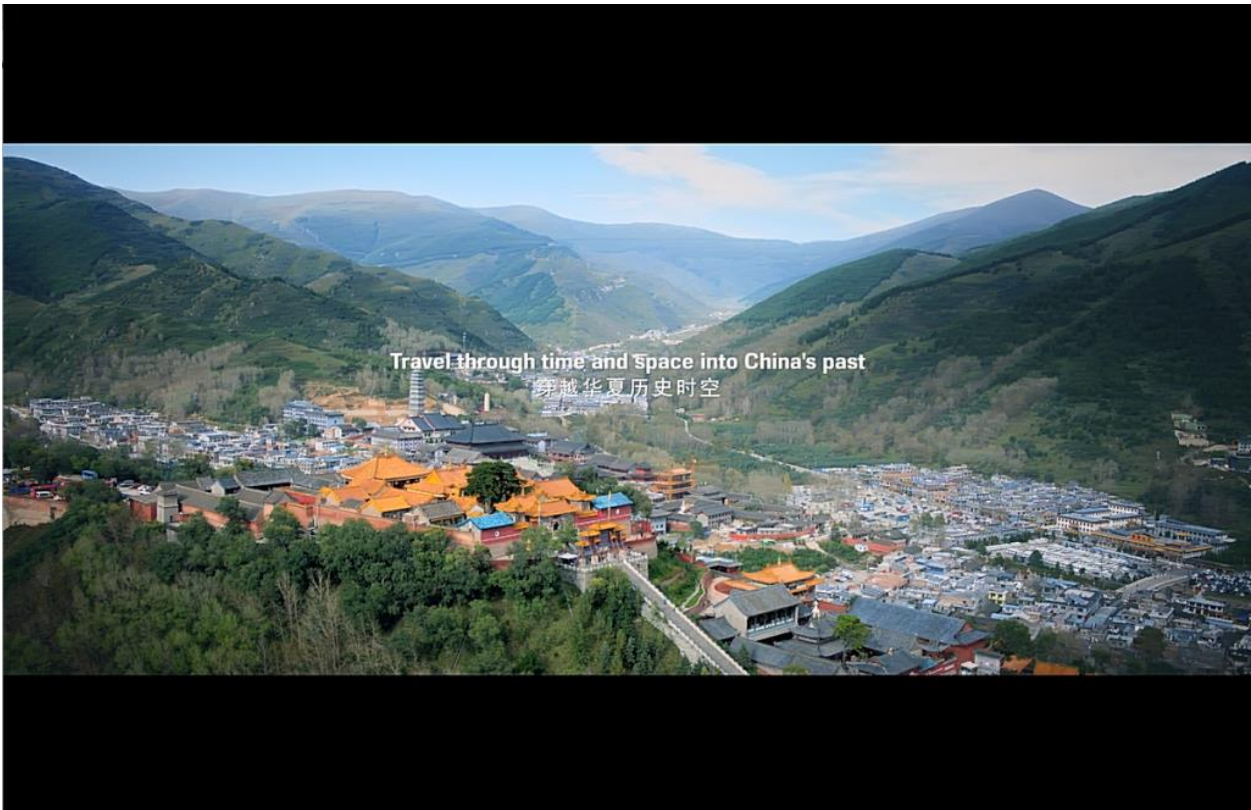


Figure 1. “The Silk Road of China – Discover the Beauty of China” – Depicting an aerial shot on a village in China.

Source: China Cultural Center – Malta. “Discover the Beauty of China – 2022 China Tourism and Cultural Week.” 2 September 2022, <https://cccmalta.org/en/news/2284/>

As the above figure depicts, minimal extravagance is used to promote China as a travel destination. The historic nature of the land and its cultural heritage is the main selling point for its visitors. Furthermore, the slogan plastered in the midground of the frame, ‘travel through time and space into China’s past,’ directly communicates the structural framework for what the ministry of tourism considers China’s profitable place brand, being its transcendental atmosphere and preservation of ancient sites and attributes. Nevertheless, the promotional place-branding of the country has limitations; by labelling and illustrating the nation as a historical time-warp, individuals who are travelling there may expect areas to be antiquated when, in actuality, they operate in modern systems and standards like any other state or destination. Correspondingly, the ideology that the nation is an archaic landscape can create stereotype or bias that China is

obsolete or that the citizens who live in rural areas of the country conduct their lives in a primitive or primordial manner – which can lead to negative connotations of those who live domestically in the nation. Consequently, the place-branding put forth by the Chinese government exploits the nation's rich cultural heritage in order to turn a profit and positions the country as an atavistic scene that is solely defined by its past rather than its more contemporary offerings.

The scarceness and unconventional nature of marketing and place-branding for China have left a marginal void in comprehensive information or images available for review by potential visitors. With the rise of social media and its ability to share images and videos of locations worldwide, many tourist advertising and marketing firms have begun to take advantage of the accessibility and wide-ranging reach that social networks provide. Subsequently, distinct social networking applications or sites allow an enhanced potentiality for reaching definite demographics and audiences, as well as formulating analytical tools for marketers to understand the scope of their influence and content with reports of advertisements that work well and advertisements that do not perform as efficiently. Xiong Li et al. describe and analyze how social media marketing has come to heighten and sustain place-branding for tourism, commenting that “the stickiness of the message content (likability, appropriateness, etc.) is one of the most important [factors affecting message diffusion through social media]...For instance, on social media, the social influence has an impact on message forwarding behaviour, as individuals exposed to their friends' sharing behaviour are significantly more likely to spread information.” (Li et al. 441). Accordingly, the lack of traditional forms of place-branding for China as a tourist destination is replaced and offset by the application of social media advertising. A study was conducted on the top one-hundred and thirteen hotel brands in China and their adoption of social media marketing. The findings from the research comprehensively show that “social media marketing brings significant benefits for hotels by attracting greater customer attention...hotels that updated their content frequently...organized online events to attract customers...made their postings interesting...and actively replied to customer inquiries show that it was useful to follow social media sites for marketing assistance.” (Denizci et al. 799). The operation of online place-branding and tourist advertising demonstrates how Chinese tourist enterprises and establishments

can directly communicate with their target audiences and attract people to visit the nation through their branding.

Following the influence of digital networking and media platforms, film has been a highly informative and influential medium for viewers - it has the capability to constitute and popularize dominant opinions and beliefs. For instance, movies that cover the topic of a historical war or event can lend to the adoption of imperialist attitudes within individuals and viewers; narratives that depict a specific nation as the good guys while portraying the opposing nation as the bad guys will perpetuate ideologies pertaining to the moral and immoral forces in global tensions. Consequently, the illustration of China and Chinese culture in Western, specifically North American, filmic narratives create a contrary and discordant notion of it as a place and its place-branding. Looking at orientalism and the illustration of China and Chinese culture in mainstream Hollywood films, I intend to analyze the movie *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018). The movie is a romantic comedy that follows a woman who visits her boyfriend's family in Asia. Though the narrative takes place in Singapore, the characters and protagonists are Chinese, and the narrative follows the diaspora of Chinese culture through its dichotomy of characters who are ethnically and domestically Chinese citizens and those who are Chinese-American individuals.

In contrast to the advertisement and figure discussed above, this film paints an entirely different picture of China and its self-ascribed place-branding. The film's title says it all, and the imagery and themes in its storyline portray the central family as wealthy and entitled. The dissimilarity between China's place-branding and North American inferences of Chinese civilization, experience, and culture can lend to the ignorance of travellers who may believe the sequences and imagery depicted in Hollywood films and, as a result, desire to travel to these countries because of the filmic representations. Understanding the dissemination of ideologies and stereotypes regarding the illustration of nations and the commodification of national identities not belonging to a film's place of origin is critical. In turn, it is crucial to investigate and understand how a nation identifies and positions itself in order to acquire capital and income.

Conclusively, the phrases, images and philosophies that accompany tourism advertisements and construct a nation's collective identity and place-brand are crucial sites for

scrutiny and analysis as the incessant commodification of anything capable of being sold is occurring under our systems of hyper-capitalistic consumerism. The cultural mythology featured in Chinese tourism advertising and place-branding combined with the influence of tourist reviews and the impact of social media as a site for travel recommendations translate the climate of travelling to China. Contrarily the illustration of orientalism and Chinese culture in Hollywood films promote opposing place-brands and ideologies for China and what one's travel experience may look like. All in all, the promotional materials employed by Chinese tourist agencies, social media users, and fictionalized Western portrayals of China reaffirm the ideology that illustrative marketing and place-branding serve as a way to legitimize further aspects of a nation, such as collective identity, cultural practices, and societal hegemony.

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