

## Emotional duplex in the nation (de-)branding: a case study of China and Shen Yun Performing Arts

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### ABSTRACT

The intricate connection between nation branding efforts and the emotions they evoke has been inadequately addressed in existing branding and international relations literature. I propose a heuristic account that theorizes this relationship. By tracing the branding efforts made by China and the de-branding efforts made by Shen Yun Performing Arts (a troupe established by Falun Gong practitioners), I argue that these “authentic” Chinese cultural presentations elicit certain emotions. The emotional works are different for Chinese domestic audiences and for international audiences. I propose a duplex model to account for the emotional processes in these two groups of audiences. Four operating emotions—pride, guilt, admiration, and anger—solidify into various political attitudes toward China. Finally, I discuss the contributions of this duplex model and its further complications.

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When I was driving from Los Angeles to Costa Mesa for the Chinese dance show “Shen Yun Performing Arts 2014”, I did not expect a large audience. Inside the Segerstrom Center for the Arts where the show was staged, hundreds of well-dressed people were waiting for the performance. The majority of them were white and most of them were in their 40s to 60s. The show consisted of 19 independent scenes—all of them dance performances except for one instrumental and two singing performances.

Shen Yun Performing Arts (SYPA) is an organization that hopes “to revive the true, divinely inspired culture of China and share it with the world” (“Our story”, Shen Yun Performing Arts, 2014). It performs across the globe, but none of its shows has been held in China. The troupe was established by Falun Gong (also known as Falun Dafa), which started as a religious association in China. In 1999, however, China’s government declared Falun Gong as a cult and banned its practice in the country.<sup>1</sup>

SYPA emphasizes its authentic “Chinese-ness” in expressing the Chinese culture, but it rejects the “China-ness” of China’s government. It uses Chinese culture as a political resource to resist the China’s state.<sup>2</sup> This strategy parallels how China itself has appropriated Chinese culture in its recent nation branding efforts (Barr, 2012). If China is branding itself through culture, then SYPA can be interpreted as “de-branding” China through culture. By “de-branding,” I do not refer to removing the brand name from a product, but to destroying or discrediting a brand. Thus, the brand of China becomes a

site of struggle over national meanings. Banet-Weiser (2012) argues that to brand a product means to build an authentic relationship between a company and its customers—a relationship fills with “affect, emotion, and trust” (p. 214).<sup>3</sup> Marketing scholars O’Shaughnessy and O’Shaughnessy (2003) also acknowledge the power of emotion in marketing. However, the intricate connection between nation branding efforts and the emotions they evoke seem to be under-theorized in existing nation branding literature. In fact, the general relationship between emotion and politics has not received enough attention from international relations scholars (Bleiker & Hutchison, 2008; Crawford, 2000; Hutchison & Bleiker, 2014).

In this paper, I propose an emotional perspective to theorize the branding efforts made by China and the de-branding efforts made by Falun Gong. Both of these parties claim to be “authentically” Chinese. Both present a face to the world and offer an encounter with Chinese culture that elicits certain emotions (Ahmed, 2004). The political aims and emotional outcomes involved are different for Chinese audiences and for international audiences. Thus, I propose a duplex model to account for these branding or de-branding efforts. As a result of these efforts, four operating emotions—pride, guilt, admiration, and anger—solidify into various political attitudes toward China.

This paper starts by discussing the roles of emotion and culture in nation branding. Based on existing accounts of the Beijing Olympics, the Shanghai World Expo, and the Confucius Institutes, I examine how China has appropriated the Chinese cultural repertoire in these branding efforts. The next section gives an overview of the conflict between Falun Gong and China’s government. According to my analysis of the SYPA’s websites, its marketing materials, and my first-hand observation of its performance, I examine the de-branding tactics used by SYPA. I then outline the emotional duplex model of nation branding and de-branding. In the conclusion, I discuss the contributions of this emotional duplex and some further complications. The model can be considered as a middle ground between the macro approach and the micro approach in the study of emotions and politics (Hutchison & Bleiker, 2014).

### Emotional and cultural logics in nation branding

In *Branding the nation*, Aronczyk (2013) describes nation branding “as the result of the interpenetration of commercial and public sector interests to communicate national priorities among domestic and international populations for a variety of interrelated purposes” (p. 16). These “interrelated purposes” include, but are not limited to, attracting overseas capital to invest in the local economy, establishing political legitimacy and authority in the global arena, and fostering nationalism and patriotism (Aronczyk, 2013). It is easy to notice the striking similarities among the notions of nation branding, soft power, and public diplomacy. Soft power, unlike the hard power of military or economic strength, involves the “power of attraction,” as derived from a country’s values, cultures, and international policies (Nye, 2004). Public diplomacy refers to a nation’s sustained efforts to create a good impression among foreigners and enhance understanding between nations (Potter, 2009). Therefore, both soft power and public diplomacy are based on an assumption that through contact with a country’s culture or people, the international community will develop a favorable attitude toward that country. The international community’s favorable attitude will then boost loyalty among the country’s domestic citizens,

which will further help to attract foreigners. If nation branding is understood as developing both loyalty among domestic citizens and a good reputation among foreigners, then the practice of nation branding is not much different from that of exercising soft power and public diplomacy. So, why do we talk about “branding”?

Branding became part of the corporate and marketing discourse during the 1980s (Aronczyk, 2013). Branding was incorporated into governmental discourse in the 1990s, as exemplified by the “Cool Britannia” brand of the UK under Tony Blair’s liberal government. Branding emphasizes the building of long-lasting relationships between companies and their customers. At the core of these relationships is emotion (Banet-Weiser, 2012). This emotional aspect of branding is what I see is lacking in the notions of soft power and public diplomacy. The emotional aspect is what makes branding so relevant and powerful for nation building.

Concerning branding of political parties, Banet-Weiser (2012) suggests that “brand politics are foundationally structured by brand logic and strategy, so that politics are defined in terms of the brand from the ground up, originating within and related to branding” (p. 128). In other words, once a brand is formed, only those images or practices that are consistent with the political party’s brand are supported, and elements that conflict with the brand are removed. Quoting Michael Porter, Aronczyk (2013) points out that the competitive advantage of a country is now found more in its cultural capital. Therefore, increasing attention is paid to branding each country’s cultural aspect, which involves “establishing rationalized and instrumentalized frameworks of legitimacy within which to situate a new and improved version of national culture” (p. 40). In the context of nation branding, culture is treated as a resource. The national culture is used to shape a favorable attitude toward the country among both domestic and international audiences. As the culture deployed in branding is often presented as the authentic heritage of the nation, branding is not only a matter of establishing an *authentic relationship* between audiences and the nation, but also of establishing a repertoire of *authentic culture*. As I will illustrate, the so-called authentic Chinese culture is highly selectively presented and strategically executed.

### Appropriation of culture in the branding of China

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has been seeking to build a favorable image among international audiences since the 1930s (D’Hooghe, 2005). However, China’s international image deteriorated drastically after the student protests at Tiananmen Square in 1989. Since then, China has been widely regarded as a totalitarian state.

Since 2003, however, the “peaceful-rise” concept of China has emerged and been promoted under the regime of the former China’s president Jintao Hu (Mierzejewski, 2012). The concept of “peaceful rise” (which was later rephrased as “peaceful development”) speaks to both domestic and international audiences. To the domestic audience, China promises that it will rise in terms of living standards. To the international audience, the state offers assurance that this rise will be peaceful. This stress on peacefulness implies that China has to use its culture rather than its military power to promote itself and to convince the international community of its benevolent intentions (Barr, 2012). The ideal of moderate development continues to be embraced by the notion of the “Chinese dream,” which was articulated by the current president Jinping Xi in 2013.

An example of using Chinese culture to brand China happened during the Beijing Olympics in 2008. The opening ceremony kicked off with 3,000 drummers chanting the classic Confucian greeting “Is it not delightful to have friends coming from distant quarters?” (Barr, 2012, p. 89). For China, the Beijing Olympics communicated more than a simple message that China was economically and physically ready to host international events. As the 2004 Olympics was held in Athens, the birthplace of Western civilization, so China’s holding of the next Olympics declared its legitimacy as the source of Eastern civilization (Brownell, 2008).

The selling of Chinese ancient culture is also exemplified by the establishment of Confucius Institutes worldwide. Barr (2012) notes that the Confucius Institutes

fit well with the notion of China’s peaceful development. ... The logo [of the Institutes] is a white dove with its wings spread to embrace the globe. At the same time, from the world, an arm extends to embrace the dove. (p. 89)

The image of Confucius is a “kind and friendly old man ... with a long beard, broad mouth and big ears” (p. 90). Moreover, the 63-meter red Chinese pavilion in the Shanghai World Expo in 2010 was modeled on China’s imperial palaces. The dominant interlocking wooden bracket features were characteristic of the traditional architecture (Barr, 2012).

It appears that China has used the notion of authentic Chinese culture to brand itself. However, this authentic culture is, in fact, anything but authentic. Confucianism was repressed and devalued by the CCP during the Cultural Revolution, as this cultural tradition was seen as a residue from the feudal system (Zhang & Schwartz, 1997). Many historic buildings and sites were also regarded as representations of the feudalist society and were severely damaged during the 10-year revolution. In this way, modern China has actually striven to dissociate itself from its Confucian past. It was not until recent decades that China started reviving Confucianism (Barr, 2012). As now incorporated into China’s brand, Confucianism is supported by the state and has regained its status as the “authentic” Chinese culture. The former president Jintao Hu once said, “We must ... enhance culture as part of the soft power of our country to ... inspire the enthusiasm of the people for progress” (Hu, 2007, part VII). The subtext behind this speech indicates an aspiration to restore China’s long lost prosperity that the imperial China once enjoyed. Overall, China has been building its brand as a partner among the global political and economic powers through an appropriation of its “authentic” cultural history. Nevertheless, there have been negative incidents that have threatened China’s brand, and one of these incidents was the clash with Falun Gong (D’Hooghe, 2005).

### Falun Gong as an anti-China brand

At present, Falun Gong is the most explicit and well-known anti-CCP non-state organization. A number of scholars have analyzed this organization from historical or rhetorical perspectives (for example Chang, 2004; Ownby, 2008; Penny, 2012; Xiao, 2011). A brief background on the Falun Gong and its relation with China helps to contextualize the political implications of SYPA’s de-branding efforts.

Falun Gong was founded in 1992 by Hongzhi Li. Influenced by the translated works from the New Age movement in the West, Falun Gong was one of many new religious practices that arose in China at that time (Penny, 2012). The organization promotes a

spiritual practice based on Buddhism and its members claim to pursue the values of *zhen* (truthfulness), *shan* (compassion), and *ren* (forbearance)<sup>4</sup> (Falun Dafa, 2014). Within a few years of its founding, Falun Gong was widely practiced by domestic and overseas Chinese. Ownby (2008) attributes this popularity to the general religious revival in post-Mao China that followed the failures of social reform. The *qigong*-like bodily exercise practiced by Falun Gong members also accorded with the national discourse on self-improvement that emerged since the 1950s (Ownby 2008).

On April 25, 1999, around 10,000 Falun Gong practitioners demonstrated outside the headquarters of the CCP in response to a denouncement of the sect published in the national newspapers. A few months later, the *People's Daily* (the mouthpiece of the state) asserted that Falun Gong was a heterodoxy. Falun Gong came under the spotlight again in 2001 when five people who were allegedly Falun Gong practitioners burned themselves outside the CCP's headquarters. However, the Falun Gong leaders maintained that the whole event had been staged by the China's government (Ownby, 2008).

Since that time, Falun Gong has been charged with being an "evil cult" that "is harmful to the physical and mental well-being of people" and that "hurts society" (Chang, 2004, p. 97). Yang Jiechi, the current China's State Councilor, said that Falun Gong aims "to overturn the People's Republic of China and to subvert the socialist system" (*People's Daily*, cited in Chang, 2004, p. 111). In this view, Falun Gong can be considered as an anti-China force that strives to discredit China.

Although many Falun Gong practitioners in China were suppressed by the state, those among the Chinese diaspora have actively protested against such suppression. To catch the attention of the international community, Falun Gong's practitioners have used a "rhizomatic media activism" that involves CDs, websites, newspapers, and other media (Ownby, 2008; Zhao, 2003). As an oppositional effort against the positive branding strategy of the China's state, such tactics by Falun Gong constitute a "de-branding" of China. In negating the favorable image of China, Falun Gong has made itself an anti-China brand.

### The rhetoric of Shen Yun: the anti-China Chinese culture

Falun Gong is anti-China, but not anti-Chinese. As Ownby (2008) observed, "even as it has expanded throughout the world, [Falun Gong] has remained unabashedly loyal to its national heritage" (p. 94). If the legitimacy of China's brand is based on Confucianism, then Falun Gong derives its legitimacy from Buddhism and Daoism. The icon for Falun Gong is a composite of the Buddhist swastika and the Daoist *taijitu* (Figure 1). This reliance on the Chinese cultural repertoire is apparent in SYPA, which is the latest de-branding effort by Falun Gong.

Founded in 2006, SYPA is a New York-based, nonprofit Chinese dance troupe. Every year, the troupe spends around six months traveling across the globe and has performed in around 100 major cities outside China. These shows are heavily marketed. For example, SYPA launched a wrap-up advertisement in the *Los Angeles Times* and on billboards near a major interstate freeway in Southern California in early 2014 (Tseng, 2014). National newspapers such as the *New York Times* also carried stories about the performance. On its website, SYPA repeatedly emphasizes its authentic "Chinese-ness," positioning itself as a force for "reviving 5,000 years of civilization" and "bringing back this glorious culture" ("Divine culture returns", Shen Yun Performing Arts, 2014). In terms of its dance



**Figure 1.** The Icon for Falun Gong (Falun Dafa, 2014).

performances, the troupe highlights the uniqueness of Chinese techniques with a diversity of ethnic Chinese dances. In terms of music, SYPA stresses its hybridity in that it “combines the spirit, beauty, and distinctiveness of Chinese music with the precision, power, and grandeur of the Western symphony orchestra” (“Music of Shen Yun”, Shen Yun Performing Arts, 2014). The performance that I attended in Costa Mesa, California welcomed its audiences with a giant Buddha projection in the first scene. In addition to the dance scenes there was a concerto of *erhu*, a traditional Chinese musical instrument. As an entertainment organization, SYPA appears to be an authentic Chinese performing troupe.

### ***Shen Yun is Falun Gong***

In emphasizing its authentic “Chinese-ness” in terms of Chinese culture, SYPA negates its “China-ness” in terms of China’s state. Three tactics of such negation can be observed. These tactics involve making reference to Falun Gong, distancing the group from China and denouncing the Chinese culture as presented by the CCP.

In presenting its program, the troupe made no effort to conceal its connection with Falun Gong. Its website stated that the group was established by Falun Gong practitioners, and described in detail how the CCP had tried to stop the show from running:

When the newborn Shen Yun was in its very first year, the CCP dispatched some 60 performance companies to compete with Shen Yun around the world in an effort to make it impossible for Shen Yun to survive financially. (“Challenges we face”, Shen Yun Performing Arts, 2014)

There were two occasions in the performance when explicit references to Falun Gong were made. In the first occasion, the master of ceremonies introduced the scene by warning audiences that meditation has been declared illegal in contemporary China. The scene began with a group of Falun Gong practitioners meditating. Then several men, all wearing black tank tops with red hammer-and-sickle symbols on their backs, arrived and attacked these peaceful practitioners. A mother was killed by these men, leaving her daughter helplessly crying. After these violent men had left, the daughter

continued her meditation, through which she reached heaven and was reunited with her mother. The description given in the program said that this scene showed numerous stories of contemporary Chinese families.

The second reference to Falun Gong was made in the last scene of the performance. Again, the scene portrayed people practicing Falun Gong. They were holding a banner that read “Falun Dafa is Good” and “*Zhen, Shan, Ren.*” The projection on the cyclorama featured multiple landmarks from around the world, symbolizing that Falun Gong has been practiced everywhere. Suddenly, the same group of men wearing black and red tank tops burst onto the scene and drove the practitioners away. Amidst the chaos, the Buddha appeared and brought peace to the practitioners.

These sectarian messages suggested that Shen Yun is not just a private performing troupe; it is an ideology-driven entertainment enterprise that has an explicit political agenda. It aims to brand Falun Gong as a victim of human rights violations and to de-brand China as an illegitimate state in the global arena.

### ***Shen Yun is not made in China***

On SYPA’s promotional leaflet there appeared a disclaimer: “Not Made in China” (Figure 2). The label “Made in ...” is often seen on the back of consumer products. Studies of branding confirm that this sort of label has a “country of origin effect,” that connects the product with whatever image of the country the customers have in their minds (Aronczyk, 2013). The label “Made in China,” however, has gained an unfavorable connotation following various incidents in which exports of contaminated toothpaste, poisonous pet food, or toys with lead-paint were revealed to the international community (Barr, 2012). Although China tried to promote the positive connotation of “Made in China” in its promotional videos (Barr, 2012), SYPA simply denied its relation with China.

Moreover, in a song performed in the show, the lyrics addressed China as the “Red Beast”:

Heaven and earth have lost their righteousness  
In the final phase, the Red Beast rises  
Now the Creator has come to this world  
Good and evil wage a stunning battle ...  
Vile as the persecution may be  
We strive to save people, yet this stirs up debased brutality ...

The binary pairs of “Creator” versus “Red Beast,” “good” versus “evil,” and “save people” versus “persecution” and “brutality” served to widen the semantic gap between Falun Gong and China, negating the “China-ness” of SYPA.

### ***Shen Yun is “authentically” Chinese***

Finally, SYPA presented itself as the authentic Chinese cultural representation. The colorful costumes that appeared in the promotional materials and the performance had the power to hook the audience. The show was divided into multiple scenes, each being a separate performance. The viewers constantly traveled across time and space. One scene

The Arts Connect Heaven & Earth

# SHEN YUN 2014

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## 精湛

### AERIAL MASTERS

"Elegant—very athletic and very skilled!"

— John McColgan, Riverdance producer

**T**HROUGHOUT the 5,000 years of Chinese civilization, martial arts techniques—tempered on the battlefield—were incorporated into classical Chinese dance in what has become a vast repertoire of jumps, spins, and tumbling techniques. Over the centuries, each dynasty instilled profound wisdom and different aesthetic principles into classical Chinese dance. Today, authentic classical Chinese dance is one of the most demanding and expressive art forms in the world.

*Experience what dance can be! Experience Shen Yun!*

**"Really out of this world!"**

There is no word to describe it... if I had to, the words might be **'divine,' 'reborn' and 'hope.'** You have to see it to believe it."

—Christine Walevska, Goddess of Cello, watched Shen Yun four times

"I probably have reviewed over 3,000-4,000 shows, none can compare to what I saw tonight. **Five Stars! 'Mind-blowing!'** You should go back and see it about six times."

—Richard Connema, Talkin' Broadway

**NOT MADE IN CHINA:** Shen Yun cannot be seen in today's China, where traditional Chinese culture has been mostly destroyed under communist rule. Based in New York, Shen Yun is a nonprofit organization dedicated to reviving 5,000 years of civilization.

Figure 2. Selected Panels of a Promotional Leaflet of Shen Yun Performing Arts.



depicted imperial lives during the *Han* Dynasty; the following scene brought the audience to the story of the Monkey King. For those who understood Chinese history, this oscillation between histories and legends provided a montage-like representation of Chinese culture. However, to the majority of the viewers who were non-Chinese (Tseng, 2014), history and myth were indistinguishable.

As discussed earlier, China has appropriated traditional Chinese culture into its branding strategy. In response to China's claiming of these forms as "authentic," SYPA pointed out that "they lack an essential ingredient ... a tradition of spiritual self-discipline and veneration for the divine" ("Misconception 1: 'But when I was in China I saw ...'", Shen Yun Performing Arts, 2014). On the website and during the performance, the viewers were constantly reminded that the art forms SYPA was presenting were prohibited in China, because China had destroyed all authentic Chinese culture ("The Cultural Revolution", Shen Yun Performing Arts, 2014). By denouncing the authenticity of the Chinese culture that China had appropriated, SYPA suggested that its cultural representation was a more authentic version of Chinese culture. This theme was emphasized through the phrase "reviving 5,000 years of civilization" in all of its marketing materials.

However, in an *LA Weekly* story, the Chinese studies professor Emily Wilcox argued that the supposedly unique bodily movements or women's gaze that Shen Yun claimed to be expressions of authentic ancient tradition were actually "an 'invented tradition' developed in China in the 1940s and 50s" (Tseng, 2014, para. 11). In this light, both China and SYPA have selectively appropriated parts of the cultural repertoire, carefully re-created these parts, and repackaged them in ways designed for appealing to their audiences. China has incorporated the image of Confucius (as a kind old man) and of Confucian virtues. This brand appeals to the domestic audience because it presents a nostalgic image concerning the prosperity, order, and benevolence of ancient China. This image offers hope that China can restore its golden era in the midst of the contemporary economy. The official brand also serves to reduce anxiety in the international audience, as Confucianism stresses *wangdao*, or a morality-driven approach to political governance (Yeung & Fung, 2011). In contrast, SYPA presents stage dances from ethnic Chinese groups and legendary stories, creating an exotic experience for its audiences. The only two solo music performers were both female. With such musical performances, which SYPA described as spiritual and beautiful ("Music of Shen Yun", Shen Yun Performing Arts, 2014) and the dominant *Chang-O* image appearing on the SYPA promotional materials, the performance conveyed a feminine exoticism—in contrast to the more masculine nostalgia presented by China. Paradoxically, these exotic feminine sounds and images were fused with a full Western orchestra and with Christianity-related lyrics referring to "heaven" and "Creator." The strange and the familiar were juxtaposed, rendering the performance attractive enough, but not too surprising for non-Chinese audiences. To Chinese spectators, many of whom may have been migrants from China, SYPA depicted cultural and political stories that may have had resonance. China uses Chinese culture to brand itself, but SYPA also use Chinese culture to de-brand China.

### Theorizing emotional work in branding: the emotional duplex

O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy (2003) argue that emotion always plays a part in the consumer's decision-making process, because emotion "is the adhesive that, when mixed

with trust, equals [brand's] loyalty" (p. 5). A brand is not only an image loaded with meanings, but also loaded with emotion. To understand how nation branding and de-branding work, it is crucial to examine the emotions operating behind them.

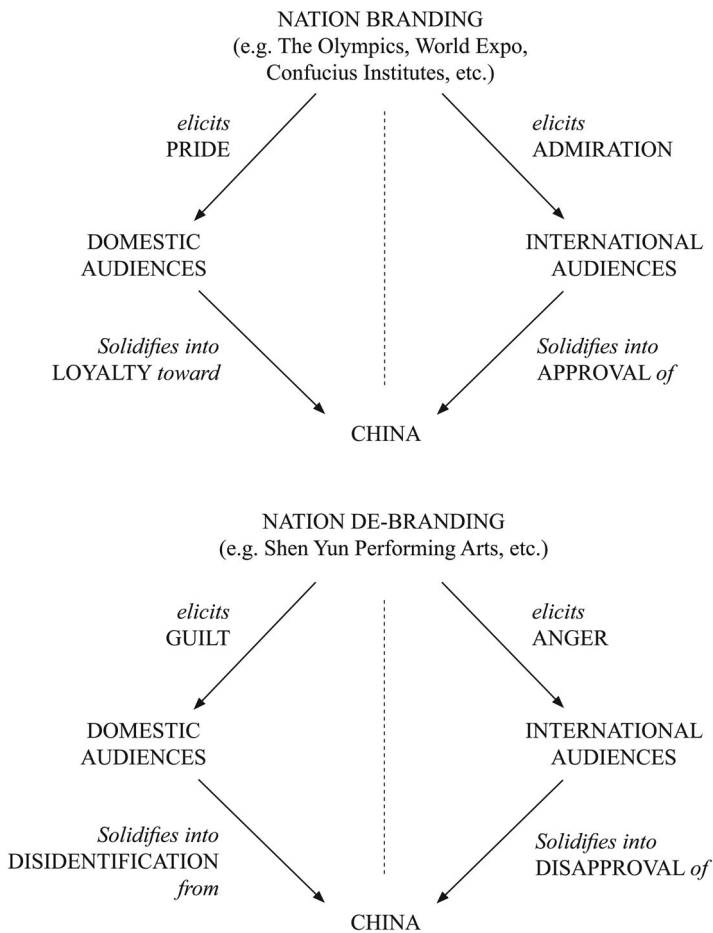
Ahmed (2004) contends that an emotion is a social and cultural practice. She argues instead that emotions "produce the very surfaces and boundaries that allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they are objects" (p. 10). These boundaries, however, do not come from nowhere. Some boundaries are originated from past encounters between the people and objects involved. Emotion is performative in the sense that it both creates new associations and repeats old associations. Emotion is not static, but evolves with the meanings of the objects concerned. Ahmed terms this symbiosis between emotions and objects the "affective economy." Building on Marx's theory concerning the process of capital accumulation, Ahmed suggests that "affect does not reside in an object or sign, but is an effect of the circulation between objects and signs" (p. 45).

In the psychology literature, the tripartite theory of attitude suggests that the attitude one takes toward an object is formed by cognition, behavior and affect (Breckler, 1984). In the affective economy, the affect attached to an object gets intensified with every encounter, and then solidifies into an attitude toward that object. In nation branding, the object is the nation. Each effort in branding and de-branding is an encounter between an audience and the brand of China. In each encounter, emotion is elicited and, gradually, attitude is solidified. To restate the affective logic behind nation branding, the branding of a nation involves a series of experiences that develop positive emotions in the minds of the recipients, which then turn into favorable attitudes toward the nation.

But a more meticulous analysis is needed. Successful branding needs to speak to both domestic and international audiences because branding has to address both "the need for internal integrity and stability and the need to be liked externally" (Barr, 2012, p. 92). Nation de-branding can be considered an effort to invoke negative emotions and unfavorable political outcomes toward a nation. In facing these two types of audiences, the emotional work of nation branding proceeds in two routes. One route concerns the domestic audience and the other concerns the international audience. I acknowledge that some audiences may not neatly fall into either the domestic or the international camp; however, for the analytical purpose of this paper, this dichotomy is adopted. The duplex model proposed here aims to provide a heuristic account that theorizes the interrelationships among nation branding effort, audiences, emotions, and attitudes toward the nation (Figure 3).

### ***The domestic route: pride and guilt***

As Mercer (2014) argues, "emotion goes with identity" (p. 530). Emotion and national identity are tightly connected. In her study of the *Yūshūkan* war museum in Tokyo, Sakamoto (2015) suggests that the images of the soldiers—particularly those of the *kamikaze*—imbue visitors with intense emotions that fuel patriotism and build the sense of Japanese national identity. Similarly, the Olympics and the World Expo in China have addressed the Chinese domestic audience. O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy (2003) accurately sum up the emotional aim of these national events: "To infuse a nation with a sense of pride that helps unite it" (p. 196). Pride, here, is the emotion that the nation branding effort hopes to elicit in the domestic audience.



**Figure 3.** Emotional Duplex of Nation Branding and Nation De-Branding.

In *Strong feelings*, Elster (1999) systematically breaks down emotions, what he calls social emotions, into eight types, according to whether they are “a positive or a negative evaluation of one’s own or someone else’s behavior or character” (p. 21).<sup>5</sup> Pride is an emotion of self-assessment, meaning that the object of the pride is the self. Elster (1999) defines pride as “a positive emotion triggered by a belief *about one’s own action*” (p. 22, emphasis added). However, holding the Olympics or the World Expo is an accomplishment of the China’s state, not the accomplishment of individuals in the domestic audience. Accordingly, it might seem that pride cannot be triggered, because these world events do not result from “one’s own action.” Nevertheless, as Ahmed (2004) reminds us, emotions build upon past encounters between the audience and the nation. Those who have been connected to China may take the accomplishments of the state as their own. The enduring relationship between the state and the citizens makes the two into one. When domestic audiences knew that people from every corner in the world were watching the Beijing Olympics, when they saw the giant 63-meter tall Chinese pavilion dominating the sky during the Shanghai World Expo, or when they heard of foreigners across the world learning Chinese at the Confucius Institutes, they felt pride

in these achievements and in their nation. Favorable attitudes toward the state and national loyalty are gradually developed and reinforced through such encounters.

The case of Falun Gong and SYPA paints an opposite picture. If the feeling of pride moves domestic audiences toward the state, it is the feeling of guilt that drives them away. To de-brand China, Falun Gong would instill guilt in the domestic audience. Like pride, guilt is also a self-assessment emotion (Elster, 1999). It is “a negative emotion triggered by a belief *about one’s own action*” (p. 21, emphasis added). Guilt comes from a negative evaluation of the self against a behavioral standard. The promotional leaflet of SYPA reminds audiences that “Made in China” means nothing but poor in quality and lacking in safety standards. The SYPA performance presents China as a violent persecutor of people who follow the practices of Falun Gong. For those who are citizens of China, learning the dark side of their homeland is uncomfortable. Although it is unlikely that experiencing guilt for an hour or two would make any citizens leave China, the feeling of guilt would intensify as these viewers had more encounters with de-branding efforts. Positive attitudes toward the state would tend to fade, and negative attitudes would build. Becoming less loyal to the state, the domestic audiences would tend to disidentify themselves with China.

### ***The international route: admiration and anger***

It is rare for international audiences to see the good and bad actions of China as their own actions, so the self-assessment emotions of pride and guilt hardly apply to them. For the international audiences, admiration and anger are the operating emotions in the branding or de-branding of China.

Admiration is a specific form of love. Elster (1999) defines admiration as “a positive emotion triggered by a belief *about another’s action*” (p. 22, emphasis added). Love pulls a person toward the other (Ahmed, 2004). The opposite of admiration, according to Elster (1999), is anger, which is “a negative emotion triggered by a belief *about another’s action*” (p. 21, emphasis added). The emotional responses of international audiences toward China’s branding efforts depend on their previous connections with China. In analyzing the responses of Americans to the Beijing Olympics, Wasserstrom (2008) distinguishes two discourses. The first discourse is the American China Dream. People holding this discourse believe that China is learning to follow the democratic way. They appreciate and admire what China is doing. The second discourse is labeled the American China Nightmare. This discourse is held by Americans who see China as a despotic state. To them, actions of China are irritating and disappointing.

Depending on their degrees of positive past contact with China, international audiences may develop admiration for China in response to the country’s branding efforts. Without a doubt, it is such admiration that China wants the international audience to feel, as admiration contributes to a favorable attitude toward—an approval of—China.

The de-branding efforts by SYPA also work in an opposite direction on the minds of international audiences. Actress Margaret O’Brien, in her review of SYPA, says that “we all have to know where we come from. ... I just admire all the people that bring the show because we don’t have enough of our old culture today, in all countries” (“Latest reviews”, Shen Yun Performing Arts, 2014). She “admires” SYPA because they bring back old culture. A subtext behind this statement is that countries that fail to protect and respect their own ancient cultures are blameworthy. Moreover, for people who hold a

China Nightmare discourse when they think of China, such comments remind them of the 1989 Tiananmen Square violence (Wasserstrom, 2008). The persecution scenes in the SYPA performance remind the international audience of China's poor human rights records. Together with other de-branding efforts from Falun Gong, SYPA helps to trigger feelings of anger toward China among its international audience. Through the affective economy, such feelings tend to accumulate and solidify into a general disapproval of China.

## Conclusion

I have argued that eliciting emotion is crucial for a nation branding effort, because emotion allows an audience to develop a long-lasting relationship with the branded nation. Both China and Falun Gong have carefully appropriated the Chinese cultural repertoire, constructing their own "authentic" versions of Chinese culture. The China's state presents a masculinized nostalgia, based on Confucian morality and the image of the old and kindly Confucius, whereas Falun Gong creates a feminized exotic experience in its SYPA shows. Through the representations of selected "authentic" cultural forms, China tries to brand itself as a "peacefully rising" nation that can be a good partner in the international community; meanwhile, Falun Gong seeks to de-brand China from such an image, and to perpetuate the image of China as a despotic state that jeopardize human rights.

This paper addresses the nuanced connection between emotion and nation branding that is often overlooked or understudied in the existing branding and international relations literature. The emotional duplex of nation (de-)branding I propose is structured by an affective logic: the differing presentations of "authentic" Chinese culture elicit emotions in their audiences, and through repeated encounters with similar images or events, emotions are built up and solidified into positive or negative attitudes toward China. This affective logic, nevertheless, operates through two routes for two groups of audiences. Domestic audiences feel either pride or guilt, which are turned into either loyalty or disidentification toward China. International audiences feel either admiration or anger, which can solidify into either approval or disapproval of China. Hutchison and Bleiker (2014) call for theorizing the relationship between emotions and politics at a middle ground level. They point out that while the macro analysis can offer generalizable propositions about the relationship, it does not consider how different emotions manifest in various specific circumstances; the micro analysis, although addressing how various emotions function in specific situations, cannot be extrapolated to a broader context. The duplex model can be seen as a middle-ground pathway between these two approaches. It outlines an affective logic that is generalizable to other branding or de-branding efforts; at the same time, it also specifies particular emotions that are relevant to various audiences in respect to the unique branding or de-branding efforts.

In my analysis, I have heavily relied on existing accounts of nation branding efforts by China and on my first-hand observations of SYPA. This textual approach, however, cannot adequately demonstrate how the four emotions—pride, guilt, admiration, and anger—are manifested and documented in the audience. I hope that the affective logic identified in this paper contributes to an understanding of the role of these emotions in nation branding and de-branding. Future studies can employ visual analyses of the audiences' responses, diary methods, surveys, and interviews to examine the complex emotions of the audiences.

As a Hong Kong Chinese person who was born before Hong Kong's handover to China, I have a fluid sense of national identity. Although politically I belong to China, I speak a different language and have a different lifestyle from my friends in China. For this reason, when I attended the SYPA performance, I experienced both guilt and anger. When I thought of myself as a Chinese citizen, I felt uneasy because my country has suppressed freedom of expression. Yet I also felt angry when I adopted an outsider position. In this sense, the emotional duplex that I have proposed—of differentiating between domestic and international audiences—clearly has its limitations. This duplex model assumes a clear-cut distinction among types of audiences in terms of their political nationality, national identity and cultural identity. The domestic route concerns audiences who are politically Chinese, identify themselves as Chinese and are culturally Chinese. The international route concerns audiences who are non-Chinese in all of these ways. Audiences like me, or members of the Chinese diaspora fall between these two categories. Still, what I hope to demonstrate is that the branding and de-branding efforts used by China and Falun Gong both have the affective capacity to imbue us, whoever we are, with a variety of emotions, and these emotions gradually solidify into political attitudes toward China. The emotional duplex is one of the pathways to theorize the interrelationships among nation branding, audiences, emotions and nations.

## Notes

1. Following Ownby (2008), I do not mean to defend the doctrines of Falun Gong, or to judge whether Falun Gong is a cult, or to condemn China for its human rights record. My analysis is based on viewing SYPA as an ideology-driven cultural enterprise, not on judging Falun Gong as a faith-based organization.
2. Throughout this paper, I use “China’s” to refer to the political state and “Chinese” to refer to the culture.
3. Massumi (2002) differentiates affect from emotion. He sees affect as a pure intensity of feeling, but emotion as a signified experience. For this paper, however, the difference between these two kinds of experience is not critical.
4. The term *ren* as used here differs from *ren* as used in Confucianism, where it means “humanness.”
5. The eight emotions are shame, contempt/hatred, guilt, anger, pridefulness, liking, pride, and admiration.

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