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**The Evolution of Brand
Communication in China:
A Semiotic Perspective on Chinese
Global Brands**

Supervisor

Ch. Prof. Adriano Boaretto

Assistant supervisor

Ch. Prof. Laura Rolle

Graduand

Chiara
Moriano

**Matriculation
number**

876263

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文摘

本文的目的是从符号学的角度分析三个中国全球品牌的引销宣传策略。这些中国的品牌是海尔、华为和联想。这三家公司都是在中国发展时期建立的。这些品牌自成立以来力图打造一个强有力的品牌形象。本文以符号学的角度研究着三家如何获得了全世界的赞誉。随着新的品牌概念的产生，现在的品牌和宣传的重要性跟以前完全不一样。品牌传播和广告深刻影响品牌形象。为了了解海尔、华为、联想的品牌身份，必须分析这些公司的传播战略，即广告。

第一章把中国历史上品牌概念演变的过程分成几个阶段。本章对品牌这个概念下明确的定义后，研究其在现前市场中的重要角色。这一章还分析清朝末期到毛泽东时代中国的广告界对品牌传播概念的起源。除了经常提到的一些最早的广告例子象“白兔”和“同仁堂”，还有毛泽东时代的对“茅台”的广告被用作政治宣传工具。这些广告都很有名，因为它们被视为中国文化的象征。

第二章专注于改革开放时创立的三个全球品牌。这三个品牌的历史是在现代中国快速发展的背景下发展起来的。随着二十一世纪初期互联网的快速发展，信息和消费者意识也随之提高。互联网在品牌传播中起着核心作用。首先，新媒体的出现使得公司能够开辟新的传播渠道。其次，互联网影响了品牌和消费者之间的关系。通过互联网的使用，品牌可以接触到其他国家的消费者，因此必须制定适合这些消费者的传播战略。

这一章还将对亚洲公司的品牌形象提出本人的见解。在二十一世纪初，曾有一些西方营销人员专家批评亚洲公司对品牌的经营方式。这些专家认为某些中国品牌，特别是海尔和联想，不能被视为真正的品牌，原因是海尔和联想的宣传没有达

成某些在西方所普遍公认的标准而无法打造所谓的品牌形象。这些批评来自一组属于西方营销文化的专家，这些营销文化一直以产品品牌为基础。西方批评家还没理解企业文化的概念对品牌战略有多重要。批评的依据是，亚洲品牌，特别是海尔和联想公司，亚洲品牌没有达到被视为品牌的标准。因为亚洲方式认为没有足够重视产品品牌，西方批评家认为他们的方式只会破坏其产形象。但是事实是亚洲品牌是建立在一种文化基础上的，这种文化将企业品牌置于中心位置。根据这一观点，品牌被视为一个整体系统而品牌以多种方式表达自己的身份。产品品牌只是整个品牌认同的一部分，所以品牌战略还应注意企业讲故事、品牌标志、员工福利方案、客户服务等等。西方的体系与亚洲体系最大的区别就是前者主要专注于销售产品。相反，后者专注于企业形象而且建立本品牌各级方面的整合和一致性。

亚洲品牌文化背后的理念影响了当前的品牌概念。事实上，品牌基于一个全面的身份概念。世界各地的品牌现在被认为是一套独特的语言、沟通策略、选择、公司政策、产品和价值。

第三章是关于这三个全球品牌的传播战略案例研究的涉及。品牌传播对于了解品牌和消费者之间的关系很重要。符号学分析有助于识别属于不同传播战略的语言和风格。海尔、华为和联想等全球性品牌不仅面对中国观众，也面对国际公众。因为海尔、华为和联想都是全球性品牌，所以它们传播战略不仅要满足中国消费者的标准，而且要满足国际客户的标准。本章基于对海尔对中国与意大利传播战略的比较研究。另外联想对中国与美国传播战略的比较研究。最后，还有华为对中国与国际市场传播战略的比较研究。

一般来说，对中国的传播战略都利用汉语。这些中国广告涉及中国民族主义、中国文化认同、传统魅力以及技术创新这样的主题。特别是海尔和联想将广告的重

点放在传统与创新之间的对话上。同时，这三个中国品牌成立一种适合国际市场的传播战略。事实上，这三个中国品牌之所以被定义为“全球”是因为它们的身份包括一个全球性特征，也因为它们已经有效地进入了全球市场。除开海尔的意大利广告，其他的国际传播战略都以英语为通用语言。这些国际广告的重点是向国际消费者展示品牌的全球特性。为了这样做，它们的本来品牌价值与国际消费者价值应该结合。因此海尔、华为、联想的全球性主题为：环境保护、机人关系、社会不平等、改善生活的技术等。

论文的最后部分是本人的结论和意见。消费者的需求和期望也受到国家的政治、历史、经济和社会背景的影响。在过去的五十年里，中国面临着许多影响品牌理念和品牌战略的变化。本论文进行的分析表明在这个中国经济活力的时代中国消费者的需求也在发生变化。还可以指出广告反映了消费者对新需求和新价值的追求。其中最有趣的一点是关于国潮风越来越重要。国潮风是最近发展起来的趋势，但许多中国品牌把它作为一项重要的战略资产。这一趋势反映了中国年轻一代对传统的普遍兴趣。由于中国年轻一代的日益增长的购买力，他们表着潜在客户的重要份额。为了满足这些消费者的需求，中国品牌的传播战略将技术和传统结合起来。比如说，联想的“开局”和海尔的“新治家之道”广告，都用幽默语气或怀旧语调强调传统元素。这种趋势不仅仅限于中国的国界。世界知名奢侈品牌与中国年轻设计师的合作导致开发出有趣的产品。这些商品是对中国年轻消费者，特别是 Z 一代非常有吸引力的中国传统元素与奢侈品的结合。最后，进一步的研究和开发将有助于了解诸如奢侈品等新趋势的日益重要。此外，应更多地考虑符号学因为符号学是品牌研究和实地应用的重要战略工具。

Introduction

The purpose of this thesis is to examine how brand communication influences and reflects the identity of three Chinese global brands: Haier, Huawei and Lenovo. The thesis will present how each one of those represents itself in different markets, underlining the key role of brand communication in the constitution of brand identity. Based on a semiotic perspective, the research will show a different way to approach branding and communication. Through the lenses of Semiotics, it will be possible to explore the expression level of brands manifested by corporate storytelling, brand architecture, and communication strategies.

The thesis consists of three chapters: the first defining the evolution of branding in China, the second focusing on the history of the three brands in question, and the third presenting case studies on current communication strategies of such brands.

The first chapter will introduce Semiotics as the main interpretative tool used to approach different issues present in the thesis. A brief overview on the concept of brand will shed a light on the global importance that brand discourse has been having during the last decades. After providing some Chinese terms currently used to identify the concept of brand, the chapter will explore the different phases of branding evolution throughout the history of China. From Late imperial China until the 1980s, the concept of brand had undergone important structural changes that eventually influenced the way today's Chinese brands represent themselves.

The second chapter will provide an overview about brand concept in the first decades of the 2000's. It will be presented an old debate involving Haier and Lenovo and critics about the fact that they could be acknowledged as brands. A main distinction between Asian branding system (Corporate branding) and Western branding system (Product branding) will be carried out to portray the background branding culture of Haier, Huawei and Lenovo. The

following part of the chapter will explore each brand's history, focusing on their communication elements (expression level) and brand identity (content level). The chapter will eventually underline how the Internet revolution influenced brand communication. With the advent of new media, a new consumer power equation rose. Consequently, the relation with consumers and the way brands narrate their identity became two fundamental elements in branding strategies.

The third chapter will present case studies on the three brands communication strategies. After a brief presentation of the main semiotic theories and semiotic analysis tools, the chapter will be divided into three sections. The sections, one for each brand, will be further divided into communicative strategy for China and communicative strategy for Italy (Haier case) or US (Lenovo case) or the international market (Huawei case). The subdivision into six advertising spots will enable a thorough analysis of those brands communication elements which will trigger some conclusion on each brand's identity.

Ads provide evidences that each brand represents itself in a different way, maintaining a consistent brand identity when communicating both in China and in the international context. Furthermore, the semiotic analysis on advertisings offers an interesting perspective about the valorization of each brand's identity.

1. History of Brand Communication in China

1.1- Brand and Semiotics of brand

1.1-1. The semiotic approach

The purpose of this research is to focus on the semiotic approach in analysing Chinese advertising as a useful driver for an understanding of brand communication in today's China. The idea of considering Chinese brand communication as the main object of study lays in the fact that, notwithstanding the potential of semiotics for brand strategies, this approach has been rarely applied in literature regarding Chinese advertisement and generally regarding brand identity and brand communication in China.

This perspective on semiotics of brand and semiotics of advertising, still little known in China, originated in the European context during the second half of the twentieth century. The first pioneer who applied semiotics to advertising was Roland Barthes, a French semiologist who, in 1964, claimed that advertising is built on two levels: an ideological level (connotative¹) which is inscribed in the foreground level of denotation.² This means that an image (denotative level³) presented in an advertisement, reflects an ideological message which conveys connotative elements (to cite some examples we are going to see: nationalism, modernization, tradition).

Even other important academics, such as Umberto Eco and Algirdas J. Greimas, focused on the semiotic analysis of advertising and brand discourse, and in particular Jean-Marie Floch dedicated his studies to find a link between semiotics of advertising and marketing strategies.

¹ "Connotation: the secondary, cultural meanings of signs; or "signifying signs," signs that are used as signifiers for a secondary meaning, e.g., the word "rose" signifies passion". Available at: https://www.uvm.edu/~tstreete/semiotics_and_ads/terminology.html (accessed 15/10/20, at 15.30).

² Traini, S. (2008), *Semiotica della comunicazione pubblicitaria*, Bompiani, Milano.

³ "Denotation: the most basic or literal meaning of a sign, e.g., the word "rose" signifies a particular kind of flower". Available at: https://www.uvm.edu/~tstreete/semiotics_and_ads/terminology.html (accessed 15/10/20, at 15.30).

The semiotic approach, due to its ability of interpreting the deep structures underlying different kinds of *text*⁴, is applicable to the multiple expressions of a brand: from posters to audio-visual texts, and even to the design of a logo or a retail store, which, as will be further examined, belong to the level of expression of the brand. Here lays the performative implication of semiotics for branding: semiotics deals with the expression of the brand but also with the inner mechanism of identity of the brand.

1.1-2. The semiotics of brand and the brand discourse

A brand can be conceived as a semiotic mechanism⁵ as it is able to create a relation between a signifier and a signified, where a signifier can be a logo or a product (level of expression) and a signified can be the core values of a brand (level of content). The semiotic approach to the brand clarifies the reason why communication plays an important role for brands: it is by working on signifiers (logos, advertising, visuality, icons, packaging) that brands can communicate their core values and therefore relate to consumers.⁶

All different signifiers contribute to the constitution of a world of reference around a brand. Consumers relate to such world of reference, experiencing the identity of the brand. Once the consumers get to know the world of reference of a brand, products, visual elements (etc.) of such brand will recall to consumers' mind a set values, related to that "world of brand". This is not an arbitrary association, instead it is a valuable instrument for brands in order to be simultaneously identified on the level of expression (the product) and on the level of content (the values). In other words, consistency is a fundamental issue in the constitution and maintaining of the brand identity and of the relation with consumers: it is not just a

⁴ A text in its semiotic meaning, is a portion of reality which has a meaning for somebody. So, it can be analysed considering its function in its relation to consumers, who will interpret it based on their background competence. (Eco U., *A Theory of Semiotics*, published by arrangement with Bompiani, Milan, Indiana University Press, 1979)

⁵ Rolle, L. (2014), *Semiotica in pratica*, FrancoAngeli, Milano.

⁶ Ibid.

matter of being loyal to consumers, rather it is a synchrony among all the levels of the brand discourse.

Marrone, in his book “Il discorso di marca” (2007), considered the brand as a *discourse*, based on the fact that a discourse occurs when a relation between a level of expression and a level of content exists; moreover a discourse occurs among a teller and its interlocutor and the syncretic nature of the discourse enables a manifestation at a surface level through different kinds of text (verbal, gestures, visual and so on). Nevertheless, such discourse maintains an overall semantic homogeneity and it is itself a manifestation of underlying narrative structures.⁷

A brand is thus a complex reality, which is represented not only by a graphical logo, but also by all the elements constituting the brand identity, signs referring to something else. Nonetheless a brand mainly appears to public through what Floch (2001) called “visual identity”, that is visual elements (colours, shapes, symbols, fonts, images etc.) which, repeatedly shown in the brand discourse, enable consumers to easily recognize the brand.⁸ Advertising has a key role in the transmission of visual contents and in “narrating a brand and its products”.⁹

By relying on the theories of Floch and other semioticians, the following chapters will show how semiotics can be meaningful to brands, as it contributes to maintain the consistency and the communicative effectiveness of a text.¹⁰

⁷ Marrone, G. (2007), *Il discorso di marca*, Editori Laterza, Urbino.

⁸ Rolle L. (2014).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Traini S. (2008).

1.2- Approach to the history of branding

In order to investigate the present stage of evolution of brand in China, a deep analysis throughout the history of Chinese brands is required. Marrone (2007), writing about the history of branding, stated that in order to understand the essence of it (the brand), one should not look at the origin of branding or at its last trend, as if they were the main standards to establish the meaning of “brand”.¹¹ Based on the assumption that Marrone (2007) referred to brand in general (without a specific geographical context), a brand in pre-modern era was a mark on an object or animal assessing somebody’s property on such object or animal; during the Industrial Revolution and after the emergency of the mass consumption, the modern brand arose: it became a necessary tool in order to differentiate one’s product and to attribute quality to it. In the present-day world, the brand has evolved to the point of being bearer of values embodied in products and reflected at each discourse level. Indeed, in the Postmodern Era, “the brand is not subject to a product, rather the product embodies the brand, increasing its symbolic value and providing recognizability”.¹² To better understand this point, Marrone (2007) exemplifies the concept as follows: it is not *Apple* which is subject to the *iPod*, rather it is the product *iPod* to strengthen the tangible and intangible capital of the Apple brand.¹³

Is this perspective as comprehensive for Chinese history of branding as it is for a general history of branding? Without claiming to be exhaustive, the following paragraphs will deal with China’s history of branding in order to trace the different stages of the evolution of branding and therefore examine the perception of brand in today’s China.

¹¹ Marrone, G. (2007).

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

1.3- Brand concept in China

Even though “the popular press in the West, as well as some academic works, often suggest that brands were introduced into China from the West during the early 19th century (Wang 2000)”¹⁴, there are few studies deviating from this and trying to assess that a developed concept of branding already existed before the introduction of Western products in China. As regards to the combination mass consumption-brand, “Holt (2008) suggests that contemporary brands are distinguished from older branding practices by virtue of being mediated by mass culture, providing heuristic shortcuts for consumers, being key tools in consumer identity construction, exploiting cultural tensions, and relying on “magic” to persuade consumers”¹⁵: characteristics that “can transform brand into agents of consumer culture”.¹⁶ Nonetheless, as suggested in the article by Eckhardt and Bengtsson (2010), in premodern China, brands were agents of consumer culture and arose independent from a capitalistic environment, and they used to have image characteristics beyond functional ones.¹⁷

From the Song Dynasty (960–1127) brands started to be a vehicle for social purpose and to support marketing strategies. A more complex society, oriented to consumption, flourished during the Ming dynasty (which corresponds to 1429-1566) and, since material culture became so important and purchase of material symbols reflected one’s social status, it triggered a social mobility.

“An important characteristic of this consumer society, especially during the Ming period, was that consumers routinely made informed distinctions about the kinds of products they

¹⁴ Dong, L., Tian, K., (2011). *Consumer-Citizens of China: The Role of Foreign Brands in the Imagined Future China*, Routledge, New York,

¹⁵ Eckhardt, G.M., Bengtsson, A., (2010). A Brief History of Branding in China. *Journal of Macromarketing* 30(3), 210-221.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

would buy in the marketplace through the use of brands (Hamilton and Lai 1989)".¹⁸ Therefore, brands were a meaningful key driver in consumers' choosing process, moreover consumers, experiencing a choice based on distinctive characteristics of brands, were pioneers in the experience of brand positioning.

The growing private sector of commerce in late imperial China was "comprised of complex distribution systems which enabled the sale of goods outside their area of production", thus it was necessary branding the products with labels showing their origin: *biāoji* and *hào* labels "[identifying producers and sellers, respectively]"¹⁹ appeared on imperial products that were distributed outside of the region for sale. This strategy was useful not only to spread around the name of the brand but also to challenge the phenomena of counterfeit brands: thus a late imperial Chinese consumer in such circumstances was already able to develop a sensitiveness to "the use of attributes beyond labels to distinguish brands in the marketplace (Hamilton and Lai, 1989, 258)".²⁰

Indeed, products such as needles were branded with 号 *hào* labels and showed pictures similar to logos to address quality to the goods.²¹

The concept of modern brands in China is expressed by terms 牌子 *páizi* (trademark), and 品牌 *pǐnpái* (product), which "came into use during the late Qing dynasty in 1904 when brands began to have a legal status".²² 名牌 *míngpái* (famous brand) is an interesting term, closer to the concept we are familiar to: it states a broader concept of brand, where "名" aims at recalling the fame of the brand and its social recognition.

The existence of 标记 *biāoji* and 老字号 *lǎozìhào* labels (currently active terms in Chinese language) is important as it suggests a cultural difference embedded in the nature of branding

¹⁸ Eckhardt, G.M., Bengtsson, A., (2010).

¹⁹ Dong, L., Tian K., (2011).

²⁰ Ibid., 39.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Eckhardt, G.M., Bengtsson, A., (2010).

in China: “The existence of these varied terms, and the concepts they embody, demonstrate the many different meanings of a brand to the Chinese (quality signal, location and family signal, formal and informal) [...] and are used to organize the marketplace”.²³

1.4- Brief history of branding in China

1.4-1. Brand communication in Late Imperial China (10th-19th century)

By taking in consideration the “developed” concept of brand existing during the Ming Dynasty and considering that it triggered a system of brand positioning in a competitive brand environment, it is now helpful to focus on how brand communication was operated in relation to different phases of branding. As a part of the brand discourse, the level of expression is equally important in the aim of exploring the history of Chinese brands; therefore, the thesis will focus on the communication which runs parallel to the constitution of brand identity.

During the Song Dynasty (960–1127), considered as a fundamental starting point for this research, the use of brands as symbolic brand went beyond the basic use of trademarks as a guarantee of quality in Shang Dynasty (ca. 1600-ca. 1046 b.C.): “Brand elements moved beyond (the concept) of just a place or person name and began incorporating pictures along with names, and also became more abstract or symbolic”.²⁴

Taking as an example an advertisement of the white rabbit needle company²⁵, “what is considered the earliest surviving complete brand in the world”²⁶, it is possible to find two elements: a symbolic use of an animal, flanked by the store name “the Liu family’s good

²³ Eckhardt, G.M., Bengtsson, A., (2010).

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ 济南刘家功夫针铺广告 *jǐ nán liú jiā gōng fū zhēn pù guǎng gào* [Advertisement for Liu Jia Kung Fu Needle Shop]. Available at: https://tieba.baidu.com/p/5951551857?red_tag=2146240119 (Accessed: 20/11/20, at 12.30).

²⁶ Eckhardt, G.M., Bengtsson, A., (2010).

needles store in Jinan” and the advice of “using the white rabbit that is in front of the door as recognition”.²⁷ Based on Pierce’s (1839–1914) theory of signs²⁸, a symbol conveys a conventionally established meaning, hence the white rabbit here is both an icon and a symbol: it represents the animal in front of the store (icon), the brand of sewing needles (symbol of the brand) and the white rabbit from a famous Chinese ancient legend (symbol related to feminine energy). These references were well established to attract the target consumer of the needles: illiterate women, who knew about folk culture and felt connected with the “yin” feminine energy that the legend depicts.²⁹

This example shows the strong persuasive power that communication strategy could have in the past and the already existing narrative function of the brand discourse. The use of narrative and figurative elements (the white rabbit) express the ability of the brand in working at different discourse levels. Furthermore, it is possible to consider this example as a visual element that sets up a kind of correlation between the white rabbit icon and the brand identity, resulting in an immediate recognition of the white rabbit as an index of the brand.

Another important example concerns a currently existing Chinese super brand: Tong Ren Tang.³⁰ Established in 1669, during the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), it “was the sole supplier of medicine to the Imperial Palace (Bolu 2002) and it is the oldest surviving brand name for traditional Chinese medicine”.³¹ By examining the brand sign, which still is the modern-day logo, the characters for 同仁堂 *Tóng rén táng* appear vertically inscribed in a circle (fig.1). On both sides of the brand name, two stylized dragons that resemble herb leaves,

²⁷ Eckhardt, G.M., Bengtsson, A., (2010).

²⁸ He, J., Telematics and Informatics (2018), *Examining the dynamic effects of social network advertising: A semiotic perspective*. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2018.01.014>,

²⁹ Eckhardt, G.M., Bengtsson, A., (2010).

³⁰ Wang, J. (2008), *Brand New China: Advertising, Media, and Commercial Culture*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

³¹ Eckhardt, G.M., Bengtsson, A., (2010).

respectively establish a connection with the Imperial Palace and with the medicinal element. On the top of the name lays a pearl symbolizing “the high value of the medicine”.³²



Figure 1. Tong Ren Tang logo³³

The consistency of the brand at other levels of brand discourse is reflected today in its old-fashioned style retail stores, which, faithful to tradition, differentiate themselves from today’s innovative style of many stores, especially in Beijing. This consistency makes the brand survive with its long history in a highly fragmented market and take advantage from the traditional elements very important for some Chinese consumers.

Furthermore, being branded with 号 *hào* label enhanced the social recognition for a brand. Such a distinctive character could guarantee a market share in a competitive market because, “although most Chinese medicines are natural products, the 号 *hào* of the selling firm became an important indication of quality and reliability”.³⁴

1.4-2. Brand communication in Post imperial China

The turn of the nineteenth century into the twentieth implied several social, economic, and political changes, especially for China. During the nineteenth century the Opium Wars meant to China an initial opening to the West, characterized by conflicts and wounds that got

³² Eckhardt, G.M., Bengtsson, A., (2010).

³³ Available at: <http://616pic.com/suca/1kxi22gmz.html> (accessed 20/11/20, at 15.30)

³⁴ Dong, L., Tian K., (2011).

imprinted in China self-representation and influenced the brands discourse and the dynamics of consumption in the following era.

With the beginning of the Republic of China (1912), Chinese government began to play a main role in the development of the consumption sector, even more important than it had been in the past, when “the reigning imperials influenced the meanings that Chinese consumers attached to branded goods, albeit perhaps unmotivated or unintended”.³⁵ Indeed, “After the collapse of the Qing Dynasty, the meanings of branded goods were shaped by multiple institutional forces, both state and domestic private industry, to convey positions of nationalism.”³⁶

The national engagement, fuelled by the republican idea “to rid China of the foreigners”,³⁷ was an important factor in the constitution of antforeign brand campaigns taking place at that time, in which Chinese consumers were urged to use domestic products.³⁸ As claimed in the book *Consumer-Citizen of China* (2011) “the institutional and discursive processes that emerged during this period [were elaborated] to demonstrate that consumption became a primary means for the Chinese people to conceptualize themselves as citizens of a modern nation.”³⁹

We could say that in the moment China began relating to another reality (the West and Japan), also Chinese brands entered a broader, more competitive and fragmented environment, characterized by the presence of foreign brands and products representing the New and the Other.

³⁵ Dong, L., Tian K., (2011).

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Eckhardt, G.M., Bengtsson, A., (2010).

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Dong, L., Tian K., (2011).

In such a disorienting and novel context, Chinese brands, Chinese consumers and the nation itself, started to build up a strong identity force, in some cases able to oppose to the foreign influences that were spreading at geographical, ideological and political levels, and that were conspicuously showing up through foreign products and innovative consumption practices.

Taking as example the narrative of the Chinese brand “918”⁴⁰ analysed on a packaging of cigarettes dating back to 1931, we can notice a few interesting things: the brand name refers to the time China was invaded by Japan (September 18, 1931); moreover the celebrity Zhang Xueliang, general of Kuomintang party, was used as an endorser, “and [this] is one of the first instances of celebrity endorsement in modern branding”.⁴¹ This kind of communication is subtle compared to the one used in other advertisements openly declaring “Please use domestic product”, but could have been even more persuasive to Chinese consumers who were encountering new communication styles introduced by foreign brands.

Considering this, it may be possible to draw up the conclusion that Chinese brands already had an ability to maintain a solid value (opposition to foreign identity) conveying it through innovative ways, imported by foreign communication styles.

This demonstrates that a Chinese cigarettes brand, supposed to stand out in a dynamic and confusing environment of the 1930s, had to employ innovative communicative strategies enhancing the brand recognition. To challenge such a competitive system, those brands needed on one side to maintain values of nationality and on the other respond to the growing needs of Chinese consumers to be modern: they desired “to conceptualize themselves as citizens of a modern nation”.⁴² The 918 brand example shows an evolution of the

⁴⁰ Eckhardt, G.M., Bengtsson, A., (2010), 218.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Dong, L., Tian K., (2011).

communicative style which is not just a matter of themes and content of the brand , but also the kind of narrative and the manner a brand expresses itself.

Considering the narrative of opposition that Chinese brands were performing towards foreign brands at that time, there is an interesting echo to semiotics, which, among other aspects, is based on the opposition of two antipodal elements. In this specific context, one of the principles of brand identity can be found: “Brands use the dialectic system of the identity building, based on the fact that the *self* is determined depending on the *other*, and vice-versa; this is also the basic principle of positioning”.⁴³ In underlining this aspect, it can be acknowledged how a brand, whether as propaganda instrument or not, is strictly related to a complex social context where institutions, people and products influence the brand discourse and get influenced by it. This interconnection suggests that a brand couldn’t exist by itself. A brand develops when related to other subjects, and to other brands, thus its discourse is strategic.⁴⁴

Without discussing the deep relation between Chinese brand discourses and the constitution of the Chinese nation, it might be of great interest to consider the meaning of the *other* (the foreign) in Chinese branding history: the brand system and brand perception inevitably evolved during this time. Thus, without judging the impact that foreign brands had on Chinese brands, it may be stated that the former triggered new ways to approach communication and consumers.

1.4-3. Brand communication in Mao’s Era

From 1949 and throughout Mao Zedong’s presidency, consumption was discouraged and brands that used foreign symbolism were banned.⁴⁵ In particular, “the Cultural Revolution

⁴³ Marrone, G. (2007).

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Eckhardt, G.M., Bengtsson, A., (2010).

(1966–1976) brought an abrupt end to the budding commercial advertising”.⁴⁶ Wang (2008) claims that “with the exception of Chairman Mao himself, brands did not exist in China from 1949 until 1978, nor did the notion of mass consumerism”.⁴⁷

Moreover, the notion of national products, embedded in the previous decades, was now exacerbating the division of “products into domestic and foreign and attaching respectively positive and negative nationalistic meanings to them”.⁴⁸ Even though several studies suggest that a total cultural rupture happened in the passage from capitalist period to communist period, it is important to underline that the aforementioned nationalism constituted a common factor and a common aim between the two different stages. From a marketplace point of view, the decisions brought by the Communist Party inevitably influenced the balance created during the former period: the banning of foreign brands and foreign names meant for Chinese brands less competitiveness and a chance for some of them to build a strong brand identity, thanks to endorsement from the Communists. A meaningful example is the ancient Maotai 茅台酒 (*Máotái jiǔ*) liquor brand: since it was used as the official liquor in banquets celebrating the republic, constituted a strong value of Chinese identity and nationalism. Due to its core value and to the Party’s endorsement, the brand was used during the historical presidential visit of Nixon in 1972. It was the first time in history that an American president visited China and it may be suggested that the role of Mao Tai liquor was more important than an icebreaker with a foreign president: the liquor conveyed the value of Chinese nationalism.

The image and the meaning of the liquor in that event probably got impressed in the collective imaginary where liquor Maotai, and *báijiǔ* 白酒(liquor) in general, represented an

⁴⁶ Wang, J. (2008), 8.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 25.

⁴⁸ Dong, L., Tian K., (2011), 41.

important element during banquets, as symbol of conviviality; indeed, “In recent decades, baijiu has become a pillar of banquet dinners, where it is used to give toasts until a bottle of the high-proof liquor is empty”⁴⁹, making of this costume an active expression of Chinese culture. The motif of dinner gatherings and parties has been predominant in Mao Tai advertising posters from the 60s on, constituting an important theme and element for the communication of the brand.⁵⁰ This event shows how culture is permeated by visual and narrative contents which enable historical events and brands to become an icon, and perhaps a symbol; this is what happens when a brand, after a long process of identity construction within the common imaginary, eventually can be considered a brand.

The downside is that the social revolution of the ‘60s-‘70s had brought a sterile commercial landscape in which “any promotion on billboards was limited to political slogans, perhaps a Mao Zedong thought or government propaganda for productivity and political education, as well as family planning in late 1980s (Croll, 2006) ”.⁵¹

1.4-4. Brand communication during 改革开放 *Gǎigé kāifàng* (The Open Door Policy): the ‘80s

Gǎigé kāifàng, policy which determined an opening to the West and a reforming plan to enhance China’s economy, was introduced in 1979 by Deng Xiaoping, Mao’s successor. The reform restructured “China’s centrally planned economy, where state-owned enterprises produced three-quarters of China’s goods”⁵², although, many scholars claim that the Chinese

⁴⁹ Griner, A. (2016) “The Chinese culture of drinking baijiu”, *China Daily*, 13-04 [online]. Available at: http://beijing.chinadaily.com.cn/2016-04/13/content_24530465.htm (Accessed 18/11/2020, at 11:50).

⁵⁰ “历次茅台酒广告大全，你见过几个？” *lì cì máo tái jiǔ guǎng gào dà quán, nǐ jiàn guò jǐ gè?* [How many Maotai commercials have you already seen?]. (2018-04-08). Available at: <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1597100852221369079&wfr=spider&for=pc> (Accessed 18/11/2020, at 15:00).

⁵¹ Dong, L., Tian K., (2011), 42.

⁵² Ibid.

“market from 1978 to 1990 was dominated by state-owned trademarks rather than brands (Croll 2006)”.⁵³

The aim was implementing socialism through economic development on one hand while maintaining a contention of consumerism on the other. For such purpose, at the beginning of the ‘80s the government promoted movements and ideological campaigns, such as Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign (清除精神污染 *qīngchú jīngshén wūrǎn*), to emphasize “the importance of simple and frugal living and rejected worshipping material possessions and the idea that consumption can bring happiness”.⁵⁴ However, between 1984 and 1988 Chinese citizens could enjoy the consumption of a variety of consumer goods, condition proving the ambivalent attitude of the government which “aimed at encouraging spending”.⁵⁵ Such “first wave of consumption” implied, besides the spread of durable goods (e.g. bicycles, colour television sets), “the introduction of Western brands, the emergence of retail sites, and awareness of fashion”.⁵⁶

This is a crucial point in Chinese consumer culture and in the Chinese perception of Western brands because their discredited image got “transformed into an image of a desired destination fostered by the new reform government’s bid to modernize and ‘catch up with the West’ (Croll 2006)”.⁵⁷

Amid the unceasing offers of foreign consumer goods which were now welcome by Chinese consumers, Chinese brands were facing a troubled time because of their incapability to keep the pace with Western brands. Chinese brands had to face a fast-changing marketplace,

⁵³ Dong, L., Tian K., (2011), 42.

⁵⁴ Zhao, X., Belk, R.W. (2008). Politicizing Consumer Culture: Advertising’s Appropriation of Political Ideology in China’s Social Transition. *Journal of consumer research* 35 (2), 231-244.

⁵⁵ Dong, L., Tian K., (2011), 44.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

hesitation and pressure from an ambiguous government, and a continuous imbalanced situation with foreign brands which fiercely wanted to enter the Chinese market.

Furthermore, advertising and communication strategies had to conform to socialist contents to flee from social disapproval, indeed “advertising in 1980s China was vulnerable to political fluctuations and was often the target of ideological criticism. To justify itself, advertising continuously adapted to the latest Chinese communist ideological campaigns, even those condemning advertising”.⁵⁸

1.4-4.1. Shanghai watch and Citizen: a comparison between two different watches

In order to investigate how brand communication developed in the unusual environment of 1980s China, it may be helpful to compare the communication strategy of a Chinese brand(上海牌 *Shanghaipái*) and a Japanese one (Citizen) for the selling of the same product category: the wrist watch.

Shanghai watch

Founded in the mid-1950s in Shanghai, Shanghai watch brand gained much success and its watches became elements of pride for many Chinese people, since they were the favourite branded watches of Prime Minister Zhou Enlai, who wore one at national and international congresses.⁵⁹ Since then, Shanghai watches started to be known as “national watches”⁶⁰, linked to the values of Chinese nationalism and pride (like Maotai during Mao’s Era). Due to the limited supply and high price of these luxury goods in the ‘70s, Chinese men wanted

⁵⁸ Zhao, X., Belk, R.W. (2008), 237.

⁵⁹ 从经典到时尚：周恩来自愿为上海牌手表“代言”*cóng jīng diǎn dào shí shàng: tā zì yuàn wèi shàng hǎi pái shǒu biǎo "dài yán"* [From Classic to Trendy: Zhou Enlai has voluntarily been the “voice” for Shanghai Watches] (13/02/2014) Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20150402134809/http://news.163.com/14/0213/11/9KV804P400014AEE.html> (Accessed 19/11/20, at 12:00).

⁶⁰ 限量“上海牌”怀旧手表 *xiàn liàng "shàng hǎi pái" huái jiù shǒu biǎo* [Limited Shanghai nostalgic watch] (15/04/2014). Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20140918161801/http://xmwb.news365.com.cn/mj/201404/t20140415_1012716.html (Accessed 19/11/20, at 15:00).

to possess a Shanghai watch which soon became a status symbol: an erstwhile popular saying stated that, if one did not wear a Shanghai watch, he would not have had a chance to get marry. Taking into account what Marrone (2007) states about the brand becoming a status symbol, this event is a watershed in the history of Chinese branding, because a brand switches from being a standard from differentiation of mass production and quality warranty, to be a status symbol, i.e. a brand which is valuable by itself, as a *griffe*.⁶¹ Thus, it is understandable in 1980s China, as in many other countries, the brand became for consumers an “object” to be exhibited in order to express a social status. According to that, brands gain value due to their brand name and distinguish themselves from non-branded items: this explains why to possess a Shanghai watch in 1980s China enabled men to be socially distinguished from ordinary men who possessed non-branded watches.

In parallel with the development of the idea of brand, Shanghai brand logo carries out innovative solutions relative to visual identity, level of expression and narratives bound to the brand. The logo presented the two Chinese characters for Shanghai in cursive style. It is a peculiarity that the logo’s technicians selected those characters from Mao’s calligraphy⁶², which not only adds an artistic taste to the logo, but also represents a commitment to the figure of Mao and to the Chinese nation in general. It can be suggested that drivers for the design of such logo are close to a modern perception of logo and brand discourse. The modernity of such logo not only strengthened the core values of the brand, but also allowed the brand to be competitive in a saturated environment and enhanced its positioning in the luxury market of watches in 1980s China.

⁶¹ Marrone, G. (2007).

⁶² 上海牌手表：中国人民的志气和荣耀 *shàng hǎi pái shǒu biǎo:zhōng guó rén mín de zhì qì hé róng yào* [Shanghai Watch: Chinese People's Ambition and Honor] (02-11-2011), *China Daily*. Available at: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/dfpd/bj/2011-11/02/content_14024385.htm (Accessed 19/11/20, at 16:00).

Citizen

In considering Citizen brand, it is helpful to showcase the ads related to each brand, exploring the competitors' communication in the same Chinese market.



Figure 2. 1980s poster ad for Shanghai watch ⁶³

The 1980s ad for Shanghai watches shows a simple style, characterized by few important elements, neatly displayed on the poster (fig.2): two Shanghai watches and a tidy list of the product main features work as a frame for “上海”(Shanghai), the brand logo placed in a predominant central position. Such layout, different from the ones used in pre-Mao’s Era advertising, is based on the balance between elements which could be interpreted as a recall to the traditional philosophical idea of balance rooted in Chinese ancient culture. The use of characters is concise and the language is limited to depicts the product features in a basic and calculated way: each point of the list is structured upon four characters, reminding the typical structure of *chengyu* (成语), Chinese idioms. All these elements contribute to build a practical definition of the brand. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy the absence of socialist

⁶³ 80年代家居商品广告令人终生难忘 *bā shínián dài jiā jū shāng pǐn guǎng gào lìng rén zhōng shēng nán wàng* [Home merchandise advertising of '80s is unforgettable] (2014-10-29), Available at: <https://m.biud.com.cn/news-view-id-466016.html> (Accessed 23/11/20 at 20:00).

baggage and references which at the time constituted for brands an element to break through the marketplace. It is hard to establish if this was a communication choice by the brand, but considering other advertising posters of those years, the absence of the socialist language is a quite important element of distinction. In fact, in contrast to the communicative style of Shanghai brand in such advertising, it can be observed that Japanese Citizen brand opted for another narrative in the ad (fig. 3) on December 16, 1983: the watches lay on the bottom of the poster, while Tiananmen square at night (the cradle of socialism) occupies the top.



Figure 3. Poster for 1983 ad for Citizen watch ⁶⁴

The square is recognizable due to the three communist palaces⁶⁵ prominently highlighted, which represent the symbolic elements of socialism in China. The brand logo stands out, above the centre of the square, “replacing the red star that symbolizes the CCP and that usually occupies this position in propaganda posters”.⁶⁶ This position makes the logo look like the hands of the Citizen clock; whose face is the nighty square. The original logo is displayed at the bottom of the poster, near the Chinese transliteration of Citizen brand name:

⁶⁴ Available in Zhao, X., Belk, R.W. (2008), 237.

⁶⁵ Memorial Hall of Chairman Mao, Monument to the Heroes of the People, the Great Hall of the People.

⁶⁶ Zhao, X., Belk, R.W. (2008), 238.

西铁城 *xī tiě chéng*, literally “west iron city”. As claimed by Zhao and Belk (2008), the name “conveys a sense of being masculine and modern”⁶⁷, values reinforced by the announcement about the mission of the brand: the extension of Citizen’s services network in China provides the technologies to enhance Chinese modernization.

This mission complies to the general attempt of realizing one of the Four Modernization⁶⁸: the technological. Furthermore, following the narrative of the ad, the realization of modernization is not an abstract utopia anymore, rather it is something that can be built by each person who wears a Citizen watch. Through these premises, it can be seen how the ad highlighted the empowerment that an object could bring to people. This advertisement is appealing for Chinese consumers in a way that differs from the appeal created by Shanghai watch advertisement, since the narrative is totally different and helps to target the brand with an idealistic definition. It is interesting to note how a Japanese brand entered a culturally hostile environment where consumers suffered from a humiliating past and were devoted to their national identity. Furthermore, Citizen brand was also able to build a communication strategy based on the desires of the Chinese society at that time, and a subtle narrative in which the modernity of the nation could be achievable with the support of everyone, by the purchase of a Citizen watch. It is noteworthy that such narrative, playing up the notion of the individual commitment for the greater good, reflects socialist ideals and the national narrative.

Such communication strategy may be considered as a great step forward towards the understanding of the still debated ambiguity between communism and consumption in China,

⁶⁷ Zhao, X., Belk, R.W. (2008), 238.

⁶⁸ The Four Modernizations regarded the following fields: Agriculture, Defence, Science, Technology and Industry.

and of the modern evolution of Chinese brand communication. Indeed, “consumption of the status-evoking Citizen watch is justified as part of the modernization project”.⁶⁹

Without claiming which is the best communicative practice, it is interesting to consider the idea that brand identity, including the communication level, is built up on the relation with the other brand.⁷⁰

Chinese branding system faced a very critical and very important moment during the 1980s. Nevertheless, it could be pointed out that Citizen might have leveraged on social and political changes occurring in that period to build an impressive brand communication. Chinese society was recovering from the past choices of Mao, while orienting towards a new approach towards welfare of the nation. The brand, instead of creating an identity bound to the figure of communist representatives, decided to identify with the new socialist ideology. If such an assumption was true, it would be right to acknowledge to the Citizen brand a wise adoption of communicative strategy and brand positioning, during a delicate moment in Chinese history.

Ultimately, the research underlines the strong connection between brand sphere and politics sphere, that in China, as it happened in the West, is based on shared values which are expressed and strengthened through public image and communication. Brands took advantage of such elements in different ways, strengthening the relation with the consumer-citizen of China (Shanghai brand being endorsed by Zhou Enlai and Mao, and Citizen brand by using the socialist narrative and wisely exploiting the Four Modernizations).

⁶⁹ Zhao, X., Belk, R.W. (2008), 238.

⁷⁰ Marrone, G. (2007).

1.4-5. Brand communication in the '90s and the first steps toward the 2000s

Wang (2008) noticed that Chinese branding sector “took a dramatic turn to image design”⁷¹ at the end of the 1980s: in 1988 the Chinese health-drink manufacturer Apollo (太阳神 *Tàiyáng shén*) adopted, via Japan (considered a western brand), the CIS strategy⁷² which, among other aspects, focused on a development of the visual identity of the brand. Apollo managers started to acknowledge the importance of visual identity and its cash value, making of “image design” (形象设计 *xíng xiàng shè jì*) one of the pillars in the constitution of the brand identity and brand discourse in China. Many other brands followed the path of Apollo, making “the Chinese public all the more aware of the importance of corporate logos, mascots and image culture in general”.⁷³ This episode, as Wang (2008) claims “was a watershed event not only for a commercial culture takeoff but also for a visual culture renaissance in post-Mao China”.⁷⁴

The analysis of Apollo’s logo (see fig.4) will be useful to understand how the visual identity has an important impact on a brand image: over a period of four years, significantly helped the brand to boost profits and to become a huge corporation, still famous in China today.



Figure 4. Apollo brand logo⁷⁵

⁷¹ Wang, J. (2008), 26.

⁷² Corporate Identity System includes mind identity (company’s philosophy of management), behaviour identity (concrete development) and visual identity.

⁷³ Wang, J. (2008), 26.

⁷⁴ Ibid., preface, X.

⁷⁵ Available at: <http://www.apollo.com.cn/about/detail.aspx?code=002004¤tcode=002004003> (Accessed 25/11/2020, at 12:00).

The logo presents the stylized figures of a red sun and a triangle shaped element which resembles letter A, the initial of Apollo's brand name. The English name of the brand is capitalized and placed below the stylized A, while the Chinese name 太阳神 (the God of the sun) appears on the bottom of the logo. The rounded edge font used for ideograms reminds about the circularity of the sun and the red colour creates a visual link between the two elements. The red colour in Chinese culture symbolizes happiness, success, and the Chinese nation, and appears in many Chinese logos.

The integration of the English translation of the brand name in the logo is an important element suggesting a deep change in the brand communication, making of Apollo's strategy an example of what was happening in the broader framework of China. Indeed, the '80s - '90s created the basis for the flourishing of brand cooperation between Chinese and foreign companies, resulting in an intercultural character of Chinese brand communication. The outbreak of many brand cooperations in China at the end of '80s, meant a large penetration of international brands in the Chinese market, but also allowed a gradual integration of foreign methods in the building of a strong Chinese brand identity and brand discourse.

The "increasingly integrative approaches to brand management and communication"⁷⁶ are reflected for example, in the constitution of new joint ventures whose name was typically the result of a combination of Chinese and English brand names in cooperation. As Polfuß claims, "in the 1990s, Chinese consumers were enthusiastic about Western brands, but ill-informed"⁷⁷, thus Chinese brands leveraged on joint ventures and brand cooperations to obtain a domestic share, while enhancing experience in communication strategies.

⁷⁶ Jonas Polfuß (2020): "Made in China" and Chinese Brand Management Across Cultures: A New Matrix Approach, *Journal of International Consumer Marketing*, 5. DOI: 10.1080/08961530.2020.1731900.

⁷⁷ Ibid.,11-12.

If the 1988 Apollo's logo represents a development in Chinese brand communication on one side, it also anticipates the blossom of advertising agencies which helped the diffusion of a new visual culture and enhanced the importance of the brand's visual identity. Advertising gained a lot of attention also from the government, as demonstrated by the approval of Chinese Advertising Law in 1995, including among others, articles about the prohibition of using the Chinese National flag and figures and the prohibition of using adjectives like "the best".⁷⁸

In summary, throughout the 1990s, brand communication and advertising became well integrated in Chinese corporate branding system. Nonetheless, while China started to focus on American theories about advertising and marketing, at the end of the century consumption was already moving on the internet and it required marketers to rethink the relation with Netizens and "the one-on-one dialogue through broadband".⁷⁹ Albeit China's technological infrastructure was not yet as developed as the American one, the main problem was that the larger share of Chinese population had as a primary medium television and not the Internet. For this reason, for long time Internet advertising in China was left aside, in anticipation of a higher purchasing power from Generation Y, the first familiarizing with the Internet.

In the 2000s a different context defined Chinese market: Chinese brands were successfully operating also due to an increasing consumer consciousness about domestic and foreign brands, enhanced by a larger participation in the internet community. Thus, Chinese brands, understanding the growing need of consumers to be offered more than an international brand

⁷⁸ "Advertisement Law of the People's Republic of China – 1995", www.lehmanlaw.com, available at: <http://www.lehmanlaw.com/resource-centre/laws-and-regulations/advertising/advertisement-law-of-the-peoples-republic-of-china-1995.html> (Accessed 25/11/2020, at 16:00).

⁷⁹ Wang, J. (2008), 27.

name, started to draw a path to “independence”, consisting in new marketing investments oriented to become “strong, independent brands that can be marketed at home and abroad”.⁸⁰

In conclusion, the encounter, the collaboration and the detachment from foreign brands, enabled Chinese brands to focus on a new concept of brand identity which marks a turning point towards the Chinese brands existing today, including global players such as Lenovo, Haier and Huawei.

⁸⁰ Polfuß, J. (2020), 12.

2. The first twenty years of 2000: the cradle of Global Chinese brands

2.1- The third millennium: a shifting paradigm for Chinese brands

The subdivision between the first and the second chapters of this thesis happens to coincide with the beginning of the new century: it doesn't mean to establish a rupture on a timeline concerning the brand evolution in China. Nevertheless, the division between the eras is a choice guided by the will to offer the neatest context possible, able to depict the birth of today's Chinese global brands.

As every process, the evolution of Chinese brands and brand communication in China is a dynamic continuum and so shall be intended. Indeed, the transition from the 20th century to the 21st century neither corresponds to nor is the reason for the switch from an older way to operate brand communication and the anew.

Looking at the end of the 20th century it is possible to detect some early important factors which radically influenced the paradigm of brand communication in China and in the overall world. Among the factors shaping the brand discourse and the relation with consumers, we can find the spread of the internet and the integration of storytelling in corporate culture.

This thesis doesn't exclude the existence of other factors, nonetheless the focus on internet and corporate culture is appropriate to the extent of what the research is finalized to. As it can be evinced from literature about Chinese global brands such as Haier and Lenovo, 1990s China offered the conditions for the blossom of homegrown brands with strong identity which have now become global giants.

This chapter intends to focus on the history of three Chinese global brands which, born at the beginning of the '80s, were both able to adopt unique communication strategies and to keep the pace with the Internet and the development of new media. Along with that, the chapter will investigate how internet influenced the relationship between companies and consumers, since the time it became widely used from masses. The brands in case are Haier, Lenovo and Huawei, respectively operating in white good sector (home appliance), Pc sector, and telecommunication industry. The illustration of such brands history is also aimed at closely observing the subject of study of the third chapter dealing with a semiotic analysis of today's communication strategy operated by each of them.

2.2- Corporate culture and corporate storytelling: the Asian way of branding

Haier, a home appliances manufacturer founded in Qingdao in 1984, is an example for peculiar organizational elements which shed light on Chinese corporate storytelling and corporate culture. The focus on how Haier and other main Chinese brands have approached corporate culture, not only offers a closer investigation to each brand evolution, but also highlights crucial points in the history of branding in China. Before deepening the research in the history of the three global brands organizational strategy and culture, an overview on an event taking place in 2005 could be meaningful to such investigation for a variety of reasons.

The event, also reported by Wang in *Brand New China* (2008), corresponds to an interview by the People's Daily to Shelly Lazarus, at that time CEO of Ogilvy & Mather Worldwide advertising agency. In order to defend herself from a previous thorny declaration in 2004 stating "so far China has no brands in any real sense"⁸¹, in 2005 interview, Lazarus affirmed:

⁸¹ Lazarus quoted in Wang, J. (2008), 145.

“I never said that Haier and Lenovo are not brands. They are brands. They are brands with huge potential. They are just not yet as fully developed as brands can be”.⁸²

Premising that this thesis does not take sides, Lazarus’ declaration rises few important issues. First, worth mentioning is the public and global nature of a debate around brand strategies, not only important because it took place at the beginning of the 21st century, but also because it initiated a confrontation between Western and Asian branding models. This might suggest that Lenovo and Haier in 2004 were already growing in importance in the global scene. In addition, the discussion triggered a reassessment of both strategical models in the subsequent years, as witnessed by Wang who, lately in 2008, stated: “the West is reassessing the value of corporate branding while an entrepreneurial China finds itself actively engaged in learning about the tricks of brand management”.⁸³ This is an evidence that corporate branding, carried on by Chinese and Asian corporations, is important for brand discourse as much as product branding. To better explore these two concepts of branding, which are not mutually exclusive, this paragraph sticks to Lazarus’ interview by extrapolating critics and point of views to analyse.

The main critique Lazarus moved towards Chinese brands, affirming that “advertising which doesn't help to build the brand may well generate short-term returns but will not generate longer term growth”⁸⁴, could be referred to a business model, common to Asian companies. It might be possible to affirm that, in Lazarus’ opinion, the problem lays in a marred business model which, by nature, couldn’t bear the opportunity of going global because of its intrinsic inability in creating long-term branding strategy, as evidenced by inadequate advertising. Lazarus’ pinpointing a lack of commitment from Asian brands in building marketing

⁸² Available at: http://en.people.cn/200502/27/eng20050227_174878.html, (accessed 05/12/20, at 10.15).

⁸³ Wang, J. (2008), 147.

⁸⁴ Available at: http://en.people.cn/200502/27/eng20050227_174878.html, (accessed 05/12/20, at 10.30).

strategy, is partly accounted for by the American marketer's background of that time, totally focused on marketing and branding of products.

Indeed, Lazarus' declaration could be representative of a wider aim, made by American marketers, of emerging with the most efficient branding strategy applicable to every market. As witnessed by fervid debates taking place during those years, the presumption of Americans was based on the distinction between a trade-dominant Asian logic, prioritising distribution and relying on short-term tactics, and a Western marketing paradigm, dedicated to product branding and marketing.⁸⁵

Since then, a spread belief among American marketing specialists claimed that the so called "Chinese corporate-centric paradigm"⁸⁶ would have hindered the chance for Chinese brands to go global.

Here lays the misleading point of view that Lazarus, and probably the overall American marketing specialists, used to have at that time. Although it was, and still is, fundamental for brands to have a strong communication strategy for product branding, a lot of attention shall be put on the overall corporate branding, as it takes part to the brand discourse. To build an overall consistent brand identity, none of the expressions of the brand discourse shall be neglected. That is the reason why American marketers had a partial vision of the future of Chinese global brands.

The Asian aptitude towards corporation culture, whether Asian brands knew it or not, already constituted a fundamental element for brand constitution as it is intended today. Evidence of that can be observed in today's world, where the interest for the overall brand discourse has been growing in importance for every brand, especially during the last decade. Without

⁸⁵ Wang, J. (2008), 146.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 147.

claiming with absolute certainty that Chinese brands in the late '90s had already guessed the need to consider and communicate the brand as “a whole”, it might be possible to identify them as forerunners of the present-day concept of brand.

This perspective can be enhanced if one looks at the cultural diversity underlying Chinese brands architectures that inevitably influenced their brand communication system. Without any pretence of articulating how companies' architecture works, as this pertains to Management domain, the paragraph only intends to provide an overview on two opposite brand structure models, the American and the Asian, and on the implication they had on brand communication.

Western organizations at that time were typically structured around a sub-brand strategy (or “House of brand”), the approach giving “priority to product branding over corporate branding”.⁸⁷ In contrast, Asian corporations such as Mitsubishi, Sony, and soon after Haier, due to the branded-house strategy, were favoured “to extend product lines under the umbrella of a master brand”, and “create strong leverage for their offerings across product lines”.⁸⁸

The neat difference among such organizational structures, which undoubtedly influenced each brand constitution process, doesn't give the right to Western marketers to consider the Asian one as a marred system and “profit-conscious trading culture”.⁸⁹ Instead, the existence of an umbrella strategy and, more important, of a corporate brand equity⁹⁰ in Asia at the beginning of the 2000s is an important element to remark how different global markets give rise to different marketing needs and consumer expectations. Nonetheless, this is not a reason

⁸⁷ Wang, J. (2008), 146.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Brand Equity: “Aaker (1991) defined brand equity as a set of assets and liabilities linked to a brand that adds to or subtracts from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and/or to that firm's customers.” In Lee Chuen Cheng, *Brand Sensitivity and Consumer Buying Behavior: An Exploratory Study of Proprietary Chinese Medicine*, in “Journal of China Marketing Volume 6 (2)”, 29, September 2017, Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

to avoid foreign markets, as the thesis will explain. With these premises it is possible to drive an important conclusion about the debate on Asian brands: the concept of brand cannot be reduced to product brand equity, on which American marketers had been building brand strategy for decades; such perspective has not been efficient for years now, since the spread of internet influenced consumers perception of brand. Instead, in order to keep the pace with the time, attention shall be put on corporate brand equity and the expression of the brand at every discourse level.

The overview aims at evidencing how different brand architectures imply different communication strategies. Moreover, a strong communication strategy based on building an emotional bond with consumers, doesn't necessarily correspond to a sub-brand architecture, and vice versa. This leads to another important issue raised by Lazarus. She claimed that Chinese brands' lack in creating emotional bonding with foreign customers would have discriminated their chances to become global brands: in order to have a strong global identity, "Chinese brands have to establish and maintain an 'emotional' bond with local consumers (abroad)".⁹¹

Haier's lack in the establishment of emotional bond with foreign consumers, seems from Lazarus perspective the one and only natural consequence of a marred business culture which emphasises short-term gains.⁹² The assumption of Lazarus, criticising Haier way of doing advertising abroad, might be explained considering the brand architecture in question (the Asian) and the "limits" that such brings to brand communication. Haier, due to its corporate equity, has always branded its product with the "Haier" logo, thus it is more difficult to create an emotional bond with target consumers belonging to different social and economic realities and buying totally different category products. The corporate brand equity

⁹¹ Available at: http://en.people.cn/200502/27/eng20050227_174878.html, (accessed 05/12/20, at 14.00).

⁹² Wang, J. (2008), 146.

though, on the contrary, proves that this might not be a limit, because the emotional relation with consumers shall not be limited to communication strategies based on target related advertising or, in general, on product advertising. As long as a sub brand is related to its own advertising campaign it is not possible to enrich the corporate brand equity.

As the thesis is trying to explore, brand communication is not just a matter of advertising products; it is a complex set of elements which relates to issues such as how a company tells its story and how a company manages its brand discourse, issues that are not just limited to the advertising context. Taking as example Haier, the next paragraph will provide evidence on how it was possible to build a strong communicative strategy focusing on other elements rather than advertising spots, and how the unique brand Haier significantly enhanced, and not limited, Haier brand identity.

2.3- Haier

2.3-1. The constitution of Haier brand identity: between corporate storytelling and branded entertainment

Lazarus, who doubted about chances that brands like Haier 海尔 had in communicating with local consumers abroad, didn't consider few elements, which were already inscribed in Haier history at that time: on one side, Haier created a communication strategy in order to establish a relation with foreign consumers, while on the other, its organizational storytelling had already established a solid brand narrative for connecting to Chinese consumers.

Ranked 68th in the Global Top 100 Brands list according to BrandZ 2020, with a brand value of \$16.3 billion, Haier is the leading IoT ecosystem brand in the world.⁹³

⁹³Available at:

https://www.haier.com/global/active/brandz2020/?spm=net.31999_pc.hg2020_home_live_20200717.5
(accessed 07/12/20, at 09.30).

The leader of the entrepreneurial spirit that drove the brand to global success is Zhang Ruiming, Haier CEO since 1993. Still elaborating important models for business management, such as the latest 人单合一 *rén dān hé yī*⁹⁴(Business Model Innovation), Zhang Ruiming has been a noteworthy manager for many reasons, first of all, for his ability in building a winning corporate branding strategy based on important communication pillars: the organizational tales interwoven at the workers level, permeated the company from the inside towards the outside, and eventually reached consumers thanks to advertising, cartoon marketing and so on. Wang (2008) suggested that, although marketing value of storytelling was rediscovered by American corporation around 2003, a long tradition of myths and storytelling culture had already been characterizing Chinese culture for centuries. It is noteworthy and no accident that Zhang Ruiming and Liu Chuanzhi (Lenovo founder and chairman since 1984) were sent-down youth during the Cultural Revolution and early developed storytelling skills, because telling stories was one of the few available pastimes in the Mao era. Of course, the education of these chairmen is rooted in Maoist culture as Haier and Lenovo narratives evidenced at some discourse levels, but the majesty lays in how they adapted and leveraged such narratives for company organizational culture.

2.3-2. How a brand tells its story: Corporate Storytelling

One historical event which marks the start to the mythmaking of Haier occurs in 1985, a year after Zhang took over the company. When he found dozens of defective refrigerators, called a meeting with the employees to make them smash the defective products. “As a result, a sledgehammer, accompanied by the loud noises, really woke up the quality consciousness of the Haier people”⁹⁵ which started to make of quality the driver of product innovation and

⁹⁴ A model where “every employee should directly face the users and create user value. Employees should realize their own value through creating value for users.” Cited from www.haierresearch.com/home?spm=net.32045_pc.hg2020_into_innovate_20210409.5 (accessed 07/12/20, at 10.10).

⁹⁵ Available at: <http://smart-home.haier.com/en/gsls/> (accessed 07/12/20, at 16.30).

this meant for the company a national quality prize a few years later. Due to such episode, which is praised on Haier website historical section⁹⁶, one of the core values, still representing the brand today, was neatly delivered: the quality control of the product, much sought after by Chinese consumers and for international consumers. It is curious indeed, that from such value it is possible to better understand the English slogan related to the brand name: “Haier” sounds like “higher”, meaning an ongoing quest for the best performance and quality, and also a metaphorical image for “globalization”.⁹⁷ To dispose of core values able to captivate a high number of consumers doesn’t pave the road for a brand to success if it is not able to balance the communication of such values. In this case, to play up the pun between “Haier” and “*higher*” is a strategical move not only to declare the value of the brand, but also to make the sound of the Chinese brand name more comprehensible and repeatable for foreign speakers. One of the main obstacles for Chinese brands going global is the difficulty in pronunciation of their original brand name; this explains why many Chinese brands have both the original name and the international name.

Another organizational tale which contributed to build Haier identity and enhanced the attraction of Chinese consumers is strictly related to product innovation and it is consumer-needs driven. When Haier entered the rural consumer market in the southwest of China, a lot of complaints arose about the bad quality of washing machine pipes. After a check by a Haier team, they found out that the problem was not about the quality of Haier products rather about what peasants did with it: some yams were found in washing machine pipes because countrymen were using the appliances to wash yams. Clearly the countrymen were closer to farming needs rather than being concerned to do the laundry, thus used Haier product to satisfy their own need. The foresight of Zhang Ruiming was not limited to teach

⁹⁶ History section on “www.haier.com”. Available at: https://www.haier.com/global/about-haier/history/?spm=net.31999_pc.footer_141718_20200720.1 (accessed 07/12/20, at 17.30).

⁹⁷ Wang, J. (2008), 150.

how to correctly use washing machines, it instead consisted in enlarging washing machine pipes in order to make the product suitable for other needs: the new product was named Big Yam and became the most sold washing machine in rural China.⁹⁸ Being aware of and meeting people needs let Haier gain popularity and that strategic choice got inscribed in Haier literature and served as pedagogical inspiration on how to approach consumers. This evidences a key point of this thesis, which is: brand communication corresponds to the way in which a brand tells its history, which episodes the brand chooses in order to convey its values and which narrative is put in place in different historical moments and facing different consumer communities.

What is even more important from the Big Yam experience is that, although this category product registered lot of sales, it hardly was a stand-alone sub-brand because it remained branded with Haier's name and had not develop an independent product category brand. Here lays the answer to Americans' doubts about the marred Asian system, and it could be better depicted through Wang's words (2008): "the corporate-centric paradigm of Haier – the conflation of product identities with company identities and the unchecked horizontal and vertical extensions- has generated incentives for product innovation as strongly as the Western brand-centric paradigm".⁹⁹ In order to better understand this point, the following paragraph focuses on how Haier communicated its corporate paradigm.

2.3-3. Brand communication: "The Haier Brothers" and the branded entertainment

Another important event for Haier was the partnership in 1984 with Liebherr, a German refrigerator company, and the establishment of the joint venture resulting in 琴岛—利勃海尔 (*qíndǎo-libóhǎiěr*) "Qingdao-Liebherr". The current brand name 海尔 (*hǎiěr*) derives from the last syllables of the Chinese transliteration of Liebherr, and so has been since when

⁹⁸ Wang, J. (2008), 151.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 152.

the joint venture went public and Zhang changed the brand name into “Haier”. Apart from the interesting story around the name origin which maintains a “foreign” trait, the cooperation with Germans meant the implementation of new technology, ideas and an incentive for building a brand value around partnership and fraternity. Zhang Ruiming during the 1990s moved to cartoon marketing strategy and created the cartoon series “Haier Brothers”. The cartoon marketing culture derived from Japan where cartoon figures emerged as successful endorsers for brands. Moreover, the communication power underlying a cartoon series shall be considered equal to advertising. It is a medium through which a brand identity can be expressed, and Zhang Ruiming made an advantageous instrument out of it, consistent with the corporate culture it was designed to represent.

It shall not be surprising that a corporation which had based many elements on popular culture, made of the Haier Brothers “China longest-running cartoon TV series”.¹⁰⁰ It had been broadcasted on CCTV for eight years starting from the ‘90s, becoming so successful that it was planned to be broadcasted abroad. The series showed as protagonists the Haier brothers, a dark-haired child, and his blonde brother, symbolising the friendship between the Chinese Haier and its German partner Liebherr. The cartoon “is a fable for universal love and the power of positive thinking”¹⁰¹, and the wanderlust of the company is embodied by the two brothers travelling around the world. The show belongs to the adventure genre which not only guarantees an attraction from children watchers, but also reflects the bold spirit of Haier for its desire and determination of going overseas, just like the two protagonists. Altruism is an important value for Haier and, besides being reflected in the cartoon when

¹⁰⁰ Wang, J. (2008), 173.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

characters must face hardships, it is also reiterated by Zhang Ruiming's metaphor "Haier as ocean"¹⁰², where altruism is a "quality inherent in the moral character of Haier".¹⁰³

The attention Haier put on branded entertainment in cartoon format back in the '90s is significant and differs from the kind of American branded entertainment which will have developed ten years later (dramas with product placement and famous stars as endorsers). The main distinction lays in what shall be branded: an advertising entertainment, from Americans' perspective, had to play on product placement, because the product itself embodied the company. While Haier, in the making of the cartoon, neither relied on product placement nor hired important celebrities as endorsers, because it was probably not the most appropriate way to communicate the overall corporation identity. In fact, Haier marketing strategies, different from American ones, enabled a strong brand awareness among Chinese consumers, who still nowadays make the association between the brothers' icon and the Haier brand.

It is now important to recall the American dispute during the 2000s on the short-term returns attributed to the "profit-oriented" Asian paradigm: contrary to the Americans' expectation, the highly criticised Chinese strategy neglecting product branding resulted in a communication approach able to create an emotional bond with consumers and able to work universally. The absence of a product branding strategy, which from the American disputers' perspective would have precluded Asian companies from going global, was instead the keystone for companies such as Haier to appeal to universal needs and values through a culturally independent way of communication: a cartoon which, beside the cartoon name, didn't clearly state a relation with the brand "Haier", acted as entertainment tool, following a narrative scheme common to any book, movie or advertising. The cartoon became very

¹⁰² Wang, J. (2008), 173.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

popular probably because on one side it was the kind of “product” that Chinese consumer desired, while on the other it was in compliance with the corporate brand structure of Haier. Indeed, in the West the importance of branded entertainment in drama format developed later in post-modern advertising¹⁰⁴ (which developed during 2000s) probably when advertising started to re-evaluate the relevance of narrative elements.

Eventually, the Haier brothers cartoon on one side evidences that a brand might be branded not only throughout product placement or celebrity endorsement, while on the other side the corporate centric paradigm created conditions in which a brand like Haier could strengthen its identity without the presence of products.

To better understand how two different paradigms produce different impacts on branding, the following distinction takes as example the Coca Cola Company. Due to its sub-branded structure, the co-existence of product lines like Coca Cola, Fanta, Powerade and so on, constitutes a product mix able to respond to different target consumers (e.g. Coca Cola is for families while Powerade is for sportsmen). Such product mix creates the perfect conditions for a product branding strategy: due to a particular attention to each target market, it is easier for a company to build a marketing strategy on each product, whether it is designed for a family or for sportsmen. In contrast, due to its Branded House architecture where product lines go under “Haier” brand, Haier built its brand equity by focusing on universal values embodied by cartoonish figures, excluding product placement. This enables Haier to be recognized when ones look at the Haier Brothers icon, and to relate Haier identity to values of fraternity, courage and altruism.

The same happens with storytelling: due to the corporate equity, building a storytelling around the Big Yam washing machine (branded “Haier”) directly influenced the perception

¹⁰⁴ Wang, J. (2008), 175.

on the whole Haier identity and not just on the washing machine itself. This shows a high capability of enhancing brand communication and an emotional bond with consumers.

In conclusion, there is one more consideration: Whether it is impossible to establish if Chinese CEOs predicted how much important Corporate branding would have been, it is easy to understand that an old tradition based on oral storytelling like the Chinese would had created the condition for the flourishing of such a particular organizational storytelling culture. This is true also for Lenovo and Huawei, as it will be further presented.

2.3-4. Haier's logo

As far as the Haier brothers concern, they became the icon of the brand, perfectly fitting the corporate identity that the brand was pursuing.



Figure 5-Haier's old logo with icon¹⁰⁵

The cartoonish figures indeed used to complement the brand logo for a long time in the past. Even though the logo (see fig.5) had changed and no longer carried the icon, the association between Haier and the two brothers didn't fade: the visual identity created by the cartoon is strong enough to recall a certain kind of values related to the Haier brand.

Haier

Figure 6- Haier's logo (2004-2013)¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ Available at: http://archive.designigniteschange.org/news/551?partial=true&project_id=1349 (accessed 17/12/20, at 12.30).

¹⁰⁶ Available at: <https://1000logos.net/haier-logo/> (accessed 18/12/20, at 14.30).

In 2013, Haier's logo (see fig.7) was redesigned due to a need to better fit different cultural markets. The brand "uses a bilingual logo in China but uses only a Western name in Western markets. [...] English as a logo mark can quickly communicate a brand to an audience, rather than utilizing a Chinese character with complicated strokes, which is more difficult to create. Many Chinese corporations stress the Western letters to set their image apart and create a modern perception of visual identity".¹⁰⁷



Figure 7- Haier logo since 2013

The 2013 redesigned Haier's logo expresses on one hand the pursuit of innovation and of internationality because Chinese characters are left aside, while on the other hand, the ocean blue colour recalls the ocean, *hai* "海", showing a deference to the origin of the brand and to the metaphor of Zhang Ruiming.

The logo is an important part of brand communication but for Haier is relevant because *every* sold product is branded as "Haier", thus every product is fundamental for the brand as it directly influences the corporate brand image.

In conclusion, the paragraph about Haier was exploited to highlight an important paradigm at the base of some Chinese brands, which today are global brands. Nevertheless, neither the brand architecture nor the brand communication are sufficient conditions for any brand aiming at going global. As the thesis is trying to highlight, a brand is a complex system where brand communication plays an important role. But brand equity and brand consistency require brands to work on effective strategies and actions, likewise core values must be

¹⁰⁷ "Why is it Important to Teach Bilingual Logo Design in China?" (July 23, 2014), Available at: <http://archive.designigniteschange.org/> (accessed 18/12/20, at 17.30).

embodied in day by day management decisions. Of course, in the run to go global, brands like Haier and Lenovo have been combining actions and brand philosophy.

2.4- Huawei

2.4-1. Huawei: the balance between China and “globalization”

Ranked 45th in the latest BrandZ Top 100 Most Valuable Brands study (2020), Huawei relies on the “success in executing its long-term vision of building a fully connected, intelligent world”.¹⁰⁸

The company, founded in 1987, was originally a switch manufacturer for a third company and only in 2011 it started to produce and sell under Huawei brand. The CEO Ren Zhengfei, a communist party member, has been strongly influenced by Mao’s vision and has always believed in ideological education of workers. If, in 1984 Zhang Ruiming made workers smashing refrigerators in order to give a lesson, at Huawei in 2011 thousands of employees “had to undergo a six-month course, including a 2-week cultural induction on the campus itself and an internship, to acquire the “wolf spirit” which is said to drive Huawei on”.¹⁰⁹

Corporate storytelling is predominant and influences the brand discourse from work philosophy to mission statement, which is inscribed in the brand name. *Huawei* 华为 is made by *huá* 华, standing for “China” or “splendid”, and *wéi* 为 meaning “action”, converging in the meaning “China can” or “splendid action”: indeed, Zhengfei’s mission has always been “helping China to develop its own telecom technology”.¹¹⁰ But the scope of the mission has never been limited to China. Indeed, on Huawei website is declared: “Huawei's mission is

¹⁰⁸ Available at: <https://consumer.huawei.com/en/press/news/2020/huawei-soars-in-brand-value-goes-up-in-brandz-worlds-most-valuable-brands-rankings/> (accessed 27/12/20, at 10.00).

¹⁰⁹ Michelle Haveman and Jeroen Vochtelloo, *Huawei: A Case Study on a Telecom Giant on the Rise*, in Rien T. Segers, “Multinational Management A Casebook on Asia’s Global Market Leaders”, 2016, Springer International Publishing Switzerland.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

to expand the benefits of technology to everyone, everywhere”.¹¹¹ The connection is not just metaphorical though, as there has always been a concrete commitment to provide services that connect people: Huawei products range from network services and infrastructures to devices, such as mobile phones.

The competitive advantage of the company has always been its low prices of the products, which somehow really influenced Huawei capacity of connecting any kind of people around the world: it is noteworthy that “mobile technology progression in Africa might not have happened without Huawei’s cheap, but advantaged, equipment strategy”.¹¹² The competitive prices though have never reflected poor quality goods or low standards, despite common thinking and expectations that Western people usually had towards Chinese products during the beginning of the ‘10s.

Huawei’s commitment to global standards enabled the brand to satisfy global expectations. The strategical choice let Huawei both enter foreign markets and build a brand awareness around quality and affordability, and at some extent trigger a re-evaluation of Chinese products by the Westerners. The kind of relation that a brand like Huawei established with the world is a tangible part of the brand mission, a relation made of cables, networks and devices. Such relation is the basic condition of subsistence of a telecommunication company; thus, “globalization” and interconnection are fundamental factors for such company to be realized. Also, it might be possible to consider the concept of global as an intrinsic value of Huawei. In order to reinforce such assumption, other elements in the brand discourse underline Huawei global attitude.

¹¹¹ Available at: <https://www.huawei.com/en/fully-connected-intelligent-world> (accessed 20/01/21, at 10.10).

¹¹² Haveman, M., Vochtelo, J. (2016).

Many Chinese companies, among which Haier and Lenovo, are state-owned enterprises. In contrast, Huawei is a privately owned and employee-held company.¹¹³ Diversity characterizes the company in terms of countries, as it operates in more than 170 countries, and in terms of employees, as they come from 156 different countries and just looking at the Chinese workers, they belong to 36 different ethnic groups.¹¹⁴ The fact that the company is owned at 99% by its employees drives to important considerations on the real focus of the business: the biggest asset of Huawei is people, and it is by leveraging on individual abilities that a collective mission can be enhanced. This perspective, together with employees' diversification, has been important in Huawei process to go global because employees belonging to many cultures and nations enabled the brand to better adapt to foreign countries. Huawei acknowledges the importance of localization and diversity as assets rather than disadvantages, moreover it is based on "an integrated work culture where east and west meet and where employees enjoy a heightened global sense of awareness".¹¹⁵ All these elements, which take part of the brand discourse, nourish the brand core values and enable the brand to be consistent in ideologies and in actualizations. The global aspect of Huawei has been inscribed in its identity for years, and an efficient brand communication allowed the brand to convey its core values and cater them to international audience, as it will later be presented with 2014 "The hertz of Huawei" advertising.

The brand commitment to people is not just reflected in the company ownership or in educational and benefit programs for employees, but also in the "customer-centric strategy" driving the company, where costumers have always had the priority on everything else.¹¹⁶ As stated on Huawei Europe website, since the foundation, Huawei "source of competitive

¹¹³ Haveman, M., Vochtelloo, J. (2016).

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ David De Cremer, (2018) "Lessons from Huawei: when Chinese companies go global", London Business school review, issue 3.

¹¹⁶ Haveman, M., Vochtelloo, J. (2016).

advantage was (the) dedication to satisfying the customer, no matter what”.¹¹⁷ This can help to understand why in 2012, 66 % of the total revenue of the company came outside of China and how at that time the brand was gaining much importance at global level. The attention to consumers has always been a business issue, but it is an everchanging topic because people needs change faster and faster, and “a global mindset is needed to achieve this customer-centric focus”.¹¹⁸ Huawei employees and managers are indeed required to have such a global mindset.

The founder’s philosophy highly contributed to consider the “global experience” as fundamental characteristic for choosing Huawei future leaders.¹¹⁹ Having a global cultural background enables leaders to identify and solve team-functioning problems raised by cultural differences of team members. From this perspective it is understandable how “‘global’ to Huawei leaders means integrating Chinese and western perspectives – not simply being Chinese in a global world”.¹²⁰

All these efforts reflect Huawei’s attempt to keep a balance between Chinese culture and Western culture and integrate it in its own corporate culture. It might be possible to think that since Huawei was born with the “gene” of globalization, it had been easier for it to succeed in a world oriented to “globalization”. Nevertheless, the Chinese origin of Huawei has never been left aside, on the contrary it has been integrated with the international tendency of the company without renouncing to consistency. Huawei, more than others, represents the harmony between Chinese world and international world, and it is the proof that these two elements are not necessarily incompatible. Complementarity is itself a

¹¹⁷ “Who is Huawei?” in Huawei Europe website. Available at: <https://www.huawei.eu/story/who-huawei> (accessed 01/01/21, at 9.00).

¹¹⁸ David De Cremer, (2018).

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

fundamental cosmic law related to Chinese philosophy, fact that demonstrates the attempts of Huawei to integrate its Chinese origin.

Another example concerns the “collectivism”, dear to Chinese culture, which is the key driver for Huawei employees: following Ren’s words, individuality shall be maintained because each person is different, but “individualism must serve the collective interests of the team”.¹²¹

The effort of Huawei is more profound than connecting people throughout telecommunication networks, as Huawei’s scope includes pursuing both the western and the Chinese dream. The mission of Huawei is inscribed in its values and in its identity, thus the “globalization” of such brand is tangible in every discourse level.

It is possible to conclude that the efforts of connecting two different cultures, the Chinese and the western, is a challenge that Chinese brands aspiring to go global shall pursue. Huawei is the example that going global does not mean to renounce to one’s origins, conversely it means find a common ground where two different identities, the Chinese and the international, can constitute one solid identity.

2.4-2. How a brand tells its story: Visibility and the importance of brand name

Huawei different product categories are particularly interesting for the thesis because they exemplify how much the presence of brand name on products influences the brand identity. Contrary to expectations, Huawei is more relevant for the Cloud, network services, and the Pipe, infrastructures service, which constitute a market that is not directly in contact with end consumers.¹²² Due to the fact that these products were mostly unknown and “invisible” to end consumers, the brand awareness could only rely on Huawei devices and it took some

¹²¹ Rui Zhengfei cited in David De Cremer, (2018).

¹²² Haveman, M., Vochtelloo, J. (2016).

time to be established. This curiously suggests that consumers must be in close contact to the brand name shown on products, because the visual identity of a brand plays a fundamental role in making a logo familiar to consumers and in creating an association with the brand identity in consumer's mind. Considering mobile phones and the daily use that people make of them, the presence of a logo or a brand name is even more significant. Each model of Huawei mobile carries the brand name expressing a needful element to create the association.

The more frequently consumers are in contact with a brand name, the more the brand literally enters their lives. Electronic devices and home appliances are important examples where the presence of the brand name act in the constitution of the brand identity. By considering the brand name as a “visible tool” for a brand to enrich brand identity, corporate brands that brand their product under mother brand name (Huawei, Haier, Lenovo) are once more the most strategic brand solutions.

2.4-3. Brand communication: “The hertz of Huawei”

To focus on the communication strategy that the brand adopted and that emphasizes the global attitude of Huawei, the paragraph will examine a 2014 advertising campaign. “The hertz of Huawei”¹²³ is an announcement of the brand Corporate Social Responsibility and a commitment to environmental sustainability, issues which have become relevant for business during the last ten years. The spot was broadcasted domestically and internationally, and it is not a commercial for products but rather a focus on corporate branding.

The main meaning of the spot plays on the pun between the words “hertz” and “heart”, related to Huawei identity: “hertz” is the standard unit of frequency used in

¹²³ “the hertz of Huawei”, Huawei APAC Youtube. Available at: <https://youtu.be/yAjm38cEGOA> (accessed 05/01/21, at 12.30).

telecommunications, which is Huawei sector, and it expresses the frequency of sound waves. While “heart” represents the spirit of caring that belongs to Huawei.

The spot begins with the mission of Huawei: “bridging the digital divide, connecting the futures”, which is projected over a natural landscape. Different scenes of nature follow, and a voiceover runs parallel with the text “This is the hertz of nature” (see fig.8).¹²⁴



Figure 8- The hertz of nature.

The voice “reads” the texts for the whole duration of the spot, emphasizing the correlation between the sound of “hertz” and the similar sound of “heart”.

As the spot develops, some other natural images are presented with the text “This is the Hz of life” and “This is the Hz of the Planet”; a reference with the environmental world is established.

Taking as example the frame “This is the hertz of nature”, it is possible to recognize few elements which become representative of the message that the brand wants to convey. The frame represents the grains gently waved by the wind, which express the movement of nature and its being alive. The message is that Nature has a heart and people could communicate with it. Nature is alive and expresses itself and the main role of Huawei is enabling a connection between the man and nature.

¹²⁴ Frame 0:14. Available at: <https://youtu.be/yAjm38cEGOA?t=10> (accessed 05/01/21, at 17.30).

The spot thus plays on two parallel things: on one side, each element presented is implied to have a heart, also metaphorically talking with a frequency expressed in Hz. On the other side, Huawei can help people understand what each presented element communicates, because Huawei offers devices and values able to interpret whatever is communicated in Hz. Huawei in this narrative could represent “the helper” which enables people to connect to the world in its broadest sense.

To formulate this assumption, it is necessary to look at the question “what resonate with people?”¹²⁵, because nature constitutes a part of people lives and communicating with nature is very important to people. During the 2010s a worldwide interest influenced many industries. The focus of many businesses shifted from the “industry” affectionate paradigm to the “natural” devoted paradigm, shift which clarifies the attention that in the last decade every company put on building a Corporate Social Responsibility and the consequential sustainability projects. Huawei is not an exception. The spot this paragraph is analysing suggests that the brand accurately identified what concerned people most, what resonated with people and condensed it in a spot: nature, life, planet, care, hope, humanity, commitment; these elements, which are presented throughout the spot, constitute the core values of Huawei. Indeed, the spot ends with the gathering of all these elements which together establish “the Hz of Huawei”.¹²⁶

The message presents Huawei as the “helper” in the telecommunication era because it creates connections thanks to its products and infrastructures, but mostly because it *resonates with the world*. One of the final scenes shows an overview of people of a variety of nationalities

¹²⁵ Available at: <https://youtu.be/yAjm38cEGOA?t=40> (accessed 05/01/21, at 19.15).

¹²⁶ Available at: <https://youtu.be/yAjm38cEGOA?t=279> (accessed 05/01/21, at 19.30).

talking at the phone and smiling; the voiceover says “every beat of your heart is answered in ours”¹²⁷, establishing a connection with the consumer which is based on devotion and care.

In conclusion, the spot represents an efficient example of brand communication which is balanced between the core values of the brand, as the customer centric innovation, and the attention to topics and trend which are contemporary to that time. In addition, the spot establishes the global character of Huawei without referring to its Chinese origin.

2.5- Lenovo

2.5-1. Lenovo: chasing a global identity?

Lenovo, an ICT company founded in Beijing in 1984, is currently maintaining the position of the world’s largest PC vendor.¹²⁸ However, it has not been ranked in BrandZ lists for years.

Lenovo’s history shares similar traits with Chinese brands aspiring to go global. Hence the acquisition of IBM in 2005, Lenovo has boosted its reputation at a global level: as Gellert (2016) claims “Lenovo is best known as the outfit that came out of nowhere to buy IBM’s PC division and ThinkPad brand in 2005, which is why in 2011, Lenovo launched its largest-ever branding campaign, aiming to become the first global consumer brand to emerge from China”.¹²⁹ Far from explaining the managerial choice of the acquisition, it is important to underline the attention that worldwide literature put on such event. IBM’s acquisition has been a turning point in the history of Lenovo and for the brand image, so much that it raised various questions by international press. The interesting point for the thesis is: how much

¹²⁷ Available at: <https://youtu.be/yAjm38cEGOA?t=272> (accessed 05/01/21, at 19.30).

¹²⁸ Available at: <https://www.gartner.com/en/newsroom/press-releases/2020-10-12-gartner-says-worldwide-pc-shipments-grew-3-point-six-percent-in-the-third-quarter-of-2020> (accessed 07/01/21, at 12.30).

¹²⁹ Gellert, F.Z. (2016). Lenovo: A Case Study on Strengthening the Position in the European Market Through Innovation. In R. T. Segers (edited by), *Multinational Management A Casebook on Asia’s Global Market Leaders* (pp. 95-110) Springer International Publishing Switzerland.

IBM's acquisition has been meaningful to Lenovo way of approaching "globalization"? To answer that, a look at international Lenovo's websites can be useful: IBM's event still echoes in the company history section narrated in every Lenovo's website except for one, the Chinese.¹³⁰

It is curious that only the Chinese website lacks this information, but this can represent a starting point in what the paragraph is meant to explore: has Lenovo ever chased a global identity? Brand communication elements are important to explore Lenovo's identity. It is important to remember that brand is consistent also when its communication accurately report the company values. However, a brand can and shall adopt diversified communication strategies for domestic and for international markets, but above all it shall communicate a congruous brand identity across all the markets.

What if the "global" aspect of a brand was inscribed in its brand name? The question arises when considering Huawei and Haier brand names which, in any part of the world, employ the Chinese pinyin transcription. On the contrary, Lenovo uses two different brand names which differ in terms of sound and meaning: "Lenovo" for international context, and "Lenovo 联想" (*lián xiǎng*, meaning "association") for Chinese context. In addition, Lenovo is the only one underlining its Chinese origin in every website.

These choices contribute to constitute each brand identity; Lenovo probably wants to maintain its Chinese belongingness and separate it from the international belonging, but the risk is to constitute a fragmented brand identity. Truth is that, to be consistent with its brand identity, Lenovo choses to declare its Chinese origin; is this value in line with Lenovo history and Lenovo's pursuit for "globalization"?

¹³⁰ Polfuß, J. (2020).

2.5-2. How a brand tells its story: Lenovo Identity and the Chinese pursuit of innovation

Lenovo, like many Chinese brands, used to be tightly associated to its CEO figure, Liu Chuanzhi, who, through certain types of narrative, achieved to build a strong corporate storytelling. Liu Chuanzhi, like Zhang Ruiming (Haier CEO), got influenced by Maoist and SunZi ideals during his youth, thus he decided to integrate a strict and military vision to the organization philosophy, as an efficient teaching tool for workers. Such similar trait that Lenovo shares with Haier and many other Chinese companies, is even more relevant for the constitution of Lenovo brand which learnt the hard way the fundamentals of communication: brand communication, being a communicational act, implies not only an “enunciator” (who communicates a message), but also an “enunciatee” or “receiver” (to whom the message is addressed). Taking the case of an online debate taking place in 2004, which engaged on one side Lenovo and on the other Chinese consumers-netizens, it is possible to have a look to one problem that the company faced during the constitution of its brand image. Triggered by Chinese bloggers, the debate challenged Lenovo brand history.

Corporation storytelling played an important role in that debate because people were eventually discussing about how Lenovo communicated past intentions had not been fulfilled. Such event reminds how much important was the role of consumers, which were also the receivers, in the brand communication process that the company had been applying since it was founded. Wang (2008) states that, contrarily to Haier, “Lenovo’s company history has not been so neatly contained within the carefully managed narratives scripted by Liu’s cult followers”.¹³¹ In order to understand the source of the debate it is necessary to outline the origins of the brand and the communicative biases which caused problems to the brand consistency.

¹³¹ Wang, J. (2008).

Lenovo, also known as Legend Group, was established in 1984 by scientists from the Chinese Academy of the Social Science (CASS), a government think tank working in Beijing. In 1999 they invented the first-generation Internet-enabled Chinese PC, opening doors not only to the information technology sector but also to developments regarding Chinese society. Since then, Lenovo became China's leading vendor of personal computers. The fact that the brand originated in academical, governmental and scientific fields, influenced the constitution of its identity. The chance for China to become a leader in the IT sector ran parallel to the innovative projects of Lenovo, especially considering that in 2001 Yang Yuanqing (the new CEO) publicly announced that Lenovo would have become a high-tech and IT service company. The public announcement confirmed the image of Lenovo as the Chinese pioneer in the technological field, and along with that, the opportunity of "redemption" for an ashamed China, which had survived Western hegemony since the Opium Wars. However, in the beginning of the 2000s, albeit the company had already established innovative technological plans and an extension in product diversification, some difficulties resulted in the failure of such projects and the foreclosure for Lenovo to form "homegrown standards in the high-tech field".¹³²

The company suffered a decline in the public opinion since the dismissal of Ni Guangnan, a technological expert who could have led the company to change the course of technology. To fire such a relevant player was considered a misstep for Lenovo's mission and a betrayal of its core values. In fact, a few years later, in 2004, plenty of disappointed Chinese started the abovementioned debate on BlogChina. The discussion "converged in a deep reflection on the Chinese dream of strengthening the nation through science and technology"¹³³, from

¹³² Wang, J. (2008).

¹³³ Ibid.

which it is understandable the high trust Chinese people had put in the mission that Lenovo was trying to accomplish through its projects.

It is interesting that the blogger Bluethinker raised the idea of “dream about technonationalism”¹³⁴ and fiercely accused Lenovo by claiming: “why has Lenovo become our target? Because in Lenovo we entrusted so many of our precious dreams”.¹³⁵ The fact that the blogger made further references about China’s historical events in which technology would have meant a redemption for China, suggests that Lenovo’s failure had been considered China’s failure to keep the pace with the developing world.

The fierce debate also suggests that Lenovo values and the brand communication around the original image of Lenovo had eventually been violated, resulting in an inconsistency between what the company had been communicating and the strategies it applied.

Such an event is important for another reason: the massive use of the internet to carry on a debate, among geographically scattered people, questioning the values and the reputation of a brand. In today’s world there are different kind of episodes recalling this one, for example the debate born in 2018 around Dolce and Gabbana Chinese advertising considered offensive by many Chinese people. The ongoing presence of debates revolving around brands consistency and discrepancy proves, on one side that, since the internet is so spread, brands must be more careful than ever in their communication strategy and shall promptly react to critics in order to save their face. On the other side, the opinion of a single consumer, which became easily spreadable due to the Internet, in the digital era has gained more historical importance than ever.

¹³⁴ Bluethinker quoted in Wang, J. (2008), Available at: <http://tech.sina.com.cn/it/2004-02-02/1316287002.shtml> , (accessed 08/01/21, at 16.00).

¹³⁵ Ibid.

2.5-3. Brand communication: how Chinese culture meets “globalization”

There are plenty of episodes in Lenovo’s history which can be representative of the absence of an integration between Chinese identity and global identity. But the brand records a relevant issue which might represent the opposite: Lenovo might have found its own way to go global while maintaining a relation to traditional Chinese culture. The case in question is related to the brand core values which resonate with the traditional Chinese value of Harmony. One important aspect of this value is that one shall adjust himself to nature without prevailing on it.

The past choices of Lenovo, including the withdrawal from the expansion in mobile phones fields, might find a resolution in the perspective of Lee and Tsui (2017), who claim that “to secure a healthy position, Lenovo has had no choice but to continue focusing on its IT devices—i.e. PCs, notebooks and tablets—that have a competitive edge over its closest competitors”¹³⁶. From this viewpoint, to take in account only the communication management of a company could be too simplistic because a company is a composite system. It is also true that Culture plays a fundamental role not only in the constitution of corporate culture, but also in brand communication and public relation areas. The value of Harmony is representative of this phenomenon and it offers an innovative perspective to the western strategic management.

Chinese culture “meets” globalization because it reflects social and strategical perspectives suitable for the modern business world where old paradigms have been replaced by new values and paradigms: indeed, the traditional value of Harmony has been compared to Corporate Social Responsibility, widely known in the West.

¹³⁶ Bernard Lee and Anthony Tsui, *The Influence of the Traditional Chinese Value of Harmony on an International Chinese IT Organization*, “Journal of China Marketing Volume 6 (2)”, September 2017, Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Another example concerns the going global “protect and attack” strategy, coined by Lenovo CEO Yang Yuanqing. Lenovo used to have many competitors in China during the first decades of the 2000s, such as Dell that in 2003 achieved the second selling position in Chinese PC market. The strategy of Yang, CEO from 2001, consisted in “protecting Lenovo’s strengths in the local Chinese market and penetrating other markets with opportunities”.¹³⁷ Without discussing the managerial aspects of it, the military terms used for such strategy perhaps recalls the Chinese tradition enclosed in the Art of the War and in the military propaganda of the last centuries.

It is important to take into consideration the cultural background of a company because such a military connotation could be interpreted in different ways and being perceived erroneously in other social and economic contexts.

Is a strategy called “protect and attack” suitable to address a company’s desire to go global? The choice of terms is as important as any other communication element. Words enshrines the core value of a brand and shall be adapted to every context to avoid misleading meanings.

Noteworthy is a public relation issue of 2018, regarding Lenovo CEO who stated “We’re not a Chinese company, we’re a global company”¹³⁸, and thus sparked harsh reactions among Chinese online community. The reaction of Chinese netizens is significative and suggests that Lenovo was perceived in a way that differed from how the brand was trying to depict itself. The debate worsened in 2019 when Lenovo changed its official Weibo account name from “Lenovo” to “Lenovo China”: complains arose on the fact that “China’s Lenovo” could had been a more appropriate name.¹³⁹

¹³⁷ Bernard Lee and Anthony Tsui (2017).

¹³⁸ Lenovo CEO cited in Jonas Polfuß (2020).

¹³⁹ Polfuß, J. (2020).

This example can result in two considerations with no claim of universal validity: first, Chinese netizens feel an attachment to Lenovo as it represents a national proud and a Chinese excellence. Second, the choice for a social media name account of a brand is a communicative act which can produce consequences on the brand image because it is a part of the brand discourse.

Lenovo's attempt to be a global company had not been achieved when the brand CEO announced it. The "globalization" of a brand shall be integrated to the brand identity as part of it, in balance with the brand values. This thesis does not presume to measure the level of "globalization" of Lenovo, or other Chinese brands. Rather it is intended to explore how each brand communication works to convey its "global aspect".

2.5-4. Lenovo's logo

Lenovo's pursue of "globalization" can be observed in the brand logo evolution. Initially the brand was called "Legend 联想" (*lián xiǎng*) and used to manufacture PC production. When the product offerings increased in variety and after the listing in Hong Kong stock exchange, Legend switched to "Lenovo" in 2003, to cater international standards with a suitable name for an international context.¹⁴⁰

After an evolution of products category and brand values, and after the IBM acquisition, in 2011 the brand was already known globally, thus the logo was redesigned once again (see fig.9) : the new design consisted in dropping off the Chinese name and adding a pay-off "for those who do" which expressed the performative aspect of the brand. By such payoff it is possible to see a further targeting as the verb *to do* is typically an expression related to

¹⁴⁰ Available at: <https://www.infoworld.com/article/2655387/is-lenovo-a--chinese-company--.html> , Is Lenovo a 'Chinese company'? [Steven Schwankert](#), 2006, (accessed 11/01/21, at 19.30).

“performance”, able to communicate proactivity and motion, thus is attractive for the “young ‘doer’ segment”.¹⁴¹



Figure 9- Evolution of Lenovo's logo (before 2003-2015)¹⁴²

First, it is noteworthy that a re-branding, which is the restyling of the visual element in a brand logo, must be carefully operated whenever it is necessary. Lenovo *tells* the story of its “globalization” process through the evolution of its brand logos.

The consistency of a brand undergoes also its logo, and more important the evolution of the logo shall maintain some peculiar traits in order to be recognizable and familiar to consumers; if some fundamental visual elements are not well-preserved in the new version of the logo, not only the brand might not be so easily recognizable at first glance, but most important, the logo would not be able to convey the value of the brand, therefore it may undermine the brand consistency.

To refer to 2003 new logo, very few traits are maintained, so a re-branding might had been a risk, but the urgency came by the fact that the original brand name “Legend” turned into “Lenovo”. It is peculiar and very important that in the 2003 logo, the continuity element, besides the blue colour, is the Chinese name *lián xiǎng* “联想”. The preservation of such element points out the need to help consumers, especially Chinese, to familiarize with the new English name of the brand on one side, and probably to underline the national identity

¹⁴¹ Jijo George and S Victor Anand Kumar, 'Going Global': *The Case of Chinese Brands* ; The IUP Journal of Business Strategy, Vol. XIV, No. 3, 2017

¹⁴² Available at: http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_5fe569e40102vfb7.html , (accessed 12/01/21, at 09.30).

of Lenovo which wanted to maintain links with its origins and the Chinese market. In the Chinese market the brand has maintained the traditional logo alive, fact that could suggest the need of the brand to be presented with diversified logos.

From this perspective it is understandable that the need of communicating certain elements and deliberately neglecting others is not just a mere aesthetic choice, rather it is a powerful way of communicating some changes occurred at a deeper level of the brand. In this case a change occurred in approaching “globalization”, in 2003 represented by a more international brand name, while in 2011, by the drop off of the Chinese characters and the addition of the English pay off.



Figure 10- Lenovo's logo since 2015 ¹⁴³

The current Lenovo's logo (see fig.10), used for every Lenovo website, on one side recalls the red element of the Chinese tradition, and on the other maintains the international character.

2.6- The new consumer power equation and the Chinese social credit system

The role of internet has been marking Lenovo brand history since the beginning of the century and will keep doing it because of the new paradigm of brand communication, where consumers, due to their online pro-activism, participate more than ever in shaping a brand image. It is noteworthy that consumers' opinion has become a fundamental pillar for companies because popular opinion influences the purchase choices of many people.

¹⁴³ Available at: <https://i.paizi.com/dp44470> (accessed 12/01/21, at 11.30).

In China, the social influence and the social perception of any issue play an important role. Chinese cultural heritage provides opportunities to face the contemporary world in a peculiar way. As it happened with the traditional value of Harmony adapted to Lenovo's corporate culture, where cultural elements were resumed and applied to business practice, some traditional perspectives might also influence the entire social paradigm of a nation.

Without claiming to offer an indisputable opinion, it might be possible to affirm that China is influenced by historical events based on social evaluation system, such as the Anti-Rightist Campaign (1957-1959) where "rightists" were publicly shamed in cities squares. It is possible that the role of a social and public evaluation system might be still relevant in the constitution of contemporary China. Chinese citizen are also consumers, and the business market cannot be excluded from such logic.

It is no coincidence that China instituted the Social Credit System as a benchmark where business identity and individuals' behaviour are evaluated based upon trustworthiness. Without being exhaustive on the Social Credit System which is very complex and covers many aspects of China social, economic and political areas, the paragraph will outline the influence that evaluation and rating system has on business and brand image in China.

The Social Credit System, announced in 2015, is supposed to "forge a public opinion environment that trust-keeping is glorious", warning that the "new system will reward those who report acts of breach of trust"¹⁴⁴, and a punishment for the transgressors. The system, fully implemented in 2020, is an institutional arrangement to monitor and rank people behaviours and their consumption attitude. The thesis has no purpose in exploring this policy,

¹⁴⁴ Celia Hatton, China 'social credit': Beijing sets up huge system, 26 October 2015. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-34592186>, (accessed 15/01/21, at 17.30).

but the existence of a governmental instrument to measure and rank its citizens triggers interesting considerations.

In China, where consumers undergo such evaluation system, it might be possible that a sentiment of responsibility towards “evaluation” has been developed in citizens mind. Thus, it might be possible to establish a correlation between the “educational” social system to which every Chinese citizen is subject, and the evaluations that he/she is called to make when using a public or private service in daily life.

Examples might be found in the feedbacks that common people use to “judge” the performance of professionals in many categories of work: from *Didi* 滴滴, the Chinese platform that gathers taxi drivers, to food delivery operators such as *Eleme* 饿了么.

The evaluation system in China is rooted in citizen-consumers daily life, that is why it achieved so much importance. In the business sector, the evaluation system is strictly interconnected with the daily life of consumers and, in order to comprehend the dynamics around the consumer-brand relationship, it is important to know how a society approaches “evaluation”. Evaluation system in business might be represented by the feedback system that became widely used when Internet gave the chance to consumers to express and directly interact with brands. Even though it is different from the SCS policy, it is likely that the consumer feedback system leverages on Chinese people desire to give an opinion. The two systems are correlated as it is follows:

The evaluation system is extended from the daily life habits to the online world, shaping the lives of the Chinese and affecting the perception of opinions and judgment. This way, the consumer is influenced because is itself the object of an evaluation. At the same time, the consumer of a service becomes the one who evaluates other people job performance and the brand offering the service.

In today's world where brands rely more than ever on consumers' opinion, it is important to consider the social environment and the institutional context in which they operate.

As Polfuß (2020) stated, "in China, brand communication must respond carefully to public discussions and consumer feedback"¹⁴⁵ also because the Social Credit System works well.

Because public opinion is such an important issue for brands and their public image, attention shall be put to the spread of the Internet during the beginning of the century: Internet meant the multiplication of consumers feedbacks and the rise of a new consumer power equation.

This point is strictly related to an issue that all the global brands analysed in this thesis have been facing since the internet revolution: the management of brand communication through Internet.

2.7- Internet and the affirmation of Corporate-centric paradigm

Albeit one's effort in building strong corporate storytelling, as Wang stated in 2008, "digital media now allow smart consumers to find the chinks in the armor and revolutionize the ways in which official organizational storytelling can be *undone*".¹⁴⁶ The power that Internet has brought to consumers' opinion is something to be aware of but is not necessarily an obstacle.

From this perspective Lenovo, Haier, Huawei and all the companies which had been building a communication strategy based on corporate branding can benefit from such situation. Because "digital media changed the power equation between consumer and manufacturers"¹⁴⁷, consumers got smarter, faster, and more curious about the overall identity of a company. With the Internet and the circulation of news and events, even the

¹⁴⁵ Jonas Polfuß (2020).

¹⁴⁶ Wang, J. (2008).

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 178.

connection between a mother brand and its sub-brands is unveiled, and the communication that previously interested only one sub-brand, is next simultaneously interconnected to the mother brand and to each of the other sub-brands. In such a new “paradigm”, coherence and consistency at every level of the company (including sub brands) are the key factors in order to approach a smarter and more aware consumer.

Asian brands which established a corporate communication and a corporate identity as the foundation of business, not only have benefited from that but, it might be possible to state that they became the model for a paradigm that has gained much importance in the contemporary way of building a brand.

In fact, during the last years many brands around the world have put their efforts and attention in communicating their overall image, being transparent in the brand relation with sub-brands and this helped them to build a corporate brand equity. In an interconnected and always online world it is important to communicate and build a dialogue with consumers who are questioning brand identities much more than ever before. The need for transparency could had emerged from the diffusion of the Internet and the accessibility to information.

Also brands that once were focused on product branding, for example Coca Cola, switched to corporate branding because the Western sub-branding approach, was not the winning one anymore. It was the predominant approach for U.S. and European brands until the 2000s, but since products often didn't carry the name of their mother brand, a corporate equity could had never developed. When Internet spread and consumers started to associate sub-brands with each other, brands lacking to manage the overall corporate identity, not only couldn't maximize the equity around the corporate brand, but some risks in brand communication could rise. To cite some examples, inconsistency in values of sub-brands belonging to the same mother brand or scandals on a single sub-brand could have ruined the corporate image. To maintain a strong identity, many brands urged to reconsider the brand communication

system, solving the discrepancies between sub-brands and realizing that each sub-brand equity constituted a piece of the overall corporate brand equity. Indeed, when Americans understood the importance of the changing paradigm, corporate branding was re-evaluated in the West.¹⁴⁸

In conclusion, today business reality evidences what Wang (2008) suggested that could had happen due to the changing scenario that was offering the Internet during the '2000s. Wang (2008) stated: "I argue that the Internet is paving the way for a renewed interest among American entrepreneurs in corporate or master brand marketing"¹⁴⁹, trusting the vision that Internet and the new media were already changing corporate practices.

¹⁴⁸ Wang, J. (2008).

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 177.

3. Cases Studies - Communication strategy and Advertising of three Global Chinese brands: Haier, Lenovo and Huawei

3.1- Advertising: a perspective on brand communication

Throughout the thesis it has already been underlined the importance of brand communication and the strict relation between the expression level and the content level of the brand discourse. The third chapter will proceed with the analysis of those brands' spots to verify how each brand's identity is affirmed at the expression level. Advertising is the main field of analysis while spots, by their nature of texts¹⁵⁰, are the subjects of study: in order to give the most complete analysis possible on each brand communication strategy, two spots were chosen for each brand: one for brand communication operated in China and the other for communication in western countries that will be later specified.

Without any pretence of being exhaustive, the choice of specific ads rather than others has been driven on one side by the remarkability of elements which could have been submitted to a semiotic analysis, and on the other by the limited chance to find materials for this kind of study. Nevertheless, the fact that Chinese advertising has rarely undergone a semiotic analysis opens the door to research opportunities that hopefully this thesis can trigger and support.

Last preliminary consideration is about the kind of brand communication the chapter is considering. Each ad and each spot belongs to three brands which have been focusing on corporate identity since their constitution. The advertising production of those brands often

¹⁵⁰ A text, in a semiotic perspective, is a portion of reality that has a meaning.

offers different kinds of promotion that, besides product branding, include a Corporate branding that is an overall promotion of the brand itself. The choice not to focus only on product advertising derives from considerations drawn in chapter two of this thesis: product branding rarely has been a priority for Asian brands; thus, their communication strategy has been evolving with substantial diversity from other countries brands' communication. To operate an overall analysis of a Haier, Huawei and Lenovo identities, it is important to consider such premises and scale back on the influence that product advertising has on Corporate equity and Corporate branding.

3.2- Semiotic analysis of advertising

In Cinzia Bianchi's book *Spot. Analisi semiotica dell'audiovisivo pubblicitario*¹⁵¹ (2005), it is highlighted the fact that there is no fixed methodology to analyse a text; instead the researcher shall detect the most relevant aspects influencing the significance of the text under analysis. It is possible thus that, based on characteristics of the text, semiotician will choose for the analysis some theoretical instruments rather than others.¹⁵²

This introduction is relevant as the semiotic tools that will support the analysis of the spots might not be used following a fixed schedule of analysis. Nevertheless, there are some basic theories that shall be highlighted before starting the analysis.

Greimas "Generative trajectory of meaning" (1974) is fundamental for analysing audio-visual advertising. Bianchi (2005) states that the analysis of a spot is a step-by-step procedure, requiring to divide the text into shot-by-shot and into sequence-by-sequence decoupage. After this first step it is possible to consider the spot in its complexity and deal with the discursive and semio-narrative structures.¹⁵³ These structures compose the Generative

¹⁵¹ Bianchi, C. (2005), *Spot. Analisi semiotica dell'audiovisivo pubblicitario*, Carrocci Editore, Roma.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁵³ Bianchi, C. (2005).

trajectory of meaning (see fig.11), a generative path which manifests in a text starting from its deepest level (semio-narrative structures), going through the discursive structures, until its superficial and expression level (textual structures).

Generative Trajectory			
		Syntactic Component	Semantic Component
Semiotic and Narrative Structures	Deep Level	Fundamental Syntax Operations and relations in the semiotic square	Fundamental Semantics Semantic investment of the semiotic square
	Surface Level	Narrative Syntax Narrative schema: actants and modalities	Narrative Semantics Semantic investment of the actants and the modalities
Discursive Structures		Discursive Syntax Discoursivisation actorialisation temporalisation spatialisation	Discursive Semantics Thematisation Figurativisation

Figure 11- Generative trajectory of meaning ¹⁵⁴

Based on Greimas' perspective, discursive structures are the level at which meaning is embodied in figures and themes, through space, time and actors presented in a spot.

Semio-narrative structures are divided into two different levels: at a surface level there are the Canonical Narrative Schema, actants and modalities, while the Semiotic Square (see fig.12) covers the deepest level.

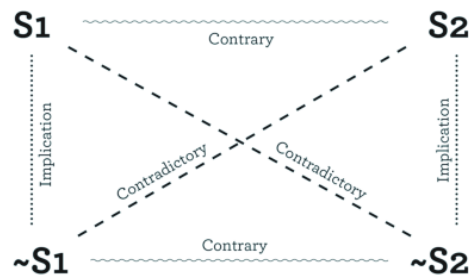


Figure 12- Semiotic Square ¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁴ Available at: <https://www.erudit.org/en/journals/ttr/2016-v29-n1-tr03915/1050714ar/#:~:text=The%20generative%20trajectory%20of%20meaning,Figure%201> (accessed 01/02/2021, at 10.00)

¹⁵⁵ Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Greimas-Semiotic-Square_fig2_316939820 (accessed 01/02/2021, at 10.00).

The Semiotic Square corresponds to the basic structure of the constitution of meaning: the square is based upon a semantic opposition, from which it defines other terms within a relation of contrariety, contradiction, and implication.¹⁵⁶

This introduction is relevant as the semiotic tools that will support the analysis of the spots will not be used following a fixed schedule of analysis. Among the main theoretical instruments, some will later be introduced to enhance a more practical formulation of the analysis.

3.3- Haier

3.3-1. Communication through advertising in China: Analysis of the spot “a new way of ruling the home”, “新治家之道” *xīn zhìjiā zhīdào*.¹⁵⁷

The spot¹⁵⁸, addressed to Chinese audience, is characterized by the use of Chinese language sustained by subtitles in Chinese and English. This is a curious choice which expresses the will of the brand to achieve international character and probably to make the advertising campaign accessible to a wider audience. A little introduction to the spot will be useful to draw up the semiotic analysis which will follow.

An old Chinese man, presented with 孔子 *Kongzi* (Confucius), is travelling by train and suddenly gets into a conversation with a middle-aged western man who revolves his world upside down. Due to the western man, Confucius begins to question the concept of traditional family whose forerunner is himself. The seek for the truth becomes possible thanks to two important characters in the story: 图灵 *Tuning* (Alan Turing), the middle-aged

¹⁵⁶ Bianchi, C. (2005), 67.

¹⁵⁷ Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=PAsFQXivB7U> (0:00- 1:28). The spot was broadcasted on Chinese media and on YouTube starting from January 2020, peculiar time of the year as Chinese people celebrate Chinese New Year.

¹⁵⁸ Based on the purpose and the length of the thesis, the analysis will focus on one part of the entire advertising campaign (5:48). The spot hereby for this sub-chapter will refer specifically to the range from min 0:00 to min 1:28, as it represents a unit of semiotic analysis.

westerner who gets to be Confucius travel mate, and a young Chinese woman who is a passenger of the train traveling home. Both characters have a relevant role in the story as they respectively represent a guide and an inhabitant of the “new” world Confucius is going to explore.¹⁵⁹

Confucius’ interest in the discover of that new world is raised by the girl claiming that she is the only component of her family: this element of surprise drives Confucius to an openness towards a reality which is not his own. The discover is also driven by a physical movement: the two men get off the train to meet the world in which the girl lives, to meet the representation of the contemporary era. In fact, the train stop, called 独身主义 *dúshēn zhǔyì* (celibacy), represents one of the symbols of the contemporary concept of family (e.g. a lady living alone in an enthusiast and confident way).

It is possible to observe that despite the various questions Confucius asks to the lady, in the end it is the performance of Haier technology in the lady’s house which fulfils Confucius curiosity. The symbolic role of lights lighting up (someone waiting for you at home), is another important element able to confirm Haier’s role in combining tradition and innovation. The spot ends with Haier’s logo and pay-off: “定制美好生活” *dìngzhì měihào shēnghuó*, translatable in “customize a better life”, which triggers interesting cues on brand identity.

3.3-1.1. Shot and sequences¹⁶⁰

Even though a spot is a syncretic text, the visual expression is, in this case, the most prevailing aspect. The analysis might start with the focus on the shots and sequences.¹⁶¹ The spot has a duration of one minute and twenty-eight seconds and it is made of thirty-five shots.

¹⁵⁹ These narrative elements might recall a Dante’s vision of journey within oneself, accompanied by a guide in an extraordinary world where experience of the unknown can be made.

¹⁶⁰ Several concepts for the visual analysis of advertising have been borrowed from the cinematic language.

¹⁶¹ In filmmaking a shot/frame represents the portion of film included between two cuts, while a sequence represents a series of scenes which form a narrative unit. (Bianchi, 2005, 180).

The average duration of the shots varies from two to three seconds, except for three shots which, for their unusual length, suggest their importance for their narrative meaning. They indeed carry elements of significance which can be a guidance in the reading and interpretation of the spot. The shot number three, seven seconds long, introduces the protagonist of the story, Confucius, and the traditional concept of family and home (Confucius states “Every year in this period, the only destination of this train is home”). In shot number eighteen, six seconds long, the young lady addresses to Confucius and states “I bought the house on my own and have a very fulfilling job. Isn’t being single accounted for family?”. The camera moves gradually closer to the lady drawing the attention to her words: she presents an innovative vision of the family, constituted by herself. The shot number thirty-two presents Confucius sanctioning the new knowledges he has just acquired: “In this era, home is really different”.

Such shots are fundamental for the storyboard because they present how family and ruling of the house, the main theme of the spot, follow a dynamic of change.

The analysis can proceed taking into consideration sequences and narrative units.

The first sequence (comprised between shots 1-5) presents the train as the main set of action and the main character who is captioned as “孔子。传统家庭观念奠基人” *Kǒngzǐ. chuán tǒng jiā tíng guān niàn diàn jī rén* (Confucius, founder of the traditional family concept). He is depicted in the situation of travelling back to his native place, a traditional custom belonging to Chinese culture which has been carried on for centuries on occasion of the Chinese New Year. Without a specific reference to the festivity, it is possible to assume this due to the sentences of Confucius: “Every year in this period, the only destination of this train is home”.¹⁶²

¹⁶² The time in reference is probably the Chinese New Year which has not a fixed date but is celebrated between Jan 21 and Feb 20. During such festivity, lot of Chinese people, who during the year live and work in big cities, go back to their native town and visit relatives. It is very important to participate to family gatherings as for many people Chinese New Year is the only moment they can visit their home.

Right after, another character is introduced: “图灵。人工智能之父” *Túling. rén gōng zhì néng zhī fù* (Alan Turing, Father of Artificial Intelligence) who, with a strong confidence, sits in front of Confucius and tries to question the original concept of home: “Is home the same as before?”.

The sequence ends by showing the two men sitting at the opposite side of the cabin: on one side, a confused Confucius who is probably wondering about the identity of the stranger and the sense of his words; on the other side there is Turing, who peacefully opens up and read a newspaper (The Daily Telegraph).

By these elements it is possible to make few considerations: the characters have been projected in a suspended time where the past and modernity coexist and are embodied by the two protagonists, their clothing, and objects. This opposition, added to the contrasting attitudes of the characters, can be attributed to a deeper contrast underlying the narrative of the spot: the opposition between tradition and innovation, which will become more evident as the spot develops, especially when the single lady and her high-tech home will be in the spotlight.

The second sequence (shots 6-13) starts with the train approaching the station and the lady heading to the train exit. She is momentarily stopped by the train conductor who affirms: “go back home quickly, your family is waiting”, to which the lady replies “I am the only one in my home”. By hearing this declaration, Confucius considers the only rational thought that he is capable to make: “Is she a knight?”. Such an affirmation, which results to the viewer as ironic, is an essential trait of the character identity and function: Confucius’ ideals and beliefs seems to be harshly debatable; plus, it is remarkable that he manly expresses himself through questions. If on one side Confucius questions the reality by the only tools he owns, on the other side Alan Turing reveals its role in the narrative of the spot: he wishes to help

Confucius to understand how the contemporary world works. Indeed, by nodding at Confucius he seems to invite him to the discovery.

The third sequence (shots 14-20) sees Confucius and Turing getting off the train and starting a dialogue where the latter reveals his role of guide who shows a residential area called “独身主义” *dúshēn zhǔyì* (“celibacy”). For the first time Confucius directly asks a question to Turing: “can one person make a home?”. Nevertheless, the question is answered by the young lady who, despite being far away from the interlocutors, firmly declares: “I bought the house on my own and I have a very fulfilling job. Isn’t being single accounted as a family?”.

Confucius tries to argue this perspective by stating: “If you say so...but every time you go home, you will hope there is a light waiting, right?”.

The dialogue between Confucius, Turing and the young lady might represent the dialogue between the different eras and thus between different points of view on issues like “family” and “home”.

The traditional concept of family (embodied by Confucius) is clearly the one that casts doubts on contemporary perspective. The inquisitive tone of the Chinese philosopher, though, is not to be interpreted as an anachronistic vision of the tradition, rather it might be read as a typical trait of wisdom which needs evidence to be fulfilled. With these premises, it is possible to make a consideration: no explanation offered by the young lady or Turing is as important as the performance of Haier appliances. In fact, the only way for Confucius to believe to the new concept of family is by experiencing Haier Smart home.

The fourth sequence (shots 21-27), in contrast to the third, is characterized by non-verbal signs which happen to be more important than words. To the last provocative statement by Confucius, the young lady replies with a smile. The act of smiling can be interpreted only when related to what happens next: while the girl approaches her home, house lights

automatically turn on. This key event blows Confucius and Turing's minds, making them visibly astonished. Their reaction is followed by an internal view of the house which seems to come alive thanks to the lamp lights turning on one by one. The performance of Haier smart home and devices shows how AI can guarantee a light waiting for a lady who lives by herself. The displayed text states “回家场景。总有盏灯等你回家” *huí jiā chǎng jǐng. zǒng yǒu zhǎn míng dēng nǐ huí jiā*, translatable as “when going back home: there will always be a light waiting for you”. The spotlight on smart home, besides showing the presence of contemporary elements, seems to express an effective answer to Confucius doubts and seems to establish harmony between innovation and tradition.

The fifth sequence (shots 28-31) is the sequence where the sanction takes place. It is now necessary to explore the concept of Canonical Narrative Schema which belongs to the surface level of the semio-narrative structure. At this level, terms belonging to the semiotic square translate into actions of the subjects of the story. The subjects (also called actants), at the abstract level, act following their own narrative trajectory (Narrative Program) which is standardized¹⁶³: every story presupposes a purpose, a value object. When the Subject achieves its purpose, the *performance* phase occurs. But there are other phases of the Narrative schema: *manipulation*, the ‘causing-to-do’ something, where a Sender causes the Subject to do something; *competence*, the ‘wanting-to-do’, the ‘knowing how to do’, and the ‘being-able-to-do’ of the Subject; *sanction*, the ‘knowing’ and the praise by the Sender towards the performance of the Subject.¹⁶⁴

As far as this scene is concerned, it is possible to detect three sanctioning moments related to three different Narrative Programs: woman's, Confucius', Turing's.

¹⁶³ That is why it is called *Canonical* Narrative schema. (Bianchi, 2005)

¹⁶⁴ Bianchi, C. (2005).

The sequence opens with the lady waving to the men and yelling “新年快乐”¹⁶⁵ *xīnnián kuàilè* (“Happy New Year”); Confucius’ sanction follows as he smiles at the lady with an almost imperceptible bowing and tries to reply to her greeting with the ancient salutation. But he hesitates and surprisingly waves back to the girl, imitating the gestures he has just learnt.

This event corresponds to two sanctioning moments: the first is the sanctioning of the lady by Confucius, while the second is the sanction of Confucius by himself. The first sanction relies on the fact that, when in the previous sequence Confucius questioned the lady words by stating “If you say so, but every time you go home, you will hope there is a light waiting, right?”, the lady had to rewrite her Narrative Program (NP1) with the new purpose of making him aware of innovative possibilities of living a home. Only after the performance of the lady consisting in showing Haier technologies, she achieves the purpose of making Confucius experience “one-person family” concept, thus he sanctions her through greetings. The second sanction regards Confucius’ Narrative Program which is elaborated when the protagonist waves back to the lady: the scene carefully underlines the difficulty of the man in performing a greeting that is not in compliance with his customs. Despite that, he tries and imitates the greetings of the lady. The performance corresponds to his choice of waving hands rather than bowing: he finally realizes its Narrative Plan (getting closer to the innovative way of doing things). This moment is also important for the whole narrative of the spot which, as the thesis will show, is focused on Confucius’ certainty and doubt. The objective to replace a prior knowledge with a new one is meaningful in the case of Confucius because he embodies the tradition. The double sanction, reflected in the deference to the lady,

¹⁶⁵ It is now revealed the time of the year corresponding to the New Year festivity, although the era and historical moment remains suspended and unidentifiable.

reveals a deeper message: tradition can accept and be in harmony with innovation only if it can accept contemporary ideals and innovation.

The last sanction occurs when Turing, after observing the greeting scene, states “Interesting”, probably referring to the fact that Confucius for the first time leaves behind his knowledge to get a new one. This sanction also establishes that the purpose of making Confucius aware of new concept of family is partly achieved.

The sequence ends with a shot on Confucius who declares “这个时代，家真的不一样了” *zhè gè shí dài, jiā zhēn de bù yī yàng le* (“In this era, home is really different”), giving an unequivocal evidence about what the character is aware of. This narrative passage is very important because it suggests that the character concluded its Narrative Program which consisted in understanding how modern concept of family can be different from the traditional.

The sixth sequence (shots 33-34) shows the train ready to leave and Turing who recalls the old man to get on the train. The train leaves and a text appears on the screen: 用智慧 支持 家的更多可能 *yòng zhì huì zhī chí jiā de gèng duō kě néng* (“More possibilities to support your home with AI”).

The seventh sequence (shots thirty-five) corresponds to the final shot where the brand logo and payoff appears: “定制美好生活” *dìng zhì měi hǎo shēng huó* (“customize a better life”).

3.3-1.2. The Semiotic square

Considering that the whole narrative revolves around the dichotomy Certainty-Doubt, (particularly expressed in sequences four and five) it might be possible to apply a semiotic square based on the semantic opposition /Certainty/ vs. /Doubt/, as represented below (see table 1).

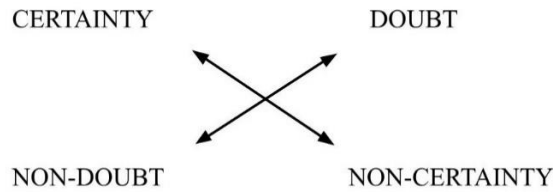


Table 1. Semiotic Square Certainty vs Doubt

A semiotic square can be also read as a linear and dynamic development of a narrative (see table 2), thus we can see how the dynamic is applicable to the main character’s figure: Confucius is initially so disbelieving (NON-CERTAINTY, 1) that his only assumption for a girl living alone is that she is a knight. Later, when he asks Turing if a person could make a home, he starts to consider explanations that go beyond his knowledge, so he stops doubting reality (NON-DOUBT, 2). And still, when he replies to the lady “If you say so, but every time you go home you will hope there is a light waiting, right?”, he is doubting about the fact that the lady actually has a satisfying life despite the fact that she lives alone (DOUBT, 3). Eventually, only thanks to the performance of the smart home, Confucius is satisfied and convinced (CERTAINTY, 4) that “home is really different”.

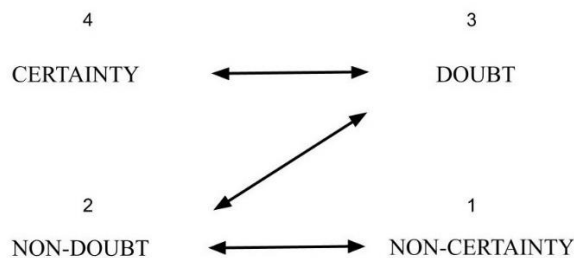


Table 2. Linear process in Certainty/Doubt square

The Certainty / Doubt opposition is reinforced by another opposition, which has been already mentioned and which is the leitmotif of the spot: the contrast between tradition and innovation.

3.3-1.3. Conclusions

The narrative, based on the Certainty / Doubt opposition, is underlined by a deeper opposition between /Tradition/ and /Innovation/. The coexistence of the old and the new is the leitmotif of the entire spot. Haier way of presenting an openminded Confucius confronting a cosmopolite lady triggers some interesting conclusion on Haier brand communication. Such is based on a combination between tradition and innovation, where Haier technology doesn't deny Chinese tradition, but it rather adapts tradition to cater current social needs and expectations.

For example, being a single woman could not be plausible in ancient China, but Haier technologies enable a single woman to live by herself without renouncing to the traditional Chinese ideals. As it will be shown, Haier AI is able to maintain a Chinese custom which is the symbol of "a light waiting at home". In fact, Haier smart home ignites house lights when the girl is approaching her home, to reproduce the feeling of someone waiting at home. Therefore, it is possible to identify Haier as the guarantor of the preservation of Chinese traditional values in the contemporary world. The spot wants to present Haier as element of transition and continuity: it doesn't deny the past, rather it maintains and reinforces past while opening to the future. Haier presents itself as a brand focused on the future that attempts to include tradition in a changing world.

In fact, rather than being represented as realities in conflict, the dynamic of contrast among tradition and innovation changes throughout the spot, until a harmony between the two is achieved: the climax of such harmony is reached when Confucius and the lady greet each other, and the "happy new year" becomes the metonymy for harmony.

The element of inclusion is also highlighted by another relation built upon dialogue: the coexistence of Chinese and western culture. It is very common in Chinese history and in the collective imagery to acknowledge westerners as bearers of scientific and technological know-how. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy how this spot presents the evolution of Turing's scientific findings which is embodied by Haier's AI. Another important message is that Haier's technologies are the syncretic evolution of ancient Chinese tradition and modern Western technologies.

3.3-2. Communication through advertising in Italy: Analysis of the spot "Haier, preserve life's flavour"

The spot¹⁶⁶, posted on Haier Italia YouTube channel on June 13, 2020, had been broadcasted on the main Italian Tv channels for a month during the summer of 2020.¹⁶⁷ With a total length of thirty seconds, the spot fits the regular duration of advertisements designed for tv channels, differently from the already analysed spot "a new way of ruling the home". It is important to state that, differently from Chinese ad which is a corporate branding ad aimed at enhancing Haier identity in China, the Italian ad is a product branding ad. The choice of two different communication strategies is probably based on the fact that Haier still needs to build a strong brand image in Italy, thus it focuses on products. In contrast, the brand has already a strong identity in the Chinese market, so it invests in solving the long-standing conflict between tradition and innovation.

The adv, addressed to Italian consumers, depicts various daily life moments in which different kinds of people are associated in different ways to food: cultivating, eating, buying and enjoying food are the main actions emphasized in the spot. Food is the focus of every action, from the beginning when a farmer handles a bunch of grapes, until the end of the spot

¹⁶⁶ Available at: <https://youtu.be/Q1qFwPUz3dQ>

¹⁶⁷ Available at: <https://www.eldomtrade.it/2020/06/18/on-air-uno-spot-tv-di-haier-per-raggiungere-58-milioni-di-contatti-totali/> (accessed 05/02/21, at 10.00)

when a little girl picks a strawberry from a cake in the fridge. The aim of the spot is showing how Haier Fresher Techs® can help the consumer to preserve food, and the brand mission statement is enclosed in the sentence “Haier, preserve Life’s flavour”, shown at the end of the spot. The payoff deliberately use a playful tone to express the ability of Haier in preserving flavours; the slogan, constituting a pun with the flavour of food, plays on the importance of life’s flavour, which can be preserved thanks to the technologies offered by the brand.

3.3-2.1. Discursive structure: Figures and Themes

Themes and figures are part of the meaning construction of a narrative. They belong to the discursive structure (see fig. 11, pg. 69), where the discourse takes place and it is embodied in figurative (space, time and actors) and thematic elements. It is a fundamental level for the narrative because it enables a brand to express its values thanks to actors who interacts in a given space and time.

The spot represents daily life moments of random people who aren’t related to each other, driving the focus to the only element that puts in relation such daily moments: food, which could be intended as an actor since it has an important role for the various narratives presented in the spot. It might be possible, indeed, to establish a recurrent narrative throughout the spot where any actor¹⁶⁸ (a farmer, a child, a lady, a man and a girl), when related to food, has an evident facial reaction expressing a change of his/her emotional state.

One of the main themes of the spot is the preserving of food freshness, based on figurative elements presented throughout the entire spot: from the first “bucolic” scene of a field, to the last domestic scene with Haier fridge. The first sequence shows a farmer who walks in its vineyard, approaches an unpicked grapes and smiles. Natural elements expressed by

¹⁶⁸ An actor refers to the actual character of a narrative. “Actors” fulfil the position of structural functions and abstract roles, called “actants”. (Bianchi, 2005)

figures like the field, fruit trees and the countryman, give a sense of freshness and naturalness which are usually found in food and kitchen related ads. The following sequence presents a kitchen where a mom is feeding her child with some food and the child seems shaken by the unexpected taste. The narrative is brought to a home environment, embodied by a family context where food is “discovered” by the child, thanks to the help of his mother. Noteworthy is the element of mother-child feeding which is a recurrent theme in Italian advertising for food¹⁶⁹, thus could help Italian audience to indirectly recall to memory other products and emotions related to the kitchen environment. The third sequence is set in a kitchen where a girl is preparing a bowl of salad with fresh vegetables, while dancing. The girl bites some food creating a joyful reaction on her face; she keeps dancing while closing the fridge door. The shot on a green and colourful bowl of salad recalls the freshness that the food has maintained: the food appears to be freshly picked and ready to be eaten. Here lays the key point of the spot: a relation is established between the fridge, home environment and the freshness of food. The narrative presents Haier fridge as guarantor of food freshness, as preserver of the natural and original qualities of food, element that can trigger satisfaction in the final consumer of such food.

The evolution of the storyboard seems to confirm the idea of a continuum of freshness: from the unpicked grapes portrayed in the vineyard to a man at a market which chooses a fruit over the other by smelling their “flavour”; a numerous family reunited around a rich meal and eventually a girl who sneaks out the feast and goes for the dessert in the fridge. All these scenes are alternated with the presentation of appetizing food, in particular the last scene, where the dessert becomes the overwhelming desire of a young girl. In fact, despite the girl risks to be scolded when she escapes a family dinner, she aspires to eat the dessert in the

¹⁶⁹ One of the most famous examples is Barilla 132 anniversary advertising spot, where such figure recurs three times.

fridge. The clear message coming from this narrative is that the risk of judgment or punishment from other people is worth the desiring object. Attention shall be put once again on the role of the fridge and of the food. The young girl escapes a boring situation in which she is forced (during a lunch with relatives), to do something not allowed (eating the dessert) that drives her to be joyful. This narrative, in compliance with the others of the spot, shows food as an element which triggers emotions like gratification, joy, self-realization which are the real desiring objects of the various Subjects. The fridge powered by Haier technology is the element enabling all the characters to reach the food and realize their own narrative program (S→Ov) because thanks to the fridge they can join food.

3.3-2.2. The importance of time and timing

Albeit the presence of various narratives throughout the entire spot, the continuity elements are emphasized by the voiceover which states: “Food needs time to surprise you and to be enjoyed, so take your time to taste at best what you choose. Thanks to Haier Fresher Techs you will taste freshness for the longest. Haier Fresher Techs, Preserve Life’s flavour”.¹⁷⁰

The whole spot revolves around the idea of time. This emphasis is undoubtedly related to the role of Haier technology in the spot: preservation of food. As already evidenced by Haier Chinese ad, Haier technology helps to maintain something over time. This message is here expressed by the central role of Haier fridge which “preserves” the freshness of food. This element relates to the issue of timing. The value of freshness throughout the spot is related to the sentiment of “joy”, so the role of Haier Fresher Techs® is not only preserving food freshness but preserving it specifically until when the consumer wants to enjoy it. Haier technology respect the timing of the consumer in order to give him a moment of reconciliation with life. “Preserve life’s flavour” payoff encloses the respect and maintaining

¹⁷⁰ The translation is edited by the author of this thesis. Original text is in Italian.

of food quality on one side, and the respect towards each consumer's timing to re-join life's flavour on the other. Moreover, the use of the verb "to preserve" implies an ability of maintaining the original qualities of something despite the passing of time and influence of external factors. The verb also gives a sense of safety and assurance, and if related to "life's flavour", suggests the central role of life's essence.

3.3-3. Conclusions

The analysis of these spots triggers interesting considerations about Haier brand identity. It is eventually possible to establish that Chinese and Italian spots are both based on a fundamental element: the time axis. The narrative belonging to Haier ads is deeply related to time although it is expressed through different languages and style. The leitmotif is the preserving of elements in time for the enhancement of better life condition. The key message is that Haier technology enables the maintaining and reassessment of Chinese traditions (Haier smart home) and it also guarantees the preserving of product freshness (Haier Fresher Techs®).

Haier different communication strategies share a common radical element: the need to combining tradition and innovation, where innovation is an evolution of tradition and not a denial. Such idea is reflected for example in the figure of an open-minded and curious Confucius which tries to find out more about innovation. Haier's identity is presented in both spots in a consistent way: Haier is the warranty of preserving the origin element, and technology is the element of such a preservation, whether it is for tradition or freshness.

3.4- Huawei

3.4-1. Communication through advertising in China and out of China: analysis of the spot “HUAWEI #TECH4ALL – With the Dreams of Digital Inclusion”.¹⁷¹

Between the end of the year 2020 and the beginning of 2021, Huawei posted on different social platforms its new spot. The platforms including Weibo, Twitter and YouTube make of this advertising an international spot able to integrate a universal meaning suitable for any country. The spot promotes the campaign #Tech4All, playing a main role in Corporate Communication strategy. The campaign responds to Corporate Social Responsibility of the brand by promoting themes like social and environmental sustainability and equality. The spot conveys the idea that Huawei is putting a lot of effort in achieving global equality and giving opportunities to less developed societies around the world. Huawei technologies, as already underlined in the abovementioned spot “The Hertz of Huawei” (see Chapter two; pg. 50), help the development of communities and spread digitalization.

The spot, presented on Huawei official website, comes in two different versions, English and Chinese, which slightly differ from each other due to the translation of subtitles in the latter.¹⁷² By comparing the two spots, it is possible to draw important points on Huawei strategic communication, on the basis of similarities and differences. Apart from subtitles, the spots are identical and both work on the same values, themes, and visual elements to build the narrative. Such a uniformity suggests a homogeneity in the strategic communication of Huawei which addresses to global and Chinese market in a very similar way. As it has been pointed out in the second chapter, Huawei brand philosophy is oriented towards *globalization*, employee’s cultural inclusion, global social activism and so on. The

¹⁷¹ Source: Huawei.com. Available at: <https://www.huawei.com/minisite/tech4all/en/>, (accessed 12/02/21, at 9:30).

¹⁷² Spot Huawei (China) <https://www.huawei.com/minisite/tech4all/cn/>, (accessed 12/2/21, at 10.00).

spots analysed in these paragraphs express the effort in achieving a unified corporate communication: Huawei's global character is clearly reflected in these spots, highlighting the consistency among the different levels of the brand discourse. Elements such as music, values and figures become not just functional tools to build a spot, but part of the brand identity and the representation of the global nature of Huawei.

3.4-1.1. Sequences

The spot has a total length of one minute and forty-nine seconds. It opens with a statement which is a commitment to values like sustainability and equality: "In creating a more sustainable and equal future for all, everyone should have the right to digital access".

The sequence goes on with an overview of a wooden sphere representing the globe. The playful tone given by figures which resemble wooden toys gives to narrative a subtle fantasy mood. The world is represented as a dreamy place where objects, people and animals are made of wood and where the dream of a better world becomes reality thanks to the help of a little robot called *Huawei*.

The narrative follows the perspective of the main character of the story, the robot Huawei, who travels around many world communities. By visiting different places characterized by underdeveloped services, the robot has the chance to see the issues and difficulties that communities encounter. The sad mood overwhelming the robot when he faces inequalities, reflects a human sympathy which enable the audience to empathize with it.

The purpose is to present the effort of the brand in enabling people and environment to have a better future. By helping underdeveloped communities over the world to enhance an active economy and by supplying hospitals with new technologies, Huawei aims at realizing digital inclusion.

3.4-1.2. Figurative and thematic elements

One of the most important figurative elements which is strictly related to the global character of the brand is the wooden world, setting of the narrative. The figurative element “world” already present in “the Hertz of Huawei” as context of narrative, might indeed refer to the globality of Huawei. What enables the spot to be more universal is the cartoonish style where actors are made of wood. Real world is thus represented through wooden elements recalling the imagery of toys and puppet shows in a non-childish perspective.

This drives to the definition of the main theme of the spot: the dream, conveyed by many elements like the soundtrack “A million dreams”¹⁷³, and the cartoonish perspective of the world which recalls a dreamy vision.

The dreamy mood might enable audience to picture a soften perspective on the real world, conveying a clear message: underdeveloped societies and economies are suffering inequality of the access to internet technology and the consequent influence on education, medical, environmental and economic systems.

In the fictional world, technology is partly also presented in form of wood: the robot, which is technology par excellence, has a wooden face who rolls depending on emotions the robot feels: this element triggers emotions of the audience, because an empathy is established. Its face expression changes whenever the robot brings change in world communities: the passing of the robot indeed coincides with improvements and innovations. A correlation is thus created between the smiling robot and the achievements of good conditions in the communities, representing benefits coming out from the help of Huawei. By analysing the sequence of events in the narrative, it might be possible to identify the ad as a *causal*

¹⁷³ From the movie “The Greatest Showman”, released in 2017 by 21st Century Fox

advertising because there is a correlation between the action of the robot and the transformation undergoing the places it visits.

3.4-1.3. Huawei thematic isotopy: the protagonism of the brand

Such a narrative recalls the narrative presented in the spot “The Hertz of Huawei” (see Chapter two, pg. 50), where Huawei social initiatives were already represented as result of the heroic identity of the brand. It is possible to find similar element and a common grammar between the two spots of the same brand: the recurrency of Huawei’s logo through the entire spot, the centric focus on the brand and on its goals, figures representing the heterogeneity of the world communities, values of environmental and social sustainability.

Recurrency of Huawei’s logo is also useful to understand communication strategy. Differently from Haier spots where logo and brand appear in the last sequences, Huawei’s logo has a central role in the ads. The centrality of the logo is strictly related to the central image that the ad wants to create around the brand: Huawei is the protagonist, depicted as the “hero” which helps people to solve issues. The spot here presented underlines a fixed pattern of narrative where different problematic social situations are solved by the intervention of Huawei. Indeed, every stop-over of the robot represents an area in which Huawei offers its help in order to achieve development: the commitments of the brand are driving equity and equality in education, enabling inclusion and equity in health, protecting the environment with technology and driving balanced development.

3.4-1.4. Music: a strategical choice for brand communication

One important element of the spot is music. Absence of voiceover and dialogues is completely substituted by the song “A million dreams”, from the famous movie *The Greatest Showman*. This stylistic choice is strategic because the song belongs to a western cultural background where the movie has been well-known since its release in 2017. The soundtrack of the movie has become popular also due to an all-star cast featuring Hugh Jackman,

Michelle Williams and Zack Efron, among others. Nevertheless, the ignorance of the movie or the soundtrack does not necessarily undermine the understanding and the enjoyment of the song in this ad. The meaning of the song is indeed explicit and applicable to different contexts, but it is likely that western audience might have been more appealed than Chinese by a song which is mostly know in the west.

However, the song lyrics constitutes an important verbal content which, together with the spot figurative elements, creates the imagery of the dream. The lyrics used in the spot includes a part of the original song, which is reinterpreted by young singers with a soft voice:

There's a house we can build

Every room inside is filled

With things from far away

The special things I compile

Each one there to make you smile

On a rainy day

They can say, they can say it all sounds crazy

They can say, they can say we've lost our minds

I don't care, I don't care if they call us crazy

Runaway to a world that we design

Every night I lie in bed

The brightest colours fill my head

A million dreams are keeping me awake

I think of what the world could be

A vision of the one I see

A million dreams is all it's gonna take

Oh a million dreams for the world we're gonna make¹⁷⁴

¹⁷⁴ Lyrics from the song "A Million Dreams", Atlantic Recorded Corporation record label

The Chinese version maintains the music but presents a translated lyric which slightly differs from the original meaning:

让我们共同打造一个家园 *ràng wǒmen gòng tóng dǎ zào yí gè jiā yuán*

一个面向未来的 *yí gè miàn xiàng wèi lái de*

让每个人的梦想都可以实现的世界 *ràng měigèrén de mèngxiǎng dōukěyǐ shíxiàn de shìjiè*

这个世界里的每一样事物 *zhè gè shì jiè lǐ de měi yī yàng shì wù*

都很特别，会让你微笑 *dōu hěn tè bié, huì ràng nǐ wēi xiào*

即使是在困难，失落的时候 *jí shǐ shì zài kùn nán, shī luò de shí hou*

有人会说，我们是在胡思乱想 *yǒu rén huì shuō, wǒmen shì zài hú sī luàn xiǎng*

有人会说，我们不切实际 *yǒu rén huì shuō, wǒmen bù qiē shí jì*

但我都不在乎，因为我坚信 *dàn wǒ dōu bù zài hu , yīn wèi wǒ jiān xìn*

美好世界可以由我们共同去开创 *měihǎo shìjiè kěyǐ yóu wǒmen gòng tóng qù kāi chuàng*

每个夜晚当我躺在床上 *měi gè yè wǎn dāng wǒ tǎng zài chuáng shàng*

对未来的美好想象让我兴奋不已 *duì wèilái de měihǎo xiǎngxiàng ràng wǒ xìngfèn bù yǐ*

让千百万人的梦想成真 *ràng qiān bǎi wàn rén de mèng xiǎng chéng zhēn*

我想像着那个美好智能世界的模样 *wǒxiǎngxiàngzhenàgèměihǎozhìnéngshìjièdemúyàng*

仿佛它就在我眼前 *fǎng fú tā jiù zài wǒ yǎn qián*

让每一个人都能实现自己的梦想 *ràng měi yí gè rén dōu néng shí xiàn zì jǐ de mèngxiǎng*

让千百万人的梦想成真 *ràng qiān bǎi wàn rén de mèng xiǎng chéng zhēn*

Translation ¹⁷⁵

Let's build a house together

One which is forward-looking

Make the dreams of every person become true

In such a world, every object

Is particular and can make you smile

Even during difficult time

There might be people saying that we let our imagination run wild

There might be people saying we are not realistic

But I don't care because I firmly believe that we can build a wonderful world together

Every night I lie in bed, I get thrilled by thinking of such a wonderful world

Where a million dream will come true

I imagine what the wonderful intelligent world looks like as if it was in front of me

Where every person can realize his own dream

Where a million dream will come true.

In the Chinese version, the general meaning of the song is maintained and includes the theme of dream. However, the comparison between the two versions of the spot suggests an

¹⁷⁵ The translation is edited by the author of this thesis

important point about the communication strategy of a global brand which is Huawei. In order to cater for Chinese audience, a language adaptation of the subtitles both helps the understanding of the song and conveys the Chinese cultural character which is totally absent in the ad. This implies an important consideration about how Huawei prefers to place on the foreground its global character rather than its Chinese origin.

3.4-2. Conclusions

“Dream of digital inclusion” The theme of dream is related to the mission of the brand in realizing a better future for communities who are suffering the lack of digital inclusion. The ad, besides promoting the brand activism, communicates a vision where social inclusion and equality are a shared dream. Apart from the values of sustainability and equality which are very common topics nowadays, dream as a narrative expedient is an important element, because it implies possibilities which don’t exist in the reality but have the same chance to happen in a fictional world.

In addition, Huawei ads reflect a balance between communication strategies for China and for the international market. This element drives the attention to the strong brand image that Huawei already has in the global context. If on one side it is surprising to find the same corporate advertising for two different realities, it shall be outlined that Huawei has always had a predisposition toward the “global”. Furthermore, Huawei’s vision is projected to the future, a future where issues are global issues and where the focus is on an innovative world. In contrast to Haier, Huawei Chinese brand communication is not focused on how to solve the conflict between tradition and innovation. It rather places China at the same level of the rest of the world. Therefore, from Huawei perspective China and the world have the same purpose: enhancing better social condition and equality for everyone. This is also evidenced by the tag #TECH4ALL which underlines a shared purpose based on a common effort.

3.5- Lenovo

3.5-1. Communication through advertising in China: Analysis of the short film “开局”*kāijú*, “The Beginning”.

Lenovo opens the year 2021 with a new short film¹⁷⁶ dedicated to praise the efforts made by China to become a great country. The spot is present on Chinese Lenovo website, but it has also been shared on many Chinese social media accounts obtaining great consent. The short film is the outcome of a strategic communication targeting Chinese consumers of all ages sharing a common cultural background. The communication is focused on themes, figures, and languages dear to Chinese people and thus effective. The choice to create a short film entirely designed for Chinese consumers, emphasizes a communication strategy focused on a differentiation of communication content. Such a differentiation reflects a brand identity which is built around many elements underlining the “national” character of Lenovo, first of all advertising projects.

Lenovo’s history reveals an ongoing ambiguity in communication strategies which have struggled to combine and create an overall solid brand identity based on an effective “global” character. As already underlined in the second chapter, the choice of having two different communication patterns, one to communicate with Chinese consumers and one with foreign consumers, challenges Lenovo’s corporate identity because the brand might be perceived in different ways inside of China and outside. Even though only few suggestions can be made on Lenovo’s business strategies, it might be possible to say that the effort of the brand to go global is certainly not reflected in the short film hereby presented, because it has been designed for Chinese people on Chinese cultural perspective which is hard to understand by

¹⁷⁶ Lenovo website. Available at: https://activity.lenovo.com.cn/tsyx/kj.html?pmf_group=in-push&pmf_medium=bannergw&pmf_source=Z00017927T001&ga=2.151624890.2039176733.1610017718-1745813587.1609164347 (accessed 11/01/21, at 9.30)

those who don't belong to it. The short film narrates indeed the story of the Republic from its foundation in 1949, driving the audience to a remembrance of the beginning of today's China. However, the focus on China might suggest other important considerations about a current way of building brand awareness in China: 国潮 *guócháo*, the trend of reassessment of the old and traditional Chinese elements by a young category of Chinese consumers.

Lately, several brands have been focusing on the growing interest of young Chinese consumer, particularly Gen Z, towards Chinese national identity and traditional culture. This trend, called 国潮 *guócháo*, has implications on the stylistic and communicative choices that homegrown brands adopt in China. This could be the reason for a corporate branding spot which enhances feelings of nationality, belonging, nostalgia. Therefore, if on one side Lenovo's attitude might lack in "global" character, on the other side, the need for "global" might be overtaken by an existing need to catch up with Chinese competitors in China.

国潮 *guócháo* is the pre-announcement of a new trend which sees China at the core of world businesses, where China will not be "the World's factory" anymore but will be one of the main consuming countries. This assumption implies several effects on the rush for "global" identity of Chinese brand. Without any claim to establish whether Lenovo's interest for globality is carried on, the research here conducted is aimed at studying how the image of China is depicted and celebrated by one of the most famous Chinese global brands.

3.5-1.1. Narrative sequences and audio-textual content

The short film has a length of three minutes and is mainly relevant on a semiotic level for visual and audio-textual content. A voiceover narrates the text in Chinese emphasizing the expression of meaningful images; in order to give a more complete vision of the spot, the verbal text will be presented sequence by sequence and will serve as a driver for the interpretation of the spot. The analysis will be based a commentary of one utterance at a time

with the correspondent figurative elements. Since the narrative rhythm is given by the audio-textual, the content has been divided into different sequences.

Sequence one (0:00- 0:19)

他们，他们拿什么追赶世界 *tā men, tā men ná shén me zhuī gǎn shì jiè* (What do they take to catch up with the world?). The dark setting is lighted up by a fire which represents a heat source for some people who are warming up. The camera focuses on some hands around a bonfire which are attributable to some men wearing working clothes. Personal pronoun “they”, repeated twice, introduce an element that create a social distance from the interlocutor (narrator) and from the addressee of the text (audience). The sentence “What do they take to catch up with the world?” introduces the theme of the entire spot. The identity of people in question (“they”) is still uncertain and so is why “they” had to catch up with the world, but the sentence implies that the subject “they” eventually achieved such result.

“开局” *kāijú*: the title of the spot appears on the foreground in a paintbrush font. The dawn illuminates the background where some subjects’ silhouettes stand out. The men gain a more specified identity thanks to the working tools they carry with them.

Sequence two (0:20-0:39)

这片大地两手空空/世界握有领先的工具/他们只有铁锹/算盘和钢笔 *zhè piàn dà dì liǎng shǒu kōng / shì jiè wò yǒu lǐng xiān de gōng jù / tā men zhǐ yǒu tiě qiāo / suàn pán hé gāng bǐ* (This land is empty-handed /The world had the leading tools/All they had were shovels, abaci and pens). The images clearly show men at work, digging the ground with shovels. There is then a change of setting: in a school, students are counting using abaci and writing numbers with pens. These three elements represent the basic tools used by a society which could enhance development through the hard work in construction land and the hard work at school. Those elements enable an assumption on the time period of the narrative:

teaching materials like abaci and pens don't belong to the contemporary era, rather to a near past that precedes the advent of technologies and calculators. The subject "They" doesn't just refer to the workers but also includes the students.

An opposition is created between "This land", which is an undefined place that is poor and lacks in instruments (it is "empty-handed"), and "the world" probably refers to the richer countries which hold instruments for growth.

Some engineers study the ground appointed to be a construction site; A close-up on one engineer focuses the attention on his action: he is looking into a measuring tool to measure the ground. Such tool, which is similar to a telescope, also recalls the function of the telescope that is seeing far. It might be a metaphor of an engineer who is far-sighted and already sees the result of a project.

Sequence three (0:40-1:10)

白天不够用/他们就把夜晚攥进手里 *bái tiān bù gòu yòng / tā men jiù bǎ yè wǎn zuàn jìn shǒu lǐ* (They held the night in their hand, when the day was not enough). In contrast with the previous shots at daylight, this sequence shows some workers in a dark environment which reveals to be a coalmine. Men are lightened by the light of their helmet while they are mining big amount of coal. A close-up on one worker's hands gripping a spade closes the sequence.

艰苦/就用身体承受艰苦 *jiān kǔ / jiù yòng shēn tǐ chéng shòu jiān kǔ* (When they encountered hardship, they used their bodies to bear hardship). Some industrial sparks mark the change of setting: a factory where iron and metal are transformed. Such figure echoes industrialization and blue collars working class. Some workers are walking near a furnace lighted up by incandescent material. A close-up on one worker's hands gripping a tool puts

once again the attention on the action of doing and the importance of hands¹⁷⁷: frames focused on hands will recur many times during the whole spot, creating a figurative isotopy.¹⁷⁸

The reference to “used their body to bear hardship” is aimed at underlining the physicality of hard work, common characteristic of working class.

The scene presents different changes of setting sharing a same theme: transportation. Overviews of a docks and of a railroad suggest a dynamic sense of the world; this feeling is emphasized at the end of the sequence where a subjective camera angle shows the head of the train travelling along the snowed rails. Such dynamic impasse enables a change of setting for the following sequence.

危险/就拿生命/面对危险 *wēi xiǎn / jiù ná shēng mìng / miàn duì wēi xiǎn* (When facing danger, they grasped life and faced danger). A snowy landscape presents two young shepherds driving a herd of sheep. Hand in hand, the two pastors grasping whips, drive the sheep in the right direction.

陷入僵局/他们用友好/打破僵局 *xiàn rù jiāng jú / tā men yòng yǒu hǎo / dǎ pò jiāng jú* (When facing an impasse, they broke it thanks to friendship). The scene is held during a table tennis match where audience and players are highly focused on the game. A close-up on a gamer’s sweating face reveals the professionalism and the importance of the event. On the background it is possible to observe a banner on the judge’s table saying “友谊第一，

¹⁷⁷ Hands are emphasized through visual images and through a main metaphor on which is based the meaning of the spot: hands are the tools that Chinese people used to build a better nation; that is why “future is in the palm of a hand”, meaning that every project starts with hard work and that every people may achieve their purpose even without any tool but their hands, good will and talent. The metaphor encloses the Chinese dream of making a great nation, which is the result of many ordinary Chinese people who worked for a shared purpose.

¹⁷⁸ An isotopy is a recurrence in a text of a same semantic category which constitutes a consistency in the reading path (Rolle, 2014).

比赛第二” *yǒu yì dì yī, bǐ sài dì èr*, (friendship first, competition second), which recalls the message announced by the narrator.

Even though it is probably a friendly match, table tennis is the Chinese national sport and used to represent an important diplomatic tool in the past of China. The reference might indeed not be so random, because China’s diplomatic deals started during the ‘70s and were embodied by table tennis matches between Chinese nation and foreign countries.

Sequence four (1:11- 1:24) 没有人能跑赢时间 *méi yǒu rén néng pǎo yíng shí jiān* (No one can beat time). A school bell rings and marks the end of lessons as lot of students run down the stairs. A close-up focus on a hand grasping an English book from a shelf creates the image of opening to the world. Eventually an overview on a library shows several students who intensively study recalling the deference to hard work.

但他们是无数人 *dàn tā men shì wú shù rén* (but they are countless people). A new setting is defined by the presence of a train: some boys hanging their head out of a train window look happy and excited to start their journey. The train on the rails represents once again a dynamic movement which leads to another environment in the following sequence.

努力追赶/却在追赶中跌倒 *nǚ lì zhuī gǎn / què zài zhuī gǎn zhōng diē dǎo* (They try to catch up but fell in pursuit). The dynamic of the train running on the rails is linked to the dynamic of a bicycle wheel. The city setting presents several people cycling on the side of a big red city wall decorated with the Chinese propaganda banners frequently found in public places. This sequence is important because clearly marks a change from a rural environment to a city one, which is the same change that China had undergone during its development.

Sequence five (1:25- 1:38) 他们就拿出勇气/继续追赶 *tā men jiù ná chū yǒng qì / jì xù zhuī gǎn* (They came up with courage and kept chasing). The initial scene presents a Lenovo’s

branded big box being lifted by a man. The man is loading several of such branded boxes on a truck. The scene, one of the most important in the spot, presents the brand and creates a relation between the brand and the value of courage. The logo is presented in its old version (see chapter two; pg.60) suggesting a temporalization which links the past of China to the past of Lenovo: the message that the spot wants to convey is that Lenovo is an integral part of the evolution of China, and the brand accompanied the country towards a development. The single worker who must carry Lenovo products by itself suggests that the brand was at the beginning of the business. The scene thus represents the beginning of Lenovo business, based on hard work and sacrifices, similarly to China.

十分付出/一分收获/他们耐心追赶 *shí fēn fù chū / yī fēn shōu huò / tā men nài xīn zhuī gǎn*
(A lot of effort corresponded to a little harvest, but they patiently kept pursuing). A painted city wall depicting Chinese propaganda opens the new sequence. A man carrying a radio with him, walks towards an electronic repair service. Repairers at the stand bring the radio and fix it. Radios, along with goods such as bicycle and tv, suggest a more accurate temporalization: such goods used to represent material success in 1970s China because they were the first example of mass consumption goods in the country.

The last shot of the sequence presents important elements for the understanding of the spot. A Chinese family watches on tv the launch of the Chinese missile *Dongfanghong 1* 东方红一号 dated 1970.¹⁷⁹ The achievement of such aerospace project reflects the real commitment and effort from Chinese scientists and engineers who were able to catch up with aerospace

¹⁷⁹ The missile was the first spatial engineering project of the PRC and occurred during Mao's presidency as part of the project for the expansion of the nation. The missile was designed to play Mao's anthem "The East is Red" from which the satellite is named after. Noteworthy is the introduction of a national pride element: propaganda goes beyond the city walls and is embodied into a historical event which is the missile launch in 1970.

programs of the world's major countries. The spot tends to underline, both indirectly and directly, the dedication that characterized experts and ordinary people in building China.

Sequence six(1:39-1:59) 一代人无法完成 就两代人 三代人 四代人 *yī dài rén wú fǎ wán chéng, jiù liǎng dài rén, sān dài rén, sì dài rén* (One generation couldn't do it alone, so the following generation helped).

A tracking shot shows different groups of characters representing the different generations which took part in the development of the country. The sequence offers a perspective on the cultural idea of group and the relevant role that community sense has in Chinese society and in the building of china itself.

就是这样的人/用这样的方式/把自己的国家从泥潭早拖出来 *jiù shì zhè yàng de rén / yòng zhè yàng de fāng shì / bǎ zì jǐ de guó jiā cóng ní tán zǎo tuō chū lái* (It is this kind of people who drag the country out of the mire using these abilities).

A group of people wearing black raincoats clear away the rubble of buildings probably created by a strong earthquake. The gloomy atmosphere, the rain and the heavy sensation of the rubble convey an uncomfortable feeling which is overloaded with the yells of effort coming from the volunteers taking away the rubble. The reference to the earthquake¹⁸⁰ which can destruct societies, villages and cities, is also a metaphor of all the difficulties which had undermined the development and that eventually had been overcome by the commitment of “this people” to their nation.

¹⁸⁰ It is likely to be referred to 2008 Wenchuan earthquake, the most destructive earthquake since the founding of the Republic.

在一片又一片天空展开它的旗帜 *zài yī piàn yòu yī piàn tiān kōng zhǎn kāi tā de qí zhì*
(Spreading the flag of China across every sky): an aviator is shown as an ambassador of
China for his metaphorical ability of “spreading the flag of China across every sky”.

Sequence seven (2:00-2:23) 他们就是一群普通人/除了这里再没有这样的普通人 *tā men*
jiù shì yī qún pǔ tōng rén / chú le zhè lǐ zài méi yǒu zhè yàng de pǔ tōng rén (They are a
bunch of ordinary people, but there are not such ordinary people except here)

这片大地从不是两手空空 / 他们就在这里 *zhè piàn dà dì cóng bú shì liǎng shǒu kōng / tā*
men jiù zài zhè lǐ (This land has never been empty-handed, because they are here). The
message of the spot is included in these key statements: today’s China has been built by
those people. With this sentence the message negates the initial statement that China was
empty-handed, because Chinese generations of “beginners” were so talented that eventually
caught up with the world despite hardships and lack of instruments. Such a negation
emphasizes the role of all the ordinary people presented: workers, miners, shepherds, the
Lenovo worker and all the “beginners” are unique ordinary people that can only be found in
a land like China. They had the ability of shaping with their hands the country leading it to
the development. The metaphor of shaping with one’s hand is reflected in concrete actions
the characters carry out. The sequence offers a close-up on all the little actions that the
characters did in their jobs and that eventually compose the big puzzle of modern China. The
focus is on their hands which are the tools of their jobs: train conductor’s hand holding a
wrench, miner’s holding charcoal, table tennis player’s holding a racket and a ping-pong ball.
The last shot introducing two workers with a surgical mask projects the scene to the present
time, where Covid-19 emergency still has a big impact in societies. Lenovo, as many Chinese
brand, has offered help and support to local communities for overcome the emergency. The

statement “they are here” linked to the last shot represents the serious commitment that Lenovo, as part of Chinese community, has in helping the society.

Sequence eight (2:24-2:39) 他们就是我们/如果能赤手空拳/改写命运/ 手握强大工具的我们/手里就有明天 *tā men jiù shì wǒ men / rú guǒ néng chì shǒu kōng quán / gǎi xiě mìng yùn / shǒu wò qiáng dà gōng jù de wǒ men* (They are us. If they lacked tools and they still changed their destiny, for us who have powerful tools we are holding the future in our hands).

A city environment occupies the scene and a nighty Shanghai skyline is projected on the background. These elements give a present temporal definition to the last part of the sequence. Several contemporary settings follow showing scientists and professors working with high tech solutions. The last scene shows a man walking in an empty room of a high building: city skyline can be admired beyond wide transparent windows. An objective frame from the outside of the building shows the same man beyond windows who is admiring the city from the top. The succession of these opposite camera angles (subjective and objective) gives the impression to the audience that ones can identify with that character and, at the same time, watching the scene from the outside. The offering of these two perspectives reflects the relation built between the opposition of “They” and “We” presented throughout the entire spot. It is not by chance that the two elements join in the sentence “They are us”.

Sequence nine (2:40-2:48) 把这片大地的智慧/交到这片大地的手中 *bǎ zhè piàn dà dì de zhì huì / jiāo dào zhè piàn dà dì de shǒu zhōng* (putting the wisdom of this land in the hands of this country)

The man slowly places his hand on the window facing the city while the text appears (fig.13). The shot is created on a visual balance: a blurry shape of the man’s hand is at the centre of the picture dividing the two sentences. The reference to hand “手中” is more accurate than ever: the concept of "putting the tools of wisdom in the hands of every Chinese" is a mission

for Lenovo, as the pay-off "Smart China" upholds. The urban background helps to convey the idea of technological future where the tools of wisdom and bravery are not the only tools Chinese people hold. Indeed, these abilities added to the tools of intelligent technology will be the basis to win tomorrow.¹⁸¹



Figure 13- Frame from Sequence nine (2:40-2:48)

Sequence ten (2:49-3:00) 智慧联想推动时代新开局/联想/智慧中国 *zhì huì lián xiǎng tuī dòng shí dài xīn kāi jú / lián xiǎng / zhì huì zhōng guó* (Smart Lenovo driving a new start in this era. Lenovo, Smart China.)

The reference to “开局”, “start” suggests a recall of the past and a looking forward to the future: generations of "starters", who have been building China will not stop their struggling pace. Lenovo has a leading role in providing to new “starters” the right tools to achieve better results, as the brand has already done in the past.

3.5-1.2. The importance of “identity”

The spot is a tribute to new China and to the billions of people who marked its beginning. Hence 1949, Chinese population has been committed to building a modern nation. The spot shows how the evolution of the country was made possible and how the feelings of praise for who made it possible can drive new development for the future. Lenovo depicts a former

¹⁸¹ “致敬历史与未来：联想《开局》大片的正能量！” *zhì jìng lì shǐ yǔ wèi lái: lián xiǎng 《kāi jú》 dà piàn de zhèng néng liàng!* [Tribute to History and Future: the positivity of Lenovo short movie “The beginning”]. Available at: https://www.sohu.com/na/443832075_120143856, (accessed 11/01/21, at 17:51).

China as a backward country that had no tools but “bare hands”; when the narrative unfolds, it is possible to acknowledge that wise and devout people are the real value of China and they are the reason why it eventually became the great country it is today. The narrative is built around values like identity, belonging and nationalism which are combined in a nostalgic but proud vision of China. Identity is a key issue in the spot, first of all because it is reflected in a national identity common to the audience.

The spot reveals how Lenovo’s history is bounded to Chinese history and how the brand corporate identity creates a strong relation to its nation. The insertion of Lenovo’s worker in the middle of the spot enables Lenovo to be recognized as one of the “beginners” of new China and to consider its participation in the country development. By doing this, the spot focus on the important Chinese cultural value of sacrificing oneself for a greater good. At the same time the individual effort is celebrated by the spot where “beginners” are depicted as ordinary people but also as heroic figures. The narrative, the language and the style built by the spot reveal a deep Chinese cultural trait based on how Chinese people perceive themselves and their country. The identification process is nourished by a spot which use a rhetoric similar to a nationalistic propaganda where the community is asked to do its part for building a strong nation. The proud and human tone through which Lenovo builds the spot message conveys a warm and humanistic care of the brand, establishing an emotional connection with the audience.

It is important at this point to remind that initial Lenovo’s attempt of building the corporate identity around the image of leading technology power of China; the brand has always aimed at driving the nation to technological innovation and realise the scientific and technological “redemption” of China (see Chapter two; pg.54) . The unsuccessful attempt of many years ago was the result of a weak communication strategy and of some contingency unfavourable situations, but, most of all, it communicated a brand image that was not properly

correspondent to the concrete actions of Lenovo at that time. Nowadays, Lenovo is a leading global technology company that has a strong propensity to identify with its Chinese origins. The spot expresses to Chinese audience an old promise of innovation: the role of Lenovo as innovator for China clearly emerges. Lenovo's story is the story of every Chinese person and of Chinese nation that share a similar beginning made of efforts and strong will: the scene presenting a Lenovo's worker reflects the figure of Yang Yuanqing (Lenovo founder) that started his business by selling computers. That figures embodies the "beginning" of a present-day global business and it is the metaphor for the realization of the dreams for innovation.

The beginning *kaiju* 开局, also refers to the beginning of a new era powered by Lenovo Artificial Intelligence, as underlined by the last frames stating: 智慧联想推动时代新开局 *zhì huì lián xiǎng tuī dòng shí dài xīn kāi jú* meaning "Lenovo's AI is driving the beginning of a new era". Throughout the spot, the concept of "beginning" puts in relation a past era, where efforts and sacrifice drove Chinese to build a strong nation starting from scratch, with a new era, where commitment and hard work can drive to progress as well. The spot bounds Lenovo not only to the past of China but also to its future which becomes "smart" thanks to the technological tools offered by the brand.



Figure 14- Last frame from the spot "开局"

智慧中国 *zhì huì zhōng guó* "Smart China" is the promise by the brand expressed through a payoff (see fig.14); Lenovo's identity definitely unfolds due to such mission statement:

China is not merely a place in the world or a target market for the brand, it instead marks the brand identity. By comparing this frame to the ones of Huawei and Haier ads, the reference to China is distinctive in Lenovo spot where the direct reference to China delivers a totally different character to the nature of its spot. As already underlined by logo visual elements, the presence of Chinese characters underlines a deeper link between China and the brand. Here, Lenovo not only uses a logo carrying its Chinese name but makes explicit its Chinese belonging by recalling China itself.

By these few elements it is possible to underline that Lenovo is strongly identified in Chinese ideals. But Chinese identity is presented in the spot with an alterity of elements. In fact, the recurring pronoun 他们 *tāmen* (they) recalls a feeling of otherness which eventually is resolved with a same identity (“they are us”), when 他们 meets pronoun 我们 *wǒmen* (we). It is interesting that the sense of alterity based on belonging to different historical periods is created among people of the same group who share similar past and culture. It is a travel through time where past, present, and future, are held together by a shared Chinese identity. There is a complete absence of foreign elements and references which might be indicative of which kind of image Lenovo wishes to have in China.

3.5-2. Communication through advertising in US: “Rise of smarter”.¹⁸²

During 2019, Lenovo shared “Rise of smarter” spot on Facebook and Twitter to reach a wider international audience. The English spot, found on Lenovo American website, had been shared in other Lenovo websites where it was translated to cater for consumers’ culture. For example, Italian version consists in a translated content suitable for Italian culture but maintains the original content and narrative structure. The choice of having a homogeneous international communication strategy differs from the case of Huawei: differently from

¹⁸² Available at: <https://youtu.be/g5RuNz7Jv-Y> (accessed 10/03/21 at 10:00)

Huawei's "#TECH4ALL", Lenovo offers a spot (translated to cater for international cultures) identical for every market except from the Chinese; in fact, the absence of Chinese version of the spot suggests the limits of such communication strategy.

"Rise of smarter" is a cunning valorization of "smarter" which is not a real product but an evolution of the category "smart". The spot builds an imagery around "smarter" where the nearly impossible comes possible. Photography and editing processes emphasize the innovative and efficient side of "smarter", defining how smarter technology helps some current social needs such as curing cancer, protecting the environment, and building bridges using 3D print. The narrative of the spot moves from one theme to another in a fast sequence of figurative elements; this dynamic is made possible by a clever use of lights and colour which enable a fading of frames resulting in a homogeneous narration. The kind of communication style reflects the content of the spot: it is in fact as smart as the dynamic presentation of frames and figurative elements.

3.5-2.1. Sequences

The spot has a total length of 1 minute and 30 seconds and it has been designed both for social media platforms and for tv. Among audio-textual elements, voiceover plays an important role as it establishes a homogeneity in narration, while dialogues are absent. The only verbal text inside the narrative is the voice of two promoters in a tv commercial, which marks the beginning and the end of the spot. This element leads to a cyclic presentation of elements which can be represented as follows: smart (first sequence), smarter (second sequence), smart (third sequence). The key issue marking the end of such cycle corresponds to the fourth sequence where the brand payoff establishes that "smarter" gets the better of "smart".

The playful tone characterising the spot enables a soft but captivating presentation of “smarter” which triggers in the audience a feeling of interest rather than concern. The spot relies on the dismantling of the idea of smart which is the dismantling of how technology has been perceived until the advent of Lenovo “smarter” technology. The spot is a gradual constitution of the meaning of “smarter” which is defined by opposition to the well-known category “smart”.

The first sequence (0:00- 0:15)

Voiceover: *These days, everything is smart.*

What’s wrong with smart? nothing.

The first scene depicts two promoters advertising a “smart diaper” and its ability in revolutionizing the way parents do parent. The following scene flips the perspective: the advertising is framed into a tv screen of an electronics store where it is simultaneously broadcasted on all tv screens on an exhibition wall. The focus moves on the spectator of such ad: a kid who probably represent young generation which looks at “smart” as an obsolete element.

The perception created by this change of perspective helps the audience to take distance from “smart”, which is omnipresent in our lives. The opulence and the pervasive presence of tv screens broadcasting an identical message might reflect the dominating role that “smart” has in mass media and in products: smart diapers are the evidence that literally everything is smart and, due to this, “smart” has been trivialized and commercialized as any other object of consumption until he has lost its innovative nature.

However, even if “there’s nothing wrong” with smart, the reaction of young kid conveys the idea that smart doesn’t respond to young generations’ needs and expectations.

The pic of irony is achieved at the end of the sequence when the kid who was watching the smart diaper commercial, runs toward a smart piggy bank in which he inserts a coin but gets slightly disappointed by the smart piggy reaction: “piggy says good job” (see fig. 15).



Figure 15- kid disappointment in front of smart technology; 0:14

Sequence two (0:16-1:10) is the longest sequence and the core of the spot.

Different shots presenting different subjects and settings are interrelated by the leitmotif of “smarter” which becomes the main subject of narration. Homogeneity of the sequence is maintained thanks to the dynamic and fluid changes of scene.

But smarter, smarter thinks big.

Smarter helps destroy cancer. With precision.

Smarter 3D prints a bridge. Out of steel.

Smarter makes the fastest, faster.

Smarter lets you binge watch, without being watched

Smarter sees the future of medicine. In deadly venom.

Smarter sends school kids on field trips without leaving the classroom

Smarter uses big data, AI and 5G to fight climate change and feed future generations

The set of actions related to “smarter” reflects the powerful tool it is, as it can improve what already is the best, making it *better*. This logic of performance is reflected in the payoff and it is dear to a young audience who needs to be provided with the best tools possible in order to face present-day challenges.

The rhetoric figure of the anaphora underlines the central focus on “smarter” taking advantage of the repetition which creates association in consumer’s mind. Nevertheless, it not only remarks the importance of “smarter” and builds a continuity in narration, but also creates a grammatical linearity where “smarter” is the subject of every single utterance. This grammatical operation combines human action to the subject “smarter” conferring on it a social role in the constitution of a better society: in fact, “smarter” *helps* cure cancer, *sees* the future of medicine, *sends* school kids, and so on.

The spot seems to give a new meaning to how technology can help humans to build a better tomorrow: smart diapers are not the revolution while curing cancer is. The irony used to convey such an important message is a strategical choice which guarantees a balance between seriousness and appeal, suitable language for young audience.

Sequence three (1:11-1:25)

Because the toughest challenges demand smarter technology.

Take that, smart.

The smart/smarter dialectic dynamic of the spot is especially underlined in two different moments: at the beginning and at the end of the spot marking the beginning and the end of a cycle that praise “smarter” and Lenovo’s quality. The first moment of the cycle corresponds to the first sequence when a kid shows its disappointment by the limits of *smart* (smart diaper, smart piggy bank). The second moment corresponds to the third sequence presenting a domestic environment where a dad and his baby watch the tv. After a series of

scenes concerning environmental destruction, the tv shows the overmentioned smart diaper ad; while the two promoters are presenting the advanced smart product, a bunch of pasta is thrown on the tv screen as a sign of protest against the ad. The speechless and shocked dad looks at the guilty baby who amused smiles back to his dad.

The two moments show the opposition running between smart and smarter, and the related representation of a world where young generations are bored and disappointed by the outdated “smart” and where the “toughest challenges demand smarter technology”. This might be an attempt from Lenovo to express the discomfort experienced by the youth towards a technology which is not enough smart. The message is that “smart” had saturated their lives without being of any needed assistance. Meanwhile it shows that Lenovo and its “smarter” technology brings efficiency to current day challenges such as facing climate change and preserving next generations opportunities.

“Take that smart” is the proper conclusion to a demand for an efficient technology able to respond to necessities of this era, where “smart” has been outdated by “smarter”.

Sequence four (1:26- 1:30) presents a roundup of Lenovo branded products which had been used in the narrative as indicators of smarter technology: a smartphone, a VR set, notebook and database hardware.

Lenovo, smarter technology for all.

The last shot, as usually happens in Chinese brand advertisings, presents the payoff reflecting condensed identity of the brand. The payoff “Lenovo, smarter technology for all” confirms what the spot aimed at building: on one side, Lenovo creates and identifies itself with a new meaning of innovation (smarter) which goes beyond innovation itself (smart). But it also points itself as the highest innovator in the technological field of reference and a real supplier of efficient innovative tools.

3.5-2.2. Payoff and brand positioning

In contemporary age, “smart” has been declined in every object and service, so people from almost every part of the world live in close relation with “smart”: smart home, smartphone, smart watch, etc. In the popular imagination and especially in the West, which is the target market for this kind of spot, “smart” has become synonym for innovation. Nonetheless, Lenovo thanks to this spot presents a new idea of innovation where “smart” has been outdated by “smarter”, embodied by Lenovo itself.

Even though the spot is dated 2019, the pursuit for “better”, “more innovative” and “upgraded” is still of great importance in 2021. “Smarter technology for all” is a payoff suggesting the identification of the brand with an innovation which is superior to competitors: the majority comparative, expressed by the *-er* suffix in “smarter”, states that the brand is sanctioning itself as *better* than “smart”; it is a sanction which is borderline with performance, because “smarter” expresses a change of state.

This payoff not only implies that every technology other than Lenovo’s is obsolete, but it also reflects the narrative program used by the brand when communicating with consumers: “smarter” reflects the performance phase of the Canonical Narrative Schema which reveals the kind of positioning of the brand. Thus, in an international market, Lenovo represents itself as a performative brand able to achieve the best results in performance. Having clarified the picture of Lenovo’s payoff from 2019, it is possible to understand the type of consumer who is likely to be attracted by the core values of the brand. The payoff here presented recalls the previous Lenovo’s payoff “for those who do” analysed in the second chapter¹⁸³ which already expressed the performative aspect of the brand. This suggestion is enhanced in this ad payoff which places the brand at a boundary between *performance* and

¹⁸³ See chapter two, 2.5-4. *Lenovo’s logo*

sanction. The narration is indeed based on an ongoing process of confrontation and exaltation of “smarter” resulting in a brand which confronts with the competitors and establishes itself as the best.

3.5-3. Conclusions

The many differences characterising the analysed Lenovo ads sheds light on the radical division between communication strategy for China and the one for US. The presence of different figurative and thematic elements, different narratives, and especially different settings although underlines a common thread characterizing the overall communication strategy of Lenovo. Indeed, both ads share the same message: Lenovo holds the technology able to change the world’s and China’s future for the better. The ads are apparently in conflict among each other, especially due to difference of cultural elements; but both of them represent Lenovo as the helper, as the proponent of a new world powered by its smart technologies.

The narrative develops following two different paths: the US ad presents Lenovo technologies as the game changer in education, medicine, food security and environmental protection fields. Chinese ad introduces Lenovo as a game changer but exclusively for Chinese nation. In fact, the brand wants to convey to chinese audience the identity strictly bound to national history and national pride. The narrative and language style contrasts between the two ads suggest a distancing between China and the rest of the world, which is reflected in Lenovo communication strategy. Lenovo ads, differently from Haier’s, are based on the space/geography axis: in both ads, Lenovo represents itself as the bearer of innovation, but it operates in two separated settings, China and the rest of the world.

Nonetheless, a common identification with the characteristic of “smart” (or its comparative form) undoubtedly brings together different communication strategies that Lenovo designed

for China and for the international market. 智慧中国 *zhì huì zhōng guó* (“smart China”) and “smarter technology for all” move in the same direction despite being based on different styles, languages and types of communication.

When considering the overall brand communication, both spots convey the smart identity of Lenovo. From a semiotic point of view, the spots just analysed maintain a consistent Lenovo’s identity despite being narrated through different communication style. In conclusion, the value of innovation is at the core of Lenovo’s communication strategy, and while for Chinese audience it is presented along with a nationalistic sentiment, for American audience, it is presented as the innovator technology helping curing cancer, for example.

Conclusions

The purpose of this research was to analyse from a semiotic point of view the brand communication strategies of three Chinese global brands: Haier, Huawei and Lenovo. Based on elements and findings from the research, it is possible to draw conclusions starting from the following keywords: Brand, Global and Semiotics.

Brand

The evolution of branding in China evidenced how much the concept of brand is dynamic and is constantly changing. Branding has developed in line with economic, historical, and social contexts, having a different role depending on the historical era. During post-imperial China, branding was to acknowledge products quality; during the Republican period the concept of brand was revised especially due to the presence of foreign brands. During Maoist era, Chinese products were exclusive products, but since China opened to the West, brands competitiveness between foreign and local products influenced the concept of branding. Haier, Huawei, and Lenovo resulted from a long and twisty process which inevitably marked their brand identity and the concept of brand itself.

Global

The concept of global, related to the three brands, is undoubtedly linked to their preeminence in the context of the current global landscape. Nevertheless, their importance and greatness not only depend on good foreign investments policies or CEOs' entrepreneurial spirit. As the thesis aims to underline, a brand image is based on the relationship with consumers, thus brand communication is one of the most important aspects for a brand. As evidenced by the research, even for some Chinese global brands, communication strategy has represented a great obstacle. For example, 2004 Lenovo's case offered an interesting perspective on how

brand identity might be badly influenced by lack of a good communication strategy, especially when in an interconnected global context.

The thesis aims at emphasizing a further meaning around the concept of “global”, which has little to do with the above-explored meaning. In fact, the idea of “global” is closely related to conceive a brand as “a whole”, “a unique system”, “a discourse with many levels”. The greatness of the three brands is also due to the central role that entirety and overall corporate identity had in Asian branding culture. During the writing of the dissertation, one of the most interesting focus was understanding how brands like Lenovo, Haier and Huawei have such an important role in the current worldwide branding landscape. Notable contribution has been given by the research on Asian Corporate culture, to which the three Chinese brands belong. The idea of totality and comprehensiveness, thus, makes of the term “global” the representation of the unique and holistic identity of a brand. Such identity reflects all the aspects in a coordinated way: based on Greimas’s “Generative trajectory of meaning”, a brand identity follows a trajectory which starts from the core values (content level) until the advertising and the products (expression level).

The current global relevance of the analyzed Chinese brands is also the result of the economic and social evolution of a world where a new paradigm sets the standards that a brand shall follow: in order to be competitive, a brand must be consistent, must have a mission, must be socially engaged, and must convey a coordinate and unique brand identity (comprehensiveness). Due to their cultural origins, the three Chinese brands have earned an important space among other global brands who, in contrast, had to reconfigure their original way of doing branding.

Semiotics

Semiotics offered interesting perspectives on how to interpret the identity of a brand and on important tools to carry out practical research on brand advertising. The existence of Corporate branding at the basis of Chinese branding culture rose interest in deepening the research on the communication strategies that Lenovo, Haier and Huawei have experienced. Since the global paradigm has changed, Western brands started to focus on Corporate advertising rather than product advertising. Even though Chinese brands were already familiar to the idea of corporate communication, the case studies on their current advertisings lead to interesting conclusions. It was particularly relevant to understand how those three brands convey their brand identity both in a system that is familiar to corporate advertising (Chinese market), and in a system that is getting close to the concept of “corporate branding”.

The semiotic analysis could be used for further research on how brand communication adapts to paradigms present in a society and how the international landscape might evolve. With the growing importance of China and Chinese brands, it is also important to understand how to interpret the way China is “narrated” and Chinese brands represent themselves through the spots. As the thesis was meant to underline, advertising is one of the most powerful tools for a brand to communicate values, figures, and themes within a social imagery.

A further investigation might involve, for example, which idea of China is conveyed through advertising spots. To give a complete perspective on the brands analyzed in the thesis, a final remark on their ads might be noteworthy. Such ads follow two parallel ways: on one side, they express brand identity and positioning; on the other side they are the actualization of socio-cultural themes and trends which will influence the next future by several point of view.

Floch's valorization square

The thesis evidenced how the narrative dimension used in communication strategies reflects and confirms the brand identity of Haier, Huawei, and Lenovo. Communication strategies of each brand convey how each brand positions itself in the market system. The analysis of each brand's communication, one targeting Chinese market and one targeting international market, evidenced a consistent in presenting itself at local level and abroad.

Another important outcome of the analysis is that a brand can maintain the same brand identity and value while using different communication strategies, languages and styles for different markets.

The analysis on communication strategies enabled the identification of the different narrative dimensions belonging to the three brands:

Haier ads are based on the time axis, Lenovo ads are based on the space/geography, while Huawei ads make an exception. In fact, the communication narrative is not generated from a spatial or time axis because Huawei's operation at Chinese level is the same at a global level.

One last consideration must be made on the brand positioning and on how the brands make a valorization of their product (industry sector): technology.

To explain how each brand builds up the valorization of the element technology, a reference to Floch's square of valorization might be helpful.

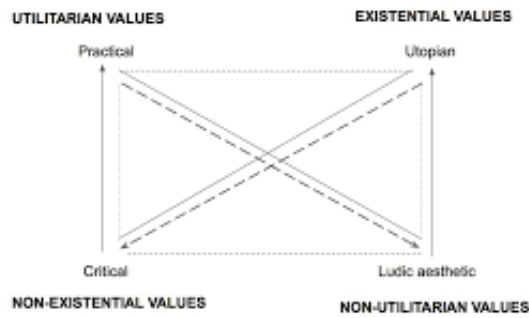


Figure 16- Floch's square

Valorization, firstly theorized by Floch (1992) in his Square of consumer values (after Floch 2001), is a process in which a product is represented through its “existential” (basic) values or “utilitarian” (use) values.

Based on Floch’s square (see fig.16) it is possible to draw a square on the valorization of technology (see fig.17)

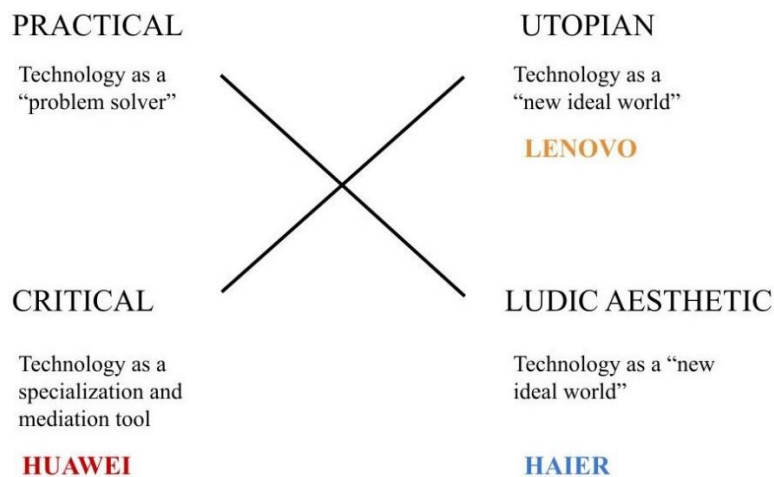


Figure 17- Valorization of Technology

Haier in its Chinese spot presents the encounter between past and future through an ironic tone; in the Italian spot it underlines the Freshness as element which can trigger joy and excitement. The emphasis on positive emotional state, enhancing of better life and pleasure

sin suggests that Haier valorization of technology is *Ludic aesthetic*, because technology is the tool to reach satisfaction and a life balance. In fact, elements conveying the idea of pleasure seek are typically at the basis of Ludic Aesthetic valorization.

On one side, Haier technology enables the balance between traditional values (Confucius) and the contemporary world (young lady), because Haier AI enables the preservation of ancient tradition (light waiting at home) in the contemporary world. On the other side, Haier technology guarantees the freshness of food, preserving not only the original flavor of food, but also “preserving life’s flavor”, a payoff which triggers a sense of gratification and better living.

The similarity between the Chinese and the international versions of Huawei ad suggests a communication homogeneity and balance, already inscribed in the identity of the brand. Huawei conveyed its unique message in a spot based on common and universal languages, suitable both for China and for the World. It is an example of *Critical* valorization because Huawei technology is a mediation tool, specialized in connecting the world through databases, devices, and telecommunication infrastructures. Furthermore, Huawei communication strategy relies on the neutrality of elements such as languages, themes, and figurative elements. The use of a cartoon with no specific geographical and ethnical references (universal language), a narrative based on music (in line with the theme) and no narrating voice, the share of environmental and social commitment (universal messages); all these elements corresponds to a stylistic choice in line to Huawei’s tendency for a neutral international image.

It must be pointed out that the public image of Huawei is suffering critics due to US-China economic war, therefore, future explorations into the topic could be useful to find more exhaustive results.

Lenovo ads apparently differ in many aspects. The Chinese ad focuses on Chinese nationalism nostalgia while the American ad focuses on smarter innovation. They reflect two quite different images of the same brand, but both ads are based on the same valorization of technology. The idea that Lenovo is the bearer of a smart technology which helps people to build better social conditions is at the core of a *Utopian* valorization. Both the ads, despite the difference of stylistic and figurative elements, recalls the same concept of a better ideal new world which can be created thanks to the help of Lenovo technologies. It is not by chance that Lenovo Chinese ad presents China as a myth. In fact, such ad is particularly interesting from a socio-semiotic point of view. The focus on Chinese heritage, the nostalgic tone, and the presence of different generations of Chinese people go beyond the communicative process for conveying Lenovo's identity. These elements have a precise meaning in the current historical era and are designed for a precise audience. The ad helps build, aside from the "mythical" identity of Lenovo, a particular idea of China which, throughout its seventy-two years of history has become a myth of collectivism, sacrifice, and devotion.

Cues and provocations

The reassessment and the emphasis on the past of China recalls the attention to an existing trend, known in China as 国潮 *guócháo*. Such a trend is relevant to approach young Chinese consumers who have a growing purchasing power; besides it might be of great interest for Western luxury brands whose target is mainly composed by Chinese Gen Z.

Because it is a relevant theme for the future developments of Chinese and international market, a more extensive research would be appropriate. Nevertheless, within the constrain of this thesis, a final reflection on the subject could be an inspiration for future studies as it provides cues and provocations.

What will *Guochao* 国潮 mean for the Chinese and international brands' communication strategies?

How will such trend influence narration of China and the idea of China?

Finally, considering the relation between “brand” and “nationality”, it would be of great interest to deepen dynamics which regard topics like “Made in China”. Therefore, how will *Guochao* 国潮 influence the perception and the concept of “Made in China” around the world?

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