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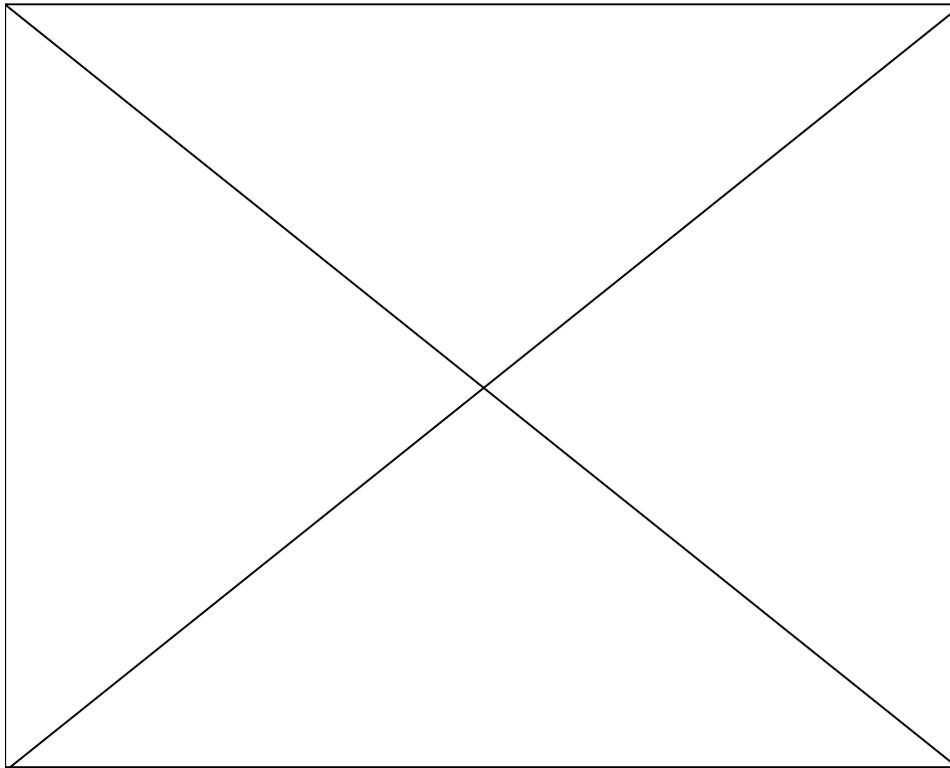
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The PRC and PR: Baffling Messages in Times Square?

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By Christopher C. Heselton

Amid all the fanfare and fear-mongering over President Hu Jintao's visit to the United States last week, the Chinese government has also launched an advertising campaign to enhance its national image in America. The campaign includes a 60-second ad showing on a mega screen at Time Square, New York, a 30-second segment at Gallery Place, Washington DC (DC's "Chinatown," though it's a rather small one), and a series of 15-second advertisements airing on several news networks over a multi-week period. A host of Chinese celebrities, models, entrepreneurs, astronauts, and other household names appear in these advertisements, standing and smiling at the camera with their names and significance to China written on the screen in English. For a look, here are both of the segments that began running on BON last week, which also appeared on several major US networks:



At first glance, this attempt at promoting a favorable view of China to the American public seems like an utter failure. Many in the blogosphere and media have claimed the ad to be a major flop because it is too distant from its American viewers (see, for example, ["China's Latest PR Fail?"](#), ["Pro-China Ad Makes Broadway Debut,"](#) ["Wary Powers Set to Square Off,"](#) and this excellent discussion at Kaiser Kuo's [Sinica Podcast](#) [9 minutes in]). The advertisement has little action or movement, no dialogue, awkward phrasing, and the celebrities and renowned figures in it might be familiar names in China but are virtually unknown to most Americans. When asked by a CCTV news crew if she recognized any of the figures in the advertisement, one New Yorker at Times Square replied, "I know Yao Ming and some of the models, but not a lot" (though the last four words were not translated on CCTV). While from a Chinese standpoint, the message of the ad may seem to be that these great people are Chinese too, for many Americans the message is not as clear since most of these names are unknown and not very memorable. Speaking to the *Wall Street Journal*, David Wolf, Chief Executive of Wolf Group Asia, said that the advertisement even gives a negative impression to many Americans, by invoking China's "material strengths, which worry America." The advertisement is a confusing and unusually baffling piece, and, in this sense, it does seem to be unsuccessful in giving Americans a truly new sense of what China is and assuaging American concerns over a rising China.

I think, however, that viewing these advertisements purely as a public relations campaign aimed at the American public is missing a large piece of the picture; we also need to consider the Chinese popular and political audience. In this respect, the advertisement has two possible intents, in my opinion. The first possibility is that the advertisement is intended to serve as a mark of national pride for a Chinese domestic audience. This is one of the most ambitious and highly publicized attempts to enhance the image of China in American minds since the 2008 Olympics. Unlike the Olympics, when the PR push was in Beijing, this time the message is airing in the very heart of the United States. This is something that the Chinese media has seemed to emphasize as a point of pride and demonstration of China's progress. Thirty-odd years ago it would have been almost inconceivable that the Chinese government would have the desire and ability to take out an advertisement in Times Square. The message seems to say to Chinese audiences, "Look how far we've come! Our faces and our celebrities are in the cultural center of the US." Of course, it's not as nearly as exciting as China's aerospace missions, but still acts as a badge of progress to display to the Chinese public (in some ways, it could also be seen to have similar purposes towards an American audience, though the message likely isn't as clearly received). The commercial's desire to reach Chinese audiences is made clearer with its use of well-known celebrities instead of nobodies. The designers of the ad claimed that their aim was to literally put a human face on China. If that were so, they could have shown a variety of everyday Chinese people—but instead they chose to feature a large group of Chinese notables that are virtually unrecognizable to most Americans, though highly recognizable to most Chinese. This suggests to me that the ad was meant to reach Chinese viewers, and not just Americans.

A second possible intention of this marketing campaign—though I admit this is more speculative—is to gain the attention of both domestic and international political leaders. Although one of the top planners of this endeavor, Shen Zanchen, maintains that the timing of these ads with President Hu's arrival was "purely a historic coincidence," it is difficult to shake the notion that there is more than a passing connection. In my previous work experience with several Chinese Information Offices that are responsible for city marketing, the synchronization of political events and marketing campaigns often ran like clockwork. I recall one time in 2009 (I promise this is my only anecdote) while at a conference on Chinese city image branding, I asked the head of an Information Office for a major Chinese city how she chose the timing slots for the city's advertisements, as I noticed they never seemed to appear during popular television dramas. She remarked, "We always put it on during the evening News Broadcast (新闻联播), because that is when the leaders are most likely to watch television." The goal, at least for this particular propaganda chief, was to catch the attention of the political leadership—possibly for her own promotion, but also to gain prestige for her city and the mayor of that city (her boss) among other CCP leaders. And this increased stature does lead to concrete results, as political leaders often help broker investment deals. In fact, the success of city branding campaigns in China, and even Chinese endeavors in international marketing, is not just measured in terms of viewership and ads, but also in which political leaders participated in, attended, or viewed their efforts. This way of weighing the effects of regional marketing shapes how many people in China understand public relations campaigns.

In this case, these new ads seem to be directed at gaining the attention of Hu Jintao, Barack Obama, and other Washington political leaders. Two aspects of the PR campaign make this point very plausible to me. First, in the segment on "Enchanting Chinese Art" we see Song Zuying (宋祖英), the diva of propaganda, who is very popular among CCP leaders but largely ignored in mainstream music. This possibly shows an attempt to play on the favorites of many older Chinese officials. The PRC leadership might not be as intrigued, and might even be uncomfortable, if pop-icons like Jane Zhang (张靓颖), Kym (金莎), or Jason Zhang (张杰) were on screen, though they are more popular with a younger audience. Second, the display of the ad at Gallery Place in Washington DC is a somewhat unusual choice for a commercial promoting China's national image. Gallery Place is not a particularly high-traffic portion of DC, if one's goal is to capture a large audience, but the location happens to be very close to the White House and Capitol Hill, and is smack-dab in the middle of DC's Chinatown, which is a popular eating spot for Washington politicians, bureaucrats, and aides. So, it seems to me that another possible intention of these ads is to gain the attention of political leaders directly. It is speaking to them—not just to a generalized American public. Regardless of whether or not this is merely my overactive imagination at work, I think that when looking at these advertisements we

should also consider the political dimensions and political understanding of what public relations means.

I would, however, like to end on a positive note about this advertisement campaign, because these ads are unique. In the past, advertisements portraying China seemed to come in only a few forms: tourism promotions that displayed Chinese monuments and traditions, investment promotions that emphasized favorable business conditions, or international event promotions in which improving the national image was not the overt goal of the message. This recent set of advertisements seems to be the first attempt to explicitly market China to the US, showing a greater understanding of the importance of manipulating a national image to gain favorable international support. Moreover, it moves beyond hackneyed images of the Great Wall, quaint ethnic customs, or cuddly panda bears, but instead pushes a more modern depiction of the country and its people that places China in a light that Americans could find very familiar, despite the unfamiliar faces. For Americans whose understanding of China is limited to what they've seen in Kung-Fu films or media images of impoverished Chinese slums, these commercials offer something new.

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