

Nov 04, 2016 by *Jian (Jay) Wang*

Advertising China ^[1]

Last week, China unveiled an ad campaign on the jumbotron screens in New York City's Times Square to promote its national image. The two 30-second spots, titled "Experience China," feature the country's celebrities and luminaries from different walks of life. So, like many other countries, China is now taking a page out of the Madison-Avenue playbook to try to get its message out.

Of course, no one would naively believe that a single ad campaign like this will galvanize popular perceptions of China in the U.S. Nevertheless, it is meaningful to talk about the ad in the context of a series of undertakings China has pursued over the last several years to enhance its soft power on the world stage, from the global expansion of its media properties to the rapid growth of the Confucius Institutes.

This campaign, which aims to broaden the American discourse about China, adds to the momentum of these efforts. Therefore, whatever one might think of the ad itself is really beside the point. In this case, the medium is the message.

Still, out of the 50-plus people featured in the ad, the majority of Americans would most likely only recognize Yao Ming, while for the Chinese all are among the "Who's Who" of contemporary China. The domestic dimension of such internationally-oriented communication cannot be overlooked. In this age of increasing information transparency, the boundary between the "domestic" and the "international" is certainly artificial at best; so is the distinction between nation building and nation branding.

It also comes to no surprise that China chose, out of all places, Times Square for the campaign. Perceived as the center stage of America, Times Square occupies a privileged position in the Chinese imagination. The annual New Year's Eve ritual is widely known in China, having inspired Chinese versions of it, for instance, at Shanghai's own Times Square. In this sense, the ad campaign is also spatially meaningful for the Chinese public.

In fact, Times Square is not unfamiliar territory for China. Sanjiu Medical and Pharmaceutical Company was the first Chinese company to place a billboard ad there. Clips of a Peking Opera performance were shown on the giant screens a couple of years ago.

This ad attempts to showcase various facets of China's achievements, and its tone is decidedly celebratory. In a clamorous media environment, spots such as this one typically serve to draw attention and to start a conversation with target audiences, rather than being a stand-alone, be-all-and-end-all venture.

That's why it is surprising that the campaign doesn't include any other component. Since most Americans are not familiar with the people featured in the ad, a related website, for instance, would be helpful and even illuminating for interested individuals to visit and learn about their stories and accomplishments. Indeed, the desire to tell, as evidenced in this ad, needs to be

balanced out by the act of explaining.

What's more, against a crowded information setting, whether it is in the environs of Times Square or anywhere else for that matter, presenting multiple images of people in rapid succession results in the audience only noticing the most outstanding, based on their physical features or physical placement in the ad. But to tell a compelling story of any sort these days, it is ever truer that less is more.
