

# Public interactives, soft power, and China's future at and beyond the 2010 Shanghai World Expo

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## Abstract

This article uses the Shanghai World Expo as a case study to examine how soft power and processes of nation branding are articulated to public interactives, defined as a range of technological devices and applications that serve as the stage for digitally mediated communication with audiences in communal spaces. We focus on three Expo pavilions—those of Saudi Arabia, the United States, and China—and show how their public interactives augmented the performance of culture, the production of soft power, and a future vision at a global mega-event. We argue that public interactives not only transformed built environments into spaces for the pleasure of physically proximate audiences but also were the conduit for mediated narratives that represented contemporary understandings of a particular nation and actively produced imagined futures of that nation in a China-centric world. This article adds to prior scholarship by analyzing the use of public interactives by both host and guest nations to produce culture through spatial and temporal logics, comparing how technologically mediated narratives communicated these three nations' soft power goals more generally as well as within bilateral relations underscored by the rise of China, and discussing the significance of these (past) future visions in the present. We thus add to understandings of the concept of soft power and the role of technology in the praxis of public diplomacy.

## Keywords

Futurity, nation branding, public interactives, Shanghai World Expo, soft power

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In keeping with the nature of World Expos historically, the 2010 Shanghai World Expo was a spectacle of urban futurism. The theme of the Expo, “Better City, Better Life,” announced the agenda for the participants in this 6-month celebration of China’s ascendancy as an economic world power. The Shanghai Expo included 190 nations and 50 corporate and NGO exhibitions, and it drew more than 73 million visitors. It was the largest and costliest World’s Fair ever,<sup>1</sup> and it garnered significant coverage in Chinese and western media before, during, and after the event.<sup>2</sup>

World Expos are staged for many reasons, most generically to augment the development of international relations and promote national economies, cultures, and technologies. The famous Expositions of the past—Paris in 1844, Chicago in 1893 and 1933, Montreal in 1967, Osaka in 1970—proved to be spectacular portals that gave us a glimpse of the futures that we now live. As the third of three massive media extravaganzas hosted by China since 2008 (the other two were the Beijing Olympics and the 60th Anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic), the Shanghai Expo revitalized and amplified the World Expo-genre. China used the Expo as a soft power effort to trumpet its economic rise and ongoing ambition to be a global leader not only in manufacturing but also in designing the future. Like China, many of the guest nations that participated in this “Economic Olympics” projected technologically enhanced visions of a future that was prosperous, peaceful, and sustainable.

The first Universal Exposition since Shanghai took place in 2015 in Milan, Italy. Smaller in scope and scale, it barely registered a blip on the US media radar, which is precisely why it invites an opportunity to revisit the spectacle of Shanghai and the narratives that were offered in order to situate these within a changed geopolitical environment that has important implications for China’s future. To do so, in this article we explore three of the most popular and visible Expo pavilions—those of Saudi Arabia, the United States, and China—focusing specifically on how each used elaborate forms of mediated experience that we call “public interactives” to circulate carefully crafted narratives invoking the past, the present, and the future. We use the term public interactives to describe a range of technological devices and applications that serve as the stage for digitally mediated communication with audiences in communal spaces such as museums, theme parks, trade shows, outdoor entertainment plazas, and urban streets (Balsamo, 2016). For whatever else they do, public interactives preview the technological contours of human experience in the future (Balsamo, 2011). The novel interactives offered at the Expo included three-dimensional (3D) and four-dimensional immersive films, crowd-based responsive environments, gesture manipulated graphics, and mass customized interactives. While some of these interactive experiences are now commonplace, others were previewed for the first time at the Expo. We focus primarily (but not only) on cinematic public interactives to elaborate how these technologies augmented the performance of culture and the production of soft power in the service of public diplomacy. We argue that public interactives not only transformed built environments into spaces for the pleasure of physically proximate audiences but also were the conduit for mediated narratives of a particular nation and actively produced imagined futures of that nation in a China-centric world, and that such narratives still hold import into the present.

Previous scholarship has analyzed the Shanghai Expo through a variety of lenses, including nation branding (Wang, 2013), spatial difference and “worlding” (Nordin, 2012), “imagineering” (Cohen, 2013), city branding (Dynton, 2011), and tourism studies and human geography (Lu, Zeng, & Lu, 2012). In most cases, the focus has been on China’s use of the Expo as an opportunity to brand itself and attempt to achieve its own soft power goals for foreign as well as domestic audiences. There have also been comparisons of Expo pavilions, most notably a book-length work by Wang (2013), who focused on how eight guest nations (Brazil, India, Israel, South Africa, South Korea, Spain, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States) communicated their brands to a

growing middle class Chinese audience. Through interviews with domestic visitors to determine how they experienced the pavilions and remembered them in hindsight, he analyzed the success and implications of such foreign soft power efforts aimed at China. We add to these conversations through focusing on three underexplored facets of this literature: (1) the use of public interactives by both host *and* guest nations to produce culture through spatial and temporal logics, (2) a comparison of how technologically mediated narratives communicated these three nations' soft power goals more generally as well as within a context of shifting bilateral relations (i.e. Saudi Arabia and China, and the United States and China) underscored by the rise of China, and (3) the significance of these visions as modes of public diplomacy into the present. By discussing the cultural narratives that circulated through the use of public interactive experiences and how these narratives gestured to future geopolitical relationships, we add to understandings of the concept of soft power and the role of technology in the praxis of public diplomacy.

Our analysis focuses on the Saudi Arabian, US, and Chinese pavilions for several reasons. China and Saudi Arabia's pavilions were among the most costly and extravagant, and all three were among the most popular as measured by the number of daily visitors and the length of time people waited to gain admittance. Saudi Arabia, with its stunning pavilion, showed its willingness to pay tribute to a newly risen China, an increasingly strategic trading partner.<sup>3</sup> Although the United States has a vexed relationship with China, and its pavilion offered the least "interactive" or "novel" visitor experience, based on the reign of the United States as the sole world power and the popularity of its cultural exports, the pavilion remained a must-see destination at this tournament of nations. Finally, at the Expo grounds, China positioned itself at the center, not only because it was the host nation but also to communicate its current and the future significance as a world power.

In what follows, we first discuss nation branding and soft power and relate these to China. We next outline our framework for understanding public interactives and then analyze the interactives/narratives of each of the three pavilions within the context of broader geopolitical relations. The conclusion considers the relevance of these World Expo narratives for the present and speculates on their particular significance to understandings of China's future. We make our arguments based on fieldwork in Shanghai during the Expo in June and July 2010 as well as a follow up visit to the former Expo site conducted during March 2012. During our research, we were participant observers but also conducted a small number of interviews with media relations staff and engaged in casual conversations with Expo volunteers and domestic attendees. In our analysis we also rely on official Expo documents and media reports in English and Chinese.

## **Narrative, nation branding, and soft power**

Historically, World Expositions have had several functions for participant countries, most notably showcasing a nation's industrial or technological progress, highlighting its commodities, and projecting its aspirational visions for the future (Harvey, 1996). These messages are achieved through linguistic, visual, and other representational strategies that present carefully constructed narratives of the nation and its place in the world.

At the Shanghai Expo, three levels of narrative were offered, and each was nuanced and functioned in relation to other narratives. At a base level, each nation presented a highly particular story about itself, focusing on positive values and unique cultural attributes—a strategy that many identify as "nation branding" (Wang, 2013).<sup>4</sup> This was most evident in the national pavilions, which celebrated forms of art and culture through performances, demonstrations, and traveling monuments that drew upon national mythologies (such as the Little Mermaid statue that sat in a place of honor in the Denmark Pavilion).

At a second level, the stories presented an argument about the relationship of the particular nation to China. In many cases, these stories were negotiated in advance between China and the individual nation. Political scientist Astrid Nordin (2012) notes,

As in global development, China financially supported “less-developed” states in a way that visually emphasized the impressive scale and central location for the Chinese pavilion and reaffirmed China as a “helper” and “developer” ahead of the “helped” and “developing” states at the Expo site periphery. (p. 241)

Indeed, the five zones of the Expo site were a calculated orchestration of proximity and power. As Tim Winter (2013) points out in his reading of the symbolic layout of the Expo site, Zone A, anchored by the massive China Pavilion, manifested the centrality and importance of the Asian Zone with China in the middle and in the position of dominance: “Not far away sat some of China’s closest regional allies, Pakistan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. Beyond them stood the other ‘rising giant’ of Asia: India” (p. 10).

A third level of narrative spoke to the position of China in a broader global context. Every symbol created for the Shanghai World Expo communicated and confirmed the central importance of China, not only as the host for this global event but also as a world cultural power. The emblem for the Expo was based on the Chinese character for “the world.” It was graphically manipulated into an image of three figures holding hands to symbolize “the big family of mankind in harmony and happiness” (Expo 2010 Shanghai China Official Guidebook, 2010). Haibao, the abstract mascot, incorporated the Chinese character for “people.” Its blue color intended to signify “inclusiveness and imagination, symbolizing China which is full of hope and potential for development” (Expo 2010 Shanghai China Official Guidebook, 2010; see Figure 1).

While the content of individual pavilions often explored aspects of the Expo theme, “Better City, Better Life,” in presentations about carbon footprints, helpful robots, and green inventions, considered most broadly the story of the Expo was to showcase China’s internal transformation (a more literal translation of the Expo theme would be “Cities, make life better”) as well as its rising economic and diplomatic power.

## The world expo and soft power

China’s orchestration of these multiple narratives at the Shanghai World Expo can be seen as a grand exercise in “soft power,” what Joseph Nye (2004) defines as “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments” (p. x). In contrast to hard power—military threats, economic sanctions—soft power derives from “a country’s culture, political ideals, and policies” (p. x), particularly when foreign countries view these as legitimate and admirable. Soft power can be understood as one facet of public diplomacy, defined as how governments communicate their ideas, culture, and policies to foreign publics for the purpose of advancing their own policies and interests.<sup>5</sup> Nye originally conceived of the concept of soft power to suggest how the United States could maintain its strength and appeal in the post-Cold War era, but in recent years, the term has gained acceptance globally among diverse nations. All the nations that participated in the Expo were displaying soft power but most especially China.

At first glance, the concept of “soft power” might not seem applicable to China.<sup>6</sup> China has not had a positive image in the eyes of many outsiders, particularly in the West, for numerous reasons, including its authoritarian rule, media censorship, and open rejection of what many consider universal human rights.<sup>7</sup> Thus, there has been a discrepancy between how China views itself (largely



**Figure 1.** Haibao, the official Expo mascot. Photograph by Anne Balsamo, 2010.

positively) and how other countries view China (more negatively; Ramo, 2007; Wang, 2011). For this reason, in the mid-2000s, China's leadership began to embrace the term "soft power" as central to China's role in the international arena and as a key component of its "peaceful rise" (Ding, 2010; Li, 2009). As China has focused on external soft power efforts—such as the proliferation of overseas Confucius Institutes and economic aid to several Latin American and African countries (Ding, 2010)—it has also expanded the definition. Whereas soft power has conventionally been seen as something a nation wields to gain affection, admiration, and compliance from other nations, in the Chinese appropriation, soft power is also a key "to meet domestic needs" (Li, 2009, p. 1). This was made explicit in 2007 by then President Hu Jintao, who in a major speech clearly

stated the importance of “enhanc(ing) culture as part of the soft power” of China and focused specifically on the domestic benefits of such efforts (“Full Text,” 2007). A central way China has attempted to harness soft power for both international and domestic purposes has been through actively drawing upon the symbols and philosophy of traditional Chinese culture, in particular notions of “harmony” (Cao, 2011; Li, 2009). Under the Hu Jintao-Wen Jiabao leadership (2002–2012), building a “harmonious society” was enshrined as domestic policy. Outside China, the cultural value of harmony has been deployed to allay western fears of the “China threat.” Both the Beijing Olympics and the Shanghai World Expo drew upon concepts of harmony to communicate China’s place in the world historically and in the contemporary moment.<sup>8</sup>

## Public interactives as technologies of persuasion

As mentioned earlier, public interactives incorporate diverse components designed to engage audiences in meaningful ways. At the Shanghai World Expo these included touch-enabled displays or hand-held communication devices that simultaneously reinforced existing technological literacies and subtly coached new ones into existence. Whereas presentation media such as films and dioramas present stories, interactive media provide the occasion for viewers to improvise themselves into a story. By staging new forms of technological encounters, evoking new technological behaviors, and projecting a vision of the future populated with new technological devices, services, and affordances, the public interactives installed throughout the Expo served as cultural reproductive technologies. These technological devices and experiences enabled the reproduction of cultural narratives, mythologies, global understandings, and distinct temporalities, while at the same time they served as stages for the expression of these mythologies in a new context—the China-centric World Expo.

Public interactives necessitate a “public,” and the interactives presented in the Expo pavilions promoted three distinct but related notions of “the public” through varying degrees of interactivity. In the broad Expo context, the public was constituted as “the masses”—Expo attendees, assembled as an aggregated entity, were addressed through the prolific presence of large-scale screens and a symbolically designed exhibition site. Inside the national pavilions, attendees were addressed as “spectators” through site-specific dioramas, multimedia presentations, and other forms of visual programming (signs, photos). Such public interactives were designed to bridge the scale of nation and person through focusing on individuals performing culture by recreating traditions, practices, and ethnic lives (Tilley, 1997). Finally, through interactives that encouraged dyadic communication between a single user and a technological device, the public was often addressed as “participant” or “player” involved in some sort of experiential co-creation or exploration of a digital environment.

Through addressing these various audiences and inviting their participation, the public interactives at the Expo functioned as “technologies of public persuasion” that engage in public-making. Gaonkar and Povinelli (2003) describe this process as “the circulatory matrix, both national and global, through which new discursive forms, practices, and artifacts carry out their routine ideological labor of constituting subjects who can be summoned in the name of a public or a people” (p. 386). In the next section, we argue that the three pavilions—as manifestations of public interactive mediated experiences—served as the technological infrastructure for the activation of multiple publics and the production of soft power. These public interactives did not simply disseminate a set of narratives for the physically present audience who were predominantly domestic tourists. At another level, they participated in a much larger exchange for

a global public in which the future of China as a world power underscored the national narratives being presented.

## **National pavilions: public interactives and the performance of global relations**

Expos famously showcase imaginaries of the future; they also cannot avoid reproducing staged versions of the past and are complexly implicated in the performance of the present. In the following discussion, we pay attention to the ways in which temporalities were intermingled and spatial logics deployed in a nation's effort to brand itself in a shifting global environment.<sup>9</sup> We focus on how public interactives—as technologies of public persuasion—repurposed traditional national mythologies to simultaneously perform the present and produce the future.

### *The Saudi Arabia Pavilion: the “Moon Boat”*

Saudi Arabia and China established diplomatic relations in June 1990, and according to official Saudi press materials, at the time of the Expo, China was the second largest importer of goods into Saudi Arabia and its fifth largest export market. Saudi petrochemicals, liquefied natural gas, and plastic are crucial for China's continued economic development, but it is Saudi oil upon which this strategic relationship is built: Saudi Arabia is the number one supplier of crude oil to China, accounting for over 20% of its crude oil imports. Saudi Arabia has also invested heavily in petrochemical plants and other oil-related projects in China while Chinese contractors and construction teams in Saudi Arabia have continued to increase in number as they build the country's burgeoning infrastructure. During the Expo, much was made of the recently announced joint Saudi–China venture to build a new railway between the sites of Mecca and Medina; the railway was to be constructed by a Chinese firm. Given these economic partnerships, it is no wonder that official Saudi press materials heralded the Expo as an occasion to celebrate 20 years of Chinese–Saudi diplomatic ties. Moreover, the pavilion was built “to endure as a bridge for communication with the friendly people of China in particular, and with the world in general” (Saudi Arabia Pavilion Media Kit).

Saudi Arabia reportedly spent the most money of any guest nation in building their pavilion: US\$164 million (MacKinnon, 2010). From a distance, it resembled a large oil tanker on stilts with a band of animated screens circling the top; in more poetic terms, it was described in the Expo media guidebook as a “huge hanging boat shaped like a half moon.” Indeed, the Moon Boat, as it was popularly called, was the largest pavilion after the China Pavilion, covering 6000 m<sup>2</sup>. Its location on the Expo site was also highly symbolic; it was positioned in close proximity to the main China Pavilion in Zone A, along with other important Asian nations, including Japan and the Republic of Korea. The project represented a massive collaboration among design teams from Saudi Arabia, China, Hong Kong, and Spain; it was managed by a Hong Kong architect. It is one of only five structures that still remain on the former Expo site, having been donated to China in November 2011.

The real wonder of the Saudi Arabia Pavilion was the spectacular media experience it offered to its 12,000 daily visitors (almost a total of 4.4 million for the 6 months). After queuing in line for up to 8 hours, visitors entered the pavilion at ground level and slowly wound around an open spiral walkway adorned with images and quotations about the harmonious relationship between China and Saudi Arabia. Near the top, visitors stepped onto a moving walkway, where they were pulled into a 360° theater. Here, they were presented with the world's largest parabolic walk-through 3D



**Figure 2.** Still image of the immersive cinematic experience at the Saudi Arabia Pavilion at the Shanghai World Expo. Photograph by Anne Balsamo, 2010.

IMAX cinematic experience. In total, 25 projectors were arrayed to display onto a 35-million pixel screen that covered 1600 m<sup>2</sup> (also the largest in the world; see Figure 2).

The film covered most surfaces of the parabolically shaped cavernous room: the floor below, the ceiling, and the curved walls. The fully immersive 15-minute film called “The Treasure” featured IMAX quality images, including sweeping panoramas of the Saudi natural and urban landscapes and mesmerizing images of abstract patterns of buildings, grasslands, and sand dunes. The film begins with shots of desert formations and moves to urban scenes and oil drilling installations; it ends by returning to views of the desert, lush mountains, and the Red Sea. A musical score affirms the sweeping majesty of the images. The sheer scale of this effort, in terms of money spent, the dimensions of the projection space, and the pavilion structure, as well as the grandeur of the filmic images implicitly branded Saudi Arabia as a nation whose soft power derived from its stature as an economic powerhouse, with a rich, seductive cultural heritage.<sup>10</sup>

Although this was not the only pavilion to feature an immersive cinematic experience, it was one of the only ones that succeeded in creating what might be considered a true work of “architectural cinema”—a filmic experience that succeeds because of its architecturally designed staging.<sup>11</sup> By merging form and content, the film sidesteps issues of representation and the semiotics of the image to put the focus on the quality of the immersive experience as a mode of spectacular time-travel. The moving walkway served as a “magic carpet” to move participants through the panoramic majesty of Saudi Arabia’s natural resources and urban landscapes. The cinematic viewpoint never stood still nor landed. The present richness of Saudi Arabia was manifested through a technofuturistic experience of flying through scenes of ancient cities, verdant oases, and oil fields. The pavilion deftly merged mythologies of the past (the magic carpet) to trumpet Saudi Arabia as an important oil-trading partner for China now and indefinitely by showing images of King Abdullah with then President Hu Jintao, and these narratives were wrapped in a 21st century spectacle of a large-scale immersive film. In doing so, the Saudi Arabia Pavilion announced the mutual admiration between itself and China, providing a sweeping endorsement of China’s economic power both



currently and into the future. With its impressive pavilion, Saudi Arabia was, as one Saudi Pavilion press representative claimed, “romancing the dragon.”<sup>12</sup>

### *The US Pavilion: “Rising to the Challenge”*

The significance geopolitically of the relationship between the United States—the world’s reigning super power—and China—the world’s fastest rising power—cannot be underestimated. The economies of the two countries are intricately connected and the nations’ leaders have committed to cooperating on a number of fronts, including fighting the global “War on Terror” and reducing carbon emissions. However, for years the relationship has been fraught with tension over issues such as human rights, cyber espionage/computer hacking, and Tibet and Taiwan. Moreover, China believes the United States seeks to maintain its hegemony by containing China despite US assertions to the contrary.

Such ambivalence in US–China relations was manifested at the Shanghai Expo. The United States was one of the last countries to commit to creating a pavilion, and in the years prior to the Expo opening, speculation ran rampant that the United States was not going to participate. By the time planning for the Expo was in full swing (2008), the United States was in the midst of a severe recession. Due to a ban on funding for international expositions without congressional approval, US participation had to be funded through private sources. When the United States missed several deadlines, rumors circulated that it too was being considered for a Chinese subsidy because it would have been unthinkable from the Chinese perspective not to have the world’s reigning super power present (Minter, 2010). Regardless of funding particularities, it became clear over time that the United States could not miss the 2010 Expo, not only because of face saving for China but also for itself.

In the end, the US Pavilion was built entirely through corporate sponsorship, and thus a major failure of public diplomacy was avoided. At US\$60 million and just under 6000 square feet, the US Pavilion was dwarfed in terms of cost and size by the largest and most expensive two pavilions (China and Saudi Arabia). Housed in an uninspiring building that was supposed to look like an eagle with outstretched wings (yet, only distinguishable as an aerial view), the US Pavilion nonetheless ranked among the most popular. During the 6-month Expo, the pavilion drew 7.36 million visitors (“Final Commissioner,” 2011), many waiting in line for several hours to gain admission. The US Pavilion did not include any interactive experiences per se; yet, it still sought to constitute and persuade a public through three short films and a final room filled with screens and illuminated corporate images. In the welcome hall, Student Ambassadors mingled with guests before the first film showed Americans from all walks of life trying to greet Chinese viewers in Mandarin. While Chinese people tend to be greatly amused and pleased by foreigners speaking Mandarin, in the broader context, this gesture of cross-cultural communication seemed a bit anemic.

Once visitors were seated inside the pavilion, a second film, “Spirit of America,” featured then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton welcoming visitors saying, “As you explore the pavilion, you will see core American values in action: diversity, innovation, and optimism.” The film sought to communicate the “common challenges and aspirations” of the United States, China, and other nations on display through the voices of children as well as an array of corporate and non-profit talking heads. Their messages covered sustainability, the centrality of the family, the values of caring and volunteerism, education, public/private partnerships, and teamwork. At the end of the film, US President Barak Obama acknowledged “China’s rise as a strong, prosperous, and successful member of the community of nations,” echoing China’s own discourse about its “peaceful rise.”

He also asserted, “We are bound by our common humanity and our shared curiosity.” A third film portrayed urban blight that was transformed through the tireless effort of an optimistic child who persevered with her dream of planting a garden despite numerous setbacks.

Unlike the Saudi Arabia Pavilion and the China Pavilion (discussed below), the temporal structure underpinning the narratives in the US Pavilion was oddly ahistorical, with the past seeming almost irrelevant. There were only a few fleeting images of US cultural monuments, and nothing evoked the multiple pasts of the country. Instead, the US Pavilion portrayed a multicultural present, with the main message structured to communicate timeless and universal “American values” of family, community, and the rewards of hard work and entrepreneurship. The future was invoked through statements about individual and corporate social responsibility. With only minimal interactivity (at one point during the third film raindrops fell on the audience), the US messages were top-down and pedagogical in tone, and they received mixed reactions from Chinese visitors.<sup>13</sup>

In contrast to the Saudi Arabia Pavilion, the films only minimally addressed the importance of China as a world power. However, if official US attitudes toward China were somewhat ambivalent—despite the familiar soft power maneuver of touting American values—the corporate sponsors clearly understood the value of over 1 billion Chinese consumers. The message in the final room of the pavilion, covered with corporate displays and prominent organizational logos and brands, was twofold. First, in keeping with the Expo theme, these companies asserted their ability to harness the power of technological innovation to solve the pressing issues of the present, such as environmental sustainability, water conservation, clean energy, and climate change, thus articulating the familiar equivalence of technology and progress. This cultural mythology also asserted that problems would be solved in a distinctly neoliberal manner through individual creativity, hard work, and the free market, and not from government intervention. Second, and related to the first, the embrace of this ethos by China would ensure a future of happiness and prosperity for the nation and its people. In either case, though subtler than in the past, China in the future was positioned as benefitting from the United States’ ideological guidance and technological support.

### *The China Pavilion: “The Oriental Crown”*

Little can be said about China’s staggering achievements over the last few decades that has not been covered in both popular media and academic scholarship—a stagnant economy turned into a global powerhouse, millions lifted out of poverty, rapid urbanization, phenomenal Internet and cell phone diffusion, a rising middle class and so on. After China’s coming out party that was the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the Shanghai World Expo was another chance for China to showcase its grand achievements. In keeping with China’s “bigger is better” approach to global events, the China Pavilion was not only the largest at the Shanghai Expo, but it was also the largest pavilion at any Expo ever. Built to accommodate 50,000 daily guests, it hosted 10 million visitors during the 6-month exposition. Even with a required reservation, most visitors had to wait upwards of 8 hours to be admitted for a visit that would last between 1 and 3 hours. Built at a cost of an estimated US\$220 million (MacKinnon, 2010), the China Pavilion was steeped in symbolism. From its red color to the architectural reference of the *dougong*, every detail communicated the cultural mythology of China. Its location within the Expo site was equally symbolic as it was positioned at the intersection of the main east-west and north-south axes, signifying China’s historical and contemporary identity as “the Middle Kingdom,” which means the “center of the world.” It was literally and symbolically the center of the Expo universe (see Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** The China Pavilion at the 2010 World Expo. Photograph by Anne Balsamo, 2010.

The experiences within the China Pavilion were organized thematically and not strictly chronologically. Although there were many interesting media elements installed,<sup>14</sup> we focus our discussion on the public interactives that specifically addressed the Expo theme and by extension China's internal soft power efforts.

After strolling through a concrete antechamber with video displays showing snapshots of life in China, visitors were ushered into a large theater for an "orientation" film, which began in 1949 with the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Viewers see Han Chinese workers, in what seems to be a western region of China, building a steel factory with the locals. The film then moves to a cityscape, seen through the eyes of a son who has left the countryside, where the years fly by—1980, 1984, 1986, 1990, 1995—with images that correspond with economic development: skyscrapers, highways, and the increasing presence of cars. The film then cuts to the side of a building where a large clock is stopped at 2.28 p.m., which every Chinese visitor would have recognized as the time that the Sichuan earthquake struck on May 12, 2008. For such a short film (it ran only 7 minutes), a significant portion of time is dedicated to the earthquake: the devastation, the rescue efforts, and the rebuilding (with of course no mention of the "tofu-dreg" schools that collapsed during the quake while government buildings stood). The film then shows clips of the 2009 60th anniversary celebration of the founding of the PRC and brief flashes of the 2008 Olympics. It ends with images of the Chinese stock market, symbolically reinforcing the benefits of over 30 years of economic opening and reform. The overall narrative is intentionally apolitical with no reference to Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, or the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

The chronological treatment of time in the film continued in the public interactive experiences that followed. Four carefully staged dioramas labeled 1978, 1988, 1998, and 2008 showcased the rising standards of living for urban Chinese, as exemplified through consumer appliances, home-entertainment devices, and increasing square footage. Whereas the 1978 diorama features a radio and worn books, in 1988 a refrigerator and television appear along with a sewing machine, while a desktop computer shows up in 1998 along with a stereo system.<sup>15</sup> By 2008, the domestic scene includes a laptop, a flat screen TV, and a robot vacuum cleaner. Pencil sketches of the view out the windows in each diorama subtly shift the spatial orientation upward each decade—from a 1978 window view at street level to a 2008 perspective from the upper



**Figure 4.** A family is photographed in front of the 1978 diorama in the China Pavilion. Photograph by Anne Balsamo, 2010.

floors of a high-rise apartment building. Like the film, the dioramas reinforced a dominant cultural narrative about the meaning of China's opening and reform policy through focusing on the real material improvements available to urban Chinese citizens (and providing human-scale backdrops for photographic opportunities, see Figure 4).<sup>16</sup>

For all of China's achievements over the last several decades, tensions have also been inherent, including forced dislocation of urban and rural residents, massive layoffs of urban workers, pollution, increasing inequality among all levels of Chinese society, and the suppression of dissent. Of course, these could not be presented in this recounting of China's recent history any more than military missteps in Iraq could be part of the US Pavilion's narrative of teamwork and entrepreneurship. Nonetheless, at least some of China's domestic problems were addressed in the third major area of the pavilion that focused more specifically on present notions of sustainability and urbanization. For example, by touching digital display screens, visitors could manipulate parameters such as commuting distance and mode of commute to obtain a calculation of their daily carbon footprint. For the most part, however, there were few individually manipulatable "interactive" experiences. This was due, no doubt, to considerations of both "through-put"/wait-times and the intended story of harmonious development.

While the design of expo pavilions offers important branding opportunities for all nations, for China the Expo was a massive opportunity to use public interactives to brand itself for the world and its own people. Of the 73 million Expo visitors only 4.2 million (5.8%) were foreigners (Barboza, 2010). Through 3D films and immersive mediated experiences the message communicated was that traditional Chinese culture created a great nation that has risen again. The exhibits in the China Pavilion were also used as technologies of persuasion to convey a linear notion of progress and development, and visitors were to understand that the CCP (even if not overtly mentioned) was the guiding hand behind this triumph. More broadly, the educational work of the China Pavilion focused on the significant transformation of China, which will become increasingly

urbanized and high-tech. Thus, the real meaning of “Better City, Better Life” was a call to domestic visitors, and the world as well, to embrace this strong, emergent China.

## **Conclusion**

World Expos perform the past and the present; yet, they exist to imagine spectacular and hopeful futures. In this article, we have focused on the pavilions of Saudi Arabia, the United States, and China in order to show how technologically mediated narratives produce understandings of a nation as a singular entity and within broader geopolitical relations. Drawing upon concepts of nation branding, soft power, and technologies of persuasion, we examined how public interactives deploy temporalities, spatial logics, and visual and linguistic narratives in this pursuit.

At the Shanghai World Expo although a range of public interactives was present, the three pavilions we analyzed relied heavily on cinematic media to perform their own idiosyncratic dance of nation branding that also attested to China’s rise on the global stage. Through the grandeur of its 360° IMAX cinematic experience, Saudi Arabia drew upon a rich cultural heritage while displaying its economic trump card—oil—from which it derives its economic might and strategic alliance with China. Saudi Arabia’s public interactive was certainly the most innovative in terms of technological accomplishments: the integration of 20 projectors to create a seamless dynamic environment, the realization of a sweeping immersive visual poem, and the well-paced movement of visitors along the “magic carpet” created an experience of “interactivity” as the visitor’s body-frame-of-reference was transcended through insertion into an expansive and volumetric audio-visual world. Evocative images and music, meant to produce bodily sensation, were thus the conduits for soft power.

Compared to Saudi Arabia, the public interactives in the US Pavilion were not technologically innovative (except for the raindrops), perhaps reflecting the United States’ initial reluctance at participating on this global stage. In the US Pavilion, soft power did not necessarily derive from portrayals of a rich cultural heritage. Rather than letting images speak, the concept of “American Values” was asserted through statements by government officials and corporate spokespeople and through narratives of self-help leading to cooperation. In fact, the most interactive section of the US Pavilion was in the final room, where corporations had individual screen displays. Overall, from the filmic sound bites of corporate heads to the dizzying array of logos in this last room, nation branding was synonymous with corporate branding. If the Shanghai Expo was the “Economic Olympics,” the United States was going for the gold prize—China’s 1.3 billion consumers.

China combined elements found in both the Saudi and US pavilions, utilizing cinematic media that relied minimally on words while also invoking a marketing logic where consumer commodities took front stage, though in a subtler manner than in the US Pavilion. The short, carefully orchestrated film served as a cinematic backdrop for the insertion of domestic viewers into the story of China’s historic contemporary development. Once visitors left the theater to enter the hall of dioramas, they were offered the opportunity to place themselves into domestic scenes where they were the only missing element; thus, they were invited to complete the story of China’s transformation in the reform era—measured in urban living standards and levels of consumption—with the CCP at the helm.

All three pavilions prominently deployed cinematic media, supplemented by other visual displays, to construct a narrative, and although the mode of communication and the “interactive” experiences differed, the impact was similar: to bring people into the vision of the future on offer by each nation and to frame that vision with explicit reference to China as a dominant national

power. In this sense, public interactives are performative—they not only are a performance of culture but also seek to actively bring into being the present and the future. As modes of public diplomacy, they both announce the future and serve as stages for the working out of its contours. Public interactives thus act as technologies of culture and technologies of persuasion to bring publics—masses, spectators, and participants—into dominant national narratives through media rich immersive experiences that are not simply technological but also profoundly cultural.

In the years since the Expo's staging, how have the soft power efforts and the visions set forth by these three nations figured into the present? Since 2012 Xi Jinping has been China's leader and his "Chinese Dream" lays out a path for the rejuvenation and development—economically, militarily, spiritually—of the nation in line with and beyond what was envisioned at the Shanghai Expo. The paths of Saudi Arabia and the United States, and their relationship with China, have also evolved in both expected and surprising ways. Saudi Arabia is still the largest supplier of oil to China, trade volume and joint construction projects between the two countries have increased, and their geopolitical ties are deepening in the wake of the US nuclear agreement with Iran and the crisis in Syria (Nazer, 2015). However, Saudi Arabia faces challenges on a number of fronts: a drop in the global price of oil, a military quagmire in Yemen (Naylor, 2015), and a broader crisis in the Middle East due to the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS; which Saudi Arabia has helped produce). Given China's non-interventionist stance, it seems unlikely that no amount of "romancing the dragon" would entice China to come to Saudi Arabia's aid militarily if requested.

The case of the United States and China is a bit more complicated, however. Headlines in US newspapers regularly mention the two countries' strained relationship, which has increased in recent years as both jockey for position in a changing global order. Since the Shanghai Expo, the United States has continued to deal with the effects of the global financial crisis of 2007–2008, and with China holding so much of the US' debt, the global balance of financial power has continued to shift. The United States clearly recognizes this. On one hand, the United States has been the main architect of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a major trade agreement that includes several Asian countries but glaringly excludes China. On the other hand, in September 2015 Barak Obama hosted Xi Jinping on his first official state visit (as opposed to a summit). The two leaders agreed to cooperate on a number of issues, including cybersecurity, the situation in Afghanistan, and sustainable development ("Fact Sheet," 2015). But in a move that perhaps even the US Pavilion's corporate emphasis could not foreshadow, what really garnered publicity was Xi's visit with American tech giants, including Facebook, Microsoft, and Apple, and their CEOs' presence at the formal state dinner. Of equal importance was Xi's visit to Boeing and the announcement that China will purchase 300 Boeing aircraft valued at US\$38 billion and Boeing will build an aircraft completion plant in China ("Boeing Just," 2015). Even as China needs US technology, the future of the aviation business appears to be shifting.

As Xi's visit to the United States (and shortly thereafter the United Kingdom) attests, China continues its rise as a world power, and it is largely following the path laid out at the Expo albeit with some unexpected challenges. Domestically, the goals of China's 12th Five Year Plan (2011–2015) continued several themes on display at the Expo, emphasizing clean energy and environmental sustainability, increased domestic consumption, a shift from export processing, and greater urbanization. In 2014, when the government created comprehensive guidelines for further urbanization, China's urbanization rate was nearly 54% ("Guoji Xinxing," 2014). However, China has also faced economic difficulty, particularly the plunge of its stock market in June 2015, which could not be staved off despite the government's best efforts, and the devaluation of its currency. Furthermore, Xi's visit to the United States notwithstanding, China continues to struggle with its

soft power goals globally. Although a 2014 global attitudes survey showed China faring somewhat positively (“Global Opposition,” 2014), a 2015 survey ranked China last out of 30 countries in soft power (“The Soft,” 2015). The jailing of five young feminist activists in March 2015 and the detainment and harassment of rights lawyers have taken place amidst greater repression of civil society in China under Xi’s leadership.

Yet, China marches on in its quest toward fulfilling its soft power goals domestically, if not globally. Much to Washington’s consternation, in 2015 China officially launched the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, with 56 founding members (including Australia and the United Kingdom), which many see as a challenge to the dominance of the World Bank and Asian Development Bank, led by the United States and Japan, respectively (Perlez, 2015). Still, for all of the emphasis on harmony and peaceful rise at the Expo (and in subsequent government rhetoric), China has become more willing to show its might, most notably in more aggressive claims to the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands and in the South China Sea, where China is claiming what were formerly neutral waters and building islands that many fear will be used for military purposes.

In late 2015, in the midst of continued economic woes, the Chinese government hosted the first major media spectacle since the Shanghai Expo, designed to demonstrate China’s stature globally but this time showing its potential for hard power—the September 3rd Military Parade celebrating the end of World War II and emphasizing 70 years of victory over Japan. The parade was broadcast across China and kicked off a 3-day holiday. Over 1 month later, as it looped continuously on small video screens on numerous subway lines in Beijing, it demonstrated the allure of the use of public interactives to call forth publics and suture them into China’s present and the future.

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## Notes

1. Winter (2013) reports that “by every measure, Shanghai broke the record books in the history of world’s fairs and universal expositions” (p. 1).
2. The *Liberation Daily*, the Shanghai Party mouthpiece, carried daily news stories and commentaries. See, for example, [http://newspaper.jfdaily.com/jfrb/html/2010-04/30/content\\_322895.htm](http://newspaper.jfdaily.com/jfrb/html/2010-04/30/content_322895.htm)
3. Saudi Arabia did not even participate in the Milan Expo.
4. On the Expo as “place branding” Shanghai, see Dynon.
5. For definitions of public diplomacy, see Gilboa (2008).
6. Because the term is US-centric and is difficult to measure, some have suggested that “nation branding” is more useful for discussing a country’s international profile (Fan, 2008; Wang, 2013). However, several media reports overtly referred to the Expo as a showcase for China’s soft power. See Kurtenbach (2010).
7. For an overview and critique of Nye’s conception of soft power and its relation to China, see Li (2009) and Fan (2008).
8. For an extended discussion of how “harmony” was deployed at the Expo, see Nordin (2012, pp. 242–246). See also Dynon (2011).
9. On space and temporality in the China and various theme pavilions see Nordin (2012).
10. See also Cohen (2013, p. 160) for a description of the Saudi Pavilion.
11. Other national pavilions with immersive cinematic experiences included Singapore, Turkey, Taipei, India, Thailand, Australia, Canada, Spain, and the Republic of Korea (Cohen, 2013, p. 169, fn. 2). Cohen also reports on research (from an unpublished paper by Chen and Jiang dated 2010) that suggests there were more than 17 “different forms of screen presentation developed across the expo” (p. 158).
12. Personal interview, 6 July 2010.

13. We make this assertion based on conversations with attendees. Wang (2013) also found this to be true. In contrast, the Student Ambassadors with whom we spoke thought the pavilion represented the United States well.
14. One of the most impressive installations was the large-scale animated painting of the Song Dynasty scroll, "Riverside Scene at Qingming Festival," which was projected onto a surface 128 m long by 6.5 m tall and featured animated vignettes of urban life during the festival.
15. Domestic visitors would have recognized these as the "three big items" that changed each decade in accordance with rising standards of living and increasing availability of consumer goods.
16. Through a post-Tiananmen "compromise legitimacy," the government has promised a greater standard of living in exchange for citizens' political rights.

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