



Selling the environment: Green marketing discourse in China's automobile advertising



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ABSTRACT

Despite the substantial advance of environmental communication research over the past decade, studies on green marketing discourse in non-Western contexts have been relatively sparse. To address this research gap, this article examines the multimodal discursive means through which the concept of “nature” is constructed in recent automobile advertisements in China. Following the analytical framework of multimodal critical discourse analysis, the article analyzes a total of 24 advertisements that were produced between 2013 and 2014 by four top-selling automobile brands in China. The data analysis reveals a consistent ideological separation between nature and human society in the analyzed advertisements: “nature” is constantly framed as either a valuable commodity for human consumption or an added value for high-end car models that in fact have low energy efficiency (e.g. luxury SUVs and sedans). Implicitly, these advertisements also appropriate the growing public concern on China's deteriorating environment through green consumerism. The above findings not only deconstruct the operations of specific advertisements and how they contribute to problematic environmental narratives; they also situate China's deepening ecological crisis within the broader context of neoliberalism, the ubiquitous doctrine underlying today's global economy. Overall, this article invites readers to consider the irresolvable contradiction of green capitalism and market-based environmentalism: the benefit offered by technological innovation is often offset by the endless pursuit of material consumption growth.

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1. Introduction

Advertising discourse has been pivotal in shaping public understanding of environmental issues. While much has been written on the negative impacts of green marketing narratives on the global struggle against contemporary ecological crises (e.g. Budinsky and Bryant, 2013; Gunster, 2005, 2007; Hansen, 2002; Hansen and Machin, 2008), such studies have been relatively sparse in non-Western contexts. This article focuses on an issue that has arguably become a priority on China's public agenda: the expansion of private car ownership and its devastating social and environmental impacts.

Over the past three decades, the accelerating industrialization and marketization in China has been accompanied by a sharp increase of domestic environmental issues, which has led to growing public attention and policy discussions. In particular, major metropolitan areas such as Beijing and Shanghai have suffered from increasing low visibility days since the 2000s, making air pollution a high-profile public issue in China (Chan and Yao,

2008; Chen, 2014a, 2014b). Among the various contributing factors of China's poor air quality, the dramatic increase in private car ownership has been frequently regarded as a major cause by government and media narratives. For instance, the number of vehicles in Beijing increased from 1.39 million to 2.65 million between 1999 and 2005 (Chan and Yao, 2008). In response to such explosive increase, the Beijing government has taken a series of tough measurements to control vehicle exhaust, such as adopting the Euro-III standards and conducting traffic control by banning certain license numbers. One recent example showing the tough control of private vehicles in China was the use of odd-even car ban¹ in Beijing and its surrounding six provinces between late August and early September, 2015. This radical measurement reduced almost 50% road traffic and significantly improved air quality. However, when the ban was lifted in early September,

¹ The purpose of this ban is to ensure air quality during China's mega-military parade commemorating the 70th anniversary of victory in World War II.

Beijing's air pollution quickly returned to alarming levels (Tatlow, 2015).

As the public concern over private vehicles' negative environmental impacts keeps growing, question marks begin to haunt the discourse regarding private vehicle use in China. Within this context, many automobile brands begin to employ concepts such as "energy efficiency" and "earth friendly" to continue the promotion of private car ownership. Empowered by various forms of green consumerism, these seemingly environmental narratives tend to underscore the glaring contradictions between the marketing of private vehicles and their actual usage. In many ways, these narratives have received a great success: although automobile sales in China have slowed down in 2014 and are very likely to face even weaker growth in coming years, China remains the most promising market for global automobile corporations (Murphy, 2015). In other words, the growth of private car ownership in China has not yet been challenged by the rising public concern over air pollution. In this regard, the green narratives promoted by China's automobile advertisements (auto-ads) would continue to be a crucial component in the public debates on China's escalating environmental degradation.

This paper aims at elucidating the ways in which auto-ads in China respond to the public's rising environmental concern. Specifically, the article explores how recent auto-ads in China obfuscate the negative environmental impacts associated with excessive private vehicle use. By attending to discursive constructions of nature within sample auto-ads, the article criticizes green consumerism's expropriation of the public's environmental concern and its discursive legitimation of capital's domination of nature. Compared with previous research on auto-ads (e.g. Budinsky and Bryant, 2013; Gunster, 2005, 2007; McCarthy, 2007; Paterson, 2007), the paper also addresses the unique symbolic value of "private car ownership" in the Chinese context: the automobile has become a pivotal symbol of "middle class status" in China and other developing countries with booming private consumption. For the above purposes, the article adopts multimodal critical discourse analysis (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006; Machin, 2007) as its analytical framework.

The remaining sections of this article will be structured as follows. Section two presents a brief historical review of automobile culture in North America, which elaborates how the automobile has become a crucial cultural symbol for the American lifestyle and neoliberal ideology. This section also discusses how the automobile and its associated symbolic meanings have been gradually "re-contextualized" in China following its market reforms since the 1980s. Section three then reviews previous research on media's discursive constructions of nature, especially those found in auto-ads. Section four introduces empirical data and research methods used in the current study. This is followed by section five in which prominent discursive strategies adopted by the analyzed auto-ads are elaborated and discussed. Finally, section six deconstructs the greenwashing effect of green capitalism² by critically evaluating natural imagery found in contemporary commercial discourses and its underlying ideological separation between human and nature.

² This article uses the term "green capitalism" in its narrow sense to refer to views or policies promoting market-based or technology-based solutions for the current ecological crisis. By contrast, authors such as James Speth (2008) has proposed "green capitalism" in a broad sense, using it as an umbrella term to describe views or policies that try to combine market mechanisms with strong government policy instruments.

2. Automobile culture and China's "Catch-up" with the West

Private vehicle use has been naturalized in many ways in contemporary societies, with private car ownership being commonly regarded as a key component of modern lifestyle (McCarthy, 2007; Paterson, 2007). This is especially true in North America where driving is considered as a necessity instead of a free choice. As recognized by many automobile historians (e.g. Flink, 1988; Heitmann, 2009), it is almost impossible to write a comprehensive monograph on the automobile's cultural influence on contemporary life since it is a culture artifact embedded with too much present relevance. Indeed, the automobile is perhaps the "perfect symbol" of America life with its connotations of mobility, speed, privacy, power and status. Take consumer culture as an example, it can be argued that contemporary consumer culture was born out of the development of the modern automobile industry. At the beginning of the 20th century, the introduction of the production line system by Fordism not only made automobiles an affordable commodity for middle class Americans, but also established the very foundation of industrial capitalism's economic and social systems: a standardized form of mass production (Ewen, 2001). As the American manufacture industry shifted from producing war-related items to consumer goods, the automobile industry experienced an explosive growth during the 1950s, which also left an enduring influence on modern consumer culture by introducing the concept of customized consumer goods and initiating the culture of "upgrade". Both phenomena can be observed almost in every corner of today's non-stoppable digital marketing. Now, even when we have stepped into the "digital ear", the automobile remains one of the most advertised commodities in the global market. In the U.S., the cost of auto-ads dwarfs that of all other types of commodities: seven of the fifteen most advertised brands in 2000 were cars (Gunster, 2007).

Arguably, the key semiotic value of the automobile lies in "automobility": not simply the car per se, but the hybrid car-driver and its designation of mobility and autonomy (McCarthy, 2007; Urry, 2000). Writing on the political economy of automobiles, Paterson (2007) discusses how the automobile's key connotations (e.g. movement, migration and mobility) have been the constitutive features of most modern political ideologies, which have created seemingly unbreakable links between automobiles and modernity. Similarly, based on his research of consistent utopian themes in SUV ads, Gunster (2005, 2007) argues that as an iconic consumer good, the automobile has gained psychic and social meanings through the creation of new forms of subjectivity, in which driving's transformative impacts define one's self-identity: "you are what you drive". Overall, the automobile has been socially and culturally constructed as a signifier of emancipation and freedom, and, more importantly, as an embodiment of desire and status.

The semiotic perspective of automobile culture offers a crucial lens for addressing the "auto mania" in newly industrialized countries such as China. Aiming at "catching-up the West", China's market-oriented economic and political reforms since the 1980s have dramatically changed its economic, social, and cultural landscapes. Now, as the world's second largest economic entity, China has been fully integrated into the global economic system, with its well-recognized status as "the world's factory", and, increasingly, a crucial player in global capital flows. China's accelerating modernization and marketization, however, have also been accompanied by noticeable economic and social contradictions, especially in terms of alarming social inequalities. For instance, the digital revolution in China's information and communication technologies (ICTs) has been characterized by a seemingly paradoxical feature (Zhao, 2007): on the one hand, ICTs have been progressively promoted among the population; on the

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