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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.

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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

1 other hand, the market authoritarianism along with ICTs' diffusion
2 has stimulated dispersed and intensified social conflicts, which in
3 turn has led to increasing state control over media content and
4 access.

5 In the same vein, China's enthusiastic adoption of consumer
6 goods for individual needs (e.g. private vehicles) has served as a
7 double-edged sword for the Chinese society: while the utility
8 values of automobiles have significantly improved many ordinary
9 Chinese people's material living standards, issues such as traffic
10 safety, road congestion, and air pollution have also become com-
11 mon problems of everyday life. More importantly, by serving as a
12 signifier of power, freedom, and mobility, driving has become a
13 necessity for those inspired by American lifestyles in China. Con-
14 sequently, the automobile is turned into an embodiment of desire
15 and status, an inseparable component for those wanting to show
16 off their status as "members of privileged social classes". This
17 explains China's booming luxury automobile market and the low
18 sale records of hybrid cars in China before 2013: compared with
19 traditional luxury models, many Chinese consumers regard
20 hybrids as "powerless" and detrimental to their social statuses (Li,
21 2013). One prominent issue showing the close connection
22 between social status and the automobile in China is the rudeness
23 of luxury car drivers, which, over the past decade, has become a
24 repetitive theme in media coverage and received rising public
25 outcries. The most shocking incident occurred in 2011 at Nanjing,
26 Jiangsu Province, where a BMW driver, when engaged in an illegal
27 drag racing with another luxury car, crushed and killed a passing
28 cyclist. This incident has become an iconic event showing the
29 breathtaking social inequalities along with China's booming
30 economy.

31 Meanwhile, driving is damaging to the environment, as shown
32 in the production and distribution of automobiles, the construc-
33 tion of paved roads, the emission of private vehicle use, and the
34 disposal of vehicles at the end of their life cycles. For many years,
35 these known environmental impacts of automobiles have been
36 taken for granted or regarded as acceptable costs in China.
37 Nevertheless, as China's escalating air pollution has gradually
38 become a priority on its public agenda, concerns regarding the
39 established "common sense" of private vehicle use begin to
40 emerge in public discussions. These voices have been further
41 reinforced by the government's implementation of odd-even car
42 ban in various occasions. As a result, major automobile brands in
43 China have been forced to adopt new rhetorical strategies to
44 continue the promotion of private vehicles, especially luxury ones
45 with poor environmental profiles. Broadly speaking, these brands
46 have adopted two common narrative strategies: on the one hand,
47 auto-ads in China increasingly adopt natural imagery to signify
48 utopian scenarios in which appealing natural views becomes an
49 added value of driving; on the other hand, these ads also promote
50 the apparently easy solution of green consumerism by frequently
51 articulating concepts such as "energy efficiency" and "earth
52 friendly".

53 As this paper will discuss later, however, both narratives are
54 problematic from the perspective of environmental political
55 economy (EPC). EPC advances the idea of the social totality by
56 incorporating the natural totality of organic life: it critically
57 investigates the links between social behavior and the environ-
58 ment, thereby "broadening political economy's concern for moral
59 philosophy by expanding the moral vision beyond human life to all
60 life processes" (Mosco, 2009, p. 61). Building upon Marx's (1932)
61 notion of "alienation", EPC aims at deconstructing the ways in
62 which humans are alienated from nature in the life of capitalism
63 (Foster, 2000, 2002). According to EPC, both "nature as an added
64 value for driving" and "driving in an earth friendly way" need to be
65 challenged since their promotion of themes and representations
66 that are in harmony with corporate capitalism not only favors

individual and market-based solutions for contemporary ecologi- 67
cal crises, but also legitimizes the ideological separation between 68
human and nature by indicating that "nature" is (only) achievable 69
through purchasing ostensibly green products. 70

3. Images of the environment 73

74 Before examining the complex natural appeals found in auto-
75 ads in China, let us briefly review previous research on media's
76 discursive constructions of nature. As Raymond Williams (1983)
77 addresses in *Keywords*, nature is as a highly complex and histori-
78 cally specific concept, with its predominant definition constantly
79 changing along with the advance of human society: from the Age
80 of Enlightenment's diagnosis of nature as laws to be discovered by
81 human reasoning, to the Romantic Movement's emphasis on
82 nature as pure, pristine and original, and to modern era's
83 increasing diversified interpretations of nature. According to Wil-
84 liams, one fundamental factor remains largely intact despite these
85 semantic shifts, namely the binary tension between human and
86 nature. Of particular relevance to the current research is Williams'
87 observation that: "one of the most powerful uses of nature, since
88 the late 18th century, has been in this selective sense of goodness
89 and innocence; nature has meant 'the countryside', the 'unspoiled
90 places', plants and creatures other than man" (p. 223). In other
91 words, the rhetorical power of nature mainly lies in its ability to
92 function as a "floating signifier" to support arguments with moral
93 and universal authority (Hansen, 2002; Hansen and Machin, 2008,
94 2014).

95 Indeed, as the history of advertising suggests, discursive con-
96 structions of various "natural images" have been a persistent
97 rhetorical strategy found in the cluttered landscape of advertising,
98 along with changes over time in prominent images, messages, and
99 ideals (Ewen, 2001; Goldman and Papson, 2011; Leiss et al., 2005).
100 Writing on consumer culture's emergence in the U.S. in the early
101 20th century, Marchand (1985) discusses how advertisers during
102 the 1920s and 1930s exploited the public's fears of industrial
103 technology as an incentive for promoting the consumption of
104 products that would "magically" restore a harmonious balance
105 between nature and society. Such narratives further intensified in
106 the U.S. during the 1970s and 1980s along with the shift of public
107 opinion from urban techno-worship to more pastoral themes,
108 which, according to Wernick (1991), was mainly caused by the
109 American public's increasing dissent on technology (and its mili-
110 tarianistic overtones) and expressed concerns over issues such as
111 growing traffic congestion, energy consumption, and road con-
112 struction. As human civilization steps into the new millennium,
113 the pressing global environmental degradation also brings the
114 "sign wars" over nature to a new level: the growing public concern
115 for the environment has led corporations to advance a new
116 ideology of green consumerism, in which citizens are urged to
117 help the environment through the consumption of (ostensibly)
118 eco-friendly products and this noticeable trend of greenwashing
119 have received eloquent critiques from critical scholars (Budinsky
120 and Bryant, 2013; Goldman and Papson, 2011; Hansen and Machin,
121 2008).

122 Within the growing body of research dealing with visual dis-
123 courses of the environment, there have been numerous studies
124 explicitly addressing how images found in advertisements and
125 news stories contribute to the public perception of nature (e.g.
126 Budinsky and Bryant, 2013; Gunster, 2005, 2007; Hansen, 2002;
127 Hansen and Machin, 2008, 2014; Li, 2013). Collectively, these
128 studies have recognized how public imagination of nature is
129 socially, politically and culturally constructed, with media rep-
130 resentations of natural imagery playing a vital role in this
131 process. Another common finding shared by these studies is the
132

“re-contextualization” of natural imagery for the purpose of marketing and this tendency is particularly evident in auto-ads. Focusing on the visual narratives of utopian scenes in North American SUV advertisements, [Gunster \(2005, 2007\)](#) discusses how the invocation of natural themes reinforces the escapism promoted by SUVs and obfuscates these vehicles’ devastating environmental impacts. More crucially, the constant commodification of our imagination of utopia forecloses our ability to conceptualize a world beyond capitalist relations. Similarly, in a recent survey of prominent green advertisements in Canada, [Budinsky and Bryant \(2013\)](#) note that instead of thoughtful, collective environmental actions, eco-friendly narratives in contemporary advertising encourages individualism, greed, and consumption, which in fact promotes the neoliberal agenda that has been proven detrimental to a sustainable future. Meanwhile, visual green marketing has already move beyond conventional commercial discourses. In their detailed analysis of Getty Images, one leading commercial image bank offering stock photographs for promotional materials as well as news features, [Hansen and Machin \(2008\)](#) show how green issues are re-contextualized for branding and marketing as *specific environments* are systemically turned into *symbolic environments* in Getty Images’ visual narratives of the environment and climate change.

Yet, despite the steady growth of research on visual environmental communication, it is noticeable that green marketing discourses in the Global South remain a peripheral research topic. In light of the increasingly important roles of developing countries such as China, India, and Brazil in global climate politics, it is surprising that very few attempts have been made to examine how the concept of nature is discursively constructed in non-Western contexts where the historical, socio-cultural, and institutional factors are considerably different from those found in North America and Europe. To address this research gap, the following sections will next report on an exploratory research that examined the discursive representations of nature in China’s auto-ads by drawing upon the framework of critical discourse analysis.

4. Data and methods

The research reported here examined how the concept of nature is discursively constructed in auto-ads by top-selling automobile brands in China. Multimodal critical discourse analysis was adopted as the main approach for data analysis, given the multimodal nature of advertising discourse and the research’s critical stance. As an academic movement inspired by critical theories, critical discourse analysis (CDA) emphasizes the hegemonic power of discourse and social representations as a key site for political struggles, which favors a context-sensitive and in-depth exploration. ([Fairclough, 2001](#); [van Dijk, 2008](#)). CDA differs from descriptive textual analysis methods with its commitment to social equality and emancipation. Traditionally, CDA scholarship has mainly focused on the textual domain by examining how particular ideas and interests are promoted through various linguistic choices in public texts. As suggested by recent elaborations of CDA’s methodological implications (e.g. [Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006](#); [Machin, 2007](#)), however, CDA is experiencing a “visual turn” in which the multimodality of discourse is becoming an increasingly important research subject. This trend has special implications for environmental communication since the concept of nature has been primarily communicated through visual means in the contemporary media landscape ([Hansen and Machin, 2014](#)). Public engagement with climate change, for instance, is constantly mediated by prominent visual representations of this global issue ([O’Neill, 2013](#)).

Like linguistic choices, visual representations are able to implicitly promote particular social values, ideas, and interests by re-contextualizing certain aspects of social reality through discursive strategies. According to [van Leeuwen and Wodak \(1999\)](#), the re-contextualization is achieved through three major ways: (1) substitution (details of actual activities are substituted by generalized abstractions), (2) addition (additional elements such as legitimation, purpose and reaction are added into the re-contextualization process), and (3) evaluation (events and people are always unconsciously or deliberately evaluated during the re-contextualization process).

The ideological power of re-contextualization is also associated with the “reasonable acts” promoted by legitimized discursive representations. [Van Leeuwen and Wodak \(1999\)](#) use the term “script” to describe the normative and cognitive functions of discursive representations, and their study shows how hegemonic and dominant scripts are socially and institutionally embedded and how they prompt present and future decisions and actions. Similarly, within critical policy studies, [Jessop \(2004, 2012\)](#) proposes the concept of “imaginary” to describe how the super-complexity of reality is discursively simplified into selective “mental map”, and [Dryzek \(2013\)](#) adopts the concept of “storyline” to compare distinctive argumentations within contemporary environmental politics. Despite their differences, concepts such as script, imaginary, and storyline collectively mark a unique “discursive turn” in policy studies, and they highlight the importance of argumentation in contemporary policy analysis ([Fairclough, 2013](#)).

Meanwhile, it seems that the focus on argumentation can be extended to the study of commercial discourses. The prevalence of cultural branding in advertisements has created a saturated symbolic universe in which corporations strive to align the narratives of their products with particular social values to gain appeals among consumers ([Goldman and Papson, 2011](#)). In the case of auto-ads, although functionality remains an important aspect in the promotion of certain car models, the diminishing distinctions between different car brands have made manufacturers to link a particular car model with a range of desired social identities, such as SUVs as the symbol of power and freedom ([Gunster, 2005, 2007](#)). As such, through an analysis of the prominent macro-argumentations established by sample auto-ads, the current research was designed to reveal the efforts of major auto-brands in China to shape the concept of nature for branding and marketing purposes.

To be specific, the current research focused on auto-ads of intermediate and luxury car models that were aired in China during 2013–2014. This time period was chosen since it was a “critical discourse moment” ([Carvalho, 2008](#)) in the recent developments of Chinese environmental politics. The initial outbreak of the lingering smog in Beijing at the beginning of 2013 received extensive media attention both domestically and internationally, which significantly prioritized air quality on China’s public agenda ([Chen, 2014a, 2014b](#)). As national media began to criticize vehicle exhaust for being a major cause of the “Beijing smog” (e.g. [Zheng, 2013](#)), automobile brands were forced to defend the necessity of driving through advertising campaigns. Thus, it would be interesting to explore nature-related discursive constructions in auto-ads during this special time period. The research focused on intermediate and luxury car models since these models, due to their relatively high emissions, were hit the most by the government’s tightening regulations on vehicle exhaust pollution and the public’s rising concerns on air quality.

The abundance of automobile models and their related advertisements in China made it necessary to circumscribe the number of texts for the actual analysis. The current research chose to examine auto-ads produced by specific brands, which would offer

an indicative glimpse into the macro-argumentations of auto-ads in China. Based on the 2013–2014 automobile sale records in China (source: <http://auto.sina.com.cn/>), TV and online ads from four brands' official websites were gathered for data analysis: Shanghai Volkswagen, Honda, Audi, and BMW³. During 2013–2014, Shanghai Volkswagen and Honda were the best-selling brands in the intermediate price range in China and the same applied to Audi and BMW in terms of luxury cars. China's domestic auto-brands were excluded from the data collection since Chinese consumers tend to prefer foreign brands over domestic ones when purchasing intermediate and luxury cars because many purchase private vehicles for the purpose of showing off their wealth and status within their social circles (see Li (2013) for detailed discussions). The over-presence of German brands in the data was due to the fact that these brands generally outperform American and Japanese competitors in the Chinese automobile market. China's historical and contemporary conflicts with Japan and the U.S. make many Chinese believe that purchasing American and Japanese automobiles is unpatriotic. In this context, German brands offer a "politically correct" solution. These brands are also associated with good safety records by many Chinese consumers due to Germany's reputation of machine-making. Eventually, a total of 24 video ads covering the selected brands' major models during 2013–2014 were finally included in the data analysis (See Table 1 for details).

In terms of data analysis, this research analyzed the macro-structures of the selected auto-ads in order to reveal what discursive strategies they employed to construct nature and to evaluate the less-explicit values, assumptions, and ideological standpoints behind such constructions. Visual narratives regarding nature found in the auto-ads were qualitatively assessed following van Leeuwen and Wodak's (1999) framework of discursive re-contextualization, with the following aspects being considered: substitution, addition, evaluation, and omission. The analysis also attended to how the auto-ads collectively establish a "meta-narrative" legitimizing and promoting driving and private vehicle use. Finally, given the context-sensitive nature of CDA, the analysis moved beyond individual texts and linked the ideological standpoints found in the auto-ads to the wider social context, namely China's aggressive embrace of Western life styles along with its embrace of the global capitalist order. The inclusion of screenshots below is intended to increase the transparency of the data analysis and the arguments built upon it. These screenshots are meant to be illustrative and they represent general tendencies found in the empirical material.

5. Research findings

The most noticeable feature shared by natural images in the analyzed auto-ads is that these images tend to be general rather than specific. According to Hansen and Machin (2008, 2014), contemporary visual depictions of nature, especially those found in commercial discourses, are moving away from the old adage of "seeing is believing" by offering a symbolic system in which natural imagery is constantly manipulated for cultural branding rather than serving as "record of reality". As mentioned earlier, in the era of cultural branding products are not merely sold for their utility values; Rather, they are increasingly represented as embodiments of positive attributes such as love, friendship, youth, and so on. Driven by this trend, natural images become increasingly

³ Most foreign auto-brands in China are manufactured domestically by joint ventures. Shanghai Volkswagen, for instance, is China's first joint venture of automobile manufacturing (between Volkswagen Group and SAIC Motor) since market reforms.

Table 1
List of Analyzed Auto-ads.

Automobile Brand	Automobile Model
Audi (http://www.audi.cn)	A3, A4, A5, A6, A7, A8
BMW (www.bmw.com.cn)	1 series, 3 series, 5 series, 6 series, 7 series
Honda (www.honda.com.cn)	Odyssey, Crosstour, City, Fit
Shanghai Volkswagen (http://www.vw.com.cn)	Cross Lavida, Gran Lavida, New Santana, New Tiguan, Polo

generic so that they are more easily associated with a variety of attributes.

The generosity of natural imagery in the auto-ads is primarily achieved through the process of de-contextualization, with images of real natural environment being substituted or enhanced by CGI or special effects. Such idealized natural imagery is further combined with attractive conceptual themes such as speed, youth, and nostalgia. These conceptual themes not only refute the heavily polluted urban environment that most Chinese are suffering on a daily basis, but also reinforce the taken-for-granted assumption that driving is a "necessary means to happy life" in modern society. For instance, the auto-ad featuring BMW's 3 series, inserts natural imagery, in the form of a visual clusters showing the car crossing natural and urban environments into a series of visual montage illustrating the notion of speed and its associated expressions of power and strength (Fig. 1). This auto-ad's visual narrative begins with a sequence of close-ups (relay races, shooting, swimming, soccer, hurdling, etc.) that demonstrate the fierce competition in professional sports and key factors for winning: teamwork, speed, courage, and so on. Following this visual cluster of positive attributes, a BMW 3 appears in the screen and swiftly runs through different environments: a picturesque mountain road, an urban road surrounded by modern glass buildings, and a giant concrete bridge with a blurred natural background. The last shot displays the three variants of BMW 3 under a somewhat unrealistic blue sky, with Beijing national stadium on the right side of the background. The prominence of sport elements in this auto-ad presents the fact that BMW is an official sponsor of the Chinese Olympic delegation. Yet, the natural imagery presented here is equally eye-catching: identifiers showing where the auto-ad was actually filmed have been eliminated to a large extent, which allows viewers to insert the scenes depicted here into their own living environments. Regardless of urban or rural settings, the scenery where the car passes by is simply spectacular and with the extensive use of special effects, it even acquires a conceptual feeling of brightness and harmony, which contrasts the gray sky of most Chinese cities. Clearly, the negative impacts of vehicle exhaust do not exist in the world depicted here.

Not limited to luxury sedans, the phenomenon that nature as generic settings can be also found in the visual narratives of compact cars that mainly targeting China's growing middle class. For instance, the auto-ad featuring Audi A3 posits nature as the "pure and happy" context in which various happy moments of our lives occur (Fig. 2). Similar to the BMW 3 series ad, this auto-ad adopts the technique of visual montage by showing typical scenarios of happy moments: finishing a creative project, enjoying an outdoor adventure, receiving a marriage proposal, playing with your kid, and so on. The visual narrative ends with a series of feature images showing a happy family driving Audi A3 moving through urban and rural environments. The final line of the auto-ad reads: "colorful life is directed by Audi A3". The nature presented here, like many other natural images found in the empirical material, substitute references to our real living environments with abstract, idyllic scenes in which a wide range of positive emotional resonances can be signified: inspiration, romance,



Fig. 1. BMW 3 series.

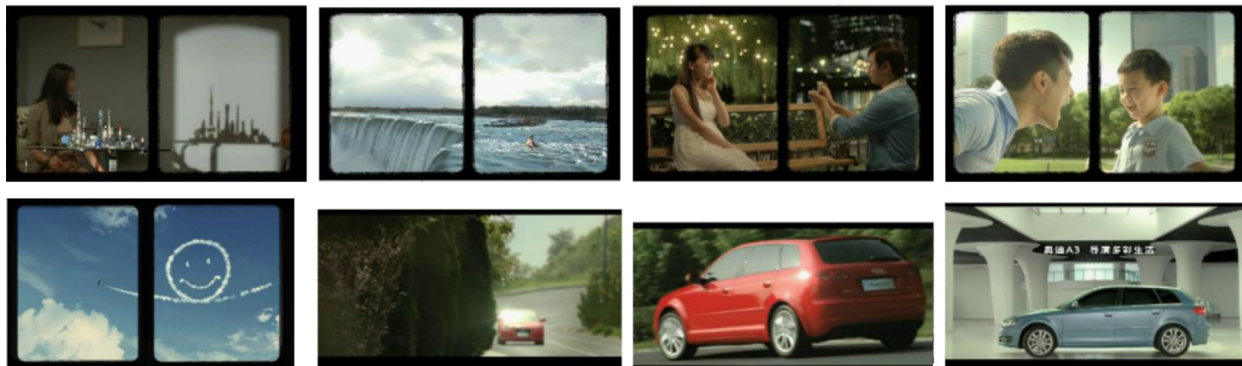


Fig. 2. Audi A3.



Fig. 3. Volkswagen cross avida.

parental love, and so on. This is further nourished by the fact that the actors in the auto-ad are also presented as “generic people”, whose depicted lives here are meant to echo the expectations of many Chinese middle class families.

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) develop the concept of “visual modality” to address the particular ways that information can be encoded into visual representations. For the above auto-ads, it is evident that they lack “denotative excess” that retains the realistic details of visual representations. The empirical truth that we naturally associated with pictures has been replaced by abstract, sensory truth that gains credibility mainly through symbolically showing the essence of nature and eliciting emotional responses. As Hansen and Machin (2008, 2014) comment, although unreality has been a common feature of advertising discourse, the notable decline of empirical truth in naturalistic images is still alarming since it demonstrates the powerful commercial appropriation of rising environmental concerns, in which the symbolically beautiful and tender environment is aligned with visions and innovations offered by commodities and corporations, instead of collective environmental actions.

If specific environments are systemically replaced by symbolic ones in the analyzed auto-ads, then what elements have been added into these symbolic environments for promoting private vehicles? A common theme constructed by the examined natural images is an utopia only reachable by driving. As Gunster (2005, 2007) argues, images of nature tirelessly make the case that a certain commodity would enable a magical escape from one’s mundane everyday life. In the current case, the visual clusters of

symbolic nature, such as the bright and clean sky and the well-maintained urban green spaces are difficult to be found in the everyday life of ordinary Chinese citizens. These surreal scenarios are seamlessly incorporated into the close-ups showing the promoted car models, which invites us to naturally connect our desire of escapism with driving. For instance, a widely circulated online commercial of Volkswagen Cross Lavida tells the story of a young man’s spiritual journey. Inspired by a lyric, the young man takes a leave from his daily job and then drives to Beijing to pursue the nostalgic place in his imagination. The appealing aspect of this auto-ad is that it incarnates nature as a central component of Beijing’s mysterious past, with images showing soft sunshine, shallow shades under leafy trees, and silent alleys with traditional Beijing residences (Fig. 3). Through this visual narrative, nature itself is reconfigured as a primary source of commodity desire, an added value for the consumer experiences of automobiles. Similarly, in one auto-ad featuring Honda Fit, a mid-range sedan targeting the family market, the car literally becomes the necessary intermediary for families to embrace the amazing nature. As shown in Fig. 4, this auto-ad presents an ordinary family traveling from their weekend outing back to the city: the car is surrounded by dancing butterflies as it runs through the beautiful suburb road; then, when darkness falls, the car’s sunroof enables the family to view the glittering Big Dipper in the sky. The key message delivered by this visual narrative is how the spatial mobility offered by automobiles would provide access to places and experiences that are fundamentally different from the (polluted) urban life, which, on the surface level, seems to construct a perfect harmony

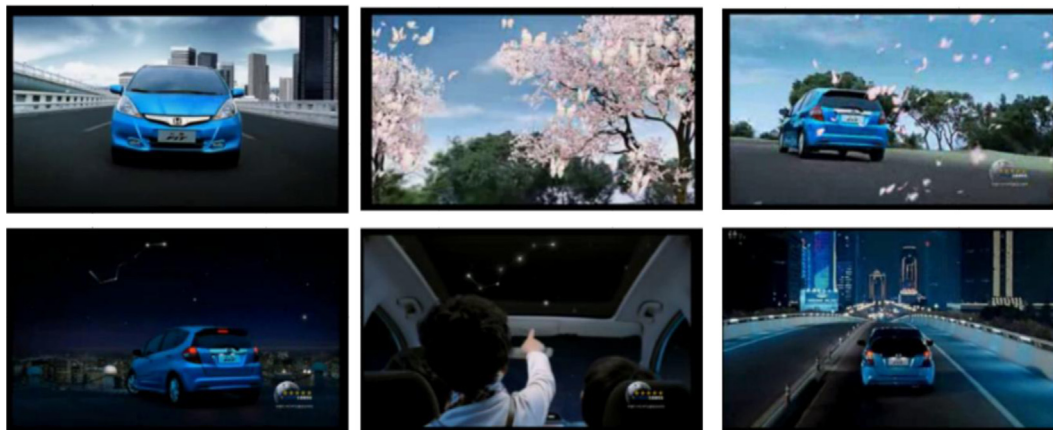


Fig. 4. Honda fit.

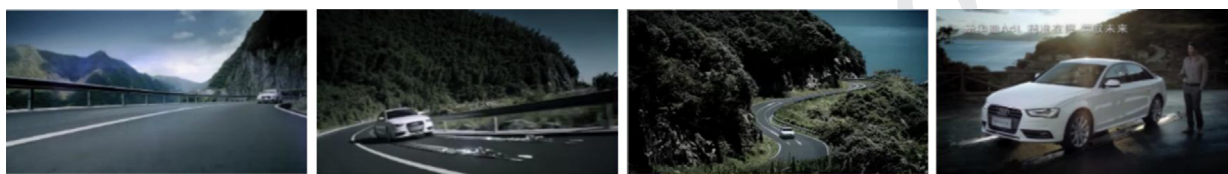


Fig. 5. Audi A4.

between humans and nature. Yet, as indicated by the extensive use of CGI technique, the picturesque scenario depicted here is, eventually, a utopian dream for ordinary Chinese citizens who have to suffer from the poor air quality in their cities.

While visual narratives such as the one found in Honda Fit echoes ordinary Chinese citizens' utopian desire, the marketing of luxury car models such as high-end sedans and SUVs takes the appropriation of natural imagery to a new height by showing how nature can be challenged and even dominated by the automobile. Gunster (2005) finds that one common theme of SUV commercials is "a struggle between the SUV and nature in the form of aggressive contexts of strength, speed, agility and power with a variety of wild predators" (p. 10). In the current research, auto-ads featuring high-end car models also adopt the classic "man versus nature" struggle theme: with equipped four-wheel-drive (4WD) technologies, an Audi A4 is able to deftly run across complicated mountain roads while a Honda Crosstour is able to effortlessly handle all kinds of road conditions, from asphalt roads in the modern city to rugged paths in the forest (Figs. 5 and 6). The symbolic relocation of high-end automobiles from paved roads to wild environments is crucial for demonstrating how the embedded technologies in these expensive machines would enhance driver control. This discursive strategy literally brands the vehicles as signifiers of technology that would enable drivers a seamless adaptation to the wild nature by enhancing particular physical attributes such as speed, power, and agility (Gunster, 2005, 2007). The narrative of dominating nature found in these auto-ads re-articulates of conventional Enlightenment narratives about technology, celebrating it as the "magical bridle" that enables human beings to tame wild nature.

As mentioned earlier, the public attention to vehicle exhaust during 2013–2014 made automobile brands in China to adopt concepts such as "energy efficiency" or "earth friendly" for legitimizing private vehicle purchase. Although such green marketing discourses can be easily found in the promotional brochures of the examined car models, images explicating emphasizing "earth friendly" are surprisingly peripheral in the analyzed auto-ads. The only exception is one featuring BMW 5 series, in which the car's hybrid engine system and energy efficiency are extensively

illustrated via a series of animated presentations (Fig. 7). Yet, even this auto-ad does not challenge the ideological separation between nature and human society. Similar to many green auto-ads examined in previous research (e.g. Budinsky and Bryant, 2013; Li, 2013; Gunster, 2005, 2007), the taken-for-granted assumption of this BMW commercial defines driving as a necessity and avoids any explicit discussion on the environmental impacts of the automobile industry. More importantly, the "green solution" indicated by this ad proposes a market-based and technology-based solution, shifting ecological responsibility from governments and corporations to individual consumers. Therefore, while acknowledging the green efforts made by the automobile industry, we shall remain cautious regarding such environmental claims since they essentially depoliticize environmental discussions and sometimes even mislead consumers, as illustrated in Volkswagen's 2015 scandal of cheating in emissions tests.

Taken together, how private vehicle use is presented in the analyzed auto-ads and what goals, values, and priorities have been advanced by their attractive visual clusters of nature? The above analysis of common themes and discursive tactics in the empirical material demonstrates that automobile brands in China make substantial use of environmental elements as part of their overall promotional strategies. On the surface level these auto-ads tend to construct a harmony between human and nature, with automobiles being the technological intermediary to fulfill consumers' utopian dream. Nevertheless, on the fundamental level this meta-narrative indicates an ideological separation between human society and nature, with nature being consistently defined as a valuable commodity for human consumption or an added value for the driving experience. In contrast to vehicle exhaust's significant impact on air quality, no tension at all between environmentalism and driving is suggested in the empirical material.

Viewing from the perspective of environmental political economy, it becomes evident why the ideological separation between human and nature embedded in the analyzed auto-ads is problematic: such separation still takes the human domination over nature as granted and regards the environment as an externality. Endless economic growth based on excessive exploitations of natural resources is the central factor behind contemporary ecological crises, and to a large

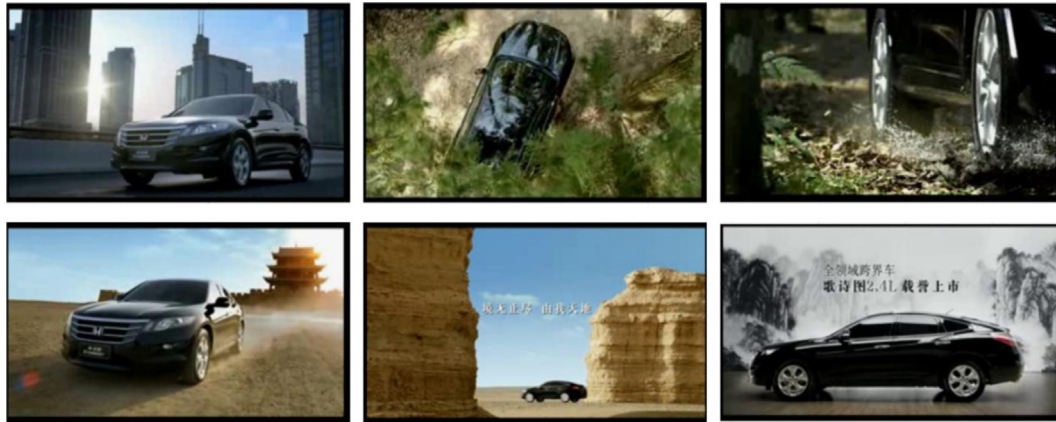


Fig. 6. Honda crosstour.

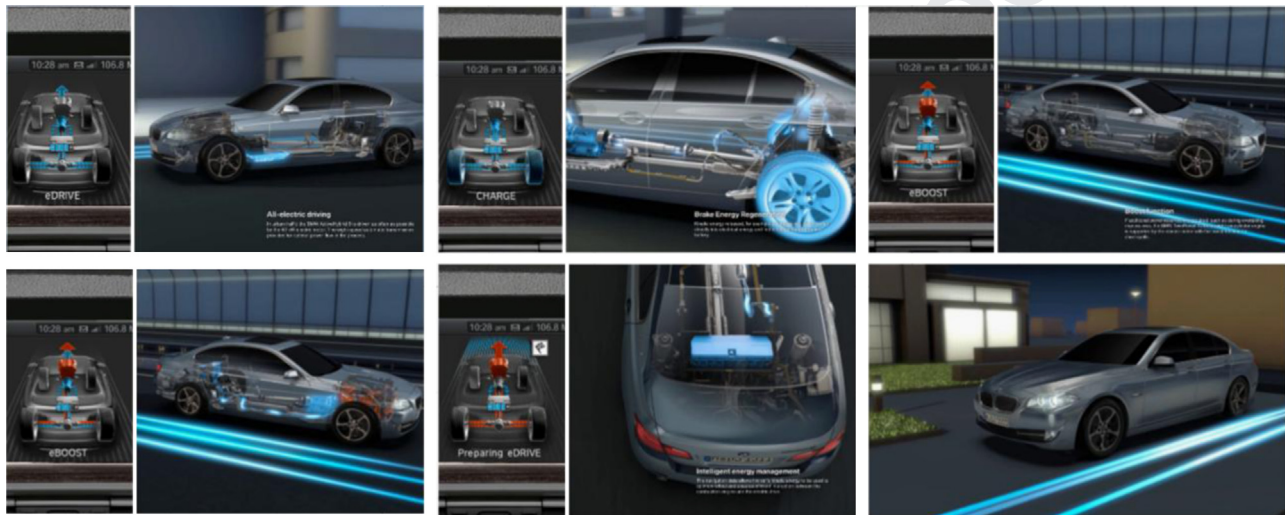


Fig. 7. BMW 5 series.

extent this system legitimized through the marginalization of nature as capital for human domination (Dryzek, 2013). As Lakoff (2010) argues, the very concept of the “environment” as separate from and around us fails to recognize the fundamental fact that we are not separate from nature. In many respects, the progressive moral system advocated by environmentalism requires us to move beyond the binary construction of human versus nature; yet the analyzed auto-ads show how the binary construction is reinforced by discourses embedded in our everyday encounters.

Noticeably, all the analyzed auto-ads are addressing the needs of individuals, with no mention of how corporate practices and government regulations would respond to the collective environmental problems in China. Although such omission can be attributed to the genre features of advertising discourse, the prominence of individualist expressions here is still indicative of how public “consensus” on consumerism is discursively constructed. The ideological power of discourses lies in the cognitive boundaries they set for our social imaginations. In the current case, the promotion of individualist desires not only legitimizes excessive private consumption and but also encourages us to prefer individual interests to collective ones, which further reinforces the neoliberal notions of “freedom” and “independence” (Budinsky and Bryant, 2013). It is the discourse of advertising that “systematically relegates discussion of key societal issues to the peripheries of the culture and talks in powerful ways instead of individual desire, fantasy, pleasure and comfort” (Jhally, 2000, p.5). The emphasis on individualist interests suggests a fundamental

contradiction of market fundamentalism: the benefit offered by technological innovation is often offset by the endless pursuit of material consumption growth and as a result, market-based environmental actions often fail to constrain the overall rate of natural resource depletion and the process of climate change (Foster, 2010). Meanwhile, individualized solutions for environmental problems can be also criticized for their “distraction effect” that constantly shifts the responsibility of environmental protection away from corporations and government regulations.

6. Concluding remarks

In the late 1970s, Dallas Smythe, a founding figure in the political economy of communication, went to China to study the country's technology and path of development. After witnessing China's mindset to “catch up with the West” by aggressively embracing Western technologies and consumer goods, Smythe (1994) asked a provocative question in his research report: “After bicycles, what”? In essence, Smythe was questioning the fundamental developmental path of China and the viability of China's search for a genuine alternative to Western modernity (Zhao, 2007). As time moves on, Smythe's concern has gained new relevance in contemporary China. Today, automobiles fill up China's streets and the country, once celebrated as the “kingdom of bicycles,” has become the biggest growing market for private vehicles. Nevertheless, excessive automobile consumption is not an ecologically sustainable option for heavy populated China.

The discourse of advertising is crucial for maintaining the neoliberal agenda advanced by global capitalism. Through the tireless promotion of individualism, greed, and material consumption, advertising discourses have effectively undermined the urgency of social issues, especially those related to the environment. As shown in the current research, the discourses of auto-ads in China fits clearly into the broader social processes of neoliberalism, the ubiquitous doctrine underlying today's global economy (Harvey, 2014). Rather than calling for collective efforts against our deteriorating environment, these auto-ads promote the consumption of "utopian nature" through private car ownership. The consistent ideological separation between human society and nature found in the analyzed auto-ads reflects the dominance of anthropocentric values that constructs nature as either material or symbolic resource for human consumption. This separation also presents a major barrier for any climate solution that requires collective actions. Overall, the findings of this study speaks to the irony of using pristine images depicting "pure nature" to advocate the use of a product that consumes excessive amounts of natural resources to manufacture and emits high levels of pollutants.

Unfortunately, the meta-narratives celebrating driving and mobility have further integrated with our daily lives along with the prevalence of new media platforms, which deserves further research attention from interested scholars. Admittedly, it is difficult to imagine a society without automobiles in contemporary societies. Yet, with the adoption of a range of small-scale and relatively inexpensive policies, it is still possible to achieve a remarkable and sustainable reduction in traffic levels, which then could bring about safer streets, happier people, and most importantly, a cleaner environment (Sloman, 2006). The true "green revolution" of the automobile industry, is yet to be started. It is imperative for us to continue the confrontation with green consumerism discourse that is detrimental to a sustainable future.

Q6 Uncited references

Freund and Martin, 1993; Goldstein and Lewis, 1983; Hall, 1997.

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