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EAST ASIAN STUDIES

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**Visualizations of Chinese Nation Branding:
A Comparative Study of the 2008 and 2022
Beijing Olympic Games Opening Ceremonies**

NO. 139

WORKING PAPERS

**WORKING PAPERS
ON EAST ASIAN STUDIES**

JULY 2024

UNIVERSITÄT
DUISBURG
ESSEN

Offen im Denken

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ISSN: 1865-8571 (Printed version) / 1865-858X (Internet version)

Download: https://www.uni-due.de/in-east/news/green_series.php

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Visualizations of Chinese Nation Branding: A Comparative Study of the 2008 and 2022 Beijing Olympic Games Opening Ceremonies

WORKING PAPERS ON EAST ASIAN STUDIES, NO. 139, DUISBURG 2024

Abstract

As Beijing became the first city in history to successfully host both Summer and Winter Olympic Games, this paper looks into the different visualizations of the two Olympics opening ceremonies in 2008 and 2022. By incorporating the concept of Nation Branding, it features a comparative case study to discuss how China has understood and branded the country through detailed and well-rehearsed artistic presentations in these events. The case study mainly focuses on three layers: role conception, role perception / the formation of brands, and finally the presentation of strategically designed brands. Each layer of comparison answers a specific question, and their combination in turn answers how the difference in artistic presentation may connect with the shifting Chinese nation branding strategies. The result of this paper suggests that the presentations in 2008 and 2022 Olympics opening ceremonies, as the focus shifted from "country and heroism" to "people and togetherness," generally stood in line with the nation branding strategies performed by the Chinese government throughout this 14-year span.

INTRODUCTION

The 2022 Winter Olympic Games left us with a noteworthy mark, as Beijing became the first city ever that successfully hosted both Summer and Winter Olympic Games. Many people set their eyes on the new opening ceremony of the 2022 Winter Olympic Games, since the “four-hour opening spectacle” (Buckley 2022) from the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympic Games has always been regarded as a masterpiece in the history of Olympics. Did the 2022 opening ceremony deliver? Answers to such satisfaction-related and subjective questions may vary from person to person. But besides satisfaction rates, there is another great aspect within the comparison between two Olympic opening ceremonies that can and should be observed: the different messages and images being delivered.

Nation branding therefore comes into play, a concept that perfectly symbolizes these so-called “messages and images” in the eyes of political scientists and IR theorists. One may argue that the two opening ceremonies represent two well-rehearsed campaigns with huge global audiences, while China, as the narrator or storyteller, may purposefully deliver country’s desired “messages and images” to these targeted audiences. Meanwhile, China’s transition of global status from a “rising power” in 2008 to a “risen power” in 2022 should also be taken in-

to account along with the discussions of these “messages and images.”

This paper aims to conduct an empirical comparative case featuring the two Beijing Olympic opening ceremonies. It experiments with and questions whether the study of artistic presentations may be understood as a useful medium to help better explain features within nation branding. The paper is separated into two main parts: first a brief overview to introduce certain features of nation branding and its visualizations, followed by a detailed comparative case study featuring the two opening ceremonies of 2008 Beijing Summer Olympic Games and 2022 Beijing Winter Olympic Games. This comparative case study is designed to help investigate artistic presentations and nation branding within specific contexts. There are two main research questions for this paper: How do the 2008 and 2022 Beijing Olympic opening ceremonies differ in artistic presentations? And how does such difference in artistic presentation connect with the shifting Chinese nation branding strategies? Meanwhile before the case study starts, there is a general hypothesis for this research: the different nation brands for China to be promoted in 2008 and 2022 result in the different contents to be presented, as well as the different messages to be delivered through the two Olympic opening ceremonies.

NATION BRANDING AND VISUALIZATIONS

The concept of nation branding is a relatively modern concept that builds upon national role theory, which has been relevant in the fields of International Relations and Political Science since its introduction in 1970. Introduced by Kalevi Holsti, the theory constructed “a typology of national roles that is richer in detail and more sensitive to distinctions in actual diplomatic behavior.” Holsti claimed that foreign policy deci-

sions and actions derive primarily from policymakers’ role conceptions, domestic needs and demands, and critical events or trends in the external environment (Holsti 1970: 243). And as Cameron Thies suggested, a crucial part of the explanatory value of national role theory “derives from its own middle range theories as well as harnessing its concepts to other theoretical approaches” (Thies 2010: 3). The challenge to de-

finitively conceptualize nation branding has always been present. As most people should subconsciously speculate, the concepts of “brands” and “branding” originated from business practices. It was only in the 1990s when these two terms started to have political, cultural, and sociological implications beyond the commercial ones with the emergence of nation branding. One of the earliest attempts to conceptualize nation branding came from Simon Anholt, as he described the term “nation brand” as an effort to measure and increase a country’s reputation by focusing on distinct characteristics (Anholt 1998). The approaches to this concept were later re-polished in the 21st century, as Keith Dinnie divided its definition into two “camps”: “definitions that focus upon the visual manifestation of a brand” and “deeper definitions that go beyond the visual aspects of a brand and attempt to capture the essence of a brand,” understanding nation branding as “the unique, multi-dimensional blend of elements that provide the nation with culturally grounded differentiation and relevance for all of its target audiences” (Dinnie 2008: 14–15). Meanwhile, Nadia Kaneva envisioned nation branding as “a component of national policy” and “a compendium of discourses and practices aimed at reconstituting nationhood through

marketing and branding paradigms” (Kaneva 2011: 118). Carolin Viktorin et al. formulated a more precise definition more recently, suggesting that “nation branding represents a deliberate, collective effort by multiple constituencies to generate a viable representation of a geographical-political-economic-social entity” (Viktorin, Gienow-Hecht, Estner and Will 2018: 1).

In essence, this paper will stick to the last definition of nation branding as this concept should often be brought up in the remaining sections. Interestingly, the wordings of “deliberate, collective effort” may also be understood as how nation brands are delivered through various forms of presentations. For example as Bolin and Ståhlberg (2010) believe, branding in addition to mass media adopts the media of public relations and advertising such as billboard advertising, commercials and event marketing. These marketing strategies all involve heavily on the different modes of presentation, while artistic presentation is an indispensable part in mega-events such as Olympic opening ceremonies. Also similarly as Dinnie (2008) emphasizes, artistic presentation and its visualizations may enrich the visual perspective of nation brands, and may efficiently be accessible to the mass public.

COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY: BEIJING AND THE OLYMPIC OPENING CEREMONIES

Accounting the introduction above, it may be argued that accessing from a country’s self-representation and international image, its presentation in various forms may be understood as the targeted storytelling of its own image-making process. There have been related case studies in the past that discussed specific nation branding strategies through practices of discourse analysis (Lebedenko 2008; Akutsu 2008; Kaneva and Popescu 2013; Knott, Fyall and Jones 2015; Surowiec, 2016), but rarely did they connect nation branding with specific artistic presentations. This research therefore aims to fill this gap, try-

ing to investigate the potential connections of these two concepts through empirical evidence.

The two cases to be analyzed in comparison are the opening ceremonies of 2008 Beijing Summer Olympic Games¹ and 2022 Beijing Winter Olympic Games². It can be argued that the two

1 Full video available online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bufV3EgyPGU&ab_channel=Olympics

2 Full video available online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NUs0iL5QOVI&ab_channel=Olympics

ceremonies represent two different stories told by the production team during two different time periods through artistic presentation. The two ceremonies share a few basic similarities that are crucial for this comparative study: they were both Olympic opening ceremonies directed by the same director (Yimou Zhang) and held in the same venue (The Chinese National Stadium, also known as the Bird's Nest). One may thus assume that the difference in artistic presentations between these two ceremonies, or so to speak the difference in the messages being conveyed, should predominantly result from the shift of China's self-representation and nation branding strategies as the host country in the 14-year span. A few researches, assuming with similar intentions, have linked the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics Opening Ceremony with Chinese political agendas, exploring the visual politics of the 2008 opening ceremony and how it reinvented Chinese tradition to serve contemporary political objectives. For example, Roche (2010) analyzed the multiple layers of meaning conveyed through the 2008 opening ceremony and its role in Chinese nation building. And approaching from the different angle of soft power, Chen (2009) discussed how the opening ceremony was a performance of politics that specifically aimed at enhancing China's soft power on the global stage. Two Korean researchers, Lee and Yoon (2017), also performed a similar comparative analysis based on the 2008 Beijing Olympics and 2012 London Olympics. They concluded that the Beijing opening ceremony represented the Sinocentric Chinese new nationalism, whereas the London opening ceremony highlighted civic-based multicultural nationalism.

The comparison analysis contains a mixture of discourse and content analysis. It aims to look into specific details that were embedded in the artistic presentations throughout the opening ceremonies (Brownell 2009; Chen 2009; Garcia 2012 and Lee 2017). It will mainly be separated into three parts, and three questions are asked respectively towards each section of analysis as

they form the basis of the comparison between these two opening ceremonies: 1) How did China as the Olympic host country understand its national roles in 2008 and 2022? 2) How did the director and his team picture China's nation brands to be promoted in these two opening ceremonies? 3) How did the director and his team execute the nation branding through storytelling and artistic presentation? After these three questions are answered, the previous research question and general hypothesis will then be revisited.

PART 1: ROLE CONCEPTION OF THE NARRATOR'S SELF

In order to compare the difference of role conception between 2008 and 2022 Olympic opening ceremonies, one should first examine the potentially different national roles of China around these two time points. The Chinese national roles may be viewed from two perspectives in this regard. One focuses on the Chinese role conception as a nation state in 2008 and 2022, while the other adds in the context of the Olympic Games, aiming to discuss whether or how differently China is positioned as the host country for these two global events.

Two names may hypothetically summarize how China's national role has transformed over the span of these 14 years: from "rising power" in 2008 to "risen power" in 2022. This specific or somehow similar phrasing appears in multiple publications³, and unsurprisingly more often in

3 For example, Jeffrey Legro (2007), "What China Will Want: The Future Intentions of a Rising Power", *Perspective on Politics*, 5(3); Thomas Christensen (2015), *The China Challenge: Shaping the Choices of a Rising Power*, W.W. Norton & Company; Ashley Smith (2019), "China's Rise as a World Power", *International Socialist Review*, Issue 112: Interviews; Shaun Breslin (2021), "China Risen?: Studying Chinese Global Power", *Policy Press Scholarship Online*.

media reports⁴ in the past decade. The difference in adjectives captures how China has been successfully transforming from a developing powerhouse to a widely-acknowledged giant. As the headline for the pre-Winter Olympics NBC News report (Smith and Jett 2022) pointed out, “the country hosting the 2022 Winter Games is no longer rising; China has risen, confident in its place in the world as an economic and political power.”

Such acknowledgement may be supported by numbers from multiple perspectives. For example according to the World Bank data, China’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) grew from 4.59 trillion dollars in 2008 to 14.72 trillion dollars in 2020.⁵ After hitting the accomplishment to have tripled its national GDP over these twelve years, China has become the world’s undisputed second largest economy after the United States. From China’s domestic point of view, the country’s national images have also gradually been evolving according to its own research. For instance, the *China International Image Global Survey* published by the Academy of Contemporary China and World Studies may clearly outline how China’s roles and images have been transforming at the global level. Although this annual survey was first introduced in 2012 and ceased updating in 2020 due to the global pandemic, its analyses and conclusions should still serve as strong evidence between this period of time. In the 2013 survey, the final conclusion stated that “China’s national image is by and large the

same as in previous years.”⁶ To be more specific, people around the world have little knowledge of the Chinese politics and lack common understandings of the Chinese model, therefore it is believed that “there is a big gap in the perceptions between Chinese and international respondents.” But the latest survey published in 2019 showcased something completely different,⁷ as the first conclusion pointed out that China’s overall image favorability has been continuing to rise at the global level. Besides, it was concluded that people overseas expect China’s international status and global influence to grow continuously in the near future. The 2019 survey also noted that China serves as the second most influential country in international affairs, which unsurprisingly coincides with its position as the second largest economy worldwide.

Survey results in the west also confirm such acknowledgment towards Chinese national image from another perspective. A report published by the PEW Research Center in 2008 concluded that “the Chinese people tend to believe their country is admired around the world, but in reality many people in other countries voice serious concerns about China” (PEW Global Attitudes Project 2008: 12). Considering specifically the economic development, the report stated that majorities applauded China’s economic prowess, but publics in the United States and most of Europe found China’s growing economic worrisome. In a later report published in 2015, PEW confirmed that majorities or pluralities in 27 of 40 countries surveyed believed that China “either will eventually replace or already has replaced the US as the world’s leading superpower” (Wike, Stokes and Poushter 2015: 26). Survey in this report also found the overall ratings for Chinese global image mostly positive, in which a global median of 55 % express a favorable view of China

4 For example, Ana Nicolaci da Costa (2018), “How the World is Grappling with China’s Rising Power”, *BBC News*, 26 October 2018; Tasha Wibawa (2019), “Could China’s Rise to Power Really be ‘Peaceful’ and Different to Anything We’ve ever Seen Before?”, *ABC News*, 14 June 2019; Saphora Smith and Jennifer Jett (2022), “Beijing Olympics Then and Now: Why the 2008 and 2022 Games Feel Worlds Apart”, *NBC News*, 3 February 2022.

5 Data acquired from World Bank National Accounts Data and OECD National Accounts data files, available online at <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?end=2020&locations=CN&start=2008&view=chart>

6 Full survey available online: <http://www.accws.org.cn/achievement/201402/P020140226152233649792.pdf>

7 Full survey in Chinese available online: <http://www.accws.org.cn/achievement/202009/P020200915609025580537.pdf>, author’s own translation.

(Wike, Stokes and Poushter 2015: 8). In 2022, clearer transitions may be witnessed. The latest report from the same institution confirmed that “the sense that China’s power and influence on the world stage is growing is both widespread and long-held,” while the 2022 survey captured a median of 66% across 19 countries say that China’s influence in the world has recently been getting stronger (Silver, Huang and Clancy 2022). The increase in favorable attitudes worldwide over these 14-year span solidifies the acknowledgment towards China’s evolving image. Therefore considering the transformation of both China’s own role conception and other countries’ role perception towards China from 2008 to 2022, the progress from “rising” to “risen” may be seen as accurate generalization.

Besides numbers and surveys, China’s different paths to secure the host country positions for 2008 Summer Olympic Games and 2022 Winter Olympic Games may also provide insights to the comparison of the country’s image at these two time points. The bidding process for every Olympic Games is always different and remains an interesting topic to be observed. China indeed, although being able to host two Olympic Games in 14 years, also has went through two completely different routes in terms of bidding for the hosting position. The bids for the 2008 Summer Olympics witnessed a fierce competition among 10 countries/cities. Among the 5 shortlisted countries reaching the final voting session, Japan (Osaka), Canada (Toronto) and France (Paris) were all competitive candidates that had multiple hosting experiences for Olympic Games, while only China (Beijing) and Turkey (Istanbul) had never been voted as the final winner. China eventually secured most votes in the final voting session to many people’s surprise, as the country’s key strengths are “strong public support, guarantees of construction of venues, and strong government support” (International Olympic Committee 2000). The bids for the 2022 Winter Olympics, however, told a drastically different story. Among the 6 countries/cities submitting initial bids, only China (Beijing) and Ka-

zakhstan (Almaty) had not withdrawn their bids ahead of the final selection. A number of strong competitors capable of hosting winter sport events including Sweden (Stockholm), Norway (Oslo), Ukraine (Lviv) and Poland (Krakow) all failed to complete their final bidding due to the high costs of hosting Olympic Games or the lack of local support (Abend 2014). Thomas Bach, the president of the International Olympic Committee responded to these many withdrawals of bids one year before the final selection in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in 2015. According to Bach, “the number of candidates for winter is already very limited by geography; also we cannot forget that this is a challenging time with regard to the world economy” (Wade 2021). China’s final bidding speech presented by Lan Yang also focused on the country’s economic prowess and ability to fulfill the country’s commitment made during the bidding process, which showcased China’s already built-up confidence resulted from its risen power over the years. Such confidence was later proved to be essential after China’s victory, as Bach confirmed that “we know China will definitely deliver on its promises” (Wade 2021).

Back to the question for this part of analysis: How did China as the Olympic host country understand its national roles in 2008 and 2022? The answer should start from China’s transformation from a “rising power” in 2008 to an acknowledged “risen power” in 2022 on the global stage. However, there is one significant point that should not be overlooked when China’s perspective as an Olympic host country is integrated: the confidence. It is worth noting that a country’s national role and role conception are not necessarily always in line (Holsti 1970; Walker 1987). But China’s acknowledged roles and its own role conception coincide with each other along the bidding process for both 2008 and 2022 Olympic Games in this specific case. Moreover, China has been appearing to be a more confident narrator to embrace its own role transition from a “rising power” to a “risen power,” which is a worthy note that will be revisited in the next two parts of this comparative analysis.

PART 2: OUTLINING THE BRAND FROM THE ROLE PERCEPTION PERSPECTIVE

The second part in this comparative case study features the crucial linkage between role conception and the formation of brands. As brands may only be established with the basis of role conceptions, an indispensable step within nation branding strategies is to outline the brand to be promoted based on these conceptions (Dinnie 2008: 15). The transition from roles to brands also features a transition from abstract conceptions to actions to be initiated, which involves heavily on “thinking” in this regard.

Considering the specific case of the comparison between 2008 and 2022 Olympics opening ceremonies, it is necessary to figure out how the production team picture China’s distinctive role conceptions into brands before the two events. One of the key sources to be analyzed here is an interview with the general director Yimou Zhang of both 2008 and 2022 Olympics opening ceremonies (Xinhua News Agency 2022). The interview was completed before, while its video⁸ was published online by the Xinhua News Agency immediately after the Winter Olympics opening ceremony finished on 4th February, 2022. In this short interview, the general director elaborates on how he and his team understood and approached the 2008 and 2022 Olympics opening ceremonies with different mindsets:

We did not plan to talk about the “five thousand years” as in the past, or our splendid history and traditional culture. Indeed in 2008 there was a very strong desire to do so. That is to say, we have a lot of backgrounds that we want everybody to know. Please look at our family, look at us, right. In the meantime, we also have such strong desires to introduce ourselves to the world by opening the door. But it is different this time. I believe that China’s international status

nowadays [is strong] on the global stage. Everyone knows what China looks like. In fact, we need to open our broad mind and tell everyone that we are always together. We are actually expressing ourselves. So as the focus of the whole opening ceremonies turns from “I” to “We,” that is a giant leap from my point of view. [The leap] should not merely be judged by several exciting programs, or either the show is good or bad in the eyes of specific audiences. The predominant idea, “We,” indeed expresses the Chinese people’s world-view.⁹ (Xinhua News Agency 2022: 0’07–1’16)

The general director used some noteworthy wordings and phrasings while expressing how he and his team understood the ideological difference before organizing these two opening ceremonies. A more detailed comparison is listed in the following table:

Table 1: General Director’s interpretations

2008 Summer Olympics	2022 Winter Olympics
Strong desires to show the unique Chinese traditional cultures	Emphasis on showing the “broad mind” of China
Attract the world with historical fascinations and accumulations	Most people should be aware of China’s global status
“Come and look at us”	“Welcome everyone in”
“I”	“WE”

The transformation of the main idea from “I” to “We” was again brought up by the general director during the online press conference on 5th February 2022. While being asked to recapitulate the difference between the 2008 and 2022 Olympics opening ceremonies in three words, the general director answered that the 2022 opening ceremony is “warmer, calmer and simpler” (Sun and Tao 2022). Instead of focusing on cultural prides and stunning visuals through the 2008 Summer Olympics opening ceremony, the 2022 Winter Olympics opening ceremony aimed to strengthen the humanitarian perspective

8 Full video available online: http://www.news.cn/2022-02/04/c_1128330981.htm

9 Original interview in Chinese, author’s own translations.

from the very beginning. As the quote from the general director indicates, even the quality of individual programs is not of utmost importance anymore, whereas the general idea to express Chinese people's worldview tends to have higher value. In other words, the transformation from "I" to "We" is not merely a change of general idea, but it also represents China's shifting interests in the promotion of nation brands.

An interesting observation may put the shifting brands from "I" to "We" embraced by the production team in line with the decision-making process of the Chinese government. The 14-year span between the two Beijing Olympic Games witnesses a crucial point in Chinese foreign policies: the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) introduced in 2014. Ever since the introduction of BRI, wordings such as "joint" and "jointly" have been appearing more frequently in speeches and publications around Chinese foreign policies. For example in 2017, Chinese President Xi Jinping stated: "in the face of both opportunities and challenges of economic globalization, the right thing to do is to seize every opportunity, jointly meet challenges and chart the right course for economic globalization" (Xinhua News Agency 2017). And in the keynote at the opening ceremony of the BRICS Business Forum in 2022, President Xi even used the word "jointly" in every main statement: 1) First, we should embrace solidarity and coordination and jointly maintain world peace and stability; 2) Second, we should reach out to each other and jointly promote sustainable global development; 3) Third, we should tide over difficulties together and jointly pursue win-win cooperation; 4) Fourth, we should be inclusive and jointly expand openness and integration (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2022). Besides, "Community with a Shared Future of Mankind" is also a concept frequently cited by President Xi (Gao 2017). The exact phrase was even included in the preamble of the Constitution of China when it was amended in 2018. Similar as the wording of "joint," the concept of "Community with a Shared Future of Mankind" also evidently implies the general sense of co-

operation, union, and togetherness. Therefore, it may be argued that the brand embracing the importance of "We" and "togetherness" conveyed by the general director Yimou Zhang before 2022 Beijing Winter Olympic Games clearly mimics the nation brand of China in the same time period. How the production team understood and interpreted the brands directly reflects China's desired brands to be promoted along with the opening ceremony.

Again back to the question: How did the director and his team picture China's nation brands to be promoted in these two opening ceremonies? The shift from "I" to "We" that stands with China's nation brands is a crucial part of the answer. Besides, the director and his team tried to emphasize on showing the "broad mind" of China in the 2022 Olympics opening ceremony, which was hardly brought up in 2008. One may hence speculate that a huge motivation behind the shift of nation brands was in fact China's confidence, as the transition of role conception from "rising power" to "risen power" creates the base for the shifting emphasis of nation brands from "I" to "We." The general director's quote may also be seen as supportive for such speculation, as the confidence of believing in China's global status is a constructive factor for his team in the process of building up nation brands.

PART 3: PRESENTING THE ROLES AND PROMOTING THE BRANDS

The final part of this comparative analysis deals with the presentation of brands. Specifically towards the cases of 2008 and 2022 Olympics opening ceremonies, the presentation of brands is mostly displayed through artistic presentations. It is worth noting that other forms of presentation, for example media promotions and celebrity influences, should also have contributed to the presentation of these opening ceremonies as a whole. But considering the difficulties to measure and compare these various forms of presentation, this part of analysis will solely discuss the artistic ones.

To provide some visualized supports to the comparison, this part of analysis will focus on two indispensable sections for any Olympics opening ceremonies: the entry of national flag and the lighting of the Olympic Cauldron. First, the entry of national flag is a crucial section in the early showing of the Olympics opening ceremony. After carefully examining the respective sections of the two ceremonies in 2008 and 2022, one may end up with these noteworthy observations:

Table 2: The entry of national flag in 2008 and 2022 opening ceremonies

	2008 Summer Olympics ¹⁰	2022 Winter Olympics ¹¹
Entry	Kids hold the flag and walk to the flagpole	People stand still and pass the flag towards the flagpole
Participants	Kids from 56 ethnic groups in China	Ordinary people with various nationalities and professions
Background Music	<i>Ode to the Motherland</i>	<i>My People, My Country</i>

The key difference of how the Chinese national flag enters the stadium and reaches the flagpole is the selection of participants. The flag was in the hands of 56 Chinese kids respectively from the 56 ethnic groups in 2008, whereas it was passed towards the flagpole by people with various nationalities and professions in 2022. It may therefore be argued that the arrangement corresponds with the transition of promoting distinctive brands from “I” to “We”. Meanwhile, a noteworthy detail – the background music accompanying the entry of national flag – indeed supports this argument. Both the 2008 and 2022 opening ceremonies have selected well-known Chinese folk songs for this section, but the two songs (*Ode to the Motherland* for 2008 and *My People, My Country* for 2022) tend to have different implications. The titles and lyrics (translations see Table 3) of these two songs once more suggest the general transition from a country-oriented brand and pride-oriented tone to a

10 Olympics (2019): 18'05–20'29.

11 Olympics (2022): 12'37–15'42.

people-oriented brand and humanitarian-oriented tone to be promoted through these two events.

Table 3: Lyrics of the two songs (Author's own translation)

<i>Ode to the Motherland</i>
The five-starred red flag is fluttering in the wind, How loud and clear the victory song is. Singing our beloved motherland, Heading towards prosperity and strength from now on. We are diligent, we are brave, Independence and freedom are our ideals. We have overcome so much sufferings, To achieve today's liberation.
<i>My People, My Country</i>
My motherland and I cannot be separated for even a moment. No matter where I go, there is always a song of praise. I sing of every mountain, I sing of every river. Of the curling smoke from kitchen chimneys, the small villages, and the tracks along the road. My dearest motherland, I am forever close to your heart. You speak to me with the pulse of a mother.

Similar to the entry of national flag in the beginnings, the process of the Olympic flame cauldron being lighted by the end of the ceremony is always a highlight for Olympic opening ceremonies. In this respect, Table 4 lists some points of contrast between the respective sections of the two ceremonies:

Table 4: The lighting of the Olympic cauldron in 2008 and 2022 opening ceremonies

	2008 Summer Olympics ¹²	2022 Winter Olympics ¹³
Final torch-bearer(s)	Ning Li	Dilnigar Ilhamjan and Jiawen Zhao
Lighting the cauldron	Torchbearer runs horizontally along the walls of the stadium through to the Olympic cauldron	Torchbearers place the torch carrying Olympic flame in the center of the “snowflake” engraved with the names of all 91 participating countries
Approximate total time	4 minutes 20 seconds	1 minute 50 seconds

12 Olympics (2019): 4h 09'33–4h 13'56.

13 Olympics (2022): 2h 17'56–2h 19'51.

Similar to the entry of nation flag, the drastic difference in terms of how the Olympic cauldron is lighted should also result from the promotion of different brands to be promoted along the opening ceremonies. The arrangement in 2008 implied a tone of “heroism,” as the three-time Olympic gold medalist Ning Li, who has always been widely acknowledged as a Chinese national hero, wandered along the walls of the stadium in an epic fashion. Starting from the moment Li’s torch was lighted, the whole cauldron-lighting process took more than 4 minutes to create stunning visuals at the end of the opening ceremony. In contrast, the director and his team approached this section with a completely different perspective in 2022. The two final torchbearers were by no means comparable with Ning Li in terms of achievements or fame, whereas the final lighting was more about the overall set-up rather than about the torchbearers. At the moment when the torch was put down to replace the traditional cauldron, the visual focus was in-

deed not the torchbearers. The more catchy visualization turned out to be the giant “snowflake” surrounding the two torchbearers, engraved with the names of all 91 participating countries. The variation of such visual focus creates a transition of ideology from “heroism” to “togetherness,” which stands in line with the aforementioned transition of brands from “I” to “We.”

It is therefore time to answer the third question: How did the director and his team execute the nation branding through storytelling and artistic presentation? Examples from the two cases show that the 2008 opening ceremony emphasized more on presenting China as the hosting country at the center of display, whereas the 2022 opening ceremony went through a different path to focus on the sense of togetherness. The showcase of individual heroism was significantly cut down in the 2022 opening ceremony, as the broader focus on people and all participating countries stated to shine.

CONCLUSION

The results are definitely rewarding, given this comparative case study goes through empirical evidence and provides insights in explaining nation branding processes through the lens of artistic presentations. It is time to bring up the initial hypothesis: the different nation brands for China to be promoted in 2008 and 2022 result in the different contents to be presented, as well as the different messages to be delivered through the two Olympics opening ceremonies. The comparative analysis throughout this research shows absolutely positive signs to the statement. The comparison between these two cases indicates two distinctive paths in terms of how different roles were understood, constructed and practiced, as well as how different brands were established and promoted:

As Table 5 summarizes some major observations from the comparative case study, it cre-

Table 5: Three facets to understand nation branding through the comparative case study

	2008 Summer Olympics	2022 Winter Olympics
Role Conceptions	Rising power	Well-acknowledged risen power with confidence
Ideas and Brands	Cultural pride and emphasis on “I”	Broad mind and emphasis on “We”
Presentation and Story-telling	Country and heroism	People and togetherness

ates a complete logic chain to understand the essence of nation branding, and in turn answers the two research questions: How does the 2008 and 2022 Beijing Olympic opening ceremonies differ in artistic presentations? And how does such difference in artistic presentation connect with the shifting Chinese nation branding strategies? As

the two opening ceremonies in 2008 and 2022 represent two well-rehearsed stories told by the production team during two time periods, they reflect how difference in storytelling may be reflected by the distinctive nation brands to be promoted. And arguably not a pure coincidence, such difference stood in line with the nation branding strategies performed by the Chinese government throughout this 14-year span based on the beforementioned details. Along with the presenting focus of the opening ceremonies shifted from "heroism" to "togetherness," China has been actively promoting the idea of "joint effort" and "common prosperity" at the international level.

The result of this paper should also provide certain insights for future studies. This comparative case study in general proves that the conception-brand-presentation mode of analysis (as Table 5 shows) should be considered as a viable option to examine both nation roles and nation branding strategies. As only two specific sessions in the 2008 and 2022 Beijing Olympic opening ceremonies are selected in the third section of the comparative case study, it should be interesting and worthwhile to see whether the same pattern may stand when more cases are selected for comparison.

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