CULTURAL MIRRORS: EU VS CHINA IN THE EU – CHINA TOURISM YEAR (2018)

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Abstract: At European level, 2018 was declared the EU-China Tourism Year. As part of this initiative, a series of events were planned, to bring together European and Chinese tourism operators or stakeholders, in an effort towards mutual understanding of needs and offers. This article focuses on online materials designed for tourism operators in Europe, and it takes a critical perspective on how such instructional/educational/promotional material envisages both European hospitality operators and Chinese tourists. I analyse the language, as well as the visuals featured on the official website of the programme (https://ecty2018.org/) and how they are used to create representations of cultural identities that are marketable, as well as questionable.

Keywords: EU-China Tourism Year, critical perspective, cultural identities, textual and visual promotional material.

Introduction

According to World Travel and Tourism Council, for the 8th consecutive year, in 2018, the travel and tourism sector's contribution to the world GDP "outpaced the global economy" (www.wttc.org). The same source lists the United States of America and China as the top two counties in which travel and tourism contributed the most to the national GDP, the five European countries that made it in top 10 (Germany, the United Kingdom, Italy, France and Spain), together, lagging behind the American or Chinese individual contribution.

2018 was declared the European Year of Cultural Heritage. In parallel, precisely because China is such a major player in world tourism, it was also the EU-China Tourism Year. Under this label, a series of events were designed and carried out, for the purpose of bringing together European and Chinese tourism businesses, or stakeholders, in an intended effort towards mutual understanding of needs and offers.

Undoubtedly, tourism is never just a business; apart from its contribution to a country's GDP and apart from its reliance on and interdependence with other sectors (transportation, agriculture and food processing, communications, constructions, furniture production, etc.), tourism dwells on the creation and perpetuation of identities, myths, stereotypes, and narratives. Touristic sights have economic value, as long as they can tell a story, as long as they capture cultural values and are part of a larger network of sites invested with symbolic capital. This symbolic capital has been tapped on in the ongoing project that designates two European capitals of culture, every year.

1. Aim of research and methodology

This article aims to analyse how European and Chinese identities are constructed in the textual and visual materials produced at EU level to promote and support actions under the EU-China Tourism Year, and which are available on the official website of the programme (https://ecty2018.org/ready-for-china/).

The theoretical model employed in our analysis relies on basic tenets of Critical Discourse Analysis. Developed by Norman Fairclough, Ruth Wodak, Teun D. van Dijk and Gunther Kress, among others, Critical Discourse Analysis starts from the presumption that the

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production and circulation of discourse, in all its forms and media, serve the interests of its originators, whose ideological positions, perspectives and values it purports. "The aim of a critical approach to discourse analysis is to help reveal some of these hidden and 'often out of sight' values, positions and perspectives. As Rogers (2004: 6) puts it, discourses 'are always socially, politically, racially and economically loaded'" (Paltridge 2013: 77). In a nutshell, discourse does not exist in a vacuum, and it is instrumental in the construction of social reality: "social and political issues are constructed and reflected in discourse; power relations are negotiated and performed through discourse; discourse both reflects and reproduces social relations; ideologies are produced and reflected in the use of discourse (Paltridge 2013: 78).

According to Wodak and Meyer, Critical Discourse Analysis "*is not interested in investigating a linguistic unit per se but in studying social phenomena which are necessarily complex and thus require a multi-disciplinary and multi-methodical approach*[1]" (Wodak Meyer 2009: 2). For the advocates of this sub-field of sociolingusitics, language is a vehicle that carries speakers' intentions and values, constructs personal, group and institutional identities, webs of coherence, and builds ideological agendas. In Fairclough's analyses from *Language and Power*, the ideology of neoliberalism works by a proliferation of passivizations and nominalizations – the authors of public texts thus avoiding the expression of agency and the undertaking of social responsibility. Similarly, in his analysis of educational discourse, Fairclough noted a tendency towards the marketization of discourse, i.e. towards the colonization of public institutions' discourse by the discourse of marketing (Fairclough .

Though CDA has had its critics for relying too much on the analyst's interpretation of a "text" (Cameron 2001, van Noppen 2004), its agenda remains of social relevance, as well as its applicability, as a method, outside of the field of sociolinguistics. I agree, however, with Cameron (2001), that exploring the actual interpretations of other text recipients, apart from the analyst, increases the relevance of potential findings and conclusions. That this article provides the interpretation of a single analyst is a limitation that I assume.

Data for this brief analysis come from the official website of the EU-China Tourism Year (https://ecty2018.org/). My corpus includes textual and visual representations; more precisely, I will analyse the *Meet the Chinese Travellers* brochure and the logo created for the EU-China Tourism year. My methodology will combine Critical Discourse Analysis with visual analysis, by relying on the guidelines for reading images (content analysis and social semiotics) laid out in Gillian Rose's book *Visual Methodologies. An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials.* In this by now classical book, Gillian Rose argues that we are caught in a 'vision machine' (Paul Virilio's term), in a world turned into a 'society of the spectacle' (Guy Debord's term). The visual is so pervasive in our social life that we can talk about the contemporary culture as a visual culture (Rose 2012: 4). In this context, institutions "mobilise specific forms of visuality to see, and to order, the world" (Rose 2012: 10), these forms (re)producing social relations, social difference and social power.

2. Origin and Goal of the EU-China Tourism Year

The EU-China Tourism Year originated in discussions carried out in July 2016 between the then President of the EU Commission (Jean Claude Junker) and the Chinese Prime Minister (Li Keqiang). The declared purpose of this initiative was to promote lesser known destinations, to improve travel and tourism experiences, to provide opportunities to increase economic cooperation, and to create an incentive to make quick progress on EU-China visa facilitation and air connectivity (https://ecty2018.org/). The discursive justification of the programme is that EU destinations are at the top of Chinese preferences yet tourists from China count for only 2% of incoming tourists in Europe. China has a growing

[1] Italics in the original.

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importance as an origin market; the changing preferences and behaviour patterns of Chinese visitors need, therefore, to be known, so that the untapped potential of the Chinese market could be fructified.

The agents involved in implementing this project were the European Commission's Directorate-General for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs (DG GROW), a steering Group made of DG GROW (European Commission), the EEAS (European External Action Service), the EU delegation in Beijing and ETC ("European Travel Commission" managing Visiteurope), as well as the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People's Republic of China. Within the framework of this programme, several types of events were designed, such as: high level political conferences, business summits, B2b matchmaking workshops for tourism operators, webinars, public events "attractive to Chinese visitors and investors", the EU-China literary festival, held in various locations in China, the light bridge (lighting canonical buildings and monuments across Europe in red, to raise awareness of the EU-China tourism year), the Eleven Fountains exhibition in Leeuwarden-Fryslân, the unveiling of Karl Marx sculpture made by Chinese artist in the city of Trier, Germany, the European Union film festival in China, the China Festival in Dusseldorf, and the closing ceremony, in November, 2018, etc.

3. Cultural representations

3.1. Visual representations

Beyond events and measurable outcomes, the EU-China Tourism Year engaged in a game of representations, carried out in documents and visual data available on the official website of the programme, such as market reports, practical tips on doing business in China, promotional materials, or legal information. In what follows, I will perform a micro-analysis of the visual identity elements designed to promote and identify the project. More precisely, I will focus on the logos below, which mirror each other, and which grant an equal weight to European and Chinese symbols.

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On the one hand, one can notice that the logos function by setting a standardized colour code: red for China, blue for Europe, in agreement with the colours on the national and European flag, respectively. Both the writing in English and in Chinese, respectively, as well as the sketchy outline of representative buildings from the two different cultural spaces, observe the colour of the flag. However, the curbed lines before and after "2018" reverse colours, thus emphasising, visually, the idea of cultural and information exchange that justifies the project.

The symmetry in the sketchy visual representation of iconic buildings from the two cultural spaces signifies both sameness and difference. The Oriental Pearl Tower is set against the (French) Eiffel Tower; the Memorial Archway is set against the (German) Brandenburg Gate; the Greater Wild Goose Pagoda is set against the outline of a (Dutch/Spanish) windmill, and the Temple of Heaven is set against the (Italian) Coliseum. Thus, this setting, one below the other, of schematic drawings of iconic European and Chinese buildings, that look similar,

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in their outline, and reversed, as if mirroring one another, points to the fact that in both cultures, there is similarity of structure; if there are any differences, they are at the level of form/appearances, and they are manageable.

The logo, therefore, conveys the message that the EU and China are spaces in which one can encounter familiarity rather than strangeness, and where one can feel at home. On the other hand, it somehow runs against objectives from the agenda of the EU-China Tourism Year, one of which is to market the "lesser known" Europe, by showing canonical images of Western, "hard-core" Europe. The selection of what represents "Europe" and what represents "China" implies both the working of an ideology and the establishment, or rather reinforcement, of a hierarchy which the "old Europe" continues to own the highest cultural capital.

3.2. Discursive representations

The site features an entry "Ready for China", under which the brochure *Meet the Chinese Traveller* is available for downloading. This brochure constructs a binary typology of the Chinese traveller: on the one hand, potential tourists are middle-class, package tour travellers, used to high-quality services, and travelling as a family; on the one hand, there is the category of the self-organised traveller who travels alone and is young. The contrastive series continues by arguing that the Chinese are "money-rich but time poor," therefore efficiency of services must be ensured. In addition, the Chinese are arguably interested in experiencing "otherness" but need some ground in "familiarity" (which should be provided by the wide availability of Chinese food). Another characteristic feature is that they are IT literate, so it is important to ensure their access to electronic services and facilities.

Europe is presented via reported perceptions, with both positive and negative aspects. Under "annoyances", the list contains "high prices", "lack of Chinese language information and material", "Chinese debit cards cannot be used", "need to pay for the use of toilets", "long queues at tourist attractions", and "shops close early." Under "delights", Europe seen through Chinese eyes is a place with "blue sky", with a "high level of cultural sophistication", with "clean, peaceful cities and beautiful landscapes", with "friendly, helpful people", "delicious and safe food", and "convenient public transport". The brochure does not specify on what sources it grounds its data and statements. It reiterates stereotypes of (implicitly) polluted China versus "clean" Europe, of the Chinese as picture-taking tourists, who can enjoy the European cuisine yet need Chinese food as well, and as superstitious persons, in whose presence numbers 4 and 44 should not be pronounced, as they are similar to the Chinese word for "death".

Since the Chinese are considered to hold the past in high esteem, Europe is also marketed as a depository of past vestiges - sites of world cultural heritage. Some events in the EU – China Tourism year were correlated with events organised in the two European Cultural Capitals from 2018 – Valetta (Malta) and Leeuwarden (the Netherlands), and videos are available on the official website of the programme, depicting Europe as both a map and a territory covered in historical buildings and monuments.

Europe is described as a hospitable place. Yet, when read against news that announced the opening of the EU-China Tourism Year in China, this idea of European hospitality could be taken with a pinch of salt. Daniel Meesak's article from the 16th of January 2018 mentions that as a consequence of the actions in the EU-China Tourism Year, "Chinese tourists may be able to expect a warmer welcome than usual" (https://jingtravel.com/how-the-eu-is-celebrating-its-china-tourism-year/) – which implies that hospitality has not necessarily been a rule. Hospitality, therefore, is a matter of performance, rather than a state of facts.

Similarly, performance of an open smile is recommended as a ritual, which will make Chinese travellers feel more at easy. For the same purpose, tourism operators interested

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in offering their services to the Chinese are highly recommended to perform, again, familiarity with the Chinese culture and language by learning some simple greetings and expressions provided on the website.

4. Conclusion

Tourism is a human activity based on cultural awareness, and which involves cultural learning. At the same time, tourism is increasingly more a form of public diplomacy, through which hosting countries advocate and advertise themselves as hospitable destinations, rich in amenities and with a varied cultural, historical or geographical heritage. As Peter van Ham noticed, place branding is now part of a larger discursive apparatus of soft power – defined by Joseph Nye as "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. . . . Soft power arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies." According to Nye (2004b, 6), quoted by the same author mentioned above, soft power should be considered a significant asset in influencing others, not by using "hard" military power, but by "the ability to attract," which goes beyond influence or persuasion (van Ham 2008: 127).

In the particular case of the EU-China year, the agenda to attract Chinese tourists to Europe, supported by statistical data and videos – some in English, others in Chinese – meant to showcase those sites that could be of interested to Chinese travellers, as well as to familiarise Chinese tourists with forms of travelling in Europe, complemented the other major agenda of 2018, namely to promote the European cultural heritage by declaring 2018 as the European Year of cultural heritage.

Tourism is a form of business, indeed, that leads to more business, but it is also part of a visual, multimodal culture in which perceptions are consolidated into stereotypes. To envision Chinese travellers as a source of revenue, welcome because they are “money-rich”, bypasses the possibility of genuine intercultural encounters and of actual intercultural learning.

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*** *Meet the Chinese Travellers*, https://ecty2018.org/meet-the-chinese-travellers-brochure/

https://ecty2018.org/

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