

# **The National Image of China and the Construction of a Profilic National Identity**

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## **Abstract**

The construction of national identity through the communication of a national image takes on external and internal representational forms according to the notions of soft power and national branding in play. When viewed through the conceptual lens of prolificity, however, the mechanisms involved in the construction of national identity under such conditions are revealed to be more complicated. The presentation of a national image is not simply a “monologue” to the international community, and the recursive influence this presentation has on national identity is not simply a reflection. This article explores national identity through the communication of a national image to the world, its recursive influence on citizens at home, and how the identity paradigm of prolificity can be applied to national identity to reveal otherwise hidden, peculiar mechanisms that occur within the construction of national identity in a globalized world. These peculiarities are particularly conspicuous in the case of the People’s Republic of China due to its ascension as a global power, demand for recognition from other powers on the international stage, and its ongoing campaigns to both “transmit” the national image of China abroad and rearticulate a contemporary national identity at home. As such, while the identity work of prolificity is performed in all national identities, Chinese national identity and the state’s attempts to fortify a positive national identity will be used as a case study to reveal certain mechanisms of a profilic identity in the construction of national identity.

## **Keywords**

prolificity, general peer, second-order observation, national image, nation branding

## Introduction

With the continual breakdown and re-stabilization of supranational organizations like the European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the influence of unpredictable national leaders, violent conflict over contested territory, and grassroots movements surrounding issues of identity, national identity remains an emotionally and politically effective topic. Ideas like national branding and soft power illuminate many of the ways in which national identity influences the behavior of both nations as member-states of the international community and citizens to the degree they have internalized a national identity. However, there remains much to be explored within the intersection of a nation's internal and external self-representations and the effect on national identity these representations cannot account for. This article addresses how the identity paradigm of prolificity, as described in Hans-Georg Moeller and Paul J. D'Ambrosio's book *You and Your Profile: Identity after Authenticity*, can be applied to national identity to reveal certain peculiarities found in the construction of national identity in a globalized world. These peculiarities are particularly conspicuous in the case of the People's Republic of China (PRC) due to its ascension as a global power, demand for recognition from other powers on the international stage, and the Communist Party of China's (CPC) ongoing campaigns to both "communicate" the national image of China abroad and rearticulate a contemporary national identity at home. As such, attempts by the CPC to fortify a positive national identity at home and abroad will be used as a case study to reveal how certain mechanisms of prolific identity operate in the construction of national identity. Terms like "nation," "identity," and even "Chinese-ness" are notoriously controversial, with as many definitions as there are people to define them. What is meant by "Chinese national identity" in the context of this article thus requires a brief explanation. Insofar as a nation can be said to have a subjective "identity" at all, metaphorically or otherwise (Ringmar 5), Chinese national identity will refer to the "identity" of the PRC as a member-state of the international community, specifically as it is articulated by the CPC through state-sponsored media, research institutions, etc. National identity in this sense can also be extended to citizens of the PRC to the degree that they have internalized this articulation of national identity. "Chinese national identity" as it is used here is thus narrow and will not refer to the "national character" or traits of China nor to a more general, international collective identity of Chinese people, but to the CPC's attempts to (re)articulate a national image at home and abroad. Furthermore, this article will not

address national identity campaigns such as the “The Core Values of Socialism” (社會主義核心價值觀 *shehuizhuyi hexin jiazhi guan*), which are intended to promote specific values domestically with very little energy spent “advertising” them abroad. It focuses instead on the CPC’s attempt to communicate a national image within the context of the international community and its recursive influence on national identity among citizens back home. As depicted in government releases and state media, the “communication of the national image of China” (中國國家形象傳播 *Zhongguo guojia xingxiang chuanbo*) has become a major ideological project oriented around building China’s soft power, intended to both influence public opinion in the international community as well as inform domestic national identity. Popular concepts like soft power and national branding take into account the bi-directional influence that a successfully constructed national image has on both the international community’s perception of that nation as well as its own citizens’ sense of pride, patriotism, or identity. Discourse surrounding the “communication of the national image of China” more explicitly refers to the soft power influence that the image of China has over the international community and how it can be developed. Thus, prior to discussing proficility as a paradigm for national identity, the external transmission of China’s national image will be explored in the following section.

### **National Branding, Soft Power, and the Communication of the National Image of China**

National branding and soft power share much in common regarding the ability of a nation to influence the opinion of governments or citizens internationally for the sake of economic, cultural, or political benefit. In *Branding the Nation*, Melissa Aronczyk notes that one of the goals of national branding is “to help the nation-state successfully compete for international capital in areas such as tourism, foreign direct investment, import-export trade, higher education, and skilled labor” (16). In a similar vein, Joseph S. Nye describes soft power as “the ability to shape the preferences of others,” “the ability to attract, [where] attraction often leads to acquiescence,” and “an attraction to shared values and the justness and duty of contributing to the achievement of those values” (*Soft Power* 5, 6, 7). While the soft power influence that a nation has over others is often more effectively generated through civil society rather than government-sponsored campaigns or state institutions, some governments are much more aggressive and explicit in their direct formulation and control of soft power. In the case of China, since the “reform

and opening-up” of the late 1980s, but particularly over the last two decades, the CPC’s commitment to various national branding campaigns has been indicative of its recognition of the importance of soft power for an ascendant nation. Even more recently, the externally-oriented soft power and branding campaigns designed to influence the opinion of the international community are frequently expressed with the phrase “communication of the national image of China.” In 1991, the State Council Information Office (SCIO) (國務院新聞辦公室 *Guowuyuan xinwen bangongshi*) was formed. According to its website, it is intended “to propel domestic media further along the path of introducing China to the international community, including China’s domestic and foreign policies, the development of the Chinese economy and society, as well as China’s history, technology, education, and culture” (“About SCIO”). Perhaps the most paradigmatic element of the CPC’s national image campaign is the establishment of Confucius Institutes. From 2004 onwards, the CPC has invested heavily in Confucius Institutes around the world, which offer China-related services and resources, including language courses, teacher training, and cultural events. In terms of externally-oriented national branding and soft power, they communicate an image of China to the world that is almost entirely informed by cultural and (officially) decidedly apolitical content intended to sway international opinion through cultural attraction and appeal. According to an article discussing Confucius Institutes published in the CPC Central Party School affiliated journal, *Chinese Cadres Tribune*,

Cultural dissemination is an indispensable factor in the process of building national soft power, which is the expression of the country's cultural tradition and its national will, and the process of cultural dissemination is the process of externalizing the power of the state. [Chinese] culture overseas plays a crucial role in promoting friendly relations among countries, improving China’s cultural soft power, and shaping a good national image. (Yu 38)<sup>1</sup>

The term used by state-sponsored media to describe the promotion of the national image of China represented by institutions like the Confucius Institute is *chuanbo* (傳播 transmit, communicate, broadcast). Such language reveals the perception that China’s national image has a unidirectional influence on the outside

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<sup>1</sup> This and all other quotes from Chinese language sources have been translated into English by the author.

world—that China has a history, language, and culture essential to its identity that it hopes to “show off” to the rest of the world. The emphasis here lies in a relatively simple, one-dimensional external presentation of an already existing national image waiting to be exported. While cultural projects have served as the “cornerstone of Beijing’s policies to develop soft power” (Dynton) over the first two decades of the twenty-first century, China’s branding strategy has promoted an increasingly diversified set of national assets as carriers of China’s national image. For example, China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the massive global infrastructure investment campaign that involves direct cooperation with many countries, is primarily economically and diplomatically oriented. This project is also representative of China’s national branding campaign because it ties together the many already existing international infrastructure development projects under one “message” that China’s economic development and diplomatic coalition-building sends to the world. The “brand promise” or “brand position” that the BRI is intended to establish within the perception of the international community is described in a publication from the state-sponsored think tank Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and posted online by SCIO. It describes the BRI as

fully demonstrating the new image of China’s courage to explore the road of peaceful development, and thus has received wide recognition and positive response from many countries. . . . [it] demonstrates an open and inclusive image. . . . [it] demonstrates China’s image as a responsible great power. . . . [it presents a] responsible national image to the world, which will surely win the confidence and support of the people for China’s future development and the recognition and respect of the international community for China’s rise. (X. Zhang)

Presentations of projects related to the BRI are portrayed by media both in terms of how they symbolically represent China’s national image as well as their economic and material particularities. In a 2023 conference held by city representatives from across China, the BRI was discussed not only in the context of the material economic benefits it brought to manufacturing or engineering firms in those cities but also, more specifically, how its economic framework can “more efficiently transmit [傳播 *chuanbo*] to the international world . . . and help cities promote their cultural influence, and by capturing the market, shape their cultural image” (You and Qiu). Within the framework of China’s soft power and national branding campaigns, the national image has been commodified and its value has

been defined according to the international market of influence. The importance of China's national image is widely recognized through pronouncements from the government and state-sponsored affiliates, and the value of this national image is put specifically in terms of its external presentation, its "transmission" or "communication" to the international community. The international community being exposed to and, more importantly, recognizing and responding to China's national image *as articulated by* the CPC is crucial to this project, as described in the preface to the *Annual Report on National Image Communication of China (2020-2021)*:

Focusing on China's rise and development, its challenges and opportunities, its present and future, has become a positive and natural psychological tendency for the public in other countries. The objective reality is projected in the minds of the international public, forming their new impressions and evaluations of China. . . . The rise of China as a global power is recognized by the international community. The image of a vibrant, economically growing, technologically advanced, socially stable, and strongly defended China is gradually being constructed. (K. Zhang 1)

As with the previous examples, the language used here emphasizes soft power influence through the external communication or transmission of China's national image. Along with language that describes China's national branding in terms of the soft power it provides *externally* over the international community, the examples quoted above also contain implications of concomitant *internal* transformations in Chinese national identity through the construction and transmission of a national image, such as "shaping a good national image," "building a national image," and "the image of . . . China is gradually being constructed."

### **The Other and the Articulation of Chinese National Identity**

National branding campaigns are not exclusively oriented toward generating a nation's soft power abroad but are often explicitly directed internally toward a nation's own citizens for the purpose of bolstering or (re)articulating a sense of national identity. Aronczyk points out that one of the core functions of national branding is to "help a nation articulate a more coherent and cohesive national

identity, to animate the spirit of its citizens in the service of national priorities, and to maintain loyalty to the territory within its borders” (3). “Believe in Britain,” “Reimagining Jamaica,” and “Made in China 2025,” for example, are national branding campaigns intended to promote national pride, public trust, or investment in the local economy within the respective countries more so than promoting a national image abroad. Yet even national branding campaigns that are ostensibly directed externally, toward an international audience, can equally function in the construction of national identity at home. The dual directionality of a national brand’s influence thereby operates such that “national leaders hope to generate positive foreign public opinion that will ‘boomerang’ back home, fostering both domestic consensus or approbation of their actions as well as pride and patriotism within the nation’s borders” (Aronczyk 16). Language that describes the national image of China as being “communicated” to the international community through brand carriers like the Confucius Institute or BRI can obscure the way in which the influence generated by externally-oriented national branding and soft power campaigns can “boomerang back home” and function in the shaping of national identity domestically. Indeed, the very communication of China’s national image to the international community, to the “foreign Other,” is an articulation of what China believes distinguishes itself from the Other, allowing it to recursively articulate a national identity in an important way. The role played by the foreign Other in China’s national branding campaigns, whether explicit or implicit, externally or internally oriented, is significant to the articulation of national identity. The Other functions in the construction of any individual or collective identity, and the foreigner as Other is particularly conspicuous in the PRC, in part due to the role played by foreign countries within the official narrative of China’s modern history. Historical consciousness provides a cache of significance and context for how interactions with foreigners and foreign states, both those that represent disrespect and recognition, are depicted in Chinese media, which in turn informs Chinese national identity. The CPC promotes a national historical narrative that emphasizes its abuse, exclusion, and the denigration of its way of life by foreign powers during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, characterized by phrases such as “one hundred years of humiliation” and “unequal treaties.”<sup>2</sup> Peter Gries describes this as one of the “major ways socially appropriate worldviews are learned” in the PRC, according to which “enduring party-state and popular narratives about the more recent ‘Century of Humiliation’ promote resentment toward Japan and the West:

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<sup>2</sup> See Z. Wang and Tooze.

China was unfairly knocked off its rightful place at the top of international affairs in the mid-nineteenth century, and will retake it” (64). This instills a sense of distinctiveness and solidarity in contradistinction to the foreign Other, the West and Japan in particular, through stories of shared suffering, struggle, and triumph that are constantly referenced in popular culture, the media, and political discourse. This narrative is regarded as central to establishing a modern Chinese national identity and legitimating the CPC as “savior” of the nation (“without the Communist Party there is no new China”), whereas alternative narratives are silenced as “historical nihilism.” In a speech celebrating the 100th anniversary of the founding of the CPC, for example, General Secretary Xi Jinping declared, “The Communist Party of China and the Chinese people solemnly declare to the world with brave and tenacious struggle that the Chinese people have stood up, and that the era of the Chinese nation being slaughtered and bullied is gone forever!” (Xi). The relationship with the foreign Other, which is strongly characterized by resentment, furthermore importantly functions in distinguishing national identity. Prior to and following the 2023 Two Sessions parliamentary meeting, for example, the phrase “modernization does not equal Westernization”<sup>3</sup> was promoted, distinguishing China from Western nations and thereby making Chinese national identity distinct. Because it is crucially involved in the construction of national identity through national branding, the Other to which China’s national image is communicated (the international community) is particularly conspicuous and constantly intimated. The influence that national branding and soft power campaigns has on Chinese national identity and, more specifically, the role that the foreign Other plays in this process are evident in the symbolically momentous 2008 Beijing Olympics.

The 2008 Olympics was described by Western media outlets as a “coming out party” for China as an emerging power and is generally regarded as a resounding win for China’s soft power. The international market of public opinion was clearly in mind as the target of China’s national brand campaign and “the Chinese government launched a massive media campaign both domestically and externally in an attempt to build China’s national identity and image in the world: a vital arm of its soft power agenda” (Chen et al. 195). However, “this soft power agenda had internal targets too” (195). Weidong Zhang likewise points out that while the image the PRC presented of itself was intended “to captivate the world in awe, or hail the international audience in a subject position,” it also “speaks aloud to a domestic audience . . . to promote national solidarity with this rekindled national pride of the

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<sup>3</sup> See Yeh.



rise of China” (10). The depictions of diverse Chinese ethnic groups, displays of traditional Chinese culture, and massive choreographed *fou* drum performance during the opening ceremony were seen as a positive image of China communicated to the international community. Insofar as this image was perceived as being positively recognized by the international community, it affirmed China and “Chineseness” as making positive contributions to the world and being worthy of admiration, thereby reaffirming the people of the PRC’s sense of national identity. Affirmation of national identity is not merely an incidental secondary effect of national branding campaigns; rather, this presentation of a national image to the world abroad is crucial to the articulation of national identity. Many elements of the 2008 Olympics national brand campaign were intended to bolster a sense of national identity domestically, and the awareness that it was also being transmitted to the international community, that the foreign Other was watching, was a powerfully operative component within this process. The notion of national branding addresses the influence that the transmission of a national image has both in terms of soft power abroad and national identity at home. Scholars like Aronczyk have complicated this further by exploring the relationship between the transmission of a national image abroad and the influence the response to that national image has on a nation’s citizens. Whereas the first level of analysis regards both foreign and domestic opinion insofar as they are swayed by the content of the branding campaign itself, the second level investigates how foreign public opinion regarding a nation’s national image recursively influences the sense of national identity among that nation’s citizens. Investigating the construction of national identity through the lens of national branding certainly contributes to a more sophisticated understanding of national identity in the modern world, but it also raises questions for which it appears ill-equipped to address as a conceptual construct. First, who is the Other to whom this national image or brand is presented? The “international community” is no community in any real sense, sharing no space, religion, historical narratives, or symbolic structures. It is not even an “imagined community” in Benedict Anderson’s sense, aside from the one that exists in the most dewy-eyed, utopian imaginations. Shared institutions and goals that effect all nations, like the United Nations and global climate change agreements, are rarely characterized by anything other than dysfunction and a lack of consensus, and thus there does not seem to exist any unifying intention that we can ascribe to this Other. Second, how is it that this Other, being a mere abstraction, is able to recursively influence a sense of national identity? How do national brand managers obtain and interpret feedback confirming whether the national image is “working” as a brand

when the national image is being communicated to an abstracted “international community” rather than specific people, nations, or regions? Addressing these questions through the notion of a *profilic* national identity might reveal the construction of national identity under such conditions to be much more complicated, contributing further insights into some of the hidden yet highly effective socio-psychic processes involved in the construction of national identity in a globalized world. The following section will explore these questions utilizing profilicity as a *national* identity paradigm, emphasizing two of its central concepts: the general peer and second-order observation.

### **A Profilic Chinese National Identity**

The dual-directional influence that the presentation of a national image has on both international opinion and national identity reveals a mechanism within the construction of national identity that is not easily interpreted through traditional models of identity and for which concepts like national branding do not account. Discourse surrounding national branding often describes a national brand as functioning in the generation of soft power abroad, reinforcing national identity domestically, or instilling a sense of national identity through its “brand position” abroad. A national image or brand, however, can also be regarded as oriented around its *presentation* to the international community, which, through the act of presentation itself, thereby constructs a national profile. Insofar as “producing images of oneself . . . in order to present them to others is at the heart of profile-based identity work” (Moeller and D’Ambrosio 3), phenomena related to the construction of national identity through the presentation of a national image might be more constructively interpreted through the notion of a *profilic* national identity, thus altering what has hitherto been referred to as either a national image or national brand into a national profile.

According to a profilic national identity, a national profile cannot be regarded as a simple representation of what it *really* is as a nation—its cultural prestige, economic might, or benevolent spirit as essential elements of what might be considered an *authentic* national identity. Additionally, the presentation of a national profile can no longer be simplistically regarded as having the bifurcated functions of influencing foreign opinion abroad and affirming national identity at home. Rather, “the ethics of profilicity is concerned with the presentation of the self, and it is this presentation that requires curation” (Moeller and D’Ambrosio 29). So too a national profile is selectively curated, cultivated, and designed with the

intention of being presented to and positively received by others. A national profile must thus be understood as intended specifically for presentation to others, to the Other. This represents the first central element distinguishing an analysis of national identity through proficity from that of national branding: the Other as “general peer.”

Moeller and D’Ambrosio argue that the general peer “does not refer to any actual and particular individual but to a transpersonal collective.” It is “an impersonal abstraction,” “the audience to which profic identity is presented. It is impersonal, is nonpresent, and—as peers do—varies from context to context” (48, 49, 50). While references to data and analytics from specific countries regarding China’s national image, such as “the image of China in popular English language media in Pakistan” (Jin and Liu 213), do operate as the general peer within the construction of a profic national identity, the general peer’s function is more evident in its most abstracted forms. Analysis of China’s communicated national image often refers to the general peer not as any particular country, region, or people, but rather an abstracted Other, the not-us, the foreigner. It is put in terms of, for example, the “degree to which foreign respondents recognize Chinese brands” (Zhang and Wang 36), “foreign respondents’ evaluations of the BRI” (Zhang and Wang 33), or “foreign respondents’ evaluation of the image of the Chinese people” (Zhang, Yue, and Chen 67). It is indeed this “impersonal abstraction” characteristic of the general peer that allows the general peer to function within the construction of a profic identity at all. Just as individual profiles are created for the purpose of presenting-to-be-seen by the general peer, national representatives likewise construct a national image to present to the “international community” (general peer), a profile that is then “seen-as-being-seen” (Moeller and D’Ambrosio 48), thereby constructing a national profile. That a national image is “seen-as-being-seen” in a way that constructs a profic national identity captures the second central element of the proficity identity paradigm: second-order observation.

For Moeller and D’Ambrosio, second-order observation refers to the way in which “we do not simply look at people or issues directly but rather at how they are seen publicly by others” (15). When a profile is presented to the general peer, it is done with the implicit awareness that it will be seen and judged accordingly, and as such “in second-order observation, both the object and its observer are taken into account and are simultaneously considered” (39). Second-order observation furthermore compels us to consider how the general peer might respond to the profile we present to them and, to the degree that we seek the general peer’s approval, to present a profile we hope will generate positive feedback. In terms of

national identity, whereas soft power and national branding account for how a positive national image might attract and shape the preferences of others or establish a more cohesive national identity, prolificity addresses the phenomenon according to which the very presentation of a national image (profile) to the international community (general peer) simultaneously establishes a national identity that, insofar as it is seen-as-being-seen, is curated according to the general peer. As such, China's transmission of a national image or presentation of a national profile to the international community is done in the hope that the general peer will respond positively, which requires the national profile to be curated such that it resonates with the general peer in what is referred to by Moeller and D'Ambrosio as a "social validation feedback loop" (30).

Creating and curating a successful profile requires consistent validation from the general peer and, in the event that the profile does not receive validation, constant curation such that it achieves its desired feedback. In the case of China's prolific national identity, a successful national profile as a responsible trade partner and world leader requires China to not only construct a profile presenting them as such but also to present a profile that will be recognized or validated by the general peer. In the context of China as a potential trading and diplomatic partner within the BRI national image campaign, the content of the national image (profile) of China is presented as follows: "the 'Belt and Road' strategy conveys to the world China's values of peaceful development, openness and tolerance, and mutual benefit and win-win cooperation with other countries, so it is also a process of building a national image" (X. Zhang). Merely presenting a profile is not quite enough, however, because "in prolificity, we need to be invested in the identity presented to the 'general peer'" (Moeller and D'Ambrosio 32). Elements of the profile require validation by the international community to achieve legitimacy as a prolific national identity.

In March of 2023, China mediated a historic normalization agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran, thereby validating China's national profile, its Global Security Initiative (GSI) (全球安全倡議 *quanqiu anquan changyi*) and BRI profile(s) in particular. According to a conventional international relations perspective, this was a major diplomatic success for China insofar as it represented a step toward stabilizing a region from which almost half of its imported crude oil is sourced<sup>4</sup> and increasing international trust in China as a world leader, thereby generating influence and soft power. In terms of China's prolific national identity,

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<sup>4</sup> See Akcay.

however, this successful mediation also generated positive feedback for, and thereby validated, China's national profile. American representatives, among others, "recognized Beijing's contribution. . . . four U.S. officials, including Secretary of State Antony Blinken, have responded positively to Beijing's mediation" (Gering). This diplomatic success and the positive response from the international community led the CPC to quickly reaffirm this element of its national profile, with Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wenbin Wang issuing a statement that:

The Beijing dialogue is a robust and successful effort to put the Global Security Initiative (GSI) into practice. . . . China will be a promoter of security and stability, partner for development and prosperity and supporter of the Middle East's development through solidarity. . . . It is our hope that more and more countries will join us in implementing the GSI to realize enduring peace and universal security. (W. Wang)

China's GSI and BRI are of course motivated by more concrete economic and diplomatic concerns, yet the way the CPC "markets" China's involvement in these initiatives "is also a process of building a national image" (X. Zhang) through the presentation and curation of a national profile, thereby establishing a profilic national identity. The blunders that the PRC has committed in its soft power campaigns as a result of the assumption "that government is the main instrument of soft power" (Nye, "What") are well documented, but its careful presentation of China's national image to the general peer and subsequent curation according to feedback have established an increasingly successful and adaptable national profile, both as a member-state of the international community and among citizens of the PRC.

The terminology used, the analytics and statistics according to which its "success" is judged, and the intended goal of its image management campaign (a positive and politically, economically, and culturally effective national image) all indicate the Chinese state's awareness of its own profile as-being-seen by the general peer and its need for validation, which thereby establishes a profilic national identity through its very presentation and careful curation. Indeed, the CPC's presentation of China's national image (profile) to the international community (general peer) according to which it is "seen-as-being-seen" (second-order observation) and the curation of this profile according to a "social validation feedback loop" is explicitly described in reference to China's national image:

The Chinese public, encouraged by the long period of peace and tranquility and development dividends at home, has quietly undergone significant changes in its self-perception of the country and its sense of recognition and belonging. These changes reflect the core content of the national image, that is, the self-perception of the nation and the evaluation of the national image by others. (K. Zhang 2)

The relationship between “the evaluation of the national image by others” and “the self-perception of the nation” is recognized in almost profilic terms. Such profilic terminology is in fact somewhat common in discourse surrounding the national image of China, often expressed with the vocabulary of “self-image shaping” (自塑 *zisu*) and “other-image shaping” (他塑 *tasu*): “self-imaging is like a monologue, while other-image shaping is like a mirror reflecting the cognition of others” (Ouyang). Profilicity provides a conceptual lens through which to understand this as more complicated than the simplistic bifurcated relationship between “other-image shaping” and “self-image shaping.” Rather than understand the “other-image shaping” of China’s image in terms of “Western media demonizing and stigmatizing China,” in response to which China “must debunk the lies through ‘self-image shaping’ and show the world a more realistic, three-dimensional and all-round China” (Ou), profilicity allows us to see this “self-image shaping” as a profilic national identity process that is constantly in a state of being curated in response to feedback from the general peer.

## Conclusion

In a globalized world where soft power is increasingly viewed as a strategic commodity, the communication of a national image to the international community for the sake of generating soft power and its recursive brand influence on national identity domestically is vital to any nation’s international success and domestic cohesion. Understanding “communication of a national image” through profilicity as part and parcel of a more comprehensive process of presenting and curating a profilic national identity further contributes to explaining many aspects of national identity overlooked by concepts like soft power and national branding. Applying the concept of profilicity to national identity, however, also reveals heretofore hidden mechanisms involved in the construction of national identity that are worthy

of research and exploration. For example, proficility explains how a national profile is observed through second-order observation and curated according to the reception of positive or negative feedback from the general peer through public opinion polls, tourism data, etc., thereby establishing a social validation feedback loop. However, such analytics are not always available for the general peer to whom the national profile is presented due to its abstracted nature. This leads to peculiar manifestations of the social validation feedback loop and corresponding national profile curation. One such manifestation is the way in which the general peer can likewise be curated in national media. A brief description of the Chinese state and media's promotion of popular Chinese YouTuber Ziqi Li and her channel provides some insight into this phenomenon as a potential object of future study.

Li is a content creator with over 50 million followers on the Chinese social media platform Douyin (TikTok) and 17 million subscribers on her YouTube channel as of February 2023. In her videos she uses traditional methods of farming, making clothes, and cooking, which idealize Chinese country life and traditional values. What distinguishes her from most other successful content creators is that a fair amount of the praise she has received from Chinese netizens, Chinese media, and the CPC is not necessarily because she produces high quality videos or even that they resonate with the Chinese people's sense of cultural pride in the traditional way of life. Rather, the media often praises her "communication of the national image of China" to the international community and her popularity among "foreigners." An article published by the Communist Youth League Central Committee entitled "Because of Ziqi Li Millions of Foreigners Have Fallen in Love with China" comments that "there is no doubt that Ziqi Li is a part of the communication of [Chinese] culture to the outside world" (Ai). She has won numerous accolades related to communicating China's national image to the world, including *China Newsweek* (中國新聞周刊 *Zhongguo xinwen zhoukan*) "2019 Cultural Communication Person of the Year." State-sponsored academic projects have used her success as the object of research "because Ziqi Li's videos have received recognition from people outside of China," thereby making her an appropriate case "to understand the current shaping and reception of the image of Chinese culture on international social platforms . . . [and] to explore the possibility of communicating Chinese culture overseas" (Chang and Tian 55). In profilic terms, she is celebrated by the Chinese state and media for her presentation of a national profile of China and its positive reception by the general peer.

Research on the success or failure of a national brand or image abroad often utilizes analytics and data based on public opinion polls in foreign countries,

revenue generated by the sales of national products, or analysis of foreign media representations of that nation. Chinese media, academia, and the state celebrate Li's YouTube channel as a national image of China successfully communicated abroad, but they use no such data. Rather, virtually all depictions of Li's positive reception among foreigners cite the same two pieces of evidence to confirm her popularity abroad: that YouTube is a "foreign" website<sup>5</sup> and many of the comments are written in English. This is not particularly hard evidence, and any confirmable analytics provided by the website regarding the countries from which her videos are being viewed are accessible only to Li and her team managing the channel. Reviewing English language media from outside of China written about Li's channel further problematizes the depiction of its immense popularity among foreign content consumers. The majority of articles about her channel's success in English language publications from outside of China<sup>6</sup> are published by websites dedicated to "China watchers" or those who are interested in political, economic, or cultural news within China. Whereas many Chinese language publications depict her channel as an example of "being able to use Chinese culture to win innumerable hard-core fans from overseas" (Guan), these English language articles generally focus on her popularity *within* China or how she's celebrated by Chinese media and the state, for example by her appointment to the "All-China Youth Federation" (W-q. Zhang). This is certainly not to say that the channel is *not* well-received among viewers outside of China, but the presentation of it as *particularly* popular seems specious. When considered according to prolificity, however, the veracity of the channel being "popular among foreigners" is beside the point because this image of China being-seen-as popular by "the foreigner" serves a specific function within the construction of a prolific national identity. Chinese media's description of this channel as popular among foreign viewers (general peer) validates an image of China, providing an "image of the foreigner" which positively responds to an "image of China" regardless of how "authentically true" either image is. Chinese state media's promotion of Li's channel, insofar as it is presented as popular among foreigners, establishes a self-contained social validation feedback loop, affirming a national profile that the CPC wants to be seen-as-validated by the general peer, thereby informing a sense of national identity among citizens of the PRC. This

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<sup>5</sup> YouTube is blocked in mainland China by the "Great Firewall," but these restrictions are commonly circumvented.

<sup>6</sup> See Matei and Zhou for the only English language publications from non-China watcher websites outside of China that I found written about this channel.



raises a number of questions regarding the construction of national identity in general and a profilic national identity in particular. For example, to what degree does the curation of the general peer in the form of the “image of the foreigner” manifest itself as Orientalism or perhaps self-Orientalism, expressed by one Weibo user as “she [Li] caters to foreigners’ outdated impressions of China” (qtd. in Yan). The curation of the general peer is one of the many avenues of research potentially opened through the concept of profilicity as it is applied to national identity. This article represents an initial attempt to articulate how a profilic national identity might be articulated and some of the curious mechanisms at play in its construction. Further exploration will no doubt lead to a richer understanding of the construction of national identity in a globalized world.

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