

Constructing National Image in the Beijing Winter Olympics Opening Ceremony from the Perspective of “Chinese Romance” (Postprint)

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Date: 2023-03-24T00:00:00+00:00

Abstract

On February 4, 2022, the Beijing Winter Olympics opening ceremony was successfully held, becoming an important vehicle for China to project its national image. Previous research has predominantly concentrated on three domains: first, deconstructing the presentation of China’s national image at the Beijing Winter Olympics through new media platforms; second, analyzing the national image constructed by the opening ceremony from a cultural perspective; and third, interpreting the Winter Olympics and national image within a globalized context. While these three areas primarily adopt macro-level approaches, this study selects the nationally debated topic of “Chinese Romance” as its point of departure to analyze the construction and dissemination of national image in the Beijing Winter Olympics opening ceremony through the deployment of cultural symbols, demonstration of care for the populace, and artistic creation that transforms fleeting moments into eternity. Simultaneously, the widespread discussion of “Chinese Romance” reflects deeper-seated cultural confidence and the compensatory psychological function of the ceremony for the public amid the pandemic context. Moreover, as an abstracted topic, “Chinese Romance” also facilitates the formation of collective memory, thereby enriching and reshaping national image. Finally, this paper also offers reflections on its research limitations.

Full Text

Viewing the Construction of National Image in the Beijing Winter Olympics Opening Ceremony Through the Lens of “Chinese Romance”

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Abstract

On February 4, 2022, the opening ceremony of the Beijing Winter Olympic Games was successfully held, serving as a significant platform for China to showcase its national image. Previous research has predominantly focused on three areas: first, analyzing the presentation of China's national image through new media; second, interpreting the national image constructed by the opening ceremony from a cultural perspective; and third, examining the Winter Olympics and national image within a globalized framework. While these studies tend to adopt macro-level approaches, this research takes the widely discussed topic of "Chinese romance" as its entry point to analyze how the Beijing Winter Olympics opening ceremony constructed and disseminated national image through the building of cultural symbols, expressions of care for the people, and artistic creation that transforms fleeting moments into eternal ones.

The heated public discussion surrounding "Chinese romance" reflects deeper cultural confidence and the ceremony's compensatory psychological effect on audiences amid the pandemic. Furthermore, as an abstracted concept, "Chinese romance" contributes to the formation of collective memory, thereby enriching and reshaping national image. Finally, this paper reflects on the limitations of the study.

Keywords: Beijing Winter Olympics Opening Ceremony; National Image; "Chinese Romance"

As the premier event in international sports, the Olympic Games provide nations with a crucial avenue to display national image, enhance national visibility, and engage in image construction and dissemination. The successful hosting of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics presented the world with a distinctive image of a major country. Existing literature on the Beijing Winter Olympics and national image has concentrated on three primary domains: first, analyzing the presentation of China's national image through new media; second, interpreting the national image constructed by the opening ceremony from a cultural perspective; and third, examining the Winter Olympics and national image within a globalized context. Simultaneously, the planning and presentation of Olympic opening ceremonies play a pivotal role in demonstrating national image to the world and constitute an essential component of a country's "national calling card." On the evening of February 4, 2022, the two-hour spectacular performance of the Beijing Winter Olympics opening ceremony told China's stories to the world, constructing a brilliant, civilized, and romantic national image. On Weibo, China's most representative public opinion platform, the topic "Chinese romance" topped the trending list that evening, becoming a subject of national discussion. Building upon previous research, this study takes the Beijing Winter Olympics opening ceremony as its foundation and "Chinese romance" as its entry point to explore why this topic resonated so widely and what significance it holds for national image construction.

Conceptual Definitions and Literature Review

National Image

Scholarly research on national image has a long history both domestically and internationally. The concept was first defined by American scholar Kenneth Boulding in 1956, who argued that national image represents a combination of a country's self-perception and how other actors in the international system perceive it, resulting from a series of information inputs and outputs [1]. Scholar Scott suggests that a nation's image encompasses the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions that arise when people think about a particular country [2]. With the implementation of China's reform and opening-up policy, domestic scholarship on national image began to emerge in the 1980s. Xu Xiaoge provided an early definition, viewing national image as the image formed by a country in international news flow—that is, the image presented in the news media of other countries [3]. Sun Youzhong defines national image as the internal and external public's recognition and evaluation of a country's politics, economy, society, and culture [4]. Liu Xiaoyan considers national image as the projection of a country's objective state in public opinion, representing a comprehensive reflection of the public's impressions, views, attitudes, and evaluations of the nation, as well as the sum of emotions and will that the public holds toward the country [5]. Han Wenqian, drawing on President Xi Jinping's major discourses, summarizes national image as the basic cognition and overall impression formed among domestic citizens and the international community regarding a nation's history and present state, economy and politics, culture and society under certain conditions [6]—a concept currently widely accepted in academic circles.

Winter Olympics and National Image

Against the backdrop of globalization and digital technology development, research on national image has expanded into various domains, including national image on social media platforms and in external communication relationships. The construction of national image through the Olympic Games has also become a significant area of academic concern. Regarding the Beijing Winter Olympics specifically, Hu Baijing discussed the major significance of hosting the Games for China's national image construction from a macro perspective [7]. Domestic scholars have primarily approached Beijing Winter Olympics and national image research from three angles: first, analyzing the presentation of China's national image through new media, as Hu Cencen examined how short video narratives at the Beijing Winter Olympics influenced national image construction through narrative characters, scenes, types, and audio-visual language [8]; second, interpreting the national image constructed by the opening ceremony from a cultural perspective, with Zheng Shanshan arguing that the ceremony used “small narratives” to convey “big ideas,” employing emotional appeal and symbolic metaphors to create a new audio-visual spectacle and tell China's stories using universally comprehensible discourse [9]; and third, ex-

aming the significance and strategies of China’s national image construction from a global perspective, particularly against the current pandemic backdrop or from the perspective of a global community of shared future, as Zhang Kun and Pu Rui analyzed the opportunities and challenges facing Beijing Winter Olympics international communication and proposed specific strategic planning and implementation pathways [10]. Overall, existing research on the Beijing Winter Olympics and national image primarily focuses on macro-level analysis and strategic measures, while studies on the opening ceremony’s national image presentation concentrate mainly on cultural communication, lacking specific entry points and interpretations of audience reception and its underlying significance.

“Chinese Romance”

As one of China’s most representative and grassroots public opinion platforms, Weibo saw topics such as “Chinese romance” and “Zhang Yimou understands Chinese romance best” dominate the trending list on the night of the opening ceremony, making “Chinese romance” a viral subject of national discussion. While not the first time this topic has emerged—for instance, on July 1, 2020, during the artistic performance “Great Journey” celebrating the 100th anniversary of the Communist Party of China, spectacular fireworks forming the number “100” above the National Stadium similarly sparked discussion about “Chinese-style romance”—the concept can be traced back further to poet Xu Zhimo’s book titled *Chinese Romance*, which later evolved to describe the unique, 含蓄 (reserved), and romantic characteristics of Chinese people.

Based on the above conceptual and literature review, this study selects “Chinese romance” as its entry point to explore its manifestation in the Beijing Winter Olympics opening ceremony and its significance for national image construction.

Viewing National Image Construction Through “Chinese Romance”

Romance in Memory: Shared Cultural Symbols

Cultural symbols are symbolic systems that can represent certain cultural traits and generate significant influence [11]. These symbols carry traditional connotations and metaphorical meanings, as people’s understanding of culture is often achieved through conceptual symbols. The imprints of traditional Chinese culture are precisely the diverse traditional symbols that embody the wisdom and civilizational progress of the Chinese people—symbolic carriers of Chinese elements at the cultural level and concrete expressions of profound traditional Chinese cultural connotations. Emotions stem from people’s diverse cultural needs, and through typical symbolic representations, they can evoke cultural memories among Chinese citizens or satisfy the multicultural needs of overseas audiences, thereby mobilizing collective empathy. This process guides people from sensory perception to emotional resonance, which then transforms into

identification with values and ideals, ultimately amplifying communication effects. In other words, the dissemination of cultural symbols through the opening ceremony constructs a positive national image.

The opening countdown short film featuring the twenty-four solar terms embodies unique traditional cultural memories. Each solar term was presented through imagery, with winter sports scenes integrated into the transitions to align with the Olympic theme. The twenty-four terms corresponded to the countdown number 24, changing with the timer until finally arriving at “Lichun” (the Beginning of Spring) at the moment of the opening ceremony. Selecting the twenty-four solar terms as a significant cultural symbol not only evoked memories of traditional culture among Chinese citizens but also deepened their understanding of the solar terms, enhancing their pride in and identification with Chinese culture. Simultaneously, the opening ceremony’s bold departure from conventional countdown formats by using the number 24 piqued the curiosity of overseas audiences, guiding them to explore the Chinese culture behind the number. Through this traditional cultural symbol, a shared meaning space was established with global audiences, rendering China’s image in the world more richly textured and culturally profound.

The *Lichun* program in the Beijing Winter Olympics opening ceremony selected grass and green—two typical symbolic images of spring—as its motifs. Grass alludes to Gao Ding’s poem *Village Life*: “Grass grows and orioles fly in the February sky, willows by the dike intoxicated by spring mist” [10]. The opening ceremony utilized technological means to transform nearly 400 long, luminous, flexible poles into swaying grass, demonstrating its tenacity and endless vitality and composing a hymn to life. The sprouting of grass heralds spring’s arrival, embodying both the Olympic spirit’s continuous renewal and China’s vibrant, forward-looking national image. Green represents hope, and with green as its theme color, *Lichun* conveyed to the world the hope that humanity will overcome the pandemic and conflict. The spring memory outlined by grass and green presented China’s thriving national image, expressed aspirations for the eternal flame of the Olympics, and conveyed hopes for peaceful coexistence among all peoples worldwide [12].

The construction of sensory symbolic symbols in the Beijing Winter Olympics opening ceremony also implicitly contained traditional Chinese culture, evoking cultural memories among Chinese citizens. For instance, the “Yellow River water descending from heaven” presented using 8K+ technology alludes to Li Bai’s poem *Bring in the Wine*: “Yellow River water descends from heaven, flowing to the sea never to return.” The surging Yellow River water created an immensely magnificent scene, reflecting the profound and extensive nature of traditional Chinese culture and encapsulating the broad-mindedness, rich emotions, and romantic sentiments of the Chinese people. Subsequently, ice hockey players interacted with projected ice hockey images to complete the *Ice Breaking* program, demonstrating its underlying meaning. In Chinese culture, “ice breaking” represents breaking down barriers, resolving conflicts, approaching one another,

and achieving mutual understanding [13]. The use of this element expressed China's friendliness and care for people worldwide through Chinese cultural idioms, constructing a major country image committed to maintaining unity and peace.

Returning to the People: Saluting the Silent Majority

Traditional impressions of Chinese grand ceremonies have largely focused on macro-narratives of China's five-thousand-year cultural heritage, with relatively limited representation of individual life conditions among the masses. The Beijing Winter Olympics opening ceremony broke away from these stereotypical impressions, dismantling individual labels and presenting people as independent and active rather than passively dependent beings [14]. Human values were embodied in the opening ceremony's philosophy, allowing "Chinese romance" to return to every Chinese individual and indeed all humanity, shaping a people-centered national image.

The opening ceremony's warm-up segment featured a thirty-minute square dance performance. As a popular form of entertainment and fitness among Chinese people, square dance showcases the life details of ordinary citizens. Performers spanned four generations—elderly, middle-aged, young, and teenage—creating a vibrant and energetic display that conveyed the Chinese people's aspirations for a better life while presenting the details of ordinary people's existence and demonstrating concern for the people. This also aligned with the Olympic spirit as a festival for all people. Moreover, global audiences gained insight into the life details of ordinary Chinese citizens through the square dance performance, achieving the goals of international exchange, understanding, and dialogue. This square dance performance, belonging to ordinary Chinese people, not only presented compelling Chinese stories but also demonstrated China's magnanimity in wishing to "understand one another and maintain lasting friendship" with people worldwide.

The flag-raising ceremony, a significant component of Olympic Games, has always attracted widespread attention. In the Beijing Winter Olympics opening ceremony, before the national anthem played and the flag was raised, the Five-Star Red Flag was passed through the hands of representatives from various Chinese industries, national meritorious figures, and representatives of China's 56 ethnic groups before being handed to the flag bearers. During this procession, accompanied by a trumpeter's soulful rendition of "Me and My Motherland," the moment was deeply moving. What was passed through ordinary people's hands was not merely the national flag but also an ideological spirit. The flag guard formation, composed of a tableau of Chinese people, highlighted China's people-centered national image. The program *Salute to the People* brought people from around the world onto the opening ceremony stage, with 76 young people from various countries walking together while their footsteps printed images of athletes striving for excellence and humanity overcoming the pandemic [12]. This represented not only a demonstration of universal participation in

sports but also highlighted China's people-centered approach to developing ice and snow sports and its athletic undertakings. As a global ice and snow sports event, the Beijing Winter Olympics, through the *Salute to the People* program, transformed the opening ceremony's philosophy from "me" to "we," elevating the perspective from "Chinese people" to all humanity worldwide. This demonstrated care for all people globally and presented a national image characterized by great love.

The Continuation of Romance: Snowflakes and Fireworks

Snowflakes and fireworks serve as important elements of romance. These images are inherently fleeting and ephemeral, yet in the Beijing Winter Olympics opening ceremony, the story they told brought Chinese-style romance that transformed the instantaneous into the eternal, presenting China's image to the world from a more artistic dimension.

Zhang Yimou, the chief director of the opening ceremony, summarized the event's theme as "the story of a snowflake." During the Olympic flame lighting segment, small snowflakes bearing the names of participating delegations gradually converged to form a giant snowflake torch. The final torch passed inside the stadium became the main torch—a "micro-flame" unprecedented in Olympic history. Yet "a single spark can start a prairie fire," a concept long advocated in Chinese culture. A small flame "ignited" a snowflake, ultimately uniting the Olympic spirit burning brightly in all humanity—a snowflake belonging to all humankind. In Western culture, the prevailing notion is that no two snowflakes are alike, whereas Chinese culture interprets snowflakes through Li Bai's verse: "Yanshan snowflakes are as large as mats." This clever arrangement allowed different snowflakes from around the world to converge in Beijing as one snowflake, representing the concept of greater unity—that is, "we." The narrative context constructed by "the story of a snowflake" enables Chinese stories to continuously evoke emotional resonance among audiences, allowing national image to be constructed within viewers' subconsciousness. The snowflake torch built by this story will be recorded and perpetuated in Olympic history, establishing a positive and constructive Chinese image.

Cai Guoqiang served as the chief fireworks designer for this opening ceremony, having collaborated with Zhang Yimou on numerous major international events, including the 2008 Beijing Olympics. An internationally acclaimed Chinese artist who has received numerous awards worldwide, Cai Guoqiang once again refreshed public impressions of ceremonial fireworks displays with his "subtle yet profound" approach. The opening ceremony's fireworks performance adhered to minimalist principles, using only 1,800 eco-friendly shells—just 10% of the amount used in the 2008 Beijing Olympics. The design of these fireworks is rooted in Chinese national culture, pursuing the concept of endless vitality and perpetual life. Centered on this theme, elements full of energy such as Lichun, welcoming pines, and northern landscapes were incorporated. Cai Guoqiang's fireworks works fully embody the unique Chinese romantic aesthetic of artistic

conception.

When Cai Guoqiang's ice and snow fireworks bloomed above the Bird's Nest stadium, they achieved horizontal dissemination of the fireworks medium as an image [15]. Fireworks are instantaneous, but through digital communication technology in the new media era, they can be vertically transmitted and perpetuated. As a leading short video platform, Douyin (TikTok) has become a carrier medium for various art forms due to its great inclusivity and creativity. Cai Guoqiang designed a fireworks special effect called "Earth's Tangent" on Douyin, allowing ordinary people to "co-create online opening ceremony fireworks and support ice and snow athletes." Through this fireworks effect, millions of ordinary people participated in this ice and snow extravaganza, genuinely feeling connected to winter sports. Through the fireworks special effects in short videos, people connected their memories and emotions from watching the Beijing Winter Olympics opening ceremony fireworks, extending this romantic moment into eternity.

The Deep Logic of "Chinese Romance"

Vertical: 2008–2022, Confidence in Romance

The 2008 Beijing Olympics opening ceremony answered the question "Who are we?" By 2022, China no longer needed to deliberately "introduce itself." Chinese culture was no longer presented with great fanfare but flowed flexibly through every segment, demonstrating the posture of a major country dedicated to building a global community of shared future and embodying the goal and spirit of "Together for a Shared Future." These changes signify a shift in the logic of telling Chinese stories, as China's national image construction has embarked on new approaches. The deep reason behind this transformation is the growth of China's national strength and cultural confidence. "Only when we are no longer eager to express ourselves can we achieve the calmness and composure brought by true confidence." The Beijing Winter Olympics opening ceremony seamlessly blended traditional elements with modern civilization in a remarkably innovative way. This expression of long-term oriented culture also reveals deeper cultural confidence among the Chinese people today [16].

Horizontal: Against the Pandemic Backdrop, Romance is Precious

Psychology posits that compensation is a psychological adaptation mechanism through which individuals correct deviations in their social adaptation process [17]. In the current international environment, the COVID-19 pandemic has spread globally, severely impacting political and economic development in various countries and placing people worldwide in a state of psychological suffering. The normalization of the pandemic, prolonged self-isolation, and the pain caused by COVID-19 itself have all contributed to varying degrees of tension, anxiety, and even panic among the public. This suppressed emotion urgently requires an outlet and compensation, necessitating more humanitarian care and human-

istic encouragement. The 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics became a platform for global citizens to release their emotions, serving as an important opportunity to boost global morale in fighting the pandemic and revitalize confidence in world development. Against today's backdrop of global suffering and hardship, the beautiful, pure, harmonious, and romantic scenes and elements in the Beijing Winter Olympics opening ceremony appear increasingly precious. By integrating the grand narrative of caring for human health and building a global community of shared future into the spiritual themes of the Beijing Winter Olympics, using hope and care as communication themes, and employing empathetic narratives to resonate with the public [18], this grand event can also dispel negative emotions brought by the pandemic, enhance public enthusiasm for sports, and strengthen people's confidence in returning to normal life after the pandemic.

Deconstructing “Chinese Romance”

In his study of collective consciousness, Durkheim addressed the function of rituals, arguing that through shared communal experiences and feelings, individual collective consciousness is stimulated and strengthened, thereby achieving consistency in emotional attitudes and values at the collective level [19]. The transformation of event meaning into emotional symbols draws audiences in, generating what Kenneth Burke termed “identification by sympathy.” Through rituals, the world of human existence and the world of imagination merge through symbolic forms into a single world, constituting a spiritual consciousness. Under the ritual of the Beijing Winter Olympics opening ceremony, national image was constructed through the building of cultural symbols, care for the people, and artistic creation that weaves eternal moments from the instantaneous, evoking people's collective consciousness and emotions. The topic “Chinese romance” becoming a subject of national discussion abstracted the meaning brought by the opening ceremony into an emotional symbol for the public, facilitating the formation of collective memory while enriching and reshaping national image. However, since the core of the “Chinese romance” topic is built from specific events and individuals, vigilance is required against its potential misuse on the internet, which could diverge from its core essence.

This study takes the nationally discussed topic of “Chinese romance” as its entry point to explore the construction and dissemination of national image in the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics opening ceremony. “Chinese romance” manifested in three aspects of the opening ceremony: first, through the construction of cultural symbols such as the twenty-four solar terms, grass, and Yellow River water, which evoked shared meaning spaces and romantic memories among the public, presenting the image of a brilliant and civilized major country; second, through care for the people, returning “Chinese romance” to Chinese individuals and indeed all humanity, constructing and disseminating a people-centered national image; and third, through the artistic continuation of “Chinese romance,” weaving the instantaneous into eternity.

Meanwhile, the widespread discussion of “Chinese romance” during this opening ceremony reflects deeper Chinese cultural confidence and the role of such grand events in inspiring, comforting, and compensating for public psychology amid the pandemic. Additionally, the construction and meaning of national image in this grand ceremony were abstracted into the nationally discussed topic of “Chinese romance,” which in turn facilitates the formation of collective memory, thereby enriching and reshaping national image.

However, this study has several limitations. First, due to time and cost constraints, the research did not delve more deeply into data mining. Second, considering article length constraints, the analysis of cultural symbols in the Beijing Winter Olympics opening ceremony was not comprehensive. It is hoped that these limitations may provide some direction for future research.

Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

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