

## RESEARCH PAPER

## Propagating 'Chinese invention' through landscape performing art: sublimating the arts to nationalism

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### ABSTRACT

Landscape performing arts (LPA) is a series of large-scale performances that was developed in China. The performances use natural scenery in open-air theatres, characterized by fixed locality and daily performances, coupled with spectacular visual and audio effects using modern stage technologies. They employ hundreds of local amateur performers who display their traditional culture through music and dance to both domestic and international tourists. Chinese media present the LPA form of theatre as a 'Chinese invention'. The general concept of LPA highlights the Chinese traditional philosophy of harmony between humans and nature, and the traditional aesthetic *shanshui* (mountain water) to evoke a quintessential 'Chinese' scene, essence and tradition. The first 2003 performance of *Impression Liu Sanjie* has spawned a colossal LPA industry, each LPA adopting regional cultural characteristics. LPA has become a national brand for Chinese theatre. The format is internationalizing (it has been exported to Vietnam and Malaysia, for example), thereby allowing China to assist other countries in developing their cultural tourism industry.

This paper examines how the power of the Chinese landscape has been exploited by the party-state to propagate Chinese invention through LPA. One critical question about the development of the creative industry in China involves the paradox between mobilization (encouraging public creativity) and control (limiting liberality of ideology). China's authorities in the reign of President Xi have focused on both strategies simultaneously. To explore the underlying principle of this seemingly self-contradictory policy, LPA is used to analyse the nationalistic affirmation of 'Chinese invention'. The paper appropriates theories related to landscape and the sublime. Concepts relating to the sublime from Kant, Burke, Li Zehou and Wang Ban will be employed as theoretical instruments to deconstruct the notion of 'Chinese invention' within LPA and to expose the misguided discourse and nationalistic propaganda created to justify and promote it.

The research finding is that, on the one hand, the sublime emotionality of Chinese invention centres and unifies the loose contingency of individual experiences and the heterogeneity of subject-positions in the interest of covertly resolving the tension between mobilization and control of the creative industry. On the other hand, it cultivates aggressive individual and collective voices recruited in the party-state's interest while resisting foreign forces. Arguably, hegemonic sensations are fabricated by the state apparatus in the country's cultural landscape in order to cultivate belief in the inventiveness of the nation.

### KEYWORDS

China, culture, Chineseness, landscape, performing arts, innovation

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## Introduction

For decades, Chinese radicals and some liberal-minded intellectuals held ‘Chineseness’ responsible for China’s backwardness, a hindrance to political modernization. Their tactic for national salvation was anti-traditionalism. They were convinced that China would not become great unless it reformed or Chinese tradition was abandoned. Nevertheless, nowadays, one often hears remarks in China that Chineseness is the key to China’s economic triumph and an invaluable source of soft power. This interest in traditional Chinese culture will probably last given China’s economic development and soaring national confidence.

Flaring nationalism is not new, but in Xi’s era, the top-down model for instigating nationalism has been developed and deployed relentlessly. In promoting cultural nationalism, Chinese officials have been keen on using the ‘four great inventions’ from ancient China (papermaking, printing, gunpowder and the compass) to promote Chinese cultural pride. An example of the extreme lengths to which the nationalistic promotion of these four inventions can go is the experience of Zheng Wenfeng, a lecturer at a Chinese university who inadvisedly criticized the notion: ‘The Four Great Inventions were not world-leading, and there was no real innovation in the dynastic eras of China’ (Tang, 2019). Zheng’s lectureship was suspended for two years as his criticism was inconsistent with Xi Jinping’s political ideology of promoting cultural confidence.

Recently, Chinese officials have imprudently announced China’s ‘four new great inventions’: high-speed trains, online shopping, mobile payment and bike-sharing (Chen, 2017). However, the BBC correctly stated that ‘China did not invent any of these technologies, but it has led the way in their wide-scale implementation’ (Jakhar, 2018). Emphasizing invention has become popular in China, a nation desperate to promote its creative potential to give the impression of being a rising power. Li (2017) considers that transforming from ‘made in China’, to ‘created in China’ is a government strategy to market China as creative and trustworthy, thus positioning China as an innovative global leader. Keane (2007) notes that the concepts of creating (*chuang*) and ideas (*yi*) have an overt emphasis on art and imagination: ‘China is rapidly developing its creative industries and implementing policies to generate value and investment’ (p.292). In Chinese linguistics, invention and creation are often jointly referred to as ‘inventive creativity’ (*chuangzao faming*). The slogan ‘created in China’ likewise occurs in performing art. The founders of landscape performing arts (LPA), Mei Shuaiyuan and Wang Chaoge, nationalistically called LPA a Chinese invention.<sup>1</sup> LPA is also considered a new form of performing art by Chinese media, academics and practitioners in the cultural tourism industries. Government media and unofficial media actively support this assertion and promote discourse about LPA at a national level (Liang, 2017).

Statements about LPA being a Chinese invention can be challenged; numerous spectacles based on the landscape concept occurred globally long before the first LPA, *Impression Liu Sanjie*. Western opera, from its traditional roots to modern times, has included large-scale open-air performances. The outdoor opera’s inception during the Renaissance was viewed as a revival of ancient Greek drama. The world is full of various festivals and performances intended, at least in part, to exploit the environment and attract visitors. *Son et lumière* is just one type of this spectacle. It is presented at an outdoor venue and with lighting effects projected onto the façade of a building or ruin, accompanied by recorded or live narration and music to dramatize the history of a place.

The paper examines how the power of the Chinese landscape has been used by the party-state to propagate the notion of Chinese invention through LPA. One critical question about the development of creative industry in China involves the paradox between mobilization (encouraging public creativity) and control (limiting liberality of ideology). China’s authorities in the reign of President Xi have gone to great lengths to effect both strategies simultaneously. In order

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<sup>1</sup> Mei Shuaiyuan refers to a *New York Times* article, ‘Chinese extravaganza uses valley as backdrop’ (Barboza, 2019) as confirmation of LPA as a Chinese invention. Mei’s editor ambitiously translates ‘Chinese extravaganza’ into simplified Chinese: 中國式山水狂想.

to explore the underlying principle of this seemingly self-contradictory policy, the LPA is used as a case study to analyse the nationalistic affirmation of 'Chinese invention'. The landscape discourse is placed firmly into the realm of the nationalism and sublime that underwrites the claim of Chinese invention. The critique originates within the broad context of the party-state's programme to promote cultural confidence through inventiveness. The research finds that the sublime is valorized in the Chinese invention claim. On the one hand, it does not require super-human individuals, but rather centres and unifies the loose contingency of individual experience and heterogeneity in the interest of balance between the control and development of the creative economy. On the other hand, aggressive individual and collective voices are encouraged in the national interest to resist foreign forces. Hegemonic sensations are fabricated by the state apparatus in the country's cultural landscape to cultivate self-strengthening and blind self-confidence in the inventive future of the nation.

The paper is divided into three sections. The first section introduces the theories and concepts utilized to support the argument. The second section investigates the definition of LPA, which is based on information collected from interviews with industry insiders. This is crucial because, for LPA to be called a Chinese invention, a convincing explanation is needed for how it is defined and why it is attributed to China. By anchoring LPA in the nationalism discourse, the final section becomes key, focusing on what this Chinese invention assertion reveals and, more significantly, what it obfuscates. Drawing upon landscape theory and the concept of the sublime, the paper identifies and deconstructs the propaganda of the nationalistic discourse created to advance LPA.

### Literature review: theoretical underpinning

The concept of *shanshui* (landscape and nature) has received particular attention in LPA, especially since the genre, theme and aesthetic are intimately linked to so-called 'Chinese cultural characteristics'. The prominence and significance of landscapes in the Chinese artistic, cultural and popular imagination mean that the landscape is developed theoretically and philosophically. It is, after all, a symbol imprinted into the country's collective consciousness. Many scholars have suggested that Daoist emphasis on how minor the human presence is in the vastness of the cosmos, or neo-Confucian interest in the principles that underlie all phenomena, natural and social, have led to the highly structuralized nature of *shanshui* (e.g., Maeda, 1970, p.16). Dictionary definitions of *shanshui* assume that the term includes all ancient Chinese paintings with mountain and water images. When Chinese painters work on *shanshui* painting, they do not try to present an image of what they have seen in nature, but of what they have thought about nature (Siren, 1956). *Shanshui* painting goes against the standard definition of what a painting is; it is not an open window for the viewer's eye, but is more like a vehicle of philosophy (Maeda, 1970).

Landscapes of mountains and water are not unique to Chineseness. Landscape painting became the focus of the Romantic painters, the first Western artists to appreciate landscape as a subject and not just a background.

Natural objects are to be enjoyed aesthetically rather than used practically by the human object ... we should instead look at the ocean as poets do and attend to 'what strikes the eyes'. When the ocean becomes tumultuous, we should regard it 'as an abyss threatening to overwhelm everything'. (Kant, 1790/1951, p.11)

Sublime experiences, whether in nature or in art, inspire awe, reverence and an emotional understanding that transcends rational thought, words and language (Kant, 1764/1960). Burke (1757/2008, p.113) notes that 'For Romantics, the sublime is a meeting of the subjective-internal (emotional) and the objective-external (natural world), allowing emotions to overwhelm rationality as we experience the wonder of creation.' Emerson illustrates how the landscape could be interpreted for spiritual purposes with individualism overwhelmed:

Standing on the bare ground, my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space – all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of nature. (Emerson, 1982, p.39)

In considering nationalism, Kant (1790/1951, p.78) would doubtless also comment on its enormity and bestow upon nationalism the sublimity of a ‘formless object’. Burke (1757/2008, p.53) creates a model of nation based on a relationship with masculinity and sublimity; he clarifies the authority the sublime has over the beautiful, with the sublime, like nationalism, demanding ‘admiration, reverence and respect’. Burke’s language (immensity, power, magnitude, grandeur, elegance) represents sublimity and all the terms were used by the eighteenth-century middle classes to describe and shape the nation state (Trevor-Roper, 2009, p.117).

Different scholars interpret the sublime in slightly different ways. In Chinese literature, sublime often goes with ‘theme’, which means to elevate an object to a higher state as is observed in literature or poetry. According to Wang (1997), the modern idea of the aesthetic stems from Western aesthetics. Since its initial reception in China, Western concepts of aesthetics have occupied a prominent place in various ideological discourses; Chinese thinkers and writers appropriate them to deal with ethical, social and political issues. If, in Kant, nature is a scene for the subject to contemplate and play out its drama, for Li (1981), who interprets the Chinese sublime, it is a scene for active and transformative human action and enterprise. A scene that Li depicts as sublime is characteristic of socialist China: a gigantic construction site lit up as if in broad daylight by electric lights, where tens of thousands of workers labour in the landscape. Such scenes, he states, can often invoke a sense of sublimity. Though Kant and Li have both given humans a place in the sublime, Li enables natural objects to reveal the striving of humans as they conquer external nature. He depicts the aesthetic feeling aroused by the sublime object by embracing the images of landscape and nature; however, against these natural phenomena, he places the collective labour and struggles for human existence and cultural achievements. These achievements encompass heroic actions and artistic genius with their creative endeavours, such as magnificent symphonies. These collective achievements give us a feeling of sublime satisfaction. Li places a higher value on human and artistic endeavour than he does on the landscape as the source of the sublime.

In theory, the sublime serves simultaneously as a method of engagement and a determining feature for thinking about politics and aesthetics (Wang, 1997). Understood in this way, politics in the context of Wang Ban’s notion of the sublime is taking over the aesthetic business of building images, constructing identities, erecting symbolic structures and creating an emotional ambience. In this paper, the suggestion is made that the power of landscape through LPA links directly with a strong affective appeal to the artists’ unconscious. Perception of the sublime regime can be seen as a sphere of the bodily, and what can be perceived by the senses instead of rationality and cognition. This theoretical application of the sublime eventually leads us to see how the centralized state rebrands Chinese landscape *shanshui* to propel the viewing subject out of the imaginary realm and sublimate artists in their symbolic discipline and order. By utilizing the concept of the Chinese sublime in the context of the Chinese cultural landscape, this research treats the sublime as a form of effect and sentiment expressed in worship, admiration and veneration of the country’s intangible cultural legacy.

### **Defining LPA: cultural timelessness and temporality of landscape**

In the light of LPA being proclaimed a Chinese invention by its nationalistic creators, this section will delve into its essence and defining characteristics. Specifically, it will feature the interviews conducted with Chinese cultural experts. Mobilizing the theory relating to landscape facilitates analysis of why LPA is claimed as a Chinese invention and how problematic this assertion is.

Since *Impression Liu Sanjie*, directed by Zhang Yimou and first performed in 2003, LPA has appealed to a wide range of audiences via the tourism market. Its production patterns are shaped



by socio-economic trends, artistic innovations, the development of the mass tourism market and developments in stage technology. The LPA designers introduce Western theatrical technologies while retaining what they consider to be the quintessential LPA mountain water (*shanshui*) aesthetic (Liu, 2021). LPA productions occur in a special kind of mountain water theatre. State landscape policies are not just articulated through the official discourse and organizers' claims, they are in the visual components of the scenes, which need to be fully addressed and positioned as art or theatrical form. Landscape is at the heart of LPA as a performing art genre which carries Zhang Yimou's artistic imprint – the form far outweighs the content. (Figure 1 and the video weblinks in the footnote<sup>2</sup> offer a comprehensive overview of LPA.)



**Figure 1.** An LPA from *Golden Age: The Kangxi Empire* © Dingsheng Cultural Industry Investment Ltd.

The first LPA, *Impression Liu Sanjie*, is a site-specific extravaganza which occupies the river as a stage and the mountain landscape as a backdrop illuminated by lights. *Impression Liu Sanjie* is a place-branding project as well as a large-scale tourist event. The show adopts a reductionist approach to the cultural object by fusing the local cultural icon, Liu Sanjie, with ethnic music, local customs and traditions which abstractly present the local people's 'authentic' rural life. It includes scenes of fishing, singing, marriage ceremonies and so forth. The show lasts about 70 minutes and comprises seven phases. A characteristic is that it uses 600 permanent performers; 450 of them local peasants and fishermen, who continue in their normal jobs during the day, yet perform in this spectacle in the evening.

This art form and marketing strategy are highly successful, generating peripheral tourism industries in the locality. The manager of the *Impression Liu Sanjie* theatre, Wang Jiaxian, stated, 'the greatness of *Impression Liu Sanjie* is that it has created a new industry for China – a Chinese cultural tourism industry' (interview, March 2018). LPA has created a new local economy based on sightseeing during the day, then watching a performance in the evening. LPA has become both a

<sup>2</sup>The video is from the Shanshui Culture Company, one of the most influential companies in the production of LPA, available at <https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1Qv41167CM/>

An additional video on LPA, *Impression West Lake*, is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oEcPJRiRaT4>

cultural tourism phenomenon and a fast-growing art form, with over a hundred LPAs burgeoning in many of China's most iconic tourist spots over nearly two decades. According to statistics from the National Tourism Administration, LPA has become a colossal industry, contributing more than 100 billion RMB (approximately £10 billion) to the Chinese economy (Zou, 2016). A further hundred regional projects are planned or under construction. These developments are very much part of the Chinese government's encouragement of localities to undertake an industrial transformation, upgrade through developing the cultural tourism industry and create a political economy in less-developed regions.

In defining LPA, Mei Shuaiyuan states: 'since I am the founder of LPA, I am the most qualified person to define LPA' (interview, March 2018). Though there were many performances in the West based on the concept of outdoor theatre before *Impression Liu Sanjie*, Mei Shuaiyuan still believes they are different from LPA on account of philosophical Chineseness:

This performing pattern can only exist in Chinese wisdom; Westerners would just build a theatre. We do not spend money building a theatre; nature itself is the theatre. I found this creativity had a traditional theoretical basis. When the place, the culture, and the people are united, it is called 'harmony between humans and nature', originally a Chinese Confucian philosophy. There is a fundamental difference between Chinese and Western thinking. Western people pay more attention to high technology for creating stage effects. Their science technologies are well-developed; therefore, they use technological means to express their art. (Interview, March 2018)

By comparing China's ancient past with modern Western culture, Mei's stereotypical view of China and the West repeats the platitude that the Chinese mind is more poetic than the Western scientific mind. He is utilizing Chinese philosophy as a means of differentiating cultures and endorsing LPA's Chinese originality. This idea echoes Chinese scholar Fei Xiaotong, who asserts that Chinese philosophy emphasizes harmony between humans and nature, while Western philosophy does not. Western dualism leads to the opposition of man and nature, man conquering nature being the ideal (Tang *et al.*, 2004, p.143). Mei Shuaiyuan continues to draw a line between China and the West by connecting LPA with the aesthetic of Chinese traditional *shanshui* (mountain water) painting:

As Chinese, we embrace nature more. Our old scholars' mountain water paintings (especially the scholars of the Song Dynasty) contain what the scholars and sages said about the sentimental attachment to mountain water (寄情山水) that is their ideal and aesthetic. This mountain water is not a physical mountain and water; it is people's internal emotions, a personal subjective perception, and an exploration into the state of harmony between humans and nature. That is why traditional Chinese painting's *xieyi*<sup>3</sup> is the opposite of Western realism landscape painting. Therefore, LPA has its source rooted in Chinese cultural origins and has developed within a traditional Chinese cultural context that comes down in one continuous line. (Interview, March 2018)

To question why this cultural demarcation matters, given that LPA applies technology that is not from China, Mei responds:

Applying high technology to an LPA is just a way of improving the effects; it is the sentimental attachment to the mountain water that is the core concept of LPA. (Interview, March 2018).

Mei emphasizes the mountain water concept and downplays technology's application, although it enhances LPA's novelty and popularity. The *paean* of the Chinese aesthetic is confirmed by Mei, who considers that the Chinese aesthetics flowing in Chinese people's blood makes modern Western aesthetic tastes unpalatable to the Chinese. This cultural otherness is essentialist and accentuates an

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<sup>3</sup> *Xieyi* is a concept of Chinese traditional painting. It is also often called *xieyi* splash-ink which is to paint unrealistically. *Xieyi* in the theatrical context is equivalent to abstract, imagistic or suggestive (Quah, 2004).

orthodox genealogy to legitimize LPA's abstract conception of Chineseness in the form of cultural aesthetics. This effort to construct an aesthetic Chineseness echoes Chao (2019), who argued that 'aesthetics, pastness, and nation branding are conjoined to question the shared visibility that obscures a timelier and inventive imaginary of the country' (p.321). The Chineseness expounded here is a regression to tradition; Mei Shuaiyuan has selectively used the aesthetic of Chinese art in a particular historical period to seek a primordial Chineseness aligned with Western Orientalist stereotypes of China. Unsurprisingly, all the interviewees express great pride and respect for Chinese traditional culture; for example, Zhang Xiao, a music composer in the LPA industry, emphasizes the extensive and profound nature of Chinese culture. Lili, a choreographer-director in the industry, expresses this Chinese philosophy: 'When I train the performers in the field, I can feel what Mr. Mei said about harmony between humans and nature; it is great' (interview, October 2018). However, cultural timelessness and landscape can be at odds with the affirmation of Chinese invention.

Physical landscapes have cultural significance; there is an issue of 'temporality of landscape' (Ingold, 1993) or what Sharif (2019) calls 'landscape of time and immobility', which can be employed to reveal the temporal politics behind Chinese landscapes: a sense of timelessness, the eternal stream of inspiration for the Chinese heart and soul. Thus, LPA can be considered a theatre of tradition and pastness enacted through the language of *shanshui*. Landscape and place are frequently read through the past and through time-embeddedness (Clope and Jones, 2001). 'To perceive the landscape is, therefore, to carry out an act of remembrance ... [to engage] perceptually with an environment ... pregnant with the past' (Ingold, 1993, pp.152–3).

History and the past are crucial to the understanding of place and landscape, but a more lively imagination of an intertwining of trajectories which also has a future which must be addressed would serve to counter the impression, so often left, that the present is some kind of achieved terminus. (Massey, 2006, p.4)

Metaphorically, landscape functions as cement, a sense of territory, to paste native history, legend, tradition and culture into place. The immobile mechanism of landscape makes it understandable that the Chinese landscape is transformed into a political culture to negotiate the country's temporality. The deployment of a politics of time and cultural timelessness is meant to 'mobilise China's dynastic past and its traditional arts to enhance the present' (Chao, 2019, p.321). The abstract inventions celebrated in Chinese *shanshui* paintings and gardens (Tan, 2016) inspire the Chinese Communist Party to claim LPA as a Chinese invention establishing a continuous cultural line from dynastic times. The Chinese Communist Party firmly positions this new invention among the inventions of ancient China. Such quiescent-ness, permanence and immobility are implicitly symbolic of the stability of the state and, thus, the durability of the Chinese Communist Party. To elaborate on how the temporality of the landscape is embodied in LPA, we need to focus on why it is necessary for Mei *et al.* to claim the genre as a Chinese invention. The answer is predictable: 'We Chinese have not invented new things for centuries, but more inventions will appear from now on' (interview with Mei Shuaiyuan, March 2018).

The inventions Mei refers to are not only the artistic inventions of LPA, but also those of science, technology and business. With Chinese landscape and philosophy as a Chinese civilizational essence and cultural gene, LPA has didactic ambitions from this past to witness China's present rise and wish it an inventive future. Therefore, past, present and future issues of temporality are all crystallized in the Chinese invention statement that has shown Mei's desire and confidence, and maybe even his anxiety. He insinuates that the emergence of LPA as an invention is significant in this 'great era', complying with Xi Jinping's dictates concerning the promotion of traditional culture: 'No origin, no future; where there is inheritance, there is innovation' (Zhang, 2019).

The West and the East are not incommunicable as humans are the same in physical structure. Westerners over-emphasized the human factor above nature. In the present era, Americans must return to nature. (Interview with Mei Shuaiyuan, March 2018)

Chinese cultural values and ideology have a universal value to Mei, to which even American cultural ideology must return and embrace. They align with current Chinese governmental propaganda on the themes of China's Rise and the China Dream, which depicts China as a great and responsible world power dominating in terms of culture. Xi Jinping, on many occasions, endorses harmony between humans and nature, which is 'a wisdom for the world from China' (a superior vision of Chinese culture broadcast to the world by the state) (Cao, 2015). As a producer designated by the party-state, Mei exhibits keen discernment of the prevailing political climate and direction. His statement is full of President Xi's catchphrases, such as 'great era', 'community of shared future for mankind' and 'cultural confidence'.

Nowadays, our thinking is more open and filled with innovative spirit, not second to Westerners ... This is the era belonging to China, a powerful country ... with the help of our cultural prosperity and cultural confidence. (Mei Shuaiyuan, as quoted in Ding, 2017)

Mobilizing tradition to create an art form does not necessarily deserve derision. There is hardly ever a totally new artistic invention; new inventions are usually built upon older inventions or traditions. Hybridity and the interweaving of culture have arguably always been characteristic of a nation's arts (Fischer-Lichte, 2009). 'Much of the creative invention of the period involved the hybridizing of old and new, foreign and local' (Cohen, 2016, p.9). The creation of LPA remains rooted in the past. China's official media declare that 'LPA is a Chinese invention and creation of modern culture' (Liang, 2017). If anything, LPA can be characterized as a traditional production adorned with commercial packaging, drawing inspiration from the ancient concepts of *shanshui* and the harmonious relationship between humans and nature. The traditional cultural elements and the landscape serve as pre-existing foundations, while Chinese artists skilfully amalgamate and brand them, resulting in an infusion of novel elements within LPA. To make art by essentially reproducing tradition hints at a glaring lack of artistic creativity. Hence, LPA's mobilizing of tradition and the past allows a convenient production; it is a reproduction with artistic embellishments. Perhaps a better description of the approach of LPA is that of a large-scale cultural adaptation rather than an invention.

Chow (2013, p.101) uses this 'affect of pastness' to suggest a form of geographical-temporal politics that classifies non-Western cultures when comparing them to the West and modernity through 'a temporal status of lagging and needing to catch up' (p.101). China is not simply wanting to use tradition to differentiate itself, but rather to demonstrate that the present can be close to the past. LPA has disclosed that, instead of creating a modern national brand, China passionately tracks back to the traditions of dynastic times. This is in accord with the legitimization of China's soft power and cultural nationalism through traditional culture and past glory. The further back this past can be traced, the more China can be imagined as a cohesive whole. Nation-branding underscores the imperative for a country to establish a distinctive visual and rhetorical identity *vis-à-vis* its competitors, frequently achieved through the promotion and preservation of its cultural heritage. But it also runs the risk of unintentionally evoking the spectre of Orientalism, suggesting a denial of passing time. Motionless culture runs counter to the surge of invention. Tradition, present and future are not always compatible. Tradition often becomes a stumbling block, preventing the nation's present from progressing to the future and to new possibilities. If LPA repeats traditions in a landscape loaded with Western stage technology, this is hardly an invention worthy of a 'great era'.

Political recuperation and control in China via a utilitarian approach to traditional culture obstruct creative minds (Gladston, 2014; De Nigris, 2016). Goxe and Dimitris (2012, p.153) generalize that 'the notion of Chinese values based on Confucianism serving indigenous innovation is mere rhetoric; the notion serves political agendas, but has little to do with innovation itself'. Inventive ideas flow neither from overwhelming propaganda nor from the assertion of blind faith. It is not that the authoritarian state never has a creative or artistic breakthrough. However, if China wants to transform into a world-leading inventive nation, the party-state must double down on optimizing cultural, social and political reform strategies. Many Chinese artists obsessively trace what



cultural historian Claire Holt (1967, p.3) considers ‘strands of continuities’ from the prehistoric period to the present, looking for signs of ancestor worship and national symbols in the most contemporary of expressions. Relying on tradition as a material to make artwork can be lucrative and inspirational, even if the topic is assigned by the government; however, the heavy hand of government in some instances can cripple the artistic imagination.

A heavy-handed instrumentalization of the country’s history and traditions obfuscates images of a contemporary China that is actively pursuing and nurturing attributes such as creativity, innovation, and originality in its creative industries and beyond. (Chao, 2019, p.336)

The topic of invention in the context of LPA serves to create a stationary national image for an ‘imagined community’.<sup>4</sup> Without a determinate break from tradition, LPA as a national brand is simply the resurrection of tradition, or at most, the ‘reinvention of tradition’ (Beiner, 2007, p.272) to imagine nationhood. By analysing China’s situation and considering tradition’s political instrumentalization, an invention with less reliance on tradition but a more progressive national image would possibly be closer to the spirit of invention.

### Chinese invention as a sublime for Chinese cultural nationalism

This section serves to extend the discussion on Chinese invention from the perspective of nationalism, thereby providing a critical analysis that bolsters the paper’s central argument. In deconstructing the Chinese invention assertion, ‘sublime’ is used to demonstrate how Chinese elites employ the landscape to promote cultural pride. Li Zehou (1981) stresses the sublime in human cultural achievements by dividing it into two categories: the sublime in humankind’s practical activity and the sublime in nature. ‘In human beings’ socio-historical activities, we find sublime images of great men and heroes in natural objects who readily sacrifice themselves for the nation or state and well-being of their fellow humans’ (Li, 1981, p.77). Thus, the sublime derives from practical human activities, and almost all of Li’s examples are of cultural constructions initiated by enterprising human beings. Following this thread, LPA claimed as a Chinese invention is an example of the sublime of cultural nationalism and achievement in the imagined landscape.

The feeling of greatness is portrayed as a moment of sublime that can be utilized to link pride, or admiration, with nationalistic sentiment and project the country’s greatness. It is also true that the sublime aesthetics, delineated by Schiller and Paul de Man (1983, p.52), is the popularization of a philosophy that belongs to culture and the state. In his *Sublime Figure of History*, Wang Ban (1997, p.191) has highlighted that the Schillerian brand of the sublime was privileged in Chinese aesthetic discourses. He avers that ‘the Chinese sublime is the altruistic commitment to collective goals and saintly self-sacrifice held up by the party state’s ideological discourse’. The application of the Chinese sublime to LPA has revealed that this alleged Chinese invention has transformed the individual victories of the LPA artists into a triumph for the state, which makes LPA an aesthetic ideology serving the state. It is essentially a sublime of the collective, which is less prone to experiencing the awe of self-empowerment. Evidently, this collectivism as an ideological aesthetic does not resonate with the Western model of democracy, freedom, individualism and self-determination. The aesthetic sublime obscures the boundaries of the controlled collective. It creates a fantasy that collectivistic Chineseness can produce great inventions that lead China to fight and

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<sup>4</sup> ‘Imagined community’ is a term coined by political scientist Benedict Anderson (1991). It refers to a concept where people within a nation or community have a sense of shared identity and belonging, even though most of them will never meet or interact with each other directly. This feeling of belonging and connectedness is fostered through shared symbols, rituals, language and a common understanding of history and culture. The idea of an ‘imagined community’ emphasizes the role of collective imagination and cultural representations in shaping a sense of nationhood and community among people who identify with a particular nation or group.

defeat Western individualism. The intended consequence of this cultural determinism is the ongoing erasure of individuals as political entities and their repositioning within the collective. The Chinese invention assertion dressed as a nationalistic sublime establishes the supremacy of national collectivism and the creative force of the collective at the expense of individual creativity. The deeper the collective icon penetrates, the more the tangible sense of individuality shrinks.

Kant (1764/1960, p.77) claims that ‘we call that sublime which is absolutely great; the effect of sublime experiences in landscape often inspires awe and reverence and an emotional understanding that transcends rational thought’. The Chinese invention statement attached to the Chinese cultural landscape delivers a sense of the sublime, which leads the elites to overrate the power of Chinese culture and neglect the fact that Western technology enables LPA’s viewing at night. The mountains and waters have always been there and enjoyed by tourists, but it was not until the LPA – enabled by technology – that they became prominent. Furthermore, the nationalistic sublime spreads the fallacy that the cultural heights the sages achieved in the past are unsurpassable for contemporary people. In fact, many feudal traditional values run counter to modern values and obsolescent traditions may have little influence on the modern world.

The repeated articulation of superior Chinese characteristics based on the exceptionalism of the cultural landscape signals the superiority of polity. It indirectly promotes a fatalism whereby China is destiny-bound to the authoritarian system that normalizes the Chinese Communist Party’s everlasting control. The sublime legitimizes an alternative socio-political, cultural and economic model to develop the creative industry rather than the Western approach. The Chinese invention assertion seeks to create a sensational media impact to mislead and govern the perception among the populace that China is becoming a creative country through its powerful cultural landscape. Hence, the sublime produced by the grand narrative of the *shanshui* concept creates a nationalistic fervour that overwhelms rationality and obscures the reality of China’s invention predicament. It is also a counterargument to the necessity and urgency of reforming the cultural and political system as the country transforms from an industrialized manufacturing economy to a creative economy.

Mei Shuaiyuan’s position of not assuming Western cultural superiority is essential here. His declaration implies that China (Chinese culture) is superior; thus, he promotes a hegemonic cultural nationalism. This cultural nationalism and hegemony embodied in LPA are further elaborated in the statements of Wang Chaoge, another pioneer of LPA. If Mei Shuaiyuan asserts LPA as a Chinese invention with an ethnocentric tone, Wang Chaoge, executive director of many LPAs (known as the *Impression* series), presents LPA with a more fervent and aggressive nationalism. Wang Chaoge bears the media title of ‘most innovative stage director in China’. She maintains a high media profile and is the self-declared ‘top-grossing director’ since her touristic theatrical productions, including the *Impression* series, are ceaselessly performed daily throughout the nation.

Wang Chaoge is inextricably linked with the Chinese government; she was invited in 1995 by the Chinese Communist Party to direct the play *Chinese National Spirit* in the Great Hall of the People. Wang’s stage productions predominantly take advantage of nationally and locally induced cultural pride devoid of any negativity. They promote a eulogizing sentimentality. For example, her tourist theatrical production, *Encore Pingyao*, emotively compliments Pingyao people’s morality and integrity. *Impression National Music* rouses people’s awareness of the loss of national traditional music and urges the Chinese to preserve their Chinese musical traditions. As a cultural nationalist, Wang once charged only a single Chinese yuan (equivalent to 10 UK pence) for directing *Impression National Music*, stating that ‘it is a cultural obligation to pass on Chinese national music’ (Wang Chaoge, as quoted in Feng, 2013). After Zhang Yimou stepped back from producing LPA, Wang Chaoge took over his role and took charge of LPA productions. She enthusiastically believes LPA is a Chinese invention: ‘it is about not only using the landscape as the backdrop but also performing the landscape’ (Wang Chaoge, as quoted in Liu, 2008). When she compares LPA with Western cultural values, Wang Chaoge demonstrates her strong cultural nationalism:

Various Chinese ideologies nowadays are less significant; our aesthetic has been invaded by the West. We must do our Chinese things to express our own emotions and aesthetics. I will let my kid and my kid's kids know that Chinese is the best. (Wang Chaoge as quoted in Yan, 2007)

Unsurprisingly, Wang's anxiety about losing Chinese culture and aesthetics fires her motivation as a Chinese artist and cultural elite in LPA. Regardless of how much Western culture and cultural globalization have drifted to China, the landscape's power can stabilize such influences by absorption, adaption and appropriation. The powerful narrative displayed in the Chinese landscape acts as an antidote to Western cultural aggression and hegemony. Wang's cultural nationalism resides at the intersection between China and the world. One simply needs to remember her orchestral work, *Encore National Music*, which employs the Chinese landscape as a stage backdrop, performed in the United States by the Chinese National Orchestra:

We took *Encore National Music* to the Kennedy Arts Center in the USA. After the show was performed several times, their manager and staff bowed and paid their respects to us. I was proud that I was contending against them by using the best show in the world to fight. I won! (Wang Chaoge as quoted in Yan, 2017)

Her dramatic statements clarify that by weaponizing traditional Chinese culture and emphasizing cultural differences, LPA as an invention serves as both a shield and a sword against American cultural invasion. The Chinese employ discourses of victor and victim to interpret the cultural conflicts between the US and China; from this comes an enhanced consciousness of nationality, which is depicted as 'the logic of the wound' by Rey Chow (1998, p.4). Seton-Watson (1977) holds a similar opinion: Chinese nationalism was partly a creation of Western imperialism.

Though Wang Chaoge is now Mei Shuaiyuan's competitor in the LPA field, they both utilize self-exoticizing strategies to produce their works. The language of Wang Chaoge's hyper-nationalism is more aggressive than Mei Shuaiyuan's, but they both resort to a superior tone which is alienating and provocative. It is a language of nationalism that is distasteful and dangerous. The subtle irony is that Wang Chaoge's vocalizing against Western hegemony makes her hegemonic. Rather than asserting China's position positively, she causes both East and West to recognize and reinforce their otherness. It has been common for China's national branding to employ its traditions and past. However, only recently have we seen cultural elites actively making a 'newly invented art form' through LPA that places China in a more culturally hegemonic position. LPA itself is nothing more than an audio-visual spectacle, but it relentlessly bonds the nation. It is debatable whether creating a theatrical production is necessary to articulate forms of national representation or embodiment. Newly created performing arts expressing artists' individual visions and interests which are not driven by nationalistic leanings or nation-specific attributes can still achieve commercial success. However, LPA is the dominant force that accentuates identification with national contexts, as when the Beijing Olympic Games opening ceremony was employed to present the nation's cultural merits.

According to Wang Ban (1997), the acquisition of national identity is indeed a sublimation process. Nationalism, when superimposed on Burke's sublime, informs us that beauty and the sublime are in diametrical opposition:

For Burke, the sublime is vast, rugged, and even dangerous. The sublime challenges the assumption that beauty is a necessary condition of good art. It inspires awe, excites ideas of pain and danger, and can be solid and massive. (Hanfling, 1998, p.44)

Similarly, nationalism can evoke these sublime feelings of awe and danger that confound reason. There may be accompanying feelings of elation, admiration or reverence; it can instigate a sense of awe produced by national ascendancy. Nationalism can be viewed simultaneously as a source of both horror and beauty: horrifying in its boundless and unimaginable nature, yet beautiful in the

recognition that it is nothing more than a myth or a fiction. In similar vein, LPA has shown that nationalism, when beautified, transforms the majestic landscape into an art form. However, it is wise to exercise caution since commandeering this art form for nationalistic purposes could be dangerous. Wang Chao's nationalistic speeches are too numerous to enumerate here, but they are generally antagonistic and swashbuckling in their assertion of dominance. It is no secret that hyper-nationalism constantly floods social media and is accepted by jingoistic Chinese nationalists (referred to as 'Wolf Warriors'<sup>5</sup> and 'Little Pink'<sup>6</sup>). One may jeer at such nationalistic sentiment, but this is the central ideology behind the Chinese Communist Party's regulation of the internet in the Great Firewall. On the one hand, such statements as 'Chinese culture is the best' denote a cultural superiority that elevates China to the summit of a worldwide civilization. On the other hand, this hyper-susceptible mentality could be seen as a lack of confidence. This nationalistic sublime, wanting in rational thought, sensitizes the nation and invokes a fragility unable to withstand criticism and questioning. This could potentially precipitate dissension and conflict. For the moment, internal contradictions are disregarded by the population, and its venom is directed toward the state's external enemies. It is notorious that the irrationality of the Chinese public reinforces the difficulties of separating national interests from the interests of the Chinese Communist Party. The implications of aggressive nationalism should not be underestimated as it is not only hazardous to China, but also the world. Belligerent Chinese national pride has drawn broad academic interest in the transition from affirmative to assertive and thence from assertive to combative.

By producing xenophobia toward ruthless and exploitative foreign powers, this state-led nationalism could lead China to overestimate its strengths and misjudge how far it can push other countries. (Zhao, 2021, p.157)

A cultural landscape can either constrain the nation or emancipate it from psychological rigidity. A narrow understanding of the cultural landscape brings about less ideological freedom than broad-minded thinking. Mitchell (2002, p.200) sees landscape as territorial, its photographs understood as something like pictorialized No Trespassing signs. Hyper-nationalism, aroused by the emotionality of the sublime from the landscape, not only burdens the nation with a narrow-minded narcissism, but also generates a strong sense of territorial protection and expansion.<sup>7</sup>

Treating the United States, Japan, India, Southeast Asian countries, and other Chinese neighbours with full disdain, state-led popular nationalists have supported the state taking coercive foreign policies, including using force to safeguard state sovereignty and territorial integrity. (Zhao, 2021, p.152)

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<sup>5</sup> The name 'Wolf Warriors' is derived from the title of the patriotic Chinese film, *Wolf Warrior*. The tagline of the film was 'Whoever attacks China will be killed no matter how far the target is'. Wolf Warrior is later used to describe an aggressive style of coercive diplomacy, namely 'Wolf warrior diplomacy', adopted by Chinese diplomats under Xi Jinping's administration.

<sup>6</sup> 'Little Pink' or 'Pinkie' are terms used to describe young jingoistic Chinese nationalists on the internet. The term 'Little Pink' originated on the website *Jinjiang Literature City*, when a group of users kept strongly criticizing people who published posts containing negative news about China. In the first days of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Little Pink drew international attention for their role in contributing to the mostly pro-war, pro-Putin sentiments on the Chinese internet (available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/27/business/china-russia-ukraine-invasion.html>) accessed September 2023.

<sup>7</sup> One survey conducted by Zhao (2021) in 2017 revealed that most Chinese urban residents were supportive of the government using force to take back the disputed Diaoyu Islands from Japan, even though such an action risked war with the United States. Another survey in 2018 confirmed hawkish attitudes among the Chinese people, who endorsed greater reliance on military strength, supported greater spending on national defence and approved of sending troops to reclaim disputed islands in the East and the South China Sea.



With its sense of belonging, the landscape is linked to Chinese nationalism, especially at this particular junction in contemporary Chinese history. Images of Chinese landscape are among widespread expressions of cultural nationalism: 'What amazing landscape there is in our country' (祖國的大好河山). The phrase is promoted in the media (both official and unofficial) to nurture a sense of pride and territorial belonging. It has also become the favoured expression Chinese tourists post on social media. This nationalism expressed through the landscape becomes more evident and acute in Galwan Valley, where Chinese and Indian troops often engage in violent skirmishes along the Sino-Indian border. Recently, Weibo recorded what Chinese soldiers had written on a cliff there: 大好河山 寸土不讓 (not one inch of our amazing land will we surrender).

The territorial issues with India and the South China Sea, and the claims to Taiwan and Hongkong, make the world anxious to see how far China's current state-led popular nationalism may push the nation toward military and violent conflicts. Presently, one unfortunate outcome of this nationalistic confidence and anti-Americanism is the vigorous assertion of the 'China model' and the rejection of universal values. If the Chinese elites are reluctant to acknowledge Western influence or learn from the West to develop their creative industry, they must at least temper their cultural superciliousness. They also need to be fully aware that assertive nationalism has put China's economic and political development on a risky track in the international arena and jeopardizes China's continued ascendance.

## Conclusion

The assertion of Chinese invention embedded in LPA is an outcome of the sublime in the Chinese landscape. On the one hand, the sublime emotionality of Chinese invention does not constitute superman individuals, but rather unifies the loose coalition of individual experiences and the heterogeneity of subject positions in the interests of total control and development of the creative economy. On the other hand, it nurtures aggressive individual and collective voices recruited for the national interest while resisting foreign forces, despite the risk of creating ideological maniacs. The emotion-driven sublime of the cultural landscape is employed to rationalize something irrational. LPA is a firm statement that the development of the country's creative industry is not through Western liberal means, but rather through Confucian ideology – as the party-state interprets it. In other words, it legitimizes the China model, normalizing China's political rhetoric in the development of creative industry independent of the West. The exceptionalism of the Chinese landscape and the Chinese invention erases the necessity and urgency for political reform. A top-down agenda places Chinese creativity under tight ideological control. No matter how grandiloquent the description of China's ancient past and tradition, China still lacks a convincing explanation of how a glorious past can save the nation's present and future creativity from the restraint of tradition. The political exploitation of the Chinese landscape has become an obstacle, a shield and a trumpet. If LPA is essentially a spectacle, then the Chinese invention assertion is also a spectacle, a media spectacle. This may double the sensational impact, but at the cost of masking China's inventiveness and how it is fettered by the country's political system.

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