

Chapter 12

Chinese Wisdom, World Quality: A Visual Semiotic Analysis of China's “Zou Xiang Shi Jie” (Going Global)

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ABSTRACT

The typical feature of emergent economies is a slow, apparent transformation from being predominantly a home base of Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) to becoming more home markets for various firms that expand internationally. In this aspect, China differs from its Asian forerunners. Without question, the most rapid development in recent decades within East Asia and the global economy as a whole is the (re-)emergence of China. While most studies on growth strategies for multinational corporations from emerging economies come from the perspective of economic strategies in international business, this study offers a novel perspective by using visual semiotics as a framework of study and analysis of data. It uses theories of social semiotics borne of the traditions of linguistics to conduct a systematic analysis of the representations of China's desire to go global with their automobile industry. The company in focus is China's Zhejiang Geely Holding Group (Geely) in the years between 2007 to 2011, just prior to an after its acquisition of Volvo Car Corporation (VCC).

1. INTRODUCTION

The typical feature of emergent economies, particularly those in Asia, from Singapore, South Korean, Taiwan and also Thailand is a slow, apparent transformation from being predominantly a home base of foreign direct investments (FDI) to becoming more home markets for various firms that expand internationally (Alvstam & Ivarsson 2014). In this aspect, China differs from its forerunners. Without question, the most rapid development in recent decades within East Asia and the global economy as a whole is the (re-)emergence of China. China recorded the highest growth rate in the world between 1980 and 2003 with annual average rates of more than 10 percent. The IMF World Economic Outlook Database from 2005 has also ranked China's economy as highest in GDP accumulated growth (in percent at constant prices) at above 320% compared to the next highest economies at about 150% (Ireland and Singapore).

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Two significant characteristics of China's renaissance is its populous, cost-efficient labour force and its openness to global trade (Dicken 2015). It began with its "*yin jin lai*" ('coming-in') strategy (Tang et al. 2008:37) after the relaunch of the 'Four Modernizations' in 1978, where its economic global influences could be seen to increase with the launch of the "*zou xiang shi jie*" (going global) and "*yu lang gong wu*" ('dances with wolves') strategies (Alvstam & Ivarsson 2014, Tang et al. 2008). As a result of its going global efforts, China's influence today stretches deeper than its exports of cost efficient goods, exhibited in its foreign policy and global diplomacy in the aftermath of the global financial crisis that began in 2007/8 (Deng 2014). Many voices seem to regard China's rise with weariness and caution, where those who consider themselves a global power are caught in the web of deciphering a value and meaning system set in a language that is not quite understood (Dicken 2015, Deng 2014).

In this process of the globalization and reconfiguration of China, language plays a focal role, being involved with almost every aspect of human interaction and human cognition (Ng, Ye & Lee 2011, Fairclough 2006). The capacity for language is innate in the human species with a distinct social function. It is the medium in which thoughts are organized and communication proceeds (Hodge & Kress 1993). In the context of globalization and international management, where organizations find themselves having to navigate the different language environments and their meanings, language is increasingly acknowledged as being at the heart of international business (IB) activities (Brannen, Piekkari & Tietze 2014). Yet, few studies outside the field of sociolinguistics have studied language as used in a globalizing context, and in understanding of the workings of organizations (Cordeiro-Nilsson 2009, Leitch & Palmer 2009, Fairclough & Thomas 2004, Alvesson & Kärreman 2000).

Language is a semiotic system of symbolic representation of meaning, used to both describe and circumscribe meaning in a certain reality. Being an effective tool of transaction (i.e. taking material action with words), it continues to contribute to the evolving nature of human development and civilization (Cook-Greuter 1995). Because meanings belong to culture, rather than to specific semiotic modes, studying both linguistic and visual structures point towards particular interpretations of experience and forms of organizational interaction (Kress & Van Leeuwen 2006). As such, language in this chapter takes on a more comprehensive definition, encompassing not just the grammar of linguistic structures, but also that of visual structures.

The specific example taken in this chapter as an example of an Asian-founded emerging market firm is the acquisition in 2010 of the originally Swedish company Volvo Car Corporation (VCC) by Chinese Zhejiang Geely Holding Group (Geely). This chapter consists of a visual semiotic analysis of the globalization efforts of Geely. It traces the semiotic developments of China's global ambitions in the automobile industry, analysing the years prior to and after, Geely's acquisition of VCC from between 2007 and 2011, with the years of the negotiation for VCC falling between mainly 2009 and 2010, offering insights to the study of emerging global organizations from emerging economies (Alvstam & Ivarsson 2014). It illustrates how theories of social semiotics borne of the traditions of systemic functional linguistics (SFL) and critical discourse analysis (CDA) can be applied in conducting a systematic analysis of the representations of China's desire to go global with their automobile industry, tracing Geely's organization ideological developments in global corporate visioning and ambition as reflected even in their annual reports between 2007 and 2011.

This chapter is organized in the following manner: the following section will give an overview of the Chinese automobile industry from a Swedish perspective, followed by background information to China's Geely. The background information of Geely serves as the focal points of contributing information to the narrative of Geely, a narrative that is then reproduced in a discourse of text and visuals in secondary

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