The revival of China time-honoured brands

Following the paw prints of the "White Rabbit" (*Dabaitu* 大白兔)

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This article fills an existing gap by examining the ongoing revival of China time-honoured brands (*laozihao*). It first offers a critical overview of the recent changes that happened in the perception of Chinese brands outside China and their current development inside China, by relating them to the country's wider strategies of soft power and national branding. After providing an updated account of the governmental regulation concerning the revival of *laozihao*, the article focuses on the brand White Rabbit (*Dabaitu*) as a case study. Based on the theoretical framing that brands are cultural texts, it identifies the different historical phases of WR development and provides a critical analysis of the branding and promotional strategies that allowed it to thrive over the past few decades, in line with the official priority of shifting to "Created in China" and the increasing demand for *guochao*.

Keywords: Chinese brands, *laozihao,* White Rabbit, *Dabaitu,* nation branding, *guochao,* nostalgia, retro branding, revival.

1. White Rabbit Creamy Candy: you never forget your first one

In China's national bestseller *Brothers* by Yu Hua, a passage about two child protagonists—Song Gang and Baldly Li—reads as follows:

> [t]he boys cried out in surprise. This was the first time they had tasted soft candy—chewy, cream-flavored candy. The wrapper had a picture of a big white bunny, and the name was White Rabbit … The two kids placed the milk candy in their mouths, slowly licking, chewing, and swallowing their saliva, which was now sweeted with candy and tasted like cream. (Hua 2009: 50)

As the narrative unfolds, this intimate, hedonistic shared experience—and consumption—of the brand White Rabbit (*Dabaitu* 大白兔, WR)[1] turns out to be crucial: in that precise moment, the two children

[1] It is worth pointing out that the literal English translation of *Dabaitu* is actually "Big White Rabbit;" nonetheless, it was never used as the official international brand name.

officially become brothers, despite being born to different parents, having opposite characters as well as distinct lives ahead of them in a fast-changing China. Moreover, as the story continues, later on that night,

> ... the children lay in bed cradling their White Rabbit wrappers, sniffing the remaining traces of creamy sweetness and thinking about how they would encounter more White Rabbits in their dreams (Hua 2009: 51).

The novel *Brothers* sets off in China before the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976, CR), at a time when conspicuous consumption was uncommon—to use a euphemism—and only a few national brands and rationed products were available. During the ravages of the so-called "ten years of chaos," advertising and branding were associated with Western capitalism and considered evil, thus they gradually became rare (Puppin 2020). Nonetheless, some branded products—such as *Xiongmao* 熊猫 (Panda) radios and *Feige* 飞鸽 (Flying Pigeon) bicycles—managed to survive and even became sought after goods (Fan 2006). The same destiny befell White Rabbit Creamy Candy (*Dabaitu naitang* 大白兔奶糖, WRCC), which, since its origin in 1959, has become a household name, as it accompanied the growth and brought alive the childhood memories of Chinese generations born in the post-1960s decades.

After more than half a century, in 2019, the same WR that Song Gang and Baldly Li met in their dreams made a grand reappearance on giant candy packages, vintage milk bottles and tin boxes, as well as rabbit- and candy-shaped soft pillows, crowding the shop windows of Shanghai First Foodhall in Nanjing Donglu, the busiest shopping street in the city. To celebrate the 60th anniversary of its WR brand, the Shanghai-based state company Guan Sheng Yuan Food Group (*Guan Sheng Yuan shipin youxian gongsi* 冠生园食品有限公司, GSYFG) launched its Cartoon Rabbit Tin Boxes, which were available in different colours and candy flavours. The window displays caught the eyes of the floating crowds of passers-by: they sometimes happened to be family members of three different generations of Chinese, who were probably sharing their brand-related stories and memories (Fig. 1).

Figure 1. Shanghai First Foodhall window displaying WR products (Nanjing Donglu, Shanghai, June 2019). Photo by the author.

The aforementioned brand extension is just one example of the different marketing tactics recently employed by GSYFG to revitalise its former mono-product brand strategy, and to attract a new segment of consumers amid the ever-fierce market competition of contemporary China. Considering that, all around the world, even the most iconic brands, sooner or later, struggle with their own decline, a set of questions naturally arises: what is the brand history of WR? How was its development influenced by the political, economic and sociocultural context? What branding and promotional strategies enabled WR to survive over the past few decades and become the protagonist of a revival in recent years?

This article intends to follow the journey of the brand WR, from its origins to the present day, as an illustrative example of the prominent role occupied by Chinese brands in the national cultural landscape. To date, only a few English-language academic contributions have investigated China's efforts to build its own national brands, often with a focus on their global ambitions (Fan 2006; Wu, Borgerson and Schroeder 2013), rather than their development at home (Li 2008; Jin, Shao, Griffin and Ross 2018). A new stream of English-language literature is flourishing around the recent revival of the so-called "China time-honoured brands" (*Zhonghua laozihao* 中华老字号, CTHBs or THBs), which mainly consists of contributions from a management and marketing perspective (Forêt and Mazzalovo 2014; Balmer and Chen 2015; Wu and Lin 2018), with just a few exceptions taking into account the cultural dimension of the phenomenon (Schroeder, Borgerson and Wu 2015; Dubois 2021).

In addressing this gap, this article aims to provide some comprehensive, original and updated insights into what is happening in China's brand world by adopting WR as a case study. It first offers a critical overview of the recent changes that happened in the perception of Chinese national brands *outside* China, followed by an investigation of their current development *inside* China, and explains the crucial link between soft power, national branding and the rise of national brands. It then focuses on the ongoing process of revival of CTHBs and provides an updated account of the relevant governmental

regulation. Based on the theoretical framing that brands are cultural texts, the article then proceeds with a critical history and analysis of WR and some of its promotional strategies: the aim is to provide an in-depth reading that takes into account the cultural, historical and sociopolitical dimensions of its brand essence, which have played a crucial role in the different phases of birth, growth and revival.

2. Copycats or piranhas? The paradox surrounding Chinese brands' perception outside China

The first time Chinese brands managed to gain significant international recognition was related to the "going-out strategy," a policy which was launched by the Chinese government in the 1990s to encourage domestic companies to go global and become international. With China gaining access to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) on 11 December 2001, this priority became even more urgent: between 1992–2000, the State Council identified 120 state-owned industry groups to support their overseas expansion. These companies could count on a wide variety of financial subsidies, from domestic tax breaks to low-interest funding from banks (Shambaugh 2013).

Such generous support from the Chinese government has to be understood as a conscious effort to erase the old stereotype of the label "Made in China"—which traditionally stigmatised the country as the factory of the world, producing cheap and low-quality goods—and an acknowledgement that it kept undermining China's national image, in general, and domestic brands, more specifically (Fan 2016).

As a matter of fact, before the Beijing 2008 Olympics, the perception of Chinese national brands outside China was characterised by an underlying paradox. On the one hand, China's brandscape was seen as inhabited by mere copycats, as can be evinced in the following passage by the expert in country branding, Simon Anholt:

> I have in front of me a bronze and black torch battery which looks exactly like a Duracell, but on closer inspection [it] is called "Guanglihua." Where the Duracell battery says "EXTRA HEAVY DUTY," this one says "EXERY NEAVY DUTY" (an easy enough mistake to make when you're trying to copy words in an unfamiliar alphabet); and most amusingly, the useful little chemical strip which, on the Duracell, tells you whether the battery has any charge left in [it], is simply printed as a flat image onto the side of the Guanglihua battery, and serves no purpose whatsoever. (Anholt 2005: 32)

This view perpetuates the old "Made in China" stereotype and its link to the act of counterfeiting that violates the economic order of the free market, thus resulting in being detrimental to the country's national image.

On the other hand, but interestingly in the same year, the evolution of Chinese brands was described in drastically different tones by Tom Doctoroff, the former CEO of J. Walter Thompson Asia Pacific:

> [t]oday, they [Chinese national brands] are an increasingly high-power threat, one that multinational competitors ignore at their peril... [t]actically ruthless, they are a school of piranhas smelling blood in the water and instinctively detecting weakness in the primordial soup that is China's brand universe. They will chew the flesh off of MNC players trying to survive off quick, shallow liaisons with (increasingly savvy) consumers. Less than a decade ago, local "trademarks" were laughably inferior, fodder for self-denigrating (yet nationalistic) Chinese patriots. Yet, as we pass the midpoint of the twenty-first century's first decade, Shenzhen-based TLC is (painfully) digesting its recent Thompson television acquisition and Lenovo has—in one breathless, bold stroke—purchased IBM's PC division... No one is snickering now. (Doctoroff 2005: 161)

The powerful metaphor of threatening "piranhas" refers to the practice of mergers and acquisitions (M&As), through which Chinese companies acquire foreign companies and brands as a form of overseas direct investment (ODI). A representative example is Lenovo's purchase of IBM's PC division for $1.75 billion in 2004 (Fan 2006).

Still in 2005, the American businesswoman Shelly Lazarus—former Chairman and CEO of Ogilvy & Mather Worldwide—publicly stated that: "Lenovo and Haier are not brands and so far China has no brands in any real sense"; she then reiterated and clarified: "I never said that Haier and Lenovo are not brands. They are brands. They are brands with huge potential. They are just not yet as fully developed as brands can be" (Yong 2005). Yet, this pessimistic view was soon to change.

The Beijing 2008 Olympics constituted an unmissable opportunity for China to promote both its country brand and its national brands. Consequently, a number of publicity campaigns were broadcast internationally, in order to promote the country's evolution into a country synonymous with "Created in China," capable of developing its own cultural creative industries, as well as IPR-eligible brands (Keane 2007).

In 2009, the Ministry of Commerce (henceforth MOC) and four Chambers of Commerce sponsored the publicity ad "Made in China, Made with the World,"[2] which also ran on Cable News Network (CNN). It portrayed a variety of products whose labels were "Made in China," but also included the names of other countries, with which China collaborated: the aim was to establish China's profile as a reliable business partner rather than a mere manufacturer (Barr 2012). In 2011, before former President Hu Jintao's state visit to the United States, the Chinese government launched an external publicity

[2] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kmbTseEJpWI

campaign entitled "Experience China." The ad "People,"[3] which was aired in New York's Times Square, depicted a number of Chinese personalities excelling in different fields, and highlighted the contribution of the country on a global level (Li 2020).

These examples of national branding, intended as the "the quintessential modern exemplar of soft power" (Anholt 2005: 13), are inextricably intertwined with the promotion of national product brands, which are crucial vectors of a country's culture, image and reputation. The Chinese authorities were—and still are—well aware that the growth of national brands would play a crucial role in boosting the country's soft power, both inward- and outward-looking (Barr 2011). Not surprisingly, in 2011, large corporations such as Haier (*Hai'er* 海尔), Wuliangye (*Wuliangye* 五粮液) and Gree (*Geli* 格力) also advertised their products in Times Square: this news was reported with great fanfare back home, as it satisfied the national fantasy of Chinese companies and brands conquering the world (Li 2020).

Despite the traditional Western scepticism about the power of Chinese brands, the latest editions of the most renowned global rankings are witnessing a significant increase in their number. For example, in 2010, the renowned *BrandZ Top 100 Most Valuable Global Brands* (which was originally drafted by Millward Brown) included only 5 Chinese brands, whilst the 2024 edition featured 11.[4] Moreover, starting in 2011, the world's leading marketing data, insight and consultancy company Kantar has been issuing its *Most Valuable Chinese Brands*;[5] in 2019, 2020, and 2021 it has also been publishing its *BrandZ Chinese Global Brand Builders*.[6] Similarily, Interbrand—another leading global brand consultancy—has been issuing its *Best China Brands*, so far in 2014, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2021, 2022 and 2023.[7] All these are important signs that China's evolving brandscape is becoming increasingly powerful and, thus, worth monitoring.

3. Sometimes they come back: the revival of China time-honoured brands

Long gone are the days when China was thought of as being devoid of its own domestic brands. For hardcore sceptics, a simple walk around the most touristic areas in China's metropolises, such as Nanluguxiang in Beijing and Tianzifang in Shanghai, will be revealing. The former unbranded shops with kitsch souvenirs have been replaced by the official stores of CTHBs; in addition to WR, one can

[3] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tubAilANUJU

[4] https://www.kantar.com/campaigns/brandz/global

[5] https://www.kantar.com/campaigns/brandz/china

[6] https://www.kantar.com/campaigns/brandz/special-reports

[7] https://interbrand.com/newsroom/interbrand-releases-best-china-brands-2023/

find brands such as *Tongshenghe* 同升和 (cloth shoes), *Daoxiangcun* 稻香村 (bakeries), *Xiefuchun* 谢馥春 (cosmetics) and *Huili* 回力 (also known as Warrior, sneakers), to name but a few. One of Huili's in-store adverts audaciously appropriated the once denigratory "Made in China" label and, by juxtaposing it with the image of a cool young Chinese girl, gave it positive connotations (Fig. 2).

Figure 2. Huili shop display (Tianzifang, Shanghai, June 2019). Photo by the author.

The aim of similar promotional materials is to tackle the negative country-of-origin effect and establish a good reputation for China-made brands and products, by stimulating domestic consumption in a sort of revival of the wave of nationalist consumption that gained momentum in the 1920s and '30s (Gerth 2003). Needless to say, the reappearance of the aforementioned CTHBs did not happen overnight and, most importantly, was not spontaneous—it was, rather, the result of a policy decision.

Despite China having a very long history of brands (Ma 2007; Eckhardt and Bengtsson 2010), it was only after the founding of the People's Republic in 1949 that the MOC began to rank the best national brands, but this practice was suspended around 1966 due to the start of the CR (Forêt and Mazzalovo 2014). After China's economic reforms in 1979 and throughout the 1990s, the domestic market was dominated by state-owned trademarks, which lost ground to foreign brands: the latter, for decades, symbolised high-quality products and a middle-class lifestyle that Chinese people aspired to, whilst domestic goods were left with the lower end of the market (Dong and Tian 2010). According to the results of some reviews conducted in the early 1990s, the old national businesses and brands were in crisis, mainly due to their lack of competitiveness and innovation compared to multinational enterprises (Dubois 2021).

In the early 2000s, whilst the world was still confused over competing views and speculation on China's next brand move, a lively national debate on how to develop domestic brands was raging across the country. Alongside the official discourse on creating and promoting new Chinese brands, the government also endorsed another project: its "Plan for the Revival of THBs" (*zhenxing laozihao gongcheng* 振兴老字号工程), which aimed to save the country's historical brands and commercial traditions.

It was in 2006 that the MOC issued the first guidelines on the award of *Zhonghua laozihao* status. The "Notice Implementing 'The Plan for the Revival of THBs'" established the eligibility criteria for awarding the label, provided the details of the application process, and set the goal to establish 1,000 CTHBs within three years. It specified that the *laozihao* status could be awarded to selected businesses that:

1. own or have the intellectual rights of the trademark;
2. were founded in 1956 or before;
3. sell products or employ skills that are unique and have been handed down over time;
4. carry on the tradition of China's excellent business culture;
5. possess a distinctive Chinese and local flavour, as well as specific historical and cultural values;
6. enjoy a wide and good reputation;
7. are held by mainland China, Hong Kong, Macao or Taiwan capital stock, and are capable of long-term growth (Mofcom.gov.cn 2006a).

In October of that year, the "Notice of the MOC and the State Administration of Cultural Heritage on Strengthening the Protection of THBs' Cultural Heritage" was issued to guarantee the sustainable and healthy development of CTHBs and the cultural heritage they embody (Mofcom.gov.cn 2006b). In November, the MOC released the first list of companies and brands that were awarded *laozihao* status – totalling 430 (Mofcom.gov.cn 2006c). One year later, it issued its official CTHBs logo (see Fig. 3), which could be used by qualifying businesses on their packaging, instructions and advertising for their products, as well as a certificate and a plaque (Mofcom.gov.cn 2007).

中华老字号
China Time-honored Brand

Figure 3. The official *Zhonghua laozihao* logo (Mofcom.gov.cn 2007)

In 2008, the MOC and 14 other departments jointly released their "Opinions on Protecting and Promoting the Development of THBs," which extolled local authorities to include the promotion of *laozihao* in city planning (i.e., through dedicated commercial streets, like the ones mentioned above), protect their intellectual property (IP) and help them solve any financial credit issues (Mofcom.gov.cn 2008). In 2010 the MOC released its second list of companies and brands that were awarded *laozihao* status—totalling 345 (Mofcom.gov.cn 2010). A year later, it issued its "Notice on the Effective Implementation of the Protection and Promotion of CTHBs," which listed the benefits of the Plan, such as: the building of corporate integrity systems, expansion of the domestic market, improvements to operations management etc. It also urged more control by setting up a hotline for complaints regarding IP infringements and encouraged the use of information management systems via a dedicated online platform (Mofcom.gov.cn 2011). In 2017, the "Guiding Opinions on Promoting the Reform and Innovative Development of THBs"—which were jointly issued by the MOC and 16 other departments—urged businesses to adapt to changing consumer demand and catch up with the opportunities provided by the so-called "Internet+" space (i.e. through e-commerce), as well as improve their market competitiveness (Mofcom.gov.cn 2017).

In 2022, the MOC and 8 other ministries and administrations jointly issued their "Opinions on How to Promote the Innovative Development of THBs," which urged further enhancing the protection of *laozihao* and stimulating cross-border integration, as well as widening the online presence of CTHBs (i.e. through a digital museum). For the first time, explicit reference was made to the internationalisation process of CTHBs (Mofcom.gov.cn 2022).

By protecting old businesses, and helping to retain the best ones, the Plan appears to be "a process that also rewrote the narrative of China's commercial history" (Dubois 2021: 49). The Plan also urges CTHBs to catch up with the innovation and competitiveness that are required to meet the increasing demand for *guochao* 国潮,[8] in line with other initiatives related to domestic brands in general. First and foremost, the official call made in 2014 by Xi Jinping to "push from Made in China to Created in China, from China speed to China quality, from Chinese products to Chinese brands," which led to the creation of an annual China Brand Day shopping event celebrated on 10 May (CCTV.com 2020).

[8] The term *guochao*, literally "national tide" but usually translated as "China chic," mainly refers to brands and consumer goods that exploit Chinese cultural elements and nationalism as key selling points.

4. Case study: White Rabbit

The theoretical standpoint of this contribution is that culture is a vital resource for brands (Schroeder 2009; Eckhardt 2015). From a Cultural Studies perspective, "brands can be read as cultural texts which are culturally produced and consumed, and as symbolic articulators of production and consumption … [b]rands are socially constructed texts which mediate meanings between and amongst consumers and producers" (O'Reilly 2005: 582). Moreover, a brand "garners an identity through its name, its association with cultural meaning, its dissemination through mass manufacturing and advertising campaigns, and other strategies designed to give it what can be called 'cultural relevance'" (Bedbury and Fenichell 2002: 25). Like all other brands, WR has a fundamental essence that goes beyond its physicality and its relation to the products it identifies with, and it is activated by the promises and hopes that ensue from its purchase.

WR was purposively selected for a case study because it is an iconic CTHB and its brand history and development are representative of the changes that have happened in China's brandscape in the last 60 years. Moreover, WR implemented most of the suggestions made by the governmental guidance illustrated in the previous section.

The second part of the article reconstructs WR's brand history by breaking down the journey of WRCC into different developmental phases, in chronological order: birth, growth and revival. In each phase, the main branding and promotional strategies are examined against the political, economic and sociocultural context. The analysis draws upon cultural theory and semiotics, and aims to provide a critical reading of the brand and its different forms of "textuality," such as logo, adverts, slogans, packaging etc.

4.1. From Mickey Mouse to the sitting White Rabbit (1943–1978)

According to the official brand history provided in the GSYFC website, in 1943 the president of the now defunct Shanghai-based ABC Confectionery (*Aipixi tangguochan* 爱皮西糖果厂) decided to produce a Chinese version of British fudge. The result was the precursor of WRCC, which was called "ABC Mickey Mouse Roll," as the packaging featured Walt Disney's famous cartoon character. The sweet taste of the candy, combined with its low price, if compared to imported ones, guaranteed sales success (Gsygroup.com n.d.).

In 1956, following the nationalisation of private companies, ABC Confectionery became state-owned, and its original English-sounding name was substituted with the socialist-friendly *Aimin tangguochan* 爱民糖果厂 (literally: "the confectionery that loves the people;" Bo 1994). This example

of renaming is representative of a widespread trend in post-1949 and pre-1979 China: as advertising and branding were considered ideologically polluted by Western capitalism, some companies opted for more revolutionary names in order to better align with the political priorities of the time (Puppin 2014). Being an unequivocable symbol of American culture, Mickey Mouse was associated with "the adoration of things foreign" (*chongyang meiwai* 崇洋媚外),[9] thus it could no longer be used.

In 1959, a new brand name, logo and packaging appeared, and this is how WRCC was born. Its production was linked to the celebrations for the 10th anniversary of the People's Republic: this milestone event marked the product's first political and cultural connotations and endowed it with the status of *guomin naitang* 国民奶糖 ("national creamy candy;" Guo Li 2019, Gsygroup.com n.d.).

The brand logo consisted of a sitting rabbit with blue contours: it was portrayed side-on and looking to the left, with two stylised artist palettes (one black, one red) in the background. The name in English appeared above the rabbit (in red) and below it (in black), the latter followed by its version in Chinese characters. At the top, a geometrical shape contained the character *xi* 喜 ("happy event", normally referring to weddings) repeated three times. Apart from this element, which later disappeared, the candy wrapping has remained the same to this day; the candy—white, cylindrical and with an edible rice wrapping paper—has also remained unchanged (Fig. 4).

Figure 4. An actual wrapper of WRCC. Photo by the author.

[9] This expression became popular towards the end of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), particularly during the Self-Strengthening Movement—a movement of radical reforms which spread in the second half of the 19th century in order to introduce Western methods and technology to China. *Chongyang meiwai* is still used today to scorn those Chinese who are overly interested in the West and often instigates cultural nationalism and antiforeign feelings.

The first slogan used to promote the product was *Qili Dabaitu naitang dengyu yibei niunai* 七粒大白兔奶糖等于一杯牛奶 ("Seven WRCCs equal a glass of milk"), which positioned the candies not only as sweet, but also as nutritious. This characteristic meant the product was in high demand: in the 1960s and '70s, milk was rationed in China's planned socialist economy, and people had to queue to buy WRCC as the quantity they could buy was limited (China.com.cn 2009). In those years, the candy was mostly given as wedding gift (newly married couples used to place a couple of them in their wedding sweets bags) and was also typically given to children during the Chinese New Year holiday. The experience of eating WRCC was so rare that it was not eaten immediately but, rather, kept in pockets (People.com.cn 2020).

For those Chinese generations who had their childhood in those decades, eating WRCC today can trigger feelings of nostalgia. The popular saying *Yiban shi yinwei kouwei, yiban shi yinwei jiyi* 一半是因为口味，一半是因为记忆 ("Half for taste, half for memory") expresses how Chinese consumers developed both cognitive associations related to the candy's sweetness, as well as emotional feelings such as childhood brand nostalgia. The latter is defined as "a positively valenced emotional attachment to a brand because of the brand's association with fond memories of the individual's non-recent lived past" (Shields and Johnson 2013: 4).

It is in this historical phase that WRCC took on thicker political connotations and was even referred to as a tool for "sugar diplomacy:" back in 1972, China's then-Premier Zhou Enlai presented a bag of candy as a gift to visiting US President Richard Nixon. Later on, the candy was also given to Soviet leaders, Krusciov and Brežnev, thus gaining the status of a national gift, and it began to be exported abroad: these events proved to be a boost to national pride. In 1976, when previously state-owned companies were going through restructuring, the *Aimin* company was annexed to GSYFG, which was founded in 1915. The daily production of candy increased fourfold, from 1 to 4 tons (China.com.cn 2009).

According to the categorisation employed by Jones (2016), the aforementioned company itineraries, as well as historical and political events, fed into the iconisation of WRCC, a process in which the positive attributes of the candy became certified by the Chinese authorities and were intertwined with a variety of discourses related to the emergence of China as an economic and political power.

4.2. IP wars and the milk scandal (1979-2011)

In 1979, the year of China's reform and opening up, WRCC received the first of a long list of prestigious national awards, such as the silver prize for a quality product and, in 1992, the label of well-known trademark (Peng 2021).

In 1986, the logo changed to that of a hopping rabbit, designed in a cartoon-style, with a mushroom in the background, which—with minor changes—is still in use today (Fig. 5). The candy wrapping remained unchanged.[10]

Figure 5. The latest version of the WR registered trademark (https://sbj.cnipa.gov.cn/sbj/index.html)

A print advert of the time used the unique selling proposition (USP) of nutritious value for the product, stating: *Naiwei nongyu, yingyang fengfu* 奶味浓郁 营养丰富 ("Fragrant milk flavour, rich in nutrition"). It depicted different types of packaging for the product and, in the background, a mother and her little girl holding a piece of candy (Fig. 6).

[10] The style of the new logo resembles the illustrations of a famous children's serial picture book titled *Cai Mogu* 采蘑菇 ("Gathering Mushrooms"), which was printed in 1978 and tells the story of four rabbits and a big mushroom.

Figure 6. Advert for WRCC in the 1980s (https://www.sohu.com/a/156438002_119756)

In 1985, production stopped due to an issue with the registration of the brand. In 1983, an entrepreneur from Guangzhou stole and registered the Mickey Mouse Roll brand, and then sold it to the Disney Company. This event was labelled a breach of IP and passed into history as a lesson paid for in blood. This prompted GSYFG to register its different brands and even the rice-paper wrapping. The brand was also registered abroad (Bo 1994). This is an important milestone event that illustrates China's willingness and determination to protect its own IP rights, and acted as a model example that other domestic companies could and should learn from.

Originally, the WR brand was associated only with one product—WRCC. It was in 2002 that WR evolved from a mono-brand architecture to a dominant-secondary brand architecture: by adding two new candies—Plum Candy and Peanut Nougat—it extended its product range and introduced new choices to consumers (Gsygroup.com n.d.).

In November 2004, GSYFG made a winning bid in a CCTV prime-time advertising auction, which is considered to be China's barometer of the country's economy. In early 2005, a series of WRCC ads were placed in golden slots of *Xinwen lianbo* 新闻联播, *Jiaodian fangtan* 焦点访谈, and also of the historical drama TV series *Han Wu dadi* 汉武大帝. The latter became so popular in China that sales of WRCC subsequently plummeted (CCTV.com 2005).

A popular WR slogan in the 1990s was *Dabaitu naitang lili hao kouwei* 大白兔奶糖粒粒好口味 ("WRCC, each one tastes great"), as recited by the closing slogan of a TV ad of the time. Using 3D

animation technology, the ad showed some WRCC rabbits and a mushroom—the same as the new official logo—dancing together to a theme song clearly targeting children.[11]

In 2004, the WRCC product range became national products that didn't need inspection and were given the award of China Top Brand. When the Plan for the Revival of THBs was launched in 2006, GSYFG was listed in the first batch of *laozihao* (Mofcom.gov.cn 2006c).

Despite all this recognition, a big problem was waiting round the corner. In 2008, WRCC was directly involved in the 2008 Chinese milk scandal: a variety of dairy products were found to be tainted with melamine, which led many children to develop kidney stones. Exports stopped and, soon afterwards, sales were also suspended in China; they only resumed in 2009. This event is representative of a phase of stigmatisation: ironically, the same association with milk that was first used in the WRCC iconisation phase became the driving force behind its stigmatisation phase, making the product and the brand itself hover between a symbol of safety and one of danger (Jones 2016).

A few months after the scandal, GSYFG invited the famous actress Vicky Zhao (Zhao Wei 赵薇) to feature in its advertising campaigns: the aim was to help rebuild the WR brand image and reputation through the use of reliable testimonials, with the slogan *Kuaile fenxiang Dabaitu* 快乐分享大白兔 ("Let's happily share WR"), which became very popular (Fig. 7).

Figure 7. Ad featuring Vicky Zhao (https://www.photophoto.cn/sucai/02285873.html)

After the melamine scandal, the WR journey proceeded smoothly with further rounds of recognition, among which was the awarding of the *laozihao* label in 2010 (Mofcom.gov.cn 2010). This official recognition can be interpreted as an additional form of certification, according to which the Chinese

[11] https://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XNDIzNDYxMDA0NA==.html?spm=a2h0c.8166622.PhoneSokuUgc_6.dtitle

authorities acknowledge the candy's quality and its status as a symbol of the country's economic progress (Jones 2016).

4.3. Retro branding, product line extension, cross-border marketing and a new segment of consumers (2012–2019)

In the increasing market competition of contemporary China, the survival of CTHBs depends on their ability to rejuvenate and adapt to the new environment, if they don't want to succumb. The biggest challenge they must face is their ageing process: some products have lost their appeal to the older generation of loyal consumers, and they lack recognition among young consumers born after the 1990s.

The first step taken by WR to rejuvenate itself and become a trendy brand among the younger generation was product line extension, a strategy that introduces a new product within an existing category to satisfy new market segments. This is how, in November 2012, the Giant White Rabbit was born: this 16cm-long and 8cm-wide candy contained 200g of the classic WRCC and was immediately a sales hit. On that occasion, two new styles of packaging were launched: vintage tin boxes and milk bottles. Both of them made a clear reference to the original packaging of WR, and, thus, can be interpreted as representatives of "retro branding," which is defined as "the revival or relaunch of a product or service brand from a prior historical period, which is usually but not always updated to contemporary standards of performance, functioning or taste" (Brown, Kozinets and Sherry 2003: 20).

Interestingly, in 2013, two political events contributed to the renewal of the political connotations of WR: current President Xi Jinping paid a visit the new factory of GSYFG, and, during his visit to Mongolia, he distributed the candy to local officials and children (Roxburgh 2018). In this way, the official status of WR as the national candy of the 1960s and '70s was reinvigorated with additional, updated political connotations.

Following the government call for CTHBs to engage more with digital trends, WR invested massively in its social media presence: according to Mr Shen Jinfeng, WR Marketing Manager, the brand holds the ambition to become a web celebrity. Beyond its official WeChat account and Weibo account (which has 96,000 followers), it has two flagship stores: one on Taobao.com (98,988 followers) and one on JD.com (996,000 followers).[12]

In 2014, WR co-produced the idol drama *Hongse qing ganlan* 红色青橄榄, which tells the story of some senior high-school students and their campus life. The theme song, entitled *Ni shi wo de tang* 你

[12] As per 15 November 2022.

是我的糖 ("You are my candy"), was tailor-made to boost WRCC with a new appeal to the younger generation. The official MV alternates scenes depicting the singer—Kym (*Jin Sha* 金莎)—holding a Giant WR candy and dancing with a big WR puppet, with scenes of the two main protagonists from the drama.[13]

Cross-border marketing is another strategy employed by WR. In 2015, during Double Eleven or Singles Day—the biggest online shopping festival in China—WR collaborated with the French fashion brand agnès b. to launch a limited collection of gift boxes. The latter were available in two colours (light blue–milk flavour, and pink-red bean flavour) and featured the stylised contours of a rabbit and a little star (a classic element of the agnès b. brand). Their design, if compared to the former WR tin boxes, appears modern, minimalist and chic. These characteristics are reflected in print adverts, which had the slogan: *Shishang shi yizhong weidao b.happy* 时尚是一种味道 *b.happy* ("Fashion is a kind of flavour b.happy;" Fig. 8).

Figure 8. Print advert for the limited collection of tin boxes (https://socialbeta.com/article/104808)

Nonetheless, this first international collaboration soon attracted some criticism from Chinese Weibo users. Why? Because the price of WRCC increased ninefold. As revealed by consumers, nowadays the sweet taste of the candy is no longer a priority: instead, it is the desire for exclusivity that drives young Chinese buyers to spend more in order to secure a limited edition either to give as a gift or to "satisfy one's 'little girl' heart" (Yi 2016).

In 2018, WR's brand architecture evolved to include co-branding with Maxam (*Meijiajing* 美加净), another Shanghai-based CTHB established in 1962 and considered to be China's No. 1 cosmetics brand. The new WRCC Lip Balm came in a candy-shaped box, and the first batch of 920 products sold out online

[13] https://www.iqiyi.com/w_19rsd6dnzh.html

in half a minute. An additional 10,000 sets sold out in three hours the next day, when sales opened (Marcus and Wong 2022). The fact that both companies are originally from Shanghai amplified the idea of authenticity and resonated well with local consumers.

In early 2019, to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the birth of WRCC, a touring exhibition was scheduled to travel around China's big cities. The first stop, which was signposted by a 7-metre-tall WR statue, was CapitaMall LuOne, in Shanghai. Visitors could find the updated range of WR derivative products, and enjoy an improved, immersive consumer experience thanks to a series of interactive activities, such as claw machines, augmented reality games and graffiti. For the occasion, a WR Milk Tea pop-up store (in collaboration with the Chinese brand Happy Lemon, *Kuaile ningmeng* 快乐柠檬) also opened: despite the price of a cup of milk tea skyrocketing from 20 *yuan* to 150 *yuan*, the product became so popular that people queued for up to five hours to get one and then post their experience on social media (Guo 2019). Apparently, this latest craze offered a golden opportunity to scalpers (who queued and then resold their cups for as much as 500 *yuan*!), but also to residents who, in the context of the US-China trade war, confessed that the reason behind their purchase was not the taste, but the possibility to help Chinese domestic brands (Ren 2019). Moreover, the choice of revamping the brand through a touring exhibition can be interpreted as an evolved form of "nationalist commodity spectacles" (Gerth 2003: 281), which in early modern China consisted of shows, exhibitions and adverts that aimed to promote a new kind of nationalist consumer culture. Needless to say, the context has changed, but some strategies adopted for the resemiotisation of WR are far from new—and nationalism has been proven to sell in China.

In 2019, WR collaborated with the Chinese brand Scent Library (*Qiwei tushuguan* 气味图书馆) to launch the Happy Childhood Fragrance Series, which included the following WRCC-inspired products: Eau de Toilette, Shower Gel, Body Lotion, Hand Cream and Car Freshener. With the slogan *Lai dian haiziqi* 来点孩子气 ("Let's go childish") this collaboration targeted Generation Z, those born in the 21st century, and re-vitalised their emotional association with WRCC through sensory branding. It was a success beyond expectations: within ten minutes, the series sold close to 150,000 units on Tmall, China's e-commerce giant, which promoted the new products as part of its annual *guochao* plan (Jing Daily 2021; Fig. 9).

Figure 9. Online launch of the series *Lai dian haiziqi*
(https://fashion.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201906/17/WS5d083e26a3108375f8f2b0fe.html)

It is precisely around the sense of smell that lies the creative idea of the four ads of the audiovisual campaign, which was strategically launched prior to Children's Day (1 June): each ad stars a big WR puppet and either a young female or male Chinese, who behaves in an overtly childish and playful way, while he/she is being drawn by the smell of the products. The style of the ads is fresh, cool and funny.[14]

The co-branding journey of WR continued, this time with the Ningbo-based young clothing brand Ledin (*Leding* 乐町): the Winter Collection 2019 employed the colours of the famous art-deco-inspired wrapper of WRCC and transposed them onto warm, soft fabrics.[15]

At the end of 2019, a brand new advertising campaign was launched: entitled *Kuaile, chaohu xiangxiang* 快乐, 超乎想象 ("Happiness, beyond imagination"), it targeted Gen-Z by collaborating with the famous Chinese illustrator, TN (*Te Nong* 特浓). The ads portray a young girl who—just like a Chinese version of Alice in Wonderland—enters an imaginary world inhabited by some cute, cartoon-like WRCC figures. Thanks to the unique artistic style of TN, who uses Chinese elements, the ads capture the viewer in an immersive, dream-like experience filled with sweetness, both visually and aurally.

[14] https://v.qq.com/x/page/u0878jk6dnz.html

[15] https://www.suntchi.com/en/projects/128.html

Figure 10. Print advert for the "Happiness, beyond imagination" campaign (https://www.zcool.com.cn/work/ZNDE0ODUyNjA=.html)

5. Conclusion

This article fills in an existing gap by contributing to a better, more in-depth understanding of China's ever-changing brandscape by adopting WR as a case study. It first situates and explains the priority of developing strong Chinese brands as part of the country's strategies of soft power and national branding, in line with the government call to evolve from "Made in China to Created in China." It then focuses on the Plan for the revival of CTHBs by providing an updated account of the relevant governmental regulation. Following, this article carries out a critical analysis of the brand history of WR and, by examining a variety of promotional texts as well as the most recent marketing strategies, it explains how it managed to survive throughout the decades and became a web celebrity in today's China. During the Maoist years, WRCC was considered a luxury product, it was consumed slowly and only on specific, festive occasions; it was also strictly linked both to the journey of GSYFG and to China's political events. Today, its success in sales reflects the interest of young consumers in purchasing a China-made product that indulges in a variety of brand extension experiments, such as cross-border collaborations and co-branding, and evokes feelings of nostalgia through retro branding campaigns.

The success of WR was also supported by the dedicated government regulations illustrated in this article and the ongoing wave of *guochao*: its Chineseness becomes a reason to be proud and fuels a

revitalised nationalist consumer behaviour in an environment where domestic brands are gradually becoming Chinese consumers' top choice (Wang and Kidron 2020). Even in more recent years, WR has still been a big hit: in the summer of 2021, it opened its first flagship store in Shanghai. In 2022, it collaborated with the American fashion house Coach and featured in its new collection. Nonetheless, WR runs the risk of becoming just a fad, as customers' enthusiasm and passion might fade away. Will WR still feature in the dreams of Chinese generations for many years to come—just like that happened to Song Gang and Baldly Li? Only time will tell.

The success of WR also relies on the crucial role played by the Chinese diaspora, on the one hand, and by non-Chinese consumers, on the other. For example, in 2019 the US ice cream maker Wanderlust Creamery launched a WRCC ice cream that became a hit in Los Angeles over the Lunar New Year. Etsy, the global online marketplace for handmade, vintage and unique items, now sells a wide range of WR-inspired products, such as earrings, stickers, t-shirts etc. Although these aspects have not been addressed in this article, it would be fruitful for future research to investigate the role that WR is playing in creating a global market for Chinese brands for both Chinese and non-Chinese consumers overseas.

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