Master's Thesis of International Studies

Italian Nation Branding in China

중국에서의 이탈리아 국가 브랜딩

A study of the making of Italian country image in China

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Abstract

English

This research studies the making of the Italian country image in China. It analyzes selected Italian nation branding campaigns, interviews Chinese nationals on their perceptions of Italy, and compares the resulting information. It experiments nation branding analysis using tools that are specific to the luxury industry.

It argues that the Italian country image in China is defined by the "dolce vita" concept, a life of pleasures, and that this perception has positive and negative implications: Italians are simultaneously lovers of life and unserious. Also, it finds that Italian nation branding communication is similar in its characteristics to that of a luxury brand and reinforces Chinese people's pre-existing perception of dolce vita.

한국어

본 연구는 중국에서의 이탈리아 국가 이미지 형성에 관한 연구이다. 이를 위해 선별된 이탈리아 국가 브랜딩 캠페인을 분석하고, 이탈리아에 대한 중국인의 인식을 인터뷰한 후, 분석 결과를 비교하였다. 분석방법으로는 럭셔리 산업에 특화된 분석 도구를 사용하였다.

본 연구는 중국에서의 이탈리아 국가 이미지가 돌체 비타(Dolce Vita) 개념, 즉 쾌락의 삶으로 정의되며, 이러한 인식은 긍정적이고 부정적인 시사점을 동시에 가지고 있다고 주장한다. 즉 이탈리아인들은 삶을 사랑하는 동시에 불성실하다는 인식이다. 특히 본 연구는 이탈리아의 국가 브랜딩이 돌체 비타에 대한 중국인의 기존 인식에 부합하는 럭셔리 브랜드를 만드는 데 중점을 두고 있음을 보여주고 있다.

Keywords: nation branding, country image, Italy, China, Dolce Vita

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1 Introduction

1.1 Research Topic

Nation branding is a crucial topic in the Information Age. If information and perception mean power and opportunity, a country with control over its brand can shape its perception abroad. Consequently, its brand can enhance its soft power and be used to achieve many soft power objectives or ensure economic prosperity. (Hassan and Mahrous, 2019)

Successful examples of nation branding campaigns are, to only mention some, South Korea, Japan, and the UAE. In detail, the Korean Wave was crucial in building the country's reputation and the perception of potential tourists, buyers, investors, or migrants. The Cool Japan campaign skillfully promoted Japanese products and creativity worldwide that still define the perception of entire generations. The UAE's masterful branding fueled the explosion of Dubai as a finance hub and a global tourist attraction. With these premises and a constructivist perspective, this research believes soft power building is one of the most effective tools a country has to shape its future. (Hassan and Mahrous, 2019)

Nation branding research is strictly connected to soft power research but is much less developed. (Hao et al., 2021) However, academic papers on the nation branding campaigns mentioned above are plentiful and can serve as a blueprint for future research on other countries. This creates an opportunity for new research on countries with significant international standing but less clear nation branding. This research will then focus on the case study of Italian nation branding. Italy has an almost unrivaled reputation in topics like culture, food, and tourism, and it enjoys an excellent nation brand abroad. However, its nation branding strategy is much less studied compared to other countries. (Hao et al., 2021)

Naturally, a single research could not cover this entire topic. So, this research will concern Italian nation branding in China. This case study can provide information on the Italian brand in a new context for the Italian government, operating in a country with a very different internal political system and public sensibility than usual partners.

The choice of studying Italian nation branding in China also has pragmatic reasons. Nation brands strongly influence purchase behavior in a country and the target population's attitudes toward it. Information and research on nation branding are, then, crucial to Italy's future.

To name a current issue, Italy's economy is less dynamic compared to the country's political allies. (Istat, Accessed April 15, 2023) Italy is a markedly manufacturing country, one of the few among its peers with a net positive balance of payments and a flourishing group of small-size exporting firms. It successfully exports various products, ranging from pharmaceuticals to food, from precision mechanics to interior design, from advanced chemicals to leather bags. However, it is mainly known abroad for its economic stagnation, except in its perceived traditional fields, like the luxury sector. (Istat, Accessed April 15, 2023) In a crucial and growing market like China, this perception could impede business partnerships in cutting-edge industries. It could also redirect foreign investments to countries with a better economic reputation or reduce sales of non-traditional Italian products abroad. A country in a precarious economic situation cannot afford to lose these opportunities.

In another example, Italy's global stance has significantly declined in the 21st century. At the same time, it is a Western country that historically showed high interest in countries outside of its European and American allies. Its communist party was the strongest in Western Europe during the Cold War, and the United States was convinced it could jump the iron curtain. Continuing this tradition, Italy is now the only traditionally-Western country to be part of the Belt and Road Initiative and to have signed a memorandum of understanding with China. (Horowitz, 2019) Chinese police forces and government agencies commonly cooperate with Italian local authorities. (Yardley, 2016) This peculiarity puts Italy in an outstanding position to increase its relevance for the years to come. If China's relevance keeps increasing, Italy could be a point of contact for it to the West and take advantage of this position.

Despite the clear advantages of a nation branding strategy, researchers agree that the Italian government lacks a coherent vision of its nation brand, from knowledge of its current perception and understanding of nation branding tools to planned campaigns and competent use of its assets. (Cultur-e, 2021)

To address - in part - this issue, this research hopes to provide valuable insights into the making of the Italian country image and relevant information for developing a potential nation branding strategy.

In the process, it hopes to emphasize the link between the disciplines of International Relations and Branding and the importance of public-private partnerships in building soft power. In particular, it wants to apply luxury branding analytical tools to study nation branding and country image.

1.2 Research Questions

This thesis studies Italian nation branding in China and how it shapes the country image of Italy. In order to evaluate nation branding campaigns and their effectiveness in shaping country image, it is necessary to gather information on the country image of Italy. In the absence of previous organized research on the topic, this research asks:

1. **What is the country image of Italy in China?**

The second step in evaluating nation branding effectiveness and messaging is to analyze its contents and strategy. Therefore, a qualitative view of nation branding campaigns is needed to conclude their value and communication. Therefore, the second research question of this thesis is:

2. **What brand does Italian nation branding promote in China?**

Equipped with a qualitative view of the Italian country image in China and nation branding campaigns, it is possible to link the two, infer possible influences, and partially evaluate their effectiveness or the presence of a unitary message. These topics will be explored in the third research question:

3. **How does Italy's country image in China relate to nation branding?**

This research will use semi-structured interviews and branding analysis tools to answer these questions. In detail, it will interview 20 English-speaking Chinese nationals about their perception of Italy. It will also carry out a visual analysis of selected 2022 nation branding campaigns in China. (See Methodology)

2 Literature Review

2.1 Soft Power

According to Joseph Nye, soft power is cooptive behavioral power (i.e., getting others to want what you want). In his elaboration, soft power flows from what is intentionally or unintentionally communicated through various sources, including education systems, media and popular culture, science and technology, brands and products, and business practices. (Nye, 2004) The concept became a journalistic success and opened a new research branch on non-violent and non-coercive ways to exert power.

Plentiful research on soft power brought forward a cross-disciplinary field of study: nation branding. (Hao et al., 2021) As outlined later, this branch of soft power is not concerned with the ability of the government to affect other governments' behaviors directly. Instead, it focuses on shaping a country's attractiveness and perception in the minds of foreign nationals. This knowledge, together with that of country image, will serve as a more defined and precise way to approach the research questions above.

Before discussing nation branding, it is crucial to point out some key terminology. Some literature uses soft power, nation branding, and country image interchangeably. For the sake of simplicity, this research uses the following distinction: "whereas [...] nation branding is something a country proactively does, a country's image is something it has and exists in the perceptions of audiences." (White, 2012: 110)

Country/national reputation, country/nation brand, country/nation image, and country/nation perception all relate to soft power and nation branding. However, different authors provide different definitions for them. Some use the terms country and nation interchangeably, and many replace the word "brand" with "image." Again, for the sake of simplicity, this research defines country image (or nation brand) as a "collective judgment based on impressions of a variety of factors including foreign policy, responsible government, people and culture, tourism, economic strength, and brands, products, and exports." (White, 2012: 110)

It is essential to note that "people do not actively seek, but rather passively take in, information about other countries." Furthermore, people "may not differentiate whether their perceptions about a country come from official government sources and purposeful nation branding or from other sources of communication" (White, 2012: 110). In short, nation branding is the active process of shaping foreign opinions on a country – and creating a country image – while soft power concerns the power that derives from those opinions.

With these distinctions in mind, let us look at nation branding and country image in detail.

2.2 Nation Branding and Country Image

As previously mentioned, nation branding is less explored than soft power. Research on the topic is "still in its infancy," and "the topic itself remains [...] a complicated and somewhat confused construct" (Fan, 2006: 5). For clarity, this chart will list some definitions.

2.2.1 Definitions of Nation Branding

To summarize research on nation branding, Hao et al. (2021) compiled a list of research frameworks in the field. They point out that "nation" and "country" are used interchangeably in the literature, and only a few definitions of nation branding exist. This research uses the following two definitions:

- Fan (2006: 6): "Nation branding concerns applying branding and marketing communications techniques to promote a nation's image. [...] The aim is to create a clear, simple, differentiating idea built around emotional qualities which can be symbolized both verbally and visually and understood by diverse audiences in a variety of situations."

- Anholt (2005: 296): "The nation brand is the sum of people's perceptions of a country across the six areas of national competence: the cultural, political, commercial and human assets, investment potential, and tourist appeal."

Fan's definition will be the theoretical base for this research, and Anholt's definition will be the main tool to build an interview structure (see Methodology), ensuring that respondents cover a wide range of relevant topics.

Finally, it is clear from these definitions that nation branding is an interdisciplinary phenomenon. It can be explored from the perspective of international relations and political sciences, marketing and communication, or psychology and other humanities. (He, Wang, and Wu, 2021: 23) Also, Hao et al. (2021) found that some key themes emerge from the intellectual debate and are prevalent in the literature on nation branding, here reorganized in order of relevance for this research:

- Country image and reputation (e.g., Fan, 2006)

- Nation brand strength (e.g., Anholt, 2005)

- Nation branding and integrated marketing communications

- Nation brand personality

This research will use the first two concepts to draw a theoretical framework.

2.2.2 Country Image and Reputation

Most relevant for this thesis, recent studies focus on country images, dividing them into cognitive and affective images. The cognitive image of a country is the collection of "consumers' beliefs of a country [in terms of] its levels of economic development, living standards, industrialization, technological advancements, and so forth." The affective image of a country refers to the "positive and negative feelings toward a country and its people." (Wang et al., 2012: 1042). Together, these images form a unified country image.

Country image is predominantly studied from a consumer perspective. In fact, "consumers' perceptions about countries are on two levels: associations and beliefs about the country at macro level and associations and beliefs about its products at micro level." Consequently, related literature falls into three categories: product-related (country of origin), nation related (the nation as a whole), and culture related (the culture and people of a nation). (Hakala, Lemmetyinen and Kantola, 2013: 540)

Specifically, the concept of nation brand "refers to the nation as a whole; it describes the country's intangible assets without any explicit links with a product" (Fan, 2006: 6).

Additionally, Hakala *et al.* (2013) published a study on country image and reputation. Their results show that "country images are based on stereotypical views, and these stereotypes should therefore be altered or reinforced, depending on their nature" (Hakala *et al.*, 2013: 548).[1]

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[1]A stereotype can be defined as a "biased view of a group or class of people". In a nation branding context, a stereotype "places nations and their people in categories. It can be positive, negative, or just neutral" (Hao et al., 2021: 49).

While studies on the country of origin effect are plentiful, country image is a less popular research topic. Also, "there is no consensus on the dimensions and the operationalization of the country image construct in the nation branding context" (Hao et al., 2021: 62).

Summarizing previous research, He *et al.* (2021) state that a country image can:

- Result from direct institutional communication and public diplomacy.

- Be shaped by marketing communication used for corporate or product branding.

- Be inferred from existing knowledge or stereotypes. This image is also often resistant to change.

This research branch is primarily qualitative and descriptive and will be the theoretical basis for this research and its interviews.

2.2.3 Nation Brand Strength

Also crucial is the study of nation brand strength. According to studies in the field, a strong country brand can create a positive country image, stimulate exports, and attract tourism, investments, and immigration. In fact, Anholt (2005) developed the Anholt Nation Brands Index (NBI) "to measure the power and appeal of America's brand image by surveying 10,000 consumers in ten countries on their perceptions of America's cultural, political, commercial and human assets, investment potential and tourist appeal" (Hao et al., 2021: 48).

Anholt's study follows a consumer-based brand equity approach, defined by Aaker (1997) as the value that consumers associate with the brand. It explores brand awareness, associations, perceived quality, brand loyalty and other assets. In practice, it emphasizes the value consumers of a brand (or foreign nationals interested in Italy) place on that brand.

Today, Anholt's NBI is one of the most widely used measures of nation brand strength and is measured yearly by Ipsos, according to 6 factors: (McGrath and Bobev, 2022)

- Exports: Public image of products and services from each country and the extent to which consumers proactively seek or avoid products from each country of origin.

- Governance: Public opinion about national government competency and fairness, as well as its perceived commitment to global issues such as peace and security, justice, poverty, and the environment.

- Culture and Heritage: Global perceptions of each nation's heritage and appreciation for its contemporary culture, including film, music, art, sport, and literature.

- People: The population's reputation for competence, openness and friendliness and other qualities such as tolerance.

- Tourism: The level of interest in visiting a country and the draw of natural and man-made tourist attractions.

- Investment and Immigration: The power to attract people to live, work or study in each country and how people perceive a country's quality of life and business environment.

This field of study is more quantitative, focused on ranking and specific attributes of brands that allow for immediate comparison and easy consumption of information. This thesis will use the consumer-based brand equity approach to define some relevant dimensions in Italy's country image, defining follow-up questions to ensure that interviewees cover these topics. It will also help make a stronger case for a comprehensive nation branding strategy.

2.3 Nation Branding and Commercial Brands

According to He *et al.* (2021), a country image can be shaped by marketing communication used for corporate or product branding. It is then crucial to consider businesses' role in shaping a nation brand. Research in this field will help this research choose a methodology and interpret its final results.

2.3.1 Branding Research Tools

Branding is the process of creating a brand. It is a tool used mainly by firms, and the relationship between nation brands and commercial brands is one of the most developed fields of nation branding.

This chapter will explore the aspects of branding that can be used to study country image and nation branding. It will also focus on tools used to evaluate luxury brands, assuming Italy's brand follows the same logic as luxury brands (see Italy's Past Nation Branding). In fact, it will argue that these analytical tools are pertinent to the study of nation branding and country image and can contribute to a deeper understanding of specific case studies like this one.

Brand Association

As mentioned above, understanding brand equity involves identifying the network of strong, favorable, and unique brand associations in consumer memory. Summarizing previous research, it is clear that "consumers might associate a brand with a particular attribute or feature, usage situation, product spokesperson, or logo. These associations are typically viewed as being organized in a network consistent with associative network models of memory. This association network constitutes a brand's image, identifies the brand's uniqueness and value to consumers, and suggests ways that the brand's equity can be leveraged in the marketplace." (John et al., 2006: 549)

This thesis will use brand association strength (i.e., how often and how intensely topics are brought up in interviews or visual communication) as the starting point to rank the relevance of different aspects of Italy's brand.

Attitude Theory

Attitudes are connected to brand associations. Each individual associates an attitude to their perception of a brand. Attitude Theory studies those perceptions and behaviors each customer associates with a brand. (Roth and Diamantopoulos, 2009)

Consumers' attitudes are usually divided into:

- Cognitive: the knowledge customers associate with a brand

- Affective: the emotions customers associate with a brand

- Conative: the behaviors consumers have towards a brand

According to Roth and Diamantopoulos (2009), relevant studies often use the same tripartition for country images. However, they point out that, in most cases, the conative aspect of attitude theory is considered a consequence of cognitive and affective perception. They define the cognition and affection towards a country as its country image, and behaviors towards that country as a consequence of country image and cultural norms. To focus on nation branding alone, this research will focus on the cognitive and affective perceptions of Italy. It will use this knowledge to build a more faceted country image of Italy and to differentiate between affective and cognitive interview responses.

Brand Identity Prism

The most commonly used framework to evaluate branding strategies, including for luxury brands, is the Brand Identity Prism developed by Kapferer (1994). It develops along two axes: externalization vs. internalization (social aspects expressed by the brand vs. social aspects incorporated into the brand itself) and constructed source vs. constructed receiver (an image of the brand itself vs. the image of its users). Along these two axes, he defines six attributes of a brand identity:

- Physique: which physical features are evoked when a brand is mentioned

- Personality: which personality traits are associated with a brand

- Culture: the system of values and principles on which a brand bases its behavior

- Relationship: the way the brand interacts with its customers

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- Reflection (of the consumer): the stereotypical user of the brand

- Self-Image: the emotional reaction to interactions with the brand

Taken together, these describe a brand identity. They can be adapted to analyze Italy's nation brand identity, build interview questions, and serve as a base for section two of the following research interview.

Brand DNA

Assuming Italy's brand is a luxury brand (see Italy's Past Nation Branding) or, at least, that its brand can be understood through luxury branding tools, this chapter will now look at a luxury-specific framework.

A common way to analyze and categorize the messaging of luxury brands is by using codes and DNA. A brand's DNA makes it unique and different from its competitors, while its codes depict this DNA. (Som and Blanckaert, 2015) The DNA and codes approach is the most widely used and best fitting for this context. It will help this thesis describe the essence of Italian nation branding communication and its resulting image.

This research will find that Italy's brand can qualify as a luxury brand and be understood well through the Brand DNA framework (see Results Discussions Questions 1, 2, 3). Therefore, this framework will be the main point of reference for the following discussions.

2.3.2 Product Marketing and Nation Branding

Marketing and consumer behavior literature heavily focuses on the country of origin effect (COO effect). Scholars agree that images and beliefs about a country affect the assessment of its products (e.g., Han, 1989). Usually, this concept is applied to measure the ability of businesses from certain countries to apply a higher premium to their products compared to competitors solely based on their country of origin.

However, more interestingly, the inverse process is also valid. "Brands and products evoke perceptions that have the potential to affect the overall image of their country of origin and to contribute to national reputation" (White, 2012: 110).

The best example of this dynamic could be cultural exports. Music, movies, and consumer goods can become legendary and part of their country of origin's image. For example, Samsung's products help South Korea's reputation as a technologically advanced country. (Lee, 2009)

Some researchers, notably White (2012), find that commercial brands also play a significant role in nation branding. Her findings apply to all brands considered and affect how governments lay out their nation branding strategy. A nation's products and exports are then part of its soft power.

The same relationship is even more true for symbolic brands matching their country brand. In practice, a synergy can form between a nation brand and a commercial brand when they rely on the same storytelling. In fact, Torelli and Ahluwalia (2012) find that consumers of a brand accept new information about a country best when it matches that country's brand. In fact, "culturally congruent extensions (i.e., when both the brand and the extension category cue the same cultural schema) [are] evaluated more favorably than culturally neutral extensions, which in turn [are] evaluated more favorably than culturally incongruent ones (i.e., cue two different cultural schemas, or the cognitive representations of a culture, acquired directly or indirectly)" (Torelli and Ahluwalia, 2012: 933). In practice, brands sell more when they use pre-existing knowledge of their country of origin to market their product. They are then incentivized to do so.

Some brands can even become legendary and forever intertwined with their nation brand. MacInnis, Torelli and Park (2019), explain this process using Elvis Presley as an example. "Elvis was an iconic role model who emerged as a cultural phenomenon in the late 50s and early 60s. From a socio-historical perspective, American culture at that time was emerging from a traditional and conformist society centered on traditional gender and ethnic roles to a more modern, freer, and rebellious society. [...] Elvis (i.e., the King of Rock N Roll) [...] became an embodiment of rebelliousness and sexual-openness. Consumers who craved the appropriation of these emerging cultural meanings avidly consumed Elvis' music and movies to affirm, confirm, and express their own identities. In turn, Elvis' embodiment of key valued cultural characteristics made it easier for consumers of that era to publicly agree on Elvis' cultural status [...]. Hence, he influenced how the emerging trend would solidify and shape American culture in the late 60s" (MacInnis *et al.*, 2019: 559). Cultural, self, and brand

meanings influence each other reciprocally and dynamically. In this sense, Elvis heavily influenced America's country image.

To summarize, when a product category fits a cultural schema that a brand activates, customers can "better understand" products. Customers will then prefer products that are, in their perception, related to that cultural background. At the same time, these cultural products affect the cultural schema in customers' minds and will influence customers' new product evaluations. (Torelli and Ahluwalia, 2012)

Country images are closely linked to cultural schemas. Translating this process into nation branding, it is clear how culturally symbolic brands and products directly influence how people perceive a country. Symbolic brands are then relevant for this study of nation branding.

Italy and Luxury Brands

In their experiment, Torelli and Ahluwalia (2012) find that people attribute a cultural fit to a Giorgio Armani cappuccino maker and, therefore, are more inclined to buy it over, for example, an Armani tea kettle. Giorgio Armani and coffee are linked to Italy, while tea is not usually associated with the country. Also, as detailed below, Italy's country image is unmistakably linked to luxury brands, especially fashion ones. Luxury brands are then best suited to define consumers' perception of Italy, especially in China. They are symbolic and revolve around a specific lifestyle, encompassing many aspects of personality and everyday life. They will then be a focus of this research. This allows the Italian country image to be analyzed as a luxury brand.

2.4 Summary of Literature Review

This thesis studies Italian nation branding in China and how these efforts shape the country image of Italy. To do so, this thesis will use the following information:

- Nation Branding is the effort to promote a nation's image, using branding and marketing communications techniques. (Fan, 2006)

- A Country Image (or Nation Brand) is the set of beliefs and feelings about a country. It is divided it into cognitive and affective (Wang et al., 2012) and includes (Anholt, 2005):

    - Cognitive: Products, Governance, Culture, People, Tourism, Investment and Immigration (given the age of respondents, let us substitute Immigration with Study), Jobs and Economy
    - Affective: Emotions, Feelings (and Lifestyle)

- Stereotypes are the categories where nations and their people are placed and help forming a nation brand. (Hakala *et al.*, 2013)

- This thesis assumes Italy to be a luxury brand and analyzes it as such. (Dematteo, 2020). It considers luxury brands the most relevant source of Italian firm-led nation branding, as they are symbolic brands (especially in Italy's case, whose image is reportedly defined by luxury brands). In practice, it selects and analyzes the most relevant brands for Chinese customers to evaluate Italian private nation branding. (MacInnis *et al.*, 2019)

- This study does not consider the conative aspect of marketing attitude theories, as it focuses only on nation branding and its relation to the country image (with no interest in the power or influence these might have). (Roth and Diamantopoulos, 2009)

These premises bring forward a theoretical framework, depicted in **Figure 1**:
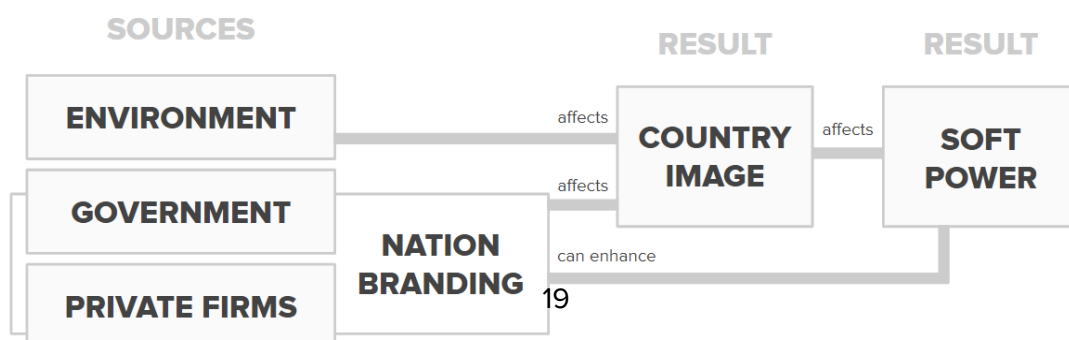
3 Italy's Nation Branding

3.1 Italy's Global Nation Branding

Existing studies all agree that Italian government agencies for nation branding do not communicate one coherent Italian brand. Individual agencies tend to switch key messages across time and to act independently of one another.

One online perception survey by the research firm Cultur-e (2021) concludes that "Italy still has not started a global, integrated promotion strategy based on constant analysis and monitoring of its worldwide reputation. [...] The sentiment analysis reveals an objective fragmentation and weakness of institutions and campaigns to promote Italy as a nation brand" (Cultur-e, 2021).

In 2020, only for tourism, the survey found a "dizzying number" of institutional websites: 20 for regions, 109 for provinces and metropolitan areas, and hundreds managed by local, education, and cultural institutions. Additionally, they often overlap more than once in covered areas and do not have consistent naming conventions (e.g., Visit Tuscany, Visit Sicily, In Lombardia, Veneto.eu, Viaggiare in Puglia, Charming Puglia, Visit Marche, Turismo Marche,...). Finally, the country-wide tourism portal was born to guide users through available content, but it eventually missed the opportunity to use existing resources. This institutional absence allows private actors to monopolize Italian storytelling. (Cultur-e, 2021)

Our research agrees with the finding that Italian institutional nation branding campaigns are scattered, unorganized, often incoherent, and confusing to final users. Different ministries, government institutions, regional and local institutions, and ad-hoc government programs create an overwhelming number of sources, messages, and targets, often contradicting each other.

However, Italian storytelling is monopolized by the private sector. Brands, sports clubs, soccer players, singers, newspapers, scientists, tourism agencies, and other players all act spontaneously as nation branding sources. (Cultur-e, 2021)

In a globalized, social-media-focused world, anyone can create Italy's nation brand. However, different authors agree that there is some level of coherence in the communication of these different actors. Private firms and other actors seem to communicate around a common understanding of Italy, creating a "Sistema Italia" ("Italy system", meaning the collective effort of the Italian private sector in supporting the Italian economy). In it, firms build on each other's reputation to connect their own brands to the already existing perception of Italy. This is true when connections are more obvious (e.g., fashion, food, tourism, design, cars) and for firms that do not fit the Italian stereotype (e.g., pharmaceutics, chemistry, energy).

However, at a glance, Italy has an excellent international reputation. It scores consistently and comfortably in the world's top ten nation brands in the most commonly used indexes. In Anholt's NBI index, the most commonly referred to, Italy's brand has generally improved in the ten years until 2022, as shown in **Figure 2**:

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
NBI Anholt	7	7	7	6	7	6	7	6	4	4	NA

Some of the few available data on Italy's country image were collected for its most direct nation branding effort, the Be-Italy campaign, which started in 2020. Its official documents include a 2020 study carried out by Ipsos in 19 countries (including China), interviewing 500 people (200 of whom were categorized as "high-income" or "managerial class"). In addition, they drew upon web listening and 40 deeper interviews with 40 international "business actors" (Ipsos, 2021).

These research results show that Italy is comfortably one of the countries with the best awareness, ranking third globally. Most respondents report learning about Italy through social networks, tv, and friends. Interestingly, 44% of the respondents (and 55% of high-income respondents) say they are "very or extremely interested in content on Italy, its culture, and made in Italy."

The topics most searched about Italy are culture, food and wine, politics, sport, made in Italy, and the economy. Interestingly, made in Italy seems to have lost relevance in searches, going from 19% of searches in 2016 to only 8% in 2020.

Food and wine are perceived most positively, followed by tourism, culture, and made in Italy. Instead, the economy and politics are perceived negatively.

In the question "Which country do you associate most with X", Italy ranks first among all countries in quality of life, optimism and positive attitude, creativity, and ingenuity.

Italy is also the country that scores best in people's perception of dynamism and quality. When asked what Italian products people associate with quality of life, respondents answer: fashion (51%), drinks (50%), tourism (48%), food (48%), arts and culture (44%), design products (32%), jewels and watches (31%), vehicles (30%), and interior design (20%).

Also, 62% of high-income respondents strongly agree that "Italy has a great culinary offer", and 89% strongly or moderately agree. In China, "only" 55% strongly agree.

Made in Italy is often related to excellence, tradition, and passion, especially in luxury. Usually, the brand and the tag are the most used criteria to evaluate products' origins.

Finally, Italy is an attractive tourist destination. 40% of all respondents identified Italy as their first choice for a free vacation. 44% of those who had visited Italy more than three times said they would return. 27% of respondents (and 43% of high-income respondents) will "surely visit Italy" in the following 5 years. In China, this percentage is even higher, at 52%. (Ipsos, 2021)

In sum, according to Italy's official nation branding campaign, the qualities of its country image are creativity, tradition, quality, and beauty. It is a desired travel destination, luxury goods maker, and food and wine connoisseur. Also, high-income respondents consistently show a more positive perception of Italy.

To complete the picture, Anholt's NBI report holds that, in 2022, Italy holds first place in the Culture and Tourism categories. In the same year, Brand Finance consulting ranks Italy 3rd for cultural heritage (Brand Finance, Accessed March 22, 2023) and 5th for "people and values" and "familiarity". (McGrath and Farkas, 2021) These results are also confirmed by the social intelligence analysis by Cultur-e and the interviews administered by the University of Salerno in 2010. (Cultur-e, 2021) (Marino and Mainolfi, 2010)

3.2 Italy's Luxury Brand and Dolce Vita

Despite the apparent lack of a global, durable strategy for nation branding, a few authors find a pattern in Italian communication abroad: promoting Italian "*dolce vita*", a lifestyle of pleasures.

Dematteo (2020) argues that when Chinese people buy an Italian product, "they consume the images produced by Italian trade agencies and marketing services." She also finds the root of this construction during the Fascist era. Despite fascist and like-minded intellectual disdain for luxury, Benito Mussolini created the *Ente Nazionale della Moda* (National Fashion Authority), starting a battle for Italian taste: "Italian style had to be purer [than the French one] because it originally was poorer. All the initiatives of those years were developed with a democratic concern and aimed to dethrone the 'Parisian Doll'" (Dematteo, 2020: 99).

Although French fashion and style were originally imported to France from Italy by the Comité Colbert and inspired by some of the artisanal excellences of Northern and Southern Italy, futurist poets and intellectuals of the early 20th Century publicly spoke against Parisian fashion and luxury in general. For example, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti wrote a very violent text against luxury, describing fashion as a "morbid mania, which, by apelike imitation, is overtaking all [women] like an epidemic, mak[ing] them all equal and level[ing] their seductive power", and again, "In the name of the great virile and fecund future of Italy, its future of genius, we Futurists condemn the spreading feminine cretinism and the pious imbecility of males, which are combining to promote feminine luxury, prostitution, pederasty, and the sterility of the race" (Dematteo, 2020: 109).

The Ente Nazionale Moda introduced coercive measures to encourage women to follow Italian fashion and abandon French trends, forcing autarky in style. Tailors decided then to take inspiration from Italian regional costumes and were forced to submit their creations to fascist aesthetic criteria, with styles promoted by Mussolini.

After World War II, Italian elites needed to redesign Italy's global image and, starting from American perception and communication on Italy, decided to advertise the "sweetness" of Italian life in every way possible. Italy and the Italian language were literary inventions before becoming realities creating effective popular projections on Italy's very existence. In the same way, Italy was being marketed as a luxury brand and an exceptional place to visit. (Dematteo,

2020: 113) "Italian lifestyle is systematically associated with elegance, fashion, hedonism, and refinement. [...] Italy has become synonymous with eating well and living well." In this dynamic, "commodities create [the Italian] identity." "Italy's national character is best captured by [brands] representative of the 1960s Dolce Vita style" (Dematteo, 2020: 113).

The term dolce vita is used as a synonym for the Italian lifestyle. It translates into "sweet life", but it is commonly understood as a life of heedless pleasure and luxury, a true concept of lifestyle made up of a unique mix of family, food, nature, art and fun. Its global popularity originates from the legendary movie directed by Federico Fellini that used this Italian expression as its title.

Dematteo (2020) takes Milan Expo 2015 as an example of Italy being presented as a luxury brand. She argues that Palazzo Italia, the pavilion informing visitors about the country, transformed Italy into a commodity. In her words, "by becoming a toy, Italy has become an absolute commodity without use value (precisely as a fetish) and the commodification has been turned against itself. If the commodification of the landscapes and monuments is pushed to the extreme in the kaleidoscope, the visitors can no longer ignore the fact that they are experiencing a waking dream; the dialectical structure of the commodity is thus revealed and Italy is finally transfigured [...]. The nation seems elusive as such—that is, a pure object of desire (without real substance). This representation, rooted in the past, perfectly illustrates the relationship of mutual fascination (admiration and hatred) between the Europeans and the Chinese" (Dematteo, 2020: 112).

Finally, she states that private marketing campaigns coming from Italy are "saturated with myths and symbols in order to better capture the interest of the Chinese consumer." This strategy implies describing Italy and Europe as exceptional places to live. (Dematteo, 2020: 115) In conclusion, despite lacking a general institutional strategy, it can still be argued that Italian nation branding after World War II transformed Italy into a luxury brand synonymous with dolce vita.

Assuming Italy is a luxury brand synonymous with dolce vita, it is possible to compare this nation branding with some measure of objective reality through the OECD's Better Life Index (Accessed May 1, 2023), an attempt to evaluate the quality of life across member countries.

The report states that, in 2023, "Italy performs well across a number of well-being dimensions relative to other countries [...]. Italy outperforms the average in health, work-life balance and

civic engagement. It underperforms average in income, employment, education, environmental quality, social connections and life satisfaction" (OECD, Accessed May 1, 2023).

Importantly, "when asked to rate their general satisfaction with life on a scale from 0 to 10, Italians gave it a 6.5 grade on average, lower than the OECD average of 6.7." Then, the perceived quality of life is no better in Italy than in any other OECD country. A lower salary, higher unemployment rate, and low perceived safety could all be important factors in their life [dis]satisfaction. This first conclusion is incompatible with the dolce vita brand. (OECD, Accessed May 1, 2023)

However, Italy ranks first in time devoted to leisure and personal care. The report states that: "in Italy, about 3% of employees work very long hours in paid work, much less than the OECD average of 10%. [...] In Italy, full-time workers devote 69% of their day on average, or 16.5 hours, to personal care (eating, sleeping, etc.) and leisure (socialising with friends and family, hobbies, games, computer and television use, etc.) – more than the OECD average of 15 hours." Combined with a high life expectancy and overall good health, this second result is compatible with the dolce vita brand. (OECD, Accessed May 1, 2023)

Naturally, this study only scratches the surface of the Italian lifestyle and cannot represent the reality of living in Italy. However, it can be helpful to approach the following sections being aware that the dolce vita brand does not fully match reality.

3.3 Italy's Nation Branding in China

Like with global Italian nation branding, it is difficult to identify a single Italian strategy or a coherent organization for its nation branding in China.

For the sake of simplicity, this research organized institutional nation branding efforts by the ministry managing them, excluding regional and local actors. It will use this distinction to collect data for research. The resulting most relevant campaigns for each ministry are:

- Ministry of Tourism: Italia.it (Italia, Accessed March 5, 2023)
  With the main objective of attracting tourists to Italy, this campaign wants to show the beauty of Italian cities and nature.

- Ministry of Trade: Be-Italy (MadeinItaly, Accessed March 5, 2023)
  With the main objective of promoting Italian products and services, this campaign tells the story of traditional Italian industries and highlights their quality.

- Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Embassies and Cultural Centers (Ambasciata d'Italia Pechino, Accessed March 5, 2023)
  With the main objective of promoting Italian culture, this campaign spreads some italian cultural content and raises awareness of local events.

These three campaigns are the first step in this nation branding analysis. The following research will dissect their communication and relate them to Italy's image (see Methodology and Results Discussion).

As noted above, however, Italian nation branding is dominated by the private sector, and this thesis assumes this to be the case in China too. Therefore, the following analysis will also look at relevant private firms' communication and choose luxury brands, for the reasons mentioned in the last chapter. For example, a qualitative study by Agility Luxury Brand Affinity of the Chinese market found the most relevant luxury brands in the minds of consumers, and the first three Italian ones, in order of importance, are Gucci, Giorgio Armani, and Bulgari. (Ap, 2021)

This research will then mix these public and private sector nation branding campaigns to evaluate Italian nation branding in China.

Having explored Italy's active efforts in shaping its image in China, let us now turn to its existing perception.

Unfortunately, data on Chinese nationals' perception of Italy is very scarce. Some data were found by Orizzonte China - a specialized magazine affiliated with the University of Turin - in a study of the opinion of Chinese university students. They selected 443 students learning Italian or undertaking studies on Italian culture or society, out of an estimated total of 2200 such students in China. They consider this a "strategic public for Sino-Italian relations", as these individuals will likely play some part in the relations between Italy and China after their studies. (Andornino, 2016: 8)

The study reveals that only 61% of the respondents chose Italy as their first study choice. However, virtually all students reported a positive opinion of Italy and its relations with China. 98% had a very or moderately positive opinion of Italy, and 96% thought Italy would be an ally or a partner of China. These results are especially remarkable when compared with their view of the US. 88% of respondents thought that American culture constituted a threat to Chinese culture. (Andornino, 2016: 10)

Some of the adjectives most frequently associated with Italy are: welcoming (85%), elegant (45%), generous (43%), and unorganized (or messy, 30%). (Andornino, 2016: 10)

In the absence of organized data on Italian country image in China, this thesis resorts to the existing studies on Chinese immigrants to Italy.

In fact, Chinese people living in Italy and Italian people with Chinese family origins are pivotal in shaping the Chinese perception of Italy worldwide. In a century dominated by social media, it is likely that sinophone tourists, students, and residents in Italy share their opinions on Italy and have great resonance in the minds of Chinese nationals.

As a premise, researchers agree that while people from all over China decide to travel to Italy, most permanent migration to Italy comes from the Wenzhou region. According to Pedone (2013a), this fact influences the Chinese perception of Italy. In fact, "Wenzhouese are described as 'extremely peculiar' by common people, by media and by a whole subgenre of very popular reportage works devoted specifically to the characteristics of the Wenzhouese. [They are associated with] the development of large numbers of small and medium family-run enterprises. The objective success of many of such enterprises along with a pervasive

narrative about Wenzhouese special talents contribute to the myth of Wenzhoueseness, the ability to produce wealth from scratch as an innate disposition. Similar ideas are shared by those Wenzhouese who migrate to Italy, who, like the Wenzhouese in China, devote their efforts to the collection of wealth through family-run enterprises" (Pedone, 2013a: 45-46).

Coming to the Chinese stereotypes of Italy and Italians, Pedone (2013a) compiled a review of works detailing opinions of the Chinese population in Italy, summarized as follows:

"Italy appears as a rather poor country, whose economy is slowly but surely plunging down. Streets are dirty compared to other countries in Europe and buildings are not well kept. Italians are lazy, spoiled, racist and chauvinist. There is a lack of public safety in Italy and Italians have the tendency to cheat and take advantage of others. On the positive side, Italy is acknowledged to be artistically beautiful and its climate and pure air are often praised. People are considered warm and romantic and the social and health system is especially appreciated. As explained later, some of these views also emerged in the interviews conducted during fieldwork in China. However, overall the answers of the subjects in Italy tended to indulge more in the observation of the daily behavior of Italians and on individual virtues (or lack thereof) of Italian people, while the comments received during the fieldwork in China referred mostly to the Italian society and system in general terms and how they respond to the needs of Chinese immigrants" (Pedone, 2013a: 42-43).

A strong duality characterizes this general view of Italy. The same stereotypes of Italy seem to have a superficially positive but overall negative connotation. For example, Pedone (2013b) researched Chinese writing about Italy and concludes that "Italians are deemed friendly and warm, but also superficial, unreliable, immoral, not capable of any commitment, irrationally dependent on good food and sex. Overall Italians are considered weak-willed, lazy, unable to sacrifice for future goals, but also lovers of "good life"; this, in Chinese migrants' eyes, pushes them to be inclined to cheating and prone to criminality" (Pedone, 2013b: 41).

In literature and ethnic press, Pedone (2013a) finds that: "the Italian family, when compared with the Chinese family, is judged as not equally stable. Most sources find the reason for such frailty is in Italian male behavior and Italian individualism in general. [...]. In daily relations Italians are seen as exceptionally warm and friendly by most sources, nonetheless many observe that this openness is often perceived as excessive [...], some perceive it as a sign of superficiality, and a consequence of a general tendency to not take anything seriously [...]. On

the same note, several Chinese sources see Italians as lazy, not capable of hard work, excessively prone to indulge in food, vacations, expensive clothes and the likes. […] Connected to the observed individualism and perceived ineptness to commit to any shared project (e.g., marriage), is the observation of a lack of civic sense and little respect for public places and goods […]. This is also why the police in Italy are not reliable and the streets are not safe […]. In many writings by Chinese in Italy there are complaints about how Italian police do not enforce the law firmly enough. The whole public sphere appears as unreliable […] and many denounce that they do not trust Italians, for they often try to steal from Chinese or take advantage of them, even public officers […]. On the other hand in ethnic press, in Sino-Italian literature and in some of the aforementioned studies, some Chinese immigrants praise Italian school as being especially open and warm to children of foreign origin and find public healthcare, and Italian public welfare in general, excellent and better in concept and realization than that in their country of origin […]" (Pedone, 2013a: 44-45).

Pedone (2013a) also finds in her fieldwork, "what the Chinese praise about Italians is their generosity and quickness to befriend with others, although this is also interpreted as a symptom of their refusal to take anything seriously (in relationships, in work, in school, in politics and so on)" (Pedone, 2013a: 44).

A more recent study on Chinese teenagers living in Italy by Berti et al. (2022) confirms previous research and categorizes young interviewees' opinions about Italians in three clusters. Importantly, participants also give an inside view of some Italian prejudice against people of Chinese origins. In order of importance and frequency during interviews, the three clusters are:

- Value differences: "The participants seem to perceive a culture gap between the Chinese, who value strong family ties and honour generational hierarchy, and the Italians, who do not. More significantly, according to the participants, while the former are busy accumulating wealth, to ensure long-term livelihood, the latter focus more on their present lifestyles and the enjoyment of short-lived pleasures. Italians are seen as the irresponsible, carefree and lazy grasshopper portrayed in Aesop's fable 'The Grasshopper and the Ant' while the industrious and provident Chinese are not unlike the ant" (Berti et al., 2022: 7-11). In fact, interviewees:

- "Seem to deplore the lack of moral standards in Italian society (i.e., tradition), and particularly the 'carefree attitude' of Italians, insufficiently concerned with the welfare of their family."

- "Consider money the most important way to take care of the family and support future generations."

- Confirmed that "their parents as well express rather negative views about Italian values" (Berti et al., 2022: 7-11).

- Peer relationships and school life: "The participants are ambivalent about their school life. On the one hand, compared to China, school in Italy is far less demanding. On the other, peer relationships appear to be less than satisfying, as they are hindered by prejudice, according to the participants, who also spoke of episodes of discrimination. Teachers, however, are seen as supportive and sympathetic" (Berti et al., 2022: 7-11).

- Stereotypes and prejudices: "Chinese teenagers express negative views towards Italians and acknowledge some negative views expressed by Italians towards the Chinese community" (Berti et al., 2022: 7-11). In fact:

  - Stereotypes of Chinese teenagers about Italians revolve around "complaining". "It refers to the Italians' attitude toward life. Italians are considered reluctant to take action and oblivious to everything except the enjoyment of life." For example, *"Some Italians are sly, they act all nice in your presence but then they backstab you, they're turncoats… Italy is a country of complainers. Italians complain about everything and they complain a lot about the Chinese for everything they do. The worst thing is that Italians complain all the time but they do nothing to change things."* or *"At home we barely talk about Italians. My parents believe Italians are all ignorant. They just know how to complain about their country and the crisis, but do nothing concrete to improve the situation. That is why they avoid contact with the Italians"* (Berti et al., 2022: 7-11).

  - Talking about stereotypes that Italians have about Chinese people, "Participants also have a profoundly negative perception of the Italian views towards them. Chinese participants feel they are treated as members of an

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ethnic category rather than as people, and are victims of generalization." They believe Italians see them as dirty, sly, and dog-eaters, manufacturers and sellers of poor-quality products who steal their jobs and money. One states *"Italians complain that Chinese people are dirty, because they don't clean the apartments they rent when they move out. They complain that our cooking smells. Then Italians whine that we Chinese have iPhones, and therefore we are richer. Perhaps we are, but our wealth is based on huge sacrifices"* (Berti et al., 2022: 7-11).

Berti et al. (2022) use a fascinating metaphor for Chinese prejudice against Italy and Italians, the fable "The Grasshopper and the Ant"[2]. This is a good summary of the view of Italian people, but it "only partially captures the way the Chinese view Italians, as the separation between virtues and vices it expresses is clear, without the ambivalence that characterizes the attitude of the interviewees" (Berti et al., 2022: 9).

As mentioned above, this thesis assumes these stereotypes to be relevant to the formation of the Italian country image in China. The following research results very well match this assumption. (see Research Results)

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[2] "Aesop's fable is about a grasshopper that spent the summer singing and dancing whereas the ant toiled away to stockpile food for the winter. When winter came, the grasshopper found itself starving and begged the ant to give it some food to eat. Instead, the ant rebuffs her for her laziness and tells her sarcastically to dance the winter away now. Despite an alternative version, also attributed to Aesop, in which the ant was seen as setting a bad example, the story was used to teach the virtues of hard work and the dangers of idleness" (Berti et al., 2022: 8-9).

4 Research and Results

4.1 Methodology

Each research question requires a different methodology. All frameworks and in-detail questions are available in the Appendix.

4.1.1 Question 1 - What is the country image of Italy in China?

To answer the first research question, this study relies on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Chinese nationals. These will provide an in-depth glance into the respondents' image of Italy and with the opportunity to devolve into their personal interest and their relation with or emotions towards Italy. Also, the lack of previous research on Italian country image, especially in China, will make results more valuable and, possibly, call for future studies in this field.

Analytical Tools

Before starting research, let us introduce the two main theoretical tools from branding research that will define the structure of the interview. This approach slightly differs from previous research, using analytical tools specific to luxury branding. This choice is based on an assumption of resemblance between a nation brand and a luxury brand, and therefore, that the methodology used in luxury branding will apply to nation branding. In fact, these two types of branding both promote intangible, symbolic qualities and aim for an emotional response from their target. They do not focus on communicating objective features, aiming instead to link a brand or a country to unique and differentiating qualities. They also aim at creating a "brand universe" through codes, legends, and emotions, choosing a sensory-first communication. This resemblance should be especially true for Italy. Therefore, it can be assumed that luxury analytical frameworks can well describe Italian country image.

The first tool is the previously mentioned Brand Codes and DNA framework, a common way to analyze and categorize the messaging of luxury brands, part of the so-called "brand-based"

view. (Som and Blanckaert, 2015) It will help create a clear, understandable country image and to grasp the guiding factors in the respondents' understanding of Italy. According to Som and Blanckaert (2015), this approach explores on the motivation behind the product, what makes it different, who the consumers are, and the history of the product. As seen in the Literature Review, a brand's DNA makes it unique and different from its competitors: its Codes are the visual depiction of this DNA. A visual representation of this tool, used to interpret interviewees' answers and comments, is depicted in **Table 1**.

Table 1 - Brand Codes and DNA

Codes	DNA
The brand's Codes are the visual depiction of DNA. Therefore, DNA can be inferred from communicated codes	A brand's DNA is what makes it unique and different from its competitors It is the essence of the brand

The second tool used is the Brand Identity Prism. Developed by Kapferer (1994), it is the most commonly used framework to evaluate branding strategies, including for luxury brands. This tool will help ask follow up questions that create a 360 degrees country image of Italy. It develops along two axes: externalization vs. internalization (social aspects expressed by the brand vs. social aspects incorporated into the brand itself) and constructed sender vs. constructed receiver (an image of the brand itself vs. the image of its users). Along these two axes, he defines six attributes of a brand identity: (1) Physique; (2) Personality; (3) Relationship; (4) Culture; (5) Reflection (of the consumer); (6) Self-Image. This tool and the definition of its components are explained in **Table 2**.

Table 2. Brand Identity Prism

	Externalization			
	Physique	Relationship	Reflection	
Sender	Which physical features are evoked when a brand is mentioned	The way the brand interacts with its customers	The stereotypical user of the brand	Receiver
	Personality	Culture	Self-Image	
	Which personality traits are associated with a brand	The system of values and principles on which a brand bases its behavior	The emotional reaction to interactions with the brand	

		Internalization	

Interview Structure

Let us now see how these analytical tools will be used to define the structure of the interview, available in **Table 3**.

Interview questions are designed to find a descriptive and comparable country image. In short, the introduction and conclusion cover basic personal information and possible sources of information on Italy. The two main questions are based on the definition of country image found by White (2012) (i.e., including the topics of Culture, Products, Job & Economy, People, Tourism, Governance, Investment / Study, Lifestyle, and Emotions) and follow the structure of the mentioned branding tools.

The first question wants to build a Brand Codes and DNA framework and simply asks "what comes to mind when I say 'Italy'?" following up with other relevant questions to make sure that the answer covers a minimum of topics (cognitive: products, governance, culture, people, tourism, investment and study, jobs and economy; affective: lifestyle and emotions). These questions were always similar and generic at first (e.g., "do you know anything about the Italian economy?"), and then, depending on the respondents' interest and knowledge, deep-dived into particular topics they mentioned (e.g., "tell me more about why you think that the Italian economy relies on fashion and food"). The same process was repeated for each conceptual area. The broad initial question allows for the ranking of answers by brand association strength (i.e., how strictly a topic or emotion is connected to a brand).

The second question wants to build a comprehensive brand identity, based on Kapferer's (1994) Brand Identity Prism and asks participants to detail what is the generic opinion of Italy in China according to the six criteria mentioned above (i.e., Physique, Personality, Relationship, Culture, Reflection, Self-Image). This question asks respondents to provide, instead of their own opinion, a representation of what they think is commonplace. This structure is designed to incentivize honest and generalizable responses, taking especially from what the interviewees heard through word of mouth.

The research was conducted in Spring 2022. The interview length depended on the informants' ability to provide additional insights and their interest in the topics, but most interviews lasted between 25 minutes and 1 hour. They were conducted mostly online (2

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offline and 18 online), in video or audio calls (according to the respondents' preferences). An audio track of each meeting was recorded for later study and collected in the supporting material available in the Annex.

Table 3 - Interview Framework

Section	Question	Answer			
Disclaimer		Do you consent to the recording of this interview? I will not include your name at any point in the project, I will list only your age, gender, nationality, master degree field and location. Thank you for participating in this experiment, it is really important for me. I am conducting a research on the country image of Italy in China. [Brief description of the interview structure] This is an unstructured interview, please answer as freely as possible. It is really important to gather data on your perception, so please answer with what comes to mind first.			
Introduction	Could you share some of your information?	Age & Gender	Nationality	Master's Location	Master's Field
Section 1	What comes to mind when I say Italy? (+ follow ups)	Culture	Products	Job & Economy	People
		Tourism	Governance	Investment / Study	Lifestyle and Emotions
Section 2	Could you help me find out how Chinese people describe Italy with some words that come to mind?	Physique	Relationship	Reflection	/
					/
		Personality	Culture	Self-Image	/
					/
Conclusion	Where did you get this information?		/	/	/

To describe interview results, this study will list answers starting from the strongest brand associations (i.e., the facts or emotions that appear unprompted most frequently in the interviews).

Target Selection

Let us now briefly see the target selection process.

Ideally, this experiment would require a large number of Chinese nationals responding both from China and abroad. Also, the study would include a wide spectrum of ages and backgrounds. However, due to limited resources, this research opted for a more reachable and specific target. In fact, it interviews a group of 20 young Chinese nationals living and studying in China and abroad. These are selected among English-speaking master's degree students and young workers with a previous master's degree. This can be a relevant group shaping Italian country image in China and for future business and political relations between the countries. The data regarding interviewees is detailed in **Table 4**.

This procedure helps describe the country image of Italy in selected young Chinese nationals' minds. Naturally, results cannot be generalized to represent an overall Chinese opinion on Italy, but could be a starting point for future studies.

Table 4 - Interviews Participants Information

Informants: 20 Chinese Nationals			
Age	Gender	Master's Location	Master's Field
22 - 1 24 - 2 25 - 5 26 - 4 27 - 4 28 - 2 30 - 2	Male - 7 Female - 13 Other - 0	S.Korea - 2 France - 10 Australia - 2 China - 4 US - 1 UK - 1	Int'l Relations - 2 Management - 11 Economics - 1 Architecture - 1 English - 1 Media - 2 Translation - 1 Hospitality - 1

4.1.2 Question 2 - What brand does Italian nation branding promote in China?

This question wants to analyze nation branding communication in a simple and comparable manner. To do so, it uses the tools outlined above, the Brand Codes and DNA and the Brand Identity Prism frameworks, to detail and categorize messaging to then compare different campaigns.

Target Selection

The research was conducted in Seoul, South Korea. Due to the wide availability of data online, it runs a visual communication of nation branding content in China. In fact, visual communication strongly resonates with audiences, well describes its senders' communication targets and themes, and is available worldwide.

Specifically, this study collects information from the Weibo pages of institutions and brands. Weibo is recognized as the Chinese equivalent of Twitter and is relevant for the selected age group. This way, images posted by Italian government agencies and private firms can be easily compared.

This question examines all posted content in the year 2022. This choice provides the research with a sizable sample and ensures that the sample is representative. In fact, as communication codes and messages shift with time and visual cues and change with seasons and trends, an analysis of communication over a one-year communication span ensures both diversity and consistency.

Campaign Selection

As mentioned above, relevant institutional campaigns are selected and organized according to their sponsoring ministry. Commercial branding campaigns, instead, are selected by luxury brand relevance in the Chinese market, as reported by WWD (Ap, 2021) (see Literature Review).

Three campaigns for each sector emerge as relevant. Italia.it (Tourism), Be-Italy (Trade), Istituto di Cultura Pechino (Foreign Affairs) for institutional campaigns. Gucci, Giorgio Armani, and Bulgari for private firms with influential branding campaigns. They all communicate on their

Weibo account and have different communication strategies. Their central position as possible sources of nation branding and their representativity of each organization's branding strategies make these six Weibo pages a relevant selection of nation branding communication.

Analysis and Summary

A visual analysis is run on all 2022 Weibo media posts collected from the six campaigns.

This analysis is based on the Brand Codes and DNA and Brand Identity Prism frameworks. They ensure a more complete picture of communicated brand identity and the comparability with the results of the first research question.

To simplify results, they are summarized into two tables - one for each framework - for private, public, and overall messaging, and from the analysis of overall messaging, the final communicated Italian brand identity is inferred.

Although online social media presence is only one of many possible nation branding channels, it is the closest to the direction of the organizations that execute it. It can be assumed that the public and private sectors communicate on social media following their primary communication strategy. Therefore, messaging and communication strategies found in the analysis should partially represent broader communication strategies. For example, events held by the Trade Ministry and Gucci's in-store communication should follow their respective social media communication. This way, this research can have a partial but relevant view of nation branding strategies.

Again, results for this question cannot be generalized, as they are drawn from a small sample size. However, they can exemplify some Italian nation branding and serve as an experiment in studying nation branding through luxury branding tools.

4.1.3 Question 3 - How does Italy's country image in China relate to nation branding?

The answer to the final question relies on the results of the previous two questions and the theoretical framework found in the literature review.

Table Comparison

To find possible links between nation branding and country image, the results table of communicated and perceived country image, brand identity, and DNA are compared.

Analysis and Conclusions

This analysis identifies possible influences and recurring patterns between communication and perceived country image. Naturally, these results do not establish causality between communicated and received messages, as too many variables are involved in creating a country image. Instead, they want to evaluate the cultural congruence of messages in a symbolic environment and the relative importance of private-sector communication in the field of nation branding in the case of Italy.

4.2 Research Results

4.2.1 Question 1 - What is the country image of Italy in China?

As a premise, virtually all respondents feel confident in their awareness of Italy, indicating that Italy's nation brand is easily recognizable to the target group. Naturally, the specific knowledge of respondents varies significantly depending on education and personal experiences. In fact, a trend is evident in the interviews: participants with experience living in Europe can give more specific answers about their country image of Italy, especially in the fields of jobs, economy, and government, without using their previous knowledge of "the West", the United States, the United Kingdom, or the European Union. One important note is that the same is not valid for respondents with experience living in the United States. Their answers qualitatively resemble those of participants without similarly significant experiences abroad.

Connected to awareness, some respondents seem to fill possible knowledge gaps in less discussed aspects of Italy with previous knowledge of the United States, the United Kingdom, or the European Union. For example, words like "democracy", "capitalism", "modernity", "freedom", "free press", "free healthcare", "invading of China", and "good environmental laws" are commonly associated with other Western countries and are, sometimes, explicitly linked to general knowledge of "the West" (e.g. (paraphrasing) "I think you have free healthcare and weekends because you are in Europe" or "I know that "the West" is composed of democracies"). Also, some participants compare or cluster Italy with France and, less often, Spain. Their answers often compare Italy and France in different aspects (e.g. (paraphrasing) "I know Italy's culture is similar to France's but warmer"). This result can be justified by the minor role of Italy in its relations with China after the 17th century. Since then, when Italy participated in global missions, it did so only as a follower of other European powers. Its lack of protagonism results in a lack of a distinct identity.

These findings point to the fact that Chinese perception of Italy is dependent on, and intertwined with, their perception of "the West"[3] and, for some, Europe or the European Union.

Let us now detail Italy's country image starting with the strongest brand associations. Supporting quotes are attached where interviewees raised the topic unprompted or seemed emotionally connected to it. They were also selected according to relevance in less obvious topics (e.g., Italy's connection to food is clear to the reader as is).

Low-Pressure Life

Participants display a strong set of emotions and feelings related to Italy, making the affective side the most relevant. Respondents often associate Italy and its perceived lifestyle, creating a distinct country image.

Virtually all participants talked about the Italian lifestyle. They frequently use words and expressions such as "chill", "relaxed", "no stress", "happy", "spontaneous", "unorganized", "carefree", "stable", "calm", "sense of belonging", "sociable", "free weekend", "not competitive", "time to chat with friends and neighbors", "colorful life", "romantic", "no hard work", "simple life", "work-life-balance", "know how to enjoy life", "obsession with quality of life", "priority in enjoyment", "only doing what you love". They also add "freedom of speech" and "freedom of Individuality" (e.g., "I feel like it would be easy to just be myself even if I am different from others").

Emotional associations with this lifestyle are not necessarily always positive. Although most participants described it with a genuine positive connotation, it is the impression of this research that in most cases this perceived lifestyle has a double connotation. This confirms the above-mentioned literature review on Chinese stereotypes of Italians.

Italians are appreciated as lovers of life who focus on what is really enjoyable. They can befriend anyone, speak their minds freely, and they have no preoccupation whatsoever.

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[3] This thesis purposefully avoids providing a clear definition of "the West". It is a debated and confusing term included here because it was directly quoted by participants. In most cases, participants seemed to define "the West" as: the United States, United Kingdom, and European Union. They also implied that it is centered around a clear American cultural and material dominance.

However, another (implied or explicit) side of the coin exists. This lifestyle drives, for some, Italians to be lazy, unmotivated, and unserious.

Let us now see some supporting quotes:

"Chinese young people are under enormous pressure, but I think Italians don't experience that. If I imagine life in Italy, I think of a colorful life. As an Italian, I would be able to go see the opera and then hang out with my friends in the countryside, sit on the grass and not think of anything. It's like a dream."

26[4], Female

"Italians don't need to worry about the basics in life. If they get sick, they are protected, etc."

24, Male

"Italy reminds me of sunshine, sea, gelato, hot men, and pizza. But also colorful villages, Vespa[5], lemon, that famous Sicily movie (The Godfather)[6], Monica Bellucci[7], Ferrari[8], and luxury products."
"I think living in Italy would be chill, with no stress. Nothing will happen, and I will live the same lifestyle forever. It would make me feel calm."

25, Female

"I would describe the Italian lifestyle as Mediterranean, like in Southern France. People are relaxed, they spend lots of time at the beach and take a nap at lunchtime until 3 o'clock."

28, Female

"I had no perception about Italian life when I was little, but from some literature I learned that Italians live a very romantic life, people express their feelings freely, they exchange roses every day, with sunshine, and drink espresso. They have a happy life every day, with no work."

28, Male

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[4] The numbers below quotes represents the age of the respondent
[5] A 60's-style urban motorcycle brand
[6] A movie about the Italian Mafia in the U.S.
[7] A famous Italian actress
[8] An Italian sports car brand

Great Food and Drinks

Coming to the core of the discussion on Italy's country image, the uncontested central brand association is food. All interviews started their first section with the question: "When I say Italy, what comes to mind?". Virtually all participants mentioned "pizza" and "pasta" or "spaghetti" at the very top of their answers. Additionally, they often mention "gelato", "coffee", "olive oil", "lemons", and "wine". While it is true that the question encourages short, simple answers, it also ensures spontaneous recollection and an instinctive reaction. Also, the theme of food is a recurrent answer throughout all parts of the interview. It appears in discussions about Italian products, culture, lifestyle, tourism, jobs, and gastronomy is even perceived as an excellent Italian university specialization.

Participants are overall confident in their knowledge of Italian food. This knowledge seems to have very different sources. Respondents talk about their experiences in Italian restaurants in Italy, China, or abroad. They also mention the food they saw in movies and what they saw on social media (especially TikTok or Douyin). Often, they repeat some "culture bites" that they remember (e.g. (paraphrasing) "I know that Italians get mad if you break spaghetti", "they hate pineapple on pizza", "I think you cannot drink cappuccino after lunch", or "you just drink espresso in Italy"). As mentioned before, the theme of food permeated every part of the interview (e.g. (paraphrasing) in culture and lifestyle, "Italians usually eat lunch and dinner with their whole family every day", "Italians often get coffees and drinks with their coworkers", "Italians eat and drink on those little tables on the streets", "Italians really value the quality of food". In products and people, "olive oil and wine are great Italian exports", and "Italians should be foodies". In jobs, economy, tourism, and studies, "I think Italy could be a good place to study agriculture", "I think many Italians can find jobs in the service industry", "when I travel to Italy, I always think of what I want to eat", or "I tried so many different regional foods when I was in Italy"). Importantly, all food mentioned is traditional of Southern Italy, especially Campania and Sicily, which is also the Italian food that became iconic abroad, starting with Italian immigration to America and elsewhere.

Let us now see an exemplary supporting quote:

> "When I think of Italy I always think of good food, like pizza, pasta."
>
> 27, Male

Highest-Quality Luxury Products

In addition to food, participants show an interest in other Italian products. Overlapping with the culture and symbols categories, participants mention the craftsmanship and quality that characterize Italian products. Specifically, they mention "fashion" and "leather goods", "cars", and "design". A significant part of respondents mentions Italian brands like "Ferrari", "Gucci", "Prada", "Vespa", and "Smeg", often even before mentioning product categories. Connected to these brands, they mention the status and lifestyle benefits of Italian products. They are perceived as symbols of a successful career, a modern lifestyle, and a well-placed value in the quality of daily life. Also, they are seen as high-class, stylish, creative, and bold. Some respondents differentiate them from French or American products saying that Italian products show more creativity, personality, and character.

Let us now see some supporting quotes:

"Chinese people love Italy for its exquisite lifestyle, good wine, and *dolce vita*. I think people are attracted to Italy by great food and hospitality, and a luxury lifestyle."
27, Male

"I think about easy-going and outgoing people, I think about the ocean and the summer, I think of a vacation or wedding place, and especially of luxury goods and craftsmanship."
27, Male

Beauty and History

Other aspects that are often spontaneously mentioned in relation to Italy are its beauty and long history. Both aspects seem profoundly connected to the perception of Italian culture and Italy as a tourist destination. Almost every respondent mentions "beautiful views" on the one side, including "beautiful cities and countryside", "beautiful ocean", "good weather", and "beautiful monuments" on the other, including "columns and sculptures", "churches", "palaces", and generic "old buildings". They also seem deeply interested in a future trip to Italy, and those who have been to Italy on vacation seem satisfied and interested in returning. This finding confirms the literature on the topic and reaffirms Italy as an extraordinary tourist destination in the Chinese perception.

Let us now see some supporting quotes:

"I might think of Italy as a grandpa, sipping wine, eating fruits and ham, and chilling by the beach getting tan."

25, Female

"Life there is artistic, people express themselves freely everywhere. Even on the streets, you can see strange people that are doing art." "Italians use luxury brands not to show wealth, but to show their styles and their appreciation for beauty."

24, Male

Business-Adversity

Another core result of the interviews is the evident absence of brand associations between Italy and the fields of job, economy, study, or investment. No participant seems to associate Italy with any of these fields spontaneously. They answer with a consistently negative perception of these fields even when asked. Virtually every participant replies to "Would you invest your money in Italy" with a resounding "No". A few specify that they would invest in a small fashion company, but only if they knew it personally. Some others specify that they would consider investing in real estate for a vacation house to have a place to retire or spend summer in. No interviewee ever mentions they would trust their capital to grow. Also, a few participants explain that they know the Italian legal system is complicated, outdated, foreigner-averse, and business-averse.

Low-Quality Education

Given the age of the respondents, a follow-up about possible studies was included. Answers on this topic are more varied, but they still show a generally negative image of Italy. Most respondents answer that they would not study in Italy, and a significant portion of them answers that they would only study specific topics in Italy, mostly humanities. Specifically, they would trust Italy to be a good place to study mainly "history", "arts", "religion", and more rarely "car engineering", "fashion and design", "architecture", and "business". Here, Italy shows a stark connection to the humanities compared to the sciences. Additionally, the answer "business" is only mentioned by business school students studying management in France. In fact, they directly and spontaneously mention Bocconi as the only Italian university they know, as it is a minor competitor to the major French business schools (where some of them have

studied). Therefore, it cannot be assumed that "business" would be an answer for Chinese nationals outside of this context.

Slow Economy

To complete the picture, when asked about the job market and economy in Italy, most respondents perceive Italy as a slow, backward-oriented economy. The respondent's choice of comparison defines one major difference in answers on the topic. When Italy is compared to Europe, it appears as a poor country with few jobs and opportunities for young people, without a developed financial system, and generally outside of the global market economy. Virtually all respondents detailing their answers on jobs defined them as stable, but low-paying. When they compare it to China, instead, respondents emphasize Italy's firm position as a developed economy, with decent-paying jobs, decent safety nets, and other advanced workers' rights. However, even for these respondents, the economy seems to revolve around government jobs, service jobs, or family-owned businesses. Finally, some respondents with connections to Italian people report that (paraphrasing) "young Italians love Italy, but they cannot find jobs there and are forced to move abroad."

On a positive note, respondents highlighting decent work conditions talk about Italians having "weekends off", "stable and short working hours", "good job opportunities even if they underperform on the job or in their studies." However, these qualities are often associated with the European Union or "the West" in general. In fact, they are often described in opposition to Chinese 9-9-6 culture and associated with European workers' protection and work-life balance.

Let us now see some supporting quotes:

"I think even if Italians are incompetent, they can still get a job in government and live an easy life."

24, Male

"I think most Italians work in fashion and international trade. Otherwise, they specialize in agriculture and make food or they make leather goods."

27, Male

"The first thing that comes to mind is that people have a low workload. They are legally protected to have few working hours while they earn a decent salary."

24, Male

Hedonist Culture

Still a strong association, respondents seem to have a consistent perception of Italian culture. Most respondents recognize Italian culture as central to Western history; many spontaneously mention Ancient Rome or the Renaissance. Interestingly, many respondents have specific views on Italian culture, mentioning an "obsession for food", "culture of coffee", "love for the arts", "appreciation for beauty", "care for craftsmanship", "value of tradition", "importance of dressing well", and "individualism" (often meaning "freedom to be yourself"). Some also mention "family values", "mafia", "use of gestures", "soccer", "advanced feminism", and the bite-sized cultural knowledge introduced above (e.g., Italians "cannot have pineapple on pizza", "hate American coffee").

Specifically, some respondents without living experience in Europe focus heavily on family values and mafia, mentioning that "Italians always live with their parents, uncles, and grandparents", or that they "are used to exchanging favors and helping each other in the family", and that they "place high value on family and friends, they come before anything else." This perception seems to be connected to the American portrait of Italian life, usually referring to traditional families in the 20th Century in Campania or Sicily. In fact, Naples and Sicily (places connected to the mafia) often come up in conversation and many respondents quote "The Godfather"[9] as a source of information on Italy.

Connected to culture, as mentioned above, an overwhelming majority of respondents associate some lifestyle factors with Italy. Italy's perception is undoubtedly defined by a relaxed lifestyle. Italian culture is perceived to be "chill", "easy-going", "focused on enjoyment", "low pressure", and "carefree". All these considerations together describe a perception of a hedonist lifestyle.

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[9] Referring to the legendary 1972 by the American-Italian Francis Ford Coppola. The movie is set in the 1940s and takes place entirely within the world of the Corleones, a fictional New York Mafia family with origins in Sicily. It shows scenes of typical American perception of 40s Italian immigrants to the US and it is partly set in Sicily.

Let us now see some supporting quotes:

"I learned that Italy's geography is very good. You have a very long coastline and the land is very fertile, so you can easily get good food, like vegetables and grapes. I think this great starting point shaped Italian culture, making people optimistic."

26, Female

"As for people, in my traditional Italian image, I think of advertisement campaigns. I imagine a sexy Italian guy. He's very masculine and attractive, but outgoing, welcoming, and talkative." "I think Italian people don't care that much. It's much better than how Chinese people overthink. They have a carefree life."

27, Male

"I think the stereotype of Italian people in China is that Italians are lazy. Not necessarily in a bad way, it's just that the lifestyles are very different."

25, Female

"When Italian people meet, they kiss."

24, Male

"Overall I think Chinese perceive Italians as chic and handsome – like a model, because they associate the country with fashion – and also someone that is living life without considering the future, just living in the moment. Just being pretty, having fun."

25, Female

Mostly Friendly, Family-oriented People

Connected to a hedonist culture, Italian people are undoubtedly perceived as "enthusiastic", "friendly", "warm", "talkative", "loud", "easy-going", "passionate", "romantic", "charming", "carefree", "direct", and "caring". At the same time, the country is "lazy", "child-like", "unorganized", and "disloyal". In short, respondents confirm the literature review stating that Chinese perceive Italians as hedonists, incapable of commitment but happy and passionate.

A less clear matter is the friendliness of Italians toward foreigners or, specifically, Chinese. Respondents described Italians as "racist" and "welcoming", sometimes in the same interview. Surely, they consider Italians "proud of their culture", but different personal experiences or personal sensibilities seem to have shaped respondents' opinions in this aspect. For example

some specify regional differences and context-based differences in how they were treated as foreigners. However, Italians do not seem more unaccepting of Chinese people or culture than other Western countries. Also, Milan's Chinatown is mentioned as a great example of peaceful and respectful integration and as "one of the few places where you can get authentic Chinese food at a Chinese price." This example seems to reflect well on the Italian integration of Chinese people, even though some interviewees mention that they heard of difficulties for Chinese people being accepted in Italy, especially if they did not speak Italian.

Finally, Italian people are identified as beautiful and stylish, despite not asking for physical aspects in the interviews. Italian women are described as fashionable and beautiful (e.g., "like Monica Bellucci"), but most emphasis was put on men. Italian men are described as tall, masculine (beard, short hair), tan, slim and fit, charming and passionate, stylish, confident, and romantic. Some interviewees described them as "hot" and "attractive" (e.g., "just like in a Dolce and Gabbana ad").

Let us now see some supporting quotes:

"I saw Mamma Mia the other day and I think it should be pretty similar to Italy, because it's in Europe. Italians ride bikes and Vespas. Even if they are ten years old they still look very good, and when you ride them, you look attractive. I think the lifestyle is slow and you can have time to drink tea, to talk with your friend, to chat with the neighbors. It's not like in China, where we are very competitive. We have to study very hard to find a job and to get into a good university."

27, Male

"I would see that Italians are very *carpe diem*. They put the pleasure of life above many other things, like work and politics."

25, Female

"About Italian people, I know Pavarotti and some actors. I think they are very enthusiastic, passionate, full of energy. They are also very romantic and friendly. They can also speak at least two languages, because they live in Europe. Also, there are lots of old people, and I saw in movies that they often play with their grandkids and have fun together."

27, Male

"I saw a movie where Italian people live with their entire family, like in The Godfather. We live only with our father, mother and brother, but in Italy, they would live with their uncles, cousins, and grandparents."

24, Male

Thieves and Scammers

A remarkably relevant aspect of the perception of Italy is the presence of thieves. Interviews do not provide much context on this aspect, but the overwhelming majority of interviewees spontaneously mention "thieves" at some point in the interview. Many report that they, or their friends, had their wallets stolen in Italy. Additionally, many report being worried about being approached by scammers in major Italian cities and feeling uncomfortable or unsafe. The issue of safety seems to be a top-of-mind concern for most interviewees and the main drawback of traveling to Italy.

Interestingly, a significant number of respondents mention a new law that would make it impossible for the Italian police to arrest thieves (they seem to refer to the so-called "Riforma Cartabia" of the Italian civil justice system, implemented on February 28th, 2023). In their remarks, this seemingly nonsensical law would worsen the already grave crime rate in major Italian cities. They report social media as their primary source on the issue and display an arguably (and understandably) partial understanding of it.[10] The high interest in this law is especially startling considering that virtually all respondents reported knowing little about the Italian government and political issues.

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[10] Despite its relatively high frequency, theft remains a crime in Italian law. The "Riforma Cartabia" changes only a procedural aspect of non-violent theft reporting. Simplifying, after the reform, non-violent theft needs to be reported to police forces in order for the authorities to prosecute thieves. Supporters of the reform argue that this will help the police process theft more efficiently and reduce bureaucracy clogging the Italian justice system, while its opponents argue that it will leave thieves unpunished and redirect towards people with a lower chance of reporting theft, i.e. tourists.

Unstable Government and Low Relevance

The weakest overall brand association is the government and politics category. A significant number of respondents declined to answer this part of the interview, reporting having too little information on it. A few, especially those living in Italy, mention some political instability and the marginal role of Italy among traditionally Western countries. Some respondents bring up Italy's position in WWII and its general tendency to switch sides during wars, but they do not elaborate. Others bring up progressive laws and values such as "feminism" or "gay marriage". From answers in this and other categories, it can be concluded that Italy is politically interpreted as a passive member of "the West" and the European Union.

Here is a related supporting quote:

"I think when you asked me about what Chinese people think of Italy, people would answer with what Americans think of Italy. English-speaking elites control the media content about Europe. When we want to see something Italian, we watch The Godfather or the BBC, which are from Anglosaxon countries. Also, if we choose to read an Italian book, we usually find an English translation, or, if we can find it in Chinese, it is usually translated from English."

26, Female

This marks the end of affective and cognitive brand associations and, therefore, of this section.

Summary of Results

Above, respondents' answers are organized by brand association strength. A summary of these results is available in **Table 5**. However, it can be useful to organize them according to the frameworks seen above. Specifically, the filled-in Brand Codes and DNA framework is available in **Table 6**, the filled-in Brand Identity Prism in **Table 7**, and finally an overall description of Italian country image according to the respondents in **Table 8**.

These findings reinforce the view of Italy's communication and perception as a luxury brand. Just like luxury brands, Italy focuses and excels at sparking emotional responses, creating legends, manipulating symbols, and, most importantly, building dream factors.

They also show that the sources of the Italian country images are various. However, personal connections, word of mouth (including on social media), and Hollywood movies are by far the

major sources of perception of Italy. At the same time, luxury brands' communication also seems to play a crucial part.

In an effort to identify the main characteristics of the Italian country image in short, this research finds that the perception of Italy is mainly connected to its perceived lifestyle.[11]

In other words, **in Chinese people's eyes, Italy is the *dolce vita*.**

As mentioned, *dolce vita* (lit. "the sweet life") can be defined as a life of heedless pleasure and luxury, a true concept of lifestyle made up of a unique mix of family, food, nature, art and fun.

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[11] Please note that, throughout this chapter, some interview quotes are paraphrased to reduce interruptions and unnecessary words, but always maintain their original meaning.

Table 5 - Italy Perceived Brand Associations

Italy Brand Associations (Section 1 - Unprompted)	
Strong (mentioned in opening question by almost each informant)	Medium Strong (mentioned during the interview by the vast majority of informants)
Pizza, Pasta, Quality Food in general (gelato, coffee, wine, olive oil), Lifestyle ("chill", "no-pressure", "go-with-the-flow", "enjoy life"), Thieves (and scammers), Warm and Friendly people, Art	Good Weather, Family values, Romanticism, Fashion, Iconic Places (Rome, Venice, Sicily, Milan, Cinque Terre, Florence), Classical architecture (statues, columns, monuments), Movies (often American about Italy), Ferrari (and Vespa), Mafia, Freedom and individuality, "Guanxi" relations, Good government services and democracy (just like Europe)

Italy Brand Associations (Section 1 - Unprompted)	
Medium Weak (mentioned during the interview after follow-up question by a relevant number of informants)	Weak (mentioned by only some informants with strong interest)
Long History (ancient Rome, Renaissance, WWII), Luxury (other than fashion and cars), Churches, Soccer, Law favoring Thieves, Wedding Destination, Unorganized, Ocean, Family-owned Firms, Other Family-related topics (extended family living together)	Good for Studying Arts (and fashion, cuisine), Monica Bellucci, Low Salary, Paintings, Good relations with China, Feminism, Kisses to say hi, Formula 1, Milan's Chinatown

Table 6. Italy Perceived Codes and DNA

Italy's Perceived Codes and DNA (Sections 1 and 2 combined)	
Codes	DNA
Physical Good Food, Quality Products Beautiful Views, Sunshine, Drinks Attractive, Stylish People Ocean, Vineyards, Countryside Columns, Statues, Paintings Monuments, Churches Emotional Relax, Spontaneity, Carefree-spirit Low-organization, Low-stress, Low-competition Harmony with Community and Nature Friendliness, Sociability, Reciprocity Simplicity, Time for Family and Friends Romanticism, Passion, Color Appreciation for Beauty and Life	*Dolce Vita* (Definition: a life of heedless pleasure and luxury, a true concept of lifestyle made up of a unique mix of family, food, nature, art and fun)
Note Negative aspects are also an important part of the Chinese image of Italy. Importantly, some informants described the "*dolce vita*" lifestyle as overall negative, synonymous with laziness, simple-mindedness, and disrespect for rules. Thieves and lack of efficiency or organization are the top-of-mind concerns. In a way, they also play into the "*dolce vita*" DNA of Italy, as they easily link to an hedonistic lifestyle and country-wide lack of seriousness.	

Table 7 - Italy's Perceived Brand Identity Prism

Italy's Perceived Brand Identity Prism (Section 2 - Guided)		
Physique (What are some symbols of Italy?)	Relationship (How does Italy treat Foreigners?)	Reflection (What kind of Chinese person likes Italy?)
Pizza, Pasta (spaghetti), Gelato Rome, Venice, Sculptures, Churches Gucci, Ferrari, Vespa	Welcoming, Caring, Talkative Open-minded only at times, Judgy, Proud Common Thefts, Difficult to Integrate	High-Class, Shopper, Fashionable, Model Passionate about History or Art, Foodie Educated, Open-Minded
Personality (What kind of person would Italy be?)	Culture (What are some Italian values?)	Self-Image (What do the people above care about?)
Talkative, Relaxed, Direct, Caring, Charming, Romantic, Enthusiastic, Warm Lazy, Child-like, Rule Breaker, Disloyal	Craftsmanship, Quality of Food, Quality of Life Family, Individualism, Freedom, Passion History	Chill, Unique, Cultured, Authentic Want Social Validation and a Lavish Lifestyle Care about Image and Etiquette Want to Enjoy Life

Table 8 - Italy's Perceived Country Image

Italy Country Image (Section 1 - Unprompted)	
Culture	Products
Coffee Culture, Arts (painting, statues, architecture), Obsession for Food, Appreciation of Beauty (architecture, arts, fashion), Easy-going (go-with-the-flow), Craftsmanship (better-quality products, made in Italy), Family-Centered (living in symbiosis with family, living under the same roof), Gestures, Traditional, Long History (ancient Rome, Renaissance), Importance of Dressing well, Mafia, Feminism Bite-sized culture (don't like pineapple on pizza, kisses to say hi, can't break spaghetti, don't like American coffee, can't drink cappuccino after lunch)	Traditional Food (pizza, pasta, gelato, coffee, wine) Luxury Brands (fashion, cars) (Gucci, Ferrari, Vespa, Smeg, Buccellati) Arts (movies, opera, music, paintings)

Italy Country Image (Section 1 - Unprompted)	
Jobs & Economy	People

Don't know Relatively easy to find stable jobs (decent, low-pay, slow-pace jobs, legally protected) Economy is good but not growing	Talkative, Friendly, Outgoing, Passionate, Nice, Welcoming, Warm Focused on Entertainment/Enjoyment, Enthusiastic, Loud, Caring Beautiful, Handsome (bearded, manly), Tall, "Hot", Latin-Lover (word not used) Open-Minded vs. Closed-Minded (depending on comparison), Can speak other languages Individualistic (compared to China, because it's part of Western culture)

Italy Country Image (Section 1 - Unprompted)	
Tourism	Governance
Great Tourist Destination, Beautiful view, Aperitif and Relaxing in street-side Cafés, Watch soccer, Sunshine, Ocean, Coast line, Wedding, Biking, "Waste Time", Beautiful Cities and Countryside	Don't know Thieves and Scammers problem (a law was passed that makes it impossible to arrest thieves) Political instability

Italy Country Image (Section 1 - Unprompted)	
Investment / Study	Lifestyle and Emotions (How would you feel living like an Italian?)

Bad for Investments (no modern industry, no economic growth) Good for studying some Humanities (arts, religion, history), but I wouldn't study there	Chill, No stress, Happy, Spontaneous, Unorganized, Carefree, Stable, Calm, Sense of Belonging, Sociable, Free weekend, Not Competitive, Time to chat with friends and neighbors, "Colorful life" (I can go see the opera and then sit on the grass and not think of anything. It's like a dream"), Romantic (with roses), No hard work, Simple life, Work-life-balance, Know how to enjoy life Freedom of Speech, Freedom of Individuality ("I feel like it would be easy to just be myself even if it's different from others"), Worry about thieves

4.2.2 Question 2 - What brand does Italian nation branding promote in China?

As previously mentioned, this research agrees with the literature review finding that Italian institutional nation branding campaigns are scattered, unorganized, often incoherent, and confusing to final users. Different ministries, government institutions, regional and local institutions, and ad-hoc government programs create an overwhelming number of sources, messages, and targets, often contradicting each other. The same is true for Italian nation branding in China. As explained in the methodology, this section will analyze the visual communication of selected campaigns and attempt to find a common factor that can define Italian nation branding in China. It will then do the same with private-sector communication. Of course, firms do not forward nation branding objectives, but they have much more effective and pervasive campaigns and are, therefore, impactful on nation branding.

Let us first see what nation brand is portrayed by institutional Italian nation branding. For the sake of simplicity, this discussion will focus on the DNA and codes communicated by each ministry and brand. Detailed Brand Identity Prisms are available in tables and in the Annex.

Ministry of Tourism

Campaign: Italia.it, with the main objective of attracting tourists to Italy
DNA: Tradition, Peace, Emotion, Nature, Timelessness, Romance

The campaign's visual communication focuses on showing Italy's beauty through different filters. It makes a compelling case for tourists wanting to come to Italy and wanting to find a "simple" life. In fact, the images and videos show a picture of Italy that resembles, at times, a romantic getaway, a spiritual journey, an exploration of nature, or a jump through history. In all posts, it is easy to see how the Ministry of Tourism communicates different aspects of the dolce vita. Simplifying, in these posts, the setting is always empty and peaceful, the buildings are old palaces, the cities are small historical towns, the food looks tasty and enjoyable, the subjects seem free and relaxed, the sky is blue, the sun is shining, the sea and the mountains are beautiful. Any other aspect of Italian life is absent, together with any reference to modernity. Vehicles are usually old 500s or Vespas, restaurants are located in medieval streets, flowers grow on lake-side vases spontaneously, the houses look like TV sets. There is almost no reference to any internet connection, skyscraper, experiential museum, or store.

Also, the page features a great number of "influencer videos" directly shot by Chinese people and reposted by the Italian government. These videos follow the same topics as the non-organic ones but they feel more authentic and localized. Finally, the page includes many "educational" videos that explain some parts of Italian culture in detail and inform future tourists of regional specialties, history, and attractions.

Naturally, these images might attract a great number of tourists each year, but they also build a brand of a country that is outside of time. This depiction shows a clear lack of interest in economic fortune, academic research, technology, or any other element of development. It characterizes Italy as a country only of tourism. This is by far the Italian institutional agency with the widest reach and it can be understood as repeating dolce vita stereotypes without attempting to transform them.

Table 9 - Ministry of Tourism's Communication

Ministry of Tourism: Italia.it (Weibo: 意大利国家旅游局)		
Brand Identity		
Physique	Relationship	Reflection
Good food, Good art, Handmade clothing and accessories, Sea and mountains, Church, Garden, Boat	Welcoming, Attentive	Young, Pretty, Active
Personality	Culture	Self-Image
Warm, Proud, Free of worries	Tradition, Authenticity, Romance	Adventurous, Independent, Curious
DNA		
Tradition, Peace, Emotion, Nature, Timelessness, Romance		
Codes		

Monument, Color, Village, Empty, Celebration, Food, Wine, Craftsmanship, Date, Sea, Mountain, Church

Ministry of Trade

Campaign: Be-Italy, with the main objective of promoting Italian products and services

DNA: Quality, Creativity, Innovation, Elegance

This campaign's visual communication focuses, instead, on objects and craftsmanship. It shows Italian traditional products, how they are made, and what part of history they come from. The page features interviews with chefs, woodworkers, engineers, designers, and artisans. Overall, it shows a productive side of Italy that is absent in the campaign above.

This campaign also has an interesting introduction video to it, clearly showing the intent of detaching Italy to its traditional called "Italy the extraordinary commonplace". It starts by asking the question "Pizza makers?" answering that "Italy is a world leader in the creation of infrastructures - 1000 construction sites in 90 countries". Then, it juxtaposes commonplace knowledge about Italy with impressive economic and technological results (pharmaceutical production, patents, academic research, robotics, precision mechanics etc.). However, the analyzed posts almost exclusively focus on traditional Italian items like food, wine, musical instruments, leather goods, clothing and accessories, luxury cars, interior design pieces, and art.

This apparent internal contradiction only reinforces the perception that Italy is not a productive part of modernity but rather a repository of history. A clear example of this dynamic is a series of videos about Italian ingenuity. To make the case that Italy is a place of engineers and scientists, they describe inventions and discoveries made more than four centuries ago. This messaging is counter-productive. It reinforces the knowledge that Italy's best days are well behind and not much has happened since then.

Again, then, it can be argued that these posts resemble the dolce vita stereotypes, as they exemplify quality, tradition, and elegance.

Table 10 - Ministry of Trade's Communication

Ministry of Trade: Be-Italy (Weibo: <u>ICE_SHANGHAI</u>)		
Brand Identity		
Physique	Relationship	Reflection
Made in Italy, Interior Design, Vespa, Coffee, Boats, Fashion, Machinery	Passionate, Proud, Open-for-business	Business person, Educated, Rich
Personality	Culture	Self-Image
Serious, Business-focused, Pragmatic	Creativity, Craftsmanship, Quality, Innovation, Elegance	Elegant, Elevated, Connoisseur
DNA		
Quality, Creativity, Innovation, Elegance		
Codes		
Minimalism, Art Display, Design, Refusing Stereotypes, "Extraordinary"		

Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Campaign: Beijing Italian Cultural Center, with the main objective of promoting Italian culture
DNA: Arts, Refinement, Enjoyment

This campaign is much less far followed and content-rich than the previous two. Posts are fewer and feel less like advertisements. Many posts share information on public events like

classical music concerts or art galleries. Other posts show past art expression forms and seemingly educate viewers on some traditional aspects of Italian art (e.g. medieval tapestry work).

Unfortunately, this campaign does not offer as much insight into Italian institutional nation branding content as the ones above. Instead, it exemplifies the lack thereof. In other countries with successful nation branding campaigns, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs usually plays a coordinating role in the campaigns.

Table 11 - Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Beijing Cultural Institute		
Weibo: 意大利使馆文化处		
Brand Identity		
Physique	Relationship	Reflection
Concerts, Instruments, Food, Dance	Passionate, Sharing	Artists, Musicians
Personality	Culture	Self-Image
Warm, Artistic, Fun	Tradition, authenticity, romance, creativity, color	Cultured, Artistic, Active
DNA		
Arts, Refinement, Enjoyment		
Codes		

Drawings, Dance, Music

Summary of Institutional Campaigns

In conclusion, this research finds that despite sending overall different signals, public sector nation branding can be summarized into:

Public Sector Codes: Monument, Color, Village, Nature, Empty, Celebration, Food, Wine, Craftsmanship, Date, Sea, Mountain, Church, Dance, Music, Art.

Public Sector Brand DNA: Peace, Emotion, Enjoyment, Romance, Fun.

Again, these points show the interest of the Italian government in portraying Italy as a place where time stops and where anyone can enjoy an exquisite lifestyle.

Let us now turn to private sector communication.

Gucci

Brand: a fun and retro fashion house and leather goods maker
DNA: Dreamer, Passionate, Playful, Childish

Gucci's communication is, of course, focused on clothing. It uses a retro style to tell about its craftsmanship and its products. But most importantly, it uses colorful settings and a playful attitude to show an image of a life. The characters in these videos and pictures are always confident, they have fun, and they enjoy life. Its focus on travel and its lightheartedness show a resemblance with the stereotype of the "dreamer". At the same time, the models show character and exude confidence. When the setting is location-specific, it is often Italian-looking, including arches, gardens, lakes, and other Italian classics.

It can be said, then, that a Gucci fan might make an obvious connection between this brand's personality and their pre-existing stereotypes of Italy. Here, modernity is included but again overshadowed by the atmosphere of the 80s and the feeling of timelessness. Naturally, one might also connect this and many more luxury brands with the knowledge of excellent quality of life that Italy represents.

<div align="center">**Table 12** - Gucci's Communication</div>

Gucci (Weibo: GUCCI)		
Brand Identity		
Physique	Relationship	Reflection
Bag, Shoe, High fashion	Proud, Distant, Open	Young Woman, Romantic, Extravagant
Personality	Culture	Self-Image
Fun, Childish, Artsy, Carefree	Creativity, Heritage, Craftsmanship, Passionate, Retro, Fun	Elegant, Fun, Happy, Edgy
DNA		
Dreamer, Passionate, Playful, Childish		
Codes		
Bright Colors, Spring, Retro, Travel, Games, Checkers		

Giorgio Armani

Brand: a classic tailoring fashion house and lifestyle brand
DNA: Quality, Lifestyle, Timelessness

Armani's campaigns are, comparatively, more focused on quality materials and lifestyle. In fact, the brand encompasses many luxury sectors, from high fashion to hotels, from flowers to nightclubs. The pictures show gala dresses and celebrities, but they also play with texture and

earth colors highlighting the fabric. The characters here are confident, powerful and always at ease, and the set is definingly modern and minimalist. Although these characteristics might seem distant from the other nation branding examples seen above, the overall feeling of the page remains Italian. Not only does it show the quality of materials, it wants to share a glimpse of an exquisite and refined lifestyle. It also portrays the very Italian concept of effortlessness.

Here too, it is possible that an Armani fan might connect some of these brand qualities to Italy, as they follow current stereotypes of the country. However, the modernity and minimalism of the brand are partially in conflict with some aspects of the perceived Italian lifestyle, possibly adding a new side to the Italian country image.

Table 13 - Giorgio Armani's Communication

Giorgio Armani (Weibo: Armani阿玛尼)		
Brand Identity		
Physique	Relationship	Reflection
Bag, Shoe, Fashion, Sports, Watch	Proud, Distant, Open	Elegant Woman, High-Class, Minimalist
Personality	Culture	Self-Image
Powerful, Warm, Classy, Calm	Craftsmanship, Quality, Independent	Classy, Elegant, Powerful
DNA		
Quality, Lifestyle, Timelessness		
Codes		
Minimalism, Light, Silk, Calm, Earth Tones, Sports		

Bulgari

Brand: a roman-inspired jeweler and watchmaker
DNA: Elegant, Expertise, Timelessness

Bulgari's campaign is a mix of colors, monuments and power. Its videos show many shots of the city of Rome and its elegant parties. Here too, the models are clearly carefree and living a pure, "simple" life. Many symbols in the pictures recall the Roman Empire and Italy's noble families, while, for example, their iconic snake signifies power and desire.

Finally, the connection between Bulgari and Italy couldn't be more explicit. It is likely that fans of the brand associate Italy with these symbols and attitudes and imagine a life like the ones portrayed in these campaigns.

This marks the end of this very brief analysis of the campaigns. Detailed tables are available in the Appendix.

Table 14 - Bulgari's Communication

Bulgari (Weibo: <u>BVLGARI宝格丽</u>)		
Brand Identity		
Physique	Relationship	Reflection
Bag, Ring, Necklace, Watch	Proud, Distant, Open	Elegant Woman, High-Class, Bold
Personality	Culture	Self-Image
Powerful Woman, Romantic, Dreamer	Creativity, Tradition, Color, Craftsmanship, Romance	Empowered, Bold, Classy
DNA		
Elegant, Expertise, Timelessness		
Codes		

Bright Colors, Snake, Rome

Summary of Private Sector Campaigns

This research finds that despite not prioritizing nation branding communication, the private sector serves as a nation branding actor (with these brands being representative of overall private sector communication themes) and its message can be summarized into:

Private Sector Codes: Bright Colors, Spring, Travel, Light, Material, Calm, Earth Tones, Passion

Private Sector Brand DNA: Elegance, Tradition, Quality, Empowerment, Character

This research argues that these characteristics are used by the brands to affirm themselves in Italian tradition, but that they also transfer back to Italian nation brand. This dynamic reinforces existing perceptions and pushes Italy's brand towards the dolce vita concept.

Superficially, the communication strategies of the public and private sectors might seem distant and separate. However, they both seem to play on different aspects of the already present perception of Italy and, when taken together, they paint a specific picture of Italy, in a "Sistema Italia".

Summary of Results

Table 17 - Italian Nation Branding Analysis

	Public Sector	Private Sector	Mixed (Sistema Italia)
DNA	Peace, Emotion, Enjoyment, Romance, Fun	Elegance, Tradition, Quality, Empowerment, Character	Dolce Vita
Codes	Monument, Color, Village, Nature, Empty, Celebration, Food, Wine, Craftsmanship, Date, Sea, Mountain, Church, Dance, Music, Art	Bright Colors, Spring, Travel, Light, Material, Calm, Earth Tones, Sports, Rome, Happiness	Sum of the previous columns

This research finds that: **the nation branding communicated by the mix of private and public sectors matches the definition of dolce vita.**

This finding confirms the theory of culturally congruent brand extensions. The public and private sectors act and communicate in a way that matches Chinese people's pre-existing perception of Italy, creating congruent cultural schemas.

As stated in the previous chapter, these findings reinforce the view of Italy's communication and perception as a luxury brand. Just like luxury brands, Italy focuses and excels at sparking emotional responses, creating legends, manipulating symbols, and, most importantly, building dream factors.

4.2.3 Question 3 - How does Italy's country image in China relate to nation branding?

Using answers from Questions 1 and 2, it is possible to draw some conclusions on the relations between the communicated and received Italy brands.

As a premise, country images are mostly stable and inertial. Naturally, a single branding campaign cannot change the image of an entire country. However, over a long time span, branding communication can influence perception. Therefore, these results can only serve as a first attempt to evaluate the perception of Italy in China.

To answer the question, let us look at the Kapferer's Brand Identity Prisms collected in the research above and compare communication and perception. Although specific words might not match exactly, it is possible to attempt qualitative comparisons between the two. The results of this comparison are summarized in **Table 18**.

Table 18 - Italy's Country Image and Nation Branding (Source Matching)

Source Matching in Italy Perceived Brand Identity Prism (Simplified)			
Aspect/Source	Public	Private	Other
Physique	Pizza, Pasta (spaghetti), Gelato Rome, Venice, Sculptures, Churches	Gucci, Ferrari, Vespa	/
Relationship	Welcoming, Caring, Talkative	Judgy, Proud	Open-minded only at times, Common Thefts, Difficult to Integrate
Reflection	Passionate about History or Art, Foodie	High-Class, Shopper, Fashionable, Model	Educated, Open-Minded
Personality	Romantic, Enthusiastic, Warm	Child-like, Rule Breaker	Talkative, Relaxed, Direct, Caring, Charming, Lazy, Disloyal
Culture	Passion, History	Craftsmanship, Quality of Food and Life	Family, Individualism, Freedom,
Self-Image	Wants to Enjoy Life	Unique, Cultured, Authentic Wants Social Validation and a Lavish Lifestyle, Cares about Image and Etiquette	Chill

Summary of Results

Although this is a primitive attempt at analysis, it points to a few findings.

As a premise, the association category to "other" (used to classify brand identity elements not linked to public or private sectors) is a very relevant factor in the perception of Italy that finds no justification in nation branding. This supports the literature review finding that stereotypes and the surrounding environment are the most critical factors defining country image. Also, "other" includes media sources neither from China nor Italy. For example, Hollywood movies. Media, in general, seem to have a significant role in shaping Chinese perception of Italy, but they are (to a point) outside of Italian control.

As a first result, public and private communication elements do not seem to create a coherent picture. Nevertheless, when combined into the "Sistema Italia" they clearly send a message resembling the dolce vita. Also, no actor seems to actively try to change the existing country image of Italy. Instead, as previously mentioned, they seem to use culturally congruent brand extensions to ensure their communication connects to their targets' pre-existing perceptions.

Connected to this point, there seems to be a lack of efforts to change the perception of Italy on safety and laziness. The Italian government launched some campaigns to fight some Italian stereotypes, including laziness – Be-Italy. However, this message got lost in the overall communication and was in no way adapted to the Chinese sensibility.

Additionally, this research argues that Italy communicates on a brand that does not match the perceived reality of Italians (see Literature Review). Naturally, brands are constructions that have roots in reality and build on those to create value and shape perception. This is especially true for luxury brands. Just like luxury brands, Italy does not focus on communicating specific realities or knowledge. Instead, it uses symbols to build legends and a brand universe creating dream factors.

This answers this thesis' last question on Italian nation branding in China.

5 Conclusions

5.1 Main Findings

To conclude this research, let us summarize its findings.

First, Italian nation branding can be analyzed with luxury communication tools. In fact, this confirms the study's assumption that Italy can be considered a luxury brand.

Second, the Italian country image in China is defined by the dolce vita concept, a life of heedless pleasure and luxury, a unique mix of family, food, nature, art, and fun. This perception is ostensibly positive, but it could hide some negative implications. Italians are appreciated as lovers of life who focus on what is really enjoyable. They can befriend anyone, speak their minds freely, and have no preoccupation whatsoever. They live free of worries and concerns and enjoy a quality lifestyle independently of their efforts. At the same time, for some, they could be lazy, unmotivated, and unserious.

Third, Italian nation branding focuses and excels at sparking emotional responses, creating legends, manipulating symbols, and, most importantly, building dream factors. Also, private sector communication is more localized and adapted to Chinese sensibility. Overall, the public and private sectors together communicate the dolce vita brand.

Fourth, both the public and private sectors act and communicate in a way that matches Chinese people's pre-existing perception of Italy, creating congruent cultural schemas. Consequently, they communicate specific aspects of dolce vita that match their specific brand DNA and objectives that make up Italian nation branding overall. The resulting alignment of the private and public sectors creates a Sistema Italia, helping Italy's image and economy abroad.

Also, personal connections, word of mouth (including on social media), and Hollywood movies are the major perceived sources of their perceptions of Italy. However, it can be argued that stereotypes portrayed by Chinese people living abroad or in popular entertainment still play the most relevant role in shaping Italian country image. Also, it can be argued that luxury brands help shape the perception of Italy adding to its sources. In fact, they employ effective, localized, and persuasive communication, representing Italy in it.

5.2 Implications and Further Research

Given the success of this analysis, it can be argued that luxury branding tools would be a great addition to future research in the field of nation branding.

This research finds a great gap between nation branding research in Italy and abroad. It strongly argues for increasing and publishing research on the topic. It also believes the Italian statistical agency should publish more data on the perception of Italy. Furthermore, It finds a gap in the communication strategies of the public and private sectors. The public sector shows a clear absence of direction and long-term strategic planning. This research strongly argues for the need for a coherent long-term nation branding strategy for Italy, similar to the Korean and Japanese ones.

Finally, this research believes an effort should be made by Italian nation branding overall to improve the negative Chinese perception of Italian laziness by using the same codes to fight stereotypes that may impede Italian business expansions in China. Additionally, it believes that more attention should be attributed to the issue of thieves by authorities and by nation branding campaigns, for example, by ensuring a higher sense of safety with foreign-friendly access to authorities.

However, given the methodology research, these results are not generalizable to the wider Chinese public. They are intended to partially capture the opinions of a group of young Chinese people with some foreign exposure. Although other studies generally validate these findings, more research should be conducted on these topics.

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7 Annex

Additional Material

More information on this thesis is available at the following links:

- Data collection spreadsheet, including frameworks and individual answer tables for each candidate:

  https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1Z3RY52wEpND7FGbkepow_L_1-RoohzN21KY4ldYJPgQ/edit?usp=sharing

- Presentation slides, including simplified results and tables:

  https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1OW8mR3_BMfZiAjUzYq0zSlwkZQPdHZh5n2L9EZYURGM/edit?usp=sharing

- This document in digital version:

  https://docs.google.com/document/d/1hD0m2DXSQf7QBPuxOfrBbcDohDGp_-ZjZY7_ke_pn_0/edit?usp=sharing

- Recordings from the 20 interviews:

  https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1W6KNgCZiikQf5Z3vNnncJUqwkieCE62V?usp=sharing

Figure 1 - Italy's Nation Branding Ranking

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
NBI Anholt	7	7	7	6	7	6	7	6	4	4	NA
FCI Future Brand	NA	18	NA	NA	NA	NA	14	NA	NA	NA	NA
BSI Brand Finance	NA	NA	9	NA	9	8	10	9	9	9	9
CRI / NBP	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA

Figure 2 - Theoretical Framework
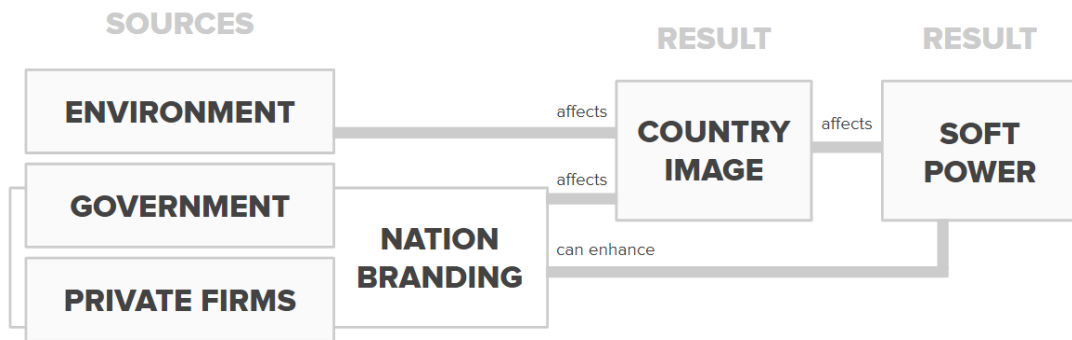
SOURCES

RESULT

RESULT

ENVIRONMENT

GOVERNMENT

PRIVATE FIRMS

NATION BRANDING

affects

affects

can enhance

COUNTRY IMAGE

affects

SOFT POWER

Table 1 - Brand Codes and DNA

Codes	DNA
The brand's Codes are the visual depiction of DNA Therefore, DNA can be inferred from communicated codes	A brand's DNA is what makes it unique and different from its competitors It's the essence of the brand

Table 2 - Brand Identity Prism

	Externalization			
Sender	Physique	Relationship	Reflection	Receiver
	Which physical features are evoked when a brand is mentioned	The way the brand interacts with its customers	The stereotypical user of the brand	
	Personality	Culture	Self-Image	
	Which personality traits are associated with a brand	The system of values and principles on which a brand bases its behavior	The emotional reaction to interactions with the brand	
	Internalization			

Table 3 - Interview Framework

Section	Question	Answer			
Disclaimer		Do you consent to the recording of this interview? I will not include your name at any point in the project, I will list only your age, gender, nationality, master degree field and location. Thank you for participating in this experiment, it is really important for me. I am conducting a research on the country image of Italy in China. [Brief description of the interview structure] This is an unstructured interview, please answer as freely as possible. It is really important to gather data on your perception, so please answer with what comes to mind first.			
Introduction	Could you share some of your information?	Age & Gender	Nationality	Master's Location	Master's Field
Section 1	What comes to mind when I say Italy? (+ follow ups)	Culture	Products	Job & Economy	People
		Tourism	Governance	Investment / Study	Lifestyle and Emotions
Section 2	Could you help me find out how Chinese people describe Italy with some words that come to mind?	Physique	Relationship	Reflection	/
					/
		Personality	Culture	Self-Image	/
					/
Conclusion	Where did you get this information?		/	/	/

Table 4 - Interviews Participants Information

Informants: 20 Chinese Nationals			
Age	Gender	Master's Location	Master's Field
22 - 1 24 - 2 25 - 5 26 - 4 27 - 4 28 - 2 30 - 2	Male - 7 Female - 13 Other - 0	S.Korea - 2 France - 10 Australia - 2 China - 4 US - 1 UK - 1	Int'l Relations - 2 Management - 11 Economics - 1 Architecture - 1 English - 1 Media - 2 Translation - 1 Hospitality - 1

Table 5 - Italy Perceived Brand Associations

Italy Brand Associations (Section 1 - Unprompted)	
Strong (mentioned in opening question by almost each informant)	Medium Strong (mentioned during the interview by the vast majority of informants)
Pizza, Pasta, Quality Food in general (gelato, coffee, wine, olive oil), Lifestyle ("chill", "no-pressure", "go-with-the-flow", "enjoy life"), Thieves (and scammers), Warm and Friendly people, Art	Good Weather, Family values, Romanticism, Fashion, Iconic Places (Rome, Venice, Sicily, Milan, Cinque Terre, Florence), Classical architecture (statues, columns, monuments), Movies (often American about Italy), Ferrari (and Vespa), Mafia, Freedom and individuality, "Guanxi" relations, Good government services and democracy (just like Europe)

Italy Brand Associations (Section 1 - Unprompted)	
Medium Weak (mentioned during the interview after follow-up question by a relevant number of informants)	Weak (mentioned by only some informants with strong interest)
Long History (ancient Rome, Renaissance, WWII), Luxury (other than fashion and cars), Churches, Soccer, Law favoring Thieves, Wedding Destination, Unorganized, Ocean, Family-owned Firms, Other Family-related topics (extended family living together)	Good for Studying Arts (and fashion, cuisine), Monica Bellucci, Low Salary, Paintings, Good relations with China, Feminism, Kisses to say hi, Formula 1, Milan's Chinatown

Table 6 - Italy Perceived Codes and DNA

Italy's Perceived Codes and DNA (Sections 1 and 2 combined)	
Codes	DNA
Physical Good Food, Quality Products Beautiful Views, Sunshine, Drinks Attractive, Stylish People Ocean, Vineyards, Countryside Columns, Statues, Paintings Monuments, Churches **Emotional** Relax, Spontaneity, Carefree-spirit Low-organization, Low-stress, Low-competition Harmony with Community and Nature Friendliness, Sociability, Reciprocity Simplicity, Time for Family and Friends Romanticism, Passion, Color Appreciation for Beauty and Life	*Dolce Vita* (Definition: a life of heedless pleasure and luxury, a true concept of lifestyle made up of a unique mix of family, food, nature, art and fun)
Note Negative aspects are also an important part of the Chinese image of Italy. Importantly, some informants described the "*dolce vita*" lifestyle as overall negative, synonymous with laziness, simple-mindedness, and disrespect for rules. Thieves and lack of efficiency or organization are the top-of-mind concerns. In a way, they also play into the "*dolce vita*" DNA of Italy, as they easily link to an hedonistic lifestyle and country-wide lack of seriousness.	

Table 7 - Italy Perceived Brand Identity Prism

Italy's Perceived Brand Identity Prism (Section 2 - Guided)		
Physique (What are some symbols of Italy?)	Relationship (How does Italy treat Foreigners?)	Reflection (What kind of Chinese person likes Italy?)
Pizza, Pasta (spaghetti), Gelato Rome, Venice, Sculptures, Churches Gucci, Ferrari, Vespa	Welcoming, Caring, Talkative Open-minded only at times, Judgy, Proud Common Thefts, Difficult to Integrate	High-Class, Shopper, Fashionable, Model Passionate about History or Art, Foodie Educated, Open-Minded
Personality (What kind of person would Italy be?)	Culture (What are some Italian values?)	Self-Image (What do the people above care about?)
Talkative, Relaxed, Direct, Caring, Charming, Romantic, Enthusiastic, Warm Lazy, Child-like, Rule Breaker, Disloyal	Craftsmanship, Quality of Food, Quality of Life Family, Individualism, Freedom, Passion History	Chill, Unique, Cultured, Authentic Want Social Validation and a Lavish Lifestyle Care about Image and Etiquette Want to Enjoy Life

Table 8. Italy Perceived Country Image

Italy Country Image (Section 1 - Unprompted)	
Culture	Products
Coffee Culture, Arts (painting, statues, architecture), Obsession for Food, Appreciation of Beauty (architecture, arts, fashion), Easy-going (go-with-the-flow), Craftsmanship (better-quality products, made in Italy), Family-Centered (living in symbiosis with family, living under the same roof), Gestures, Traditional, Long History (ancient Rome, Renaissance), Importance of Dressing well, Mafia, Feminism Bite-sized culture (don't like pineapple on pizza, kisses to say hi, can't break spaghetti, don't like American coffee, can't drink cappuccino after lunch)	Traditional Food (pizza, pasta, gelato, coffee, wine) Luxury Brands (fashion, cars) (Gucci, Ferrari, Vespa, Smeg, Buccellati) Arts (movies, opera, music, paintings)

Italy Country Image (Section 1 - Unprompted)	
Tourism	Governance

Great Tourist Destination, Beautiful view, Aperitif and Relaxing in street-side Cafés, Watch soccer, Sunshine, Ocean, Coast line, Wedding, Biking, "Waste Time", Beautiful Cities and Countryside	Don't know Thieves and Scammers problem (a law was passed that makes it impossible to arrest thieves) Political instability

Italy Country Image (Section 1 - Unprompted)	
Jobs & Economy	People
Don't know Relatively easy to find stable jobs (decent, low-pay, slow-pace jobs, legally protected) Economy is good but not growing	Talkative, Friendly, Outgoing, Passionate, Nice, Welcoming, Warm Focused on Entertainment/Enjoyment, Enthusiastic, Loud, Caring Beautiful, Handsome (bearded, manly), Tall, "Hot", Latin-Lover (word not used) Open-Minded vs. Closed-Minded (depending on comparison), Can speak other languages Individualistic (compared to China, because it's part of Western culture)

Italy Country Image (Section 1 - Unprompted)	
Tourism	Governance

Great Tourist Destination, Beautiful view, Aperitif and Relaxing in street-side Cafés, Watch soccer, Sunshine, Ocean, Coast line, Wedding, Biking, "Waste Time", Beautiful Cities and Countryside	Don't know Thieves and Scammers problem (a law was passed that makes it impossible to arrest thieves) Political instability

Italy Country Image (Section 1 - Unprompted)	
Investment / Study	Lifestyle and Emotions (How would you feel living like an Italian?)
Bad for Investments (no modern industry, no economic growth) Good for studying some Humanities (arts, religion, history), but I wouldn't study there	Chill, No stress, Happy, Spontaneous, Unorganized, Carefree, Stable, Calm, Sense of Belonging, Sociable, Free weekend, Not Competitive, Time to chat with friends and neighbors, "Colorful life" (I can go see the opera and then sit on the grass and not think of anything. It's like a dream"), Romantic (with roses), No hard work, Simple life, Work-life-balance, Know how to enjoy life Freedom of Speech, Freedom of Individuality ("I feel like it would be easy to just be myself even if it's different from others"), Worry about thieves

Table 9 - Ministry of Tourism's Communication

Ministry of Tourism: Italia.it (Weibo: 意大利国家旅游局)		
Brand Identity		
Physique	Relationship	Reflection
Good food, Good art, Handmade clothing and accessories, Sea and mountains, Church, Garden, Boat	Welcoming, Attentive	Young, Pretty, Active
Personality	Culture	Self-Image
Warm, Proud, Free of worries	Tradition, Authenticity, Romance	Adventurous, Independent, Curious
DNA		
Tradition, Peace, Emotion, Nature, Timelessness, Romance		
Codes		
Monument, Color, Village, Empty, Celebration, Food, Wine, Craftsmanship, Date, Sea, Mountain, Church		

Table 10 - Ministry of Trade's Communication

Ministry of Trade: Be-Italy (Weibo: ICE_SHANGHAI)		
Brand Identity		
Physique	Relationship	Reflection
Made in Italy, Interior Design, Vespa, Coffee, Boats, Fashion, Machinery	Passionate, Proud, Open-for-business	Business person, Educated, Rich
Personality	Culture	Self-Image
Serious, Business-focused, Pragmatic	Creativity, Craftsmanship, Quality, Innovation, Elegance	Elegant, Elevated, Connoisseur
DNA		
Quality, Creativity, Innovation, Elegance		
Codes		
Minimalism, Art Display, Design, Refusing Stereotypes, "Extraordinary"		

Table 11 - Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Cultural Institute		
Weibo: <u>意大利使馆文化处</u>		
Brand Identity		
Physique	Relationship	Reflection
Concerts, Instruments, Food, Dance	Passionate, Sharing	Artists, Musicians
Personality	Culture	Self-Image
Warm, Artistic, Fun	Tradition, authenticity, romance, creativity, color	Cultured, Artistic, Active
DNA		
Arts, Refinement, Enjoyment		
Codes		
Drawings, Dance, Music		

Table 12 - Gucci's Comunication

Gucci (Weibo: GUCCI)		
Brand Identity		
Physique	Relationship	Reflection
Bag, Shoe, High fashion	Proud, Distant, Open	Young Woman, Romantic, Extravagant
Personality	Culture	Self-Image
Fun, Childish, Artsy, Carefree	Creativity, Heritage, Craftsmanship, Passionate, Retro, Fun	Elegant, Fun, Happy, Edgy
DNA		
Dreamer, Passionate, Playful, Childish		
Codes		
Bright Colors, Spring, Retro, Travel, Games, Checkers		

Table 13 - Giorgio Armani's Communication

Giorgio Armani (Weibo: Armani阿玛尼)		
Brand Identity		
Physique	Relationship	Reflection
Bag, Shoe, Fashion, Sports, Watch	Proud, Distant, Open	Elegant Woman, High-Class, Minimalist
Personality	Culture	Self-Image
Powerful, Warm, Classy, Calm	Craftsmanship, Quality, Independent	Classy, Elegant, Powerful
DNA		
Quality, Lifestyle, Timelessness		
Codes		
Minimalism, Light, Silk, Calm, Earth Tones, Sports		

Table 14 - Bulgari's Communication

Bulgari (Weibo: <u>BVLGARI宝格丽</u>)		
Brand Identity		
Physique	Relationship	Reflection
Bag, Ring, Necklace, Watch	Proud, Distant, Open	Elegant Woman, High-Class, Bold
Personality	Culture	Self-Image
Powerful Woman, Romantic, Dreamer	Creativity, Tradition, Color, Craftsmanship, Romance	Empowered, Bold, Classy
DNA		
Elegant, Expertise, Timelessness		
Codes		
Bright Colors, Snake, Rome		

Table 15 - Public Sector Campaigns

Summary: Public Sector Campaigns		
Brand Identity		
Physique	Relationship	Reflection
Food, Art, Quality Products, Architecture	Welcoming, Passionate, Caring	Elegant, Active, Artistic
Personality	Culture	Self-Image
Warm, Proud, Free of worries	Tradition, Authenticity, Romance	Adventurous, Independent, Curious, Cultured, Romantic
DNA		
Peace, Emotion, Enjoyment, Romance, Fun		
Codes		
Monument, Color, Village, Nature, Empty, Celebration, Food, Wine, Craftsmanship, Date, Sea, Mountain, Church, Dance, Music, Art		

Table 16 - Private Sector Campaigns

Summary: Private Sector Campaigns		
Brand Identity		
Physique	Relationship	Reflection
Luxury Products, Bright Colors, Legendary Cities	Proud, Distant, Open	Elegant, High-Class
Personality	Culture	Self-Image
Fun, Artsy, Carefree, Dreamer	Creativity, Craftsmanship, Quality, Innovation, Elegance	Elegant, Classy, Fun, Empowered, Bold
DNA		
Elegance, Tradition, Quality, Empowerment, Character		
Codes		
Bright Colors, Spring, Travel, Light, Material, Calm, Earth Tones, Passion		

Table 17 - Italian Nation Branding Analysis

Public Sector	Private Sector	Mixed (Sistema Italia)
DNA	DNA	DNA
Peace, Emotion, Enjoyment, Romance, Fun	Elegance, Tradition, Quality, Empowerment, Character	Dolce Vita
Codes	Codes	Codes
Monument, Color, Village, Nature, Empty, Celebration, Food, Wine, Craftsmanship, Date, Sea, Mountain, Church, Dance, Music, Art	Bright Colors, Spring, Travel, Light, Material, Calm, Earth Tones, Sports, Rome, Happiness	Sum of the previous columns

Table 18 - Italy's Country Image and Nation Branding (Source Matching)

Source Matching in Italy Perceived Brand Identity Prism (Simplified)			
Aspect/Source	Public	Private	Other
Physique	Pizza, Pasta (spaghetti), Gelato Rome, Venice, Sculptures, Churches	Gucci, Ferrari, Vespa	/
Relationship	Welcoming, Caring, Talkative	Judgy, Proud	Open-minded only at times, Common Thefts, Difficult to Integrate
Reflection	Passionate about History or Art, Foodie	High-Class, Shopper, Fashionable, Model	Educated, Open-Minded
Personality	Romantic, Enthusiastic, Warm	Child-like, Rule Breaker	Talkative, Relaxed, Direct, Caring, Charming, Lazy, Disloyal
Culture	Passion, History	Craftsmanship, Quality of Food and Life	Family, Individualism, Freedom
Self-Image	Wants to Enjoy Life	Unique, Cultured, Authentic Wants Social Validation and a Lavish Lifestyle, Cares about Image and Etiquette	Chill