Nele Noesselt (Ed.)

Visualized Narratives

Signs, Symbols and Political Mythology in East Asia, Europe and the US

East Asian Politics
Regional and Global Dynamics
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Edited by
Nele Noesselt

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Visualized Narratives
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Preface: Approaching the Complexities of Visual Global Politics

Roland Bleiker

Visuality plays a key role in global politics. Scholars and practitioners—from diplomats to NGO workers—meanwhile recognize that visuals are political and politics is visual. Academic books and articles have begun to engage the issues at stake. They offer valuable insights about the power of visuals to reveal the political world around us and, at the same time, shape it in profound and lasting manners. At the same time, we are in many ways only just beginning to grapple with the diverse, complex and interactive dimensions between the political and the visual. This is in part the case because rapidly changing technological developments—from communication methods to the algorithms that drive big data—are constantly transforming how images are taken, circulated and received. These ongoing shape-shifting transformations not only render images ever more global but also amplify and alter the political roles they play.

Visualized Narratives offers insightful contributions that enter the key debates from a series of different vantage points. These contributions illustrate the exceptionally multifaceted relationship between the visual and the political. William A. Callahan, in his contribution to this book, highlights the power of visual art to provide us with both new insights into politics and a form of politics itself. Taking Ai Weiwei’s art and activism as a focal point, Callahan situates the links between visuality and the political in the manner in which art offers a unique way of witnessing the political and, in doing so, a form of resisting repression. While Callahan focuses on artists, other contributors, such as Niko Switek, Han Xie, Lionel Fothergill and Andrea Riemenschnitter, examine the links between the visual and the political in popular television
programs, reality shows, series and movies. They reveal how popular culture is both omnipresent and highly political, even in instances when they do not seem to engage the political in explicit manners.

Visual politics happens anywhere across the spectrum that ranges from high art to popular culture. It is, in fact, precisely through mundane and seemingly apolitical representations that popular culture becomes political. This is the case because popular culture establishes and rehearsing the kind of narratives that we live in, the ones that tell us who we are—as individuals and collectives—and what kind of values drive our attitudes and interactions. In this sense, popular culture provides the background against which politics takes place. Han Xie, in the contribution to this book, explores how Chinese entertainment shows are part of larger visual and verbal patterns that promote and legitimate a discourse of victimhood and anti-colonial national sentiment.

These visualized narratives, as the book appropriately calls and depicts them, become more explicitly political in the realm of photojournalism, advertisement and in the role of documentaries, as is explored in the book by Alex Heck, Lucy Xu Yang, Nele Noesselt, Tanja Eckstein, Elizaveta Priupolina and Tanja Walter. Central, here too, is how visuals contribute to depicting and entrenching particular notions of identity and nation building. And here, too, we see how various media representations not only represent but also constitute the political: they show us how the world around us and the many more worlds that lie far away function; they provide us with insights into the lives and fates of others and, in doing so, influence how we see, perceive, react to and interact in this world.

Diplomats have, for long, been acutely aware of the power of visuals. And, as a result, they have made conscious and strategic use of visuals and their efforts to project power. Iver B. Neumann’s contribution illustrates the issues at stake in a particularly insightful manner. He illustrates how “the visual has always been, and remains, an inevitable aspect of diplomacy.” These forms of visual diplomacies have multiple dimensions and multiple purposes. Face-to-face negotiations are set in surroundings designed to optimize their outcome. Joint press
conferences are publicly staged for a range of purposes, including to influence audiences at home.

One aspect is clear, then: the interactive dimensions between the visual and the political are exceptionally diverse and complex. The visual is a source of insight and a form of politics itself. And it is a form of politics that operates in countless different realms, from media representations to private photographs circulating on social media, from the use of videos by terrorist organizations to the visual projections of state ideologies during national holiday celebrations. But the visual also acquires political dimensions in and through many other realms, including maps, cartoons, video games, surveillance cameras, drones and satellites. Add to this that the visual is not just about two-dimensional images but at least as much about three-dimensional artefacts and performances, from national monuments to military parades and diplomatic ceremonies.

Given the complex nature of visual politics, a second aspect is equally clear: that we need a wide range of methods to understand how images and visual artefacts/performances become political and shape politics. One needs to understand how visuals emerge, how their content projects meaning, and how this meaning then shapes people and political dynamics. Understanding these completely different aspects of the visual requires an equally diverse and complex set of methods, including interviews, ethnographic field research, semiotics, content and discourse analysis and quantitative surveys. Then there are a range of more specific methods that are useful, from photo elicitation to visual autoethnography. The contributors to this book jointly offer a nice illustration of the wide range of methods required to understand visual politics. They range from Switek’s quantitative coding of movie databases and viewer ratings to Lucy Xu Yang’s narrative analysis and the close hermeneutic investigation of Fothergill and Riemenschnitter.

This is, in many ways, the key insight that Visualized Narratives offers: the recognition that visual politics is so complex that it can only be understood through a diverse set of approaches and insights. Promoting such diverse inquiries is essential even if—or perhaps precisely because—they might generate forms of insights that are seen as incompatible. There is no one right way to understand all aspects of
the relationship between visuality and the political. What we can do though is exactly what *Visualized Narratives* does: embrace the ensuing complexities and continue to grapple with the difficult challenge of understanding the ever changing nature of visual politics.
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With the “pictorial” (Mitchell 1986; 1994) (also labeled as “visual,” and “iconic”) turn(s), the decryption of visual signs and (iconic) symbols has emerged as an additional level of analysis across disciplinary boundaries (inter alia: Bleiker 2018; Callahan 2015; Elkins 2003; Elkins and McGuire 2013). This turn implies that images and visual artefacts are expected to “speak” for themselves. They are thus regarded as objects of analysis beyond, or complementary to, “texts.” Images convey meaning(s) and (aesthetical, emotional) messages. Newsreel images, pictures, and cartoons as well as artwork not only depict and document reality but—via the choice of perspective and the editing and arrangement of the visual context—embed single events into a coherent narrative speaking to (and incrementally shaping) the addressed audience’s collective memory.
Peace and conflict as well as securitization studies responded to this change of the medium of communication (and interaction) and turned from text- and speech-based research to the interplay between narrative frames and visual representations (Williams 2003; Crilley et al. 2020). Enemy images, triggering security spirals, are thus regarded as not only created via powerful narrations but communicated via the skillful visual representation of the moral “self” and the evil “other(s)” (e.g., Winter 2020). Apart from promotion and recruitment videos by transnational actor groups such as the Islamic State, enemy images can also be found in the worldwide entertainment sector (i.e., movies, graphic novels, PC games)—visual public culture and political perceptions (and related “enemy” narratives) are hence mutually re-enforcing (Valeriano and Habel 2016).

Media images and visual representations not only observe and comment on past or contemporary socio-political events, but they can also cause political actions—as the Danish Muhammad caricature crisis (Hansen 2011) or the Charlie Hebdo attacks (The Guardian 2015) evidence. Investigative photojournalism as well as newsreel coverage of political events do not only shape public opinion but are also widely believed to impact on political decision-making (“CNN effect”), as these visual real-time representations of developments raise demands for immediate response by national governments or international institutions (inter alia: Robinson 2002; Gilboa 2005). The way political events—e.g., wars (Seib 2005), the global refugee waves (Bleiker et al. 2013), or the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong (Tang 2015)—are visualized and framed via the official media triggers emotional responses of the audience and thus impacts on public opinion—and related policy preferences and moral convictions. Photographs (or other visual representations of “concrete” events), sometimes, become iconic images, meaning that one photograph is perceived and remembered as reliable (historic) account of political reality, potentially challenging the official storyline. The “hooded man photo” from Abu Ghraib which

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4 On the various streams of conceptualizing “self” and “other” in international relations: Neumann (1996).
5 For an excellent overview article on the often overlooked role of emotions in world politics, see: Bleiker and Hutchinson (2008). On images and emotions, see: Schlag (2018).
questioned the US narrative of a “just war” against global terrorism is just one of the most prominent examples (Andén-Papadopoulos 2008; Hansen 2015).

Especially in times of elections or when preparing for passing policy reforms, politicians are extremely concerned with the visual images associated with their campaigns, as the visual symbols created or used by mass media impact on people’s perceptions. Mass media could hence generate visual storylines that would run counter to the messages communicated (and visualized) by political parties or individual politicians (Schill 2012).

While liberal democracies generally guarantee freedom of opinion and thus cultivate a pluralist media landscape, autocracies are known for censoring and controlling—or at least steering—public opinion and for setting up unified, orthodox storylines, circulated via state-owned media channels (Stier 2015). The coining of iconic images forms part of these systems’ propaganda—publicly displayed when hosting prestigious international events, such as the Olympic Games, or when celebrating key events of national history. Modern autocracies, however, seek to present themselves as enlightened political regimes dedicated to rational realism instead of ideology. State media in these countries hence display a strong focus on newsreel- and documentary-style views on politics (including political history), claiming to document and archive political “reality.”

Images and visual representations can be consciously coined and integrated in a sublime, highly emotional(ized) narrative. In this vein, the symbols and icons created form part of “strategic narratives” (Miskimmon et al. 2013; Crilley 2015), coined to justify political actions via the creation of “political myths” (Bottici 2009; Flood 1996). Strategic framing and visualization techniques are also powerful tools used by contestation movements (e.g., transnational pro-environmental movements such as Fridays for Future) or by individual activists—leading to a battle over ideas, images, and meanings between the various players involved.

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6 See, inter alia, the visual framing of China’s maritime New Silk Road: van Noort (2020).
Apart from these consciously coined visualized narratives, however, images used to illustrate the news or visual artefacts and representations in the realms of arts and public entertainment might also contribute to the formation or re-confirmation of “myths” and (re-)constitute or challenge societal order—but not necessarily as planned and intended outcome.

The chapters compiled in this volume address the phenomenon of visual(ized) narratives from a multi-actor perspective, ranging from top-down communicated strategic (political) narratives to the realms of public culture and visualizations in the fields of literature and arts. Furthermore, contributions also reflect on visual codes and rituals, and contemplate on methods and coding schemes to assess visual and non-visual layers as well as the realms of image perception and (emotional) image interpretation.

The volume opens with a preface by Roland Bleiker, followed by chapter I, focusing on the visual modalities of diplomacy,7 by Iver B. Neumann. Moving beyond obvious examples of staged performance of diplomacy—such as the APEC summits’ official group picture for which all state leaders are wearing costumes that represent the customs and traditions of the host country—, Neumann elaborates on the often-overlooked meaning of aesthetics in political interactions and shared imaginations of beauty across the boundaries of nations and civilizational spheres in diplomatic-cultural exchange. Neumann postulates that successful diplomacy is based on diplomats’ ability to interact in a way that is “visually pleasing” to the counterpart targeted. However, diplomats engage in visual routines not only vis-à-vis significant others, but their performance is also watched and evaluated by the polity (the institutionalized “self”) they formally represent. Neumann acknowledges the diversity and heterogeneity of the multiple audiences targeted—and identifies a remaining hegemony of certain “Western” diplomatic practices, partly due to the fact that their diplomatic services are equipped with the resources and professional personnel (including proficient photographers and a professionally trained team for feeding social media). Apart from the (pre)dominant hegemonic

7 For a book-length analysis of the history of diplomacy and related performative actions, see: Neumann (2020).
streams and ritual visual performances of diplomatic codes as celebrated by the world’s liberal democratic powers, Neumann’s study also addresses the persistence of national or anti-hegemonic (visual) diplomacy. In ancient times, as Neumann’s reference to the historical antecedents of the Opium Wars illustrates, empires were following their distinct diplomatic practices—such as the performance of the kowtow demanded from all foreign delegations seeking to exchange “tributary” goods with the Chinese son of heaven—and refused to comply with the diplomatic practices and ritual performances of their counterparts, hence drawing a visible line between the “self” and the “other.” In the 21st century, rising powers, by contrast, are seeking to rise within a globally intertwined system which is dominated by norms and visual rituals of its post-WW II architects and thus centered on the US. They are thus copying and mimicking the predominant rituals and visual codes (Johnston 2008), hoping to become accepted and treated as “equals.” Symbolic recognition, as Neumann stresses, plays a very important role in diplomacy.8 Covertly questioning the hegemony of Western diplomatic performances, however, when hosting multilateral meetings, rising powers might add some local, traditional elements to the otherwise global architecture and the staging of the meeting space—as China’s hosting of the G20 Summit in Hangzhou (2016) exemplifies. Nonetheless, apart from the symbolic signs and signifiers of traditional Chinese cosmology (round and square architectonic elements representing heaven and earth), the general setting and the ceremonial arrangement of the meeting followed universal, global patterns of diplomacy. A recent example of obvious discontent with the formally established diplomatic rituals—not addressed in Neumann’s chapter that is dedicated to the discussion of the abstract, timeless patterns of visual diplomacy rather than their episodic manifestations—would be the diplomatic efforts by the Taliban government to gain recognition and support from the international community without transforming local political-religious customs. The media coverage of the Taliban’s spokesperson’s encounter with Western journalists or diplomatic envoys clearly illustrates the tensions between performances reflecting the expectations of the political body’s “self” and the demands of the

8 On recognition in international politics, see also: Lindemann and Ringmar (2014).
addressed “other.” Thus, Neumann’s philosophical meta-reflections on the foundations of visual diplomacy empower the reader to decrypt some often-neglected visual subtitles of global diplomacy and, potentially, also to identify shifts and rifts of diplomatic encounters before they become officially verbalized.

While Neumann’s chapter assesses the visual modalities of diplomacy and diplomats’ performative obligations vis-à-vis governments as well as societies, the contribution by Niko Switek turns to the meta-perception and representation of (world) politics in popular TV movies and films. While TV series relating to concrete political events or presenting a fictionalized story embedded in a “realist” national political context—thus reflecting the organizational patterns and principles of parliaments or governments of the depicted state (or international organization)—have to entertain in order to reach their respective audiences, they also shape spectators’ interpretation and imagination of “real” world domestic and global politics. Neumann and Nexon thus summarize the causal interplay between popular (media) culture and states’ foreign behavior as follows: “[if we can assume that] a state’s foreign policy is driven by its national identity we can look to popular culture to get a better handle on the content of that national identity” (Neumann and Nexon 2006: 15). Fictionalized visualized narratives of (domestic or global) politics can hence be expected to contribute to people’s mind maps and their judgment of political institutions and actions. Switek’s study questions the empirical validity of studies that engage in a mapping of popular culture via collecting and coding the views and perceptions of select audiences before and after having watched the movie/TV series. He instead develops a quantitative coding scheme based on data retrieved via the Internet Online Movie Database that also includes user reviews and ratings, which allows him to identify dominant patterns of perceptions and imaginations underlying people’s popular culture-inspired views and judgement of politics—including political developments and foreign affairs of “other” countries.

Lionel Fothergill and Andrea Riemenschnitter add an empirical case study of the manifestation and transformation of popular culture in literature and arts by examining the Ming dynasty novel Shuihuzhuan and one of its TV series adaptations. They trace the evolution and
development of one of the novel’s most iconic characters, Lu Zhishen, undertaking an in-depth semiotic, hermeneutical analysis of select episodes in the novel as compared to the visualized re-interpretation presented in the CCTV series *The Water Margin* (1998). Based on a thoughtfully compiled set of quotations (translated from the Chinese originals), Fothergill and Riemenschnitter identify a literati resemantization of Lu Zhishen during the late Ming era—the knight-errant personality was ascribed an additional (Zen) religious layer. The CCTV adaptation in the 1990s, however, removed this Zen connection and references to what the party-state would have classified as religious superstition. In the analysis, the authors hence discuss the various modifications and supplements to the original storyline before the backdrop of party politics and socio-economic changes in the PRC. They conclude that the state discourse on the role of religion in modernity (i.e., as modernized religion without superstition) indirectly informed the re/presented form of religion in *The Water Margin*. Their analysis reveals the political importance of the *Shuihu Zhuan* as a narrative concerned with the legitimization of violence and revolution and its symbolic value as “national heritage.”

The tracing of the (silent) adding and removing of select story components and processes of resemanticization by Fothergill and Riemenschnitter demonstrates not only how the political context impacts on the literary re-interpretation and re-imagination of Chinese tales, but also allows conclusions regarding the remaining diversity, fragmentation, and heterogeneity of popular culture in China.

The chapter by Han Xie turns to a Chinese TV production in-between fiction and political history, looking at the entertainment reality show *Who’s the Murderer* and the fictionalized allegorical coverage of the Second Sino-Japanese War in Season 6/Episode 11. While this show is produced by Mango TV, a private media channel, it has, as Han Xie emphasizes, to comply with the official media regulations issued by the Chinese party-state. S6/E11 of the TV show includes a fictional(ized) story about the war between two imaginary countries named *Mang country* and *Jia country*. *Jia*—the pronunciation of this Chinese character reminds, as Han Xie points out, the audience of the first country syllable of “Ja”-pan—invades *Mang*. The fictionalized invasion story also includes a female intelligence agent from *Jia*, expressing her
view that the invasion is “inhumane,” confessing the wrongs of Jia’s doing in front of others—obviously, if one follows the reading of the TV show proposed by Han Xie, resonating with the CCP government’s never-ending public rememorizing of the war crimes committed by Japan. Han Xie doubts that the inclusion of this fictionalized episode was just for attracting more viewers in China. Instead, he draws a connection between the entertainment show’s discovery of political history episodes and the PRC’s Patriotic Education Campaign and related efforts to promote patriotic sentiments. To substantiate and validate this assumption, Han Xie circulated an anonymized questionnaire among Chinese netizens. The answers to the survey questions generally confirm his reading of the depicted war scenes as visualized (and abstracted) representations of the Second Sino-Japanese War, but they also illustrate that those answering the questionnaire had ambivalent feelings regarding the fictionalized confession of war crimes by the intelligence agent of Jia—as China is hence presented not only as victim of aggression but also as victorious as its contemporary positions and demands vis-à-vis Japan are recognized in the fictionalized episode, thus deviating from the official perception of Japan as a country denying its historical responsibilities and its war crimes. Strikingly, however, the majority of the rather young fans of the entertainment show answered that they would like to see more events of “real” political history covered in future episodes. Obviously, the orthodox coverage of history by official Chinese state media—including fictionalization via history dramas and movies—did not make the younger generation turn away from these official (visualized) narratives but paved the ground for additional “private” entertainment channels’ re-interpretations and variations of the historical material (in line with orthodox historiography). These “visual memorials” constructed via (fictionalized) history dramas are far more flexible and responsive to changes in politics (and political culture) than stone monuments and memorials on core events in Sino-Japanese history—such as the September 18 Memorial in the Chinese city of Shenyang, commemorating the military invasion of China by Japan, or the Nanjing Massacre Memorial, re-iterating the national humiliation and victimization of China, or the Yasukuni Shrine, imagined in the official Chinese debate as a place for worshipping Japanese war criminals (though this
place has far more meanings and layers, see: Callahan 2017). While stone monuments and memorials often require additional inscriptions or explanatory texts, visualized memorials and fictionalized, imagined iconic representations of history trigger feelings and emotions—even the more if the narrative is coined and visualized in line with the audience’s visual socialization and visual consumer behavior.

State media, especially in non-democratic systems, are generally expected to just reproduce the official (master-)narratives and to provide illustrating pictures and images bolstering these official storylines. One could hence be tempted to regard TV news and political documentaries broadcast via these official channels as mere propaganda. The analysis of these visual documents nonetheless allows one to gain insight into the unspoken narratives of self-identity and the role claims underlying these actors’ political decision-making. The chapter by Lucy Yang as well as the one by Nele Noesselt, Tanja Eckstein, and Elizaveta Priupolina examine China’s daguo (great power/major power) role-identity articulations as narrated and visualized in CCTV documentaries.

**Lucy Xu Yang**, looking at the documentary via the lenses of National Role Theory (NRT), decodes China’s self-imagination as daguo in the realms of global economic governance by focusing on pivotal events around three major fora: World Economic Forum (WEF), G20 Summits, and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meetings. Moving beyond the international debate that mainly conceives of China as a rising economic superpower, seeking to replace the US as global hegemonic power and to challenge the post-WW II (liberal) international order, Yang also outlines the frictions and fragmentations across the various intellectual camps and inner-party factions with regard to China’s future development strategy and its global positioning. Given this (invisible) heterogeneity and diversity of ideas, one should obviously be eager to learn more about how the CCTV documentary manages to coin (and visualize) role-identities that bridge the widening gap between these competing camps. The episodes coded by Yang via tools of narration analysis indicate that the PRC is not depicting itself as a challenger but as a responsible stakeholder and contributor to global (economic) governance. The metaphors used in Xi Jinping’s speeches at the WEF, G20, and APEC meetings are universal ones—
hence signaling to the world that the PRC is willing to integrate itself into the existing order. Nevertheless, the documentary subtly promotes a shift from US-led institutions toward policy-making platforms in which China holds discursive power. Addressing the various domestic audiences, the documentary, as Yang argues, presents various layers of China’s political and business elites, all linked to specific role fragments or auxiliary roles—but united under the umbrella of the “economic growth—global recognition—global bargaining power”-nexus.

The chapter by Nele Noesselt, Tanja Eckstein and Elizaveta Priupolina excavates Chinese role-identity claims as visualized and narrated in the 2006 CCTV documentary *Daguo Jueqi (The Rise of Great Powers)* vis-à-vis the US and the Soviet Union/Russia. In the Chinese (academic and political) debate, both serve as reference and, simultaneously, counter-models to the Chinese case. While the Soviet Union is generally regarded as a failed socialist experiment, Chinese analysts are nevertheless interested in the lessons to be learnt from the observation of the Soviet case. Likewise, the US is classified as a hegemonic (and, during the Mao years, imperialist) power, incompatible with China’s self-identity as a modern daguo. The visualization of the US and the Soviet Union/Russia in *Daguo Jueqi*, however, goes far beyond these stereotypical classifications of “self” and “other.” Tracing the economic development strategies of the US and the Soviet Union and their modifications over time, the documentary visualizes the core ideas underlying the PRC’s post-Maoist reform policies as lessons learnt from the historical experiences of other powers. The chapter finally connects the coding results of the 2006 documentary to the *daguo* role-identity frames visualized in *Daguo Waijiao* (2017), narrating the successful rise of China to global *daguo* status under the leadership of Xi Jinping.

Tanja Walter undertakes a cross-continental comparison of the visual narratives of military recruitment campaigns in the PRC and Germany. Her dataset consists of recruitment posters issued during the years 2015 and 2016. After a short sketch of the historical and contemporary role of the military in both countries, Walter introduces the reader to her framework of analysis consisting of elements of narration theory complemented by core assumptions of branding and marketing approaches. Applying Nina Janich’s coding scheme to the analysis of
the military recruitment posters, Walter traces the differences and similarities of both countries’ efforts to increase the number of recruits and to set up an effective army.

There are, however, also counter-visualizations to the party-state’s orthodox narratives and efforts to streamline public opinion (and public culture).

**William A. Callahan** discusses the visibility/visuality dimensions of Ai Weiwei’s artwork and traces the artist’s transformation from producing art(efacts) and engaging in art activism perceived as provoking the Chinese political regime towards becoming a global artist-activist siding with the victims of globalization and exploitation. Callahan starts with some critical reflections on the “CNN-effect”—the assumed impact of the visual coverage of war atrocities or general political developments by mass media, including also social media and YouTube videos, on public perception and the resulting pressure to act imposed on the political decision-makers. Turning to the fields of arts—quoting the abstract reflections on the mobilizing function of visual representations in modern arts by Alex Danchev, Walter Benjamin, and Jacques Rancière—Callahan formulates that “art can resist oppression through witnessing.” This serves as (invisible) leitmotif of his analysis and discussion of Ai Weiwei’s art activism during his years in China and later activities (in political exile) as critical commentator on the refugee crisis—addressed in his documentary *Human Flow* (2017). Callahan analyzes the visibility/visuality strategies applied in *Human Flow*, concluding that via these visualization techniques Ai Weiwei not only reveals and unmasks the invisible dimensions of the global refugee waves, but also makes the audience question (or, maybe, even change) their own perspective on this unbelievable global crisis of humanity. In Ai’s artworks on global developments, the PRC, as Callahan notes, remains invisible—though China can be assumed, given its engagement in global trade and investment, to be (automatically) involved in the local conflicts underlying the global refugee and migration waves.

**Axel Heck** shifts the focus back to photojournalist and documentary coverages of the final stage of the “Umbrella Revolution” in Hong Kong—the siege of Hong Kong Polytechnic University in November 2019. In the beginning of the movement, international media documented
the developments, photos and videos were circulated via social media, raising international attention, and generating symbolic solidarity statements, or at least emotional backing, of the street protests perceived as legitimate “pro-democracy” upheaval of local civil society. Heck decrypts the visual coverage of the general protest movement and the PolyU siege guided via the lenses of visual framing strategies and Tilly’s WUNC (“worthy,” “united,” “numbers,” “commitment”) displays. As empirical case study of visual-narrative framing, he looks at the coverage of the PolyU protests by the German weekly news magazine Der Spiegel. The focus shift from police violence to violence by the students and visual coverages narrating the conflict as a beginning civil war finally, as Heck synopsizes, resulted in a sharp decline in international symbolic support. The movement was no longer seen as legitimate act of (peaceful) resistance but as an act of violent rebellion. Heck’s observation hence reconfirms the general assumptions by Dan Schill on the power of images used in the news (TV, print media, online/social media) in promoting (or demoting) the rise and popularity of political players.

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Diplomatic Visual Modalities

Iver B. Neumann

When diplomats and the persons they serve meet, there is performance, and performances always have a visual aspect. Successful performances are often not understood as performances, but rather simply as stuff people do when they address one or more audiences. It is only when things go wrong or when performers feel out of their element that the audience is reminded that the performance is indeed a performance, and not just stuff people do. Typically, therefore, most people will not necessarily think of state visits, TV appearances and other well-rehearsed performances when they think of visual diplomacy; that will rather be thought of as stuff politicians do. It is only when the performance is somehow unexpected and/or not fluent, say something like the annual summits of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and their practice of donning visiting heads of state in local costume, that audiences are reminded that they are watching a performance. The reason why such awkwardness does not occur more often, lies in the substantial and meticulous work diplomats put into the planning, execution and dissemination of such performances.

It is the nature and effect of this work that will form the subject matter of this chapter. Drawing on previous work (Neumann 2013, 2020) and taking my inspiration from the so-called visual turn in International Relations (IR) and attempt to do the groundwork for the study of visual diplomacy by establishing its visual modalities. Part one of the chapter analyses what is visually specific about diplomacy as compared to other and previously studied international social institutions, such as security (Williams 2003; Review of International Studies 2009¹; Hansen 2011; O’Loughlin 2011; Heck and Schlag 2013; van Veeren

¹ Vol. 35(4), Special Section on “Art and War”, pp. 775–857.
or torture (Friis 2015; Hansen 2015; Leese and Koenigseder 2015; Austin 2016). Just like textual diplomatic interaction is playing out within specific genres (the demarche, the report, verbal note and so on), visual diplomatic interaction has its visual modalities (or scopic regimes) and genres (the accreditation, the reception, the state visit and so on). I argue that diplomacy is characterized by three visual modalities. The visual tends, first, to be unacknowledged by diplomats discursively, even though it is consuming large resources practically. Put differently, little is said about it, although a lot of work goes into it. Discursively unacknowledged or not, the visual remains an inevitable aspect of diplomacy because much diplomacy is face-to-face. Secondly, given that these face-to-face meetings bring different aesthetics into contact, the visual remains inevitably contested. A third and final visual modality of diplomacy, which is also an additional reason why visual diplomacy is always contested, is the presence of multiple audiences to any one diplomatic visual performance. Diplomats perform not only for one another, but also for their home audience (which they represent) as well as for third parties.

Having identified the specific visual modalities that inform a diplomatic performancy, I proceed in part two of the chapter to draw attention to the specific practices that bring diplomatic genres such as accreditation to a wider public. Diplomats muster large resources in order to make the visual aspects of diplomacy visible to larger audiences. Images have to be made and then distributed to sundry media. This is an important but often overlooked aspect of diplomatic work, which further stabilizes visual diplomacy around its hegemonic variant.

I conclude that one of the reasons why a Western variant of how to do diplomacy lingers is to do with how Western aesthetic standards and Western practices for disseminating visual images continue to outdo other available variants.

**Three Visual Modalities of Diplomacy**

One way to identify diplomatic visual modalities is to ask what aspect of the institution that is the most striking compared to other interna-
tional institutions, such as war or international law, on the three basic levels of social analysis: the epistemic, the ontic and the practical.

**Unacknowledged**

Epistemically, visual diplomacy, and particularly Western diplomacy, is primarily characterized by being discursively unacknowledged by its practitioners. While the importance of the visual to politics in general may seem intuitive, for specific historical reasons, contemporary Western political debates downplay its importance. The result is an imbalance between the West and the rest, who do not seem to downplay their acknowledgement of the visual in the same degree. It is, furthermore, indicative of the poor state of scholarly knowledge about what it entails to be seen like a state that we know very little about the role of the visual in relations between non-Western states. Given that the general denial of aesthetics to politics is a problem that is also, I would argue, at the root of the proven inability of scholars of diplomacy to account for the visual, I begin with this point.

The visual may be an aspect of all social fields (to the seeing, that is), but it will not be so in the same ways. The visual modalities of, say, warfare will differ from those of international law, which will be different again from those of diplomacy. Furthermore, different visual modalities will have different histories, as have ways of seeing. Gary Shapiro sums up three decades of continental philosophical debate on the matter in his observation that:

“In a time that takes the thought of difference so seriously, there is an anomaly in thinking of vision as always the same, always identical, and so opposing it to other forms of perception and sensibility, which, it is claimed, offer more finely nuanced, more engaged, more historically sensitive ways of engaging with things.” (Shapiro 2003: 6)

It follows that there cannot be only one diplomatic way of seeing. One striking aspect of this is the cross-cultural variation regarding in which degree the visual is discursively acknowledged (as opposed to practically performed) as being important to diplomacy. Edward Hall’s (1976) distinction between high-context and low-context cultures is useful here. High-context cultures will create and expect settings (contexts) that are highly symbol-laden. Since the expression of these sym-
bols will often take visual form, it means that the visual is expected to carry more weight in overall communication. By contrast, low-context cultures will stress settings relatively less, and other factors, notably deliberation, more. For our purposes, Western states, and particularly the United States, will acknowledge the importance of the visual less than do the rest (which, to repeat, is not to say that they hold the visual to be unimportant). I think there are two major reasons for this, both of which pertain to politics at large rather than specifically to diplomacy.

The first reason has to do with how, following the Renaissance and particularly the Enlightenment, Westerners tend to hold that authority should be rationally established and maintained. It is a commonplace of historical literature on seeing to point out the irony of how a period that used a visual metaphor as a self-description (‘enlightenment’), would take so little interest in ways of seeing. With the rise of populist politicians like Erdogan, Modi, Putin and Trump, we are once again reminded of how visual strategies rival rationalist ones in establishing political authority. This focus privileged the visual in the sense that what was real now became what was visible; the inventions of microscopes and telescopes were followed by positivism. There were two flip sides to this, however. First, as argued by Bolter and Grusin (2000; cf. Ruggie 1993), with the emergence of linear perspective from the 14\textsuperscript{th} century on, it became a widespread Western pursuit to make the visual medium disappear. The image was supposed to be ‘true to life’, so the mediating element—that is what comes, as it were, ‘between’ the phenomenon represented and the image representing it—would have to go. This started in painting, and may then be observed again and again, as new visual media appeared technologically, only to be disappeared socially. If it had not been like that, it would hardly have been such big news when Marshall McLuhan ([1964] 1994) proclaimed that the medium was the message. Secondly, positivism’s focus on rationalism read out everything that had to do with emotions (Damasio 1994), including our responses to the visual, with a key example for our purposes being the positivistic resistance to acknowledging the importance of the visually pleasing and frightening for social and political life. One epistemic casualty of the bracketing of the visually pleasing
was the analysis of how this works where the state generally, and the institution of diplomacy specifically, are concerned.

This tendency not to acknowledge the importance of the visual maintained itself in subsequent European tradition (for France, see Jay 1994). When, in the 1930s, the focus on rationality broke down in a number of Western states, the standard intellectual explanation of how this could happen was to blame aesthetics (this is a question to which I will return in the following chapter). While it is easy to sympathize with the sentiment that reason is a better arbiter of right and wrong than is aesthetics, one should also be wary of the a-historical hubris of such a view. It is simply not the case that Western modernity put paid to the importance of the visual for politics and diplomacy. Not acknowledging the importance of the visual and of aesthetics does not make these aspects of reality any less real. Historically, aesthetics predates deliberation as an aspect of politics, and there is no indication that it is going away.

Be that as it may, in Enlightenment thinking, the disasters perpetrated by its aestheticizing fascist detractors and the subsequent Western tendency not to acknowledge the importance of aesthetics to diplomacy, we have not only an explanation for why the importance of visual diplomacy tends to be less acknowledged in the West than elsewhere, but also, I would argue, for why the visual aspect of diplomacy remains unaccounted for in scholarly literature.

**Inevitable and contested**

Ontically, the visual in diplomacy is inevitable because trying to look good is part of being presentable, and inevitably contested because there will be differences between as well as within polities as to what it means to look good. This stands in direct opposition to the former, epistemic point. The importance of the visually pleasing or beautiful—in any one realized form, what is at issue here is the *category* of the visually pleasing, as distinct from what any one culture may find to be so—is an inalienable aspect of the human condition. Given that the visual and the visually pleasing is a basic category of human life, it will be in play in any communication with Others. However, since the visually pleasing is demonstrably multiply realizable, particularly
across polities, it follows that such communications will inevitably involve aesthetic clashes and negotiations. The importance of this to diplomacy should be obvious: the visual will always be relevant, and it may always be a field of potential clashes (that is, agonistic). Since this description also covers diplomacy at large, the visual is intrinsic to diplomacy. There is isomorphism between the potentially agonistic way that different visualities relate to one another in diplomacy, and the potentially agonistic way that different parties relate to one another in diplomacy at large.

It is an empirical fact that humans may communicate in lieu of a commonly spoken language. Part of the explanation for this is visual. Even groups of humans that are culturally wide apart share basic visual modalities because they share the physiological substrate that defines humans as a species. The area that is best covered by scholars in this regard is cross-cultural facial expressions and the degree in which they are readable across wide cultural divides. Psychologist Paul Ekman (1999: 318), who spent his life professional life on the issue, sums up by stating that: “Our evolution gives us universal expressions, which tell others some important information about us, but exactly what an expression tells us is not the same in every culture.” This insight may be generalized. The infinite variety in human visual modalities is offset by a physiologically guaranteed human psychological unity which means that certain basic stuff, in this case emotions, may be universally recognizable, in outline if not in specificity. As a category, emotions are also a total social fact—with a total social fact being an experienced phenomenon that is always an aspect of sustained social interaction, such as food and drink—in that this category is an aspect of all parts of social life (Mauss 1966). This universality should not be overestimated. Every single phenomenon is multiply socially realizable and will, therefore, vary radically with social context. The point to be made is that certain human phenomena, like emotions, may be conceptualized as a series of units that belong together. They are of the same kind, but they are also unique, in the limited sense that they are different from the other units of the same series.

The phenomenon that some things are visually pleasing, while others are not, is, I would argue, one such phenomenon. The name that we use for this category is beauty. It is beauty’s quality as a total social
fact that explains why it was part of the basic triad of ancient Greek philosophical inquiry: the beautiful (kalon), the good (agathon) and the true (alethes), and why it was, until the 19th century, a staple of Western social analysis. As psychologist Nancy Etcoff (1999: 8; also Neumann 2017) reports,

“Beauty is a basic pleasure. Try to imagine that you have become immune to beauty. Chances are, you would consider yourself unwell—sunk in a physical, spiritual, or emotional malaise. The absence of response to physical beauty is one sign of profound depression.”

Eccoff highlights the bodily effects of beauty. The ability to induce bodily effects is one way of making people do what they otherwise would not have done, which is to say that the ability to induce bodily effects is a source of power. Putting people at ease by exposing them to beauty increases their willingness to listen and perhaps to compromise, and may even in certain cases affect outcomes directly by overwhelming people. While all humans, and seemingly also apes, can read bodily effects of this kind, diplomats are trained to do so, and good ones may produce such effects (Holmes 2013, 2018). Here we have one, but not the only, reason why the display of the visually pleasing is widespread in diplomacy. It is the mandate of human agents that represent polities to draw on any and all available resources to sway others. Since beauty is a total social fact as well as a potential power resource, one of these resources will be the visually pleasing.

There is, however, no guarantee that fielding something that is expected to be visually effective will actually prove to be effective, for the simple reason that exactly what is visually pleasing varies so widely from polity to polity (and also within polities). The visual is, therefore, not only an inevitable, but also a precarious modality in diplomacy, since it is always potentially contested. In diplomacy, it simply does not hold up that a rose is a rose is a rose, for the rose is a culturally specific visual inducer of pleasure. The rose only works on the initiated, and so its area of validity as a visual inducer of pleasure is limited.

Two consequences flow from this, one practical and one methodological. Practically, we should positively expect diplomacy, which by definition takes place between polities and so in a social space where the common frame of references is generally thinner than it would be
within any one polity, to lean on practices that are relatively independent of a common spoken language. Since the category of beauty is a total social fact, we should expect diplomacy to be shot through with what different polities think is visually pleasing, and since beauty is multiply realizable, it is equally inevitable that the visually pleasing will be contested and make for challenges that are to do with their content.

**Multiple audiences**

Representation must by necessity involve three discreet phenomena: the represented, the representing and the audience (Pitkin 1967), and since international institutions by definition must involve more than one audience, all such institutions have multiple audiences. Since representation is the presence of absence, that which is represented in diplomacy (e.g. the sovereign) must necessarily take semiotic, as distinct from embodied, form. This semiotic form is usually a text. Indeed, the word diplomacy hails from Greek *di-ploun*, to fold a document, and the document so folded was a text issued by the represented, verifying that he was represented by its bearer (Constantinou 1996). Note, however, how image interacts with text in the most literal form possible here: the document that makes the diplomat textually, takes its name from its visual form—it is double-folded—and the document was usually richly ornamented, not least calligraphically, as are other diplomatic documents such as treaties.

Given that the diplomat represents the Self polity by definition, she has to be presentable by the standards that the Self sets for its diplomats. When juxtaposed with the previous point, that diplomats must strive to be visually pleasing to the Other, the visual stakes of any one diplomatic encounter increase, for signalling to two audiences rather than one leaves less room for manoeuvre and intensifies the possibilities of failure. Visual diplomacy is not only about fielding objects that may (or may not) induce visual pleasure, such as daggers, necklaces and roses, or prepping the sites where diplomacy is to take place. Objects or vehicles, as well as the sites where they take place, are part and parcel of all diplomatic performances, but the key thing about performance is that it is embodied.
Diplomacy is performative both in the everyday sense that representation has to be embodied and staged (Alexander 2011; Ringmar 2015) and in the Foucauldian sense that such iterative performances produce the phenomenon that is diplomacy itself. Put differently, diplomacy is a socially emergent phenomenon, in the sense that every staging is constitutive thereof. Nothing special about that; one may say the same about any social institution or practice. What lends specificity to diplomatic performance, is the multiplicity of implied audiences. Since diplomacy is about handling the Other, the Other—be that in the form of its diplomatic representatives only or also in a form that includes chunks of those represented by them—is by definition an audience for the diplomat’s performances. This kind of audience will ask how well the diplomat represents the Other. Furthermore, since the diplomat is representing a polity, the head of that polity—and possibly also other chunks thereof—is also by definition an audience to the same performance. This kind of audience will ask how well the diplomat represents the Self. Any performance, then, should be visually pleasing to the Other as well as to the diplomat’s in-group or Self polity.

This fact significantly shrinks the possible forms that any one polity’s visual diplomacy may take. In addition to the shrinkage caused by the inherent possibility of getting it wrong that is due to the multiple realizability of the visually pleasing across polities that was already discussed, comes the factor that the performance must be visually pleasing to the Self that the diplomat represents. In a word, and this is the theme of the following chapter, in addition to being presentable to the Other, the diplomat must be presentable by the Self’s own lights. Since there will be no consensus about what is visually pleasing within the Self polity either, this is also always a contested question. Diplomacy is an elite pursuit; it follows that the aesthetical repertoire of which the visual is a part, will be that elite’s repertoire, where pluralist societies are concerned perhaps with certain trimmings (with British diplomacy post ‘Cool Britannia’ including elements of the visual traditionally associated with rock music, etc.)

In terms of visual modalities, then, the diplomat’s performance must be visually pleasing to the Self—it must be representing of and presentable for the in-group. It should also, however, if at all possible, give visual pleasure to the Other as well, for in this visual strategy
inheres a potential source of power. This double requirement leaves little room for manoeuvre, and is not an easy feat to bring off. The visual modalities of diplomacy, of which I have highlighted three in this section (unacknowledged; inevitably contested; pitched to multiple audiences) conspire to make diplomatic performances highly charged and potentially precarious affairs.

When considered as an international institution (as distinct from, say, a series of functional outcome-producing organizations), the most public and highly charged diplomatic practice performed today is arguably accreditation, a practice that culminates in the first official meeting between a head of state on the one hand, and the personal representative of another head of state—the ambassador, on the other. Accreditation of a new ambassador—a new personal representative of another head of state—confirms and renews the mutual recognition of and ties between the two states in question. Extant work on recognition in political theory and IR mostly follows Hegel in concentrating on the process leading up to recognition (Honneth 1995). IR studies have recently expanded the focus from questions of legality and sovereignty to studies of how identity and moral politics may lead to a questioning of recognition of other states (Bartelson 2013; Daase 2015; Adler-Nissen and Tsinovoi 2019) and on recognition practices that affirm sameness (Ringmar 2014; Strömbom 2014; Lindemann and Ringmar 2016; Haugevik 2018). Accreditation is definitely a recognition practice that affirms sameness and reciprocity, and yet it also grades states, for the hosting state will put more or less work into staging the performance, and its society may respond to the performance in different ways.

Extant literature does not seem to discuss how even a highly formal and central practice necessitated by international law such as accreditation is not conferring recognition on states in the same way and in equal measure. Accreditation is the precondition for permanent diplomacy to continue unabated, and yet it is meted out in a manner that grades recognition. The grading is mostly done visually. States routinely see to it that domestic and global publics at large are informed about accreditations by having photographers at hand. States make certain that this visual practice is made, as it were, visible to larger audiences. In some states, accreditations are announced on the radio and, as we
will see, they are sometimes covered by TV and print media, but it is as the key self-reproducing genre of the institution of diplomacy that accreditation is of principal interest. It is only by dint of accreditation that you become an ambassador. No accreditations, no permanent diplomacy between states as we know it. Given that accreditations are also richly visual affairs, this is the critical genre for teasing out how the visual aspect of diplomacy plays out. Elegance will not necessarily be a dominating aspect of accreditation, and there is nothing inherently peaceful about the practice. For example, in 1858, acting upon orders not to engage in any practice that would question the reciprocity principle and so bring British honor into question, British ambassador Frederick Bruce tried to force his entry into Beijing in order to present his credentials directly to the Queen. When he and his entourage were stopped by gunfire, the British decided to make the incident a *casus belli* that escalated into what became known as the Second Opium War, and occupied Beijing (Wang 1971).

**Dissemination**

Hegemony must be performed again and again, and these performances must be disseminated as far and wide as possible, or else hegemony will weaken. In order to gauge how this happens, we need a study of the practices that produce visual diplomacy, along the lines of what van Veeren (2014) and Austin (2016) begin to do for the social institutions of security and torture, respectively. All diplomats have in their job description the need to make visual diplomacy visible to wider audiences, but they have different resources available to get the job done. When the United States hosts diplomatic events, they may draw on one of the two steady White House photographers, or on the services of sundry stock photography services headquartered in the U.S. So does the Court of St. James. By contrast, most Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MFAs) use in-house photographers that take stills. One reason why the Western hegemonic version of visual diplomacy is able to stabilize its hegemony over other versions, then, is to do with the use of material resources that are used on reproducing its instantiations.
When it comes to the distribution of the reproduced images, we also find that Western states have the upper hand. Head of state apparatuses and Foreign Ministries draw on a whole range of practices that are geared towards making visual diplomacy visible to broader audiences, both domestic and foreign. When I interviewed a Head of Communication of a European Ministry of Foreign Affairs about his global assessment of this work, he answered that

“The resources are primarily spent on web pages and social media, particularly Facebook and Twitter. Certain MFAs also use Snapchat and Instagram. My team is recruited on a 50/50 journalist/diplomacy basis. We have a dedicated staff for social media and for graphics, we also have a team overseeing the rolling out of a complete line of lay-outs for embassy web pages. The US, the UK, Germany, the EU and Russia lead the pack. Most authoritarian regimes use talking heads and men in suits greeting one another.” (Interview, Head of Communication of a European MFA, 14 March 2017)

Indeed, leading Western states will have a full-time photographer on staff, who will usually be part of the minister’s entourage on official and unofficial visits. Even minor Western states will hire photographers for accreditations and larger conferences, put photos on Flickr and national equivalents, and furnish newspapers with images directly. As the already quoted Head of Communication put it, “in this respect the MFA works rather like a news desk, with the press spokesperson as a functional equivalent of a journalist” (Interview, Head of Communication of a European MFA, 14 March 2017).

The approach to making the visual visible is forward-leaning. By contrast, in an aspiring great power like Brazil, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs neither has an official photographer nor hires any external agencies, but has for years trusted a public servant to string as the press office’s photographer. On stations abroad, low-ranking diplomats are supposed to snap the pictures. Brazil is representative of most non-Western states in this regard. Western visual diplomacy is able to draw on a seemingly universal discourse in order to sustain its hegemony, and this ability is matched by the finding that Western states tend to be more highly professionalized regarding and allocate more resources to practices that make visual diplomacy visible to a maximum number of audiences consuming a maximum number of different media. The
stabilization of global visual diplomacy around a Western hegemonic version evolved during the imperial era, but the practices that sustain it are material and technological and have to do with how images of diplomatic events like accreditations are produced and reproduced.

Conclusion

Widespread protestations to the contrary, not least in the form of scholarly neglect, the visual has always been, and remains, an inevitable aspect of diplomacy. Since any diplomatic performance involves multiple signalling to different audiences, the visual is not only inevitable, but also inevitably divisive, at least potentially. The visual is a constitutive field of contest for diplomacy: it enables and constrains communication with and signalling to the Other.

My discussion of the work that the visual does yielded the answer that there now exist three variants of visual diplomatic strategy: a Western hegemonic, a national and an anti-hegemonically spiteful one. The hegemonic visual strategy turns on performances that demand Western bodily comportment and Western props: Western body language, Western clothes, Western accoutrements. It is hegemonic because Western props tend to be recognizable by global elite and often also non-elite audiences, whereas most non-Western props do not. Western props are therefore effortlessly global, whereas other props most often are not. The diplomatic hegemonic visual strategy also owes its hegemony to being stabilized by a wider Western visual order (as observed, say, in otherwise widely distinct institutions such as global fashion (Neumann 2017), the world of international law or the diplomatic meal (Neumann 2013)). Stabilization of an entire diplomatic visual order or scopic regime around a Western hegemonic model is also made possible by the not inconsiderable resources that are involved in reproducing images of its performance and making them visible to global audiences in multiple media.
References


Experiencing World Politics through the Screen. Using IMDB to Assess the Role of Politics in Popular Culture

Niko Switek

Introduction

We learn about the world, other countries and the relations between them in school and at university; we inform ourselves about global affairs through newspapers and magazines or news shows on television. However, a large part of our media diet consists of entertainment (Aalberg et al. 2013). We encounter representations of the world and world politics woven into the fictional stories in the movie theatre or on the television screen. Popular movies and television shows are consumed by millions, they travel around the globe and are widely discussed in the media and between fans. Scholars increasingly accept the notion that popular culture plays a significant role in shaping our thinking and our world-views (Street 1997; Neumann and Nexon 2006; Goren 2016), even if it is difficult to assess or measure the precise impact.

Because of the sheer magnitude of popular titles, movies and shows it is a complex task to determine the extent of this interaction or how the audience balances the input from serious non-fictional sources on the one hand and fiction made to entertain on the other. There are studies that pursue an experimental setting in trying to answer this question, surveying respondents before and after the exposure to a selected movie or show (e.g., the acceptance of torture after watching the television series 24; Kearns and Young 2018). While these studies discover short-term changes in attitudes and preferences, it remains challenging to accurately identify or measure the long-term consequences. At the same time, it is
somewhat an (intentional) oversimplification to isolate singular movies or shows out of the multitude of popular culture that surrounds us every day. This article therefore suggests an additional direction researchers could pursue: working with data from the Internet Online Movie Database website (imdb.com) as the largest online source for information about movies, television shows and video games. I argue that the website does not simply catalogue titles, but in itself comprises an integral part of the discourse on popular culture and therefore can be aptly used to trace effects of popular culture on political opinions and attitudes of the audience. The main strength of the website is that it is essentially based on user generated data. Users submit suggestions for titles, assign keywords or add plot synopsis. In addition, users are able to rate titles and post reviews, where the latter give detailed descriptions of their assessment of the title. We can utilize these descriptions to explore how users react if they are exposed to stories that contain elements of politics. This is especially interesting considering the underlying global appeal of the website. It connects viewers from around the world and gathers their reactions to productions from other countries. For instance, a U.S. viewer might state in a review that he gained insights about the Danish political system by watching the popular Danish production *Borgen* about a female prime minister, and that those insights make her or him think more critically about U.S. politics. While *Borgen* was produced by a Danish public broadcaster, the advent of internet streaming platforms further blurs these national contexts. It is easier for a popular show to become successful and attract fans in other countries as the platforms make their productions readily available around the globe. Even more so, they engage in producing shows with the specific goal of attracting a global audience (Jenner 2018; Lobato 2019).

This paper therefore asks how we can draw on the wealth of information on the IMDB website to better understand the mechanisms how popular culture impacts politics. It outlines the structure of the data available on the website, how to access it and how it relates to the question of political science research. First, we get a systematic assessment of how politics is incorporated into movies and shows. Second, the reviews on the website offer a rare window into the reception side (van Zoonen 2007)—how are stories perceived by the audience? Do viewers judge these series as fiction for entertainment purposes or do they declare that the shows are an
accurate portrayal of what they understand politics to be? Do they state that they learned something about politics or other countries from the shows and how do the fictional stories resonate with their preconceptions about the political world? An examination of reviews as self-reported statements enables us to probe the link between an element of popular culture and the audience’s perception more directly, which otherwise has to be inferred from a more general viewpoint.

This paper volunteers a novel concept of how to employ the IMDB website as part of social science research to address questions how thinking about the world and world politics is shaped by stories and narratives prevalent in popular culture.

The Interaction of Popular Culture and Politics

The relationship of popular culture and politics is of course more complex and multi-faceted than presented in the introduction, where popular culture primarily influences and shapes attitudes and preferences of the viewers. Neumann and Nexon (2006) explicate that there are many ways in which, inversely, politics shape popular culture. For instance, the dominant role of the United States in world politics is reflected in popular culture itself. A great deal of people around the world will have watched an episode of Friends or Seinfeld, but few non-American shows have had the same global impact. In the U.S. the entertainment industry commands extensive resources and financial strength, clearly ‘Hollywood’ has a dominant role in globalized pop culture. Teenagers and adolescents around the world learn about role models or slang of U.S. American subcultures, which they probably will remember their whole life (Mai 2006). European countries on the other hand often feature strong public broadcasting corporations that are financed by the state. They play an influential role in determining the production landscape, and because of their public funding they are mandated to provide a certain amount of political information and reporting as part of their program. In turn, this could affect the characteristics of fictional stories about politics, on the one hand with the knowledge these broadcasters possess and on the other with the indirect political oversight to which they are subjected. Notwithstanding these differences, the underlying
principle in the U.S. and Europe is based on a free distribution with a market and ratings logic. However, there are not only free and democratic states in the world. In non-democratic and authoritarian regimes there is censorship and control over what movies or shows can be distributed. In this sense, it is somewhat surprising that the Netflix production *House of Cards* as a story set in a freely elected parliament was indeed screened in China. Flos (2014) argues that the Chinese audience with their background are less critical in their appraisal, as the main themes presented in the show, scheming, corruption and illegal strategies, conform to their picture of politics. In contrast, for the governing Communist Chinese Party it makes sense to employ this show as an element of propaganda, as the negative depictions of a self-interested and corrupted political class discredit the appeal of democracy and portray a supposedly decayed and immoral West (Wang and Zhang 2016).

The tension between national constraints and a globalized popular culture continues to increase as the world is more and more connected through technological advances. The IMDB website as well as streaming platforms are the expression of new communities that transcend borders and form around interest and fandom for different formats and genres (Dodds 2006). At the same time, the novel orientation of the streaming platforms affects the conditions for creating and producing new works. These new actors are more committed to secure a unique profile and a high visibility with costly and elaborate productions (Kelleter and Jahn-Sudmann 2014). Especially television series with multiple episodes are a convenient strategy to attract and keep subscribers. In combination with the willingness to spend and invest more renowned directors and actors gravitate to this format, making television series resemble feature film productions. Seemingly complex or niche topics become more appealing. The storytelling options change because episodes do not have to conform to a structure of commercial breaks and cliffhangers (Kelleter 2012). Television series encompassing several seasons can tell more detailed and elaborate stories, and therefore incorporate representations of politics in a novel way (Switek 2018). For instance, the already mentioned *House of Cards* about the political landscape in Washington D.C. in the first season focuses less on the U.S. president at the top of the political food chain but rather introduces the character of Francis Underwood, a whip in the U.S. Congress, as the main protagonist (Fritz 2015). While the arch of the
story is about the revenge Underwood takes for being denied the office of secretary of state, the audience is confronted with conditions of lawmaking in Congress and the need for elected representatives to secure the popular support of their constituents. *House of Cards* is the most prominent example, there are multiple other recent productions with a background of U.S. political institutions: *Veep, Scandal, Madame Secretary* or *Alpha House* to just name a few. However, there are similar productions from Europe with an explicit focus on politicians and political institutions that occasionally crossed the threshold of global recognition: The already mentioned show *Borgen* about the female prime minister Nyborg is the prime example; there is also the French production *Baron Noir* about intraparty conflicts in the socialist party and a presidential election campaign.

Yet, popular culture is not just shaped by the political system and the media system, the content reflects the time, society and culture it originates in. Accordingly, Neumann and Nexon (2006) state that works of popular culture can be used as data to tells us something about the societal background at the time and place of their production. Movies and shows stand for a certain political culture and mirror national conditions, circumstances, and mannerisms (ibid.: 13ff.). Comparative analyses provide insights into patterns and images of politics and their underlying cultural foundations. This is an especially helpful approach for researchers interested in closed societies, where those products of mass media are one of the few options to learn about the country (e.g., the Soviet Union or North Korea). In addition, popular culture tells a story that complements, qualifies or contradicts the official elite discourse. A detailed reading uncovers collectively shared norms, ideas, and identities in countries, regions, or societies. Political elites and decision-makers in democratic systems have to be aware of these dominant ideas, to understand them as limits on what the citizens they are accountable to will accept. They incorporate and reference these elements into their rhetoric to convince the electorate of their policy priorities and to organize acceptance. “Because ideas condition how agents act, we argue that international relations theorists should take seriously how popular culture propagates and shapes ideas about world politics” (Daniel and Musgrave 2017: 503). Of course, there are also intentional and explicit political messages which writers, authors, and directors straightfor-
wardly embed into their stories. The lauded HBO television series *The Wire* uses the city of Baltimore as a backdrop to sketch grievances paradigmatic for U.S. American metropolises (Penfold-Mounce et al. 2011). The series successfully manages to visualize institutions that transcend the individual actors, hinting at structural forces outside of the range of individual action which exacerbate and reinforce problems of urban politics (Mark 2008). The show is even employed in academic teaching as it presents connections and patterns more accessible than academic literature. “Though scholars know that deindustrialization, crime and prison, and the education system are deeply intertwined, they must often give focused attention to just one subject in relative isolation, at the expense of others. With the freedom of artistic expression, ‘The Wire’ can be more creative. It can weave together the range of forces that shape the lives of the urban poor” (Chaddha and Wilson 2010). Movies and television series, in particular when they feature a politician or a political institution, frequently contain a critique of society, that in the form of a story may appear more impressive and impactful (Hamenstädt 2016: 25).

Finally, to return to the original question raised in the introduction, Neumann and Nexon (2006) see a category where popular culture is constitutive for politics. This is based on an understanding, where the differences between the worlds of pop culture and politics is not a matter of principle but rather of a gradual nature. Ultimately, a politician in a speech depicts political proceedings in a similar manner authors do in creating a fictional story about the White House, the Élysée Palace or the Chancellery. “Popular entertainment usually takes the form of second-order representation, in that its narratives re-present elements of social and political life through a layer of fictional representation” (ibid.: 7). As many viewers consume fictional stories more often than serious news, attitudes, preferences and opinions of citizens are to no small extent shaped by the former. “… both [political] speeches and television dramas are representations of social life, and they interact with one another in a variety of important ways. We need to keep in mind that, for many people, second-order representations are often more significant sources of knowledge about politics and society” (ibid.: 8). This is not as disadvantageous as it might sound. For instance, Nitsch et al. (2019) conducted a study where they contrasted the depiction of politics in the fictional
television series *Borgen* with actual political reporting in a traditional German television magazine (*Berlin direkt*). Their results suggest that the fictional drama actually corresponds to the high demands of quality originally established for journalistic media content.

Nevertheless, the argument is not simply about time spent consuming different television stations, programs or genres. Neumann and Nexon see the way fictional stories are fabricated and represented as crucial, and they emphasize the fundamental role of stories or narratives: “There are undoubtedly a number of relationships between popular culture and political narratives. Political narratives draw from and inform popular cultural stories, while the effectiveness of both kinds of narratives may derive from similar features; both politicians and entertainers need to tell ‘good stories’ if they want to ‘sell’ a product or a policy” (Neumann and Nexon 2006: 17). There are narrative approaches that argue that narration is a core element of communication and therefore as a matter of principle is more influential in reaching and convincing an audience (Gadinger and Yildiz 2017). Narratives are a way to make sense of the world through metaphors, roles, and plot elements. In this perspective, causality is created through the arrangement of interpretations in the context of a storyline. Therefore, a successful political campaign or speech does not solely need a convincing strategy or rhetoric but should be embedded into a convincing, cogent, and legitimatizing narrative. This approach creates a strong link between politics and popular culture with a focus on the narratives both worlds employ and rely on.

Narratives are most powerful when they address ideas that are widely shared in a society. This is where the popular part of culture becomes important, as this speaks to the collective character of certain works. This somewhat undermines the idea to isolate individual titles in probing the link between the two worlds, as we need to be aware of the context and the connections to overarching themes, images and ideas, which are present in more than one title. Hence, researchers focus on genres or types to trace and illustrate the prevalence and proliferation of specific images and stories. Graeber (2015) draws on superhero comics to demonstrate how this genre disseminates a conservative-reactory sentiment. With their role as defenders and guardians of the existing order change and transformation receive a negative connotation. “Almost never do superheroes make, create, or build anything. The villains, in contrast, are
relentlessly creative” (ibid.: 211). The comics transport an underlying moral argument to their main audience of teenagers and adolescents. We might sympathize with a certain feeling for chaos and destruction, but ultimately this appetite has to be controlled and hedged in (ibid.: 213). The emergence and increasing popularity of superhero stories in the U.S. in the early 20th century parallel to the rise of fascism is not a coincidence: it tells us something about the zeitgeist and the uncertainty about the best way to organize the state and the legitimization of government authority and power. Superheroes were employed as propagandistic symbols for nationalism, patriotism and ethnicity, for instance to separate in- and out-groups (Costello and Worcester 2014: 86).

These approaches share a broad sociological perspective. They are predicated on the conception that thoughts and images prevalent in a society leave their imprint on series and genres and in this way are reflective of societal conditions and moral systems (Neumann and Nexon 2006: 13; Hamenstädt 2016: 13–17). Daniel and Musgrave (2017) build on Neumann and Nexon’s (2006) theoretical framework, but attempt to conceptualize a more direct link. Based on insights from psychology they argue that the way our cognitive processing works, factual information and fictional elements are almost impossible to separate, even if we are aware of the overall fictional character of a novel or a television show. These “synthetic experiences” generate “impressions, ideas, and pseudo-recollections about the world derived from exposure to narrative texts” (Daniel and Musgrave 2017: 61). Daniel and Musgrave apply their framework to Tom Clancy novels and point to instances where politicians referenced his works. It remains a difficult task to connect this to a politician’s preferences and actions though. Other researchers resort to experimental settings, where the audience is surveyed before and after the exposure to an element of popular culture (Mulligan and Habel 2012; Kearns and Young 2014)—but again there is the question if this setup can truly capture long-term effects and isolate them from other sources.

While these strands of research follow the same set of questions they offer different conceptualizations of the relationship between popular culture and politics. I argue that the suggestion to utilize data from the IMDB website presented here satisfies scholars pursuing either direction. First, it is possible to understand all titles and their supporting
information as an expression of popular culture. Politics is of course ubiquitous, so we can attempt to search for certain themes included in all titles on IMDB, that at a first glance might not even feature a connection to politics. For instance, the categorization scheme offered by Neumann and Nexon (2006) I based this chapter on stems from a text in an edited volume about *Harry Potter and World Politics*. The Harry Potter books and subsequent movies might not seem the first pick with which to explore questions of world politics with. Second, we are able to create subsets of the data, identifying what users themselves label as political and compare these titles with the overall set. What are similar storylines or tropes for political content that viewers are repeatedly exposed to? How do they differ by time, country, or genre? Finally, we can utilize the ratings and reviews posted to IMDB to systematically probe the reception side. How do viewers react to the content movies and shows presented to them? Van Zoonen (2007) in a study selects a set of political television series to systematically code the corresponding reviews, trying to understand what kind of commentaries the fictional presentations of politics contained in the series provoke.

While the worlds of serious politics and entertainment are often seen as separate realms, Goren argues for a fundamental connection of these two in modern democracies: “popular culture is a key aspect of democracy since the demos will indicate what they find to be of interest, popular to them” (Goren 2016: 53). The decision what to read, listen and watch is an individual choice, but if a large group or even a majority becomes enthused by a certain movie, song or television show, it is elevated into the realm of popular culture. In a way, this resembles the mechanism in a democracy where the majority sets the rules for the society as a whole (notwithstanding minority rights). There are elements of popular culture that are nearly impossible to escape and that a large part of a society will have some image or understanding of—popular culture therefore plays a role in shaping our norms, values and identities. “When we claim, for example, a state’s foreign policy is driven by its national identity we can look to popular culture to get a better handle on the content of that national identity” (Neumann and Nexon 2006: 15).
These remarks illustrate the ways in which the data hosted by IMDB allows to pursue relevant research questions based on different theoretical approaches. This article presents a conception how IMDB can be helpful as a data source as it can be seen as part of a global discourse on popular culture. In particular, the millions of reviews are an invaluable window into how titles are perceived by a global audience.

**Methodology and Data: IMDB as a Data Source**

The Internet Online Movie Database (IMDB.com) is one of the most popular movie and television information websites and contains entries for millions of titles. For each entry it offers basic information (e.g., name, year published, director and producer, cast), but there is an additional wealth of supplementary information on the website for each individual title. For instance, one section called ‘connections’ lists references (based on titles) to earlier films. Canet et al. (2016) use this data to create networks of citations that help to uncover the most influential movies as well as to identify their distinguishing features. Going back to our discussion of narratives this is a way to trace how these are constructed, gain prominence and are picked up and reworked in later productions. This reiterates the most important feature of the IMDB website in that it stresses user participation. Users are able to suggest and add new titles to the website. There is an elaborate review and rating system for the titles. Users can assign ratings from 1 star (awful) to 10 stars (excellent) for all movies and television shows on the site (popular shows typically have tens of thousands of ratings) (Ramos et al. 2015). Furthermore, users upload reviews detailing the specific reasons for their rating and discuss their impression of a title. This offers insights into the logic of reception on a large scale (at least depending on the popularity of a title). In addition to the already mentioned work by van Zoonen (2007), there are multiple studies that have utilized these reviews as data. Fatemi and Tokarchuk (2012) construct a social network graph based on the network of reviewers, which identifies the highly connected clusters and illustrates that the content of these subgroups are diversified and not limited to similar tags. Topal and Ozsoyoglu (2016) use IMDB reviews to develop an
emotional map for movies that could be used to identify titles with similar storylines and content. Ridanpää (2014) conducts a case study of a Sasha Baron Cohen movie, understanding the reviews as speech acts, which establish broader interpretative patterns through which the audience may approach the questions related to the serious and political aspects of humor.

While the website offers part of its data as a download, there is no interface to access the individual user ratings and reviews. Because we are interested in titles specifically mentioning politics, I used the search function to identify all titles that match the keyword “politics” or that contain the term “politics” in their plot description. I used R and “rvest” package to scrape the results list. For this article, I extracted the unique title identifier (e.g., “tt1526318” for Borgen) and used the identifier to filter the downloadable interfaces that contain basic information and rating data. However, because the identifier is part of the web address it is a rather simple task to systematically collect more information about each title (e.g., production companies, country of origin, gross income) or to gather the reviews users wrote for a movie or series.

Contrasting the two subsets (the title has a user assigned keyword “politics”, or the plot description contains the term “politics”) with the overall data allows us to identify specific properties of titles that contain political elements as part of their stories. This article puts the main emphasis on a descriptive quantitative exploration of the data, but it also showcases the potential of further investigations of the large number of reviews supplied by users. Building on the typology created by van Zoonen (2017), examples are given for a few popular shows and directions for future research sketched.

Mapping Political Content on IMDB

As detailed before, the IMDB website is continuously growing, making the analysis conducted in this article a snapshot at a specific time. Nevertheless, an exploration of the data concerning the relevance and status of political content identifies structural characteristics that help to understand how the IMDB website could be helpful for scholars inter-
ested in the link between popular culture and politics. In September 2021, the downloadable file with basic information about every title consists of 8,263,105 movies, television series, and video games (accessed 14 September 2021). Using the search function on the IMDB website to identify titles tagged with the keyword “politics” returns 6,517 titles. A second search for the same term, this time in the plot descriptions of the titles, returns 24,980 titles (the IMDB search algorithm also matches similar terms, e.g. political). While we would assume that both sets are rather similar, because if the plot description talks about politics it is likely that a user will have assigned the politics keyword accordingly, in fact there is not an extensive overlap. One explanation could be, that there are more fine grained keywords that qualify the political base category (e.g., politics-and-government, u.s.-politics, geopolitics). In addition, the plot descriptions are at times adopted from production companies or other websites, while the keywords have to be actively assigned by users, which might take longer or are less frequent for niche or obscure productions.

**Tab. 1: Top 10 titles with highest number of votes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>All Title</th>
<th>Votes</th>
<th>Keyword Politics Title</th>
<th>Votes</th>
<th>Plot Politics Title</th>
<th>Votes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The Shawshank Redemption</td>
<td>2458535</td>
<td>The Dark Knight</td>
<td>2414201</td>
<td>Game of Thrones</td>
<td>1870107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The Dark Knight</td>
<td>2414201</td>
<td>Game of Thrones</td>
<td>1870107</td>
<td>Schindler’s List</td>
<td>1264153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Inception</td>
<td>2165777</td>
<td>Gladiator</td>
<td>1396134</td>
<td>Captain America: Civil War</td>
<td>706972</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Fight Club</td>
<td>1936622</td>
<td>American History X</td>
<td>1065932</td>
<td>Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice</td>
<td>663320</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Pulp Fiction</td>
<td>1904895</td>
<td>V for Vendetta</td>
<td>1064894</td>
<td>How I Met Your Mother</td>
<td>630152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Forrest Gump</td>
<td>1900895</td>
<td>Braveheart</td>
<td>987352</td>
<td>12 Monkeys</td>
<td>595241</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Game of Thrones</td>
<td>1870107</td>
<td>A Clockwork Orange</td>
<td>784577</td>
<td>Casablanca</td>
<td>542017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. The Matrix</td>
<td>1751105</td>
<td>Captain America: The Winter Soldier</td>
<td>775671</td>
<td>Get Out</td>
<td>528460</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1 lists the ten most voted on titles for each data set. While the number of votes a title receives is somewhat indicative of its popularity, contrasting this with the ratings can also tell us about how controversial it is. For instance, the television series *Game of Thrones* is part of all three sets and attracted about 1.8 million votes. A distinct majority of them is positive, but there are also about 60,000 votes (3 percent) that assign the lowest rating of one star (mainly containing criticism about the last season of the show). *Game of Thrones* is the only television series in the list of most popular titles of the full set, illustrating that the website is somewhat skewed towards movies. However, the series is also part of the two other subsets, and the plot summary of user Tfilm78 and Cajunman gives a reason why: “Nine noble families fight for control of the mythical land of Westeros. Political and sexual intrigue is pervasive.” The war between monarchies and dynasties is considered to be a political representation. Users also assigned the keyword “politics” to the second most voted on title, the Batman movie *The Dark Knight* (73 % of the ratings are 9 or 10 stars). While the plot description does not explicitly mention politics (except vaguely for the reference to the elected district attorney Harvey Dent), Kellner in his analysis finds an unmistakable theme related to the political atmosphere in a post-9/11 U.S.: “As the convoluted plot unfolds, the cinematic spectacle portrays a series of assaults on the inner city, targeting corporations, banks, the police and the legal system. In this desperate situation, Batman goes after the Joker, employing surveillance of the telephone system, putting civil rights and the constitution aside, and torturing the Joker once he is caught. This appears to legitimate Bush-Cheney politics against terrorism; if our enemy, the logic runs, is absolutely evil, anything we do to destroy him is good […]” (Kellner 2009: 11). The other titles in the list are more straightforward in their relationship to politics considering their storyline: *Gladiator* is a story about political rule in the Roman empire and the fight for succes-
The main protagonist in *Braveheart* is a Scottish rebel who leads an uprising against the cruel English king. *V for Vendetta* and *A Clockwork Orange* both sketch dystopian futures, where governments show little respect for the rights of their citizens. *American Citizen X* recounts the story of a former neo-Nazi skinhead that struggles to break free from his extremist political ideology after a prison sentence.

We see a clear difference to the list where the plot description mentions politics. There are more television series in this list because the search algorithm checks the descriptions of individual episodes. The romance-comedy *How I Met Your Mother* appears on the list because of one episode where the main character Ted Mosby meets the political columnist Arianna Huffington at a party. *Schindler’s List* and *Casablanca* are movies set in the turmoil of the Second World War, speaking to the close overlap of politics and war. *Captain America* (“When politicians and world leaders think that people like Captain America and Iron Man are running amok, they tell them they need to be regulated”; user rcs0411@yahoo.com) and *Batman v. Superman* (“Man of Steel becomes involved in the complexities of international politics”) are examples for the superhero genre and how it references the political world. The list illustrates the ubiquity of politics, as we find mentions across multiple storylines, genres and formats.

Understanding the number of votes as an indicator for popularity or visibility, the political titles do not constitute a niche. On the contrary, the average number of votes for all titles is around 1,000, but for the set of titles with the keywords politics the average is about 16,300, and the plot politics set reaches 5,800 votes per title. In large part this is driven by the outlier *The Dark Night*, which by itself reaches a record 2.5 million votes. *Game of Thrones* and *Gladiator* also are among the most voted on titles with 1.8 and 1.3 million votes. In any case, political references or politics as an element of the storyline does not make titles unpopular.

In a second step we can use the data to probe how the attribute of a political connotation affects the genre of a title. This allows us to check if there are certain genres that are more common when authors and directors turn to politics as material for their stories.
### Tab. 2: Percentages for data sets per genre

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Titles Genre</th>
<th>All (%)</th>
<th>Keyword Politics (%)</th>
<th>Plot Politics (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Action</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adventure</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Animation</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biography</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comedy</td>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>19.4</td>
<td>17.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crime</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documentary</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>30.4</td>
<td>34.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drama</td>
<td>27.4</td>
<td>39.2</td>
<td>33.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fantasy</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Film-Noir</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Game-Show</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horror</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Musical</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mystery</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reality-TV</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romance</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sci-Fi</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>18.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sport</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talk-Show</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thriller</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>War</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N=8263105   N=5562   N=10304

Source: IMDB dataset title.basics from https://datasets.imdbws.com/ plus titles collected by author

Note: Adds up to more than hundred because titles can have multiple genres. There are lower total numbers for keywords and plot descriptions than mentioned in the text because television series episodes are aggregated under the series’ overall title.
Inspecting the titles by genre reveals some interesting findings. Compared to the number of votes, the differences between keyword and plot description are negligible but both political sets differ significantly from the overall data set. There is a clear dominance of the genres biography and documentary, speaking to an increased relevance of non-fictional content. Additionally, the genre history is represented to a greater extent. Looking at the other genres, that are more closely related to fictional entertainment, we see that especially the drama genre sticks out with 40 percent and 33 percent, while this only makes up about 27 percent of the overall set. There is a similar pattern for the genres thriller, war and crime. Politics as a topic seems to lend itself more for serious and solemn narratives than for humor and laughter in comedy and satire.

Figure 1 plots the distribution of ratings for the three different sets. Users can assign up to 10 stars, where 1 is the lowest and 10 the best rating. Despite their different sizes and composition, the three groups exhibit similar properties. Most of the user ratings fall into the range between 6 and 8. Ramos et al. (2015) identify this specific rating distribution as a general underlying mechanism for the IMDB data, independently of movie attributes such as average rating, age and genre. Political titles are slightly less popular, but there is no discernible difference between the keyword and plot description set. If we explore the more detailed reviews that for some users give a textual explanation for their rating, we find reflections on the political content of movies and series. In her analysis of productions with political content, van Zoonen conceptualizes four different types of reviews: They “enable people to think about the dilemmas of politics that politicians face (reflection), criticize or praise politicians for their morals and stories for their ideology (judgement), and express their hopes and ideals (fantasy). In addition, some stories give their viewers the feeling that they have acquired new knowledge about specific elements of politics, which provides them with means to describe what they see as politics (description)” (van Zoonen 2007: 544).
An initial exploratory look at other reviews for the titles in the two political data sets indicates that the judgement category could be correlated with lower ratings. Some reviews exhibit a pattern that the impetus for a judgment spoils the suspension of disbelief and the criticism extends beyond the narrative sphere of the show. One example is the review written by user *spokanegolfer* on July 20 2016 for *House of Cards*: “This might be rather accurate of actual politicians. It is hard for me to watch all of the payoffs my lobbyists and crookedness that goes on, even in families. […] It is rather like Hillary Clinton taking 100 million dollar
pay out to look the other way with the sale of a Uranium mine to Russia. So now the Uranium mine that is located in the USA, is owned by Russia!! Go Bernie!!” The viewer judges *House of Cards* to be an accurate representation of politics that confirms his negative stance towards the U.S. Democratic Party. Of course, this is an isolated illustration, but it serves to demonstrate how the extensive number of reviews, especially for popular titles, can be used to assess audience reactions on a large scale. While we cannot take everything written on IMDB at face value, van Zoonen argues that this does not lessen the value of these self-generated posts: “There may be disadvantages related to this source of data: one does not know who is behind the posting, why the individual sent in a comment or how postings relate to people’s ‘real-life’ politics. […] Yet, in the context of the assumption that politics also involves the presentation of a political self, these data are helpful. The postings are put on a public forum that is meant for a wider audience” (van Zoonen 2007).

In a last step, I use the IMDB keyword system to connect the quantitative description with the qualitative dimension regarding the actual content of the titles. Of course, this can only be done on an abstract and general level, and does in no way compensate for detailed qualitative analyses and readings of individual titles. But going back to the idea of overarching images, plot elements, and tropes that are influential and powerful because of their prevalence, this might give us general insights into the narrative structure of political movies and series. The value is that users themselves assign these keywords, which makes it possible to select titles accordingly without being subject to a researcher’s bias or presumptions.
Table 3: Keywords used conjointly with keyword “Politics”

Source: https://www.imdb.com/search/keyword/?keywords=politics (September 2021)

Table 3 displays the broad range of keywords which titles with the keyword “politics” feature as well. The nature of IMDB as a place for film enthusiasts is reflected in the keywords giving meta information, i.e. that a title is based on a novel or contains the character name in the title. This allows to group titles by format or formal attributes. We also see that “non-fiction” is a frequent keyword, speaking to dominance of the documentation and biography genres. However, even this perfunctory analysis uncovers keywords that speak to the content of the shows and that sketch recurring plot elements on an abstract level. There is a distinct dominance of the dark side of politics. Among the most common keywords we see “violence”, “murder”, and “death”, and we find mentions of “corruption”, “deception”, and “betrayal”. Writers and directors seem to favor a Machiavellian flavor of politics in which to embed their stories. A second interesting finding concerns the frequent mentions of family relations. On the one hand it seems to be a conve-
nient plot device to place a couple or family in the world of fictional politics to use the tension on their relationship to drive the story. In *House of Cards* Francis and Claire Underwood are an interesting power couple, which support each other to climb the political ladder but which just as well could turn on each other to realize their own goals (Fritz 2015). In *Borgen* on the other hand the well-intentioned female prime minister Birgitte Nyborg struggles to balance the requirements of a stressful job with keeping her own family intact (ultimately to no avail) (Vatsikopolous 2013; Bongardt et al. 2018). Furthermore, this entails the historical or fantastical dramas in the list, that place politics in a monarchical system where power relations are defined by bloodline (e.g., *Game of Thrones, Rome, Medici, Borgia*). There are noticeably fewer neutral terms associated with modern day politics like “politician”, “election”, and “president” (the common keyword “U.S. president” substantiates the ‘Hollywood’ dominance). The latter hint at a focus on executive politics, as presidents and prime ministers as head of state and/or government are typically the most visible politicians. The U.S. president embodies the state and his role as commander-in-chief often functions as the basis for a fictional story, for instance if the U.S. has to be defended against attacks from outside, be it from other hostile nations, terrorists, or aliens. This is fueled by the dominant and influential position the U.S. occupies in world politics. The U.S. president is often labeled as “the most powerful man on earth” and his or her actions have repercussions for the international community. That the U.S. constitution just as well sets up a system of institutional checks and balances is usually not reflected in the story. The emphasis on executive power can also be found in European television productions, where the main protagonists frequently are presidents or prime ministers (*Yes, Prime Minister, Borgen, Baron Noir, Servant of the People*) or hold ministerial offices in the government (*Yes Minister, The Thick of It*). In part this is driven by the necessity to construct stories around central and recognizable characters. The representation of collective bodies like parliaments or assemblies is more difficult. On the other hand, as a matter of principle, writers are interested in leadership positions in democracies, which command strong authority and high visibility. They resemble the top of a democratically-constructed hierarchy and are responsible for far-reaching decisions that affect every
citizen. Decisionistic situations are especially well suited for serial dramas (Kelleter and Jahn-Sudmann 2014: 17). Finally, this hierarchy explains why actors in movies or series always strive for higher office. I already mentioned that the turning away from this premise constitutes part of the success of *House of Cards*, where Underwood starts in the position of democratic majority whip.

**Conclusion**

Popular culture plays an important role in world politics—but the interconnection remains difficult to assess and measure. This article introduced the IMDB website as an element of the globalized discourse on popular culture that can be employed to pursue research questions that address this relationship. The structure of the IMDB data was illustrated and in a first descriptive quantitative analysis the properties of all titles tagged with the keyword “politics” or with “politics” as an element of the plot description contrasted against the overall data set. The analysis shows that the popularity and ratings of titles with political content do not differ starkly from other titles, but the list of most popular titles and the genres points to some unique characteristics for political content. The analysis of the user assigned keywords hints at an overall more negative portrayal of politics as an element of storytelling, illustrates the frequent use of family relationships to drive a political story and substantiates an emphasis on executive politics. The exemplary look at user reviews clearly signaled how invaluable these commentaries are, as they offer a rare window into the logic of reception. Especially with an increasingly global pop culture this is a convenient and feasible way to trace receptions of movies and television series around the world.
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The Bandit Who Lost His Zen.
Transmedial “Resemanticizations” of Lu Zhishen in TV Drama

Lionel Fothergill and Andrea Riemenschnitter

Emerging from revolutionary disorder, the ideological void left by the discrediting of socialist ideology has made the century-old questions of national identity and China’s position within a global order of nation-states resurface once again during the encounters with the global Other of the 1990s.¹ Similar to the early Republic, the reaction to the identity crisis ran its course through self-criticism and rejection of the past in the culture debates of the 1980s (Zhao 1997), followed by intensifying nationalist rhetoric asserting a self-confident cultural identity resting on the collective imagination of an ancient civilization reborn.² While the state claimed an interpretative monopoly on Chinese culture and identity by appropriating traditional culture, the cultural nationalism these efforts would foster has constructed Chinese identity upon a shared cultural heritage that is potentially outside the Party’s control.³ A centerpiece to this contested heritage is the national

¹ The first two decades of post-revolutionary reform, the 1980s and 90s, have been compared with the 1910s and the period 1920–1937 (Zhu 2008a, 22). The national-identity crisis after the dissolution of the Soviet Union was, in part, a global phenomenon of readjustment to the new world order (Dittmer and Kim 1993, 1–2).
² Yu (2009: 162–165) shows how the revival of a great civilization was celebrated during millennial spectacles, and how it replaced the socialist utopia with a post-modern dream of nostalgic returns to the bygone Empire’s glory, nationalism, and consumerism in the present.
³ See, for example, the documentary series planned by Beijing University in 1993 on contemporary uses of traditional culture. The aim behind promoting reinterpretations of Confucianism was to instill pride and patriotism in the population, reigning in diverging identities (Makeham 2011: 15–16; see also, Guo 2004; Makeham 2008; Brady 2008).
literary canon (cf. Guo 2004). But which works belong to it? What does that canon stand for? And how are contemporary discourses reshaping the canon’s meaning(s)?

Given the central importance attached to vernacular literature in the process of nation-building, the Ming dynasty novel Shuihu zhuan (水浒传) can be said to belong to this canon. Yet, this anchor of cultural identification is less stable than it seems. It is, indeed, not one novel but a fluid set of interconnected texts that have been (re)written and (re)told in written as well as oral media for centuries now.4 Within this tradition of (transmedia) narrative, we can find an evolution of meaning(s) that continues to this day. Each new compilation, commented edition, and transformation5 leaves semantic sediments in the text and contains “resemanticizations”: the attribution of new meanings in response to the current structure of feeling (Williams 2015) or Zeitgeist and evolving and evolving contexts such as the crises of modernization, globalized nationhood, or post-revolutionary economic reforms.

Among the various media involved in the continuous retelling of the story, the printed novel and the television drama are of particular importance: the novel because of its elevated cultural status as the normative form of literature in public understanding; the TV drama for its availability and reach, ideological utilization, and cultural potency, most prominently the power of the (self-)image and visual narrative (Cutting 2016). The empirical facts underpinning these three aspects are, first, TV drama is ubiquitous and accessible, with the medium’s penetration in China having reached 96.8 percent and indeed watching TV being the leading recreational activity (Schneider 2012: 3–4). Second, the political elites regard TV and drama in particular as crucial instruments for the dissemination of official policy and discourse (Allen 1992: 2; Kramer 2004: 39; Zhang et al. 2005: 36; Brady 2008). Third, over the past 40 years, TV drama has “gradually taken the place of cinema” (Hong 2002: 30) and even news broadcasts as the predominant “cultural forum” (Newcomb and Hirsch 1983) for the

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4 Ge (2001) has shown that the novel text has formed in ongoing interaction with oral transmission.
5 Either the process or the product of a transfer from one medium to another (Mundt 2010).

Among the diverging versions of the novel, the earliest preserved edition—by Rongyutang (容與堂) from approximately 1602, totaling 100 chapters—was selected as the transform for this analysis.⁶ Out of the numerous audiovisual works concerned with the *Shuihuzhuan*, the first complete transformation *Shuihuzhuan* (水滸傳, two English titles: *The Water Margin; The Outlaws of the Marsh*, 1998)⁷ is the one chosen for further examination in this paper. To avoid confusion, *Shuihuzhuan* (SHZ) hereafter refers to the Rongyutang edition of the novel, *The Water Margin* (*WM*) to the TV series. *WM* was produced by China Central Television under Zhang Jizhong (張紀中) as producer and directed by Zhang Shaolin (張紹林).

To demonstrate how the religious layer of meaning was demystified via the modernization discourse, this paper will engage in a close comparative reading of chapter three (or four, depending on the edition) in which Lu Da (魯達) struggles with his new life in a Buddhist monastery and becomes Lu Zhishen (魯智深).⁸ This passage is key to the latter’s characterization and adds a substantial layer of cultural complexity to it, at least for literati readers—as will be shown in the first part of the paper. The second part will then show that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) policy of tolerating institutionalized religion that is ready to modernize and not compete with Marxism-Leninism is what informed the resemanticization featuring in *WM*.

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⁶ The “transform” is the “origin” text for a given transformation (Mundt 2010).
⁸ Shi (1963: 29); Shi and Luo (1988 [1981]: 45–61; 1994–2002: 83–111; 2012 [1975]: 52–70). There are three commonly used English translations of the *Shuihuzhuan*, by Jackson (1963), Shapiro (1988) and Dent-Young (1994–2002) respectively. In this paper we will use Dent-Young’s translation (referred to as “D-Y” hereafter) since it is by any measure the better of the three. For the passages analyzed in this paper, the fact that Dent-Young’s translation is based on a 120-chapter version of the book does not make any difference. All translations are our own unless otherwise noted.
Part 1: The Zen Connection

Lu Zhishen is among the most iconic figures of the *Shuihuzhuan* and has been described as the personification of the call for justice so essential to the story (樂衡軍, Yue Hengjun, quoted in Hong Chen 2009b: 310). The figure’s popularity lies in his thematic richness, combining fearless rebellion with religious transcendence.9 Lu’s hero cycle, the first cycle following the introduction of the story’s main antagonist, Gao Qiu (高俅), is the archetypical tale of the bandit-hero: after killing the local ruffian Zheng the butcher (鄭屠), who was trying to force Jin Cuilian (金翠蓮) to become his concubine, Lu Da must become Lu Zhishen the monk to escape the law.

The latter’s actions make him more bandit than monk: like the other outlaws on Mount Liang, he kills, eats meat, and drinks wine. His transgressions at the Manjusri temple (文殊寺, wenshusi) on Five-Terrace Mountain (五臺山, wutaishan), where he took the tonsure, led to his banishment. With an eye for satire, the book describes how Lu’s unfettered coarseness—his snoring, sleeping during meditation, and relieving himself behind the holy hall—enrages the monks.10 There are two more significant incidents in this episode, a few months apart. In the first, Lu is in a pavilion outside the monastery, bored and hungry from the vegetarian diet, when a wine vendor approaches; after a quarrel because the vendor is not allowed to sell wine to monks, Lu takes the wine by force, gets drunk, and starts a brawl with the laymen at the monastery.11 Further escalation is only prevented by the abbot’s intervention, who justifies forgiveness via reference to Lu’s religious potential and Mr. Zhao’s face.12

The second incident is more dramatic still: Lu goes to town on a sunny day and gets drunk out of boredom, claiming to be a wandering monk;

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9 Lu Zhishen shares this thematic makeup with Sun Wukong (孫悟空) from the *Xiyouji* (西遊記, *Journey to the West*), a figure that was also immensely popular around the same time (ibid.: 318).
12 Mr. Zhao (趙員外) is Jin Cuilian’s husband who would help Lu Da become a monk to evade the law. SHZ.62. and D–Y. vol. I 99.
on the way up the mountain he demolishes the pavilion, destroys the
gate guardians,\textsuperscript{13} vomits up the dog meat he had eaten, and gets in
a mass brawl with a hundred laymen and monks.\textsuperscript{14} Again the abbot
stops the fighting, before expelling Lu to Xiangguo Temple (相國寺) in
Kaifeng (開封).\textsuperscript{15}

These transgressions illustrate how unfit a bandit with a predilection
for wine and meat is for monastic life. However, the text suggests
that the transgressions are indeed no obstacle to Lu’s religious poten-
tial: when the prior and other monks oppose accepting him into the
monastery, the abbot enters meditation and returns with two markers
of Lu’s religious potential. For one thing, “a heavenly star corresponds
[to him]” (上應天星, \textit{shang ying tianxing}); for another, “he will eventu-
ally achieve great purity of soul, and his spiritual achievement will
be quite out of the ordinary [正果非凡, \textit{zhengguo fei fan}]. None of you
[i.e. the monks] will equal him.”\textsuperscript{16} The first of these refers to Lu being
one of the star-spirits that were sent down to Earth as punishment;\textsuperscript{17}
the second, his “spiritual achievement,” may sound like an excuse to
the modern reader. However, the term \textit{zhengguo} (正果) is a prophecy
that Lu will eventually achieve transcendence and enter nirvana, as is
in fact narrated in chapter 99.\textsuperscript{18} On the march back to the capital after
a bloody campaign on behalf of the emperor, Lu suddenly understands
the prophecy the abbot had given him in chapter 90, bathes, and
enters nirvana.\textsuperscript{19} The scene ends in a beautiful poem, summarizing
Lu’s epiphany:

“All my life long I never sought to gain merit; / My interest was only in
killing and burning. / Now of a sudden the golden cord is cut, / The jade lock
shattered; / Now Old Faithful rides on Qiantang’s stream, / And I know at
last who I really am.”\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Dvārapāla}, 金刚 (力士) jingang (lishi).
\textsuperscript{14} SHZ.64–68, D-Y. vol. I 103–107.
\textsuperscript{15} SHZ.68–70, D-Y. vol. I 109–111. The temple was named after the King of Xiang,
Tang Emperor Ruizong’s reigning title (r. 710–12).
\textsuperscript{16} SHZ.57, D-Y. vol. I 90–91.
\textsuperscript{17} This is part of the mythological frame of the whole story, told in chapter one / the
\textsuperscript{18} Chapter 99 in SHZ, chapter 119 in D-Y.
\textsuperscript{19} SHZ.1240–1241, D-Y. vol. IV 432–435.
\textsuperscript{20} SHZ.1241, D-Y. vol. IV 435.
The use of prophecies on this and other occasions in the text and this emotive depiction of Lu’s epiphanic state of mind both suggest intentionality on the part of the editor(s) vis-à-vis the deeper religious meaning here.

Different from “pilgrim” Wu Song, Lu’s religious layer is not mere coincidence, but carefully evoked through his violation of religious code. The late-Ming philosopher Li Zhi (李贄, style name Zhuowu 卓吾, 1527–1602) sees almost every one of Lu’s transgressions and signs of naivety as indications of his Buddha nature, himself being an unorthodox thinker who was influenced by Wang Yangming’s (王阳明, 1472–1529) idealist neo-Confucianism (心學, xinxue) and Buddhist thought—even later becoming a drinking traveling monk himself (Chen et al. 1996: 121).

The early-Qing scholar and Shuihuzhuan editor Jin Shengtan (金聖歎, 1610–1661) compares Lu’s destruction of the gate guardians to Tianran’s burning of the Buddha statues (ibid.: 118). Referenced here is the Tang dynasty Zen master Tianran (丹霞天然, 739–823), whose life and deeds can be found in Pu Ji’s (普濟, 1179–1253) Wudeng Huiyuan (五燈會元, Engl. A Compendium of the Five Lamps) (Pu 1997: 261–264). The idiosyncratic, sacrilegious deeds of Tianran, or Master “Natural”—such as disrespect for the interdictions against alcohol and meat, burning of the Buddha statues, as well as entering nirvana as the result of an epiphany—are (with a few exceptions) mirrored in Lu’s own actions (Chen 2009b: 311–312).

The latter’s transgressions thus create an intertextual link to Tianran, who was one of the key figures in what came to be known as “Mad Zen” (狂禪, kuangchan).21 Mad Zen takes Zen Buddhism’s (禪宗, chanzong) detachment from ceremony and scripture one step further in asserting that Buddha nature can be realized through introspection, without the need for meditation or scripture (即心即佛, ji xin ji fo). Mad Zen’s dramatic iconoclasm—such as insulting the masters and Buddha, or

21 Mad Zen, also “Mad Chan,” is a derogatory term used by more conservative neo-Confucians during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, referring to iconoclasm within Chan Buddhism deemed too radical. It was also used by later neo-Confucians in the Yangming tradition, such as Li Zhi (cf. Wang 2017).
destroying statues—is meant as an aid in overcoming the subject’s attachment to outer forms of religion, including the Five Interdictions. Zen Buddhism became popular among the elite during the Song dynasty (960–1297), while Mad Zen shows striking similarities with neo-Confucian thought at the time of the Shuihuzhuan’s editing during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. The intertextual link to this thought tradition was—either consciously or unconsciously—brought into the text when the editors assembled the figure from different existing sources. The early sources only afforded the blueprint of a rebellious monk/bandit, which was then fleshed out with the memorable deeds of Tianran—shaping Lu’s religious layer alongside a knight-errant (俠, xia) layer derived from other sources (Chen and Chen 2003: 313–315). Taken together, the figure’s multi-layered meaning from varied sources constitutes a literati resemanticization that has left sediments of the philosophical fashion of the time in the text.

**Part 2: Taming Religion**

WM takes up the religious theme and presents a journey of maturation progressing from episode two’s ignorance to episode three’s self-improvement with setbacks toward episode four’s dignified warrior-monk. At first, Lu is shown stupefied by monks, monasteries, and Buddhas, leaving him gaping at a statue while sitting in the abbot’s chair. Later, after scripture class, he gazes into the distance as the abbot encourages him to learn these texts:

"Abbot: ‘Zhishen?’
Lu (stupefied): ‘Huh?’
A: ‘What are you looking at?’
L: ‘I … nothing. I mean, why hasn’t Mr. Zhao come in such a long time?’
A: ‘Is there anything you need from him?’
L: ‘No. I mean, he ought to bring me something tasty [you know]?’"
A: “Zhishen, you must not forget the Five Interdictions of Buddhism.”
L: “Sure, sure, I haven’t! One, no killing. Two, no stealing. Three, no adultery. Four, no … um … See? I know them by heart.”
A: “Well, good to hear that. Good to hear indeed.”

While Lu in the transform neither needs nor wants the abbot to remind him of any interdictions, through word choice, facial expression, and tone in WM he is shown as a man with the mindset of a child fearful of his teacher.

Just after this scene, Lu is then shown memorizing the interdictions until he reaches the pavilion where the first aforementioned incident took place—there is, however, no reason for him to take the wine by force, only his own weak will. The abbot’s admonition after the incident is quite different from the one in the transform:

A: “I accepted you into the monastery not only because of Mr. Zhao, but also because you have a strong Buddha nature. You will reach transcendence certainly. Yet, having Buddha nature is not enough to enter nirvana: you need both enlightenment and [meditational/Buddhist] practice. I’m sure you won’t prove me wrong and waste my efforts.”
L: “If I get drunk and cause trouble again, I shall accept punishment.”
A: “This time has already been quite the disturbance. If something like this happens again, I won’t dare to keep you here anymore.”
L: “Yes, Master.”

Notice that the tone is far gentler here, like a benevolent father talking to a naughty child; for example, “expel you from the monastery” (趕你下山, gan ni xiashan) is changed to “won’t dare to keep you” (不敢

23 WM.E03 (06:00–06:50), (魯智深望遠) 方丈: 智深。 (魯智深半開口, 一臉迷茫): 啊? 方丈: 你看什麼呢? 魯智深: 沒…… 沒看什麼。 我是說啊, 趙員外這些天怎麼不上山來了? 方丈: 你和他有事? 魯智深: 沒事。 我是說, 他該送些好吃的來了。 方丈: 智深, 佛家的五戒你可得牢記於心喲。 魯智深: 當然當然, 我記著呢。 一不殺生, 二不偷盜, 三不邪淫, 四不貪…… 嗯…… 你看, 我這不記得挺清楚嘛。 方丈: 嗯。 記著就好。 記著就好哇。 This is an addition in the transformation, without a corresponding text in the transform itself.

24 WM.E03 (06:57–07:21, 07:22–13:00).

再留你, bugan zai liuni). After this exhortation, Lu is determined to commit to meditation, even when mocked by the other monks whom he asks for help. His efforts are montaged crisscrossing the laymen he had beaten up in the first incident, who are now plotting their revenge. This is to clarify that Lu’s efforts are indeed honest—he even declares he “hates wine” now—and the only reason for the second incident is that the laymen deliberately, and successfully, tempt him with wine against his best intentions.

The abbot is indeed not proven wrong, as Lu has become a dignified warrior-monk by episode four. However, his “religious achievement” (正果, zhengguo) is transformed in peculiar fashion. First, his greatness still to come is no prophecy but a prediction, as WM does not show the abbot returning from meditation with holy insight or repeat it in the aftermath of Lu having caused trouble. WM goes out of its way to argue against the superstition of prophecies when the character Song Jiang himself asks for one:

Song: “My brothers and I are about to start an expedition [against Fang La]. The future is uncertain, so I implore you to give us your advice.”

Zhiqing [the abbot of Xiangguo Temple]: (pause) “This so-called advice is but empty talk. You are men of action and commanding an army. You won't need me [a monk] to say anything. Just do what you think is best.”

Right after this “advice,” Lu enters and informs Song that he will go on retreat at Xiangguo Temple to become a proper monk. The real reason for this seems to be cowardice since, first, Lu withdraws before fighting Fang La (not after defeating him, like in the transform) and,

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26 One could also point out that the Abbot's saying “have a strong Buddha nature” (大有佛性) does not conform to Zen Buddhist theory, since all living beings are said to have Buddha nature.
29 WM.E03 (22:49).
30 WM.E03 (20:10–39:51) covers the whole second incident.
31 WM.E40 (07:02–07:53). 宋江: 我們兄弟即將出征, 前途未卜, 想請長老指點迷津。智清: ...... 所謂指點迷津, 不過一句空話。二位都是做事之人, 身負軍令, 用不著老衲多言, 還是順隨心意而為吧。The corresponding chapter where a prophecy is spoken by abbot Zhizhen (not Zhiqing) is in chapter 90, SHZ.1117–1132 and D-Y. vol. IV 481–494.
32 WM.E40 (09:00–10:00).
second, he even lies to get Song’s approval. In contrast to Lu’s ascen-
dance to nirvana in the transform, it has become clear that “religious super-
stition” (宗教迷信, zongjiao mixin) has been removed from the
depiction of religion while keeping only a “sterilized” version thereof
in the form of the abbot’s profane guidance of a simpleton toward
self-improvement.

The form depicted here has the appearance but not the faith of reli-
gion; it is a religion without mysticism or superstition, one that fits into
the modernizing project of the party-state. During the translingual
flow that brought a Western concept of religion to China via Japan, the
idea that a modern religion follows the superstition-free model of
Protestantism also entered the Chinese discourses of early Republican
nation-building (Liu 1995; Nedostup 2009). Delineating the bound-
daries between discursive spaces and power spheres of the nation-state
versus religion would become a task at the forefront of nation-build-
ing (Nedostup 2009). Like after the end of suppression in the early
twentieth century, religious activity rebounded to enjoy a widespread
renaissance in the Reform era too (ibid.: 18). However, as under
Kuomintang rule, constitutional religious freedom only extended to
institutionalized religion (ibid.: 10; Leung 2005). While all religious
activity was deemed superstitious and therefore criminalized during
the first decades of the People’s Republic, the delineation between
religion and superstition changed at the beginning of the Reform era,
making institutionalized religion legal as long as it was “patriotic”: that is, subordinate to Party ideology and serving the party-state’s own
interests and policies (Central Committee of the Chinese Communist

33 WM.E40 (00:00–00:40). Lu mentions he wants to visit Xiangguo Temple before
they set out, yet Wu Yong points out that he had already visited a few days ago,
so Lu changes his reason saying his farewells. Lu also seems frustrated that Song
decides to come along, indicating that he intended just to sneak off. Such “sneak-
ing off” instead of confronting Song with the pain of farewell also happens in WM
when Wu Song leaves Song without saying a word (also in WM.E40).
34 On the distinction between “religious superstition,” “general superstition” (一般迷
信, yiban mixin), and “feudal superstition” (封建迷信, fengjian mixin), see Anag-
35 For an overview of scholarship on the religious revival, see M. M. Yang (2008).
In order to receive legal protection, it is in the interest of Daoist, Buddhist and, to a lesser degree, Muslim religious communities to present themselves more as cultural heritage than defined by their faith (Ji 2010: 32–52; Chau 2010: 5–7), as since the early 1990s the CCP has seen its own Marxism-Leninism as being in competition with religion in the ideological marketplace (Brady and Wang 2009a: 785–787; Leung 2005).

After scholars in the 1980s had called for actualizing traditional thought and culture to remedy the moral decline of Reform-era China (Zhu 2008a: 58–59), state funding became increasingly available for modern appropriations of the country’s cultural heritage (Brady 2008: chapter 2)—including Confucianism and classical literature such as the *Shuihuzhuan*. This increased instrumentalization of traditional culture coincided with (or appropriated) a shift back to national pride in the intellectual discourses of the 1990s, which brought forth cultural nationalism and the “national studies craze” (國學熱, *guoxue re*) of the new millennium (Zhao 1997, 2004; Dirlik 2011). Since the legitimation of CCP rule gradually changed from serving the revolution to providing economic development (and, more importantly, modernization) (Brady and Wang 2009a: 785–787), it stands to reason that modernization of religion was also a concern in state-funded productions like *WM*. In the post-Tian’anmen era, Chinese arts and media are still theorized to be serving ideological education and modernization first, commerce and artistic expression second (Lull 1991: 4; Brady 2008: chapter 3); it is only the short interlude of leniency in the 1980s that makes this seem like a new course.

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36 For an example of state control over the curricula taught to prospective clerics of institutionalized religions, see D.-R. Yang (2010).

37 At least since the first half of the twentieth century, there have been discourses condemning superstition within organized religions as well, see Nedostup (2009: 13–15); Liu (2012). Therefore, presenting itself as more cultural relic than actual Weltanschauung (worldview) is not wholly a result of policy.
Concluding Thoughts

The results of this transformation analysis exemplify the reshaping and reimagining of the now canonical narrative of the *Shuihuzhuan* at two points in time. In the late Ming dynasty, a literati resemanticization occurred during the compilation of the novel, adding a religious layer alongside the knight-errant layer of meaning embodied in the composite figure of Lu Zhishen. Similarities in his transgressions imply an intertextual link to Tianran and Mad Zen, which was indeed pointed out by prominent commentators such as Li Zhi or Jin Shengtan. The cultural complexity of this “Zen connection” was then reshaped once more in the discursive environment of the 1990s. Though superficially narrating the religious theme of self-betterment, as overseen by the abbot, *Water Margin* removes “religious superstition” from the representation of religion. This “sterilization” of religion is paralleled in the legalization of institutionalized religion—albeit premised on subordination to Party policy during the Reform era’s first decade.

In the context of the Chinese Communist Party’s instrumentalization of traditional culture after 1989 through state-funded visual transformations of literary classics into television series and other media/policies, this is indicative of the appropriation of cultural heritage for various purposes. Among these are the broad dissemination of knowledge about the nation’s premodern canonical texts (and their literary, religious, historical junctions) through compelling visual narratives—as in WM’s sumptuous traditional (but not necessarily historical) costumes and stage settings. Further, the accommodation of hegemonic discourse by means of resemanticization is a key dimension here too.

This paper represents an attempt to shed light on the subtle rearrangements that affect semiotic interactions within and between the interlinked aesthetic texts of different media. It has opened up the field to more in-depth inquiry into the many questions that cultural resemanticizations raise. Pertinent here are comparisons with similar transformations of other classics, further audiovisual transformations, as well as trans-medial interactions between oral, literary, and interactive media, to name but a few.
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Presenting the History of Sino-Japanese Relations: The Visualization from a Chinese Entertainment Reality Show

Han Xie

Introduction

In both Eastern and Western television scenes, people rarely connect reality shows with political agendas. Political Science scholars most of the time exclude these entertainment shows from academic discussions, since the shows almost never plan to situate themselves in this position. Even some notable research involving reality TV or reality shows in the field of Political Science was not designed around any potential political references or implications, as it rather investigated how certain gaming strategies depicted in the shows (Big Brother and Survivor for example) may resemble the balance-of-power theory in the basic education of International Relations (Dreyer 2011; Bourdon 2008; Graham and Harju 2011).

Entertainment reality shows have significantly gained in popularity in China in the last ten years. And with the transition from reality TV to the majority of shows being network-based variety ones nowadays, the whole entertainment industry in China has been developing rapidly. However, despite being under the strict supervision of the Chinese National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA), Chinese reality TV has not been completely devoid of political references. Running
Man (also known as Keep Running), Go Fighting!, Back to Field, and Happy Camp are all examples of big-name Chinese reality shows that have featured specific episodes or plots praising and promoting certain political accomplishments by the CCP.

As these shows more or less focus on the internal promotion of political contributions and successes, another example turns out to be much different as it steps into the territory of Chinese foreign policy: more specifically, the history of Sino-Japanese bilateral relations. Who’s the Murderer S6 E11, also known by the name Mangcheng Fengyun, achieved much success by making this breakthrough after its release in early 2021. As one of the most well-known entertainment reality shows in China in the past few years, Who’s the Murderer is a network variety production by Mango TV, a subsidiary of Mango Excellent Media. Since the show is produced by a private new media company instead of a state-owned satellite-TV station, its postproduction contents are supervised but not completely controlled by the NRTA. In other words, the latter is supposed to make a final decision on whether the contents require further modification or are suitable for public viewing. However, it does not participate in, nor is it involved in the decision-making of, the early production phase.

1 For example, Season 5 Episode 5, premiering May 12, 2017. This episode is filmed in Yan’an, the former Chinese Communist Party (CCP) base before the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), and is designed around a final cantata of famous revolutionary songs.
2 For example, S4 E1, premiering April 29, 2018. This episode features the role-play of young students in 1978, the year when the CCP restructured the national entrance exam after the dark period of the Cultural Revolution. It concludes with praise and gratitude toward CCP policymaking.
3 For example, S1 E1, premiering January 15, 2017. This episode features a conversation between two Chinese celebrities with a Western-education background, in which they conclude by affirming that China is always the best.
4 For example, the weekly episodes, premiering September to November 2019. To celebrate the 70th anniversary of the establishment of the PRC on October 1, 2019, these episodes feature a trivia-based game to enumerate and praise the contributions of the CCP in the past seven decades.
5 It is worth noting that the Chinese TV and network-entertainment industry rapidly developed and received greater attention after 2010; most examples featuring in this paper are chosen from the last decade therefore.
Structure-wise, *Who's the Murderer* presents a unique fictional story in each episode in which the participating celebrities play their respective roles in the given settings. Regarding the episode discussed in this research (S6 E11), it tells a story that closely resembles the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945)—however using alternate names and terms while firmly claiming the whole story to be fictional. This paper aims to investigate the political visualizations and references featuring in this story. The main focus is not on frame-by-frame analysis of all possible clues, rather I seek to question how well certain references are perceived by audiences alongside identifying the logic behind this process too.

The two main research questions are clear: What role does the given episode play as an entertainment reality show within the Chinese entertainment industry? How have audiences perceived the political references and ideologies introduced? To address these both, a two-step research agenda is formulated. First, the concept of the “patriotic education campaign” will be introduced as an explanatory factor for the chosen storytelling in the given episode. Second, a targeted questionnaire for audiences helps explain how these visualizations have been perceived. The research thus seeks to establish whether S6 E11 is a solid attempt by the production team considering the groundbreaking nature of its topic selection.

**Sino-Japanese References**

*Who’s the Murderer* S6 E11 features a fictional historical background involving two countries, Mang Guo and Jia Guo.\(^7\) Eight years after its establishment, Mang Guo is invaded by Jia Guo; its territories are gradually taken away too. Mang Cheng,\(^8\) one of the most famous and prosperous cities in Mang Guo, is completely controlled by Jia Guo invaders two years after they first set foot in the latter. The main story focuses on three different groups of people: Jia Guo invaders stationed

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7 *Guo* in Chinese means “country”; these two names are made up for the purposes of this story.

8 *Cheng* in Chinese means “city”; this name is a fictionalization.
in Mang Cheng, Mang Guo civilians suffering following the invasion, and Mang Guo underground agents hoping to fight back. The seven celebrities participating in this episode each play roles with vastly different character backgrounds. Apart from a “detective” who hails from a third country, there are two roles each assigned to Jia Guo invaders, Mang Guo underground agents, and Mang Guo civilians with their own goals of exacting revenge.

Although all names and terms in this fictional story are made up, the plot appears to have learned from, if not to closely resemble, the history of the Second Sino-Japanese War. In fact, the name Jia Guo in a way leads the audience to the name “Japan,” as the pronunciation of the character jia sounds extremely similar to the first syllable of Japan. As any made-up names could be selected for this story, it is reasonable to assume that the character jia being chosen is no mere coincidence then. Besides, many other fictional terms may be better explained via the connection to the Second Sino-Japanese War. For example, Mang Cheng may refer to Shanghai, as the term “Bu Ye Cheng”\(^9\) is used five times in this episode as a nickname for that city. Meanwhile the main stage of the episode, Mang Cheng Da Fan Dian,\(^10\) which is described in the show as the only peaceful place in the whole of Mang Cheng amid the flames of war, may refer to the Shanghai Fairmont Peace Hotel—which has a similar background.

Interestingly, the production team not only aim at telling a story with potential political and historical references, but they also try to convey critical values via the storytelling. For example, the only female character (playing a Jia Guo intelligence agent) admits that the invasion is inhumane and wrong, bowing and apologizing for the mistakes made in front of other characters. Besides, the episode ends with all participating members praising the values of “nationalism” and “national identity,” commending the contributions of past veterans fighting for the establishment and prosperity of China. The following quote at the end of the show perfectly encapsulates the values being conveyed here:

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\(^9\) Bu Ye Cheng literally means “City That Never Sleeps,” which is a well-known Chinese term to describe a fast-growing and modernizing Shanghai in the 1930s.

\(^10\) Translates as “Mang Cheng Big Restaurant.”
“The basis for our country to be this strong nowadays is determined by the arduous efforts made by our veterans from time to time. And the growth is also achieved by the collective construction of everyone involved. So all of them are really great figures, and I do admire them a lot.”¹¹

Besides, there is also a deliberately enlarged slogan shown by the production team after all celebrities have shared their opinions in the talking session:

“Let us remember the struggle of our ancestors, and cherish our hard-won peace.”¹²

One question remains unanswered concerning all these political references, attitudes, and slogans included in S6 E11: Is it necessary for *Who's the Murderer*, an entertainment reality show in essence with no political affiliations, to discuss this topic in the current depth it does? The production team surely were able to determine what dialogues, opinions, or slogans would or would not appear in the final cut. In other words, the production team should always be able to guide how audiences perceive the central theme of each episode with post-filming editing. Therefore what might have been the reasons for them challenging the customs of the entertainment industry, in creating and showing such content with strong political implications?

**The Chinese Patriotic Education Campaign**

A number of arguments could be made in the attempt to answer the question above. For example, the motivation to include political or nationalistic implications in an entertainment reality show may be justified as a marketing technique to resonate with audiences, in turn attracting viewership. But temporarily setting marketing theories aside, one good alternative explanation concerning Political Science concepts involves a relatively uncommon term in the Western scene: the patriotic education campaign. The latter is called “Ai Guo Zhu Yi Jiao Yu” in Chinese, which can also be directly translated into “the
education of patriotism or nationalism.” This so-called campaign has rarely been connected with Western societies, as most related research has targeted China, Russia or formerly the Soviet Union (Rapoport 2009a; Rapoport 2009b; Rapoport 2012), and Japan (Sneider 2013; Ide 2009; Rose 2006). Specifically, China has always been at the center of discussion around this topic.

In the early 1990s, the patriotic education campaign in China started with the crucial ideological shift from a “victor narrative” to a “victim narrative.” According to Zheng Wang, a victor narrative features the ideological conviction that “it was under the leadership of the CCP that Chinese people overcame the difficulties and won national independence” (Wang 2008: 789). But starting 1991, CCP leaders detected a different route, one now assumed to be a more effective tool for the Party to legitimize its rule in China. Therefore the previous emphasis on national pride was soon replaced by one on national humiliation instead, and the so-called patriotic education became a significant measure to help realize such a shift. Two documents issued in 1991 officially signaled the emergence of the Chinese patriotic education campaign: “Notice about Conducting Education of Patriotism and Revolutionary Tradition by Exploiting Extensively Cultural Relics” (Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party 1991) and “General Outline on Strengthening Education on Chinese Modern and Contemporary History and National Conditions.” The latter stresses that “history education reform” is crucial as it helps “defend against the ‘peaceful evolution’ plot of international hostile powers and is the most important mission for all schools” (Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party 1994). With a clear direction already established, the 1994 “Outline on Implementing Patriotic Education” added more fine details to the major objectives to be achieved by the patriotic education campaign (Chinese Ministry of Education 1994):

“The objectives of conducting [the] patriotic education campaign are to boost the nation's spirit, enhance cohesion, foster national self-esteem and pride, consolidate and develop a patriotic united front to the broadest extent possible, and direct and rally the masses' patriotic passions to the great cause of building socialism with Chinese characteristics.”

Scholars share diverse attitudes toward the CCP ideological shift from victor narrative to victim narrative. For example, Kenneth Pyle ac-
knowledges the falling away of traditional communist ideology in supporting the CCP’s maximization of its legitimacy, as he believes that patriotic education redefines and emphasizes the Party’s role as the bearer of China’s historic struggle for national independence (Pyle 2007). Similarly, Neil Renwick and Qing Cao believe that the CCP consolidated its ruling legitimacy by portraying itself as the historic agent that successfully restored national unity and practical independence (Renwick and Cao 1999). However, William Callahan believes that “a patriotic education policy was formulated not so much to reeducate the youth, as to redirect protest toward the foreigner as an enemy, as an external other” (Callahan 2006). Yinan He approaches the shift through the concept of “national identity,” pointing out that “the ‘defending fundamental fissure’ for Chinese national identity was now drawn between the Chinese nation and those foreign nations that had invaded and humiliated China in the past” (He 2007). Meanwhile by summarizing the patriotic education campaign as “designed to present the Chinese youth with detailed information about China’s traumatic and humiliating experience in the face of Western and Japanese incursion,” Wang claims that the CCP’s legitimacy to rule China “has been justified by ending the history of humiliating diplomacy and regaining China’s national independence” (Wang 2008: 791–793). Offering a more practical view at last, Suisheng Zhao compares the 1990s patriotic education campaign with previous propaganda initiatives launched by the CCP, concluding that the latest one would be carried out “in a much more practical and sophisticated way of selling the CCP ideas and agenda” (Zhao 1998).

That “more practical and sophisticated way,” according to Zhao, started with the drastic reform of the content of history textbooks. As an example, the Teaching Guideline for History Education published in 2002 defined the country’s past as follows (Chinese Ministry of Education 2002):

“Chinese modern history is a history of humiliation that China had been gradually degenerated into a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society; at the same time, it is also a history that Chinese people strived for national independence and social progress, persisted in their struggle of anti-imperialism and anti-feudalism, and was also the history of the success of New Democratic Revolution under the leadership of the CCP.”
With the focus on education targeting young students, the patriotic education campaign’s influence soon spread throughout the whole country. Patriotism, nationalism, traumatic history, and memories of humiliation—all these terms would take root in the heads of countless Chinese students. After seeing some gradual progress, the CCP leadership used two adverbs to describe how the campaign should move forward as a long-term project: “unwaveringly” and “tirelessly” (Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party 1994). This attitude set the tone for the future of this campaign, as short-term successes were not considered sufficient at the time.

Moving into the twenty-first century, Chinese society would begin embracing dramatic change with the development occurring on various fronts. While the victim narrative has remained stable for the CCP as part of this long-term patriotic education campaign, more measures besides textbooks would become available in this new era for the promotion of ideologies. Since the strategy of targeting young people or students proved successful in the 1990s and early years of the new millennium, innovative strategies emerged based on such a premise. For example, as Wang points out, the CCP “has made special efforts to ‘make entertainment a medium of education’ and to socialize educational content penetrating every facet of people’s daily lives” (Wang 2008: 799). The call would be made, and the responses immediately followed. The Chinese entertainment industry, in which the reality show plays an important role, started to design and create content aimed at promoting patriotic ideas, more often than not in a straightforward fashion. Compared to textbooks, as described by Robert Schmuhl, TV shows are “a medium highly dependent on engaging pictures,” offering direct and vivid visualizations to audiences (Schmuhl 1990: 87). As many examples mentioned earlier also did, these shows have not shied away from including political references or even expressing political opinions. Therefore it can be argued that Who’s the Murderer S6 E11 may not be considered a pioneer in this regard, rather a bold adventurer further testing limits in proceeding down an already-unfolding route.
Perceiving the Visualizations

To further investigate the relationship between this episode of *Who's the Murderer* and the Chinese patriotic education campaign, a questionnaire was designed. Approaching matters from the perspective of how audiences perceive the promotion of politics throughout the episode, this anonymous questionnaire is divided into three parts: basic information; perception of visualizations; and perception of ideologies. The second and third parts are designed in such a way as to test the participants’ attitudes according to different scales. A series of declarative sentences were provided, with participants choosing between five different answers based on their instincts toward each sentence: strongly disagree; disagree; neutral; agree; and strongly agree. In May and June 2021, a total of 41 valid participants who had watched *Who’s the Murderer S6 E11* completed their questionnaires online.

Part 1: Basic Information

Although the questionnaire is designed to be anonymous from start to end, a number of quick questions were still in place to capture some basic information on participants.

Table 1: Age of the Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>15 or younger</th>
<th>16–20</th>
<th>21–25</th>
<th>26–29</th>
<th>30 or older</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An interesting observation emerges regarding the ages of the 41 participants: all of them are under 30 years old. This observation might not indicate too much, but some significant assumptions can be made after combining the numbers with the results of the second question.

Table 2: Since when have you been following the show of *Who’s the Murderer*?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Considering that most participants have been following the show for at least four years (34 out of 41), they indeed first started to watch it when they were much younger than the ages shown in Table 1. Though not directly related to each other, it can nevertheless be argued that the main audience groups of Who's the Murderer, or possibly those of other similar network-based reality shows in China as well, are teenagers and students—who are simultaneously the targets of the patriotic education promulgated by the CCP. Therefore, in other words, these shows may, if necessary, serve as some perfect substitutes for—or more oftentimes great additions to—the Chinese patriotic education campaign dominating the modern era.

This assumption is in a way manifested by the answers collected for the third question: Were you a student when you started to follow Who's the Murderer? Out of the 41 participants, 39 answered “yes,” while only two participants indicated that they were not.

**Part 2: Perception of Visualizations**

The second part of the questionnaire aims at investigating how participants perceived the political references and visualizations featuring in the given TV episode. A number of declarative sentences are provided, with participants supposed to indicate their attitudes based on the same five-point scale.

*Table 3: While watching this episode, I recognize Mang Guo and Jia Guo as China and Japan*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 4: While watching this episode, I see the invasion as a metaphor for the Second Sino-Japanese War*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
While watching this episode, I see the veterans as a metaphor for the early CCP pioneers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I am able to find clues through the dialogues, prop sets, or character backgrounds to understand the fictional story and its connections to real history

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I feel that the production team has intentionally included these allusions in this episode

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An assumption emerges concerning the five tables above: while watching *Who’s the Murderer* S6 E11 for the first time, most participants perceived the story as a metaphor for the Second Sino-Japanese War after recognizing the allusions and their relations to real history based on the presented clues and visualizations. Meanwhile, building on this assumption, a majority of participants (38 out of 41) believe that the allusions or metaphors were, rather than pure coincidence, intentionally included by the production team as a way to manipulate the perceptions of audiences. Considering these participants are mostly students, or used to be so a few years ago, this assumption in fact coincides with general understandings of the ongoing Chinese patriotic education campaign.

As the major foci of the latter are, as summarized by Wang, “educating Chinese people, especially the young people, about China’s humiliating experience in the face of Western and Japanese incursion, as well as explaining how the CCP-led revolution changed China’s fate and won national independence” (Wang 2008: 789), the goals of this campaign perfectly match with the storytelling in this particular episode of a Chinese reality show. Based on the questionnaire, both the intention and the outcome of these visualizations align with official CCP histo-
riography regarding how the Second Sino-Japanese War should be understood. That audiences, including the 41 participants taking the questionnaire, are able to relate this fictional story to the real history of the Second Sino-Japanese War is thus indicative of the patriotic education campaign’s success. Viewers are not exactly forced to reach this conclusion, since the names and terms appearing in the show are fabricated—intentionally so. However, young audiences are more likely to connect this episode with the information they acquired via textbooks, since the storytelling to a great extent mirrors the knowledge being taught in classrooms across China. Therefore it may be argued that the long-term efforts of the Chinese patriotic education campaign, earlier through textbooks and later via a broader range of other mediums too, have shaped the way the new generation in China understands or perceives certain periods of the country’s modern history.

**Part 3: Perception of Ideologies**

The third and last part of the questionnaire deals with ideological and emotional perceptions, in other words with what audiences may have taken in after watching the given TV episode. Questions in this part are designed similarly to in the previous one, but those here are meant to be more subjective.

*Table 8: I have watched and understood the final part of this episode, in which celebrities and the production team convey the core values of this story*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 9: I feel comfortable with the values conveyed throughout this episode*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 10: I believe that Chinese entertainment reality shows like Who’s the Murderer have the obligation to discuss similar topics in depth

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 11: I look forward to seeing more entertainment contents designed around similar topics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At first glance, the direction implications of the four tables combined may not be as straightforward to identify as was the case for the previous two parts. Nevertheless, an assumption can be made based on the distribution of numbers: audiences would like to see similar topics be further discussed in reality shows in general, although they share certain feelings of ambivalence toward Who’s the Murderer S6 E11 per se. Tables 9 and 10 showcase some interesting results, as the 41 participants expressed neutral attitudes overall toward the respective statements. The statement for Table 9—“I feel comfortable with the values conveyed throughout this episode”—includes a section for participants to write down the reasons for their answers. Among 16 valid inputs, seven participants expressed similar opinions toward the apology made by the Jia Guo secret agent, ascribing their discomfort to this plot point. Especially, one participant wrote that: “The bow and the apology just make me feel so unreal. I could just experience awkwardness and embarrassment when I watched this for the first time.”

Meanwhile, five participants pointed out that the final part of the show, with celebrities sharing their opinions after the viewer has experienced the whole story, was “awkward” and “deliberate.” In particular, one participant made clear that: “Everyone basically says the same ideas again and again. That makes me feel quite forced to be immersed in their sorrow.” These statements coincide with Roderick Hart’s theory

13 Author’s own translation.
14 Author’s own translation.
on visualized political history that concludes TV content conveying political ideas is likely to increasingly rely on emotional appeals (Hart 1999).

Given that the results in Part 2 indicate that most participants did understand the political allusions planted throughout this story, the reasons behind such ambivalence require further explanation then. Again, the nature of and some ongoing patterns within the Chinese patriotic education campaign can be said to play significant roles in this regard. Although, as noted, one of the core premises of the campaign has been the shift from a victor narrative to a victim narrative, the production team seems to have been perplexed in terms of definitively establishing the underlying narrative of this fictional story. The two parts mentioned and indeed criticized most frequently by participants, the apology from the invader and the summary of core ideologies, are indeed contradictory in nature. Mang Guo, widely acknowledged as China in the Second Sino-Japanese War in reality, is simultaneously depicted as victim and victor in the course of the storytelling. Such contradictions in narratives unnecessarily aroused feelings of awkwardness among audiences, making the summary in the final talking session even more “deliberate” in their eyes than it was perhaps meant to be.

Conclusion

In 2012 the political scientist Dan Schill left one critical question unanswered: How do audiences process and respond to images (Schill 2012)? Although the questionnaire is definitely not comprehensive enough, as only 41 participants shared their opinions on Who's the Murderer S6 E11, it gives a general outline of how the story told in this reality-show episode was perceived by them. Three assumptions or arguments are manifested by the three parts of the questionnaire: 1) a significant portion of those watching Who's the Murderer are or were students when they first started to follow the show; 2) while watching Who's the Murderer S6 E11 for the first time, most questionnaire participants were able to grasp the allusions and their relations to real history based on the clues and visualizations planted in the course of
this television episode; 3) many viewers would like to see similar topics also be discussed in future Chinese reality shows, although these individuals shared certain feelings of ambivalence toward the particular TV episode discussed here.

Schill believes that “audiences process messages differently and further research is needed addressing how various audiences respond to diverse visual messages”; he then lists a series of potential factors that may influence the process (Schill 2012: 134). This paper does not seek to approve or negate any of these psychological or interactional dimensions without solid prior research, but instead argues that collective inputs of ideologies will influence perceptions of visualizations on the most basic level. As an example, the three arguments above may seem to be independent from one another but they are in fact clearly interconnected once the concept of the Chinese patriotic education campaign is integrated therewith. Starting in the 1990s, the ongoing efforts of this campaign have gradually influenced and shaped the perceptions of the young generation in China. The collective outcomes of this campaign have to a great extent determined how Chinese audiences, the predominant target group, are to perceive related visualizations. From another perspective Who’s the Murderer, as one of the most well-known Chinese reality shows, should be considered an adventurer in following up on these ongoing efforts with its production and premiering of S6 E11. The show is definitely not a pioneer within the Chinese entertainment industry vis-à-vis promoting patriotic or nationalistic values, but regardless it did venture down the unfamiliar path of introducing the currently in vogue victim narrative of modern Chinese history in a reality show.

However, the questionnaire indicates ambivalent results regarding this adventurous decision-making in topic selection. Although most viewers understood the allusions of the fictional story similarly, they indeed did not have overwhelming preferences regarding the values being conveyed. As most answers given in the final part of the questionnaire lean toward neutrality, whether the story in S6 E11 accurately captured the essence of the original motivation behind its crafting is open to debate then. Since half of the participants favored similar topics featuring in future Chinese entertainment content, subsequent adventurers should take the definition of narratives under more serious consideration.
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Legitimacy through Narration: How Chinese Visions of Global Economic Governance Align with International and Domestic Expectations

Lucy Xu Yang

China’s Role Construction in Global Economic Governance

Over the last two decades, China’s paradigm shift from passive membership in international economic institutions to a more active, even assertive approach has intrigued and unsettled policymakers, scholars, and investors worldwide. Having risen to a global economic heavyweight and powerhouse, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) can no longer shy away from the global frontier of governance—and it plans to speak up. Notwithstanding the profound impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on China’s economy and reputation in 2021, its economic growth, trade, and investment flows have staged a fast recovery, securing the country’s position as one of the largest and most dynamic economies in the world. Historically, the PRC has come a long way from seeking accession to the Bretton Woods institutions and the World Trade Organization (WTO) in the era of opening-up, to increased calls for institutional reforms in the wake of tensions, to reinforcing alternative platforms of multilateral cooperation such as BRICS Summits and, finally, to establishing new initiatives such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). In light of recent developments in the Sino-US trade war, the acceleration of the “One Belt, One Road” (OBOR) initiative and US President Joe Biden’s attempts at a countercampaign, “Build Back Better World,” economic governance has become one of the most contested fields in global politics and thus deserves further research attention.
Given the obscure nature of the autocratic decision-making process, the power shift in global economic governance has generated mistrust and raised insecurity about which exact roles and “great power” ideas China envisions and plans to enact in the global order. The idea of China assuming global leadership poses a problem of legitimacy both at the international and the domestic level; the party-state counters this through media discourse, deliberately defining vague notions of “responsible leadership” and “peaceful rise” via the particular interpretations and narratives they intend to project. In the process, the use of propagandistic media is not limited to speeches and press releases but extends to visualization through film and art, too.

An exemplary manifestation of political storytelling can be found in the documentary series *Daguo Waijiao (DGWJ, China’s Major Country Diplomacy)*, which was produced by the Publicity Department of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and two of the three largest official state media outlets, Xinhua News Agency and China Central Television (CCTV). The series was broadcast on national television from August to September 2017 and hence could be interpreted as a preparatory act for the 19th National Party Congress, during which Xi Jinping’s term as General Secretary of the CCP was renewed—before being extended to life-long rule half a year later. Across six episodes of 45 minutes’ length each, the series centers on China’s approach to global governance under Xi’s lead, revolving around his allegedly new ideas and strategies of diplomacy as they gradually propel the country toward a great power status on the international stage. The coordination of economic policies is featured among other key realms of global governance (e.g. development, climate, and security); the frequency and prominent arrangement of relevant scenes across the episodes allow for detailed analysis of the presented narrative and the visualizations thereof. Events organized by three multilateral economic institutions are chosen as mileposts to represent China’s role construction: the World Economic Forum (WEF) in 2017, the G20 summits in 2016 and 2017, and the leaders’ meetings of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in 2014 and 2016.

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1 Chinese broadcasting, advertising, and media reports about the series ceased immediately after September 2017.
This chapter will first explore the legitimacy dilemma China has been facing since it adopted a more assertive strategy, by reviewing international public opinion as well as the domestic debate pursued by different factions. The second section then introduces a relatively new framework of analysis that combines narratology with legitimation politics. The identified key devices of narrative analysis—roles, plots, and metaphors—build bridges to National Role Theory (NRT) and give insight on the process of role construction. The case studies in the third section draw on the dataset of the DGWJ documentary and examine the storytelling and visualization for the presented WEF, G20, and APEC events. By deconstructing these unilaterally communicated statements using a role-theory approach, this study aims to further the understanding of China’s self-conception, associated role claims, and their implications for the PRC’s positioning in global (economic) governance.

The Legitimacy Dilemma of an Increasingly Assertive China

Role contestation in international debate: Reformer or hegemonic threat?

Ever since the PRC’s rise to power following the reform and opening era there has been an ongoing debate in the international community about whether to welcome Chinese influence as an opportunity or to reposition oneself against an upcoming threat. Regarding the global economy, China has received praise for its performance and growth-induced development prospects (e.g. Heberer and Senz 2007). Its contribution to the achievement of the UN Sustainable Development Goals by investing heavily in long-term poverty eradication, green technology, urbanization, and many more policies have been acknowledged and are generally considered promising.

At the same time, the lack of transparency in China’s decision-making processes and the vague articulation of its role in the global order have sparked insecurity and mistrust. For example, in international discussions on its membership in the WTO, the acknowledgement of China’s enhanced participation and outstanding performance in the multilateral trading system is overshadowed by the fact that it is
enacted within the confines of a “black box” by a small political elite (e.g. Hopewell 2016: 17f.). This uncertainty of intention has confounded media commentators and academic researchers alike, as well as enticed them into engaging in speculation: optimistic comments point to “accommodating features in Chinese policy”; more nuanced ones claim it is a question of domestic capacities; observers vilifying China see “evidence of aggression,” expansionism, and a “ burgeoning new Cold War” on the horizon (Mitter 2021: para. 1). The oscillation of China’s chosen policy measures between marketization, state-led guidance, and protectionism still causes irritation, especially when China is, arguably, seen as the main—sometimes even sole—beneficiary of economic globalization (cf. The Economist 2020).

The most dominant threat scenario, especially among Western observers, paints a picture of China’s hegemonic aspirations creating new dependencies and marginalizing the existing institutional structures in which the industrialized economies still dominate. These perceptions also stem from a fear of an alternative illiberal political model being promoted along the way, and thereby the undermining of Western ideals and interests. These assumptions are not beyond reason, since China’s surge in economic and monetary power has granted political leverage, enabling its shift from rule-taker to rule-maker. Developmental support within the China Model has increased agency for (semi-)autocratic regimes and debt relief has been exchanged for military assets, for instance, in the case of the Hambantota Port Development Project (Abi-Habib 2018). Thus, the activities occurring within the framework of China’s development strategy with global outreach, most strikingly manifested in the OBOR initiative, continue to fuel foreign skepticism of win-win deals (Noesselt 2019: 6–14; cf. McMaster 2020).

In case of perceived reshaping of or decoupling from the current form of global trade and investment flows, Western policy advisors are quick to react proactively with counterstrategies (Blanchette and Polk 2020). Nevertheless, China is not isolated; in its calls for reform of the economic governance architecture it enjoys the support of leaders of the Global South. There is general consensus among emerging economies that the current governance structure is no longer representative of actual economic performance and strength. As such, an accompanying need for far-reaching reform proposals is recognized and a disposition
to institutional experimentation has emerged (e.g. Grabel 2019; O’Neill and Terzi 2014).

**Domestic role contestation: Factional balancing between liberals, leftists, and nationalists**

While abundant research has been conducted on Chinese foreign policy, only a handful of scholars have looked at leadership development on the home front and how “domestic considerations, including elite competition, the economy, energy security, nationalism, and maintaining political support from the military” (Li 2016: 33) influence the decision-making of the CCP. In an in-depth study, Li (2016) explores how “collective leadership” (*jiti lingdao*) is accounted for in Xi’s governance style, who practices a strongman rule while simultaneously compromising with competing power factions. For this, Li has mapped out the main power-holding factions that represent a variety of socioeconomic strata and, therefore, follow contrasting agendas. He identifies two leadership coalitions: the “elitists” (*mincui tongmeng*), who are mostly the heirs of former high-ranking officials and their allies in the business and entrepreneurial class, and the “populists” (*jingying tongmeng*), who emerged mostly from the CCP’s Youth League (ibid.: 197f.). In order to assess the factional views on the role China should enact in global economic governance, this study will take into account the academic discourse echoing the competition of political ideas, respectively.

The elitist coalition, to which President Xi belongs, consults a body of pro-market economic technocrats, who are often experts on global economic and financial development, and returnees from pursuing studies abroad. Their mainstream visions of economic governance promote the so-called China Model, in other words the “liberalization”\(^2\) of market, trade, finance, and investment with a priority on economic stability and growth—all within the regulative boundaries of the state. Accordingly, China has successfully “flagged its opposition to all forms of protectionism” (Long 2017: para. 17, own translation).

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\(^2\) The terms “liberalization” and “(neo)liberalism” are deemed Western concepts, and meanwhile avoided or perhaps silenced in political and academic discourse despite being regularly implied. Often, the terms “marketization” and “globalization” are used as substitutes.
The populist coalition, also categorized as “the New Left”, does not reject liberal notions in their entirety (although some leftist scholars do; see Wang 2018), but insists instead on “putting people first”—consequently addressing economic equality and social justice by strengthened state regulation and redistributive measures (Li 2016: 197; Wang 2021). In this vein, the realization of national goals is of the utmost importance; fortifying the PRC’s role in global economic governance is treated as a means to this end. They endorse legal coordination at the international level to enhance the domestic economic-law system, extending to “extraterritorial application or long-arm jurisdiction” (Zhang 2019). This is mentioned in the context of preventing and responding to trade wars as well as regarding corruption containment.

Although rather silent in public debate, the business elite also play a role in setting the agenda of economic governance. Zhu et al. (2017) have concluded that, depending on the firm structure, political embeddedness and agency vastly differ. While in big enterprises that have evolved from state-owned enterprises corporate decision-making is bound to party influence, medium-sized firms that were jump-started as family businesses in the 80s and 90s may suffer from lack of governmental support, but make up by increased firm agency. This “second generation of entrepreneurial elite” (chuang’erdai) has dared to break out from path dependencies, i.e. low-cost export-oriented production, and made way for innovative industrial development and domestic high-value supply chains.

Regarding China’s role in key economic institutions, there is broad consensus among scholars on the malfunctioning of the existing economic governance system now in crisis, the need to transfer Western (i.e. US) dominance and voting power to emerging economies, and also for a shift toward the G20 becoming the major discursive platform (Zeng 2019; Lin 2020). Divergence can be observed on the promoted level of assertiveness: whether to keep as low a profile as possible and “merely” reform, to construct new rules and promote alternative platforms, or even to replace them altogether. Some scholars propose that emerging countries’ platforms such as BRICS should not only transform old mechanisms but take the initiative to “form a new global economic governance proxy organization” (Mi 2018: 88, own translation) and insist on nonalignment with the US.
Across factions, global economic policy-making is viewed as the extension of global governance in the economic field, and to a certain extent, as the basis for other forms of leadership (e.g. Zhang 2019; Lin 2020). The shared goal is to raise the PRC’s international reputation, improve national capacities, and to “combine the development of common interests with the promotion of [China’s own interests]” (Sui et al. 2014: 51, own translation). This facilitates Xi’s requirement to address the needs of all factions under the umbrella of nationalism by emphasizing the elimination of vulnerabilities, particularly in the form of dependencies on other countries. According to Li (2016: 196), Xi has maintained factional balance of power by promoting global outreach, market reform, and financial liberalization via the visible hand of the state while simultaneously reclaiming the slogan of “serving the people.” In this course, he aptly framed his anticorruption campaign as a fight against rent-seeking officials and illicit practices threatening China’s economic performance—albeit the motives behind it clearly included silencing political opposition (Fabre 2017; Diallo 2021).

All in all, it has become clear that at the international level, legitimacy contestation derives from insecurity, lack of trust, and a fear of lost influence to a country holding different values. At the domestic level, legitimacy contestation is a result of factional power competition based on differing politico-economic agendas. Since legitimacy in this context is dependent on the recognition of self-proclaimed roles (cf. Harnisch et al. 2011), China’s political leadership finds itself in a position of imminent need to meet both external and internal expectations in striving for recognition.

**Using Narrative Analysis to Assess Role Claims**

From an NRT perspective, China’s official role set is currently under reconstruction. This has had a significant impact on its preferences and behavior within international institutions; at the same time, changes in role behavior may have been triggered by modifications in institutional settings as well as by domestic role contestation (Harnisch et al. 2011; Cantir and Kaarbo 2012). Therefore, identifying the dynamics behind
role claims and processes of role construction provides valuable insight on the decision-making process and policymakers’ behavior.

In this constructivist comprehension, the identities and role conceptions of global state actors are not fixed but rather evolve through learning, socializing, and argumentative discourse (Wendt 1999). Wehner and Thies (2014) make a compelling case for interpreting narrative forms of discourse as a way to collect empirical evidence on the worldviews of state actors. When voiced by political agents, narratives are proclaimed as the strategic and intentional construction of roles and interests (ibid.: 421). Beyond that, the use of narratives may generate legitimacy to address a problem concerning the institutional order and to enforce a certain interpretation amid a multitude of overlapping norms and interests. In case of legitimacy contestation, political actors struggle for recognition of their own “definition of the common good and the most reasonable means to achieve it” (Yildiz et al. 2018: 137).

From a role-theory perspective, the PRC faces both external and internal contestation in the process of assuming a leadership role in global governance and thus employs narratives as a political-communication strategy designed to secure popular support and social prestige.

**The medium of (propagandistic) film as a narrative transporter**

While narratology in language discourse is rather well developed, the analysis of visual narratives in film has remained undertheorized. This may come as a surprise since political power, regardless of the type of regime, has extended to pop culture ever since its invention—namely to “serve and justify ruling ideas and actions” (Combs 2014: 10). According to Jowett and O’Donnell, “[o]f all the mass media, the motion picture has the greatest potential for emotional appeal to its audience, offering a deeper level of identification with the characters and action on the screen” (2012: 110f.). The potential of instrumentalizing documentaries and newsreels by staging realities, while presenting them as authentic, was exploited early on to convey political concerns in a persuasive manner (Maland 2014: 243, 261). Propaganda in film is framed as a form of informative communication rather than the promotion of own objectives (Jowett and O’Donnell 2012: 45).
The CCP has far-reaching media capacities at its disposal and uses them strategically to drive specific narratives, as explicitly promoted by Xi’s national speeches and policy advisors (e.g. Fu 2020). In 2017, the documentary Daguo Waijiao was released with the propagandistic purpose of constructing China’s role as an emerging global leader in relationship to key institutions and actors of global governance, and to contextualize the advancement of OBOR in international fora. By looking at the receiving end, it can be assumed that the series is supposed to address, first, national citizens and to harmonize the expectations of a great power held by the different political camps. Second, since the series is also featured on the global social network YouTube in a dubbed version via the channel “CCTV English,” it can be said to target—albeit to a lesser extent—an international audience too. Deconstructing the underlying narratives of DGWJ seems particularly promising because of its explicit articulation of China’s great power visions and ideas of global (economic) governance.

**Tools of narrative analysis: Role, plot, metaphors**

Based on Yildiz et al. (2018: 142f.), the analysis adopts a threefold method to expose what the core narratives are and how they are constructed. The key narration strategies to be examined will be: a) role construction, in the sense of ascribing typologies and constellations to the protagonist(s), such as “the hero” or “the guardian of stability”; b) plot construction, whereby focus is on the structure of montage and the deliberate creation of causalities, for example regarding potential discrepancies between voice-over narrations and visualizations; and c) lead metaphors, in attempts at using universal symbols to standardize interpretation, like via the depiction of or referral to doves for “peace.” In the following cases, all three strategies will be identified and contextualized to assess which roles China claims in global economic governance and to whom these are addressed.
Case 1: World Economic Forum

The World Economic Forum is an international non-profit foundation turned think tank. It is widely known for its annual conference in Davos, Switzerland, where key figures from politics, industry, academia, and media gather together to discuss global economic and social issues. On January 17, 2017, Xi held the opening speech in Davos on the invitation of Executive Chairman Klaus Schwab, marking the first time a Chinese paramount leader would speak at the WEF. In DGWJ, Xi’s keynote speech is featured several times and listed as a milestone event in the move toward Chinese leadership in global (economic) governance (Episode 1: 0:12:30–12:47).

In these scenes, China is ascribed the role of a problem-solver in times of severe common global challenges. Xi is the courageous messenger for China’s new “blueprint” for global economic governance which relies on the pillars of openness, inclusiveness, balance, and win-win cooperation (E3: 0:24:30–24:37). Even if not explicitly mentioned, the Davos event is arranged between two other scenes presenting China as the voice of the Global South speaking up to the international community (E3: 0:20:27–21:48, 0:26:50–27:08), and eager to share spillover effects from its own developmental success and wealth.

The plot is constructed around Xi’s hero-messenger role in a quest fraught with challenges. This is visualized by contrasting the romanticized setting of the small, enclaved mountain village Davos, covered in snow, with people with worried faces trudging through noisy gusts of wind and a snowstorm. The global challenges to be overcome (namely the threat of anti-globalization movements and protectionism) are stressed and dramatized by footage of riot police building a wall against a crowd of angry protesters and of burning streets (E3: 0:23:08–23:13). According to a reverse image search conducted by the author, the footage does not stem from anti-globalization protests but rather from right-wing-nationalist riots in Brussels (2016) and from the Euromaidan unrest in Kiev (2013). This does not mean anti-globalization protests do not exist; rather, it shows the deliberate exaggeration of the level of violence to create a scenario of common threat.
It is suggested that in times of crisis and uncertainty all eyes are on China, who is able and willing to point the way; China is therefore living up to role expectations held by others and proving to be a responsible leader. In *DGWJ*, this assertion is acknowledged and approved by both international key actors and domestic voices. Throughout Xi’s speech the audience is shown listening attentively and taking notes, smiling and applauding. On the stage, Schwab looks up to Xi from a seated position. As a symbolic act of respect, which is always perceived with deep appreciation throughout the documentary, a subplot revolves around Schwab picking up Xi at the train station in person despite very cold temperatures (E3: 021:50–22:08). Christine Lagarde, then managing director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Doris Leuthard, then head of state of the Swiss Confederation, and Aleksandar Vučić, the later president of Serbia, comment positively on China’s contribution to global economic stability. Vučić is even quoted as perceiving the conference as a “revolution within a day,” during the course of which “everyone fell in love with the Chinese president” (E3: 025:47–25:57). Domestic approval is mainly derived from comments by tech giant Jack Ma, known for being the co-founder of the Alibaba Group and a strong advocate for a market-driven economy. He praises Xi’s speech for showing China’s commitment to the world and its responsibility toward its own people, adding to be “especially proud [of it] as a Chinese” (E3: 024:45–25:07). Li Baodong, then vice minister of foreign affairs, commends Xi for giving direct answers and promoting Chinese ideas of global economics to the world (E3: 023:45–24:02).

Besides the depiction of snow and railroad tracks to symbolize general uncertainty about the future pathway, no noteworthy visual metaphors were detected in WEF scenes. However, Xi uses several such devices in his speech: He portrays economic globalization as “Ali Baba’s treasure cave” that has been disturbed by chaos and turned into “Pandora’s Box.” The mentioning of Ali Baba’s tale inevitably evokes an association with the Alibaba Group, and can be construed as the CCP’s acknowledgement of its international assets. Finally, he compares protectionist behavior with locking oneself in a dark room to shelter from storms and rain but actually being isolated from sunlight and air (E3: 023:30–23:43, 024:10–24:26). The use of metaphors with universal interpretations—instead of images that can be exclusively understood
by a domestic audience—appeals to the allegedly shared consensus on promoting anti-protectionism and underlines the vision of a “[global] community with a shared future for humankind”—a recurring *topos* in the PRC’s foreign policy under Xi’s leadership.

**Case 2: The G20**

The G20 is an intergovernmental forum formed by most of the world’s largest economies, comprising both industrialized and developing nations to discuss key issues concerning the global economy. The 11th G20 Summit held on September 4–5, 2016, was the first time such an event would be hosted by China, in the city of Hangzhou. This event is covered significantly in *DGWJ* and also listed as one of the milestones in China’s evolving role in global governance (E1: 0:12:15–12:30). The 12th G20 Summit held in Hamburg, Germany, in the following year is also briefly referenced, but ultimately framed as a mere continuation of the course set by China in 2016 (E3: 0:35:05–35:35; E4: 0:29:08–29:23).

According to Wang Shouwen, then vice minister of commerce, the 2016 Summit was full of first-time achievements and an array of adoptions regarding mechanisms, growth strategies, guiding principles for international trade, and cross-border investment; it also established development issues as a coordinating element of global economic governance (E3: 0:33:26–33:50). These outcomes are attributed to China’s position as a tone-setting host, who has taken up the roles as a shaper of global economy and a trailblazer for transforming the G20 into a more sustainable and significant governance mechanism. This is also accredited to Xi, whose style of diplomacy emphasizes dialogue and soft power for problem-solving, and who manages to demonstrate China being a worthy host venue for the event. In a crucial scene—striking because there is no spoken audio, only harmonious emotional music—the viewer is walked in detail through Xi’s tight agenda for the day (E1: 0:13:09–14:35). The scene focuses on quantity, quickly cutting from one country-leader meeting to another, enumerating handshakes before successfully ending the busy day with a boat tour, a stage performance, and fireworks. Xi is hereby depicted as a hard-working leader.
and attentive host, ready to (re)present the Chinese civilization to the international community.

Although not as visible as in the WEF case, the plot setting here can be still interpreted as a continuation of Xi’s hero-messenger role as part of a noble quest—only that now he has taken his mission home. There are multiple shots showcasing the surrounding lush nature, West Lake, and Liuhe Pagoda, contrasted by modern architecture. Several scenes hint at China being a cultural melting pot and a perfect environment for the “dialogue between civilizations”: on stage, classical (Western) ballet is performed in front of a traditional Chinese fan (E3: 0:34:06); on the boat tour, Xi introduces his visitors to a local folktale and calls it the “Chinese Romeo and Juliet” (E3: 0:40:45–40:52). These visualizations convey the guests’ extensive approval of the romantic venue and of Xi’s hospitality, but also of his leadership qualities. Similar to the WEF atmosphere, delegates are seen in the listening position while Xi speaks, and he is often shown leading the way (e.g. E1: 0:14:05). Jacob Zuma, then president of South Africa, lauds Chinese proposals to “ignite the [global] economy,” reprising appreciation by the Global South (E3: 0:33:10–33:22). At the G20 Summit in Hamburg one year later, Xi is shown in a tête-à-tête with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, signaling that he is acknowledged as a leader among equals.

The idea of a “shared destiny” is quite fittingly translated into the image of the leaders onboarding an illuminated boat that comes to life as it sails peacefully through the night; later, Hangzhou is also titled the “ship of the global economy” (E3: 0:34:12–34:20, 34:54). In line with this, China is visualized as a starting point for “building bridges”—in this case reaching from Hangzhou to Hamburg.

**Case 3: Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation**

The Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation is an intergovernmental forum for countries in the Pacific Rim that pursues the long-term goal of forming a free-trade area between the forum’s cooperating member economies. As APEC effectively connects four continents, it bears special significance to China as a model of (inter)regional integration (Morton 2020: 167). The 22nd APEC Summit on November 10–11,
2014, would be the second time China hosted the event since 2001, and has also made the list of landmark events appearing in the examined documentary (E1: 0:12:00–12:13). DGWJ also features the 28th APEC Summit that took place on November 19–21 in Lima, Peru, centering on Xi’s keynote speech there.

The event in Beijing is described by Wang Shouwen as a very productive one, at which allegedly 100 agreement proposals were discussed—more than half of them proposed by China. Li Baodong evaluates the meeting as successful from a foreign policy point of view, stating that the Asia-Pacific Free Trade Area (APFTA) process was initiated there and a long-term concept for Asia-Pacific connectivity was elaborated. Here, the PRC is clearly outlined as taking a leading role in (inter)regional cooperation and integration. On the same occasion, APEC ministers passed the “Beijing Declaration on Corruption.” In contrast to the other analyzed scenes focusing on multilateral dialogue, this initiative is embedded in China’s domestic anticorruption campaign in DGWJ’s fourth episode and proves that the country is able to elevate its national agenda to the global stage. The role China claims here is that of a rigorous “fighter for justice,” while both abiding by international rules as well as simultaneously forming them.

The plot constructed around the APEC summits is twofold. In a first thrust, the summits are embedded in the broader narrative of China’s shared history and discriminatory treatment with the Global South. The previous scene (E3: 0:26:48–28:03) presents in a factual manner the discrepancy between the international contributions of emerging economies and their distributed voting rights in the IMF and the WTO. This scene includes one of the rare mentions of the BRICS New Development Bank and the AIIB to underline China’s claim of having a dual identity: a developing country with the economic capacity of an industrialized peer that consistently speaks up for the disadvantaged Global South. To suggest external approval, the series shows Michelle Bachelet, the then Chilean president, who credits Xi with reviving the APFTA and calls it a “long-cherished wish” (E3: 0:29:57–30:10). In the latter’s keynote speech in Lima, the familiar images of an attentive audience and waves of applause can be found.
In the second plot strand centering around anticorruption, the setting is more reminiscent of a true-crime series and shows China’s judicial system hunting down rent-seeking officials in coordination with Interpol. The APEC scene is visualized in stark contrast to the issue at hand here, with harmonious aerial views of the event building and the surrounding nature, underlined via calm music playing (E4: 0:41:18–42:07). National corruption is reframed as a global threat that is now being tackled internationally on the PRC’s initiative, coined “China’s economic diplomacy.”

In his Lima speech, Xi uses the visualization of a sweet potato, a product native to Latin America, to emphasize that China will extend its “vines” in all directions, but its “tuber” will always grow downward, suggesting shared roots and history between Asia and Latin America (E3: 0:30:58–31:45). China therefore commits to regional affiliation—per a broad definition of the Asia-Pacific region—and will continue to help build up the region and to benefit its people. In the APEC scenes the image of a bridge is reused for building a connection to Peru (E3: 0:30:36). Moreover, the notion of cultural exchange is reprised: first, by showing country leaders such as Vladimir Putin in traditional Chinese costume (tangzhuang)—which is actually an APEC ritual; second, in the ceremonial show, by contrasting children in clothing from different cultures with traditional Chinese drummers (E3: 0:29:00–29:13, 28:48–28:50).

Conclusion

The documentary DGWJ reveals a shift in institutional preferences that has been mirrored in Chinese academic and political discourse. Key institutions of global economic governance such as the IMF, World Bank, and WTO are rarely mentioned and never shown, unless in the form of their directors or chairpersons expressing verbal or visible approval for China’s chosen pathways. Instead, the depicted fora of the WEF, G20, and APEC can all be categorized as dialogue platforms that may have been selected for representation in DGWJ for the following reasons: China has been a core member of the mechanism; China is trying to strengthen these discursive platforms to replace or at least
complement existing (US-led) frameworks; or the platforms feature reportable events that can be visualized effectively (in contrast to the daily business of the IMF, for instance) (cf. Zeng 2019). In any case, the role of institutional discursive power has become of the utmost importance to China’s contemporary approach to global governance (Lin 2020).

The case analysis yields plot constructions that can be broadly summarized as indicative of a quest for leadership and recognition that is achieved in a successful manner. The roles of an innovative contributor and reformer of global economic governance are ascribed to China, with an emphasis on connectivity. By reaching out to everyone and building bridges, the country pleads for inclusiveness and the equal distribution of economic benefits and growth; OBOR is recurrently referred to as an appropriate means to achieve the common good. In this plot, Xi is assigned the role of the calm and hard-working messenger, who aspires to solve common problems by presenting common solutions and shouldering responsibility. Global challenges such as anti-globalization movements are overdramatized to generate notions of a shared destiny and alliance, and to stress the significance of China stepping in.

The grand narrative that is reproduced in DGWJ is the alignment of Chinese with global world visions, as well as with domestic expectations. At the international level, China poses no threat but rather respects existing structures and institutions. This is enhanced by the use of universally interpretable metaphors (e.g. ships and oceans) that create a unifying emotion. Along these lines, China is visualized as a socially and culturally embedded actor who embraces different cultures and civilizations, something that is explicitly acknowledged by former IMF head Lagarde (E3: 0:25:30–25:37). Global economic governance with Chinese characteristics means reform not replacement, as China presents itself as a strong advocate for a globalized economy, opening up, free trade, and anti-protectionism. The last point indicates that, when the documentary was in the making, role contestation vis-à-vis US global dominance was existent but not an open conflict. While the US is clearly implied to be a protectionist actor, no fingers are pointed, and contestation of its leadership is only conveyed through silent messages such as visually sidelining Barack Obama in multilateral events.
This is especially noticeable in the context of APEC, in which the US has continually been striving for a leading role in regional economic integration and viewed China as a challenger of its proposed model (Ho and Wong 2011)—yet, this rivalry is not portrayed. All in all, through the montage of the scenes, approval is received from leaders of emerging and industrialized economies, as well as from chairs of international and regional organizations. For the domestic audience, this external recognition is vital. The depicted Chinese ambitions in global economic policy are congruent with the plans of the elitist coalition: promoting first and foremost free trade and anti-protectionism, and attaching weight to economic power as the necessary basis for subsequent political capital. However, the portrayal of all the visualized approval featured in the documentary could also be seen as a strategy of assuaging the populist coalition's fears that China might suffer from reputational backlash for being too assertive. Arguing for the fairness of the market order and taking a stand for economic equality and decision-making rights for underprivileged countries feeds into this narrative. For the populists, it might also be reassuring that, despite all the proposals to advance marketization, (inter)governmental regulation is depicted as an integral component and precondition for long-term development. This is indirectly observable through the fact that global governance decision-making does not include non-state actors at all in DGWJ.

Furthermore, the drastic anticorruption operation overseas is framed as a convergence with international standards on the one hand, but also as an enhancement of China’s own capacity to recover diverted funds and defend Chinese core interests on the other. Since 2014, with two operations abroad (Foxhunt and Skynet), China has been seeking “diplomatic outreach [and] tangible cooperation within international fora like APEC, G20 [and] Interpol” (Lang 2019: 8). The assurance that justice will be served even beyond the country’s borders bolsters public support, particularly from Chinese citizens, and also constitutes an

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internal threat directed toward rent-seeking officials. The documentary also addresses the Chinese business elite by evoking Jack Ma, who has been widely known for his prioritizing of industrial innovation, speaking his mind, and being cautious about public-private partnerships. His endorsement of the Chinese government can be interpreted as a guarantee that firm agency will not be hindered by state regulation.\(^4\)

The referral to Chinese patriotic sentiment by Ma supports the hypothesis that nationalism is the unifying umbrella that brings all political factions to the table. In this vein, the display of China’s cultural heritage and civilization power in the context of multilateral events is mostly expressed in subtle ways, namely through verbal metaphors and visualizations of art or gestures of hospitality; obvious nationalist symbols such as Chinese flags are discreet or absent in such scenes. This demonstrates strength and raises China’s profile as a qualified leader without losing reputational points for acting too aggressively.

Whether the documentary was successfully received in 2017 was not examined in this study, but given there was little resistance to Xi’s pathway to becoming ruler for life, it can be assumed that the television broadcast was at least not detrimental to his and the CCP’s ambitions. It is important to keep in mind that the narratives transmitted via the documentary—and the concealed intentions exposed by the narrative analysis—are ultimately only snapshots of a broader dynamic process. While alternative global finance models were mentioned only peripherally in *DGWJ*, Xi suggested in July 2020 that the AIIB shall “grow into a new platform that promotes development for all its members and facilitates the building of a community with a shared future for mankind” (Xi 2020: 2). Moreover, several cases have been observed in the past few years of Chinese diplomats shifting their style of communication from cooperative to confrontational rhetoric; this has been rather ill-received and coined the term “wolf-warrior diplomacy” (cf. Martin 2021). The fall of Jack Ma in 2020 and the “dual circulation” strategy might also indicate a policy turn taken in seeking to balance entrepreneurialism and stability. Nevertheless, this study has revealed

\(^4\) The latest strategy of “dual circulation”, put forward in 2020, may be born out of a stressed domestic economy (Schurman 2021) but accounts for the desire of the entrepreneurial elite to create domestic supply chains for Chinese consumers.
that the intersectionality of film and politics deserves further research. The analysis of *DGWJ* has proven the effectiveness of moving pictures and narrative construction as tools of political communication, and, vice versa, the potential of visual analysis to assess political intent.

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Decrypting Contemporary China Central Television Documentaries: Assessing the Transformations of Chinese Role-Identity Claims in the Twenty-First Century

Nele Noesselt, Tanja Eckstein, Elizaveta Priupolina

Introduction

The rise of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) to global (economic) power status is beyond doubt, but less is known about the role-identity claims that underlie Beijing’s positioning in global affairs and its normative world-order views. Even though China’s one-party regime does not engage in free parliamentary debates, there are a multiplicity of role concepts and world-order visions debated by factions within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as well as among the various Chinese academic communities—implying that there are a diversity of philosophical concepts and strategy contemplations from which the political elites can cherry-pick. Given that the power constellations between these factions are dynamically evolving, the ingredients of the PRC’s official role set might, then, be subject to continuous modifications and adjustments.

The PRC defines itself as a daguo 大国, which is officially equated with the English term “major power” (or “major country”) as opposed

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to “empire/imperial power” (diguo 帝国), “superpower” (chaojidaguo 超级大国), or “great (and strong) power” (qiangguo 强国). This chapter argues that the inner-Chinese debate has recently started to see the PRC’s role-identity narrative as undergoing a transition (and rise) from daguo to qiangguo. As both terms can be (and often are) translated as “great power,” an in-depth decryption of the related reflections on the concrete role frames associated with daguo (and, respectively, qiangguo), might offer additional insight into the sociopsychological and role-identity layers of Chinese foreign policy.

In order to assess this gradual shift in China’s official role set, this chapter compares the interpretation of daguo under the Hu Jintao–Wen Jiabao administration (2002/3–2012/13) to the modifications of China’s daguo role-identity in the era of Xi Jinping (2013–). Speeches by Chinese politicians as well as academic publications use these terms but continue to refrain from providing any concrete definition of them. Therefore, the core dataset to be analyzed in this chapter is the visualization of Chinese role conceptions and role enactment in China Central Television (CCTV) documentaries—as these can be expected to expose unarticulated definitions of China’s daguo/qiangguo reflections.

The CCTV documentary Daguo Waijiao (DGWJ) (China’s Major-Country Diplomacy) broadcast in 2017—in other words, at the end of Xi’s first term in office and shortly prior to the 19th National Party Congress—visualizes China’s official daguo role-identity as being centered on the triad peace, development, and cooperation (serving as foreign policy axioms since the PRC’s entrance into the post-Mao reform era). Simultaneously, it also documents the internal consensus among China’s political leaders that the PRC has to actively defend its core interests. This is signaled by using the term qiangguo in those episodes of DGWJ where China’s core interests are perceived as being under threat, such as in the South China Sea. Furthermore, DGWJ invokes the narrative that Beijing is pursuing a foreign strategy different from previous great powers, as symbolically expressed by core foreign policy slogans coined by Xi: “new type of great power relations,” “new neighborhood diplomacy,” and “win-win [cooperation].”
However, as other great powers are not analyzed in DGWJ, to assess the patterns of role-identity and role behavior underlying these claims voiced by Beijing one has to turn (back) to the CCTV documentary Daguo Jueqi (DGJQ) (The Rise of Great Powers) aired in 2006—that is, during the office term of Hu and Wen. This documentary examines the rise and fall of nine world powers (in Chinese: daguo) from a historical perspective. DGJQ has thus widely been assessed via a world history as seen from China lens (e.g. Müller-Saini 2013; Schneider/Hwang 2012; Ye 2007). Looking at DGJQ from a role-theoretical perspective, this chapter seeks to decrypt hidden processes of role-making and internal role-contestation regarding China’s role-identity as daguo around 2003–2005.  

Starting with a short sketch of the methodological-theoretical framework of analysis, the chapter briefly summarizes the literature on China’s quest for “great power” status and the related scenario of an increasingly assertive positioning by Beijing on the global stage. It contrasts these neorealist views on China with the inner-Chinese role-identity contemplations, centering on the notion of daguo—defined in opposition to the role-identities of (premodern) empires and hegemonic powers. The coding process of DGJQ is based on a combination of narration analysis and elements of political psychology, being complemented by select streams of visual semiotics. Moving beyond the level of official role articulations—limited, in the pioneering study by K. J. Holsti (1970), to the role conceptions developed and voiced by a country’s political leader(s)—this chapter shifts the focus of analysis to the level of role construction. It focuses on Chinese role-identity claims in DGJQ vis-à-vis the United States and Russia—as these two global players are ascribed significant importance in Chinese foreign affairs and considered (counter)models for China’s rise to daguo status, as visually underlined in the opening scenes of the later 2017 CCTV documentary DGWJ. Noting that DGJQ draws inspiration from Paul Kennedy’s (1987) The Rise and Fall of Great Powers and his reflections on the impact of the economy-security nexus on a country’s global

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2 In November 2003, a CCP Politburo Study Session on the rise of great powers was held in Beijing, reflecting on the ongoing inner-Chinese (academic) debates on the strategic options and historical inspirations for China's (re)ascent to global-power status (Müller-Saini 2013: 24–25). In 2005, the production process for DGJQ started.
rise, special attention is paid to the 2006 CCTV documentary’s visualized narratives surrounding the evolution of economic modernization strategies pursued by the Soviet Union/Russia and the US. In closing, the general findings are compared to the (visualized) representation and narration of the daguo frame under Xi, as based on the coding results of DGWJ (see Noesselt, Eckstein, and Priupolina 2021).

Narratology and the Visual Sphere

To identify and decrypt the various sub-narratives and role elements associated with the notion of daguo visualized in CCTV documentaries, this chapter proposes to take a two-step approach:

1) Starting from the basic assumptions of national role theory, the coding process focuses on the role claims and patterns of role behavior associated with other “great powers” (daguo). Holsti once defined national role conceptions as:

“[P]olicymakers’ own definitions of the general kinds of decisions, commitments, rules and actions suitable to their state, and of the functions, if any, their state should perform on a continuing basis in the international system or in subordinate regional systems” (1970: 245–246).

The role elements visualized in CCTV documentaries stand for unilaterally voiced role claims, ones decoupled from real-world interactions and the perceptions by significant others. Nonetheless, Chinese role-identity claims are not static but dynamically evolving, leading to the coining of auxiliary roles to formally uphold the official role frame (Noesselt 2016). As Cantir and Kaarbo (2012, 2016) have shown, roles and their sub-elements are subject to processes of contestation—as documented in open parliamentary controversies. Processes of role contestation, as this chapter argues, also take place in autocratic regime settings, though not publicly displayed. Chinese political leaders continue to operate with “empty” (Laclau 2005) or “floating” (Lévi-Strauss 1950) signifiers such as daguo—which seem, at least at first glance, open to interpretation—and, via conscious framing, strive for symbolic balance between the various competing political factions. This equilibrium, however, can only be achieved if these factions see their key demands and pos-
itions valued and reflected in official policymaking and related role-identity articulations. CCTV documentaries, forming part of the party-state’s official communication instruments, depict the final consensus reached—or imposed top-down—that establishes the orthodox wording and framing of Chinese politics and integrates the multiple, partly competing role-identity concepts linked to concrete policy fields under the umbrella of one unified narrative.

2) Drawing on approaches and instruments of narratology (Bal 2018; Berger et al. 2011; Nünning and Nünning 2002), especially film narratology (Chatman 1990; Kuhn 2013; Berger 2019), the coding process starts with identifying key narratives in the CCTV documentaries wherein the daguo role frames ascribed to the USSR and the US become observable. These narratives consist of multiple interwoven, partly mutually reinforcing layers of (spoken) text—the story told by an omniscient speaker and voice-overs/direct statements by politicians or individual people—and various types of (moving) images, signs, and symbols. These again have to be coded as parallel visual storylines, following Ferdinand de Saussure’s dyadic relationship of “signifiant” and “signifié” (1971: 113–114), and inspired by Roland Barthes’ broader definition of signs as “a written or spoken word, a symbol or a myth” (1964).

Assessing China’s Global Role

The rise of China has widely been associated with a quest for “great power” (Rozman 1999) or “major power” status (Shambaugh 2014). The inner-Chinese debate on the PRC’s role-identity in the twenty-first century has, as noted, mainly used the term daguo instead of qiangguo—though this latter term can also be found in some of Xi’s recent speeches (Pu 2019), especially in statements on global cyberspace (Cai 2015). In 2012, prior to being appointed CCP General Secretary, Xi visited the US and promoted the concept of a “new type of great power relations” in demanding to be treated as equal partner (Zeng and Breslin 2016). While used as a neutral term to refer to “great powers,” also including the US and Russia, the self-conception of the PRC as daguo obviously contains certain distinct features, as Beijing claims...
to pursue a unique development model and to follow an alternative approach to global governance (see also, Larson 2015).

While international China watchers argue that the PRC’s foreign policy under Xi has not fundamentally deviated from the path chosen by previous leadership generations (Goldstein 2020), there is an ongoing internal debate on how to adjust the country’s global strategy against the backdrop of the PRC’s new global status and in the context of changing global power hierarchies (Hu 2019; Wang 2019). This debate is driven by the perceived increase in the PRC’s economic and financial power, and the strategic calculation that the country’s involvement in global trade will require a more active positioning on issues of global security—necessitating a substitution of the PRC’s current passive observer role in global affairs. So far, however, attempts to identify China’s refined “grand strategy” in light of its increased global power have not led to any tangible results (Wang 2011; Wang 2016; Leverett and Wu 2017; Jones and Zeng 2019).

Chinese scholars’ contemplations on global power and status, by contrast, operate per the concept of “comprehensive national power” (zonghe guoli 综合国力) (Chen 2015), a multidimensional understanding of combined power capacities. When reflecting on the rise of old empires and superpowers, however, the focus lies on the dimensions of economic and military power—as also illustrated by the slogan of the late Qing dynasty self-strengthening movement “a rich country, a powerful army” (fu guo, qiang bing 富国强兵). China is a “learning” autocracy which, as during the late Qing era, seeks to adopt the advanced technologies and solutions of other countries without giving up its own unique identity (see Zhang Zhidong’s ti-yong 体用 formula). There is, reportedly, a long tradition of learning from the “West,” including in the fields of policymaking and Political Science (Wang 2011). One could hence assume that Chinese academic (and political) reflections on significant others might be focused on lessons to be learnt when rising to daguo status. As such, what are the roles, positions, and developmental strategies associated with the USSR/Russia and the US in CCTV documentaries? And, how are these reflected in China’s chosen developmental strategy?
Case Study I: DGJQ—USSR/Russia

Economic development narrative: The case of the USSR

Articulating China’s perception of the Russian pathway to becoming major power, the documentary narrates more than 300 years of Russian history starting from the rise to the status of the empire under Peter I, to an even greater rise under Catherine II (both in E8), and, finally, to the achieved recognition as great power during the Soviet era (in E9). The section below focuses on the analysis of DGJQ’s narration of Soviet economic strategy between the 1920s and 1940s. The documentary highlights that the newly founded USSR experienced dramatic weaknesses in its industrial base and overall economic backwardness, while having to secure its own legitimacy vis-à-vis more economically developed and confrontational Western counterparts.

Visualization of economic development as a socialist state relies on two overarching narratives, constituting the main storyline of E9. The narrative about the New Economic Policy (NEP) is closely associated with the name of Vladimir Lenin (E9: 0:07:15–17:35). DGJQ reveals that the situation in the USSR in the early 1920s forced Lenin to search for new ways to develop the country’s economy. Under the NEP, the government allowed some elements of a free-market economy: the policy legalized small-scale private businesses, aimed at opening and stimulating contacts, and enabled economic exchange with foreign counterparts. Even though the approach induced quick economic recovery after the civil war and famine, it was abandoned after the death of Lenin.

The second overarching narrative outlines the specifics of the industrialization process under Joseph Stalin. After canceling the NEP, he opted to prioritize instead the development of heavy industry as a way to ensure the security of the state. The introduction of five-year plans based on the strictly controlled command economy secured extraordinarily speedy development and great achievements in the field of heavy industry. Completion of the first and second five-year plans turned the USSR into an industrial developed state and helped it become one of the victors in World War II, leading to its recognition as a great power by Western counterparts. Yet the worldwide admiration
of the quick achievements of the planned economy is cited in the 2006 CCTV documentary as the reason why the negative sides to the policy, such as the high costs of industrialization for the people (and especially the peasantry), were overlooked at that time.3

Visualizing development: Technologies and the people

The visual narrative of DGJQ’s E9 puts the spotlight on two dimensions of the USSR's economic development: technologies and people. Visualizing technologies and technological development, the documentary highlights Soviet automobile production and heavy-industry achievements. Visualizing people, meanwhile, the documentary aims to reflect on how the Soviet state’s economic policies affected the lives of workers and peasants. From this perspective, the visual narrative heavily emphasizes two major driving forces within the Soviet economy: political leaders, as heroes to unite around in terms of experimenting, general guidance, and decision-making (E9: 0:04:07–05:11); and ordinary people, in terms of working toward the achievement of the goals set out by leaders (E9: 0:20:53–30:10).

The narrative of the NEP is introduced by reference to the famine that ravaged the country at the end of the civil war. The accompanying visual elements feature cold winter days and unhappy children (E9: 0:07:46–55). The end of the narrative depicts the success of the NEP: one discerns a vivid marketplace on a summer’s day, full of people; shelves are stocked with goods for purchase too (E9: 0:10:55–11:02). Another significant emphasis in this visual narrative is on the life of Lenin and his deep connection to ordinary people. Lenin is often visu-

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3 The outlook projected in DGJQ navigates between varying approaches to the interpretation of industrialization in Chinese academic debate some years prior to and soon after the airing of the documentary. The generally shared view is to regard excessive emphasis on heavy-industry development and a too-great burden of industrialization on the people as major shortcomings (Gu 2005). Furthermore, the fall of the Soviet system is explained by highlighting economic imbalances and rigid governance as well as management systems (Cheng 2007). Yet, similar to the documentary, these shortcomings aside, some authors have also recognized the successes of Stalin's approach (Tang 2006) while others rather focus on the negatives in advocating for a more balanced strategy (Lu 2005; Li 2004).
alized very close to the latter, talking to them privately or delivering a speech in front of a crowd (e.g. E9: 0:07:34).

Technologies and the people are also the focal points of the visual narrative of the industrialization process under Stalin. Thus, shots featuring people at work are the element recurring most often in this visual narrative (e.g. E9: 0:20:53–21:17, 0:24:09–30, 0:27:13–38). In this way, the great success of the industrialization process is narrated not only as being the result of correct economic policies, but also as the outcome of the great enthusiasm and hard work on the part of ordinary people (e.g. communicated in the narrative about Stakhanov; E9: 0:28:46–30:10).

To highlight the essential role of the people, the emphasis is visually shifted from the leader to the latter (E9: 0:35:40–50). Yet, toward the end of the narrative one observes many references being made to the challenging economic situation in which ordinary people would live during their country’s tremendous rise (E9: 0:33:36–34:15). In this way, the visual narrative proceeds from positive images to negative ones.

Beyond that, reflecting on the importance of technological development and heavy industry, a range of visual elements highlight the link between industrial development and security (e.g. E9: 0:29:57–0:30:20). Moreover, shots featuring Stalin avoid visualizing his connection to ordinary people. He is rather depicted as surrounded by party members, high-ranking figures, or alternatively alone.

**Visualizing development: Significant others and mutual learning**

The narratives outlined above altercast the West (the US and Europe) the role of significant other. This role gains particular importance as a constitutive element in the development process of the Soviet economic model. The economic level of the US and Europe in this

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4 The documentary shows us a poster: happy people all smiling and looking at Stalin (who is in the center of the poster with his hand raised, showing the way). Yet the presentation of the poster starts from the lower-left corner, then moves to the lower-right corner—so that one can only see people at first. Stalin comes in later, when the whole picture is presented.
context not only serves as the benchmark by which to measure the successes and failures of the Soviet model but also as a crucial source of knowledge and know-how.

The narrative of (mutual) learning presented in the documentary highlights certain specifics. On the one hand, the Soviet leaders adopted a range of experiences from the West. Thus, the introduction of the NEP in the early 1920s signified greater openness to contact and exchange with international partners and the welcoming of technology and foreign investment (E9: 0:13:46–14:02). The narrative makes the argument by showcasing how GAZ, an automobile enterprise identified in the documentary as “one of the symbols of the Soviet era” (E9: 0:14:21–34), was founded as a joint venture by Henry Ford and the Soviet state (E9: 0:14:35–15:15). Similarly, despite the drastic change in economic-model priorities, the vital role of the imported technologies and experts from the US and Germany is showcased in the narrative about industrialization. It is recounted that two-thirds of large enterprises in the USSR during the industrialization of the 1930s were built up by using US technologies and that there were around 6,800 experts from abroad working in the heavy-industry sector at the time (E9: 0:27:40–28:18). On the other hand, the documentary continuously emphasizes the need to adjust all practices to local conditions too.

At the same time, the documentary highlights how significant others learned from the Soviet experience as well. In this narrative, a model relying on the command/planned economy is a unique experience demonstrative of the advantages of government intervention. The documentary goes on to stress that the uniqueness of the USSR and its planning approach aroused great interest in the Western world: “In the 1930s, Western people went to the Soviet Union to learn from their experiences” (E9: 0:31:26–32:24). Visual reference to this interest is reflected via shots featuring European newspapers writing about the USSR in English and French (E9: 0:28:47).

Visualization of significant others highlights the rise of the USSR to the status of great power. The visual narrative of the NEP features a range of shots where United Kingdom and US cities are shown from a bottom-up perspective (E9: 0:11:40, 0:11:55, 0:13:53), being combined with direct-perspective views. By contrast, the visualization of indus-
trialization rather combines direct-perspective views and those featuring top-down perspectives offering a bird’s-eye view on the cities (E9: 0:20:07, 0:20:17, 0:25:00). The reference to the USSR’s economic rise is further reinforced through shots featuring staircases from a bottom-up perspective (E9: 0:20:45).

Reflecting on China’s own experiences

Providing an outlook on the economic development of the USSR, the documentary implies that the strict command economy based on comprehensive planning was the major reason why the country was able to consolidate the economic base needed for the attainment of the status of military and political great power. At the same time, the documentary implies that such an economic approach led to the emergence of heavy imbalances and neglected the needs of the people (mainly peasants and farmers). In other words, the narrative highlights that “the rise and fall of the USSR are connected to the highly centralized command planned economy” (E9: 0:24:32–39).

By contrast, the narrative of the NEP only mentions positive outcomes from the policy. The emphasis is placed on the benefits generated by the NEP both for technological development and for the improvement of ordinary people’s lives. In an interview used in the documentary, Zheng Yifan argues that “the introduction of a market is a major breakthrough in the history of Marxism” (E9: 0:15:40–55).

The episode reflects on China’s own approach to economic experimentation and reform. One of the focal issues in this context is the assessment of the interpretations of Marxist theory by Soviet leaders. The documentary argues that the theoretical framework developed by Marx suggests that the transition to Communism should proceed on the basis of a developed industrial state (E9: 0:05:11–43). Since the Russian economic situation at the beginning of the twentieth century was that of a developing state with a weak industrial base, there turned out to be no “ready-made solution” on how to restructure the economy. In this context, Lenin came to the conclusion that only experiments, and practice as a way to measure success, could help facilitate the transition to Socialism (E9: 0:09:30–44).
The beginning of reform and opening in China in the late 1970s signified the emergence of a new round of theoretical debate on how to fit the introduction of market elements into the framework of the Marxist state. The documentary highlights that such an approach had been first suggested and tested by Lenin. In this way the narrative appeals to the ontological security of the regime by providing evidence for the legitimacy of the pursued political ideas from a Marxist-Leninist perspective. This interpretation reflects on the Chinese debate as well as on the experimental approach adopted after the beginning of the reform and opening policy in China.

Thus, reflecting on China’s own economic model and development experience, the documentary narrates a combination of market economy and state planning as the preferred strategy to ensure the transition to Socialism while avoiding major societal imbalances in the process.

Case Study II: DGJQ—The US

Early twentieth-century US economic policies and strategies

Narrating roughly 330 years of US history from its origins in early seventeenth-century British settlements in North America to the nation’s increased international influence by the mid-twentieth century (E10 and E11), DGJQ illustrates the Chinese interpretation of the US’s rise to great-power status. The 1910s to 1930s (E11) stand out among the documentary’s narration of US history due to great upheavals stretching across society, economics, and politics, ones that fundamentally challenged some long-standing convictions about the relations between these spheres in the country.

For a discussion hereof, see Ma (2015).
Visualizations of development: People, innovativeness, and economic pitfalls/insufficiencies

DGJQ highlights the link between high-speed economic growth, monopoly development, and the accompanying increase in social inequality, pressure, and dissatisfaction at the end of the nineteenth/beginning of the twentieth century. Through focal figures, the documentary gives faces to the various forces in US economics, society, and politics at the time: John Rockefeller, founder of monopoly firm Standard Oil and representative of the development trend of trusts; Eda Tarbell, a central Progressive Era investigative journalist challenging monopoly power and societal issues; and Presidents Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt, political personages who initiated wide-ranging antitrust initiatives and economic policies to overcome the Great Depression respectively.

Their visualizations display subtle yet clear differences. Although both Rockefeller and Tarbell are presented through portrait shots, DGJQ only ever depicts the magnate alone in formal dress. This is done in photographs that present him in static manner, for example sitting (E11: 0:05:27–33, 0:06:03–12, 0:17:55–18:17). This applies to both contexts that the visuals of Rockefeller are embedded in: first when narrating his building up of Standard Oil into a large, monopoly company, and once more when discussing the federal-government crackdown on monopolies—thus targeting Standard Oil—starting under President Theodore Roosevelt (1901–1909). The first images of Rockefeller are followed by visuals of oil fields/production sites without people (E11: 0:06:24–48), while detailing his company’s monopoly practices. Turning to the overarching political-economic context, the visuals depict a clouded, dark sky after showing the logo of contemporary US oil company Mobil (created out of Standard Oil’s breakup). Accompanied by a voice-over narrating Standard Oil’s development into a monopoly (E11: 0:07:23–41), this creates an implicit cut in the visual representation that allows for a shift in focus.

After detailing the harsh or even hazardous conditions facing US workers, depicting for example scenes of child laborers and workplace accidents (E11: 0:10:08–12:09), the narrative illustrates the role of the Progressive Era movement and the life and work of one of its
main proponents, Tarbell (E11: 0:12:48–15:48). Photographs of her are more varied than those of Rockefeller, including both individual and group shots (E11: 0:14:15–38) and ones in different environments or situations too, such as working at a desk (E11: 0:15:04–13, 0:15:24–38). Thus an active, engaged, and even working-class impression of Tarbell is created that Rockefeller’s solo, static shots do not engender.

Moreover, the Tarbell / Progressive Era narrative of demanding political action to address societal problems caused by prevailing economic practice directly transitions into the documentary’s account of the central government’s pivotal role under Theodore Roosevelt. As the voice-over highlights the societal pressure on the administration and Theodore Roosevelt’s belief in a people-oriented government, the underpinning visuals include various shots of the president surrounded by groups/crowds of people, on the streets, giving speeches, and directly interacting with everyday folk (E11: 0:15:51–16:09). This creates an impression of President Theodore Roosevelt being a man of the people. This framing is additionally strengthened by the juxtaposition with the second set of solo Rockefeller shots, one of his younger self and one of him in old age (E11: 0:17:55–18:17), which contrast with the scenes of Theodore Roosevelt amid cheering/happy crowds of people (E11: 0:19:44–20:06). Thus, DG/JQ’s differing depictions of the US’s economy, society, and politics through these three focal persons not only create a more personally relatable account of the contending spheres but also engender a favorable image of an actively people-oriented national government. As such, the documentary portrays the need as well as popular support for government involvement in managing the economy.

Moving further along in time, the voice-over narrates the US’s economic boom of the 1920s and the decline in both Progressive Era social pressure and in federal-government intervention in the economy (E11: 0:24:26–26:21). However, this period of high-speed development is curtailed by the 1929 New York stock-market crash and the ensuing Great Depression (E11: 0:26:23–26:55). The abruptness of this occurrence is visualized by two contrasting images of the trading hall of a stock market: one busy with people, the other empty and deserted (E11: 0:26:46–57). This depiction is accompanied shortly after by a
scene made up of dark clouds, rain, and lightning above a cityscape (E11: 0:27:16–21), which together create a gloomy atmosphere.

The economic repercussions of the Great Depression are given in the numbers of job losses, bankruptcies, and regarding lost wealth said to have left many in need of government aid regarding food provision for example (E11: 0:27:22–28:34). The visuals underscore and expand on this narrative of US citizens’ distress by showing scenes of people with grim expressions, lowered heads, or in poor physical condition, sitting on the street, standing in crowds, waiting in line, or hawking basic commodities (E11: 0:27:42–28:39). Shots of the Statue of Liberty’s silhouette against a mostly dark background, of a cloudy day, black clouds above a cityscape (E11: 0:28:41–29:36), and upward-looking shots of snowfall amid the skyscrapers of a large city (likely New York, as a street sign with “Wall Street” is shown) with no people visible (E11: 0:29:53–30:33) then accompany the voice-over narration of the unprecedented extent and depth of the economic crisis, both for the US and internationally. While not adding substantially to the crisis narrative’s content, these more abstract visualizations do create an impression of a time of darkness, perhaps even sadness—as the presented scenes are roughly overall 90 seconds in length.

In this context, another key historical figure, President Franklin Roosevelt (1933–1945), is introduced as the political leader engendering trust and hope among the US population amid the devastation of the Great Depression. The documentary’s narration accords him credit for, one, his open and direct engagement with US citizens through radio announcements on current national issues and their solutions, gaining him much public popularity (E11: 0:31:15–33:08), and, two, his New Deal economic policy of strong government intervention and spending to ensure the US economy’s successful recovery (E11: 0:36:07–40:19). Depicting several scenes of crowds either cheering or attentively watching Franklin Roosevelt give speeches and of families listening to radio broadcasts at home (E11: 0:31:20–48, 0:32:20–57), while the voice-over simultaneously details the inspiration and hope he instilled in people, DGJQ frames him as a president of and working for the people—similar to his predecessor Theodore Roosevelt’s depiction. Images of a partially cleared-up sky at dawn/dusk then follow, the voice-over recounting the need for heavy-handed measures—addi-
tional to public confidence in the administration—to overcome the economic crisis (E11: 0:33:08–17). This signals some improvement in the situation when contrasted with the repeated use of shots of dark, overcast skies earlier on in the episode to portray negative contexts.

**Visualizations of significant others and selective learning from abroad**

Thereafter, the narrative turns to the influence of the Soviet planned economy and of its initial successes on Western political-economic thought, such as on Keynes’s theory on the roles of the market and government (E11: 0:33:31–36:02). Here, scenes of a modern-day parade on a bright day in Moscow create a positive impression of circumstances in the USSR and by association of the newly implemented planned-economy system (E11: 0:33:23–47). Having implicitly linked the Soviet planned economy, Western economic theory, and President Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal, DGJQ’s voice-over then details various related government policies and large-scale public projects aimed at stimulating the US economy’s development. In visual terms, contemporary images of commuters in business attire precede historical shots of (workers engaged in) infrastructure projects (E11: 0:36:40–54, 0:37:25–51), highlighting and exemplifying the New Deal’s job creation, US public-infrastructure improvements, and strengthened economic growth—conveyed also in the voice-over. These depictions of busy economic activity, modern and historical, appear linked through their positioning directly one after another, thus implying the positive effects of 1930s economic policy on the US’s situation today.

This interpretation is further underscored by, shortly afterward, the voice-over narrating Franklin Roosevelt’s work to create a social-security net under his “Freedom from Want” ideal (E11: 0:37:58–40:48). Here, contemporary shots of elderly tourists visiting the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial (reminding of, according to the voice-over, issues of elderly poverty, economic security, and freedom) are depicted (E11: 0:40:16–48). In this way, the visual composition illustrates the significance of 1930s economic-policy changes for modern-day US citizens; images of a cheering crowd (E11: 0:40:56–41:02) then help frame these in a positive way. During this sequence, the documentary
pays particular attention to Franklin Roosevelt as the savior of the capitalist, free-market system and his New Deal enabling US economic recovery starting in the mid-1930s (E11: 0:40:03–41:55). This again buttresses the importance of the government’s role in economic management. Finally, stressing the US’s economic strength compared to most other powers following WWII, this narrative is established as the background to the country reaching great-power status during the latter half of the twentieth century (E11: 0:42:01–43:48). Here, various wide-lens contemporary shots of well-known US buildings and landmarks on sunny days, interjected with scenes of people looking upward or dancing, together denote a positive outlook (E11: 0:43:33–44:35).

**Reflections on Chinese history**

Through its depiction of US history, DGJQ draws parallels to and reflects on parts of contemporary PRC history, in particular the reform and opening-up starting from the late 1970s. Much like the US during Theodore Roosevelt’s presidency, China has been experiencing a period of high-speed economic growth facilitated by cheap wage costs and a lack of labor standards. Furthermore, the PRC’s reform period has represented a time of gradual, selective incorporation and adaptation to local circumstances of elements from Western-centered capitalist systems into its own planned economy, reminiscent of the US’s own previous adoption of economic ideas from the outside. The leadership generations starting with Deng Xiaoping (1978–1989) have continually worked at adjusting the nation’s economic system through trial and error so as to boost both domestic development and ties to the global economy, while negotiating also the relationship between economy and society.

While the PRC retained its socialist basis, economic-cooperation incentives for the democratic capitalist West soon outweighed discrepancies in ideological convictions. China’s growing entanglement with the rest of the world translated into heightened global demand for low-cost Chinese goods from the 1990s onward, leading to the PRC’s unprecedented development since. The nation’s economic rise signifi-
cantly elevated its leverage and political influence in international institutions, and enabled it to expand and upgrade its military capabilities to more actively assert its national interests beyond its official borders. Still, in more recent decades the Chinese leadership has increasingly promoted a shift nationally toward higher-value manufacturing and indigenous innovation. This mirrors the leadership’s understanding of the limits of such growth and of the importance of a country’s creative capabilities for sustained economic growth, as highlighted for the US in *DGJQ*.

Finally, reminiscent of the US experience, a renegotiation of the economy’s relationship to society has also begun in China alongside the transformation of its market system and rapid related development. Hence, questions and discussions on, for example, the distribution of socioeconomic benefits, labor standards, and social security have become more frequent and indeed heated among Chinese citizens over the last few decades. Consequently, the Chinese government is under increasing pressure to alleviate societal dissatisfaction and avoid potential unrest.

Thus, through *DGJQ*’s choice and framing of historical events, *E11* presents an economically focused Chinese interpretation of the US’s historical development toward great-power status. The distinct framing of early twentieth-century US history in terms of economic issues and policy creates a guiding narrative for *DGJQ*’s view hereon: namely the importance of political economy, and therewith focus lies strongly

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6 Around the time of *DGJQ*’s airing in 2006, differing opinions, depictions, and nuances regarding nations’ rise to great-power status were circulating both in Chinese academia and public discourse. The US was no exception here: many acknowledged the important role economic strength has continued to play in the US’s great-power status. Still, many went beyond *DGJQ*’s interpretation, focusing additionally on, for example, the US’s ability to oversee international-system innovations (Wang 2007) or the significance of sustained national-system tweaks and the crucial role of property rights for creating the innovative environment found in the North American country (Ning 2007). Others saw a combination of strong national political and legal systems, high technological and education levels, and the overall economic position as crucial for the US being a *daguo* (Yang 2007). For others again, the US’s national soft power from political and economic progress (via its political and legal systems) and its human rights values was needed to supplement hard (military and economic) power (Lin and Xie 2007). Yet others highlighted the role of geopolitical strategies and power in the US’s rise to *daguo* status (Feng 2007). Seeing such
on the needs of US citizens. Despite the undoubted significance of economic progress to the US's development and acquisition of global-leadership status, DGJQ’s representation of events creates the impression of the singular importance of the US’s national economic strength for its rise to power; military and political prowess are only mentioned marginally, and when so as mere consequences of economic strength. Hence, the success of the US on the world stage is predicated on the country’s success in creating strong, lasting economic growth—all while the government is responsible for ensuring the equal distribution of benefits, the fairness of the market order, and citizens’ economic security, thereby enabling each person to successfully pursue their own dreams/goals. As such, E11 of DGJQ makes a strong argument for the necessity of government involvement/intervention in national economic management, and for economic power being the key prerequisite for reaching daguo status.

**Conclusion**

As the above-sketched case studies evidence, DGJQ does not provide the audience with an abstract Chinese interpretation of the rise and fall of great powers. At first glance, the documentary seems driven by the party-state’s interest in the lessons to be learnt in order to secure a peaceful rise and long-term positioning as daguo. A second look reveals that it could also be read as part of an ex post justification—complemented by a visual layer that triggers certain positive emotions and generates a joint role-identity narrative—for the PRC’s reform and opening process in the post-Mao years, presented as being the outcome of the theory-guided analysis of the developmental strategies of other great powers.

The title of the 2006 CCTV documentary signals that there might be some universal patterns of daguo politics. There are, indeed, certain varying opinions on the facilitating factors for the US’s prominence shows how DGJQ’s political-economy lens depicts a selective interpretation crystalizing many but certainly not all of the core underlying aspects that informed such diverging opinions hereon.
features associated with both the USSR/Russia and the US—regardless of their antagonist political regimes: in both cases, the role of a strong, heroic leader is highlighted. Moreover, there seems to be a consensus that political-economic modernization can only succeed if the interests and needs of the people are taken into account—hence resonating with the CCP’s slogan minben 民本: “taking people as the root” (and, thus, narrating the official government as ruling “for the people”). Finally, global-power status obviously does not just derive from economic power capacities but requires: (1) leadership in terms of technological innovation capacities (as the documentary’s reference to the quest for technological supremacy between the USSR and the US as well as the coverage of the Industrial Revolution illustrate); and, ultimately, (2) recognition as a superpower by other international players. Economic power is the necessary capital that can subsequently be converted into political status (and global recognition).

By voicing its criticism regarding the dark sides of the rise of previous empires and great powers, the 2006 CCTV documentary provides justificatory footnotes to the Chinese party-state’s global positioning strategy as a “new type” of great power. DGJQ thus indirectly responds to the (past) inner-Chinese contestation regarding the PRC’s (domestic) developmental strategy. This reached a new peak in early 2012 with the open battle between China’s neoliberal camp and the “New Left.”

While DGJQ undertakes an ex post rationalization of the PRC’s post-Mao reforms, the core lessons presented as learnt from the observation of power and leadership in world history—especially with regard to the meaning of recognition—would be taken up again in the 2017 documentary DGWJ, where they are expressed via a narrative that is oriented toward the future (though rooted in the present). DGWJ opens with a fast-motion kaleidoscopic selection of symbolic episodes from China’s current role in global governance. The sunrise and epic shots of nature from a bird’s-eye perspective illustrate the claim that Chinese foreign diplomacy is dedicated to the resolution of shared global challenges—as the related one-second respective zooming in on global security (peacekeeping), global health, and global development (infrastructure, connectivity) highlights. Brief shots of Xi’s travel diplomacy visualize the PRC—represented by a strong, charismatic leader—as a recognized global player that is treated as an equal by the US and
Russia, and furthermore welcomed as a reliable cooperation partner by states located in the so-called Global South.

At the same time, the first few seconds of DGWJ also underline the PRC’s military strength as well as its advanced position in global science and technological innovation. With this shift from domestic stabilization (DGJQ) to global-power status (DGWJ), the meaning ascribed to the concept of daguo has changed. The 2006 controversy over daguo versus qiangguo, surrounding the production of DGJQ (Müller-Saini 2013), has not only been reawakened (Qin 2014; Xu 2017; Zhou 2021) but also resulted in the emergence of the latter concept as a core reference scheme in select global governance fields, stressing the importance of robust capacities in combination with “discursive power” (huayuquan 话语权) (Noesselt 2021: 266).

In 2017, Xi’s report to the 19th National Party Congress silently added the term qiangguo to the PRC’s official role frames. Immediately afterward, a Xinhua article elaborated on its meaning in party rhetoric, seeking to defuse perceptions of a significant accompanying reorientation of Chinese foreign policy (Xinhua 2017). DGWJ—representing the lessons learnt from the failures of “old” empires and, while operating under the guise of daguo, referencing and visualizing elements of China’s (future-oriented) qiangguo role-identity—symbolically illustrates the fragmentation within China’s daguo/qiangguo role-identity frames and ongoing internal role contestation. Apart from widely visible daguo-related role-identity narratives of peace and harmony, a second (auxiliary) layer has thus been added to the PRC’s official role set—one seemingly still highly contested. Role-identity oscillations, the expected outcome of continued role contestation, might result, then, in seemingly contradictory foreign policy behavior when looking from the outside.

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Visual Narratives in Recruitment Campaigns: Promoting Military Service in the People’s Liberation Army and the Bundeswehr

Tanja Walter

Introduction

In 2016 former German defense minister Ursula von der Leyen announced a turnaround in the Bundeswehr’s management of personnel, assuring the public that “the signal is very clear to the troops that a quarter century of a shrinking Bundeswehr is over” (Bundesministerium der Verteidigung 2016).1 Indeed, the number of staff in the Bundeswehr had decreased from 509,100 troops in 1990 to 177,069 in 2015, and from 226,276 to 87,903 civil servants in the same period (Bundeswehr 2021). Von der Leyen thus set the target of recruiting an additional 7,000 soldiers and a further 4,400 civil servants by 2023 (ibid.). The turnaround was justified by the increased scope of the tasks and challenges the Bundeswehr must now deal with in national and allied defense, such as refugee support and disaster management as well as international deployments as part of United Nations missions in Mali and Afghanistan for example.

The 2016 announced personnel strategy aimed to ensure the continuous positioning of the Bundeswehr as a “competitive, modern, and attractive employer” and thus to increase the German military’s personnel readiness (von der Leyen 2016: 7). To realize the announced increase in staff, the Bundeswehr had already started in 2015 an advertising campaign encompassing over 30,000 posters and placards, five

1 This and other quotes from German are the author’s own translation.
million postcards, and video-clips presenting individual job profiles within the Bundeswehr (Dewitz 2015). While the number of civil servants would further decrease to 81,393 by 2019, that of troops slightly increased to 181,816 by the end of the same year. The stabilization of troop numbers may be considered a direct and measurable result of the human-resources campaign. However, the personnel strategy also intended to transmit a new image of the Bundeswehr as a “meaningful and qualified employer [that] strives to reconcile the demands of service with family and private aspects as well as the individual life phases of its employees” (von der Leyen 2016: 7). Against this backdrop, a narrative analysis of the Bundeswehr’s recruitment campaigns in the media can shed light on the relationship between the military and everyday civilian society.

However, such a recruitment campaign regarding military service has been implemented not only in Germany but also in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in recent years. While Germany focused on how to increase applicants to the Bundeswehr, China announced contrariwise the reduction of troop numbers by 300,000 in terms of infantry, artillery, logistics, and support while focusing on recruitment for the “aviation, missile and maritime fields” (China Daily 2016; Wuthnow and Saunders 2017: 9). Overall, even after the reduction in troop numbers, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) still amounts to an army about two million strong as of 2021 (Office of the Secretary of Defense 2020: 38).

In a century of the Internet’s growing influence among the younger generations, the PLA faces the obstacle of promoting military service not only as patriotic duty but also as personal opportunity for fulfilling one’s life ambitions (Naftali 2021: 178ff.). While China’s Military Service Law² states all male citizens have an obligation to serve in the armed forces for two years, statistics comparing the number of Chinese 18 year olds versus that of annual recruits suggest that joining the PLA is a rather competitive process and not everyone is accepted (ibid.: 181). To fulfill the military goals set by former president Hu Jintao and continued by current incumbent Xi Jinping, however, the PLA needs to professionalize its troops. Since the beginning of the

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² This law was adopted in 1984, before being amended in 2011.
new millennium in particular the Chinese military has undergone modernization and development away from concentrating on national defense and toward becoming an internationally recognized army that serves in counterpiracy missions in the Horn of Africa, participates in multilateral military trainings, and contributes to UN peacekeeping missions (ibid.: 180). The PLA’s goal of improving the quality of its personnel remains a challenge in an era of economic growth, when many young graduates with excellent grades prefer to enter university instead of joining the army (ibid.: 181). As a reaction to such conscription challenges in the early years of the new century, the PLA launched a series of recruitment campaigns addressed at potential applicants and promoting military service especially among higher-educated youth.

In 2015 and 2016 both the Bundeswehr and PLA used posters for their recruitment campaigns that could still be found online when this study was conducted in June 2021, and thus they form the basic research objects of this inquiry. In scientific research, investigations about the effects of the military’s media communication on the creation of stereotypes has been largely neglected so far. Several years ago Friedemann Vogel (2014) presented an analysis of images used in the Bundeswehr’s recruitment campaign of 2012. Another example is the scholarly contribution by Tanja Thomas and Fabian Virchow (2006), who provide an overview of the so-called military-entertainment complex—a term to describe the blending of the military with civilian everyday culture (Thomas and Virchow 2016: 39).

The present empirical comparison of Bundeswehr and PLA recruitment posters is a contribution to the further development of the research field. While documentaries of human suffering and destruction are the oft-presented images of conflicts, as analyzed by Axel Heck and Gabi Schlag (2013) for example, this study takes instead the perspective of those who get involved in conflicts as part of military missions. In this regard, it explores the question of which linguistic and pictorial narratives are used to recruit military personnel in Germany and China, especially from among young people. The study focuses on randomly selected posters by the Bundeswehr and the PLA (12 each, 24 in total) that were displayed in the context of recruitment campaigns in 2015 and 2016. A discourse-linguistic analysis of these
posters helps to identify recurring language and image patterns in the context of recruitment campaigns. The results furthermore allow conclusions to be drawn about the images of the Bundeswehr and the PLA as well as comparison of perceptions of the military in both countries. The findings illustrate that despite announced new strategies to professionalize the army and establish a favorable image among high-school graduates, the PLA’s recruitment posters of 2015/2016 portray the Chinese military per a rather traditional mantra of a patriotism that sees one fight to defend the country’s borders. By contrast, the Bundeswehr’s campaign covers only very few purely military elements and mostly emphasizes its civil-service dimensions.

**Theoretical Background to Narrative Analyses**

The objectives behind advertising have by now been widely discussed in scientific work on communication strategies. Günter Schweiger and Gertraud Schrattenecker (2017) identify at least four categories to the practice: (1) an initial advertisement to make the product known; (2) a reminder advertisement to maintain sales; (3) advertising to maintain market share in the face of competitor products; and (4) advertisement to expand the product’s market share (Schweiger and Schrattenecker 2017: 55, 90, 112). Bruhn (2004: 212) adds a category for approaching specific target groups. Finally, Janich (2013: 27) mentions the special case of changes in a product’s name or design, and states the name change from Raider to Twix as a prominent example hereof that had to be communicated to consumers. Overall, when analyzing advertising campaigns, mapping the case at hand according to different advertising objectives helps to capture the underlying strategies at work.

In both economic and linguistic communication research, scholars have tried to outline that advertising exceeds simple transfers of information from a sender to a recipient (ibid.: 41). While scientists have discussed the scope of information content in advertising, it can be said that even if technical details and the price of a product or its ingredients are mentioned such information is mostly purposeful. Sometimes it is exaggerated too with regard to obvious facts such as “vegetarian” ice cream or “vegan” bananas (ibid.: 47).
Linguistic and visual-image analyses help to decode such advertising. At the heart of these are the signs that do not simply portray products but constitute also the recipient’s understanding of them too (Vogel 2014: 191). How we perceive specific products—and the world as a whole—is thus dependent on what we understand and indeed want to understand about their/its construction (Berger and Luckmann 2014). Commercialized language and images are used to establish associations, and to create social and cognitive models that promote specific modes of understanding within particular groups (Vogel 2014: 191).

For example, the term “army” will be understood differently depending on the audience in question. People in Germany will make different associations to those in China, since their socializations consist of different areas of knowledge, prevailing stereotypes, and historical backgrounds (Konerding 2001; Scherner 2000; Vogel 2014: 192). Using the example of online searches, Vogel (2012: 50ff.) outlines how the same topic is perceived differently depending on the linguistic illustration in play. In this regard, meaning is not hidden within the terms used but is ascribed by both the senders of the advertising and the recipients depending on their empirical knowledge (Vogel 2014: 192). In case the standard use of words changes, linguistic knowledge may also shift and an expression might hence take on a new association. A very prominent influencing factor with regard to linguistics was the development of the Internet (Storrer 2020).

While our understanding of words and language—and thus our worldview—changes and develops constantly, a large part of our knowledge consists of that which conforms to social conventions reflected in established language and images (Vogel 2014: 192). On the one hand, narrative and linguistic analyses thus outline how brands and advertisers try to shape this knowledge. On the other, the objects of analysis reflect the prevailing views, values, and principles of a society while using symbols and stereotypes that can be easily understood within a given cultural environment (Tykwer, Neumann-Braun and Aufenanger 1995). In addition, conventional knowledge is enriched by individual socialization experiences and one’s everyday environment (Janich 2013: 42; Vogel 2014: 192).
Janich (2013) outlines that both the senders and recipients of advertising are complex entities highly influenced by competing actors and thought leaders alike (Janich 2013: 41). Family and friends might advise on purchasing decisions, particularly major procurements such as a car, but also life choices such as which university to go to or where to buy a house. Societal factors also play a role in smaller everyday decisions, for example whether to buy organic or to quit smoking. Television, billboard, and Internet advertising have become a constant source of mass media influencing people’s decisions and of shaping conventional knowledge and determining how we see the world (Luhmann 2017). As Vogel (2010: 350) outlines, “individual frames of knowledge, especially about facts and objects that are beyond the direct experience of individuals, are created via the media and their reporting, for example by means of media discourse”. Frames and stereotypes are thus both reflected and indeed promoted in advertising.

Regarding the examination objects of this paper, this means that it is assumed that the designers of the Bundeswehr and PLA posters started from the premise that their audiences have specific knowledge and interests that form the basis for understanding the messages conveyed in their respective advertising campaigns. At the same time, the designers find themselves among many other actors trying to shape public opinion by promoting certain images and language. The latter results in specific knowledge about serving in the army and the promotion of a “stereotype” about the social recognition of military service, on the basis of which the recipients of the advertisement should orient their actions and enlist as candidates (Vogel 2014: 193).

In general, advertising can be understood as a tool for brand management (Janich 2013: 21). The advert should thus reflect and communicate the identity of the brand and differentiate it from other competitor products (ibid.: 21). Janich (2013) outlines how different brands use specific advertising tools: images (e.g. Ferrari’s horse); words (e.g. Facebook); letters (e.g. H&M); combinations thereof (e.g. Apple). These are what companies use to stand out from their competitors (ibid.: 21f.). Behind each advertising campaign is a planning process that starts with the analysis of the current market situation and a decision about the communicative objectives of the advert (ibid.: 24). Moreover, the target group as well as the instrument of commu-
nication need to be predefined to start planning concrete advertising efforts (ibid.: 24). For recipients, the characteristics communicated in brand images provide guidance on decision-making and promote trust in the brand itself—since “consumers” get the feeling of knowing the brand (Janich 2013: 21).

In the case of a country’s armed forces, they usually do not compete with other military units within state borders (Schweiger and Schratte-necker 2009: 90ff.). Hence both the Bundeswehr and the PLA have a monopoly on being the military arm of Germany and China respectively, and as such neither is confronted with any other military employer as competitor. During universal conscription, the need for advertising for the military is further reduced to a minimum. However, as soon as compulsory military service is absent (Germany) or not applied (China), military organizations move into direct competition with other employers. They must therefore communicate their attractiveness to potential applicants and convince them of their merits. Consequently, both the Bundeswehr and the PLA have to present their unique selling points. The images and slogans on the posters under examination here therefore provide evidence about which stereotypes both armies neglect (such as: “the army is not a boring office room”), with such negations rather to be found only implicitly. The advertising campaigns of the Bundeswehr and the PLA instead explicitly focus on how they want to and should be seen (for example: “exciting adventures await you here”). Moreover, the use of particular narratives and language in their advertising campaigns reflects the advertisers’ interest in influencing common knowledge about worldviews and military service in general.

Systematic analysis of narratives in Bundeswehr and PLA military-recruitment campaigns helps to decode and compare schemes of discourse and linguistic strategies of the producers in both Germany and China. At the same time, this exercise also contributes to a better understanding of the standing and prestige of the military in both countries.

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3 Exceptions might be guerrilla groups in unstable or conflict-affected countries.
Method

The conceptual framework of this study operationalizes image analysis of recruitment posters using the multilevel model proposed by Janich (2013). The latter focuses on a holistic approach to not only individual aspects but to the advertisement as a whole. Examining, for example, only the linguistic part of an advert neglects the subtle effects that images add to the text. At the same time, exclusive analysis of images would not lead to the full picture since they need to be put in their linguistic context—at least if a text is available (Vogel 2014: 296). As Janich (2013: 251) points out, the linguistic part can often only be fully understood in combination with an image and should hence be jointly considered.

So far, the scientific literature has not provided many models that cover both elements and thus allow for comprehensive and holistic analysis of advertisements and commercials. Previous approaches have often used a collection of categories to dissect specific advertisements such as speaker, topic, or rhetorical codes (Hantsch 1975). Janich (2013) considers such categories helpful “checklists” but not sufficient to scrutinize advertising linguistics and narratives holistically. Therefore, Janich (ibid.: 265ff.) suggests an own analytic model that allows for a comprehensive investigation of both individual aspects as well as the content and form of the whole advertisement. The model consists of six steps: three analytic and three synthesizing ones.
Figure 1. Analytic Model for Advertisements

1st Analytic Step
Factors external to the advert (e.g. producer, target group, market situation)

2nd Analytic Step
Structure of the advert (verbal and visual)

3rd Analytic Step
Content-related associations, connotations, verbal and visual

1st Synthesis Step
Interaction of text-internal factors

2nd Synthesis Step
Combination of external and internal factors, objective of the advert

3rd Synthesis Step
Advertising content, intention and impact

Source: Author's own compilation, based on Janich (2013).

In the first analytic step, external factors that frame the advertisement are noted. This covers the type of advertisement as well as the current market situation. General points such as the producer, the group of recipients (target group), and the general topic of the advertisement should be noted to obtain an initial overview of the analytic object.

In a second analytic step, the design and structure of the advertisement are looked at. This covers the position of text elements, particular slogans, and eye-catching characteristics of style. In addition, visual
aspects are noted such as the specific images used and how they are located within the advertisement. While both linguistic and visual elements are considered separately, the second step is a preparation for the interpretation that will follow later.

The third and final analytic step covers initial connections between text and image. Moreover, the main question to be asked is: Which associations, dissociations, and connotations can be connected to the combination of text and image in the advertisement? This third step is closely connected to the one before.

The first synthesis step is based on the previous analytic ones. From now on, the form and content of the advertisement in question need to be jointly handled to understand their interaction. Focus here lies on the function of the separate elements in the advertisement as well as on the underlying argumentation of both form and content.

In the second synthesis step external factors have to be combined with the content of the advertisement to identify the dominant message of the object at hand. Moreover, it is of relevance here to relate the analyzed framework of the previous analytic steps to the content.

The third and last synthesis step covers the overall interpretation of content and the intention of the advertisement, allowing for an overview of possible impacts. This step is closely connected to the one before, and strict separation between them might not always be possible. However, at the end of this step the results should enable statements to be made about the connection between the main message of the advertisement, the target group, and probable effects among recipients within a defined society (ibid.: 268). Moreover, the interrelation of language and image in the context of the producing organization provides information about the advertisement’s underlying intention.

When applying this model, the following research questions should guide the investigation:

1. What attributions, both implicit and explicit, do the recruitment posters of the Bundeswehr and the PLA offer in terms of image?
2. To what extent do the resulting stereotypical narrative outcomes accurately reflect the role of the military in China and Germany respectively?
3. What narrative differences can be identified between the recruitment campaigns in the two countries?

It should be noted that not all the proposed criteria of Janich’s (2013) model are applied to every military-recruitment poster examined here, since some of them do not have any textual elements for example. Given Janich (2013) proposes a generic model that can be applied to several types of advertising, it has been adapted with regard to the analytic framework needed for the particular objects under investigation here.

**Recruitment Campaigns by the Bundeswehr and the PLA**

The core of this study consists, as noted, of the analysis of 24 recruitment posters by the Bundeswehr and the PLA (12 for each country) that were issued in the years 2015 and 2016. With regard to textual elements, the call to “enlist in the army” featured prominently in the majority of the PLA’s posters. By contrast, the invitation to apply was more subtle in Bundeswehr posters and accompanied by the slogan underpinning the German military’s whole recruitment campaign: “Do what really counts.”

While the analysis also covered stylistic elements such as format, color, and design, focus was given to comparison of the underlying narrative components of the respective posters. Scrutiny was thus oriented toward the three research questions outlined above. In the following, the results are compared and categorized. Commonalities in recruitment narratives could be found with regard to the military leaving a positive imprint for life, the promise of a unique community, and the prospect of adventure. Differences in advertising were identified in the fields of diversity, individuality, women, the use of youth-oriented language, and references to popular movies.

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4 The original slogan in German was: “Mach, was wirklich zählt.”
Commonalities

The military’s positive imprint for life

Bundeswehr and PLA recruitment posters both emphasized the lifelong benefits enrollment in the military would have for potential candidates. A prominent question on one of the Bundeswehr’s posters was: “Can you learn for life within seven months?” This seven-month time period refers to the duration of the Bundeswehr’s volunteer-service program that consists of basic military training on using hand weapons and on medical matters. The applicant will assist in domestic tasks during, for example, natural disasters, emergencies, or pandemics that require immediate action to be taken on behalf of the country (Bundeswehr 2021a).

Similarly, one of the PLA’s posters stated: “The trainings here in youth will help you achieve a wonderful life.” While the PLA poster did not refer to a specific time schedule, both armies’ adverts thus suggested that enlisting in the military would provide young applicants with the chance to shape their life with formative experiences destined to leave a long-term positive imprint on them. Remarkably, both of these posters showed soldiers in the wilderness—a context that most of the applicants might not have known from their everyday lives. Both the image and the text of the posters suggested that the learning content in the military exceeds what has been taken in so far at school and will furthermore provide applicants with skills they can use throughout their whole life. In addition, one of the PLA’s posters stated that the experience gained will have beneficial effects on character always subsequently recognizable: “Even when you dress casually, someone will still ask whether you were once a soldier. Enlist in the army, the growth of your life.”

Adventure

Remarkably, several recruitment posters of both the Bundeswehr and the PLA suggested a high level of adventure in the military. In addi-

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5 This and other quotes from PLA posters were translated with the help of a native Mandarin speaker.
tion to the already-mentioned scene in the woods, other Bundeswehr posters displayed a diver in the open sea as well as flying helicopters—two activities that many high-school graduates might dream of doing for themselves. The diver seems to be very concentrated and fully equipped with all necessary apparatus. The dark water as well as the cloudy sky in the background support the feeling of suspense conveyed by the image, and suggest an important mission is underway.

On a different poster, a helicopter is ready for takeoff and a woman is just about to fit her helmet—another hint at conscious safety precautions and available equipment for personnel. The latter aspect was not stressed in the PLA posters. Rather, one poster depicted a helicopter that seems to have just landed in a crisis location. The background is full of smoke, and two armed soldiers have just stepped out of the helicopter and are portrayed as black shadows in the picture. Another poster showed the capturing of a person while soldiers were again portrayed as shadows with their faces not able to be seen.

Overall, both posters by the Bundeswehr and the PLA portrayed scenes that are not related to the everyday life of young people but displayed adventurous locations and equipment instead. None of the Bundeswehr’s posters showed weapons or tanks, elements that prominently featured on the PLA’s. In this regard the PLA included the existence of enemies in the field, a connection not made on the Bundeswehr posters. This finding corresponds with the results of analysis of the Bundeswehr’s webpage (www.treff.bundeswehr.de) provided by Vogel (2014). The author found that dangerous or frightening associations with the German military are avoided in public advertising. While the Bundeswehr’s recruitment approach is thus focused on an outlook of dynamic, adventurous, and sporty activities, the PLA connects the aspect of “adventure” with the military’s task of defending the country’s borders against enemies—portraying related (dangerous) scenes.

**Unique community**

Both Bundeswehr and PLA posters stressed the unique community that is to be found within the military. The Bundeswehr asked: “What are a thousand friends on the net against one comrade?” Similarly, one
of the PLA’s posters highlighted the distinctiveness of a soldier with the words: “There is a kind of charm. It may be written on faces, or it may be manifested in gestures. It may be hidden in words, or it may be reflected in subtle aspects.” While the Bundeswehr poster did not show an outright picture but rather consisted of a background in different shades of green and a large textual part in the middle, the PLA’s own one depicted a group of soldiers cheering and laughing as they run along. The underlying message is quite clear: the Bundeswehr and the PLA are unique communities to which everyone can belong if they want to.

**Differences**

**Diversity**

When comparing Bundeswehr and PLA posters, differences with regard to the people displayed could be found. On the Bundeswehr’s posters a greater variety of people were discovered. Both young and older men and women with blonde or dark hair, short and long trims, or no hair at all were portrayed. Moreover, on one of the posters a soldier with slightly darker skin color can be seen—hinting at the inclusion of people with a migration background in the Bundeswehr. By contrast, the portrayed soldiers on the PLA’s posters seem more homogeneous with regard to their appearance. All men and women appear rather young, with short, black hair—even among most of the women. On posters with more than one person, focus lay on standing to attention within the group. Overall, a stronger emphasis was put on the group, with less room for the diversity of the individual.

**Individuality**

The criterion of individuality is connected to diversity. However, while the latter focused on the composition of the military per se, individuality rather refers to each person’s possibilities of employment with both the Bundeswehr and the PLA. Remarkably, the posters of the Bundeswehr displayed highly diverse training and job opportunities that one might not necessarily directly relate to the military. For
example medical professions, IT jobs, mechanic positions, and office employment were all presented. The posters, furthermore, stressed individual career prospects and therewith chances for development within the Bundeswehr. The underlying narrative thus presents the German military as an organization that offers a range of civil jobs known to people from other contexts.

The texts on the posters, however, suggested that the tasks are unique in being fulfilled in a highly important context. One example is the slogan on a poster that showed a nurse treating a wounded soldier: “Here you fight for your patients, not for profit.” By contrast, the recruitment posters of the PLA were focused on a military service encompassing weapons and tanks, thus being reflective of a rather traditional portrayal of a state’s army. This demonstrates the contrast in the image and stereotypes that both militaries put forth in their respective countries. While the PLA seemed to remain an army in the traditional sense, the Bundeswehr aimed at changing this stereotype in Germany toward a less war-oriented organization that focuses more on civil service and the promotion of opportunities for young applicants to develop themselves as people.

**Women**

Another difference identified in the analysis of military-recruitment posters in Germany and China was how the role of women was portrayed. Six out of the 12 Bundeswehr posters examined featured women, seven out of 12 men. In their study of the YouTube series “Die Rekruten,” Frank Stengel and David Shim (2021) found that the Bundeswehr’s appeal to women and a generally diverse audience can be reasoned to follow the German military’s distinct civilian nature.

By comparison, only two out of 12 PLA posters portrayed women\(^6\) while seven out of 12 discernibly featured men.\(^7\) The Bundeswehr’s

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\(^6\) Additionally, one poster portrayed a little girl. However, this poster was not counted here since the point was to outline to what extent the employment of women in the PLA is depicted.

\(^7\) Four posters showed only black shadows of people that could not be identified as male or female. With regard to the stature of the shadows, however, it is rather assumed that they are male soldiers.
posters clearly focused on the recruitment of women and made no differentiation in terms of employment possibilities. Rather, women are portrayed in similar situations to men: both in helicopters and as mechanical engineers on posters advertising for officers and technicians. By contrast, the two posters portraying women in the PLA do not clearly state what kind of employment is possible for women in the Chinese military. One poster shows women running and cheering happily in a group (this poster was referred to earlier already). A second poster shows only women standing in a row, with a textual line stating: “Gorgeous and enchanting, full of heroism.” The description of “gorgeous and enchanting” can be associated with rather soft female elements that seem to exist in contrast to the hard war-related military tasks displayed on other posters. While it is not clear which kinds of tasks women are being recruited for and if they differ from those of male soldiers, the Chinese military is somewhat presented as male-dominated. The portrayal of women here clearly differs from the Bundeswehr’s own approach, with the underlying stereotypes suggesting a different societal status for women in Germany and China.

Youth-oriented language

The question of the language used in military-recruitment campaigns has been subject to discussion in Germany before. Vogel (2014: 199) in analyzing the abovementioned webpage of the Bundeswehr found a series of terms related to youth language used such as “Sportcracks” (German expression for a very sporty person), “cool,” or “games”. With regard to the recruitment posters under investigation here, this finding cannot be extended. Rather, textual elements consist of formal German expressions that are grammatically correct and do not contain any colloquial terms. One exception might be the expression “career.zip” —this is, however, rather associated with technical IT parlance rather than specific youth language.

While the Bundeswehr’s recruitment campaign in 2012 largely focused on youth language to address recent high-school graduates, subsequent criticism thereof in the German media might have caused a renunciation of such specific expressions and a return to formal language instead (Grimm and Strozyk 2012). By contrast, the PLA’s
recruitment campaign made use of youth language on several posters. Examples are “enlist in the army, bro” or “driving fancy cars already makes you lame,” which address a particular young audience and suggest that applicants will be among an exclusive group of “brothers” ("bros") destined to have a lot of fun together.

**Popular movies**

Finally, a difference in narrative images on military-recruitment posters was found regarding references to popular movies too. German film productions and docudramas exist about the Bundeswehr; one example is *A Murderous Decision* about a 2009 military incident in Kunduz, Afghanistan, as analyzed by Axel Heck (2017). However, no references to any film productions were displayed on Bundeswehr posters, while the PLA was found to promote slogans or images from popular movies. For example, one such poster shows the actors from a Chinese TV series about the war with Japan. The connection of the Chinese military with popular movies ties in with similar discoveries in previous research on the PLA’s contributions to UN peacekeeping (Walter 2020).

The use of actors on recruitment posters can be seen as a clear blending of fiction and reality that risks a mixing of the action and adventure portrayed in movies where the “good guys” usually win with the reality of employment as a soldier in crisis situations. Again, parallels can be drawn to the Bundeswehr’s 2012 recruitment campaign—although the use of movie stars goes beyond the mere youth slogans used in Germany to convey an image of adventure, action, and fun in the military. While the PLA did not hold back from the presentation of dangerous scenes on its recruitment posters, the advertising strategy was comparable to the promotion of a new movie. Even the posters that did not portray prominent actors produced strong associations with scenes from action films. A poster where soldiers used green lasers could furthermore be associated with a video game or the popular shoot-'em-up sports game laser tag. This could lead to a mispercep-

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8 Original German title: Eine mörderische Entscheidung.
9 Name in Mandarin: 我的兄弟叫顺溜 (wo de xiongdi jiao shunliu, “My Brother Called Shunliu”).
tion of possible dangers in performing military service among young applicants.

**Conclusion**

The analysis of recruitment posters of the German Bundeswehr and the Chinese PLA was helpful to compare visual narratives about the promotion of military service in both countries. The two organizations have different starting points: The Bundeswehr has been confronted with a shortage of personnel for the last decade now, and especially since the suspension of conscription in 2011. By contrast, the PLA has historically had more than enough applicants and has rather focused on recruiting professionalized personnel for specific positions recently. Nevertheless, while the communicated need for PLA personnel was outlined in the aviation, missile, and maritime fields, the analyzed recruitment posters displayed a rather monotonous image of employment in the Chinese military focused on infantry and artillery. Keeping in mind this backdrop, narrative and linguistic images deployed by the military in Germany and China to stimulate certain cognitive attribution patterns were investigated in this paper. Hence, the overview achieved contributes to greater scientific knowledge about advertising language and marketing strategies in the military. Regarding the three research questions outlined earlier, results are summarized as follows.

The underlying narrative trope of the PLA posters portrays an army in the traditional sense of soldiers that fight battles on the ground. While the posters showed little variety in terms of employment possibilities, they did highlight the exclusiveness of being a member of the PLA and strongly related conscription to popular movies. By contrast, the core impetus portrayed on Bundeswehr posters was a departure from such traditional images of the military—achieved here by highlighting the variety of possibilities for self-development. In this regard, both apprenticeships and full-time jobs were offered. The Bundeswehr’s projected image was thus transformed from a pure army with military tasks to an organization that also offers civilian services. Both prospects for being part of a unique community and individual development were highlighted here. While the Bundeswehr thus pro-
moted the narrative image of offering more than war-related tasks, the employment fields of mechanical engineers, IT services, or health staff must strongly compete with other institutions such as hospitals or with the private sector. A focus on the importance of the work done by the Bundeswehr was thus used as supporting narrative to create a new stereotype of military service.

In comparison, the PLA still seems, as noted, to have more than enough applicants. As a result, the PLA does not currently need to change previous narratives. However, the large number of applicants might also be related to the special entrance system for Chinese universities. The latter includes an entry test that many applicants do not pass. When one has served in the army, however, extra credits are granted that facilitate entering a university—an element that is also promoted on military-recruitment posters. As long as this system prevails, traditional narratives and recruitment campaigns are unlikely to change significantly—inter alia concerning the role of women in the military.

Finally, the analysis of such recruitment posters showed that several topics were not covered by these campaigns—even though they might be important factors for future applicants. First, the compatibility of family life and employment. While one of the PLA’s posters portrayed a soldier and a child in stating “The tenderness (of soldiers) does not overshadow the iron soul,” no reference was made to whether the little girl was the soldier’s own child. In the Bundeswehr, meanwhile, flexible working models have been introduced to allow family-friendly working hours (Bundeswehr 2021b). Moreover, a respective contact person has been introduced for the topic (ibid.). Yet, these possible advantages for young mothers and fathers were not reflected on the posters analyzed here.

Besides that, overseas deployment in crisis regions could not be found on the posters either. While the PLA published one poster with a helicopter landing in a cloud of smoke that might hint at it being a crisis-affected region, it could also be a sandstorm in China. As outlined, posters issued by the Bundeswehr did not contain any dangerous locations or scenes. Given that both Germany and China actively contribute to international UN peacekeeping missions, however, this could
be an appealing aspect to employment in the two countries’ armed forces. Young applicants might be interested in having the prospect of spending part of their career abroad. While the PLA’s commitment to being international “guardians of peace” has already been portrayed in Chinese movie productions, it has not been reflected in recent recruitment campaigns however (Walter 2020).

Overall, the narratives and stereotypes used to promote military service in Germany and China reveal a number of similarities. However, the multiple differences also found ultimately dominate, being reflective of general distinctions in how the military is perceived in the two countries. While Chinese soldiers are portrayed as strong men ready to fight, Bundeswehr members have been transformed in recent years into people taking on a greater variety of tasks. This encompasses a shift toward having a job description that increasingly bears similarities to civilian occupations and yet stands out because of the Bundeswehr’s continued status as the country’s military unit. Ultimately, this also hints at societal differences regarding attitudes toward military topics and the role that the armed forces are expected to play in the two countries.

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In the past decade, Ai Weiwei has burst out from his limited role of a Chinese artist to become an artist-activist who has “gone global.” Ai first gained international fame as the consultant for Beijing’s “Bird’s Nest” Olympic stadium, which was designed by the Swiss architectural firm Herzog and de Meuron. Just before the 2008 Olympics, however, Ai became infamous for denouncing the stadium as China’s “fake smile” to the world. In October 2010, Ai fascinated the art world with his *Sunflower Seeds* exhibit at London’s Tate Modern art gallery; before the exhibit closed in May 2011, Ai became a global political figure when the Chinese government illegally detained him for eighty-one days. After years of post-detention harassment by China’s party-state, in 2015 Ai moved into self-imposed exile first in Germany and now in the United Kingdom, where he continues to produce compelling art—and engage in political activism.

This chapter charts Ai’s transition from being a “Chinese” artist to be a global artist, and how this shapes his relationship with power and resistance. In China, Ai worked as a patriotic Chinese dissident to criticize the illegitimate power of the corrupt Communist party-state. After he went into exile in Europe, Ai refocused on the global issue of refugees, especially in his film *Human Flow* (2017). In this way, he expanded from a critique of China’s domestic oppression to creatively address the global problem of refugees. Strangely, though, one of the main beneficiaries of the globalization of Ai Weiwei’s work has been China’s party-state: for whatever reason, it is no longer the main target of...
his art-activism. Before examining Ai's art and films, the essay first will
discuss theories of power and resistance, and visual IR methods.

**Power/Resistance and Visibility/Visuality**

How are we to understand the role of still and moving images in global politics: what do they mean, and what can they do? Can visual art and film serve as a site of resistance to power? State and corporate power certainly have vast resources to govern our views of culture, society, and politics. But such “cultural governance” does not exhaust political possibility, because there are opportunities for resistance. Resistance here does not necessarily take place in political institutions (e.g. political parties at home and international organizations abroad), but also can emerge through other modalities of expression—films, journals, diaries, novels, and counter-historical narratives—that “challenge the state's coherence-producing writing performances” (Shapiro 2004: 49).

One way to figure the resistance capacity of visual images is to frame discussion in terms of the “CNN-Effect,” where images drive policy: i.e. how the spectacle of suffering and vulnerable people, displayed first on 24-hour cable news programs and now on popular YouTube and social media sites, is able to mobilize the viewing public—and ultimately their political leaders—to respond to injustice (Strobel 1996). Indeed, in the twenty-first century you need a visual image to transform local political violence into a global political event (Andersen 2015: 260). Others argue that the CNN-Effect is a ruse: rather than showing the democratizing power of widely distributed topical images, such visual campaigns are evidence of the elite manipulation of our emotions (Robinson 2002).

The argument about the impact of art on politics follows similar contours. Alex Danchev (2016: 91) takes an emancipatory view of art/politics: “contrary to popular belief, it is given to artists, not politicians, to create a new world order.” On the other hand, Walter Benjamin (1968: 241) famously concludes that “[f]ascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life,” and thus “[a]ll efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war.” While the iconoclastic approach (seen in Benjamin’s comment) employs the hermeneutics of suspicion to deconstruct ideological meaning, active witnessing (seen in Danchev’s comment) is better
explained in terms of an appreciation of how affect-work can provoke communities of sense that complicate what can (and cannot) be seen, said, thought, and done (Rancière 2004).

The visibility/visuality dynamic develops this approach to analysis of the global politics of visual art and film (Callahan 2020). The “visibility strategy” examines the meaning of art by considering how, as a “social construction of the visual,” art can resist oppression through witnessing. On the other hand, the visuality strategy explores how art can provoke new affective communities through a “visual provocation of the social”—and of the global (see Mitchell 2005: 343ff.). Visual art and film as a mode of resistance here works in complementary ways: on the one hand it acts ideologically as a witness to atrocities in order to speak truth to power, while on the other it works affectively to creatively excite new affective communities of sense (Rancière 2004; Hutchison 2016; Callahan 2020).

**Ai as a Chinese Artist-Activist**

Ai Weiwei is famous for crossing boundaries, especially the boundary between art and politics. His activities explore the limits of what is acceptable in China both in terms of political action and aesthetic taste: in 2000 he coorganized an exhibit in Shanghai called *Fuck Off* (Hua et al. 2000), and more recently his nude photos were denounced as pornography both by the police and in the court of public opinion. He thus is a polarizing figure among both artistic and nonartistic audiences who delights in making people—both friends and enemies—feel uncomfortable. Ai’s main friend, promoter, and defender in the West, Swiss art collector and former ambassador to China Uli Sigg, warned Ai “to be careful. Don’t let them mix your position as an artist and a political activist” because “‘political art’ is not a good word”.1 After Ai was illegally detained in April 2011, a critic in one of China’s official newspapers complained that Ai’s art “confounds the boundary between the artistic and the political; in fact, he uses it to engage in political activities” (Liu 2011).

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1 Ai Weiwei, interview with the author in Beijing, May 27, 2013.
However, Ai’s work as an activist-artist is not noteworthy because it is “new.” His critique of China’s politics and society is actually part of a broad and ongoing debate about the moral crisis that China faces after four decades of economic reform and opening. In other words, China’s New Left, traditionalists, and liberals are all worried about the “values crisis” presented by what they call China’s new “money-worship” society (see Callahan 2013). Intellectuals from across the political spectrum thus are engaged in what Chinese call “patriotic worrying” (youhuan yishi); they feel that it is their job to ponder the fate of the nation, and to find the correct formula to solve China’s problems (Davies 2007).

Ai’s contribution to this debate is straightforward: he feels that the People’s Republic of China (PRC) is a corrupt authoritarian state and that the country can only be saved if the government respects freedom of expression and the rule of law. As he wrote in his blog:

“Return basic rights to the people, endow society with basic dignity, and only then can we have confidence and take responsibility, and thus face our collective difficulties. Only rule of law can make the game equal, and only when it is equal can people’s participation possibly be extraordinary.” (Ai 2011a: 181f.)

Here Ai conceives of politics as a Manichean struggle of good versus evil, wherein the heroic dissident fights the cruel state (see Kraus 2004: 1).

Ai thus shares many political values with Nobel laureate Liu Xiaobo, who also questioned Beijing’s authoritarian rule: in his co-authored “Charter ’08” manifesto, Liu (2012: 301) argued that the Chinese people need to “embrace universal human values, join the mainstream of civilized nations, and build a democratic system.” Yet Ai’s style and tactics are quite different. Liu acted as a classic dissident. The Charter ’08 manifesto, which landed Liu in jail for “state subversion,” reads like a five-year plan for rational democratic reform in China. Ai, however, takes a different approach to resistance that blurs art, life, politics, and activism. Rather than writing earnest essays that demand rational governance, Ai appeals to people’s outrage, mocks the government, and works primarily through the internet to witness and expose the party-state’s oppression in new and interesting ways.

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2 Ai Weiwei, interview with the author in Beijing, May 27, 2013.
This often takes the form of an ideological campaign for government transparency and accountability that is expressed through visual art (Strafella and Berg 2015). Although Ai has always been political in the sense of demanding freedom of expression, he was moved to intervene more directly in politics by China’s Wenchuan earthquake in 2008 (see Sorace 2014). Noticing that public schools often suffered more damage than surrounding buildings, many people felt that the schools collapsed because of substandard construction stemming from official corruption. After the government refused to investigate, Ai enlisted hundreds of volunteers in what he called a “Public Citizen Investigation Project” to expose the combination of state and private corruption that had produced this tragedy.3

Eventually the citizens’ investigation compiled and published a list of the names of the 5,212 children who were killed in the earthquake. Again jamming the line between art and politics, Ai turned this tragedy into visual art (Marlow and Tancock 2015: 136–143). The Wall of Names, which lists in Chinese and English the name, gender, age, and school of each of the victims was exhibited as an artwork. Ai’s massive mosaic Remembering (2009), exhibited at Munich’s Haus der Kunst, lined up nine thousand school bags to spell out one mother’s reaction to her daughter’s death: “She lived happily on this earth for seven years.” Ai also straightened out 150 tons of twisted steel rebar that had been salvaged from the Wenchuan ruins, which was exhibited in orderly piles as “Straight” at the 2013 Venice Art Biennale (Marlow and T Hancock 2015: 128–141). Indeed, Ai’s first films came out of the collaborative experience of the “Public Citizen Investigation Project” (Sniadecki 2011). Ai thus uses art to highlight the party-state’s lack of accountability; this includes the literal counting of dead children. To fight the crookedness of official corruption that led to the collapsed school buildings, Ai straightened out the mangled rebar taken from the ruins of those buildings.

Through his nude photography, Ai also promotes witnessing, visibility, and transparency in a more playful way that blends art, politics, and life. Many Chinese artists and intellectuals visited Ai during his New York sojourn (1981–1993). At this time, he always carried a camera, and often persuaded his friends to pose nude in public with him: Ai and Yan Li are

3  Ai Weiwei, interview with the author in Beijing, May 27, 2013.
smilingly nude in a now-iconic photo at the World Trade Center Plaza (1985) (Bei 2011). After his release from detention in 2011, Ai used nudity to poke fun at China’s political leadership. “Grass Mud Horse Covering the Middle” is a photograph of a naked Ai covering his genitals with a stuffed animal, which Ai posted on the Internet. Its title invokes the word-play (e’gao) used to resist the keyword-based online censorship of China’s Great Firewall: “Grass Mud Horse Covering the Middle” is a homophone for “Fuck your mother, Communist party central committee.” Ai also returned to his New York habits: in 2011 four activists wanted a photograph with Ai to commemorate their visit to his studio in Beijing. Ai suggested that they take off their clothes, and the result is a nude photograph of him with these four women, “One Tiger, Eight Breasts,” that was posted on the Internet. The police reacted by accusing Ai and his photographer of spreading pornography online, and then China’s netizens responded in support of free artistic expression by posting online naked photos of themselves (Branigan 2011). Like with the Citizen’s Investigation of accountability after the Wenchuan earthquake, here Ai brings together a diverse group of artists and activists to protest the party-state’s lack of transparency. To protest the opaqueness of the state, Ai witnesses its invisibility through the hypervisibility of nude photography.

Ai Weiwei’s eighty-one-day illegal detention also provoked activist art that targeted China’s party-state. Some of it is playful: Ai’s debut music video Dumbass is a foul-mouthed mockumentary about his time in detention (Branigan 2013). But other work is more serious: S.A.C.R.E.D. is a six-part installation of half-scale dioramas in iron boxes; it uses the themes of supper, accusers, cleansing, ritual, entropy, and doubt to reproduce the scene of Ai’s illegal detention in a cheap hotel room (see Marlow and Tancock 2015). This art work exemplifies both the invisibility of being held in secret detention and the hypervisibility of being under constant surveillance by a team of guards. The themes of nudity and surveillance are combined in “Cleansing,” which witnesses how Ai was forced to take a shower under the watchful gaze of two (fully clothed) guards (Marlow and Tancock 2015: 215). It also addresses issues of transparency at a structural level: in the art gallery, people can only see into S.A.C.R.E.D.’s six boxes through small, awkwardly placed holes;
hence viewers are turned into voyeurs who are complicit with China’s party-state.

Art, Exile, and Global Witnessing

Up until his illegal detention in 2011, Ai’s work focused almost entirely on China. His art and film, as we saw above, aimed to expose the oppression of the party-state. Ai’s art generally exhibits Chinese things to the world—one hundred million ceramic sunflower seeds in London, or thousands of children’s backpacks in Munich. However, after 2009, Ai more or less disappeared from the mainland’s Chinese-language media, which was restricted by the censorship regime from even criticizing his work. At the same time, Ai received support and praise from the artistic and activist communities outside China. After his release from detention, Ai was named one of Foreign Policy’s “100 Top Global Thinkers of 2011,” and he made the shortlist for Time magazine’s “Person of the Year 2011.” The coup de grace was when ArtReview chose Ai as the “most powerful artist in the world” (“Power 100” 2011). Still, even after his release in 2011, Ai was worn down by the strain of four years of quasi-house arrest, artistic and political censorship, and threats against his family.

This combination of push-and-pull factors finally motivated Ai to accept Germany’s offer to set up a studio in Berlin. Once the Chinese government returned his passport in 2015, Ai moved into self-imposed exile. But this European exile was not a totally new experience. Actually, Ai has spent most of his life like that. Soon after Ai was born in 1957, his family was sent into internal exile on the harsh borderlands of the PRC because Ai’s father, the famous Communist poet Ai Qing, had criticized Mao and the Communist Party. The family only returned to Beijing in 1976, as the Maoist period drew to a close.

After living in Beijing for five years, Ai was frustrated by the restrictions on artistic expression in China, and in 1981 he went to study in the United States. After dropping out of art school, Ai bummed around New York as an illegal alien: he did odd jobs and hung out with visiting Chinese artists, filmmakers, and poets, all the while shooting over ten thousand photographs and numerous films (Ai 2011b; Bei 2011). He returned to Beijing in 1993 to see his sick father, and was based in China
until 2015. Hence, Ai has only spent seventeen of his sixty-some years not in exile.

It is not strange, then, that Ai Weiwei made *Human Flow* (2017), a film about the current global crisis of the world’s sixty-five million refugees. Like with Ai’s art-activism in China, the message of *Human Flow* is extremely clear: we need to look beyond national borders and national interests to appreciate the refugee problem as a global issue of humanity that demands a global solution (see Ai 2017). Ai’s goal in this film is not simply to inform people about the inhumane conditions of refugees but also to provoke a new global activist community that would creatively do something to help refugees. As one of Ai’s colleagues explains, the film “reminds us that in this crisis, we have to look, we have to feel, we have to not accept the status quo and we have to change it” (Diane Weyerman in Ai 2017b). Ai likewise states that “[t]here is no language to describe this crisis. I am trying to see what is the role of civilization and human nature, how they treat these refugees, how they spread the most basic values and human dignity” (*ArtsBj* 2017). In other words, the CNN-Effect of providing information for rational discussion of policy options is not enough; *Human Flow* engages active ethical witnessing beyond language, to creatively move people to act in new affective communities of sense.

To understand the global artistry of *Human Flow* it is helpful to see how it addresses the fluid situation of transnational migrants through the interplay of the local, the national, and the global, as well as the individual and the collective. *Human Flow* not only criticizes nationalism and territorial borders; it also aims to efface such borders in its presentation. Although people in the film are categorized according to their citizenship for bureaucratic reasons, *Human Flow* forces viewers to appreciate less national and more global identities, spaces, and experiences. While national police certainly are shown guarding national borders, most of the film presents the plight of migrants who are often a multinational or transnational group of travelers. Likewise, most of the expert testimony offered in the film is from people who work for the United Nations and transnational aid groups. Ai questions national boundaries by juxtaposing different geographical scales through the journey to twenty-three countries and over forty refugee camps: “At times during the film, the viewer may be disoriented, [and] not know which country or camp he or
she is in. Yet this sensation is integral to the film” (Andrew Cohen in Ai 2017b).

Even so, the film risks reproducing the hackneyed logic of a package holiday that overwhelms the audience. One reviewer felt that the film’s “patchwork construction can make it hard to determine exactly which particular crisis you’re in at any given moment. The colors of land, skin and sky are often all you have to go on” (Collin 2017). In other words, Human Flow is like a grand tour of suffering that merges many horrible experiences in ways that risk reaffirming the hierarchical division of a safe “here” in Euro-America from a dangerous “there” in refugee camps (Tzanelli 2017). Interestingly, because of its appeal to global humanity, there is not a clear Other or enemy in this film. It is certainly critical of European (and Western) policing, apathy, and complicity. But since the Westerns are the target audience, “the West” is not constructed as the Other to the refugee self. Indeed, Ai’s new country of residence—Germany, which let in over one million refugees in 2015 alone—comes off as a welcoming place.

Human Flow also addresses these artistic-activist issues through an individual and collective dynamic. The film starts off with an image of a boat rocking gently in the deep blue sea. Filmed from a drone far above and accompanied by evocative music, the scene is more beautiful than agonizing: the bright orange dots (that we later recognize as people in life jackets) look cute against the aquamarine canvas. It is only when the drone descends that we see the precarious position of the people in this overloaded boat. A police boat comes up alongside the refugee-filled vessel, and the refugees come ashore on the Greek island of Lesbos. At this point, Ai Weiwei appears, filming the scene with his smartphone. Next, we witness Ai offering hot tea and a reflector blanket to a tired and wet man who has come from Iraq (see fig. 1).
The cinematography of this opening scene is repeated numerous times in the film to visually depict a mixture of collectives and individuals, who are both general and specific, on the one hand, and abstract and material, on the other (see fig. 2). It is common in documentary films to choose an individual and follow that person on a journey, either to show his or her unique idiosyncrasies or to represent the general experience of a collective (see Lawrence 2020). Ai, however, explains that he didn’t want to choose between the faceless mass of the collective and the unique experience of the individual; his purpose was to “get more knowledge on a global scale. Not making a film about one family or one person, but global scale to see the humanity, the human flow” (Ai 2017b).
This appeal to the collective has echoes in Ai’s earlier artistic work: in the one hundred million porcelain Sunflower Seeds (London, 2010–11); in the 5,212 names on the Wall of Names of the Wenchuan earthquake victims (London, 2015); 150 tons of straightened rebar in “Straight” (Venice, 2013); and in the more than forty camps in twenty-three countries depicted in Human Flow. Many of the film’s sections begin with a drone’s-eye view, an establishing shot that shows wide landscapes and seascapes. Again, as the drone descends, the view shifts from the abstract to the material, from the aesthetic to the social, and from the collective to the individual. One scene starts far above an abstract pattern that evokes Islamic geometric designs; as it descends,
a refugee camp of orderly tents in the desert takes shape; then we see
things moving around like ants; finally, we see these things emerge as
people, including young children, who cheer on the drone as it hovers
just above them. The transition from collective to individual, however,
is incomplete: since the images are captured from above, we don’t
clearly see specific people’s faces.

After these establishing shots, which highlight the shared experience
of global humanity, the film offers a series of images of individuals.
In addition to depicting how people encounter challenging situations,
the film also shows them doing things in everyday life: cooking food;
checking and charging mobile phones; and playing. The film thus
employs a “pluralist” strategy that presents refugees not just in life-or-
death crises but also as ordinary people who do ordinary things in
daily life (see Bleiker and Kay 2007). Everyday life is also where Ai
again enters Human Flow as a character: we see him grilling meat, get-
ing a haircut, giving a haircut, and taking selfies with refugees. Here
we are shown that refugees are just like “us” in Euro-America—and
indeed could be us. In one scene, Ai offers to exchange passports and
homes with a Syrian man in a camp: “Next time you are Ai Weiwei.
Exchange tent for studio in Berlin. … I respect you.”

“Human Flow” thus ethically witnesses the migration crisis through an
interesting mix of the visibility strategy and the visuality strategy. It
makes visible the often invisible challenges faced by refugees, and it
also is a film that aims to “do” something by provoking new relations
in an audio-visual (re)construction of transnational communities of
sense. This activism was seen both at the film’s world premiere at
the Venice International Film Festival (2017), and its British/Irish pre-
miere across 120 cinemas that was followed by a live interactive panel
discussion with Ai Weiwei. “Human Flow” is a consciousness-raising
and activity-provoking performance that is like an extended Public
Service Announcement, complete with injunctions to do something:
contact your Member of Parliament! Donate to charity organizations
through this URL link! At the end of the panel discussion Ai Weiwei
bowed to the ecstatic cheers of the various audiences, perhaps provok-
ing new social-ordering and world-ordering.
At my university, I’ve screened “Human Flow” to students in class and to a diverse audience at a public event, and it provoked an ecstatic response in both groups. Indeed, one student told the class that seeing “Human Flow” in 2017 changed his life; it showed the power of artistic documentary films, and thus inspired him to study filmmaking as a mode of political activism. This exemplifies Alex Danchev’s (2016: 91) emancipatory view of art/politics: “contrary to popular belief, it is given to artists, not politicians, to create a new world order.”

For some, however, the film is problematic. Although Ai says that the purpose of the film is not to follow one family or one person, the film actually does follow Ai on his own personal journey of discovery. Whereas in his earlier work, Ai positioned himself as the rebel of Chinese art, he now presents himself as the Chinese savior of humanity (see Callahan 2014). Sometimes this presentation is compelling, but at other times it is like Marie Antoinette’s performance as a milkmaid at the Versailles dairy. Ai was criticized for an earlier refugee-themed photograph, whereby he appropriated the image of the toddler, Alan Kurdi, who was found dead on a Turkish beach in the summer of 2015, by lying down on the beach in a similar way (India Today 2016). While it is common to criticize Euro-Americans for appropriating the experience of people of color, here we have an example of the Chinese savior mentality, also known as the “Yellow Man’s Burden” (see Nyíri 2006). Although the lingering gaze of the camera can “humanize” suffering people, it also risks becoming a “colonial gaze” that exploits them (Fanon 2008). And, as mentioned above, the colossal scale of the film risks morphing the experience into a Grand Tour of dark travel (Tzanelli 2017).

This beautiful and agonizing film risks aestheticizing the suffering: the camera is fascinated with the bright orange life jackets, and the deep blue sea (Bradshaw 2017). Individual refugees are largely nameless and voiceless in similar ways to the “humanitarian” style of photography that targets Western audiences (Bleiker and Kay 2007). Visualizing refugees as masses of faceless people crammed onto a boat—rather than individuals with a face—is problematic politically and ethically. According to an article by Roland Bleiker, David Campbell, Emma Hutchison, and Xzarina Nicholson (2013: 413), this is a common strategy for dehumanizing refugees, treating them more as a security threat.
than as “a humanitarian crisis that involves grievable lives requiring compassion.”

Lastly, it seems odd that China is invisible in a film about the global refugee crisis. On the one hand, China is a major source of refugees in the world; on the other hand, China is one of the most antirefugee places in the world. According to an online poll, 97 percent of the Chinese public opposes receiving any refugees at all (Li 2018). Beijing is commonly criticized both for sending North Koreans back across the border to face certain punishment, and for not allowing dissidents, Uyghurs, and Tibetans leave the PRC. Ai actually mentions North Korea in one of the interviews promoting his film, but he does so only to criticize a “Western mentality”: “I’ve seen people who escape North Korea and cannot accept the Western lifestyle. Don’t take the Western lifestyle as the natural, absolute condition” (Ai 2017b). Interestingly, this criticism of Western hypocrisy chimes with the message promoted by the Chinese Communist Party’s Propaganda Department. This is not a one-off: in exile, Ai focuses his activism on global issues rather than on the Chinese party-state. For example, although he lived in Xinjiang for over twenty years, Ai has been relatively quiet about the PRC’s mass “reeducation” camps. Ai’s global resistance activities in exile are therefore still shaped by the party-state back in China. And, as mentioned above, Germany, Ai’s new home, also comes off looking pretty good in the film.

*Human Flow* thus shows how Ai Weiwei has followed the lead of China’s state-owned enterprises to “go global” (Shambaugh 2013). While many political dissidents become irrelevant in exile because they still focus on the authoritarian state back home, Ai has successfully recast both his art and his activism to adapt to his new European exile experience. Rather than being simply an individual artist creating individual works, Ai has expanded to work as a director who orchestrates artistic and cinematic works on an epic scale. The film is interesting because it works hard to provide objective facts for rational discussion at the same time as it provokes collective emotional experiences.
Conclusion

As a Chinese artist struggling against a Communist party-state, Ai Weiwei seems like an idiosyncratic case that does not explain much else. But Ai is interesting for a number of reasons. Living and working in China, America, Europe, and refugee camps has allowed him to creatively combine these experiences for art, film, and activism that is truly global. As a long-time exile who has felt the sharp boot of the party-state on his own body, Ai doesn't simply represent other people's suffering: his art demonstrates how his own oppression is also a collective experience shared by many inside and outside China. Ai's concern with accountability raises the important issue of how one can speak truth to power in an authoritarian state.

Ai's film *Human Flow* shows that he is not simply a “Chinese artist”: this creative juxtaposition of his personal refugee experience with those of a range of other refugees is an indication of his working hard to provide information about the horrible situation migrants face, while at the same time provoking a global form of resistance. Still, Ai's shift from a very visible resistance to the Chinese party-state to a global activism in which China is largely invisible shows how his resistance is still shaped by the global power of the People’s Republic of China.

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The Visual Politics of Violent Protests: Narrative Framings of the PolyU Standoff in Hong Kong

Axel Heck

And David put his hand into his bag and took from it a stone and slung it.
1 Samuel 17:49

Introduction

The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU) would attract rather unpleasant international media attention in November 2019. After months of growing tensions and an escalation of violence, PolyU finally became the prime spot in the showdown between pro-democracy protesters and Hong Kong’s police forces. Journalists reported in real-time how a university campus amid the city of Hong Kong turned into an “urban battlefield,” as the New York Times (NYT) called it.2 Besieged by police units for 12 days, the protesters were finally forced to give up their resistance. Many of them were arrested, some managed to escape, while more than 200 were injured.

International reaction to China’s and Hong Kong’s robust moves and solidarity with the protesters were quite assertive initially. But how did it come to be that after the PolyU standoff support for the protests would diminish? Many Western governments and civil society activists criticized the harsh police measures in confronting the pro-democracy movement, but the growing violence among protesters and the massive destruction they caused did not go unnoticed either. Hence, media...
coverage of the protests shifted. The legitimate goals of the protest movement faded from view while the protesters’ violent and devastating tactics became the prime subject of media attention—especially during and after the PolyU standoff. Based on an exemplary analysis of two reports published in Der Spiegel, I argue that the media’s visual narrative framing of the protest taking place at PolyU largely adhered to what is called the “protest paradigm.” Legitimizing narratives in the sense of Charles Tilly’s (2006, 2008) WUNC displays were marginalized and “overwritten” meanwhile. Hence, the media coverage of the PolyU standoff contributed to the conditions of possibility for Western governments’ reluctant support of the protest movement afterward.

Situating the Hong Kong Protests and Western Governmental Reactions

#HongKongProtests 2019—Goals, means, ends

Due to growing concerns regarding China’s expansion of power and control over the city in the last decade, the recent uprisings were not the first of their kind in Hong Kong (Kong 2019). In 2014, the so-called Umbrella Movement attracted international attention (Chan 2014; Ortmann 2015). The Umbrella Movement criticized the decision of the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress of the People’s Republic of China that proposed the selective ideological pre-screening of candidates for the 2017 election of Hong Kong’s chief executive. According to the decision, a candidate for the position has to “love the country [China] and love Hong Kong” which is considered a phrase indicating that the person has to be pro-Beijing (Davis 2015: 107). The decision was considered a violation of the principle of free and fair elections, and led to massive protests in the streets of Hong Kong. In 2019, people there took to the streets and public places again. This time it was to express dissent for an extradition law bill regarded as another attempt by Beijing to expand its power over Hong Kong (Purbrick 2019). During the protests, the tension between protesters and Hong Kong authorities grew enormously. In contrast to the Umbrella Movement, which condemned all acts of violence and therefore enjoyed far-reaching international support but was regarded
as unsuccessful by some activists, the 2019 protests soon escalated and turned bloody (Ng 2020).

Initially the protests were directed against a bill that would have allowed the Hong Kong authorities to extradite criminals to China, where they would have been charged under a different legal system. On July 1, 2019, protesters violently stormed the Legislative Council, where a vote was being held on the bill. From that time on, the situation would become increasingly out of control and attract international media attention—especially in the West. In September 2019, the controversial bill was formally withdrawn. But the protesters shifted their demands to now include the resignation of Hong Kong’s chief executive Carrie Lam and the investigation of police violence—so the protests went on. The struggle to retain control over the streets and public places by the Hong Kong authorities ended in large-scale police operations and violent clashes with protesters. Rubber bullets injured people, and at least one protester died: Chow Tsz-lok (known as Alex Chow), student, 22 years old, would become the face of the movement. International news outlets launched reports on the situation, and thousands of images and videos were uploaded and circulated on social media. Hence, the discursive battle over “legitimacy” and the “appropriateness” of the governmental reaction was not limited to Hong Kong or Chinese media—it became subject to international discourses too, especially in the West.

After the battle of PolyU, the public pro-democracy protest lost momentum despite overwhelming success in a local election in late November 2019 as well as some small-scale demonstrations that would sporadically take place up until mid-2020 (Lo et al. 2021). In June 2020, China finally crushed the still-lingering protests by imposing a draconic national security law on Hong Kong that criminalizes public demonstrations, mass gatherings, and prohibits events such as the annual public remembrance of the Tiananmen massacre. In the wake of the Hong Kong protests, thousands of people would be taken into custody; some of the leading activists and initiators of the protests are in prison and face long sentences. As a result, the autonomy status of Hong Kong and the “one country, two systems” doctrine are endangered. Thus, street protests and millions of tweets could not prevent China from seizing power over Hong Kong in the end.
Western governments and the Hong Kong protests

At the beginning of the protests, many Western citizens, activists, and politicians expressed their solidarity and denounced the Hong Kong/Chinese governments. News agencies circulated images of overcrowded streets and places where hundreds of thousands Hong Kong citizens were peacefully demonstrating. But as tensions between police forces and protesters escalated, the narrative framing of the protest as a peaceful “pro-democracy” movement backed by an overwhelming majority of civil society—indicating solid legitimacy—was more and more contested. The siege of PolyU marked a turning point in the discourse on the Hong Kong protests, as the media coverage shifted from police violence and the authoritarian oppression of a pro-democracy movement to the scale of destruction and protester violence. The narrative framing in Western media increasingly changed from highlighting the peaceful protest performed by hundreds of thousands to focusing on criminal acts committed by a small number of “frontliners.” This shift in the narrative framing of the protests seriously harmed the legitimacy and international support initially gained.

When German Chancellor Angela Merkel visited China in September 2019, Joshua Wong, a prominent organizer of the Umbrella Movement in 2014, published an open letter asking for her backing up of the pro-democracy movement. During a press conference with Prime Minister Li Keqiang in Beijing, Merkel responded that “rights and freedoms agreed upon in Hong Kong’s Basic Law should be safeguarded.” 3 In a similar vein, the European Union and Canada would express their concern over the situation in Hong Kong in a joint declaration already in August 2019: “Fundamental freedoms, including the right of peaceful assembly, and Hong Kong’s high degree of autonomy under the ‘one country, two systems’ principle, are enshrined in the Basic Law and international agreements and must continue to be upheld.” 4

On November 19, 2019, by when the situation at PolyU had already begun to intensify, the Council of the EU called on both sides to

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deescalate the situation: “[A]ny violence is unacceptable. Actions by the law enforcement authorities must remain strictly proportionate, while fundamental freedoms, including the right of peaceful assembly of Hongkongers, must be upheld.”

United States President Donald Trump flip-flopped in his own reactions meanwhile. In August 2019 he called the protest “riots,” thereby picking up Beijing’s narrative. By the end of November—amid the evolving situation at PolyU—he had signed a legislation bill requiring the State Department to annually certify that Hong Kong has enough autonomy to justify favorable US trading terms. Although Trump pointed out that he considered President Xi Jinping a “friend” and “great guy,” some Hong Kong protesters frenetically celebrated Trump for his “backup.” As United Kingdom prime ministers still carry a special responsibility for Hong Kong due to colonial history, Boris Johnson declared in July 2019 that he “backed the people of Hong Kong every inch of the way.” In September 2019, the UK’s Foreign Office expressed “concern about the situation in Hong Kong.” Unsurprisingly, the Chinese government rejected such international criticism as “illegal interference” and threatened Western governments siding with “rioters.” But during and after the events at PolyU, the rhetorical and symbolic support for the protesters by Western governments decreased. The PolyU standoff marked a turning point then. During and shortly after the PolyU protests the attempts to bump up the price for China’s move on Hong Kong remained half-hearted, and

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7 https://www.reuters.com/article/us-hongkong-protests-trump-idUSKBN1Y12NB.
critics argue that Western governments did not use their leverage to support citizens’ struggle for autonomy.\textsuperscript{11}

When it comes to how the West reacts to China, the argument that Beijing is economically too important and militarily too influential—so that no Western government has the serious intention to “tantalize the dragon”—is often made. But this reality cannot fully explain Western governments’ decreasing support for the pro-democracy movement, even after it was hit by a wave of arrests following the PolyU incident. In the recent past, Western governments have repeatedly lashed out at China for all sorts of policies. Criticism has encompassed such domains as intellectual property rights, industrial espionage, disinformation campaigns, territorial expansion, the situation of the Uighurs, or human rights violations in general. Hence, China is certainly by no means off-limits when it comes to harsh criticism from Western governments. Erasing the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong just like that should have come at a price then—so one might have thought. However, the reaction by Western governments was tame compared to other similar incidents. To better understand how reluctant support for the pro-democracy movement during and shortly after the PolyU standoff came to be, an analysis of the Western media’s narrative framing of the protest is insightful.

**Theorizing Narrative Framings of Protest Events**

**Framing political protest**

Many works in Media Studies and Communication Studies have focused on the media “framing” of protest. They have also shed light on the question of how both individuals and collective audiences react to images and cognitively process visual information. According to Entman, to frame is to

“select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular prob-

As the concept of framing was traditionally more focused on textual representations, recent developments have consequently expanded on how this applies to visual images as well. The associated concept of “visual framing” refers to Entman’s initial definition mentioned above, being a

“process of selecting some aspects of a perceived reality, highlighting them above others by means of visual communication, and making them salient, meaningful, and memorable, so that certain attributions, interpretations, or evaluations of the issue or item described are visually promoted.” (Geise 2017: 1)

However, as Brantner et al. (2011: 523) have already argued, especially in the modern media the messages conveyed appear in multiple and interacting semiotic modes of communication such as images, text, and sound. Thus, speaking of visual framing necessarily includes examination of other modes of communication such as texts, voices, noise, sounds, music, and similar.

This concept of visual framing is especially fruitful when applied to the media coverage of political protest, because the fundamental problem for political activism always remains the same: successful protests require support and acknowledgment by a reference public. Hence, protest performances, especially when public, are necessarily based on a meaningful visual choreography (Neumayer and Rossi 2018; Mattoni 2016; Mattoni and Teune 2014; Doerr et al. 2013; Corrigall-Brown 2011). Protesters often run an appealing show to stabilize in-group identity and disseminate their message to a broader public and to political authorities (Klandermans 2014; Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2013). To “make” the people listen, political protest and social movements require publicity and must mobilize potential supporters (McGarry et al. 2019; Rovisco and Veneti 2017; Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993). Therefore, protesters express political dissent through public protest events, defined by Sidney Tarrow “as a disruptive direct action on behalf of collective interests, in which claims were made against some other group, elites, or authorities” (Tarrow 1989: 359; Elam 2001).
With regard to political protest and the performance strategies of social movements, Tilly (2008) has observed that protesters are likely to be successful and “heard” if they appear “worthy,” “united,” show up in significant “numbers,” and exhibit strong “commitment” (the earlier-mentioned WUNC displays) (Bailey et al. 2020; Wouters and Walgrave 2017; Tilly 2008; Tilly 2006). To efficiently disseminate their message and garner support, activists must reach out to the aforementioned reference public (Juris 2015: 83; Lipsky 1968: 1146). Worthiness is related to somber dress; the presence of clergy, dignitaries, and mothers with children. Unity is expressed through wearing badges or headbands, marching in ranks, chanting. Numbers are displayed by filled streets, signatures on petitions. Commitment is associated with braving bad weather; visible participation by old and disabled people (Tilly 2006: 291).

Successful WUNC displays, therefore, “define and confer legitimacy on the core claims made in a movement. In essence, the WUNCness of a movement illustrates its collective identity by demarcating the set of grievances and concerns that participants regard as meaningful” (Wang et al. 2018: 234).

Since the political protest of the powerless constantly struggles with the problem of activating “third parties” and drawing support from a wider (international) public (Lipsky 1968), protest events are often performed through radical communicative practices—and sometimes even disturbing visual choreographies—to enforce news coverage (Harlow et al. 2020). But whether the movement’s self-representation is satisfactorily communicated and how it resonates with the reference public depends on whether and how the protesters’ self-narratives are represented, shared, and circulated in the media (Jasper et al. 2018). Tilly’s WUNC concept remains helpful to cover protesters’ self-representation, but it overlooks how protest events—especially if they reach out to an international reference public—are narratively framed in and by the media. Hence, the crucial questions are whether the WUNC displays appear in news reports covering the protest events and how legitimacy is assigned to the movement and the performances by a specific narrative framing.
As mentioned above, attention is crucial for every protest movement. But there is a flipside to that: the protest paradigm (Boyle et al. 2012; Gitlin 1980). Media Studies and Communication Studies have identified how news coverage of political protest often conveys biased messages, casting doubt on the protest movement’s legitimacy and sincerity—regardless of protesters’ political positions and the addressed social grievances (Boyle et al. 2012). Some researchers argue the protest paradigm is ideological in origin. Traditional mainstream media would previously more often portray political protest negatively, for instance by emphasizing the protest’s spectacle over its substance and arguments (Dardis 2006: 412). In an early study, James Hertog and Douglas McLeod (1995) identified four significant frames that repeatedly appear in media reports, thereby delegitimizing protest: riot, confrontation, sensation, and debate. Danielle Kilgo and Summer Harlow (2019) argue that protesters need media coverage to gain publicity, and journalists—for commercial reasons—require a spectacular narrative to cater to their readers’ demands. Hence, the dilemma is that “protest coverage tends to demonize protesters, characterizing them as menaces to society, marginalizing their voices, and under- or inadequately reporting the grievances, demands, and agendas of movements” (Kilgo and Harlow 2019).

However, in recent years some researchers have argued for a more complex understanding of the conditions under which the protest paradigm enfolds. Given divergent protest coverage, the protest paradigm’s basic assumption that the media frames activism as “deviant behavior” regardless of the protest issue at hand has become more and more contested (Jiménez-Martínez 2020; Lee 2014; Harlow and Johnson 2011; McLeod 2007). There are also conceptual shortcomings related to the examination of the protest paradigm, as most scholarship on the media coverage hereof is still based on textual reports alone (Harlow et al. 2017; Lee 2014; Weaver and Scacco 2013; Boyle et al. 2012; Hertog and McLeod 1995). Hence, our knowledge of how visuality affects the narrative framing in media coverage of protests is currently limited (Corrigall-Brown and Wilkes, 2012). Especially press photographs and visual documentaries are considered effective vehicles for the visual framing of political protest, because they implicitly “guarantee of being closer to the truth than other forms
of communication”—as Messaris and Abraham already argued long ago (Messaris and Abraham 2001: 217; Greenwood and Jenkins 2015). Through the press photographer’s on-site decisions (such as angle and perspective) and the editor’s selection and cropping of pictures prior to being published/printed, a particular visual framing of the protest at hand is thus created (Grabe and Bucy 2009: 5; Veneti 2017; Schwalbe 2006).

As argued above, political protest is always a “show,” and the enormous diversity of protest performances frames the movement’s public image. Yet, as noted, protest rallies gain public awareness precisely through media coverage. Thereby, a movement’s self-representation is subject to visual framing (Boykoff 2006; Edwards and Arnon 2021; Gottlieb 2015). Visually framing protest rallies by emphasizing their WUNC components is consequently a form of media coverage that might contribute to the legitimization of the protest movement (or not). But from time to time political protests turn violent, and images of masked protesters clashing with police dominate the news cycle. In this case, the effects of the protest paradigm might kick in, and therewith the legitimacy of the protest is likely to wane (Neumayer and Rossi 2018).

**From “causality” to the “conditions of possibility”**

Theorizing the politics of visuality from a postmodern perspective, Roland Bleiker states that “images are political in the most fundamental sense: they delineate what we, as collectives, see and what we don’t and thus, by extension, how politics is perceived, sensed, framed, articulated, carried out and legitimized” (Bleiker 2018: 4). Jacques Rancière argues meanwhile that “politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time” (Rancière 2004: 13). Hence, what is made visible and what remains in the dark is the consequence of human decision-making—and these choices are inherently political (Schlag and Heck 2020).

As such it is necessary to closely analyze how protest performances are heralded in the media, especially regarding how something is presented, what is not shown, and how the chosen narrative framing
enables/constrains meaningful (re)actions toward the depicted issues. Consequently, postmodern policy analysis prefers the “how-possible” questions, indicating a mutual constitutive understanding of “agency” (political decisions that are in principle contingent) and “structures” (notably political discourses that enable and constrain what can be meaningfully said and done) (Doty 1993; Wendt 1998). Or, as Roxanne Doty has put it “when we pose a how-possible question, we can still ask why, but we must in addition inquire into the practices that enable social actors to act, to frame policy as they do, and to wield the capabilities they do” (Doty 1993: 299).

Calling the events that took place at PolyU in November 2019 a festival of “love, peace, and harmony” is in principle possible, but ultimately not meaningfully compatible with the (dominant) narrative framing created by the news coverage. Hence, it appears reasonable to say that these framings shape what can be said and done in reaction to the Hong Kong protests without claiming that other meaningful actions would not have also been possible—but they do not appear sound interpretations of the dominant modes of media representation. No protest movement or event is meaningful of itself, rather it obtains meaning through different modes of (aesthetic) representation: namely the campaign or event (Bleiker 2001). In this regard, Doty claims that how-possible questions “are concerned with explaining how these meanings, subjects, and interpretive dispositions are constructed” (1993: 299); therewith agents are enabled to act accordingly.

However, the discursive power of the narrative framing resides in its ability to structure interpretations of the depicted event, as it delimits the space of what can be meaningfully said and done. I would argue here—referring to Doty and Bleiker—that the media coverage of protests does not directly cause political reactions. Still, it helps shape the conditions of possibility that enable specific (non)actions to be undertaken (Bleiker 2014: 80). Hence, I conceptualize the media coverage of the PolyU standoff and Western governments’ responses thereto accordingly. As such, this paper is not about the causal effects of media coverage but how a specific narrative framing (one including visual, textual, verbal, and tonal modes of representation) assigns meaning to a protest event and how it structures the conditions of possibility for political action.
Media Coverage of the Hong Kong Protests 2019–2020

Research on the Hong Kong protests

Researchers have already begun to scrutinize and assess the reasons behind, and the impact of, the Hong Kong protests from various analytical angles (Holbig 2020; Choi 2020; Kong 2019; Mathews 2020). Cheng and Yuen (2020) address the necessary conditions for what they call “total mobilization,” although visible political opportunities and organizational resources were limited. But these works are primarily concerned with the mobilization among Hong Kong citizens; the international dimension remains unaddressed. Lee (2020) shows in a study how the protests affected ordinary people’s lives and how they were inscribed into sites within the city that people pass by every day. This work does refer to the visual dimension of protest, but focuses solely on representations thereof in Hong Kong. Lowe et al. (2021) visually document the dissident messages of protesters during the PolyU siege, primarily how graffiti was used to express resistance.

Zhang and Jenkins (2020), meanwhile, analyze how journalists reported on the Hong Kong protests and critically reflect on their role during the unrest. R. Wang and Liu (2021) examine the social media dimension of the protests. They show how the moral framing of Twitter messages affected the mobilization of supporters. G. Wang and Ma reveal how the Hong Kong protests were covered by the NYT and China Daily, arguing that the NYT especially sided with the protesters (Wang and Ma 2021). But despite that, the empirical results show that the two authors do not systematically account for the visual dimension of the media coverage. What is missing so far are in-depth analyses of media’s visual coverage of the Hong Kong protests and how the narrative framing thereof in Western media discursively enabled the somewhat reluctant reactions by Western governments.
Narrative framing of the PolyU protests in reports published by Der Spiegel

“Resistance against the police: Students hunker down in Hong Kong University,” Der Spiegel, November 19, 2019

On November 19, Der Spiegel launched this first report on the situation at PolyU in Hong Kong using video footage provided by the news agency Reuters. The protests had already been going on for some days; the report mainly covered the attempts of students to escape from campus. The opening scene shows how several young people hastily jumped on motorcycles and drove off quickly. The narrator provides some context information about the “dramatic scenes.” Accordingly, we see a group of protesters who are trying to flee the university campus to avoid getting caught by the police. The visual images show a group of three to four mummed or masked people who seem to run off. We see how three of them hop on a motorcycle and drive off, while another who is obviously wearing a gas mask is shown jumping on a second motorcycle before escaping as well.

This opening scene creates a narrative framing as if the protesters have lost control over the situation at PolyU and a stampede-like escape is their only chance to get out of the situation without being charged. In terms of the WUNC displays, the report creates a narrative that commitment among the protesters seems to be diminishing and their number decreasing. On the other hand, the images show how the presumably young people are fleeing; due to it being dark, the masks they wear and the rather shaky video footage make it look as if they are trying to leave the scene of a crime. As such, the video footage of the opening scene does not contribute to a narrative framing helping foster the legitimacy of the protest; on the contrary, the visual imagery is more in favor of a protest-paradigm reading. The protesters are on the run, presented as if they have done something wrong.

12 The title of the video in the original German version is “Proteste in Hongkong: Studenten verbarrickadieren sich in Universität”.
13 All Reuters sourced images are reprinted with permission.
The report continues to elucidate the different ways in which students are desperately trying to escape, for example via drain pipes and similar. The images show how Hong Kong firefighters are using technical equipment to search for protesters probably stuck in these pipes as they are too narrow. The visual images create a narrative framing according to which the firefighters are trying to rescue students who have brought themselves into potentially life-threatening situations—the authorities do not appear as opponents, more as saviors who are concerned about students. This scene also leans more into the direction of the protest paradigm, as the authorities do not appear aggressive but rather as helpers; it is the students/protesters who are desperate and reckless. In addition, the visual imagery shows how the university campus has been affected by the protests: in the background we see rubble, damage, and chaos. Although the report does not mention the damage done, it is clear to viewers that the protesters are responsible for a situation that can be read as a kind of “vandalism.”
The report’s third scene shows students simply surrendering to the police and leaving campus without resistance. Images provided by the news agency Reuters are used, with the report explaining that many of those involved were later arrested by the police. While a large number of protesters have left the campus, a small group still resists and “hunkers down” in the university building.\\footnote{14}

Nearly every sequence that portrays the actions of protesters is engulfed by various forms of physical destruction. This visual framing in the most literal sense certainly does not work in favor of the protesters, confirming the protest paradigm instead. As the students have barricaded the university campus, it is an obvious interpretation that they are also seen as responsible for the chaos and destruction left behind. As the pictures roll, the narrator relays that protesters are being taken...
into custody by the police. This does not appear as an illegitimate act of authoritarianism, however, but as a consequence of a violent protest that obviously spiraled out of control and might have resulted in intentional destruction of property.

The fourth scene of the report then contains an interview sequence with one of the protesters. The young woman whose face is covered by a black scarf tells the reporter that she is resisting and uncertain about what happens next, or whether she will be arrested or even die. But she will continue her resistance regardless, so that the police will not come away with another victory.15

The first visual impressions of police brutality appear after nearly 90 seconds have passed—in a report only 120 seconds long in total. The


Figure 3 Der Spiegel: Proteste in Hongkong: Studenten verbarrikadieren sich in Universität (Students barricade themselves in the university). Source: https://www.spiegel.de/video/proteste-in-hongkong-studenten-verbarrikadieren-sich-in-universitaet-video-99030812.html (01:17/02:02).
images depict the police chasing protesters, with one of the latter forced to the ground while a member of the riot police puts his knee on the protester’s neck. Another officer appears in the foreground, holding a gun. The riot police are masked, and equipped with military gear.16

These pictures clearly indicate the brutality of the Hong Kong riot police, and they furthermore nurture the narrative of a fight that pitches the protesters in the position of “David” while the authorities are represented as “Goliath.” But the late-on appearance of police brutality might also be interpreted as the logical consequence of the protests. If students in Germany were to occupy a university campus and leave behind such a level of damage and destruction, it would be not unthinkable for police units to storm the building to end the protest—
also by using physical force. For example, when the G20 protests in Hamburg got out of control in 2017 and a whole city quarter was attacked by protesters, the Hamburg authorities called in the Austrian special forces EKO Cobra and WEGA—who were in Hamburg at the time to protect the summit from terror attacks—to put a stop to the violence.

The visual juxtaposition of brutal police force and protesters’ violent acts creates a narrative framing according to which the police are there to restore order and to put an end to the chaos unleashed by the protesters. The original reasons for the protests play a marginal role in the report; the message is completely overwritten by the visual presence of rubble, turmoil, and excessive violence on both sides.

Finally, the report shows a short sequence from a statement by Lam declaring that she has ordered the police to deal with the protesters humanly. The closing shots then turn to a destroyed stairway on the university campus, which could be interpreted as the response of the protesters to Lam’s “peace offer.” Here, the protest paradigm kicks in again, as the report portrays a softly-spoken Lam while the next scene is dominated contrariwise by the devastation left behind by protesters.

“How a Spiegel reporter experienced a protest day”

While the first report on the PolyU standoff was more informative in nature, the second one selected for this exemplary media analysis is a firsthand eyewitness report from Der Spiegel correspondent Bernhard Zand in cooperation with Anders Hammer. He is reporting directly from the PolyU campus, covering the battle between protesters and the police that has besieged the university. The opening shot of this eyewitness report shows Zand wearing a gas mask, with him referring to its necessity—as the only way to breathe due to the heavy use of tear gas.17

17 The images are reprinted with courtesy of Der Spiegel and Anders Hammer.
Zand's report is supplemented by five images depicting the events around the PolyU protests. All five show protesters, with them mostly being engaged in violent acts. Police aggression is absent in these stills. Hence, these images foster the narrative framing of the protest as violent and devastating.

The political goals of the protesters are neither mentioned nor otherwise visible. The report is exclusively directed toward covering the clashes between the riot police besieging the campus and the protesters fighting back or trying to disrupt the circumvallation. While the first report at least contains some utterances framing the protest in terms of the WUNC displays, the second’s legitimizing features are almost entirely absent. Due to Molotov cocktails thrown by the protesters (see Figure 6 and 7), Zand is forced to interrupt his report as it is “too dangerous” to continue.
Figure 6  Der Spiegel: Im Video: Wie ein SPIEGEL-Reporter einen Protesttag erlebte (In the video: How a SPIEGEL reporter experienced a day of protest). Source: https://www.spiegel.de/video/hongkong-spiegel-reporter-begleitet-protest-tag-video-99030798.html; (01:09/02:08).

Figure 7  Der Spiegel: Im Video: Wie ein SPIEGEL-Reporter einen Protesttag erlebte (In the video: How a SPIEGEL reporter experienced a day of protest). Source: https://www.spiegel.de/video/hongkong-spiegel-reporter-begleitet-protest-tag-video-99030798.html; (01:21/02:08).
In the final sequence, Zand is speaking directly into the camera again and reporting on the “massive” violence and apocalyptic scenes. In closing, he calls the happenings a “collapse of culture” in the city.

Although Zand avoids one-sided commentary blaming the protesters or the police for the escalation, the visual narrative framing strongly emphasizes the violence being caused by the protesters. The invisibility of police violence and the omnipresence of devastation caused by the protesters fit with the expectations of the protest paradigm. Accordingly, the heavy police presence might be interpreted as a justified response to the excessive use of violence by protesters.

Conclusion

Examining two Der Spiegel reports, I have argued that the protest coverage in German media of the events of November 2019 largely adhered to the protest paradigm especially due to the visualization...
of violence and destruction. The positive wordings in terms of the WUNC displays are countered and even overwritten by visual images suggesting that the conflict has turned into a “civil war.” Turmoil, rubble, and heavy clashes with police are omnipresent in the media coverage. The visualization of disorder, chaos, and excessive violence largely committed by the protesters dominates the selected Western news reports covering the siege of PolyU in Hong Kong. The visual dimension hereof cannot escape from what is known as the protest paradigm.

A framing perspective on the news coverage of political protest during the PolyU standoff reveals how disturbing scenes of excessive violence overexpose the legitimacy ascription and claims that protesters are representatives of the pro-democracy movement. The visual narrative deprives the events of legitimacy, constituting the protesters as “violent occupants.” Hence, the narrative framings of the standoff, and especially the visual framing of the protests, contributed to the discursive conditions of possibility for Western governments’ reluctant support for the pro-democracy movement during and shortly after the PolyU standoff.

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