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## Representations of China in the Global Media Discourse

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### Abstract

News about China is ubiquitous, yet we know very little about how the global news media have represented China. This study is aimed at providing a theoretical overview of the global media representations of China. Arguably China remains one of the few countries which have been widely debated in both global media and public discourses vis-à-vis its growing economic and political influence in the global world order, its unique cultural and political system, and internal and external challenges. The modest attempt of the current study is to present an overview of the dominant Western and non-Western media representations of China along with the theoretical and methodological approaches the studies utilized. The synthesis of the findings of the studies suggests that there is overwhelmingly negative and critical representation of China in the Western media often depicting China as “negative Other”. However, the non-Western media on the other hand depicted China in a favorable and nuanced ways. The findings are elaborated in the light of the forces and factors at play that might shape the media narratives on China in the cross political and cultural settings.

**Key words:** China; Media framing; Representations; Image construction; Discourse

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### INTRODUCTION

“We don’t see things as they are: we see things as we are” (The Talmud in Pan, 2004)

In the Post-Cold war era, the international order commonly known as “neo-liberal order” was shaped and led by the emergence of the United States as the sole global super power. However, during the past two decades, China has emerged as a competing and contesting global power in terms of its economic and political influence with vexing challenges to West-led global order and started playing a serious role in the world affairs (Zakaria, 2008; Willnat and Luo, 2011). This growing importance of China in the arena of international affairs has attracted media attention from across the world resulting in a burgeoning of media scholarship on China. There is a widely held recognition among media scholars and critics to the argument that the news media are important ideological and political actors wielding great ideological, cultural and economic power (Poole, 2002; Gitlin, 1980) and which can shape and mold the public opinion and understanding of the social and political world through the process of framing (Reese, 2001; Liss, 2002). Furthermore, given the pivotal significance of the news media in the world politics, scholars have argued that the news media have the ability to “move and shake governments” toward a particular direction in foreign policy making process (Cohen, 1994: 9; Robinson, 2001) through the framing process of inclusion and exclusion certain aspects of issues and events in order to “render a particular understating, explaining and making sense of events” (Entman, 1991: 7).

With its growing influence, China has been critical to its global media imageries as unfavorable images of China could undermine its global leadership. China has consistently voiced that the Western media has “demonized China” (Ying, 2008). Do the literature on media images of China support these arguments raised by China? The present study aims to delve into the

representation of China in the global media narratives regarding its imageries, its rising power and its economic interventions in certain parts of the world. Specifically, it aims to provide how China has been represented in the global media spheres. To that end, the studies examine the media representations of China by providing an overview of the major studies and their findings on media imageries of China in both Western and non-Western media systems. The study thus aims to add to the theoretical literature by probing the similarities and differences regarding the representations of China in two seemingly different political and cultural systems of the world.

## MEDIA AND THE POWER OF THE REPRESENTATIONS

Images of nations and countries are the product of a complex historical process involving the interplay of many factors including the political, economic and social realities of a particularly country or nation, their diplomatic relations with other countries, and their standing in the global economic and political spheres as well as the mediated and symbolic representations in arenas of media and popular cultures (Peng, 2004). According to Nimmo and Savage (1976, p.8) image is a “human construct imposed on an array of perceived attributes projected by an object, event or person”. Among the various forces that shape our views in the post-modern world, the news media are said to play pivotal role in constructing images of the social and political world including nations and societies through the process of framing and meaning constructions. Emphasizing significance the notions of representations and imageries by the news media, Stuart Hall (1997) notes:

...that representations are images, descriptions, explanations and frames for understanding what the world is and why and how it works in particular ways...the media's main functions is to produce meaning and represent the reality. (p.3)

Media make a nation real and tangible by relaying to the receivers a range of images, symbols and meanings about events and issues including nations and societies about which the audiences have little firsthand experience. Thus in forming our images and beliefs about the world of international affairs which reside out of the contours of the common citizens, our reliance on the media representations is emphasized. Nevertheless, not only the common folk but equally the policymaker and diplomats of countries get much of their cues from the news media as major sources of information about the political world (Cohen, 1963; Zhang, 2010). Some scholars have even argued that the notion of nation is itself a symbolic concept or what Anderson (1991, p.6) calls an “imagined community”. Others have argued that the power of media lies in the meaning making about the social and political

world (Orgad, 2012). In the arena of global politics and media and foreign policy, the news media are believed to be important organs of the national government in articulating the national agendas and their dissemination on the one hand, and acting as a government instrument in promoting and protecting the national interests and perspectives of the governments on the other hand (see Chang, 1988; Cohen, 1994; Singh, 2015 among others). In the case of the United States for instance, various studies have shown that the news media narratives on foreign affairs including the China-US relations were in congruent with the official policy narratives (Dorogi, 2001; Lee, 2002; Lee *et al.*, 2001; Lee *et al.*, 2011; Chang, 1989). There is a general agreement among scholars of international communication that the media produced images about countries inform, shape and contribute to people's understanding or miss-understanding of the countries covered (McNelly & Izcaray, 1986). Such representations of countries and nations and their media imaginaries argued to having important influence on the political, economic and cultural relations between nations (Kevin, 1987).

Studies have noted that ideological persuasions of media organizations, national interests of the countries and nationalism and ethnocentricism, cultural/ geography proximity, and the positioning of a country in the international community are powerful factors shaping the media discourse on foreign affairs including the images of countries (e.g. Peng, 2004; Pan *et al.*, 2001; Lee & Yang, 1996; Akhvan-Majid & Ramaprasad, 2000; He, 2002; Edelman, 1993). China- geographically distant, cultural and political unique and ideological a different has remained mystery for decades with varying images across the social and political settings. In recent history, the primary means through which images of China are constructed are by its own national self-image through the domestic representations of China aimed at its own people. However, much of the global images which are available to the global audiences are portrayed by outside global forces particularly the global news media. The focus of the current study is to understand the representations of China in the global media specifically in the Western and non-Western media. As a part of the larger project, the current study provides with a brief account of the media representations of China in international media spheres. What follows is a brief theoretical overview of the representations of China in the Western and non-Western media discourse.

## REPRESENTATION OF CHINA IN THE WESTERN MEDIA

The Western imageries of China are located both in historical and contemporary times. It is beyond the scope of the study to distill the representation of China

in both contexts; instead the focus of the current study will be more on the recent imageries of China appeared in the Western media narratives. Some of the historical imageries of China in the Western popular cultures have appeared as 'exotic', 'fabulous', 'Yellow Peril', 'unscrupulous', 'cruel', 'despotic', 'devious', and 'inscrutable' and many other stereotypes (see Jespersen, 1996; Spencer, 1998; Mawdsley, 2008 among others). In recent times although the images of China have shifted from being 'unscrupulous' to a rising power, yet the dominant media representations of China remain unfavorable and often negative. Peng (2004) using the quantitative analysis as methodology and framing parading as a framework explored the representations of China in two major elite newspapers of the US namely the *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* and concluded that although the coverage on China during 1996 and 2001 increased significantly, yet the overall image of China remained unfavorable and negative. In a similar vein using the qualitative textual analysis and framing theory, Golan and Lukito (2015) have argued that the framing of China's rise in the *New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* from 2011 to 2013 framed China as a global power yet undermined by the structural limitations and a direct threat to the US foreign policy interests. The study of Stone and Xiao (2007) in their content analysis of the US news magazines *Time*, *US News*, *World Report* and *Newsweek* from 1984 to 1999 revealed that after the break of the Soviet Union in 1991, China got substantially more US media coverage than before. However, the overall tone of the US media remained negative overtime. Numerous other studies have found the increasing global media attention to China. Spark (2010) in British newspapers namely the *Financial Times*, *Sun* and the *Daily Express*, Stone and Xiao (2007) in their study of US magazines reporting on China found increasing amount and similar patterns in the media coverage of China with an overall negative media tone toward China. In similar ways, studies from the UK context have shown that the China coverage in *Financial Times*, *The Economist*, and the *International Herald Tribune* between 1989 to 2005 increased arguably due to the increasing number of correspondents working in China (see also Zhang, 2010). Even the representations of China in the global Television remained limited to issues of human right and internal coherence. Willnat and Luo (2011) in their global Television coverage of China have revealed that the coverage focused on the politics, human right issues more and less on the cultural aspects of Chinese society and that the global TV represented China in limited aspects and one-dimensional with an overall unfavorable depiction in the Western TV coverage.

Anti-communist frame seems to remain a constant frame on China in the Western media narratives particularly in the US media. Some studies have shown

that in the western media, the framing and image of China changed according to the changes in their political relations. In a study of *New York Times* coverage of Nixon's China visit in 1971, Wang (1991) compared it with the student's demonstration of Tiananmen Square in 1989. The study found that during the Nixon trip China was depicted as "good socialist country that was vested with cultural heritage and historical sites" (p.61). On the other hand the student demonstration marked a return to the dominated anti-communist frame, "emphasizing the confrontation between the pro-democratic, pro-change and college students and the corrupt, incompetent and unyielding communist regimes" (p. 59). Even reporting on the Fourth UN Conference and the NGO Forum in Beijing, the American press focused more on China as a communist nation and used the anti-communist frame more visibly and lesser focus was given to the goals of the conference (Akhwan-Majid & Ramaprasad, 2000; Majid & Ramaprasad, 1998). Wu (2006) in a comparative study of media framing of HIV/AIDS in China as covered in the Associated Press and Xinhua News Agency found that both the selected news outlets constructed that issue in strikingly different ways. While the Xinhua News Agency constructed a positive and favorable image of Chinese government in handling the issue, the Associated Press on the other hand framed China as "dishonest" and "oppressive" and "incompetent" in dealing with issues of public concerns (see also Luther and Zhou, 2004). Goodman (1999) conducted a study on news stories of China in the *Washington Post* and *The New York Times* between 1985 to 1995 revealed similar findings of negative representation of China with more coverage on conflict and violence within the country. Other studies from the Western media context have concluded similar findings that the US media mainly focused on human rights issues and even framed China through the anti-communist frames. For instance a 10-year content analysis of the elite US press from 1998 to 1997 Li and Cyr's (1998) have found that the *New York Times*, focused more on the human rights abuses in China although the coverage on the rights issues declined in the 1990s arguably due to the improvement in the US-China trade relations. Studies have also shown the anti-communist frame is often employed in the Western media discourses on China. In comparative analysis of the US news coverage of a students' movement in China and South Korea in the 1989 and 1980 respectively, Koblan *et al.* (1992) have identified anti-China/ anti-communist frames more prevalent in the US elite press with framing the actions of the Chinese government as unjustified, illegitimate and repressive state actions; while Korean government and its actions against the protesting students were framed as a legitimate response to the threat posed by a "rebellious insurrection" (see also Akhwan-Majid & Ramaprasad, 2000; 1998).



In a recent study on China discourse in the political rhetoric and news in US media pertaining to three crucial areas namely China- US relations, currency valuation, cyber espionage and East China Sea disputes, Ooi and D'arcangelis (2018) have argued that both in the political rhetoric and media narratives employed Orientalist narratives and constructed China as a "potential enemy Other" posing threat to the US interests. Other studies have revealed similar findings that the China framing in the major US news media is driven by anti-communist ideology and is often presented within the limited frames of human rights abuses and anti-Chinese government frames (Huang & Fahmy; 2013; Guo *et al.*, 2012; Wu, 2006). Few studies however have revealed more nuanced and diverse representation of China in the Western media in recent times. In recent times, some studies have shown that the western media coverage about China has become more diverse covering many aspects of Chinese society including culture, science and technology, domestic economics, education, human interest stories, sports and the changing dynamics of Chinese society than merely focusing on politics or human rights issues (see Zhang & Cameron, 2003). In the British media contexts and China representations, studies have found that the newspapers overwhelmingly represented China using the framework of Orientalism vis-à-vis China's economic engagement in the African region often as a "ruthless" and "unscrupulous" in contrast to the West as "civilizer" and "benevolent" (Mawdsley, 2008; Wei, 2015; Tan, 2014 ).

## REPRESENTATION OF CHINA IN NON-WESTERN MEDIA

As aforementioned the predominant theoretical literature on China deals with the imageries of China in the Western media, in recent times studies have delved into the representations of China beyond the Western media. These studies have explored China's representations in the Global North particularly the increasing interventions of China in the African regions in the spheres of economic, media and cultural realms and have revealed favorable and nuanced imageries of China in contrast to the predominantly reductive, monolithic and orientalized images in the Western media. While examining China's economic engagement in African and its media depictions, Nassanga and Makara (2016) have noted that contrary to the predominantly anti-China framing in the western media, the perceptions about China in the news media and among the journalists were largely positive or neutral, however a considerable part of the coverage also seemed to be critical about the transparency issues surrounding China's business enterprises. Dwelling on the South African media perspective, Wasserman (2012) has argued that China's presence in Africa cannot be put into the binaries of 'negative' or 'positive' rather could

be termed as cautiously optimistic that suggest that the media stand towards China was more balanced rather than what is generally perceived (see also Wasserman & Morales, 2017; Wasserman, 2016 on Chinese media impact on the local media of South Africa). Ojo (2015) while examining the media narratives on China's presence in the socioeconomic milieu of Africa in two African diasporic magazines has found that the *New African* covered China-African ties from multi-dimensions with an overall positive depiction of the relations and China's presence in Africa, in contrast the *African Business* provided a more contextual and nuanced coverage of China and African relations. Ojo has argued that various factors could be accounted for varied and nuanced media framing of China's engagement with Africa including the socioeconomic factors, cultural norms, beats of the journalists and the socioeconomic standing of the readers of the news media. Other studies have noted that Africans generally see China in much less negative light than often being portrayed by the Western media. Wasserman's (2012) study on coverage of China in South African media, has dispelled the notion of China's presence in Africa as often viewed in stark binary of 'positive' or 'negative' light, 'exploitative', 'predatory force' or 'development partner'. In contrast, the media coverage of China's presence Africa was found to be more balanced and diverse which Wasserman (2012) has termed as cautiously optimistic in a stark contradiction to the Western media's portrayal of China in Africa in negative light (Rebol, 2010; Rossouw et al., 2014 as cited in Nassanga & Makara, 2016). In a similar vein, Hirvensaloor (2012) in a comparative study of media coverage of Chinese aid and cooperation with African countries found a similar framing of Africa as more nuanced or neutral to the overwhelmingly negative images in the Western media. Studies have noted that the internal circumstances of the respective countries of Africa could influence the Chinese narratives of development and cooperation (Grimm, 2014). Keeping in view the phenomenal increase of Chinese engagement in Africa a study conducted by Wang and Elliot (2014) has revealed that China has gained substantial goodwill among the people of Africa, On the basis of their surveys and field studies to examine how the China's presence in eight African countries namely Ghana, Botswana, Kenya, Namibia, Madagascar, Tanzania, Zimbabwe and South Africa, these researchers have found diverse and nuanced perceptions among the local scholars and practitioners ranging from love to a bit suspicion. They concluded that China is being perceived as a beneficial business partner, donor contributing significantly for the economic development of the host countries. Intriguingly, how China is being represented in the symbolic culture of Asian and Latin American countries has hardly been explored yet exploring it would provide us a with a

broader picture of representations of China. Future studies could embark on representations of China in South Asian contexts like India and Pakistan that could further add to the existing theoretical literature on representations of China.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Despite the increasing global standing of China, the global media tends to cast China in negative light particularly in the Western media. Thus the anti-communist frame as the theoretical literature reveals tends to remain a dominant framework through which China is represented in the Western media discourses. On the other hand, the representation of China in the non-Western media spheres tends to be more nuanced and often positive. These findings suggest that the representations of countries like China vary from one cultural and political system to other. Various possible explanations could be accounted for the contrast in the imageries of China in global media spheres. First, the international news is a social constructed version of reality wherein various internal and external forces interplay that shape the media narratives including the ideology, national interests of countries, ethnocentrism and cultural and geographic proximities (Akhavan-Majid & Ramaprasad, 2000; Lee et al., 1999; Sreberny-Mohammadi; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1984). Secondly, media constructions are shaped by the economic, cultural and political realities of societies within which the media are embedded. Thus the cultural and ideological differences between the West and China might have influenced the Western media narratives on China. Lack of understanding of the local cultural realities on the part of the foreign journalists, lack of enough firsthand knowledge of the country being reported and the “tourists journalists” who landed on the foreign countries and start writing the story without understanding enough the local realities and context (Louw, 2004) could be yet another explanatory factor for the predominantly negative imageries of China. The journalistic culture and practices are noted to be influencing the media narratives on international news making. As Archetti (2010) has revealed that journalistic culture and editorial policies of each media. Finally, culture seems to be a powerful force in creating knowledge and meaning constructions about the social and political world in each society. As Foucault (1980) argued that individuals are not instrumental in any fundamental way in creating meaning; instead they reproduce and reinforce the cultural codes that control the social understanding. How a news story is framed therefore is an embedded way of expressing ideas already deeply ingrained in the ethos of a culture. It is the culture that determines what kind of discourse is acceptable in a given society and culture. This notion is equally true for the media constructions of the world including nations

and societies. Consequently, as Schudson (1995) notes, “the press follows more than leads and reinforces more than challenges conventional wisdom” (p. 76). Thus the global media constructions of China can be understood as assemble of the larger culture within which the news media are embedded and that the media imageries are outcomes of larger frameworks of societies.

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