Introduction

Media narratives of China’s future

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Welcome to the inaugural issue of Global Media and China, an academic journal that is committed to deepening the understanding of the important role that China plays in the world, and the impact that the global media system has on shaping public attitudes, values, and perceptions. The journal will bring together leading scholars from both inside and outside China to discuss the important issues affecting China and the world while also contributing to the development of new communication theories that are more sensitive to the differences in cultures and media systems. We are deeply honored by the invitation to edit this first issue devoted to the topic of mediated narratives of China’s future. We chose this topic because China’s future will have profound consequence for the future of the planet.

Never before in history has any nation experienced such profound social, economic, and political changes as those China has realized in the past few decades since Deng Xiaoping opened the country to foreign investors and adopted a market economy. Despite its rich cultural and philosophical traditions, China had for centuries been beset by military conflicts, political insurrections, social inequalities, and famines. The rise of New China in 1949 swept aside many of the old traditions and ruling families and introduced radical reforms in China, but the nation remained mired in poverty. It suffered through the terrors of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, which caused China to fall still further behind the developed world. But Deng’s reforms capitalized on the nation’s greatest asset, its hardworking people. China quickly attracted investments from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, the United States, and Western Europe as companies built factories that created market-place advantages through the lower costs of production. Soon entrepreneurial Chinese business leaders and state-owned enterprises also began to modernize existing factories, reform the operating structures, and reinforce the market orientation to further grow the economy. Huge investments were made on infrastructure and on urban development projects, and growth fueled a remarkable increase in both the country’s gross domestic product (GDP) and in people’s living standards. Pulling more than 800 million people out of poverty in only three decades, China created its own miracle. Yet this growth created other new challenges including widening income inequality, a looming environmental catastrophe, and the social disruption caused by the uprooting of millions of rural immigrants now taking up residence in expanding megacities. These problems have challenged the government and society at large and created uncertainty about the future.

As China has developed, it has dramatically raised its importance in the family of nations, and it recently became the world’s second largest economy. Today, China enjoys a huge trade surplus, and it has become a relatively rich nation that bankrolls other nations through the purchase of foreign bonds. Its sheer size allows companies that focus primarily on domestic customers to mimic
international corporations that often become market leaders. Its communication, journalism, and entertainment enterprises employ hundreds of thousands of people and generate significant profits. China has also moved up in the manufacturing supply chain, and while the manufacture of relatively simple goods such as clothing, shoes, toys, and cheap electronic goods continues, today Chinese manufacturers produce cars, computers, aircraft, pharmaceuticals, bullet trains, and space transport vehicles. Chinese companies are busy acquiring large overseas companies including meat packing companies in Virginia, office towers and apartment complexes in New York, Los Angeles, and London and have now set their sites on some of the world’s largest hotel chains. Chinese investors are also making major acquisitions in the US media industries, including film studios and even theater chains. China has also dramatically increased its investments in Africa and has pursued large infrastructure development projects as well as small family-owned commercial trading enterprises. China has also made significant new investments in higher education. China’s universities are brimming with talent and are surrounded by research and innovation start-ups. With such investments, China hopes to inspire in its younger generation a genuine entrepreneurial spirit that will create Chinese Silicon Valleys. In addition, some 400,000 Chinese students have gone abroad to pursue their studies, and in the process are creating still new opportunities for China to engage the world and for the world to come to know China and its people.

Despite this economic surge—and arguably because of its rapidity—China today also faces extremely challenging problems as it looks to the future. China’s leaders rightly assert that despite producing many wealthy elites and a growing middle class, China remains a developing country as numerous pockets of poverty persist, especially in rural areas. Like many large nations, it has ethnic strife and regional disparities. In addition, taking on the role of the world’s factory has led to serious air, water, and land pollution that threatens public health, shortens lives, and will be expensive to remedy. The current leadership has also identified corruption as a pervasive problem that threatens the stability of the nation and the legitimacy of the governing Communist Party. In addition, China’s rise has produced anxieties in other nations who worry that China’s growing economic power and increasing military capabilities might threaten their own interests.

China, however, remains a geographic and cultural phenomenon of intense natural beauty, numerous historic monuments, poetic and theatrical mastery, artistic prowess in all creative endeavors, and a land renowned for its ethnic and regional culinary expertise and diversity. Its array of urban architectural gems is unparalleled and has helped lead an explosion in both domestic and international tourism. Even for those who have never entered its physical borders, China is increasingly a key subject of interest and intrigue. In a wide variety of stories in most any country, China, in some form or personage, is now the headline. Globalizing processes have inexorably intertwined China’s future with that of other nation states, environments, cultures, institutions, and systems. Whether the issue is its domestic human rights, its role in the global financial market, governmental controls over the Internet, its ability to broker peace agreements between nations, its efforts to reform its economy, its ambitious territorial claims in the East and South China Seas, or its newly announced focus on “One Belt, One Road,” China has captured the world’s attention. China’s gifts and deficits are large and, in some cases, the most extreme in the world today, and this raises serious questions about its future, and without question, the future of the rest of the world.

The essays in this Special Issue all include studies of media narratives that shape public understanding and imagined visions for China’s future. These studies consider how China and China’s aspirations are reported in the legacy news media, social media and represented through soft power efforts. China has undertaken significant efforts to expand its soft power and burnish its global image through an expansion of its overseas news publications and broadcasting efforts, through
developments of its entertainment industry, and through athletic contests, public exhibitions, and other media spectacles. The studies in this issue will consider how stories about China’s future shape possibilities, locate constraints, and suggest directions, regarding China’s place in the world and the desirability of alternative policy outcomes.

In the first essay, “China and Climate Change: Strategic Narratives of the Future,” Patricia Riley, Rong Wang, Yuehan Wang, and Lingyan Feng of the Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, University of Southern California, consider how social media users in China are communicating about the impending climate crisis. As has already been noted, one of China’s most vexing problems is its environment. In its race to develop its economy and raise the living conditions of its population, China made choices that have had devastating results for its own environment and that imperil the world at large. Riley, Wang, Wang, and Feng undertake a critical content analysis of the narratives and stories that emerge in posts on Chinese language social media websites to better understand how the Chinese government, Chinese media outlets, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and ordinary citizens are communicating about climate change and related environmental issues. The paper takes a strategic communication perspective and examines how the interplay of social media messaging from these various sources contributes to a coproduction of narratives that give voice to an array of different stakeholders representing often-competing interests. Individuals, government officers and spokespersons, businesses, international agencies, and other organizations see themselves as key stakeholders in this controversy as they create and share ever-evolving stories and develop their own visions and hopes for the future.

The study finds that the social media activity is heavily driven by events (e.g. major conferences or weather-related happenings) and also by celebrity appearances or statements (e.g. Leonard DiCaprio mentioning the climate crisis in his Oscar Award acceptance speech). The Chinese posts are then compared to Twitter messages coming from social media users outside of China to assess the degree to which the social media discourse in China resembles or differs from that in the United States. It may of course be easier to create global action to prevent a climate catastrophe, if the citizens of the nations that produce the most carbon dioxide come to imagine a shared future that binds them to act in a coherent and unified manner. This article suggests that many of these voices are engaged in narratives that seek to create a win–win discourse for continued economic growth in conjunction with environmental sustainability.

In the second paper, “Public Interactives, Soft Power, and China’s Future at and beyond the 2010 Shanghai World Expo,” Cara Wallis, Texas A&M University, Ann Basalmo, University of Texas, Dallas, take a close look at the Shanghai World Expo as a site for imagining China’s future and using narratives of that future to influence both domestic and international audiences. They argue that the Chinese central government and the cities of Beijing and Shanghai used huge global public events such as the Olympics and the Expo to showcase their global power and respect and to buttress the legitimacy of state. The complementary yet also competitively staged events were intended to reflect the political and economic importance of the two megacities. The Olympics brought Beijing to the world, and the Expo brought the world to China.

Wallis and Basalmo argue that the Expo brought the attention of the international community and some 73 million visitors, 94% of whom were Chinese citizens, to Shanghai to witness the centrality of China’s place in the world. They argue that the event used a variety of different storytelling devices and technologies to demonstrate China’s soft power. Architecture, moving images, and scripted voices were used by national governments to explain their own cultures, traditions, and economic opportunities to the Chinese. In some cases, the Chinese government underfoot the bill for building the exhibit spaces for these nations, of course, but who was to care? The Shanghai
Expo boldly declared that China had fully arrived as a major power on the world scene, and that the global future flowed from Beijing to the rest of the world.

In the third essay in the issue, Zhan Zhang of the Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism at the University of Southern California and Institute of Media and Journalism at Università della Svizzera Italiana revises a chapter from her postdoctoral research project about the mediated interdependence between Europe and China. The essay, “A Narrative Future for Europe-China Economic Relations After the Financial Crisis,” examines newspaper coverage about China’s economy and European–Chinese trade and economic investment policies in three leading legacy daily newspapers in Europe. The content analysis study analyzes sample news coverage in 2-week periods in 2008, 2010, 2012, and 2014 in The Times (London), Le Figaro (Paris), and Süddeutsche Zeitung (Munich).

In this study, Zhang discovers that all three dailies gave significant attention to China’s rise, but she also learns that the nature of the coverage differed both over the years sampled and in the three newspapers. In the immediate aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis, the coverage of China tended toward positive stories (especially in the French newspaper) that characterized China as an economic engine that could help soften the downturn. As China’s own economy continued to grow, however, there was a greater tendency to view China as a competitor and sometimes even as an economic threat, and many of the stories shifted to news frames that emphasized the problems that European companies faced in conducting business in China. The study also discovered that for the most part the British and German, newspapers did not frame their stories from the perspective of the European Union, but instead from the perspective of the national business and economic interests. The dominance of these news frames has consequence not only for the future of China but also for the future of the European Union.

The fourth essay examines the evolution of political ideologies in China by examining the results of a large national survey. The paper, “Mass Media, New Technology and Ideology: An Analysis of Political Trends in China,” is co-authored by Ye Lu & Yajie Chu, Fudan University, and Fei Shen, City University of Hong Kong. The study discovered that most survey respondents favored a more liberal political ideology and supported an expansion of free market reforms and a continued move toward economic globalization. These citizens also wanted additional political reforms, increased restraints placed on governmental leaders and officials, and increased opportunities for democratic deliberation and input. The paper discovered that some Chinese citizens continued to harbor an almost nostalgic longing for the stability and certainty of the more authoritarian past, including a fondness for the practices of the Cultural Revolution.

The study also reported that there were noteworthy differences in political attitudes based upon respondents’ age, place of residence (i.e. urban vs rural), access to education, political experience, and use of the Internet and social media. The study concludes that China is a nation that is somewhat susceptible to further political and ideological instability as it undergoes further economic and political reforms and as a slowing economy intensifies the potential that its future will be contested.

The fifth essay in the journal focuses on China’s deliberate strategies to develop its soft power and enhance its influence around the world. Paul S.N. Lee, from the Chinese University of Hong Kong, offers an interesting discussion of soft power theories and then undertakes a critical case study analysis of China’s efforts. The essay is entitled “Toward a Strategic Model for Enhancing National Images.” China has undertaken significant investments in enhancing its image abroad, especially through pushing its state media to reach a global audience, but neither the circulation of this official “China story” nor the Chinese propaganda model have produced significant results in improving China’s global image.
Lee’s essay considers expert opinions of soft power theory and then offers recommendations regarding how China might enhance its soft power strategy. He also acknowledges that it is conceivable that due to the challenges of global press framing—overseas media narratives often focus on human rights issues which overwhelm the possibility that China can receive favorable global press coverage—China may never win foreign audiences over to its perspective. He also noted that China’s new leader Xi Jinping has shifted China’s strategy away from assuring the world of its peaceful rise and toward the creation of a more assertive and competitive discursive power in recent years.

In the sixth essay in the issue, Hiroko Okuda of Kanto-Gaikun University in Japan examines the dominant press narratives in English language media outlets of China’s rise. The essay is entitled “China’s ‘Peaceful Rise/Peaceful Development’: A Case Study of Media Frames of the Rise of China.” Okuda is especially interested in understanding how historical analogies and metaphors (i.e. the Thucydides Trap) of past situations where a rising military and economic power challenged a dominant hegemonic power resulted in conflict.

Okuda undertakes a critical analysis of legacy print media coverage of China and discovers that even though China expends significant efforts to assure other nations that its intentions are peaceful and that it should not be seen as a military or economic threat, nonetheless, the dominant media frames in these publications suggest otherwise. Okuda warns that the result of such media frames could become a self-fulfilling prophecy where conflict is taken as all but inevitable and that as a result government policies and mediated public discourse may serve to increase rather than mitigate global anxieties.

The last section of the Special Issue is devoted to a roundtable discussion entitled “Learning from Crises and Managing the Future.” We invited three distinguished communication scholars: Monroe Price, Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania; Jack Qiu, Chinese University of Hong Kong; and Fei Jiang, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences to participate. We asked each of the respondents to answer a few questions regarding how the Chinese government and Chinese media responded to the explosion at the chemical depot and warehouse in Tianjin in August of 2015, and the rapid decline in value in the Shanghai Stock Market in 2015–2016. The discussion proved highly informative and hopefully will provide some lessons learned for the management of future crises.

We are especially appreciative and wish to thank Patricia Riley and Jay Wang who served as reviewers and provided us with very useful feedback on some of these essays.