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A new world of spectacle in the post-cold war era: China's central television and its significant other, 1992–2006

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ABSTRACT

As the Chinese society is increasingly looking outward, such official media outlets as China's Central Television have been adapting their international news production to the bend of marketization. A longitudinal content analysis of its flagship news program Network News from 1992 to 2006 found that although the quantity of international news hardly echoed such gear changes, the news' timeliness increased remarkably. Consistent with previous findings about the distinctions between the conceptual devices of foreign news and foreign policy news, the focus of CCTV's foreign policy news coverage on the U.S. and East Asia indicated China's regionalized foreign policy design, while the increasing soft news in its foreign news coverage implied CCTV's inclination to tap the audience demands. A further examination of the U.S.—the longstanding “significant other” in CCTV's survey of global spectacle—echoed the Chinese bifurcated views of the U.S. in its pursuit of “peaceful rise”.

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1. Introduction

Since China Central Television (CCTV) launched its global channel in 2000, the rise of China through international communication has become not only visible, but also formidable. The China brand can no longer be ignored, not necessarily because the “Beijing consensus” has emerged as a viable alternative to the “Washington consensus” in the form of political and economic governance, but because CCTV's global communication has turned out to be a realization of what [Tunstall \(1977, p. 63\)](#) predicted in the late 1970s when he argued that China would be the only country “to construct a new box” to break away from the domination of an American built TV box. It has been a long process of rationalization in the Weberian sense that has transfigured the institutional character of CCTV either as a domestic or foreign player in the production and dissemination of news about China and the world in the global arena.

Given its staunch position of anti-imperialism and anti-hegemony in international affairs since the 1950s, it is theoretically difficult, if not unconvincing, to argue that China's global communication ambition is a manifestation of its imperialistic and hegemonic design to carve out a sphere of influence in the flows of news and views across national borders. Although [Tunstall \(2008\)](#) hinted, but did not elaborate, the emergence of national media, such as those in China and India, represents a form of media nationalism that has contributed to the decline of U.S. supremacy in both the form and content of international communication. In the case of China, the theoretical and practical rationale of media nationalism does not appear from

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nowhere. It can be traced to the two separate, but intertwined roles the Chinese national media, particularly CCTV, play in the theater of international communication: one to bring the world to China and the other to take China to the world. The dual functions are explicitly tied to the interplay between how China sees itself and what foreign/international news may help shape that image.

Like other countries, foreign news in China is not completely “foreign” in that it tends to be domesticated in some way, with its proportion being contingent on the extent to which the audience is perceived to be interested in the world out there. Although foreign news has been considered as an “endangered species” in the U.S. and many other parts of the world (Emery, 1989; Moore, 2010), China has shown a robust interest in international reporting. For example, a nation-wide survey in 2002 showed that international news was of most interest to 63.2 percent of Chinese residents among all aspects of news (Zhou, 2003). No sector has borne witness to the Chinese people’s appetite for international news more patently than television. More than 80 percent of Chinese residents received international news via TV (Zhou, 2003). Despite the burgeoning Internet and social media platforms in China, TV remains hugely influential, serving as a prime source of information for the public to know about the outside world.

Because of the state’s authority and domination in the form and content of news in China, the significance of TV, especially CCTV, as the main carrier of international news raises both theoretical and practical questions as to how foreign spectacles are constructed on the Chinese window on the world. Theoretically, to paraphrase Schumpeter (1942), there is an understandable relationship between the rise of nationalism in China and its coverage of international news since the end of Cold War. Media nationalism in the form of CCTV’s global presence takes this symbiotic configuration to a rational culmination. Practically, against the backdrop of the sole purveyor of foreign landscape, the world as sketched on China’s national TV network represents the sort of spectacles that are deemed, by implication, acceptable by the powers that be and thus knowable to the Chinese viewers. Examination of such coverage therefore helps determine how and why the world is presented in China the way it has been.

One of the major scholarly foci in the international news on television is the balance of coverage and the value of diversity; a biased presentation of the world spectacle might particularly impact viewers and shape their world view (Gunter, 1997). Not all such international news is treated equivalently, however (Franks, 2005). Various types of preferences have been identified in the making of international news, including geographic, topical, and source propensity (Kirat & Weaver, 1985). While previous research has mostly examined this subject in the U.S. context, far fewer inquiries have involved the patterns and underlying nature of foreign news coverage on television in China. From an epistemological point of view, such paucity of scholarly attention leaves a gap in the literature regarding how and why the world might be perceived from different perspectives. Given CCTV being the centerpiece of China’s broadcasting industry, our study zooms into its international coverage and seeks to pick up where Warren (1988) had left off in his investigation of Chinese national television news. As Warren (1988, p. 232) pointed out, because “China is in a state of flux,” a “longitudinal” study of its news output and process might provide insights into “how the nation’s priorities are changing”. Since its opening to the outside world in the early 1980s, China has undergone dramatic changes in many respects, including the state-owned media apparatus. The increasing market force has propelled the transformation of its television sector from a primitive propaganda apparatus into a profit-seeking marketplace under the watchful eye of the government.

CCTV is widely regarded as an “archetypical” state/commercial hybrid that has come to prevail in the Chinese media system (Zhu, 2012). While the international news making in the U.S. is primarily driven by public interests, commercial profits, and audience taste, the Chinese counterpart functions as boundary-spanning intermediaries responding to the needs of both the government and the public (Hong, 1998; Polunbaum, 2013). With competition from the profit-making commercial media, a limited pluralism as a result of journalistic rationality is emerging in the newsrooms of CCTV despite the continued presence of censorship. Xu (2013) observed that state-owned media capitals have achieved rapid growth and maintained their dominance with the introduction of market-oriented policies in the broadcasting sector. While the globalizing pressures and market opportunities have brought positive changes to the Chinese television industries, substantial regulatory hurdles continue to persist at all levels (Curtin, 2007). The tension between the state and market logics therefore creates a media landscape that has its roots in the legal-rational process unleashed by the Chinese Communist Party’s pragmatism following the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union around 1989. This study thus attempts to fill the gap through a longitudinal analysis of the performance of CCTV against the opposing demands by the audience and the government over time in ways that elucidate the Chinese prisms of the post-Cold War world and the significant other therein. The assumption is, as a rising power, China’s position in the realm of communication among nations can be best understood through its own window on the world.

2. Literature review

2.1. *The domestic culture filter in international news*

Media scholars have grouped determinants of international news into two perspectives (Chang, Shoemaker, & Bredlinger, 1987): event-oriented and context-oriented. The first approach examines foreign events that are selected as newsworthy, including micro-level social psychological factors (e.g. journalists’ professional norms and values) associated with foreign nation visibility in the news (Chang & Lee, 1992; Peterson, 1979). The second approach looks into macro-level variables external to the media per se, such as a foreign country’s national traits and its level of trade with the home nation (Robinson

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