

STRATEGIC NARRATIVES AND NEW REALITY

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Strategic Narratives in China's Bid for Discursive Hegemony¹

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Abstract

Power in international relations implies not only the possession of outstanding material resources, but also the ability to propose and popularize attractive ideas, values, and norms and thus control discourse. Scholars note that during the presidency of Xi Jinping, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has joined the struggle for discursive hegemony. This change in China's foreign policy requires systematic study, for which the concept of a strategic narrative has analytical value. As defined by A. Miskimmon, B. O'Loughlin and L. Roselle, strategic narratives "are a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors." This article provides an overview of strategic narratives as a conceptual lens to study international relations, summarizes the existing research of strategic narratives in general and regarding the Chinese case in particular, and suggests directions for future studies. The core idea of Chinese strategic narratives is that the PRC is a new type of great power that is capable of changing the existing unjust and conflict-prone world order. At the same time, China does not propose to radically revise the international system—it portrays the world as divided into great powers and the rest. Overall, China's strategic narratives are characterized by a duality that reflects the complexity of China's foreign policy interests and its attempt to expand the field of opportunity. Aimed to support different agendas, narratives include references both to the "century of humiliation" and the more recent successful experience of China's modernization. The content of the narratives suggests that China is mainly trying to attract the developing countries of the Global South and thus form its own group of followers. However, there is significant variation in communication processes, namely the formation, projection, and reception of China's strategic narratives. The study of this variation, as well as the analysis of the effectiveness of Chinese narratives, is a promising direction for future research.

Keywords: strategic narratives, discourse power, discursive hegemony, China's foreign policy, Belt and Road Initiative, discourse

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Introduction

Power in international relations implies not only the possession of outstanding material resources but also the ability to propose and popularize attractive ideas, values, and norms and thus control discourse [Ikenberry, Kupchan, 1990; Risse, 2011]. In pursuit of discursive hegemony, actors use so-called strategic narratives, defined as “the set of interrelated stories forming certain images of past, present and future, designed to manage the perception of a key audience and aimed at achieving strategic goals” [Bogdanov, 2019, p. 148]. In the long term, strategic narratives are expected to influence an audience, its interests, identity, and understanding of how international relations function and thus shape its behaviour.

Scholars note that under Xi Jinping’s rule, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has joined the battle for discursive hegemony [Denisov, 2020]. In his speeches, Xi stresses that it is necessary “to tell China’s story well” (*jianghao zhongguo gushi*) and to develop and spread Chinese narratives and concepts to promote better understanding of the PRC and its outlook on international relations [Qiushi, 2021]. The soft power strategy, which previously was mostly aimed at creating an attractive image of the PRC, has been supplemented by attempts to increase so-called discourse power (*huayu quan*) [Yang, 2020]. The PRC not only tries to transform or alter liberal norms but also aims to develop and popularize its own ideas, norms, and standards [Denisov, 2020; Denisov, Zuenko, 2022].

This article reviews existing scholarship on China’s strategic narratives, which contributes both to the research of China’s discourse power and the role of narratives in international relations. Such an analytical lens is valuable because it shifts attention from research on the PRC’s international image or particular Chinese ideas to the identification of broader narratives that offer new interpretations of the international system, international norms, and China’s place in global politics. Moreover, apart from examining contents of the discourse, such a conceptual approach implies studying other aspects of strategic communication, for example, how the PRC constructs narratives, how and where they are projected, and how other actors of international relations react to them.

The Rise of the PRC and Discursive Hegemony

The rise of the PRC and its influence on the future of the liberal order has attracted a lot of scholarly attention [Makaricheva et al., 2019]. Research about the role of ideas and discourse in these processes can be grouped as follows. First, many researchers focus on the PRC’s discursive engagement with existing international norms and institutions [Grachikov, Xu, 2022], as they are considered a cornerstone of the modern international system. For example, China’s approach to global governance institutions and norms regulating the world economy and human rights, which were created by western countries after World War II, has been thoroughly studied [Kinzelbach, 2012; Yang, 2020].

Second, the PRC’s soft power strategy and public diplomacy are two other widely studied topics. Research in this field discusses various aspects of China’s policy; it evaluates its public diplomacy resources and tools (such as Confucius Institutes or “wolf warriors” diplomacy on Twitter), assesses the effectiveness of China’s soft power strategy, and considers the obstacles that Beijing has to overcome [Lee, 2016]. Although research in this group touches upon China’s actions to shape its discursive representation in foreign countries, narratives do not get much attention.

Third, the study of China’s discourse power is another relatively new direction of research. Scholars debate the reasons for the PRC’s growing interest in discourse power, outline major

elements of this Chinese concept [Denisov, Zuenko, 2022; Zhao, 2016], and compare China's discourse power to the discourse or normative power of other actors, such as the European Union (EU) [Alekseenkova, 2020].

Finally, in another related group of studies, authors use the concept of strategic narratives to analyze the role of discourse and communication in various spheres of China's foreign policy, from bilateral relations to its involvement in global governance. When applied to the analysis of China's rise, such an approach not only shifts the focus from China's material power to the narratives it promotes, but also examines how these narratives are used to affect a target audience's behaviour and make it possible for China to reach its strategic goals [Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, Roselle, 2013].

Strategic Narratives: A Conceptual Framework

During the last 15 years, international relations scholars have focused on narratives that actors construct and promote on the world stage. Geoffrey Roberts [2006] called this process the "narrative turn in international relations." Within this approach, international relations are viewed as a battle of narratives in which each actor tries to promote its preferred version of reality.

Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, and Laura Roselle have made a major contribution to the study of strategic narratives and their role in shaping world order. As they put it, political actors use strategic narratives "to construct a shared meaning of the past, present and future of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors" [2013, p. 3]. What makes strategic narratives different from discourse is that the former has a particular strategic goal, that is, it is aimed at managing other actors' expectations and actions. According to the classification suggested by Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle, there are three types of strategic narrative. First, there are system narratives, which are about the nature, structure, and transformations of the international system that define relations between the actors in this system. A classic example of a system narrative is the Cold War narrative. Second, there are identity narratives, which are about particular actors, their interests, reputation, reliability, role, and place in the system. Finally, there are issue narratives, which focus on particular policies and norms in international relations, such as human rights or nonproliferation of nuclear weapons [Ibid., pp. 10–1].

Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle [Ibid., p. 11] introduced the following stages in the communication process associated with strategic narratives: formation, projection, reception, and feedback. When studying the formation of strategic narratives, scholars often examine the role of various actors in this process, which mainly includes governing elites, mass media, and epistemic communities [Zhang, Orbie, 2019]. In the studies of the projection of strategic narratives, attention is paid to the infrastructure employed to spread the needed information. The battle for discursive hegemony includes attempts both to control already existing infrastructure and to create a new one. Finally, the question of the audience's reception of strategic narratives is another important research topic. A narrative is considered effective if it changes an audience's behaviour, for example, if it alters another country's policy [van Noort, Colley, 2020]. However, it is often very difficult to prove a causal link or isolate a narrative's influence from other possible explanatory factors.

Nevertheless, scholars suggest that the following factors make strategic narratives effective. First, a strategic narrative has to be coherent. Second, it needs to address "rational" material interests of the audience as well as reflect myths that are important for their collective identity [van Noort, Colley, 2020]. For example, Xu Jinming and Cao Dejun stated that the conflicting sides involved in territorial disputes in the South China Sea, the PRC among them, draw upon

historical memory in their strategic narratives [2022]. Moreover, it should be noted that the strategic narratives of some actors are often contested or challenged by other actors to generate a particular short-term behavioural response or “a long-term discursive shift” [Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, Roselle, 2013, p. 251–2].

System Narratives of the PRC

According to Edward Yi Yang [2020], the PRC’s system narrative justifies building a “community of common destiny for mankind,” a concept that was first mentioned in Hu Jintao’s report in 2012 but became associated with China’s new foreign policy approach under Xi. China’s system narrative portrays the existing international system as unfair, in which some actors can break established rules and norms without being punished and can exploit other actors [Lams et al., 2022]. Turning to history, the PRC condemns western colonial practices of the past and hints at ongoing exploitation that has to be stopped. On the one hand, China’s system narrative stresses the need to establish a new system of international relations and give an opportunity to all actors to participate in developing and benefiting from a new set of rules. On the other hand, China’s position in this system is unique. It is China that plays the role of the leader and coordinates common efforts in building such a community.

Zhang Feng demonstrated that China’s system narrative relies on the idea that great powers define the nature of the entire international system. China is not just another great power, but a Chinese great power. Its difference from the great powers of the past is that the latter gained their status in the context of a zero-sum game. As China is another type of great power, the system formed under its influence will also be different. For example, according to Zhang, one distinctive feature of China that will have an impact on the entire system is its “benevolent pacifism.” The concept of “peaceful development” introduced by Hu is also based on this idea. China’s system narrative also encompasses the principle of “harmonious inclusionism,” which resonates with the idea of the multipolar world [Zhang, 2011].

Shane Fairlie [2020], who studied narratives in China’s state-owned media and speeches made by Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leaders, came to a similar conclusion about the way China portrays its role in the international system. He argued that, apart from stressing the role of the CCP, the grand narrative is represented by the slogan “without China, there is no global prosperity.” In addition to this, Fairlie distinguished three sub-narratives: it is China that can establish a more equitable world; China is a “win-win partner;” and China is a “peace-loving nation” [Ibid., p. 230].

China’s Identity Narratives

An identity narrative is essential for any international actor, as it shapes expectations of other actors and influences behaviour of the actor itself by structuring “the range of the possible” [Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, Roselle, 2013, p. 77]. Liao Ning [2017] suggested that nationalist discourse is an important communicative device used both for domestic and international audiences to construct the identity of modern China. It includes the ideas of China’s victimhood and the historic role of the CCP in leading the country to prosperity after the “century of humiliation.” According to Liao [Ibid., p. 129], promoting these ideas, on the one hand, helps achieve social cohesion and maintain the CCP’s legitimacy, but, on the other hand, creates certain expectations about China’s international behaviour and thus undermines pragmatic foreign policy. Moreover, the victimhood discourse implicitly contradicts the idea of peaceful development, as assuming the role of a victim means juxtaposing oneself to “the other” (the

aggressor), and implicitly points to the necessity for retribution, which is at odds with the idea of peaceful and harmonious coexistence.

Lutgard Lams [2018] has also explored nationalist references in China's strategic narratives. She defined two dimensions of how the nationalistic discourse is used to construct China's identity. First, the identity narrative includes the ideas of western imperialist containment of China's development and anti-Americanism. It talks about China's moral superiority and juxtaposes the PRC with western countries that break international law and norms in pursuit of hegemony [Lams et al., 2022]. Second, the identity narrative includes the more positive idea of a nationalist revival (the Chinese dream, cultural confidence) that urges Chinese people to unite on the basis of common cultural values. Lams [2018] noted the duality in China's identity narrative, which, on the one hand, has hostile anti-western rhetoric, but, on the other hand, presents China as a benevolent and peaceful power. Moreover, China often stresses that it is the second economy in the world but simultaneously positions itself as a developing country. However, it should be noted that in the PRC, "developing country" denotes a country with particular historical, political, and cultural background that is not related to the level of its economic development [Luo, 2018].

Tabitha Rosendal's study demonstrated how China's identity narratives adjust to different international audiences. She explored China's strategic narratives in Sri Lanka and showed how Buddhism is used in China's communication. In its identity narrative, the PRC positions itself as part of Buddhist world, pointing to the fact that China and Sri Lanka have a common "Buddhist past" and a common "Buddhist destiny." Buddhism in this context is utilized as a means to juxtapose China and its "Buddhist partners" with the west, which does not share values with the Global South [Rosendal, 2022].

Issue Narratives of the PRC

As for the issue narrative of the PRC, Edward Yi Yang [2020] has compared China's strategic narratives in three global governance areas: climate change, human rights, and Internet governance. In the case of climate change, China supports existing norms and does not attempt to alter the narrative; rather, it uses its own terminology to speak about this topic. As for human rights, China challenges some existing norms, attempts to form its own narrative, and promotes ideas of particularism. In the sphere of Internet governance, norms are still being developed and China has the opportunity to take part in this process. Yang noted that, at the moment, China successfully opposes the idea of the free and open Internet and promotes the narrative of Internet sovereignty.

Pascal Abb [2021] has studied China's issue narrative about peacekeeping operations. He demonstrated that, since 2003, the concept of "developmental peace" has been the central element of China's narrative about peacekeeping. Unlike the western approach of liberal state-building as a means to stop and prevent conflicts, China's narrative suggests that socio-economic development tends to be more effective in conflict prevention. To support this idea, China points at its own recent history, emphasizing stability and success in socio-economic development, which started with the beginning of the reform and opening-up policy and was not preceded by democratization. Interestingly, such a connection between peace and development corresponds with China's narrative about human rights, that is, the idea that "the right for peace" is a "basic human right" which precedes all other rights.

The strategic narrative that accompanies China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has also attracted a lot of scholarly attention [Zeng, 2019]. For instance, Ray Silvius [2021] demonstrated that this narrative relies on two ambivalent ideas. The first idea holds that only China pos-

sesses unique necessary features, including material power and political will, which are required to lead cooperation within the BRI. Its approach, based on principles of win-win cooperation and mutual respect, allows everyone to be part of the BRI on beneficial terms. According to the second idea, the BRI is not China's own foreign policy project—it does not serve Chinese interests exclusively, but belongs to all the countries that join the BRI. Thus, this issue narrative is linked to China's system narrative that promotes the idea of mutually beneficial cooperation under China's leadership.

Caroline van Noort has also contributed to the studies of China's strategic narratives about the BRI. For instance, she has explored the way China rewrites the history of the Silk Road to create a more appealing context for the BRI. In her view, Beijing promotes the Silk Road legacy to present China's increasing engagement in Eurasia as an attempt to develop a flourishing region as described in Marco Polo's *Travels* and thus avoid other historical parallels, such as comparison to the Great Game for Eurasia as depicted in Rudyard Kipling's novel *Kim* [van Noort, 2020b]. In another study, van Noort [2020a] focused on the visual representation of the BRI by analyzing its official website. She demonstrated how verbal narratives are backed up by images, such as a train of camels roaming a desert used as a symbol of interconnectedness, or photos of businesspeople of different nationalities to illustrate mutual benefits and inclusiveness.

Summarizing the research focused on the contents of China's strategic narratives, we can make some conclusions about their goals. First, China seeks international and domestic recognition of its political model as successful and legitimate. This is important not only for the domestic approval of the CCP, but also for stimulating international cooperation. Second, it is strategically vital that other countries accept the idea that China's rise and development poses no threat and is beneficial for other countries. Attempts to resist China's leadership will slow not only China's development, but also development of the whole world, including developing countries. Moreover, for the PRC, it is crucial to maintain a favourable international environment and gain international support for its foreign economic projects. Finally, Beijing is searching for followers who will endorse its attempts to reform the current international order, in particular by supporting changes in those elements that China sees as unfair or inconvenient (such as U.S. hegemony and the human rights regime).

Formation, Projection and Reception of China's Strategic Narratives

In comparison to studies focused on the contents of China's strategic narratives, much less attention is paid to their formation, projection, and reception by the audience. Nevertheless, based on existing research we can come to a number of preliminary conclusions.

Different actors take part in the formation of China's strategic narratives: ruling elites, mass media, and the academic community. Unlike many other countries, there is not much opportunity to contest the strategic narratives of the ruling party—the CCP—as there is no political opposition and most popular mass media are owned by the party. However, it is inaccurate to say that the formation of strategic narratives in China goes smoothly and that all narratives are always clear and unambiguous. First, using the discourse about the BRI as an example, Zeng Jinghan [2019] demonstrated that the decentralization of power in China also affects discourse: the provincial governments take part in the formation of the strategic narratives and promote ideas that are sometimes different from the ones put forward by the central government. Second, the concept of “empty signifiers” is essential for understanding the process of narrative formation in China. Empty signifiers are terms or slogans introduced by China's leaders that at first do not have a clear meaning. Their contents develop with time and can evolve depending on changes in domestic and foreign policy [Noesselt, Eckstein, Priupolina, 2021].

Third, when there are no strict guidelines from the CCP on how to cover a particular topic, the same events can have different interpretations in Chinese media.

As for the projection of China's strategic narratives, this process very much depends on the target audience. Channels that are used to spread strategic narratives to China's domestic audience (mass media, social media, and non-profit organizations) are controlled by the CCP, and this significantly simplifies the process of communicating important ideas [Zhuravliova, 2022]. Overall, there is very little opportunity to spread alternative discourses and narratives in the PRC. However, some scholars note that due to commercialization of China's mass media, it not only caters to the interests of the CCP but also has to take into consideration and adapt to public opinion [Wang, Wang, 2014]. In addition, social media provides an opportunity to express alternative opinions on some issues related to international relations.

The infrastructure that is used to spread narratives to foreign audiences is usually also located abroad. Therefore, its rules and functioning principles and overall informational environment differ significantly from those in China, which makes projection of China's narratives abroad much more complicated. For instance, dozens of Confucius Institutes, key instruments of China's public diplomacy, have been recently closed in western countries. These institutes not only popularize traditional Chinese culture, but also serve as channels used to spread strategic narratives about China and its place in the world [Hartig, 2015]. Moreover, social media platforms, video hosting services (such as Youtube) and other websites that are employed to project Chinese strategic narratives online to international audiences [Hagström, Gustafsson 2021] belong to foreign companies that often refuse to comply with the CCP's censorship requirements.

To spread its narratives about the international system and its elements among political elites of other countries, China uses various international and regional organizations and forums. The Chinese government not only exploits these platforms to promote its position to foreign officials, but also seeks to control the very infrastructure by promoting Chinese citizens to key positions [Zhao, 2021, p. 44]. Among various international venues are those that have been established by China in which Beijing has more opportunities to spread its strategic narratives in comparison to its competitors, for example, the Boao Forum for Asia.

The reception of China's strategic narratives is different among different international audiences. For example, Chinese scholar Cao Dejung concluded that the China-U.S. trade war and the coronavirus pandemic exacerbated the competition and tensions between the strategic narratives of the U.S. and China [Cao, 2021]. Cooperation within the BRI, which China presents as mutually beneficial, is often described by other actors as a zero-sum game [Zeng, 2019]. Caroline van Noort and Thomas Cooley [2020] noted that some Chinese ideas resonate more with international audiences than others. For example, countries that have joined the BRI accept Chinese narratives concerning the importance of connectivity, trade, and prosperity, but question the selflessness of Chinese projects, pointing at human rights violations, debt traps, and assertive foreign policy.

Conclusion

Under Xi's leadership, the PRC has joined the battle for discursive hegemony. The conceptual lens of strategic narratives used in this paper presents a systematic framework to analyze China's discourse power and offers tools to study not only the contents of the discourse, its key elements, types, and connection to strategic goals, but also the related communication processes such as the formation, projection, and reception of these narratives.

Having reviewed scholarship on three types of China's narratives (system, identity, and issue), we can make a number of conclusions. Beijing exploits historical memory about the cen-

ture of humiliation not only to maintain the CCP's legitimacy and national unification in the face of hostile external forces, but also to construct its strategic narrative about the international system and influence foreign audiences. When addressing developing countries, China condemns western colonial practices of the past and hints at the ongoing exploitation that has to be resisted. Appeals to transform the existing system are embedded in the community of common destiny concept which became an important element of China's foreign policy under Xi. China promotes the idea that only a new type of power can create a new, fairer world order. It comes as no surprise that China is presented as such a power because other great powers are content with current state of events and reproduce the existing order with such narratives as "the Cold War," "threat to the free world," and "zero-sum game." These narratives are used to explain why it is important to control rising powers. Second, mutual benefit and prosperity are presented as key features of the new fair international system. Although China stresses the need to transform some elements of the system, its narrative does not suggest any revolutionary change; it is still about dividing the world into great powers and the rest.

China's identity narrative is closely linked to the above-described system narrative. Beijing promotes the idea of Chinese great power as a unique great power. For instance, an important distinguishing feature of the PRC is its moral superiority and commitment to international rules and law. At the same time, scholars point to the duality of China's identity narrative. On the one hand, China portrays itself as a country that has gone through the century of humiliation and engages in a battle against an unfair international system. On the other hand, Beijing seeks to form an image of a constructive player that will encourage peace and development through global initiatives. Such duality (victim vs. leader) and, consequently, contradiction in China's identity narrative is directly linked to the complexity of its strategic goals. Beijing seeks to transform only certain principles of the international system but to keep the others. For example, a fairer international system does not imply that China will give up its United Nations Security Council permanent membership or support permanent membership enlargement. In the short term, the duality of identities allows China to reach particular strategic goals, as that victim narrative and the leader narrative justify two totally different types of possible behaviour. In the long term, inconsistent behaviour may create a credibility gap in relations with other actors and have a negative impact on the image of China and on the effectiveness of its strategic narratives.

Summarizing China's issue narratives, we can see that the main ideas they have in common are particularism and an opportunity for actors of international relations to choose suitable international norms. Moreover, in China's issue narratives, development and infrastructure are presented as key elements for prosperity and peace. All these ideas are primarily aimed at developing countries, many of which are dissatisfied with their position in the international system, tired of criticism, and in need of external financing.

Chinese ideas seem significantly less appealing to western countries, as they challenge liberal norms. Moreover, the criticism of injustice and exploitation and accusations of amorality require western countries to change and abandon familiar and convenient rules. This leads us to a conclusion that China targets developing non-western countries and thus tries to form its own group of followers. However, scholars are yet to find out if China adapts the contents of narratives to different audiences, that is, if there are differences between the ideas that are projected to developed and developing countries, western and non-western countries, and China's Asian neighbours and overseas partners.

Formation, projection, and reception of China's strategic narratives vary significantly depending on the audience and the topic. China's case is of interest for further theoretical investigation of strategic narratives because it offers abundant empirical material and opportunities to test different hypotheses. Even the formation of narratives in China is not a centralized process, as various actors with different interests take part in it. Infrastructure used to spread China's

strategic narratives varies significantly depending on the intended recipient, that is, domestic or foreign audiences, elites, or average citizens. Despite globalization, media spheres and their regulation differ significantly in different countries, which has an impact on China's opportunities to spread its narratives. The effectiveness of narratives also exhibits a lot of variability. Existing scholarship demonstrates that some countries tend to willingly adopt certain Chinese strategic narratives while others contest them. At the same time, some Chinese ideas are more popular than others. However, it is worth mentioning that audiences' reactions to Chinese narratives are significantly less examined in comparison to studies of narratives' contents. This demonstrates an important gap in the literature, which presents opportunities for further research.

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