China, media, and international conflicts

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Published online: 01 Apr 2024.

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BOOK REVIEW

China, media, and international conflicts, edited by Shixin Ivy Zhang and Altman Yuzhu Peng, Taylor & Francis, London, 2023, 226 pp., $160.00 (hardcover), ISBN-13: 9781032198736

As China gets increasingly influential in international conflicts, attracting heightened attention from the United States and generating a hegemonic rivalry between the two nations across economic, technological, and territorial domains. Concurrently, China's elevated global status and expanding overseas interests are leading to its deeper involvement in distant conflicts, such as the Russo-Ukrainian war, the Israel-Palestine dispute, and various transnational conflicts in Africa. This volume titled *China, Media, and International Conflicts*, comprising 12 articles and edited by Shixin Ivy Zhang and Altman Yuzhu Peng, aptly addresses key questions: How do Chinese domestic media represent conflicts involving China? How does China memorialize its historical conflicts while crafting a future-oriented identity? What strategies is China deploying in the escalating international 'narrative war'? How do external stakeholders' media portray China in conflict situations? For those intrigued by these questions, this book serves as a comprehensive resource.

The book commences with Altman Yuzhu Peng and Shixin Ivy Zhang's substantive introductory chapter that is both empirically rich and theoretically sound. It situates the volume against the backdrop of global power transitions, China's more assertive diplomacy, and its far-reaching international ambitions. It also provides an extensive review of existing literature in the realms of media and conflict, invoking theories ranging from the CNN effect and the Al-Jazeera effect to the cascading network activation model and mediatization theory. This overarching introduction lays a solid foundation for subsequent discussions on China's domestic media portrayal of international conflicts and how foreign media mediatize conflicts involving China.

Following the theoretical foundation, two comparative framing analyses are presented to disentangle how different influencing factors set the tones for media outlets' coverage of the US-China trade war. Utilizing media data from China, Singapore, the U.S., and Ireland, Shujun Liu and Mark Boukes in Chapter 2 examines the role of various factors such as media independence, conflict involvement, and temporal variations in shaping a nation's media framing preferences. In Chapter 3, Xianwen Kuang narrows the scope to Chinese domestic media and demonstrates that political affiliation and media type significantly influence framing choices. Party-affiliated news organizations are more inclined to discuss the trade war's global repercussions, serving a public diplomacy role by aiming to garner international support. Conversely, non-party news outlets focus more on the bilateral impacts on both China and the U.S., catering to market interests.

Chapters 4 and 5 touch upon China's soft power rivalry on international arena, on different facets of platform geopolitics and narrative war. Chapter 4, crafted by Alessandra Massa and Giuseppe Anzera, titled 'Soft power clashes? China in platform geopolitics: Global aspirations and political struggles,' juxtaposes the digital platform strategies of the U.S. and China, revealing the geopolitical undercurrents that shape global soft power contests. While the U.S. leverages its platforms to promote free-market ideology, democracy, and transparency globally, China seeks to build a model of technology governance, where tech giants are co-opted by the government to serve political purpose. The chapter

underscores that these platforms are not merely tools for wielding soft power but are deeply entwined with broader geopolitical strategies. Chi Zhang's penetrating analysis in Chapter 5 reveals how the contestation over narratives surrounding the Xinjiang issue has been geopoliticized in the context of Sino-Western relations, undermining the prospects for mediation and peaceful conflict resolution. Despite China's concerted efforts to project a favorable narrative about Xinjiang, these endeavors have largely failed to shift international opinion and have instead attracted heightened scrutiny.

Chapters 6 and 7 refocus to scrutinize China's domestic media, zeroing in on official, commercial and grassroots channels, respectively. For Chapter 6, Yiben Ma and Chi Zhang's collaborative effort employs narrative analysis of People's Daily and the People's Liberation Army Daily, unpack Chinese strategic use of Korean War commemoration for collective memory management, which serves to legitimize assertive foreign policy, and craft a peaceful global image. Chapter 7, authored by Tiantian Diao explores the intricacies of commercial media, revealing how they navigate the tightrope between political conformity and the market's demand for more reasoned, liberal voices. This delicate balance is further complicated by the absence of Japanese perspectives and the challenge of maintaining news neutrality. The section is wrapped up by Chapter 8, wherein Shixin Ivy Zhang, Altman Yuzhu Peng, and Ranna Huang's analysis of Zhihu users' comments reveals the negative assessment of NATO at the Chinese grassroots level, thereby highlighting the inadequacies of NATO's strategic communication efforts.

The final set of chapters delves into external perceptions of China through the lens of key global issues: the Sino-Indian standoff, the Syrian crisis, the Israel-Palestine conflict, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Chapter 9 by Suhail Ahmad scrutinizes the Indian media's alignment with the Modi government's nationalist agenda, noting a shift from a confrontational to a conciliatory tone during the 2020 standoff with China. This shift illuminates India's internal struggles with national confidence and cautious diplomatic balance with its powerful neighbor. Selim Öterbülbül, in Chapter 10 examines China's strategic involvement in the Syrian conflict, arguing that its use of veto rights at the UN serves broader foreign policy goals, including non-intervention and regime security. Chapters 11 and 12 explore the symbiotic relationship between media framing and diplomacy. Specifically, Shadi Abu-Ayyash, with Chapter 11 shows that China's sustained support for Palestinian leadership results in favorable media coverage in Palestine. Conversely, Kelly Chernin underscores the impact of media framing on diplomatic ties in concluding Chapter 12, contrasting Ghana's constructive portrayal of its relationship with China against American media's more adversarial stance, which potentially jeopardizes collaborative prospects.

The book offers a notable contribution to media and conflict studies, highlighting the rise of China and the resulting series of crises and disputes. This rise not only signifies a power shift but also underscores China's growing involvement in distant conflicts. In the context of China's ascending power, burgeoning ambitions, and expanding international influence, the book identifies three categories of external actors: 'Developers', such as Ghana and Palestine, whose national media present a favorable view of China to sustain economic tie and political support; 'Disputers', exemplified by India, where the media reflect a blend of nationalistic sentiment and diplomatic circumspection; and 'Competitors', like the United States, which engage in discursive critiques of China's human rights record, political system, and foreign policy initiatives for strategic rivalry.

While the book's selection of case studies is commendably inclusive, it may benefit from a clarification of the rationale and criteria of case selection. For instance, although the book engages in a meaningful discussion of the Syrian war, it omits the Ukraine crisis, a conflict from 2014 to the present that is arguably equally, if not more, influential. Similarly, while

the inclusion of the Diaoyu/Senkaku dispute adds depth to the narrative, the absence of the more far-reaching disputes in the South China Sea raises questions about the selection process. Understanding that editors may face constraints in directing and choosing case studies, this selective approach may nonetheless disappoint readers drawn to the themes of China, media and conflicts. Additionally, the frequent shift of focal points from Chinese domestic media (Chapters 2 and 3) to comparative analysis between Chinese and foreign media narratives in Chapters 4 and 5 before circling back to China's internal media discourse in Chapters 6–8 could lead readers in disarray. Should there be a future edition, the editors might consider organizing different chapters into distinct sections with a clearer explanation of the central themes. Such an organizational refinement would facilitate smoother navigation through the chapters, granting readers a more coherent grasp of the book's key insights and the unique communication dynamics across various countries and media forms.

Another noteworthy point of critique is the book's limited success in fulfilling its ambition to de-westernize the field of media and conflict studies. While the volume does an admirable job of foregrounding Chinese scholars, amplifying their viewpoints on China's representation in both domestic and international settings, it stops short of a full-scale theoretical reorientation. Rather than pioneering new frameworks that draw from Chinese or other non-Western experiences, the book frequently leans on established framing and mediatization theories with only slight adjustments, rather than pioneering innovative theories derived from Chinese or other non-Western contexts. Thus, the book's efforts to shift away from a Western-centric paradigm in media and conflict studies appear to be only partially realized.

Overall, *China, Media, and International Conflicts* not only unpack the narratives advanced by Chinese media to boost the legitimacy of the nation's regime and foreign policies, but it also dissects the subtle variances across media platforms distinguished by ownership, genre, and target demographics. Meanwhile, the work shed light on the complex discursive landscape that China navigates on the international stage. In the context of China's ascending power, this book's insightful findings offer a timely reflection on the changing nature of media coverage, geopolitics, and diplomacy, even as they come with the caveat of organizational and theoretical limitations.

Funding

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