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Re-constructing “China” in a transnational context

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Abstract

This study critically examines two Chinese newspapers’ representation of China as a “nation” and “culture.” Prior studies have deeply and broadly explored various ways through which China, Chinese culture, and nationalism were constructed in popular media forums. What has been missing is a continued exploration of these constructions offered by the Chinese media sources that are published outside the dominant Chinese cultural, national, and political contexts. Using *World Journal* and *Sing Tao Daily*, two major Chinese immigrant newspapers, as the texts for analysis, this study produces important findings that demonstrate how China is constructed as a contested, multi-layered, powerful, and divided culture and nation. Based on the study’s result, future inquiries can continue to analyze the representation of China across multiple media and linguistic platforms.

Keywords

China, critical, culture, nation, newspapers, transnational

Introduction

The different voices and opinions surrounding how China should be defined and what China represents as a *nation*, *state*, and *culture* have been an ongoing debate for decades (Starr, 2010). Especially with the recent rise of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in global economy and politics, the PRC’s escalating tension with the Taiwan government, and the continuing territorial dispute between the Communist leadership and the Tibetan independent activists, the understanding of China both in a global and regional context has become increasingly complex and contingent upon the cultural *lens* through which China is viewed (Starr, 2010; Yu, 2011). The *lens* refers to the *media platform* and *cultural context* from which the understanding of a particular type of representation is produced (Yu, 2011). Plenty of studies have already picked important lenses to examine the construction of China as a nation and culture. The current project continues this path to study

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the construction in media forums and cultural spaces that are away from the traditional Chinese cultural, national, and political contexts. The findings illustrate how political struggles, global events, nationalist bonding, historical experiences, and cultural practices intertwine to construct China as a site of contestations for meaning, power, and identities.

Literature review

Defining China in popular media forums

The tumultuous history of China since Xia dynasty in 2100 BCE has been the focus of numerous scholarly works, TV dramas, movies, news coverage, and various forms of cultural representations (Chen, 2016; Cheung, 2018; Yeh, 2018; Zhu, 2014). As a country that has a long history of over 5000 years filled with wars, conflicts, and significant cultural and political transformations, China is often constructed by the media as a land where complex struggles over powers and territories exist and persist (Chen, 2016; Hsu, 2012; Mann, 2018; Yeh, 2018). This type of construction often alludes to the understanding that China is a culturally rich and politically influential country that has been playing a major role in shaping the larger formation of Asian culture (T. Chang & Lin, 2014; Chen, 2016; Hsu, 2012). The idea that China is the origin of Asian cultural civilization and the influence of Chinese culture can be seen in not just every Asian country, but all over the world is a major theme of the cultural propaganda supported and normalized by the Chinese media (T. Chang & Lin, 2014; Hsu, 2012).

As Hung (2011) and Yeh (2018) pointed out, the Chinese media usually portrayed Chinese people as diligent farmers, brave warriors, skilled martial artists, enthusiastic revolutionaries, and talented art performers who not only represent the core part of the Chinese cultural identities, but have also made indelible contributions to the human civilization and world peace. For example, the portrayal of the Chinese Red Army as the fearless fighter against the fascist Japan is often imbued with the implication that China is the one who saved the Asia Pacific from the Japanese troops in World War II (Hung, 2011). The lack of media coverage about the other countries' active involvements in the anti-fascist battle, such as the United States and Korea, is an evidence of the way the Chinese nationalist pride is strategically sutured into the construction of China as a powerful nation and state (Hung, 2011).

Such complex intersectionality of culture, nation, and state is key to the critical examination of the ways China is defined by the media discourse. As Moyo (2012) argued, the political influence of China grows as it gains stronger momentum in the world economy. Hence, the understanding of China as a *culture* and *nation* must be placed in a global context (Chu, 2013; Sun, 2015). It is not enough to just recognize the superficial representation of China as a country where 56 ethnic groups co-exist and thrive under the Communist leadership, or how the traditional Confucianist tenets affect the current and younger Chinese generation's ways of living (T. Chang & Lin, 2014; Chen, 2016; Chu, 2013). Scholars need to look further into the fluid definition and constant negotiation of China's *global identity* (Chu, 2013). By *global*, Chu (2013) clarified that it refers to the different and conflicting interpretations of Chinese culture, nation, nationalism, and even *neo-imperialism* that has re-positioned China as an emerging superpower.

Chu (2013) and Hsu (2012) asserted that the global media provides different narratives about Chinese culture, history and political situation. The way a Taiwan's media text narrates China's modern and contemporary history is drastically different from the way a mainland China's media source recounts the same historical events (Hsu, 2012; Y. Wang, 2017). The way a Western media

talks about 1989 Tiananmen Square Protest will challenge the way it is described in a story published by a state-run Chinese newspaper (Daccache & Valeriano, 2012). It is through these different narrations and recounting, China is defined and re-defined through the different cultural and political lenses (Daccache & Valeriano, 2012; Hsu, 2012). As Law and Li (2013) stated, Taiwan and China have been in this *ownership fight* for a very long time over who really represents China and Chinese culture. They found that the Taiwan's news media had strongly criticized the way the Communist Party "stole" the title for being the original creator of Chinese culture and its traditional values (Law & Li, 2013). This concept of a "stolen" cultural and national identity has been supported and adopted by many news stories or commentaries that claimed the Republic of China laid the cultural and political foundation for the birth of a modern China (Law & Li, 2013). A very common example used by the Taiwan's media is that the mainland Chinese only write in simplified characters, whereas Taiwan still preserves and requires the use of the traditional characters that are more sophisticated and complicated in writing (C. W. C. Li, 2015; Yang & Hu, 2012). This contrast demonstrates the latter's loyalty to the traditional literacy practices, which are considered one of the most significant legacies of Chinese civilization (C. W. C. Li, 2015).

Another critical issue that needs to be noted is the representation of China in the Western media sources. There are two types of representation that have been and are currently dominating the popular media: one is the Hollywood's depiction of China as a mysterious and dangerous foreign territory where brave and naïve Western explorers seek adventures (Daccache & Valeriano, 2012). The other is the news media's coverage critical of the China's growing domination in the world economy and politics (Shambaugh, 2013). As Brautigam (2011) and Leman (2014) pointed out, PRC has been exploiting African countries' human and natural resources for decades. *USA Today* and *The Guardian* referred to PRC's trade relations with African continent as exploitative in nature and an evidence of the country's neo-imperialistic agenda (Zhou, 2013). In these news reports, China is constructed as a *bully* unkind and abusive to the other developing and underdeveloped countries (Zhou, 2013). This kind of construction is further corroborated by the criticism targeted at the Chinese government's oppression against those who support the Tibetan independence and Hong Kong's democracy movement (Barnett, 2016; Poon, 2012).

As Zhou (2013) stated, "the foreign media has not been easy on China" (p. 121). The international media sources do not just present the beauty of Chinese culture, such as its artistic traditions and historic landscapes (Zhou, 2013). A very big portion of their coverage is focused on cultural and political oppressions (Zhou, 2013). According to Orgad (2012) and Zhou, the news articles published by *The Advocate*, *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Daily News*, and *Vancouver Sun* revealed that in China women are not valued the same way as men, ethnic minorities are forced to be assimilated into the dominant Han group, and young children's bodies are tortured in order to be competitive at the Olympics Games. These news outlets construct China as culturally oppressive and backward (Orgad, 2012; Zhou, 2013).

In his critical study of Chinese cultural and national politics, Youngseo (2015) claimed that the China's complex historical experiences and cultural system make it impossible and unreasonable to define China in a black and white, good or bad fashion. It is important to detect the biases in both the Chinese media that often over-glorify Chinese culture and nationalist pride, and foreign media that tend to represent China in a negative light (Youngseo, 2015; Zhou, 2013). The understanding of China as a nation and culture needs to be critical (Youngseo, 2015; Zhou, 2013). To gain such critical insight, scholars need to situate their lenses on media platforms that are not fixed on a particular cultural and national space (Shumow, 2012; Zhou, 2013). Such media platform needs to be fluid, or in other words, *transnational* (Shumow, 2012).

Transnational media

Transnational media refers to the media information and messages that are transmitted globally across the different cultures, nations, and states (Darling-Wolf, 2014). The content produced by the transnational media usually satisfies the global market's needs and meets the global audience's expectations (Darling-Wolf, 2014). For example, immigrant press is a form of transnational media (Hickerson & Gustafson, 2014; Shumow, 2012). Especially for the major immigrant news media that are mass-produced and circulated, the information produced by these news sources usually convey a highly complex and critical understanding of the important political events or social issues that concern the immigrants (Hickerson & Gustafson, 2014; Shumow, 2012). This is the key difference between the immigrant press' *transnational* function and the press operated in immigrants' home countries, where political system often controls the nature of the news production (Hickerson & Gustafson, 2014).

According to Zecker (2013), the major function of an immigrant press is to provide its readers with news stories that are focused on their homelands' political and social situations. What needs to be noted about these types of news stories is the tones, angles, and representations that are delivered through the news discourse (Zecker, 2013). As Hickerson and Gustafson (2014) stated, the immigrant press tends to be very critical of the sensitive and controversial events, issues, or incidents that are indicative of the immigrants' home countries' political and cultural systems. The news stories or commentaries published by the immigrants' news media often provide multiple perspectives when covering and analyzing a serious social and political event (Hickerson & Gustafson, 2014).

Some of these perspectives are in conflicting positions and offer harsh criticism against the immigrants' home countries' existing political situation and traditional cultural values (Hickerson & Gustafson, 2014). This is the main reason why the immigrant press has been and is still thriving in the immigrant communities; people want to read news stories that are different from what they would read in their hometowns (Hickerson & Gustafson, 2014; Zecker, 2013). As Samovar, Porter, McDaniel, and Roy (2013) stated, "we really understand what our nationalities and cultural identities mean after we leave our homelands and start to have that 'outsider looking back' experience" (p. 141). This statement speaks to the immigrants' difficult journey as *boundary crossers*, who long for the news about their home countries, and meanwhile are critical of the opinions embedded in the news narratives. J. J. Hua (2014) shared his interview transcript with a Chinese immigrant, who was quoted as saying,

I understand what being a Chinese means when I came to the United States, such an eye-opening experience! I do see China in a different light now because the things that I have seen and heard in the United States. They gave me a different view. (p. 210)

The above quote demonstrates an immigrant's shifting views as she went through that transnational experience where new cultural and political point of view are fostered (J. J. Hua, 2014). As Park (2010) and Shumow (2012) pointed out, an immigrant's traveling experience shows exactly why a transnational media, such as immigrant press, is important, desirable, and sellable: it creates a platform for the different voices to be heard, opinions to be shared, and stories to be told. Therefore, a critical study of the ways China is constructed in major immigrant press could yield a new insight into the understanding of China as a *transnational* concept, which is likely more multifaceted and fluid than what media sources operated by a specific national and political group produce. Following this line of thinking, a research question is identified: how do immigrant news media construct China as a "nation" and "culture?"

Method

Critical analysis of news discourse

Fairclough (1989) once stated, “news discourse has a close relationship to power. The importance of controlling news discourse in power struggle and in maintaining power domination leads to the competition for power over media” (p. 594). In this quote, Fairclough drew our attention to the relationship between the news discourse and the way it is used by the privileged social class to support their dominant position. The power of news discourse to shape public opinion is also recognized and highly valued by those seeking to control and regulate society (Fairclough, 1989). Van Dijk’s (1983, 1988a, 1988b, 1991) research on news discourse focuses on how the semantic and lexical level of the news content is linked to and merged with the larger cultural discourse, social forces, and ideological assumptions. Van Dijk’s critical studies revealed local-global and surface-structural relations in the text. His methodology centers on uncovering how the link between the larger cultural system and the linguistic structure of the written texts is articulated in the representation (Van Dijk, 1983, 1988a, 1988b). Following Van Dijk’s methodological approach, I first analyzed how China was represented in the news texts. I then unlocked how the semantic structuring of the texts was linked to the dominant political and cultural system that shaped the representation.

For the second part, I drew on De Cillia, Reisigl, and Wodak’s (1999) categorization of themes as a specific methodological tool, which unveiled the discursive construction of national identities in the news texts. There were three thematic frames laid out by the authors to guide the analysis. They were (1) content/topics, (2) strategies, and (3) linguistic means and forms of realization. *Content/Topics* represented the thematic issues highlighted in the news texts. *Strategies* meant how particular types of representations were supported and naturalized in the discourse. *Linguistic Means and Forms of Realization* referred to the structuring and forming of the specific languages, terms, words, and sentences that constructed the national *self* and foreign *others* (De Cillia et al., 1999). Using the categorization model established by De Cillia, Reisigl, and Wodak, my analysis was first driven by finding the major topics and issues in the news coverage of China, Chinese government, culture, and society. The next step included two parts; part one was to examine the specific ways through which the newspapers represented China as a *nation* and *culture*. Part two was to reveal how the representation was supported, justified, and naturalized by the immigrant press.

Data collection

For my data collection, I choose two biggest Chinese immigrant newspapers published in the United States, which are *World Journal* (WJ) and *Sing Tao Daily* (SD). WJ was founded in 1976, by a Taiwan media conglomerate (Machleder, 1998). WJ is published daily with a circulation of 350,000, which makes it the largest Chinese language newspaper in the United States (*World Journal*, 2011). WJ has had a complicated relationship with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The newspaper’s tone was initially hostile to the PRC and its Party leadership (Duzhe, 2001). Such hostile tone was gradually softened in the mid-1990s following a rapid growth of the immigrant population from the mainland China, who came to the United States for higher education and work opportunities (Duzhe, 2001). The growing number of immigrants from the mainland China constitute a large portion of the readership for WJ, who has been struggling between maintaining its critical tone in the news writing and surviving the market where the readership has become increasingly diverse (Duzhe, 2001).

SD was founded in 1938, by a Hong Kong news corporation (Cook, 2013). SD's first oversea office was established in New York City in 1965 (Cook, 2013). Since then, SD has grown to be a major newspaper that serves Chinese immigrants around the world (Cook, 2013). SD is known to be under the influence of the CCP. For example, SD has long avoided sensitive topics that may portray the Communist leadership in a negative light, such as the Tiananmen Square Protest and the Tibetan Independence (Cook, 2013; Duzhe, 2001). Meanwhile, SD remains critical of the Chinese government's diplomatic relationships with other countries and the ways the Communist leadership handles various domestic and international conflicts (Cook, 2013; Duzhe, 2001).

According to Cook (2013), SD has always been somewhat critical of the mainland China's political system because Hong Kong had been ruled under a Western cultural and political model for over 100 years. But one of the main and recent factors that contribute to the SD's complex political stance in news coverage is the pro-democracy movements that have been growing both in and out of Hong Kong since 2014 (Kai et al., 2015). The global influence of pro-democracy movements has strongly shaped the way SD discussed sensitive issues about CCP; on the one hand, SD criticizes the political oppressions and supports the democratic transformation. On the other hand, the newspaper's criticism has been indirect and avoiding the direct reference to the Communist Party (Kai et al., 2015). Similar to WJ, SD's complicated and shifting relationship with CCP is evidenced in the ways China is talked about and represented in the news.

I collected and examined all the relevant articles published by these two newspapers between the years 1997 and 2018, including both news reports and editorial comments. China has been through drastic social, economic, and political changes right before the start of the millennial. By *drastic*, I refer to the rapid economic development, social reform, and shift of political powers. Winning the competition for hosting the 2008 Summer Olympics, joining the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, and the return of Hong Kong and Macau in the late 90s were major international events that were frequently highlighted in the news as proofs of the extraordinary leap that the nation has made over the years (Lee, 2003, 2010). On 14 March 2013, Xi Jinping was elected the President of the PRC. This major change in the Communist leadership signified a new era in China's global economic and political strategy (Wuthnow & Saunders, 2017). As De Rycker and Mohd Don (2013) argued, the critical exploration of how news media represent a country's cultural and national identities needs to be situated within the historical period where significant social, economic, and political transformations occurred.

For the next step, I examined the news texts that were focused on discussing national and cultural issues. As a result, 436 articles were collected. These 436 articles included a variety of news stories, reports, and commentaries. I did not include articles that merely provided a very brief and simple description of China; I selected texts that centered on the discussion of China as a nation and culture. This selection strategy helped me identify news discourse central to the critical understanding of China and its fluid cultural and national formations. I translated the original Chinese texts into English to make them understandable to the wider audience groups. The following analysis specifies the findings.

Analysis

Self-victimizing—the discourse of nationalist “Othering”

Critical research on the construction of a national identity has demonstrated that the negative portrayal of other nations and their nationalist sentiments supported the positive representation

of *self* (M. H. Chang, 2001; Han, 2011; Huang & Lee, 2003; Loizides, 2015; Pugsley, 2006). A very important part of the findings developed by this line of scholarship is the concept of *self-victimization*. It is through creating a strong sense of brother and sisterhood where immigrants of the same national and cultural origins come together due to their similar experiences with racist and nationalist prejudice, a beautiful, innocent, and wounded *national self* is created and glorified (M. H. Chang, 2001; Loizides, 2015). This type of construction could be seen in a series of news articles published by the WJ and SD. For example, a news report published by the SD stated,

The discrimination against Chinese immigrants still exists in the job market.

A young Chinese woman who recently graduated from college recounted her humiliating experience at a job fair where she was told that only applicants with “excellent” English skills can apply for this position. She said she is an Ivy graduate with 3.8 GPA and rich working experiences. To push her away for reasons like this in a job application process is downright rude and an indication of racist prejudice. (translated by the researcher, F. Hua, 2008, p. 4)

This quote is the example used by the entire news story to criticize the current unfair treatment that young Asian immigrants often received in the job market, with a specific focus on the experience of Chinese immigrants. However, what is usually missing in such reports is the key connections between the different parts of the narrative and the critical information that is needed to understand what really happened in that occasion.

Using the above quote as a case in point, there was no explanation on whether this young woman spoke excellent or poor English. By making the claim that “she is an Ivy graduate with high scores and rich experiences,” the article asserted an assumption that she must speak excellent English. Moreover, there was no further explanation as to whether she was told the applicants must possess excellent language skills *before* she even started the interview. By using the terms such as “humiliating experience” and “racist prejudice,” the article made readers easily feel this is an example of cultural stereotype against young Chinese immigrants who are often perceived as speaking with a strong foreign accent and hard to assimilate into the host society. The article succeeded in evoking a nationalist *sympathy* and *rage* for this young Chinese immigrant, without clearly explaining her actual English skills, and offering detailed information on how she learned about the requirement for high language proficiency.

Another article published in the WJ shared similar sentiment:

Many young Asian immigrants feel they are left out by American society. A Taiwanese international student said he was tired of answering questions like “where you are from?” Things like this rarely happen to white students. He thinks there is an overall attitude from the society that Asian students only know how to study, work hard, and they do not want to be part of the mainstream culture. The battle against racism, nationalism, and all the widespread stereotypes that tend to marginalize Asia immigrants still needs to be fought hard. (translated by the researcher, Liu, 2010, p. 11)

This quote demonstrates how one particular type of cultural stereotype could lead to the *racialized* and *nationalist* aggressions through the practice of “articulation.” In cultural studies, articulation refers to the act of drawing connection between concepts that are not necessarily related, to serve a certain group’s political agenda or maintain the power relationship (Yin, 2005). Using one Taiwanese student’s statement to picture the entire Asian immigrants’ experience with cultural stereotype is one of the implications behind this narrative. By starting the paragraph with “many young

Asian immigrants feel they are left out by American society,” the news report created an impression that the following story of that Taiwanese student could represent Asian immigrants of all types. But there was no explanation, throughout the report, about whether other Asian students voiced the same concerns, or they considered those experiences examples of racist stereotypes. To homogenize all Asian immigrants as they *must* share the same feeling and experience as a Taiwanese international student, the quote supported the nationalist construction of Taiwan as the one who can speak for all. Meanwhile, the discourse of *homogenization* itself also erases the diverse voices and experiences within the Asian immigrant communities. In other words, the nationalist construction to a certain extent reinforces the self-marginalization.

Another critical issue emerging from the analysis is the construction of *whiteness*. The quote did not make it clear who were referred to as the “white students.” It is somehow implied that the white students mean international students from European countries. By not calling them European students, or white international students, the quote itself naturalized a perception that all white students are the same, regardless of their national origins, language differences, and cultural backgrounds. It serves to create a *white-other* dichotomy placing the Asian students on the “othered” side of the power relationship. The discursive creation of the traditional white-other power dichotomy reinforces the problem that was criticized by that Taiwanese student: the mainstream society’s stereotype about Asian immigrants. Calling non-Asian *others* “white students,” the article itself echoes the racial politics that constructs the whiteness as the superior *self* and gives rise to the racialized and nationalist aggressions that we need to, again, fight white racism.

According to Kitching (2014), European students or immigrants deal with the same issue as students from other countries; they were constantly asked about their countries of origins due to their heavy accents and ways of communicating. The claim “rarely happen to white students” needs further explanations concerning where this impression comes from and if this is a personal experience or an experience that has been talked about by many Asian immigrants, not just a few international students. Between this statement and the following two claims that stated, “Asian students were stereotyped as hard-workers and unassimilable to the host society,” and “we need to fight the racism,” there was no clarification on why these ideas were closely related. This news story *jumped* from a Taiwanese *student’s* personal experience with *othering* to *Asian immigrants’* larger battle against the racist and nationalist stereotypes. From both a cultural and legal level, international students are not immigrants and they can’t fully represent each other’s voices. This article “articulated” the linkages that justified the nationalist and racialized sentiments serving the needs of the cultural group who read the story and might see it as a way to bond with other compatriots (Anderson, 2016).

Re-constructing the concept and cultural landscape of China

China has a long and complicated history. There have been numerous debates on what China is and how China should be defined (Wasserstrom, 2003). Most of these debates centered around the territorial disputes, military conflicts, and struggles for political dominations that have played crucial roles in shaping the relationship between the Communist China, Taiwan (Republic of China), Hong Kong, and Tibet (Wasserstrom, 2003). Although the data showed there was no news report or commentary that directly addressed these debates, several news stories have been found to either support a particular lens of understanding China or construct multiple forms of China. What these news reports had in common was the *denial* that the word “China” only represented the PRC, or PRC was the only and authentic representation of China. Challenging the ideological construction

of China as a PRC-centered cultural and political territory was the common theme that drove these reports. For example, an article published by the SD in 2017 stated,

Taiwan is prepared to face the worst scenario in the imminent attack from the mainland government. With the growing number of military fleets and planes that have entered the Taiwan territory since 2016, the Taiwan government is dedicated to doing whatever it can to protect the safety of neighboring areas, and ensure the normal function of the economic and business activities of the region. The mainland has been using military forces as a threat to enforce its one-China policy over the past decades. The Taiwan government will not back down and continue to fight against the global imperialism. (translated by the researcher, Fang, 2017, p. 15)

This quote was taken from a three-page-long news report that described the escalating tension between the Taiwan and mainland China. What is particularly important in examining this quote is the construction of “China” as a *fluid* concept. By fluid, I mean the *discursive erasure* of “China” as a rigid notion defined by a territorial and physical space. No part in this quote and the entire news article called the mainland government “Chinese government,” or referred to the mainland as the “mainland China.” The discursive erasure is a strategic practice of news writing that both evokes and echoes the nationalist rage of Taiwan as a *country* oppressed by the Communist government. It alludes to a complex feeling of nationalism; the mainland used to be ruled by the Nationalist Party since the end of Qing Dynasty in 1912. The Mao, Zedong-led Communist Party took it over in 1949. The Nationalist Party retreated to Taiwan ever since. Thus, the definition of “China” and “Chinese culture” has always been debated by the people from both sides (Bush, 2013).

To many people from Taiwan, they think they preserve the real Chinese culture, custom, and tradition (Bush, 2013). This argument was often rejected by the mainland Chinese as “untrue and absurd” because in their opinion, the core Chinese cultural values, beliefs, and heritages were saved and further introduced to the world by the Communist Party (Bush, 2013). Therefore, erasing the word “China” in the description of “mainland” creates a nostalgic reminiscence about Taiwan as the Republic of “China,” and denies the legitimacy of the Communist leadership in ruling and *defining* China.

Further, this quote constructed China as a *threat* to the *global* peace and asserted Taiwan’s position as a *fighter* against the imperialistic attack launched by the Communist regime. But nowhere in this quote nor did the rest part of the article mentioned how and in what ways would mainland’s military fleets and planes’ possible entry into the Taiwan’s territory affect the “neighboring areas” and “the normal functions of the economic and business activities of the region.” There was also no clear explanation on what these neighboring “areas and regions” are. By making these sweeping and confusing remarks about the mainland’s military threats, the article created an impression that the Taiwan’s defense against the *Communist oppression* was a battle against the *global imperialism*. The linkage between *saving Taiwan* and *saving the world* was strategically established through the negative construction of the mainland as the imperialistic oppressor, and the positive representation of Taiwan as the *defender* battling the *bullies*.

Some articles exhibited a multi-layered understanding of “China” as there was not just one Chinese national identity. China can’t be defined through territorial boundaries. China should be conceptualized as a *cultural phenomenon* that includes different languages, religions, identities, and political affiliations. For example, an article published by the WJ in 2011 made the following statements:

People from all walks of life and different cultural backgrounds came to see the annual Lunar New Year Parade in Chinatown, New York City. This event reminded us the beauty of Chinese culture, and more

importantly, it is a sign that Chinese cultural festival is receiving global attention. Many Chinese tourists even commented that they feel more like home in New York than in China because they do a very good job here preserving the traditional Chinese cultural customs. (translated by the researcher, Zhao, 2011, p. 9)

This quote demonstrates how China, as a nation and culture, can have a *global* identity with “multiple layers.” The feeling of that authentic Chinese cultural experience moves beyond the national borders and there are also different types of those authentic experiences. The tourists’ comment that showed that they felt more like home in New York’s Chinatown reflects the different layers of that “authenticity” because the cultural experience in New York was considered “more Chinese” than the time spent at China. Such *layered* construction of cultural *authenticity* continued to be shown in the following part of the article where tourists made comments such as

“they are all different across the world. They do things differently in Australia, Canada, and London. Each Chinatown has its own flavors. But I felt I was home each time I was there. (translated by the researcher, Zhao, 2011, p. 9)

In another article published by the SD, a woman who emigrated from the mainland China stated that

I have been to many parts of the world, especially places in Asia. You can see the cultural influences of China in almost every one of them. The food, languages, music, religions, and even politics, they all seem kind of Chinese to me. I once talked to my friend from Singapore, who told me his father was originally from South China. He said if you pay attention, you would see the strong impact of Chinese culture in many Asian countries. Maybe you do not feel it is Chinese enough, but to foreigners, this is a representation of Chinese culture. (translated by the researcher, Huan, 2014, p. 13)

This quote illustrated a *globalized* view of Chinese culture as it can take different forms across the different national contexts. The understanding of a cultural and national identity should not be limited to the lens of a particular group of people. Multiple cultural lenses need examining in order to develop a holistic view of the nation and its *global identity formation*. That Chinese immigrant’s claim and personal story about how foreigners understand Chinese culture demonstrates the *hybrid* and *shifting* modalities of the national culture when it is placed in the global context and seen through the eyes of *others*.

A “Mother’s” right to claim her “Lost Children” or a new imperialistic “Bully”

Two major events that dominated the news headlines of the WJ and SD in the late 1990s and early 2000s were Hong Kong and Macau’s return to the PRC. These two events were the focus of 36 articles and editorial commentaries that were collected and studied for this project. About 25 out of the total 36 were found between the year 1997 and 2002. The cultural, economic, social, and political influences of these two globally known and sensational events are tremendous, which have led to a series of discussions highly critical of the outcome of these two regions’ return to the mainland China.

In WJ and SD, a very common way of describing the *return* is the metaphorical construction of Hong Kong and Macau as *orphans* or China’s *long lost children*, who finally found their way back to the *family*. In turn, China is constructed as a loving and strong *mother* determined to reunite with her children who were snatched away by the imperialistic West. However, the stigmatizing representation of the West as the ruthless *robber* is very strategic in a sense that such representation did

not support a positive characterization of China as the victim. Rather, these two newspapers called into question the negative perception of the West as the suppressor and fostered an impression that the *return* fed China's neo-imperialistic agenda. For example, an article published by the SD stated,

Hong Kong, the *Pearl of the Orient*, returned to the motherland, after more than a hundred years' humiliating experience as a British colony. The nation is reveling in joy that cannot be described in words. As President Jiang Zeming stated, "Hong Kong's return should not be read just as a return of a city. It signals the end of an old era and the beginning of a new one. China fulfilled its promise and never forgot about her baby that was robbed away from the cradle. It has been a long and difficult journey. Today, a powerful China stood up to the bully and fought for its right." President Jiang's comment was criticized by *The New York Times* as inaccurate and misleading. A recent article published by *The New York Times* raised the question: "not sure who the real bully is here. Chinese government has been exploiting other developing and underdeveloped countries for decades. Hong Kong's return means the loss of the political freedom and more power to the Chinese government as part of its agenda for global domination. The so-called *One Country, Two Systems* principle is a sham used to keep the local public opinion under control." The Chinese government has strongly condemned the comment. (translated by the researcher, Q. Wang, 1997, p. 11)

A very important issue that needs to be noted in this quote is the way China is constructed through the strategic use of the Western media sources in relation to the comment provided by the Chinese government. The newspaper's early construction of China as a *strong-willed mother* determined to fight against the *bully* who robbed her *child* away was challenged by the *The New York Times* article, which represented China as the new imperialistic *bully* seeking global domination. From a loving *mother* to a neo-imperialistic *bully*, the newspaper seemingly presented two conflicting narratives by quoting two different sources in equal weight; one is the statement of a Chinese President and the other is the comment from a well-known US newspaper. But the way these two claims are positioned creates an impression that there is more to the story about Hong Kong's return as simply a "mother finding her child" drama.

The article used words such as "motherland," "baby," and "cradle" to assert a dramatic portrayal of Hong Kong's return as "reuniting with the family." The insertion of President Jiang's statement works to glorify the *dramatic return* as a successful battle against the imperialism. But immediately, the President Jiang's comment is questioned by the media forum that reveals a very different interpretation. The article used the word "criticize" to demonstrate the high level of disagreement that the US media holds about the way the Chinese government represents the return. The quick shift to a new political perspective openly critical of the Chinese government's neo-imperialistic rise complicates the meaning of Hong Kong's return and easily raises the concern of those who read the story. As Cramer (2011) pointed out,

Placing a negative claim after a positive one would make readers feel less positive about the issue being discussed. This is a very strategic and common way of positioning in the news writing. The seemingly fair presentation of different perspectives is in fact not fair. (p. 160)

Following this line of thinking, what reinforces the negative re-construction of China as the *bully* is that the article simply used a one-line statement issued by the Chinese government to fight back the much longer and detailed claim made by the US media and quoted by the SD. It is through this type of strategic positioning of commentaries, the construction of China as a *bully* is asserted and yet shielded through the earlier representation of it as a loving *mother*.

Similar to SD, the WJ used Western media's comments critical of the return. But the way the comments were stated are different. For example, an article titled *Hong Kong, Macau, and Who Will be the Next....?* made the following statement:

The return of Hong Kong and Macau is a huge boost to China's economic and political influence in the world. Chinese media described the return as a over a hundred years' search for the "lost children" came to an end. Hong Kong and Macau are no longer "orphans" suffering from the West's colonial rule. In a recent concert organized to celebrate the return, pop stars Liu Dehua, Zhang Xinzhe, Rong Zuer, and Chan Shanchung all performed. The concert is a happy reunion party! But not everyone is happy about the return. In a recent interview published by *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Tony Blair, the British Prime Minister, claimed in a joint press conference with his Japanese counterpart Keizo Obuchi that "China took a big advantage of the West. With a highly developed Hong Kong and Macau under its control, who knows who will be next. We need to be aware of China's rise." Tony Blair's comments were echoed by many world leaders who expressed the similar concern. Indian President K. R. Narayanan described the return as a sign that China is looking to expand its global territory. (translated by the researcher, Bao, 2000, p. 13)

There are two major issues that need critical exploration in this excerpt. One is the unequal comparison of voices and events that are not relatable and comparable in a discussion about the serious political issues. The other is the post-colonial discourse that is discursively normalized by the representation of China as an *invader*. The earlier part of the article painted a rosy picture of "happy family reunion" through citing Chinese media's dramatic depiction of Hong Kong and Macau's return as the *orphan* and *lost children* were found by their families and a celebrity-studded concert. The characterization of China as the *family* tirelessly searching for the lost loved ones was "quickly denied" by the two world's top leaders at the time, who warned about China's *dangerous rise* as a result of these two developed regions' return. Hence, the "denial" is strategically affirmed because two powerful politicians' serious warning carries more weight and should be taken more seriously than an unknown Chinese media's dramatic narration and a celebratory concert. The construction of China as an *imperialistic invader* looking to expand its global influence through territorial conquest is implied in this article. What needs to be further discussed is the presence of post-colonialist rhetoric.

Tony Blair's comments "China took a big advantage of the West" and "Hong Kong and Macau are highly developed regions" embodied the colonialist mentality: colonialism is not always about oppression and subordination. Colonialism brings civilization to the *uncivilized* (Chomsky, 2004; Rodney, 2011). As Rodney (2011) stated, a very important part of the post-colonialist discourse is to glorify the legacy of colonialism as saving, educating, and developing the primitive and backward *other*. Colonialists do not always see them as being the *exploiters*. Rather, they consider themselves as the *explorers and developers* (Chomsky, 2004; Rodney, 2011). As one of the world's most developed cities, Hong Kong's socioeconomic prosperity has been largely attributed to its colonial relationship with the British Empire (Gentle, 2012). Macau's economic boom also started under the Portugal's colonial rule (Dawson, 2010; Wong, 2014). Tony Blair's comment is a discursive negation of the Chinese media's representation of Hong Kong and Macau as orphans who actually "suffered" from the colonialism. China is represented as a *greedy nation* that feeds on the West's colonial legacy to support its own imperialistic expansion. The colonialist exploitation is justified without an in-depth investigation of the ways the colonialists exploited the colonized human and natural resources.

Constructing the “God” of the communist party

Many articles collected for this study talked about Chairman Mao and his strong political and cultural influence in modern China. The mainland’s glorifying personification of Mao Zedong as the “God” of the CCP and the PRC was heavily discussed by both WJ and SD. Most of these discussions started with a description of the mainlanders’ *cultural worshipping* of Chairman Mao, followed by a critical review of Mao’s major achievements and mistakes in leading the PRC. These articles constructed Chairman Mao as a controversial political figure. What is of particular importance in understanding this type of construction is the concept of “inter-textuality,” which refers to the strategic use of ideas and images that are commonly found in a certain type of *text* to describe the ideas and images painted in a different textual space (Elaine, 2011). The shift of the *text* also brings the change of the *context* (Elaine, 2011). Intertextuality is often adopted to help viewers gain a deeper and more accurate understanding of a complex idea (Elaine, 2011). But this is not the case for the WJ and SD. In these two newspapers, the intertextuality functions to support an agenda critical of the Chairman Mao’s glorified personal and political images, and the mainland’s overall sociocultural environment. For example, an article published by the WJ described a scene in the city Shaoshan, the birthplace of Mao, where tens of thousands of people gathered to commemorate Mao’s great deeds as the PRC’s founding father and celebrate his 124th birthday:

Today is 124th birthday of Chairman Mao. His hometown Shaoshan attracted tens of thousands of Mao Fen (Mao’s fans) to visit only for celebrating “MaoDao Jie” (the festival for celebrating Mao’s birthday). The atmosphere was enthusiastic with people singing Communist theme song—Dong Fang Hong (*the East is Red*), holding flowers in their hands, standing in long lines to pay respect to Mao’s statue as they all kneel down and nodded their heads on the floor when facing the statue. The local government had to use special police forces to maintain the order. (translated by the researcher, Peng, 2017, p. 8)

The representation of Mao Zedong as the irreplaceable “God” of the PRC has been the major theme of the Communist propaganda since 1949 (C. Li, 1997; Waldron, 1993). Mao’s ideas and theories have long been praised as the *only* way that could lead PRC to peace, prosperity, and power (C. Li, 1997; Waldron, 1993). Even today, the Communist leadership still recognizes Maoist thoughts as the larger system that people need to follow in developing the market economy specific to China’s cultural and political situation. The Communist representation is *serious* in a sense that it focuses on constructing Mao as a natural leader, brilliant theorist, and kind *soul* who needs to be seen with huge respect and followed with complete obedience. But this type of representation was *caricatured* in the above quote through using words and terms that compared the level of enthusiasm that people held toward a serious political figure to that of a pop star.

The word “fan” is often used to describe zealous fans of a super star in the entertainment industry. Especially in modern China, fans (pronounced as Fen Si in Chinese) are overall adopted to mean younger people who are loyal followers of their favorite celebrities. “Kneeling down and Nodding head” on the ground is often a religious practice of worshipping. Borrowing these terms to portray the way people worshipped Chairman Mao, a serious historical figure and political leader, revealed the strong impact of the Communist ideology, which could blind people to the mistakes that Mao had made and his controversial leadership style. For example, the following part of the same article stated, “Mao Zedong has a huge influence in China. But he is also a controversial figure, some people called him dictator” (translated by the researcher, Peng, 2017, p. 8). Similar comment could be found in SD. For example, an article published in 2015 made the following statements:

Mao Zedong was a charismatic leader, who also launched a series of political movements such as Cultural Revolution. His life was filled with controversies. The majority of Mao's followers are people who are in the military, from middle to old-age groups, and those from the bottom of the society who did not benefit from the open-door policy. Nowadays, young people do not have much feeling or feel connected to Mao. They grew up in a peaceful time, became familiar with the market economy, and tend to think internationally. (translated by the researcher, Xia, 2015, p. 6)

The construction of Mao as a controversial figure who belongs to the *past* is the major theme of this quote. The *past* is not simply represented as a historical moment dominated by the Maoist leadership. Rather, it is constructed as a dark period of China plagued by poverty, military conflicts, and illiteracy. By calling readers' attention to Mao's mistake in launching the Cultural Revolution at the beginning of this quote, and then describing his followers as "military, middle to old age groups, and those from the bottom of the society," a perception was created to characterize the Maoist period as violent, backward, and poor, as opposed to the representation of the modern China thriving in the market economy, where younger generation feels distant to the Communist leader. A *divided* nation marked by the competing political ideologies is created in this quote. The younger Chinese generation is the embodiment of the advanced and forward-thinking *new* China. Comparatively, the *old* China ruled by the Communist leadership is constructed as a turbulent era. Making such comparison between the *new* and *old* China, the article asserted a nationalist stance supporting a new and changing "China," through the negative representation of the traditional and dominant political system.

China's complex political system, historical experiences, and cultural formations have been and are still being studied by scholars across many different disciplines. This study is one of those scholarly endeavors aimed at providing a valuable insight into the construction of China by an important media platform. The analysis above has shown how specific forms of news discourse could contribute to the different and new ways of understanding China in a transnational space. The following section highlights and reflects on these critical understandings in detailed account.

Discussion and conclusion

The present study critically examined two major Chinese immigrant newspapers' construction of China. To lay the theoretical foundation for this project, I first mapped out an extensive review of the literature, which discussed the complex ways China, Chinese culture, and Chinese nationalism have been constructed across the different cultural spaces and media platforms. I then explore the construction of China as a nation, state, and culture in popular media forums that had not been extensively investigated. More importantly, my choice of the WJ and SD, two immigrant newspapers, was largely based on the target readership population: the Chinese immigrants who learned about what happened in their homeland(s) through reading the news. They would likely create their own versions of "China" and develop a more critical understanding about the ruling government (Anderson, 2016). The unpacking of these complex constructions of the nation, culture, and state offered me insight into the definition of China in a *transnational* context and the various political struggles, cultural forces, and historical conditions that had shaped the construction.

The result of my analysis also revealed a multi-layered understanding of China as a *concept* that cannot be defined through the physical space and boundaries. The *multilayer* does not just refer to the fact that each individual has different experiences with Chinese food, custom, and cultural practices. Rather, it means a contested view about how China should be understood as a site of struggle

over power and identities. For example, the absence of the word “China” in the article that described mainland China (PRC)’s possible military attack on Taiwan, the representation of the Maoist Theory and Party as the “dark past,” and the criticism against the One-China policy as a form of political oppression challenge the traditional perception of China as the *mainland* ruled by the Communist Party, and re-construct the meaning of “China” through competing forms of nationalism.

The competing forms of nationalism are not just limited to the struggles between the mainland and Taiwan, and Communist and Nationalist Parties. The competition also alludes to the cultural and ideological gaps between the people from the same homeland. For example, the younger Chinese generation’s lack of connection to Chairman Mao, who is still worshipped by the older generation, is symbolic of a divided nation, culture, and even state. The different approach to a political figure and Party could lead to the different constructions of the nation and nationalism. In addition to these important lines of thinking, my study revealed how the nationalist bond could be fostered and strengthened through racist discourse. For example, the article that described a Taiwanese student’s experience with *othering* and the quote that talked about a Chinese student’s job application were rejected as cultural stereotypes demonstrate the discursive creation of a nationalist sentiment through portraying the nation as the victim of racism. The nationalist *bond* with others, who might have experienced the similar negative attitude and mistreatment, was developed and reinforced through re-creating the *white-other* racial binary and *forcing* a view about the racist rejection and marginalization. Such integration of the racist ideology into the construction of the nationalist *bonding* deserves critical attention and further investigations.


Finally, the present study uncovers the discursive articulation of the linkage between the *nationalist* discourse and the *neo-imperialistic* construction. For example, the WJ and SD often portrayed Hong Kong and Macau’s return to the PRC as “lost children coming back home” and recognized China’s fast growth as a nation. But such positive representation of the nation was immediately put into question or abruptly denied by the following part of the article where China’s *nationalist achievement* is re-framed as an *imperialistic oppression and invasion*. The newspapers strategically positioned the Western media and foreign politicians’ comments to construct China and Chinese government as a dangerous and ambitious global powerhouse. My critical revelation of the way the nationalist sentiment is *transitioned* into the portrayal of a neo-imperialistic *bully* shows the complex effects of the news discourse and the way it had been used to advocate a certain political view.

In conclusion, my study demonstrates a contested, multi-layered, and contextual representation of China as a “nation” and “culture” in two major immigrant presses. A major limitation in this study is the use of critical discourse analysis (CDA). Although CDA is an important methodology widely used by the scholars conducting critical research, it does not exclude the possibility that there are weaknesses in CDA specific to the context of the present study. For example, it is possible that some important patterns or themes central to the media coverage of China were left out during the analytical process. These thematic issues might not contribute to the larger critical paradigm that studies the complex struggles over power and identities. But they could add to the existing knowledge on how China, as a shifting form of cultural and national identity, is represented. A mixed methodology combining both critical and content analysis could have yielded a different result or produced findings that are more inclusive of the ways China is constructed. In addition to this methodological limitation, future inquiries can also examine how China is constructed in Chinese newspapers published in English language, or how social media, such as Facebook or Twitter, construct China and its identities. These studies, if conducted properly, could continuously produce significant findings on the construction of the “nation” and “culture” in popular media.

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