Painting Chinese mythology: Varying touches on the magazine covers of *Time, The Economist, Der Spiegel,* and *China Today*

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Abstract
This study applied semiotic analysis to examine the national image of China on the magazine covers of *Time, The Economist, Der Spiegel,* and *China Today.* This study sought to find out and explicate the myths of different, even conflicting portrayals of the image of China. By comparing the signs on these magazine covers, five themes were identified: a threatening China versus a friendly China, a collectivistic China versus an individualistic China, a paradoxical China versus a progressing China, a capitalist China versus a communist China, and a dark China versus a promising China. These themes further led to the construction of the transnational comparative framing model. The similarities and differences in presenting China's image between Western magazine covers and Chinese magazine covers were also discussed in the study. The mechanisms for framing China's national image include the use of objectification, collectivistic illustration, contradiction, dual identity, and reference to historical contexts.

Keywords
China, magazine cover, mythology, national image, semiotics, visual analysis

Research background

In 2001, China joined the World Trade Organization (WTO). Being a member of WTO enabled China to further open its market to the world and contributed to its current status as the world's second largest economy. However, China's national image is not consistent with its current role in the world economy. Cao (2012)

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suggested that the image of China in Western media is generally entrenched and ingrained. Despite the growing spotlight that Western media have cast over the years on global events in China (e.g., the 2016 G20 Hangzhou Summit, Beijing's successful bid for 2022 Winter Olympics), Wei (2012) argued that those Western media select and tilt toward the topics such as China's military force and natural disasters, which has held up the setting-in of a more positive national image of China.

As a nation's image has remarkable associations with its trustworthiness, examining the national image would help increase people's knowledge about the nation and consequently reduce misperception (Paulo, 2015). Thus, centering on the magazine covers of *Time*, *The Economist*, and *Der Spiegel*, combined with a perspective weigh-in from *China Today*, this study seeks to identify, sort through, and explain the conceivable gaps between the different takes on China's images, from the frowning and swaying Western media to the advocacy voice of Chinese media. Understanding the discrepancies between China's images would help pave the way for fewer misunderstandings and promote more conversations internationally. Meanwhile it would benefit future policymaking in bridging the disparities between the coverage in Chinese media and Western media, i.e., the Western European and American media that are market-driven and share the fundamental value of freedom of speech (De Smaele, 1999).

There are several reasons for studying the magazine covers across different nations. First, Pyka et al. (2011) suggested that it is the front cover of a magazine that initially draws the readers to uncover the topics and meanings behind it. Second, prior research suggested that about 80% of magazine sales are dependent on the cover image (Johnson and Prijatel, 2007). The images and the linguistic messages presented on the magazine covers can largely influence a passerby's decision in purchasing the magazine (Johnson and Prijatel, 2007; Pyka et al., 2011). Third, magazine covers usually weld visual and verbal elements into persuasive messages (Held, 2005). Examining these visual elements on the magazine covers not only helps understand how these media shape readers' perception, but also casts light on how the magazines frame their concerns over global issues (Pyka et al., 2011).

Literature review

Magazine covers as a genre

Prior research suggested that news media can build and shape a nation's image by framing ideological, political, and cultural events (Peng, 2004). They also can deliver a concrete national profile by exposing their audiences to a variety of images and symbols (Peng, 2004; Scannell and Cardiff, 1995). When explaining the relationship between national image building and media coverage, researchers have investigated how newspapers across regions presented national images differently (Peng, 2004; Wilke and Achatzi, 2011). However, few studies have focused on the power of magazine covers in shaping readers' perception of national images.

According to Held (2005), magazine covers can be perceived as a multimodal genre (Held, 2005). A visual analysis of a magazine cover can break down its combination of visual pictures, textual content, and stylistic design (Held, 2005). Researchers can thus find out how visual images, typography, layout, color, and language are integrated on a magazine cover. Among the elements on magazine covers, visual pictures often occupy the most conspicuous position. Visual pictures afford the function of making rhetorical arguments more impressive and solid than text-based expressions (Popp and Mendelson, 2010). They can also alert and inform readers of intricate social events within a succinct framework (Popp and Mendelson, 2010). In addition, pictures embody the value and the identity of magazine editors, magazine owners, and even dedicated readers (Pyka et al., 2011).

Apart from demonstrating rhetorical statements, magazine covers can form social ties with readers. First, magazine covers function as a reminder of public knowledge with visual and textual elements (Held, 2005). Second, magazine covers afford the means and capacity to capture public attention, working to bridge the hiatus between media and readers (Held, 2005). Third, magazine covers reveal the content of the magazine and act as a visual and textual guide to the reader. Meanwhile, they come with the label of authority as a prestigious media institution (Held, 2005). Given the limited empirical research on magazine covers, it is necessary to see magazine covers as a genre in the study, allowing researchers to understand how magazine covers inform the public, promote their sales volume, shape their narrative styles, and reflect the values of their institutions.

China's national image

This study focuses on how the magazine covers illustrate China's national image. Researchers have referred to a national image as a profile or stereotype of a nation that people make generalizations of or abstractions about (Huang and Leung, 2005; Wei, 2012). Wei (2012) suggested that the construction of a nation's image is a historical process involving political and social realities, diplomatic relations, international politics, economic power, mass media presentations, and popular culture.

Wen (2011) pointed out that among the various factors, media coverage is a major contributor to national image building. For example, Peng (2004) investigated the news coverage in the American media and found that since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, China's national image has undergone four eras. The first era is the Red China (1949–1979). Coverage of the Red China featured ideological symbols such as Communist China and the improvement of Sino-US relations (Peng, 2004). The second era is the Green China (1979–1989). Based on the formal establishment of the diplomatic relations between the two sides and China's own reform and opening policies, the American media covered China in a more objective and favorable way than in the first era (Peng, 2004). The third era, the Dark China (1989–1992), was marked by the Tian'anmen Square event, which violates the American expectations of China's

political and social liberalization (Peng, 2004). The fourth era is the Grey China (1992–2004) (Peng, 2004). On one side, due to China's political claims and American's stereotypical impressions of China, China's national image remained negative. On the other side, China was regarded as a strategic partner with US (Peng, 2004). Therefore, during this period, news coverage of China ranged from economic progress, human rights, policymaking, and Mainland China's relations with Taiwan and Hong Kong (Peng, 2004).

Despite the variety of topics that American media covered on the Grey China, researchers have argued that China's national image is not consistent with its economic power in the world (Peng, 2004; Wei, 2012). Peng (2004) compared the coverage of China in *The New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* from 1992 to 2001. Peng (2004) found that the quantity of news coverage of China increased over time, but the overall tone remained negative. Huang and Fahmy (2013) compared the coverage of the 2008 Olympic torch relay in both American media and Chinese media. They found that American media used protest frames to emphasize the negative aspects of the torch relay. They also made reference to human rights issues and Tibetan independence in their coverage.

Similar findings emerged in research on German media. Wilke and Achatzi (2011) examined the coverage of China in two German newspapers from 1996 to 2006. They found that the general attitude toward China improved in the German press. However, recurring topics such as the censorship of the Internet, human rights, the activities of the Dalai Lama in Germany, and the concessions that Google made to the Chinese government overshadowed the positive side (Wilke and Achatzi, 2011). The 2008 Olympics and the 2010 World Expo in Shanghai were framed as propaganda and received criticism in German media (Wilke and Achatzi, 2011).

Media portrayals of a foreign nation may eventually lead to people's bias toward the nation (Wilhoit and Weaver, 1983). By analyzing China's image on social media such as Digg, Reddit, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Topix, Xiang (2013) confirmed that China's image was often mentioned along with authoritarianism, human rights, ethnic groups, and religious minorities.

While the angle of Western media shaping China's national image has been a major focus in past studies, some Sinology scholars have included the perspective of the official state of China. Wang (2003) found that the Chinese government seeks to present itself as an antiviolent, antihegemonic, independent, and collaborative actor in the world. Since the beginning of the 1990s, the Chinese government has been publishing official documents on disputed issues such as human rights, national defense, and environmental protection to clarify its stance (Wang, 2003).

The gaps between the ways Western media portrayed China and the ways desired by the Chinese government were hard to miss (Ding, 2011), but so is China's role as the second largest economy in the world. The global influence of China may have set in motion a change of views on the Western media front.

Considering that Peng's (2004) Grey China era began in 1992 and ended in 2004, it is necessary to continue to investigate what characteristics China's national images have been endowed with.

Mythology

Barthes' methodology of visual analysis originated from the examination of signs. According to De Saussure (1959), a sign consists of a signifier and a signified. The signifier is the sound image and the signified is the concept of the entity. Fiske (1990) explained that a signifier is the representation of a physical entity and its signified is the mental impression people have when they see the representation.

Drawing on the relations between signifiers and signifieds, Barthes (1972) pointed out that myth is a second-order semiotic system. According to Barthes, a sign that is the associative of a signifier and a signified becomes a signifier in the second-order semiotic system. That is, a sign with a meaning based on some sort of 'reality' becomes a signifier for another meaning (Gorham, 1999).

Based on the second-order semiotic system, Rose (2007) suggested that myth is a form of ideology. Myth makes us forget how things were presented. Barthes (1972) argued that it is the bourgeois norms that transform the reality of the world into an image of the world. According to Barthes (1972), the bourgeois ideology naturalized the signs and adapted its values to all the people. An image does not always evoke people's awareness of its 'being-there' (Barthes, 1977: 159). Rather, it evokes people's perception of its 'having-been-there' (p. 159). Readers are likely to refer to the content of an image as an existent social reality. Myth is thus created from the discrepancies between 'being-there' and 'having-been-there' (Barthes, 1972).

Barthes (1977) further distinguished denotative messages from connotative messages. The denotative messages focus on the signifiers in the images. The selection of the signifiers can navigate readers' assignment of meanings to the images. The connotative messages focus on the cultural meanings of the images. For example, the use of lines and shades in an image can help viewers understand its connotative messages (Popp and Mendelson, 2010).

Three other types of messages can help understand an image (Barthes, 1977). They are linguistic message, coded iconic message, and noncoded iconic message. Linguistic messages help readers retrieve and understand some of the signifieds. They can fixate certain implications of the images and exclude other implications (Barthes, 1977). The coded iconic messages are related to both perceptual and cultural knowledge. They can construct the connotation of the image (Barthes, 1977). The noncoded iconic messages can reinforce the myth of an image.

Though mythology is one of the approaches to studying visual images in news coverage, limited research has applied it to magazine covers. Researchers only have examined magazine pictures by focusing on the visual discourse of magazines. For example, Pyka et al. (2011) combined content analysis and visual analysis to study the national identity of Germany after historical events such as the collapse of the

Berlin Wall, the adoption of the euro currency, and the 2006 World Cup. Pyka et al. (2011) found that over the years, *Der Spiegel* witnessed an increasing number of national identity symbols on its magazine covers. Such symbols include the national flag and national colors. In addition to magazine covers, Kim and Kelly (2007) examined the visual depictions of news stories. They suggested that visual framing can provide a better understanding of how an event or an issue is presented to the public. Similarly, Darling-Wolf and Mendelson (2008) argued that the *National Geographic* magazine readers understand the news stories through the integration of magazine images and the embedded Western hegemonic view of the world.

Transnational comparative framing model (TCFM)

The TCFM was applied as a complementary framework in this study. Guo et al. (2012) proposed the TCFM for analyzing cross-national framing studies. TCFM first outlines a framing pool where a variety of frames can be used to analyze cross-national media coverage (Guo et al., 2012). TCFM includes three types of frames that are not mutually exclusive: generic frames, domestic frames, and issue-specific frames (Guo et al., 2012). Generic frames refer to those frames that have been universally applied across issues and regions. Examples of generic frames include human rights, social progress, public accountability, and so on (Guo et al., 2012). Domestic frames are used to explain domestic events. Four factors are included in this category: culture factor, ideology, political positions, and media systems (Guo et al., 2012). Issue-specific frames are used to analyze particular issues such as war and peace, labor and capital, and consumption and production (Guo et al., 2012). Guo et al. (2012) then proposed a three-dimensional framing matrix where researchers can code units of analysis according to different types of frames (i.e., generic, domestic, issue specific), frame functions (i.e., define problem, diagnose cause, evaluate morality, suggest remedy, framing device), and frame contexts (i.e., individual level, national level, global level).

The TCFM model has rarely been combined with mythology research in studying magazine covers. Thus, the current study would be pioneering in demonstrating (1) what signs and myths Western magazine covers embed to present China's national image, and (2) how these signs and myths inform the types of frames identified in the TCFM. By integrating Barthes' mythology and TCFM, I propose the following research questions.

RQ1: What are the emerging signifiers and signifieds in the image of China on the magazine covers of *Time*, *The Economist*, *Der Spiegel*, and *China Today*?

RQ2: What myths have the signs of the image of China created on the magazine covers of *Time*, *The Economist*, *Der Spiegel*, and *China Today* since 2001?

RQ3: How has the image of China evolved on the magazine covers of *Time*, *The Economist*, *Der Spiegel*, and *China Today* since 2001?

RQ4: How do the signs and myths inform the construction of TCFM?

Method

Data collection

Four news-oriented magazines were selected to study the national image of China. By comparing the global perspectives from *Time, The Economist, Der Spiegel*, and *China Today*, it is expected that some recurrent patterns of American, British, German, and Chinese perspectives of China's national image would be discovered.

Time magazine was first published in 1923. It is one of the most widely circulated news magazines in the world (Paragas, 2004). It reached more than four million US readers per week in 2005 (Popp and Mendelson, 2010). In 2015, the circulation of *Time* magazine reached 3.06 million (Alliance for Audited Media, 2015). Though its visual representations have been studied in prior research (Grainge, 1999; Paragas, 2004), limited research has focused on the image of China on the *Time* magazine covers.

The London-based *The Economist* magazine began publishing in 1843. Its circulation is now over 1.4 million worldwide (The Economist, 2016). More than four-fifth of its circulation is outside Britain and the circulation in the US accounts for half of its total publishing (The Economist, 2016). *The Economist* offers insights and comments on international news, politics, business, and finance information (The Economist, 2016).

Der Spiegel was founded in 1946. It was first published in 1947. *Der Spiegel* is one of the oldest news magazines in Germany. It has been distributed in 172 countries and its circulation was about 0.87 million in 2015 (Sheahan, 2015). Considered liberal in its political position, *Der Spiegel* is known for its investigative journalism and its constant exposure of the scandals of major political figures (Pyka et al., 2011).

China Today was founded in 1949 in China. It has been distributed in more than 160 countries and regions and has been printed in Chinese, English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Turkish, Arabic, and Tibetan. As a magazine of the China Foreign Language Publishing Administration, *China Today* seeks to promote understanding between China and the other parts of the world (Yang, 2012). Its current circulation is about 3.8 million per year (China Today, 2016). Compared to other China-based English news magazines (e.g., *Beijing Review, NewsChina*), *China Today* has exceeded in its history and its global distribution. Its magazine covers can presumably show a continuous record of how the Chinese government anticipates its self-presentation to the world.

I accessed the magazine issues from January 2001 to March 2014. Year 2001 was selected as the starting point because it marked China's entry in the WTO. It is expected that after 2001, China was more open to the world and its economy became more powerful. Three types of magazine covers were selected. The first type directly includes the linguistic messages 'China' or 'Chinese.' The second type of magazine covers includes words or pictures related to Chinese characters or Chinese animals such as Mao, President Xi, and dragons. The third type includes

cities or implicative symbols such as Beijing and the Great Wall. A total of 29 magazine covers were selected from *Time* magazine and 53 covers were selected from *The Economist*. *Der Spiegel* had 15 covers related to China's image.

All the covers of *China Today* were related to the topic of China. In order to narrow down the focus and specifically target its presentation of China's national image, only those with the linguistic messages 'China' or 'Chinese' were selected. The use of 'China' or 'Chinese' on the cover of *China Today* can be perceived as a purposeful practice to promote China's image. Thus, a total of 48 magazine covers of *China Today* were selected in this study. In all, 145 magazine covers were used as the sample in this study.

Data analysis

Barthes' semiotic analysis was applied to studying the signs in first- and second-order semiotic systems. Data were coded according to Hesse-Biber and Leavy's (2010) qualitative data analysis strategies. The strategies include data preparation, data exploration, data reduction, and interpretation (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2010).

I coded the first-order signifiers and signifieds on these magazine covers as the first step. The coding was based on Dyer's (1982) checklist for exploring signs in a picture (e.g., coding of age, hair, size, postures, settings, etc.). As a complementary reference, the framing matrix in the TCFM was used to code and identify the repetitive themes. To explore data, I reviewed these first-order signs and identified the signifiers in the second-order semiotic system. In data reduction, I discovered some recurrent themes of second-order signifiers and compared them to the frame pool in TCFM. Then for data interpretation, I compared the similarities and the differences in these themes and analyzed why such themes construct the image of China.

Results

A threatening China versus a friendly China

Time magazine, *The Economist*, and *Der Spiegel* all used dragons to frame the image of China. A total of eight issues of *The Economist* used dragons to represent China. Dragons can be viewed as a domestic frame in TCFM. For example, in 21 August 2004 issue of *The Economist*, one of the signifiers was a Western dragon wearing a green suit and spitting out smoke from its mouth. The smoke was so filthy that it shrouded the people behind the dragon. Another signifier was a doctor with his hands on his hips. The doctor was angry but he could do nothing but staring at the dragon. The linguistic message on the magazine cover, 'China's growing pains,' helped clarify the signified of the dragon. The signified of the dragon was the image of China. The coding of the green suit implied that China was claiming to be environment friendly. However, the chimney-like mouth of the dragon connoted that China was indifferent to pollution emission. The dragon,

with its giant stature and its arms crossed, was showing its apathy toward the people around. In this picture, China's image was depicted as giant and powerful but simultaneously as irresponsible toward the environment.

Similar to the use of dragons in *The Economist*, the dragons in *Der Spiegel* were not depicted as an affable companion. 11 October 2004 issue of *Der Spiegel* illustrated the dragon as a 'Weltmacht' (world power). The signifier in that picture was a dragon climbing out of the globe. The globe was split into half just like an eggshell was broken. The dragon was framed to have strong muscles and sharp teeth. The hairs of the dragon were standing, suggesting that it was irritated. The signified was that China became a new world power and that the new power was not a congenial company to the world.

The dragons on the two covers were Western dragons. They were not traditional Chinese dragons that symbolize auspiciousness. In Western culture, dragons are endowed with strong power. They are often depicted as greedy, brutal, and despotic (Yuan, 2015). They appeared in the mythologies of Satan and Cadmus and acted as evil, catastrophic, and hostile supernatural creatures (Yuan, 2015). However, in Chinese mythology, the supposed equivalent of a dragon is called a 'Loong,' and it is perceived as a symbol of integrity and authority. In ancient China, Loong referred to the Chinese nation and the ancient emperor. Today, the meaning of Loong has been associated with bliss and vitality. For example, Loong is often used in idioms to describe magnificent landscapes and talented people who achieved extraordinary accomplishments (Yuan, 2015).

By using the image of Western dragons, a myth was created in Western media. Readers would be impressed with the misrepresentation without being informed of the differences between Loong and the Western dragons. As a result, readers would be likely to accept the evil and threatening dragon as the image of China. In contrast to Western dragons, the use of Loong on *China Today* can provide some insights into how China expects to present itself. In October 2004 issue of *China Today*, a photo of dragon dance was used as the magazine cover. The Chinese dragon dance, which is the signifier of the picture, is often performed during Chinese festivals. The signified of the dragon dance was to express the jubilance of the people. Compared to the myths in Western dragons, the depiction of dragon dance had more associations with honoring traditional Chinese customs and wishing for auspiciousness.

A collectivistic China versus an individualistic China

Chinese workers and farmers were also framed on magazine covers. Coverage on workers and farmers belongs to both generic frames (e.g., human rights) and issue-specific frames (e.g., labor and capital) in TCFM. *The Economist* had the most magazine covers related to Chinese workers and farmers. Most of these pictures appeared in the late 2000s, suggesting that *The Economist* was paying increasing attention to China's lower social class. In 13 March 2006 issue of *Time* magazine,

the signifiers were a group of farmers carrying sickles and shovels in their hands. They were walking on their land and some of them were holding their fists. In this picture, editors used the touch of sketching to demonstrate the farmers. The non-coded message was the details of their facial expressions and their appearances. The red background of the image was also a signifier. Combined with the linguistic message 'China's rural rage,' the signified of the red color may refer to China's national color and people's anger. The signifieds of the red color and the sketches were that Chinese farmers were irritated and protesting. Lack of facial expression strengthened their group identity as peasants. Their seamless connection to the earth implied that their life could not be separated from their land. The framing of sickles and shovels showed irony in that they represented communism and party emblem.

In addition to this cover, 2 July 2012 issue of *Time* magazine presented an iPhone with China's national flag on the screen. The signifiers were a disassembled iPhone and a factory with chimneys and smoke rising from it. Many people were standing on the iPhone shell. The signified of the image was that iPhones were made in China. Though China had the fame for being the world factory, many workers and employees were receiving low respect in their working environment. They were usually anonymous and underpaid, and lived in limited space. However, the linguistic message showed that the editors' attitude toward 'Made in China' was more complicated than negative. Despite the vicious working environment, the magazine editors were concerned about how Apple could make profit from China's market without these labors.

The workers and farmers on both covers were framed as anonymous. Myth was created in these pictures considering that the figures in the pictures lacked subtle portrayals of their appearances. Their group identity was related to collectivistic behavior. It is consistent with Hofstede's (1980) identification of China as a collectivistic country. Readers would be likely to overlook the individualities of Chinese people and fail to recognize the human side of them.

By contrast, *China Today* did not lean toward the depiction of the group identity of Chinese people. More individual faces appeared in *China Today*. In the issues of April 2003 and February 2013, Chinese film celebrities, Zhang Ziyi and Li Bingbing, appeared on the magazine covers. Their signifieds were that Chinese film industry was booming and receiving global attention. In the March 2004 and November 2006 issues, the signifiers were an obese child lifting bars and a little girl shooting digital videos outdoors. The signifieds were associated with China's obesity status quo and ordinary people's DV fad. The myth on these magazine covers endowed China with more individual differences and delivered a stronger presence of culture diversity.

A paradoxical China versus a progressing China

The Western magazines did not neglect the progress China made. However, when presenting the progress, the image of China was framed as more paradoxical than

positive. An example would be the illustration of China's landscape. Framing of landscape could be viewed as the generic frame in TCFM as it is connected to global issues such as environmental protection and social responsibility. In 3 May 2004 issue of *Time* magazine, the signifiers were the mountains, rivers, and old pines. These signifiers constituted the traditional Chinese ink-and-water painting style and conveyed an esthetic sense of the ancient China. Meanwhile, the landmarks of Shanghai and Beijing replaced the white space in traditional Chinese ink-and-water painting. These landmarks, playing the role of signifiers in the picture, include the Shanghai Oriental Pearl Television Tower, the Jinmao Building, the Beijing National Stadium (also known as the 'Bird's Nest'), the state television station building, and residents' houses. The signified of this picture was that new architecture was springing up in China and sprawling into the old landscape, a contrast that implied the sense of disharmony. The inharmonious arrangement of the modern architecture breached the esthetic charm of the Chinese painting style.

Der Spiegel also framed China's new landscapes. In 15 January 2007 issue (Figure 1), the magazine cover was split into two parts. In the upper half of the picture, the signifiers were Shanghai Oriental Pearl Television Tower, high-rises, and commercial brands such as CocaCola. The signifieds of these signs were Shanghai's rapid development and its commercialism. In the bottom section of the picture, the signifier was a historical painting in China. In that picture, people were waving their hands and some of them were carrying red pamphlets—a compilation of quotations from Chairman Mao. The slogans behind the people were 'Long live Chinese Communist Party' and 'Long Live the People's Republic of China.'

According to Mullen and Fisher (2004), the esthetic production such as the use of color and light can help understand the function of the image. The painting style on this cover could be traced back to the Cultural Revolution in China. The style was called 'Hong guang liang' (in English meaning red, smooth, and bright). This painting style was often used during the Cultural Revolution in China to express people's enthusiasm for revolution and to promote mainstream ideology. The color 'red' must be used in the painting style because it can reflect workers and peasants' fervor and initiative in constructing a communist country. The lines of the painting must be 'smooth' so that the pictures can seem realistic, clean, and verisimilar. 'Bright' means that the painting should look shiny and glossy. In this picture, the 'Hong guang liang' style reflected that proletariats were the foundation of the nation. All ethnic groups in China were exhilarated under the leadership of the Chinese government.

The connotative message of this magazine cover in *Der Spiegel* conveyed the contrast between the commercial China and the communist China. The linguistic message 'Funktioniert der Kommunismus doch (Does communism still work)' showed that the editorial attitude toward China's development was rehashed. The paradox is that on one side, China is still a communist country. On the other side, China's development relies on its market economy, which places its identity in a predicament.

Figure 1. The magazine cover of 15 January 2007 issue of *Der Spiegel.*
Note: copyright@2007 DER SPIEGEL. http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/

China Today also framed the skyline in Shanghai to present China's development. In October 2012 issue, several foreigners were walking by the Huangpu River in Shanghai with the skyline of the high-rises mirrored in the river. The signifieds of the skyscrapers and foreigners were that China's development was associated with foreign investment and immigrants' contribution. Compared to the three mainstream Western magazines, China's identities in *China Today* were compatible and unified.

While admitting that China was becoming modern and developed, the Western magazines preferred to use paradox to present China's national image. The myth created here was that the images of China delivered a fixed thinking mode. Under the influence of the myth, when the audiences view the modern China, their minds might be naturally associated with communism or the inharmonious landscape.

It is consistent with Barthes' (1972) argument that myth transforms history into nature. The history of constructing new buildings is transformed into the nature of disarrangement.

The myth conveyed by *China Today* is about openness. Rather than stress its communist ideology, *China Today* linked China's development with its open market. The difference between the myths in Western magazines and Chinese magazines suggests that Western magazine editors were both affirmative and critical of China's development, while the editors of *China Today* sought to only portray China as an open economy.

In addition to the landscape frame, both *Time* magazine and *The Economist* used pandas on their magazine covers. Similar to the framing of dragons, pandas fall in the category of domestic frames of TCFM. *The Economist* had a total of three images about pandas. In 21 December 2013 issue of *The Economist*, the signifiers were a panda carrying a cigar, a film tape surrounding the panda, a national emblem of People's Republic of China, and a female film staff taking a flashlight in a cinema. The signified of the panda was the image of China. As cigar is often associated with wealth and supremacy, the connotation of framing the panda with the cigar was that China was becoming well off and powerful. The social context was that in 2012, China overtook Japan to become the second-largest film market in the world (Child, 2012). Around 1.3 billion people are willing to go to cinema (Child, 2012) and the box office of China film market in 2012 was around 2.8 billion US dollars (17 billion Chinese dollars) (The Economist, 2013). Therefore, to show the prosperity of China's film industry, the editors used the signifier of the film tape. Its signified was the trademark of the Metro Goldwyn Mayer Company. This sign was used in view of the fact that the Metro Goldwyn Mayer Company represented the booming American film industry in history.

While the signifieds of the panda and the film tape reminded readers of the booming film industry, the coding of the national emblem under the film tape added more connotations to this picture. The signified of the national emblem was the Chinese government and the Communist Party. The coding of the national emblem below the panda and the film tape connoted the role of the government in China's film industry administration. Combined with the cinema staff looking over the empty cinema, the red seats, and the red curtains, the signifieds of the whole picture could be that China's film industry was flourishing, but the government was still enforcing censorship and controlling the film market.

The linguistic message 'China's Hollywood' confirmed the implications. On one side, China's film production cooperated with media companies such as Sony, DreamWorks, and Hollywood studios (The Economist, 2013). This showed China's commitment to developing its film industry. On the other side, China's film industry does not have a sex-and-violence rating system. Instead, with unilateral censorship from the government, China curbed its film industry development and distinguished its film administration from the universal values. Thus, 'China's Hollywood' implied both positive and negative aspects of China's film industry.

The noncoded iconic messages in the same picture were the audiences in the cinema. Imagine if the cinema had not been empty, the interpretation would have been that the status quo of the Chinese film industry was well received by the Chinese audiences regardless of the censorship. Therefore, in this picture, the editors framed the empty cinema to illustrate the compelling influence of the censorship as undesirable, creating a myth that would naturally lead the readers to take Chinese government as the violator of Western values. Adding to that equation was the national emblem closely related to the communist ideology, reinforcing the stereotyped image of the Chinese government controlling its media system. However, in real life, the behaviors of the movie-going public may not necessarily be influenced in the way as the image suggested. The editors took it for granted that most Chinese audiences would be against film administration and boycott censorship.

China Today did not use pandas on its magazine covers, probably for the reason that the myth of using panda to represent China has already been naturalized and no further relation between pandas and China needs to be built.

A capitalist China versus a communist China

Luther (2002) argued that power relation is one of the key factors in understanding press images. All the three Western magazines used Chairman Mao to represent the image of China. The use of Mao in media coverage can be seen as both domestic frames and issue-specific frames. Mao is not only a political figure in China but also a representation of communism and proletariat. *The Economist* used a total of four Mao's images on its magazine covers. *Der Spiegel* had two pictures related to Mao. In 15 October 2012 issue of *Der Spiegel*, the signifier was Mao wearing a suit and carrying a cigar. A national emblem was coded on his suit and he was looking at the readers. The signified of his red necktie suggested that he represented China. The signifieds of Mao's image and the national emblem were concerned with the founding of the People's Republic of China and the communist ideology. Some other signs also appeared in the picture. The signs of dollars were on Mao's necktie. A ring was on Mao's hand. The signifieds of the ring, the cigar, the suit, and the dollar signs could be wealth, power, Western values, and commercialism. Thus, Mao's image in this picture was presented with two identities. First, he was a communist party member. Second, he was a businessman, a boss, or a bourgeois. The linguistic message provided the readers with more information. 'Die Firma: Mord, sex, corruption, Machtkampf unter Chinas Kommunisten' (The company: murder, sex, corruption, power struggle under China's communism) reflected that the theme of the picture was about Chinese political leaders' power struggle. Considering that the issue was released in October 2012, the social context was that a new Chinese president would soon be elected and political leaders were struggling for promotion.

The myth created in this picture was that Mao was no longer a solemn political leader. Instead, Mao was commoditized by capitalism. Here the naturalization was

that in the past, Mao was representative of communism. Now Mao's image would be more likely to be subject to commercialism and entertainment.

China Today did not use Mao's image on its magazine covers. It supports the prior academic perspective that Beijing had assuaged the employment of Maoism for propaganda purposes (Wang, 2003; Zhao, 1998). Instead, *China Today* sought to build an image that reflects the domestic organization principle of democratic centralism and collective leadership in China. In April 2013 issue, *China Today* used a picture of President Xi walking in the Great Hall of the People surrounded by other members of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China. At that time, the National People's Congress elected Xi as Chinese president. The Standing Committee Members of the NPC were also elected to administer the nation (Xinhua News Agency, 2016). Compared to the Western renderings (e.g., the use of President Xi in *The Economist* and *Time*), no identity conflict was involved in *China Today*. The postures of President Xi and the other party members demonstrated their confidence and expectations for the future of China. The framing of the national emblem and the national flags in the background of the picture further connoted that communism is the only ideology in China. These Chinese political leaders were naturalized as upright, solemn, successful, confident, and integrated figures.

A dark China versus a promising China

In addition to political figures, social memory was framed on both European and American magazine covers. In 29 March 2010 issue of *Der Spiegel*, the signifier was a person sitting on the ground using his laptop. On his laptop screen was the trademark of 'Google.' The military tanks lining in front of the person were also signifiers in this picture. The signified of the tanks was that China was prohibiting its Internet users from using Google. The social context of the picture was that in 2010, Google dropped out of the Internet market in Mainland China. The signified of the coding of the tanks in front of the computer user might remind readers of a well-known picture related to the 1989 Tian'anmen student movement. In that picture, an unarmed student was standing in front of the tanks and attempting to stop the tanks from moving forward. The red color in the background not only implied that the topic was related to China but also delivered a sense of depression. As red is the color of blood, the picture might stir up readers' memory of the sanguinary event. Furthermore, the linguistic messages 'Kalter Krieg im Internet' (The Cold War in the Internet) and 'Der Kampf um die Freiheit im Netz' (the fight for freedom in net) could remind readers of their memory for the Cold War and their insecure feelings in the age of the US–Soviet hegemony. Here, framing the student protest could be seen as an issue-specific frame in TCFM.

Two myths existed in this picture. First, the conflict between Google and the Chinese government was simply attributed to China's political intervention. Readers would view Google's withdrawal from Mainland China as a result of government pressure and neglect the other reasons that made Google quit the

mainland Internet market (e.g., market occupation, culture differences). The pressure from the government was naturalized as the main contributor to the withdrawal of Google.

Second, by using the 'Cold War' and 'Fight for freedom,' the conflict between a government institution and a commercial company was naturalized into the conflict between Chinese and the US government, and even between authoritarianism and liberalism. The image also presumed that online users actually enjoyed the freedom of using Google, which was not justified in the image.

In addition to recalling the social memory of student movements, the Western magazines used Terra-Cotta Warriors on their covers. For example, the image of the warriors in 11 September 2006 issue of *Der Spiegel* was polysemic (Figure 2). The signifiers were a group of warriors holding cars, cell phones, laptops, and high-speed rails. The warriors were in an orderly arrangement. Instead of being dilapidated and decrepit, the warriors were coded blue and silver in their imposing appearances, conceivably to reflect the grimness in them. The signifieds of the warriors were China's ancient military power. As a national flag appeared in the picture, the connotative message might be that products made in China were entering the world market. The export of these products was invasive. The linguistic message supported this interpretation. The use of 'Angriff aus Fern-ost' (Aggression from Far-East) and 'Weltkrieg um Wohlstand' (World war on wealth) reflected that China's export was viewed as aggressive.

The myth created in this picture was that the brand of 'made in China' was viewed not only as part of a fair trade but also as a cause of unemployment in Western countries. In addition, the use of 'Far-East' on the magazine cover reflected the Europeans' perspectives of geopolitics dating back to the 18th and 19th centuries, when Europe was perceived as the center of the world. The ethnocentric messages explained why China's products were viewed as aggressive and threatening.

Terra-Cotta Warriors were also framed in *China Today*. The signifiers were three warriors and two warhorses standing in the vault. The linguistic message 'The endurance of Chinese charm' suggested that the magazine editors sought to present China's splendid historical relics, which functioned as the signifieds of the warriors.

In contrast to the Western magazine covers, *China Today* did not touch upon sensitive issues such as the Internet censorship or the export of made-in-China products. *China Today* focuses more on China's future. In the issue of August 2012, the signifiers were six foreign children in China. They were presenting their works of Chinese calligraphy. The girl in front of the image was wearing a green shirt. The Chinese character she wrote was 'Fu' (meaning luck and happiness). The signified of the picture was that these children were delighted to learn Chinese characters. They were excited to know about China and Chinese culture. The myth in this picture was that it left the readers with the impression that learning Chinese was prevalent and fashionable. Children would feel joyful when learning Chinese characters.
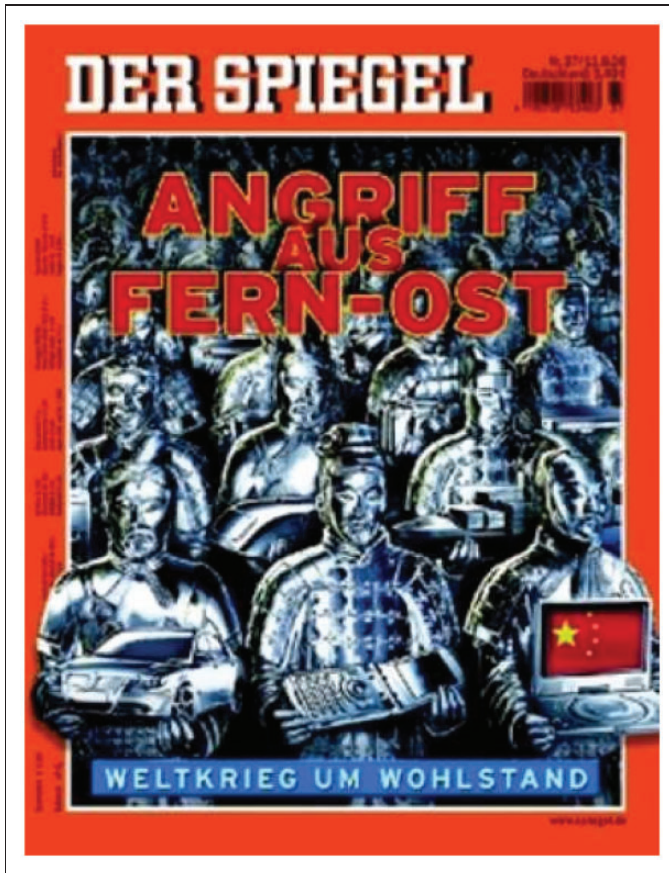
Figure 2. The magazine cover of 11 September 2006 issue of *Der Spiegel*.
Note: copyright@2006 DER SPIEGEL. http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/

The myth on this magazine cover naturalizes the idea of China being a cultural power. Similar to the use of Chinese dragons to show China's civilization of 5000 years, *China Today* portrayed foreigners on their magazine covers to illustrate that Chinese culture is globally oriented (Pan, 2010). Pan (2010) argued that the narrative of the universalism of Chinese culture was conveyed in tandem with cultural superiority, as Chinese culture had assimilated others into its own cultural practices in the history.

Presenting cultural universalism on the magazine cover further manifests the growing state-led nationalism in China. After the Tian'anmen Square Event, China's images had been portrayed as dark and callous. To enhance its image, the Chinese government has avoided using Maoism and attempted to rebuild itself through the agglomeration of national pride (Zhao, 1998). Entering WTO, as well as hosting both the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, and the 2010 Shanghai World

Expo, has been viewed as the bedrocks of a rising nationalist zeal in China (Pan, 2010; Zhao, 1998).

Evolution of China's image

In addition to the signs above, China's image has gone through an evolution from 2001 to 2014 on these magazine covers. Over time, *Der Spiegel* weakened the use of dragons, but more frequently linked China's image to political figures (e.g., Chairman Mao) and to the depiction of a rising superpower. The linguistic messages on the covers of *Der Spiegel* often used 'kampf' (struggle), 'macht' (power), and 'kalter krieg' (cold war). These words consistently appeared on the covers and might lead to the perception of an insecure China.

On the magazine covers of *Time*, China's image appears to be gradually moving from a developing country to a hero or a savior of the world. Before 2008, the topics that appeared in *Time* were related to the changes in China. The editors used words such as 'new dreamscape,' 'turns the page,' and 'dawn of a new dynasty' to describe a progressing China. After 2008, *Time* magazine not only focused on China's domestic policy, but also discussed China's interaction with India and Japan. Over time, *Time* magazine reduced its presentation of China's social movement and increased its analyses of China's social policies, lower social class such as workers and peasants, and China's impact on the world economy. However, it should be pointed out that the image of China as a savior of the world is dialectically consistent with the stereotypical image of rising China as a threat. For example, in August 2009, *Time* framed a panda using a pump to inflate the flat globe, but the size of the panda was coded larger than the globe. The paradoxical framing reflected an editorial disquiet at a potentially destructive power of the world. Similarly, in an issue of October 2011, China was framed as a large red bubble. The linguistic message was 'We're counting on China's growth to save the world. Unless its economy blows up first.'

The Economist centered on China's economic issues. From 2001 to 2007, The Economist had 18 China-related magazine covers. From 2008 to March 2014, the number increased to 34. It suggests that *The Economist* increased its coverage of China's role in the world. Similar to *Time*, *The Economist* had concentrated on China's changes and growth in the first few years since 2001. Later, it framed China as an unstable superpower of the world. Though the focuses on consumerism and policymaking indicated that China was shouldering the responsibilities of leading the world economy, the linguistic messages such as 'fear,' 'face-off,' and 'takeovers' reflected editors' mixed feelings toward China. An example would be the use of a Peking Opera makeup on one of its magazine covers. The makeup was coded as black and white. In Peking Opera, black means integrity and selflessness, while white means deviousness, guile, and suspicion. The use of a black-and-white makeup again established a double-faced China.

China Today had more diverse ways to present China. In early 2000s, political leaders and city landscapes appeared to be the main themes on its magazine covers.

More recently, *China Today* has covered various topics such as China's birth policy, the Chinese dream, economic growth, higher education, Chinese culture, financial crises, Chinese art, environmental protection, the role of Hong Kong, and so on. The presentation of political leaders decreased, whereas more individual faces appeared. These ordinary citizens were framed with the signifiers of children, students, workers, parents, kites, trees, and balloons. The signifieds point to the enhancement of life quality and China's expectations for the next generation.

TCFM and myths

Barthes' semiotic analysis (1972) and Guo et al.'s (2012) TCFM were used to analyze the creation of myths in *Time* magazine, *The Economist*, *Der Spiegel*, and *China Today*. By comparing the national images on these magazine covers, five themes were identified. They were the constitution of a threatening China versus a friendly China, a collectivistic China versus an individualistic China, a paradoxical China versus a progressing China, a capitalist China versus a communist China, and a dark China versus a bright China.

The five themes not only exhibit different perspectives from the European and American magazine institutions but also contribute to the construction of TCFM. The frames of dragons, workers and farmers, infrastructure, pandas, political leaders, and history events could all be added to the China-specific frame pool in TCFM. These frames could help researchers in the future to replicate and conduct more studies about China's national image.

In addition, as mentioned in the results, all the frames corroborated the validity of the different types of frames in TCFM. For example, the framing of political leaders and China's landscapes had the same function as the ideology-driven frame in TCFM (Guo et al., 2012). The framing of peasants and workers corroborated the powerless frame under generic frames (Guo et al., 2012). The validity of TCFM is thus strengthened.

The current study would be conducive to building a more comprehensive TCFM. Guo et al. (2012) argued that TCFM can be applied to analyses of newspapers, televisions, radios, micro blogs, and social media. The current study expanded its theoretical scope to pictures on magazine covers. TCFM also suggests that the functions of framing include problem identification, issue diagnosis, moral evaluation, and solution (Guo et al., 2012). The current study combined Barthes' mythology (1972) and incorporated a new function of framing in TCFM: myth creation. The visual frames could create a myth that reflects a naturalized social reality.

Apart from the contribution to TCFM, the results further revealed Western magazines' mechanisms for framing China's national image. First, as Pan (2010) noted, creating myths involves objectivizing the signs. China's image was objectified by the use of dragons, pandas, and warriors. Even though pandas were regarded as a sign of friendliness, they were painted as the concomitants of wealth and privilege. Objectifying China in an antagonistic relationship with

other countries would underplay the complexity of China's issues. For example, it stands to reason that China may never be either one of the two extremes—savior or destroyer as presented on *Time* and *The Economist*. In the globalization process, it needs to rely on all other economy powers to manage exports, imports, and domestic economic growth.

Second, the collectivistic illustration of China led to the image of an aggressive China. Warriors, workers, and farmers were often portrayed in groups. Their individual characteristics were often neglected. The framing of the crowd of terra-cotta warriors and outraged peasants was likely to create the myth that China was imposing pressure on other countries.

Third, though China's new landscapes were demonstrated, the negative side such as the damage to the ecology and the inharmonious city planning was presented as well. By placing China's development into contradiction (e.g., *The Economist* presenting a contrastive image of an industrialized city being the water reflection of a pristine natural landscape), China's paradox of its prosperity was naturalized.

Fourth, dual identity was often depicted on Western magazine covers. The conflict between communism and capitalism (e.g., Mao wearing a Louis Vuitton suit on *Time*) may lead readers to considering China as incongruous in its economic system and political system.

Fifth, historical context exerted influence on readers' perception as well. Using a historic image as a reference, the magazine covers would lead readers to overlook the differences between history and contemporary events. The readers would be likely to draw biased conclusions based on the insinuation of historical events such as the Tian'anmen student protest. Consistent with the electronic colonialism theory (McPhail, 2013), as the Western magazines are all published in core nations, the myths, along with a set of norms, values, and cultures, would be imported to peripheral nations and would influence beliefs and attitudes across borders.

Above all, the mechanisms for framing China's national image on Western magazine covers include the use of objectification, collectivistic illustration, contradiction, dual identity, and reference to historical contexts. Compared to Western magazine covers, *China Today* used fewer cultural symbols. Photos of students graduating from colleges, a little girl playing kites, and a lady dancing in a plaza suggested that *China Today* attempted to exhibit an ordinary façade of life in China. Instead of applying dual identities, development dilemma, and prior historical events, *China Today* has built an image that was much more straightforward, distinct, and futuristic.

Conclusions, limitations, and future research

This study identified five themes of China's national image on *Time, The Economist, Der Spiegel*, and *China Today*. Additionally, this study went on to confirm the validity of TCFM and expanded its theoretical boundary to the visual presentations on magazine covers. However, there are some limitations in this study.

First, the magazine covers were selected after 2001. In order to better understand how China's image has evolved over time, researchers can track more dated issues of the magazines. The magazines in other countries such as France and Japan can also be included for future research. Also, this study concludes in April 2014. The national image of China may have further changed since then. Thus, more research is needed to track the evolution of China's national image in the future.

Second, though *China Today* is a China-based multilingual magazine that exhibits China's image, it does not fall into the category of hard-news magazine. It focuses more on Chinese culture and lifestyle. Future research could include more China-based English magazines that center on business and political news. For instance, researchers can integrate *Beijing Review* and *NewsChina* in their studies to discover more patterns in the government-desired national image of China. The former magazine was launched in 1958 with a circulation of over 70,000 per issue (Beijing Review, 2016). The latter was launched in 2008 (NewsChina, 2016) and may represent the latest government-desired image of China.

Third, semiotic analyses may not be enough to explicate editors' intention in presenting China. Scholars can combine textual analysis and visual analysis to examine the image of China in a more detailed way.

Fourth, this study has primarily analyzed China's national image from the perspectives of the European and American media. It is recommended that more semiotic analyses could be conducted from the perspectives of Sinology.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

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