

“The West” in “the East”:
Representation of the Concept of the West in Contemporary Chinese Media

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How does the typical Eastern country China identify the West? How is the West represented in Chinese media in the age of globalization and digitalization? This study provides an overview of how the concept of the West is represented through major media in China.

Evolution of the Concept of “the West” in Modern China

In ancient China, the West is a more geographical concept referring to countries and areas located west of China. In Chinese view of history, “Modern China” starts from the First Opium War in 1840 when United Kingdom defeated Qing dynasty with a series of unequal treaties. In the following one hundred years, more foreign countries are on the opposite side of China’s nationalism, including USA, Russia, Japan and most countries in Western Europe. During that period of time, “foreign” is more common used to identify these countries rather than “the West”. As the famous Qing thinker Wei Yuan brought up in his book, “learning merits from the foreign to conquer the foreign” (师夷长技以制夷)¹, many Chinese elites began to come up with solutions dealing with the national difficulty targeting their strong and well-equipped foreign enemies.

After losing several wars to “west foreign” countries and being invaded, the hostility kept existed after the foundation of People’s Republic of China in 1949 with the concept of the West evolved into a more ideological term due to the big gap between Communism and Capitalism. In early 1980s, China changed its national strategy to “Reform and Opening”, and established the market economy system until today. As for now China is embracing the West more than ever but at the same time being cautious and skeptical about the West.

¹ Yuan Wei, *Illustrated Annals of Overseas Countries* (Zhengzhou: Zhouzhou Guji , 1999), 1.

Representation of the West on China's Major Media Weibo Accounts

In the media landscape in China nowadays, social media is an important platform to reflect and observe opinions of Chinese. The Twitter-like Weibo website has nearly 300 million monthly active users², with almost all Chinese media agencies operating official accounts daily. In this study, four major media Weibo accounts are chosen as samples for analysis, which are China Central Television (CCTV, 46.5 million Weibo followers)³, People's Daily (48.9 million Weibo followers)⁴, Xinhua News Agency (8.78 million followers)⁵ and Global Times (5.47 million Weibo followers)⁶. By searching and analyzing "the West"(西方) as keyword among all their news posts, this study tries to find out who is included in the West, under what circumstances they are being mentioned and what is the purpose of Chinese media to use the concept.

Most samples using "the West" can be classified as follows:

Politics: Western powers (USA, France, UK, Germany), Western countries (including most European and North American countries in general, countries that have invaded China in history and also so-called "developed countries"), Western democracy

Culture: Western festivals (Halloween, Christmas, Valentine's Day, Mother's Day), Western proverb, Western education, Western literatures

Media: Western media ("always talk white into black, with prejudice and negative coverage of China"), Western public opinions.

² "SINA Reports Third Quarter 2016 Financial Results." Accessed November 23, 2016, <http://corp.sina.com.cn/eng/news/2016-11-22/185.html>.

³ CCTV NEWS Weibo Account, accessed November 23, 2016. <http://weibo.com/u/2656274875>

⁴ People's Daily Weibo Account, accessed November 23, 2016. <http://weibo.com/rmr>

⁵ Xinhua News Weibo Account, accessed November 23, 2016. <http://weibo.com/u/1787920531>

⁶ Global Times Weibo Account, accessed November 23, 2016. <http://weibo.com/huanqiushibaoguanwei>

Values: Western values (“are not appropriate for textbooks used in China”), Western civilization.

An Unsettled and Imagined Community: Western audience, Western views, Western society.

The categories mentioned above are rather roughly classified with no clear boundaries in between. Different media may also have various regulations and biases when using “the West” in their news stories. However a whole picture of the usage of “the West” can still be seen from these samples found.

Findings and Conclusions

From the use of “the West” in these four Chinese media Weibo accounts, it turns out that the West is very common used to indicate different groups of countries and cultural concepts in various situations. It is also a frequently used expression in official documents of Chinese government.

However, the concept does not have a clear and settled definition in China, which can include different objects when needed. For example, Russia used to be the “Western power” in history fighting with Qing dynasty. But with the historical communism friendship and current diplomatic relationship between China and Russia, it is no longer on the list of being the West especially when the West is depicted as rivals. On the other hand, not all countries can be categorized as the West. The West still has to be strong, well-developed and sometimes against

China both in history and present. As some scholar argues, “the West may not exist in Europe, but it exists for much of the non-Western world which has conjured up an image of the West”⁷.

Emotion is mixed and “blurred” when using “the West” by Chinese media, sometimes criticizing, sometimes also admiring. “Western media” is very frequently used as a discourse system being subjective and always tarnishing China. While if some Western media are praising any aspect of the development of China, it would become a trustworthy recognition again to highlight China’s achievements.

Orientalism and Occidentalism do not apply in China’s nationalism discourse traditionally, but both of them are being accepted implicitly through media coverages. In a word, “the West” does not have a fixed and well accepted definition in today’s China, but has become a nuanced term based on the different purposes of media bias under different circumstances.

(956 words)

⁷ Gerard Delanty, “The idea of a post-Western Europe,” in *Europe and Asia Beyond East and West*, ed. Gerard Delanty. (Oxon: Routledge, 2006), 2.