

RESEARCH ARTICLE

America the Failure? Critical Narratives of the United States in Chinese State Media

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Abstract

As relations between the United States and China have grown tenser, how has the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) portrayal of the United States changed? And what might portrayals of the United States tell us about domestic messaging in China? This study systematically investigates CCP messaging about the United States in the contemporary era. To do this, we hand code, categorize and analyse 1,761 editorials about the United States published between 2003 and 2022 in *People's Daily*, the Party's flagship newspaper. In addition to showing a sustained rise in critical portrayals since 2018, we identify and elaborate three distinct critical narratives about the United States: it is a dangerous hegemon abroad, it has poor values at home, and it is increasingly weak and in decline. These narratives appear both independently and in combination and are often framed to contrast with portrayals of China. We argue that these narratives are not just negative propaganda to discredit the United States but can also be a strategy to promote a positive vision of the CCP's virtues and governance at home. This study contributes empirically and theoretically to research on propaganda and legitimation in China.

摘要

随着中美关系日趋紧张，中国共产党对美国的描述发生了怎样的变化？其对美国的描述又能揭示中国国内宣传的哪些特点？本研究系统调查了当代中共关于美国的宣传内容。为此，我们手动编码、分类并分析了从 2003 年至 2022 年间中共党媒《人民日报》的 1761 篇关于美国的评论。我们发现，自 2018 年以来对美国的批判性描述持续增多。此外，我们还辨识并详细阐述了三种不同的批判性叙事：美国是国际上的危险霸权国家；其国内价值观低劣；其国力日渐衰弱。这些叙事既可以独立出现，也可以组合呈现，且通常与对中国的描述形成对比。我们认为，这些关于美国的官方叙事不仅是为了抹黑美国的负面宣传，还可能是一种宣扬中共优越性与治理能力的策略。本研究为中国的宣传与合法化研究提供了经验和理论贡献。

Keywords: Chinese Communist Party; *People's Daily*; propaganda; anti-Americanism

关键词: 中国共产党; 人民日报; 宣传; 反美主义

State media in the People's Republic of China (PRC) have long focused much of their outward attention on the United States (US). As part of a complex and often fraught relationship, much of this attention has been negative: state media outlets have often been critical of the United States, especially during periods of bilateral tension. Anecdotally, observers have noted a shift in the tone and stridency of portrayals of the United States since the mid-2010s compared to much of the reform era. Snippets of state media show descriptions of the United States as a superpower in decline, as the main cause of instability across the globe, and as a governance failure, especially in its feeble response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Scholars, however, have yet to systematically analyse recent discursive shifts and their implications. What is the substance of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) messaging about the United States, and how might that contribute to its domestic propaganda strategy?

Understanding Party rhetoric about the United States is important because it offers insights into how the regime understands its relationship with foreign powers and how it wants cadres and citizens to interpret global events. Moreover, analysing how these arguments are deployed adds to our understanding of how the regime wants domestic audiences to view the Party itself. In this sense, messaging about the United States is part of political legitimization at home.

Existing scholarship highlights how the CCP depicts America as a threat to China and its ambitions. Iain Johnston and Daniela Stockmann argue that the main feature of Chinese messaging about the United States is “that it is hegemonic, arrogant, and ... aimed at preventing China’s legitimate rise as an economically developed major power.”¹ Anne-Marie Brady argues that “since 1989, anti-US rhetoric has been a constant theme” in propaganda, which bolsters domestic stability by “emphasizing a hostile Other to unite the population.”² During the Korean War, criticizing the United States helped to instil patriotism among citizens in the newly founded PRC, while accusations of American germ warfare mobilized the population to undertake patriotic health campaigns, which continue to this day.³ In terms of foreign policy, Rush Doshi shows how the CCP began to see (and portray) the United States as more threatening after a trifecta of events in the late 1980s and early 1990s: the crackdown in Tiananmen Square, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Gulf War.⁴ These arguments reflect a common strain of logic in political science that heightening external threat can produce domestic cohesion,⁵ bipartisan unity,⁶ or a “rally-round-the-flag” effect.⁷ Analysis of other regimes, especially Russia, has also found that state media focus on portraying America as a threat.⁸

Scholars also point to Chinese descriptions of America that might discredit the United States and its political system. Focusing on the period from 1972 to 1990, David Shambaugh notes that Chinese portrayals of US society were rife with stories of divorce, crime and drugs, among other evidence of immorality and social decay.⁹ Burgeoning scholarship argues that China’s critical messaging about the US political system aims to undermine support for liberal democracy.¹⁰ In a study comparing Russian and Chinese propaganda about Western political systems, Erin Baggott Carter and Brett L. Carter write that “critical coverage is potentially valuable, insofar as it undermines the appeal of an alternative, more democratic government.”¹¹

While existing work offers useful insight, this study argues that the portrayal of the United States in Chinese state media is more complex than existing scholarship suggests. We systematically analyse editorial columns, commentaries and op-eds, which we refer to collectively as editorials, about the United States in the print edition of *People’s Daily* (*Renmin ribao* 人民日报), the Party’s flagship newspaper, between 2003 and 2022. We identify and trace three major critical narratives about the United States in Chinese state media: (1) America is a dangerous hegemon abroad; (2) America has poor social values at home; and (3) America is weak and in decline. None of these three narratives is entirely new; however, we show how they have fluctuated over time, and the overall share of critical narratives was elevated in the period 2018–2022. In some cases, these narratives stand alone; in others, they work together to create a coherent picture of American behaviour, such as

1 Johnston and Stockmann 2011.

2 Brady 2008, 98.

3 Kuech 2020; Perry 2024.

4 Doshi 2021.

5 Stein 1976; Markides and Cohn 1982; Hoffmann 2015.

6 Flynn 2014.

7 Baker and Oneal 2001.

8 Shlapentokh 2011; Sokolov et al. 2018; Shlapentokh 2009; Shlapentokh, Woods and Shiraev 2005; Alrababa’h and Blydes 2021.

9 Shambaugh 1988.

10 Chester 2023.

11 Carter and Carter 2023.

when American weakness is used to explain the foreign policy actions that China sees as dangerous and hegemonic.

We argue that these critical portrayals of the United States are not just negative propaganda to discredit the United States but can also promote a positive vision of China. Our findings suggest that one pathway through which the Party can “tell its story well,” both domestically and internationally, is by contrasting narratives critical of the United States with narratives of China.¹² The framing of this contrast not only rallies citizens against a foreign threat or diminishes the American system but also conveys positive messages about China’s own performance, virtue and direction. All three of the narratives we identify in this study can contribute to efforts at “relative legitimation” in Chinese state media.

This study makes three contributions to the study of Chinese politics, propaganda and legitimation. First, our comprehensive empirical analysis of 20 years of *People’s Daily* editorials about the United States offers a systematic look at Party messaging in the period 2003 to 2022. Second, we advance a typology of the major narratives in Party messaging about America and show how distinct narratives can work in tandem to craft a larger vision of the forces shaping US–China relations. Third, by showing how state media frame critical narratives of the United States to contrast with China, we highlight how negative descriptions of the United States can portray China in a positive light. Narratives of the United States are as much about China’s unique successes as America’s flaws. This adds to discussions about the content of Chinese propaganda and highlights an undervalued way that China can pursue political legitimation.

This study proceeds as follows. The next section details the paper’s methodological approach. The paper then presents empirical analysis of contemporary *People’s Daily* editorials about the United States and elaborates the three major critical narratives they deploy. It explains how these narratives work either independently or together within editorials to frame events. Drawing primarily on editorials during the trade war and COVID-19 pandemic, the study then shows how these narratives are framed in contrast to China. Based on this empirical analysis, the paper argues that these critical narratives can contribute to the CCP’s efforts at political legitimation through the crafting of positive images of the CCP and its justifications for rule. A brief conclusion discusses the implications of the study for US–China relations and future research directions.

Methodology

To undertake our analysis of narratives of the United States in Chinese state media, we selected, read and categorized *People’s Daily* editorials between 2003 and 2022. We chose to begin data collection in 2003 because, as past scholarship has shown, the United States’ invasion of Iraq marked a global turning point in attitudes towards America.¹³ With two decades of data, we are able to observe how Chinese state media addressed several major developments in US–China relations, as well as two changes in Chinese administrations.

Following many past studies of state media, we selected *People’s Daily* because it is the carefully vetted mouthpiece of the Party at the national level.¹⁴ As Clyde Yicheng Wang argues, *People’s Daily* is a “newspaper of history” whose objective is to catalogue official Party narratives that will remain etched in time.¹⁵ We chose to focus on editorials because they often serve as a conduit of approved opinion.¹⁶ Moreover, *People’s Daily* is targeted at a general audience (as opposed to other authoritative but sector-specific newspapers, such as *PLA Daily*). While regular citizens may not frequently

12 While most analyses of the slogan “telling China’s story well” focus on external propaganda, it is also used internally as well. See Xu and Gong 2024.

13 Keohane and Katzenstein 2011.

14 Wu, Guoguang 1994.

15 Wang 2024.

16 Shambaugh 2007.

read *People's Daily*, as the paper of record it sets and disseminates the Party line on important topics, and its articles are widely copied across other state media and on private platforms.

People's Daily editorials are arranged into columns with varying levels of authoritativeness and different subject specialties. We selected four prominent columns that focus on international affairs. The first two are columns considered to be direct expressions of the CCP leadership's voice: *Guo Jiping* 国纪平, which presents major opinions on international affairs, and *Zhongsheng* 钟声, the name of which is a homophone for "voice of the Central (Committee)."¹⁷ We also selected two other editorial columns, *International Forum* (*Guoji luntan* 国际论坛) and *Global Dispatches* (*Huanqiu zoubi* 环球走笔), which appear most frequently among the columns focused on international affairs. These columns often feature op-eds that reflect global themes. *People's Daily* published 6,496 editorials across these four columns between 1 January 2003 and 31 December 2022. Table 3 in Appendix A provides the numbers of editorials in each column and how often they feature the narratives we identify.

Among these editorials, we identified 1,761 that dealt substantively with the United States – a determination that we made according to whether there were at least four references to the United States in the text. We picked this number inductively because it is high enough to exclude editorials that mention America in passing but low enough to capture editorials that substantively discuss America, even if only in one part. We conducted two simple robustness checks: lowering the cut-off to three references increased the number of editorials about America to 1,822 (from 1,761), whereas raising the cut-off to five references decreased the number to 1,712. These changes – a 3.5 per cent increase or a 2.7 per cent decrease – do not affect the overall findings.

We used a fully qualitative approach in this study. First, based on close reading of many editorials, the authors identified the main narratives and the recurring themes they emphasize. One author read all 1,761 editorials and attempted to categorize them, and the other author went through and independently read, categorized and analysed a random sample of more than 25 per cent of them to verify the coding and assessment. The authors then worked through any questions in coding and reassessed any editorials where there might have been further discrepancies. Some editorials did not contain any critical narratives or portrayed the United States in positive terms, while others promoted one or multiple critical narratives.

We analysed the set of editorial columns as a whole rather than treating each column independently. While there are differences between the four editorial columns in their emphasis and content – for example, *Zhongsheng* often discusses America as a dangerous hegemon, while *Guo Jiping* rarely mentions America's bad social values – we are interested in the overall Party line over time rather than differences between editorials. The frequency of each editorial fluctuates and there is a shift from *International Forum* to *Zhongsheng* over the period covered in our dataset, but the overall trends we identify in the aggregate are reflected within the major columns over time. Moreover, in certain periods, the distinction between columns is blurred: *Zhongsheng* is both a column name and an author, and some editorials in the *International Forum* series are attributed to *Zhongsheng*. Since there are no requirements for how often columns appear, the introduction of a new column or the more frequent appearance of a column or author like *Zhongsheng* is more likely a result of the message that Party leaders want to convey, rather than the cause of a change in perspective. Table 4 in Appendix A provides further details about the columns over time.

The qualitative methodology employed is appropriate for this study because it allows us to identify natural narrative structures across disparate topics and ensures that we did not neglect the nuance of these narratives as they evolve. This approach draws on a fruitful tradition of close reading of official discourse in China.¹⁸ We hope this study will complement other more quantitatively driven studies on related topics.

¹⁷ Gitter and Fang 2018.

¹⁸ Schoenhals 1992.

Critical Narratives of the United States

The presence of editorials in *People's Daily* with critical narratives of the United States fluctuated over the period 2003–2022 but exhibited a general and sustained rise between 2018 and 2022. More than 90 per cent of all editorials from 2019 to 2022 discussing the United States included at least one major critical narrative (as opposed to neutral or positive narratives). While aggregate numbers cannot capture the tone of the editorials included in this rise, a brief glance at the language of editorials in this period suggests a more aggressive tone. In earlier periods in the study, critical language is often restrained. For example, an article on US democracy references leading Western political journals to analyse the shortcomings of multiparty democracy.¹⁹ In contrast, an editorial in May 2021 excoriated American-style democracy as “degenerating in its own stench,” dismissing it as “nothing more than an untrustworthy game played by the country’s vicious political circles.”²⁰

The periods of relatively greater use of critical narratives reflect political responses to major geopolitical events (Figure 1). A higher share of negative editorials in 2004 is connected to the aftermath of the US war in Iraq, while relative nadirs in 2009, 2015 and 2017 correspond to brief episodes of rapprochement intended to improve bilateral relations. (These three years also feature higher percentages of positive editorials about the United States.)

The potential drivers of this rise in negative portrayals of the United States are complex, and this paper cannot possibly fully explicate them. Nonetheless, the timing of the overall rise in critical narratives reflects a broader deterioration in US–China relations. In addition to the launch of a trade war in 2018–2019, a bipartisan consensus emerged in Washington that the United States had to do more to compete with and counter China.²¹ Congresspeople from both parties in the United States sharply increased their political messaging about the threats posed by a powerful and assertive China in technology, trade, military affairs and other areas, often drawing sharp rebukes from Chinese leaders.²² At the same time, China’s foreign policy continued to move away from Deng Xiaoping’s 邓小平 classic formulation of “biding one’s time” to actively asserting territorial claims, especially on its maritime periphery.²³ Marking the end of a “century of humiliation,” Chinese diplomacy embraced a more combative and confrontational “wolf warrior” style that aggressively rebutted any perceived criticisms of China.²⁴ These underlying tensions now define a new normal of US–China relations.

Three narratives: America is dangerous, America has bad values and America is weak

The editorials we analysed about the United States feature three major critical narratives (Figure 2). These narratives are not simply topics but rather are stories about what kind of country the United States is. They both inform and are derived from Chinese state media’s discussion of specific events and trends. Here, we elaborate these major narrative categories and the prominent themes that recur within them.

The first and most common narrative describes America as a dangerous hegemon that uses its power to harm other countries. “In the more than 200-year history of the United States, it has accumulated a disgraceful record of too much foreign hegemonic interference,” one *People's Daily* editorial summarized in 2020.²⁵ “The facts have fully proven that the United States is a hegemonic country suffering from ‘war addiction,’ and it is the biggest source of risk to global peace and

19 “Ningjuli ye shi xingdongli” (Cohesion is also the power to mobilize). *Renmin ribao*, 7 January 2013.

20 “Miu yan qi shi jishi xiu” (When will the lies and deception end?). *Renmin ribao*, 30 May 2021. All translations are authors’ own.

21 Swaine 2019.

22 Carothers and Sun 2023.

23 Goldstein 2020.

24 Yuan, Shaoyu 2023.

25 “Ganshe taguo neizheng, weixie quanqiu zhengzhi anquan” (Interfering in other countries’ internal affairs, threatening global political security). *Renmin ribao*, 28 October 2020.

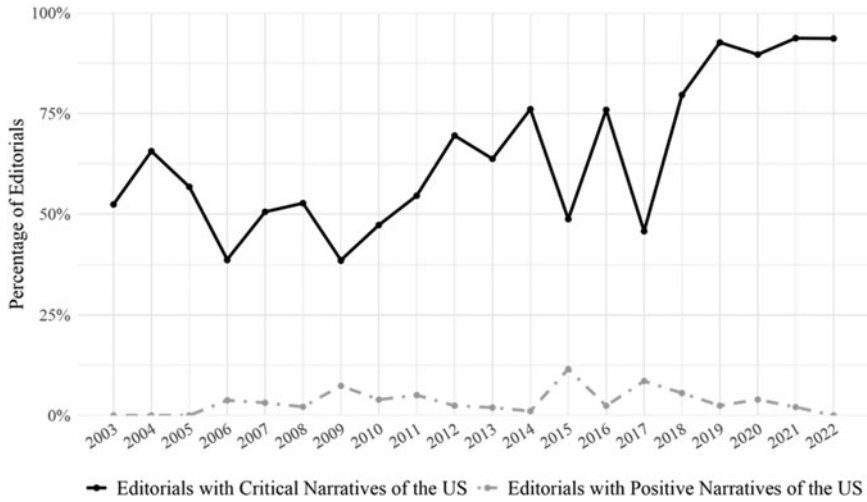


Figure 1. Critical Narratives of the United States in *People's Daily* Editorials, 2003–2022

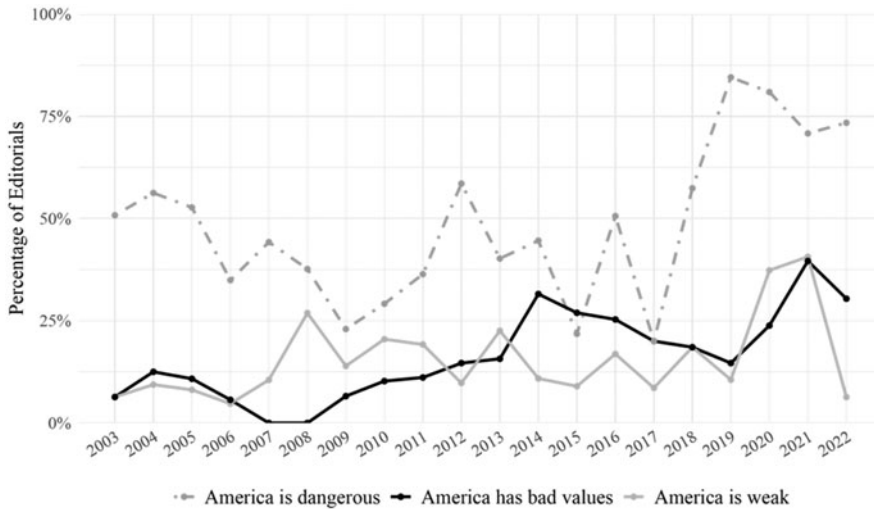


Figure 2. Variation in Three Major Critical Narratives

stability.”²⁶ According to this narrative, when these foreign interventions do not succeed as the United States intends, they leave behind destruction that US leaders have no intention of cleaning up.²⁷ Editorials often express sentiments to this effect, including, “In recent years, in order for the US to strengthen its hegemony by any means, and in clear violation of international norms and laws, it has repeatedly stirred up tensions in a region and then just backed out.”²⁸

26 “Meiguo ‘zhazheng chengyinzhen’ gei shijie dalai zainan” (America’s “war addiction” brings disaster to the world). *Renmin ribao*, 6 December 2021.

27 “Buneng buji houguo yi zou liaozhi” (One cannot leave irresponsibly without considering the consequences). *Renmin ribao*, 13 May 2021.

28 “Mei Han buyao zai bandao wenti shang shiqu xianshigan” (The US and South Korea should not lose sight of reality on the Korean Peninsula issue). *Renmin ribao*, 1 October 2016.

A similar sentiment is expressed that the United States also bullies other countries into serving American interests. The United States thinks that it represents the international community and can “gang up on people and exert pressure,” *People’s Daily* opined in 2021.²⁹ In Latin America, Africa and Asia, the United States forces other countries to serve its will, regardless of what is in the best interests of those countries.³⁰ The United States often “betrays international commitments and obligations”³¹ when it exhibits hegemonic behaviour that hurts other countries, which includes protectionist, unilateral and beggar-thy-neighbour policies.³²

Chinese state media stress that the United States has taken aggressive actions towards China in particular. Numerous editorials accuse the United States of interfering in China’s internal affairs; treating Chinese companies unfairly; having a “Cold War mentality” regarding technology, trade and security; and allying with regional neighbours to pressure China, such as using the THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defence) deployment on the Korean peninsula to spy on China. *People’s Daily* editorials argue that American leaders and political elites are prone to generating false theories about China as part of their efforts to keep China down, including “China threat theory” (*Zhongguo weixie lun* 中国威胁论),³³ “free-rider theory” (*dabian che lun* 搭便车论),³⁴ “American loss theory” (*Meiguo chi kui lun* 美国吃亏论)³⁵ and “China backtracking theory” (*Zhongguo tuibu lun* 中国退步论).³⁶

A second major narrative focuses on America’s bad values in its own domestic sphere. Money dominates US politics and only serves the rich: US democracy is rife with special interest lobbying, expensive campaigns, anonymous funding through “super PACs” and other forms of corruption masquerading as free speech.³⁷ While America claims to uphold ideals like democracy, politics is more about profit than public welfare. One editorial explains: “It must be pointed out that if money rules politics, there will be no true democracy. Since ‘people’ are replaced by ‘money,’ American-style democracy cannot be called true democracy ... All kinds of data show that American democracy is like a ‘one-man show’ for the rich.”³⁸

The United States also pushes a doctrine of human rights on other countries, editorials argue, but the US system is itself full of its own rights violations and mistreatment of individuals. “The United States most needs to reflect on what human rights are,” one editorial explains. “The world has to ask whether the word ‘human rights’ really exists in the dictionaries held by the so-called ‘human rights teachers’ in the United States.”³⁹ The CCP has since its early days condemned the United States’ mistreatment of African Americans and other minorities, and this theme reappears in numerous editorials.⁴⁰ “American society is still a society based on skin colour, and ethnic minorities are still deeply mired in the nightmare of racial discrimination,” an editorial argued in 2021.⁴¹ America’s rampant violence is also evidence that it undervalues life: “Gun

29 “Meiguo youxian’ shi dui duobian zhuyi de zuida shanghai” (“America First” is the greatest harm to multilateralism). *Renmin ribao*, 27 July 2021.

30 “Yingjie Zhong La mingyun yu gong de lishi xin shiqi” (Welcoming a new historical era of shared destiny between China and Latin America). *Renmin ribao*, 29 October 2020.

31 “Jiuqing shei zai tui fan xianyou guize tixi” (Who exactly is overturning the existing rules-based system?). *Renmin ribao*, 19 September 2020.

32 “Huiwu zhicaidabang, weixie quanqiu jingji anquan” (Brandishing the big stick of sanctions, threatening global economic security). *Renmin ribao*, 29 October 2020.

33 Ma 2010. For a military version, see Xi 2007.

34 “Meishi ‘da bianche lun’ de pian’ai” (The bias of American “free-rider theory”). *Renmin ribao*, 5 September 2014.

35 “Ban tizi hai shi reng zhuanou” (Building ladders or tossing bricks?). *Renmin ribao*, 9 June 2019.

36 “Qingzhou yi guo wan chongshan” (The light boat has passed ten thousand mountains). *Renmin ribao*, 22 May 2019.

37 Wu, Chuqi 2014.

38 “Minzhu jingran you qian zhu” (Democracy is controlled by money). *Renmin ribao*, 16 May 2021.

39 “Huangyan zhiyu zhenxiang” (A lie ends with the truth). *Renmin ribao*, 3 April 2021.

40 Roman 2012.

41 “Fuse cheng le ming gen zi” (Skin colour has become the root issue). *Renmin ribao*, 18 May 2021.

violence is a national epidemic in the United States, and has been called a ‘deficiency in America’s character as a nation.’⁴²

Editorials also contain a third narrative – that of American weakness and decline. This narrative is relatively underemphasized in comparative political studies but has long featured in Chinese politics.⁴³ The United States is beset by systemic problems that have rendered it increasingly incapable of governing effectively. Partisan polarization, excessive checks and balances and political infighting have revealed “deep-seated institutional drawbacks” preventing the United States from addressing its issues.⁴⁴ America is staggering from crisis to crisis and unable to resolve underlying problems. American institutions have failed to show resilience; rather than improving after facing challenges, editorials argue, they are getting weaker.⁴⁵

In its foreign policy, too, editorials suggest that US influence is declining. Countries in Latin America and the Middle East are no longer willing to follow America’s lead; instead, resentment towards the United States is growing.⁴⁶ The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in particular revealed the limits of US power. The United States has failed to make policy changes that would help it adapt to a changing international order, further weakening its global appeal.⁴⁷

Overall, many editorials describe the United States as suffering from an underlying illness that has hobbled its economy, politics and society. As one editorial explains, the United States is suffering from a sickness that lies in “the failure to enact necessary structural reforms in the post-Cold War era, which has led to an accumulation of structural contradictions. Small diseases have metastasized into a major illness.”⁴⁸ America’s weaknesses are systemic and growing, and American leaders are both unwilling and unable to solve the country’s problems.

Framing events: when narratives overlap

These narratives do not rise and fall in unison, and many editorials contain multiple narratives. When narratives overlap, they combine to frame the world in terms that accord with the Party’s perspective on global events. Most prominently, editorials use narratives of weakness to explain dangerous actions and hegemonic behaviour. For example, editorials suggest that America’s use of economic and technological pressure reflects internal decline: a “narrow, insecure attitude” causes the United States to “make baseless accusations, lack the temperament of a great power, and even lack basic rationality.”⁴⁹ Another suggests that America’s problems “stem from internal reasons, but they push external reasons as excuses.”⁵⁰

Editorials attributing dangerous behaviour to internal weakness were especially prominent during the COVID-19 pandemic. *People’s Daily* accused US politicians of lashing out at China to “cover up [their own] failure to control COVID-19 and the reality of economic decline.”⁵¹ In August 2021,

42 Zhang 2021.

43 This ranges from Mao’s declaration of American imperialism as a “paper tiger” to Chinese coverage of debates about “declinism” in America in the 1980s and 1990s. See, e.g., Qiu 1989.

44 “Shuiguoguo tuize zhiyu buliao meisshi ‘jichu jibing’” (Blaming others cannot cure American-style “underlying diseases”). *Renmin ribao*, 11 August 2021.

45 Yuan, Peng 2011.

46 Fan 2008.

47 “Zou zhengdao fang you yuanda qiancheng” (Only by following the correct path can you have a bright future). *Renmin ribao*, 9 October 2013.

48 Yuan, Peng 2016.

49 “‘Zhanlüexing’ maoyi baohu haowu zhanlüe yan guang” (“Strategic” trade protection lacks strategic vision). *Renmin ribao*, 30 March 2018.

50 “Meifang zhisu de weiyi chulu shi xuanyai lema” (The only way for the US to stop its losses is to pull back from the precipice). *Renmin ribao*, 5 April 2018.

51 “Quanqiu hezuo kangyi xuyao daguo qianshou” (Global cooperation in fighting the pandemic requires major powers to join hands). *Renmin ribao*, 29 January 2021.

People's Daily published a 16-part series of editorials with the same subtitle for each: "Political manipulation can hardly hide the United States' ineffectiveness in fighting the epidemic." Attributing America's dangerous actions to internal weakness creates a coherent picture that contrasts the American and Chinese systems and attributes the recent deterioration in US–China relations to actions taken by the United States.

Editorials also employ other combinations of narratives to similar effect. Bad values domestically can drive dangerous foreign policy: editorials claim, for example, that America's criticisms of China's treatment of Uyghurs are motivated by a desire to hide its own mistreatment of minorities.⁵² Bad values at home also explain American weakness and decline. As one editorial in March 2020 explained, America's money-driven political system and insistence on commercializing all areas of life resulted in a healthcare system rife with special interests that could not handle the virus outbreak.⁵³ And dangerous foreign policy actions result in weakness when they generate a backlash that decreases American power and influence.

The use of overlapping narratives reflects a longer history of critical portrayals of the United States in China. State media during the early years of the PRC frequently described the United States as both dangerous and weak, encapsulated most famously in Mao Zedong's 毛泽东 dictum of US imperialism as a "paper tiger" that appears strong on the outside but is weak on the inside.⁵⁴ *People's Daily* editorials during that era attributed America's aggressive foreign policy to its internal failings: the weaker America was, the more it lashed out against China and others. As one editorial on American military expansion explained, "No matter how many atomic and hydrogen bombs the US imperialists pile up, it will not change its essentially weak status ... This fatal weakness is insurmountable. But US imperialism has never been one to back down from a difficult situation; the more difficult it is, the more it struggles madly."⁵⁵ This was especially the case during the Vietnam War, when state media blamed US actions in South-East Asia on America's own insecurity and weakness.⁵⁶

Criticism of America is Praise for China

How these narratives are deployed offers insight into their strategic use. The critical narratives about the United States, either individually or in combination, are frequently framed to contrast with the Chinese alternative. Editorials either explicitly or implicitly contrast America's dangerous external behaviour, poor domestic values and internal weakness with the CCP's peaceful and rational foreign policy, commitment to its people and competence and strength. A detailed analysis of all relevant editorials during the trade war and the COVID-19 pandemic – two major flashpoints in US–China relations between 2018 and 2022 – highlights the use of this strategic comparison.

Editorials about the trade war in 2018 and 2019 portray the United States as arrogant, bullying and selfish – classic descriptors of America as a dangerous hegemon. US leaders claimed to support the international order but were actually tearing it down. "It has been the consistent practice of the United States to regard international rules as playthings, to use them if they fit and discard them if they do not," one editorial explained in May 2019.⁵⁷ US politicians have "lost their rationality and brought out rusty discarded 'Cold War weaponry'" to try to keep China down.⁵⁸

52 "Fankong qi rong 'shuangchong biao zhun'" (Counterterrorism cannot tolerate "double standards"). *Renmin ribao*, 30 June 2013.

53 Zhang 2020.

54 Liu 1996; Powell 1965; Mao Zedong 1977.

55 "Quanshijie yiqie fandui Meidiguo zhuyi de liliang lianhe qilai!" (All forces opposing American imperialism around the world unite!). *Renmin ribao*, 21 January 1964.

56 "Duanming de pianju" (A short-lived hoax). *Renmin ribao*, 13 April 1965.

57 "Guoji zhixu rong bu de renxing wangwei" (The international order cannot tolerate capricious and reckless actions). *Renmin ribao*, 23 May 2019.

58 "Kuangfeng zhoyu bu neng xianfan da hai" (Major storms cannot overturn the ocean). *Renmin ribao*, 25 May 2019.

In contrast, editorials portray China and the CCP leadership as upholding international rules, the ways of the world and, ultimately, rationality itself. While America has forgotten to read Adam Smith, China is adhering to the objective laws of economics.⁵⁹ And while the United States rejects international commitments whenever it feels like, China upholds them.⁶⁰ America's dangerous actions harm the world; in contrast, China acts magnanimously and conscientiously in the interests of others. As one editorial summarizes, "The battle between rationality and irrationality has become the most obvious feature of the economic and trade friction between China and the United States."⁶¹

America's combination of weakness and hegemonic behaviour stands in contrast to China's growing strength and peaceful global relations. "While countries in the West are exposed to one systemic crisis after another," an editorial explained in mid-2018, "China is seeking a path of high-quality development recognized by more and more countries around the world and becoming more attractive."⁶² China's far-sightedness and burgeoning global support are at odds with US actions that are short-sighted, immoral and self-defeating. The real victims of the trade war will be the United States and its citizens: those who "start with the purpose of harming others will end up harming themselves."⁶³ While US leaders are willing to sacrifice the well-being of their citizens to score political points, the arguments suggest, China's leaders are instead thinking of the greater good.

When the COVID-19 outbreak emerged in China in 2020, Chinese state media focused on the United States. Even before the pandemic exploded across America, *People's Daily* criticized America's past record of dealing with public health challenges to defend its own image.⁶⁴ In February 2020, Chinese state media pointed out that America's annual death toll from other infectious diseases was worse than the death toll China was facing from COVID-19. While the 2009 H1N1 flu epidemic in the United States had a mortality rate of 17.4 per cent, *People's Daily* said, China's COVID-19 death rate had been contained at 2.1 per cent.⁶⁵

Once COVID-19 cases in the United States began to rise, Chinese state media seized on the American failure to control the virus to promote China's relative success. "In the United States, which has the world's most developed economy and the most advanced level of medicine, the epidemic has caused such a tragedy," noted one editorial.⁶⁶ Quoting a British author, *People's Daily* argued that the United States "flunked out due to the narrow-mindedness, selfishness and incompetence of the US government."⁶⁷ Ultimately, in the face of a botched response to the outbreak, US politicians "put on a blindfold to pass off their responsibility" rather than try to contain the spread of the virus.⁶⁸

Editorials contrast this failure with China's own success at controlling the outbreak. While editorials praised China's scientific response, "US politicians put politics ahead of science, and political self-interest ahead of the lives and health of the people. This is the main culprit of US-style failure." The comparison to China's handling of the coronavirus was often explicit: "The 'big test' of the novel coronavirus epidemic has once again verified the strong governance capacity of the

59 "Jiujing shi shichang jingji hai shi qiangmai" (Is it truly a market economy or is it coercion and exploitation?). *Renmin ribao*, 8 June 2019.

60 "Guoji guize bu rong pu huai" (International rules cannot be violated). *Renmin ribao*, 5 August 2019.

61 "Shengji moca yu shi wu bu" (Escalating friction serves no purpose). *Renmin ribao*, 30 August 2019.

62 "Huan guoji maoyi huanjing yi pian qing lang tian kong" (Bring back clear skies to the global trade environment). *Renmin ribao*, 30 July 2018.

63 "Meiguo xu wei wuli mangzhuang zhi ju danze" (The United States must be held accountable for its unreasonable and reckless actions). *Renmin ribao*, 24 March 2018.

64 "Cheng ren zhi wei de 'kanke' zuopai dang xiu yi" (Bystanders should stop taking advantage of others' misfortune). *Renmin ribao*, 13 February 2020.

65 "Yiqing mian qian, you ba hengliang daoyi de chizi" (Facing the pandemic, there is a measure of morality). *Renmin ribao*, 5 February 2020.

66 "Huangyan he qipian zhansheng bu liao xinguan bingdu" (Lies and deception cannot defeat COVID-19). *Renmin ribao*, 17 September 2020.

67 Li 2020.

68 "Shuai guo' qi neng zhengjiu shengming" (How can "passing the buck" save lives?). *Renmin ribao*, 2 May 2020.

Chinese Communist Party and the superiority of the Chinese system, which is the general consensus of the international community,” declared one column.⁶⁹

Compared with the United States’ failure to control the virus and its politicians’ moral callousness, China’s actions operated on a higher moral plane. In direct contrast to the United States, “China adheres to the distinctive attitude of being responsible for the people and their lives, responds to extraordinary events with extraordinary actions” and “has come up with an anti-epidemic answer sheet that can stand the test of time and history.”⁷⁰ The Communist Party has created “another heroic feat in the history of mankind’s fight against disease.”⁷¹ The critical portrayal of America’s pandemic response highlights China’s superior performance, its adherence to higher principles and its strength and global support.

Comparison as Legitimation

Comparative studies of authoritarian politics show that state media expend great effort to craft narratives that can help legitimate regimes.⁷² Studies distinguish between two potential strategies for how regimes choose the content of this messaging. On the one hand, regimes may seek to frame stories in ways that promote their achievements, drawing attention to their leaders and portraying their policies in a flattering light. On the other hand, regimes may seek to distract from problems by focusing on why alternative systems are unworkable. In this case, they highlight the deficiencies of their competitors to divert attention or blame outsiders.⁷³ Other scholars use the terminology of positive and negative propaganda to explain similar ideas. Positive propaganda elevates the regime by glorifying its successes, while negative propaganda distracts from failures or diminishes alternatives.

Studies of Chinese propaganda highlight the role of both positive and negative propaganda as part of domestic legitimation efforts. Much of the CCP’s messaging aims to justify the Party’s rule by touting its economic and governance successes and downplaying its missteps.⁷⁴ At the same time, scholars argue that criticisms of other countries – especially the United States – deflect attention and reduce support for alternatives to Party rule.⁷⁵ Critical portrayals of the United States are usually understood in this context. Narratives of US hegemony can generate a sense of threat that unifies public opposition, while those focused on America’s poor principles and weakness can diminish the perceived benefits of the leading alternative political system in the world today.

We argue that critical narratives about the United States can also be a source of positive propaganda for China. While positive and negative propaganda are often seen as discrete approaches, the evidence here suggests that they can work towards the same goal. Each of the three critical narratives we identify about the United States contains corresponding narratives highlighting the outstanding qualities of China’s system. These reflect central themes of the Party’s efforts at political legitimation. Portraying America as a dangerous hegemon highlights the idea of China as a “responsible great power” (*fuzeren da guo* 负责任大国) that has earned the respect and support of the international community with its actions on the global stage.⁷⁶ Critical narratives of America’s domestic social ills cast a positive glow on the Party’s claims to uphold core Chinese values, including social

69 “Suowei ‘gaibian Zhongguo’ tumou chunshu chiren shuomeng” (The so-called “plan to change China” is wishful thinking). *Renmin ribao*, 30 July 2020.

70 “Zhengzhi caonong cheng bu liao jiuming daocao” (Political manipulation cannot become a lifeline). *Renmin ribao*, 1 July 2020.

71 “Huangyan he qipian zhansheng bu liao xinguan bingdu.” *Renmin ribao*, 17 September 2020.

72 Boussalis, Dukalskis and Gerschewski 2022; Dukalskis and Gerschewski 2017.

73 Boussalis, Dukalskis and Gerschewski 2022; Alrababa’h and Blaydes 2021.

74 Lams 2018.

75 Zhong 1996.

76 Holbig 2011.

harmony, protecting lives and livelihoods, and people-oriented governance.⁷⁷ And narratives of American decline show the Party's effective governance and its role as the essential steward of the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" (*Zhonghua renmin weida fuxing* 中华民族伟大复兴) and China's continued global rise.⁷⁸

While our study does not claim to assess whether such messaging ultimately shapes public opinion, the choice of narratives offers insight into how the regime seeks to legitimate its rule. This study suggests that rather than only seeking to discredit the United States, the Party also relies on "relative legitimation" – that is, the use of critical portrayals of the United States to promote the superiority of China's political system and its leaders. Framing China in contrast with the United States accentuates existing positive legitimation strategies that portray the Party as uniquely successful in its governance, virtuous in its morals and capable of leading China into the future.

The strategy of relative legitimation includes both the structural characteristics of each political system and the qualities of their respective leaders. Descriptions of US politicians as impulsive, short-termist and self-defeating stand alongside Chinese leaders who are rational, magnanimous and public spirited. And when America's own internal insecurities drive its leaders to lash out at China, China's ruling elite maintains its equanimity. Any comparison, editorials note, additionally reflects well on China because China faces greater challenges than the United States. While America is wealthy and powerful, and therefore better situated to act responsibly, it is the CCP that upholds its principles and succeeds despite the odds.

While the conventional approach to understanding CCP legitimation in the post-Mao era focuses on "performance legitimacy" – justifying its right to rule through successfully delivering material benefits to citizens⁷⁹ – we emphasize that the relative legitimation we show here goes beyond simple conceptions of performance. Critical portrayals of the United States not only highlight China's material achievements but also promote narratives focused on other crucial elements of CCP legitimation, including the Party's claims to superior morality, its cultural and historical roots in China, and its deep and personal connection with the public.⁸⁰

Editorials during the COVID-19 pandemic highlight the wide range of sources from which this strategy of relative legitimation draws. US leaders' disregard for the well-being of their own citizens was reprehensible, while the Party remained committed to protecting people's livelihoods. This conveys both effective performance and a commitment to upholding core principles of protecting the people – an idea that has its roots in a long tradition of Chinese history, as rulers that failed to meet this basic principle would lose their right to rule.⁸¹ In addition, the CCP's superiority in pandemic control stemmed from its adherence to its original ideological mission and its "flesh-and-blood connection with the people."⁸² A strategy of relative legitimation thus extends beyond performance to highlight the Party's wide-ranging claims to rule.

Conclusion

This study investigates portrayals of the United States in *People's Daily* editorials from 2003 to 2022. We show fluctuations in critical content about the United States throughout the period, with a rising trend over time and a sustained increase during the period 2018–2022. We identify three critical narratives about the United States that recur in editorials – America is dangerous, America has bad values and America is weak – and show how these narratives can work together to frame

77 Kubat 2018.

78 Carrai 2021.

79 Zhu 2011.

80 Zeng 2016.

81 Zhao 2009.

82 "Suowei 'gaibian Zhongguo' tumou chunshu chiren shuomeng." *Renmin ribao*, 30 July 2020.

international events. We further highlight the myriad ways that these critical narratives of the United States are used to contrast with China itself.

Based on this, we suggest that critical portrayals of the United States can contribute to domestic legitimization efforts in China by contrasting the United States and its shortcomings with the superior qualities of the CCP. This “relative legitimization” strategy is not merely about discrediting the American alternative or unifying against a shared threat, but rather about painting a positive picture of China’s extraordinary performance and virtue. For each of the critical narratives we identify, the contrasting portrayal of China highlights aspects of the Party’s unique successes and connects to an array of sources of legitimization from which the Party draws.

These findings add new empirical data to our understanding of Chinese state media at a time when US–China relations are increasingly tense. Unpacking key narratives helps us to gain a better comprehension of the messages the Party wants to send, both about the United States and its own rule. These narratives matter, regardless of whether they are believed: propaganda practices shape public discourse, which in turn shapes the shared meanings of citizens in society.⁸³ For cadres in particular, these messages set the orthodox Party line and circumscribe the boundaries of proper thought and action.⁸⁴ The narratives the Party crafts are integral elements of its political project.

Because this project investigates the content of state media and not its reception, its scope is limited to the messages the Party sends and the potential strategies behind them. Future research could build on this foundation by assessing how citizens or cadres respond to these critical narratives about the United States. Moreover, while we propose that such narratives can serve to paint China in a positive light, additional studies are needed to test whether such narratives increase positive images of China or harden attitudes towards the United States. Some studies have set out to do this, but more work is needed.⁸⁵ More broadly, there is limited research on negative propaganda, both theoretically and empirically, despite its relevance to the CCP’s messaging strategy.

This study also limits its scope to official Party media by looking at *People’s Daily*, which means that it does not cover commercial media or other areas of public discourse. Earlier studies have found higher levels of critical content about the United States after media in China became more commercialized⁸⁶ – negativity sells – but such work needs to be updated in light of a tightened environment of media control. How both state and commercial media deploy positive narratives of the United States in times of rapprochement would also contribute to our understanding of domestic discourse and possibilities for improved US–China relations. This research is crucial to understanding contemporary China and its messaging strategy, both at home and abroad. As the CCP seeks to “tell China’s story well,” how China tells America’s story is central to the plot of how it tells its own.

Acknowledgements. The authors would like to thank Rongbin Han, Daniela Stockmann and the other participants in the 2022 APSA annual meeting who provided valuable feedback on an early draft of this paper.

Competing interests. None.

Disclaimer. The views expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the US Department of State.

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83 Edney 2014.

84 Sorace 2017.

85 Deng 2024.

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Appendix A

Table 1. Critical Narratives about the US by Editorial Column

| Editorials by column | Includes at least one critical narrative | America is a dangerous hegemon | America has bad moral and social values | America is weak |
|---------------------------------|--|--------------------------------|---|-----------------|
| 国际论坛 <i>International Forum</i> | 54.3% (448/825) | 42.2% (348/825) | 8.5% (70/825) | 15.2% (125/825) |
| 钟声 <i>Zhongsheng</i> | 83.4% (546/655) | 70.4% (461/655) | 19.8% (130/655) | 18.9% (124/655) |
| 国纪平 <i>Guo Jiping</i> | 59.0% (23/39) | 43.6% (17/39) | 2.6% (1/39) | 28.2% (11/39) |
| 环球走笔 <i>Global Dispatch</i> | 50.0% (121/242) | 15.3% (37/242) | 32.6% (79/242) | 14.0% (34/242) |

Notes: Articles written by *Zhongsheng* in the *International Forum* series are coded as part of *Zhongsheng*.

Table 2. Share of Critical Narratives for Editorial Columns by Year

| Year | <i>International Forum</i> | <i>Zhongsheng</i> | <i>Global Dispatch</i> | <i>Guo Jiping</i> |
|------|----------------------------|-------------------|------------------------|-------------------|
| 2003 | 52.4% (33/63) | | | |
| 2004 | 65.6% (21/32) | | | |
| 2005 | 57.5% (42/73) | | | 0.0% (0/1) |
| 2006 | 39.0% (41/105) | | | 0.0% (0/1) |
| 2007 | 50.5% (48/95) | | | |
| 2008 | 51.7% (46/89) | 100.0% (1/1) | | 66.7% (2/3) |
| 2009 | 36.6% (30/82) | 50.0% (3/6) | 39.4% (13/33) | 100.0% (1/1) |
| 2010 | 52.9% (36/68) | 100% (5/5) | 34.6% (18/52) | 50.0% (1/2) |
| 2011 | 59.0% (23/39) | 71.0% (22/31) | 30.8% (8/26) | 33.3% (1/3) |
| 2012 | 60.0% (3/5) | 81.7% (49/60) | 14.3% (2/14) | 100.0% (3/3) |
| 2013 | 48.0% (12/25) | 70.0% (42/60) | 56.3% (9/16) | 100.0% (2/2) |
| 2014 | 68.0% (17/25) | 84.6% (33/39) | 70.4% (19/27) | 100.0% (1/1) |
| 2015 | 41.4% (12/29) | 40.7% (11/27) | 77.8% (14/18) | 25.0% (1/4) |
| 2016 | 81.3% (13/16) | 86.3% (44/51) | 30.8% (4/13) | 66.7% (2/3) |
| 2017 | 37.5% (3/8) | 26.7% (4/15) | 70.0% (7/10) | 100.0% (2/2) |
| 2018 | 100.0% (11/11) | 81.5% (22/27) | 66.7% (10/15) | 0.0% (0/1) |
| 2019 | 95.7% (22/23) | 91.9% (79/86) | 100.0% (7/7) | 85.7% (6/7) |
| 2020 | 89.5% (17/19) | 92.9% (91/98) | 80.0% (4/5) | 25.0% (1/4) |
| 2021 | 100.0% (8/8) | 94.0% (78/83) | 100.0% (4/4) | 0.0% (0/1) |
| 2022 | 90.9% (10/11) | 93.9% (62/66) | 100.0% (2/2) | |

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Cite this article: Carothers C, Freedman JB (2025). America the Failure? Critical Narratives of the United States in Chinese State Media. *The China Quarterly* 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741024001528>