A comparative study of the communication strategies of Chinese and Russian English language international broadcasting

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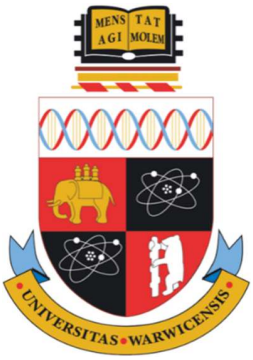

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CONTENTS

TABLES

FIGURES

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BRICS	An acronym coined for an association of five major emerging national economies: Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa
CCP	The Communist Party of China
CGTN	China Global Television Network
COC	Code of Conduct in the South China Sea.
CNC	China Xinhua News Network Corporation
CNN	Cable News Network
DOC	Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea
EEZ	Exclusive Economic Zone
EU	European Union
G77	The Group of 77
ICJ	International Court of Justice

ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
ITLOS	International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea
KGB	Committee for State Security
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NBC	The National Broadcasting Company
NGOs	Non-Government Organisations
NRTA	National Radio and Television Administration
NWICO	New World Information and Communication Order
PCA	Permanent Court of Arbitration
PRC	People's Republic of China
ROC	Republic of China
R2P	Responsibility to protect
RT	Russia Today
SARFT	The State Administration of Radio, Film and Television

TRT	Turkish Radio and Television Corporation
UN	United Nations
UNCLOS	The United Nations Convention for the Law of the Sea
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
VOA	Voice of America

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DECLARATIONS

This dissertation is submitted to the University of Warwick in support of my application for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. It is entirely my own work and follows the guidelines provided in the Guide to Examinations for Higher Degrees by Research of the University of Warwick. The dissertation does not contain any materials that have been previously published or submitted for a degree at any other university.

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ABSTRACT

The thesis studies the international communication of Chinese and Russian governments by examining the construction of narratives in international, English-language news platforms: *CGTN* and *RT*. Realising the limitations of Western-centrism in international political communication studies, the thesis adopts a de-Westernised perspective to conceptualise the counter-hegemonic discursive practices of Chinese and Russian governments in a transitional geopolitical context.

Drawing on a systematic multimodal content analysis supported by rich interview data, the thesis examines how Chinese international broadcaster, *CGTN*, covered the South China Sea arbitration, and how Russian international broadcaster, *RT*, covered the Ukraine crisis. It shows how Chinese and Russian international broadcasters frame international conflicts by projecting strategic narratives that are focused on negotiating three ideational resources: identity, normativity, and territoriality. Yet, as the thesis demonstrates, *CGTN* and *RT* also differ significantly in terms of content and style, which is to a significant extent rooted in their distinct organisational cultures. Based on interviews with journalistic professionals and managers of the two media institutions, the thesis reveals that *CGTN*'s sourcing preference derives from its embeddedness in Chinese propaganda bureaucracy, whereas *RT*'s comparatively greater sourcing flexibility is linked to a more limited approach of government control over the media, which fosters innovative and disruptive communications.

The thesis contributes to bridging critical geopolitics and international political communication studies, revealing the discursive practices of China and Russia in the context of geopolitical conflicts, and recognises their complexity, malleability, and diversity. While much Western scholarship has tended to subsume the communicative practices sponsored by authoritarian countries under the umbrella terms of 'propaganda' and 'sharp power', it makes the case for re-conceptualising these as counter-hegemonic discursive practices in a transitional geopolitical context. At the same time, the thesis demonstrates that while Chinese and Russian international broadcasters aim to offer an alternative to Western-centric media representation, there is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach to projecting alternative geopolitical narratives.

1 Introduction

1.1 The rise of contemporary international broadcasting

China and Russia are increasingly engaged in projecting geopolitical narratives to a broad range of audiences beyond their borders. While the United States (US) has thus far retained the role of international hegemon that has long relied on shaping perceptions of international politics through news media and popular culture (Löfflmann, 2013), the country is downsizing its public funding for public diplomacy (Nelson, 2013; Zakaria, 2017). China and Russia, in turn, are intensively investing in externally oriented communication projects to expand their international reach. Displaying concerns about this trend, the then US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, warned about the dangers of the US losing control of the information domain as early as 2011,

> We are in an information war, and we are losing that war. The Chinese have opened up a global English-language and multi-language television network. The Russians have opened up an English-language network. We are cutting back. The *BBC* is cutting back… we are paying a big price for it (Clinton, 2011).

What appeared to lie at the heart of Secretary Clinton's concerns was not merely the fact that Anglo-American media dominance was being ceded to multiple regional challengers (Tunstall, 2008), but the broader effects this may have had on the discursive construction of international affairs.

Chinese and Russian governments' increasing investment in international broadcasters is often understood as being driven by a common desire to end the monopoly of Western media in interpreting international events that directly concern their national interests (Xie and Boyd-Barrett, 2015; Simons, 2015). Existing research on the communication practices of authoritarian regimes suggests that China's and Russia's advances into the realm of international news media are interwoven with the advancement of their respective foreign policies. For Beijing, international media constitute key pillars of a 'charm offensive' aimed at reshuffling Asian, African and Latin-American diplomatic orientations in favour of China (Kurlantzick, 2007).

Under the context of the 'Belt and Road Initiative', *CGTN* (China Global Television Network) turns into a vital component of a 'Great Overseas Propaganda' (*Da wai xuan*)[1] project, in aid of facilitating China's export of infrastructure (Liu, 2020), building of financial institutions (Yang and Keukeleire, 2019) and the broader project of the Belt and Road Initiative (Zhang, 2021). Transitioning from a 'keeping a low profile' principle, the Chinese government under Xi has switched to being a more assertive advocate of discursive power – the right, capacity and proficiency for Chinese state-sponsored media to tell a positive Chinese story (Zhao, 2016). China's efforts to defy Western criticism regarding human rights violations and democracy issues are crystalised in its management of public perceptions of the Hong Kong Protest (Feng and Cheng, 2019), the Xinjiang issue (Sudworth, 2021), and the Covid-19 pandemic (Verma, 2020; Smith, 2021). The South China Sea dispute, especially the Philippines vs China Arbitration has turned into a chronical process that receives sustainable discursive investment from the Chinese government (Clarke, 2019). The Chinese narrative projection attempts to delegitimise the US's security alliance and the US-led regional order, while justifying China's land reclamation based on historical rights and bilateral negotiations with regional disputants (Park, 2018; Heritage and Lee, 2020).

In a similar vein, Moscow's *RT* (Russia Today) has re-activated the Soviet-style propaganda to assist in Russia's geopolitical engineering in Syria and Libya, aimed at neutralising anti-Russian sentiments and mobilising anti-Americanism in the Middle East (Abrams, 2016; Mejias and Vokuev, 2017; Ng and Rumer, 2019). *RT's* framing of the Syrian war, for example, was designed to nurture anger towards US foreign policy and generate gratitude towards Russian interventionism (Crilley and Chatterje-Doody, 2020). In turn, through reframing the European Refugee Crisis as a cleavage between the conservative and liberal Europe, the Russian media championed the Kremlin's conservative leadership among European right wing parties via mobilising an anti-Muslim rhetoric (Braghiroli and Makarychev, 2018). In the 2016 US presidential election, Russian state-funded broadcasters were found to have interfered with the US democratic process and manipulated the election results (United States Intelligence

[1] This thesis will propose the key foreign language terms that are difficult to translate into native language (mainly in Chinese and Russian).

Community, 2017). During the Ukraine crisis, Russia's state sponsored media were not only influential in setting the agenda and narratives for Western mainstream news outlets, such as Associated Press (AP) and Agence France-Presse (AFP) (Watanabe, 2017), but functioned to demobilise public support from the interim Kiev government and delay military actions (Riga, 2015). Christopher Walker (2017) has therefore suggested that, collectively, Chinese and Russian investment in international broadcasting constitutes a force of 'distraction and manipulation' in the international arena that cultivates a public preference for illiberal values, norms and visions of the world order, at the expense of the liberal ones.

Despite recent advances in capturing Russia's and China's externally oriented geopolitical narratives, existing research into authoritarian international broadcasting has two main limitations. First, rather than exploring how precisely Russia and China imagine and narrate geopolitics, the studies often perceive the two countries' communication efforts through a Western-centric securitized lens. This tendency to 'look for enemies' (Suzuki 2009: 789) carries the risk of exaggerating a 'propaganda threat' (Chernobrov and Briant 2020: 12-13) emanating from authoritarian countries such as China and Russia that could harm Western values, norms and models, which generates blind spots in the understanding of authoritarian broadcasting styles and strategies. Second, while single case studies on China's and Russia's outreach actions have flourished (Avgerinos, 2009; Brady, 2015; Velikaya and Simons, 2020), scholarship that features a comparative analysis of these two major authoritarian players on the international broadcasting field is in its infancy. Some explorative studies have here shed light on the rationales, potency and limitations of China's and Russia's public diplomacy struggles to modify the Western media's discourses about themselves (Rawnsley, 2015; Wilson, 2015a; Xie and Boyd-Barrett, 2015). However, systematic comparisons of the Chinese and Russian international media's discursive construction of geopolitical conflicts, closely tied to their national interests, are scant.

Drawing upon insights from both critical geopolitics and communication studies, this thesis provides a detailed comparative exploration into China's and Russia's state sponsored international broadcasters, *CGTN* and *RT*, to address these limitations. Based on research by Gerard O' Tuathail (1992), John Agnew (2003) and Jason Dittmer (2008), it understands media representation of international conflicts as a discursive practice to construct geopolitical imaginations of places, people and identities delineated by certain boundaries (Tuathail and

Agnew, 1992: 190). Geopolitical imaginations do not suggest a holistic picture of how the world is depicted, but refers to "the prevalent images, conceptualisation and discourses among the general population of a state, where that state is positioned and located within the world's community of states" (O'Loughlin, Toal, and Kolossov, 2005: 324). In other words, the study of geopolitical imagination is about eliciting how the images of the the Self and Other have been constructed (Sharp, 1996). In this context, China's and Russia's construction of geopolitical imagination are concentrated on reshaping the images of themselves, the regional disputants, the Western countries and the rules upon which they negotiate their borders.

The thesis does not seek to provide an exhaustive illustration of China's and Russia's externally oriented media representation of all international political dramas. Rather, it seeks to shed light on two conflicts that have attracted intensive discursive contentions, in particular, between China and Russia on one side and Western liberal democracies on the other: the South China Sea arbitration and the Ukraine crisis that ended with Russia's annexation of Crimea. As moments at which China's and Russia's core national interests, territory, security and geopolitical influence, were being contested (Simons, 2015), they can be understood as epitomizing China's and Russia's ambitions to challenge Western narratives over the definition of political issues, normative values of regional orders and boundaries, and ideational identities of political entities.

Building on works that subsume the sequential assembly of these discursive elements as strategic narratives (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle, 2014), the thesis unpacks the political messages conveyed by China's and Russia's state sponsored international broadcasters to redefine identities, norms and territorialities in their host countries' favour. Projecting narrative is about storytelling. A strategic narrative is a communicative tool for political actors to achieve goals through re-arranging the events and identities via storytelling (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle, 2014: 5). Strategic narratives are constituting pillars of media representation of international realities. In this research the terms of representation and imagination are interchangeably used to describe the stories and storylines that countries use to communicate and project their interpretation of events. The term 'geopolitical imagination' is especially employed to emphasise the affordance of media representation to shape the collective beliefs of the boundaries, places and the people who lives on the territory (Dittmer and Bos, 2019: 41). Investigating the content of these media discourses is aimed at revealing how Chinese and

Russian externally oriented media produce geopolitical reasoning through mass media, with the intention of shaping global audiences' perception of the nature, responsibility attribution and the norms and values that are supposed to regulate regional conflicts.

While the media sponsored by China and Russia share a mission of countering Western media hegemony, the international broadcasters' alternative geopolitical representational texts can vary significantly across countries and are heterogeneous in communication styles. Past scholarship has made the case that the way in which authoritarian governments seek to shape how audiences interpret and consume international representations through international broadcasters differs, including between Russia and China, which are the empirical focal points of this study. For instance, while *CCTV-9* (the former name of English-language Channel of *CCTV*, now known as *CGTN*) is found to be the least bold channel (when compared to *RT* and *Al Jazeera*) and "strives for political neutrality, bordering on inoffensiveness" (Xie and Boyd-Barrett, 2015: 72), *RT* (funded by the Russian government) established its popularity among "audiences who have a natural anti-establishment, anti-corporation and anti-Western (American) predisposition" as a victimised underdog rising up to challenge the 'mainstream' media monopoly (Miazhevich, 2018: 3).

This research will explore in detail to what extent such differences in communication styles exist, what narrative elements *CGTN* and *RT* share, and how organisational contexts affect the communication styles of Chinese and Russian state sponsored international broadcasters by addressing the three-fold overarching research question: How do international broadcasters that are sponsored by the Chinese and Russian governments represent geopolitical conflicts that occur within their governments' respective neighbouring region, how do they deflect Western criticisms of their governments' foreign policies, and to what extend do their communication strategies differ?

In answering these questions, this thesis makes two main contributions to existing research on international authoritarian communication. First, it will offer an original in-depth empirical analysis of the commonalities and differences between Chinese and Russian state-sponsored international broadcasting, unpacking the externally oriented geopolitical narratives deployed by these authoritarian countries in the re-construction of international conflicts. Second, in so doing,

it will move beyond a Western-centric perspective in conceptualising how China and Russia project geopolitical narratives, how they legitimise their national interests and actions in critical times; this perspective will not assume that authoritarian international broadcasting is inherently threatening.

The remainder of the introduction will provide the context and rationale for the thesis. It will start by problematising the Western-centrism embedded in much of the existing research on authoritarian international broadcasting to establish the importance of a novel theoretical framework to capture counter-hegemonic geopolitical discourses (Section 1.2). The subsequent section will locate the research in this thesis at the intersection between critical geopolitics and political communication studies and outline the research's contributions on theoretical, empirical, and methodological dimensions (Section 1.3) and the structure of the remaining chapters (Section 1.4).

1.2 Problematising authoritarian international broadcasting studies

Much existing scholarship on China's and Russia's international communication practices has been constrained by a Western-centric positionality that engages with the rise of state-owned international broadcasters from China and Russia, primarily through the lens of enmity. In particular, the increasing communication of authoritarian regimes with international audiences is understood and analysed as a revisionist threat to Anglo-American media dominance, Western cultural hegemony and the overall US-led world order. Research into authoritarian broadcasting has been conducted mainly within the broad confines of propaganda theory and information wars. Foreign propaganda, conventionally defined in the domain of political communication, refers to government-funded, institutionalised information management that attempts to shape overseas public opinion in the host country's favour with a mobilisation of symbolic resources (Lasswell, 1927b; Jowett and O'Donnell, 2014).

It conceptualises Chinese international communications as 'Beijing's propaganda offensive', and asserts that Chinese media aims to 'redraw the global information order' and challenge Western media imperialism. Brady (2015) regards the overseas expansion of *CCTV* as a form of foreign propaganda that advances a selectively forged international image. Diamond, Plattner

and Walker (2016) went further and warned that authoritarian regimes sponsored international propaganda challenged the universalism of liberal democracy and the interests of its steadfast upholder, the United States. While scholarly reviews of Chinese international communications tend to focus on China's instrumentalisation of international broadcasters to manage international and domestic public opinion (Edney, 2014; Ohlberg, 2016), Russian media studies tend to be more interested in how Russian media use more militarised language (Richter, 2017).

Drawing on terms such as 'information warfare' (Thornton, 2015), 'information operation' (Lange-Ionatamišvili, 2014), 'psychological warfare' (Doroszczyk, 2018), 'disinformazia' and 'active measures' (Abrams, 2016; Kragh and Åsberg, 2017) that have all been applied to the US-Soviet's competition over global opinions, propaganda researchers have revived an information war scenario between Russia and the West. Elliott (2019) stressed that the deluge of Russian disinformation on the Venezuela Coup and Skripal poisoning would amplify social distrust and destabilise democratic civil societies. As a result measures ranging from civil to military domains are called upon to counter the disinformation (McGeehan, 2018). Herpen's (2015) work went further to equate Russia's international propaganda as Putin's personal manipulative information tool, which reinforces the myth of Russian dictatorship and fake news. However, these state-based case studies are usually bound by their objective to provide an in-depth delineation of China's or Russia's international communication initiative. Rarely has attention been paid to the divergent organisational dynamics that may lead to differences between communication practices of authoritarian countries.

The soft power / sharp power paradigm that has gained increasing traction in International Relations scholarship for observing and characterising differences in countries' international engagement has likewise split the world into opposing spheres of good and bad conduct that privileges the West. Nye defined soft power as being about obtaining a political outcome by creating attraction. While subaltern contra-flow theorists have applauded *CGTN* and *RT* for their manifestation of peripheral voices against the domination of Western discourse (Thussu, 2018), some scholars constrained by American-policy lenses are reluctant to fit China and Russia into the framework of soft power. They criticise China and Russia for misunderstanding soft power as "distraction and manipulation" (Walker *et al.*, 2017) and for "instrumentalising information technology" (Sergunin and Karabeshkin, 2015). Chinese and Russian international

communication practices are disregarded because both governments fail to liberate civil society (Nye, 2013), or stick to the state-driven model (Foxall and Hemmings, 2019).

To regard China's and Russia's efforts to construct international broadcasting as either inherently threatening or less valuable, delegitimises information news frames that reside outside Western mainstream media and the values that they reflect. It also replicates rather than questions how the rules of international order have been written by the West and for the West that reproduce a Western-centric international hierarchy and Western claims to moral authority (Suzuki, 2017: 220-222). This is problematic as it side-lines, even hinders, research into the journalistic value and workings of alternative media that recognises the nuanced, but substantial, differences between authoritarian international broadcasters. At the same time, it questions a priori the legitimacy of public diplomacy from non-Western, non-liberal states, depriving them of recognition as equal discursive players in the international arena. This thesis moves beyond existing research on authoritarian international communication practices by exploring the discursive struggles of two non-Western, non-democratic states that share a communist legacy, to offer alternative representations of world politics through a de-Westernised lens.

1.3 Contribution of this study

How do Chinese and Russian international broadcasters project strategic narratives to defend their foreign policies in times of crisis? The question straddles the boundary between critical geopolitics and political communication studies, which underscores the importance of language in international politics (Neumann, 2002; Crilley and Chatterje-Doody, 2018). It is based on the premise that news media play a key role in international politics by producing and diffusing knowledge about national identities, international structure and international norms, which in turn may shape decision-making in the international arena. Mass media, as concentrated sites of symbolic resources, interlink with power because of the role they play in (re)constructing social realities (Couldry and Curran, 2003). The distribution of such "intersubjective knowledge", as Wendt (1992) argues, provides structure to international actors' perceptions of the 'self', the motivation of foreign policy and the interpretation of the international situation and other actors' behaviours.

Traditional Western mainstream media have long held monopoly claims over the definitional power of international affairs, enshrining journalistic norms such as 'balance', 'objectivity', and 'neutrality' (Boyd-Barrett, 2015). The advent of digital networks, however, has begun to decentralise the global discursive structure while empowering previously silent voices, ranging from grassroots individuals to non-traditional international players such as Southern states, terrorist groups and NGOs (Nongovernmental Organisations) (Castells, 2007). The development of satellite and digital technology has helped to bridge the temporal and spatial division of international news consumption, forging a more interconnected global public sphere. While this remains underpinned by Western mainstream media such as *CNN* and *BBC* (Volkmer, 2014), an increasing number of alternative media channels, such as *Al Jazeera*, have begun to challenge the Western monopoly over global mediated public spheres, enriching the transnational deliberation by shedding light on peripheral visions (Cottle and Rai, 2008). It is in this context of a broadening global discursive space that the nexus between media and international politics is examined to increase our understanding of how the communicative practices of authoritarian international broadcasting engage with international politics through negotiating national identities, political norms, and geopolitical imagination.

Constructivist scholarship in IR has long opposed a static understanding of national identity, stressing the fluidity, inter-subjectivity, and conditionality of identity. Identity is a role-specific, socially constructed and relational understanding of the self, upon which states define their interests, interpret what is happening, and base their foreign policy decisions (Wendt, 1992; Billig, 1995). National identity as a collective sense of belonging to an 'imagined community' hinges on discourses to create and diffuse the uniqueness of communities, including to the self. "The members of even the smallest nation" as Anderson (2006: 6) writes, "will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion." The ever-evolving technological change in media formats reconfigures the shape and distribution of national consciousness. That imaginary of the communion is formed to a significant degree through members' daily consumption of national media, a process in which the print press was the primary form to draw a boundary between 'Us', a community bonded by shared language, history, myths and beliefs, and 'Other' (the foreign people) (Billig, 1995). While the rise of vernacular print-journalism since the Industrial

Revolution contributed to the formation of national identity in modern Europe, the development of wireless communication in the first half of the 20th century extended the construction of collective identity from domestic to international domains, such as the *BBC*'s public service broadcasting, which aimed to 'restore national unity' and 'reinforce the bonds' of the British Empire (Potter, 2012: 5). The rise of cable and satellite in the second half of the 20th century suspended the monopoly of state government over the construction of collective identity. In this 'market for loyalties' (Price, 1994: 668), commercial media giants such as *Disney* and *News Corp* and foreign government-funded broadcasters such as *VOA* and *Al Jazeera* competed with local government content providers and deconstructed national identities while re-constructing transnational or subnational identities (Price, 1994). In the 21st century, the changing global media landscape provides not only a platform for symbolic re-distribution of national identity but enables a shift in the construction of identity away from the national domain into the international arena. Importantly for the research in this thesis, this has also given voice to counter-hegemonic discourses and geo-cultural imageries as contra-flow media join the contest for regional and global identity forging (Kavoori, 2007).

Internationally connected discursive platforms also enable the contestation of dominant norms through re-narration of international affairs. While 'rhetorical practices' more broadly enact, socialise and consolidate or delegitimise certain sets of norms (Wendt, 1994; Risse, 1999), globally interconnected media serve as a transnational public sphere that fosters normative contestation, through which norm entrepreneurs shape, pursue, and challenge hegemony (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998). As Gilpin asserts, "in every social system the dominant actors assert their rights and impose rules on lesser members in order to advance their particular interests" (Gilpin, 1981: 36). If international order is understood as the distribution of power that hinges upon the broad acceptance of normative and institutional principles, American hegemony can be seen as being dependent upon a combination of coercion and consent, with consent generated through a collective commitment to free trade, democracy and multilateralism (Ikenberry, 2005; Ikenberry, 2014). Liberal order, though claimed by Ikenberry to be an equal and open system that empowers multiple voices, is fundamentally a hierarchy that descends from the West to peripheral non-democratic states, and in this "morally superior grouping" within the international community, deviance and dissent are discouraged (Suzuki, 2017: 220-222). The

US-centric liberal order, from the perspective of Ikenberry and Lim (2017), can hold up to the challenge of emerging powers as long as neither China nor Russia have a strong motivation to topple the rule-based liberal system, which they substantially benefit from, by providing alternative models of international order that attract significant support.

The past two decades, however, have witnessed China's and Russia's mobilisation of ideational and institutional resources to call in to question the 'universal values' associated with the Western-centric liberal order and developing alternative international cooperation mechanisms. While the assumption of contestation between liberal and non-liberal norms is an intersubjective construction (Wiener, 2014: 57), a key strategy that China and Russia have applied is to object to the discursive elevation of democratic systems of government and liberal values as primary sources of legitimacy for position and conduct in the international arena. Proposing 'democracy with Chinese characteristics', Chinese statesmen demand that the international society "respect a country's right to independently choose its own social system and path of development" (Hu, 2005). Likewise, Russian defence minister Sergei Ivanov contended that, "if there is Western democracy, there should be an Eastern democracy as well" (Popescu, 2006). Russian intellectuals coined the term 'sovereign democracy' to indicate Russia's commitment to democratic values yet reserve the autonomy for Russia to incorporate cultural-specific characteristics into the definition of the Russian model (Surkov, 2006). Therefore, Chinese, and Russian state-funded international broadcasting content is expected to push alternative norms in line with their sponsoring governments. *CGTN* and *RT*, which are the empirical focal points in this research, can be understood, firstly, as liberating platforms that vocalise marginalised norms in contrast to mainstream media-validated values and, secondly, as public diplomacy tools for the Chinese and Russian governments to project alternative values through the re-narration of international affairs.

The above suggests that the mediation of reality through international broadcasting is a process of inclusion and exclusion, in which some values, beliefs, voices and actors are privileged at the expense of others (Foucault, 1971). Journalistic practices are inevitably shaped by the symbolic systems and material structures that they are situated in, even if they assert their independence and professional norms (Couldry, 2005). The public perceptions about international identities and political norms are likewise not formed in a discursive vacuum but are instead shaped

through the narrative construction of 'imagined geographies' that define the territorial, cultural and representational terrain for international players. 'Imagined geographies', as coined by Said (2003), refers to a collection of beliefs and stereotypes about specific places and its group of residents. In previous centuries, it was a Western-centric vision that dichotomised the spatial, temporal and civilisational hierarchy between a civilised, democratic and developed Occident, as represented by the West, and the barbaric, despotic and underdeveloped Orient represented as the East or the South (Said, 2003: 150). The gradual demystification of the construction of international hierarchy that sees the West as being placed above the East (Hobson, 2004; Suzuki, 2009b) has fostered and engaged with works that consider geopolitics as a discursive practice that (re)orders the international space as well as its characters and dramas (Tuathail and Agnew, 1992). Re-calibrating geopolitics as a meaning-making system where politics and ideologies participate in geographical delineation, critical geopolitical scientists' endeavours to unpack the power dynamics underlying the predominant geopolitical visions have helped to de-naturalise and de-construct Eurocentric and masculine geographical scripts (Agnew, 2003: 15). Critical geopolitical studies have thus opened the space for non-Western and feminist geographies to emerge (Hyndman, 2004; Sharp, 2011).

This thesis builds upon such scholarship by examining how China and Russia, as the two major emerging authoritarian powers who do not readily identify with the current liberal world order, have begun to assert their subjectivity and roles by projecting Sino-centric and Russo-centric narratives as alternatives to Western geopolitical visions, through international broadcasting. Existing works have shown, for example, how a Sino-centric storyline envisions a restoration of a China-centred East Asian order and a Chinese civilisation unique and equal to the Western one (Agnew, 2010). Russia, in a similar vein, has offered an ideological alternative to Western liberal globalisation by advancing a 'Greater Eurasia' project which spans from Shanghai to Minsk (Yefremenko, 2017), and suggests a 'Russian world' bound by a common language, ethnicity, and religion (Lewis, 2018). They may not seek to overturn the liberal world order, as argued by Ikenberry (2018), but they are dedicated to uplifting their status in this international hierarchy. At the same time, this signals that although both countries seek to disseminate and reinforce their geopolitical narratives infused with a specific geographical, cultural and ideological agenda, it does not mean that they share the systematic, cultural-linguistic and infrastructural conditions in

the narrative projection (Dittmer and Bos, 2019: 13). As this thesis explores, to gain broader acceptance, counter-hegemonic geopolitical discourses are mediated through international broadcasting (Dittmer and Bos, 2019: 16), but how China and Russia delineate and project geopolitical imaginations to global audience may differ significantly.

This research speaks to the increasing scholarship in the study of international politics and communication that questions the Eurocentrism embedded in the discipline and its core concepts (Hobson, 2012), and its contribution can be divided into two main elements. At the theoretical level, the thesis will adopt a constructive approach to unpack the meaning-making mechanisms that non-Western international broadcasters rely on to offer alternative geopolitical imaginaries to those of the Western media, through re-construction of international conflicts. As this thesis argues, the strategic target of Chinese and Russian international communications is not limited to being heard, but to construct a discursive regime and narrative system that competes with the Western one in order to construct a favourable public opinion environment for the legitimisation of their internal and external policies as well as international leadership claims. The de-Westernised perspective thereby allows moving beyond conceptualising authoritarian international broadcasting as propaganda and to instead understand it as a counter-hegemonic discursive strategy aimed at reshaping the Western-centric geopolitical narratives.

At the empirical level, the research in this thesis advances our understanding of how China and Russia, who share a communist legacy, seek to shape international public opinion towards favouring their domestic and foreign policy interests. The growing economic power of China and Russia has provided abundant funding for government-backed media to spread their influence, and this trend in media resurgence is both a result of, and a driving force in, the rebalancing of power away from the developed to the emerging markets, from the Atlantic to Asia Pacific. Through its comparative mixed-methods analysis the thesis shows, however, that the strategies for external communication activities can differ greatly between authoritarian countries, even if they share an emphasis on identity building, norm diffusion, and counter-hegemonic geopolitical imagination. Importantly, rather than treating authoritarian countries as quasi-homogeneous entities, the thesis' detailed investigation of the international broadcasting of both countries opens up the black box – and demystifies – monolithic conceptions of

authoritarian communicative power, showing how structural, cultural, and historical elements account for common, yet different, international engagement strategies.

While the collective emergence of, and convergence between, Chinese and Russian media is understandably invoking the memory of the 'Cold War' in the West, this thesis does not lend weight to the assumption that China and Russia are forming a new authoritarian frontier. Rather, it suggests that the efforts to legitimise their authoritarian values and political systems should be understood as a significant challenge to the universality of liberal values democracy as the source of legitimacy for sovereign governments. Speaking directly to the linguistic turn in the field of international relations as well as the 'post-truth' discursive trend observed in contemporary populist politics (Neumann, 2002; Crilley and Chatterje-Doody, 2018), the thesis argues that replacing the terminology of 'soft power' to characterise how states seek to shape international behaviour with that of 'discursive power' helps to counteract simplistic research and politics too eager to frame China and Russia's media projects as a revival of a propaganda war from the 'non-liberal' world (Zhao, 2016; Velikaya and Simons, 2020).

1.4 Thesis structure

The thesis is organised into seven chapters, including the Introduction and Conclusion. *Chapter 1* problematises the conceptualisation of Chinese and Russian international broadcasting projects in the context of power transition and the adaptation of a liberal world order. Positioning international information flow as a contentious site of knowledge production, it provides the broader context for the thesis' interrogation of the meaning-making process for authoritarian governments to mobilise discursive and mediational resources in constructing alternative geopolitical representations for the world.

Chapter 2 conceptualises the strategic narratives of international broadcasting sponsored by authoritarian states. It begins by underscoring the limitations of Western-centrism embedded in the literature on the international communications of authoritarian regimes. The chapter proceeds by setting up the theoretical framework by engaging with literature relating to critical geopolitics and strategic narratives (*Section 2.4*). It begins by establishing the agency of the East in the construction of non-Western imagined geographies and defines geopolitical imagination-making

as a process of geopolitical narrative projection. It then lays out the analytical framework of strategic narratives to unpack the media discourse and communication styles of international broadcasters sponsored by authoritarian states and their organisational contexts (*Section 2.5*).

The methodology and analytical approach are elaborated on in *Chapter 3*. The chapter firstly explains the case selection of international conflict events pertinent to the discursive advancement of two authoritarian rising powers – China and Russia. It then outlines the mixed-methods approach employed to unpack the communicative features of Chinese and Russian international broadcasters.

Chapters 4, *5* and *6* present and discuss the findings generated by the empirical analysis. *Chapter 4* is a comparative exploration into the communication styles of *CGTN* and *RT* and traces their different sourcing and framing preferences to media organisational cultures. *Chapter 5* unpacks the geopolitical narratives projected by *CGTN* through the mediation of the South China Sea arbitration, which sought to shape public perceptions of the regional stakeholders, legitimate settlement mechanisms and the territorial boundaries within the contested area. *RT*, likewise, redistributes responsibility, redefines humanitarian interventionism and negotiates the rules of territorial change through mediating Russia's annexation of Crimea, which is elaborated on in *Chapter 6*.

The concluding chapter draws together the main arguments that emerged from theoretical development and empirical analysis. Collectively, Chinese and Russian government sponsored international communicative practices both enrich the Western-dominated global information landscape and constitute a main pillar of public diplomacy for authoritarian states. Internally, authoritarian international broadcasters are heterogeneous with their content and communication styles varying with organisational cultures, which consist of organisation-specific, state-media interactions, organisational structures, and professional beliefs. The empirical investigation appeals for a revisiting of authoritarian international broadcasting studies that both recognises the communication endeavours led by non-Western states and understands the nuances of communication patterns and implications of digital authoritarianism in transitional and established democracies.

2 Chinese and Russian international broadcasting in comparison

2.1 Why international communication matters

Information is a key source of power in international politics, as it shapes the perception of identity, interests, and order of international actors. In the modern world, national states systematically mobilise information resources to create a favourable external opinion environment for foreign policy agendas. These state-sponsored international communication practices evolved into institutionalised 'mass suggestions' during the two World Wars and their intervals (Jowett and O'Donnell, 2014: 5). Early communication researchers conceptualised the professionalised techniques of "managing collective attitudes by the manipulation of significant symbols" as 'propaganda' (Lasswell, 1927b: 627). These propaganda techniques were woven through wartime experiences by mobilising animosity, maintaining friends and neutrals, as well as demoralising the enemy (Lasswell, 1927a: 10). Propaganda, which started to have an 'unpleasant connotation' for its rhetorical manipulation in its early days (Bernays, 1928: 20) – was largely a neutral technical term applied by all the war participants ranging from Britain and France to Germany and Japan (Chakotin, 1940; Bartlett, 1942; Padover, 1943; Doob, 1950). The technical understanding therefore defines propaganda as "the deliberate systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions and direct behaviour to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist" (Jowett and O'Donnell, 2014: 7).

In the aftermath of WWII, propaganda studies diverged according to the classification of political systems. While external communicative practices of authoritarian regimes, such as the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, have been retrospectively conceptualised around 'propaganda' (Lasswell, 1951; Klemperer, 2013), the similar conduct of democratic states was gradually packaged under the concept of 'public diplomacy' (Adelman, 1980; Roth, 1984; Alexandre, 1987; Tuch, 1990). Soviet propaganda studies found that the Bolsheviks developed a wide range of propaganda techniques to construct a coalition and demoralise the descendants of the Soviet regime (Lasswell, 1951). Among such techniques were agitation (Cull et al., 2003: xvii), mobilising public emotions with sharp and simple ideas, employing

agents of influence such as recruiting opinion leaders of the target audience (Abrams, 2016), and self-positioning as the "guardian of the developing world" (Barghoorn, 2015: 144). All these techniques have provided inspiration for the authoritarian regimes in present-day China and Russia.

Public diplomacy studies have gained momentum due to both technological and social trends. The rise of cable and satellite TV and computer technologies make direct government-to-foreign people communication technologically viable (Tuch, 1990: 4). This multiplied with liberalisation and democratisation in developing worlds (Ayhan, 2019), made the dissemination of US democratic values along with the dominant information outflow from the US socially possible (Hoskins and Mirus, 1988). It was against this background that the concept of public diplomacy emerged to capture the actions that international actors developed to "manage the international environment through engagement with a foreign public" (Cull, 2009: 12). Public diplomacy is seen to be distinct from one-way propaganda as it takes into account the side of the audience: the practitioners of public diplomacy are expected to actively listen to the targeted foreign citizens before conducting advocacy, cultural diplomacy, exchange diplomacy, and international broadcasting (Cull, 2008). However, this theoretical innovation does not necessarily succeed in practice. As Nye (2004c) observed in a commentary on foreign affairs, the unpopularity of the US foreign policy in the Middle East is exactly because of the failure to listen, and he suggests that, "to communicate effectively, Americans must first learn to listen."

Nye's evaluation of US public diplomacy suggests that it can be challenging to draw a line between propaganda and public diplomacy. The two terms have transformed into politicised labels to differentiate the strategic communication by 'us' from that of 'the enemy'. As the Economist (2010) proposed,

> like other international outfits such as America's Radio Liberty and Germany's Deutsche Welle, [the *BBC*] does not provide propaganda… They […] counter the propaganda from state media machines in places such as Russia and China. Without its own voice, the West's case risks failing by default.

This definitional difference reflects the negotiations over the boundary between legitimate and illegitimate communication and is in itself a contestation of power. This glorification of self-communication at the expense of others is not rare. In China, the communicative practice

of Western news media and entertainment cultural providers is also negatively framed as the 'infiltration' of Western ideologies (Ren, 2016), while domestic state-funded propagation is positively termed as 'building consensus' (Gu, 2020). In the next section, I will discuss how Chinese and Russian international broadcasting has been re-conceptualised negatively as 'sharp power' under soft power studies.

2.2 Understanding soft power as a Western-centric framework

In the aftermath of the Cold War, state-funded external communication practices have been largely conceptualised as a projection of 'soft power'. Coined by Nye (1990), soft power refers to the capacity to co-opt other actors by shaping their preferences and their perception of interests. Different to coercion or payment, soft power rests on building attraction through projecting appealing cultural and political values and foreign policies (Nye, 2008). Soft power, however, does not work independently of hard power – coercion and payment – but in synergy with it. In order to project smart power, foreign policymakers must fully recognise the suitability of each type in different contexts, and integrate both in the fulfilment of their foreign policy agenda (Nye, 2009). Though soft power seems to be at the disposal of all countries, the concept itself is largely a Western-centric construct.

First, the conceptualisation of soft power largely draws on, and is in the service of, US foreign policy. From the beginning, Nye's conceptual innovation was driven by a desire to reposition US leadership "in a world without a defining Soviet threat" (Nye, 1990: 153). Countering rising domestic protectionism, Nye suggested that the US should rediscover its ideological and institutional resources in the preservation of US leadership in the age of interdependence (Nye, 1990: 171). To stretch the argument further, Zakaria (2008: 218-219) stated that exerting soft power through promoting modernisation, good governance, human rights and democracy would "provide an opportunity for the United States to remain the pivotal player in a richer, more dynamic, more exciting world." In the face of the neo-conservative unilateralism of the Bush era, Nye (2004a, 2004b) reiterated his soft power theory, conceived by many scholars as a prescriptive attempt to "bring US hegemony back on track to multilateral co-operation" (Kiseleva, 2015: 319; also see Layne, 2010: 59). Thus, the development of soft power theory is largely contextualised in the evolving needs, objectives and practices of US foreign policy.

Second, soft power as a discourse performs to legitimise Western cultural hegemony. Soft power functions when, as Nye (2004b: 11) states, "a country's culture includes universal values and its policies promote values and interests that others share." Nye considers, contradictorily, that universal attractiveness occurs both as a natural result and as a social construct (Mattern, 2005: 591). To argue that soft power is a natural object, Nye takes the dominance of Western values for granted. A series of measurement efforts that benchmark soft power assets against Western democratic values and neo-liberalism reproduces Western dominance over the international ideational hierarchy (Gallarotti, 2011: 31-32). More importantly, this structural advantage does not necessarily translate into external favourability: "while we may often associate certain democratic principles with the USA," as Lock (2010: 37) observes, "this does not mean that either the meaning or the legitimacy of such principles are, or can be, controlled solely by the USA." By stressing that soft power is a social construct, Nye calls for states to mobilise sociolinguistic resources in communicative exchange to 'convert' foreigners into believing certain values (Mattern, 2005: 591). This messianic perspective of soft power forms a new expression of Western mission civilisatrice (civilising mission) (Kiseleva, 2015). The conceptualisation of soft power therefore, in itself, is a discursive practice of building cultural hegemony, consolidating Western dominance through manufacturing consent about certain values.

Third, Western-centrism renders the concept of soft power ideologically discriminatory against authoritarian regimes, and thus analytically misleading (Kiseleva, 2015: 319). As established, contestation over sources of attraction is a cultural hegemony formation process that represses non-Western values, norms, and political / economic systems. Modelling soft power on American values, Nye judges that the source of China's and Russia's soft power deficit is due to them mistakenly believing that "government is the main instrument of soft power," and the only remedy for them is to emulate democracies and "be self-critical and unleash the full talents of their civil societies" (Nye, 2013). Ironically, Nye consistently calls for a suspension of the 'scattered' distribution of soft power instruments within US government (Nye, 2009) and demands the formation of a "White House public diplomacy coordinating structure" that supervises and integrates the soft power branches across societal, governmental and military sectors (Nye, 2004c). In addition, ideological bias would lead to an underestimation of authoritarian states' soft power, thus misinforming Western foreign policymaking. For instance, failing to recognise the attractiveness of Russian illiberal governance, conservative values and anti-American policies, Western policymakers missed

the rise of right-wing movements within liberal societies (Keating and Kaczmarska, 2019). The neglect of the influence of Russian cultural legacy as well as 'transnational (Soviet and Slavic) identities' in post-Soviet regions partly led to the West's passive reaction to the crisis in Ukraine (Cheskin and Kachuyevski, 2019). At the same time, the self-mirroring neo-imperialist criticism prevented the West from fully recognising the rising traction of China's model of development among Asian and African countries (Fijałkowski, 2011; Stuenkel, 2017: 104).

Finally, the emergence of the concept of 'sharp power' pushed ideological discrimination to the extreme and further diluted the analytical purchase of soft power. Coined by Christopher Walker and colleagues of the National Endowment for Democracy, sharp power refers to the influence of campaigns sponsored by authoritarian regimes, especially China and Russia, that seek to "pierce, penetrate or perforate the political and information environments" in democracies, especially vulnerable ones (Walker et al., 2017: 6). Sharp power operates in different contexts as authoritarian states exploit technological and information asymmetry (domestic censorship and openness of democratic societies) to expand their influence. However, what truly distinguishes sharp power from soft power, according to Walker and colleagues (2017:13), is authoritarian political system:

> Although Russia and China undertake some activities that can credibly fall into the category of normal public diplomacy, the nature of these countries' political systems invariably and fundamentally colour their efforts.

The question, then, is why media from authoritarian countries are deemed a 'distraction' or 'manipulation' of the audience whereas their liberal counterparts are seen to only construct messages of 'attraction' and provide information. If soft power is an inter-subjective construct, who has the power to label a certain communication as soft power and another as sharp power? The reason why the soft power strategies of countries such as China are constructed as a 'threat', as Suzuki (2009) stated, tends to derive from an excessive search for threats to Western dominance. Realising this issue, Nye (2018) notes that soft power should be narrowly defined as the "deceptive use of information for hostile purposes", as used by both the US and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, whilst open sourced public diplomacy such as "Moscow's *RT* or Beijing's *Xinhua* broadcasts… is employing soft power, which should be accepted, even if the message is unwelcome" (Nye, 2018). This refinement is made to avoid excluding authoritarian powers from soft power engagement and constrain

the application of soft power theory in an authoritarian context. However, Nye's recalibration dilutes the explanatory power of sharp power, as it now bears no richer connotation than black propaganda[2] and disinformation[3]. The intertwined policy and academic agendas shape the soft power / sharp power dichotomy into a Western-centric framework. A lack of reflexivity would compromise the analytical purchase of the soft power concept in an authoritarian context. To compensate for this, the next section will offer a 'de-Westernised' conceptualisation of Chinese and Russian international broadcasting. Instead of viewing them as antagonistic propaganda or disruptive sharp power, it positions Chinese and Russian international media as producers of alternative geopolitical imaginaries, through which international conflicts concerning Chinese and Russian national interests are re-constructed.

2.3 Strategic narratives and Eastern geopolitical imaginations

2.3.1 Locating the East in critical geopolitical texts

Chinese and Russian international broadcasting implies the return of the East in geopolitical narratives. What, however, is 'the East'? It is well known that the East is a geopolitical imagination, constructed as an 'Other' through which the West can anchor its cultural, civilisational, and ideological centrality. To Said (2003: 1-2), for example, the East or 'Orient' was an imagined 'Other' that was geographically distant, culturally divergent, and morally inferior to the 'self', awaiting the West to conquer and enlighten it. For Huntington (1997: 89, 272), the East referred to the non-Western civilisations ranging from Confucian China to Islamic countries in Eurasia and Orthodox Russia, that challenged or posed a threat to Western dominance and world peace. From this perspective, the East represented a formidable ideological enemy, whose battle with the democratic West accounted for the main

[2] Black propaganda refers to the institutionalised dissemination of information when "the source is concealed or credited to a false authority and spreads lies, fabrications, and deceptions. Black propaganda is the 'big lie', including all types of creative deceit." See Jowett, G. and O'Donnell, V. (2014) *Propaganda and Persuasion*. Sixth edition. Thousand Oaks, Calif: SAGE Publications, Inc., p.21.

[3] Disinformation derives from the Russian term *dezinformatsia*, and refers to "false, incomplete, or misleading information that is passed, fed, or confirmed to a targeted individual, group, or country." See Cull, N. J., Culbert, D. H. and Welch, D. (2003) *Propaganda and mass persuasion: A historical encyclopedia, 1500 to the present*. ABC-CLIO, p.104.

international script of the second half of the 20th century. Unlike the South, which tended to galvanise compassion over enmity in interpreting its ceaseless contention over repression, colonisation, and exploitation, the East was excluded from the South and North on the modernisation vector and was lost as an ideology after the demise of communism (Müller, 2018). The East was seen as a floating signifier upon which the West drew a boundary between 'us' and 'them' on spatial, temporal, and ideational dimensions. In short, the East emerged from a Western 'imaginative geography' (Said, 1977: 49), which characterised, classified, and located the divergent objects and spaces through the eyes of the West. Tuathail (1996: 41) termed this point of view behind geographical knowledge production, as the 'geopolitical gaze', which

> triangulates the world political map from a Western imperial vantage point, measures it using Western conceptual systems of identity / difference, and records it in order to bring it within the scope of Western imaginings.

This geographic knowledge production has privileged the West and naturalised the Western gaze on the world. At the same time, it assigned agency to the West as the narrator and articulator of geopolitical imagination at the expense of the agency of the East (Agnew, 2007), which was considered to be silent, passive, and waiting to be represented (Said, 2003: 293). This stripping of agency from the East prompted significant scholarly efforts to reflect upon Western-centrism in the popular narration of the East, and to shed light on the East's political project to reclaim a voice, including the counter-hegemonic mediated geopolitical narratives from the Eastern states that are the focus of this thesis.

The attempt to locate the East on Western imaginative geographies leads us to problematise the presumption of objectivity and rationality in Western-centric geographical knowledge production (Agnew, 2003: 11; Shapiro, 1989: 11). Inspired by Foucauldian discourse theory, critical geopolitical scholars have begun to reveal the power structures that underpin geographical knowledge and the international myth-making processes that inform geopolitical reasoning (Tuathail, 1999). Prevalent international scripts, as critical geopolitical researchers have emphasised, should be understood primarily as a "cultural practice of 'experts' in powerful Western institutions" (Tuathail, 1999). As Dalby and Toal (1998: 3) argued, critical geopolitics thus "bears witness to the irredeemable plurality of space and the multiplicity of possible political constructions of space," and "confronts and analyses the geopolitical imagination of the state, its fundamental myths and national exceptionalist lore."

This understanding of geopolitics defines geopolitics not as being based on neutral, objective geographical knowledge, but as a "discursive practice by which intellectuals of statecraft 'spatialise' international politics and represent it as a 'world' characterised by particular types of places, peoples and dramas" (Tuathail and Agnew, 1992: 192).

Geopolitical knowledge production has three main functions. Firstly, it imposes ordered vision, administrative management, and fixed boundaries over otherwise messy territories. Geopolitical knowledge production, viewed under the lens of governmentality, turns into a technology to visualise and re-order the invisible and chaotic, with an aim to install sovereign authority over territories (Tuathail, 1996: 5). Beyond territorial space, techniques of governmentality such as cartographic surveys and national atlases contribute to advance Western colonial expansion by envisioning and disciplining the spinning globe to a fixed imperial perspective (Tuathail, 1996; Thompson, 2014).

Secondly, geopolitical knowledge production establishes a civilisational order by converting time into space and reinforcing a stereotypical hierarchy of region, people, and cultures. Cartography always entails a taxonomy, namely the technique to abstract, differentiate, and establish a relationship between different objects (Huntington, 1997: 78). Modelled upon European social, political, and economic experience, the Western epistemic community developed what Agnew (2003: 11) described as "modern linear geopolitical narratives". These modern geopolitical narratives position the Euro-American community as the epitome of 'modernisation' and 'advancement' and constructs scattered places elsewhere as 'backward' regions. Eurocentric narratives position geographical spaces according to their proximity to Western values, such as a free market, capitalism, and democracy, and universalise the Western model as the 'end of history' (Fukuyama, 1989), which every society, civilisation, and nation-state must march towards.

Thirdly, geopolitical knowledge production constructs Western cultural hegemony by normalising, objectifying, and justifying geopolitical myths, scripts, and maps (Dalby and Toal, 1998: 159). In the modern world, the core states that compete for primacy of material power also vie for hegemony to set geopolitical reasoning. By constructing a geopolitical reasoning, the political and intellectual elites of core states are promoting a certain way of seeing the world, representing space and envisioning the order, while suppressing alternatives. Those geopolitical reasonings, once adopted by peripheral states, will shape international actors to internalise the dominant gaze and adjust identity, normative

commitment, and the perception of territorial conflicts according to hegemonic geopolitical reasoning (Tuathail and Agnew, 1992). The stability of cultural hegemony, however, is challenged by emerging, alternative narratives that resist the dominant scripts. Emerging powers refuse to be objectified. They mobilise the international communicative capacity to project counter-narratives, and re-allocate meanings to the scenes, actors, and plots of international politics (Agnew, 2003: 109).

The above illustrates that the production of geopolitical knowledge, whether formal, practical or popular, is not immune from Western-centrism. Western-centrism is present in IR studies, where it promotes a Western subjectivity, focusing on Western experience and engaging in a West-centred reflexivity, obstructing the integration of non-Western experience, wisdom and agency in the construction of IR theories (Ling, 2002; Acharya and Buzan, 2007; Hobson, 2007). To transform IR theories – a form of formal geopolitics – to popular geopolitics and have them accepted as the dominant world imagination, the media plays a key role. In the next section, I will theorise the role played by the media in popularising geopolitical scripts, especially in the format of storytelling. I show how the concept of strategic narrative – the politicised instrumentalisation of storytelling – serves as a useful entry point for understanding the formation and projection of a geopolitical discourse that enables alternative imaginations of world politics.

Geopolitics, as many critical scholars stress, is far from being an objective form of analysis but it is a discursive practice that reproduces power in the international arena through spatialising, classifying, and ordering places and the people within them. As Shapiro (1989: 12) argued in his seminal essay *Textualizing Global Politics*, which laid the intellectual foundation of critical geopolitics:

> To regard the world of 'international relations' as a text, therefore is to inquire into the style of its scripting, to reveal the way it has been mediated by historically specific scripts governing the interpretations through which it has emerged.

Yet geopolitical texts can be produced in different formats on different platforms for different audiences. Geopolitics was classified by Tuathail (1999) into three types, according to their function: formal, practical, and popular geopolitics. Formal geopolitics refers to the academic theories and perspectives that are produced by intellectuals and institutionalised in research institutions to inform the geopolitical thinktanks of foreign policy. Practical geopolitics

captures the geographical language used by politicians and policymakers to address world politics and is usually geared towards their citizens (Dittmer and Dodds, 2008). Though practical geopolitics may be shaped by formal geopolitics through policy consultation, it is influenced and utilised by the agencies and complex interests that support particular politicians and their agendas.

Popular geopolitics, which is the focal point of this study, refers to the integration of geopolitical scripts in popular culture, such as television, news, cinema, and music (Tuathail, 1999; Dittmer and Dodds, 2008). Popular culture, including international broadcasting, serves to both transform statecraft and intellectual geopolitical reasoning into common sense geopolitical imaginaries and shape collective geopolitical thinking by disseminating specific visions of the world (Dittmer and Bos, 2019: 16). Yet while a focus on popular culture allows us to understand the emergence and staying power of hegemonic geopolitical understandings, it is also a lens through which to observe geopolitics as a dialectic process in which counter-hegemonic 'talkback' gives voice to the geopolitical margins. What we are witnessing is that the emerging powers are increasingly leveraging the cultural representation of world politics within the geopolitical contest as a key asset of soft power (Browning and de Oliveira, 2017; Dodds and Khatib, 2009).

But how precisely is geopolitics transformed into soft power? Rhetorical actions to justify or invalidate certain values or policies have long been understood to lay at the core of shaping international politics, without the use of military force (Hayden, 2011). The concept of strategic narrative, which has recently been introduced to the study of international dynamics, provides an analytical tool to analyse how geopolitics operate at the intersection of popular culture and public diplomacy. As Roselle, Miskimmon, and O'Loughlin (2014: 71) put it, "strategic narrative is soft power in the 21st century."

A narrative is a story that defines the problem which is disruptive to the initial order, attributes blame and responsibility as well as suggests solutions to re-establish the order (Miskimmon et al., 2014: 5). While the attractiveness of certain political values may vary from one culture to another, the power of storytelling is universal. Human beings are essentially story-telling animals, as they rely on the composition of symbols to make sense of their lived experiences (Fisher, 1984). In the international arena, political actors employ narratives strategically with the aim of reordering the past, present, and future to "extend their influence, manage expectations and shape the discursive environment in which they

operate" (Miskimmon et al., 2014: 2). Such strategic narratives not only restructure the temporal sequential order but also enact identities, interests, morality, definitions, and solutions to international actors and events, deconstructing or re-constructing geopolitical visions for world politics (Miskimmon et al., 2014: 4-5). Serving as a rhetorical materialisation of soft power, the strategic narrative confirms the coercive nature of shaping preference and designating attractiveness through representational force (Mattern, 2005).

According to Miskimmon and colleagues (2014: 7), strategic narratives are comprised of three forms: (1) identity narratives, which construct the identities and images of international actors; (2) system narratives, which explain the emergence, evolution, and nature of international order as well as who its key actors are; and (3) issue narratives, which focus on characterising the issue or event at stake by identifying who the relevant actors are and by (de)legitimising their actions. Miskimmon and colleagues (2014) however also propose that identity narratives interlink with system narratives. This suggests that an intimate relationship exists between the existing structure of the international system and the degree and types of agency assigned to its different actors (Mattern, 2004: 119; Sikkink, 2011: 3), narratively privileging Western geopolitical imagination.

The way in which strategic narratives can serve as a counter-hegemonic force in re-configuring how we see the world has remained as a significant blind-spot in International Relations studies. Yet, as this study shows, Chinese and Russian international broadcasters mobilise the discursive resources of strategic narratives to forge alternative political identities, normative commitments and territorial imaginations about the international order and world politics. In the following, I set out the three types of authoritarian counter-narratives that lay at the centre of this study, which are performed to challenge the existing geopolitical imaginary that assigns (re)emerging powers such as Russia and China an important but largely peripheral role outside the constructions of enmity.

2.3.2 Identity narratives

Our ability to make sense of a geopolitical narrative requires that it clearly sets out who the central characters are in the story of world politics (Said, 1977). Identity narratives here serve as an essential pillar in discursive geopolitical imagination. They assert the subjectivity of actors in the spectacle of international politics while setting out an actor's key characteristics, including the 'attributes they possess', the 'actions they take', and the motivations that drive actors (Miskimmon et al., 2014: 32). How actors are positioned in the geopolitical "web of meaning" woven by "images, metaphors, analogies, and reasons that these narratives allow" (Tuathail, 2002) is an integral element of how countries narrate their own identity and that of others.

In what follows, I understand identity narratives as a cluster of attribute constructs that designate actors with positive / negative evaluations through references to responsibility, morality, competency and legitimacy. This conceptualisation of identity narrative does not exclude the interplay between structure / agency that scholarship on strategic narratives is built upon, but instead emphasises the flexibility for political actors to project the national image on a contextualised basis. A political actor has agency, and this extends to choosing which dimensions of national self-identity are narrated to make sense of geopolitical, geo-economic, and geo-ideological stories, and how they are narrated. For example, externally downplaying levels of economic and military influence rather than traditional posturing may be seen as a viable strategy to shape domestic and international behaviour. This is because the selective signalling of low competency and status may serve to incur wider international support (Pu, 2018: 7), even if this is at odds with domestic narratives of national greatness. In turn, in a challenge to existing normative hierarchies, a state may base its claim to international legitimacy and standing on a reinterpretation of which attributes and codes of conduct demonstrate superior performance in international conflicts. Furthermore, a country that dedicates itself to seeking a great power image may also resort to self-victimisation narratives based on a 'chosen trauma' to highlight both systematic repression from the structurally hegemonic bloc and to justify the aggressive revisionist action over the geopolitical landscape (Volkan, 2016; Mijić, 2020).

2.3.3 Normative narratives

The second type of strategic narratives explored in this study are the normative narratives that reinforce or contest international order. While international orders reflect the distribution of power (Gilpin, 1981b), norms constitute the ideational core of that order. International norms provide guiding principles for what is understood as appropriate or accepted behaviour in world politics. As Finnemore and Sikkink (1998: 892) argued, "norms by definition embody a quality of 'oughtness' and shared moral assessment, norms prompt justifications for action." They also play a key role in consolidating an international order by regulating the perception about interests, expectations, and organisational rules within the system while functioning to legitimise certain behaviours within the system (Florini, 1996).

The character, structure, and resilience of the international order vary when emerging powers tend to transpose and institutionalise domestic norms into norms that govern the international system (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998; Kupchan, 2014). The unipolar Pax Americana, for instance, differs from the unipolar ancient East Asian order. While the former features a relatively egalitarian and variegated core or periphery model due to an adherence to liberal democratic values, the latter penetrates power from the imperial core (China) to regional peripheral actors in a hierarchical manner (Kupchan, 2014). In turn, the international system may display similar characteristics over time, despite a fundamental change in the distribution of power, when the normative core of a past international order remains. This can be illustrated by the persistence of the liberal legacy from Pax Britannica to Pax Americana when the structural hegemon shifts (Layne, 2018). The current world order has widely been seen as moving away from a US-centric international system, a process in which long-standing allegiances may shift, opening up opportunities for challenging existing principles and distributions of power. While the structure of the current order is thought to fluctuate between unipolarity (Ikenberry, 2002), bipolarity (Zeng and Breslin, 2016), and multipolarity (Miskimmon and O'Loughlin, 2017), a focus on strategic narratives shows that normative contestation is underway and centred on a non-Western geopolitical vision that encapsulates localised values rooted in divergent cultural, socioeconomic and political practices.

Norms are fluid and subject to both interpretation and contestation. Their broader acceptance emerges from a socialisation process of norm constituting, norm referring, and norm implementation to secure the inclusiveness of a norm construction that is open to discursive

contestation (Wiener, 2014: 50). Certain norms are informed by the logic of contestedness and the logic of practicality (Jose, 2018: 21), and localised experience and background knowledge shape actors' interpretation and acceptance of norms (Jose, 2018: 34). Thus, the effectiveness and legitimacy of international norms in regulating social behaviours varies. In particular, when international norms are not only understood as ambiguous because of their "polysemic character of meaning construction" (Best, 2012: 88), but when the influence of the norm enforcer wanes as an expression of a changing international order (Jose, 2018: 28), actors tend to engage in normative contestation through localised cultural-historical lenses. This usually takes place through a significant reinterpretation of the parameters of the norm, that is how, and under which conditions the norm applies (Betsy, Jose and Stefes, 2018; Shannon, 2000).

Mainstream studies in International Relations have shown how European countries, as normative powers (Manners, 2002), and Western-led international organisations (Finnemore, 1993) have diffused Western values. Whether, and how norms, flow from the non-West to the West has so far received little attention in the study of world politics (Pu, 2012; Stefan, 2017). This is surprising, in particular because non-Western authoritarian states such as China and Russia have increasingly been testing international norms by both revising territorial boundaries through the use of force and re-interpreting the sources and principles of International Law (Mälksoo, 2016; Noble and Hetherington, 2018). As this study will show, through a focus on China and Russia, strategic narratives emanating from China's and Russia's international broadcasters are a key mechanism to challenge the connotation, application, and inclusion of international norms.

2.3.4 Territorial narratives

The third type of strategic narrative of international broadcasters under investigation performs to reconfigure territoriality based on civilisational heritage. These territorial narratives push the boundaries of sovereignty beyond the state territory towards a geographically broader sphere of influence. Under the Westphalian system, state sovereignty was established on the monopolised exercise of power over territory with concrete borders (Gerth, Mills and Weber, 1948). A state's sovereignty over territory not only ensured geographical security but also contributed to the ontological security of the nation-state – its feeling safe about itself (Vaughan-Williams, 2009b). State territoriality through drawing firm

boundaries, however, is only one way of organising spatiality. Civilisational geopolitics, as Agnew (2003: 12) argued, offers an alternative legitimation for dividing space across the globe.

Civilisational geopolitics sees the world through the lens of culture-specific values and achievements, dividing space, and people, based on the particular 'civilisation' to which they are perceived and labelled as belonging to (Agnew, 2003: 87; Bilgin, 2004: 271). It is a sense of cultural exceptionalism that has a long history, often tying statehood to a mythical foundational identity, which imposes "closure upon events, situations, and peoples" (Tuathail, 1996: 244). Civilisational geopolitical narratives were prominently used, for example, to justify Europe's expansion to the colonial peripheries with a mission to spread a superior civilisation to the 'inferior' peoples of the uncivilised lands. As Agnew (2003: 88) argued, in this civilisational geopolitical imagination, "the rest of the world was 'available' for use by Europeans because their history destined them for Greatness." The activation of civilisational geopolitics should therefore be understood as a narrative strategy that aims to legitimise the modification and expansion of territory (Larson and Shevchenko, 2010).

China's and Russia's civilisational geopolitical reimagination is centred on a return to the East, where liberal values are confined within national borders, and where states enjoy the freedom to choose a political system as they see fit, rather than what the Western normative order envisions as morally right. Refusing an orientalist narration from the West, the redrawing of the global map is centred on creating a neo-Westphalian system that re-asserts the sovereignty, non-intervention, and territoriality in the choice of political and economic models (Larson and Shevchenko, 2010). Russia has here created the terminology of 'sovereign democracy'[4] to assert its agency over defining and applying democratic values according to its political will and civilisational characteristics (Surkov, 2006). China, in turn, developed the term 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' [5] to reaffirm sovereignty over

[4] 'Sovereign democracy' was coined by Putin's political aid Vladislav Surkov in 2006 in the article *The Nationalization of the Future*. According to Surkov (2009: 9), it refers to a "mode of the political life of society in which the state authorities, their bodies and actions are elected, formed, and directed exclusively by the Russian nation in all its unity and diversity for the sake of achieving material well-being, freedom, and justice for all the citizens, social groups, and peoples that constitute it."

[5] 'Socialism with Chinese characteristics' was first proposed by (Deng, 1984). It means to integrate Marxism with Chinese realities and tailor socialism to Chinese conditions. In Xi's era, the idea is redefined to capture 'state capitalism', 'consultative democracy' and advancing Chinese traditional culture (Peters, 2017).

choosing a political system that combines the country's traditional culture and socialist values, a "democracy built on its historical cultural predilection for harmony, virtue and society" (Breslin, 2011: 12).

China and Russia also reimagine geopolitics with a sense of civilisational exceptionalism as well as through a "joint legacy of adherence to a Communist experience which significantly informs their behaviour and sense of national identity" (Wilson, 2015a: 287; Pabst, 2019). By re-narrating their imperial histories, China and Russia push for an alternative vision of East Asian and Eurasian spatiality. China, for example, draws on the imaginary of '*Tianxia*' to revision the East Asian order. *'Tianxia'* (under the heaven), comprises a geopolitical, normative, and cultural area where a hierarchical order surrounds the civilised centre of China (Zhao, 2006). In ancient times, the concept of '*Tianxia*' provided legitimacy to the de jure inequality between the 'middle kingdom' China, as a civilised centre, and the peripheral states such as Vietnam, Korea and Japan, which identified with Confucian philosophy (Spruyt, 2017). The imaginary of '*Tianxia*' seeks to designate different responsibilities to countries with varying sizes, cultures and social circumstances, expecting the central state to protect, confer legitimacy to, and grant generous tributary gifts to the peripheral states, with the latter expected to return compliance and respect to the former (Zhao, 2006). Within this '*Tianxia'* system, state behaviours are regulated with a set of common, yet differentiated, norms or rites (*Li*). The commonality of rites rests on the voluntary commitment and reciprocal interaction among system members, while the differentiations manifest in the leader's exclusive power to exert humane authority (*Wangdao*) (featuring benevolence, self-restraints, empathy, and generosity) and conduct rites teaching as well as discipline (Yan, 2018). As this thesis will show, in *CGTN*'s coverage of the South China Sea arbitration, the imagery of the '*Tianxia*' system is activated to both legitimise China's normative leadership and the exclusive regional rites, 'the code of conduct for the South China Sea', in the contested region.

In parallel to China's '*Tianxia*' system, the concept of the 'Russia world' underpins Russia's construction of alternative geopolitical imagination. Originally formulated by Putin in 2001, the 'Russian world' refers to an extended imagined community that unites Russian citizens and Russian compatriots who share the Russian language, ethnicity, Orthodox Christianity, shared history, and destiny (Laruelle, 2015). Mobilised as a political identity project, Russian authorities encourage Russian ethnic groups and Russian speakers to form transnational

identity towards Russia beyond the 'geopolitical point of residence', but based on their commitment to 'the state of mind, aspiration' of Russia (Putin, 2001). Moreover, the 'Russian world' purports to establish Russia's moral leadership based on religious legacy. In conjunction with the Russian Orthodox Church, the Russian government seeks to position itself as a protectorate of Christian moral integrity from Western spiritual decay (Payne, 2010). Revamping conservative religious values such as traditional family values, restrained civil society governance and strong leadership (Keating and Kaczmarska, 2019), Russia proclaims to safeguard European civilisation against the 'spiritual invasion' of liberal Europe (Neumann, 2016; Walker *et al.*, 2017). As we shall see, in *RT*'s coverage of the annexation of Crimea, the imagery of the 'Russian world' is mobilised to justify Russia's involvement in the referendum in Crimea and military and humanitarian actions within Eastern Ukraine.

Reviving respectively the 'Tianxia' system and 'Russian world' system, China and Russia seek to establish authority over concrete national borders, across imagined civilisation communities, the boundaries of which are subject to collective commitments to certain values, common ethnicity, experience as well as the strategic interests of China and Russia (Kupchan, 2014; Laruelle, 2015). Within the reimagined civilisational lands, China and Russia enjoy total sovereignty domestically, and assert authority over the regions by developing a paternalistic provision, expecting reciprocal compliance from the regional members at the expense of their sovereignty (Lake, 2009: 9). As this study will show, within the narratives of Chinese and Russian international media, the concept of sovereignty acts as a floating signifier (Laclau, 2005: 108) that is both mobilised for authoritarian countries' resistance to liberal cultural hegemony and problematised to redefine national boundaries.

2.4 Comparing Chinese and Russian broadcasters' communication styles

Much existing critical geopolitical scholarship has placed the extraction of underlying discourses embedded in various genres of international relations' texts centre-stage (Müller, 2008; Hansen, 2011). Little research has been done on the differences among authoritarian international broadcasters in terms of "content, style and motivation" as well as "their organisations and especially the close relationship between international broadcasting stations and the states" (Rawnsley, 2015: 274). A focus on how Chinese and Russian

international broadcasters collect and present information and their specific organisational contexts, shows how authoritarian broadcasters such as *CGTN* and *RT* project counter-narratives by signalling that they are following the 'style' of professional journalism to attract international audiences, while conveying political messages through the manipulation of sources and frames in order to shape geopolitical imagination. It also allows a reflection upon the conditions of news production, and the editorial lines these news platforms follow. As this study will show, divergent organisational cultures of international broadcasters not only reflect state-media relationships, historical legacies, and working routines but also shape the selection of sources and the application of generic frames in the media's representation of international conflicts.

2.4.1 International broadcasting as an image building project

The Chinese and Russian governments' investment in international broadcasting has been primarily driven by a concern to reshape their international images following the end of the Cold War. In the context of the political and economic turbulence that both countries experienced during the 1990s, China and Russia sought to engage with the international community with refreshed images. Driven by concerns over 'distorted' and 'demonised' representations by the Western media (Simons, 2011; Brady, 2015), building international broadcasters was seen as an important mechanism to rebuke long-held negative views and to create a favourable environment for foreign policy endeavours (Wilson, 2015a), which gained momentum in the 21st century.

With China's accession to the World Trade Organisation in 2001, it urgently needed to recast its image to cultivate a favourable environment for China's sustainable development and economic expansion (Wang, 2008). The image building campaign focused on presenting China as a "stable, reliable and responsible economic partner, and a rising economic power that the international community does not have to fear" (Hooghe, 2015: 100). In the period between 2000 to 2008, China developed the terms of 'peaceful development' and 'harmonious world' to mitigate 'China threat' suspicions and optimise opinions in the international environment (Zhao, 2015). It was in this context that China launched the 'media going out' project, urging Chinese electronic media to increase their international presence (SARFT, 2001). The project was mainly geared towards conveying the benign message of China as a responsible economic power through its own transnational media institutions

(Zhao, 2016). *CCTV* (China Central Television), as the biggest state-owned television broadcaster, tested the water. In 2000, it launched *CCTV*-9 (International) as an English language general interest channel, which later entered the American cable TV market in 2003 as part of a deal to allow AOL's, Time Warner's, and News Corporation's entry to the Guangdong market. Expecting *CCTV* international to be 'China's *CNN*, only cleverer', the then publicity chief Li Changchun designated a dual function to the media: gaining international influence as a global news service and promoting a positive national image in line with the party's voice (Jirik, 2009).

Russia's public diplomacy endeavour was driven by a similar desire to revamp its international image. Trapped between a superpower legacy and de facto being a medium power, Russia attempted to regain international importance by leveraging its energy reserves. To attract international investment and secure energy trade with the EU, Russia self-presented as a reliable business partner and an open market that embraced democratic values (Kiseleva, 2015). In the post-Soviet region, the message was that Russia had abandoned its imperial ambitions, yet retained its commitment to the historic community united by Russian culture and the Russian language (Feklyunina, 2008). Russia's image building, however, was constrained by a negative international perception. As Putin's senior consultant Sergei Yastrzhembsky claimed in 2001, "Russia's outward image is ... gloomier and uniformly darker compared with reality" (Evans, 2005). Echoing his grievances, Svetlana Mironyuk, the director of RIA Novosti, which incubated *Russia Today*, complained that "Unfortunately, at the level of mass consciousness in the West, Russia is associated with three words: communism, snow and poverty,….. we would like to present a more complete picture of life in our country" (Andrew, 2005). Thus the Russian government launched *Russia Today* in 2005 and designated a 'public diplomacy mandate' to it in its infancy (2005-2008) (Richter, 2017). As Margarita Simonyan, editor-in-chief, stated at *RT*'s establishment, *RT* aimed to "reflect Russia's opinion of the world and to make Russia clearer to understand" (Sputnik, 2005a).

Chinese and Russian image promotion initiatives turned increasingly confrontational around 2008 as they perceived deliberate Western demonisation to be the main barrier to their image building (Wilson, 2015a: 294). To China, Western media's intensive coverage of the anti-China protest along the Olympic Torch Relay route and criticisms against Tibet policies and human rights issues further revealed the foreign media's 'hostility' (Zhao, 2013; Yang,

2017). The then President Hu Jintao went further to warn that "international forces are intensifying the strategic plot of Westernising and dividing China" (Hu, 2012). China embarked on a battle to gain discursive power, which in the Chinese context refers to the right to speak or the right to be heard (Zhao, 2016). Chinese scholars considered that the dominance of Western media organisations and Western values deprived China of its right to speak within, and on behalf of, the international community (Peng, 2017: 120). In response, publicity officials such as Li Changchun urged the official media practitioners to enhance China's international communication capacity, as he remarked in 2008:

> In the modern age, whichever nation's communication methods are most advanced, whichever nation's communication capacity is strongest, it is that nation whose culture and core values are able to spread far and wide, and that nation that has the most power to influence the world (Wilson, 2015b).

Appealing to the authority's expectation, the project of 'Media going out' was upgraded in 2009 with the release of the '2009-2020 Master Plan for the International Communication Capacity Building of China's Major Media' (CPC Central Committee & State Council, 2009). The plan pledged to increase its investment in facilitating the internationalisation of media ranging from *CCTV* and *CRT* (China Radio International) to the *Xinhua* News agency. In 2009, the Chinese government made a bolder financial push that devoted $6.4 billion (45 billion yuan) to overseas media expansion, or in Chinese terms, *Duiwaixuanchuan* (external propaganda). *CGTN*, along with two other flagship platforms, claimed $2.2 billion for overseas operations in 2009 (SCMP, 2009). All the media involved were "tasked with providing an alternative to dominant Western media discourse and presenting China's own perspective on major international issues and events" (Ye and Albornoz, 2018).

Likewise, Russian elites also complained that Russia's image was being negatively shaped by Western media who were biased by anti-Russian Kremlin oligarchs (Evans, 2005). To call for a suspension of this discursive dominance, *RT*'s editor-in-chief Margarita Simonyan noted, "Why is it considered fair that any Western country can bring their voice to the world and Russia cannot?" (Sputnik, 2018). Justifying Russia's international communication as legitimate practice, Simonyan added:

> We are no more propaganda than Voice of America is propaganda or that Radio Free Europe is propaganda…*RT* has never made a secret out of being a Russian TV station (Sputnik, 2018).

For Russia, 2008 was also an important turning point, when its interference in the Georgian civil war received critical coverage from Western media (Avgerinos, 2009). This signature event led to *RT'*s intermittent weaponisation of information. When asked about the position of *RT*, Simonyan said:

> Right now, we're not fighting anyone. But in 2008 we were fighting. The Defence Ministry was fighting with Georgia, but we were conducting the information war, and what's more, against the whole Western world. It's impossible to start making a weapon only when the war has already started! (Margarita, 2018).

Since 2011, the Russian state Duma upgraded RT's budget from $80 million to over $300 million until there was a sharp decline following the US's sanctions for Russia's Crimean annexation (Figure 2-1). The Kremlin gradually diversified the media portfolio by launching Russia Beyond Headlines[6] in 2007 and Sputnik in 2014. In 2013, a media conglomerate, Rossiya Segodnya (Russia Today), was set up to incorporate RIA Novosti, Sputnik and Voice of Russia, with Margarita Simonyan appointed as its head. The move was made to integrate the internal and external media resources of Russia in its 'information war' with Western media outlets (CSIS, 2014).

Chinese and Russian endeavours to manage the international public opinion environment peaked with the international conflicts of the South China Sea dispute and the Ukraine crisis, when Chinese and Russian core national interests, territory, security and geopolitical influence, were contested (Simons, 2015). As the empirical analysis in this thesis will show, during these international crises, both countries activated public diplomacy tools to counter international criticisms and defend their foreign policies. Yet they differed significantly in their external communication styles. While the literature that positions Chinese and Russian international broadcasting in the domain of public diplomacy tends to stress their similar

[6] Russia Beyond the Headlines (now named as Russia Beyond) is a multimedia website aimed "to help the world better understand Russia" (RBTH, 2017).

rationales to promote favourable national images, it rarely takes care to delineate the different communication styles of these two media. Before conducting a comparative research of *CGTN*'s and *RT*'s sourcing and framing strategies- I will scrutinize the existing studies on *CGTN*'s and *RT*'s communication styles to develop preliminary hypotheses for the following empirical analysis.

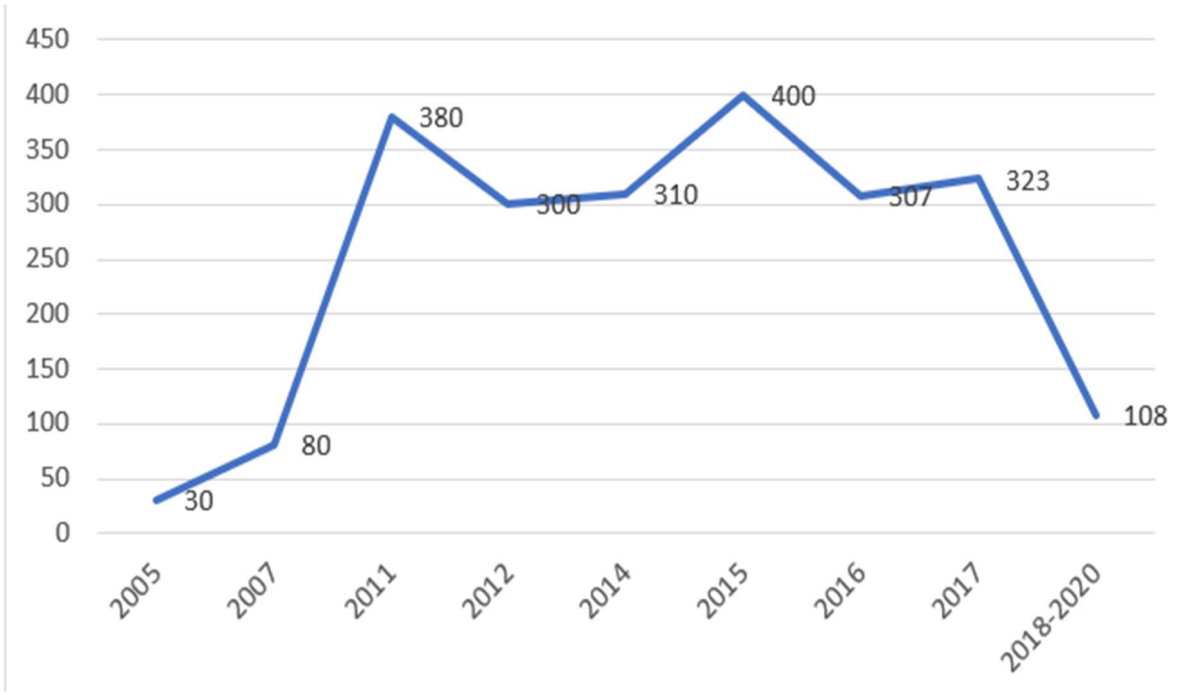

Figure 2-1 Russian government budget for *RT*

Note: Currency = Million $

Compiled from Sharifulin (2018) and *RT* (TV network, 2018)

2.4.2 The communication styles and organisational cultures of Chinese and Russian international media

A key mission of both Chinese and Russian international media is to deflect the Western media's criticisms against their hosting countries (Xie and Boyd-Barrett, 2015). At the same time, significant differences in their approaches to communication have emerged. In terms of sourcing strategy, for example, Chinese international media demonstrate a reliance on official sources, especially Chinese ones. Compared to Western news (i.e. *CNN*, *BBC* and

France 24), Chinese international media disproportionately adopt official sources in covering crises from the Tianjin Blast[7] (Fearon and Rodrigues, 2019) to Covid-19 (Gabore, 2020). Chinese media's representation of official sources is normally in formal situations, such as governmental daily press releases (Fearon and Rodrigues, 2019). At the same time *CGTN* vows to give voice to the underrepresented developing countries. As the controller of *CGTN*-English Liu Cong said, *CGTN* not only envisions to empower "a variety of voices… not just voice of China, but also voices of other Asian countries, of African countries and of Latin American nations" (Li & Wu, 2018: 41). Empirical evidence proves *CGTN*'s inclusion of African sources, however, only official voices are presented at the expense of their domestic dissenting voices. Some attribute this prioritisation of official sources to Confucian culture (Fearon and Rodrigues, 2019), while others to China's relationship maintenance strategy with target countries (Gabore, 2020).

The use of sources significantly shapes media tones and frames (Fearon and Rodrigues, 2019; Gabore, 2020). One noticeable pattern of the Chinese international media's coverage of African affairs is positive reporting. As Gagliardone (2013: 32) noticed, Chinese media in Africa focuses on covering collective achievements instead of divisive, sensational or negative issues. That positive tone is attached to three subjects: African continent, China, and China-Africa relations. As for Africa, *CCTV* (*CGTN*) taps into the narratives of 'rising Africa' and portrays the continent as a land of hope and opportunities to replace its stereotypical image of being a land of poverty and conflicts (Gagliardone and Geall, 2014; Zhang, 2014). The rationale of this positive presentation, according to *CGTN*'s managing editors, is to both use positive psychology to inspire the African people and attract foreign investment to advance the development of the continent (Zhang, Wasserman and Mano, 2016; Marsh, 2017a). This effort to present Africa in a positive light is also theorised by Zhang (2014) as a paradigm shift led by the Chinese media, from watchdog to constructive journalism. An empirical study made by Zhang and Matingwina (2016) illustrated that Chinese media (China Daily) stressed solution and accomplishment rather than focusing on negative cues such as damage, fears, and stereotypes as the Western media (*BBC*) was likely to do (Zhang and Matingwina, 2016).

[7] Tianjin Blast refers to two explosions on 12th August 2015, when two explosions occurred at a hazardous chemical storage facility in the City of Tianjin.

However, some studies evidenced otherwise. A content analysis of *CCTV* Africa's program 'Africa Live' illustrates that the media devoted more time to negative reporting than positive reporting in the majority of the observation period. It was only China's aid, investment and cultural exchanges that were uniformly positively framed in Africa (Zhang, 2013). This reflects a central mission of China's African communication: to dispel the suspicion that "China's current intervention in Africa is either a reinvention of old style colonialism, or exploitation, or a refreshing new kind of geopolitical relationship", instead, it proclaims that China is here to "help African development, free of the constraints often attached to Western aid" (Franks and Ribet, 2009: 129). The positive image as both a saviour and a close partner is geared towards cultivating solidarity between China and Africa (Zhang, 2013).

Perceiving the media as a bridge to cultivate China-Africa relations, the Chinese media remain cautious of covering African issues for fear of offending African authorities. For instance, negative news regarding African slums will be censored for being overly dark, while the North African women's emancipation movement will be downplayed for fear of offending Muslims (Gagliardone and Pál, 2017). Stressing its developing country identity, Chinese media adopt a 'relationship' perspective to define the contribution that Chinese media have made to the international media landscape. As indicated in *CCTV* Africa's website, "*CCTV* Africa promotes communication and cooperation between China and African countries on politics, economy, trade and culture" (About *CCTV* Africa, no date). *CCTV* Africa's vision is endorsed by Chinese diplomatic authorities, as the Chinese Ambassador to Kenya said (quoted in Gagliardone and Pál, 2017: 6):

> It is also unethical to force a bad image on China-Africa relations…More and more Chinese media groups are setting up camp in Africa. They have gradually changed the rules of the game and created a regime, in which Africa is positively presented to the world. I call this "the Chinese perspective" ... Our media should report the China-Africa friendship positively.

The desire to present Africa, and China-Africa relations may come from dissatisfaction with the Western media's suspicious coverage of relevant issues (Zhang, 2014). But more importantly, the broadcasting strategy comes from China's desire to create "a better environment for China's business development, for example on the African continent" as well as "reducing security costs… as it promotes dialogue and understanding" (Hartig, 2016: 6). Different from China's expectation, the well-managed positive reporting may be

counterproductive among African journalists and audiences. Some complained the style to be overly plain or even irrelevant (Madrid-Morales and Wasserman, 2018), while others consolidated their negative view of Chinese media for its linkage with governmental censorship and domestic restraints on freedom of speech (Wasserman and Madrid-Morales, 2018).

Overall, as Xie and Boyd-Barrett (2015: 72) commented, *CCTV* appears to be "the least daring" when compared to other counter-hegemonic media such as *Al Jazeera* and *RT*. Aiming to "strive for political neutrality and bordering on inoffensiveness", *CCTV*'s framing strategy "reflects the Chinese government's policy preference for noninterventionism and is broadly sympathetic to Western neoliberalism" (Xie and Boyd-Barrett, 2015: 72). Embracing the slogan of 'See the difference', *CGTN* refrains from over-criticising Western societies, instead, it struggles to "present a true, multi-dimensional and panoramic view of China" with Western neoliberal values and by imitating a Western journalism format (Li and Wu, 2018).

Compared to *CGTN*'s reliance on Chinese official sources for positive framing strategies, *RT* demonstrates different communication strategies. Deviating from *CGTN*'s Sino-centric sourcing pattern, *RT* engages with a wider range of opinion holders in Western societies. Reviving the Soviet propaganda strategy of using 'agents of influence', the Kremlin leverages Russian sympathisers active in the Western world to sow empathy towards Russian policy and mistrust within Western societies (Abrams, 2016). In Russia's broader attempt to defend its involvement in the Crimean Crisis, Russian-American hockey player Alexander Ovechkin was solicited to post pro-Russian photos online to excuse Russia's interference in Ukrainian affairs (Abrams, 2016). At the same time, Greece's populist leader Alexis Tsipras and the French far-right politician Marine le Pen were all coalesced to drive wedges within the EU and neutralise criticisms against Russia (Abrams, 2016). In a focused study of *RT*, Richter (2017: 24) termed the tactic as using 'useful idiots'. By recruiting established media professionals such as Larry King, Ed Schultz and Chris Hedges, *RT* manages to reach out to high-profile speakers such as Jeremy Corbyn, Nigel Farage and Bernie Sanders who tend to secure limited exposure in Western mainstream media (Richter, 2017). The method functions to present *RT* as an inclusive and complementary news platform while legitimising Russian foreign policy line with credible dissident insiders within Western society.

Compared to *CGTN*'s concentration on positively portraying China, *RT*'s framing strategy focuses on the negative presentation of Western countries. In the early years of *RT*'s

establishment between 2005 and 2008, intensive reportage was devoted to project Russia as a booming economy and a transitioning democracy (Avgerinos, 2009; Miazhevich, 2014). With the media rebranding itself from *Russia Today* to *RT* and championing the spirit of 'question more' in 2009, its ethos shifted to critical journalism and alternative media that accommodated marginalised perspectives (Richter, 2017). The campaign also served as a turning point for *RT* to transform from a defensive soft power instrument to an offensive information weapon (Herpen, 2015: 72). According to Rawnsley's (2015: 275) observation, while Chinese public diplomacy practitioners hold the belief that 'to know us is to like us', Russians are deeply shaped by the mentality of *ne opravdivatsya* - don't explain. Therefore, the channel's content is arguably focused on exposing a credibility gap between American words and deeds and revealing the Western media's bias (Rawnsley, 2015).

Two ideological pillars constitute *RT*'s editorial strategy. First, anti-Westernism taps into narratives such as declining Europe, liberal interventionism, the hypocrisy of Western societies and the corruption of liberal democracies (Richter, 2017; Kluver, Cooley and Hinck, 2019). The negative narratives about the West, in a broader sense, serve to neutralise Western criticisms of Russia and naturalise Russia's political system and foreign policy line (Hutchings and Szostek, 2015). Secondly, conspiracy theories are employed to fan mistrust against the American government and Western elites (Yablokov, 2015). For instance, *RT* proactively covered news events such as the Occupy Wall Street movement, the Guantanamo Bay scandal, and the 2010 WikiLeaks scandal to evoke populist dissatisfaction against economic inequality and global fury against the US's violation of human rights (Richter, 2017). Moreover, *RT* produces sensational programs that suggest 9/11 was an inside job and imply the CIA's (Central Intelligence Agency) involvement in drug trafficking (Yablokov, 2015). Most importantly, *RT*'s conspiratorial narratives reframe the Russo-US relationship. By portraying the US as a 'puppet master' that interferes in Libyan and Afghanistan politics via manipulating overseas NGOs, *RT* subtly justifies Kremlin's crack down on NGOs within Russia (Yablokov, 2015).

Compared to *CGTN*'s inoffensiveness, *RT*'s confrontational communication strategy has achieved noticeable success. On the digital platform of YouTube, *RT* demonstrates a strong capacity to reach a broad global audience and key active opinion leaders through English, Russian, Spanish and Arabic news content (Orttung and Nelson, 2019). In the niche market of Latin America, *RT* also receives higher acceptability than China's *CGTN* and Iran's Press

TV, because the Argentinian and Mexican participants appreciate its stylish resemblance to Western newscast formats and its well-designed visual representation (Morales, 2020). *RT*'s popularity has also been proved to effectively transfer into attitudinal change. Survey experiments have shown that exposure to *RT* reduces the domestic constituency for the US's international outreach, though it appear less effective in terms of enhancing Russia's international image (Fisher, 2020; Carter and Carter, 2021). Therefore, this research makes contribution to scientifically evidence the extent to which these two different styles really exist and how they manifest in the representation of the South China Sea arbitration and the Ukraine crisis.

This study of narrative geopolitical reimagination explicitly integrates an analysis of how communication style is shaped by the organisational culture of international broadcasters sponsored by authoritarian countries. Organisational culture is here understood as the pattern of assumptions and ideas that underlies how a given broadcaster operates, which can be manifested in the form of formal values, rules of interaction and rituals, as well as implicit shared identities, mental models and the working climate (Schein, 2017: 20-21). Because of the significant control exercised by authoritarian regimes over international broadcasters, the latter are often seen as unreflective tools to project government public diplomacy content and engage in government-directed propaganda wars (Smolenova, 2015; Lim and Bergin, 2018). However, this side-lines how authoritarian international media are not immune from the influence of organisational culture on the selection of sources, their modes of representation, and the annotation of quoted statements.

Specific organisational cultures include organisation-specific rules of interaction, organisational sense making, working climate and commitment to professional journalistic norms. These organisational factors will shape the way that media content is being narrated, and more profoundly the audience reception of mediatised narratives. Even if the staff of news organisations voluntarily, or are disciplined to, obey political orders, the political authority cannot micro-manage every piece of information in a 24/7 news cycle. This means that decisions such as who should serve as sources, which content is included, and what interpretations follow the statements are largely moulded by a dynamic operational code active in intra-organisational interactions. Thus, organisational culture – as a collection of organisational identity, shared visions, espoused values, internal and external power

dynamics, and interactional norms – plays a mediating role in transferring political orders into media content (Schein, 2003, 2017).

Compared to communication strategies, the organisational culture of international broadcasters sponsored by authoritarian states has been under-studied due to limited access to relevant newsrooms (Elswah and Howard, 2020). Elswah and Howard (2020: 624-625) make meaningful attempts to reveal *RT*'s "organisational structure that forms the foundation of the process of content control, socialisation of the journalists and adaptability of the channel and its journalists". In regards to *CGTN*, parallel studies have been conducted to reveal the media's struggle to strike an equilibrium among multiple forces – party-state, economic incentives, and market expectations – in the daily production of international news (Nelson, 2013; Jirik, 2016). The political orders from central government are also found to be operationalised differently in different regional, linguistic and media contexts (Gagliardone, 2013; Sun, 2018; Ye and Albornoz, 2018). Though China experts have clarified the strengths and weakness of the Chinese propaganda system in fuelling China's struggle to balance internal and external communications (Edney, 2014; Brady, 2015; Shambaugh, 2017), they have rarely zoomed in on the organisational context of *CGTN* per se. The only exception is Varrall's (2020) exploration, whose characterisation of CGTN's organisational culture as risk averse, mutual distrust and low morale serves to cross-validate the interview data generated by this project. By far, there has been no empirical studies developed to compare the organisational culture of the two media institutions, *CGTN* and *RT*, in relation to their communication styles.

In this study, I will analyse the organisational cultures of *CGTN* in China, and *RT* in Russia, to contextualise the production and delivery of counter-hegemonic strategic narratives. This will provide in-depth insights into how authoritarian international broadcasters operate affects their sourcing strategies, their application of generic *peace/conflict* frames, and their selection of content. As I will show, the organisational context, including the structure and ideational elements, plays an important role in transforming the political authority's political ideals into mediated content.

2.4.3 Contestation of discourses during international conflicts

Previous studies have suggested that China's and Russia's externally oriented media feature different styles, albeit mainly based on anecdotal or audience evaluation (Rawnsley, 2015; Xie and Boyd-Barrett, 2015; Morales, 2021). To what extent do the relevant media embody different styles in their framing of international conflicts that directly touch upon the hosting countries' core national interests (Yoshihara and Holmes, 2011; Gurganus and Rumer, 2019), national security and order building projects (Wu, 2016; Raik, 2019; Heritage and Lee, 2020)? While scholars devote intensive efforts to unpacking *RT*'s international propaganda strategy (Hutchings and Szostek, 2015; Hutchings *et al.*, 2015; Riga, 2015; Helmus, 2018), corresponding studies on *CGTN* are scant. Thus, I will draw upon studies on alternative Chinese state-sponsored media to illustrate the contours of China's narrative framing of the South China Sea dispute.

China's contestation over the South China Sea is not only about reclaiming territory, securing commerce and an energy waterway, but about projecting an alternative maritime order vis-à-vis the US-led one (Morton, 2016; Heritage and Lee, 2020). Surrounding the disputed water, China competes with the US over narratives that configure territorial boundaries, and redefine international laws and principles that regulate regional practice (Chen, 2016). On the official level, China's narrative about the region is underpinned by a discourse of a 'century of humiliation' (Callahan, 2009). Viewing the controversial sovereign issue as a result of foreign invasions and an unfair international arrangement (i.e. San Francisco Peace Treaty) [8], China legitimises its territorial claim as an act to end (post-)colonial intervention (Heritage and Lee, 2020). The historical narrative is combined with a geopolitical interpretation that conceives the US's pivot to Asia, strengthening ties with littoral states (Vietnam, the Philippines) and the practice of freedom of navigation as an encirclement of China (Lim, 2016). Although regional neighbours such as the Philippines brought up the case against China, the Chinese official discourse disregards them as merely proxies of the US's containment strategy (Poling, 2016). On a broader scale, discourses that question the applicability of international arbitration on judging sovereignty related issues in the East Asia

[8] China considers the SFPT (San Francisco Peace Treaty) as an unfair arrangement as the treaty was signed without the attendance of PRC (People's Republic of China) or ROC (Republic of China) in 1951. In the treaty, Japan renounced its claims to the Spratly (Nansha) and Paracel (Xisha) Islands without assigning the recipient. See (Heritage and Lee, 2020)

taps into the discourse of decolonisation of international law system (Wright, 2016; Heritage and Lee, 2020).

Despite the increasing assertiveness of China in the South China Sea, Chinese official media have refrained from adopting a confrontational tone (Chen, Pu and Johnston, 2014; Zhou, 2016). Positioning themselves as a channel of 'conveying, clarifying and enhancing' signals in external communication, the Chinese state media try to express goodwill and advocate a peaceful resolution of territorial disputes (Liao and Ma, 2014: 185). Empirical findings made by Indonesian scholars corroborated the Chinese media researchers' proclamation. The Chinese official news outlet, *Xinhua*, the provider of the most authoritative news pieces, was found to use the peaceful frame to arouse solidarity with regional disputants, exemplified by a discourse that "China and ASEAN countries should work together to maintain peace and stability in the South China Sea" (Bensa and Wijaya, 2017: 5). Besides, *Xinhua* also refuted the accusations against China's obstruction of the exercise of freedom of navigation, but rather, stated that the infrastructure building such as lighthouses may promote free navigation (Bensa and Wijaya, 2017). The Chinese state funded English Language newspaper, China Daily, featured a similar framing strategy. Adopting a pro-peace theme, the China Daily framed China as a positive contributor to peaceful negotiations of the regional conflict, while it labelled Vietnam and Philippine as regional "peace disruptors" and the US as an "extra-regional spoiler" (Guo, Mays and Wang, 2017). Although there have been no studies developed to examine *CGTN*'s coverage of the South China Sea, a level of similarity on frame can be reasonably envisioned. My empirical analysis of *CGTN*'s framing of the South China Sea arbitration therefore aims to contribute to scrutinise the divergence / convergence of the media frame across Chinese official media. Moreover, it seeks to demonstrate the audio-visual tactics China's multimedia broadcasters employ to cover such a significant territorial conflict.

In the same way as the South China Sea arbitration is to China, the Ukraine crisis marks the summit of Russia's discursive offensive, which has been validated by longitudinal tracking of digital news data (Biersack and O'Lear, 2014). At the governmental level, Russian President Putin and Prime Minister Lavrov play key roles in pushing forward mixed signals about Russia's military intervention to confuse and de-legitimise the West (Szostek, 2017a), while galvanising support within Russia and Eastern Ukraine (Makarychev and Yatsyk, 2014). Russia's narrative construction about the Ukraine crisis essentially concerns Russia's

great power identity construction. Russia's interference in the Ukraine crisis is externally portrayed as a counter-offensive against an antithetical other, the West, in which process, Russia's greatness emerges from both a defiance of the Western criticism and an imitation of American interventionism (Roberts, 2017; Szostek, 2017a). Internally, Russia's leadership is rhetorically legitimised with a fulfilment of the 'responsibility to protect' Russian ethnics, Russian speakers claimed to be repressed in Russia's 'near abroad' (Pupcenoks and Seltzer, 2020; Tyushka, 2021). Russia's project to return to the great power club not only involves redrawing territorial boundaries but rewriting international norms, values, and regional orders. By invoking the West's support of Kosovo's independence, Russia legitimised its military action in Crimea with the excuses of self-determination and humanitarian intervention (Allison, 2017). These appropriations and reinterpretations of norms are emblematic of Russia's efforts to regionalise international law against a universalised liberal normative order (Roberts, 2017).

Drawing on the Kremlin's discourses, Russian state-sponsored media were found to constitute the ideational force in Russia's 'hybrid war' against the West during the Ukraine crisis (Herta, 2016; Watanabe, 2017). Stephen Hutchings and his team, under the project of 'Reframing Russia' made a pioneering contribution (Hutchings and Tolz, 2017). Transitioning from the Sochi Olympic Games to the Ukraine crisis, *RT* shifted from self-promotion as a powerful and modern state to 'counter-assault mode' to debunk Western criticisms of Russia (Hutchings *et al.*, 2015). Specifically, the Russian media attacked the West for their destabilisation of Iraq, Syria and Libya and thus lacked the moral grounds to criticise Russia's involvement in Ukraine (Hutchings and Szostek, 2015). Within the West, the United States was accused of "outright criminality", while Europe was portrayed as "being led astray against their own interests by the malign American influence", and was encouraged by Russia to turn back to "pragmatic cooperation" with Russia (Hutchings and Szostek, 2015: 175-176). To negatively characterise the West, conspiratorial narratives were activated to hint that US politicians such as Victoria Nuland and Geoff Pyatt were working behind the scenes and manipulating Ukrainian politics (Yablokov, 2015). Russia's intervention was instead justified as a counterbalance to the West's geopolitical manoeuvres and a restorative force for European order (Szostek, 2018). The Russian media's narrative presentation of Ukraine was composed of belittlement and radicalisation. On the one hand, Ukraine's statehood was disregarded as an inferior component of a larger Russian civilisation, with Russia at its core. On the other hand, the neo-Nazi elements were generalised to the

whole pro-EU protestors in the Euromaidan movement, calling for a transnational bond dating back to the Great Patriotic War (Riga, 2015: 18-19). Despite flourishing investigations, former studies tend to concentrate on extracting verbal discourses, with *RT*'s visual framing of the Ukraine crisis largely under-explored. Furthermore, how these meta-narratives above were incarnated in the strategic selection of source, inter-textual juxtaposition and symbolic representation deserves a more detailed analysis. Most importantly, it calls for a systematic comparison between *CGTN* and *RT* to reveal the similarities and divergences between two state-sponsored media in their projection of counter-hegemonic narratives on international conflicts concerning host countries' national interests.

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter problematises the Western centrism of international political communication. As Cox (1981: 128) stated, "theory is always for someone and for some purpose." The theoretical development of propaganda / public diplomacy, sharp power / soft power is inevitably rooted in the context of the Cold War and the ever-evolving geopolitical competition between authoritarian states and liberal democracies. The intertwinement with the US foreign policy agenda undermines the analytical purchase of soft power and creates a need for non-Western perspectives to conceptualise the international broadcasting projects funded by authoritarian regimes. Starting from a non-Western gaze, the thesis locates the authoritarian external communications on the global South / North and East / West axes. The economic rise of the global South and the geopolitical revisionism from the Global East provides a sustainable momentum to the authoritarian states' investment in international broadcasting projects. These projects formulate strategic narratives that embody the national interests and foreign policy agendas of the hosting countries and construct international conflicts in a way that restructures the political identities, normative commitment, and territorial identities of international audiences.

The strategic narratives of authoritarian states, however, are not expressed in a homogenous manner. Instead, as Shapiro (1989: 11) noted, the representation of world politics is mediated by "historically produced styles." The thesis narrows the communication styles down to sourcing and framing strategies. Sourcing strategies not only gauge the socio-political identities of sources and their modes of representation but reveal the 'politics of voices', namely who gets to speak and is listened to in each channel (Couldry, 2009). Framing

strategies reveal the lens through which media reproduce geopolitical events. These communication styles are inevitably contextualised by the organisational cultures of each media agency. The channels' unique organisational structures, collective identities, values, and beliefs, and working climates constitute unique organisational cultures that contextualise counter-hegemonic narrative projection. Therefore, we need to compare international broadcasters in both their content level and organisational contexts. In the next chapter, I will elaborate a mixed-methods research design that synthesises systematic content analysis and interviewing, aimed at identifying commonalities and differences in the discursive practices of authoritarian states.

3 Methodology and research design

This chapter outlines the methods and analytical strategies employed to unpack the communication strategies, styles, and organisational roots of non-western international broadcasters. To elicit the sourcing / framing strategies and discourse and narratives of the relevant media, a systematic, electronic, and large-corpus content analysis was applied to the selected media's representation of international conflicts. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the staff of authoritarian media organisations to interpret the divergent sourcing strategies embraced by each media. The purpose of the empirical analysis was twofold: (1) to identify the content and communication styles of authoritarian international broadcasters; and (2) to understand the organisational roots for divergent communication styles. The chapter starts by setting up the main research question before outlining the mixed-method design aimed at unpacking the content and organisational features of Chinese and Russian international broadcasters. The chapter then elaborates the rationales for both the selection of cases and the operationalisation of the research design.

3.1 Research questions

The thesis intends to move away from the Western gaze on international communicative practices of authoritarian states and elaborate a decentred view of it. International broadcasts funded by China and Russia are neither blatant disinformation, devoid of relationships with real events, nor are they communicated in a homogenous manner. To offer a non-Western explanation of authoritarian international broadcasting is to both deconstruct the counter-hegemonic narrative projection of referent media, and to recognise the distinct communication styles encountered in different organisational contexts. Therefore, the main questions explored in this empirical investigation are:

> What counter-narratives do *CGTN* and *RT* project to re-construct international conflicts that are core to China's and Russia's national interests? How do they share or differ in their communication styles in terms of sourcing and framing strategies?

3.2 Mixed-methods research design

I adopted a mixed-method design that combined content analysis and interviews to systematically analyse the content and production features of Chinese and Russian international broadcasters. This research design aims to enhance the complementarity between different methods as the content analysis elicits the narratives and communication styles of authoritarian international media, which will be explained by the organisational contexts revealed through interviews (Creswell, 2004: 7).

The main research question is broken down into three clusters of questions (see Table 3-1). The first cluster focuses on the communication styles of authoritarian international broadcasting. It investigates the nationality and social positions of preferred sources selected by different media and how are they represented. It also explores the framing preferences of relevant media in representing international conflicts. These questions are answered through systematic content analysis. The second cluster of questions addresses the organisational dynamics shaping China's and Russia's media sourcing strategies. Assuming that case-specific state-media relationships, intra-media interactions and organisational legacies would distinctly contextualise the news production of Chinese and Russian international broadcasters, I intend to use the information collected from interviews synthesised with former studies to interpret the divergent sourcing strategies embraced by Chinese and Russian international broadcasters. The third cluster of questions investigates the discursive resources that China's and Russia's international broadcasters mobilise to construct counter-hegemonic geopolitical imaginations. A fine-grained content analysis is employed to delineate the strategic narratives projected by authoritarian international broadcasters to negotiate the identities, norms, and territorialities of world politics.

Research Questions	Method	Chapter
Q1 What are the communication styles of Chinese and Russian international broadcasters? What sourcing strategies do *CGTN,* and *RT* adopt in the mediation of international conflicts? What framing strategies do *CGTN,* and *RT* adopt in the mediation of international conflicts?	Content analysis	Chapter 4
Q2 How do organisational cultures shape the communication styles of Chinese and Russian international broadcasters? What organisational cultures of *CGTN* shape its sourcing strategies? What organisational cultures of *RT* shape its sourcing strategies?	Interviews and document analysis	Chapter 4
Q3 How do Chinese and Russian international broadcasters project strategic narratives (identity, normative, territorial)? What counter-hegemonic narratives does *CGTN* project? What counter-hegemonic narratives does *RT* project?	Content analysis	Chapter 5 Chapter 6

Table 3-1 Analytical strategy

3.2.1 Content analysis

I applied systematic, electronic, and large-corpus content analysis to answer research questions Q1 and Q3, which are related to the communication styles and strategic narratives of Chinese and Russian international broadcasters. Content analysis is a suitable method because it is a validated analytical technique to identify meaning and patterns of texts with international political significance. In a broader sense, content analysis refers to a family of analytical approaches that extract valuable patterns from systematic text reading, whether carried out statistically, interpretively, manually or automatically (Rosengren, 1981). In this research, content analysis is contingently defined as a method to elicit latent meaning and manifest patterns of communication through systematic, theoretically informed examinations of texts that incorporate both quantification and qualitative reading. Applied systematically to a years-long continuous period, news content analysis also has the advantage of revealing regularities and dynamics that non-systematic viewing, even systematic analysis over a selection of discontinued sequences, cannot grasp.

To stress that the content analysis in this research is systematic is to emphasise the consistency and transparency of data collection and data coding. Following Berelson's (1952: 18) classical definition, which notes that "content analysis is a research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication," this thesis considers systematicity as the key to content analysis. Being systematic, as Holsti (1969: 4) indicates, means that "the inclusion and exclusion of content or categories is done according to consistently applied rules." In this research, the whole coding process is conducted by the researcher, strictly sticking to the pre-set rules, and with several iterations to ensure that all of the categorisations are mutually exclusive and coherent with the codebooks. The inevitable subjective biases in my decisions in terms of operationalisation are mitigated by means of comprehensively reporting the procedures of data collection, coding and analysis to ensure the replicability of measurements (Hansen, 1998: 95; Neuendorf, 2002: 112).

Second, I insist that quantitative and qualitative content analyses create synergy when they are well blended together. Contemporary content analysis, deriving from propaganda research, is rooted in a quantitative tradition (Institute for Propaganda Analysis, 1937; Lasswell and Leites, 1949; George, 1959). Frequency counting plays an important role in gauging the prominence of certain characteristics of media texts, as the repeated occurrence

of certain messages unconsciously generates a substantial audience effect (Gerbner, 1985). Thus, I conducted quantitative content analysis to identify the manifest patterns of communication of Chinese and Russian international broadcasters, namely the sourcing and framing strategies of *CGTN* and *RT*.

However, meanings are not only conveyed through simple reoccurrence, but also "arise from the complex interaction of symbols" (Hansen, 1998: 97). Therefore a deep understanding of the latent meanings relies on an interpretation empowered, rather than compromised, by assertion of subjectivity (Holsti, 1969: 13). The asserted subjectivity, in qualitative content analysis, includes cultural sensitivity, theoretical innovation and even practical intuition to improve the coherence between the empirical research and theory testing and building. While the most inductive qualitative content analysts consciously reduce the intrusion of subjectivity in their interpretation, they do not negate the existence of bias, but reflect upon the impact that their prior held beliefs, cultural background and gender perspective exert on their case selection and analysis (Strauss and Corbin, 1998: 43). Accordingly, I followed the synthetic approach to qualitative and quantitative content analysis championed by Hansen (1998: 91):

> (quantitative) content analysis is and should be enriched by the theoretical framework offered by other more qualitative approaches, while bringing to these a methodological rigour, prescriptions for use, and systematicity rarely found in many of the more qualitative approaches.

3.2.2 Semi-structured interview

I used semi-structured interviewing to answer research question Q2, related to the organisational culture of international broadcasters. Conducting interviews with the managerial and journalistic staff of relevant media I sought to disclose the impact of the organisational culture, including ideational, institutional, and relational factors, on the sourcing strategies of Chinese and Russian international broadcasters.

The interview is a method of generating data "through dialogue between researcher and interviewee" (Fujii, 2017: 3) – the dialogue is structured with purpose (Adams, 2010). Interviews are known for their strengths in exploring an underdeveloped field and confirming undocumented behavioural patterns (Johnson and Turner, 2003), therefore it is suitable to

capture "people's biographies, experiences, opinions, values, aspirations, attitudes and feelings" (May, 2001: 120). In this research, elite interviews were adopted to capture the personal beliefs, professional values and interpretations of organisational structure and working routines of the newsroom members of *CGTN* and *RT*. The research subjects were classified as 'elites' because they are not only professionals equipped with journalistic expertise and in possession of exclusive information about the internal dynamic of media organisations, but also because they exert a disproportionate influence on society by producing information that constructs the public perception of social realities (Richards, 1996; Pierce, 2008: 119). Elite interviews, however, do not come without problems. The predominant challenge comes from the imbalance in rhetoric and knowledge resources between interviewee and interviewer. Kuus (2013), reflecting upon his contact with foreign policy elites, observed:

> High-level officials can exert far reaching influence on research, not only through their formal powers, but also through their rhetorical and social skills. They excel in arguing within the technical and ideological parameters of their field.

I faced the same challenge in conducting fieldwork in this research. To mitigate the impediment of my lack of industrial experience in earning trust and encouraging information sharing, I took two remedial measures. One remedy was to conduct preparatory and ex post deskwork on the background, institutional evolvement, organisational visions, and international controversies surrounding the media institutions, to fill gaps in my knowledge (Richards, 1996). Another method was to build up my knowledge about the organisation by carrying out fieldwork, which helped in the later interview stage by using reflections from the earlier interview stage. The interviewees had few incentives to disclose organisational information and in most cases were under institutional and psychological pressure not to do so (Berry, 2002). This meant that I was faced with a reluctance to share information and even manipulation from the interviewees to reproduce the organisational 'party-line'. In response, I exploited my positionality as a non-Western researcher who was sympathetic in countering the hegemonic media agenda and by demonstrating a scientific integrity to reduce the defensiveness of the interviewees. In practice, I would try to avoid direct confrontation with my interviewees and frame sensitive questions in a politer way. For instance, when trying to detect the level of government penetration, I asked:

> Some Western media claim that *RT* is taking orders from the Kremlin directly. As we know the Russian government provides substantial financial support to *RT*, how does *RT* interact with the Russian government on a daily basis?

Attempts like this were inspired by Berry's (2002) suggestion to refrain from showing scepticism and challenging the subject overtly but to rather "ask the subject to critique his own case" (Berry, 2002: 680) with subtly framed questions. In order to operationalise the mixed-methods design, I collected content and interview data based on a three-level case selection.

3.3 Case selection and data collection

In order to map the features of content and productions of international broadcasters sponsored by authoritarian states, I adopted a 'most similar' case selection based on the three levels of state, media, and event. The case selection was made on threefold considerations. First, the homogeneity among cases was established to maintain the boundary of theory testing (Berg-Schlosser and De Meur, 2009: 20). To identify the common features of authoritarian international communication, the authoritarian states that sponsored the media were required to be comparable in terms of international status and political systems. Therefore, China and Russia were selected for their emerging great power status and shared authoritarianism shaped by an intertwined communist legacy. A comparative examination of China's and Russia's external communicative practices, therefore, contributes to increasing the generality and explanatory power of the theory (Glaser and Strauss, 2009: 24), in this context, patterns of international broadcasters sponsored by authoritarian states. The second, 'most similar' case selection was designed to dig out differences with a theoretical significance. Drawing on the 'most similar' system design of Przeworski and Teune (1970), this research sought to control the nature (state-sponsorship), genre (televised news) and modality (multi-modal, multi-platforms) of media institutions in order to generate meaningful differences of communication styles between international broadcasters sponsored by authoritarian states, which can be attributed to organisational cultural contexts (Przeworski and Teune, 1970: 93). Third, I selected international conflicts with a similar relevance to the host countries in order to enhance the explanatory power of the empirical description. As King, Keohane and Verba (1994: 45) advocated, a "structured focused comparison" demands that the researcher systematically collects the same information

(variables) across different units in line with the theoretical guidance. In this research, the two media events – the South China Sea arbitration (Philippines versus China) in 2016, and Ukraine crisis in 2014 – were selected as they both involved state identity-building efforts, normative negotiation and territorial revision, in line with the pillars of the strategic narratives as I re-defined from Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle (2014). Based on the theoretical and analytical considerations above, I selected cases on three levels: state, media, and event.

3.3.1 Three levels of case selection: state, media, and event

Firstly, China and Russia were selected for their authoritarian regimes, shared communist legacy and great power status. China and Russia fall into the category of authoritarian states because of centralised government authority, a lack of competitive elections, and their deficiency in rule of law as well as freedom of speech (Friedberg, 2017: 12). Moreover, the two countries share a communist legacy as China's revolution and modernisation has been deeply shaped by the model and experience of the Soviet Union (Meng and Rantanen, 2015; Wilson, 2015a). In the US led liberal order, where the democratic political system is regarded as source of governmental as well as international legitimacy, China and Russia are bonded by an identity crisis. This identity crisis propels the two national governments to discursively refute the sole legitimacy of liberal democracy and legitimise authoritarian regimes in international politics (Wilson, 2015a; Bolt and Cross, 2018: 5). Moreover, China and Russia are significant for their great power status. As permanent members of the UN Security Council, they exert considerable influence on international affairs that cannot be matched by the Middle East's great media power, Qatar (Bolt and Cross, 2018: vii). Sharing a revisionist "commitment to creating a 'post-West' global order" (Stent, 2020:1), Chinese and Russian international media projects are expected to profoundly challenge Western hegemonic discourses on defining the natures, responsibilities and solutions of international conflicts that spell implications for the liberal order.

Secondly, on the media level, *CGTN* (China Global Television Network) and *RT* (Russia Today) were selected for their state sponsorship and comparable media genre. *CGTN* and *RT* are well suited to embody the public diplomacy campaign of their respective nations because they receive substantial financial and policy support from their sponsoring governments. *CGTN* sits at the core of China's Great Overseas Propaganda Campaign (*Dawaixuan*) (Diamond and Schell, 2019: 99), as Chinese President Xi holds a high expectation of it to

"tell China's stories well" to the world (*CCTV* English, 2016). *CGTN* receives generous financial support from the Chinese central government, an allocation of US$2 billion funding, far exceeding its *BBC* counterpart (US$1.1b) (Deutsche Welle, 2016). *RT* also has great political importance for Russia, as President Putin specifically designated *RT* to "not only provide unbiased coverage of events in Russia, but also try… to break the Anglo-Saxon monopoly on global information streams" (Kremlin.ru, 2013). *RT* also enjoys the institutional and infrastructural support of RIA Novosti, a Russian state-owned media company, which incubated *RT* in its infancy in 2005 (Sputnik, 2005b).

CGTN and *RT* are comparable media cases as they encompass an identical media genre as televisual, multimodal, multi-lingual news platforms. However, I only analyse the companies' English-language video clips as they have the widest international outreach due to the lingua franca status of English. As *RT*'s editor-in-chief Margarita Simonyan (2016: 53) noted, TV news outperforms other news formats (newspapers, radio and social media) because it provides the most "professional, comprehensive, and visual and often live" media representation. In this digital age, *CGTN* and *RT* actively leverage digitalisation to bypass the technical barriers to enter the global media market. *RT* strives to engage with global audiences by channelling its televisual news content through TV, digital streaming, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter; a noteworthy achievement is that *RT* became the most watched TV news network on YouTube with the first 10 billion viewership on record (*RT*, 2020b). Echoing *RT*'s passion to reinvigorate TV news in the digital age, *CGTN* developed a robust media convergence strategy, which is summarised as the five 'I's (Innovation, Invigorated, Interconnected, Inclusive and Interactive) [9]. To operationalise this strategy, *CGTN* established a news centre that directs news production in five languages (English, Spanish, French, Arabic, and Russian) and through three regional branches (in Nairobi, London, and Washington) to be distributed through the channels of television, mobile networks, news app and digital media (Li and Wu, 2018). The content of *CGTN* was made available on various platforms, such as its dedicated website, mobile app, and social media platforms including Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Weibo and WeChat (*CGTN* - About Us, no date).

[9] 'Innovation' means that as a freshly rebranded media, *CGTN* is unburdened to integrate television and digital media. 'Invigorated' suggests that *CGTN* adopts invigorated and dynamic approaches in news gathering and presenting. 'Interconnected' stresses establishing an attraction to their audience. 'Inclusiveness' highlights a tolerant and supportive environment for innovation. 'Interactivity' opens the space for two-way communication between media and audience (Li and Wu, 2018).

Thus, *CGTN* and *RT* are comparable for their shared newscast media format and multi-media delivery methods.

Thirdly, this research selected the South China Sea arbitration (the Philippines vs China) and Ukraine crisis as event cases, as they were international conflicts that directly concerned Chinese and Russian national interests. With territorial integrity, energy security and normativity at stake, the two events attracted intensive investment from both governments to gain the upper-hand in the international battle of narratives (Chen, 2016; Szostek, 2017b). The South China Sea arbitration started from the Philippines' filing of an arbitration case against China to the Permanent Court of Arbitration in January 2013. The arbitrary tribunal ruled in favour of the Philippines in the final ruling in July 2016, invalidating China's 'historical rights', and the 'nine-dash line' claims over the territory and jurisdiction of the South China Sea (South China Sea Arbitration, 2016). The arbitration marked the first case for the International Court to apply and interpret the UNCLOS (UN Convention on the Law of the Sea) in the South China Sea context.[10] The arbitration not only ruled over the status of maritime features in the South China Sea and China's historical claims (Davenport, 2016), but influenced the legal position of littoral states in their negotiations with China in the ensuing territorial negotiations (Rabena, 2018; Bernard, 2019). China's standpoint of "No acceptance, no participation, no recognition, and no implementation" to the arbitration (Fu, 2016) was also a manifold signal. China's declining of third party intervention in regional disputes embodied China's efforts to reposition itself as a returning leader of the East Asia area and a great global power (Varrall, 2015). Moreover, refusing the judgement of a European-Japanese vested international court marked China's resistance against the Western-led international legal order and China's ambition to establish normative authority in its neighbouring space (Swaine, 2016). Lastly, China's assertive objection indicated the Chinese government's determination to restore and safeguard its territorial integrity following a 'century of humiliation', thus it involved a discursive projection of sovereignty and

[10] The arbitration concentrated on four issues: (a) the legality of the 'nine-dash line' from a historical rights basis; (b) the status of maritime features; (c) the lawfulness of China's prevention of the Philippines' exploitation of resources near Scarborough Shoal; and (d) the ecological damage caused by China's land reclamation and island building. Further information: Cogliati-Bantz, V. P. (2016) 'The South China Sea Arbitration (The Republic of the Philippines v. The People's Republic of China)', *The International Journal of Marine and Coastal Law*, 31(4), pp.759–774. doi: 10.1163/15718085-12341421.

territoriality (Curtis, 2016: 8). *CGTN*'s coverage of the South China Sea arbitration under investigation ranges from 25th May 2016 to 15th December 2017. This implies that *CGTN* started to intensively shape public perception of the arbitration when the date of release approached and conducted a series of post-arbitration interpretations through mass mediation.

Ukraine crisis started from the emergence of pro-EU protests in November 2013 in the perennial Eastern Ukraine turmoil. This research sets the end of the event as March 2014, when Crimea changed its political status to be part of Russia, through a controversial referendum alongside Russian military involvement. Russia's intervention in the Ukraine crisis was driven by its great power status seeking, as it attempted to restore leadership in former Soviet regions and obstruct the West's progressive geopolitical encroachment on this region (Pedersen, 2019: 313; Krickovic and Zhang, 2020). Meanwhile, Russia's support for the Crimean referendum marked a legal revisionism that aimed to redefine the norms of self-determination, humanitarian intervention and sovereignty in favour of Russia's strategic interests (Allison, 2017, 2020; Jose and Stefes, 2018). Normative arguments are only a means rather than an end for Russia. What Russia aimed to achieve through the Ukraine crisis was to fundamentally legitimise a territorial revisionism that challenged the inviolability and mutuality of the border configurations in Eastern Europe (Forsberg and Mäkinen, 2019). *RT*'s coverage of the Ukraine crisis under investigation ranges from 21st November 2013 to 21st November 2015, covering the period from the protest in Kiev's Euromaidan square to the annexation of the Crimea. The time frames of the two media event case studies are designed to reinforce the comparability of the two media events.

These three levels of case selection are designed to draw a balance between theoretical relevance and comparability in terms of types of states, media, and events. This enables a systematic comparison between the communication strategies adopted by Chinese and Russian international broadcasters and how these deflect international criticisms of their respective foreign policies. Thus the comparative case study of media coverage of the South China Sea arbitration and the Ukraine Crises is necessary to unpack the defensive strategic narratives projected by the two countries in their attempt to generate international constituencies for their foreign policy positions and to neutralise criticisms that are largely delivered by Western media, which is seen as of vital importance to the preservation of their national interests (Wilson, 2015a). The crises chosen as empirical focal points are extreme cases that allow context-specific accounts of the media's framing on dramatic occasions

(Flyvbjerg, 2006; Willis, 2014). However, this case selection also limits the extent to which the content, narratives and styles generated by the two case studies can be generalised to the two media platforms as a whole (Bennett, 2004). To draw a more comprehensive picture of *CGTN*'s and *RT*'s coverage, one would need a larger, more representative sample of topics covered by the two media, extending on a longer period, which lies beyond the scope of this thesis.

3.3.2 Collecting content data from YouTube

As a major news distribution and consumption platform, YouTube accommodates the news content of each media platform, *CGTN* and *RT*, which reach the global audience. As a report issued by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism demonstrates, YouTube is one of the most used news consumption platforms, accounting for 25% of overall online news consumption, second only to the social network giant Facebook (Newman et al., 2018). Although citizen journalism is rising thanks to the contribution power of video-sharing websites, established news organisations still dominate online news consumption (Ramsay, 2019). *CGTN* and *RT*, like their Western news provider counterparts, have an active presence on YouTube. *CGTN* has a relatively modest digital presence, with 1.89 million followers up to 14th October 2020. *RT*, in contrast, demonstrates a more remarkable digital profile: as an early adopter of YouTube. *RT* opened its first account as early as 2006. *RT*'s skilled use of digital platforms made it the first TV news channel to surpass 1 billion views on YouTube (Wakabayashi and Confessore, 2017). By 14th October 2020 *RT* had accumulated 4.01 million followers on YouTube.[11] Therefore, the media content circulating on YouTube serves as a good proxy to investigate the communication strategies of Chinese and Russian international broadcasting. I also collected content data from the playlists of *CGTN*'s and *RT*'s YouTube channels. YouTube is the most universal cross-audience reference platform for uploading and disseminating, downloading, and searching video content. Along with many social media platforms, YouTube disseminates and amplifies *CGTN*'s and *RT*'s content to global audiences. The value of YouTube as an archive of content for retrospective retrieval

[11] To put the digital performance of *CGTN* and *RT* into context, by 14th October 2020, followers of other significant news outlets were as follows: *CNN* – 10.90 million, *BBC* – 8.46 million, and *Al Jazeera* –5.89 million.

has been validated by existing studies (Arthurs, Drakopoulou and Gandini, 2018). The video clips are deliberately cut and edited by *RT* and *CGTN* in a manner that they think can best convey their essential message to a global and varied audience. In other words, the self-selected excerpts should encapsulate the core messaging strategies of the news channels and effectively reflect the attitudes and standpoints of the two news organisations. Therefore, *CGTN'*s and *RT'*s newscasts were collected via their YouTube accounts' repositories.

I identified a folder named *South China Sea* on *CGTN*'s channel, which included 246 video clips, released between 25th May 2016 and 15th December 2017. A scan of the topics showed that the majority were produced around contextualisation, causes, follow-up, and explanation of the development and award of the South China Sea arbitration case, which corresponds to my case selection at the media event level. Within the *RT* Channel, two folders were identified concerning the Ukraine crisis: *Ukraine Unrest* contained 142 video clips uploaded between 21st November 2013 and 15th March 2014, plus several clips released in May and August 2014, and one outlier from 21st November 2015; a similar folder, *Eastern Ukraine Turmoil* held 781 video clips from 22nd January 2014 to 15th December 2017, with the majority from April 2014 and September 2015. I chose *Ukraine Unrest* as my sample because it covered the main storyline from the start, the escalation, and the climax of the Ukraine crisis - the annexation of Crimea, whereas *Eastern Ukraine Turmoil* is related to the long-lasting civil war in the Donbas region, which resides outside my research interests.

After narrowing down the content data to two folders, *South China Sea* and *Ukraine Unrest*, the data was cleaned using two criteria. Firstly, I only kept the core materials – news bulletins – and excluded raw *CCTV* footage, aerial photography, and talk show programmes. Secondly, I deleted repeated videos. This cut the number of *South China Sea* videos from 246 to 177, and *Ukraine Unrest* videos from 142 to 76. This raised the question of comparability of the samples from *CGTN*'s and *RT*'s corpuses. Though *CGTN*'s video numbers exceed that of *RT*, *RT*'s video lengths surpass those of *CGTN*. On average, the length of *RT*'s videos were 8 minutes 49 seconds compared to the shorter average length of *CGTN* videos at 1 minute 28 seconds. The total length of *CGTN*'s videos was 4 hours 17 minutes compared to 11 hours 9 minutes for *RT*. The balance between numbers and lengths compensates for each other's differences and result in the data of *CGTN* and *RT* being comparable. I retrieved video data from YouTube and stored it on University of Warwick's

servers to enhance the stability of the corpus against any potential change of YouTube dissemination policies by *CGTN* and *RT*.

3.3.3 Interview data collection and ethical challenges

In order to explore the organisational cultures of *CGTN* and *RT*, I designed a sampling framework for prospective interviewees based on three criteria: (1) senior managers who worked in the two news organisations; (2) journalists and other media professionals from the two news organisations; and (3) preferably journalists who had contributed to covering the news events that were selected as case studies. The research subjects were therefore selected for their exclusive knowledge of the organisations, due to their administrative privileges and first-hand experience accumulated through on-site reportage (Robinson, 2014). The criteria above became the basis for a purposive and snowball sampling.

Based on the criteria above, I first created a list of names that included the key reporters of *CGTN* and *RT* that appeared in the content data, who were expected to be directly involved in the mediation of the South China Sea arbitration and the Ukraine crisis. I then expanded the list by browsing the companies' profile pages: *CGTN*'s Faces (*CGTN*, 2020) and *RT*'s On-Air Talent (*RT*, 2020a). During this process I identified several managerial staff and producers as prospective interviewees; more importantly, I opened myself up to potential new interviewees once they became accessible through the later snowballing recruitment.

The second step was to contact and obtain consent from the interviewees. The entry into the two organisations followed different paths due to my positionality and the two media's organisational features. For *CGTN*, I managed to access journalists, anchors, producers, editors and their managers by mobilising my personal network gained from a Journalism school and an internship. Conceptualised as a 'backyard' approach, this sampling strategy is an effective method to explore the internal dynamics of a relatively closed organisations (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992). I also wrote to the institutional email of *CGTN* to prevent the institution from feeling it was being intentionally bypassed, but I failed to receive any reply. This confirmed the findings of many ethnographers in China – interpersonal connections, or *guanxi,* play a vital role in obtaining access to Chinese interviews rather than institutional channels (Wang, 2006; Hsu, 2007). Though *CGTN*'s interviewees (apart from foreign employees) tended to remain cautious about signing consent forms and refused to be

recorded, those who were introduced by close friends showed a passion to reveal critical information about the organisation's dynamics and were ready to help recruit new interviewees.

For *RT*, I gained access to correspondents, social media editors and managers through institutional channels. After receiving a request for an interview from me, *RT*'s public relations department demonstrated a welcoming and professional attitude towards academic engagement. First, *RT*'s PR department not only agreed to receive a formal interview from me within *RT*'s building, but helped me to arrange interviews with the journalists based on my proposed list. In this process, *RT* showed a higher level of internal integration in terms of mobilising the whole organisation to face external academic exploration. Second, *RT*'s interviewees demonstrated higher professional public relation skills, which included signing the consent form, recording the interviews themselves, and consenting to my recording of the interviews. Although the individual interviewees were reluctant to put me in touch with their colleagues without the permission of the institutions, I managed to complete eight interviews with *CGTN* staff and five interviews with *RT* staff, with *RT*'s interviewees holding higher professional and organisational statuses, and *CGTN*'s interviewees possessing more basic level positions within the institution (see Appendix 8).

The interviews were conducted following a semi-structured approach, which meant open-ended questions were listed as guides. This method guaranteed a balance between directionality and flexibility. On the one hand, the interview guide ensured information pertinent to the answering of research questions could be collected within the limited time and remained consistent across interviews within different temporal-spatial contexts. On the other hand, the interview guide allowed the interviewer to select and phrase research questions and probe the interviewees in a flexible and customised manner (see interview guide Appendix 9).

Ethical considerations underpinned the design and conduct of the interviews. The fieldwork was authorised by the research ethics committee of the Politics and International Studies Department at the University of Warwick for the measures it took to protect the researcher's safety, avoid harm to the participants, secure informed consent and preserve the privacy of all participants.

First, considering the sensitivity of the issue under investigation, I conducted detailed preparation work involving an exit plan, data backup, travel insurance and institutional assurance to ensure my personal physical safety and data security. Second, I anonymised the participants' identities to avoid physical, psychological, and professional harm to my interviewees. 'Minimising the risk and harm' is a key principle of the Economic and Social Research Council's (ESRC) framework for research ethics (ESRC, 2020). In this research it is operationalised as keeping direct identifiers (such as names, addresses, and gender) and indirect identifiers (occupation, nationality) confidential and applying pseudonyms (UK data service, 2020). The measures were taken to limit the traceability of the participants and to avoid 'persecution and retaliation' from peer competitors, employer institutions and authoritarian governments (Scott, 2005). Meanwhile I fully respected the interviewees' willingness to conduct interviews in a comfortable environment, be it a café or a restaurant, with or without recording, to avoid unnecessary social pressures. During interviews, I refrained from directly challenging my interviewees or asking leading questions to generate biased interview data.

Third, I fully informed my research subjects of the purpose, methods and potential use of the research, as well as the risks and damage that participation in the research may imply (Bryman, 2016: 136). I primarily informed the media organisation of the researcher's institutional affiliation, research sponsorship, topic, and purpose, and of prospective interviewees. Besides this information, individual participants were informed of the right to participate on a voluntary basis, and the right to decline to answer or withdraw at any time. The participants were also fully notified of the duration, expectations, and potential use of the interview data. They were entitled to refuse an audio recording, which meant the interviewer would take notes during the conversation. While *RT*'s interviewees readily accepted the requests for recording and opted to record the interviews with their own equipment, *CGTN*'s interviewees tended to decline the request to record. Exceptions occurred with foreign editors and managers as well as Chinese junior-level journalists who had graduated from Anglo-American journalism schools. The participants were asked to sign the consent form designed in accordance with the regulations of the University of Warwick. The collected interview data was manually transcribed by the author. The interview data and identifiable information of the participants was organised, stored and encrypted on the university system, in line with the University of Warwick's Data Protection Statement

(University of Warwick, 2020). The intention was to promote transparent and accountable research, while protecting the privacy of key informants involved.

Fourth, I realised the limitations of unrepresentative sampling and took corroborative measures to enhance the reliability of interview data. Due to limited numbers of participants being recruited from both media institutions, testimonies can hardly be generalised to the whole organisation. For instance, one or two staff statements about the influence of Confucian culture can hardly prove a universal influence of Chinese conventional culture on the whole organisation or how it shapes communicative practices. I therefore took a cautious approach towards both interpreting the interviewees' responses and reconstructing the organisational culture based on this data. The reliability of interview data is furthermore undermined by the possibility that interviewees exaggerate, spin, and mislead in their responses for performative purposes (Richards, 1996; Berry, 2002). In the authoritarian context, the individuals affiliated to official institutions also experience anxieties and insecurity when asked to reveal power dynamics within their institutions (Rivera, Kozyreva and Sarovskii, 2002). In light of the potential partiality and bias inherent to the interview data, I first compared statements among interviewees and corroborated these with prior research or reports to configure organisational contexts. For example, the foreign interviewees of *CGTN* tended to praise its editorial freedom, while Chinese staff were likely to complain about the censorship that permeated the news production process. This puzzling divergence was further cross-validated and made sense of by Varrall's (2020) report, which found that foreign employees are mainly tasked to ensure language accuracy in *CGTN* rather than becoming deeply involved in original content creation. Furthermore, *CGTN*'s journalists' daily encounters with micromanagement censorship can be better made sense of when contextualised in Chinese propaganda system, which struggles to draw a balance between appealing international storytelling and information consistency between domestic and international information environments (Edney, 2014; Shambaugh, 2017). In *RT*'s case, when sensitive questions are raised concerning the Kremlin's political orders over the editorial lines of the media, Elswah and Howard's (2020) investigation was used to evaluate interviewees from *RT*'s potential denial of governmental intervention over the media's editorial line.

3.4 Analysing multimodal content data

Coding multimodal content data is an essential step towards analysing the communication strategies of Chinese and Russian international broadcasting. Coding is a process of transforming data into meaningful categories. By grouping data into theoretically informed categories, coding contributes to testing theories and validating the patterns of communication (Saldaña, 2009: 8-11). Coding in this research was the procedure of organising media content into themes that measured the concepts of source, frame, and narrative. Analysis, reflection, and theoretical abstraction of the themes served to testify to the communication styles and political discourses of Chinese and Russian international media.

As the research dealt with televisual media content, data coding here was fundamentally about measuring the visibility of actors, sources, frames, and narratives across verbal and visual media formats. Verbal data, whether spoken by actors or in voiceover, or written, can be straightforwardly coded. However, compared to verbal data, visual data has been under studied in the IR domain due to a dearth of verification of the "images cause policy maxim" in which the casual relations between image dissemination and policy change are confirmed by large-n studies (Hansen, 2018). However, visual data are increasingly recognised for improving authenticity and evoking emotions in geopolitics. The use of images and moving images in journalism is considered to bring an "implicit guarantee of being closer to the truth" and is expected to add "authenticity" and "newsworthiness" to the event being covered (Greenwood and Jenkins, 2015; Veneti, 2017). Meanwhile, images become convenience for political mobilisation as they are known for their capacity to evoke fear and hatred (King and Wood, 2001; Hutchison, 2016) as well as compassion and a sense of belonging (Buzan and Wæver, 1998; Hansen, 2011).

However, images are hard to interpret. As Roland Barthes (1987: 38-39) contended, "all images are polysemous." This means that visual images are floating containers of signifiers that are open to audience decoding and interpretation. The lack of an explicit and universal propositional syntax makes the interpretation of images contingent on the metacultural frameworks of society (Hall, 1973; Messaris, 1994; Grabe and Bucy, 2009). The deficiency of the argumentative power of visual images also increases the dependency on verbal annotation to make a proposition that involves forming an association, making causality and

drawing a conclusion (Grabe and Bucy, 2009: 23). Therefore, an inter-textual content analysis of verbal and visual discourse is challenging yet meaningful for decoding the political information of Chinese and Russian international broadcasters.

The mechanisms through which verbal and visual language interact with each other are varied. When text supports and clarifies the meaning of the image, anchorage effects take place. When images illustrate and support the meaning of the text, illustration comes into force. Lastly, when the text and image reinforce each other reciprocally, a relay is formed (Barthes, 1987; Piazza and Haarman, 2016). In this research, I examined the key media elements of actor, sources, frames, and narratives in both verbal content (audio speech) and visual content (static and moving images as well as the interplay of media genres in collective meaning-making).

I coded with NVivo, a widely used piece of computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS). Compared to manual coding, CAQDAS improves data management efficiency (Bazeley and Jackson, 2013: 2), enables large-scale data analysis (Bergin, 2011) and enhances transparency and trustworthiness (Kaefer, Roper and Sinha, 2015). I selected NVivo for its strengths in dealing with multi-media sources, which allowed for the storage and coding of data including transcript texts, images, moving pictures and audio (Bazeley and Jackson, 2013: 154). NVivo not only assisted with categorising the data into codes but allowed group codes to be compared in order to elicit communication patterns. Moreover, NVivo's keywords-in-context function was used to determine how certain discourses were utilised in Chinese and Russian media representation (Leech and Onwuegbuzie, 2011: 75). The word frequency function was employed to identify the most frequently used discourse within certain corpuses and codes or to verify a hypothesis with quantifiable evidence (Leech and Onwuegbuzie, 2011: 76). Although coding with NVivo does not overcome subjective bias, it improves the transparency, replicability, and efficiency of data analysis.

3.4.1 Coding sources: nationality, social status, and mode of representation

I coded source attribution because it conditions the conveying of political messages by including or excluding certain voices, and it plays an important role in authoritarian countries' international broadcasting efforts to deliver a professional news service and contributes to promote public diplomacy. The term 'source' refers to the actors interviewed

by journalists, who appear on air, and who make public speeches that provide news-worthy information (Gans, 2004). In turn, verbal quotations of information conveyed by sources in non-visual formats tend to be excluded because of their limited utility for audio-visual news formats in a rich media context. Sourcing matters primarily because it is a media ritual that maintains the objectivity of professional journalism. As Manoff and Schudson (1986: 15) underscored:

> News is not what happens, but what someone says has happened or will happen. Reporters are seldom in a position to witness events first-hand. They have to rely on the accounts of others.

In much of the Western world, news media are expected to facilitate the free flow of information in order to cultivate informed citizens (Siebert, Peterson and Schramm, 1984) and the sourcing of information is an integral element in this process. The credibility of journalism is established through, and enshrined by, the adherence to norms such as neutrality, objectivity, and impartiality – the appearance of a balanced inclusion of a broad spectrum of voices to reconstruct social reality. Quotation marks have here become a 'strategic ritual' for journalists to conceal subjectivity and increase credibility (Cook, 1998: 5; Foucault, 1991: 138). Journalists, as Tuchman (1980: 95) argues, tend to express the desired opinion with the mouth of others, and research focusing on the media ritual of sourcing allows pulling back the curtain on the signalling of objectivity in authoritarian international broadcasting. Exploring who is allowed to speak, in what context, and with what mode of representation, as well as what message is broadcast and with what annotations also shines a light on 'politics of voice' (Couldry, 2010) as an integral element of the media discourses of international broadcasters.

In this research, the investigation of sources firstly focuses on the identity of the source in terms of nationality and social status. Research has long shown that the sourcing strategies of Western mainstream media feature Western centrism and elitism. In the seminal work *The Structure of Foreign News*, Galtung and Ruge (1965) pointed out, for example, that the political and intellectual elites from countries that carry the veneer of international political significance, such as the United States, are over-represented in the news. That this trend is ongoing is suggested by research that found US presidents made an average of 25 speeches a month through the media from 1960 to early 2000, which effectively set the political agenda for both domestic and international audiences (Pratkanis and Aronson, 2003).

In terms of social status, the sources for Western mainstream media are found to be dominated by white male elites in the intellectual and political dimensions. As scholars have sarcastically observed, a large group of white middle-aged experts is asked to explain and interpret 'anything under the sun', including events that occur where they may never set foot (Cerf and Navasky, 1998; Lee, 1998). According to research, privileged personnel, affiliated with authoritative social organisations such as government officials, specialists or experts, outweigh ordinary people in terms of source citation (Lasorsa and Reese, 1990). Among them, politicians from either elite states[12] or international organisations are predominant in source attribution (Sigal, 1973: 124). In comparison, experts earn their high media standing with recognised cultural capital and professional credibility (Hall at el., 1978: 62; Webb, Schirato and Danaher, 2002: 192). Ordinary people, in contrast, are not only less cited (Galtung and Ruge, 1981), but tend to be trivialised as witnesses or victims of the news events and relegated to news segments that fall under the category of human interest (Lasorsa and Reese, 1990; Ross, 2006).

Source identity also plays a role in the reproduction of international hierarchies. Traditionally, the ethnocentrism of source attribution has been understood to derive from geographic and cultural proximity and the practical convenience of news production. In other words, journalists tend to resort to authorities and experts that they have easier access to, and who share the same worldview (Galtung and Ruge, 1981). Pressure with respect to finances and time also pushes journalists to rely on institutionally affiliated actors such as politicians and experts to verify, authorise, and add credibility to their news coverage (Ginneken, 2009; Reich, 2011). Media sourcing is also an integral element in legitimising and normalising established social structures, domestically and internationally (Ginneken, 2009: 91). In the international arena, Western mainstream media rely primarily on Western political and intellectual sources to convey authoritative information, which serves to affirm rather than challenge existing perceptions of international order (Lake, 2009).

Secondly, the investigation of source attribution in this study concentrates on the type of information used in authoritarian international broadcasting. The mode of representation of source material concerns "the situation or mode in which a speakers' statements were

[12] Elite states refer to the great powers that have a significant influence on international politics.

obtained and/or presented" (Hackett, 1985: 257), and consists of formal public speeches, news conferences, formal interviews, unrehearsed ad hoc interviews, and overheard information (ibid.). To explore the patterns of the sourcing mode of representation, this study focuses on five key modes of representation in Chinese and Russian international broadcastings – *public speeches*, *pre-recorded interviews*, *live interviews*, *leaked conversations*, and *ad hoc street interviews* – identified through a process of inductive preliminary coding.

The mode of representation matters because the different modes, from public speeches to ad hoc interviews, convey a descending order of authoritativeness, which may cause the audience to attach a different level of credibility and authenticity to statements. Modes of representation also signify different degrees of journalistic intervention. For example, the content of a politician's public speech is not generally subject to direct influence by the news media, whereas the substance of interviews is shaped by journalistic direction and intervention. Within Western news media, authoritative figures of political institutions tend to be given voice in public speeches or formal interviews, while ordinary people are disproportionally represented as contributors through ad hoc street interviews (Hackett, 1985).

Chinese and Russian international broadcasting promises to vocalise those that are underrepresented by Western mainstream media, including through the process of source attribution. As I will show, this is achieved through purposeful source arrangement in terms of the status, location, and ethnicity of sources as well as conveying information in modes of representation that give privilege to narratives favoured by China and Russia. As a counter-hegemonic discursive force, authoritarian international broadcasts are expected to include sources that are often side-lined by the Western mainstream media and attach authority and credibility to those sources through certain modes of representation.

The coding of *CGTN*'s and *RT*'s content began with media sources. In this research, the source analysis aimed to assess the extent to which authoritarian international media include and prioritise sources underrepresented by Western mainstream media. Specifically, it revealed the distribution of nationality, social positions and mode of representations of sources by *CGTN* and *RT*.

To test the research's hypotheses, I firstly categorised the nationality of sources into four groups: *the host country* (China or Russia), *the country of dispute* (Philippines or Ukraine), *Western countries* (US, UK, EU, EU members, Canada, and Australia), and *other countries*. There were, however, there were two unexpected areas that emerged from the first round of coding: controversial regions. In *CGTN*'s case this related to Taiwan and in *RT*'s case it was Crimea. It was particularly meaningful for *RT*, as the political status of Crimea was the focus of contention during the Ukraine crisis, thus I decided to generate a code – *controversial region* – to characterise the sources originating from Crimea. *Other countries* captured the countries that did not belong to any of the groups above. The codebook for nationality coding of the source material can be found in Appendix 1.

Secondly, I designated prospective codes for the social and political positions of sources: *governmental official*, *expert*, *entrepreneur*, *police*, *army*. These codes were refined during the first cycle of coding. There were three noteworthy modifications. First, I found the need to draw a fine line between government officials and basic level leadership. I determined that the boundary of political authorities was at the city level, which meant that politicians and administrators from state to city level were coded as *government officials* and leaders of local self-organising governing entities were coded as *common people*. Second, the *journalist* code included all media practitioners that came from outside of the host organisations (*CGTN* and *RT*), and in-house journalists who were guest speakers. In other words, in-house correspondents who returned live reports were not counted as sources, but as part of the media-initiated narration in parallel with soundbites from anchors and voiceovers. Another challenge for classification was which category protestors should be allocated to. I decided to create a category of *activist* to capture the demonstrators and protestors that supported positions that were contrary to those of Chinese or Russian governmental interests (see Appendix 2).

This research not only investigated what sources were included in media coverage but how they were represented. The different modes of speech, from Hackett's (1985) perspective, reflect a hierarchy of authority and freedom for different actors to shape media content. However, Hackett's (1985) source accessibility thesis is largely source-centred and measures which actors received more exposure in the competition for influence through mass media in a democratic context. As discussed above, this research regarded source attribution as a media-centred activity, during which international media organisations attributed authority

and authenticity according to their editing stance and access to the source, which meant getting the source to speak on their news programme. Therefore, based on Hackett's (1985) seminal protocol, this research developed five codes of mode for source representations: *public speech*, *pre-recorded interview*, *live interview*, *leaked conversation*, and *ad hoc street interview* (see Appendix 3 for definitions).

Modes of representation matter because they convey different levels of authoritativeness, authenticity and accessibility of source in relation to corresponding authoritarian international broadcasters. Firstly, the degree of authoritativeness attached to different sources descends from public-oriented speech, pre-planned interviews, and overheard conversations to ad hoc interviews. Secondly, as Hackett (1985: 257) argued, "although office interviews may perhaps convey greater rationality than outdoor on-site ones," such on-site interviews may "carry the authenticity of direct involvement in the news event." Following this logic, ad hoc interviews and overheard conversations gain more authenticity because the speakers do not expect the exposure. Thirdly, while recognising the mode of representation could be strategically applied to attach/deprive authority of the sources, I did not exclude the limited accessibility of certain sources due to physical distance and political constraints. Hence, an examination of the mode of representation also revealed the accessibility of sources to relevant media organisations.

3.4.2 Coding frames: peace and conflict frames

If source attribution determines who is allowed to speak and how, then generic frames establish the lens through which the media assign meaning to political events and issues. As Cohen (1963: 13) famously remarked on the agenda-setting function of mass media: "[the press] may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about." The main mechanism for news media to shape the way in which issues, actors, and events are thought about is the selection of frames.

Frames are cognitive schemas which "locate, perceive, identify and label" meanings from a variety of possible interpretations (Goffman, 1986: 21). In the context of mass communication, a 'frame' refers to an "organisation idea or storyline that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events" (Gamson and Modigliani, 1987: 143). The organisation idea

crystallises “persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion” (Gitlin, 1980: 7). The construction of frames involves selecting a “particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation” of the referent media event, and “making them more salient in a communicating text” (Entman, 1993: 52).

Media frames should thus be understood as “the central organising idea for news content that supplies a context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration” (Tankard et al., 1991: 3). They take effect when the thematic structure, moral judgment and responsibility attribution promoted by the frames are adopted in the audience’s interpretation of the news events (Price, Tewksbury and Powers, 1997). Framing effects occur at both micro and macro levels of social interaction. While issue-specific frames work to organise the interpretation of issues at a micro level, generic frames provide organisational structures that contextualise news events while transcending issue, temporal and spatial barriers (de Vreese, Peter and Semetko, 2001).

Existing empirical studies have shown that, among generic frames in news reports, five types are most frequently applied in mass communication: (i) conflict frame; (ii) human interests frame; (iii) economic consequences frame; (iv) morality frame; and (v) responsibility frame (Neuman, Just and Crigler, 1992; Iyengar, 1994; Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000). This research will focus on the adoption of the *conflict* frame and its antithetical *peace* frame by authoritarian international broadcasters as a lens to understand how counter-narratives differ between media as a reflection of their approach to conflict coverage. As Galtung (1986: 3) has argued, media can have a constructive or destructive impact on the use of military force depending on how the frames they apply interlink with a commitment to peace.

Peace frames are defined in this study as those news frames that promote the peaceful resolution of disagreements by focusing on finding non-violent solutions and building common ground as well as post-conflict reconstruction (Lee and Maslog, 2005). They emphasise “peace initiatives, tone down ethnic and religious differences, prevent further conflict, focus on the structure of society, and promote conflict resolution, reconstruction and reconciliation” (Lee, 2010: 362). As Lynch and McGoldrick (2007: 256) suggest, the aim of adopting a *peace* frame [in news media] is to “create opportunities for society at large to consider and value non-violent responses to conflict.” *Conflict* frames, in contrast, emphasise conflict between individuals, groups, or institutions from verbal disagreement and physical

conflict to wars (Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000: 95; Bartholomé, Lecheler and de Vreese, 2018: 1690). They stress differences between opposing sides, construct conflicts as a zero-sum game, and de-contextualise the effects of military confrontations (Lee and Maslog, 2005). *Conflict* frames are linked to the dramatisation principle, which compels news producers to focus on violent scenes (Bartholomé, Lecheler and de Vreese, 2018). This dramatisation, however, will worsen the conflictual situations by exacerbating hatred and engendering apathy during war (Hussain, 2016).

The present investigation of generic *peace*/*conflict* frames aims to unpack the different journalistic styles adopted by Chinese and Russian international broadcasters to project counter-hegemonic interpretations of international realities. As I will show, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to counter-hegemonic discourse projection. Indeed, the application of generic *peace*/*conflict* frames in counternarratives can vary significantly across countries and conflict situations, shifting between inoffensive (Xie and Boyd-Barrett, 2015) to offensive communication styles (Hutchings *et al.*, 2015; Rawnsley, 2015).

Based on the conceptualisation of generic frames, this research aims to discover the conflict levels of the schemes that the studied media adopted to organise their reporting on an international conflict. The level of conflict was a meaningful measurement of authoritarian media because different representations of conflict would trigger divergent impacts on the evolution of conflicts in the real world. While peace journalism that "highlights peace initiatives, [and] tones down ethnic and religious differences" could help to "prevent further conflict, focus on the structure of society, and promote conflict resolution, reconstruction and reconciliation" (Lee, 2010: 362), war journalism that highlights a zero-sum game and violent aesthetics could exacerbate hatred, apathy and escalate the conflict (Lee and Maslog, 2005; Hussain, 2016). To champion the constructive journalistic practice of peace journalism and to identify the destructive war journalism, scholars have developed a series of criteria to pin down the two dichotomous journalistic practices (Table 3-2 below).

	Peace journalism	War Journalism
1	Converging the conflictual parties by stressing agreement and negotiation	Dichotomising the conflictual parties by focusing on disagreements and differences
2	Balanced presentation of multiple parties	Partisan presentation of conflictual parties with either victimising or demonising language
3	Win-win orientation	Zero-sum orientation
4	People orientation (includes the voices of common people)	Elite orientation (relies on elites' voices as sources)
5	Reports on invisible damage of war on emotional health, culture and society	Reports on the visual effects of war: casualties, dead and wounded

Table 3-2 Criteria for peace and war journalism

Source: Compiled from McGoldrick and Lynch (2000) and Lee and Maslog (2005).

This coding scheme is analytically comprehensive. It provides robust criteria for a *peace* frame, stressing agreement and resolution, and a *conflict* frame, emphasising disagreement and differences in the mediation of geopolitical conflicts. However, many of the criteria, such as the source selection of elites or common people and the balanced inclusion of multiple parties, have exceeded the range of media framing, touching upon journalistic norms such as balance, neutrality and objectivity. To better gauge the conflict levels of media framing, I followed a narrowly defined coding scheme for the *conflict* frame. In framing studies, the *conflict* frame refers to the generic frame that focuses on the disagreements between individuals, institutions, countries and the divergence between conflicting parties (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; de Vreese, Peter and Semetko, 2001). A *peace* frame, as the antithesis of a *conflict* frame boils down to four points: agreement finding, solution seeking, peace building and reconstruction establishment. In light of these, I set up the coding scheme of the *peace*/*conflict* frames found in Appendix 4.

3.4.3 Coding narratives: identity, normative and territorial narratives

The coding of strategic narratives was conducted inductively, but with many inputs from existing political communication and framing research. Strategic narrative, as a political instrument that shapes behaviour and expectations of political actors through reconstructing shared meaning of causality, is fundamentally a discursive phenomenon that relies on the communication process (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle, 2014: 2). An operationalisation of strategic narratives thus entails appropriating content analysis to elicit the meaning of media discourse bearing political significance. Positivists advocate for the precision of quantitative content analysis, arguing that big data textual analyses can "draw out narrative components in all forms of media [that] are helpful in understanding contestation and processes associated with projection of narratives" (Roselle, Miskimmon and O'Loughlin, 2014: 79). On the other hand, interpretivists strive to validate the relevance of qualitative content analysis, to make sense of the discursive resources in use to shape public perceptions of security, identity and policy outcomes (Hay and Rosamond, 2002; Hansen, 2006; Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle, 2017; Szostek, 2017a).

3.4.4 Coding identity narratives: responsibility, morality, competency, legitimacy

The coding of identity narratives starts from coding the media visibility of actors. Drawing on the work of Zhang and Meadows (2012), media visibility, or salience of certain actors, can be defined as the frequency of actors mentioned by anchors/correspondents or guest speakers in video footage, either orally or as images. The unit of analysis used was per video clip, which means that multiple mentions or the presence of an actor in a single clip were only counted once. Considering the public diplomacy function of authoritarian media, the research was interested in investigating which actors were affiliated to which institutions, or which nationalities gained more media exposure in *CGTN*'s and *RT*'s coverage of selected events.

The frequency distribution then served as a basis for valence coding. Valence measures the level of favourability in which a certain actor is framed (Zhang and Meadows, 2012). Recognising the value of a positive-negative dichotomy in the assessment of tone or valence of media coverage (Zaller, 1996; Norris et al., 1999), I substantiated this with dimensions that were underpinned by communication theories and also held more analytical purchase to

be applied to the 'texts' of international relations. As Entman (1993) noted, a framing-informed content analysis would help analysts to "avoid treating all positive and negative terms or utterances as equally salient and influential," and therefore failing to recognise the impact of most significant messages on an audience's reception (Entman, 1993: 57). Therefore, a coding scheme informed by framing analysis was developed to evaluate the valence (positivity/negativity) of three main actors: *the host country*, *Western countries,* and *the country of dispute.* The coding of the identity narratives started from an understanding that actor framing is a process selectively highlighting certain features of an actor or event. As Entman (1993: 52) insightfully noted:

> To frame is to select some aspects of perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation for the item described.

Following this definition, framing often involves diagnosing the factors that cause the problem, usually anchoring the news issue in a complex terrain of society, in a causal manner, by linking disruptive actions with the social consequences. This causal interpretation involves attributing responsibility for social issues to certain actors and making remedial suggestions that identify actors who have the capacity and duty to solve the issue (Iyengar, 1994, 1996). These two elements were operationalised by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000: 95) as identifiers of the *responsibility* frames, which are expected to "present an issue or problem in such a way as to attribute responsibility for its cause or solution to either the government or to an individual or group." In this research, the *responsibility* frame was broken down into two codes: *responsibility* and *solution*. The *responsibility* code had negative links, because of the actor's causation or exacerbation of the problem. The *solution* code referred to the positive attribute of an actor for their willingness and capacity to deliver a solution (see Figure 3-1).

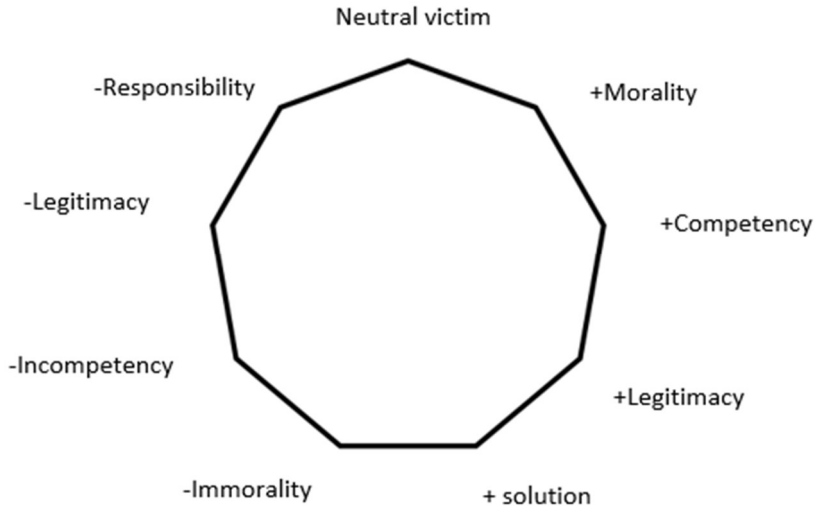

Figure 3-1 Theoretical model of identity narrative coding

Notes: + and – signs indicate valence.

The second focus of the identity narrative analysis was morality. Moral evaluation, in Entman's (1993: 52) classical definition serves as a key function of a frame in relation to the judgement of the "causal agents and their effects." In framing analysis, the *morality* frame was further operationalised by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000: 96) as the frame that "puts the event, problem, or issue in the context of religious tenets or moral prescriptions." Morality is a key dimension in the public judgement of the trustworthiness of politicians and government institutions (Earle and Siegrist, 2006; Cwalina and Falkowski, 2016). Though morality is relatively underplayed in international politics, it is increasingly gaining momentum. As Nye (2019, 2020) reminded us, ethics play a non-negligible role in forming and implementing foreign policy and evaluating the consequences of foreign policy. What is morality? In political communication studies, morality is expressed based on a fairness/cheating foundation and the former coding tends to attribute morality to activities that adhere to justice and fairness, while attributing immorality to discriminatory, unfair actions and self-interested behaviours (Bowe and Hoewe, 2016). In this research, the *morality* frame was refined as a positive attribute assigned to the actors who demonstrated moral consistency, defended moral standards, protected victims and the helpless, or acted from altruistic reasons. In contrast, the *immorality* frame was negatively constructed to characterise the actors that demonstrated moral inconsistency, violated moral standards, were indifferent to or abandoned victims and the helpless, or acted in their own self-interest.

Competency formed the third dimension of identity narrative coding. In social psychology, competency is concerned with an evaluation of a certain actor's capacity and efficiency in fulfilment of a certain task (Wojciszke, 1994; Abele et al., 2008). Competency also constitutes a key pillar of voter assessment of a politician's electability (Boomgaarden et al., 2016). In the International Relations domain, the perceived competence can be conceptualised as prestige, or 'reputation for power', which in Gilpin's (1983: 31) definition refers to "the perception of other states concerning a state's capacities and its ability and willingness to exercise its power." Prestige matters because strength, once recognised, will generate ideal political results without strength being employed (Gilpin, 1983). In this research, the competency evaluation was divided into two parts: *competency* and *incompetency*. While the positivity of *competency* was attributed to the situations where political actors had enough financial, military resources and political authority to fulfil the task successfully and efficiently, *incompetency* was defined as a lack of financial or military resources, or political authority, to effectively function.

The fourth property of the identity narrative used was *legitimacy*. Legitimacy, as defined by Hurd (1999: 381), refers to the "normative belief by an actor that a rule or institution ought to be obeyed." Specifically, it consists of two pillars: the normative legitimacy that is achieved when the authority meets the standards of appropriateness; and the subjective legitimacy that concerns the perception of the subjects (Noppe, Verhage and Van Damme, 2017). For nation-states, international legitimacy derives from an adherence to international law or international norms, such as human rights and democracy, and shouldering the corresponding responsibilities are likely to perceive them as legitimate international actors (Hurd, 1999; Mulligan, 2006). For international organisations, the legitimacy derives from input legitimacy, output legitimacy and legality (Buchanan and Keohane, 2006). While the input legitimacy is achieved by upholding transparency, institutional integrity and accountability to the global civil society, output legitimacy is evaluated on the substantive delivery of benefits, and legality is built upon consent to the normativity of international law (Bodansky, Dunoff and Pollack, 2013). Legitimacy concerns the subjective perception of another political entity based on its behaviours. Perceived legitimacy is expected to generate voluntary deference and obligatory obedience of the subjects towards social and international authorities (Levi, Sacks and Tyler, 2009), thus reducing the costs of coercion-aided governance and eliciting public support for the policy that transcends the consideration of immediate interests (Weatherford, 1992) (see Figure 3-2).

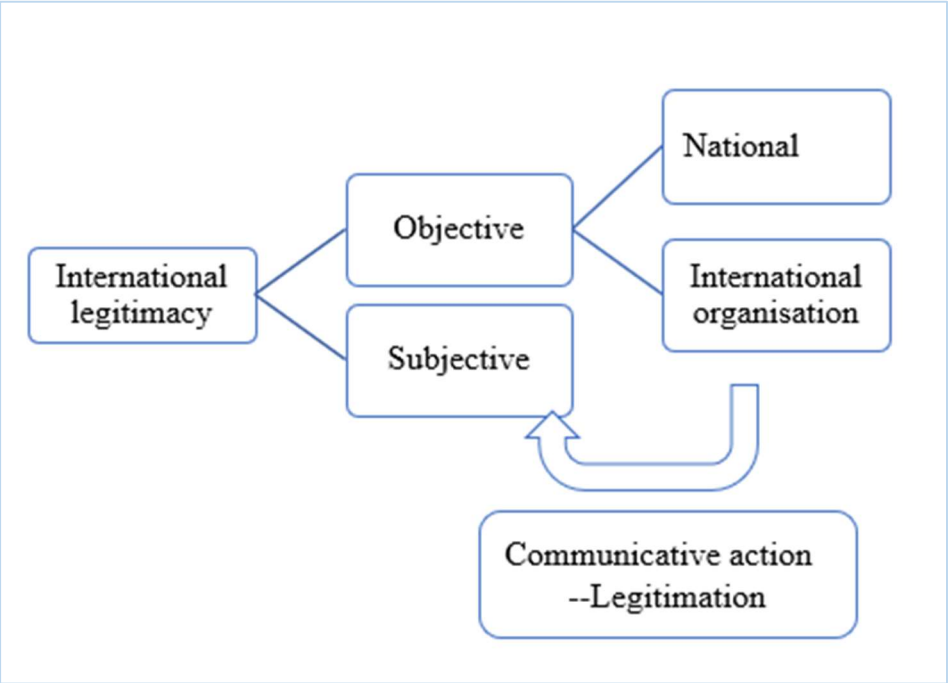

Figure 3-2 Concept graph of Legitimacy

What transfers normative legitimacy to subjective legitimacy, as discussed above, is a 'communicative action' that is also called legitimisation. The process of legitimisation is also defined by O'Neill (1977: 351) as "a communicative task addressed to the mobilisation of members' commitment to the goals and institutionalised allocations of resources that translate social goals into daily conveniences, rewards, and punishments." The process of legitimisation, as summarised by Dong and Chan (2016), with inspiration from Van Leeuwen (2008), involves authorisation, rationalisation, and moral evaluation. To identify this process of (de)legitimisation, Shoemaker (1982), developed a four-indicator framework: evaluation, legality, viability, and stability. In this research, the coding of the *legitimacy* frame was contingent on the extent to which an actor:

(1) Gained authority by remaining in accordance with legal norms and institutional procedures.
(2) Received support, trust, and voluntary obedience from the subjects for its cause.

The *illegitimacy* frame, in contrast, was attributed to actors that:

(3) Gained authority through procedures that violated the legal and institutional rules.

(4) Failed to generate support and recognition among followers for the aspirational authority.

After the first cycle of coding, a new category, the *victim* frame, emerged to capture situations where the referent objects suffered from the negative repercussions of certain political actions that they bore no responsibility for. This code was exclusively found in *RT*'s representation of the Ukrainian people who were suffering from political disorder and an economic recession due to 'Western interference'. An illustrative example is as follows:

> The people of Ukraine, the innocent reasonable people who want to work for a better life, have become pawns in an extraterritorial super-national game being led by the European Union and the USA (RT, 2013c).

In this case, a *responsibility* code was attributed to the West for causing economic turmoil in the Ukraine in its aim to promote a great power political game. The Ukrainian people, in contrast, were given a *victim* code, which denoted their victimhood from the economic shock as a result of their connection to the EU market.

The *victim* code finds its theoretical underpinning from the victimisation frame. As a media frame usually applied to women and refugees (Roggeband and Vliegenthart, 2007; Greussing and Boomgaarden, 2017), the victimisation frame sheds light on the plight of the vulnerable and calls for compassion and a humanitarian remedy for human suffering (Harrell-Bond, 1999). An over-victimisation frame portrays the sufferers as desperate, helpless agencies incapable of changing their personal conditions. It typically generates backlash by passivising, demonising and dehumanising the referent objects (Orgad, 2014: 112; Chouliaraki and Zaborowski, 2017) and undermines or degrades the subjectivity of the referent objects and justifies their dependency or patriarchal rescue from external forces (Chouliaraki, 2012). In this case, the code mainly captures actors suffering from the negative impacts of certain actions.

3.4.5 Coding normative narratives

The coding of normative follows an inductive approach, as the norms being contested vary from one context to another, although the theory of norm contestation (Wiener, 2014; Jose, 2018) provides a common theoretical foundation for the operationalisation of normative

narratives in different contexts. The contestation of norms firstly involves negotiating the hierarchy of significance when multiple norms clash with each other. Secondly, even if one universal subscription to a single norm is achieved, contradictions exist when multiple interpretations emerge in different contexts, especially the conditions under which certain norms are applied or exempted (Jose, 2018: 5). This is when a political actor exploits the ambiguity to project their preferred interpretation of norms (Jose and Stefes, 2018). Specifically, the area of normative contestation could reside in the content of fundamental norms, the formal deliberation of norms, such as international arbitration, as well as norm implementation and validation (Wiener, 2014: 7). In this thesis, the identification of the normative narrative is focused on:

(1) What are considered as essential principles of international norms and international law?

(2) What are the scopes of application for the norms being discussed?

(3) What are the legitimate normative deliberation, validation and judgement mechanisms?

(4) What are the criteria for appropriate normative practices?

I developed a codebook that listed a series of norms relevant to *CGTN*'s and *RT*'s mediation of the international conflicts (see Table 3-3 below). In the first cycle of coding, I refined the focus of *CGTN*'s normative narratives to the legality of the tribunal arbitration, the definition of international law, and the principles and appropriate dispute settlement norms. Legality formed a main theme for *CGTN*'s defence of the appropriateness of Chinese foreign policy and its attack on the legitimacy of the international court, the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA), as a mechanism for dispute settlement. The main entity that safeguards the dignity of international law is the international court. Specifically, the normative legitimacy of the international court's application of international law derives from, firstly, the consent of states to its jurisdiction; secondly, the fairness and adequacy of the decision-making process; and lastly, the justice of the outcome. In contrast, the operation of international courts incurs critiques when their application of law exceeds the scope of the authorisation of the national states (Grossman, 2012). The final codebook of *RT*'s normative narrative was focused on Western double standards, the self-determination norm, and the condition and methods of

implementing humanitarian intervention (see Appendix 6).

	RT	CGTN
Sovereignty	Interference in domestic affairs	Freedom of navigation
Territory Integrity	Self-determination	International jurisdictional
Order	Self defence	Bi-lateral negotiations
International norms and law	International norms and law	International norms and law
Political values	Freedom of protest	Human rights as development rights
	Constitution	
	Traditional values	
Environmental values		Environmental protection and biodiversity

Table 3-3 First cycle of coding: normative narratives

3.4.6 Coding territorial narratives

Territorial narratives in this thesis were conceptualised as discursive constructions of the organising principles of sovereign space and the geopolitical imaginary of territorial demarcation. As revisionist powers, China's and Russia's projections of territorial narratives can be understood as discursive 'bordering practices' that set up the boundaries between "inside and outside, here and there and us and them, in order to affirm the effect of the 'presence' of sovereign political community" (Vaughan-Williams, 2009b: 730). For authoritarian rising powers, constructing territorial narratives not only concerns exercising exclusive jurisdiction by "fixing the territorial scope of sovereignty" (Agnew, 2005: 437), but also involves a great power building project. The project is built upon a geopolitical assumption that great powers should exert unproportionate influence on the territorial configuration, spatial arrangement and territorial dispute management in their spheres of influence (Svarin, 2016). For *CGTN*, territorial narratives clustered around the principles of territorial claims, such as historical rights and effective control that have a debatable legal validity in international law. At the same time, these narratives involved "pre-emptive bordering practices" such as justifying the push of their defence line deep into the South China Sea as a preventative action to safeguard Chinese national security (Vaughan-Williams, 2009a: 22). For *RT*, the territorial narratives were divided into two projects: an affirmation of linguistics or ethnicity as the principle of territorial demarcation; and constructing a geopolitical imaginary of '*Novorossiya'* that aimed to mystify and justify Russia's use of force in the Eastern Ukrainian territorial dispute (for detailed codebook, see Appendix 7).

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter has operationalised the communication strategies of Chinese and Russian international broadcasters by providing an analytical framework to identify their communication styles and strategic narratives. Positioning international broadcasting as a strategic communicative action, this operationalisation aims to elicit the ways in which visuals and words interact to construct alternative (non-Western) geopolitical imaginations in televisual communication contexts (Williams, 2003). The competition among geopolitical imaginations peaks with territorial conflicts, as they are the occasions when symbolic resources are mobilised to reconfigure territorial identity, as well as territorial control

(Reuber, 2000: 39-41). The South China Sea arbitration and Russia's annexation of Crimea respectively according to Chipman (2018) crystallised China's and Russia's territorial revisionism, as they not only challenged the territorial arrangement continued from the Cold War but tested the resilience of the Western liberal order. A multimodal analysis of *CGTN*'s and *RT*'s coverage of territorial conflicts seeks to discover how authoritarian states mobilise symbolic resources to negotiate the character, norms, and territorial boundaries amid international conflicts. The production of authoritarian geopolitical imaginations entails not only governmental political investment, but also professional journalistic practice, which is contextualised in the unique institutional structure and organisational visions and working atmosphere of the media institutions. I adopted newsroom interviewing to map out the organisational context that encultured the news production process of authoritarian international broadcasters, which illuminated the power relations underlying the production of alternative geopolitical imaginations. This analytical framework served, in its generality, to identify commonalities in counter-hegemonic narrative constructions among different authoritarian media. More importantly, it shed light on the divergences in communication styles among different news organisations. In the next chapter, I apply this analytical framework to identify *CGTN's* and *RT*'s communication styles (sourcing and framing strategies) and their organisational roots.

4 Comparative analysis of *CGTN's* and *RT*'s communication styles

This chapter investigates *CGTN*'s and *RT*'s communication styles, namely their sourcing and framing preferences in the mediation of respective international conflicts. Source attribution demonstrates the hierarchy of authority established by authoritarian media through selecting and representing different voices. Frame adoption reveals the schemas through which relevant media convey counter-hegemonic narratives. Communication styles matter as they shape the audience's interpretation of news content. They are also deeply rooted in the organisational cultures of media organisations, including the structural, ideational, and operational elements of media as social institutions. The chapter reveals that *CGTN* and *RT* challenge the source hierarchy of Western mainstream media in different approaches and tend to frame geopolitical conflicts through different lenses. These divergences derive from their different institutional adaptations of communist propaganda regimes and organisational cultures.

4.1 Sourcing strategies

CGTN and *RT* both prioritise political and intellectual elites in general yet demonstrate divergent source attribution preferences. *CGTN* prefers to adopt Chinese official sources, represented in formalised interviews or public speeches. *RT* prefers to select and represent Western expert sources in casual formats such as ad hoc interviews. The section will start by comparing *CGTN*'s and *RT*'s sourcing strategies in terms of nationalities, social positions, and modes of representation. Then it explores the most notable sources employed by *CGTN* and *RT* and how they are attached with different importance with different modes of representation.

4.1.1 *CGTN*'s sourcing strategy: vocalising the official lines of developing countries

In terms of nationality, *CGTN* prioritises sources originating from China and pro-China developing countries over those of territorial disputants and Western countries. In *CGTN*, *Chinese* sources are most visible as they appear in 57% of the clips. This confirms the finding

of Liao and Ma (2014) that officials and spokespersons affiliated to Chinese foreign ministries and defence ministries constitute the main information sources of Chinese official media. The concentration of Chinese official sources forms a sharp contrast to the visibility of the Philippines sources (2%) (see Figure 4-1). This means that *CGTN* disseminated Chinese voices, perspectives, and interpretation of the South China Sea arbitration at the expense of those of the Philippines – the key stakeholder of the international arbitration per se as well as of territorial conflicts in a broader sense. This asymmetry revealed a deviance from the norm of 'balance' in representing news events where Chinese national interests are at stake (Bennett, 1996). The sources from *Western countries* that usually dominate the Western mainstream media (Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Sigal, 1973) are eclipsed by sources from *other countries* in *CGTN*.

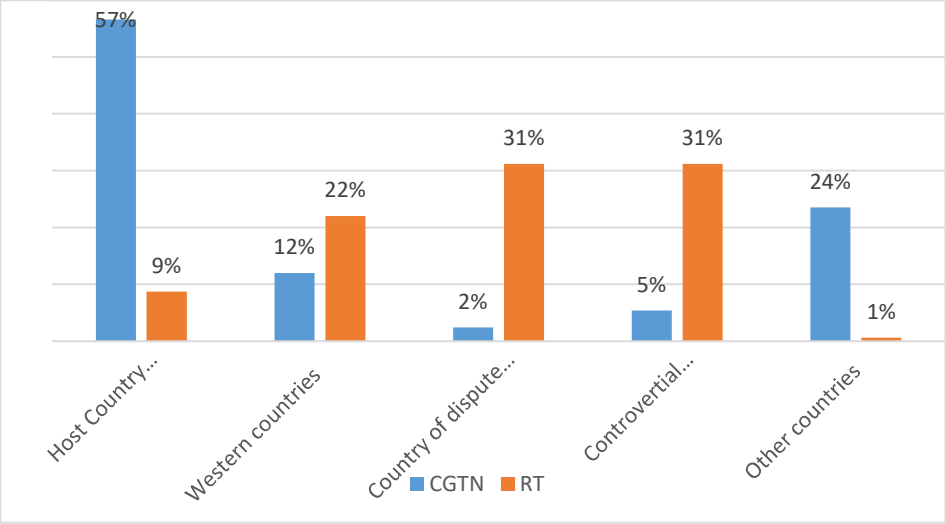

Figure 4-1 Distribution of sources' nationality per channel

Notes: Value = Number of clips (containing source with corresponding nationality) / Total number of clips %

These sources from *other countries* mainly come from developing countries that have a favourable diplomatic relationship with China, ranging from Asia (Cambodia, Sri Lanka, Lebanon), Africa (Rwanda, Tanzania), Latin America (Brazil, Chile), and Oceania (Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea) (see Figure 4-2). This suggests that *CGTN* intentionally increases the proportion of sources from developing countries while it decreases those from developed

countries. This corresponds to China's 'discursive power' strategy, which seeks to advance the influence of the Chinese plan and model under the rhetoric of increasing the representational power of the developing world (Zhao, 2016: 540). *CGTN*'s vocalisation of the developing countries materialises China's counter-hegemonic agenda of "support of a unified voice of the developing world" against the hegemonic media representation from a few developed states (Benabdallah, 2017: 508). In this sense, *CGTN* fulfils its vision to 'see the difference' – different voices, which in the words of Liu Cong, controller of *CGTN*-English, means "not just the voice of China, but also voices of other Asian countries, of African countries and of Latin American nations" (Li and Wu, 2018: 42).

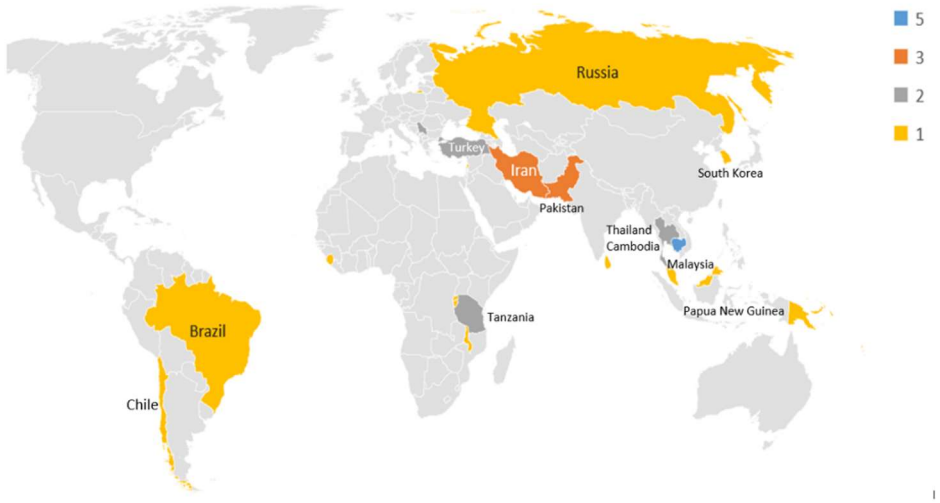

Figure 4-2 Distribution of the nationalities of *CGTN*'s other countries sources

Notes: Value = Number of clips (containing source with corresponding nationality among other countries category)

In terms of social position (Figure 4-3), *CGTN* reproduces the social hierarchy of authority by prioritising political and intellectual authorities (Sigal, 1973). *CGTN* readily sources governmental officials (52%) more than scientific authorities (33%). The top three sources are *none* (38%), *Chinese governmental officials (*27%) and *Chinese experts* (19%) (see Figure 4-3). *None* refers to the scenarios where no source appears in the video clips; in *CGTN*'s context, it usually occurs in short video clips where the anchor or voiceover reproduces official Chinese voices. This can be illustrated by the clip *CGTN* (2016ar) in

which the voiceover announced that the then Chinese Ambassador to the UK Liu Xiaoming published a commentary in a British newspaper *The Daily Telegraph*, and then reiterated Liu's call for the Philippines not to regard China's self-restraint as weakness. A screenshot of the printed newspaper is presented as proof. This confirms Yuezhi Zhao's observation about China's awkward domestic propaganda style, "highly print based and verbally oriented, rather than image driven," represented as "screen after screen of verbal texts from official documents and speeches, with voiceovers… announcing the editorial titles and news headlines of major newspapers" (Zhao 2012: 16). *None* - the clips that contain no sources therefore simply convey official Chinese voices in an implicit manner, with anchors' narration, compared to the more explicit way of delivering Chinese officially views with *Chinese governmental officials* and *Chinese experts*.

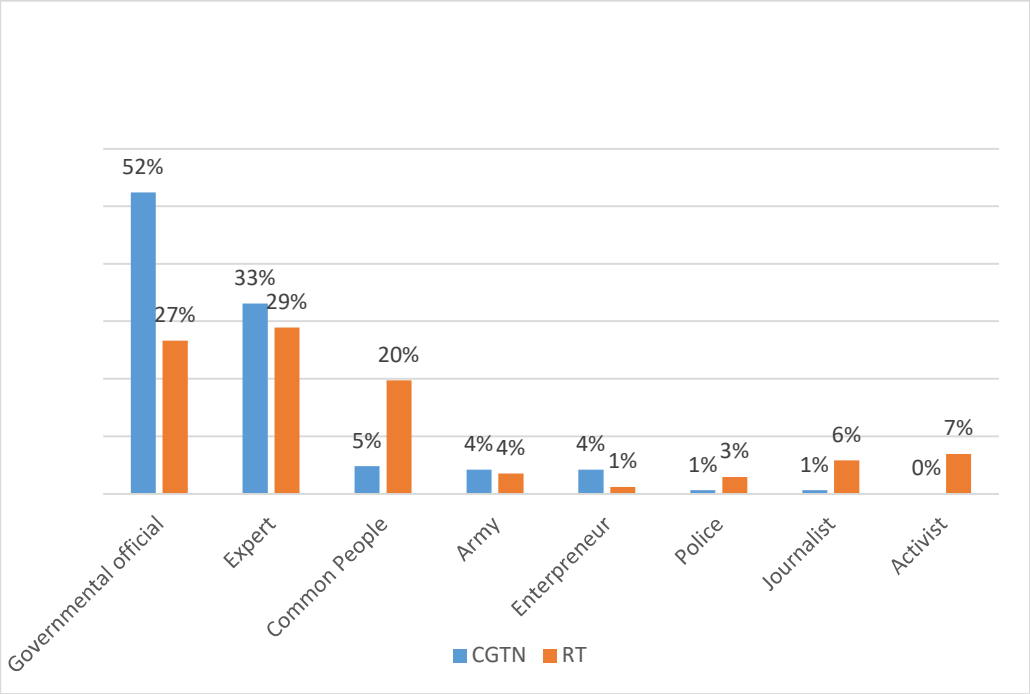

Figure 4-3 Distribution of sources' social positions: *CGTN* and *RT*

Notes: Value = Proportion of clips mentioning a given source (*Activist* combines pro-EU and pro-Russia protestors in Ukraine)

Modes of representation of sources assess the media's degree of preference for formality and authority in representing sources, as well as their capacity to access sources. *CGTN* appears to be more likely than *RT* to convey formality, authority, and preparedness. The percentage

of *pre-recorded interviews* (69%) and *public speeches* (24%) are higher on *CGTN* (see Figure 4-4). As a form of representation that carries most authoritativeness and allows the speakers to set the agenda without the heavy interference of the news media (Hackett, 1985: 257), *public speech* is employed by *CGTN* to enhance the authoritativeness of Chinese administration and military authorities. *Pre-recorded interviews* are mainly applied to *Chinese experts*, *Chinese governmental officials*, *other governmental officials*, and *Western experts*. As a method that allows for preparation from the interviewee side, *pre-recorded interviews* "convey greater rationality than do outdoor on-site ones" (Hackett, 1985: 257), therefore they are usually applied on intellectual elites – mainly Chinese and Western experts in *CGTN*. More importantly, *pre-recorded interviews* allow preparation and ex-post editing. *CGTN* favours precaution over reaction, safety over immediacy. This can be linked to the risk-averse organisational culture of *CGTN*, which will be elaborated on in Section 4.2.1.

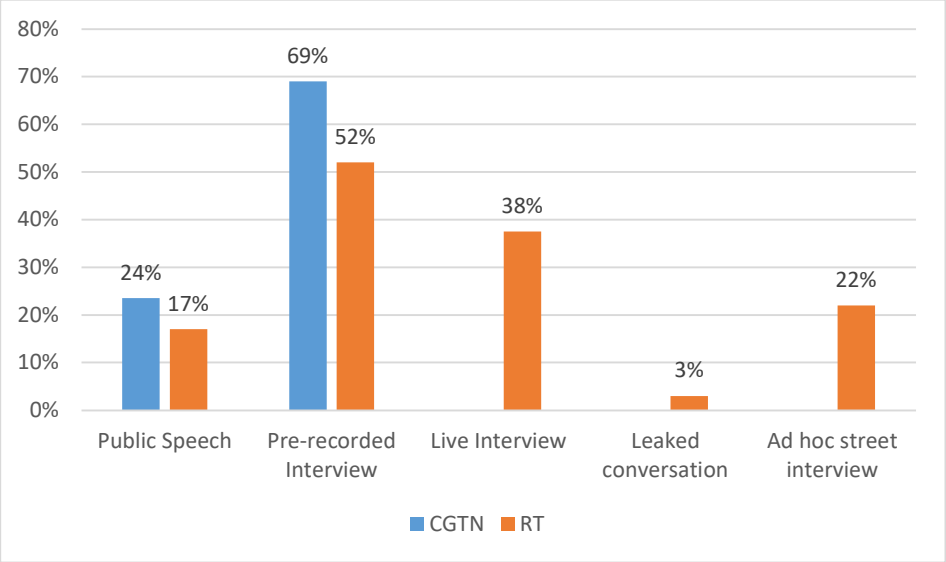

Figure 4-4 Modes of representation: *CGTN* and *RT*

Notes: Value = Number of clips (containing sources represented with corresponding mode) / Total number of clips %

4.1.2 *RT*: vocalising marginalised voices in the West and Ukraine

Compared to *CGTN*, *RT* adopts more sources from *Western countries* (22%) and scientific institutions (*expert*) (29%). Though *RT* does not give voice to developing countries, it is more willing to vocalise actors from the Ukrainian mainland (31%) and the controversial region of

the Crimean Peninsula (31%)[13] (see Figure 4-1). With regard to social position, in contrast to *CGTN*'s clinging to political authorities, *RT* makes ample room for scientific authorities, who are the third most notable sources (29%) on *RT* (see Figure 4-3). A noteworthy phenomenon is *RT*'s readiness to include the voices of *common people*, which sharply eclipses *CGTN*'s inclusion of common people sources. Compared to *CGTN*'s heavy reliance on pre-recorded interviews, *RT* employs a diversified source representation portfolio ranging from *live interviews* and *ad hoc street interviews* to *leaked conversation* (see Figure 4-4). Among these, *live interviews* are used by *RT* to accommodate tit-for-tat debates between pro-EU and anti-EU Western experts and politicians. *Ad hoc street interviews* collect voices from common people, mostly from Ukrainian protestors, and Ukrainian and European citizens. *Leaked conversations* are represented by recordings of the secret diplomacy of Western politicians. They are showcased in *RT* to reveal the dishonesty of Western politicians and their interference in Ukrainian affairs. For instance, the leaked conversation between Nuland and Geoffrey Pyatt proved that it was US politicians who were manoeuvring the leadership of Ukraine's opposition party, as Nuland said,

> I don't think Klitschko should go into the government… I think Yats is the guy who's got the economic experience and the governing experience. What he needs is Klitsch and Tyahnybok on the outside (RT, 2014j).

In the following part, I will illustrate the two most representative sourcing strategies of *RT* with one example. One of *RT*'s sourcing strategies is to employ White experts to boost *RT*'s credibility and familiarity with Western audiences. Among 173 *RT* sources, 28% of appearances are made by experts without an identifiable nationality. They are found to be uniformly ethnically Caucasian and predominantly male (49 out 50 experts). Many of the Caucasian guest speakers have an Eastern European/Russo-American background, such as Serbian American scholar Srdja Trifkovic, and Mark Sleboda, an American-born and raised, Russian sympathiser, based in Moscow. This sourcing strategy allowed *RT* to build up an objective image by reproducing the authority hierarchy of Western media which prioritise middle-aged white male experts to interpret international news (Lee, 1998: 356). Moreover, this strategy revived the Soviet propaganda of 'agents of influence'. Invented by the KGB

[13] To state that Crimea is a controversial region is because Crimea's sovereignty has shifted from a regional independence movement, independence out of referendum and re-integration with Russian Federation.

(Soviet security agency), the use of 'agents of influence' is a method of influencing the opinions of foreign publics or governments by recruiting renowned foreign figures such as senior officials or celebrities (Abrams, 2016). In *RT*'s context, a wide range of experienced correspondents such as Larry King (former *CNN* broadcaster), Ed Schultz (former *MSNBC* broadcaster) and politicians such as Jeremy Corbyn and Nigel Farage have all been invited to "lend *RT* a veneer of legitimacy that allows it to mask its propagandistic intentions and instead portray itself as a serious, reliable newscaster" (Richter, 2017: 26).

Another notable sourcing strategy of *RT* is the inclusion of *Western government officials* for inoculation purposes. *Western government officials* are the second most frequent source within *RT* (17%). Originating from medical science, inoculation in a communication context that refers to building an attitudinal immunity against certain perspectives, by exposing the audience to weakened arguments, accompanied with pre-emptive refutations, which stimulate voluntary resistance against further attitudinal attacks (McGuire, 1961, 1964). As Borcher (2011) found, *RT*'s anchors tended to pose counter-Russian arguments for the guest speakers to invalidate. The purpose is to cultivate immunity among *RT*'s audience against such contra-Russian arguments as they are prepared with confusing arguments against the former. This thesis stretches the inoculation thesis further by emphasising the significance of *Western official sources* in developing contra-Russian perspectives. The presence of anti-Russian Western governmental officials creates an impression of a pro-forma balance for the channel. By using the Western experts to debate against the Western official arguments, *RT* attempts to embed the standpoint in the seemingly internal discussion of Western society. The finding about *RT*'s reliance on Caucasian experts and Western politicians partly explains the success of *RT* in the Western market compared to its Chinese counterpart (The Moscow Times, 2012; Grove, 2020). Studies have found that nationality and geographical/cultural proximity play important roles in shaping the persuasive effect of international propaganda (Min and Luqiu, 2020). In their research, Min and Luqiu (2020) found that Korean audiences tend to grant more credibility to Chinese propaganda than American. Therefore, Russia's racial, cultural proximity with the West is likely to boost *RT*'s viewership in the Western market.

For instance, in clip *RT* (2013m) the Bulgarian MEP Marusya Lyubcheva championed the prosperous prospect of Ukraine collaborating with the EU. Here the Bulgarian MEP represents both the legislative body of the European Union and a political elite of a former

Soviet state defending the EU expansion projects. She was used as a proxy to enact the pro-EU argument and indicate the inclusivity of *RT* as a news channel. Following Marusya's statement, Srdja Trifkovic, the Serbian-American scholar, jumped in and teased Bulgaria for losing its competitiveness in the agricultural industry with a deepening reliance on the EU economy.[14] This argument aimed to dissuade the national industrialists of Ukraine from joining the EU's Eastern partnership programme. To add to Trifkovic's sarcasm, Robert Oulds from the Eurosceptic think-tank, Bruges Group, intervened and ridiculed Bulgaria by stating that its success was because it was "within the pay wall of the European Union" (*RT*, 2013m), which suggested that it required the rich countries' input and trans-regional redistribution of resources to accommodate Ukraine's potential joining of the EU. This argument spoke to the Eurosceptic audience within the EU and the UK, and warned them of the economic damage that the integration of Eastern partners would spell for the European economy. By mobilising conservative oppositionists within the EU, *RT* attempts to assist Russia's foreign agenda by exploiting the internal divisions of Western society and framing the geopolitical competition between Russia and the EU as an internal interest distribution dilemma within the EU. Thus, the anti-establishment Western experts are employed as 'agents of influence', with or without their collusion, to embed the Russian foreign policy line into an internal debate within Western society. Therefore, a heavy reliance on Western experts and Western governmental officials does not distract *RT* from its public diplomacy mission but serves to fulfil its disruptive discursive strategy to "sow doubt, confusion, and mistrust in the public mind" (Richter, 2017: 7).

4.2 Framing strategies of Chinese and Russian international broadcasters

If the examination of sources reveals the hierarchy of voices established by *CGTN* and *RT*, then the investigation of framing strategies reveals the schemas upon which media institutions project discourses and narratives. Media frames in this context were researched

[14] Srdja Trifkovic's said: "I'm amazed that a Bulgarian politician can talk in glowing terms about the European Union when Bulgaria is now a basket case, its importing tomatoes from Turkey for goodness sake, and Bulgaria used to supply all of Eastern and Central Europe with vegetables only 20 years ago."

with a dual purpose. Firstly, the preference for either a *peace* or *conflict* frame reflected the unique communication style of the media organisations involved. Following Galtung's (1986) peace/war journalism dichotomy, journalism plays a constitutive role in constructing political conflicts. Peace journalism that vocalises the traumatised and promotes mutual trust and communication is expected to enhance the prospect of peace (McGoldrick and Lynch, 2000). In contrast, war (conflict) journalism that dramatises violence and casualties and emphasises zero-sum competition reinforces the division and exacerbates confrontations (Lee, 2010). The comparison between *CGTN*'s and *RT*'s framing preferences manifest their different communication styles in the mediation of international conflicts.

Based on a close examination of the media frames of news clips, *CGTN* appears to adopt both *peace* and c*onflict* frames, yet the former appears to be more visible than the latter (see Figure 4-5). *CGTN* mainly framed the regional affairs with a peaceful schema, which, though, recognised the inevitability of conflict, admitted the attainability of peace through the endeavours of the stakeholders to negotiate and coordinate. *RT* in comparison demonstrated a more explicit favouring of the *conflict* frame compared to *peace* frame (see Figure 4-5). This suggests that *RT* tends to adopt a conflictual lens in the mediation of near-Russia geopolitical conflict.

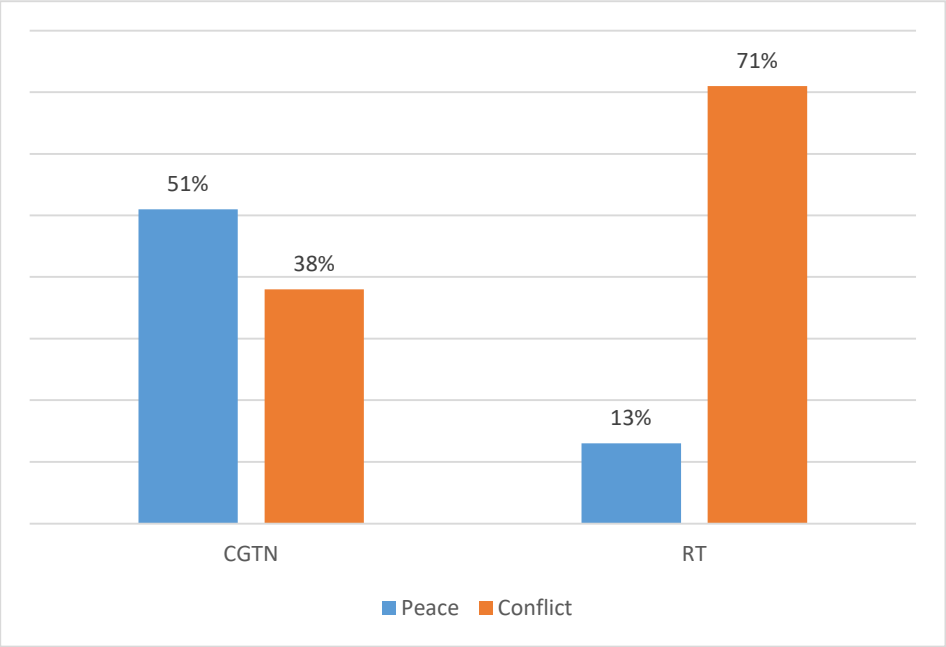

Figure 4-5 Peace and conflict frames in *CGTN* and *RT*

4.2.1 *CGTN's* peaceful framing of the South China Sea arbitration

CGTN's *peace* frame firstly emphasised that China's official position was to be committed to "safeguarding the regional peace and stability" (e.g. CGTN, 2016e, 2016k, 2016am, 2016an). Practically, a peaceful regional order provided a stable environment for China to make steady progress in its modernisation and development. Externally, the image of a peace-loving power was projected to de-escalate the hostility and the military coalition against China in the Southeast Asian region. Internally, the peaceful discourse served to generate domestic support for the growing military investment in the region as 'active defence', employed to protect territorial integrity and national dignity.

Secondly, the *peace* frame emphasised that the disputes between the Philippines and China should be resolved through 'negotiation' (with the term 'negotiation' appearing in 37 out of 90 clips with a *peace* frame). This confidence and a belief in the possibility of resolving the issue through 'consultation and negotiation' rather than military threats seemed to indicate China's reluctance to use force, at least discursively. As Feng (2007: 25) summarised, "under security, threats, diplomatic means and negotiations are preferred and proposed as the first preference" for China, and even if "force is employed under the condition that all other

means turn out to be unsuccessful, the Chinese will still pursue opportunities to go back to the negotiation table for a peaceful settlement." The constant emphasis on the need to resolve China-Philippines conflict through 'peaceful talks' (CGTN, 2016b, 2016c), 'dialogue and negotiations' (CGTN, 2016m), 'consultation and negotiation' (CGTN, 2016az, 2016ay, 2016au) illustrated China's preference for resorting to diplomatic measures over the use of force in solving the South China Sea deadlock.

CGTN's preference for a *peace* frame was most significantly presented in areas of potential military conflict. In other words, even concerning military exchanges between China and its biggest geopolitical competitor - the US, *CGTN* found a way to frame them in a peaceful manner. For instance, during the period when a Sino-US conflict was a possibility in the aftermath of the South China Sea arbitration, *CGTN* carefully captured an amicable scene where the US army was greeted by a welcoming Chinese child in order to present harmonious prospects in the Sino-US relationship. This was illustrated by clip *CGTN* (2016bf), where a US military visit was covered and visually represented as an example of peaceful cooperation. Firstly, the voiceover suggested that the US army harboured a cautious yet open attitude towards forming a new balance between China and US after the divisive arbitration. As the voiceover narrates:

> A US navy guided missile destroyer has arrived in the northern Chinese port of Qingdao. This is the first visit by an American warship to China after Beijing refused to accept an arbitration ruling on the South China Sea dispute (CGTN, 2016bf).

This passage set the scene for a story to unfold, where the US military force did not seem to be pressuring China into accepting the arbitration. Instead *CGTN* stressed that the US forces attempted to restore the relationship with their Chinese counterparts after the issues caused by the arbitration (see Figure 4-6). The voiceover relayed the commander's words:

> Fleet Commander Justin Hart spoke briefly to the media and said the visit was aimed at building relationships with his counterparts from the Chinese Navy (CGTN, 2016bf).

The US's naval visit was portrayed as a symbol that the US was seeking a balanced position in the dispute between China and the Philippines, in case becoming too close to the Philippines dragged the US into troubled waters.

Figure 4-6 *CGTN*'s footage of American Army at Qingdao

Notes: In the photo the US commander squats down to be greeted by a Chinese child by giving dap, which symbolises equal relations between the US and China, but also has connotations of peace. Source: clip *CGTN* (2016bf).

CGTN's peaceful framing of the South China Sea dispute corresponded to the official discourse enacted by the Chinese government. One day after the Arbitration's result was released, on July 13th 2016, the Chinese foreign ministry issued a White Paper to pronounce China's insistence on settling the dispute through 'negotiation and consultation' (Chinese Foreign Ministry, 2016). The discourse reinforced the master narrative of 'peaceful China' which was premised on China as a "nonhegemonic, non-revisionist and developing country" that provided public goods and pushes forward joint development (Weissmann, 2019). The terms such as 'consultation' and 'negotiation' also served as cues to signal China's commitment to the ASEAN way, that is, "decision-making based on consultation, consensus and informality" (Kerr, 2021:225). This way de facto transformed multilateral consensus-building into the bilateral negotiation approach preferred by China. Peaceful framings also corresponded to Scobell's (2003) and Šimalčík's (2020) observation that Chinese elites tend to project a non-bellicose self-image drawing on a Confucianist cultural influence to legitimise pro-active actions when it comes to border disputes.

The finding of peaceful frames also confirmed the trans-platform consistency of framing styles among different Chinese state-funded media platforms. *CGTN*'s preference for the *peace* frame resonated with Chinese-national, English-language press- *China Daily*'s 'pro-peace' feature, which portrays China as a constructive force that seeks a peaceful solution to

the dispute (Guo, Mays and Wang, 2017: 12). It also confirmed the influence of *Xinhua* (the most authoritative news agency providing officially sanctioned news pieces to media) on *CGTN.* As Wijaya (2018) found, 66.7% of *Xinhua*'s news pieces concerning the South China Sea featured a cooperative frame that delivered China's vows to protect regional peace and counter US accusations about its obstruction to the freedom of navigation. Overall, *CGTN*'s coverage of the South China Sea arbitration replicates *Xinhua* News agency's reliance on the pro-peace/pro-cooperation discourses. It emphasises the necessity of resolving the regional disputes via negotiation and peaceful dialogue and the prospect of avoiding military conflicts between US and China, thus neutralising the international criticisms on China's assertiveness in the South China Sea (Thayer, 2011; Turcsányi, 2018).

4.2.2 *RT*'s conflictual framing of the Ukraine crisis

Compared to the *peace* frames that dominated *CGTN*, *RT* leant towards *conflict* frames in the mediation of the Ukraine Conflict. According to Lee and Maslog (2005), the key features of conflict-oriented journalism were dichotomous representations of opposing sides, focusing on the clashes on the battlefield, and highlighting the visual effects of war (casualties and damage to property). The main components of the *conflict* frame within *RT* were confrontations between the police and protestors, and the visualisation of casualties on the police side.

First, most of *RT's conflict* frames were substantiated with physical contradictions between police and protestors, with the latter portrayed as imposers of violence. A frequent composition of photos revealing police-protestor conflicts is presented in Figure 4-7, where the horizontal composition divides the protestors and police into an equal dichotomy between left and right (RT, 2013i). The protestors on the left have been portrayed as initiating violence and damage on the police who are squeezed into the right corner, adopting defensive postures. This visual composition, together with the contrast in body language, constructed the protestors as a security threat to the social order and national stability of Ukrainian society since the police were the safeguards for order and stability (RT, 2013i). In this context, the fire is displayed as a weapon that protestors used against the police, with the red colour not only denoting the actual colour of the fire but connoting the danger and threats posed by the protestors to the police, which dramatised the conflict between the police and protestors.

Figure 4-7 *RT*'s footage of the burning excavator pushed by protestors towards the police

Source: clip *RT* (2013i)

Another violent scene portrayed the conflict between protestors and police in an asymmetric way, where the protestors enjoyed a numerical advantage. As shown in Figure 4-8, *RT* showcases footage in which two police officers were being beaten by a group of club-wielding protestors. This was accompanied by a voiceover:

> Well these are pictures of the aftermath of the battle between activists and police as people gather or mass in central Kiev, the Interior Ministry warns that the opposition is now arming protesters with clubs… While dozens of policemen remain hospitalised in Kiev with head injuries fractures and poisoning by unknown substances (RT, 2014t).

Figure 4-8 *RT*'s footage of violent Ukrainian protestors

Source: clip *RT* (2014u)

This footage visualised the anchor's narrative, demonstrating the militarisation of the protestors and the use of force against the police. This contributed to establishing the causal relationship between the violent protestors and the hospitalised police. It is noteworthy that the background to the violence was the Valeriy Lobanovskyi Dynamo Stadium, a landmark that connects Euromaidan Square and the Presidential Palace. The presentation of a violent confrontation at this location implied a security threat to Yanukovych, which served to prove the correspondent's reference to Yanukovych's concerns:

> Yanukovych moreover has said that he and his compatriots are being threatened with death or receiving death threats, and that's why he's been urged to ask the Russian Federation for assistance for help and to provide security for himself (RT, 2014t).

This mutually reinforced verbal-visual narrative contributed to constructing a *conflict* frame, where the contradiction between the protestors and the police, representing the political authority, was escalating into a political impasse. This *conflict* frame suggested that the social stability and civil order of Ukraine were under threat from violent protestors, and the flight of Yanukovych found its roots in the protestors' offences.

This does not mean that the violence from the police side was completely ignored. In live reportage conveyed by a British reporter, Peter Oliver, *RT* broadcast a physical attack by the

police against protestors during Oliver's real-time reporting. According to his report, the police received the order to cleanse the street of barricades and protestors on 25 January 2014. While the reporter was forced to hide in a hotel to report on protestors fleeing from the violent cleansing of the police, the camera captured one policeman beating a protestor who was already down, curled up on the floor – this was accompanied with the reporters' annotation that: "We're seeing a policeman now hitting somebody who's on the floor right there. Oh! Repeatedly beating that person" (RT, 2014i) (see Figure 4-9). This video serves as the only footage that recorded a violent attack by the police on the protestors. However, the existence of the video created authenticity for the channel to cover the type of events that contradicted the preferable storyline advocated by the media. On the other hand, the underplayed violence from the police side positioned the police violence shown in this video as an exceptional case, rather than a reflection of systematic repression of the protestors by the police.

Figure 4-9 *RT*'s footage of the Ukrainian police beating a protestor

Source: clip *RT* (2014i)

Second, what drove *RT* further into conflict-oriented journalism was its exclusive disclosure of police casualties without balanced coverage of that of the protestors. For instance, the anchor announced that "70 policemen were injured, and 20 protesters arrested" after a skirmish without reporting the corresponding information from the protestors' side (RT, 2014a). This partial representation of police casualties exaggerated the violence of protestors and excluded the protestor casualties caused by the police.

Further, *RT* interviewed an injured policeman to reveal the brutality of the protestors, as the interviewed policeman said, "They covered my head and bound my arms and legs with masking tape and taped up my eyes as well" (RT, 2014i). This detailed description of the attack allowed the police to give testimony about the conflict in front of the audience, which meant that their perspective and experience would shape the audience's understanding of the conflict, making the audience more likely to empathise with the police as victims.

This biased exposure of casualties was further intensified with a visual representation of police casualties. Taking two photos from clip *RT* (2014i) as examples (Figure 4-10 and Figure 4-11), they showcased the process and outcomes of a physical attack against the police. In the photos, the faces or bodies of policemen have been positioned in the centre of the photo, which contrasts with the general rule of photography. Here the general photojournalistic 'rule of thirds'[15] is not obeyed to create a more powerful visual expression. The photographer positioned the face of the wounded policeman at the very centre of the photo to concentrate people's attention on it, showing the wounds, pain, and an expression of depression.[16] According to visual studies, the human face is the object that is most likely to arouse affective reactions such as compassion (Smith and Rossit, 2018). By allowing the audience to directly gaze at the face of the wounded policeman, *RT* was trying to mobilise the politics of compassion to construct a shared 'we' identity between the police and the audience and therefore invited the audience to re-evaluate the Ukraine crisis without hard persuasion. Thus, by selectively presenting the process and repercussions of violent attacks by the protestors on the police, *RT* highlighted the physical confrontations between police and protestors and mobilised the audience's emotive reactions to sympathise with the Ukrainian police.

[15] The Rule of Thirds is a composition rule to create aesthetically balanced and appealing photographs. The rule proposes dividing a photograph into a 3×3 grid, which divides the image into nine parts. The rule suggests that the important elements of a photograph should be placed at the intersections of the grids, to give structure to the photographs. See Cavicchio, F., Dachkovsky, S., Leemor, L., Shamay-Tsoory, S., &and Sandler, W. (2018). Compositionality in the language of emotion. PLOS ONE, 13(8), e0201970. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0201970.

[16] Although central composition tends to be avoided for aesthetic reasons, it holds exceptional power to express human emotions when concentrated on a human face. See Amirshahi, S. A., Hayn-Leichsenring, G. U., Denzler, J., and Redies, C. (2014). Evaluating the rule of thirds in photographs and paintings. Art and Perception, 2(1–2), 163–182.

Figure 4-10 *RT*'s footage of the injured Ukrainian policeman

Source: clip *RT* (2014i)

Figure 4-11 *RT*'s footage of the Ukrainian policeman on fire

Source: clip *RT* (2014i)

RT's confrontational communication strategy is rooted in the legacy of Soviet propaganda. Studies found that Soviet propaganda featured a recurrent frame of conflict during the whole Cold War era (Shultz and Godson, 1984; Barghoorn, 2015). Shultz and Godson (1984), found

that Soviet propagandists were influenced by a Leninist dialectical view of history, holding the belief that political interaction and historical evolution were driven by constant power struggles, ranging from diplomacy as institutionalised conflict to war as a form of violent continuation of political clashes. The conflict frame used to be first and foremost employed to structure the Cold War confrontation between the capitalist and socialist blocs and that between colonial and imperialist groups (Barghoorn, 2015: 41). Even during the *détente* period, the conflict frame enjoyed a high visibility in Russia's propaganda to legitimise Russia's involvement in international rule making (Adam, 1980). Therefore, despite the efforts to portray the USSR as a pursuer and defender of peace, 'conflict' constituted the main mediated frame for Russian propaganda during the Cold War era. In the contemporary international information landscape, the Soviet propaganda style was reactivated to construct an international crisis that legitimised Russia's military intervention.

RT's framing of the Ukraine crisis, especially in the Euromaidan protest stage, was convincingly conflict oriented. It fell into the category of war journalism as it not only sensationalised the visual effects of war but exaggerated division and dichotomised police and protestors (Lee and Maslog, 2005:316). *RT*'s tendency to construct an unresolvable confrontation between police and protestors corresponds to Gaufman's (2015) finding that the Ukraine crisis was represented as a clash between the forces of evil: the Western-sponsored Ukrainian nationalists, and the forces of good: the repressed Russian ethnic and speakers in Ukraine. *RT*'s prioritised representation of casualties on the police side confirmed Miazhevich's (2014) study, which also emphasised *RT*'s highlighting of casualties among the police, while downplaying the policy brutality. The only exceptional finding is that *RT* also recorded violence conducted by the police on protestors to balance the overall coverage. *RT*'s framing strategies of the Ukraine crisis leaned towards the destructive frame compared to the constructive frames favoured by *CGTN*. Confirming Lichtenstein and colleagues' (2018) findings, *RT*'s framing of the Ukraine crisis used the confrontation frames to shift the blame to pro-Western protestors and thus legitimised Russia's intervention in the Ukraine crisis.

4.3 Organisational cultures of Chinese and Russia's international broadcasters

As discussed above, *CGTN* and *RT* demonstrate divergent source preferences. Considering that the two organisations are driven by a similar public diplomacy agenda of communicating foreign policies to overseas public and improving their relative national images (Rawnsley, 2015; Barr, 2012; Miazhevich, 2018), the divergent sourcing strategies seem puzzling. In this section, I have attempted to develop a cultural explanation of the two media's communication styles, by tracing the sourcing strategies to the media relationships, organisational structures and professional practices of each media organisation.

4.3.1 *CGTN's* organisational culture: a bureaucratic 'flagship'

CGTN is a qualified flagship international broadcaster of China, as it receives intensive investment from the Chinese government. However, the bureaucratic structure it is embedded in is holding this flagship back from sailing into international waters. In this section I elaborate on how *CGTN*'s organisational culture accounts for *CGTN*'s reliance on Chinese official sources and formalised representation modes. The party-state propaganda regime that *CGTN* is embedded in incentivises *CGTN* to compete for political credit by reproducing official statements. The penetration of a Soviet-style cadre system into the *CGTN* institution has instilled a bureaucratic culture into *CGTN*, which affects its news production procedures. The institutionalised censorship installed in the organisation for ideological control thus ties the media to the official line at the expense of audience reception.

First, *CGTN*'s sourcing strategy reproduces the domestic propaganda style because it is institutionally embedded in China's propaganda regime. As the external branch of *CCTV* (China Central Television), *CGTN* is part of China Media Group, a ministry-level media conglomerate under the direct supervision of the Central Propaganda Department of the CCP (The Communist Party of China) (Kuo, 2018). This means that the *nomenklatura* system[17]

[17] The nomenklatura system is a cadre evaluation system originating from the Soviet Communist Party system. The term 'nomenklatura' means 'nomenclature', a list of positions, arranged in order of seniority, including a description of the duties of each office. Within the Communist party, the nomenklatura system allows the Party committees to exercise formal authority over senior personnel appointments, removals, and

applies to *CGTN*, subjecting the appointment, removal, and transfer of senior personnel of the media organisation to the Party's leadership in charge of propaganda and ideological management (Burns, 1989; Shambaugh, 2017). The cadre management system thus stimulates the senior managers of state-owned media to demonstrate strict, partisan loyalty to the CCP to secure and promote their cadre within the party and administrative system. In 2016, *CCTV* (*CGTN*'s parent organisation) displayed a greeting to welcome Xi's visit, which said "*CCTV*'s surname is 'The Party'. We are absolutely loyal. Ready for your inspection" (Zhuang, 2016). This aggressive homage, as a professor of communication studies from Renmin University told me, is not even present in the more authoritative central party media, *Xinhua News Agency* and *The People's Daily*. The pressure to vie for political trust and financial investment with other externally-oriented news media such as *Xinhua CNC*, *Global Times* and *The People's Daily* drives *CGTN* to reproduce official statements issued by military and diplomatic authorities of central government to pledge its full allegiance to its CCP patron (Edney, 2014: 141). As Edney (2014: 7) found, a Chinese international influence campaign is subject to the objective of generating domestic cohesion, namely constructing internal political consensus and presenting a unified Chinese voice to the world. This means that the news production of China's international broadcaster is primarily a process of transforming Chinese official statements into the unified voice of China to expand its international influence. For this reason, spokespersons from the Chinese foreign affairs department become convenient and safe sources for *CGTN* to cite, since they are perceived to provide politically validated information and opinion that represents the official line of Chinese government (Edney, 2014: 79).

Second, the pressure to satisfy the senior officials in charge of propaganda work in the CCP and the government propaganda departments is passed to midlevel editors, the gatekeepers of news content, and down to front-line journalists who collect and produce the news items. As Palmer (2018), an American journalist who used to work at the Party newspaper, *Global Times*, observed, "the midlevel party apparatchiks who ultimately control the content are rather driven by the pressure to avoid political errors, which may damage their professional

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transfers two levels down the administrative hierarchy; in the Chinese context, the application of the nomenklatura system extends from administrative institutions to public institutions (事业单位) and state-owned companies. See Burns, J. P. (1989), *The Chinese Communist Party's Nomenklatura System* (1 edition), Routledge.

and political life than by the objective of enlarging the station's audience base." This propensity for risk aversion prevents *CGTN*'s editors from adopting innovative methods of public diplomacy for dialogical exchange (Hooghe, 2005: 103). Precautions against any statements that deviate from the official line drives *CGTN* to opt for pre-recorded interviews that allow for micro-management, preparation, and heavy editing rather than more contingent source representational modes. This can be supported by a producer's complaint in my interview:

> You see the slogan of *CNN* is Go There, but it means that when the correspondent goes there, the information can be packaged in visual materials and delivered back to the studio simultaneously. However, constrained by image security rules, our managers do not allow us to take a handheld appliance to record live video and deliver it back via Skype or other digital technologies, which may speed up our broadcasting (Interviewee C4, 2017).

This suggests that despite ample funding, *CGTN's* producers and correspondents are constrained from adopting the most instant communication technologies in relaying up-to-date information. *CGTN* has a low level of tolerance for broadcasting incidents that may get the managers and editors in charge into trouble. Unlike their *RT* counterparts, *CGTN*'s producers cannot afford to have guest speakers make negative statements about the CCP's leadership or the central government's policies on *CGTN*. In Palmer's (2018) words, "Incidents that *RT* could shrug off, such as political scientist Yascha Mounk slamming Russian President Vladimir Putin live on air, or James Kirchick damning the station as propaganda for a bigoted state, would kill careers at *CGTN*." This risk-averse organisational culture renders *CGTN* to reproduce the official line and prevents the media from adopting dynamic source collection methods towards a diversified source target.

A mediating factor is that the risk-averse propensity holds the organisation back from fully trusting and empowering its foreign staff. Compared to *RT*, *CGTN*'s foreign employees and Chinese staff with overseas educational backgrounds expressed a strong dissatisfaction with the bureaucratic culture of the institution. From a foreign-native integration perspective, *CGTN*'s employment of foreign experts is largely geared towards exploiting their linguistic and communicational expertise rather than trusting their journalistic intuition. As a foreign staff member (Interviewee C8，2017) confirmed, foreigners working in *CGTN* tend to be positioned in the lower hierarchy and are in charge of grammar checking and copy-editing

rather than independent information collection. Although 80% to 90% of staff within the organisation are either foreigners or received education in Western countries (Interviewee C5， 2017), the editing decisions are usually made by senior editors or political editors who tend to have a great deal of experience working in state-owned media outlets. This means that the foreign media staff are instrumental in promoting the language proficiency and representational appeal of the news programme rather than being empowered with journalistic independence, especially regarding politically sensitive news.

Likewise, Chinese junior journalists who have graduated from prestigious Anglo-American journalism schools find that their skills are hardly appreciated. Editors are preoccupied with avoiding politically sensitive issues rather than producing engaging news content. The young foreign-educated Chinese journalists tend to cover China from more critical approaches such as debating the sustainability of the Hukou system[18], or from human interest angles such as debating the culture of dog eating (Interviewee C2, 2017). However, their news proposals are usually disapproved by their editors for fear of incurring international criticisms about China's human rights status. A more practical measure is to de-dramatise the news. For instance, when a journalist tried to cover a primary school's filial piety education – making students cry to reflect upon the greatness of their mothers – the editor deleted the word "brainwashing" and replaced the term "cry very hard" with "weep" (Interviewee C1, 2017). The purpose, as the political editor explained to the Interviewee C1, was to avoid evoking an association between Chinese education with 'brainwashing' or to create negative impressions about Chinese traditional culture. This treatment however, as Interviewee C1 (2017) complained, completely undercut the attractiveness of the news piece and turned the journalistic storytelling into a plain news bulletin. As there is limited financial incentive for journalistic innovation, but guaranteed constraints or even punishment for producing politically inappropriate news content, the foreign-educated journalists are demotivated from activating their journalistic skills in news production. Therefore, it is safe to say that *CGTN*'s

[18] The Hukou system is a household registration system in China that categorises the population into agricultural and non-agricultural residents. It is currently under reform as it creates a discriminatory distribution of economic, education and medical resources between urban and rural citizens in China. See more: Wing Chan, K. and Buckingham, W. (2008) 'Is China Abolishing the Hukou System?', The China Quarterly, 195, pp.582–606. doi: 10.1017/S0305741008000787; Huang, Y., Guo, F. and Tang, Y. (2010) 'Hukou status and social exclusion of rural–urban migrants in transitional China', Journal of Asian Public Policy, 3(2), pp.172–185. doi: 10.1080/17516234.2010.501160.

adhesion to Chinese official sources derives from the institutional embeddedness of *CGTN* in Chinese propaganda system (Shambaugh, 2017), and more importantly, from the risk-averse mentality cultivated by the competitive cadre management system, that prioritises political loyalties over performance.

Third, *CGTN* instils institutionalised censorship to channel political control down to frontline operations, which increases the visibility of Chinese officials and officially sanctioned expert sources. Gatekeeping exists in every media agency. According to Shoemaker and Vos (2009: 38), gatekeeping refers to the action of including or excluding information according to certain schema of newsworthiness and editorial principles; usually the editors play the gatekeeping role in Western journalistic agencies. In Anglo-American journalistic practices, the most important criteria for news selection are: impact, timeliness, prominence, proximity, bizarreness, conflict, and currency (Cleary et al., 2015: 909). However, in *CGTN*, a unique gatekeeping mechanism is installed in the organisation through the political censorship editor. In *CGTN*'s context, political censorship is not mainly conducted by accepting political orders from supervisory agencies but is implemented by adding political editors between copy editors and general editors. As a copy-editor explained, once a journalist drafts a news report out of self-interest or under the designation of an editor, the draft will go through copy-editing, which is usually undertaken by an English native speaker (Interviewee C8, 2017). Before the news is sent for the editor-in-chief's approval, the political editor will review the news draft, as the Interviewee (C8, 2017) stressed to "make sure that every story reflects a Chinese perspective and does not touch upon political sensitivity."

Firstly, this censorship mechanism drives a focus on Chinese official voices. As one Southeast Asian copy-editor observed, *CGTN* predominantly includes China's claims while ignoring the Philippines' voices, which is unlikely to reduce the distrust of the channel in the Southeast Asian market (Interviewee C8, 2017). In fact, the only Filipino sources in the corpus of clips provide pro-China statements. For instance, the former Filipino diplomat Alberto Encomienda was invited to testify that, "among the five claimant countries, not only China… the Philippines was the first state to build an airfield" (CGTN, 2016x). This statement was steered to implicitly normalise China's construction of an artificial island in the South China Sea.

Second, censorship steers the media news production away from politically sensitive issues. As John Jirik, a former foreign expert of *CCTV* (precursor of *CGTN*) said, 'political

sensitivity' is "a vague catch-all category that editors regularly evoked but rarely explained." But in general, 'political sensitivity' increases when the state or the party interests are at stake (Jirik, 2016: 3540). This unique self-censorship approach is found to be prevalent in a post-communist media system, which as Schimpfossl and Yablokov (2014) conceptualise is a mechanism for journalists to produce journalism in line with the authorities' wishes, without exercising coercive censorship. The present research confirms Jirik's finding by enriching the guiding principles on territorial disputes. In the reportage of territorial disputes, a few names of foreign countries and regions are calibrated to align with the Chinese official language usage.

The naming of geopolitically controversial places is essential to constructing the geopolitical imaginary, as different naming prioritises certain sovereign belongings, territorial claims, and rules of boundary setting over others. For instance, the interviewee C8 mentioned that the Falklands War was required to be replaced by the Malvinas War due to China's official support for Argentina (Interviewee C8, 2017), as a developing country in conflict with a developed one. This, however, creates self-contradiction in China's territorial claims because China denies the proximity principle (proposed by Argentina) as employed by regional neighbours and instead insists on historical rights over territorial claims. Another example is *CGTN*'s naming of the Dok Lam crisis as the Dong Lang crisis, because Dong Lang is the name expressed in Mandarin and Dok Lam is its Tibetan name. To use the term Dok Lam suggests a subtle acquiescence to Tibet's separation, which clashes with China's territorial integrity – a core national interest. Therefore, the naming of the Dong Lang crisis contributes to asserting China's sovereignty over the Tibetan region and undercuts the legitimacy of the Tibetan separatist discourse (Interviewee C4, 2017). In regard to the South China Sea coverage, *CGTN* is found to stick to the line of 'political sensitivity' of island naming. The controversial islands such as the Paracel Islands, Spratly Islands and Mischief Reef are called the Xisha Islands, Nansha islands and Meiji Island under official Chinese guidance. Such naming reproduces and reinforces Chinese political discourse in the deliberation, negotiation and delineation of territorial boundaries.

To conclude, in support of Varrall's (2020) study, I found that low morale and a lack of trust among Chinese journalists and between Chinese and foreign journalists is compromising cooperation, enthusiasm and creativity. And although institutionalised political censorship allows *CGTN* more leeway with politically sensitive issues than other domestic media, it is

also preventing the organisation from truly engaging with overseas audiences in a de-politicised manner (Edney, 2014: 97).

4.3.2 *RT*'s organisational culture: a hybrid 'destroyer'

RT can flexibly avoid repeating Russian official statements and widely engages with European experts marginalised by the mainstream Western media because of its unique organisational culture, which has a loose state-media relationship, flat organisational structure, tolerant working environment and strict recruitment selection.

First, *RT* is more loosely controlled by its national, Russian government than *CGTN*, which allows it to develop critical international news deviating from reproducing the Russian perspective. Institutionally, *RT* is not directly affiliated to the Russian government. Though incubated by the state-funded news agency RIA-Novosti, *RT* insists that it is an autonomous non-profit organisation that enjoys "complete legal, editorial, and operational independence" (Von Twickel, 2010). Although receiving public funding from the state Duma, *RT* is not primed to reproduce the official Kremlin line. As Putin (2013) stated, *RT*'s priority is to "try to break the Anglo-Saxon monopoly on the global information streams" rather than becoming "any kind of apologist for the Russian political line, whether domestic or foreign."

Although vowing to bring "perspective on the world from Russia" in its initial stages, 2005-2008 (Ioffe, 2010), *RT* has shifted its focus to "presenting an alternative voice on the international news media landscape to complete the picture of what's going on in the world" (Interviewee R5, 2018). "Not necessarily everything has a Russian perspective on it," as Interviewee R5 (2018) stated, "90% of our news sources have nothing to do with Russia whatsoever". Though the interviewee was making an estimation, his / her information was cross validated by my content analysis, which showed that Russian sources only appeared in 9% of video clips (see Figure 4-1). This means that the loose connection with the government liberates *RT* from constantly showing political allegiance by reproducing official sources and allows it to compete for audience attention by covering news events with global as well as local relevance:

> We are covering whatever is happening all around the world, Asia, United States, Europe and giving a different perspective on what's going on there… Sometimes, we

> just cover things that happen in your backyard, but which are not being covered by your local news media (Interviewee R5, 2018).

To suggest a looser media-government connection between *RT* and the Kremlin is not to suggest that *RT* is free from the political control of the Russian authorities. Instead, I suggest that *RT* enjoys ample institutional leeway to prioritise news production over domestic political consensus building. Compared to *CGTN*, *RT* is endowed with much more flexibility because of the relatively loose, yet trusting, relationship between the state and the media. This power dynamic enables *RT* to focus on implementing its editorial line: 'Question more'. But questioning what? *RT* focuses its reporting resources on revealing the dark side of Western democratic systems and foreign policies, playing into the psych of anti-establishment sentiment within Western society, and anti-Americanism in the Developing World. This institutional structure, in which the media is embedded, generates a reactive, adaptable and adventurous organisational culture that allows *RT* to integrate its Soviet propaganda legacy with adaptive professional journalistic practice.

Second, influenced by the trusting relationship between state and media, the media is consciously distinct from the ossified Soviet propaganda system, but instead experiences a flat organisational structure, an adventurous mental model and an integrative atmosphere.

RT features a compact and flat organisational structure that economises content production and nurtures bottom-up innovation. As *RT*'s correspondent testified, *RT*'s small yet versatile staff make an efficient team, and making "a programme that takes 150 people to work on in *CNN* for instance, only takes 40 people to cover in *RT*" (Interviewee R1, 2018). This is because the correspondents are expected to "do multiple jobs such as live reporting, news editing, videotaping, etc" (Interviewee R1, 2018). This organisational structure shortens the communication process between different bureaucratic levels and occupations such as camera operators, correspondents, and editors. As Interviewee R4 (2018) said, "our line is much shorter. Because we have to do it fast." This commitment to timeliness as a news value also stimulates front-line journalists to reach out to non-official sources onsite and collect ad hoc interviews with modern data streaming devices, without over-worrying about the image quality of visual records.

In addition, what adds synergy to this flat organisational structure is the risk-taking mentality, which is secured by a relatively democratic decision-making procedure. As *RT*'s manager

explained, new ideas usually come from the implementation level, where the frontline news professionals propose a new idea and the line editor gives permission after an evaluation (Interviewee R5, 2018). The whole team would provide support for the materialisation of novel ideas and the proposers will not be penalised if the idea failed to work. The attitude is, as Interviewee R5 said, "if somebody has a great idea, let's try the great idea, if it doesn't work, it doesn't work" (Interviewee R5, 2018). This empowering working environment provides a tolerant atmosphere for experimentation and innovation regarding media convergence and creative storytelling. This is verified by a correspondent, who testified that *RT* is ready to offer opportunities to young, inexperienced journalists who may not receive them in other established agencies:

> For a lot of guys like senior reporters and those at *CNN* or *BBC*, it's like 15 to 20 years of grinding, grinding, and grinding until they get there… One of our colleagues has just been nominated for an Emmy Award and he's only been in journalism for six years (Interviewee R2, 2018).

As displayed above, the trusting working atmosphere liberates young professionals from the fear of making mistakes and allows them to mobilise their talents and sharpen their expertise and skills through learning by doing. The trusting relationship within the organisation is thus transferred into a sense of empowerment for the young professionals to voluntarily devote time to producing creative journalistic pieces that correspond to the organisational objective of countering the Western media hegemony. In other words, *RT*'s working atmosphere tolerates trial and error and allows foreign journalists to deeply engage with news production, which might be an important reason for *RT*'s more aggressive and spontaneous communication style compared to *CGTN*'s dogmatic commitment to the official Chinese line.

Moreover, the level of integration between foreign and native staff within *RT* also appears to be higher than that of *CGTN*. As Interviewee R2 (2018) confirmed, only about five staff of the 200-person team in *RT* America are Russian. Even the leader of *RT* America is an American citizen with Russian ethnicity, who obtained American citizenship after about a decade of work experience in the US (Interviewee R2, 2018). The high proportion of American nationals indicates *RT*'s localisation strategy, which enables reporters to cover American domestic news in a manner that fits the viewing habits of the local American audience.

How has *RT* attracted these large numbers of Western journalists? Financial incentives and career development opportunities seem to be pertinent here. As Elswah and Howard (2020) found, financial incentives play a key role as they "fostered loyalty and discouraged them from leaving the channel," and my fieldwork confirmed this finding. Interviewee R1 (2018) decided to work for *RT* because they offered job security, "they offered me a one-year contract, which at the time was a long, long term contract, whereas at the *BBC*, I was only offered a contract from month to month." Exploiting the saturation of the Western journalist job market, *RT* attracts young Western media professionals with job security, generous pay and respect for their professional skills and judgement. This accommodating inclusion of Western journalists enables *RT's* journalists to better understand the psyche of Western audiences and allows them to activate their social networks to access Western sources with political and intellectual authority.

Third, *RT* conducts content management by recruiting disappointed Western journalists and Russian sympathisers and respects but also exploits their agency in counterhegemonic news production. Unlike *CGTN*, *RT's* interviewees denied the existence of institutionalised censorship and appreciated the editorial freedom they enjoyed within the organisation. A former *BBC* correspondent provided a summary of his experience at *RT*:

> In all the years that I have been working there… [censorship] is not happening in the slightest way… here at *RT*, I am allowed an amount of freedom that I would not be allowed at the *BBC* (Interviewee R1, 2018).

The relatively free news production atmosphere does not mean a lack of content control. Different from *CGTN*'s institutionalised political censorship, *RT* resorts to a recruitment filtering system to implement the editorial line: relativism (denial of truth and objectivity), anti-Westernism and conspiracism (Richter, 2017: 10-13). *RT* tends to shy away from making reporters enforce *RT*'s editorial line, instead targeting appropriate Western journalists based on their identification with the anti-establishment, as Interviewee R4 (2018) said:

> Many foreign reporters that work for us share our viewpoint; they were also brought up in the West and they kept hearing these narratives brought to them by the [Western] mainstream media.

The criteria for those foreign reporters' recruitment, based on my interviews are: (1) questioning the neutrality, balance, and objectivity of the Western mainstream media; and

(2) sympathising with the negative representation of Russia by Western media. The disappointment with the Western media can be summarised by Interviewee R1 (2018), who expressed their disappointment at Western media's selective coverage of the Ukraine crisis: "I lost a lot of faith in a lot of people in Ukraine because of what I saw from different channels." That dissatisfaction with Western media culminates in the 'Russophobia' of Western media. The misrepresented Russian image by Western media provides a driving force for *RT*'s operation:

> Our work is driven by a frustration. Frustration with the fact that you open your newspaper, you open your computer, you look at Twitter and it's all the same – Russian spies, Russian aggression, Russian aggression in Ukraine. Have you seen Russian troops there? No (Interviewee R4, 2018).

RT's reporters believe that the negative coverage of Russia derives from the Cold War lens adopted by Western reporters. As Interviewee R1 asserted, the Western media unfairly depict Russia as "a threatening other" because the "old white men" who write Western journalism bring their Russophobia characterised by the Cold War period to current reportage (Interviewee R1, 2018). This finding suggests that cultivating a collective resistance against an imagined other – Western media – is an essential measure for *RT* to build organisational identity. It also confirms Elswah and Howard's (2020) research, whereby building an institutional consensus about the Russophobia of Western media is essential for *RT* to cultivate solidarity and loyalty within the news team.

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter was intended to provide a nuanced, contextualised and historicised comparison of Chinese and Russian international broadcasters. It illustrated the divergent communication styles between *CGTN* and *RT* that are precipitated in their sourcing and framing strategies. In particular, *CGTN* is more likely to present official sources from hosting countries, informants of developing countries with modes of representation that feature formality, authority, and preparedness. *RT,* in comparison, demonstrates a preference for including White experts who adopt an anti-establishment or Russian sympathising attitude and present them in scenarios that highlight immediacy and flexibility. Besides, compared to *CGTN*'s favouring of *peace* frames that stress negotiation and peaceful mitigation of the regional

conflict, *RT* is prone to adopt *conflict* frames that emphasise contradictions, physical damage and the inevitability of clashes. Rejecting the simplistic view of *CGTN* and *RT* as order-taking propaganda machines, I have treated these news organisations as sites of power contention that accommodate the tension between the political will of their sponsoring regimes and the expectations of overseas audiences; the strain between domestic journalistic culture versus Western professional journalism. The different institutional adaptations to power dynamics generate different communication styles of the two media.

CGTN's struggle to satisfy its political supervisors and overseas audience expectations has led to a counterproductive reception, especially in Western societies (Lu, 2012). On the macro level, the Chinese propaganda system strives to form a consistent discourse to unify domestic voices and consolidate regime security, which restrains externally-oriented media from presenting diverse Chinese perspectives or targeting overseas audiences in a meaningful way (Edney, 2014: 95). On the micro level, the incentive mechanism is designed to dissuade news producers from discussing sensitive issues such as human rights, democracy and ethnic problems that may engage international audiences. On the organisational level, the hierarchical structure and lack of trust towards, and among, journalists to a large extent prevents the organisation from adopting professional journalistic norms such as balance, impartiality and neutrality in their news coverage (Varrall, 2020). This in turn undermines its credibility among foreign audiences.

In contrast, *RT* has managed to deviate from being a megaphone for the Kremlin, giving more airtime to marginal experts as well as Ukrainian citizens. This implies that the media has delicately aligned itself with the disruptive dimension of Russia's foreign policy line of undermining Western moral, cultural and political supremacy to justify Russia's inheritance of European civilisation and its ensuing great power status (Yablokov, 2015; Neumann, 2016). This institutional flexibility to accommodate marginalised opinion-holders in Western societies, even anti-Russian ones, not only leads to a wide viewership in Western societies (Orttung and Nelson, 2019) but is proven to be effective in fanning US isolationism among American audiences (Carter and Carter, 2021). This tolerant, integrated working environment and democratic organisational structure stimulates the organisational staff to reveal the disfunction and corruption of Western political institutions, adroitly playing into the

paradigm of watchdog journalism[19] and anti-establishment populism (Jagers and Walgrave, 2007).

The communication style analysis identified the divergences between *CGTN* and *RT*. This, however, should not prevent the thesis from identifying the similar discursive strategies shared by Chinese and Russian international broadcasters to construct alternative imaginations. The next chapter will unpack the strategic narratives projected by China's international broadcaster, *CGTN*, in the mediation of the South China Sea arbitration.

[19] Watchdog journalism is a view that perceives news media as an independent monitor of state power that holds the public sector accountable for civil society (Norris *et al.*, 2014), though as a foreign news media organisation that may involve interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states.

5 Unpacking *CGTN*'s strategic narratives

In this chapter, I will unpack the discourses and narratives employed by *CGTN* to cover the South China Sea arbitration (the Philippines vs China), in regard to identity building, normativity, and territoriality. Corresponding to China's general national image building strategy, *CGTN* strives to depict China as a responsible and peaceful rising power and to build the legitimacy of the country's leadership in terms of providing international support and solutions. The West is mainly represented as a hypocritical US, which abuses the international legal system through the selective application of international laws, disrupting the regional order. The Philippines, as a competing claimant, is portrayed as a weak and inferior player, which serves the US's containment of China at the expense of the Philippines' national interests. On the normative dimension, *CGTN* proposes advancing a Sinocentric normative order to replace the Western-dominated international legal system for regional conflict resolution. Finally, territoriality is intensively contested in *CGTN*'s mediation, with China's counter-narratives presented to legitimise China's territorial claims on historic, legal and security bases and rebuild an East Asian order modelled on the '*Tianxia*' ideal.

5.1 Identity building and the South China Sea disputes

The South China Sea arbitration, surrounding territorial disputes, has provided an opportunity for *CGTN* to construct identities for three actors: China, the West, and the Philippines. During the past decade, the South China Sea has turned into a flashpoint where great power rivalries (US vs China) and conflicts over territories and resources (China and regional claimants) have had geopolitical implications beyond the region. Underlying these geopolitical conflicts are China's readjustment of self-identity and relationship with regional neighbours and the US.

The militarisation of the South China Sea marks China's endeavour to reclaim sovereignty, regional leadership, and self-esteem from the 'century of humiliation'. Domestically, expansive territorial claims are made to satisfy rising popular nationalism and bolster the government's political legitimacy (Johnston, 2017), since the ruling party-state vows to restore Chinese historical territory, as well as national dignity, following centuries of humiliation (Kim, 2015). Internationally, the military capacity to defend China's political

security and territorial integrity from foreign infringement has become a litmus test for China's restored status as a great power in the Asia Pacific region (De Castro, 2012).

Second, the resolution of the South China Sea disputes tests China's capacity to adjust its diplomatic relationships with its Southeast Asian neighbours. China has good reasons to adopt a tougher stance on the South China Sea issue, both for exploiting the rich energy and fishing resources and for safeguarding the lifeline of the country through which 90% of its oil is imported (Zhu, 2006). However, a paternalistic attitude persists, as former Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi remarked of the ASEAN states: "China is a big country and other countries are small countries, and that's just a fact". This is likely to create a backlash (Lowsen, 2018). An aggressive foreign policy may push China's neighbours to lean towards the US's offshore balancing strategies against China (Alenezi, 2020). In turn, a turbulent regional environment would suspend China's peaceful development in the East Asian area (Kim, 2015).

Third, the conflicts incarnate China's shifting relationship with the US. China's militarisation measures, such as constructing military infrastructure and deploying a blue water navy (deep water maritime forces) challenge the US's military primacy in the West Pacific region (Mearsheimer, 2010). Intensive island building and administrative control are also seen as an endeavour to disrupt the US's geopolitical encirclement (Ming, 2016; Scott, 2019; Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, 2020). Since the US's 'Pivot to Asia' in 2012, the US has coalesced regional powers ranging from Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and the Philippines to form a containment net against China (Campbell, 2016), with the latest move crystallised as an 'Indo-Pacific' strategy (Klare, 2018; Yeo, 2020). From China's perspective, the US and its allies' military patrols, especially Japan's participation, are targeted at containing China, which re-activate China's feelings of victimisation about imperial invasions and colonisation of Chinese territory (Raunig, 2018).

The intricacy of the South China Sea issue and the profound implications for the Asia Pacific region makes it an appropriate case study for this research to examine how the Chinese state-funded broadcaster constructs images of China, the regional claimants in the case, and the West more broadly (particularly the US).

5.1.1 Narratives about China's identity

In *CGTN*'s coverage of the South China Sea dispute, China is shown in a mainly positive light, with its foreign policy and domestic rule legitimised (38%) and an image portrayed of being a solution provider for territorial disputes (27%) (see Figure 5-1). *Legitimacy* is a key aspect of national image building. As Nye argues, the soft power of certain states increases when their foreign policies and domestic policies are perceived as legitimate (Nye, 2008). *CGTN*'s identity narratives about China draw substantially from Nye's claims. Specifically, in this section, I have focused on the discursive strategy that *CGTN* developed to legitimise the Chinese government's foreign policy. The aspect of solution provision will be elaborated in the normative narrative analysis in the next section.

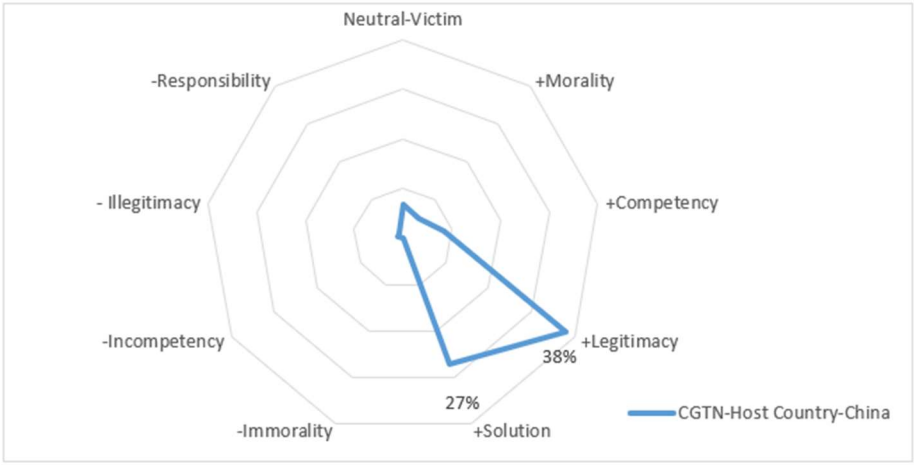

Figure 5-1 Valence distribution of the host country: China on *CGTN*

The narratives that positioned China as a legitimate international actor were based on claiming public support for China's foreign policy. *CGTN* stressed that China's non-acceptance and non-participation stance towards the arbitration was widely supported by state members of what *CGTN* qualifies as the 'international community'. As the Chinese Foreign Ministry's spokesperson stated: "many countries and international communities have expressed support for China's stance on resolving the dispute through bilateral negotiations" (CGTN, 2016ad). His proclamation was further substantiated by a collection of endorsements from government officials and spokespersons of developing countries, mainly composed of Southeast Asian and African states. For instance, Malawian President Peter Mutharika was invited to say that "We support peaceful settlement over the disputes and back negotiations

with China and Philippines" (CGTN, 2016ac). Moreover, *CGTN* emphasised that the 'international community' held a positive evaluation of China's peaceful approach to conflict resolution. As the then foreign minister of Sri Lanka said, "Sri Lanka also appreciates China's efforts and readiness to promote such dialogue in order to maintain peace and security in the region, while upholding the rule of law in interstate affairs" (CGTN, 2016ax). Support from the developing countries was portrayed as representing the majority of the international community, as Lu Kang, the spokesperson of the Chinese Foreign Ministry stated, "Over 80 countries in international and regional groups support China's stance" (CGTN, 2016ax). Meanwhile, the opposition of Western countries was delegitimised for their 'unfair bias' against China. The word tree chart of 'international community' (see Figure 5-2) underlines that though "the Western international community and legal community have a problem with behaving fairly towards China" (CGTN, 2016u), they "cannot claim to represent the international community" (CGTN, 2016d). In line with the principle of majority rule entrenched in Western electoral systems (Offe and Cohen, 1983), *CGTN* demanded the opposing parties to "follow the right stance held by the majority of the international community rather than forcing the majority towards the wrong position by that" (CGTN, 2016u).

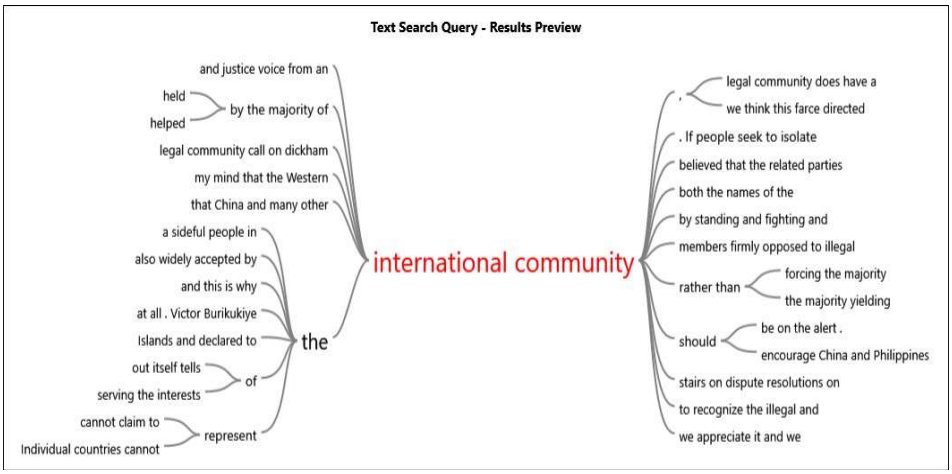

Figure 5-2 Word tree for 'International Community' on *CGTN*

Notes: Most frequent sequences of words that precede and follow the target word 'international community' in the entire *CGTN* corpus. Generated by NVivo software with the 'Text Search Query' function and keyword 'International Community', calibrated to exact matches.

The legitimisation of Chinese foreign policy was concentrated on the reframing of the term 'international community'. In the Western context, the term is normally used interchangeably with the 'liberal world', a collection of Western states and democratic allies. This use of the term is weakened by an overrepresentation of developed countries, as the developed liberal community (32 OECD countries) account for only a minority of the wider international community. However, China's redefinition of 'international community' is also strategic. By highlighting the importance of pro-China developing countries across international society, China's international media not only manufactured an imagined 'consensus' about China's international legitimacy, but confirmed China's self-asserted identity as a leading member of the developing countries (Deng, 1974). In this context, the way that developing countries exert their power was not manifest in direct political intervention, but through bearing witness and forming a global public opinion environment. Despite the relative weakness of China in contrast to the powerful West, as well as the negative arbitration result against China, China considered that international support will bring momentum for China to resist the 'unjust' arbitration and the Western hegemony.

The reliance on the 'public support' line of argument can be attributed to the Chinese traditional preference for natural moral judgement over the rule of law. The logic can be crystallised in a saying: 'Dao in people's hearts' (*Gongdao Zizai Renxin*). This rationale is reproduced in China's foreign affairs system. As Huang Huikang (2016), China's ambassador to Malaysia, wrote after the release of the arbitration decision:

> A just cause enjoys abundant support while an unjust cause finds little support. Dao, a combined concept of fairness, justice, rule, trend and direction derived from ancient Chinese philosophy, inhabits people's hearts.

Huang cited Mencius's statement to suggest that the International Court, though institutionalised by an international law system, was delegitimised for the political manipulation underlying the arbitration and imperialist intervention from the West (Huang, 2016).

Although embedding Chinese philosophy in *CGTN*'s mediated discourse contributed to countering Western discursive hegemony, it risks limiting the outreach of *CGTN*. Without a contextualisation and cultural explanation of the Confucian philosophy underlying *CGTN*'s discourse, the contradictory value system between, for instance, the 'rule of law' and the 'rule

of man' embraced by Western and Chinese societies creates a barrier for many Western audiences to understand or identify with the Chinese position. Thus, *CGTN*'s infusion of Chinese philosophy into its media representation without cultural sensitivity, has potentially trapped China's international communication into self-centred mysticism and thus alienated global audiences.

5.1.2 Narratives about the Western identity

The West played an important role in *CGTN*'s coverage of the South China Sea arbitration (29%), though less visibly than with *RT* (81%). The West as a political actor includes the nation-states, politicians and media from Western countries, including the US, UK, EU members, Australia, and Canada. For *CGTN*, the US was the main representative of the West compared to the EU (25% versus 4%). All the European nations appearing in the media were developed European states such as the UK, Sweden, Denmark, France and the Czech Republic, which all expressed support for the US's East Asian policy. This reflected and reinforced China's geopolitical imagination, which has tended to generalise the 'West' as a monolithic block, with the EU only playing a subordinate role to US foreign policy. This representation of the West partly came from the US's deeper involvement in the South China Sea issue compared to the EU; it was also derived from the domestic narrative which posited the US as the big 'bully' and the EU as an 'accomplice' (Esteban et al., 2020: 127).

The image of the West in *CGTN*'s coverage was exclusively negative, with the West accused of being responsible for the chaos in the South China Sea and depicted as an immoral actor in the territorial dispute (see Figure 5-3). In this section, I have focused on the responsibility narrative of the West to analyse how *CGTN* attributed responsibility for the regional dispute to Western actors.

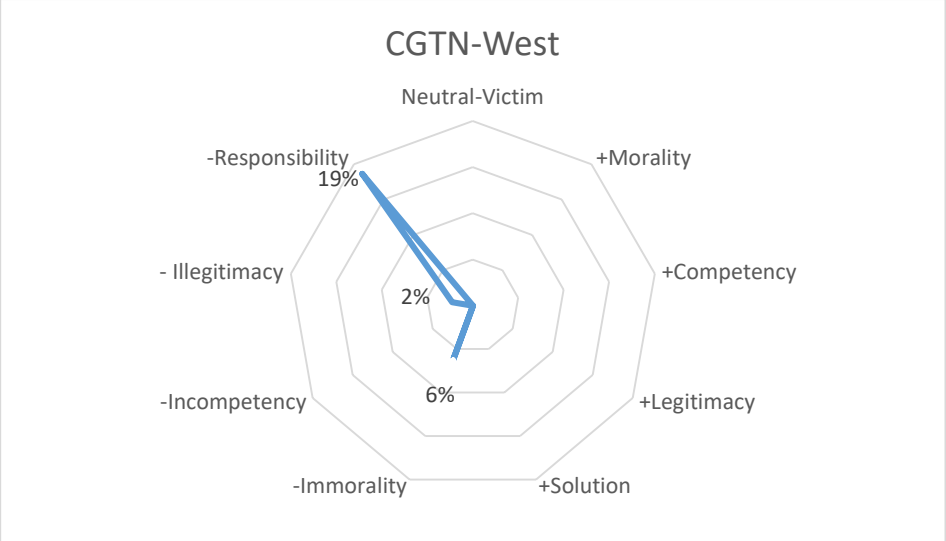

Figure 5-3 Valence distribution of the West on *CGTN*

Firstly, in *CGTN's* coverage, the West's responsibility lay in its extra-territorial interference. The narrative suggested that the former equilibrium within the South China Sea that benefited regional stakeholders was disrupted by interference from the West, ranging from military exercises to legal challenges, which caused the imbalance and turbulence in East Asia. This perspective was expressed through the anchor, who argued that "the United States and Japan's powerful intervention makes it even harder to stop" (CGTN, 2016av) and through statements from developing nations, for instance Rwandan politician Francois Ngarambe's observation that "disputes should be resolved through peaceful dialogue by both parties and not be subject to external forces" (CGTN, 2016bb). To restore order, *CGTN* suggested, as proposed by Zhao Qizheng, former director of the Information Office of the State Council, "China and ASEAN must enhance dialogue and remove interference to focus on cooperation" (CGTN, 2016al).

Secondly, according to *CGTN*, the West supported the Philippines in the legal case. *CGTN* considered that the Philippines' initiation of arbitration was a plot by the West to contain China within East Asia, through extra-territorial interference. As Iranian politician Mehdi Soli stated in a newscast, the US's involvement in the South China Sea issue did not occur out of good will, but was "an excuse to interfere in the regional affairs" (CGTN, 2016v). From *CGTN*'s perspective, the US's political manoeuvre did not aim to sustain peaceful order in the East Asian region but was to "fulfil its own needs and enhance its own influence in the region" (CGTN, 2016v). The narrative was supported by a statement from a Filipino

columnist, Rigoberta Tiglao, who argued that "the US should reimburse the Philippines, because the case unilaterally initiated by the Philippines now gives the US an excuse to interfere in the South China Sea Issue" (CGTN, 2016bh). Apart from indirect support by the US for the Philippines' pursuit of the case, *CGTN* accused Western states of distorting the jurisdictional procedure. An interview with Western scholar Toney Carty indicated that Western countries, including Japan, "have abused the judicial process by making an outlandish and unreasonable interpretation of the convention in order to engage in a form of legal aggression against China" (CGTN, 2016u). This narrative discredited Western neutrality in making a fair judgement in the South China Sea arbitration. According to *CGTN*, the West politicised the South China Sea arbitration in order to contain China, and the arbitral procedures, heavily dominated by the West, were expected to be skewed in favour of the Philippines for strategic purposes instead of legal rationality.

Thirdly, *CGTN* accused the US's military exercises in the area, together with its regional allies, of weaving a security net, which disrupted regional stability and China's national security. In this regard, *CGTN* heavily showcased the Chinese officials' denouncement of "military navigation", "military vessels and aircraft", "military aircraft and ships", "military presence", and "military manoeuvre" for their "threatening of Chinese maritime and airspace security" (CGTN, 2016l), and "doing harm to China's sovereignty rights" (CGTN, 2016g). Specifically, *CGTN*'s visual montage of the US military's presence evidenced the US's interference in the regional territorial dispute. To indicate the discrepancy between the US's 'not picking sides' discourse and military involvement, *CGTN* showcased John Kerry's promise that, "the United States does not take sides on the sovereignty questions" (CGTN, 2016ab). The following visual representation, however, countered Kerry's statement and hinted to the audience that the US was violating its own promise by conducting joint drills and supporting the 'unjust' legal case of the opposing parties to China (see Figure 5-4). Although no caption was included to signal the American origin of the soldiers and the military vessels, the visual materials that included warships, armoured cars, helicopters and snipers composed a comprehensive picture of a military exercise that heavily influenced the audience's imagination about the US's militarisation in the region. The illustration of the militarisation thus supported the oral expression, reinforcing the US's responsibility for escalating the confrontation in the South China Sea area.

Figure 5-4 *CGTN*'s footage of the US military exercise

Notes: The images following Kerry's speech contain military symbols such as armoured vehicles and aircraft, which served to illustrate American military presences in the South China Sea regions. Source: clip *CGTN* (2016ab)

Thirdly, why does the West interfere in the South China Seas regional disputes? *CGTN* considered that the extraterritorial interference derived from the US's geopolitical intention of locking China within the West Pacific and undermining China's influence in the neighbouring region. To illustrate this point, *CGTN* cited, Chinese scholar Ren Huaifeng: "the US wants to intervene in this region and blockade China in the South China Sea" (CGTN, 2016av). The US's pivot to Asia and reinvigoration of the security alliance with the Philippines (CGTN, 2016bg), according to *CGTN*, was a part of the US's strategy to "weaken other nations in order to maintain its global dominance" (CGTN, 2016a). In other words, *CGTN* substantiated the narrative of the West as being responsible for extra-territorial interference with antagonistic speculation about the US's strategic intention underlying the political and military interference of the South China Sea. *CGTN* downplayed China's

massive land and maritime reclamation in the South China Sea islands, which though claimed for defensive purposes, had the potential to squeeze the US out of the South China Sea, a nightmare for the US's global strategy (Wang and Hoo, 2019: 104). Another fact that *CGTN* failed to reveal was that China broke President Xi's promise to President Obama, made in 2015, of refraining from militarising the South China Sea by equipping the military build-up with facilities ranging from "long-range sensor arrays, port facilities, runways, and reinforced bunkers for fuel and weapons" on the artificial islands (Stashwick, 2019).

To conclude, *CGTN*'s identity narrative of the West was formulated against a 'China threat theory' which attributes regional instability in the South China sea to China's "new assertiveness" (Thayer, 2011; Chen, Pu and Johnston, 2014; Turcsányi, 2018). The narrative of the West as bearing responsibility attempted to shift the responsibility of the South China Sea dispute from China's revisionist land reclamation and military deployment to the West's side choosing legislative manipulation and military involvement.

5.1.3 Narratives about the Philippines' identity

CGTN's coverage of the South China Sea arbitration was not constrained to the great power rivalry between China and the US but involved shaping the identity of the arbitration initiator: the Philippines. The country enjoyed high media visibility and negative representation in *CGTN*'s mediation (see Figure 5-5).

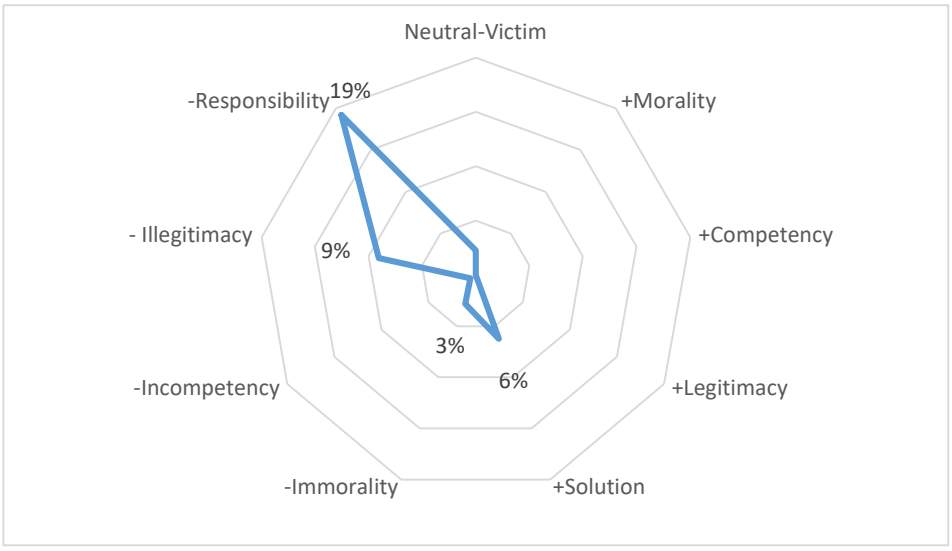

Figure 5-5 Valence distribution of the country of dispute: the Philippines on *CGTN*

In general, *CGTN* adopted a negative frame for the Philippines, with the Filipino government attributed with minor, yet direct, responsibility for the South China Sea conflict (19%). Whereas the negative frames (*responsibility* and *illegitimacy*) were uniformly taken up by the pro-US Aquino III's administration, the anti-US Duterte government received positive coverage (6% as *solution provider*) for setting aside the arbitration result (Corrales, 2016).

The main reason *CGTN* considered the Philippines responsible for destabilising the regional order was because that the Filipino government had proactively engaged in island-claiming and escalated the regional dispute to the international legal system. *CGTN*'s anchor reported that, "China's claims date long before the Philippines even achieved independence" and the Philippines' "effective occupation [started] since the 1970s" (CGTN, 2016z). Tracing the South China Sea disputes to the Philippines' geographical revision in the 1970s, the invited expert insisted that the China / Philippines dispute was a territorial dispute caused by the Philippines' illegal occupation, since the 1970s of some islands and reefs belonging to China's Nansha Islands. The narrative created an imagined order in the South China Sea where China has exercised jurisdiction over the Nansha (Spratly) Islands for a long historical period. The Philippines only sneaked in to grab the land when China was distracted by internal political turmoil. In this sense, *CGTN*'s negative presentation of the Philippines' initiation of the case derived from its public denial of China's great power status and an overt challenge to China's regional leadership.

Secondly, the Duterte administration received positive coverage for its willingness to settle the South China Sea dispute with China bilaterally. Within *CGTN*'s coverage, Duterte's government was praised for two main reasons. First, "Duterte has asked former president Fidel Ramos to act as a special envoy to China after the arbitral judgment" (CGTN, 2016bd). Second, Duterte planned to smooth over the Philippines' relations with China to attract Chinese investment. As the voiceover narrated in the clip mentioned above, Duterte "cited his plan to establish industrial zones all over the country to attract Chinese investment as a reason to settle the dispute with China soon" (CGTN, 2016bd).

Figure 5-6 *CGTN*'s footage of Filipino politician Duterte on

Source: clip *CGTN* (2016bc)

Figure 5-7 *CGTN*'s footage of former Filipino President Ramos

Source: clip *CGTN* (2016ba)

However, neither Duterte nor Ramos were given the chance to make statements as direct sources. Instead, their messages were narrated mainly by anchors or voiceovers with muted footage of Duterte and static pictures of Ramos. In *CGTN* (2016bc) and (2016az), muted footage of Duterte accepting an interview was used to accompany narration about Duterte planning to send former president Fidel Ramos to China as a special envoy (see

Figure 5-6). In clip *CGTN* (2016ba), following the narration about Duterte's proposal, the voiceover claimed that "Fidel Ramos has accepted the request" (CGTN, 2016ba). Ramos was not given a chance to make a video testimony, instead a photo of Ramos making a public speech was shown to give an idea of Ramos's image. In the footage, Ramos was dressed formally and making a speech, creating an image of a sophisticated, committed and reliable politician to enhance Ramos's authority as a representative of the Filipino population (see Figure 5-7). The only direct official validation from the Philippines in the clips was made by Perfecto Yasay, the Philippines' Foreign Affairs Secretary, who confirmed that:

> I have been informed about the designation of former president Fidel Ramos, who has reported that he has accepted the assignment to engage China in bilateral talks. We respect this issue, We would hope that this could be pursued as soon as possible (CGTN, 2016bc).

By combining Duterte and Ramos's images with the voiceover narration, *CGTN* firstly deprived the discursive right of the Philippines in the news coverage. As Said (2003: 293) said, in Orientalist discourse, Orientals cannot speak for themselves, instead they are spoken for and represented and interpreted by Westerners. In *CGTN*'s narrative, the Filipinos were also given little chance to explain and defend the Philippines' foreign policy with their own voice. Even when praising the Philippines' government's contribution to the peaceful resolution of the South China Sea issue, *CGTN* conveyed Duterte and Ramos's statements through the anchor's re-narration instead of showing their speeches directly. The underrepresentation of Filipino officials and their intellectual perspective meant that the Philippines' geopolitical concerns were underplayed, and the discursive power of the Philippines was repressed. This lack of the Philippines' voices is problematic because it restructures a hierarchical authority of voice, which replaced the 'middle aged white men' privilege with 'middle aged Chinese men' dominance over the interpretation of international affairs. In this case, China's international broadcasts can hardly be called a counter-hegemonic narrative that vocalises developing countries, instead it is one that empowers the developing country of China. Moreover, the repression of Filipino voices in *CGTN*'s media coverage of the South China Sea arbitration undermines *CGTN*'s credibility as a balanced news platform that broadcasts international news independently, neutrally and professionally.

CGTN not only deprived the Philippines' government of the agency to speak out but mobilised visual language to belittle the competency of the Philippines' government in comparison to China as a great power. Specifically, *CGTN* juxtaposed the dilapidated Filipino streets and majestic Chinese government buildings to arouse an imaginary contrast between a weak Philippines and a strong China, with a strong hint that China was on the winning side. I analysed *CGTN*'s visual strategy to make this point by taking the example of clip *CGTN* (2016y) and clip *CGTN* (2016w), which served to contextualise the Philippines' initiation of the arbitration, the Chinese government's response and the legitimisation of China's reaction.

In the beginning, the voiceover started to introduce the back and forth of the Philippines' and China's diplomatic interactions concerning the arbitration process. Instead of public speeches by diplomats or official meetings, *CGTN* employed two shots of national flags to signify the switch of national perspective. Specifically, a Philippines' flag (Figure 5-8) and a Chinese flag (Figure 5-8) were shown to imply the transfer of scenes from the Philippines to China

(CGTN, 2016y). The appearance of these two symbols also informed the audience of the location of the following street views and the buildings.

Following the presentation of the Philippines' flag, three scenes of Filipino life were shown to accompany the narration about the arbitration initiation. The three photos included urban scenes that featured broken buildings, messy streets and poorly dressed passers-by. The second (upper right) photo (Figure 5-8) was structured in a vertical composition with a shallow depth of field. The focus of the camera was devoted to the rickshaw located on the right side of the road. On the rickshaw, a large Tide logo formed the kernel of the photo and attracted the audience's attention because of its eye-catching orange colour. Tide is a laundry detergent brand owned by American consumer goods giant Procter & Gamble. Semiotically speaking, the logo formed a contrast with the monotonous shabby street view, which connoted the invasion of the Philippines by American capitalism, showing a small developing country that was formally a colony of the US. The image that this picture invoked was not only about development, but also a colonialist image of the Philippines, which had suffered from the economic post-colonialisation of American capitalism.

The third picture was also a street scene (Figure 5-8), taken with a long shot that featured a low angle (CGTN, 2016y). High-voltage cables constituted diagonal lines in the photo that intersected at the upper middle-right side of the photo. This composition attracted attention to the intersections of the cables where the audience could see a vertical line formed by the telegraph pole. Following the telegraph pole from top to bottom, a run-down house appeared with the exterior coloured yellow. Normally, a low angle shot functions to make the depicted subject look strong and powerful. However, in this photo the low angle has the reverse effect and reinforced the shabbiness of the building and the street scene. For one thing, with a deep depth of field, the photo was focused on an intersection that overlapped with the bright sky interspersed with white clouds. The strong light from the sky considerably overshadowed the downward building, which was deprived of the glow and decency of the house. More importantly, with a low angle shot, the distance between the upper roof of the building and the top margin of the picture was artificially stretched compared to an eye-level perspective. This strategy further intensified the impression that the house was low and broken.

The fourth photo (Figure 5-8), taken from clip *CGTN* (2016w), directed attention to an even darker side of the city. The photo was taken with an eye-level perspective, focusing on a bridge with a stone handrail extending into the distance. The shallow depth of field directed

attention to the focus of the camera, a heap of old clothes abandoned on the handrail. The scattered clothes of various bright colours, ranging from white, green and blue, formed a contrast with the milk-white stone roads and handrails, making the street look untidy and messy. The single figure that was in the process of waste collection indicated both his economic status and social identity. The shabby dress and bare feet suggested a poor financial situation. The orange outfit suggested his identity as a junkman or a cleaner. He could have been working to tidy the street or collecting some waste to make money for his family. The visual language of this photo highlighted the poverty and the poor management of the Philippines, hinting at the weakness of the Philippine as an international power compared to China.

Figure 5-8 *CGTN*'s footage of street scenes in the Philippines

Source: Filipino Flag, houses and street clip (*CGTN*, 2016y) and rubbish collector clip *CGTN* (2016w)

In comparison, *CGTN*'s visual representation of the Chinese scenes was completely different. As mentioned above, the video switched to a shot of a Chinese flag (see Figure 5-9) that suggested a shift in the scene to China. In this photo, the Chinese national flag was presented with a low angle close-up shot. Different from the shot devoted to the

Philippines' flag that foregrounds the sky, the Chinese flag on *CGTN* was foregrounded on a building. What followed was a long-distance shot that showcased the whole building as a background to the flag. The building is the Chinese foreign ministry building (see Figure 5-9). Both screenshots from *CGTN* that focused on Chinese buildings and street views were taken with a low angle. By comparing the governmental building photo with the Philippines' building photo, one can see the difference in terms of composition. While the Philippines' civil house was located in the lower right portion of the photo, the Chinese foreign affairs ministry was positioned at the very centre, with a very short distance to the top edge of the photo. Although the central position of the subject does not correspond to the classical photography principle, this composition had the effect of strengthening the sublimity and authority of the building in the photo and the state it symbolised.

Figure 5-9 *CGTN*'s footage of Chinese buildings

Source: clip *CGTN* (2016y)

The visual comparison of China and the Philippines cityscape revealed that *CGTN* was developing its own Orientalist imagination. Taking a Sino-centric perspective, *CGTN* was establishing a temporal-spatial order between China and its East Asian neighbours where China represents the ultimate modernisation, development, and competency, while regional disputants such as the Philippines were depicted as 'others' that were underdeveloped, backward and fragile. This Sino-centric perspective also shaped the way that *CGTN* deconstructed the applicability of international norms in the South China Sea area and

advocated the establishment of a regional normative space that adopted neo-Confucianist 'rites' in international interactions.

5.2 Normativity and the South China Sea arbitration

CGTN's coverage of the South China Sea arbitration not only redistributed the role expectations of the political actors – China, the West and the Philippines – but redefined the normative rules that regulated the interactions among such actors. *CGTN*'s normative renegotiation project was twofold: first, it contested the legality of international arbitration as a territorial dispute management mechanism; second, it advocated China's 'dual-track' approach as the guiding rule of regional dispute settlement. In the following analysis, I will elaborate on how *CGTN* cast doubt on the applicability of the international jurisdictional regime to the South China Sea issue and proposed international norms based on Chinese worldviews.

5.2.1 Contesting the legality of the arbitration

A central normative narrative of *CGTN* was that the international arbitration tribunal established by the PCA (Permanent Court of Arbitration) did not have jurisdiction over the Philippines' and China's South China Sea disputes. First, *CGTN* questioned the validity of the arbitral tribunal by questioning its partial composition. Drawing on conspiracy theories, *CGTN* suggested that the Japanese and US governments had politicised the arbitral procedure through appointments of arbitrators and legal representation, which questioned the procedural justice of the arbitration. On one hand, *CGTN* insisted that the Japanese government manipulated the arbitral procedure through Shunji Yanai, who appointed three arbitrators to the panel, as the President of the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea. The reason *CGTN* considered that Shunji Yanai might distort the arbitration was because he had "served the Japanese Foreign Ministry for 40 years" and had been involved in "Japan's 2015 security bill and the Diaoyu Islands dispute with China" (CGTN, 2016am). Yanai's close relationship with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe raised suspicions about the Japanese government's potential influence on the arbitration result, at the expense of Chinese interests. From *CGTN*'s perspective, Yanai's deep entanglement with Japanese foreign policy and right-wing, anti-China attitudes contributed to an arbitrator panel that was stacked

against China, which compromised the "independence of the international judiciary" (CGTN, 2016am). At the same time, America was involved in the case in support of the Philippines in a subtler way. This can be illustrated in the multiple identities of the American lawyer who represented the Philippines. Bernard Oxman, as stressed by *CGTN*, was used as a representative for the American government in attendance at the third United Nations conference on the law of the sea, and had a close connection with "most of the arbitrators, including Yanai" (CGTN, 2016am). This complex relationship between the US government, an American lawyer, the judge Shunji Yanai and the Abe Government, from *CGTN*'s perspective, evidenced a "complex network of special political interests," which damaged the "principles of the independence of the international judiciary" (CGTN, 2016am).

The second normative narrative focused on invalidating the legality of the PCA (Permanent Court of Arbitration) for its outsider identity in the United Nation's system. *CGTN* suggested that the PCA was not an authoritative international arbitration institution as it was not affiliated to the United Nations' system. *CGTN* used the screenshots of the UN's social media account (see Figure 5-10) and webpage of the ICJ (International Court of Justice) (see

Figure 5-11), the judicial organ of the United Nations, to evidence the detachment of PCA and ICJ. As shown in the figures below, the clarification of the ICJ was used by *CGTN* to invalidate the legal authority of the PCA. One assumption underlying the discourse was that the United Nations' system was taken as the sole source of legitimacy for international legal norms. Although calling itself an international tribunal, *CGTN* suggested that the PCA was a 'tenant' of the Peace Palace[20] and should not be granted the same respect and reverence that the UN's judicial organs received (CGTN, 2016be).

[20] The Peace Palace is the administrative building of the International Court of Justice, the principal judicial body of the United Nations. It also accommodates the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) (The Peace Palace, 2020).

Figure 5-10 *CGTN*'s footage of a screenshot of United Nations' Weibo account

Notes: This is a screenshot of a tweet from the United Nation's Weibo Account. Retrieved on 1st February 2019. The text reads: "@United Nations [United Nations Picture] The International Tribunal is the principal judicial organ of the United Nations. It is established under the Charter of the United Nations and is located at the Peace Palace in The Hague, Netherlands. The building was built by the non-profit organisation Carnegie Foundation for the International Court of Justice, the predecessor of the International Tribunal. The United Nations will use the building to donate to the Carnegie Foundation every year. Another 'tenant' of the Peace Palace is the permanent arbitration court established in 1899, but it has nothing to do with the United Nations." Source: clip *CGTN* (2016be).

Figure 5-11 *CGTN*'s footage of a screenshot of the International Court of Justice's official website

Notes: This is a screenshot from *CGTN*'s newscast, which showed the ICJ's official website. The words highlighted in the picture are:

"Award in the South China Sea Arbitration"

"The ICJ, which is a totally distinct institution, has had no involvement in the above-mentioned case". Source: clip *CGTN* (2016be)

These normative narratives that contested the legality of the international legal system had two bases. Firstly, *CGTN*'s denial of international arbitration as a dispute settlement mechanism derived from China's distrust of the Western-dominated international legal system. This was because China's encounters with the international legal system had been accompanied with unpleasant memories of land loss and colonisation enforced by 'unequal treaties' protected by a Western-dominated international law system (Zuo, 2018). After WWI, even as a victor, China was denied the return of the German colony in Shandong by the European states (Craft, 1997). This left an impression on China that international law was a political tool for the Western powers to legitimise their imperialist agendas (Chan, 2014).

It was only during the post-WWII order building that China started to actively engage with international law making by becoming a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (Chan, 2014). Therefore, China refused to grant consent to jurisdictional devices such as the PCA that were set up in the pre-United Nations era when China played no active role in building the international law system. This dissatisfaction with the Eurocentric international law system is widely shared among developing countries, with them viewing it as a "predatory system that legitimises, reproduces and sustains the plunder and subordination of the Third World by the West" (Ikejiaku, 2014).

The second reason for China's distrust of the international tribunal system derives from China's internal legal culture, which tends to use legal organs to advance the power of the will of the administration or ruling party. With a lack of a 'check and balance system' in both traditional Chinese political practice and the current political system, China's domestic legal culture tends to view the legal system as a safeguard and advocator of the Party's supremacy rather than a monitoring mechanism of the party-state (Alcala, Gregory and Reeves, 2018). Institutionally, the judicial system hardly remains independent from the Party's influence and administrative control, since judges and court officials are subject to Party directives and the administrative cadre evaluation system (Castellucci, 2007). This means domestically that the Chinese people and the government rarely believe in the role of the courts to achieve the 'rule *of* law' but understand the court as a tool of governmentality that penetrates and enforces 'rule *by* law', regulating social behaviour under the instructions of the ruling Party. This domestic distrust against the courts contributes to China's distrust of the international jurisdictional system. The representative bias in favour of European, African and North American jurisdictional professionals only deepens China's suspicions about the Japanese and American governments' manipulation of the arbitral procedure. The deficiency of commitment to the rule of law fuels *CGTN*'s conspiracy theory about the Western instrumentalisation of the International Court.

5.2.2 Proposing a 'dual-track' approach as a norm for regional dispute resolution

After disrupting the applicability of the international jurisdictional regime in Southeast Asia, *CGTN* proposed a synthesis of bilateral and multilateral negotiation among regional stakeholders as a new norm for dispute settlement. *CGTN* reproduced the Chinese official discourse of a dual-track approach as a regional dispute settlement mechanism. Originally

proposed by Wang Yi in 2014, the dual-track approach refers to resolving territorial disputes by countries directly concerned through consultations and negotiation; and peace and stability in the South China Sea was to be jointly maintained by China and the ASEAN countries (Wang, 2014). The dual-track approach signified China's strategic concession to accommodating non-claimant ASEAN partners' appeals to join the multilateral framework outside of the bilateral negotiations (Zuo, 2019: 160). Besides, by extending the range of negotiation from claimants to regional non-claimants, China created both an inclusive platform for regional maritime order building and an exclusive normative space that precludes the provincialisation of the Western-dominated international legal system. In the following analysis, I illustrate how *CGTN* championed a peaceful negotiation between China and the Philippines and a multilateral consultation according to a regional non-binding normative framework.

First, *CGTN* proposed that China, as a normative entrepreneur, championed bilateral negotiation between China and the Philippines. Terms such as 'negotiations', 'dialogue', and 'consultation' enjoyed high visibility (see Figure 5-12). This means that from *CGTN*'s perspective, the Chinese solution of addressing the regional dispute gravitated towards a peaceful mechanism such as 'negotiation' rather than jurisdiction in territorial dispute management.

When examining the discursive context of 'negotiation' in the code of 'China as solution provider', I found that *CGTN*'s normative narrative tended to focus on 'China' as the subject, with the action of 'adhere(ing) to' or 'encourage(ing)' (verb). 'Settling the disputes' and 'maritime delimitation' were followed by the prepositional phrase of 'through negotiation', that is, 'between China and the Philippines' (see Figure 5-13), through a contextualised plan for conflict resolution. This was also expected to give China an advantage in its negotiations with regional neighbours who have relatively less size and power.

Figure 5-12 Word cloud of China as a solution provider on *CGTN*

Notes: This chart was generated from a word-frequency query in NVivo with the texts coded under the node 'Chinese identity-solution provider'. Stop words such as 'China', 'Philippines', and 'also' have been cleansed in the corpus. The grouping level of the query was set at stemmed words, which means 'disputes' captures terms such as 'dispute', 'disputed' and 'disputes'; negotiations capture terms such as 'negotiate', 'negotiating' and 'negotiation'.

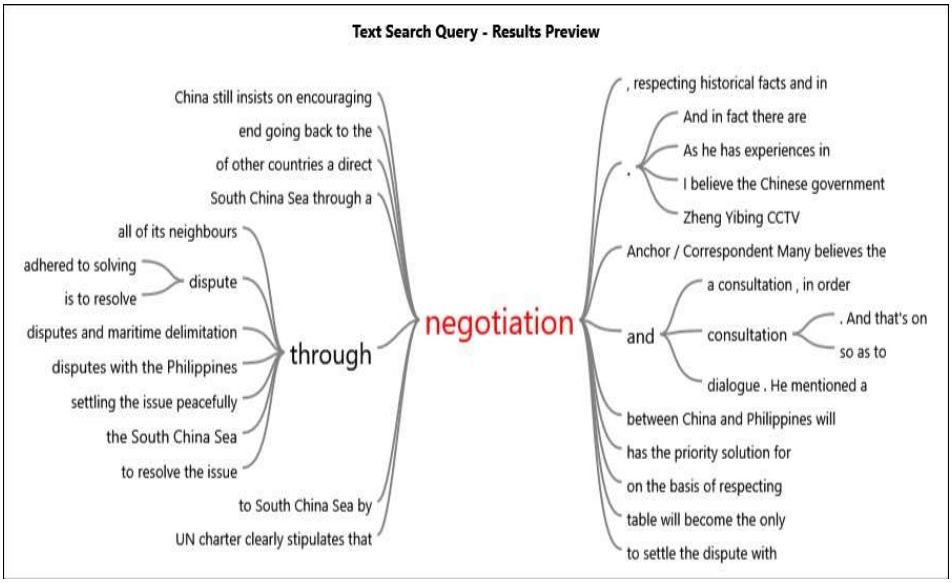

Figure 5-13 Word tree chart: 'Negotiation' in China as a solution provider attribute on *CGTN*

Notes: Generated by NVivo software's 'Text Search Query' function using keyword 'Negotiation', among all the texts coded under the node 'China as a solution provider', calibrated to exact matches.

Second, *CGTN* proposed resorting to regional non-binding treaties to guide multilateral collaboration. The two agreement frameworks it aimed to achieve were the 'Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea' (DOC) (appearing in 14 clips) and 'The Code of Conduct on the South China Sea' (appearing in four clips). A word tree examination of 'DOC' indicated that *CGTN* attached legitimacy to the Declaration by either criticising the Philippines' behaviour through its violation of the Declaration or recommending the actors involved 'abide by' it (see Figure 5-14). Signed in 2002, the Declaration is a non-binding treaty between China and ten ASEAN states that aimed to achieve a binding code of conduct among the 11 signatories (Panda, 2017). The Declaration, as suggested by *CGTN*, should form a 'regional rule' that will regulate the territorial conflicts among stakeholders.

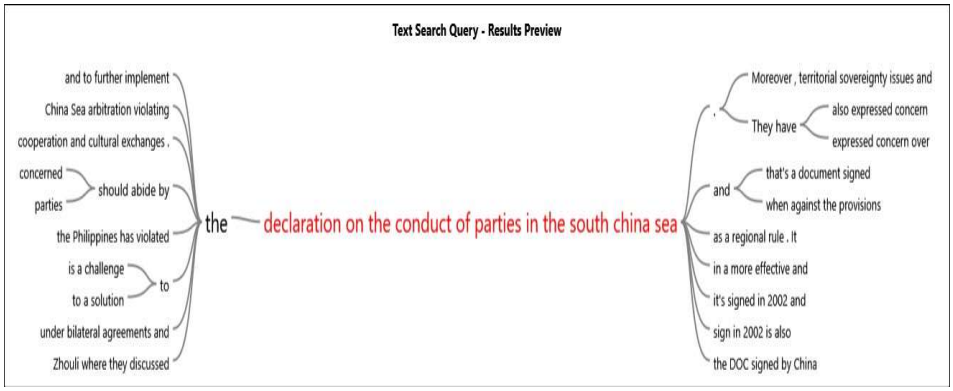

Figure 5-14 Word tree chart: 'DOC' on *CGTN*

Notes: Generated by NVivo's 'Text Search Query' function using keyword 'Declaration on the conduct of parties in the South China Sea', calibrated to exact matches.

These normative narratives that advocate China's dual-track approach further promoted a regional normative order based on Confucian ideals. The reason *CGTN* promotes peaceful negotiation over jurisdiction is because it is influenced by Confucianism, which it considers the best way to resolve conflicts through mitigation and self-restraint rather than litigation (Feng, 2010). Self-restraint is achieved through the Rites (*Li*) which discipline actors by voluntary commitment to socially-binding norms rather than fear of punishment (Yan, 2018). In the South China Sea context, 'The Code of Conduct on the South China Sea' was framed as a prospective socially-binding norm in Southeast Asia to replace the legally-binding arbitration derived from the Western international law system. Therefore, this normative narrative not only concerned a renewed understanding of the regional dispute mitigation mechanism but paved the way for China's rebuilt normative leadership in East Asia.

Normative leadership according to Confucian ideals is modelled on Humane Authority (*Wangdao*), which demands the leader stick to the norms of benevolence and righteousness in relation to the system's members. Benevolence (*Ren*) demands people or national actors develop an indiscriminate love for humanity. Although the Confucian philosophy advocates a system of hierarchy, it also calls upon the ruler to empathise with and care for the weak, poor and disadvantaged people (Yan, 2018). In the South China Sea context, *CGTN* suggests that despite China's superior, comprehensive power in comparison to its regional partners, China was committed to conducting equal and respectful conversations with its conflicting neighbours.

Righteousness refers to a performance-based leadership in contrast to the Western consent-based leadership (Yan, 2018). Different from the US's consent-based leadership in Eastern Asia, China attempts to legitimise its normative leadership by providing a new paradigm of conflict resolution, not only through equality-based negotiation but mutually beneficial outcomes. *CGTN* reproduced the Chinese official discourse and highlighted that the Chinese style of "direct dialogue and consultations" would contribute to "break a deadlock in bilateral relations and will be good for maintaining peace and stability in the region" (CGTN, 2016q).

Overall, the advancement of a dual-track approach was at the centre of *CGTN*'s normative narrative projection. The media's emphasis on the construction of the 'The Code of Conduct on the South China Sea' recommended that regional actors form a consensus on the socially accepted norms of action. This discursive formation contributed to justifying China's regional leadership by providing effective regional conflict solutions.

5.3 Territoriality and the South China Sea arbitration

The third theme of *CGTN*'s narrative projection concentrated on territoriality, specifically the legality of China's sovereign claims within the 'nine-dash line'. In international territorial boundary delineation, the most frequently employed arguments are: treaties, geography, economy, culture, effective control, history, *uti possidetis*[21], elitism and ideology (Sumner, 2004). *CGTN*'s legitimisation of China's sovereign claims drew on historical rights and effective control. To justify a historical right claim, three conditions are required to be satisfied: possession, effective occupation, and the length of possession. *CGTN* widely employs Chinese historical records from both official and civil sources to evidence China's historical ownership of *Nanhai Zhudao* (South China Sea Islands). In order to evidence effective contemporary control, *CGTN* demonstrated the Chinese government's investment in administration, infrastructure construction and scientific environmental protection. By interviewing local administrators and researchers, *CGTN* portrayed China as a capable, scientific and environmentally sensitive constructive force in the South China Sea without reference to the destruction that island and infrastructure building activities had on the maritime environment.

5.3.1 Legitimising historical rights claims by re-narrating histories

A central theme of *CGTN*'s territorial narrative projection, which was also the essential point of contention in the South China Sea arbitration, was the validity of China's 'nine-dash line' claim, a maritime demarcation line that captures almost the whole of the South China Sea. China not only claims sovereignty over the four island groups (*Dongsha, Nansha, Xisha, Zhongsha*), but the historical rights of fishing, navigation, exploration and exploitation of resources on the islands and the adjacent waters (Gao and Jia, 2013). Originally proclaimed by the KMT (*Kuomingtang*) government in 1948, it started with an 'eleven-dash line' as etched on an atlas by Chinese geographer Yang Huairen in 1947 (Shukla, 2020). Two dashes were then removed, and the U-shaped line became the nine-dash line that appeared in atlases

[21] *Uti possidetis* is a Latin term that literally means 'as you possess'. In international law, it is a principle that permits "Territories and property remain in the hands of a belligerent state after a war, unless otherwise provided by a treaty" (USLegal, n.d.).

of mainland China in 1953 (Gao and Jia, 2013: 103). Despite an ambiguous legal status, the 'nine-dash line' was transformed into an effective cue for the Chinese government to make expansive claims over the South China Sea region and mobilise domestic nationalist sentiment (Morton, 2016: 920). The legitimisation of historical rights claims surrounding the 'nine-dash line' follows two approaches: rational persuasion and emotional imagination. I start by analysing how *CGTN* rationalised historical rights by evidencing China's correspondence with possession, then effective occupation, and finally the length of possession over the South China Sea area.

First and foremost, *CGTN* used official records to confirm the first discovery status of China over the maritime features within the region of the South China Sea. As Wu Shicun, the president of the National Institute for South China Sea Studies testified:

> Chinese people came to know the islands in the South China Sea as early as in China's Han Dynasty about 2,000 years ago. And the Chinese government began their administration of the islands from the Tang and Song dynasties (CGTN, 2016i).

Wu, a Chinese scholar, served to evidence China's first discovery status from an academic perspective, drawing on research into China's official historical records.

Effective occupation and surveillance formed the second pillar of *CGTN*'s justification for China's historical rights claims over the South China Sea. This point was primarily made through arguments that engaged with the rationality of the audience. An excerpt from Chinese historical records was cited (CGTN, 2016ae), with a key sentence underlined to confirm the voiceover, "from 960 AD to 1279 AD in the Song Dynasty, the South China Sea was under the administration of Ji Yang, Changhua Army and Wanan Army" (army here refers to a semi-civil and semi-military administrative unit). These historical records indicated that China not only encompassed the South China Sea Islands in its territories but also clearly defined its administration level (see Figure 5-15).

Figure 5-15 *CGTN's* footage of an excerpt of Chinese history record

Notes: The excerpt comes from *Zhu Fan Zhi* (Records of Foreign People), written by Zhao Rukuo of the Song Dynasty. The book is considered an important historical record of the countries, people and commodities from outside China, mainly from Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean in the Song Dynasty. *CGTN* used it to prove China's effective administrative control over the South China Sea islands as early as the Tang and Song Dynasties. Source: clip *CGTN* (2016ae).

Thirdly, drawing on civil records, *CGTN* attempted to demonstrate that China's possession of the South China Sea island was lengthy, continuous and without disruption. Due to the de facto loss of control by the Chinese government over the South China Sea islands in the 19th century, this argument was made through a rediscovery of civil records. As a traditional sailing guide of Chinese fishermen, *Geng Lu Bu* records the marine geomorphic and water movements around the Xisha and Nansha area. In *CGTN*'s presentation, *Geng Lu Bu* was portrayed as civil evidence of China's "continuous exploitation of fisheries over an extended period of time," thus supporting the lengthy possession arguments (Morton, 2016: 920). As shown in clip *CGTN* (2016ae), a Chinese captain was interviewed to reflect on the influence of *Geng Lu Bu* over his fishing experience (see Figure 5-16). The voiceover suggested that *Geng Lu Bu* had guided the generations of Chinese fishermen sailing over the South China Sea, as the voiceover observed: "decades of sailing experience give him *Geng Lu Bu*'s deep roots in his blood and veins" (CGTN, 2016ae). The ancient Chinese characters in the visual illustration of *Geng Lu Bu* were mobilised symbolically to indicate the sustained influence

of Chinese civilisation on the South China Sea. The narration reinforced the visual images by stressing Chinese fishermen's continuous activities over the contested water. These historical documents were included to support China's claim of economic rights over 'traditional fishing areas' of the South China Sea (Kalimuddin and Anderson, 2018). They built upon China's mythical understanding of itself as a sustained civilisation, whose spatial extension was deeply rooted in temporal persistence.

Figure 5-16 *CGTN's* footage of ancient Chinese record: Geng Lu Bu

Source: clip CGTN (2016ae)

The second way of arguing for China's possessions in the South China Sea was through emotional evocation, drawing on a mobilisation of civilisational myths that justified China's territorial reclamation through historical chronology. In the Ming dynasty, from 1405 to 1433, Zheng He was a Muslim eunuch admiral who led a colossal treasure fleet to pass through the Malacca Straits from the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean. Historical records prove that he reached the Arabian Peninsula and East Africa during several of his last trips (Dreyer, 2006: 30-32). *CGTN* activated animation technology to represent the story with a Sino-centric gaze and as a historical basis for China to return as a maritime power reclaim its lost influence over the South China Sea.

In clip *CGTN* (2016ae), Zheng He's voyage has been presented over two scenes. In the first, Zheng He stands on the deck looking ahead; the second shows a side view of Ming

China's treasure fleet under his leadership. In the first scene, Zheng is positioned on the right of the picture with his back towards the audience. As the camera moves left, more and more of the sea view is disclosed to invite the audience to share his perspective. The shot is made to align the audience's perspective with China's gaze, which observes the South China Sea from its Western coast and appreciates an ocean as a land of resources, opportunities and strategic importance (see Figure 5-17). As the camera rolls from a focus shot on the leading vessel to a side-long overview of the fleet, the voiceover observes: "In 1405 Zheng He led a fleet of more than 200 ships and launched an unprecedented maritime expedition, demonstrating China's powerful capability for navigation in ancient times" (CGTN, 2016ae) (see Figure 5-18). This combination of oral and verbal language was designed to trigger the imagination of a powerful ancient Ming regime that supported Zheng He's maritime adventure. As a successor of the Ming Dynasty, the current Chinese government was thus projected as the revival of a 'Middle Kingdom', rewriting myths and conquering the sea again. This visual language constructed an imaginary of China's dominance over the South China Sea, the aim of which was to legitimise China's claim to exercise sovereignty over it and the political agenda to exercise influence over regional states.

Figure 5-17 *CGTN*'s footage of an animation about Zheng He

Source: clip *CGTN* (2016ae)

Figure 5-18 *CGTN*'s footage of an animation about Ming China's treasure fleet

Source: clip *CGTN* (2016ae)

5.3.2 Evidencing effective control with contemporary construction

Realising the limits of the historical basis in backing up territorial claims, *CGTN* also formulated a territorial narrative about the effective contemporary control by Chinese government. This control was exemplified with a series relating to administrative establishment, infrastructure building and environmental protection.

The first argument related to the establishment of Sansha city. Sansha city is a prefectural-level administration under Hainan province. With its city centre located at Yongxing (Woody) Island, the largest island of the Xisha Islands, Sansha city was established by the Chinese government in 2012 to oversee the civic affairs of Nansha (Spratlys), Xisha (Paracel) and Zhongsha (Macclesfield bank) islands (Lanteigne, 2016: 108). *CGTN*'s narratives about the city started from a disruption of the status quo, where Chinese fishermen's routine fishing was disrupted by the Philippines police. As a fisherman stated, "The Filipinos fired gunshots at us and ordered us to squat down, they didn't take all of us away from the ship. We were so scared, and we didn't know when we could return home" (CGTN, 2016ag). This statement framed the Philippines police forces as a threat to the property and security of the Chinese fishermen. This existential threat created a need for state intervention and thus justified the militarisation of the South China Sea by the Chinese government to protect the property and security of Chinese citizens. Appealing to the Chinese fishermen's demands, *CGTN*

suggested that the establishment of the Sansha administration provided effective protection of Chinese personnel and resources and contributed to restoring order and peace in the disputed region. As Xiaojie, the first mayor of Sansha city, testified, the establishment of the Sansha administration contributed to strengthening civil law enforcement, which was expected to "protect (China's) sovereign rights, maintain the stability of the waters and carry out effective protection and rational exploitation of the resources" (CGTN, 2016ag).

This discourse derived from the conventional Chinese understanding of territoriality. Different from the European territorial tradition of building border among urbanised authorities with mutual recognition and defensive power (Sassen, 2008: 29), Chinese territorial convention tends to grant the emperor the absolute territorial power to decide whether a territory should be urbanised or de-urbanised. This means that Chinese territoriality treats territories as places to be planned and managed by the central regime rather than organic nodes that confer sovereignty. The central empire, since the Qin Dynasty, has established a hierarchical administrative order which ensures that political orders penetrate from the centre to the county levels, right to the end of the empire's outreach. Within this authoritarian system, "the addition, elimination, adjustments and merger of territorial units have always been strategies designed by the state to cope with changing political and economic circumstances nationally and/or locally" (Ming, 2016: 226). This is why, in Ming's (2016: 239) words, "many Westerners think that Sansha was made a city… as a kind of colonisation of the South China Sea… [but] Chinese territoriality imagines Sansha as a territory with a city."

CGTN has attempted to counterattack international criticism against colonisation through Sansha city by emphasising that administration building is a conducive practice for the resources and populations to be rationally managed under effective control. More profoundly, it is a process whereby *CGTN* applied the Chinese understanding of territoriality into legitimising the territorialisation of the South China Sea islands, which thus moulded the regional development plan according to the needs of central government, not vice versa.

Second, China's effective control over the South China Sea area was substantiated by China's infrastructure building activities, which proved China's investment in its claimed territory and the life-sustaining capacity of the territorial islands. Constructions on the islands such as civil airports, hospitals and lighthouses were visually presented to materialise China's infrastructure building investment. As shown in clip *CGTN* (2016j), the operation of new

civil aircraft in the *Zhubi* (Subi) Reef marked the operating of a new civil airport besides the existing civil aviation facilities on *Huayang*, *Yongshu* and *Meiji* Reefs (see Figure 5-19). The image shows the Chinese national flag and a plane from China Southern Airline being used as visual cues to signal China's civil aviation operation in the *Zhubi* Reef, evidencing China's strategic infrastructure building there.

Figure 5-20 shows a hospital, which can be identified by the Chinese characters on the building, "Heal the wounded and rescue the dying; serve both civilians and army" (CGTN, 2016j). This presentation of the hospital was used to evidence the *Zhubi* Reef's life-sustaining capacity, a capacity that distinguishes an island from a rock in international law. Thus, the presentation of the hospital and airports deliberately contribute to the narrative that China legitimately enjoys economic rights over maritime features such as *Zhubi* Reef within their 12 nautical miles of territorial sea and 200 nautical miles of exclusive economic zone. This visual representation of infrastructure has thus reconfigured the frontier of China's imagined territory from the mainland coastline to the edge of the *Nansha* Islands deep in the bottom of the U-shape of the 'nine-dash line'. According to *CGTN*, this not only consolidated China's sovereignty over the disputed territories but enabled China to fulfil its international responsibilities. As the anchor said, the facilities "will offer aid under any emergency circumstances, experts say the move shows China's determination to fulfil its international responsibilities and commitments to promote development and peace in the region" (CGTN, 2016j). This narration posited China as a responsible public good provider that not only offered physical infrastructure but supplied medical services to regional actors. Overall, the territorial narrative that perceived infrastructure building as evidence of China's effective control over the maritime features in the South China Sea was formulated to reinforce China's aspirational international image as a responsible great power.

Figure 5-19 *CGTN*'s footage of an airplane, air crew and national flags

Source: clip *CGTN* (2016j)

Figure 5-20 *CGTN*'s footage of an hospital on a South China Sea island

Source: clip *CGTN* (2016j)

Scientifically protecting the eco-environment of the South China Sea formed the third argument for China's effective control narrative. *CGTN* focused on China's scientific research and environmental protection of the South China Sea. As the voiceover started to narrate at the beginning of *CGTN* (2016z):

> Monitoring the coral reefs in the South China Sea. For the past decade Chinese scientists have been closely watching the coral habitat on the seabed and their findings were alarming.

The clip cited the remarks of Zhang Yuyang, a scientist from the South China Sea Institute of Oceanology, to confirm the environmental sensitivity of Chinese policymakers and scientific researchers:

> We found there's been rapid loss of offshore coral reef habitats in the South China Sea and the coral cover in the archipelagos has declined sharply to as little as just one percent and the dire problem continues (CGTN, 2016aa).

In *CGTN*'s mediation, China's environmental protection went beyond scientific research to public education. As Chen Yihu, a fisherman on Yongshu island, said:

> We have been educated not to cut trees for cooking, not to kill young birds and in June to stop fishing for three months. All these measures are meant to preserve the ecosystem (CGTN, 2016s).

Chen's testimony tried to highlight the Chinese government's educational investment in mobilising the public to protect the environment of the South China Sea islands. It corresponded to the Confucian idea of having the government serve as a teacher rather than a server to the public. This can be traced to Zhu Xi's *Reading of the Analects*, which demands the ruler not only educates people with moral ethics but taught them proper farming techniques and trained them as disciplined soldiers (*Jiaominzhe，Jiaozhixiaozhongti, Xing zhixing, Wunongjiangwuzhifa*) (Zhu, 1958: 136). Thus, *CGTN* endeavoured to depict the Chinese government as a moral ruler according to Confucian ideals that educated people with scientific knowledge and supported them with practical framing techniques. Internationally, *CGTN* portrayed the Chinese government as an environmentally sensitive player guiding the production activities of Chinese inhabitants.

What the programme failed to cover, however, was the environmental damage that China's land reclamation, overfishing and oil drilling posed to the ecosystem of the South China Sea. China's massive sand-dredging, as the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (2016) observed, broke up coral reefs in the Spratly area, and destroyed the food supply of marine fish. Hydrocarbon drilling projects such as the *Haiyang Shiyou* (Offshore Oil) 981 platforms,

are also considered to cause water and air pollution with risks of leaking. Without presenting the whole implications of China's marine activities, *CGTN* developed a one-sided defence of China's environmental guardianship. This discourse, on the one hand, attempted to refute the Western criticism of China as a polluter in the South China Sea, and on the other hand it justified China's claim over the region since it harnessed the capacity and willingness to protect the "the pinnacle of marine biodiversity on the planet" (Langenheim, 2015).

5.4 Conclusion

The South China Sea arbitration was a prism through which *CGTN* re-constructed texts for international relations through mediated discourses. *CGTN* tried to depict China as a responsible great power, the foreign policy of which was supported by a wide range of developing countries, despite obstruction from the West. Adopting a Chinese gaze, *CGTN* depicted the West and the Philippines negatively as sources of conflict in the South China Sea, with the former's extraterritorial interference accused of stirring up contradictions and the latter's revisionist arbitration initiation being blamed for breaking the amicable negotiation atmosphere. By redistributing credits and responsibility, *CGTN* recast the roles played by different actors in the South China Sea, attempting to promote China's international image at the expense of that of the West. Contrary to its promise to empower developing countries, *CGTN* omitted the Philippines' response to the South China Sea arbitration, depriving the voice of Southeast Asia's littoral disputants. *CGTN* also attempted to discredit the international jurisdictional system by questioning the legality, impartiality and authority of the arbitral panel. This conveyed China's view of the international legal system. Featuring a strong distrust of Western dominance over the expertise, personnel and procedures of the international arbitration, China problematised the politicisation of the International Court in the containment of China's ever-growing international expansion. In summary, *CGTN* developed territorial narratives that engaged with both argumentative rationality and imaginative emotionality to construct a myth about China's historical discovery, sustainable development, and effective occupation of the islands in the South China Sea. These territorial narratives attempted to revive a Sino-centric geopolitical imagination in East Asia based on a civilised discourse, legitimising China's expansive territorial claims within the 'nine-dash line' using rationales based on historical precedent, legality, and issues of security.

6 Unpacking *RT*'s strategic narratives

In this chapter, I will analyse the strategic narratives employed by *RT* to mediate Russia's Ukraine crisis by examining *RT*'s depiction of identity, normativity, and territoriality in world politics. The geopolitical event served as a spectacle for *RT* to reframe Russia's international image as a defensive power in reaction to the West's normative geopolitical encroachment. *RT* normalised Russia's military involvement in the independence of Crimea with the West's endorsement of the independence of Kosovo and criticisms against the West's inconsistent application of international norms. This formed a contrast to *CGTN*'s no guilty defence of Chinese foreign policy and the latter's restraint from moral accusations against the West. What *RT* did share with *CGTN*, however was reviving a civilisational geopolitical imagery that called for a transnational political identity and normative commitment to legitimising their host countries' territorial revision and proclaimed regional normative leadership.

6.1 Identity building and the Ukraine crisis

Russia's annexation of Crimea marked the biggest territorial change in Europe since the end of the Cold War (Mankoff, 2014). The geopolitical event marked Russia's attempt to retain great power status (Larson and Shevchenko, 2014), its reaction to the EU's geopolitical enlargement in the post-Soviet region and to a recalibration of the geo-economic orientation of the region. Viewing the enlargement of the EU and NATO in the post-Soviet region as a 'humiliating' status denial signal from the West (Matlary and Heier, 2016: 40-42), *RT* used the Ukraine crisis as an opportunity to gain the respect of Western powers. Normatively speaking, the annexation of Crimea served as a turning point for Russia to re-assert its power to frame the European security order (Pezard et al., 2017; Pifer, 2019). By repackaging Western liberal norms, such as rights to protest, self-determination and humanitarian intervention, Russia turned the Ukraine crisis in 2014 into a discursive battlefield to undermine Western moral authority and advance Russia's normative values (Headley, 2015). Finally, this political event indicated Russia's determination to re-build geopolitical influence over the post-Soviet states.

6.1.1 Narratives about Russia's identity

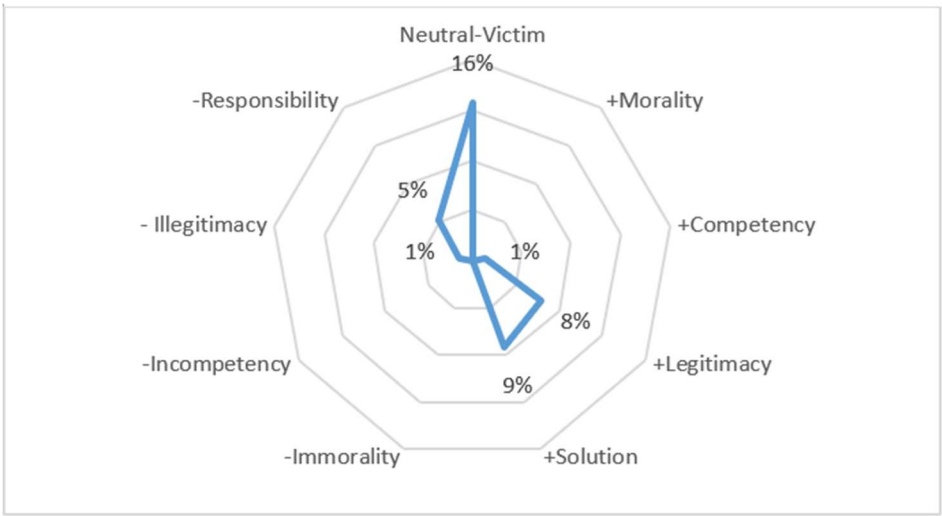

Figure 6-1 Valence distribution of Russia on *RT*

RT's construction of an identity narrative about Russia was multifaceted. Like *CGTN*'s positive portrayal of its host country, *RT* strived to ascribe legitimacy (9%) and the credit for providing solutions (8%) to Russia (see Figure 6-1). These findings confirmed Dajani and colleagues' (2019) and Miazhevich's (2018) studies, which found that *RT* emphasised the legitimacy, competency, and solution provision capacity of Russia in national image building. However, I also found that *RT* was distinct from *CGTN* in its inclusion of negative representations of Russia (responsibility, 5%) and more importantly a narrative of 'Russia as a victim' (16%).

The narrative of 'Russia as a victim' can be divided into two parts: (1) Russia as a victim of the West's geopolitical encroachment; and (2) Russia as a scapegoat of Western verbal attacks. 'Russia as a victim' assumed a carefully designed Western geopolitical plot that sought to weaken Russia, detach it from Ukrainian and European affairs, and fundamentally squeeze the country out of the 'international great power club'. Criticising the West for adopting a Cold War lens, *RT*'s commentator Mark Sleboda denounced that "the Western officials' attempted to separate Russia from the Ukraine in order to… keep it in a permanently geopolitically weakened state" (RT, 2013f). This narrative drew on the metaphor of Russia as a 'besieged fortress' which envisioned threats from the Western states that constantly "forge plans to attack and divide the country" (Kudors, 2016: 5). Like *CGTN*, *RT* positioned

Russia as a defensive power in reaction to the West's geopolitical encroachment even if Russia was engaged in aggressive territorial revisions.

As Putin stated in his Crimean speech, "Russia found itself in a position it could not retreat from. If you compress the spring all the way to its limit, it will snap back hard" (Putin, 2014a). He insisted that Russia was nothing but a victim of the West's entrenched Cold War mentality. From Putin's perspective, the West provoked geopolitical turmoil in Ukraine because they refused to accept the fact that "Russia is an independent, active participant in international affairs; like other countries, it has its own national interests that need to be taken into account and respected" (Putin, 2014a). A contextualised reading of *RT*'s victimisation narrative found its discursive roots in Putin's statement. Putin's speech set the tone for *RT*'s victimisation of Russia, which blamed the West for attempting to expel Russia from European affairs (RT, 2013h), as well as "the global bullfighting oligarchy" (RT, 2014c).

Another sub-narrative of victimisation was 'Russia as scapegoat', which presumed Russia to be falsely blamed for interfering in Ukrainian affairs when both Russia and the West were rivals over Ukraine. First, *RT* suggested that Russia was falsely accused of overseas intervention in Ukraine since the Russian military presence in Crimea was legitimised by a bilateral treaty with Ukraine. As *RT*'s anchor complained:

> Aggression is a word that you often hear in the US media and from US officials with regard to Russia's presence in Ukraine… but what the anchors and pundits often failed to mention is that Russia and Ukraine have an agreement under which Russia is allowed to deploy 25,000 troops in Ukraine, it now has presumably 16,000 or so (RT, 2014n).

Refuting the Western allegations against Russia's military invasion of Ukraine, *RT* legitimised Russia's military presence in Crimea with the Kharkiv Pact, signed between Russia and Ukraine in 1997. The Kharkiv Pact, or the Partition treaty, secured Russia's Black Sea fleet's base in the Port of Sevastopol and its military presence until 2017. However, *RT* made a conceptual shift. What the West targeted were the 'little green men' that occupied and blockaded Simferopol Airport in February 2014 rather than the military forces of the Black Sea fleet. It was those Russian-speaking, and Russian weapon-equipped, militia that the West suspected as evidence of Russia's military involvement, a fact that Putin first denied

but then admitted in April 2014 (Lally, 2014). By identifying the invading troops with legitimate military deployment, *RT* questioned the validity of the Western media's assertion of a Russian intervention. Without directly engaging with the authenticity of the Russian intervention discourse, *RT* made a conceptual shift that created confusion and suspicion about Russia's military presence.

The ambiguity was deepened by *RT*'s accommodation of a relativist critique, which put Russia and the West in a similar interventionist position, offsetting the West's moral judgement of Russia. This can be illustrated by Peter Hitchens's comment:

> Russia in this case also has forces that show there's obviously more going on in Crimea than you would normally expect to happen in a sovereign country… The status of Crimea is complicated and it is largely a Russian area, but nonetheless it's obviously interference, it is difficult for either side to point to the other and say we're completely innocent in this matter (RT, 2014g).

This relativist discourse had three parts. First, the sovereign status of Crimea was deemed uncertain so that neither Kiev authorities nor the Kremlin enjoyed total sovereignty over Crimea. However, the presence of a high proportion of Russian speakers and ethnics (Lubin, 2014), as well as the existence of the Russian Black Sea fleet, made it a space that de facto belonged to Russia. Second, Russia did not have clean hands, since the activity of Russian troops had exceeded the permissible realm of international law and impinged on the sovereignty of Ukraine. Third, admitting that Russia had made a heavy-handed interference, *RT* suggested that Russia was not the only one in the wrong, since both the West and Russia were making geopolitical investments in Ukraine. This finding confirmed Richter's (2017) report about *RT*'s extreme relativism. By denying the absolute objectivity of the media in general and rejecting the idea of morality in national foreign policies, *RT* aimed to cultivate doubts against the Western establishment, including political, media and academic institutions, among the general public. At the same time, the insufficient provision of information and perspectives by *RT* in turn justified and called for the inclusion of marginal perspectives and conspiracy theories such as Russia being a scapegoat for the West.

RT's approach to its host country demonstrated a noticeable difference from *CGTN*'s strategy (see Section 5.1.1). While *RT* suggested that both the hands of Russia and the West were dirty, *CGTN* usually made an absolute defence of China's positive and constructive role. This

difference can be traced to the different positioning of the two channels. While *CGTN* vows 'absolute loyalty' to the party-state, and tells China's story positively, *RT* strives to downplay its linkage to Russia. As its editor-in-chief Margarita Simonyan asserted, it is not *RT*'s task to polish Russia's reputation and *RT* is operated independently, she does not take orders from the Kremlin (Seddon, 2016). Therefore, the function of *RT* is disruptive rather than constructive. *RT* concentrates on attacking the Western media and political elites' immorality and incompetency rather than establishing a grandiose Russian national image, since the latter wouldlargely backfire with an aversion to self-promoting styles of propaganda. In Richter's (2017: 3) words, an extreme relativistic logic is applied by *RT* to generate a 'reality limbo' that undermines individual rationality by feeding the audience with "uncertainty, confusion, and doubt" and compromises social stability by disabling meaningful discussion.

6.1.2 Narratives about the Western identity

As a direct stakeholder in the Ukraine crisis, the West enjoyed a high visibility in *RT*'s coverage (in 81% of the clips). Within this, contrary to *CGTN*'s over-presentation of the US, *RT* granted ample visibility to European actors (70%) and US actors (50%). However, American actors (64%) such as Victoria Nuland (e.g. RT, 2013c) and John Kerry (e.g. RT, 2014h) were given more chance to speak on *RT* than their European counterparts (36%), such as Catherine Aston and Angela Merkel (e.g. RT, 2014b). The reason why US players were more vocal than Europeans was because *RT* was attempting to frame the West as a fragmented entity, within which the US held control and manipulated the EU into containing Russia in America's national interests. This was best illustrated by a scholarly comment made by William Engdahl, who observed that the "EU simply acts as a proxy for Washington to essentially strip Ukraine from Russia and we can isolate Russian even more" (RT, 2013n). Resembling *CGTN* in this stance, *RT*'s presentation of the 'West' was majorly negative, only with a more noticeable responsibility accusation and a parallel immorality judgement (see Figure 6-2). They formed two pillars of *RT*'s Western identity narratives: the West as a responsibility holder for Ukraine's economic turmoil and the EU as an unreliable collaborator.

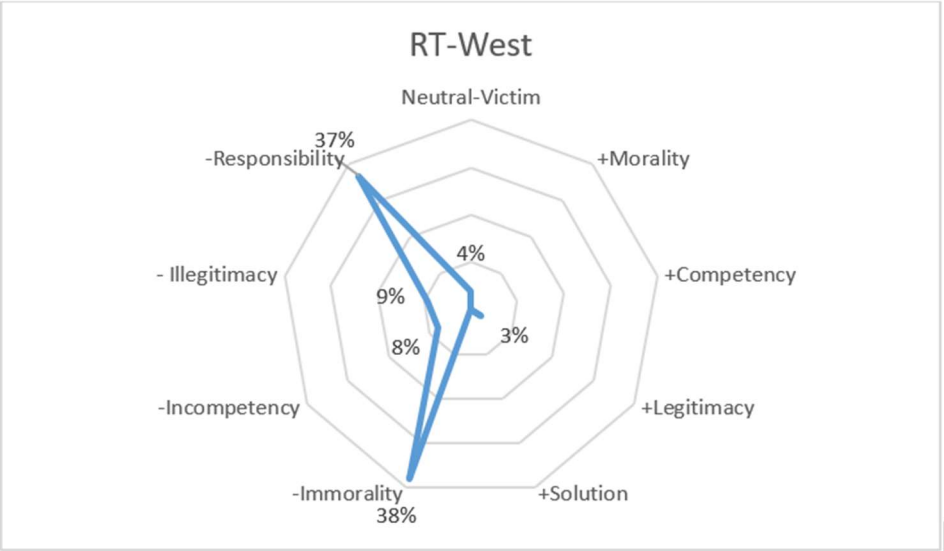

Figure 6-2 Valence distribution of the West on *RT*

RT's portrayal of the West inherited the institutional legacy of the Soviet propaganda regime. In the Cold War era, the West, according to Soviet propaganda, was symbolised as the source of evil, bigoted imperialism and capitalist oppression. The US was particularly touted as the origin of political turmoil during the whole Cold War (Barghoorn, 2015; Shultz & Godson, 1984: 56), with the examples of the US's military aggression in Cuba, Congo, Vietnam and Berlin (Shultz and Godson, 1984: 60). Soviet propaganda suggested that collaboration between the US and the EU was fragile, as the 'disunity in alliance' frame constantly emerged to highlight transatlantic conflicts (Shultz and Godson, 1984). This wedge-driving tactic was found to be inherited by *RT* in its demonisation of the US while stressing the fragility of the EU.

In this section, I firstly analysed *RT*'s *responsibility* frame concerning the West, which accused Western states of being responsible for stirring up chaos in Ukraine and causing economic recession, and secondly *RT*'s *immorality* frame about the West that emphasised its dishonesty and unreliability as an economic and political partner.

First, *RT*'s identity narrative of the West as a responsibility holder accused Western states of being responsible for Ukraine's economic losses after joining the Eastern partnership programme. From *RT*'s perspective, the agreement between Ukraine and the EU was a plan for an 'economic land grab' on behalf of the EU. The signing of this deal would imply an

"economic collapse" (RT, 2013j, 2014g) or "economic suicide" for Ukraine (RT, 2013d, 2013h, 2013a). Within *RT*'s mediation, collaborating with the EU would damage Ukraine's economy by causing the collapse of its manufacturing industry, a rise in unemployment, and, more directly relevant for Russia, sacrifice Ukraine's "customs privileges it enjoys with Russia" (RT, 2013e). By comparing the association agreement to a suicide note (RT, 2013e), *RT* aimed to dissuade the audience in Eastern Europe, including Ukrainians, against joining EU's eastward-facing economic integration programmes.

Moreover, the EU was portrayed as a high-handed partner that intended to extend its regulatory boundary at the expense of its trading partners' economic autonomy. As British scholar Robert Oulds stated, economic cooperation with the EU meant that Ukraine "will have to enforce EU regulations with very little input into those laws. That will be very damaging for the Ukrainian economy" (RT, 2013m). A complementary narrative that further discredited the EU's cooperation emphasised its incompetency and dishonesty. On the macro level, citing the former US congressman Ron Paul's words, *RT* questioned the EU's capacity to provide financial support for its trading partners. Europeans, as Paul says, "right now have to bail out some of their own countries like Greece and Italy" therefore they would lack the capital resources to rescue Ukraine's economy during a challenging transition (RT, 2014p). At the micro level, *RT* mobilised populist aversion against expansionist rescue investments within the European debt crisis; as a Spanish interviewee complained "if we don't have money for us how can we give it to Ukraine?" (RT, 2014v). The incompetency discourse implied that rescuing Ukraine would cause an unnecessary burden for EU members, thus undermining the EU's economic growth. Overall, *RT*'s sub-narrative of the EU being responsible for destroying the Ukrainian economy focused on portraying the EU as an incompetent and detrimental collaborator, that not only would destroy the trading partner's economy but created a backlash for its own, wider economy.

Second, *RT* levelled moral condemnation against the West for its lack of integrity and trustworthiness in political-economic collaboration. Economically, *RT* hinted that the EU did not have the sincerity to deliver the €15 billion promised to compensate for the economic losses that it would cost Ukraine to "modernise and join the club" (RT, 2013l). In Yury Boyko, the Vice Prime Minister of Yanukovych government's words, "We haven't gotten a clear signal from our European neighbours that the losses, which we suffered in the last four months, will be compensated by entering new markets" (RT, 2013d). *RT* demonstrated that

the EU would fail to satisfy its trading partners' needs for their new entry into the EU market. *RT*'s commentator Patrick Young mocked the gap between the EU's geopolitical ambition and its disingenuous promise: the EU "are saying of course we're going to be here. We're gonna provide money, our cheque book is open, but unfortunately somebody seems to have lost the pen" (RT, 2014k). As a frequent contributor to *RT*, Young enriched the narrative of the EU as a dishonest actor by emphasising that the EU promised economic compensation to Ukraine beyond its capacity and willingness in order to mould its eastward alliance.

Politically, *RT* attacked the integrity of the EU for creating an illusion of EU membership for Ukraine that it could not grant. The contrast was illustrated by juxtaposing Polish MEP Jacek Protasiewicz-Vpof's live speech to Euromaidan protestors, "You are part of Europe and we will support you forever" (RT, 2013a), and the *RT* reporter's debunking comment that even the Ukrainians realised that "they will not be part of the European Union anytime soon, probably not in the next 50 years." (RT, 2013m). The contrast indicated the discrepancy between EU politicians' promises for political integration with Ukraine and Ukraine's de facto arduous path to joining the EU. This discrepancy was highlighted by *RT* to question the sincerity of the EU as a political partner in forming political collaborations with Eastern European applicant states.

Overall, *RT* presented the West as a responsibility holder and unreliable partner in economic and political collaboration through the selective presentation of perspectives and facts. What *RT* failed to cover, at least within the investigated corpus, was that the EU did manage to mobilise more than €15 billion in grants and loans to support the reform process of Ukraine in the aftermath of the Ukraine crisis (European Union External Action Service, 2020). Moreover, visa liberalisation and an education integration policy towards Ukraine have both been in place since 2014 to support the political, academic and identity integration between the EU and Ukraine, which to some extent fulfilled the EU's promise to accelerate economic and political integration (European Union External Action Service, 2020). Thus, it is safe to argue that *RT* cherry-picked and truncated the Eurosceptic perspectives to question the capacity, sincerity and integrity of the EU, or the West in general, in international cooperation.

6.1.3 Narratives about Ukraine's identity

RT's mediation of Ukrainian actors was divided along the lines of pro- and anti-Russian standpoints. While the pro-Russian Yanukovych administration, and the police affiliated to it, were cast in a positive-neutral light, exemplified in the corpus by 24% of *victim* actor frame and 17% of *legitimacy* frame; the pro-EU interim government and the protestors rallying round its flag were exclusively negatively presented with *responsibility* (36%) and *illegitimacy* (39%) actor frames (see Figure 6-3). In this section, I explain how the relationship between Ukraine's Yanukovych government and the Ukrainian opposition was structured in two opposing dimensions: responsible opposition *versus* victim police force; and legitimate Yanukovych government *versus* illegitimate opposition protestors.

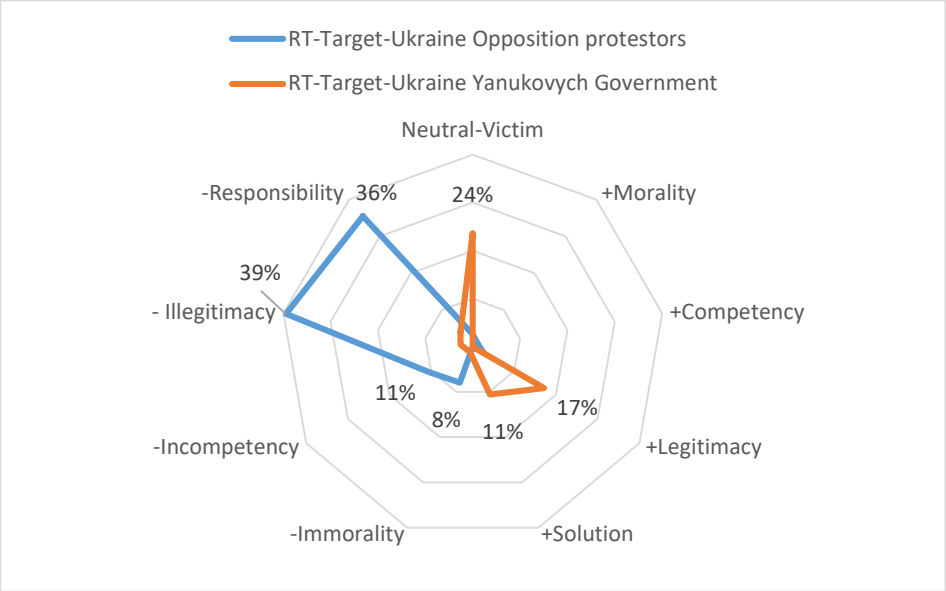

Figure 6-3 Valence distribution of Ukraine on *RT*

First, *RT* framed the relationship between protestors and police in the dichotomy 'aggressors versus defenders', which attributed the responsibility for violence to the protestors and victimised the Yanukovych government. This contradicted the 'democracy versus dictatorship' frame employed by Western mainstream media in their representation of the pro-EU protest in Ukraine (Boyd-Barrett, 2017). I have used a comparative visual analysis of two photos juxtaposed by *RT* in clip *RT* (2013n) to analyse *RT*'s deconstruction of Western identity narratives and re-attribution of responsibility and legitimacy between politics and

protesters. I argue that *RT* has constructed identity narratives concerning Ukraine strategically in terms of composition, shots and lighting of visual representations.

RT presented two photos, one taken by the *Washington Post* (see Figure 6-4) and another taken by *RT* itself in clip *RT* (2013n). I analyse how the compositions of the two photos attributed violence to different actors. Both photos adopted a dialogical structure, with the intersection falling on weapons: a rifle and a baton. Accordingly, the central theme of the photos was to highlight the bearers of weapons as imposers of violence and the victims of violence as defenders. In the *Washington Post*'s photo, the police are depicted as 'murderers' with their guns pointed to the right. In this photo, the audience were encouraged to imagine and sympathise with the invisible target as the defenceless protestors (see Figure 6-4). However, in *RT'*s photo, batons are held high in the hands of protestors with a tendency to fall on the police who are huddled in the top-right corner of the photo. This composition positioned the police as violence takers against the aggressive protestors and encourages the audience to identify and sympathise with the Ukrainian police.

Moreover, different types of camera shots put the audience in different positions, which encourage different emotional connections between the audience and the represented actors. The *Washington Post'*s photo was taken with a long shot, which positioned the audience at a neutral witness point of view with no emotional connection to the policemen. *RT*'s photo, however, was taken over the shoulder of the protestors and directed towards the policemen, enabling the audience to register the fear and pain of the police (see Figure 6-5). The protestors in these photos have been positioned with their backs towards the camera, thus disabling an emotional connection between audience and protestors, although from the actions of the protestors, the audience could imagine the hatred and anger that drove the violent actions of the protestors.

The use of light also played a role in constructing a violent aesthetic. In *RT*'s photo, the light comes from the lower left-hand side, concentrating on the hand of the protestor that holds the baton. The contradiction between the policemen featured in a dark black colour and the violence symbolised by the hands holding the batons confirmed the identity of protestors as violence initiators and the policemen as violence receivers.

Thus, *RT* cast the policemen as victims and the protestors as aggressors according to their pro- or anti-Russia political position. With strategic use of visual languages, positionality,

shot and light, *RT* invalidated the Western narrative of 'democracy versus dictatorship' in the mediation of protest in authoritarian states and constructed a counter-hegemonic visual narrative that relocated responsibility and victimhood in the contradiction between protestors and political authorities. As the domestic political contest of the Ukraine crisis was subject to a competitive international force between EU and Russia, in the next part, I further elaborate on how *RT* delegitimised the Ukrainian protestors.

Figure 6-4 *RT*'s footage of the Ukrainian police; photograph taken by The Washington Post

Source: clip *RT* (2013n)

Figure 6-5 *RT*'s footage of the Ukrainian police and protestors; photograph taken by *RT*

Source: clip *RT* (2013n)

Second, under this renewed dichotomy, *RT* delegitimised Ukrainian protestors (37%) with a wide range of strategies including radicalisation, trivialisation, and unpopularity. Here I have defined radicalisation as a mediational strategy to undermine the legitimacy of the referent objects by emphasising their ideational commitment to extremist ideas such as ultra-nationalism, fascism and violence. To this end, *RT* engaged with the Western audience by comparing Svoboda, a crucial political party in the Ukraine crisis, with other alt-right populist parties in Europe. In the same clip, John Laughland remarked that:

> Svoboda is at the European level affiliated with various extreme right and near fascist political parties like Jobbik in Hungary, the Fratelli d'Italia in Italy and the Front National in France, these parties are always attacked by the European elites as being anti-democratic, anti-European parties whose role should be reduced to the minimum (RT, 2014o).

This comparison functioned to inspire Western viewers to mobilise their socio-cultural understanding of the alt-right movements within their home countries to identify the Ukrainian protestors as anti-establishment and anti-democratic activists, though they were waving the flag of democracy. To further strengthen the radicalisation frame, *RT* stressed the violent elements in the protest and generalised them to the whole protestor group. For

instance in clip *RT* (2014p), John Laughland stated that "the so-called pro-European opposition has violence in its DNA", saying of the leader of the main political party mobilising the Ukrainian protest, "Klitschko is primarily known as a boxer", and the "name of his party [Ukrainian Democratic Alliance for Reform (UDAR)[22]] encapsulates and expresses a notion of violence, a notion of aggressive violence" (RT, 2014o). Here *RT* transferred the former occupation of the opposition leadership into a generalised characteristic of the protestors, intentionally misleading the audience to linking the violence involved in professional boxing with the nature of the protestors. The conceptual shift allowed *RT* to delegitimise the protestors by emphasising their commitment to extremist values and violent behaviours.

Based on social norms that link rationality with masculinity and maturity, emotionality with femininity and childhood (Ross-Smith and Kornberger, 2004), *RT* used the child-like celebration of the protestors to deny their ability to understand the situation and suggested that they were manipulated by pro-Western politicians. In media studies, a frequently used mediational technique to trivialise protestors is to highlight the protestors' 'childlike' behaviours, such as dancing in the streets, playing games, and so on to undermine their rationality and therefore the public credibility of protestors in a social movement (Shahin et al., 2016: 145).

This trivialisation tactic can be best illustrated by William Engdahl's sarcastic comment about the protestors, "there's a genuine belief in Santa Claus by many children, but that doesn't mean Santa Claus exists" (RT, 2013n). Engdahl compared the protestors' obsession with ideal democracy with children's naïve beliefs in Santa Claus, which worked to juvenilise the protestors and degraded them as irrational puppets "since they get on the streets out of emotion not out of rational logic" (RT, 2013n). He moved on to compare the Ukrainian protestors with the Orange Revolution back in 2004 and indicated their common sponsorship from the United States:

> People get on the streets out of emotion, not out of reasoned logic in most cases. In Tahrir Square in Egypt, the emotion was freedom democracy and that was

[22] The acronym of the partly name is UDAR, which in Russian (УДАР) means "strike" or "punch". This meaning is a deliberate pun on party leader Vladimir Klitschko's boxing heritage.

> manipulated by the backers of the Muslim Brotherhood, Morsi et al., to bring the Brotherhood into power and discard these legitimate student democratic protests (RT, 2013n).

In this discourse, Engdahl disparaged the rationality of the protestors and suggested that the emotionally driven protest in Ukraine would resemble the unsuccessful transition in Egypt, which created social division and political turmoil that could not be solely resolved through democracy (Yazaki, 2014).

Unpopularity was the third tactic employed to delegitimise the Ukrainian opposition. Street interviews are a widely used technique for mass media to delegitimise civil disobedience by stressing their unpopularity (Shahin et al., 2016). In the first stage of the Euromaidan protest, Kiev's citizens were interviewed to express their dissatisfaction or indifference to the protestors. For instance, in clip *RT* (2013g), a taxi driver and a pedestrian were interviewed and complained about the inconvenience the protest had brought to their life. As taxi driver Sergey Kurchenko said, "I'm sick and tired of this government but being a taxi driver is my job so those barricades in downtown Kiev actually make it much harder for me to do my job and feed my family" (see Figure 6-6). The taxi driver acted as a representative of the working class, with his headphones on, while engaged in his job.

Figure 6-6 *RT*'s footage of an interview with a Kiev taxi driver

Source: clip *RT* (2013g)

Figure 6-7 *RT*'s footage of an interview with a Kiev citizen

Source: clip *RT* (2013g)

While Sergey was portrayed as a breadwinner whose economic security had been put under threat by the protestors, Grigory Sitenko added a more reflective point of view from a middle-class standpoint. Grigory was shot from a low angle, which functioned to increase the authority and social status of the object (see Figure 6-7). He was positioned in front of a metropolitan cityscape where the skyscrapers created a sense of urbanity. His dress also

signified his higher social status, with a stiff coat and a green tie that matched his dark green collar; all these details signified his identity as a well-educated middle-class man, whose words should be taken to represent the attitude of the Ukrainian middle class:

> Protests are good. I'm tired of Yanukovych too because I think he's run his course but as a Kiev resident, I'm not sure why monuments needed to be destroyed. It seems these demonstrations have been privatised by a bunch of vandals (RT, 2013g).

Here he transcended his personal experience and evaluated the protestors from the sense of civil spirit. Recognising the value of collective social disobedience as a manifestation of democratic spirit, Grigory gave a positive assessment of the protestors and even agreed with their dissatisfaction with Yanukovych. However, from an institutional aspect, he also drew on the argument that Yanukovych was a democratically elected national leader who should be entitled to fulfil his presidency according to constitutional principles. Moreover, he introduced the concept of cultural heritage, which was the embodiment of collective memory and national spirit. He demonstrated his regret over the destruction of monuments and started to question the motives of the protestors, who were no longer acting as responsible civil dissidents but as "a bunch of vandals" (RT, 2013g). Grigory questioned the legitimacy of the protestors by highlighting their violent and disruptive behaviours, thus undermining their civil rights to participate in pro-democracy movement.

What cannot be ignored is the 'indifferent businessmen' narrative developed by *RT*. In the same clip, the correspondent Alexey Yaroshevsky interviewed Maksim Darnitskiy, who was identified as a public manager. When asked how the protest had influenced his business, Maksim responded:

> The number of visitors has increased only slightly since these protests kicked off, but now we've got a special offer menu which includes items such as tea and cake and will be open 24/7 for as long as the Euromaidan protests continue (RT, 2013g).

His discourse firstly exuded a sense of the apolitical disinterest and alienation of ordinary people towards both the protestors and the government. The message here was that the Euromaidan protest did not harness wide social support as it claimed, however small businesses in Kiev were exploiting the volume and length of the protest to increase profits and had even launched 24/7 services to satisfy increasing needs. This testimony from a small businessman worked to enhance the actor attribute narrative developed by *RT* that the

Euromaidan protestors were problematised by a legitimacy deficit due to unrepresentativeness and unpopularity.

6.2 Normativity and the Ukraine crisis

RT's normative contestation attempted to redefine the meaning and application condition of norms from the right to protest to self-determination. *RT* offered limited, if any, novel interpretations of the international norms above; what *RT* focused on instead was to fully reveal the Western powers' inconsistent application and justify Russia's exceptional violations of international law as a privilege of great power.

6.2.1 Contesting Western norms from protest to self-determination

The right to protest was the first norm under contestation. With the internationalisation of democratic norms, the right to protest has been widely accepted as an international norm underpinned by human rights and freedom of assembly, association and expression (Council of Europe, 2010). However, Western states and some international organisations have been found to intervene in some governmental repression of protests, while condoning others (Boniface, 2002). These inconsistent applications of international norms have thus cultivated criticisms about the 'double standards' of the West.

Drawing on this discourse, *RT* accused the West of abusing its power to interpret democratic norms and selectively condemning and colluding with authoritarian governments, depending on its varied geopolitical interests. As *RT*'s commentator Richard Becker stated:

> The United States government determines that some acts of government suppression somewhere in the world are quote 'disgusting', and yet stands silent when the people rise up in Bahrain or the people who are so suppressed in Saudi Arabia are even further suppressed and repressed (RT, 2013k).

Specifically, *RT* contrasted the West's active support for Ukrainian protestors with its indifferent attitude to Turkish protestors. In an interview with German MEP Alexandra Thein, *RT*'s anchor observed:

> We didn't see any European politician, to my recollection, going out to Ankara to support the crowd; what's the difference between for instance what happened there and what's happening in Ukraine (RT, 2013l).

After Thein replied that there were also some EU MEPs present in Ankara, the anchor commented that, "they are certainly lower key" to highlight the West's selective intervention in democratic protests (RT, 2013l).

RT pointed out that the West's 'double standards' were not only exemplified in its treatment of protests in different authoritarian states, but between authoritarian and democratic states. According to *RT*, whilst protests that broke out in authoritarian states were championed and even rewarded by Western powers, governments in liberal democracies seemed to suppress demonstrations by justifying values of social stability. The point was made by commentator Mark Sleboda in several episodes, who argued that:

> Senator John McCain hasn't shown any such concern for Occupy Wall Street protesters when they were brutally repressed in the United States and driven from Zuccotti Park and from the main centres of America, cities all across America, or with protesters in Europe against neo-liberal austerity measures when tens of millions received similar treatment over the last two years, indeed just this week in Spain, in the United Kingdom and in Italy we saw police repression of peaceful political dissent (RT, 2013f).

Sleboda's argument further illustrated how Anglo-European political and media establishments silenced the dissidents within liberal democracies and condoned state-led violence against protestors, while they might have done the reverse in authoritarian states. To further substantiate the Western countries' crackdown on domestic protests, *RT* enumerated the harsh disciplinary regulations that Western governments adopted on internal violent protestors. In clip *RT* (2014e), a series of offences against protests within European countries were displayed and explained by the reporter:

> As it stands, protestors in Europe guilty of riot get ten years in prison. In Ukraine it is a fifth of that. For vandalism in France, you get seven years, in Ukraine three years. Covering yourself with a mask during a protest, in Canada it is ten years, in Ukraine 15 days (RT, 2014e).

By revealing the West's inconsistent application of the right of assembly in different contexts, *RT* sought to attack the moral grounds of the West to coach and 'civilise' democratic norms. The message was that if the Western states themselves prioritise social stability before the rights of people to protest, then why should other states have to condone the extremist protests despite the chaos and insecurity these movements caused? With an explicit summary, *RT*'s correspondent led the audience to the conclusion that "so many charged the European Union of double standards when they were pointing fingers in Kiev" (RT, 2014e).

Self-determination was another norm upon which *RT* developed the 'double standards' narrative about the West. In response to Western politicians and intellectual elites' evaluation of the Crimean referendum as 'unconstitutional' and 'illegal', *RT* attacked the West for manipulating the self-determination norm for advancement of geopolitical interests using two approaches.

Firstly, *RT* cited the Western interference in Kosovan independence to establish the West's primary breach of international law. By showing video footage in which Kosovan protestors expressed gratitude to the West by stating "Thank you, Europe. Thank you, America. Thank you, Great Britain" to the camera, *RT* tried to evidence Western support for the Kosovan protestors (separatists). The Western involvement in Kosovo's independence was defined by *RT* as a violation of international law, and the anchor noted that "the US backed Kosovo's independence two years before the UN judged it was legal" (RT, 2014x). This action, as suggested by *RT*, disqualified the West from attacking Russia's support for Crimea's independence based on a Kosovan-style referendum, since it was the West that "set the precedent" for Russia's unilateral extra-territorial intervention (RT, 2014x).

Secondly, *RT* denounced the West for calling on people to respect the right to self-determination within Western communities while denying the same right and desire of people in regions that did not fit in with their geopolitical interests. For instance, *RT* used a montage

in clip *RT* (2014y) to juxtapose a series of Western heads of states asserting support for the right of self-determination.

Figure 6-8 *RT*'s footage of Western politicians calling for self-determination referendum

Notes: Collage of the talking heads appearing in clip *RT* (2014y). Clockwise from top left: US President Barack Obama, UK Prime Minister David Cameron, US President Bill Clinton, and US President George W. Bush. In the montage, each politician says the following:

Obama: "The referendum on self-determination."

Cameron: "Self-determination."

Clinton: "Right to speak their language."

Bush: "Be recognised by more nations around the world."

Clinton: "Shape their daily lives."

Obama: "Determine their own future... must take place."

By excerpting and conflating the four politicians' public speeches from multiple speeches, *RT* created a collective testimony for Western politicians to admit their commitment to the self-determination principle. The visual language thus set the tone for *RT*'s attack on Western powers' inconsistency when they denied the Crimean people the right to self-determination. The logic goes that if the people in the Falklands and Scotland are granted the right to decide their future, there is no reason for Western politicians to disenfranchise the Crimean population of the same right. The only reason that "Crimea's referendum has been announced as illegal by the G7 group of the world's biggest economies," as *RT*'s anchor insisted, was because "when it comes to self-determination or territorial integrity, the biggest clue is whether or not it fits with their own [Western] interests" (RT, 2014x).

6.2.2 Humanitarian intervention: US versus Russian style

After rebuking the West's 'double standards' in interpreting and applying the norms of freedom of assembly and self-determination, *RT* advanced Russian-style humanitarian intervention based on a critique of the US's manipulation of the same norm. The US's instrumentalisation of humanitarian norms, as *RT* suggested, had become an excuse for the US to initiate invasive wars without the approval of the international community. *RT* revealed the hypocrisy of US politicians' rhetorical commitment to sovereign integrity and de facto military invasions. For instance, *RT* showcased US Secretary of State John Kerry's interview with NBC, in which he said, "You just don't invade another country on a phony pretext" (RT, 2014q) (see Figure 6-9).

Figure 6-9 *RT*'s footage of US Secretary of State John Kerry's interview on NBC

Source: clip *RT* (2014r)

After Kerry's statement, the camera immediately switched to the scenes of the US-Iraqi War with a smash cut. The video showed a cannon pointing at the camera, which was accompanied with an ear-shattering booming sound effect (see

Figure 6-10). As a transition technique, smash cuts function to transform one scene to another abruptly, with the two scenes creating different atmospheres from quiet to intense or vice versa. Here this technique was used to generate a feeling of "brutality and violence" (Hullfish, 2017: 79), highlighting the coercive nature of American foreign policy. The smash cut that swiftly transitioned the video from the politician's speech to the war reinforced the 'double standards' Western narrative, as the anchor stated: "Regardless that the world's top aggressor accuses Moscow of being the one applying double standards at their convenience" (RT, 2014q). More importantly, it created a comedic effect. The bomb crash on the camera was like slapping the face of Western politicians like Kerry and ridiculing the credibility and integrity of Western politicians in interpreting and applying international norms on a fair basis. By personalising the normative attack on Kerry and generalising his ridicule to the West as a whole, *RT* attempted to distract the audience from the fact of Russia's military intervention in Ukraine. Here the 'humanitarian norms' cultivate a sentiment of nihilism and scepticism about international law and norms.

Figure 6-10 *RT*'s footage of a battlefield scene after smash cut: US-Iraq War

Notes: The shot was accompanied with a voiceover: "As if the invasion of Iraq in 2003 had never happened under what were later proven to be such false pretences some would argue the world is still shocked". Source: clip *RT* (2014r).

Russia, in contrast, was portrayed by *RT* as an upholder of the norm of humanitarian intervention by providing accommodation and live support to refugees of the Ukraine civil war. A visual narrative of Russia as a flagbearer of humanitarianism was constructed by an assembly of symbols such as camps, flags, and children. A sequence of shots was used as an example to unpack *RT*'s visual narratives in clip *RT* (2014f). The first observation was that *RT* used a long-shot to present the whole picture of the refugee camps on the Ukraine-Russian border (see Figure 6-11). The camps symbolised shields and refuges that Russia provided to ethnic Russians and Russian language speakers and thus connotated the protection by Russia of overseas ethnic Russians. This symbolism also linked to Putin's Crimean speech, which constructed an imagined brotherhood between Russian citizens and overseas ethnic Russians:

> 95 percent of people think that Russia should protect the interests of Russians and members of other ethnic groups living in Crimea, 95 percent of our citizens. More than 83 percent think that Russia should do this even if it will complicate our relations with some other countries (Putin, 2014a).

The camera then moved up to the roof of the camps where a Russian flag waved in the wind to remind the audience of the state sponsoring the humanitarian project (see Figure 6-12). Here the tricolour flag implied investment from the Russian government and government-sponsored agencies in rescuing and protecting the Ukrainian population from domestic conflict. Normally, children and women constitute ideal victims to demonstrate the brutality of war and arouse empathy about distant sufferers (Höijer, 2004; Orgad, 2014). *RT* followed this strategy to move the camera from the exterior to the interior of the camps where children seemed to be having a joyful time with other refugee peers (Figure 6-13). A voiceover reinforced the images:

> At least a third of the refugees are children and Russian humanitarian authorities try to provide what they can to make their time here as comfortable as possible. But no matter the efforts, conditions are certainly not normal for these youngsters (RT, 2014f).

The narration complemented the visual language to credit the Russian authorities for their humanitarian support of refugee children. In this clip, Russia was portrayed as a guardian of human rights that not only harnessed the capacity but had the conscience and benevolence to offer humanitarian support for the victims of regional conflicts. Intentionally ignoring the link between Russia's direct and indirect involvement in the Ukrainian separatist movement and Ukraine's turmoil, *RT* downplayed Russia's responsibility in creating the humanitarian disaster in the first place, instead seeking to establish the subjectivity and legitimacy of Russia in the preservation of human security and dignity, especially in the near boarder region.

Figure 6-11 *RT*'s footage of refugee camps on the Ukraine-Russia border

Source: clip *RT* (2014f)

Figure 6-12 *RT*'s footage of Russian flags and refugee camps

Source: clip *RT* (2014f)

Figure 6-13 *RT*'s footage of Ukrainian refugee children at Russian refugee camps

Source: clip *RT* (2014f)

In conclusion, *RT*'s normative narratives can be summarised as a deconstruction and a reconstruction of three norms: the rights to protest, self-determination, and humanitarian intervention. What sits at the centre of this normative debate is the rebalancing between two contradictory values: human rights and sovereign integrity. In agreement with Allison (2017), I found that Russia's state-funded media reproduced the Russian government's dual-track approach to sovereignty. On the one hand, Russia adopted a pluralist approach to sovereignty that opposed any form of "extra-territorial 'intrusion' in the domestic political and judicial affairs of states" (Allison, 2015); on the other hand, Russia has developed a legal exceptionalism in the post-Soviet region which legitimises Russia's forceful traversing of national boundaries on humanitarian or geopolitical grounds. To this end, *RT* criticised the West's selective support of democratic protest in different geopolitical contexts and highlighted American legal exceptionalism in relation to Kosovo and Iraq. This disclosure of the Western inconsistency to democratic commitment and interests was geared towards undermining the Western moral authority to judge Russia's military involvement in Crimea's independence (Headley, 2015). Moreover, the 'double standards' discourse sought to establish Russia's subjectivity as a norm setter. By judging the morality of Western foreign policy, Russia demanded that the West respected it as an "equal partner in developing such norms and also has views over which norms should prevail where interpretation of norms is

disputed or norms seem to come into conflict" (Headley, 2015: 301). This aggressive demand for respect can be traced to Russia's entrenched inferiority / superiority complex in relation to the West. Historically, Russia has struggled with a sense of inferiority incurred from joining the civilised community in the West and a sense of superiority as an inheritor of 'true' Europe against an imagined 'decadent' Europe (Neumann, 2016). No matter which tendency prevails, the West has always been a key referent other, whose recognition is a vital benchmark for Russia to anchor its great power identity.

6.3 Territoriality and the Ukraine crisis

As established in *Chapter 2*, territoriality refers to the statecraft needed to demarcate the space and to exercise domination within a border (Agnew, 2005). *RT*'s territorial narratives blurred the boundary between Russia and Ukraine and extended Russia's sovereignty to the Ukrainian territory under Russia's ethnic, linguistic, and cultural influence. *RT*'s territorial narrative projection was primarily a process of symbolically altering legal boundaries. As Newman (2006) asserted, "Demarcation is a process through which the criteria of inclusion/exclusion are determined". However, borders not only manifest as a physical delineation that distinguishes between 'the other' and 'us'; they may also exist as a 'socio-spatial consciousness' maintained and reproduced by symbolic construction (Paasi, 1995: 43). In a physical sense, an internationally recognised physical border did exist between Russia and Ukraine, according to the 1992 Crimean constitution (Kolstø and Edemsky, 1995: 194). *RT*'s symbolic mobilisation of the imaginary of the 'Russian world' (Russian speaking community) and *Novorossiya* (New Russia) sought to reconstruct the ideational demarcation between the Russia and Ukraine along the line of ethnic-linguistic division.

6.3.1 'Russian world': a divisive and reuniting geopolitical imaginary

The first geopolitical imaginary that *RT*'s territorial narratives drew on was 'Russian world'. Originally formulated by Putin in 2001, the 'Russian world' refers to an extended imagined community that unites Russian citizens and compatriots who share Russian language, ethnicity, orthodox Christianity, history, and destiny (Laruelle, 2015). The Russian language is an especially important cultural symbol to unite this imagined community. As Putin stated in his address to the Federal Assembly:

> The Russian language not only preserves an entire layer of truly global achievements but is also the living space for the many millions of people in the Russian-speaking world, a community that goes far beyond Russia itself (Putin, 2007).

Russia's elites may refrain from full-fledged land reclamation (unlike China), but they do, however, envision a widening civilisational space bounded by Russian cultural and religious legacy. In 2009, a policy was issued to grant Russian speakers and descendants of residents of Russia or the Soviet Union easy access to Russian citizenship (upgraded in 2014), which provides de facto protection to Russian speakers who face "ethno-cultural, political, or professional discrimination" in Russia's "near abroad" (Laruelle, 2015). Right after Yanukovych was ousted, the Ukraine parliament repealed the law "on the principles of the state language policy" (Laruelle, 2015), cancelling the regional language status of Russia. It was a gesture that Russia considered a brutal violation of ethnic minority rights, as noted by Konstantin Dolgov, the Russian Foreign Ministry's commissioner for human rights (*RT*, 2014b). This de-Russification policy was interpreted as a 'systematic oppression' of Russian ethnic minorities and Russian speakers, the key constituents of the 'Russian world', thus triggering Russia's extra-territorial intervention in Ukraine. From Russia's perspective, its military protection of Russian speakers and ethnic Russians is indistinguishable from the norm of 'responsibility to protect', albeit with a Russian perspective in the Russian-centric exclusive normative space of the 'Russian world'.

Against this background *RT* embedded the geopolitical imaginary of the 'Russian world' in the formulation of territorial narratives: Ukraine's interim government's de-Russification policy had compromised the linguistic rights and security of Russian speakers in Crimea, thus justifying the militarisation of Crimean residents and Russia's military involvement. *RT*'s territorial narratives started with victimising the Russian speakers in the face of a repressive Ukrainian authority. In response to the interim Kiev government's (composed by opposition leaders) cancellation of Russian as an official language, *RT* conducted an interview to reveal the dissatisfaction of Russian speakers in the Crimean region. As one *RT* correspondent observed: "cancelling Russian as the second official language in regions where ethnic Russians make up the majority, causing confusion, even among local civil servants" (RT, 2014d). Drawing on the personal statement of a Crimean resident, *RT* attempted to establish an argument that Russian speakers were being systematically repressed, and the personal security of ethnic Russians was severely threatened in Crimea. Holding a baby in

her hands, a Crimean resident said that "The more languages you speak the more you can learn and comprehend. I want my child to be able to learn all of them without any restrictions" (RT, 2014d). This statement served as a testimony of the Crimean people's fear of repression from the post-revolutionary Ukrainian authority and the desire for the protection provided by the Russian authorities.

RT used the cultural insecurity of Russian speakers to justify the militarisation of Crimea. As the political commentator Eric Draitser remarked at the very end of the clip, "Everything that is seen as Russian in any way is under assault, so just by virtue of the need for self-defence one can see why Crimea and other parts of eastern Ukraine are moving ever closer to Moscow" (RT, 2014d). Draitser generalised the cancelling of Russian language's official status as the cultural repression of Russian speakers in Crimea, thus attributing the responsibility for provoking the conflict in Crimea to the new pro-Western Ukrainian government, while downplaying the involvement of Russia's government and military force in fermenting the division within Ukraine. In other words, the independence of Crimea was reframed as an endogenic process driven by a bottom-up and voluntary centrifugal force instead of by an exogenous power.

After establishing the victimhood of Russian speakers in the face of a discriminatory linguistic policy, *RT* focused on formulating an integrated territorial narrative between Crimea and Russia which highlighted the voluntary nature of Crimean military forces. This territorial narrative was illustrated in clip *RT* (2014v) through an interview with a Crimean soldier named Edgar (Figure 6-14). Firstly, *RT* sought to establish the peaceful nature of the Crimean military with the soldier's statement. The correspondent asks, "What is your purpose?" Edgar replied that "our goal is to maintain the peace in Crimea" (RT, 2014u). Here by giving voice to the Crimean regional soldier, *RT* not only granted subjectivity to the Crimean military forces but portrayed the Crimean militias as contributors and guardians of regional peace.

Figure 6-14 *RT*'s footage of Pro-Russian Ukraine self-defence force

Source: clip *RT* (2014v)

Moreover, *RT*'s journalist guided Edgar to highlight the voluntary nature of the self-defence force. The correspondent asked, "Did you self-organise or do your honour some sort of command?". Edgar replied that "We have people who are in senior command, we organised all of these ourselves" (RT, 2014u). The correspondent continued, "Did you see any Russian soldiers here or military hardware?" Edgar's response ridiculed the question: "People dressed like me in the city are in the same defence groups and are those who keep law and order here" (RT, 2014u). Edgar's statement confirmed the voluntary nature of the Crimean local defence forces. This confirmed Russia's official line: Putin denied Russia's involvement in the Crimean militia and asserted that the 'little green men' equipped in Russian-style weapons and uniforms were "local-defence units" who could have bought the uniforms from local stores (Putin, 2014a).

However, *RT*'s discourse on the voluntary Crimean self-defence army was contradictory to Russia's de facto military involvement in the annexation of Crimea. One month after the Crimean referendum (17th April 2014), Putin admitted that Russia did deploy Russian Black Sea troops to support the separatism in Crimea. As he said in a televised talk in the aftermath of the Crimean crisis, "Of course our troops stood behind Crimea's self-defence forces" (Reuters, 2014). This proved that *RT*'s discursive rebuttal of Russia's military interference involved deception and misinformation. The misleading information contributed to covering

up Russia's military actions on the ground and delaying responses by Ukraine and the EU (Lange-Ionatamišvili, 2014).

To conclude, the concept of the 'Russian world' served as a fundamental imaginary for *RT* to construct a territorial narrative. The re-definition of the Crimean self-determination referendum contributed to complementing *RT*'s territorial narrative by offering a solution to the ethnic and linguistic repression faced by Russian speakers in Crimea and the eastern Ukraine region. If the monopoly of legitimate force is a signal of state sovereignty, then the development of self-organised local forces provided both a constitutional and violent guarantor of regional autonomy for Crimea. In other words, the voluntary nature of the local militia in regional law enforcement and security preservation legitimised the de facto division between Crimea and mainland Ukraine, though not necessarily de jure. Russia's indirect and subtle support for Crimean self-defence, on the one hand, crossed over the division line between Crimea and Ukraine, and, on the other hand, overstretched the national border to the Ukrainian territory occupied by Russian speakers, Russian ethnics, and those under the Russian imperial legacy. In the next section, I elaborate on how *RT* visualised '*Novorossiya*' as a secessionist geopolitical imaginary to further de-construct the integrity of Ukraine as a sovereign state.

6.3.2 Visualising '*Novorossiya*' as a secessionist geopolitical imaginary

Novorossiya, as a secessionist imaginary, acted as another pillar to anchor Russia's territorial narrative. *Novorossiya* refers to the vast land that covers present day Ukraine's southern agricultural and eastern industrial heartland. Meaning 'New Russia', the term is a political legacy of Russian empirical expansion over a contested borderland against the Ottoman Empire in the 18th Century. Historically, the residents of the land of *Novorossiya* had never been solely ethnic Russians; it has been populated with mixed ethnicities ranging from Russians, Ukrainians, Romanians and Tatars (Kuzio, 2019). With the ambiguous geographical region as a foundation, *Novorossiya* has become an instrument of territoriality because it has been used to reconfigure space for geopolitical ends (Agnew, 2005).

During the Ukraine Crisis, *Novorossiya* inspired the Donbas rebels, who developed a map of *Novorossiya* to direct the self-claimed independent regions of Donetsk and Luhansk to coalesce into a *Novorossiya* confederal union, though the project failed one year later

(O'Loughlin, Toal and Kolosov, 2017). *Novorossiya* as a geopolitical imaginary was firstly revived by far-right groups and pragmatically used by Putin to problematise the historical territorial arrangement between Ukraine and Russia and to question the sovereign integrity of Ukraine. As Putin remarked in a TV interview:

> I would like to remind you that what was called *Novorossiya* back in the tsarist days – Kharkov, Lugansk, Donetsk, Kherson, Nikolayev and Odessa, were not part of Ukraine back then. These territories were given to Ukraine in the 1920s by the Soviet government. Why? Who knows? (Putin, 2014c).

In this speech, Putin tried to detach the south-eastern Ukraine as a separate part of Ukraine, as if it were a gift given by an inexplicable re-allocation of the administration within Soviet territory. By stressing the contingency of *Novorossiya*'s integration into Ukraine, Putin evoked a divisive imagination of Ukraine as an 'artificial state' that was assembled arbitrarily, rather than formed organically with solid historical roots (O'Loughlin, Toal and Kolosov, 2017) (see Figure 6-15). Considering that Ukraine failed to "ensure the legitimate rights and interests of ethnic Russians and Russian-speakers in the southeast of Ukraine" (Putin, 2014c), the only solution Putin suggested was for Russia to weigh in to liberate the population from oppression.

As we will see in the following analysis, *RT* employed a map to visualise *Novorossiya* as a distinctive geographical area and create a perception of a fragmented and fragile Ukraine.

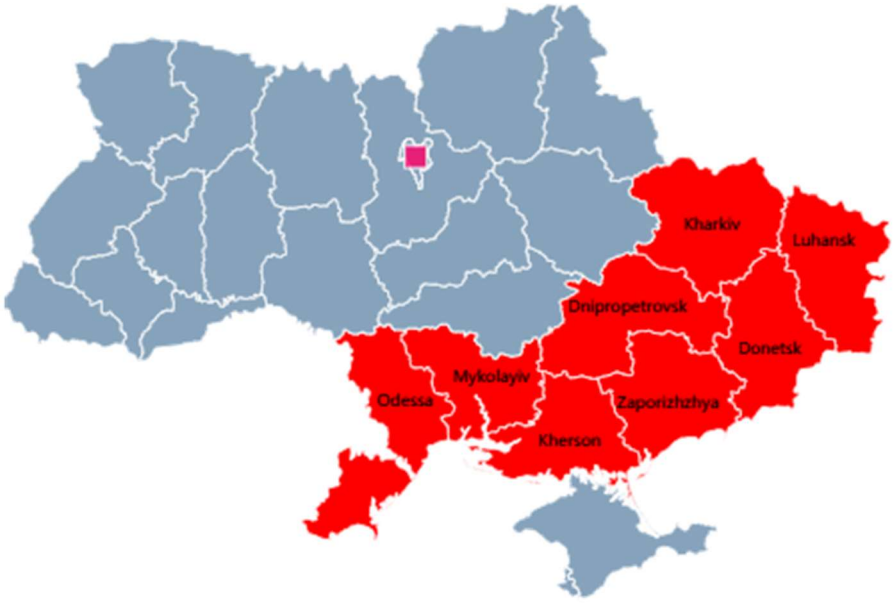

Figure 6-15 Map of *Novorossiya* claimed by eastern Ukrainian rebels

Notes: Map by author, adapted from O'Loughlin, Toal and Kolosov (2017), page 9, figure2. According to O'Loughlin, Toal and Kolosov (2017), *Novorossiya* is proclaimed by eastern Ukrainian rebels as a secessionist imaginary. It includes eight oblasts of southeast Ukraine: Odessa, Mykolayiv, Kherson, Dnipropetrovsk, Zaporizhya, Kharkiv, Donetsk, Luhansk.

Figure 6-16 *RT*'s footage of a Ukrainian Map

Source: clip *RT* (2014b)

Using multimedia presentation techniques, *RT* visualised *Novorossiya* as a secessionist geopolitical imaginary to evoke a fragmented imagination of Ukraine sovereignty (Figure 6-16). The visual narrative formulated through this map was that Ukraine's political attitudes towards the Yanukovych government were fragmented. Though the local governments of western Ukraine had been violently broken down by pro-EU protestors, *RT* suggested that the south-eastern part of Ukraine remained supportive of the pro-Russian Yanukovych government. For instance, in clip *RT* (2014x) correspondent Alexey Yaroshevsky annotated a map to indicate that the population in the south-eastern region supported the current government while the pink and red regions referred to contested territories or lands of violent conflict. The yellow region referred to the places where local governments had been overthrown by pro-Ukrainian EU protestors (See Figure 6-16).

The reporter nudged the audience to consider that public support in terms of pro- and anti-Yanukovych government were evenly distributed, as he followed up, "And you can see for yourself, this is pretty much a fifty, fifty division" (RT, 2014w). However, this fragmented visual discourse is problematic in two areas. First, by further subdividing western Ukraine into three sections and delineating eastern Ukraine as a unified block, *RT* exaggerated the proportion of pro-Russian regions within Ukrainian territory. Second, this map of public opinion may appear contradictory to the survey data that was revealed. Even among the population of eight oblasts belonging to *Novorossiya*, 44.1% of people refuted the historical basis for *Novorossiya* independence in comparison to only 14.7% who supported it (O'Loughlin, Toal and Kolosov, 2017). More importantly, the project of *Novorossiya* failed to receive support in six out of the eight oblasts included, and took hold in only two regions: Donetsk and Luhansk (Tuathail and O'Loughlin, 2015). Therefore, it is safe to say that *RT* mobilised *Novorossiya* as a secessionist geopolitical imaginary to fragment the territorial integrity of Ukraine and imply a re-integration between the Russia-oriented eastern Ukraine and the Russian Federation.

6.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, *RT*'s strategic narratives concentrated on rebuilding Russia's leadership in the post-Soviet region against the geopolitical influence of the West. As Russia's state-funded international broadcaster, *RT* deconstructed Western narratives concerning the democratic protests and the legal status of the Crimean referendum and reconstructed Russian

humanitarian interventionism to justify Russia's military annexation of Crimea. Believing that the best defence is attack, *RT* concentrated its discursive resources on attacking the 'double standards' of the West in interpreting and applying international norms. Perceiving the power to make exceptional cases as a signal of its great power status, *RT* defended Russia's violation of Ukrainian sovereignty and the non-use of force as a major step for Russia to re-assert its great power status in global politics. Different from China's discursive distance from hegemony seeking (The State Council Information Office, 2019),[23] Russia exudes nostalgia towards the European balance of power from the 19th century where a Eurocentric international law system used to direct the global expansion of great power and regulate the conflicts among segmented spheres of influence (Bugayova, 2019). Russia's desire to rebuild a multipolar world with a discriminatory understanding of sovereignty and human rights gives momentum for *RT*'s discursive project to disseminate Russia's understanding of international norms. In this Russo-centric international order, the sovereignty of small powers such as Ukraine is limited and subject to the great power politics via the proxy war. Similar to China's international broadcaster, *RT* proposed a neo-Westphalian system, where great powers respected the sovereignty and spheres of influence of each other. Territory-wise, *RT* adopted the destruction / construction approach to advance territorial revisionism. By mobilising the geopolitical imaginaries of the 'Russian world' and *Novorossiya*, *RT* fragmented the territorial integrity of Ukraine and justified a re-integration between Crimea and Russia based on ethno-linguistic kinship.

[23] In the White Paper released by the State Council Information Office of China in July 2019, the Chinese government announced that its national security promises "will never seek hegemony, expansion or spheres of influence."

7 Conclusion

7.1 Researching Chinese and Russian international communication practices in an age of power transition

How do authoritarian regimes' international broadcasting challenge the Western-centric geopolitical imaginaries? This thesis has advanced our understanding of the burgeoning international communicative practices of Russia and China, as major authoritarian players in the international arena, in the context of globalisation and digitalisation of the media landscape, which, despite their divergence in national cultures and development trajectories, are shaped by a communist legacy (Wilson, 2015b), enjoy emerging great power status (member states of the UN Security Council) and engage in geopolitical revisionism (Stent, 2020). This entailed, firstly, re-conceptualising authoritarian international broadcasting as alternative narrative projectors through which China and Russia struggle to shape their national image and frame international events with their national interests at stake. I argued that Chinese and Russian international broadcasters should be understood as key elements in the structural re-balancing of the information order between an emerging East and Global West. They push for a shift of ideas over identities, norms and territorialities in geographical pivots, Crimea and the South China Sea, that bear strategic significance. International broadcasters sponsored by the Chinese and Russian governments sit at the nexus of subaltern geopolitical text production and authoritarian counter-narrative projection (*Chapter 2*).

Chapter 3 presented a framework of analysis that broke down the overarching 'how' question into two constitutive parts: (1) What strategic narratives do Chinese and Russian international broadcasters project? (2) What communication styles do Chinese and Russian international broadcasters feature? Drawing on the literature of critical geopolitics (Tuathail and Agnew, 1992; Tuathail, 1996; Agnew, 2007), I argued that the communicative practices of authoritarian broadcasters produced alternative geopolitical imaginations. Counter-hegemonic discourses restructured the temporal-spatial order designated by the Western "modern geopolitical imagination" (Agnew, 2003: 67), with strategic narratives that sought to alter dominant understandings of the role and character of the main actors involved (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle, 2014: 109), China, Russia, the West, and regional territorial disputants. Moreover, these discourses aimed to promote non-Western norms in

regional dispute management, in resistance to the hegemonic and universal status of Western norms. Lastly, they attempted to replace the Western linear historical narrative with a recursive historical narrative that legitimised the reconfiguration of geographical territories with historical civilisational imaginations.

The thesis examined how Chinese and Russian international broadcasters – *CGTN* and *RT* – mediated two international conflicts: the South China Sea arbitration and the Ukraine crisis. *CGTN* and *RT* were selected as prime cases of Chinese and Russian international broadcasters because they are both characterised by heavy government sponsorship and multi-modal broadcasting strategies. Their broad comparability allowed a review of the impact of organisational cultural imprints on the communication styles of Chinese and Russian international media. *CGTN* and *RT* were selected for their shared flagship status in their respective countries' external communications portfolios, multi-modal genres, and delivery across different platforms. These features guarantee significance, inter-textual analysis and digital outreach. As hotspots of global geopolitical contentions, the South China Sea and the Russo-Ukraine border witnessed China's and Russia's attempts to revise the geopolitical status quo and to challenge, if not replace, the Western-led liberal order. The intense military and economic contradictions enveloped in the regional skirmishes resulted in risks and opportunities, not only for China and Russia, but also for respective regional stakeholders and Western powers. During the escalation and mitigation of the South China Sea arbitration and the annexation of Crimea, China's and Russia's battles of narratives reached new heights in rejecting the character, organising principles and plots of political drama propagated and discursively represented by Western mainstream media, politicians, and strategists. *CGTN*'s mediation of the South China Sea arbitration, and *RT*'s mediation of the Ukraine crisis were thus appropriate case studies to investigate the communication strategies and cultural dynamics of Chinese and Russian international broadcasters.

The empirical analysis broke the main research question down into the three sub-questions of what the key communication styles of Chinese and Russian international broadcasters were, how organisational cultures shaped them, and in what ways Chinese and Russian international media projected identity, normative, territorial strategic narratives. These three related sub-questions were then operationalised through a mixed-methods design that synthesised content analysis, and the interview method. Content analysis, as a method to generate valid, replicable, and meaningful inferences from systematic text reading was

employed to explore the message and styles of these authoritarian international news broadcasters. Actor valence analysis contributed by shedding light on the identity narratives of both media. The generation of normative and territorial narratives relied on content analysis. The communication styles of *CGTN* and *RT* were revealed through a systematic, deductive coding of sources and generic codes. The findings about the communication style analysis of Chinese and Russian international broadcasters were accounted for by the organisational cultures shaping *CGTN* and *RT*. Data from interviews with journalists and managers in each media organisation and document analysis of national strategic culture literature were used. This mixed-methods design effectively corresponded to complementarity principles, integrating multiple methods to cover and cross-validate divergent facets of the thesis' central queries in support of the main arguments, which are restated below.

7.2 Research findings and main argument

A core argument of the thesis is that China's and Russia's international broadcasters counter Western hegemonic discourses about essential geopolitical conflicts by a re-negotiation of identity, normativity, and territorial distributions involved. See Table 7-1.

CGTN's and *RT*'s identity narratives bear similarities in terms of their positive portrayal of host countries, negative casting of the West as well as the deprivation of agency of regional territorial disputants. *CGTN*'s identity narrative highlights the international legitimacy of China's objection to the arbitration. The legitimization of China's noncompliance is fulfilled by repositioning the 'international community' from the 'liberal democratic world' to the developing countries that sympathize with Chinese foreign policies. The narrative taps into the appeal for a de-colonization of international law among developing countries (Pahuja, 2011), however the actual resonance of Chinese narratives may vary from one developing country to another (Thao, 2019; Panda, 2020).

RT's narrative construction of Russia adopts a victimization approach. Although the treaty of Kharkiv Pact was lightly evoked to legitimize Russia's military presence in Crimea, the majority of *RT*'s discursive resources were put into excusing Russia's interference in Ukraine with the West's offense. Framing Russia's intervention in Crimea as a defensive reaction to the EU's and NATO's eastward enlargement, *RT* complained that Russia was unfairly

criticized for supporting self-determination-based Crimean independence following Kosovo's independence. *CGTN*'s and *RT*'s discursive constructions of the West are similarly concentrated on the responsibility of the West in interfering in the domestic or intra-regional affairs that transcend the jurisdiction of Western countries. The only difference resides in *RT*'s criticisms of Western immorality, which finds its roots in Russia's project to re-establish a 'true Europe' (that is Christian conservative) over a 'decadent Europe' (that is liberal) (Neumann, 2016). Both media's treatment of the country of dispute is dichotomous. *CGTN*'s representation of the Aquino III administration is purely negative as it adopts a pro-US standpoint and initiates the arbitration against China. The Duterte Administration receives a positive light as it pursued a détente with China regardless of the arbitration result. In a similar vein, *RT*'s framing divides Ukraine into 'good' versus 'evil'. While Ukrainian opposition leaders and protestors are negatively framed as order disruptors, the pro-Russia Yanukovych government and the police are depicted as legitimate authorities generated through democratic election.

		CGTN	*RT*
Identity Narratives	Self-Identity	China as a legitimate actor with the support of international community.	Russia as a victim of western geopolitical encroachment and verbal attack.
	The West	The West as responsible for extra-territorial interference.	The West is responsible for causing Ukraine crisis and unreliable as a partner.
	Country of dispute	The Filipino Aquino III administration is responsible for stirring up regional conflict. The Filipino Duterte administration as a solution provider by seeking détente China.	The Ukraine opposition is responsible for destabilising regional order. The Ukraine Yanukovych administration is legitimate government.
Normative Narratives		Questioning the legality of international arbitration and the impartiality of arbitral panel. Advancing 'dual track' approach to settle territorial disputes within the regional confinement.	Appropriate self-determination in Russia's favour Using humanitarian intervention to justidy Russia's interference.
Territorial Narratives		Promoting China's historical rights over the territory. Presenting effective control as *fait accompli*	Promoting 'Russian world' as a unifying imagery. Justifying Ukrainian division with '*Novorossiya*'

Table 7-1 *CGTN*'s and *RT*'s geopolitical narratives in comparison

CGTN's normative narratives, as revealed in *Chapter 5*, are anchored in normative constitutionalism and historical revisionism. Objecting to the established norms and institutions formalised in the West-dominated international law system, *CGTN* advocated a normative constitutionalism which posited that in the international arena, the "norms, rules and principles of governance ought to be contestable at any time by those governed by them" (Wiener, 2014: 4). This belief sets the tone for *CGTN*'s normative contestation of the legality of international arbitration. The legitimacy of international law and foreign policy, as promoted by *CGTN*, was subjected by *CGTN* to democratic deliberation among developing and developed countries, rather than being derived from a set of legal legacies from colonialism and its civilising mission (Anghie, 2006). The endeavour to replace formal legitimacy with public legitimacy can be attributed to China's developing country identity, as well as an expedient calculation to revise the international legal order to its favour. Another notable theme related to re-narrating history as a form of territoriality. As Anderson (2006: 193) observed, constructing the historical antiquity of a people is an important form of political production of a nation. In the coverage of the South China Sea arbitration, *CGTN* mobilised historical records and maps to activate a trans-historical primacy imagination of China. By animating and re-narrating Zheng He's voyage as a peaceful construction of humane authority versus violent colonial expansion, *CGTN* sought to highlight the historical continuity of Chinese sovereignty over maritime territory within the 'nine-dash line'. In addition, this historical continuity was linked with a mythical construction of China's sustained leadership within East Asia and the Western Pacific (Yan, 2018).

RT's strategic narratives surrounding the annexation of Crimea were discussed in *Chapter 6*. Rather than a strategy of legitimisation, *RT* developed a victimisation strategy in its portrayal of Russia and the pro-Russian Ukrainian leadership. The victimisation discourse directed the blame towards Western powers, which were deemed to be containing Russia for geopolitical purposes, scapegoating Russia for the failure of regional integration and disrupting the Ukrainian societal order. This corresponded to Rawnsley's (2015: 279) observation that *RT* would rather focus on "critical reporting of the US and the American media – exposing the credibility gap between what America says and how it behaves", than devoting attention to "creating a positive perception of Russia." This passion for revealing Western hypocrisy also provided momentum for the 'double standards' normative narrative, which highlighted the inconsistency of Western normative applications and the discrepancy between European normative rhetoric and pragmatic foreign policy decisions (Headley, 2015). *RT*'s

appropriation of self-determination and humanitarian interventionist norms also sought to reinforce Russia's great power identity by signalling Russia's compliance with international norms, and, more importantly, Russia's autonomy to refine these norms in practice (Szostek, 2017a).

In terms of normative narratives, in general, *RT* and *CGTN* shared a range of similarities due to shared historical enmity with the West and the influence of a legacy of Soviet / communist propaganda between China and Russia. First, the two countries have both adhered to a restrictive interpretation of international law, especially the norms of sovereignty integrity and non-intervention. They view the capacity to defy external interference from either Western powers or international organisations as a symbol of great power status. This cautious attitude towards external intervention under the framework of international law derives from bitter memories in their encounters with Western-led globalisation, when international law was used as a legitimation tool for hegemonic wars and colonial exploitation (Anghie, 2006). For instance, in the 19th century China was forced to sign a series of unfair treaties with European imperial powers after being forced to open its market and transfer land, but witnessed the handover of the German colony of Shandong to Japan without the consent of China at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 (Zhang, 1991). Russia also still recalls the historic occasion of having Allied 'white' forces encircling the new-born Bolshevik regime in 1918 (Hughes and Philpott, 2005). These historical memories of their first encounter with the international legal system generated long-lasting distrust towards the international legal system, which still largely adheres to the European colonial legacy in the interpretation and arbitration of legal terms (Mälksoo, 2016).

Second, both China and Russia put a high value on the UN charter and the derivative institutions of the UN system in regulating international behaviour. This is reflected in *CGTN*'s frequent mention of the UN charter and UNCLOS in delegitimising the arbitration's judiciary, and *RT*'s questioning of American foreign policy without UNSC's (United Nations Security Council) approval. The priority the two media put on the UN system reflects China's and Russia's participation in establishing the post-WWII system. Moreover, China's and Russia's memberships of the UNSC grant them a great power status that is unrivalled by other non-Western powers. Their participation and membership therefore give China and Russia a sense of engagement with the international order under the UN framework, driving their two national media organisations to re-interpret international law in line with the UN

charter. The literal observance of the UN charter, from China's and Russia's perspectives, seeks to restrain the Western interventionism based on human rights and de-monopolise the legitimacy of democratic system in the post-Cold War era (Mälksoo, 2016).

In a joint declaration on the Promotion of International Law issued by China and Russia, the two countries conveyed a defensive standpoint to object to "the practice of double standards" or "unilateral sanctions" that undermined the integrity and effectiveness of the UNSC (Russian foreign ministry and Chinese foreign ministry, 2016). The discourse of the 'double standards' West appeared in both *CGTN*'s and *RT*'s normative narratives, discrediting the West's inconsistent, instrumental and arbitrary interpretation of international norms. The only difference was that *RT* developed a Russian version of a double standard normative narrative, drawing on a 'mimicking of the West' discourse to confuse right and wrong, justice and injustice (Rotaru, 2019). *CGTN*, in comparison, justified its foreign policy in line with 'the principles of international law'. This was because inter-institutional consistency requires *CGTN*, a party media, to observe the official lines set by the Foreign Ministry and statesmen who tend to mechanically defend Chinese foreign policy with legal justice rather than enjoying the flexibility its Russian counterpart has been entrusted with.

Finally, China and Russia both sought to establish an exclusive normative space in their neighbouring regions. While China has sought to build a 'rites'-centred regional order modelled on the ancient Asian tribute system, Russia has attempted to revive a 'European balance of power' in the Eurasian continent that allows Russia to define the boundaries of sovereignty as well as the threshold of intervention within its sphere of special interests, while enjoying equal rights with the West to negotiate and determine the global order. China's and Russia's common ground, however, is absolute sovereignty for great powers like themselves and limited sovereignty for smaller regional countries such as Ukraine and the Philippines. The two great powers have sought primarily to establish hierarchical order in neighbouring regions with their interpretation of international norms being normalised and institutionalised within the region, without the penetration or imposition of the Western-dominated international law system, through military or legal channels.

What united China's and Russia's strategic narrative projection was the construction of non-Western civilisational geopolitics. As a way of organising world geographies with a Eurocentric imagination, civilisational geopolitics, in the 19th century, contributed to legitimising the European expansion by highlighting the distinctiveness, centrality and

superiority of European civilisation (Agnew, 2003: 87). In an age of power transition, China and Russia have been reinventing civilisational geopolitics to restructure the Eurasian continent into a multipolar system. China's civilisational geopolitics has sought to rearrange the East Asian order with "a return to a peaceful tributary order modelled on Confucian norms" (Perdue, 2015). By framing the 'China-ASEAN South China Sea Code of Conduct' as 'rites' (norms) under a Sino-centric '*Tianxia*' system, *CGTN* has manufactured a consensus under a bilateral territorial dispute mechanism that was impermeable to the West-led international law system. However, just as *CGTN* included only limited supporting sources from regional disputant countries, China's aspirations for regional leadership have been plagued by a lack of followers (Beeson, 2017). By contrast, yet with similarities, Russia's civilisational geopolitics has built on the idea of a 'Russian world', a reinvigoration of the geo-cultural legacies of the Russian empire. *RT* reproduced this Russo-centric civilisational geopolitical model by creating secessionist and unifying imaginaries. On the one hand, the historical concept of *Novorossiya* was exploited by *RT* to create a secessionist imaginary about Eastern Ukraine and its linguistic, ethnic and identity distinction from Western Ukraine (Häkli, 1994). On the other hand, a trans-national geopolitical imaginary, the 'Russian world' was activated to forge a united imagination that puts the post-imperial spaces back into Russia's strategic orbit (Kappeler, 2014).

CGTN's and *RT*'s projections of civilisational geopolitics were mediated in different styles due to distinct cultural influences at the macro and micro levels. As shown in *Chapter 4*, *CGTN* intensely sourced Chinese government officials and Chinese experts, or relied on the direct narration of its anchors, to reproduce China's perspectives and official rhetoric. This adherence to the official line derived from *CGTN*'s embeddedness in China's propaganda system. The managers and senior editors who have been disciplined by the cadre management system and socialised in the CCP's party line are reluctant to deviate from official statements in case politically sensitive media representations should risk their political and professional careers (Jirik, 2016; Palmer, 2018). *RT*, in contrast, prioritised White experts and Western official sources, especially those marginalised by Western media. This was partly due to the ethnicity of the original state, Russia, and the entanglement between Russia and the Western academic community. But more importantly, this strategy expanded on *RT*'s disruptive communications. By including the official statements of Western officials, *RT* sought to increase its viewership across Western societies by building audience proximity. Moreover, vocalising marginalised voices, such as alt-right politicians and anti-establishment

intellectuals, helped *RT* to gain relevance in Western democracies. This relevance was based on *RT*'s promise to serve as a watchdog when the Western mainstream media fails to do so (Norris, 2014).

RT has managed to deliver this disruptive communication style because of its relatively looser relationship with the state, in comparison to *CGTN*. This has nurtured a dynamic organisational culture anchored in a relatively flat and compact organisational structure. By contrast with *CGTN*, *RT* seems to draw more political trust from its central government, which has allowed it to develop strategic communications according to professional journalistic norms. Rather than installing political censorship micro-management, *RT*'s editorial line has been maintained by recruiting like-minded staff who display a Russia-sympathetic and anti-establishment attitude. With the loyalty gate being set at the enrolment level (Elswah and Howard, 2020), journalists within the organisation have been encouraged to experiment with daring journalistic innovations, such as inviting controversial guest speakers and exploiting the latest digital media platforms. At the same time, journalistic adventures that slightly touch upon sensitive issues regarding Russia have been tolerated in order to establish credibility and interactivity with a global audience. This organisational culture of *RT* contributed to boost its global popularity (RT, 2018), as much as it attracted criticism and controversy (Reuters, 2017; BBC, 2019).

		CGTN	RT
Source	Nationality	China Other countries	Ukraine, The West
	Social position	Governments of developing countries, Chinese experts	Western marginalised experts, western/Ukraine officials, Crimean common people
	Mode of representation	Formality& Authority	Immediacy& Flexibility
Frame		Peace frame dominated	Conflict frame dominated

Table 7-2 *CGTN*'s and *RT*'s Communication Styles in comparison

The thesis also concentrated on the communication strategies of *CGTN* and *RT,* especially the frames they adopt to represent regional conflicts. *CGTN* demonstrated a preference for the *peace* frame compared to *RT*'s favouring of the *conflict* frame. *CGTN*'s emphasis on negotiation as a mechanism to seek peaceful settlement of regional conflict and the scenarios of peaceful cooperation with the US was linked to China's initiative to build the image of a peaceful rising power (Li and Worm, 2011; Chang and Lin, 2014). The peaceful discourse was both strategically geared towards dispelling international suspicions on the 'China Threat' (Li, 2008), and legitimising China's assertive actions with peaceful discourses (Šimalčík, 2020). *RT*'s highlight of physical confrontations between the protestors and the police during the Euromaidan protests confirmed content analyses of Russia's external-oriented media (Gaufman, 2015; Riga, 2015; Miazhevich, 2018). Its overrepresentation of the casualties of the police at the expense of those of the protestors generated public aversion against the violence of the protestors and thus legitimised Russia's interference in the Eastern

Ukraine turmoil. *RT'*s confrontational framing style witnessed a revival of Soviet propaganda style. This style stressed the inevitability of violence and clashes among countries or domestic forces and justifies Russia's intervention (Barghoorn, 2015). In terms of journalistic practice, *CGTN* and *RT* fall into different categories of journalism. *CGTN*'s advocacy of consultation and negotiation as a regional dispute resolution mechanism can be viewed as a practice of peace and constructive journalism that provides solutions and positive prospects (Zhang, 2014). However, its capacity to convince is also likely to be undermined when pro-active measures are being taken in the South China Sea area (Kuok, 2019). *RT,* in comparison, follows the string of war journalism that dichotomises conflicting forces, dramatises the confrontational scenes and exaggerates casualties one-sidedly (Lichtenstein *et al.*, 2018). The thesis thus revealed different framing strategies for two media to construct international conflicts in defence of national interests and foreign policies.

7.3 Research contributions

7.3.1 Implications for propaganda and soft power studies

The thesis proposes a de-Westernised perspective to capture the counter-hegemonic nature of and heterogeneity between China's and Russia's international communication practices. Rather than positioning *CGTN* and *RT* as purely propaganda or disinformation machines, the thesis regards them as defensive discursive projectors that are employed by China and Russia to deflect Western criticisms of their foreign policies. It further unpacks the meaning-making system employed by the two media to formulate counter-hegemonic narratives against the monopoly of Western media in interpreting international conflicts that concern their territorial integrity and national security.

Informed by an inter-disciplinary approach, this research positions itself at the intersection of critical geopolitics and international political communication studies of authoritarian states. It refutes the artificial divide between manipulative propaganda produced by non-Western states that hold an illiberal political system on the one hand, and constructive soft power generated by liberal democracies on the other, as well as the underlying Western-centric liberal ontology and a dichotomous epistemology. Soft power does not shy away from hard power or representational force to construct attraction, and propaganda requires a basic

level of truth to remain effective (Mattern, 2005; Nye, 2009; Jowett and O'Donnell, 2014). Authoritarian international broadcasting, likewise, cannot be placed in either of the existing conceptual boxes, but calls for a theoretical innovation to capture its hybridity and fluidity. International broadcasting sponsored by authoritarian states is a hybrid of professional journalism and public diplomacy. Exploiting the vacancy left by declining Western international journalism, both from the supply (shrinking funding) and demand (trust deficit) sides, authoritarian governments have leveraged their increasing national wealth to provide transnational information feeds that align on international professional standards. Some authoritarian broadcasters, including *RT*, have gone further and engage in a sceptical populist communication, re-inventing watchdog-style professional journalism (Richter, 2017; de Vreese et al., 2018). The public diplomacy mission is designed for the state-funded media to improve the reputation of their host country, if not by self-promotion (as *CGTN* has done), then through slander (as per *RT*). The mixture of professional journalism and public diplomacy speaks to the shifting focuses of the authoritarian news platforms in different periods. As a part of the public diplomacy assembly, authoritarian news institutions serve readily as benign cultural exchange platforms during peaceful eras; they do, however, stay vigilant to 'fix bayonets' when conflicts involving their host country flare up (Margarita, 2018).

The de-Westernised conceptualisation provides a significant challenge to the simplification and stigmatisation fuelled by Cold War mentalities and West centrism. It restores the complexity and nuances of authoritarian broadcasting. The thesis advances international communication studies of authoritarian states by acknowledging that the transformative forces of the global communications order originate not only from the Global South (Thussu, 2018), but also from the Global East, a space that embodies a trans-civilisational (Chinese, Orthodox and Muslim) revival of authoritarian ideologies and Oriental geopolitical visions. While Müller (2018) largely narrows the East down to Eastern Europe, I propose that similarities in geopolitical visions and political values overcome ideological divergence. The commitment to communism has similarly been replaced by civilisational and national enthusiasm in the vast space between Moscow and Beijing, to support their reformative of the US-led liberal order, regardless of differences in religion, political structure, or economic models. In this sense the thesis has enriched the studies of authoritarian international broadcasters by adding a geopolitical dimension to the neo-Marxist political economic analysis of the information order. The analytical framework of the thesis may hold the

potential to shed light on the international communication practices of other authoritarian states that harbour suspicions of the liberal international order, such as *Press TV* in Iran and *TRT World* in Turkey.

7.3.2 Methodological contribution to international broadcasting studies

As King, Keohane and Verba (1994: 9) emphasised, "the content of science is primarily the methods and rules." Apart from the theoretical and empirical advancement of the understanding of authoritarian state-funded external communications, the thesis also contributes to the field of public diplomacy methodology. Drawing on the work of Tuchman (1980), Entman (1993), and Mateus (2017), this thesis develops an original analytical framework: approaching authoritarian media's coverage through a comprehensive portfolio of communicative forms of state-funded news platforms. This consists of characterising the communication styles of international broadcasters with valid and reliable data generated from systematic quantitative content analysis. In this research, the results of quantitative content analysis are validated and explained by the data generated by a qualitative research method including interviews and document analysis to explore the source of communication style divergence on the production side. In future research, correlation tests between communication styles and communication effects (including attitude change, credibility perception) could reinforce the analysis of international and multimodal news platforms.

This research also pushes the boundaries of qualitative narrative analysis with a quantitative frame analysis. Specifically, my adapted actor valence framework (illegitimacy and legitimacy, immorality and morality, incompetency and competency, and victim) contributes to materialise identity narratives with a deductive approach. This means that without compromising the flexibility of the qualitative, inductive analysis of narratives, the quantitative frame method permits scholars in the field to elicit and analyse the identity narrative of international broadcasters on a comparable basis. Discourse analysts of international broadcasters will thus be better equipped to transcend a subjective description of the identity narrative, but also to identify the image promotion or demonisation strategy underlying the projection of strategic narratives.

7.3.3 Empirical contribution for authoritarian critical geopolitics studies

The thesis makes an empirical contribution to the study of authoritarian states' strategic narratives. It complements the unbalanced studies that focus on *CGTN*'s policy-production circle and *RT*'s reception. While content analysis has been widely applied to reveal *RT*'s strategic communications during turning points such as the Sochi Olympics (Hutchings *et al.*, 2015), the Ukraine crisis (Miazhevich, 2014; Lange-Ionatamišvili, 2014; Riga, 2015), the Syrian War (Crilley and Chatterje-Doody, 2020), and its online reception (Chatterje-Doody and Crilley, 2019; Orttung and Nelson, 2019), corresponding studies on *CGTN* are fewer. More notable attention is paid to the penetration of power from the Chinese government to *CGTN* through the party-state propaganda system (Edney, 2012, 2014; Shambaugh, 2017). Some studies focus on *CGTN*'s operationalisation of its national strategy of the 'media going out' in different regional, linguistic and medium contexts (Gagliardone, 2013; Sun, 2018; Ye and Albornoz, 2018). Other studies illuminate the challenge for *CGTN* to strike an equilibrium among multiple forces – party-state, economic incentives and market expectations – in the daily production of international news (Nelson, 2013; Jirik, 2016). Corresponding studies on *RT*, though fewer than on *CGTN*, are starting to emerge (Elswah and Howard, 2020). I suggest that the divergence in research interests can be attributed to *RT*'s relatively larger audience base and thus the potential political impact on Western societies. Although it features a smaller global viewership, *CGTN* has earned scholarly attention for its abundant sponsorship and its significance in China's 'grand external propaganda campaign' (*Dawaixuan*).

By applying the same theoretical frameworks and analytical strategies to the content and organisational strategies of both *CGTN* and *RT*, the research reveals shared communication strategies between China's and Russia's international broadcasters: projecting counter-hegemonic strategic narratives. Specifically, through a systematic, large-corpus and manual content analysis, the thesis found that *CGTN* and *RT* both attempted to construct non-Western international scripts that re-characterise international actors, re-define international norms and re-configure territorial boundaries with non-Western ontologies. The purpose of these Sino-centric and Russo-centric geopolitical scripts is to invite the international audience to reimagine international politics from China's and Russia's positions, and to re-evaluate the historical trajectories and global prospects considering China's and Russia's thinking. On the other hand, a comparison using the same grid shows that the divergent sourcing and framing strategies employed by *CGTN* and *RT* require a cultural understanding of the distinct organisational cultures. Thus, this thesis not only provides an in-depth study of the production

and mediation process of *CGTN* and *RT*, but sheds light on the importance of integrating cultural factors in the study of other international broadcasters sponsored by non-western states, such as in Iran, Egypt and Turkey.

7.4 Limitations and suggestions for future work

Despite the theoretical contribution to the public diplomacy of authoritarian states and the delicate research design, the research does not come without limitations. Three dimensions emerge: comprehensiveness; receptivity; and accessibility of production teams.

Comprehensiveness

Primarily, the objective of investigating the communicative patterns of international broadcasters of authoritarian states can hardly be achieved through case studies alone, but requires comparative, comprehensive, and longitudinal content analysis. This research has linked the findings elicited from the two media's coverage of international conflicts to the public diplomacy strategies of China and Russia. However, the scale of this research – the limited extent of the content analysis – does not cover all the variations in communication styles of the two channels across temporal, linguistic, and platform-related specificities. Taking *RT* as an example, it has been switching between different functions such as complementary or countercultural news provider, promoter of the Russian national image and an information source, since its establishment in 2005 (Hutchings *et al.*, 2015; Yablokov, 2015). A longitudinal content analysis looking further back would shed light on *RT*'s chronological transition in regard to its sources, themes, visibility of actors, frames and strategic narratives. At the same time, further examinations of *RT*'s coverage of multiple internationally significant events, such as Brexit, the 2016 and 2020 US presidential elections, and the Syrian War (Chatterje-Doody and Crilley, 2019; Crilley and Chatterje-Doody, 2020) would enrich our understandings of *RT*'s tactics in applying an anti-West master narrative and a pro-Russia geopolitical imagination under distinctive conditions.

In addition, this research limits itself to the English-language channels of both news platforms, English being the most common linguistic denominator globally. The influence of *RT* in French, Spanish and Arabic (as with their *CGTN* counterparts), however, should not

be underestimated for their wide coverage in not only Europe, but also in the Middle East, Africa and Latin America. Empirical research showed that English language only ranks as the third most common in broadcasting, compared to Arabic and Russian (Orttung and Nelson, 2019). Therefore, a study of how an identical geopolitical issue, for instance the suspension of the German-Russian Nord Stream 2, is mediated by *RT* America, *RT* Deutsch and *RT* Arabic would be conducive to unpicking *RT*'s localisation and diversification strategies in different markets. On *CGTN*'s side, a series of studies have revealed the media conglomerate's localisation strategies in the African and Latin American continents through *CGTN* Africa (Gagliardone, 2013; Gorfinkel *et al.*, 2014; Marsh, 2017b) and *CGTN* Español (Ye and Albornoz, 2018). Since the two regions have turned into the new frontiers, into which China is expanding its financial and construction footprints via its Belt and Road Initiative, an interrogation of the communication strategies of those regional and linguistic channels would shed light on the geopolitical imagination that *CGTN* projects to assist China's geo-economic expansion.

Another aspect awaiting further exploration is the international broadcasters' interactions with social media platforms. While this research collected video clips from YouTube, it treats YouTube mainly as a video archive, rather than as an interactive platform where *CGTN* and *RT* create synergies by conducting digital diplomacy. *RT*'s and *CGTN*'s newscasts do circulate on social media, which increases the leverage of the frames I have revealed among international audiences. However, there is more to explore. As digital media are transforming the global landscape of information exchange, public diplomats all over the world are embracing digital and network technologies to advance objectives by establishing direct communications with overseas audiences (Potter, 2002; Adesina, 2017). US practitioners coined the term 'Public Diplomacy 2.0' to encapsulate the adaptation and collaboration among US embassies, BBG (Broadcasting Board of Governors, the supervisory agency of VOA, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty), USAID (United States Agency for International Development) and the US DOD (Department of Defence) in cyberspace (Dodd and Collins, 2017). I do not see digital media diplomacy as merely a new form of public diplomacy but propose that it is a revision of public diplomacy in the age of media convergence from the perspective of transmedia engagement. Transmedia engagement contributes to fulfilling the tasks of public diplomacy (listening, advocacy, cultural diplomacy, exchange diplomacy) in a more comprehensive, interactive, and flexible manner, albeit with institutional, discursive and technological challenges (Cull, 2013). For instance, collecting and interacting with

comments from social media platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook, according to my interviews with *RT* managers, has long served as a means for *RT* to strategically listen to their audience. Advocacy demands that practitioners create a web of discourse that is consistent and complementary among different media channels, yet also customised to suit divergent cultural, linguistic and political orientations (Pamment, 2016). Cultural diplomacy alike calls for operators to possess cultural sensitivity in digital interactions with overseas audiences. A counterproductive example is when a post from the Russian embassy on Weibo (Chinese twitter) suggested that Vladivostok means 'Ruler of the East', which stirred up patriotic sentiments among the Chinese public about the humiliating experience of the colonial era (Baptista, 2020). In light of the reflections above, the next step for the research could be to focus on the consistency of strategic narratives being transmitted across different media platforms and the digitalisation strategy that authoritarian media adopt to adapt to varied social network environments.

Receptivity

While this research has focused mainly on the content side, with some considerations about production, it also recognises the importance of audience analysis. Meaningful interrogation of the receptive side of media could focus first on the attributes of the audience, and second on their process for making sense of authoritarian international broadcasters. While *CGTN*'s and *RT*'s viewership data is accused of remaining opaque or being inflated (Zavadski, 2015; Rutenberg, 2017), the news channels, especially *RT*, have empirical evidence of harnessing a large and active base on online streaming and YouTube platforms (Orttung and Nelson, 2019). Therefore, one direction for audience research could be to examine the composition of the audiences of *CGTN* and *RT* both online and on television in terms of: (1) pre-held attitudes towards the host country (China, Russia); (2) demographics (age, gender, education level, income); (3) political orientation (left-right, Democrat-Republican, liberal-conservative); and (4) post-exposition attitude assessment. Another direction for further research could focus on the audience's use of the media content, specifically as to what extent the audience accepts the dominant meanings or exerts their agency to negotiate and even oppose the meaning of relevant media (Hall, 1973; Schrøder, 2016).

Accessibility

Finally, the examination of the production side of the authoritarian international broadcasters of this research is largely preliminary due to limited time, resources, and access to senior managers, as well as the sensitivity of the research topics. The fieldwork of this research was conducted on a one-time basis (August 2017 in Beijing and August 2018 in Moscow), which means that the collection of organisational culture and individual ideo-professional profiles was based on a snowball sampling and reliant on self-narration, which is susceptible to representative bias and self-censorship. A better way to unpick the organisation structure is through a tracked survey based on stratified sampling to reveal the temporal and hierarchical variations within the organisations, which could be complemented by an embedded ethnographical observation, as Wang (2006) did with the domestically oriented *CCTV* media organisation. A noteworthy difference between *CGTN*'s and *RT*'s staff was manifested in their attitudes towards recording of interviews. While *RT* interviewees all started to speak even before I asked for permission to record, the *CGTN* interviewees demonstrated a cautious attitude towards being recorded, some demanding not to. Thus, *RT* appears to be equipped with an institutionalised code of conduct in its communications with peer journalists and academic researchers, while *CGTN* does not provide proper public relations training to its staff and regulates information disclosure using ambiguous rules. This means that future studies of the media institutions funded by authoritarian state governments need to find ways to make breakthroughs by establishing trustworthy and secure relationships with journalists and managers alike.

7.5 Conclusion

The research in this thesis aimed to untangle the hierarchy of voices, visuality and positionalities embedded in contemporary counter-hegemonic media representation. As I have shown through a comparative analysis of international broadcasting by Russia and China, investigating communication styles matters because the latter mediate geopolitical visions, which, in turn, shapes public interpretations of international realities (Shapiro, 1989: 12). The selection and representation of sources as well as frame selection and composition are processes for authoritarian international broadcasters to include or exclude, and prioritise or marginalise, a variety of voices to reimagine geopolitics, legitimise non-democratic policy positions and worldviews, and challenge dominant understandings of the international order.

This thesis has furthermore shown that communication styles provide a prism for discerning comparatively the imprints of organisation and culture on media platforms. As the mixed-method empirical analysis in this research suggests, the operations of international broadcasters are entrenched in a complex structure of norms and power relations. As instruments of public diplomacy, international broadcasters are constrained by national foreign policymaking; as international news providers, they follow the rules of professional journalism. However, the realisation of these two functions is inevitably culturally shaped. "Culture shapes the process of strategy making, and influences the execution of strategy " not through a casual mechanism, but rather it is contextualised and woven into strategic behaviours (Gray, 1999: 55).

Authoritarian international broadcasting is embedded in an organizational context which, as an assembly of relational, behavioural, and ideational characters (Schein, 2017), shapes processes of externally-oriented news production. International broadcasters struggle to strike a balance between diplomatic mission and public diplomacy; domestic journalistic culture and Western professional journalism; political demands of the sponsoring regime and expectations of target audiences. These delicate balancing acts permeate various strategic decision-making, inter- and intra-organisational communications and news production practices. As this thesis has shown, China's and Russia's projection of counter-hegemonic narratives is like dancing with shackles.

Appendices

Appendix 1 Codebook of the nationality of the sources

Code	Definition	CGTN	RT
1. Host Country	The country that hosts the news media	China	Russia
2. Country of dispute	The country that is directly involved in the dispute	The Philippines	Ukraine
3. West	Western countries that include the Anglo-European community	US, UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, members of European Union	
4. Controversial region	Region that has its sovereign status contested	Taiwan (China)	Crimea (Ukraine-Russia)
5. Other	Political actors that originate from countries not listed above	E.g. South Africa, Laos, South Korea	E.g. Argentina, Belarus, Iraq

Appendix 2 Codebook of the social positions of the sources

Code	Definition	Examples: *CGTN*	Examples: *RT*
Government official	Elective Politicians, Administrative officials, speaks persons of government institutions, movement leaders	Hong Lei Spokesperson of Chinese foreign ministry (*CGTN*, 2016h)	Victor Yanukovych President of Ukraine (*RT*, 2013d)
Expert	Academic scholars, researchers of a think tank or governmental institutions or experts in a certain area	Wu Shicun President of National Institute for South China Sea studies (CGTN, 2016aw)	Robert Oulds Chairman, Bruges Group Think Tank (*RT*, 2013m)
Common people	Regular citizens unaffiliated with a particular organisation or social position	Chen Yihu Fisherman, Sansha (CGTN, 2016s)	Grigory Sitenko Kiev Resident (*RT*, 2013g)
Army	Military force, including the governmental army, self-defence forces, militia	Admiral Sun Jianguo, Deputy PLA (People's liberation Army) Chief (CGTN, 2016n)	Vasily Lobov Head, Air Force Veterans Association (RT, 2014m)

Entrepreneur	People are identified as representing, owning, or working for a large corporation or a small business	Li Manjuan Zimbabwe Chinese business association (CGTN, 2016as)	Alexey Miller Gazprom CEO (*RT*, 2014g)
Police	Police officers and maritime law enforcers	Captain Xiang Guoxiang From No.1 Law Enforcement Vessel (*CGTN*, 2016f)	Police beaten by masked rioters (*RT*, 2014i)
Journalist	Journalists, reporters, or correspondents of media institutions other than *CGTN* and *RT*	Rod Kapunan Columnist, The Standard (CGTN, 2016af)	Graham Phillips Ukraine-based Journalist
Activist	The people who advocate or practice activism		Anonymous protestor (RT, 2014s)

Appendix 3 Codebook of mode of representation of sources

Code	Definition
Public speech	Formal statement at press conference, at congress or diplomatic meeting, etc.
Pre-recorded interview	Pre-recorded interview collected in formal setting: in the office, studio or in the scenes that are edited before broadcast.
Live interview	Synchronous interview of the guest speakers in the studio and through virtual video/audio call.
Leaked conversation	Leak phone calls, overheard speeches.
Ad hoc street interview	Street interview with passers-by, witnesses or common citizens without pre-arrangement.

Appendix 4 Codebook of generic frames: peace and conflict frames

Category	Criteria	Examples: *CGTN*	Examples: *RT*
Peace frame	(a) Does it talk about negotiation and agreement? (b) Does it talk about the solution seeking and cooperation? (c) Does it talk about the ceasefire and disarmament? (d) Does it talk about reconstruction, rehabilitation?	"China adheres to an independent foreign policy of peace and a good neighbourhood policy" (CGTN, 2016an)	"In Ukraine, where the country's president Victor Yanukovych has invited the leader of the opposition to become the prime minister in a bit to quell anti-government unrest." (RT, 2014r)
Conflict frame	(a) Does the news story reflect verbal disagreement among actors? (b) Does the news story reflect one party/individual/group/ country's reproach of another? (c) Does the news story reflect any political contestation among	"China has no alternative but to oppose to it and reject it" (CGTN, 2016o)	"There is still ongoing clashes between riot police and rioter, fires still burning, over to my head." (*RT*, 2013c)

	different actors? (d) Does the news story reflect the physical confrontation and/or injury and casualty among actors?	

Appendix 5 Codebook of identity narratives

Code	Criteria	Examples: *CGTN*	Examples: *RT*
Illegitimacy	Lack of public support. Illegality. Corrupt and dishonest governance. Unfair and self-serving behaviour.	"But the Philippines and other countries not only **illegally** occupied the islands and reefs" (CGTN, 2016bi)	"Protasiewicz, who is the deputy speaker of the European Parliament and he **hasn't had the right** to voice the opinion of the whole European Parliament" (*RT*, 2013a)
Morality	Moral consistency. Goodwill. Protect the victims and helpless. Act out of altruistic reasons.	"China has been **consistent in resolving** issues between China and the Philippines through bilateral talks." (CGTN, 2016ak)	"I stand for Yanukovych, the only thing that I wish is that he would have declared the state of emergency in the country. But he didn't, because he is such a **gentle-hearted person."** (RT, 2014w)
Immorality	Moral inconsistency. Viciousness. Indifferent to another suffering.	"The Philippines unilaterally initiated the arbitration, **maliciously** packaging all of its 15 items of claims with no relevance to	"European Union a super state of humbug and **hypocrisy**." (*RT*, 2013c)

		sovereignty." (CGTN, 2016t)	
Victim/Solution	Solution: The ones who have the willingness and capacity to deliver a solution Victim: The ones who are the suffers from the problem	"China has **proposed to establish** a China Philippines regular consultation mechanism on maritime issues" (CGTN, 2016p)	"At least four policemen have **been hurt**." (*RT*, 2013b)
Competency	Financially, politically and militarily empowered to address the problem	"it will be the Golden Age of China it will emerge **the most powerful and the richest** nation." (CGTN, 2016af)	Russia on one side is the only country who has feasibly offered some sort of funding. Russia has **500 billion dollars' worth of total bank reserves** at the moment (*RT*, 2014k)
Responsibility	Causing or exacerbating the problem	"But the South China Sea is not such a case the arbitration **was unilaterally initiated** by the Philippines."(CGTN, 2016ai)	"A peaceful rally a peaceful protest at the Independence Square **was brutally dispersed** by the police." (*RT*, 2013a)
Incompetency	Lack of financial, military, and political authority or intellectual capacity	"He added that the Philippines is **unwise** to act on behalf of the	"The European Union isn't in a very good financial situation." (*RT*, 2013o)

	for effective functioning.	United States in this case." (CGTN, 2016ah)

Appendix 6 Codebook of normative narratives

CGTN

Code	Definition	Examples
Legality of the tribunal arbitration	Question the validity of third-party dispute settlement mechanism, fairness of tribunal composition, legality of PCA in territorial judgement.	"The president in question was shown Shunji Yanai-a controversial figure because of his close relationship with Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and his aggressive stance as an International Court judge of the East China Sea. To an extent, the fairness of the courts operations was called into question by the personal wishes of Shunji Yanai" (CGTN, 2016aj)
International law principles	Define the principles of international law or discuss to what extent a behaviour is in line with international law or in violation of international law	"Philippines has violated the Declaration on the conduct of parties in the South China Sea and went against the provisions at the UN Convention on the laws of the sea or un clause and abuse the arbitration procedures under the Convention" (CGTN, 2016at)
Dispute settlement norms	Define the legitimate principles and mechanism for regional dispute settlement mechanism	I think a dual-track thinking pattern is a realistic but also rational choices for China and Asean to solve the South China Sea disputes. It's important in the double-track thinking pattern that the peace and stability in the South China Sea is not guaranteed by

		China and the United States, not by China and Japan but by China and Asean. (CGTN, 2016r)

RT

Code	Definition	Examples
Western Double standard	The inconsistency in the West's rhetorical commitment to normative value and selective application of norms in different contexts.	United States government determines that some acts of government suppression somewhere in the world are quote and quote disgusting, and yet stands silent when the people rise up in Bahrain or the people who are so suppressed in Saudi Arabia are even further suppressed and repressed. (*RT*, 2013k)
Self-determination	Debate the terms of application of self-determination principle and validity of referendum	"And the rhetoric has been strong with several top Western politicians saying the referendum in Crimea is unconstitutional, this despite the West stated commitment to promoting democracy and self-determination to scores of nations in the past." (RT, 2014x)
Humanitarian intervention	Define the fine line between invasion and humanitarian intervention, the conditions for the use of force in the suspension of	"what about the idea that people in Ukraine with Russian origins feel that they could well be persecuted indeed indications that there's an extremist element within the Kiev government who indeed talked about outlawing Russian as an official language in Ukraine just a few days ago, has he not a right to protect the

	systematic domestic repression on human rights.	rights of ethnic Russians in a neighbouring country?" (RT, 2014l)

Appendix 7 Codebook of territorial narratives

CGTN

Principles for territorial delineation	Historical rights	Chinese people came to know the islands in the South China Sea as early as in China's Han Dynasty about 2,000 years ago. And that the Chinese government began their administration of the islands from the Tang and Song dynasties. (*CGTN*, 2016i)
	Effective control	Chinese authorities said that the airfields in the Meiji and Juby Reefs are preparing to receive civilian flights including the airport of Yong Shu reef which opened in January. China now has three operational airports in the Nansha Islands. (CGTN, 2016ao)
	National security	Ongoing military drills in the South China Sea. Hong said they were a routine exercise pursuant to the annual plan of the Chinese navy. He stressed the drills were conducted within China's own sovereignty and were not targeted at any third party. (*CGTN*, 2016m)

RT

Principles for territorial delineation	Protecting Russian speakers	Everything that is seen as Russian in any way is under assault so just by virtue of the need for self-defence one can see why Crimea and other parts of eastern Ukraine are moving ever closer to Moscow.

		(*RT*, 2014d)
	Reclaiming traditional territory-Novorossiya	For a better understanding of what exactly happening in Ukrainian territory, we have this map over here… And you can see for yourself, this is pretty much a fifty, fifty division...Such strong antagonism between the two sides of the country have created concerns which have been previously taken unthinkable. Ukraine may follow Yugoslavia scenario and break apart. (RT, 2014w)

Appendix 8 List of Interviewees

CGTN

Interviewees	Nationality	Occupation	Date	Location
C1	Chinese	Social media Staff	2017/7/14	Beijing
C2	Chinese/Canadian	Producer	2017/7/2	Online
C3	Chinese	Anchor	2017/7/5	Beijing
C4	Chinese	Producer	2017/7/6	Beijing
C5	Chinese	Social media staff	2017/7/7	Beijing
C6	Foreign	Human Resource director	2017/7/12	Beijing
C7	Foreign	Foreign editor	2017/7/3	Beijing
C8	Foreign	Copy editor	2017/7/4	Beijing

RT

Interviewees	Nationality	Occupation	Date	Location
R1	British (Irish)	Euromaidan Reporter	2018/7/19	Online
R2	Russian (Raised in UK, Europe)	Euromaidan Reporter	2018/8/21	Moscow
R3	South African (English fluently)	Eastern Ukraine Reporter	2018/9/8	Online
R4	Russian (Raised in US)	Euromaidan/ Eastern Ukraine Reporter	2018/8/24	Moscow
R5	Russian (Raised in US)	Deputy editor in chief and head of communications	2018/8/16	Moscow

Appendix 9 Interview Guide

Introduction: This interview guide is developed for Chang Zhang's PhD doctoral research concerning China and Russia's external communication strategies. This interview guide will guide the interview with the media professionals and senior managers of *CGTN* and *RT*.

Recoding: Audio record based on consent

Confidentiality: All the interviewees will be anonymised unconditionally. All the identifying characteristics, such as name, address, gender, and occupation will be hidden from the report.

Interview data will be stored on a secure and password university network with only temporary storage on a password protected mobile device

Conduct of interview: Face-to-Face/ Phone call.

Venue and time: Beijing, 2017, July; Moscow, 2018, July-August

Biography

1. What is your nationality?
2. What is your educational background?

Prompt: Where did you receive your primary and higher education? What subject did you learn during higher education?

3. Where have you worked before working in *RT*/*CGTN*?

Prompt: Western media organisations? Organisations other than news agency?

4. Why did you decide to join *RT*/*CGTN*?

Prompt: Salary/Job Security/ Working atmosphere/ Working in Russia/China etc.

Working experience

5. What is your daily routine of working in *RT*/ *CGTN*?

Prompt: Job responsibilities/ Schedule/ Intra-inter departmental coordination

6. How do you feel it resembles or differs from your former working experience?

Prompt: Corporate culture/ Working Pressure/ Working atmosphere

7. How do you think *RT*/ *CGTN* keep a balance between local and foreign staff?

Prompt: Are they treated equally? Are the cooperating with each other very well?

Organisational Culture

8. How do you evaluate the internal organisational culture of *CGTN*/*RT*?

Prompt: Authoritarian- democracy, Inter-team cooperation, Individualistic-collectivist, Achievement/affiliative.

9. How do you evaluate the external organisational culture of *CGTN*/*RT*?

Prompt: Defensive/Aggressive, Slogan/ brand story and myth, Mission/values)

Journalism practice

10. How do you understand professional journalism?

Prompt: Do you think it should have a universal standard?

11. To what extent to you think *RT*/*CGTN* is practicing professional journalism?

Prompt:

What do you think is the editing line of *RT*/*CGTN*?

How do you think it balance between objective reportage and public diplomacy?

12. What do you think is the main difference of media content/communication style between *RT*/*CGTN* and Western media?

Factors of Communication Style

13. What factors do you think contribute to the unique communication style of *RT*/*CGTN*

Prompt: **Organisational culture**: Government-owned media/ bureaucratic feature

Public Diplomacy Mission

14. Why do you think China/Russia's government launched this channel?

Prompt: What kind of missions do you think are attached to this media organisations by respective governments?

15. How do you evaluate the performance of *RT*/*CGTN* as a public diplomacy tool?

Prompt: To what extent do you think it has challenged the Western media hegemony?

To what extent do you think it has told a good China/Russia "story", or better communicated Russia/China?

Social media reform

16. *RT*/*CGTN* has an active performance on social media platforms. What is the social media strategy for *RT*/*CGTN*?

Prompt: All-encompassing platform strategy/ Specialised team/financial investment

17. How do staff of the social media team and TV channel collaborate with each other?
18. How to ensure the consistency channel-specific relevance across different channels?

Wrap up question

19. What kind of suggestions would you make to *RT*/*CGTN* in order to improve the media?
20. Do you have any questions for the author?

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