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## How China’s flagship news program frames “the West”: Foreign news coverage of CCTV’s *Xinwen Lianbo* before and during Xi Jinping’s presidency

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This study investigates how *Xinwen Lianbo*, a prestigious TV news program and a key propaganda tool of the Chinese Communist Party, framed a bloc of Western countries in its foreign news coverage in the period 2010–2015. The results of the content analysis performed in this study revealed that mixed and diverse images of the West were portrayed by the program. Interestingly, significantly more negative frames of these countries were identified after Xi Jinping took office in late 2012, which signaled a pivotal event in terms of China’s foreign policy. However, Xi’s speech to Chinese media workers on 19 August 2013 did not have additional effects on the program’s framing of the West.

**Keywords:** framing; foreign news; China; Western countries; *Xinwen Lianbo*; journalism; content analysis

Unlike domestic news, foreign news is not directly connected to the daily lives of its audience. When newspapers and television broadcasts report a story about a distant foreign land, audiences are often unable to fact-check the story based on their knowledge and experience (Lim & Seo, 2009). For most citizens, the truth and facts of an ongoing international event are often abstract and difficult to comprehend. Consequently, their perceptions of a foreign country are heavily influenced not only by their government but also by the domestic media’s framing of the country. According to Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur’s (1976) media dependency theory, such media coverage could affect audiences on cognitive, affective, and behavioral levels.

In the past, research on the framing of China by media in the West has yielded insightful findings and revealed similar patterns, such as the enduring “friend versus enemy” frame (Stone & Xiao, 2007; Golan & Lukito, 2015; Ooi & D’Arcangelis, 2018). However, the framing of the West by Chinese media has not yet been fully explored. In the case of the foreign news reported by Chinese media, the power of the government and the influence of the media on shaping public opinion about other nations could arguably be stronger than in the West. Unlike most Western democracies, the Chinese media are usually bound to report

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international events under the guidance of the propaganda department, which leaves little room for alternative interpretations (Shambaugh, 2007). Furthermore, the public has a limited choice of news reporting channels because of “the Great Firewall,” which prevents the Chinese public from having access to the global internet. Hence, for a considerable share of the Chinese public, the official Chinese media are the only channels through which they are informed about international events.

Among the Chinese media, the daily primetime news broadcast by the China Central Television (CCTV) program, *Xinwen Lianbo* (新闻联播 [trans.] *News simulcast*) is undoubtedly the predominant channel in the dissemination of international news. The present study is aimed to investigate *Xinwen Lianbo*'s framing of Western countries in recent years. A content analysis is conducted to answer the following research question: *How did China's flagship news program frame “the West” in the period 2010-2015?*

Based on *Vremya*, a program broadcast by Soviet Central Television, *Xinwen Lianbo* is an extremely important propaganda tool of the Chinese Communist Party. In its framing of “the West,” it represents the official voices of the Chinese leadership. The program has been claimed to have a daily average of 135 million viewers (*The Economist*, 2016). *Xinwen Lianbo* also has a strong penetration rate among the Chinese public. Many viewers, especially in rural areas, rely heavily on it as their sole means of staying connected with current affairs. Since its debut on 1 January 1978, CCTV's *Xinwen Lianbo* has been the most influential television news program in China. CCTV's channels air the show at 19:00 daily, and all provincial TV stations in China are obliged to air it simultaneously. Hence, *Xinwen Lianbo* is the only choice for Chinese audiences who want to watch television between 19:00 and 19:30.

### Theoretical Framework

Different from agenda-setting, framing is the next stage of news production, which involves “the presentation of issues” (De Vreese, 2005, p. 53). The presentation eventually may influence how the public perceives and interprets a certain fact. In the case of the Clinton–Lewinsky scandal, different media outlets employed drastically different frames (e.g., attacks by the Republicans vs. responses by the Democrats) to interpret the same event, which directly or indirectly affected their viewers' attitudes toward the US president (Shah, Watts, Domke, & Fan, 2002). In conducting a media content analysis, framing is examined to understand how media content potentially affects the attitudes and behavior of viewers (Chong & Druckman, 2007).

Entman (1993, p. 52) defined framing as “the process of selecting some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in a communicating text.” Entman also proposed four major functions of framing: “defining problems, diagnosing causes, making moral judgments, and suggesting remedies.” De Vreese (2005) similarly defined framing as the process of emphasizing the importance of different aspects of a topic. More importantly, he identified two phases in framing, frame-building and frame-setting, which correspond, respectively, to how a frame is chosen and produced in the newsroom and how the frame is eventually delivered to and interacts with the audiences.

In the context of the Western media industry, scholars have argued that the phase of frame-building is the joint effort of multiple players, such as journalists,

editors, politicians, and audiences (Entman, 2004), during which every player influences how a certain frame is selected and produced. For instance, journalists write texts according to personal preferences and interpretations; editors delete and modify the content according to their preferences; and investors and advertisers influence content by applying external pressure to create content that aligns with their interests (McManus, 1995). Moreover, the different roles in the frame-building process are described in the hierarchy of influences model proposed by Shoemaker and Reese (1996). In this model, the degree of power is categorized according to the amount of influence on the production of media content both inside and outside the newsroom.

In China, because of the lack of press freedom, an open and competitive frame-building process is not always applied, especially in top state-owned media outlets, such as CCTV. Despite marketization and commercialization in the past decades, media in China are still highly regulated by the government. According to previous studies on the contemporary Chinese media system, in the “big three” outlets (*Xinhua News Agency*, *People’s Daily*, and CCTV), political propaganda is the daily primary objective (Winfield & Peng, 2005; Shambaugh, 2007). Because these top state-owned media are directly owned and funded by China’s central government, they are the mouth-pieces of both the Communist Party of China (CCP) and the government.

Because of the special status of these media outlets, their frame-building processes often do not take place in a dynamic arena or a public town hall but in a back room where only members of the Party elite are present. For instance, in Xi’s recent constitutional amendment to abolish the limitations on his term in office, only the Party-approved frame that the decision indicated “positive progress” appeared to be allowed, whereas alternative frames and interpretations were seriously underrepresented in the Chinese media (Al Jazeera, 2018).

Because *Xinwen Lianbo* is CCTV’s flagship news program, its frame-building process is influenced by the Communist Party elite (Shambaugh, 2007). The propaganda issued by the Communist Party and the government consequently shapes the content of this program on ideological and extra-media levels. Hence, an effective channel for the delivery of messages from the Communist Party to the public via *Xinwen Lianbo* has been created. It is worth noting that although disagreement with *Xinwen Lianbo* has been expressed by domestic media workers, scholars, and the public, these critiques have rarely been tolerated, and they are not allowed to be made in public (Xu & Albert, 2014).

Furthermore, because of the show’s large viewership and its official monopoly of the Chinese TV news market at 19:00, its frame-setting process differs greatly from any Western TV news program. The results of a previous survey of news credibility (Lei, Shen, & Xue, 2012) indicated that *Xinwen Lianbo* was—according to the Chinese respondents—the most trustworthy outlet among nine selected Chinese broadcasting news programs. This result demonstrates its power to shape public opinion about certain issues through the frame-setting process.

### **Framing Foreign Nations**

Frame-setting processes and their effects are particularly influential in news reports about foreign nations because ordinary domestic audiences have little knowledge about international affairs. Moreover, because most citizens will not obtain much knowledge about international events in their daily lives, compared

to the media coverage of a domestic event, Chinese citizens are likely to be convinced by CCTV's reportage of an international event (Lim & Seo, 2009). Previous studies on how news media frame a foreign country identified and categorized two widely adopted paths: 1) How do media perceive the foreign country's relationship with their native land (i.e., the relationship path); 2) how do media evaluate the foreign country's own well-being and predict its future development (i.e., the well-being path)?

Regarding the relationship path, media tend to frame a foreign country as a friend, partner, or cooperator, and conversely as an enemy, threat, or rival of the home country. Accordingly, the so-called "friend" and "foe" frames have been developed. Lim and Seo (2009) conducted a content analysis of the framing of North Korea in *The New York Times* during a four-month period in 2002. Their findings showed that "friend" (i.e., dialogue partner) and "foe" (i.e., military threat) were the two most visible frames employed by the newspaper. Moreover, these two frames often both competed and co-existed in a single media institution.

Similarly, the findings of a content analysis that investigated the framing of the Soviet-Afghan war in Soviet newspapers demonstrated that Soviet media were inclined to frame the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) as a friend of the Afghan people, who rescued and helped them. Simultaneously, the US was framed as an evil enemy who supported terrorist activity (Erzikova, Haigh, & Sampiev, 2016). Because China and Western countries are often perceived to both have antagonistic as well as mutual interests, we therefore expected to detect simultaneous patterns of friend and foe framing in *Xinwen Lianbo's* coverage of the West.

Regarding the well-being path, media tend to evaluate a foreign country based on how well it functions. This evaluation process corresponds with Entman's (1993) proposed major functions of frames, such as "diagnosing causes" and "making moral judgments" (p. 52). The process could involve several objective or subjective evaluations of the economic, democratic, educational, environmental, and societal conditions of the targeted country. For instance, in the 1990s, *The Los Angeles Times* and *The Washington Post* framed South Asian countries, such as India and Pakistan, as lands of crime, disaster, and conflict, and their coverage focused on negative events, such as religious conflict, epidemic disease, and non-functional government bodies. However, the positive framing of science, technology, progress, and the arts, and other achievements were much less visible in the coverage of these countries by these US newspapers (Poornananda, 1998). In comparing the differences between US wire services' framing of developing and developed countries, Giffard (1984) found that the well-being path was widely employed. Based on this finding, Giffard suggested that even though every country could face crises, such as "coups and earthquakes" (p.12), in the coverage of developing countries by these US wire services, the negative frames were much more salient.

### **Framing China by Western Media**

As an emerging power with the world's biggest population, China has been receiving increasing amounts of attention in the Western media. Since the Communist Party seized power in 1949, the framing of contemporary China has been associated with Sino-Western relations, and "friend and foe frames" have been prevalent in the Western media (Stone & Xiao, 2007; Golan & Lukito, 2015; Ooi &

D’Arcangelis, 2018). In their review of the coverage in American magazines of Mao Zedong and China under his rule during the Cold War, Yu, and Riffe (1989) found that the framing of Mao’s China was closely correlated to the development of Sino-Western relations. Their findings showed that in the 1950s, China was negatively portrayed as “Red Communist” because the country then was a close ally of the USSR and an advocate of anti-Western imperialism.

In the 1960s, Sino-Soviet relations quickly worsened, which led to an opportunity for China and the US to begin a dialogue. During this period, the US media began to frame China in an increasingly neutral manner and as a potential collaborative partner. After US President Nixon’s visit to China in 1972, the coverage in the US media became increasingly positive, even conveying a “semi-ally” stance and emphasizing the possibility of the cooperation of the US and China against Soviet threats. Yu and Riffe (1989) demonstrated that the US media effectively reflected Washington’s foreign policy toward China during several different periods.

In addition, the well-being path was also detected in Western media’s framing of China. For instance, a content analysis of the coverage of China in German newspapers from 1986–2016 demonstrated mixed attitudes toward modern China (Wilke & Achatzi, 2011). These newspapers highlighted China’s economic achievements and framed the country as “economically strong.” However, they remained skeptical about China’s lack of democracy and its unpleasant human rights record, which led them to deem the country “not democratic” as well as “different and strange” (Wilke & Achatzi, 2011, p. 359).

The extant research on how China has been framed by Western media is scarce, and even less is known about the opposite perspective: How have Chinese media framed Western countries? Previous comparative studies that have conducted content analyses of Chinese media have investigated the differences in the coverage of a specific issue (e.g., the HIV/AIDS epidemic in China and NATO’s air strikes on Kosovo) in Chinese media and Western media (Yang, 2003; Wu, 2006). In the current study, a content analysis is performed to examine the Chinese coverage of the West in general. Based on the relationship path and the well-being path, six frames—three negative frames and three positive frames—are expected to reflect the framing of Western countries in Chinese media.

In negative framing, the *foe frame* indicates whether a news story portrays Western countries as aggressive and hostile toward China and as detrimental to Chinese national interests. An imaginary example would be: “A joint military exercise was conducted by the US and Japan on the East China Sea, demonstrating the US–Japan alliance’s insecurity mentality in coping with China’s rise.” Regarding the *sufferer frame*, we intend to determine whether the news story focuses on a mishap in a Western country, which could involve a natural hazard or a human accident. Examples are “A tornado hit parts of the US, causing severe casualties and homelessness”; “A Germanwings airbus aircraft crashed in the Alps, with official reports suggesting no passengers or crew members have survived.” The *failure frame* indicates whether the news story reported on a scandal, a misconduct, or a disturbance that occurred in a Western country. Examples are “the financial crisis in the Eurozone has continued to deepen, with experts warning of its potential negative effects on the global economy;” “Protesters used ‘Black Live Matters’ as their slogan – Why are African-Americans still deeply discriminated against in American society?”

Regarding positive frames, the *friend frame* indicates whether a news story demonstrated a peaceful, friendly, and cooperative image of Western countries. For instance, imagine an article starting like this “A trade agreement has been signed between China and the EU, with an expectation to lower tariffs and boost mutual trade volumes.” In the *enjoyer frame*, the news story covers a festival, a celebration or any other story that demonstrates the happy and prosperous Western public. For instance, “the King’s Day celebration in the Netherlands starts today in Amsterdam, with locals and tourists joining the canal parade to celebrate the Dutch King’s birthday.” Finally, the *success frame* indicates that the news story reported an achievement, progress, or breakthrough in the West. For example, “NASA landed a new spacecraft on Mars, advancing mankind’s recognition of the planet;” “An evolutionary discovery made by Japanese scientists which could help cure some diseases.”

### ***What is “the West”?***

The terms “the West” and “Western countries” need to be clarified before the hypotheses are stated and the methodology is described. The Western world, or simply “the West,” refers to a bloc of countries that were formed by three distinct traditions: 1) the classical cultures of Greece and Rome; 2) the Christian religion, particularly Western Christianity; 3) the Enlightenment of the modern era” (Kurth, 2003, p. 5). Kurth (2003) proposed that in practice, “the West” was comprised of the member states of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which were the best representatives of Western countries. The objective of this study is to investigate how contemporary official Chinese media have framed “the West.” Hence, we adapt Kurth’s definition of “the West” as comprising the member states of NATO.

Based on the definition of “the West” used in this study, the NATO member states of Turkey and Albania, which are characterized by Islamic culture, will be excluded. However, five non-NATO European countries (Ireland, Switzerland, Sweden, Finland, and Austria), two Oceania countries (Australia and New Zealand), and Japan will be included. Japan is included because it is a strong ally of the American-led Western world. Moreover, according to the long-standing perceptions of some Japanese and Chinese intellectuals, culturally and institutionally, Japan, which was the first Asian country to be industrialized, is European rather than Asian (Fukuzawa, 1885; Yang, 2006). Therefore, in the present study, 35 countries, including Japan, are included in “the West.”

### **Hypotheses**

Being one of the most prominent news programs in China, *Xinwen Lianbo* has often been criticized as lacking neutrality. Chang and Ren (2016) mentioned that *Xinwen Lianbo* was granted official status as the country’s most authoritative news channel, thus burdening itself with the heavy tasks of speaking as the Party mouthpiece and completely disregarding standards of newsworthiness and objectivity. Remarkably, the Chinese public has also ridiculed the show’s predictable daily schedules as “the three segments”: 1) how busy our leaders are today; 2)



how many achievements our country has accomplished; 3) how miserable the lives of foreigners are (*The Economist*, 2016).

According to Zhao (1998), the Communist Party faced internal questions about its legitimacy in the post-Tiananmen era. Therefore, it needed nationalist sentiment and anti-Western campaigns to maintain its authority and to distract the public's attention from China's domestic problems. The American-led Western world was seen as a hostile power that consistently intended to implement a "peaceful revolution" (*Hepin Yanbian*) or a "color revolution" (*Yanse Geming*) in China in the name of disseminating democracy. They had the underlying agenda of turning China into the next Russia, Ukraine, or even Syria to halt China's rising trajectory (Ong, 2007). Therefore, the following hypothesis is stated:

H1: *Xinwen Lianbo* consistently framed Western countries in a negative manner more than in a positive manner.

In this study, Xi Jinping's presidency is used as an independent variable that predicts the valence with which the West is framed (i.e., more or less positively or negatively). In late 2012, Xi Jinping assumed office as General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese President. Xi's ambition to become one of the most powerful and authoritative leaders in modern Chinese history has driven his government to increase the regulation and manipulation of the media (Wong, 2016). The *NGO Reporter Without Borders*, which ranked China 176 of 180 countries and regions in its 2017 Global Press Freedom Index, deemed Xi "the planet's leading censor and press freedom predator" (Reporters Without Borders, 2017). The question is whether evidence that supports this ranking can be found in the empirical research.

It could be expected that under Xi's administration, the Party and the government will increasingly exert their power over the media's production of content, especially in the case of a top propaganda tool, such as *Xinwen Lianbo*. Additionally, Xi demonstrated his determination to defend national identity and security by rejecting the influence of Western values, ideology, and popular culture on Chinese society (Buckley, 2013). For instance, Xi openly praised a young nationalist opinion leader who wrote controversial blogs containing anti-Western sentiment (Wong, 2014). Therefore, an increasing number of negative frames (and fewer positive frames) of Western countries is expected to emerge from the content analysis beginning 15 November 2012 when Xi assumed office.

H2a: *Xinwen Lianbo*'s coverage of "the West" has contained more negative frames since Xi Jinping assumed office in 2012.

H2b: *Xinwen Lianbo*'s coverage of "the West" has contained fewer positive frames since Xi Jinping assumed office in 2012.

We also aim to investigate another potential pivotal event that may have influenced *Xinwen Lianbo*'s content production while Xi has been in power. On 19 August 2013, Xi Jinping hosted a "national propaganda work convention" in Beijing, where he gave a historical speech that was later reported as the "8/19 speech." In this speech, Xi stressed the importance of defending the Communist

Party's ideology and the government's determination to tighten its control of the media and public opinion. Xi explicitly addressed Chinese media workers, demanding that they remain alert to the invasion by the "universal values of the West," such as democracy, human rights, and press freedom, and emphasizing that these values are not applicable to and are detrimental to Chinese society (Huang & Zhai, 2013). This event may, thus, also have exacerbated the negative framing of "the West" by China's flagship news program.

H3a: *Xinwen Lianbo's* coverage of "the West" contained more negative frames after Xi's "8/19 speech."

H3b: *Xinwen Lianbo's* coverage of "the West" contained fewer positive frames after Xi's "8/19 speech."

## Method

### Sample

The main goal of this study is to detect changes in news framing during a six-year period. A quantitative content analysis was conducted on *Xinwen Lianbo's* daily news coverage of Western countries to achieve this objective. *Xinwen Lianbo* is a primetime daily news program that airs 365 episodes per year. Each daily episode includes approximately 10 minutes of foreign news. Because the earliest accessible archive on *Xinwen Lianbo's* official website at the time of this research (i.e., April 2018) is in late 2009, we chose the study period from 1 January 2010 to 31 December 2015. Because study period extends approximately three years before and three years after Xi assumed office, it provides a symmetrical structure for using his presidency as a variable that has affected the framing of "the West." During the six-year period, an average of 36.5 episodes per year was chosen in a systematic fashion; one episode was selected in every 10-day interval.

In total, 220 episodes of *Xinwen Lianbo* were collected from its official website. In these episodes, 1,106 news items were identified as foreign news in which 529 items ( $n = 529$ ) were further identified as news about Western countries or organizations, which comprised 48% of the entire sample. The remaining 52% was identified as news that reported on non-Western countries or organizations, which was not relevant to this study. In the selection of the sample, the topics of news items were not considered: *All* news items about Western countries were included regardless of whether an article was about politics and international relations or not.

### Variables and reliability

The proposed six frames (foe, sufferer, failure, friend, enjoyer, and success) were measured according to presence (1) or absence (0) and then coded as binary data. The presence of frames was not mutually exclusive; thus, two frames that were seemingly contradictory (i.e., a friend frame and a foe frame) could co-exist and compete within one news article, which Lim and Seo (2009) proposed in their study. Thus, the presence of frames was coded independently with separate items.

An inter-coder reliability test was conducted before the main study. The two independent coders were both native Chinese speakers and graduate students majoring in communications. Approximately 9% of the sample (48 items) were randomly chosen for the test. The Krippendorff's alpha indexes of all tested variables ranged between .61 and .90 (average  $\alpha = .75$ ), indicating the sufficient reliability of all measured variables. The specific inter-coder reliability statistics for each frame are described below.

Following the codebook that we developed for this study, the presence of foe and friend frames in a news item were measured by five and four items, respectively. These items were developed based on the following four conditions: whether the news item contained contents which (a) described the country as an adversary or a friend of China; (b) described the country as a negative or a positive factor regarding global and regional peace and stability; (c) quoted an official of the country who made negative or positive comments about China or vice versa; (d) quoted a non-official of the country who made negative or positive comments about China or vice versa. When the presence of at least one of the questions in a news item was detected, the item was coded as containing the foe or friend frame. The inter-coder reliability tests for the friend frame ( $\alpha = .78$ ) and foe frame ( $\alpha = .79$ ) proved to be adequate.

Regarding the sufferer and enjoyer frames, four and three items, respectively, were assessed. Each item was coded according to the following conditions: whether it contained content that (a) covered a mishap or a celebration in the mentioned country; (b) demonstrated the hardships or happiness of the citizens of the country; (c) quoted an interviewee who made positive or negative comments about his or her life and the society in general. Responses of "yes" to at least one of the questions were identified as indicating the presence of the sufferer frame or the enjoyer frame in a news item. The Krippendorff's indices of the enjoyer frame and the sufferer frame were  $\alpha = .78$  and  $\alpha = .89$ , respectively.

Regarding the failure and success frames, each news item was measured according to the responses to four questions. The questions were developed based on whether the news item contained content that (a) described the negative or positive economic progress of a country; (b) described the negative or positive political progress of a country; (c) described the negative or positive progress of a country in science, technology, culture, or society. Responses of "yes" to at least one of the questions were identified as a presence of the respective frame. The Krippendorff's indices for the success frame and the failure frame were  $\alpha = .73$  and  $\alpha = .75$ , respectively.

### ***Analysis***

To test the hypotheses, in which no distinction is made between the specific types of negative or positive frames, we categorized the friend, enjoyer, and success frames as three attributes of a positive frame and the other frames as three attributes of a negative frame. When an individual news item contained at least one of the three frames, it was coded as the presence of a positive frame (i.e., friend, enjoyer, or success frame) or a negative frame (i.e., foe, sufferer, or failure frame). Because different frames could co-exist within the same news item, it was also possible that a news item would contain both a positive and negative frame. This

inclusiveness avoided the oversimplified “either-or” binary distinction and followed the typical Sino “both-and” dualistic thought pattern (Wan, 2003).

After the data were collected and prepared, three pairs of statistics were analyzed to test the corresponding hypotheses: 1) the proportion of positive frames *within* the whole sample size versus the proportion of negative frames *within* the whole sample size; 2) the proportion of negative frames within the recorded items *before* Xi took office compared to the proportion of negative frames and positive frames within the recorded items *after* Xi took office; (3) the proportion of negative frames within recorded items after Xi took office but *before* he gave the 8/19 speech compared with the proportion of negative frames within the recorded items *after* Xi gave the 8/19 speech.

## Results

The analysis of the news items about Western countries revealed that the US was the most visible country. It was mentioned 216 times throughout the sample. Other countries, such as Japan (84), the UK (56), France (35), the EU in general (34), Germany (25), Australia (19), Greece (15), Italy (14), and Canada (11), were also highly visible in *Xinwen Lianbo*'s foreign news section. Each country was mentioned more than 10 times throughout the study period. In contrast, other countries, such as Slovakia, Bulgaria, and Latvia, were not mentioned.

In the entire sample of news items ( $n = 529$ ), 233 were identified as containing a negative frame (i.e., enemy, sufferer or failure), and 200 were identified as containing a positive frame (i.e., friend, enjoyer or success). Hence, the proportion of negative frames in all news items (44%) was greater than in the positive frames (38%). However, based on the  $p$ -value (0.107) determined by a McNemar Test for paired nominal data (i.e., comparing the presence of categorical variables within the same article), the difference between the two categories was not statistically significant (see Table 1). Therefore, H1, which stated that negative frames were more present than positive ones in *Xinwen Lianbo*'s framing of Western countries, was rejected.

On 15 November 2012, Xi Jinping assumed office as the leader of the Chinese Communist Party and the People's Republic of China, replacing President Hu Jintao. In the current study, this date is considered a potential turning point in *Xinwen Lianbo*'s framing of Western countries. The results of the content analysis showed that after this date, there was an increased presence of negative framing in the program's coverage of the West.

Table 1. Comparing Negative Frames and Positive Frames in the Sample ( $n = 529$ )

Negative frames	Positive frames		Total	% of $n$
	No	Yes		
No	115	181	296	56%
Yes	214	19	233	44%
Total	329	200	529	
% of $n$	62%	38%		
McNemar Test	.107			
Asymp. Sig. ( $p$ )				

Table 2. Xi's Presidency as a Variable Affecting Negative Frames (n = 529).

	Xi Assume office as Chinese leader (Nov. 15, 2012)		<i>p</i>
	Before	After	
Presence of negative frames ( <i>n</i> )	113/303	120/226	
% of Before/After	37%	53%	.000
Presence of Positive frames ( <i>n</i> )	136/303	64/226	
% of Before/After	45%	28%	.000

Before Xi came to power, 303 news items were recorded in the sample period, among which 113 contained negative frames: The proportion of news items that contained negative frames in recorded news items during the corresponding period was 37%. After Xi assumed office, the corresponding proportion rose considerably to 53% (see Table 2). The results of a  $\chi^2$ -test that was conducted to compare proportions showed that the increase in negative frames was statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ). The results showed that Xi's presidency was associated with an increase in the number of negative frames in *Xinwen Lianbo's* coverage of the West. Therefore, H2<sub>a</sub> is supported.

Additionally, we investigated how the presence of positive frames changed after Xi became the Chinese leader (see Table 2, lower rows). The proportion of news items that contained positive frames in recorded news items during the corresponding time frames decreased from 45% to 28%. The results of another  $\chi^2$ -test showed that this change in proportion was statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ). News about Western countries became less positively framed after Xi became the leader of the Party and the country.

The third hypothesis concerned Xi Jinping's speech on 19 August 2013, which was a variable that could have increased *Xinwen Lianbo's* negative framing of Western countries. To eliminate Xi's presidency as a potential confounding variable, we analyzed the data after Xi took office on 15 November 2012, which reduced the sample to 226 news items. The hypothesis stated that after the speech was given (164 news items recorded), the program's negative framing of the West increased compared to the (relatively short) period after Xi assumed office but had not yet made the speech (62 news items recorded).

However, the results did not demonstrate this pattern. Before his speech, 33 negative frames were identified, which accounted for 53% of all news items. After the speech, 87 negative frames were detected; hence, the proportion of negative frames in the recorded news items during this period was identical: also 53%. The proportions of negative frames remained the same (see Table 3), indicating that Xi's speech did not affect *Xinwen Lianbo's* framing of the West. Therefore, H3 was rejected.

As shown in Table 3, the proportion of positive frames within the news items that were recorded during the corresponding period unexpectedly increased from 19% to 32%. However, the results of the  $\chi^2$ -test showed  $p = .071$ . Thus, this change in proportion was statistically insignificant.

In order to determine whether the inclusion of Japan as a Western country (which may indeed be debated) affected the outcomes of this content analysis, we repeated the three hypotheses tests but excluded the news items that were focused on Japan as a Western country. The results were robust and remained the same.

Table 3. Xi's 8/19 Speech as a Variable Affecting Negative Frames (n = 226).

	Xi Assume office as Chinese leader (Nov. 15, 2012)		<i>p</i>
	Before	After	
Presence of negative frames ( <i>n</i> )	33/62	87/164	.999
% of Before/After	53%	53%	
Presence of Positive frames ( <i>n</i> )	12/62	52/164	.071
% of Before/After	19%	32%	

The inclusion of Japan as a Western country did not affect the results of the content analysis. That is, H1 and H3 were rejected and H2 was supported also when Japan was excluded from the analysis.

## Discussion

In this study, a content analysis of *Xinwen Lianbo's* coverage of Western countries from 2010 to 2015 was conducted. The results showed that mixed and diverse images of the contemporary Western world were presented to the massive audience of *Xinwen Lianbo*. The proposed notion that *Xinwen Lianbo* predominantly and consistently frames the West in a negative manner was not reflected in this study. The balanced images of negative and positive frames may be based on the nature of modern Sino-West relations. Although China and the Western world remain significantly ideologically divided in the 21st century, and the Chinese leadership remains vigilant about the possibility of a “peaceful revolution” orchestrated by the West (Ong, 2007), the country has built strong, cooperative economic ties with Western countries by now.

Scholars of international relations, such as Buzan (2010) and Qin (2003), believe that the Chinese leadership has perceived itself as a status-quo power, and it has strived to integrate China into the Western-led world economy. In the leadership's perspective, China considers its relationships with the West as consisting of both challenges and opportunities. As the mouthpiece of the Chinese government, *Xinwen Lianbo's* coverage of Western countries reflects the Chinese leadership's mixed perceptions of “the West.” The findings of this study support Lim and Seo's (2009) conclusion that opposite and conflicting frames often compete and co-exist in one media institution and occasionally even in the same news item.

The significant increase in negative frames and the decrease in positive frames in *Xinwen Lianbo's* portrayal of Western countries after Xi took office reaffirms Shambaugh's (2007) finding that that *Xinwen Lianbo's* frame-building process was largely influenced or even dominated by the Communist Party elite. When a new Party leader assumes power, the program's frame-building correspondently changes to reflect his foreign policy doctrine. The increased frequency of negative frames after Xi assume office might have signaled a pivotal moment in China's foreign policy. Since China initiated its “reform and open” path in 1978, the leadership in Beijing has maintained a conservative foreign policy strategy, which was condensed and coded by former leader Deng Xiaoping in the strategy of *Taoguang Yanghui*, which means keeping a low profile and never claiming leadership (Chen & Wang, 2011). However, many have observed Xi's determination

to abandon the *Taoguang Yanghui* strategy and his ambition to challenge the current American-led world order (Masuda, 2016; Ferdinand, 2016; Wong, 2018). Masuda noted that Xi's foreign policy in this generation is *Fenfa Youwei*, which means striving for achievement, and is embodied in several of his initiatives, such as *One Belt, One Road* as well as the reclamation and construction in the South China Sea. According to Masuda, China's "assertive behaviors" since 2012 should be interpreted as a "unified, intentional development by Beijing."

*Xinwen Lianbo* has followed China's change in foreign policy under Xi's leadership. For example, on 19 June 2014, the show reported Washington's struggle to stabilize post-war Iraq. The news item framed America's involvement in Iraq as a complete failure throughout both the Bush and Obama presidencies and then connected it to the US's interference in Syria at that time. The Americans were framed as incompetent world leaders, negative influences on world peace, and a military hegemony lacking moderation. Because it framed the US as a military threat to regional stability and publishing "moral judgement" (Entman, 1993, p. 52) about the country's foreign policy, this news item was coded as having both a foe and a failure frame, that is, it was clearly negative. This news item, therefore, exemplifies Beijing's increasing doubt about American global leadership.

An alternative explanation of the increase in negative frames identified in *Xinwen Lianbo*'s coverage of Western countries could be that this development was a countermeasure by China resulting from the increasingly negative coverage of China by Western media in recent years (Zeng, 2017). At this time of rising international tension, it is possible that Western media are also framing China less positively than in the past. Therefore, further research is needed to determine whether there is a two-way causal relationship between the frames that China and "the West" impose on each other.

When Xi addressed Chinese media workers on 19 August 2013, it was expected that *Xinwen Lianbo*'s frame-building process would be increasingly influenced by the government. However, the results of our content analysis did not indicate this development. The reason for this finding could be that China's control over the media, especially state-owned institutions such as CCTV, is strong and has never been loosened (Shambaugh, 2007). Xi's speech might have tightened the narrative space accorded to liberal-leaning and market-driven media, but it did not affect the already heavily regulated flagship *Xinwen Lianbo*, which is the mouthpiece of the Chinese government.

The results of this study also revealed another interesting phenomenon: countries such as the US (216 times) and Japan (84 times) had much higher chances of being reported by *Xinwen Lianbo*, while some countries were reported less frequently, and some were not reported. The disparity in the visibility of different countries found in the present study supports existing theories of journalistic practices. First, as Galtung and Ruge (1965) already mentioned in their study regarding the structure of foreign news, events that occur in elite nations are more likely to be newsworthy. Hence, elite nations, such as the US, which is the world superpower and the biggest economy in the world, and Japan, which has the third largest economy (just behind China), were the two most frequently mentioned countries in *Xinwen Lianbo*'s foreign news section during in the period 2010–2015. Chang (1998) reported the similar insight that core countries in the world system had better chances to be in the international news flow than peripheral countries had. Second, Japan's high visibility in the program—as found by our content

analysis—reflected that geographical and cultural proximity (Eilders, 2006) were factors in the selection of foreign news. Hence, events in Japan are inherently more newsworthy in Chinese media than those in other more distant Western countries. Moreover, as Buzan (2010) proposed, Sino-American and Sino-Japanese relations remain the two most crucial diplomatic ties perceived by the Chinese leadership, thereby accounting for the frequency of news items about these two countries. The perception of disparate Western countries as comprising a homogenous geopolitical group might raise questions about this generalized assumption. The countries in “the West” are as diverse as their individual relations with China (Liu, 2018). In a future study, the Chinese media’s framing of a single Western country could be investigated, which would contribute more detailed insights to the knowledge about “the West” as presented in the current study.

A limitation of this study is typical of any longitudinal analysis of media content, which is the unpredictable and contingent nature of major global events that potentially affect the sample. For instance, Greece was frequently reported during the long-lasting Greek government’s debt crisis from 2009–2015. The crisis not only increased Greece’s visibility in *Xinwen Lianbo* but also was often identified with the failure frame, which was interpreted by the program as an example of how the failing Western economy is affecting the world. Had the crisis not happened, Greece probably would not have received negative framing by *Xinwen Lianbo*, and it probably would not have contributed much to the findings of failure frames in the present study. However, many other European countries had to cope with the economic crisis in 2008 and 2009. This issue is inherent in all longitudinal analyses, because most content analyses will be confronted with similar exogenous developments in the real (political) world.

It is also worth noting that despite *Xinwen Lianbo*’s influence, it is a unique case within the Chinese media landscape. It is directly owned by the central government, and it is heavily regulated. Therefore, the program does not fully reflect the dynamics of the modern Chinese media landscape. Instead, it can be considered an outlier that is a platform for the dissemination of Beijing’s political messages. In future research, scholars could investigate the ways in which propaganda-driven media, such as *Xinwen Lianbo*, differ from market-driven media, such as *Toutiao* and *The Paper*, in their framings of “the West.” The latter platforms are not directly state-owned; they are under the auspices of corporate bodies that are mainly technology giants, such as *Alibaba* and *Tencent*.

Between 2010 and 2015, *Xinwen Lianbo*’s coverage of the West was not primarily focused on framing “the West” as an enemy, a sufferer, or a failure any more than it was focused on framing it as a friend, enjoyer, or a success. During this period, Western countries were equally likely to be portrayed as a foe or a friend, a sufferer or an enjoyer, a failure or a success. However, since Xi Jinping assumed the Chinese leadership in late 2012, China’s foreign policy has become increasingly assertive. Correspondingly, the results of the content analysis found more negative and less positive framing of Western countries on *Xinwen Lianbo* from late 2012 to 2015, which indicates the ability of politicians, especially in the context of the Chinese media system, to influence the frame-building and content production processes. Nevertheless, the results of the present study indicate that Xi’s speech on 19 August 2013 did not further affect *Xinwen Lianbo*’s coverage of the Western world. As a top propaganda tool of the Chinese Communist Party, *Xinwen*



Lianbo's foreign news department serves as a platform for the dissemination of political messages.

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