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A Picture's Worth 8,500,000 People:

American News Pictures As Symbols of China

DAVID D. PERLMUTTER

Shortly after the fall of France in World War II, footage of the Nazi entry into Paris was distributed to the rest of the world.¹ The film displayed triumphant German legions thundering down the Champs-Élysées in tanks, trucks and armored cars, cheered by enthusiastic crowds. The film's messages were simple: the Wehrmacht was an advanced, fully-mechanized Leviathan. The French, in turn, appeared happy to be "liberated."

It was not until after the war that the conceit of the images was revealed. The footage was shot four days after the real German entry into the City of Lights. The entire march was choreographed and acted for the camera. Most of the crowd consisted of German civil servants bused in for the occasion. Furthermore, the army had very little motorized transport; the French had been overcome by surprise and superior tactics, not overwhelming might.²

This fateful incident is an example that a picture is more than simply a representation of what it seems to show. No lens is wide enough to capture reality. Any image that appears in news is a selec-

tion of some aspect of the world. For any news story, a particular graph, chart, map, photo or video is favored to represent it. Yet, dubiously or correctly, images are often used as symbols of wider conditions. We may ask of any news image, how tenable is the connection between the subject, the visual image, and what greater "truth" it supposedly symbolizes?

Moreover, the meaning, significance, and relevance of a picture is connected to the claims made either in the voice-over narration in video, in the captions accompanying still images or in the context in which the pictures appear.³ Changing the verbal, written or cultural texts that attend a picture may likewise alter our understanding of the slice of reality it purports to display. Another problem, therefore, is how words interact with a picture to code it for public consumption.

As the expansion of the global economy increases the salience of foreign news and as visual journalists are called upon more and more not just to show the world, but to explain it, it is important to assess how news pictures represent and symbolize the world. This study analyzes pictures depicting greater China published in the two leading image-heavy news magazines, *Newsweek* and *Time*, from 1949 (the Communist victory in mainland China) to 1989, (the Tiananmen events). China's cultural and geopolitical distance ideally suits a study aimed at deciphering how American visual news represents foreign nations and people. As the great historian Harold Isaacs noted, images, verbal and visual, of China may tell us "a great deal about Chinese...but mostly we learn about ourselves."⁴ In sum, four decades of China reporting reveals the codes of symbolic meanings of news pictures in America.

METHOD

The coding unit was the picture cluster. It comprised: (a) picture (all photographs, maps, cartoons, etc., printed in the magazines); (b) caption (written external text specifically about the picture); and (c) signage (internal text including words, such as protester's placards, that occurred within the picture).

All picture clusters in both *Time* and *Newsweek* representing people, events and scenes in geopolitical "greater China" between January 1, 1949 and December 31, 1989 were coded. For this census, China was defined as: the People's Republic of China (including Tibet), The Republic of

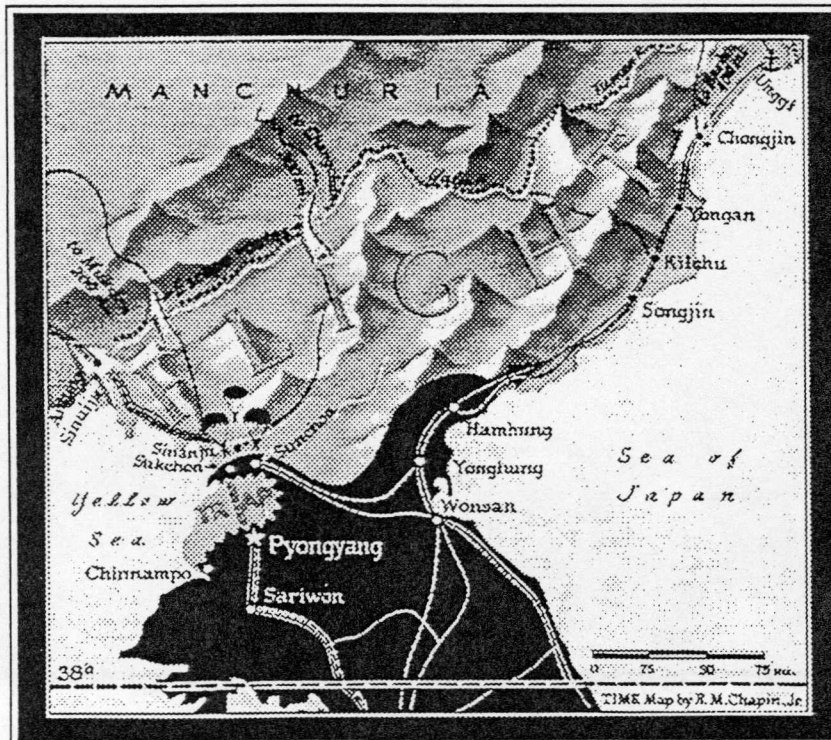


Figure 1. From *Time* magazine, October 30, 1950.

China (Taiwan/Formosa), Hong Kong, and Macao. Five coders measured the attributes of 6827 picture clusters.⁵

Among the phenomena analyzed were: How prominent were images of China? Several questions tried to gauge the quantity and position within the newsmagazine of the pictures as well as the depth and quality of their focus on China.

Next, to what extent were pictures used by the caption as an example of something general—a metonymic allusion—rather than the specific contents of the frame? A metonymic allusion occurs when a picture is directed by the caption as symbolizing something beyond its own frame. For example, a picture of a single refugee is captioned “Millions flee advancing Communists in Eastern China.”

Finally, how did the caption relate to the contents of the picture? The categories included: 1) Illustration: the caption and the picture basically agreed. Information was limited to who, what, where and when. For example, a picture showed and its caption stated, “Mao shaking hands with President Nixon.” 2) Intensification: the information was embellished through affective language. For example, a picture of a policeman hitting a protester was captioned, “A policeman mercilessly beats a helpless hunger striker.” 3) Redirection: the picture and caption seemed unconnected; an action referred to was absent from the pictures. Portrait shots often are examples of this: a picture of Nationalist Leader Chiang Kai-Shek posing in front of his flag is captioned “Can he stop a Communist peace?” 4) Contradiction: The picture and caption contradicted each other. For example, a picture of a smiling Chiang waving to a saluting crowd is captioned “Chiang’s days were numbered as the Communists roll on to victory.”

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Question 1: Prominence of China. Of the 6827 picture clusters of China, *Time* (n=3464) printed only slightly more than *Newsweek* (n=3363). Initial analysis showed that in many cases, the country of China was not the primary focus of the picture. Maps, in particular, showed slices of China obtruding into images that actually dealt

with events in other countries such as civil discord in India. When only China-focused clusters counted, the cases in the analysis were reduced to 3581 and the difference between magazines was still less than two percent (*Time*=1847, *Newsweek*=1734).

Frequency of publication was also similar between the magazines. In eight of nine years where frequency was 20 percent above the mean, both magazines exceeded that threshold. Those “high coverage” years were: 1950 (Chinese intervention in Korea), 1966 (Congressional inquiry and public debate into changing China policy), 1971 & 1972 (opening of the People’s Republic of China by President Nixon), 1978 & 1979 (President Carter’s formal recognition of the PRC and Deng Xiao Ping’s visit to the U.S.), and 1989 (Tiananmen events).

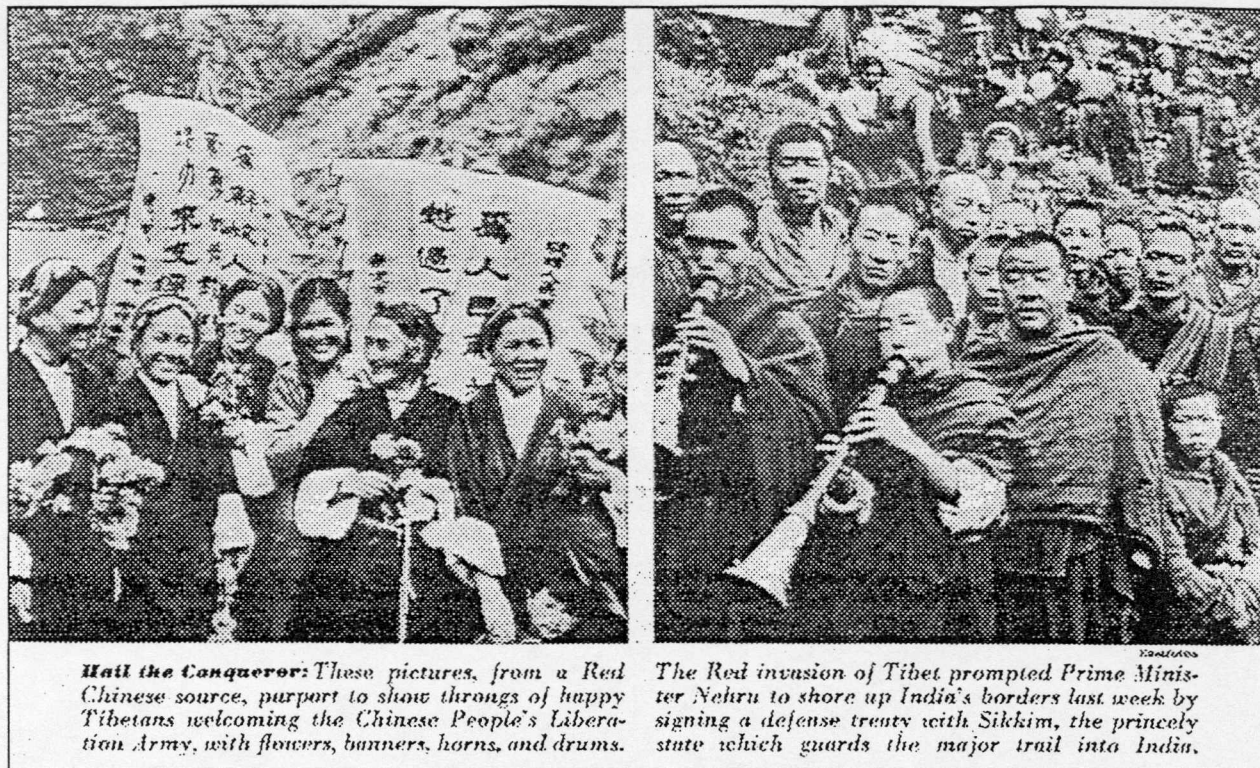
Time magazine’s slightly greater emphasis on China may be attributed to the “Luce factor” so named for the magazine’s co-founder, Henry Robinson Luce. A well known friend of Nationalist China, he was very interested in China affairs, and guided magazine policy until his death in 1968.⁶ Nevertheless, the overall similarity between publications suggests shared news values. These include industrial codes of what was news, and what news was worth according visuals. In addition, the editors of both publications do not operate in a funnel—awareness exists of what the other was covering, and what, because of their week-long publication delay, was prominent in other news sources, including, for most of this study, television news.

Finally, the choice of what is and is not labeled “China” can imply something about the editorial stance of the publication. An interesting example of “unfocusing” on China arises from the Korean War era. Indeed, the era of the fall of Nationalist China and the Korean War (1949-1950) marks a good set of examples for the discussion that follows. On Oct. 30, 1950, *Time* (p. 31) in an article on the “Battle of Korea,” subtitled “Damn Good Job” a map internally labeled “Flight” displayed the extreme North of Korea and “Manchuria.” (See Figure 1.) Red rimmed arrows mark the retreat, we assume, of North Korean forces into Manchuria. Black arrows of



FORMOSA'S RICE PADDIES FEED THE ISLAND'S 3,500,000 PEOPLE

Figure 2. From *Time* magazine, September 11, 1950.



Hail the Conqueror: These pictures, from a Red Chinese source, purport to show throngs of happy Tibetans welcoming the Chinese People's Liberation Army, with flowers, banners, horns, and drums.

The Red invasion of Tibet prompted Prime Minister Nehru to shore up India's borders last week by signing a defense treaty with Sikkim, the princely state which guards the major trail into India.

Figure 3. From *Newsweek* magazine, December 18, 1950.

post-Inchon landing American forces sweep North. No mention is made that Manchuria is part of China; no Chinese forces appear on the map.

The date is significant. The Chinese intervention started as this magazine went to publication. Yet Americans, including the Administration and MacArthur's military High Command, were all stating, at least publicly, that China was and would remain neutral in the conflict and even if it intervened it would be defeated.⁷ A few days later the Chinese demonstrated their relevance and a new visual reality was born as some 1,200,000 "volunteers" crossed the border into North Korea and inflicted a punishing defeat of the out-of-position and surprised American army.

Hindsight is accurate, and predicting the past is easy, but the signs of these huge movements of men and material were not absent. The Chinese had made clear that "Korea was a pistol pointed at the heart of China..."⁸ In short, the labeling of something as China or not China revealed the sympathies of the magazine's editors and how they adopted a worldview that mirrored American military assumptions, and, in the end, without acknowledging it, showed our failure to understand China.⁹

An additional aspect of their failure of vision was racial. The Americans had lesser regard for the North Korean soldier's fighting, strategic and supply capabilities. These experiences were projected by proxy on the Chinese, minimizing the threat from "Manchuria."¹⁰ China was placed out of sight; it showed how fatally we had China out of mind. It is also noticed that journalists may do their profession and their country a disservice if they choose to

replicate without challenge the wisdom of American military commanders.

Question 2: Metonymy. 11.4 percent (n=410) of the picture clusters employed a metonymic allusion. Figure 2 shows a typical example of the metonymy of news photography—a few farmers, and a few acres of land were used to stand for the entire Island of Taiwan.

The metonym was not without ideological connotation. Why might a fertile, prospering, scenic Taiwan be a view worth promoting by *Time*? From 1949 to early 1950, after the fall of the Nationalists on the mainland, a strong "realist" sentiment prevailed in both the State Department and the White House to dump the Nationalists and establish relations with Communist China. Luce and his publications were leading opponents of this policy shift; hence the survivability of Taiwan was a point worth visually exemplifying.

Question 3: Relationship of caption and picture. Table 1 shows the results. One would expect the majority of captions and images to support each other directly. Instead, captions often changed or redirected visual meaning. More interestingly, most "contradicted" images came from the Communist government from 1950-1972. Until 1972 very few American journalists were allowed into mainland China. Most images of The People's Republic, therefore, were either provided by international agencies, clandestine photographers, or the government.

The latter source, however, was not taken as being neutral: during most of the period America was in some state of hostility toward mainland China. Still these were visually oriented magazines, therefore the Communist enemy's pictures were employed, but were

reprocessed through captions to suit the editorial views of the publications.

For example, the original source for Figure 3 was the Communist government of the PRC (*Newsweek*, Dec. 18, 1950, p. 34). The topic was the take-over of Tibet. The caption of the image subtly undermines the message probably intended by its creators by first calling attention to the fact that it was a "Red Chinese" source, and second by using the term "claims to show." This phrase was completely absent in the caption of any picture taken by a western photographer for 41 years of China coverage.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined a few aspects of the representational and symbolic "view" of China in *Time* and *Newsweek* over 41 years. It concentrated on interpreting events surrounding the early relationship with Communist China. China images were about one percent of all non-advertising pictures on all topics in the magazines. On average, 87 pictures a year "summed up" China for the American reader. While these were not the only pictures of China available, the sample offers a good indication of what types of images about China were in circulation.

Both publications roughly accorded the same numbers with the same general level of focus on China. This unity may have arisen from standardized codes of news, reciprocal coverage of events, or following the leads of other publications or media. It was shown that what was and was not an image of China was an ideological as well as a practical decision for the editors.

More than 11 percent of the pictures had captions claiming that the image discreetly represented a larger condition. This type of allusion could have been politically motivated.

Finally, picture-caption relationships suggested that pictures created by the government of Communist China were more likely to receive a contradictory caption casting doubt upon the veridicality of the image. This was especially true until 1972. In sum, the enemy's pictures were propaganda; ours were photojournalism.

Captions, it seems, were hardly neutral product content labels. Captions could be employed to create a message not evident in the picture, to redirect meaning to things not pictured, or to intensify meaning. Whether the audience pays attention to this coding or recoding is another question. In any case, the caption is an important indicator of the ideology of the news organization, perhaps even more so than the image.

This finding suggests that the editorial slant of the publication can affect picture selection and content, but may more strongly affect captions. As noted, no lens is wide enough to reveal all of any reality, but the caption can enhance or distort the engagement between photographer and subject, and between publication and public.

In sum, visual-verbal interaction was not necessarily a neutral stretch of the particular to the general. The picture was often employed as evidence of the greater conclusion. It was ironic, though, how the leap of metonymy is accepted so naturally.¹¹ Yet, photographs are poor evidence for greater truths. In the case of Taiwan, future prosperity was eventually achieved. But a solitary green field does not a land of milk and honey make. As any traveler to the Third World can attest, even the most devastated region can have a few lush vistas. The leap from the single narrow frame to the general

condition, therefore, is perilous and should always be cause for journalistic reflection and questioning by the audience.

David D. Perlmutter is an Assistant Professor in the Manship School of Mass Communication at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge.

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- 10 op. cit., Cohen and Gooch, 177.
- 11 Roland Barthes claims that "Metonymic logic is that of the unconscious." See: R. Barthes. "Introduction to the Structural Analyses of Narratives," chap. in *Mythologies*, trans. A. Lavers, (New York: Noonday Press, 1972 [1966]). See also: J. Fiske, *Introduction to Communication Studies* 2d ed., (New York: Routledge, 1990), 104-112.