

**Portraying the United States, Imagining China: The
Visual Construction of the United States' Image in
Chinese Magazines, 1950-2021**

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All the long years of thinking and struggling now seem to have been quietly waiting for this spring. Across these four and a half years, each close-up held moments of difficulty I once felt compelled to articulate. Now, as the frame widens into a long shot, what remains most clearly is a sense of gratitude.

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Abstract

This thesis examines how Chinese pictorial magazines visually represented the United States from 1950 to 2021 and how these representations reflected and rearticulated China's imagined national community. Drawing on a mixed-method design that combines visual content analysis, visual framing analysis, and semi-structured interviews with visual editors and journalists, the study analyses 8,884 US-related images published in *China Pictorial*, *South Review*, and *Sanlian Life Week*. The findings show that the image of the United States shifted historically from an imperialist aggressor, to a symbol of modernity, and later to a strategic rival in relative decline. Despite these changes, the United States consistently functioned as a reflexive mirror through which China articulated its own national trajectory: first as a revolutionary challenger, then as a development pursuer, and more recently as a more confident global power. The study demonstrates that these visual representations were shaped by the interaction of four interrelated forces: visual framing practices, the nationalist narrative of humiliation and rejuvenation, the institutional structure of the Chinese media system, and the changing geopolitical context of China-US relations. By tracing the long-term transformation of US imagery across different media types and historical periods, the thesis argues that representations of the United States in Chinese media served as symbolic resources through which China interpreted its historical memory, negotiated national identity, and legitimised its evolving place in the world. In this way, the thesis contributes to research on visual politics, nationalism, and media systems by showing how foreign images are constructed and mobilised within a politically regulated media environment.

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Abbreviations**A**

AIIB Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank

B

BRI Belt and Road Initiative

C

CCP Chinese Communist Party

CICG China International Communications Group

CPVA Chinese People's Volunteer Army

N

NATO North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

P

PRC People's Republic of China

PLA People's Liberation Army of China

U

US United States

V

VCG Visual China Group

W

WHO World Health Organisation

WTO World Trade Organisation

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

As I paced anxiously in the *China Pictorial* headquarters, hoping someone would agree to an interview, a 1950 photograph on the building's exhibition wall caught my eye (Figure 1.1). In it, Li Shulan, a young student from the National Mongolian and Tibetan Academy, raises her fist as she denounces “United States (US) imperialist aggression,” declaring that her people will never again live in slavery and demanding to join the volunteers for the Korean War. *China Pictorial* (人民画报 *Renmin huabao*, literally “People’s illustrated”), founded in 1950, as the first Party photo magazine, has long been regarded as a visual chronicle of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) due to its continuous publication and extensive documentation of the nation’s political and social life (Hou, 2020).



Figure 1.1. Photograph of Li Shulan denouncing “US imperialist aggression” at the National Mongolian and Tibetan Academy,¹ originally taken by Wu Baoji in 1950, displayed at the *China Pictorial* headquarters in Beijing. Photo by the author, March 30, 2023.

¹ Original caption: “Li Shulan of the National Mongolian and Tibetan Academy denounces US imperialist aggression, declaring that her people will never again live in slavery and demanding to join the volunteers for the Korean War” (translation by the author).

Later that day – in the same building, and more than seventy years after that image was taken – I interviewed Liwei Huang, Director of the *China Pictorial* Image Centre. She told me:

“If you look at our magazine across its historical trajectory, you can see how Chinese feelings have changed. In the 1950s, we needed to prove ourselves, to show that we could ‘catch up.’ Once basic needs were met, our nation gained confidence and stood tall... Today, we speak with the assurance of a great power at the centre of the world stage. We stand shoulder to shoulder with the world, in some areas even leading it. Our magazine must record these things that make Chinese people so proud and confident.” (author interview with Huang, March 30, 2023).

The contrast between Li Shulan’s defiant gesture and Huang’s words of confident pride encapsulates a profound transformation of Chinese identity – from defining itself in opposition to US imperialism to measuring itself alongside, and sometimes against, the US as a global power. This historical shift, from revolutionary struggle to comparative confidence, forms the backdrop of the present study. It raises broader questions about how China has imagined itself through representations of significant foreign others and how such representations have evolved alongside changing political, economic, and geopolitical circumstances.

Among foreign nations, the US occupies a particularly significant place in the construction of modern Chinese national identity. Since the late nineteenth century, Chinese debates about national strength, modernity, and international status have frequently developed through engagement with and comparison to the US (Callahan,

2004; Wang, 2012), a theme echoed in Huang's account of China's transition from "catching up" to standing confidently at the centre of the world stage. Following the establishment of the PRC in 1949, the US emerged as one of China's most important external reference points and has remained at the centre of Chinese foreign policy concerns and public discourse across successive historical periods (Sutter, 2020). As Sutter (2020) argues, the US has consistently ranked among China's highest foreign policy priorities since the 1940s, reflecting the profound impact of the bilateral relationship on China's security, development, and international positioning. Precisely because of this enduring salience, representations of the US have become a key discursive resource through which China interprets its external environment, defines its relationship with the international order, and articulates understandings of its own national identity. The image of the US, therefore, provides a particularly revealing lens for examining the discursive construction of Chinese national identity.

This study focuses specifically on visual representations because images play a distinctive role in shaping collective memory (Brennen & Hardt, 1999), and influencing how nations perceive one another (Bleiker, 2018). Visual media have long been instrumental in expressing national identity, historical memory, and geopolitical orientation (Lutz & Collins, 1993). Picture magazines, through their selection, contextualisation, and circulation of images, contribute to the construction of a "national conversation" and the promotion of shared ways of seeing (Allbeson & Colquhoun, 2022, p. 14). As curated visual publications, they provide an especially valuable archive for examining how representations are produced, organised, and sustained over time, and how these representations shape understandings of both foreign countries and national identity within broader historical contexts. Since the founding of the PRC, Chinese picture magazines have

served as important platforms through which the Party-state, media institutions, and journalists have sought to construct national conversations and promote shared visual understandings of domestic and international affairs. Although the rise of television, the internet, and social media has transformed China's media landscape, picture magazines have continued to be published into the twenty-first century. Their persistence reflects the continuing value that state and commercial media organisations attach to magazines as curated spaces in which visual narratives can be carefully selected, organised, and contextualised. Their continued publication reveals the enduring institutional significance of picture magazines as sites where collective identities, historical memories, and representations of the wider world are formulated and communicated. Moreover, unlike many digital platforms, magazines provide a relatively stable and continuous visual archive. As curated visual publications that combine photographs, editorial interpretation, and narrative context, they offer a unique opportunity to trace both continuity and change in official, commercial, and professional representations of the US across different historical periods.

Accordingly, this study examines three mainstream Chinese picture magazines with substantial international coverage and relatively long publication histories: *China Pictorial* (founded in 1950), *South Review* (1985), and *Sanlian Life Week* (1995). The detailed rationale for their selection and the full case selection criteria are discussed in Chapter 5 (Section 5.4). Briefly, the three titles represent different institutional locations within the Chinese media system and provide extensive visual coverage of international affairs across several decades. In material terms, all three publications are large-format, image-rich magazines that combine photographs with editorial commentary and feature reporting. Although their page counts, layouts, and visual design have evolved over time, issues typically range

from approximately 100 to over 150 pages and contain extensive visual content, often incorporating well over 100 photographs and, in some cases, more than 200 images. *China Pictorial*, a monthly Party-affiliated magazine primarily devoted to international communication and external propaganda, places particular emphasis on photographic representation of China's political developments and international relationships (China Pictorial, 2016). *South Review* (南风窗 *Nanfeng chuang*, literally "South Wind Window"), a biweekly current affairs magazine published by the Guangzhou Daily Newspaper Group, combines political and economic reporting with substantial visual coverage (South Review, 2025). *Sanlian Life Week* (三联生活周刊 *Sanlian shenghuo zhoukan*, literally "Sanlian Life Weekly"), a weekly news and culture magazine published by China Publishing Group Corporation, similarly integrates extensive photographic content into its long-form reporting and cultural commentary (Sanlian Life Week, 2025). These publications together provide a substantial and continuous visual archive through which changing representations of the US can be examined across different institutional settings and historical periods.

Building on this foundation, the central question of this study is: how have Chinese picture magazines visually framed the US over time? And how these framings both reflected and rearticulated the imagined Chinese national community? The specific research questions (RQ) are as follows:

RQ1. What were the dominant images of the US in Chinese pictorial media across different historical periods from 1950 to 2021, and how did they change over time?

RQ2. How did portrayals of the US differ across the selected Party-organ and commercial magazines during the period when both were in publication, and why?

RQ3. How were visual frames constructed, and what did they reveal about the evolving dynamics of China-US relations, and how did they engage with the enduring nationalist narrative of China's humiliation and rejuvenation within the imagined Chinese national community?

RQ4. What roles did magazine staff play, and how did they navigate the tensions between Party-state control, market forces, and their limited professional autonomy in contemporary magazine production?

To address these questions, the theoretical framework of this project, as illustrated in Figure 1.2, integrates Bock's (2020) visual framing model, which conceptualises the visual as selection, creation, and solution, with Anderson's (2006) concept of the nation as "an imagined political community" (p. 6), situated within the specific soil of the Chinese media system and the historical evolution of China-US relations.

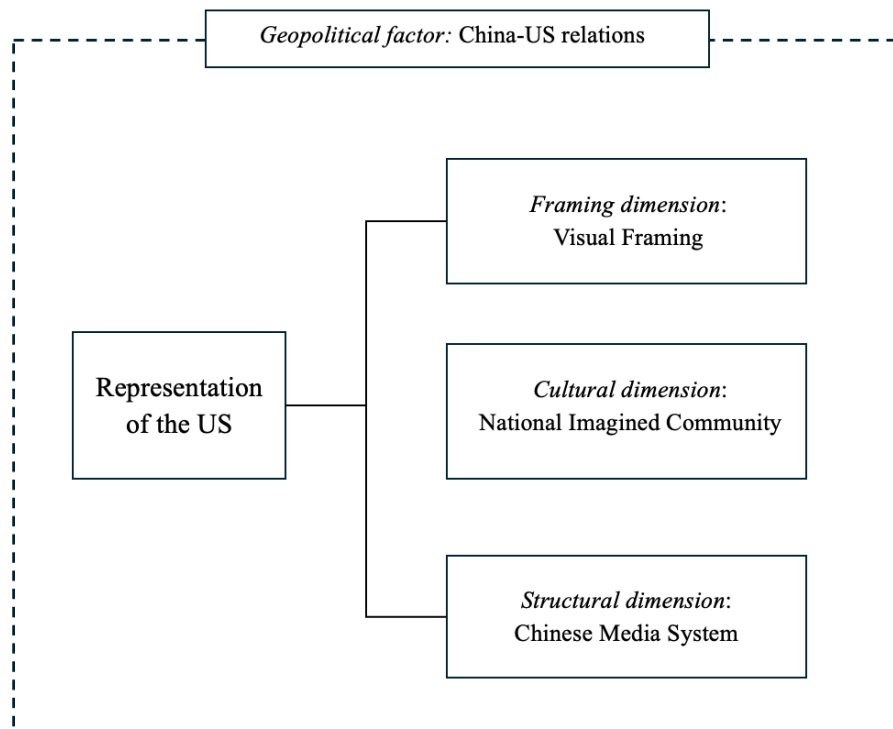


Figure 1.2. A conceptual framework for analysing the visual representation of the US in Chinese media.

In today's post-textual era, visual media have become the primary channel through which people encounter international affairs. Images shape perceptions of world politics by selecting and emphasising particular aspects of reality (Bleiker, 2018). As Bock (2020) observes, photographs function as decontextualised records that are later recontextualised within media narratives, making them powerful tools of framing. Building on this insight, Bock developed a visual framing model that conceptualises visual framing as a multistage, multimodal process that bridges creation, selection, and interpretation. Image Creation (de-contextualisation) provides what is to be seen, shaped by aesthetic and technical conventions. Image Selection (re-contextualisation) positions this material within communicative structures, aligning it with textual and ideological frames. Image as Solution represents how viewers cognitively and affectively complete these frames, generating interpretive or persuasive effects (Bock, 2020). Within the theoretical framework of this study, visual framing provides an analytical lens for examining how representations of the US are visually constructed and interpreted in Chinese media. It focuses on how visual producers generate images through particular aesthetic conventions and symbolic choices, how editors and gatekeepers select and recontextualise these images within specific narrative and communicative contexts, and how images yield effects through culturally and historically shaped interpretive frameworks. By conceptualising visual representation as a process linking production, selection, and interpretation, the visual framing perspective makes it possible to analyse how different portrayals of the US emerge across historical periods – whether framed with attraction or rejection, as a wartime enemy, a model for pragmatic learning, or a declining power.

At the cultural dimension, this study builds upon Anderson (2006)'s definition of the nation-state to examine China's historical memories, cultural context, and ideologies in the realm of foreign affairs. Anderson's point of departure was to treat the nationality, nation-ness, and nationalism as "cultural artifacts" (p. 4), defining the nation as "an imagined political community" (p. 6). Although Anderson (2006) conceptualised the nation and nationalism as modern "cultural artifacts," he did not regard them as products of false consciousness. The "imagined community" is not a fictitious construct but a psychological formation rooted in deep-seated human consciousness and intertwined with historical and cultural transformations. The narrative of national history is an indispensable component in cultivating such consciousness and constructing national imagination (Anderson, 2006). In China, the narrative of national history revolves around the Century of Humiliation (Wang, 2012).² Chinese historical discourse persistently recounts the story of backwardness inviting aggression: China's fall from the centre of the world to the "Sick Man of Asia" after the Opium War (1840), and its subsequent resurgence with the Communist Revolution in 1949 (Callahan, 2004, p. 202). So one of the central objectives of Chinese foreign policy has been to cleanse the memory of national humiliation, that is, to realise national rejuvenation. This evolving national aspiration resonates with Huang's words in the interview – a shift from China's need to "prove ourselves" in the 1950s to speaking today with the confidence of a great power on the world stage (author interview with Huang, March 30, 2023). The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has made the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" its

² The "Century of Humiliation" refers to the period between the First Opium War (1839–1842) and the founding of the PRC in 1949, during which China experienced a series of military defeats, foreign invasions, and unequal treaties imposed by Western powers. Chinese remember this period as a time when China lost sovereignty, territory, and international standing, symbolising its decline from a once-powerful empire to a semi-colonial, semi-feudal state (Wang, 2012). For further details, refer to Chapter 2.1.

grand mission (Xi, 2013, p. 3). In short, the shared historical memory of the Century of Humiliation has given rise to a Chinese collective mission of national rejuvenation. These ideas constitute a coherent Chinese nationalist imagination of national humiliation and rejuvenation. This national construct provides Chinese people with a rich historical frame of reference through which they interpret the present by drawing analogies with the past, profoundly shaping their cognitive understanding of the outside world (Wang, 2012). Accordingly, this study seeks to analyse how Chinese media construct the image of the US within the national cultural framework of China's imagined community shaped by narratives of national humiliation and rejuvenation, and how this image, in turn, reshapes the narrative texture of the imagined Chinese nation by continually rearticulating the meanings of pride, victimhood, and China's sense of place in the global order.

At the structural dimension, the Chinese media system defines the institutional conditions under which representations of the US are produced. It constitutes a distinctive interplay between political authority and market mechanisms. This study draws upon Zhao (2012) and Meng (2018)'s theoretical account of the degree and nature of journalistic professionalism and state intervention in the Chinese media system to examine this unique case. Zhao (2012) argues that China's media system is rooted in the CCP's revolutionary theory and practice. A critical historical juncture in its formation was Mao Zedong's adaptation of the Leninist press model in Yan'an during the early 1940s, which institutionalised the Party press tradition and established the media as the mouthpiece of the Party. The implementation of the Reform and Opening-up policy (1978), however, brought about the marketisation of the media. Since the 1980s, Chinese media have operated under increasingly commercialised conditions, yet mainstream news organisations

have continued to perform their historical function of propagating Party lines and policies (Meng, 2018). Since Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, the government has further tightened its grip on the media (Brady, 2017; Economy, 2014), reversing earlier trends toward marketisation, decentralisation, and limited democratisation (S. Zhao, 2016). Viewed longitudinally, the historical trajectory of the Chinese media system has evolved from the Party-state dominance of the Maoist era, through the conditional autonomy enabled by marketisation, to the recent trend of re-centralisation. Viewed horizontally, China's media marketisation has produced a dual press system consisting of Party-organ outlets and commercial media. The former perform the ideological task of "setting the tone" while relying on state subsidies due to their weak market appeal (Meng, 2018, p. 3). The latter, though more diverse and market-oriented in content and style, remain under CCP control as subsidiaries of provincial Party press groups. Moreover, the coexistence of market forces and stringent Party-state control has complicated the work of Chinese journalists, who must exploit market opportunities without transgressing official ideological boundaries. As Pan and Lu (2003) observe, their practices conform neither to the universal model of Western journalistic professionalism nor to the orthodox Party press model. Instead, Chinese journalists engage in improvisational and context-specific practices, strategically drawing upon multiple and often conflicting journalistic norms to navigate political constraints while maintaining professional legitimacy. Within this system, portrayals of the US are shaped by shifting censorship and editorial logics.

Finally, the geopolitical factor, the evolving China-US relationship, provides the broader contextual horizon within which representations of the US unfold.

Drawing on both Chinese (Tao, 2016) and US scholarship (Sutter, 2021) on Sino-US

relations, the post-1949 history of bilateral relations can be heuristically divided into five broad phases³. This typological schema serves as the analytical foundation for tracing how Chinese representations of the US have evolved alongside the changing contours of geopolitical relations. By situating media representations within these historical phases, the study highlights how particular images, themes, and interpretive frames become more or less available depending on the broader international climate. Within this framework, the geopolitical factor is therefore treated as an external contextual condition that structures the range of representational possibilities, shaping both the thematic focus and interpretive orientation of media portrayals of the US.

In general, this research conceptualises the portrayal of the US in Chinese magazines as both shaped by and constitutive of three interrelated dimensions: visual framing practices embedded in media production and interpretation; cultural narratives rooted in China's imagined national community; and institutional structures of state control and market negotiation within the Chinese media system. Each of these dimensions operates within the broader geopolitical context of China-US relations.

Based on these theoretical lenses, this study conducts a longitudinal and comparative analysis of visual depictions of the US from 1950 to 2021 in three Chinese picture magazines: *China Pictorial*, a Party-organ magazine; *South Review*, a commercial news magazine focusing on political and economic affairs; and *Sanlian Life Week*, a commercial news magazine focusing on cultural and social life. So this combination enables the study not only of the changing representations of the US across different historical periods but also of the variation in these

³ For further details, refer to Chapter 2.2.

representations across media types characterised by differing degrees of state control and market orientation. In addition, as repositories of rich historical imagery, photo magazines can serve as both a lens through which a nation views the world and a visual chronicle of its historical evolution (Lutz & Collins, 1993). The still images featured in such magazines function as social symbols of particular historical moments and as expressions of collective historical consciousness, thereby constituting important sources of collective memory (Brennen & Hardt, 1999). Therefore, photo magazines serve as an ideal medium for examining how China's national imagination shapes the visual representation of the US. Methodologically, the research employs visual content analysis, visual framing analysis, and semi-structured interviews with magazine editors and photojournalists. This triangulation enables both a systematic mapping of visual trends and an exploration of the professional practices through which images were selected, adapted, and negotiated under censorship.

This project contributes to ongoing debates in media studies, nationalism, and visual politics in several key ways. First, it foregrounds the importance of the visual in both social history and the construction of national memory. The study demonstrates that visual media and nationalism are mutually constitutive: images do not merely communicate ideas but actively construct the national identity by embodying values, reinforcing collective memories, and staging symbolic comparisons. Across the Maoist, reform, and post-reform periods, visual portrayals of the US functioned as mirrors through which Chinese nationalism was articulated – initially as moral superiority over imperialism, later as ambivalent fascination with modernity, and more recently as strategic rivalry against global hegemony. Conversely, as historical images are repeatedly “revived” in magazines, the visual

reactivation of past national memories and emotions continually endows them with new layers of contemporary nationalist meaning. In this way, the research underscores the centrality of the visual as both a reflective and constitutive dimension of national identity formation. Ultimately, the representation of the US is less about the US itself than about how China, animated by the ideal of national rejuvenation, has imagined its own transformation: from oppressed victim, to pragmatic moderniser, to confident great power. Through this evolving visual narrative, the image of the US becomes a crucial site for envisioning and legitimising China's national revival.

Second, the study challenges the US-centrism of both content and method in visual politics. Western centrism is not merely a matter of privileging Western cultural products, but also of employing the “West as method” in theorising Asia and even Euro-America (Callahan, 2020). This thesis addresses such limitations by grounding its analysis in Chinese media practices and China's own nationalist and historical imaginaries. It does not simply replace US-centrism with Sino-centrism; rather, it contributes to a more pluralistic intellectual assemblage that integrates Chinese historical narratives of the Century of Humiliation and the mission of national rejuvenation with contemporary theories of media and framing. In doing so, the research foregrounds Chinese nationalism and its evolving global imaginary as analytical resources in their own right, while remaining in dialogue with broader international theoretical traditions.

Third, the study highlights the distinctive dynamics of media representation under conditions of strict state control and censorship. While media system theory has often been applied to liberal or hybrid contexts, this research demonstrates how authoritarian conditions – characterised by the Party's ideological dominance, the

limited autonomy of commercial outlets, and recurring cycles of tightening and loosening – generate unique representational logics. By comparing Party and commercial news magazines, the study reveals how censorship, commercialisation, and audience demand interact to produce distinct visual framings of the US. Interviews with magazine staff further enrich this analysis at the level of everyday practice. The creativity of visual journalists was licensed insofar as it amplified officially sanctioned narratives or displaced critical undertones onto ostensibly safe foreign subjects. Moreover, the strong nationalist sensitivities of readers compelled commercial outlets to select personal narratives and nostalgic themes that were unlikely to provoke audience backlash or be interpreted as politically subversive. This finding underscores the necessity of situating framing analysis within the institutional and political constraints of authoritarian media systems, where visual strategies often serve a dual function of ideological reinforcement and subtle negotiation.

Fourth, the thesis contributes historical depth to the study of media, nationalism, and Sino-US relations. By covering the period from 1950 to 2021, the research traces long-term dynamics. This temporal scope reveals both rupture and continuity: while tones shifted from hostility to fascination and back to rivalry, the underlying logic of using the US as a mirror for Chinese self-definition remained constant. Moreover, the study shows how historical memories were reactivated in later decades, with images of past humiliation or solidarity resurfacing to justify contemporary positions. In this sense, the project demonstrates how archival visual material not only documents the past but is re-employed to frame the present, making visible the temporal layering of nationalist narratives.

In summary, these contributions advance the core argument of the thesis: that the image of the US thus operates less as a reflection of external reality than as a mirror through which China visualises and legitimises its own historical transformation and global aspirations. Through the lens of photo magazines, the study reveals how the US image has been continuously articulated, negotiated, and reimagined within the authoritarian media systems, geopolitical tensions, and China's evolving self-imagination. Building on these arguments, the following section outlines the overall structure of the thesis and explains how each chapter contributes to advancing this central line of inquiry.

Following this introduction, Chapters 2, 3 and 4 provide a theoretical and literature-based review of relevant scholarship. Chapter 2 argues that contemporary Chinese representations of the US must be understood within the cultural narrative of national humiliation and rejuvenation that underpins Chinese nationalism. It examines the foundational myth of the Century of National Humiliation and explains how the aspiration for national rejuvenation emerged as a response to this historical trauma. Drawing on scholarship on Confucian traditions and Marxist-Leninist ideology, the chapter contends that China's enduring sensitivity to historical humiliation helps explain the persistent salience of ideological comparison with Western powers, particularly the US. The chapter also situates these cultural narratives within the broader geopolitical trajectory of Sino-US relations, synthesising existing scholarship that divides post-1949 bilateral relations into five phases. In doing so, Chapter 2 establishes the cultural and geopolitical contexts that shape how the US is interpreted in Chinese media, corresponding to the cultural and geopolitical dimensions outlined in Figure 1.2.

Chapter 3 argues that representations of the US in Chinese media are structured not only by nationalist narratives but also by the institutional dynamics of the Chinese media system. It examines the historical tradition of Party leadership and state control over media institutions and analyses how processes of commercialisation have transformed newsroom practices without fundamentally displacing political oversight. The chapter further contends that Chinese journalists have developed a form of adaptive professionalism, through which they negotiate the constraints of political discipline while pursuing professional and market-oriented goals. In this way, Chapter 3 highlights the structural conditions that shape how foreign images can be selected, framed, and circulated within Chinese media.

Accordingly, Chapter 4 turns to the literature on the visual dimension of political communication. It first argues that images function as key sites of political meaning-making, shaping the visual construction of nationalism, collective memory, emotion, and spatial imagination at the internal level. It further extends this discussion to the external dimension of geopolitics, drawing on Callahan's (2020) distinction between "visibility" and "visuality" to explain how images participate in the production of geopolitical meaning and political action. Central to the chapter is the argument that visual representation operates through framing processes. Using Bock's (2020) visual framing model, the chapter conceptualises framing as a multistage and multimodal process linking image creation, selection, and interpretation. These three stages illuminate how meaning is actively produced at multiple points along the visual communication chain, providing a framework for understanding how the image of the US is constructed, stabilised, and circulated in Chinese media. The chapter also argues that pictorial magazines serve as important sites of visual meaning-making, functioning both as lenses through which nations

view the world and as visual chronicles that document the evolution of national ways of seeing (Lutz & Collins, 1993).

Chapter 5 argues that a mixed-method approach is necessary to capture both the visual patterns and institutional processes underlying the representation of the US in Chinese media. The chapter presents the research design in detail. It first explains the rationale for selecting three magazines – *China Pictorial*, *South Review*, and *Sanlian Life Week* – and their distinct position within the Chinese media system. The chapter then introduces the methodological integration of visual content and framing analysis with semi-structured interviews, discussing the significance of this mixed-method approach, which enables the triangulation of visual patterns, framing processes, and institutional insights. It further details the sampling and collection procedures for the US-related images, the criteria and process for recruiting interview participants, the key interview questions, and the limitations and reflections that informed the research.

Chapter 6 outlines and describes the dataset, comparing the three magazines in terms of the volume, framing patterns, and thematic content of their US-related images across different historical periods. It argues that the visual representation of the US in Chinese magazines follows a historically patterned trajectory shaped by shifts in geopolitics and media institutions. Drawing on the pronounced temporal variation in US visual framing observed in the dataset, together with the five geopolitical phases of Sino-US relations identified in Section 2.3 (Chapter 2), the chapter identifies three major representational phases: 1950-1971, 1972-2000, and 2001-2021. These phases establish the longitudinal structure through which the subsequent chapters analyse how the image of the US evolves across different historical contexts and media environments.

Chapters 7, 8, and 9 argue that the visual construction of the US changes systematically across these phases as geopolitical relations, media institutional dynamics, and nationalist narratives interact. Combining cross-magazine comparison with close readings of representative visual cases, these chapters demonstrate how the image of the US functions simultaneously as an external other and as a reflective mirror through which China interprets its own national trajectory.

Chapter 7 (1950-1971) argues that during the period of diplomatic isolation, representations of the US in Chinese media were structured primarily through revolutionary anti-imperialist discourse. Visual data are available only from *China Pictorial*, which functioned as the Party's central propaganda organ. The US was overwhelmingly portrayed as an imperialist aggressor and moral antagonist, serving as a foil through which China projected itself as a victim-turned-moral victor and a leading force in the global anti-imperialist movement. This visual framing resonated with the nationalist conviction that the humiliation of historical oppression could be transcended through revolutionary struggle and moral solidarity.

Chapter 8 (1972-2000) argues that the normalisation of Sino-US relations and China's economic reform transformed the visual image of the US from an enemy into a source of modernity. As US products, culture, and ideas entered China on an unprecedented scale, positive portrayals of the US reached their historical peak. Visual representations shifted from hostility to fascinated engagement and selective appropriation. Chinese media simultaneously displayed admiration for US technological and economic advancement while criticising its material excesses and perceived lack of cultural depth. This ambivalence reflected what this study terms a compensatory nationalist imagination, in which China could embrace learning from the US as a path to modernisation while simultaneously imagining itself as the

enduring civilisational centre. In this way, the visual representation of the US allowed Chinese media to reconcile two seemingly contradictory imperatives: the practical need to learn from Western modernity and the symbolic need to preserve national dignity within the longer narrative of humiliation and rejuvenation.

Chapter 9 (2001-2021) argues that the resurgence of strategic rivalry reshaped the visual representation of the US within a narrative of China's national rise. Amid intensifying tensions over trade, technology, and global influence, representations of the US became more critical, though not uniformly negative. Party-aligned media such as *China Pictorial* emphasised formal diplomatic imagery that projected China's confidence and status in the international hierarchy. Commercial outlets adopted more diverse strategies: *South Review* frequently used satire and visual allegory to question US leadership, while *Sanlian Life Week* often softened geopolitical confrontation through cultural narratives and human-interest stories. These representations illustrate how different media institutions negotiated the competing pressures of nationalism, marketisation, and political regulation.

The final discussion and conclusion chapter addresses the four principal research questions of this study, consolidating the core argument that representations of the US in Chinese magazines serve as a mirror through which China continuously negotiates its own national identity. It further outlines the study's conceptual, theoretical, and empirical contributions, reflects on limitations, and suggests directions for future research on the evolving intersection of media, nationalism, and global visual politics.

The next chapter turns to the literature that provides the conceptual foundation for this research. It reviews existing research on Chinese nationalism and the historical evolution of Sino-US relations. It begins with an examination of the

Century of National Humiliation as a foundational myth, which has profoundly shaped Chinese nationalist thought and continues to structure how China interprets its past, positions itself in the present, and imagines its global future.

**CHAPTER 2. IMAGINED CHINESE COMMUNITY, NATIONALISM, AND
THE US-CHINA RELATIONSHIP**

2.1 Introduction

This chapter develops the cultural dimension and geopolitical factors of the conceptual framework (see Figure 1.2, Chapter 1) through a review of relevant literature. It examines the cultural, ideological, and historical foundations through which the US becomes visible, intelligible, and meaningful within Chinese media discourse. Building on Anderson's (2006) conceptualisation of the nation as an imagined political community, this chapter examines how a specifically Chinese imagined community has been historically constituted through the intertwined narratives of national humiliation and national rejuvenation. These narratives are enduring ideological structures that organise collective memory, shape national identity, and guide the interpretation of foreign others. Against this cultural and ideological backdrop, the chapter also outlines the historical evolution of US-China relations, providing the geopolitical context within which representations of the US in Chinese media take shape.

The chapter advances the argument that contemporary Chinese representations of the US are embedded in an internal nationalist imaginary and an external geopolitical trajectory. Internally, these representations are structured by a historically sedimented nationalist imagination organised around moral order, collective memory of humiliation, and the teleology of national rejuvenation. This internally oriented framework draws on civilisational notions such as *tianxia*, a culturally specific yet politicised culture of face, and an adaptive synthesis of Marxism and nationalism (Callahan, 2010; Gries, 2004; Wang, 2012). It provides the interpretive lens through which foreign powers, particularly the US, are understood in relation to China's own historical identity and developmental aspirations.

Externally, representations of the US are shaped by the historical evolution of US-China relations since 1949, characterised by recurring cycles of rapprochement and rupture, engagement and estrangement, within shifting configurations of global power (Cohen, 2019; Lampton, 2001; Sutter, 2021). Media portrayals of the US are therefore historically contingent framing constructions, responsive to both long-term narrative structures and shifting strategic contexts.

The structure of the chapter is as follows. Section 2.2 first examines how Anderson's concept of the imagined community can be applied to understanding Chinese nationalism. It then considers three interrelated dimensions of contemporary Chinese nationalist discourse: the narratives of the Century of Humiliation and national rejuvenation, and the synthesis of Marxism and nationalism. Section 2.3 then outlines the major phases of US-China relations since 1949 and highlights how changing patterns of conflict and cooperation recalibrate the symbolic status of the US in Chinese discourse. These sections provide the cultural-ideological and historical foundations for the subsequent chapter on the Chinese media system and for the empirical analysis of visual representations that follows later in the thesis.

2.2 Constructing the Chinese Nation: Nationalism, Historical Trauma, and the Pursuit of Rejuvenation

Imagined Communities and the Construction of Chinese National Identity

Nationalism is a crucial concept for understanding how nations are constructed, sustained, and positioned in relation to the Other within the global geopolitical order. While a wide range of theoretical approaches have examined nationalism, including modernist accounts that emphasise industrialisation and state formation (Gellner, 2006), this study draws in particular on Benedict Anderson's

(2006, p. 6) concept of the nation as an “imagined community”. He defines nationality, nation-ness, and nationalism as “cultural artefacts of a particular kind” (p. 4), created through shared cultural systems, symbols, and collective memories that allow individuals to imagine themselves as members of a larger, cohesive entity. Nations are “imagined” not because they are fictitious, but because members of even the smallest nation will never know, meet, or interact with most of their fellow members. Nevertheless, they imagine themselves to belong to the same community through shared systems of representation, collective memories, and symbolic practices (Anderson, 2006). National communities therefore exist through continuous processes of cultural production that generate a sense of common belonging across space and time.

Anderson’s framework is especially suited to the present analysis because it foregrounds the role of media in shaping the collective imagination of the nation through representation. His discussion of print capitalism demonstrates how newspapers and books enabled geographically dispersed populations to consume the same information simultaneously, creating “homogeneous, empty time” in which readers became conscious of participating in the same historical moment as countless anonymous compatriots (Anderson, 2006, p. 25). The daily newspaper thus became more than a vehicle for information; it became a ritual through which the nation was repeatedly imagined into existence. Subsequent scholarship has extended Anderson’s insight beyond newspapers to a broader range of communication technologies, arguing that visual media, television, digital platforms, museums, and commemorative practices similarly contribute to the continual reproduction of national identity by circulating shared narratives, symbols, and emotional

attachments (Billig, 1995; Edensor, 2002). Among these media, visual technologies have further expanded the capacity of representation to cultivate collective imagination by reshaping how shared experience is organised across time and space. Indeed, if print capitalism enabled dispersed readers to inhabit the same temporal horizon (Anderson, 2006), photography further transformed this process by collapsing both temporal and spatial distance. As Hevia (2009) argues, photographic images create a sense of simultaneous presence while bringing geographically remote places into the viewer's visual field. Visual media therefore not only communicate national narratives, but also render the nation visible and experientially immediate, reinforcing the shared imagination upon which national identity depends. This expansion is particularly important for visual media research, where images are understood as powerful representational resources capable of generating emotional identification and shared ways of seeing (Allbeson & Colquhoun, 2022; Brennen & Hardt, 1999). As Callahan (2020, p. 2) argues, visual representations can viscerally move audiences and foster "affective communities of sense," through which collective identities are experienced as emotionally compelling as well as culturally meaningful.

If nations are continually imagined through media representational practices, then media producers are active participants in constructing the symbolic meanings through which the nation is understood. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, Anderson(2006)'s concept provides a theoretical framework for understanding the representational practices through which magazine producers imagine the nation. Editors, journalists, photographers, and designers do not simply document an external reality; they participate in constructing symbolic boundaries that distinguish

the national self from foreign others. Their editorial decisions regarding what to include, what to omit, and how to visually frame foreign countries are embedded within broader narratives about China's place in the world and the values associated with Chinese national identity. In this sense, visual representations of the US are simultaneously representations of China itself, because every depiction of the foreign other also communicates assumptions about the nation's identity, aspirations, and relationship with the wider international order.

While Anderson's theory provides a general account of how nations are imagined through media, applying this perspective to China requires situating contemporary Chinese nationalism within its own historical process of nation-building. In traditional Chinese political thought, there was no indigenous equivalent to the modern nation-state. Instead, political order was organised around dynastic rule and the idea of *tianxia* (天下, "all-under-heaven"), within which China was conceived as the moral and cultural centre of civilisation rather than a territorially bounded sovereign state (Li, 2008; Mingming, 2012; T. Zhao, 2016). This civilisational tradition, together with contemporary political narratives that portray China as a civilisation with an unbroken history of more than five thousand years, has frequently led China to be understood as a distinctive civilisation-state or the historical Middle Kingdom (Callahan, 2010; Wang, 2012). However, scholars of nationalism argue that modern Chinese nationalism should not be conflated with this longer civilisational history. Rather, it emerged within the historical context of the modern international system and the global diffusion of the nation-state (Duara, 1995). Leibold (2007) also demonstrates that concepts such as *Zhonghua minzu* (中华民族, Chinese nation) were products of twentieth-century nation-building. This

perspective avoids treating Chinese nationalism either as an exceptional phenomenon entirely outside the modern nation-state system or as merely a replication of Western nationalism. Instead, it recognises Chinese nationalism as sharing the general logic of modern nation-building while being shaped by China's own historical experiences and cultural traditions (Callahan, 2010).

As Duara (1995) argues, linear national history is never a neutral account of the past. Instead, historical events acquire political meaning through narrative frameworks organised by the nation-state, which retrospectively transform diverse and often discontinuous histories into a coherent story of national development. Chinese imagined community is therefore sustained through historical narratives that render the nation intelligible as a continuous collective subject. Wang (2012, p. 163) also believes that the imagined community is rooted in a nation's "deep culture" – the often unacknowledged assumptions, historical memories, and cultural understandings through which collective identity is constituted. National history thus serves not only to continually reimagine the nation in response to changing historical and geopolitical circumstances, but also to absorb new historical experiences into an enduring narrative framework, allowing the imagined community to adapt to contemporary realities while maintaining a sense of historical continuity. In the Chinese context, this process of national imagination has been organised predominantly around the intertwined narratives of national humiliation and the pursuit of national rejuvenation. Chinese nationalist scholars generally argue that China's traumatic encounters with Western powers in the nineteenth century – including military defeats and the imposition of unequal treaties – awoke national consciousness and the awareness of statehood (Callahan, 2010; Gries, 2004; Wang,

2012). In this view, modern Chinese nationalism emerged as a historically contingent response to imperial encroachment and the global spread of the nation-state.

Memories of foreign aggression and aspirations for national revival constitute the emotional core of contemporary Chinese nationalism (Gries, 2004). These narratives are further reinforced by the civilisational pride of Confucian moral order and the ideological lineage of Marxism-Leninism, both of which frame China's historical identity and its perceived moral mission in the world (Callahan, 2010; Wang, 2012). Through their continual repetition across political discourse, education, and media representation, the intertwined narratives of humiliation and rejuvenation reproduce the imagined community by defining the meanings of national identity, collective destiny, and China's relationship with foreign others. The following section therefore examines the narrative of the Century of Humiliation, which has become one of the principal symbolic foundations of contemporary Chinese nationalism.

The Century of National Humiliation as a Foundational Myth

The narrative of the "Century of Humiliation" (百年国耻 Bainian Guochi), spanning from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, is central to Chinese nationalism today (Callahan, 2010; Gries, 2004; Wang, 2012). It refers to the period between the First Opium War (1839-1842) and the founding of the PRC in 1949, during which China experienced a series of military defeats, foreign invasions, and unequal treaties imposed by Western powers. This period begins with the First Opium War (1840-1842), during which China suffered a humiliating defeat by Britain, resulting in the Treaty of Nanjing (1842) – the first of many "unequal treaties" that ceded Hong Kong, imposed indemnities, and opened ports to foreign control (Group, 2023, p. 18). Subsequent defeats, such as the Second Opium War

(1856-1860), led to the Treaty of Tianjin (1858) and the Convention of Peking (1860), which expanded foreign privileges and legalised the opium trade. The First Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895) brought further humiliation, as the Treaty of Shimonoseki (1895) forced China to cede Taiwan and the Penghu Islands to Japan (Wang, 2012). The foreign occupation of Beijing during the Boxer Rebellion (1900), known in China as the “Eight-Nation Alliance’s invasion”, culminated in the Xinchou Treaty (1901), regarded as the most severe of the unequal treaties for its deep erosion of sovereignty (Group, 2023, p. 39). In Chinese historical narratives, it symbolised China’s subjugation as a semi-colonial and semi-feudal state under imperialist control (Group, 2023; People’s Education Press Curriculum et al., 2007). The Treaty of Versailles (1919) further inflamed nationalist resentment when former German territories in Shandong were transferred to Japan, sparking the May Fourth Movement (1919) (Chen, 1971). This prolonged era of humiliation culminated in the Japanese occupation of Manchuria (1931-1945) and the atrocities of the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945), including the Nanjing Massacre (1937) (Group, 2023; People’s Education Press Curriculum et al., 2007). In Chinese historical discourse, this period of humiliation is understood to have concluded only with the founding of the PRC in 1949, following the Communist Revolution. It is remembered as an era during which China was repeatedly attacked, subjugated, and fragmented by foreign imperial powers, leaving a collective memory of national suffering and violation (Wang, 2012). This historical memory has also been sustained through the circulation of visual representations in Chinese media, which have become integral to the construction of nationalist memory. Figure 2.1 illustrates one such example. Published in *China Pictorial* in December 1950, it juxtaposes

historical photographs of the Eight-Nation Alliance's occupation of Beijing with contemporary anti-US narratives during the Korean War, visually connecting past imperial aggression with present geopolitical conflict. Such historical illustrations actively participate in the construction of historical continuity by inviting viewers to interpret contemporary international relations through the enduring framework of the Century of Humiliation. The ways in which this image is visually composed, repeatedly reproduced, and recontextualised within Chinese media are examined in detail in Section 7.2, Chapter 7.



Figure 2.1. Atrocities Committed by US Imperialists in China.

Top-Right Image: Fifty years ago, US and Japanese military officers who invaded Chinese territory and slaughtered the Chinese people posed for a photo inside the imperial palace after occupying the Qing imperial palace [known as the Forbidden City]. Today, the US is once again supporting Japanese militarism and is invading the territories of China and Korea.

*Bottom -Centre Image: After the Eight-Nation Alliance occupied Beijing in 1900, their iron hooves marched into the Qing imperial palace. December 1950, China Pictorial.*⁴

Political scientists have long observed China's distinctive preoccupation with a history of collective suffering and have connected this historical consciousness to questions of national identity and foreign policy (Callahan, 2010; Shambaugh, 2020; Wang, 2012). At its core, China's engagement with its traumatic past reflects a desire to maintain continuity of the national self-identity across time. Mitzen (2006) argues that states seek not only physical security but also the security of a stable identity. Narratives of historical trauma or national triumph thus function to stabilise state identity by sustaining a coherent sense of collective selfhood, which in turn shapes foreign policy orientations, including threat perception, alliance preferences, and risk-taking behaviour (Callahan, 2010; Steele, 2008). Within this framework, the discourse of "national humiliation" operates as a domestic narrative aimed at fostering internal cohesion, while also informing China's understanding of its rightful position in the international order, shaping both elite strategic reasoning and popular sentiment (Callahan, 2010). This discourse underscores that China's insecurities are not only material, defined by economic or military asymmetries with major powers, but also symbolic, rooted in deeply embedded perceptions of historical injustice and global misrecognition (Callahan, 2004). Indeed, one of the enduring aims of Chinese foreign policy has been articulated as the need to "cleanse national humiliation", restoring dignity and status to the Chinese nation (Callahan, 2004, p. 202).

⁴ Unless otherwise indicated, all image captions in this chapter are translated from the original Chinese by the author.

However, existing scholarship has tended to emphasise the construction of Chinese national identity and has consequently paid relatively less attention to how this discourse simultaneously constructs the image of the other and thereby shapes international relations. The question of how foreign actors are imagined, positioned, and symbolically constituted in relation to China's narrative of historical suffering remains underexamined, despite its utmost importance in today's global landscape, where China's role is becoming increasingly dominant. This study seeks to address this gap by examining how representations of the foreign other are produced, framed, and visually encoded within the national humiliation discourse, and how such representations contribute to contemporary geopolitical imaginaries.

China's Rejuvenation as the Restoration of its Natural Status

Although humiliation is commonly understood as an experience borne in silence, the Chinese discourse of national humiliation instead foregrounds an assertive and forward-looking narrative of historical renewal and collective redemption. A formative expression of this ethos can be traced to the Confucian classic Book of Rites (礼记, Liji), which tells us that "A thing's humiliation can stimulate it; a country's humiliation can rejuvenate it" (Legge, 1885, p. 266). This articulation frames suffering not as an endpoint, but as a catalyst for moral strength and national revival. Within this narrative logic, the founding of the PRC in 1949 is constructed within nationalist discourse as the decisive conclusion of the Century of Humiliation, marking the restoration of national sovereignty and dignity after a prolonged period of foreign encroachment. As Mao Zedong proclaimed at the inauguration of the new state, "Ours will no longer be a nation subject to insult and humiliation. We have stood up" (Mao Zedong's speech, cited in Velez-Serrano, 2018,

p. 7). The discourse of national humiliation thus functions not only as a record of historical trauma, but also as a teleological story of resurgence – one that positions the contemporary Chinese nation as the rightful agent of its own rejuvenation.

Building on this historical narrative, contemporary Chinese national identity is profoundly shaped by the discourse of national rejuvenation, which casts China's rise as the rightful rectification of historical injustices. The proclamation that China had “stood up” (站起来, Zhan Qilai) under Mao signified not only resistance against foreign domination but also the assertion of an autonomous socialist path oriented around self-reliance, developmental sovereignty, and the rejection of Western imperial influence. This framing continues to structure Chinese nationalism today, legitimising the CCP as the guardian of national dignity and the agent responsible for completing the project of rejuvenation (Callahan, 2010). Under Mao's leadership, the ‘stood-up’ China rejected foreign interference and prioritised self-reliance through socialist policies, resisted Western imperialism and consolidated territorial integrity.

The second step of China's rejuvenation narrative is that China “grew rich” (富起来, Fu Qilai) under the leadership of the CCP. Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms initiated in 1978 marked a decisive shift toward economic pragmatism. The transition from a planned economy to a market-oriented system marked a significant ideological shift, often described as “socialism with Chinese characteristics” (Xi, 2017). These reforms facilitated rapid economic growth, lifting hundreds of millions out of poverty and positioning China as a global manufacturing hub (Brandt & Rawski, 2008). The CCP frames this economic transformation as a validation of Chinese governance and a unique developmental model. Official discourses

emphasise that China's rise is due to its rejection of Western democratic prescriptions, reinforcing national pride in indigenous governance (Zhao, 2004). The success of economic reforms is frequently juxtaposed against the stagnation or perceived decline of Western economies, fostering a nationalist sentiment that China's rise is inevitable and superior (Huang, 2022).

The concept of national rejuvenation is most prominently associated with the Chinese Dream (中国梦, *Zhongguo Meng*), a vision articulated by Xi Jinping in 2013 that frames China's development as the realisation of a prosperous and powerful nation, capable of reclaiming its rightful place on the global stage (Xi, 2014). In this discursive context, China is now entering the third phase of "growing strong" (强起来, *Qiang Qilai*). A critical aspect of this stage is China's increasing assertiveness in foreign policy, framed as a necessary step in overcoming historical injustices. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a large-scale transnational programme aimed at promoting infrastructure connectivity and economic integration across Asia, Europe, and beyond, is positioned as a symbol of China's return to centrality in global affairs (Rudd, 2024). Meanwhile, nationalist rhetoric surrounding territorial disputes, such as those in the South China Sea and Taiwan, has intensified, with official narratives portraying opposition as Western efforts to contain China's rightful rise (Breslin, 2021). During this period, these developments have been accompanied by the rise of online nationalism, as digital platforms provide new arenas for the articulation and amplification of nationalist sentiment. Scholars note that Chinese online nationalism often takes the form of emotionally charged, event-driven mobilisation, including consumer boycotts and attacks on foreign media coverage of

China, which is frequently perceived as biased or hostile (Ma, 2015; Schneider, 2023; Yang, 2021).

The slogan “Never Forget National Humiliation, Rejuvenate China” permeates Chinese public discourse, appearing across settings from official textbook titles to graffiti in public parks (Callahan, 2010, p. 14). It represents a message that is simultaneously state-driven and popularly embraced, circulating through the intertwined channels of institutional propaganda and everyday communication. In sum, the discourse of national humiliation and rejuvenation forms not merely a retrospective chronicle of China’s modern transformation but an enduring framework through which the Chinese nation interprets both its past and its future. The imagined journey from humiliation to standing up, growing rich, and becoming strong encapsulates phases of national development – political independence under Mao, economic modernisation under Deng, and global reassertion under Xi. Each stage reconfigures the memory of past trauma into a legitimating resource for present governance, foreign policy and future ambition. As Callahan (2010) argued, this narrative does not unfold as a linear progression of China from humiliation to triumph; rather, it operates as a cyclical historiographical logic in which humiliation and pride remain mutually constitutive forces. Long after the formal end of the Century of Humiliation in 1949, these intertwined sentiments continue to shape the moral vocabulary of Chinese nationalism, providing a guiding template through which political challenges, diplomatic confrontations, and developmental aspirations are understood and legitimised. By situating China’s national experience within a continuum of suffering, resilience, and rejuvenation, this discourse reaffirms that

historical victimhood at the hands of foreign powers is a living grammar of identity across past and present.

However, this synthesis of national pride, historical grievance, and strategic ambition is not solely a product of political engineering; it is also embedded in enduring cultural and ideological frameworks. To fully apprehend China's evolving stance toward the US and its broader positioning on the world stage, it is imperative to examine the foundational values that inform its worldview. The following section turns to the ideological continuities that underpin the Chinese imagined community, particularly the legacies of Marxism, in shaping China's perception of its relationship with the US.

Chinese Nationalism in the Context of Ideological Conflict

Marxism serves both as an ideological framework for anti-imperialist mobilisation and as a legitimating discourse for state-led nation-building in China. As scholars widely acknowledge, the synthesis of Chinese nationalism and Marxism in the early twentieth century allowed the CCP to reconceptualise the nation as a revolutionary subject and China's modern destiny as part of a broader global struggle against imperialism and capitalism (Dirlik, 1978; Karl, 2002).

First, Marxism provided the theoretical vocabulary through which China's historical suffering under imperialism could be reframed as a class-based and structural condition rather than a purely civilisational failure, thereby restoring a sense of dignity to China's ancient civilisation. According to Dirlik (1978), the introduction of Marxist historical materialism provided Chinese revolutionaries with a framework to understand China's backwardness as the inevitable outcome of semi-feudal and semi-colonial conditions imposed by global capitalism. That means,

relations among states were no longer viewed as a “clash of civilisations”

(Huntington, 1996, p. 181), but rather as forms of structural inequality within the capitalist world system. Countries that were invaded and colonised, such as China, were not conquered because of cultural backwardness, but because they had been incorporated into an unequal economic structure created by the global expansion of capitalism (Wallerstein, 2011). This perspective enabled Chinese intellectuals to reinterpret the Century of Humiliation through the lens of global capitalism and imperial expansion, shifting the narrative from civilisational self-blame to an anti-imperialist critique.

Second, Marxism enabled the CCP to position itself as both a national and international agent of liberation. By embedding China’s national struggle within the broader anti-imperialist front, the CCP could claim to represent not only Chinese interests but also the vanguard of oppressed peoples globally (Callahan, 2010). This framing created a dual identity of Chinese nationalism – simultaneously inward-looking in its call for unity and sovereignty, and outward-looking in its solidarity with global anti-colonial movements (Zheng, 1999). The socialist state that emerged after 1949 institutionalised this synthesis, promoting a discourse of proletarian internationalism alongside patriotic education, both legitimating the CCP’s political authority and reinforcing the moral dimension of Chinese national identity (Wu, 2025).

Thirdly, in the post-Mao era, Marxism continues to shape Chinese nationalism by providing a discursive bridge between socialism and developmentalism. Classical Marxism holds that the economic base determines all superstructural forms, including culture, politics, and ideology (Marx & Engels,

1998). In the Chinese context, this principle has been reinterpreted to prioritise the development of productive forces as a necessary condition for socialist transformation. Consequently, economic reform and state-led development are interpreted as the necessary historical stages in building the economic foundation for socialism (Shambaugh, 2008). Meanwhile, economic growth is not merely presented as a socialist achievement but also as a nationalist redemption. The Party's campaign to industrialise, urbanise, and modernise is framed as an effort to restore China's dignity following the Century of Humiliation (Callahan, 2010; Gries, 2004). The Chinese economic revolution is therefore framed as a dual mission: to improve the material conditions of the people (a Marxist goal) and to reclaim China's rightful position in the world (a nationalist goal). The "growing rich" phase of China's modernisation embodies both the Marxist historical logic of productive force development and the nationalist mission of overcoming historical subjugation.

This synthesis between Marxism and nationalism in the reform era exemplifies what scholars have described as pragmatic nationalism (Hughes, 2006; Zhao, 2004). The CCP has instrumentalised nationalist discourse to justify policy flexibility and secure political legitimacy. Pragmatic nationalism allows the Party to reconcile market-oriented reform with socialist principles by framing economic pragmatism as a patriotic duty. Under this logic, participation in global markets, engagement with the US, and the pursuit of modernisation are legitimised as strategies for strengthening national power and advancing socialism "with Chinese characteristics" (Boer, 2021). Yan (2010) argues, even as China's integration into the global economy fosters pragmatic engagement with Western capitalist systems, the CCP continues to invoke Marxist rhetoric to legitimise state intervention in strategic

sectors and to critique the inequalities of Western-style capitalism. Within this discursive framework, China's political-economic model is portrayed as a superior alternative to global capitalism – one that resists its exploitative tendencies while charting a path toward a higher stage of socialist development (Rudd, 2024).

Shambaugh (2020) states that Marxist ideology in China's foreign policy functions more as a rhetorical instrument than a strict guiding principle, often coexisting with pragmatic economic and strategic considerations.

In sum, Marxism has served not only as a theoretical import but as an adaptive framework through which Chinese nationalism was modernised, moralised, and continuously legitimised. It provided the analytical language to diagnose imperial domination, the teleology to link revolution and nation-building, and the moral rationale to sustain the CCP's claim as the guardian of both socialism and national rejuvenation.

Overall, this section has argued that contemporary Chinese nationalism can be understood through Anderson's (2006) concept of the imagined community. The Chinese nation is continually imagined and reproduced through historical narratives in Chinese media that construct a shared sense of identity, collective memory, and national destiny. At the centre of this nationalist imaginary are the intertwined narratives of the Century of Humiliation and national rejuvenation. The former constructs China's modern history around memories of foreign invasion, national suffering, and the loss of sovereignty, while the latter presents rejuvenation as the historical mission of restoring national dignity, prosperity, and international status. Within the Marxist historical-materialist framework adopted by the CCP, China's past subjugation is reinterpreted as a structural outcome of global capitalist

domination, while its rejuvenation is portrayed as the redemptive correction of that historical inequity. Interwoven, these strands construct an imagined Chinese community defined by a shared moral mission – to reclaim rightful global respect, take pride in both the grandeur of its ancient civilisation and the accomplishments of modern China, and achieve collective redemption through national rejuvenation. As Gries (2004, p. 42) observes, this vision encapsulates a form of national self-assurance in which “China always wins,” reinforcing a cyclical narrative of humiliation, resilience, and triumph. Within this ideological configuration, the US emerges as the principal symbolic other, representing Western imperialism and capitalism, against which China’s historical experiences, national identity, and future aspirations are articulated. This research thus examines how this nationalist imaginary shapes the visual representation of the US other in contemporary Chinese discourse. To situate these representational practices within their broader historical and geopolitical context, the following section explores the evolving dynamics of the US-China relationship.

2.3 Understanding the US-China Relationship through Visual Representations

The historical trajectory of US-China relations has been characterised by alternating periods of engagement and estrangement, shaped by broader geopolitical transformations, ideological confrontations, and evolving mutual perceptions. Scholars have examined these dynamics from the founding of the PRC in 1949 to the Cold War’s ideological divisions and the complex interdependence of the post-Cold War era (Friedberg, 2011). Understanding the construction of these relations not only provides valuable insights into the underlying reasons for portrayals of the US in Chinese media but also facilitates an analysis of the connection between geopolitics

and media representations. To foreground the visual dimensions of these historical transformations, this section incorporates selected images associated with key moments in US-China relations. These examples demonstrate how the production, circulation, and recontextualisation of visual representations have shaped historical narratives, collective memory, and understandings of US-China relations across different historical periods. Based on existing literature (Cohen, 2019; Lampton, 2001; Shepperd, 2013; Sutter, 2021; Tao, 2016), the post-1949 history of Sino-US relations may be heuristically divided into five broad phases. However, while the periodisation set out below offers a useful analytical framework, it also presents certain limitations. It is crucial to acknowledge that transformations in bilateral relations are rarely abrupt, nor are they neatly confined within discrete temporal boundaries. Rather, they unfold through gradual shifts, contested meanings, and contingent interactions. Nevertheless, such a typological schema remains helpful in tracing the broad contours of geopolitical change and in contextualising the evolving narratives through which China constructs and communicates its understanding of the US.

Freezing Period and Wartime Relations: 1949-1972

In 1948, the Truman administration supported the China Aid Act, allocating \$125 million to the struggling Nationalist government in China. The US's unilateral support for the Chinese Nationalist Party (CNP) strained its relationship with the newly established PRC, founded by the CCP in 1949 after defeating the CNP in mainland China. In early 1950, the CCP aligned with the Soviet Union in opposition to the US during the Cold War. Seeking the technical and economic assistance necessary to govern the new nation, Maoist leadership strengthened ties with the

Soviet Union in an international environment heavily influenced by US power (Sutter, 2021). The CCP denounced the “deceptive foreign policy” of the US and implemented its “leaning to one side” (“一边倒” yi bian dao) policy, favouring alignment with the Soviet bloc. Consequently, Sino-US diplomacy entered a “freezing period” (Lanteigne, 2019, p. 95).



Figure 2.2. Fully Support the Chinese People’s Volunteer Army (CPVA) in the War to Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea. October 1951, *China Pictorial*.



2020年9月27日，辽宁沈阳，第七批在韩中国人民志愿军烈士遗骸由中国空军专机护送从韩国接回国。当载着117位烈士遗骸的车辆驶过时，抗美援朝老兵起立敬礼，目送战友。摄影 陶冉



2020年9月27日，在沈阳桃仙国际机场，礼兵将拾获志愿军烈士遗骸的棺椁从专机上护送至棺椁停放区。当日，第七批在韩中国人民志愿军烈士遗骸由中国空军专机护送从韩国接回辽宁沈阳。机上共载有117位志愿军烈士的遗骸及相关遗物。摄影 陶冉

Figure 2.3. *Top:* On September 27, 2020, in Shenyang, Liaoning, the seventh batch of remains of CPVA martyrs from the Korean War was escorted back to China by a Chinese Air Force special plane. As the plane carrying the remains of 117 martyrs passed by, veteran heroes stood at attention and saluted, bidding farewell to their comrades in arms.

Bottom: On September 27, 2020, at Shenyang Taoxian International Airport, honour guards escorted the coffins of the martyrs' remains from the special plane to the memorial site. On that day, the seventh batch of remains of CPVA martyrs from the Korean War was escorted by a Chinese Air Force special plane from South Korea to Shenyang, Liaoning. The plane carried the remains of 117 Volunteer Army martyrs and their related belongings.

November 2020, *China Pictorial*.

In early 1950, the outbreak of the Korean War further exacerbated Sino-US tensions. Known in China as the “War to Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea” (抗美援朝战争), this conflict arose after the CCP, responding to requests from the Korean Workers’ Party and the North Korean government, decided to support North

Korea's resistance against US-led forces (Military History Research Department of the Academy of Military Sciences, 2000, p. 1). Within China, participation in the war was framed as both a defence of national sovereignty and an internationalist commitment to socialist solidarity. At the same time, the war became a defining moment in the visual construction of the US as an imperialist aggressor. As illustrated in Figure 2.2, *China Pictorial* portrayed the CPVA as heroic defenders of the nation confronting US imperialism. The composition directs the viewer from the supplies and forms of popular support clustered on the left, through the monumentalised Chinese soldiers at the centre, towards the caricatured and retreating US forces on the right. Radiating lines and a warm red-orange palette elevate the central soldier into an emblem of revolutionary heroism, while the exaggerated disparity in scale constructs the Chinese forces as morally and militarily dominant. Importantly, the visual politics of the Korean War has extended well beyond the conflict itself. As shown in Figure 2.3, published in *China Pictorial* in 2020, photographs documenting the repatriation of the remains of CPVA martyrs from the Republic of Korea demonstrate the continuing political significance of the war in contemporary China. The images of surviving veterans saluting their fallen comrades alongside the ceremonial return of the martyrs' remains reconnect contemporary audiences with the historical sacrifices of the Korean War and reinforce official narratives of patriotism, national sovereignty, and collective remembrance. Their continued circulation illustrates how historical conflicts remain politically meaningful through visual commemoration and state-sponsored memory practices.

The Korean War also marked the end of US influence on mainland China. Educational reforms replaced English with Russian as the foreign language of choice for students (Chen, 1995; Cohen, 2019). By the late 1950s, however, the Chinese-Soviet alliance began to unravel, culminating in 1960 with the public withdrawal of Soviet economic aid and advisers. While US policymakers had long hoped for such a split (Sutter, 2021), China remained more antagonistic toward the US than the Soviet Union. The deepening of US involvement in Vietnam further heightened Sino-US friction. During the Vietnam War, China deployed hundreds of thousands of anti-aircraft, railway, construction, and support troops to aid North Vietnam in resisting US forces (Chen, 2001). This conflict echoed the narrative established during the Korean War, portraying US imperialism as aggressively expansionist and intent on suppressing revolutionary movements in communist states.

Meanwhile, during the early years of the Cultural Revolution⁵, China entered a period of violent and often xenophobic practices, which severely impacted its foreign relations (Tao, 2016). Revolutionary fervour overtook conventional diplomacy, resulting in the purge of the foreign minister and much of the senior foreign policy leadership. Ambassadors were recalled and subjected to state-imposed ideological re-education. During this period, the CCP placed revolutionary ideology over international diplomacy. Simultaneously, the US, deeply engaged in the Vietnam War, maintained its containment strategy along China's periphery while enforcing political isolation and an economic embargo on Beijing (Sutter, 2021), further exacerbating Sino-US tensions.

⁵ A sociopolitical movement in China, from 1966 to 1976. This movement aimed to safeguard Chinese socialism by eliminating remnants of capitalist and traditional elements within Chinese society.

Rapprochement and Normalisation: 1972-1989

The significant shift that led to the opening of US-China relations in the late 1960s and early 1970s has been interpreted in various ways by scholars. One perspective attributes this change to a waning of Mao's revolutionary drive and vigour, which created an opportunity for him to consider and ultimately pursue a pragmatic rapprochement with the US (Chen, 2001). Another interpretation emphasises a shift in US strategic thinking regarding China's role in global politics (Goh, 2004). This view argues that by the late 1960s, US leaders began to perceive China as less of a threat and increasingly as a potential ally in addressing the growing challenge posed by the Soviet Union. While these perspectives foreground different sources of agency – one locating the impetus for change primarily within China, the other within the US – they converge on a similar analytical conclusion: that the recalibration of bilateral relations was shaped by urgent strategic imperatives confronting both states amid an international environment defined by the rise of the Soviet Union and the intensification of Cold War competition.



Figure 2.4. Top: Premier Zhou Enlai and President Nixon shook hands at the airport.

Bottom: President Nixon, accompanied by Premier Zhou Enlai, reviewed the People's Liberation Army of China (PLA) military honour guard of the navy, army and air force.

April 1972, *China Pictorial*.

Symbolic of the importance of the opening to the US in Chinese politics at the time was the greeting of US National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger upon his arrival in Beijing on his secret mission in July 1971 to open US-China relations. In February 1972, Nixon undertook a historic visit to China, during which the Shanghai Communiqué outlined mutual opposition to Soviet expansion, US intentions to reduce its presence in Taiwan, and steps toward fostering US-China diplomatic engagement (Goh, 2005). This marked the beginning of normalisation in US-China relations after more than two decades of conflict, laying the groundwork for the

eventual establishment of diplomatic ties (Tao, 2016). This diplomatic transition was also staged and communicated through a carefully orchestrated visual repertoire. As shown in Figure 2.4, the airport handshake between Nixon and Zhou transformed diplomatic rapprochement into a visible performance of official recognition and mutual respect. It has also become one of the most widely circulated and repeatedly reproduced images of Sino-US relations in Chinese media, contributing to its enduring status as a visual marker of the normalisation of bilateral relations and a significant site of national memory (Tao, 2026; Zang, 2025). In the bottom photograph, Nixon's inspection of a tri-service honour guard, framed by the conspicuous presence of the PLA and a US aircraft, combines diplomatic ceremony with a display of Chinese state and military authority. The partially visible revolutionary slogan⁶ in the background further reveals the ideological ambivalence of the moment: rapprochement with the US was publicly enacted while established representations of US imperialism remained materially present within the visual environment. Published in *China Pictorial*, these photographs helped present the new direction of bilateral relations to domestic audiences as an authorised and historically significant political development, while retaining traces of the ideological tensions that had defined the preceding decades.

After Mao's death, the arrest of the Gang of Four⁷ marked a turning point in Sino-US relations, as China's leadership began to reverse disruptive policies, reflect

⁶ The visible text, "Unite the Oppressed Nations!" (被压迫民族联合起来), is the second half of a larger slogan displayed at Beijing's Nanyuan Airport, which reads: "Down with US Imperialism and All Reactionaries! Unite the Oppressed People and Oppressed Nations of the World!" (打倒美帝国主义及一切反动派! 全世界被压迫人民、被压迫民族联合起来!).

⁷ A Maoist political faction consisting of four Chinese officials who rose to prominence during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). They were later charged with treasonous crimes and held responsible for the excesses and failures of the Cultural Revolution. The group included Jiang Qing (Mao Zedong's last wife), Zhang Chunqiao, Yao Wenyuan, and Wang Hongwen.

on the mistakes of the Cultural Revolution, and restore senior cadre committed to pragmatic reforms. Deng Xiaoping's return to power culminated in his consolidation of authority at the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee in December 1978, where he initiated economic and policy reforms (Agency, 2009). These changes not only laid the groundwork for China's development but also signalled a shift toward engaging the US and the broader international community, as Deng and his colleagues worked to restore the legitimacy of the Communist Party and advance China's global position. The US-China Communiqué announced in December 1978 established official US relations with the PRC (Tao, 2016). Subsequently, Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping's visit to the US in January 1979 emphasised one of his key objectives: to "learn from all things advanced" (Zhang, 2014, p. 15). During the 1980s, China increasingly viewed its relationship with the US as essential for counterbalancing Soviet military expansion. Under Deng's leadership, which prioritised economic development, China sought to maintain favourable relations with the US to facilitate smooth and advantageous economic exchange with Western developed nations and access to international financial institutions they controlled.

Post-Cold War Realities, 1989-2000

The turning point occurred during the mass demonstrations that erupted in Beijing's Tiananmen Square and other Chinese cities in the spring of 1989. Following the implementation of reform and opening-up policies,⁸ Chinese society grappled with issues such as profiteering by government officials, corruption,

⁸ Guided by Deng Xiaoping, often referred to as the "General Architect", these economic reforms in the PRC, known as "socialism with Chinese characteristics" and the "socialist market economy", began in 1978.

collusion between power and money, and the abuse of privilege. Economic reforms were impeded by the limitations of the existing political system, and ideological divisions among senior Chinese leaders led to factional conflicts. Deng Xiaoping ultimately resolved these tensions decisively, aligning with hard-liners who advocated a violent crackdown on demonstrators (Cox, 1989). This culminated in the bloody suppression of protests in Tiananmen Square on June 4, 1989. Unlike other major historical events discussed in this chapter, however, the protests and subsequent crackdown were almost entirely absent from official Chinese media. Neither textual reporting nor visual documentation appeared in publications such as *China Pictorial*, reflecting a deliberate politics of visibility in which the omission of images became a means of regulating public memory and defining the boundaries of legitimate historical representation. The visual absence of Tiananmen is therefore significant in itself, illustrating how state power operates not only through the production and circulation of images but also through their suppression and erasure. The crackdown profoundly altered US perceptions of China, leaving both nations deeply disillusioned with one another. While the US was appalled by China's brutal display of authoritarian power (Lampton, 2001; Sutter, 2021), the Chinese government portrayed the political unrest as a conspiracy orchestrated by hostile foreign forces, particularly the US, aimed at overthrowing China's legitimate government and undermining the socialist PRC (Tao, 2016).

In the decade following Tiananmen, US policy explicitly challenged the central interests of the Chinese leadership to maintain Communist Party rule. The US increased its support for Taiwan, the Dalai Lama's interests in Tibet, and pro-democracy forces in Hong Kong, actions that China perceived as threats to its

sovereignty and territorial integrity (Lanteigne, 2019). A major crisis arose in 1995-96 when President Clinton reversed earlier assurances by senior US officials and allowed a high-profile visit by Taiwan's president. This decision led to a military standoff, with China conducting periodic live-fire military exercises in the Taiwan Strait and testing short-range ballistic missiles over nine months (Sutter, 2021). Moreover, the US bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade in 1999 (Shepperd, 2013) became a major point of contention between the two countries, with the US characterising the incident as an accident and China disputing this account. The incident contributed to a period of heightened tensions in US-China relations.

Throughout the 1990s, the US' containment strategy developed in tandem with the "China threat theory". In response, China adopted counter-containment strategies, emphasising multilateral diplomacy and promoting a "new international order" characterised by "one superpower, many great powers" (一超多强, *yi chao duo qiang*) (Lanteigne, 2019, pp. 96-97). Lampton (2001, p. 16) argues that amidst China's rapid economic reforms and its rising international status between 1989 and 1999, Sino-US relations entered a "new equilibrium" – a deeply contradictory relationship marked by both cooperation and persistent tensions. The summit meetings between Presidents Jiang Zemin and Bill Clinton in Washington in 1997 and Beijing in 1998 appeared to support this perspective. A number of experts and scholars believed that these summits symbolised the culmination of Beijing's decade-long effort to restore its international legitimacy following the Tiananmen incident (Kamath, 1998; Singh, 1998; Sutter, 2021). By the end of 1997, the two nations began discussing a "constructive strategic partnership" for the 21st century (Feng & Huang, 2014, p. 7). After protracted and often challenging negotiations,

they reached an agreement in late 1999 that paved the way for China's entry into the World Trade Organisation (WTO). In summary, during this period, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War undermined the strategic foundation of Sino-US relations. The Tiananmen incident deepened mutual mistrust, resulting in a decade of fragile engagement, where economic collaboration was delicately balanced against ongoing political and ideological discord.

Pragmatism and Disagreement, 2001-2009

US-China relations faced a significant crisis on April 1, 2001, when a Chinese jet fighter collided with a US reconnaissance plane, an EP-3, over international waters off China's coast. Neither side accepted responsibility for the incident (Tao, 2016). However, the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the US shifted US priorities, with an overwhelming focus on addressing the global war on terrorism. This new challenge became the primary concern of the US government, media, and interest groups, temporarily muting concerns about China (Sutter, 2021). The antiterrorism campaign led to an upswing in US-China cooperation, marked by frequent bilateral engagements. During the eight-year Bush administration, President Hu Jintao and President George W. Bush met 19 times and spoke more than 30 times. Bush visited China four times, more than any previous US president (Wang, 2008). Additionally, the North Korean nuclear programme emerged as a major challenge in 2003, with the US increasingly relying on China to manage the issue in ways that minimised risks to US interests (Sutter, 2021). The global financial crisis of 2008-2009 further prompted US leaders to prioritise closer cooperation with China, sidelining differences over human rights and related values in favour of addressing broader economic and security concerns (Friedberg, 2011).

Some scholars (Friedberg, 2011; Sutter, 2021), however, have highlighted the underlying tensions that persisted despite these positive developments. These included the Bush administration's assertive stance on Taiwan, strong advocacy for regional and national ballistic missile defense systems, expanded US-Japanese defense cooperation, North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) enlargement, and other security initiatives, all of which drew sharp criticism from China.



Figure 2.5. Gathered together in celebration. Chinese President Hu Jintao hosted a grand banquet at the Great Hall of the People to welcome distinguished guests from countries and regions around the world who had come to China to attend the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympic Games. Pictured here are Hu Jintao and his wife, Liu Yongqing, entering the banquet hall together with the honoured guests. September 2008, *China Pictorial*.

During this period, Chinese leaders focused on promoting economic development and ensuring political and social stability. This commitment reflected the CCP's determination to avoid the collapse experienced by other Communist regimes after the Cold War and to sustain one-party rule in China (Tao, 2016). Foreign policy was designed to support these objectives by fostering an international

environment conducive to economic growth and stability. Chinese diplomacy adopted a generally moderate tone, aiming to reassure neighbouring countries and other powers, most notably the US, that China's rising economic, military, and political influence was not a threat but an opportunity for global development and harmony. Greater emphasis was placed on engagement with regional and multilateral organisations to align with international norms and mitigate concerns about China's growing power (Lanteigne, 2019). This period also witnessed heightened national pride as China prepared to host the August 2008 Olympic Games (Xu, 2006). The Chinese government was determined to avoid domestic or international actions that could jeopardise the success of the Games, using the event to showcase China's achievements to global audiences and reinforce the legitimacy of Communist rule both domestically and internationally. As illustrated in Figure 2.5, *China Pictorial* portrayed the Olympics as both a sporting event and a diplomatic occasion. The photograph depicts Hu and Bush walking side by side at the front of the welcoming delegation as they enter the Great Hall of the People for the state banquet held before the Olympic opening ceremony. Positioned prominently at the centre of the composition and leading the procession, the two leaders visually embody cooperation and mutual engagement, while the captions reinforce the image of China as the host of a major global gathering. Through the circulation of such official diplomatic photographs, the Olympic Games were transformed from an international sporting event into a visual performance of China's growing international status and its evolving relationship with the US.

Great Power Cooperation and Rivalry, 2009 To Present

The onset of the Obama administration in 2009 brought a sense of cautious optimism to US-China relations. During President Barack Obama's administration, there was an initial attempt to establish a cooperative foundation for US-China relations. China proposed building a "new model of major power relations", emphasising mutual respect and non-confrontation (Zhao, 2015, p. 377). The two governments expanded cooperation on international issues such as climate change, nuclear security, and global economic governance. Periodic meetings in multilateral settings like the G-20 highlighted progress (Jisi & Ran, 2019). However, despite these advancements, deep-seated frictions lingered. The Obama administration's "pivot to Asia" policy, announced in 2010, was seen by Beijing as a strategy to counter its rise (Davidson, 2014).

The leadership transition to Xi Jinping in 2012 marked a turning point in China's foreign policy. Moving away from Deng Xiaoping's directive to "Hide your strength, bide your time", Xi adopted a more assertive approach, leveraging China's growing economic and military power to pursue ambitious goals (Ghosh, 2024, p. 227). This shift coincided with initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative, launched in 2013, which sought to expand China's influence through massive infrastructure investments across Asia, Africa, and beyond (Poh & Li, 2017). During this period, tensions with the US deepened. US policymakers grew increasingly wary of China's growing assertiveness, particularly in the South China Sea, its consolidation of state-owned enterprises under the "Made in China 2025" plan, and its expansion of influence through multilateral institutions like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) (Levine, 2020, p. 1). While the two countries avoided outright conflict, security concerns over North Korea's nuclear programme, cyberattacks, and disputes

over Taiwan and Hong Kong strained relations further. Despite these challenges, the period was marked by high-level dialogues and agreements, including efforts to manage cybersecurity issues and establish crisis management mechanisms (Sutter, 2021).



Figure 2.6. *Left image:* Rethinking Trump: What exactly does Trump intend to do? We need to see through him.

July 2018, *South Review*.

Figure 2.7. *Right image:* Will Trump be re-elected? He is an agitator, a divider, and also a stigmatised victim. His do-or-die battle will shake the US.

January 2020, *South Review*.

The Trump administration marked a sharp departure from prior engagement, openly defining China as a “strategic rival” (Friedberg, 2011, p. 135). The 2017 National Security Strategy (Council, 2017, p. 25) and 2018 National Defense Strategy (Defense, 2018, p. 2) framed China as a “revisionist power” seeking to reshape global norms to align with its authoritarian model. This period saw the emergence of a full-fledged trade war, with the US imposing sweeping tariffs on Chinese goods and restricting Chinese investment in critical technologies.

Allegations of forced technology transfers, intellectual property theft, and unfair trade practices were central to US complaints (Boylan et al., 2021). Cultural and educational exchanges, once a stabilising force, deteriorated as the US increased scrutiny of Chinese-funded programmes and researchers amid concerns over espionage and influence operations (Sutter, 2021). Beijing, for its part, saw Washington's actions as efforts to contain its rise and undermine its domestic stability. Measures such as the US support for Taiwan, including high-profile arms sales and diplomatic gestures, and criticism of China's policies in Xinjiang and Hong Kong added to the tensions (Wu, 2021). Strategic competition extended into emerging technologies, particularly artificial intelligence and 5G networks, with the US banning Huawei and other Chinese companies from accessing critical US technology (Arežina, 2019). This rivalry deepened as the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded in 2020, with mutual accusations over the origins and handling of the virus further damaging trust (Boylan et al., 2021). These escalating tensions were also reflected in contemporary media imagery. As illustrated in Figures 2.6 and 2.7, the Chinese magazine *South Review* portrayed President Donald Trump through highly symbolic magazine covers that moved beyond straightforward portraiture. The 2018 cover depicts Trump removing a white mask, inviting readers to "rethink Trump" by suggesting that his true intentions lie behind a carefully constructed public persona. By contrast, the 2020 cover presents Trump wearing clown makeup, visually associating him with political disorder, division, and uncertainty during the presidential election. These covers actively framed Trump as an unpredictable and disruptive political actor, demonstrating how visual representations contributed to constructing public understandings of the US during a period of intensifying

strategic rivalry. Their production, visual framing, and editorial design, together with the symbolic construction of Trump across the two covers, are examined in greater detail in Chapter 9. In short, US-China relations since 2009 have evolved from cautious engagement to strategic rivalry, reflecting deep structural, ideological, and geopolitical tensions. The relationship has been shaped by competing visions of global leadership, with China asserting its rise and the US seeking to maintain its dominance. While both nations acknowledge the catastrophic consequences of outright confrontation, the trajectory suggests continued competition with sporadic cooperation in areas of mutual interest.

In summary, the historical trajectory of US-China relations since 1949 reveals a cyclical pattern of rapprochement and rupture, engagement and estrangement, deeply embedded within the broader configurations of global power. Yet these geopolitical transformations have not been understood through diplomatic events alone. As the examples discussed in this chapter illustrate, key historical moments have been constituted, remembered, and contested through visual representations, ranging from wartime propaganda and diplomatic photography to commemorative images, magazine covers, and, in some cases, the strategic absence of images. The production, circulation, recontextualisation, and suppression of these visual representations have shaped collective memory, national identity, and public understandings of the US within China, demonstrating the central role of visual politics in the historical construction of Sino-US relations.

Understanding how these geopolitical shifts and visual narratives are translated into everyday media representations, however, requires attention to the institutional mechanisms through which images and meanings are produced,

selected, framed, and circulated. The next chapter, therefore, turns to the structural characteristics of the Chinese media system and the magazine sector, examining their historical development, newsroom organisation, and the interplay between state control, marketisation, and adaptive professionalism in shaping the production and circulation of representations of the US.

**CHAPTER 3. THE CHINESE MEDIA SYSTEM: STATE CONTROL,
MARKET FORCES, AND ADAPTIVE PROFESSIONALISM**

3.1 Introduction

This chapter develops the structural dimension of the conceptual framework (see Figure 1.2, Chapter 1) by reviewing the institutional evolution of the Chinese media system and the development of the Chinese magazine sector as the empirical setting of this study. Over the past decades, the system has transformed from a strictly politicised propaganda apparatus into a hybrid configuration in which state control coexists with market imperatives and adaptive forms of journalistic practice (Winfield & Peng, 2005). Although the media remain structurally subordinated to the leadership of the CCP, the forces of commercialisation, professionalisation, and decentralisation have introduced new spaces of flexibility, negotiation, and limited autonomy. The resulting system is neither fully authoritarian nor meaningfully liberal; rather, it is a historically shifting hybrid whose operation can be understood by analysing how political authority, economic pressures, and journalistic agency interact in practice.

The main purpose of this chapter is to provide the structural and institutional foundation necessary for understanding how representations of the US are produced within Chinese magazine organisations. In addition to examining the broader evolution of the Chinese media system, the chapter introduces the historical development of China's magazine sector and the organisational structures through which editorial and visual decisions are produced. By analysing how state intervention, editorial organisation, and journalistic professionalism jointly shape magazine production, the chapter establishes the institutional context within which representations of the US are created.

This chapter is organised into three sections. Section 3.2 introduces Hallin and Mancini's (2012) media systems theory and evaluates its applicability within the Chinese media environment. It argues that the dimensions of state intervention and journalistic professionalism are particularly pertinent to the present study. Section 3.3 analyses the evolution of state intervention in the Chinese media system, tracing the shift from the Maoist-era propaganda apparatus to the partial loosening brought by market reforms and the subsequent reassertion of political control under Xi Jinping, with a particular focus on the magazine sector. Section 3.4 then examines the emergence of adaptive professionalism, showing how journalists interpret, negotiate, and operationalise political directives within commercially competitive environments. Finally, Section 3.5 focuses on China's magazine sector, outlining its historical development, newsroom organisation, editorial decision-making processes, and image sourcing practices. These sections establish the institutional and professional conditions under which Chinese media construct portrayals of the US, providing essential media context for the empirical analyses that follow.

3.2 Applying Hallin and Mancini's Media Systems Theory in China

This section advances the argument that the dynamics shaping media portrayals in China are best understood through two dimensions of Hallin and Mancini's (2012) comparative media system framework: *state intervention* and *journalistic professionalism*. While the four-dimensional model – media markets, political parallelism, journalistic professionalism, and state intervention – has been widely applied to Western contexts, scholars have questioned how these dimensions travel to non-Western or hybrid media systems (Sun et al., 2001; Tang & Iyengar, 2011; Zhao, 2012). In the Chinese case in this research, the dimensions of media

markets and political parallelism offer limited explanatory value. The *media markets* dimension primarily concerns the reach of media circulation and the composition of media audiences, specifically, whether media serve small, elite publics or broad, mass audiences, and the extent to which audiences are socially or politically segmented. This dimension is commonly applied in cross-national comparisons (Brüggemann et al., 2014; Peruško et al., 2013), where variations in media diffusion and audience structure can illuminate broader differences in social integration and communication patterns. In this research, however, the comparison occurs within a single national system over time. All selected outlets operate within a similar circulation logic and address overlapping readerships shaped by state regulation and ideological boundaries.⁹ Given these structural commonalities, the dimension of media markets provides limited analytical leverage for explaining differences in portrayals of the US. The second dimension, *political parallelism*, refers to the alignment between media and political parties, ideological currents, or organised political actors in pluralistic contexts (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Although some scholars have described the Chinese media system as exhibiting a high degree of political instrumentalisation that resembles party-press parallelism (Zhao, 2012), the concept is less analytically useful in a context where there are no competing political parties and where media-state alignment is structurally embedded rather than pluralistically negotiated. Variations across Chinese media outlets are therefore less reflective of partisan parallelism than of how journalists and editors interpret, operationalise, and at times tactically negotiate central directives. These dynamics

⁹ More detailed information on magazine case selection, and their circulation, readership, and position are provided in Chapter 5.

are captured more precisely through the final two dimensions of Hallin and Mancini's (2004) framework – *journalistic professionalism* and *state intervention* – which provide a more meaningful lens for analysing the mechanisms through which Chinese media organisations operate and produce representations in practice.

Given this context, this research focuses on *state intervention* and *journalistic professionalism* as the most analytically relevant media system dimensions for understanding how Chinese media construct portrayals of the US. State intervention determines the ideological parameters, organisational structures, and permissible boundaries of representation (Meng, 2018; Zhao, 2012), while journalistic professionalism captures how journalists navigate these constraints through flexible, context-specific practices that balance political obedience with professional legitimacy (Pan & Lu, 2003; Repnikova, 2017). These two dimensions and their historical changes illuminate the tension between political control and professional agency that fundamentally shapes the production of China's mediated image of the US.

3.3 State Intervention from Maoist Control to Market Reform

In the "Long Shadow" of State Control

Scholars in the field of Chinese media studies generally highlight the high level of political instrumentalisation in China's media (Meng, 2018; Repnikova, 2017; Zhao, 2012), which functions as an extension of party governance, a loyal agent of the party-state. Thus, state intervention remains a dominant force in shaping the Chinese media system. The communist-led, peasant-based social revolution in China in the first half of the 20th century produced a Maoist media system that replicated and embellished the former Soviet system of control (Stranahan, 1990;

Zhao, 2011). During Mao's rule, magazines, like other media, were completely under the strict control of state power, and magazine development was integrated into the vast system of the socialist planned economy. The political propaganda nature of Chinese magazines largely overrides their profitability as a commodity (Fan, 2017). This configuration illustrates a media system fundamentally conceived as a political instrument. After the founding of the PRC (1949), liberal intellectuals attempted to challenge the Party's monopoly on the press, and fought for press liberalisation in the "One Hundred Flowers Campaign" initiated by Mao in 1957. However, these voices were quickly silenced in the subsequent "Anti-rightist Campaign" (Zhao, 2012, p. 148). At the start of the Cultural Revolution, the seventeen years (1949-1966) of publishing were rejected in its entirety and characterised as an "anti-Party, anti-socialist black-line dictatorship" (Fan, 2017, p. 277). The Chinese media system was temporarily destroyed at that time. In 1965, there were 790 magazines in the country; by the end of 1966, the number had fallen to 191; and by 1969, there were only 20 magazines left, including *Red Flag* and *China Pictorial* (Fan, 2017). During the Maoist era, Chinese media institutions functioned as instruments of political mobilisation and class struggle, designed to unify thought, consolidate authority, and eliminate dissent. The dramatic contraction of the magazine sector during the Cultural Revolution epitomised the complete subordination of cultural production to political orthodoxy. State intervention in this period was totalising – it encompassed ownership, funding, and personnel appointment, as well as the determination of permissible discourse. Magazines operated as vehicles of propaganda, tasked with transmitting the Party's directives and reproducing its ideological legitimacy. This configuration established the foundational logic of Chinese media governance:

communication as an integral component of political control rather than an independent social institution (Repnikova, 2017). However, this rigid structure was later slightly disrupted by the forces of commercialisation that emerged during China's post-1978 economic reforms.

In the “Cracks” of Commercialisation

In the post-Mao era, the state loosened the rigid chain of command through “decentralisation and depoliticisation” (Sun et al., 2001, p. 203). Despite the pervasive influence of the state, China's economic reforms have facilitated the growth of market-oriented media. Pan and Lu (2003, p. 212) describe the commercialisation of the media as a process that created “cracks” in the party press system, enabling investigative journalism and audience-driven content to emerge. Zhao (2006) outlines four key effects of marketisation: (1) the relative decline of party organs in the press structure, (2) the rise of commercially driven publications, (3) the bureaucratisation and decentralisation of media management, and (4) the emergence of quasi-independent media outlets. Chinese magazines, such as *Caijing* and *South Review*, have leveraged these market dynamics to conduct investigative journalism within the boundaries of political acceptability (Scotton & Hachten, 2010). However, marketisation does not equate to full media liberalisation. As Chan (1993) notes, the commercialisation of Chinese media is characterised by financial independence without political autonomy. While market competition influences content production, media organisations must navigate strict political boundaries to maintain their operations. Shi (2017, pp. 13-16) summarised the basic characteristics of the “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics” journal and magazine business: (1) Adhering to Marxist ideology and the principle of party-led media. (2) Upholding

the mission of “serving the people.” (3) Pursuing commercialisation and globalisation within the guidance of national historical and cultural imperatives. (4) Balancing social and economic benefits while prioritising national and party interests. (5) Implementing regulatory categorisation and oversight for different types of media publications. These developments illustrate that marketisation in China has not displaced the Party-state’s control but has instead reconfigured it into a more flexible and adaptive form. Commercial imperatives are accommodated within an overarching framework of political supervision (Zhao, 2008). The resulting system is one of negotiated dependence: media outlets pursue market legitimacy and audience engagement while remaining structurally and discursively aligned with the Party’s priorities (Winfield & Peng, 2005). This hybrid configuration underscores the enduring centrality of political control in shaping media practices, even as economic reform and partial commercialisation have opened cracks in the once-monolithic propaganda model.

For the magazine industry, China initiated institutional reforms in 1979 and began to introduce market mechanisms to fuel the development of China’s magazine industry (Winfield & Peng, 2005). The magazine market also recovered from the trauma of the Cultural Revolution and gradually expanded to what is now a large market with over 10,000 titles (Fan, 2017). Although other kinds of media were doing well in the market economy, more than three-quarters of Chinese magazines still operated under a planned economy model. These were mainly Party magazines published by different organisations of the CCP, as well as educational and academic journals. Of the 134 magazines with a circulation of over 250,000 copies, only 65 had their own subscribers, and competed in the marketplace. All the other magazines

had a fairly large and steady circulation only because the government agencies were required to subscribe to them (Scotton & Hachten, 2010). Three decades of media marketisation have produced a dual-tier press structure consisting of Party-affiliated news outlets, such as *China Pictorial*, and commercially oriented metropolitan publications. The former continue to perform a core ideological function by “setting the tone” (定调子 Dingdiaozi) in political and public discourse, relying on state subsidies due to their limited market appeal (Meng, 2018, p. 3). In contrast, metropolitan magazines such as *South Review* and *Sanlian Life Week* cater to broader audiences with more diverse content and livelier journalistic styles. Nevertheless, these commercially successful outlets remain subsidiaries of provincial Party press groups, and thus operate under the overarching leadership and supervision of the CCP.

Since Xi Jinping assumed power in 2012, state control over the Chinese media has intensified significantly (Brady, 2017; Economy, 2018; Jaros & Pan, 2018). The earlier trajectory of media transformation toward marketisation, decentralisation, and limited pluralisation has been notably reversed (S. Zhao, 2016). A clear demonstration of this tightening occurred during Xi’s visit to the *People’s Daily*, *Xinhua News Agency*, and *China Central Television* on 19 February 2016, where he underscored the need for unified leadership and ideological alignment among state-owned media. Later that day, at the Symposium on the Party’s News and Public Opinion Work in Beijing, Xi reaffirmed that media institutions must demonstrate absolute loyalty to the CCP, declaring that “media run by the Party and the government are propaganda fronts and must bear the Party’s surname” (党媒姓党 Dangmei xingdang) (Du, 2016, p. 1). The Central Propaganda Department and

the General Administration of Press and Publication maintain strict regulatory control over print media (Roberts, 2018). The state's structural interventions include appointing media officials, overseeing journalist qualifications, and setting editorial guidelines. The state controls information flows and media content through a combination of direct censorship, licensing requirements, and editorial oversight (Zhao, 2012). Yet within these pervasive institutional constraints, journalists are not merely passive executors of state directives; rather, they engage in complex, negotiated practices to reconcile political obedience with professional ideals – an issue explored in the following section on journalistic professionalism.

3.4 Adaptive Professionalism

Professionalism in Chinese journalism does not align with Western ideals of neutrality and independence. Instead, it is embedded within the political system, where journalists are officially designated as party propagandists. Accordingly, professionalism operates as a political system in Chinese journalism (Pan & Lu, 2003). The state establishes the overarching framework and institutional arrangements that keep journalists ideologically aligned. For instance, there is a formal “revolving door system” between media workers and party members (Zhao, 2008, p. 40), allowing journalists and editors to alternate between positions in news outlets and roles in Party or government departments. This circulation ensures ideological loyalty and blurs the boundary between political authority and professional journalism, reinforcing the Party's organisational control over the media. Within China's press industry, journalistic excellence is measured by one's ability to effectively convey party policies, and professional maturity is defined by an intuitive understanding of ideological boundaries (Pan & Lu, 2003).

At the same time, the incorporation of nationalist sentiment, particularly the narrative of the Century of Humiliation, forms part of the Party's strategy to cultivate journalists as agents of national rejuvenation and ideological cohesion (Schwartz, 1964). This recalls the interview with Director Huang of *China Pictorial* mentioned at the beginning of the thesis's Introduction, in which she described documenting and celebrating national rejuvenation as both her mission as an editor and that of the magazine she leads. The Chinese press thus continues to perform enlightenment, integrative, and nation-building/reviving functions, situating the Party's authoritarian control of the media within a broader discourse of national revival (Li, 2018).

Nevertheless, as Pan and Lu (2003, p. 224) observe, Chinese journalists also engage in "the arts of resistance" within their everyday practices. Positioned between the party line and the bottom line, they appropriately employed a variety of different, often conflicting journalistic ideas through improvised, locally adapted practices (Pan & Lu, 2003). A new adaptive professionalism was born among Chinese journalists in order to ease the tension between the Party's authoritative control, media commercialisation and the public's pressure for the media to express their discontent (Gang & Bandurski, 2011). First, editorial autonomy is exercised through a careful separation between propaganda and reporting. Many magazine editors strategically distinguish politically mandated content from socially relevant or investigative pieces to maintain both compliance and credibility (Pan, 2000). For example, *Sanlian Life Week* adopts a rotational publishing strategy: one issue focuses on political and economic topics that undergo strict censorship, while the next highlights cultural and entertainment content subject to relatively relaxed review. This alternating structure allows editors to satisfy ideological expectations without

alienating readers or compromising market viability (see Section 5.4, Chapter 5 for further details). Second, market-driven narratives incorporate political messaging into commercially appealing formats, using human-interest storytelling, consumer-oriented design, and entertainment-inflected framing to render ideological content more engaging and less didactic (Pan & Lu, 2003). Third, hybrid ethical frameworks have emerged as journalists combine Confucian moral ideals – such as the belief that the journalist should act as the conscience of society and the voice of the people, enlightening the public to recognise both individual and national interests – with Western notions of truth-seeking and public service. This ethical hybridity provides moral justification for investigative reporting and measured critique within politically acceptable limits (Lee, 2005).

Overall, viewed through the dimensions of *state intervention* and *journalistic professionalism*, the Chinese media system reveals a historically dynamic yet structurally consistent configuration. From the Maoist era's totalising propaganda machine to the post-reform hybrid of political control and commercialisation, the system has undergone significant institutional and ideological transformation while maintaining the Party-state's central authority. During the Mao period, state intervention was absolute – the media functioned as instruments of mobilisation and ideological consolidation within the socialist planned economy. The reform era introduced market mechanisms and relative decentralisation, creating cracks in this monolithic structure and allowing limited professional negotiation within the Party-defined framework. By the post-2000s, especially under Xi's leadership, these cracks have narrowed as state intervention has reasserted itself through tighter ideological supervision, even as professional discourses and market logic persist beneath the

surface. Across these historical stages, state intervention has continuously set the boundaries of what can and cannot be represented, while journalistic professionalism has evolved as a context-specific, adaptive practice that negotiates those boundaries. The resulting media system is a hybrid authoritarian model characterised by cyclical shifts between control and flexibility (Winfield & Peng, 2005). This hybrid configuration profoundly influences how the US is represented in Chinese media. Moving beyond a Western-centric perspective, this study foregrounds the distinctive dynamics of the Chinese media system to illuminate how a nation founded on liberal ideals is portrayed within an illiberal, state-controlled communication environment. The resulting image of the US is not merely dictated from above but produced through the continual interplay of political authority, market forces, and professional negotiation.

3.5 Organisational Context of Chinese Magazine Industry

Previous sections have examined the evolution of the Chinese media system from the perspectives of state intervention and adaptive professionalism. These discussions demonstrate that contemporary Chinese journalism operates within a hybrid institutional environment shaped by the coexistence of political authority, market competition, and professional norms. However, these macro-level institutional dynamics are ultimately realised through the organisational structures and editorial routines of specific media organisations. Since the empirical materials analysed in this thesis are drawn from Chinese magazines, it is necessary to consider how magazine organisations translate broader institutional constraints into everyday editorial practices. This section therefore shifts the analytical focus from the institutional characteristics of the Chinese media system to the organisational context

of Chinese magazines, with particular attention to newsroom organisation, editorial decision-making, and visual production.

As discussed in Section 3.3, the historical development of China's magazine industry closely mirrors the broader evolution of the Chinese media system. During the Maoist period, magazines functioned primarily as instruments of Party propaganda, operating under complete political supervision with little organisational autonomy (Fan, 2017; Zhao, 1998). Following the economic reforms initiated in 1978, market-oriented mechanisms facilitated the rapid expansion of the magazine industry and encouraged greater commercial differentiation, giving rise to specialised publications in areas such as current affairs, business, culture, lifestyle, and fashion (Scotton & Hachten, 2010). Nevertheless, commercialisation did not fundamentally alter the institutional relationship between magazines and the Party-state. As previous sections have shown, political supervision continued to coexist with market competition, producing a hybrid media system in which commercial success remained contingent upon political compliance (Stockmann, 2013; Zhao, 2008).

Although organisational structures vary across publications, Chinese magazine newsrooms are generally characterised by a hierarchical editorial structure in which decision-making authority is concentrated at the senior editorial level. Unlike many Western magazine organisations that often grant considerable autonomy to section editors, Chinese magazines typically operate through a centralised chain of command consisting of the publisher or sponsoring institution, the editor-in-chief (总编辑), deputy or executive editors, section editors, writers, and visual production staff (Lee, He, et al., 2007; Pan, 2000). Editors-in-chief occupy a

dual institutional role. Beyond directing editorial strategy and ensuring journalistic quality, they also bear ultimate political responsibility for published content. As Stockmann (2013) observes, editors-in-chief are regularly convened by government authorities to receive policy briefings and editorial guidance before politically sensitive issues are reported. One editor-in-chief interviewed by Stockmann explained that government officials “ask all the editors-in-chief and vice editors-in-chief to attend a meeting, inviting someone to explain the government’s standpoint on an issue. That’s the guideline and we follow” (Stockmann, 2013, p. 139). In Party-affiliated publications, senior editorial leaders are commonly members of the CCP and frequently hold parallel Party responsibilities within the organisation, reflecting the longstanding principle of Party leadership over the media (Zhao, 2012). Editorial leadership therefore functions simultaneously as professional authority and political accountability. Rather than exercising unrestricted editorial autonomy, senior editors operate as organisational intermediaries who translate state expectations into newsroom practice. Beneath senior management, section editors coordinate reporting, commission stories, supervise journalists, and review manuscripts before submission to higher levels of editorial approval.

This hierarchical division of editorial responsibilities is reinforced through formalised review procedures that govern the production process. Among the most important of these institutional mechanisms is the Three Rounds of Review and Proofreading (*san shen san jiao*, 三审三校), which has long been established within China’s publishing regulations and is widely implemented across newspapers, magazines, and publishing houses. The procedure generally requires multiple rounds of editorial review before publication, with progressively higher levels of editorial

authority participating in the approval process (National Press and Publication Administration, 2026). The stages are as follows:

- First Review and Proof - conducted by copyeditors using black-and-white proofs
- Second Review and Proof - carried out by section editors, also using black-and-white proofs
- Final Review and Proof - evaluated in colour proofs by both the Editor-in-Chief and the Managing Editor, both of whom must provide formal sign-off

This three-tiered system involves comprehensive reviews not only of layout, typography, and copyright clearance, but crucially of the political orientation and ideological connotation of the visual material. As Repnikova (2017) argued, within China's tightly regulated discursive environment, political safety remains the ultimate threshold for all journalistic content.

While the Three Rounds of Review and Proofreading govern the institutional approval of all editorial content, the practical responsibility for selecting, editing, and presenting visual materials rests primarily with magazine visual departments. As visual journalism has become increasingly important within contemporary magazine publishing, photo editors and art directors have assumed greater responsibility for integrating visual and textual narratives while maintaining consistency with editorial objectives (Editorial Department of Sanlian Life Week, 2009). Research on visual news production conceptualises photo editors as image brokers who mediate between photographers, journalists, audiences, and institutional identities. As Gursel (2016) argues, when photo editors evaluate numerous candidate images, they

simultaneously imagine the expectations of audiences, the editorial identity of their publication, competing media organisations, and the broader narrative that the publication seeks to construct. Image selection therefore constitutes an organisational practice of imagination. Within the Chinese media system, however, this process of editorial imagination is further conditioned by institutional accountability and political responsibility. Visual editors are required not only to evaluate aesthetic quality and narrative coherence but also to anticipate the political implications of visual representation within an environment characterised by hierarchical editorial review and state supervision. Existing scholarship has demonstrated that news communication in China is produced within institutional environments where political legitimacy, professional judgement, and commercial competition coexist (Stockmann, 2013; Zhao, 2012). Nevertheless, comparatively little research has examined how these organisational principles shape the everyday practices of image selection, sourcing, and editorial approval within Chinese magazine newsrooms. Accordingly, while existing scholarship establishes the institutional framework within which magazine production operates, the concrete organisational mechanisms through which visual materials are sourced, reviewed, and approved remain underexplored. The empirical chapters of this thesis build upon this institutional background by drawing on interviews with editors, journalists, and visual practitioners to examine how editorial authority, image selection, and political accountability are operationalised during the production of representations of the US.

In short, the preceding discussion shows how the structural and professional dynamics of the Chinese media system are translated into everyday magazine production through organisational hierarchies, editorial decision-making, and

institutionalised processes of review. These processes shape not only what can be reported, but also how events, actors, and political relationships can be rendered visible. Against this background, the next chapter turns to the visual dimension, which represents a particularly immediate and symbolically charged layer of media representation. It examines how visual framing functions as a key mechanism through which these structural and professional dynamics are materialised, revealing how China's media visually construct and negotiate the imagined image of the US.

**CHAPTER 4. THE VISUAL TURN: FRAMING AND REPRESENTATION OF
THE US**

4.1 Introduction

Images play a central role in shaping how nations perceive one another (Bleiker, 2018), and visual media have long been instrumental in expressing national identity, historical memory, and geopolitical orientation (Lutz & Collins, 1993). The main purpose of this chapter is to establish a conceptual foundation for analysing how Chinese magazines visually construct the US by explaining the mechanisms through which images generate meaning, shape collective memory, and organise geopolitical understanding within visual framing processes. In doing so, the chapter extends the previous chapters' focus on the imagined Chinese community (see Chapter 2) and the Chinese media system (see Chapter 3) into the visual domain, focusing on the framing dimension of the conceptual framework (see Figure 1.2, Chapter 1) to examine how history, emotion, space, and institutional practice are translated into concrete visual forms through which the US is represented.

The chapter advances two interrelated arguments. First, it contends that visual representations of the US in Chinese magazines are deeply embedded in the visualisation of Chinese nationalism: images of international actors are not produced on a blank canvas but are layered onto existing visual grammars of historical memory, national humiliation, rejuvenation, and civilisational space, which function as a means of constituting Chinese nationalism. Photographs condense memory, emotion, and space into recurring visual templates. Through this process, such templates shape and constrain how foreign actors, including the US, are positioned within China's symbolic landscape. Second, the chapter argues that these national visual grammars intersect with international politics through specific mechanisms of visibility, visibility (Callahan, 2020), and framing. Drawing on the visual turn in international relations and communication, the chapter shows that images do

geopolitical work in at least two senses: by determining who and what becomes visible (visibility), and by actively shaping political meaning through affective resonance and interpretive anchoring (visuality). In this context, framing theory, particularly Bock's (2020) model of visual framing as creation, selection, and solution, helps specify how images of the US acquire meaning at three interrelated stages: the moment of visual construction, the editorial and contextual embedding of images, and the interpretive completion of meaning by audiences. This multi-stage perspective is central to the empirical analysis that follows, in which Chinese visual representations of the US are examined as products of cumulative and patterned framing practices.

The chapter's contribution is to show why visuals are essential for understanding how China makes sense of the US. By linking the visual construction of nationalism, the visual production of geopolitical meaning, and the institutional role of picture magazines, the chapter brings the preceding cultural, structural, framing and geopolitical dimensions together into a coherent analytical framework for interpreting how China's visual media portray the US. The chapter is structured in three parts. Section 4.2 examines the internal layer of visual representation by analysing how nationalism is visualised through collective memory, political aesthetics, and spatial symbols, demonstrating how these visual repertoires pre-structure the ways foreign nations can be represented. Section 4.3 then turns to the external layer, focusing on visual geopolitics and framing, outlining how visibility, visuality, and the stages of visual framing shape the meaning of images of the US. Section 4.4 analyses picture magazines as institutional sites of visual nation-building and as windows through which China encounters the world, explaining why they are central to understanding the visual construction of the US in Chinese media.

4.2 Visualising Nationalism: Memory, Emotions and Space

Histories of photojournalism are often most telling not only for what they reveal about the intentions and practices of photographers at the moment of image production, but also of how images are subsequently historicised, interpreted, and symbolised within collective understandings of the past (Griffin, 1999). In this sense, images do not simply function as passive carriers of events; they contribute to shaping shared understandings of the past through which the imagined community is sustained. From this perspective, this section approaches nationhood as a visualised construction, emphasising how vision, memory, emotions, and space collectively shape the imagined boundaries of “we” and the “nation.” Two core mechanisms merit close attention: (1) the role of photographs in constructing collective historical memory; (2) the deployment of political aesthetics in representations of mass mobilisation and iconic space, encompassing rallies, choreographed bodies, symbolic landscapes such as walls, and ruins that commemorate national humiliation or triumph.

Visuals in Constructing Collective Historical Memory

Photographs have long been recognised as important carriers of collective memory. They work both as historical evidence and as cultural markers through which national identity is constructed; by bringing the past into the present, they shape how societies remember and interpret historical events (Brennen & Hardt, 1999). Their mnemonic power is closely connected to how people process visual information. Memory often operates through impulses toward simplicity and familiarity, and the visual domain is particularly effective in satisfying this demand. Compared to words, visual information can be processed more directly in ways that facilitate its retention as long-term psychological memory (Lester, 1995). Moreover,

visual media present events in ways that can appear immediate and intimate, bringing distant or abstract histories into forms that are more experientially accessible (Barnhurst & Nerone, 1999). This mode of presentation fosters emotional engagement, which in turn reinforces attention and memory, and integrates mediated events into personal and collective understandings of the past. So, photographs can testify to historical events and contribute to the formation of collective memory by shaping how the past is remembered and emotionally experienced.

Zelizer (1999) provides a clear account of this process by identifying the dual function of photography. On the one hand, photographs carry an “aura of realism” (p. 105), and for most viewers they furnish what appears to be “real” historical evidence (Taylor, 1991). On the other hand, they also operate as symbols that allow people to interpret the deeper cultural or moral meaning of an event. Zelizer (1999) demonstrates that once photographs acquire symbolic meaning, their original referential details begin to fade. For instance, when media coverage omits precise information, such as dates, locations, names of subjects, or even the photographer’s identity, and instead relies on vague captions and repeated circulation of certain iconic images, photographs accumulate meanings that extend beyond the specific moment they depict. As a result, images shift from functioning as direct records of an event to operating within broader interpretive frameworks. They are no longer read for factual specificity but for their symbolic and emotional resonance. This process contributes to a gradual narrowing of collective memory over time. The multidimensional meanings of historical events become compressed into the limited visual representation offered by a small set of photographs, which acquire fixed symbolic significance and form a standardised narrative of remembrance. Zelizer (1999) notes that atrocity photographs exemplify this dynamic most powerfully.

Their force comes from their ability to transform concrete acts of violence into broader narratives of suffering. She argues that such photographs become ritualised symbols: they lose part of their immediate documentary context and instead function as cultural objects through which communities express moral judgment and collective identity. In parallel, Griffin (1999) recalls the development of war photography and how it has served to create national myths and collective memories: photographs gradually detach from the specific historical event and become cultural icons, ritualised tokens of national belief rather than pure documentation.

Zelizer (1999) further emphasises that memory is not stable. Photographs are continually reshaped as they are reused in new contexts. A photographic archive therefore does not preserve a fixed meaning; instead, it serves as a repository in which images are repeatedly interpreted, reframed, and mobilised for new rhetorical or political purposes. Photographs have an initial life, defined by their original moment of production, and an afterlife shaped through their circulation in media, museums, textbooks, commemorations, and political discourse (Landsberg, 2004). As they are recycled, they accumulate new meanings. The more strongly an image becomes tied to symbolic or commemorative purposes, the more influential it becomes in shaping collective memory. In this way, photographs do not merely record the past; they actively participate in producing the memories through which the past is understood.

Understanding how photographs construct collective historical memory is essential for this research, because the visual construction of geopolitical narratives in Chinese media similarly relies on the symbolic power of images to organise, simplify, and circulate particular visions of the past. Photographs shape how communities imagine their historical position, their national identity, and their

relationship to external others. In the context of US-China relations, pictorial magazines and other visual media play a comparable role by transforming diplomatic encounters, ideological conflicts, and wars into memorable and interpretable visual forms. These images guide public understandings of international politics through symbolic condensation, emotional resonance, and ritualised repetition.

This insight also prepares the ground for the next section. Given that collective memory is shaped through symbolic visual forms, images tied to state power, mobilisation, and ideological display become especially significant, as they privilege particular interpretations of the past. The following subsection, therefore, examines how Chinese political aesthetics, orchestrated spectacles, and choreographed bodies contribute to the production of national identity and geopolitical meaning, further extending the visual logic through which states cultivate collective imaginaries.

Political Aesthetics and Mass Mobilisation

Political communication is never purely informational; it is always aesthetic (Benney, 2020). States communicate with their publics through a repertoire of rhetorical forms – visual, literary, spatial, and affective – that stage political authority and cultivate collective identity. Scholars have long noted that aesthetic strategies, or what Edelman (1985) terms the symbolic uses of politics, are especially central to authoritarian regimes. In such contexts, aesthetic forms are deliberately designed to eliminate ambiguity, suppress dissent, and perform the unity of the political order (Benney, 2020; Sontag, 1975). As Sontag (1975) noted in studies of fascist and communist art, both traditions exhibit a shared preference for grand scale, rigid formal order, and mass obeisance to heroic figures, reflecting a broader assumption that art functions to immortalise political authority and doctrine. In the Chinese

context, visual form similarly materialises power, stabilises ideology, and rehearses the unity of the polity through carefully orchestrated aesthetic arrangements (Benney, 2020).

To specify this visual logic, it is useful to distinguish between monuments as objects and the monumental as an aesthetic category. Danto (1985) characterises monuments as celebratory, vertically oriented structures that seek to inscribe ideals of heroism and virtue into the fabric of collective life, while Shapshay (2021) argues that the monumental is best understood as a mode of aesthetic experience. A work becomes monumental when it elicits a dual response: awe, in which the viewer feels diminished before something vast or powerful, and ennoblement, in which the viewer experiences elevation through identification with the values or collectivity the work represents. While the monumental has been discussed in relation to commemorative art and aesthetic experience, it has not been systematically articulated in visual terms. This study builds on these insights and extends the notion to conceptualise monumental aesthetics as a mode of visual organisation in which scale, spatial hierarchy, symmetry and mass obeisance to the hero are mobilised to produce specific emotional responses and to align spectators with political narratives. This mechanism is particularly salient in the media of authoritarian regimes, where monumental aesthetics operate as recurring visual strategies embedded in political rituals, mediated spectacles, and symbolic spaces. China's visual nationalism can be understood as being articulated primarily through monumental aesthetics: the use of grand-scale visual forms – monuments, mass parades, choreographed bodies, large portraits of leaders, and symbolic architectural spectacle – to materialise political power in visible and emotionally charged ways. Through scale, symmetry, order, and visual hierarchy, these forms render the state

and the nation perceptible, translating political ideology into spatial and bodily arrangements that citizens can see, feel, and participate in.

Three recurring strategies are particularly evident in the Chinese context. First, monumental aesthetics foreground heroic veneration and the visual immortality of leadership and ideology (Hung, 2007; Sontag, 1975). During events such as the 2015 and 2019 National Day military parades, state media repeatedly broadcast giant portraits of Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and Xi Jinping. Chen (2017) argues that this sequencing of leaders' images constructs a historical tableau that reactivates collective memory and reinforces the narrative that China's contemporary achievements are the cumulative outcome of successive Party leadership. These orchestrated images bind the authority of contemporary governance to the visual continuity of Party history.

Second, monumental aesthetics depend on the disciplined orchestration of mass bodies. Choreographed military units, synchronised dance formations, mass gymnastic displays, and even performative protests visually enact the unity and order of the political system. As Sontag (1975, p. 8) observes, "the masses are made to take form, be design," and such orchestrated displays of bodies have long been valued in totalitarian regimes because they materialise the image of a morally coherent and politically aligned collective. Chinese scholars likewise note that the aesthetic discipline of political ritual – from the placement of flags to the timing of gestures – cultivates emotional attachment and belonging while visually encoding the authority of the state (Chen, 2017; Fu & Li, 2020). It is worth noting that Chinese parades in the early 1950s focused on the "Resist US and aid Korea" campaign and on denouncing foreign imperialists, especially the US (Hung, 2007). Peng Zhen, in a preparatory meeting, outlined what he considered to be the principal aims of state-

led spectacles, stating that “parades are a grand demonstration against imperialism. They display our strength and can influence capitalist countries.” He further instructed that the processions must therefore be organised in “the most overwhelming way” (Hung, 2007, p. 429). This emphasis reveals the extent to which such spectacles were conceived as instruments of ideological projection and diplomatic signalling. As Hung (2007) argues, parades constituted a complex political-aesthetic text that operated simultaneously as a vehicle of glorification, legitimisation, hero worship, and nationalism.

A third dimension of China’s monumental aesthetics lies in the mobilisation of space, architectural symbols, ruins, and national landscapes as visual carriers of collective identity. Monumental space is not merely a backdrop; it is a politically charged medium through which national history, trauma, and triumph are materialised and visually apprehended. Scholars of Chinese visual nationalism note that spaces such as Tiananmen Square, the Great Wall, and Old Summer Palace (圆明园 Yuanming Yuan) operate as spatial signifiers that anchor political narratives and shape the visual imagination of the nation (Hung, 1991; Waldron, 1990; Wang, 2012).

Tiananmen Square, for instance, is one of the most emblematic political stages in modern China. Its vast scale, symmetrical layout, and concentration of ideological structures – the Monument to the People’s Heroes, the Great Hall of the People, and the Mao Mausoleum – produce an aesthetic of order, authority, and historical continuity. As Hung (1991) shows, the square has been repeatedly rebuilt and redesigned to meet political needs, and its architectural elements are arranged to create a powerful visual setting for national parades, ceremonies, and mass

gatherings. During these events, the square becomes a controlled visual stage that organises people, architecture, and symbols into a unified display of state authority. Its spatial design and ceremonial uses together communicate political order, collective strength, and national unity (Hershkovitz, 1993). Similarly, the Great Wall has long been deployed as a monumental symbol of national endurance, territorial integrity, and civilisational longevity (Waldron, 1990). Its dramatic integration into the natural landscape and its repeated appearance in political photography have long been interpreted by visual scholars as metaphors for sovereignty over the self and defence against the other (Callahan, 2018; Scobell, 2015).

Spatial aesthetics also rely on ruins and sites of national trauma. A central example is the Old Summer Palace, whose destruction by Anglo-French forces in 1860 has become a foundational symbol of China's "chosen trauma" (Wang, 2012, p. 52). Once celebrated as the pinnacle of Qing imperial art and architecture, the site's deliberate preservation as ruins after 1949 transforms it into a monumental reminder of imperialist aggression. The surviving marble structures, particularly the European-style fountains of Yuanying Guan (远瀛观), have come to represent China's "national ruin," visually enacting the narrative of "Never Forget National Humiliation" (Wang, 2012, p. 52). Such spatial memorials inscribe historical trauma into the urban geography of Beijing, binding emotional memory to physical space.

These spatial-symbolic forms – monumental squares, iconic landscapes, architectural ruins – constitute a critical component of China's monumental aesthetics. They visualise narratives of glory and suffering, continuity and rupture, sovereignty and vulnerability. Importantly, these spatialised aesthetics not only reinforce Chinese national identity but also provide the visual and ideological

frameworks through which foreign nations are interpreted within Chinese media.

When Chinese media feature photographs of US figures situated within these emblematic Chinese spaces, the images symbolically place foreign actors inside China's own spatial regime of historical meaning. This visual positioning does more than frame diplomatic encounters through iconic backdrops; it draws the US into China's broader aesthetic narrative of national trauma, endurance, and civilisational hierarchy. In this way, the US – often constructed as the paradigmatic imperialist force – becomes visually implicated in the metaphorical terrain of humiliation and resistance that these monumental spaces encode, thereby extending China's domestic visual nationalism into the realm of geopolitical representation.

In general, existing scholarship shows that large-scale visual forms, political spectacle, and symbolic spaces play a central role in shaping China's self-representation and national identity. Building on this literature, this study makes two contributions. First, it extends discussions of monumentality by conceptualising monumental aesthetics as a mode of visual organisation through which scale, order, and visual hierarchy operate across mediated images, rather than being confined to physical monuments. Second, it examines how these internally oriented political aesthetics – used to maintain identity and ideological cohesion – are projected outward and applied to the representation of foreign actors, and how they organise symbolic boundaries between self and other, thereby offering a more complete account of Chinese visual nationalism. Having reviewed these internal dimensions of visual nationalism – national memory and monumental aesthetics – the discussion now turns outward. The next section examines how visual framing practices structure international relations, especially US-China relations.

4.3 Visualising International Relations: Visibility, Visuality and Framing

A Visual Turn to Geopolitics: Images in Meaning-Making and Action

As digital technologies accelerate the movement of images across borders, visual media increasingly shape how audiences encounter and make sense of international affairs. Images often create the illusion of looking through a window onto an unmediated reality (Gurri et al., 2010). Audiences seldom register that what they see results from a series of choices – what to photograph, how to frame it, and which image to publish – each of which shapes the range of meaning potentials available to viewers. Visual representations, as Bleiker (2018) contends, shape perceptions of world politics by selecting, emphasising, and omitting particular aspects of reality. Such practices determine what becomes perceptible, intelligible, or salient within the geopolitical field. This political nature of visual mediation is aptly captured by Trachtenberg (1989, p. xiv), who characterises the viewfinder as “a political instrument, a tool for making a past suitable for the future”. Callahan (2020) offers a useful conceptual distinction between “visibility” and “visuality” for understanding how images participate in geopolitical meaning-making and action. Whereas visibility concerns the search for meaning – how visual representations signify, symbolise, or encode particular geopolitical narratives – visuality draws attention to what images do. Perlmutter’s (1998) work on iconic news imagery similarly demonstrates how certain photographs not only mirror but also shape foreign policy interpretations and reactions.

Turning first to the domain of *visibility*, Sontag (1975) offers an illustration of visibility’s performative force. She observes that political spectacles such as parades or mass gatherings are frequently choreographed with the camera in mind, ensuring that the resulting images broadcast authorised narratives of order, unity, or legitimacy. In these instances, reality itself is orchestrated to satisfy the demands of

visual production (Sontag, 1975). Callahan (2020) extends this point by suggesting that the politics of visibility entails far more than struggles over mere appearances within the camera frame. He suggests that it is crucial to examine how framing practices produce graded forms of inclusion that position certain groups within hierarchical social orders. This perspective shifts analytical attention toward the conditions under which visibility is granted, withheld, or strategically shaped, foregrounding the socially constructed nature of visibility – that is, the ways images render particular social differences perceptible or, conversely, obscure them. Such an approach enables scholars to identify the hierarchies of visibility and the ideological formations they legitimise. This line of thought resonates with Sontag's (1996) reflection that images cultivate visual codes that expand cultural perceptions of what counts as worthy of attention and which subjects the public feels entitled to observe. Photographs, in her view, constitute an ethics of seeing, shaping the boundaries of perception and moral concern. Extending this line of inquiry, scholarship on Orientalism underscores how these visual regimes are embedded in asymmetrical power relations. Said (1977) shows that Western depictions of the Orient have historically stabilised imperial Self/Other binaries: the West is constructed as strong, rational, masculine, and modern only through its juxtaposition with an East framed as weak, irrational, feminine, or exotic. Such representational asymmetry demonstrates how visual regimes can naturalise geopolitical hierarchies by repeatedly coding one civilisation as hegemonic and the other as its subordinate counterpart. While this literature has provided substantial insight into how the West makes the East visible through particular representational logics, far less attention has been devoted to how the non-Western context visually constructs and interprets the West. My study addresses this gap by examining representations of the US in

Chinese visual media, thereby extending debates on Orientalism and the politics of visibility beyond their conventional Western-centric focus.

Building on analyses of how visibility governs who and what becomes perceptible, work on *visuality* turns to the productive capacities of images, examining how visual artefacts make and remake social and geopolitical orders (Callahan, 2020). Greenwood and Thomas (2017), for instance, demonstrate how citizen journalists increasingly employ long-form graphic reportage to draw diverse publics into conversations about international politics. Such visual formats catalyse political attention and emotional engagement. In contemporary media environments, transforming a localised incident of violence into an issue of global concern often requires a compelling visual cue (Andersen, 2016). A growing body of work underscores the affective mechanisms through which visuality operates. Butler (2016) shows how photographs of torture and suffering can produce intense emotional resonances, generating an emotional economy of grief that shapes public interpretation and political reaction. Hutchison (2016, p. xi) extends this argument by tracing how affective responses can coalesce into “affective communities,” wherein shared emotional experiences mobilise collective orientations toward world politics. Callahan (2020, p. 44) similarly argues that visuality does international politics by provoking such collective sensibilities – what he terms “communities of sense” – that delimit what can be seen, said, felt, and enacted within geopolitical life.

In sum, the literature on visibility and visuality highlights that images are central to how geopolitical worlds are rendered knowable and actionable. Visibility draws attention to the patterned ways in which visual regimes delineate what can be perceived and by whom, while visuality underscores how images actively participate in shaping political responses, public sensibilities, and broader world-ordering

processes. The next section therefore turns to framing and visual framing to explore how such representations of the distant nation are assembled, organised, and made resonant in mediated geopolitical discourse.

Visually Framing the US: Creation, Selection, and Solution

Framing theory argues that media do not simply report events; they organise reality through interpretive structures that highlight certain meanings while downplaying others (Entman, 1993). Entman's well-known definition characterises framing as the act of "select[ing] some aspects of a perceived reality and mak[ing] them more salient in a communication text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (p. 52). Gitlin (2003, p. 7) similarly describes media frames as "persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion," through which symbol-handlers organise discourse, whether verbal or visual.

Such characterisations resonate with the notion of photographic framing. As Rodriguez and Dimitrova (2011, p. 50) say, "visuals are good framing devices." Visual framing entails the purposeful selection and accentuation of particular elements of lived reality in visual communication (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011). In photography, the framing act materialises through the capture of a carefully delimited composition at a specific, ephemeral moment. This moment is treated as decisive, functioning as the vantage point through which future viewers apprehend the world and its political configurations. It is inflected not only by the photographer's situated perspective but also by the subsequent linguistic and contextual reframing that occurs within media environments (Parry, 2010). As Bock (2020) argues, photographs possess a distinctive quality: they are initially produced

as decontextualised traces of embodied encounters, yet later become recontextualised when embedded in media narratives. In doing so, they frequently operate as ideological instruments that sustain prevailing power relations, cultural imaginaries, and political projects.

Bock (2020) demonstrates that photographs function as decontextualised records that are later recontextualised within media narratives, making them powerful tools of framing. She conceptualises visual framing as a three-part model that links image creation, selection, and “image as solution that yields effects” (p. 2). This processual understanding of framing underpins the framing dimension outlined in Figure 1.2 in Chapter 1. These three ‘constructs’ (p. 7) illuminate how meaning is actively produced at multiple points in the visual communication chain, offering a robust framework for understanding how the image of a nation is constructed, stabilised, and circulated.

Image creation, understood as a process of de-contextualisation, determines what becomes visible at the moment of capture. It is shaped by aesthetic, technical, and professional conventions that influence meaning prior to any editorial intervention (Bock, 2020). At this stage, the frame is treated as a property internal to the image itself, produced through choices concerning distance (such as close-ups or long shots), angle (such as high or low perspectives), composition (such as centred subjects, diagonal structures, or symmetry), lighting, and focus. These decisions guide how viewers initially perceive and interpret the depicted scene. The underlying premise is that an image acquires an incipient layer of meaning through its construction alone, before captions, textual commentary, or placement within a communicative artefact further direct interpretation. Here, the framer is the photographer or visual creator, whose embodied choices – where to stand, when to

click the shutter, how to angle the camera, and what to exclude from the frame – generate the initial visual logic of the image. This theoretical view is supported by Usluata's (1999) analysis of Turkish political cartoons about the US. In cartoons, US soldiers are shown entering a city under a "Welcome" sign suspended between two mosque minarets, visually signalling a gesture of accommodation. The Bird of Peace pursues the same soldiers while holding a "Yankee Go Home" banner, symbolising rejection (Usluata, 1999, p. 92). Through these contrasting compositions, the cartoons embed conflicting attitudes toward the US directly into their visual construction. Similarly, Sun and Wang's (2016) investigation of *China Pictorial* further demonstrates how creation-level decisions infuse images with ideological meaning. Between 1966 and 1971, the magazine consistently published large, visually commanding photographs such as "wreckage of US enemy aircraft," "military and civilians fighting against the US," and "anti-US marches" (Sun & Wang, 2016, p. 26). These images were not only prominent in size but were also constructed to foreground specific visual cues that signalled resistance and antagonism. For example, photographs of downed aircraft often placed the wreckage in the immediate foreground, using sharp focus and low angles to magnify the sense of US defeat. Likewise, Sun and Wang (2016) find that photographs of anti-US marches tended to use wide shots that captured large, disciplined crowds, making the scale of opposition visually undeniable.

Image selection, or the recontextualisation of visual material, embeds photographs and other images within broader communicative structures, thereby aligning them with specific textual, ideological, and narrative frames. Bock (2020) contends that an image does not possess an inherent or immutable meaning. Rather, meaning emerges through processes of recontextualisation, that is, through the ways

in which the image is situated within a composite communicative artefact. An image acquires significance through its interaction with surrounding elements such as captions, headlines, textual commentary, sequential placement, layout, or juxtaposition with other images. In this sense, meaning is both “contingent,” because it depends on the contextual environment, and “symbiotic,” because it is co-produced through relationships among multimodal components (p. 6). At this stage, the framer is the media producer, editor, or curator who determines which image to select, where to place it, and how to integrate it into a larger discursive structure. These framing decisions play an active role in shaping how audiences interpret and evaluate visual material. This theoretical view is also well illustrated in Sun and Wang’s (2016) analysis of the representation of the US in *China Pictorial*. Their study demonstrates how editorial re-contextualisation can systematically shape political meaning: between 1966 and 1971, the magazine consistently deployed terms such as “US imperialism” and “US aggressor” (p. 26) as de facto stand-ins for the US, embedding these labels both within images and in accompanying captions. Through this repeated pairing of visual and linguistic cues, the magazine constructed a stable ideological frame that guided interpretation.

Image as solution captures how viewers cognitively and affectively complete visual frames, producing interpretive or persuasive effects (Bock, 2020). Whereas creation concerns how an image is constructed and selection concerns how it is contextualised, solution concerns how meaning is finalised in the viewer’s mind. In this view, the frame is neither contained solely within the image nor determined exclusively by textual context; rather, it emerges from the interpretive work performed by viewers as they draw upon cultural knowledge, ideological assumptions, emotional dispositions, and learned visual conventions. Images

therefore function as prompts that guide audiences toward particular understandings.

As Tehranian (1999) states that viewers often interpret representations of other countries through the lens of their own cultural values and material interests, a process that simplifies complexity and reinforces stereotypes or, in the case of adversarial audiences, provoking backlash. Lu (2011) further argued that shifting depictions of the US in Chinese media reshape how audiences interpret US intentions, as viewers draw on evolving national priorities and strategic orientations to complete the meaning of these images. Iordanova's (1999) study of Bulgarian media provides further support for this perspective. As the post-communist media landscape changed, audiences came to interpret the US less through Cold War imagery and more through portrayals of an ineffectual global police force.

In general, Bock's (2020) three operational constructs – creation, selection, and solution – offer a powerful analytic apparatus for understanding how visual frames “work” in communication and, by extension, how the image of a nation is constructed and sustained. Rather than constituting a strictly sequential process, these constructs capture interrelated dimensions of visual framing that operate in relation to one another within specific communicative contexts. Each construct illuminates a different aspect of meaning production: the creation of an initial visual logic, the selection and recontextualisation that anchor images within ideological narratives, and the interpretive work through which viewers, operating within shared meaning structures, finalise meaning. It also aligns with Rose's (2022) conceptualisation of visual meaning as emerging across the interconnected sites of production, the image itself, and audiencing, collectively underscoring the multi-sited and processual nature of visual meaning-making. Mobilising Bock's three-part model thus enables a more precise examination of how representations of the US are

visually built, circulated, and cognitively completed in non-Western media environments, supporting this study's aim of analysing how Chinese media imagine and narrate the US. With this conceptual foundation in place, the next section turns to picture magazines as institutional sites of visual nation-building, exploring how they function as both national evolutionary chronicles that construct collective historical memory, and windows to the world that simultaneously mediate China's self-positioning in relation to foreign others, through which the US was rendered visible to Chinese audiences.

4.4 Picture Magazines: National Evolutionary Chronicles and Windows to the World

Scholarship increasingly recognises picture magazines as influential institutional sites through which nations construct visual culture, articulate collective memory, and mediate encounters with the world. Lutz and Collins (1993) famously demonstrate that picture magazines operate simultaneously as lenses through which nations view the world and as visual chronicles that narrate national evolution. Their analysis reveals that picture magazines curate visual worlds that shape how readers imagine both their own nation and distant others. Internally, the assemblage of images in pictorial magazines, as components of historical narration, organises the mnemonic structure of the nation, as images help to “constitute publics” and shape how societies understand themselves (Miles & Welch, 2020, p. 3). Externally, Hardt (2008, p. 1) argues that illustrated magazines function as mediated “windows,” enabling audiences to witness events far beyond their immediate surroundings and to engage with foreign cultures through highly structured visual forms. Consequently, picture magazines – because of their pronounced historicity and visuality – constitute a powerful platform for documenting and presenting the forms of visual agency

discussed in Sections 4.2 and 4.3, namely the internal construction of nationalism and the external framing of geopolitical relations.

This institutional significance extends into the domain of cultural memory. Brennen and Hardt (1999) argue that photographs embedded in picture magazines serve as durable markers of collective remembrance, functioning as key sites where societies assemble and visualise their past. Picture magazines are repositories of recurring visual motifs, narrative patterns, and aesthetic codes that stabilise collective memory across generations (Edwards, 2001). As Kitch (2015) notes, magazines are cultural artefacts that store and circulate recurring stories and symbols, thus embedding images within broader cultural frameworks that shape how historical meaning is produced. At the same time, contemporary scholarship stresses that magazines are never neutral containers. Klumpp (2025) conceptualises magazines as institutions of hegemony in the Gramscian sense¹⁰, insofar as they preserve dominant worldviews through the routine circulation of familiar narratives, visual tropes, and identity markers. Magazines act as community-building platforms, providing spaces in which the social and cultural identities of an assumed collective, whether national, ethnic, or ideological, are articulated, debated, and reinforced. As Allbeson and Colquhoun (2022, p. 14) argue, the publication of photojournalism constructs a “national conversation”, with editorial processes and page layout organising “shared acts of spectatorship” and ways of seeing. Kitch (2015) further extends this view by characterising magazines as hybrid cultural artefacts encompassing both dynamics: they simultaneously preserve authoritative historical

¹⁰ In the Gramscian sense, hegemony refers to the cultural and ideological leadership through which dominant groups secure consent by presenting their values and worldviews as natural and commonsensical, thereby sustaining existing power relations.

narratives, and act as community-builders by providing a platform through which a presumed homogeneous public articulates and negotiates collective identity. This perspective underscores that picture magazines should be understood as institutional actors that actively participate in shaping national imaginaries.

Critical scholarship also highlights that this process often involves the selective construction of the foreign. Lutz and Collins (1993) show that photo magazines frequently remove images of distant cultures from their historical contexts and reinsert them into domestically meaningful visual logics. In their analysis, non-Western peoples are displayed in National Geographic as if in evolutionary progression toward Western modernity, reinforcing asymmetrical representational hierarchies. The meaning of distant nations is co-produced by editors and viewers alike. Editors curate and sequence images according to institutional priorities, political climates, or ideological commitments, while audiences interpret them through culturally embedded assumptions and visual conventions (Azoulay, 2012). So, as imagological research has long suggested, national representations of others often reveal as much about the observing culture as about those depicted (Moyle, 2004), reminding us that picture magazines simultaneously construct both the Other and the Self. Cadava (2018, p. xxvii) further warns that the technical proliferation of images risks obscuring historical complexity, producing forms of “historical blinding” that reduce distant realities to recognisable but superficial visual tropes. Thus, picture magazines operate as windows to the world that also function as mirrors – mediating foreignness through domestic expectations, anxieties, and aspirations. This dual function is especially salient in geopolitical contexts where national identity and international orientation are in flux. The present study builds on the magazine’s dual function by analysing Chinese picture magazines as institutional

platforms that constructed visual knowledge of the US. These magazines served as sites where collective historical memory was produced and curated, while simultaneously mediating China's geopolitical self-positioning through visual encounters with the US. By examining recurring visual frames, narrative structures, and editorial practices across selected publications, the study illuminates how Chinese visual media articulated evolving understandings of the foreign nation and, by extension, of China's own place in the world.

In all, the literature reviewed above in Chapter 2, 3 and 4 together suggests that representations of the US in Chinese media cannot be understood as isolated visual outputs, but must instead be analysed as the outcome of an integrated system of interacting forces. At the cultural level, the imagined Chinese community – shaped by historical memory, narratives of humiliation and rejuvenation, and enduring civilisational discourses – provides the symbolic grammar through which foreign others are interpreted and positioned. At the geopolitical level, the shifting dynamics of US-China relations introduce historically contingent frames of cooperation, rivalry, and confrontation that inflect how the US is represented at different moments. At the structural level, the Chinese media system, characterised by the interplay of Party-state control, market forces, and journalistic professionalism, establishes the institutional boundaries and conditions under which such representations are produced. Finally, at the representational level, visual framing processes – encompassing the creation, selection, and interpretation of images – operate as the immediate mechanisms through which meaning is constructed, stabilised, and communicated. These four dimensions, corresponding to the conceptual framework outlined in Figure 1.2 in Chapter 1, jointly shape the patterned and historically contingent representation of the US in Chinese media.

This conceptual model also prepares the ground for the next chapter, Research Design and Methods, which details the selection of Chinese picture magazines included in this study, their institutional characteristics, and their historical positioning. It further outlines the methodological combination of visual content analysis, visual framing analysis, and semi-structured interviews that informed data collection and interpretation, as well as the criteria guiding image sampling and the procedures followed in assembling the empirical corpus.

CHAPTER 5. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

5.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the research design and methodological procedures employed to examine *how have Chinese picture magazines visually framed the US over time and how these framings have reflected and rearticulated the imagined Chinese national community*. It integrates quantitative visual content analysis, qualitative visual framing analysis, and semi-structured interviews into a coherent, mixed-methods design that aligns with the constructionist and interpretivist philosophical traditions.

The chapter proceeds by demonstrating how these methods are matched to the research questions (Section 5.2), grounded in an interpretive epistemology attentive to the socio-cultural and political contexts of visual communication (Section 5.3). It then explains the rationale for the case selection of *China Pictorial*, *South Review*, and *Sanlian Life Week* (Section 5.4), outlining the distinctive institutional characteristics that make these magazines analytically valuable. Section 5.5 provides a detailed account of data collection and sampling procedures, including the complete census of *China Pictorial* and the theoretically informed purposive sampling of *South Review* and *Sanlian Life Week*. Section 5.6 elaborates on the analytical frameworks and methodological procedures used for visual content analysis, visual framing analysis, and interviews. Finally, Section 5.7 reflects on the limitations encountered in the research design and implementation. These components constitute a methodological architecture designed to trace longitudinal trends, uncover the dynamics of institutional variation, and interpret the symbolic and ideological work performed by visual representations of the US in Chinese media. The framework not only establishes what these images depict, but also how

they organise meaning and why they take particular forms at specific geopolitical and historical junctures.

5.2 Research Design and Methodological Fit with the Research Questions

Research Design

The central aim of this project – to examine *how have Chinese picture magazines visually framed the US over time and how these framings have reflected and rearticulated the imagined Chinese national community* – requires a research design that can show both the broad patterns in how the US is pictured and the deeper meanings these images convey. To achieve this, the study integrates longitudinal visual content analysis, visual framing analysis, and semi-structured interviews within a coherent analytical framework. Quantitative visual content analysis identifies empirical patterns of representation, while qualitative visual framing analysis and semi-structured interviews offer interpretive depth and contextual insight. As discussed in Chapter 4 (Section 4.3), visual meaning arises not only from measurable representational features but also from interpretive frames and socio-cultural contexts (Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001). The content-analytic component maps the salience, distribution, and formal characteristics of US-related images across three Chinese magazines. These quantitative patterns inform the subsequent qualitative phases of framing analysis and interview interpretation. The integration of methods thus allows the study to trace historical developments, examine cross-institutional variation, and analyse the symbolic processes through which magazine images contribute to the construction of geopolitical meaning. The specific steps associated with each method, including data collection, sampling procedures, and coding strategies, are detailed in Section 5.5.

A core feature of this research design is its longitudinal orientation. To investigate how visual framings of the US have evolved, the study adopts a chronological arc from July 1950 (when *China Pictorial*, the first pictorial magazine of the PRC, was launched) to December 2021, a period that spans major inflection points in both China-US relations and the evolution of the Chinese media system. A longitudinal design makes it possible to identify periods of continuity, rupture, and rearticulation, enabling robust interpretation of how visual representations shift alongside political, media institutional, and cultural change (Hansen & Machin, 2019). Drawing on the visual framing results from *China Pictorial*, and the broader geopolitical context outlined in Chapter 2 (Section 2.3), the study divides the analysis into three periods: 1950-1971, 1972-2000, and 2001-2021. This periodisation enhances analytical clarity by aligning visual transformations with key diplomatic and media-system developments; the substantive justification for these divisions is elaborated in Chapter 6 (Section 6.2).

Magazines serve as the primary empirical source for this study for several reasons. First, picture magazines contain rich visual materials, offering high-quality photographs and illustrations that accompany their articles and provide abundant imagery depicting the US. Second, unlike websites and social media platforms, magazines possess strong historical continuity and preservability. As older and more stable media forms, they facilitate visually compelling observations of a nation's evolving historical imagination (Brennen & Hardt, 1999) and construct a continuum of national history through visible genealogies of artefacts, thereby serving as chronicles of a country's visual evolution (Lutz & Collins, 1993). This makes magazines particularly suitable for a longitudinal study tracing representational shifts across extended historical periods. Moreover, the lengthy production cycles and

editorial review processes characteristic of news magazines foster distinctive framing orientations that differ from the immediacy and volatility of digital media (Greenwood & Jenkins, 2015). The specific rationale for selecting the three magazines – *China Pictorial*, *Sanlian Life Week* and *South Review* – examined in this project, along with their institutional characteristics, is presented in Section 5.4.

Research Questions and Corresponding Methods

Table 5.1 outlines how each method corresponds to and directly addresses the four research questions, clarifying the specific analytical contribution of visual content analysis, visual framing analysis, and semi-structured interviews. This table articulates the rationale for selecting these methods and demonstrates how each contributes to examining different dimensions of the visual construction of the US in Chinese magazines.

Table 5.1. Alignment between research questions and methods.

Research Question	Corresponding Method(s)	How the Method Responds to the Question
RQ1. What were the dominant images of the US in Chinese pictorial media across different historical periods (1950-2021), and how did they change over time?	Visual Content Analysis Visual Framing Analysis	Content analysis systematically maps the frequency, salience, and compositional features of US-related images across the three historical periods, enabling the identification of predominant representational patterns. Framing analysis builds on these patterns by classifying images into attraction, rejection, and wavering frames, allowing the study to examine how the relative prominence, emotional tone, and narrative functions of different frame types vary across historical eras.

RQ2. How did portrayals of the US differ across the selected Party-organ and commercial magazines during the period when both were in publication, and why?	Visual Content Analysis Visual Framing Analysis Semi-Structured Interviews	Content analysis highlights structural and thematic differences in how magazines from distinct institutional contexts depict the US. Differences in image themes, subject positionality, scale, and salience can be systematically contrasted. Framing analysis further examines how each magazine constructs attraction, rejection, and wavering frames differently, enabling analysis of how political alignment, editorial orientation, and commercial pressures shape divergent representational strategies. Interviews directly address this question by engaging with media practitioners across different magazines to uncover differences in editorial decision-making, censorship and review processes, and professional practices.
RQ3. What did the constructed visual frames reveal about the evolving dynamics of China-US relations, and how did they engage with enduring nationalist narratives of humiliation and rejuvenation?	Visual Framing Analysis	By analysing how visual decisions in the creation stage (e.g., gaze, composition, colour, emotional tone) interact with contextual placement and editorial selection, the visual framing method identifies the interpretive patterns that guide audiences toward particular geopolitical readings of the US. This enables examination of how these frames resonate with or complicate nationalist narratives of humiliation, resistance, and rejuvenation.
RQ4. What roles did magazine staff play, and how did they navigate the tensions between Party-state control, market forces, and limited professional autonomy in contemporary magazine production?	Semi-Structured Interviews	Interviews illuminate the professional practices underlying image production, including decisions about subject choice, visual treatment, censorship, and political sensitivity. They explain how image workers navigate regulatory scrutiny by Chinese media authorities, the demands of market profitability, and the expectations of professional norms.

The research begins with quantitative mapping through visual content analysis, which establishes the empirical terrain on which subsequent qualitative interpretation is built. This phase clarifies the overall distribution of image corpus across time and across magazines, thereby identifying where closer interpretive

attention is warranted. Content analysis serves as a structuring device that delineates patterns and representational tendencies that form the basis for deeper interpretation. Building on this foundation, visual framing analysis – guided by Bock’s (2020) creation-selection-solution model – provides the conceptual framework necessary to interpret how visual elements, editorial choices, and contextual embedding jointly shape the meanings attributed to the US. This analytical structure enables the study to classify US-related images into Strong Rejection, Weak Rejection, Wavering, Weak Attraction, and Strong Attraction frames (detailed procedural steps are presented in Section 5.6), and to examine how the visual and emotional architecture of these frames shifts across different geopolitical moments. By analysing how these frame types vary in salience, emotional intensity, and argumentative function, the method illuminates how visual representations relate to broader geopolitical imaginaries and discursive constructions of national identity. Semi-structured interviews with editors, and both visual and news journalists, complement these visual analyses by bringing editorial decision-making, regulatory constraints, and professional practices into view. While the images themselves reveal representational practices, interviews clarify the professional, political, and organisational conditions under which these representations are produced. This additional layer provides insight into the motivations, constraints, and negotiations that shape visual framing choices, thereby strengthening the interpretive validity of the overall analysis.

Taken as a whole, the three methods form a coherent and mutually reinforcing design. Quantitative analysis organises the empirical field, framing analysis interprets the cultural and ideological significance of visual constructions, and interviews contextualise these interpretations within the lived practices of media production. Through this layered approach, the research design is able to address not

only what the US representations look like, but also how they acquire meaning and why they take particular forms at particular historical moments. To fully ground this design, it is necessary to articulate the philosophical assumptions that underpin these methodological choices, which are outlined in the next section.

5.3 Research Philosophy

This section outlines the ontological and epistemological foundations of the study and explains why this philosophical orientation is essential for answering my central research question. Given the project's concern with meaning-making, representation, and historically situated visual discourse, the study adopts a *constructionist* ontology and an *interpretivist* epistemology, supported by both *inductive* and *deductive* reasoning strategies.

A constructionist ontological stance assumes that social reality is produced through human meaning-making practices rather than existing as an objective structure independent of interpretation. This stance is particularly important for analysing geopolitical imagery, because representations of foreign nations do not simply reflect international realities – they constitute part of the symbolic architecture through which geopolitical understanding becomes meaningful to domestic audiences. As Couldry and Hepp (2017) argue, the social world emerges through communicative processes that structure how individuals and groups perceive themselves and others. Media, especially Chinese media under conditions of strong state intervention, play a constitutive role in producing geopolitical reality. Chinese magazines work within institutional, ideological, and professional constraints that shape what can be shown, how it can be framed, and what meanings can be attached to foreign actors (Carter, 2013). Moreover, visual representation and picture magazines are inherently constructive forms. Images derive significance from

framing, selection, sequencing, and cultural conventions. As argued in Chapter 4 (Section 4.4), picture magazines function as a national visual chronicle and curated windows to the world, embedding photographs within recurring aesthetic and narrative structures. The visual image of the US is thus a socially produced artefact whose meaning emerges through historically and institutionally patterned representational practices (Gamson et al., 1992). Constructionism, therefore, provides an ontological foundation for this project. The image of the US is not found but made, and its evolution over time reveals shifting constructions of national identity, geopolitical orientation, and media practice within China.

The interpretivist epistemological stance follows logically from the constructionist ontology. Interpretivism recognises that knowledge about the social world is generated through understanding how individuals and institutions construct meanings, symbols, and shared cultural narratives (Bryman, 2012). This epistemology is essential for studying media framings, which rely on symbolic forms, semiotic cues, cultural conventions, and narrative strategies (Hansen & Machin, 2019). Interpreting how the US is visually framed in Chinese media requires sensitivity to the polysemic nature of images, the contextual nature of political symbolism, and the historically embedded discourses through which national identity is negotiated. Representations of the US in Chinese media function as communicative devices that articulate particular visions of China's self-identification. Such visions are central to Anderson's (2006) concept of the imagined community, wherein national identity is continually reproduced through mediated narratives. In this context, interpretivism enables the study to analyse how framings of the US contribute to imagining and reimagining the boundaries, character, and destiny of the Chinese national community. Thus, interpretivism guides this research

to treat media texts not simply as artefacts to be measured, but as communicative practices that articulate meaning.

This project employs both inductive and deductive approaches in a complementary manner. The deductive dimension is informed by established scholarship on visual framing and national identity construction. Existing theoretical insights guide the initial development of coding categories and analytical lenses used in the visual content analysis. The inductive dimension is equally essential. As historical visual materials often contain emergent patterns, shifts in symbolic strategies, and context-specific signs not fully anticipated by prior research, this project employs inductive reasoning to allow new themes to surface from the empirical data. Through systematic observation of magazine images across different decades, the study identifies recurring motifs, evolving narrative structures, and changes in visual framing techniques that cannot be wholly predicted by existing theories. This dual approach permits the analysis both to test the applicability of theoretical frameworks in the Chinese context and to generate new insights into how Chinese media have visually participated in constructing the nation's relationship with the US.

Building on these philosophical foundations, the next section explains the rationale for choosing *China Pictorial*, *South Review*, and *Sanlian Life Week* as my research cases, and details their institutional characteristics.

5.4 Case Selection

This study adopts a comparative and longitudinal research design, and the selection of magazines plays a central role in ensuring analytical rigour and representativeness. The general strategy for case selection was to identify mainstream, and general-circulation Chinese photo magazines that publish

substantial visual content involving foreign affairs. “Mainstream” here refers to media outlets that are institutionally embedded within the Party-state system, widely accessible to national audiences, and influential in shaping public discourse. To ensure representativeness, the selection also sought to maximise historical span, institutional diversity, and content variety. Based on these criteria, a relevance sampling approach was adopted to select three magazines: *China Pictorial*, *Sanlian Life Week*, and *South Review*, as listed in Table 5.2. A relevance sampling strategy is non-probabilistic, and its representativeness may be subject to debate. The selection process inevitably reflects the researcher’s judgment and is constrained by archival availability. Nevertheless, relevance sampling is the most appropriate approach for this project because the research requires historically continuous, visually rich, and institutionally diverse magazines capable of supporting both longitudinal and comparative analysis. Probabilistic sampling would not ensure such diversity or historical depth, nor would it guarantee the inclusion of magazines with sufficient visual material on the US.

Table 5.2. Profiles of the three selected Chinese magazines.

	<i>China Pictorial (Chinese version)</i>	<i>South Review</i>	<i>Sanlian Life Week</i>
Location	Beijing	Guangzhou	Beijing
History	First issued in July 1950; the only magazine in the PRC that has never ceased publication and has the longest continuous history.	Founded in April 1985	Launched in 1995
Circulation	Print run exceeded 500,000 in 1963 and reached 1 million in 1972, setting a circulation record. Issue circulation of 228,000 copies in 2016 with global distribution.	Average nationwide circulation of 660,000 copies per issue	Nationwide circulation of 750,000 copies per issue in 2010

Content Focus	News photography pictorial magazine	Politics and economics news magazine	News and culture magazine
Publication Frequency	Monthly	Bi-weekly	Weekly
Ownership	China International Publishing Group - a Party-owned foreign language publishing organisation	Guangzhou Daily Newspaper Group - a state-owned enterprise	China Publishing Group Corporation - a state-owned publishing conglomerate
Institutional Nature	External propaganda Party media	Politically affiliated with the Party-state, operating with limited commercial autonomy in circulation	Politically affiliated with the Party-state, operating with limited commercial autonomy in circulation
Audience	In its first twenty years, aimed primarily at workers and peasants during the socialist revolution; today, mainly collected by domestic enthusiasts.	Predominantly readers from government agencies, academic institutions, and large corporations.	Highly educated young intellectuals

The three magazines share several important features that make them well suited for this study. First, all three are illustrated magazines with substantial international coverage, providing a rich corpus of images depicting foreign countries, including the US. Their reliance on photographic storytelling makes them ideal sources for analysing visual constructions of international relations. Second, each magazine has a long publication history, with more than twenty-five years of continuous circulation, thereby enabling longitudinal analysis. *China Pictorial*, in particular, has been published uninterrupted since 1950, making it one of the most historically stable photographic magazines in the PRC (Peng, 2019). Their archival continuity allows researchers to observe evolving visual genealogies across political eras, a feature that distinguishes print magazines from digital platforms whose records are often fragmented. Third, all three magazines are firmly situated within the Party-state media system. They possess their own reporting and photographic

capacities, ensuring sustained production of US-related visual materials, while also being subject to varying degrees of state regulation. Their dual identity – as state-owned media outlets with professionalised journalistic practices – renders them representative of the broader Chinese media ecology. Finally, the magazines' large circulation and strong social influence mean that they not only reflect mainstream perspectives but also help shape them. They function as important windows through which Chinese audiences observe and interpret the outside world. *Sanlian Life Week* and *South Review* in particular have been widely read among political, intellectual, and professional elites (Sanlian Life Week, 2025; South Review, 2025), while *China Pictorial* historically reached a nationwide readership and played a central role in disseminating state-sanctioned visual narratives, as shown in Table 5.2. As a result, this commonality enhances the historical and visual global political research value of the selected magazines and ensures that the study draws on a sufficiently rich and representative image corpus.

Despite their shared characteristics, the three magazines differ in politically and institutionally meaningful ways. These differences enhance the analytical breadth of the study by enabling comparison across varying degrees of political oversight, market orientation, and editorial autonomy. As scholars note, the absence of press legislation and uneven regional development in China has produced a media system where all outlets are state-owned in principle yet exercise heterogeneous levels of autonomy in practice (Chen, 2015). The selected magazines exemplify this diversity.

China Pictorial occupies the most politically central position. As the earliest photographic magazine of the PRC and a flagship publication of the Party-state's

external communication apparatus, it operates under stringent ideological supervision (China Pictorial Editorial Department, 1980). Its affiliation with the China International Communications Group (CICG) – an institution directly under the Central Committee – means that its visual reporting has historically aligned closely with official agendas, diplomatic priorities, and state narratives (China International Communications Group, 2022). Its uninterrupted circulation since 1950 also offers a uniquely continuous record of how the Party-state has visually articulated its perception of the US across shifting political eras.

South Review, in contrast, emerged from the more commercially dynamic and politically pluralistic environment of Guangdong in the reform era (1978). In its early years, the magazine was positioned to promote new ideas, new developments, new thinking, and new trends associated with the reform period, with its content largely focused on local affairs in Guangzhou. It was not until the comprehensive redesign of *South Review* in 1998 that the publication explicitly introduced, for the first time in China, the concept of a political-economic magazine, subsequently growing into the country's largest political-economic news magazine in terms of circulation at the time (Qin, 2002). As a biweekly journal of current affairs under the Guangzhou Daily Press Group, it benefited from a relatively flexible editorial climate shaped by regional governance patterns. Studies have shown that the Guangdong Provincial Propaganda Department often acted as a buffer, moderating central directives and creating space for more diverse editorial expression (Lee, Zhou He, et al., 2007). This environment allowed *South Review* to experiment with reform-oriented reporting and market-led operations, although high-profile political incidents, such as leadership dismissals and increased ideological tightening after the

2013 Southern Weekly incident¹¹, illustrate the conditional and contested nature of such autonomy (Chen, 2020). These institutional dynamics make *South Review* particularly valuable for analysing how semi-autonomous media interpret and negotiate foreign-image construction within a tightening political environment.

Sanlian Life Week embodies yet another configuration of state ownership and market responsiveness. Also founded in the reform era, *Sanlian Life Week* is hosted by the SDX Joint Publishing Company under the China Publishing Group (Sanlian Life Week, 2025). The magazine initially foregrounded an editorial focus on interpretive journalism, offering commentary and analytical reporting. In 2001, the magazine shifted from a biweekly to a weekly publication, strengthening its news orientation and expanding its readership (Hu, 2018). Over the past decade, *Sanlian Life Week* has transitioned into a more broadly defined general-interest magazine, with a dual editorial system consisting of a Culture Department and a Society Department that alternate in producing weekly cover stories (Editorial Department of Sanlian Life Week, 2009). This arrangement represents a formalised division of thematic orientation, labour organisation, and risk management within the newsroom. The Society Department is primarily responsible for issues that engage with current affairs, economic transformation, public policy, and social governance. Cover stories produced by this department tend to exhibit a stronger orientation toward political economy and public affairs. Given the heightened sensitivity associated with these domains, editorial procedures within this department are

¹¹ The 2013 Southern Weekly incident refers to a conflict that arose when the Guangdong Provincial Propaganda Department bypassed standard censorship procedures and unilaterally altered the newspaper's annual "New Year's Greeting" without notifying the editors. The replacement of the original editorial with a propaganda-oriented version triggered internal resistance from the newsroom and sparked wider public debate about censorship and the tightening of media control in contemporary China (Chen, 2020).

subject to stricter anticipatory review and closer alignment with prevailing regulatory expectations. The department, therefore, operates under comparatively intensified scrutiny within the state news supervision framework. By contrast, the Culture Department focuses on cultural production, education, intellectual life, and lifestyle themes. Its editorial agenda includes literature, art, social trends, and reflections on everyday life. Because these topics are situated at a greater discursive distance from core political sovereignty issues, they are generally less exposed to direct governmental intervention. This relative insulation from political sensitivity affords the department greater flexibility in narrative framing and thematic exploration.

This dual editorial structure reflects *Sanlian Life Week*'s ongoing effort to navigate the constraints of political regulation while meeting the demands of a competitive media market. By formally separating politically sensitive from culturally oriented content, the magazine manages exposure to regulatory scrutiny through an elaborate organisational arrangement. So *Sanlian Life Week*'s hybrid institutional identity makes it a productive case for analysing how state-owned yet market-oriented outlets construct visual narratives about the US.

Besides, *China Pictorial*, *South Review* and *Sanlian Life Week* differ in their content focus, covering external propaganda, political economy, and cultural livelihoods respectively, which enables a more nuanced comparative analysis of the thematic domains in which the US is visually represented. In general, these contrasts offer analytical leverage by showing how variations in political control, market orientation, editorial culture, and professional autonomy shape the visual portrayal of the US. The diversity of the sample thus provides a more comprehensive foundation for examining how China's media system constructs international political imagery under different institutional conditions. Having established the rationale for selecting

these three magazines, the next section outlines the procedures for collecting and sampling the visual data used in this study.

5.5 Data Collection and Sampling Procedures

This section outlines the procedures used to collect, organise, and sample the visual data for the analysis of US-related images in *China Pictorial*, *Sanlian Life Week*, and *South Review*. A combination of complete census and purposive sampling strategies was employed to ensure both historical breadth and analytical feasibility, as well as to maximise comparability across magazines with different publication histories.

To ensure the validity, consistency, and reliability of the corpus across the three magazines, this study developed a set of pre-qualification criteria for identifying images that are relevant to the US. These criteria were applied uniformly to *China Pictorial*, *Sanlian Life Week*, and *South Review*. An image was classified as US-related if it met at least one of the following conditions:

- (1) The image contains identifiable US individuals: This includes political leaders, diplomats, public figures, celebrities, athletes, and any person whose national identity as American can be clearly recognised visually or through accompanying textual information.
- (2) The image contains identifiable US environments: This includes US cities, architectural landmarks, public spaces, landscapes, or recognisable geographic indicators. Images depicting maps of the US, or portions thereof, are also included under this criterion.
- (3) The image contains identifiable US symbols: This encompasses political symbols – such as the US national flag, party logos, or other state insignia – as well as cultural symbols that are widely associated with the US, such as

brand logos (e.g., Coca-Cola), Hollywood imagery, and characters from major US entertainment franchises (e.g., Marvel).

(4) The image is accompanied by captions, headlines, or subtitles that contain explicit textual references to the US: Images that may not visually depict people, landmarks, or cultural markers of the US but that are textually anchored to US contexts were included as US-related. For example, a caption such as “In June, the controversial billboard took to downtown Manhattan. Jones, the model in the billboard, was named the most ‘politically correct’ model in American history” contains explicit textual references (“Manhattan,” “America,” “Jones”) that clearly situate the image within the US.

Images that do not meet any of the above criteria were excluded from the dataset. Images that meet any of the criteria were included as valid US-related samples for visual content and framing analysis.

Full Data Collection for China Pictorial

The corpus for *China Pictorial* consists of all US-related images appearing in the magazine between its first issue in July 1950 and December 2021. Across this period, the magazine published 881 issues, three of which were unavailable in the archive (Issue 5 in 2007; Issues 1 and 3 in 2009). All images that met the criteria for US relevance (as defined above) were manually identified and extracted, resulting in a total of 2,544 US-related images. To compile this corpus, I reviewed every available issue – including the physical Chinese-language editions and their scanned archival versions – to ensure accurate identification of US-related visual content. Each valid image was recorded and coded using SPSS and Excel, which facilitated the organisation, descriptive analysis, and subsequent preparation of the dataset for

the visual content analysis and framing analysis presented in later chapters. The uninterrupted archival continuity of *China Pictorial* provides the most comprehensive longitudinal dataset on the visual representation of the US in Chinese print media. As the only photographic periodical in the PRC with more than seventy years of continuous publication (Peng, 2019), *China Pictorial* offers a uniquely stable empirical foundation for informing the historically grounded sampling strategy applied to the other two magazines.

Rationale for Sampling Sanlian Life Week and South Review

In order to make the analysis both feasible and methodologically robust, this study employed purposive sampling for *Sanlian Life Week* and *South Review*. Unlike *China Pictorial*, which is a monthly publication, *South Review* (established in 1985) and *Sanlian Life Week* (established in 1995) appear biweekly and weekly respectively. Including every issue of these two magazines would generate many tens of thousands of images, far exceeding what can reasonably be coded within the scope of my independently conducted doctoral project. I therefore concentrated on a purposively selected set of years to enhance the operational feasibility of the study while preserving a detailed and conceptually rich coding frame. The use of theoretically grounded sampling in large visual datasets is well established in visual communication research, where scholars emphasise that exhaustive census coding is neither necessary nor optimal when the aim is to capture structural shifts in representational patterns (Lacy et al., 2001; Rose, 2022). In comparative media analysis, researchers also highlight the importance of maintaining corpus comparability across outlets to prevent analytical distortions arising from disproportionate dataset sizes (Riffe et al., 2023). Accordingly, the sampling of *Sanlian Life Week* and *South Review* ensures that their substantially higher

publication frequency does not produce an oversized corpus that would disproportionately shape the analytical outcomes.

How were these specific years identified and selected for sampling?

Researchers in historical and political communication have often concentrated their analyses on specific years that coincide with major political events, crises, or ideological shifts, arguing that such temporally bounded samples provide analytically meaningful windows into broader structural transformations in media discourse (e.g., Grabe & Bucy, 2009; Irom, 2025). These precedents demonstrate that selecting specific years for intensive analysis – particularly those shaped by geopolitical reconfigurations, policy shifts, or surges in media attention – is an established approach in media history and political communication research. Additionally, the full longitudinal mapping of *China Pictorial* provides an empirical overview for identifying periods in which significant changes occurred in the quantity and framing of US-related images. This study, therefore, cross-referenced fluctuations in *China Pictorial*'s image production and framing patterns, along with major historical events and shifts in China-US relations, to identify years of heightened representational significance.

South Review and Sanlian Life Week: Sampling Procedure and Data Collection

A purposive sampling strategy was adopted, guided by two criteria:

First, I selected years in which the *China Pictorial* corpus exhibited marked fluctuations in either the quantity or the framing patterns of US-related images. Such years are analytically meaningful because extreme variations in visual salience and framing often reflect broader transformations in geopolitical relations, national identity discourses, and the ideological functions assigned to foreign imagery within the Chinese media system. They therefore provide valuable reference points for

cross-magazine comparison. As shown in Figure 6.1 in the later empirical Chapter 6, the longitudinal distribution of US-related images from 1950 to 2021 reveals distinct peaks and troughs. Since *South Review* and *Sanlian Life Week* began publication in 1985 and 1995 respectively, sampling for each magazine can only be conducted from its own founding year onward. Within this permissible range, 1996 and 2001 were selected because 1996 registers the lowest number of US-related images in the corpus, whereas 2001 marks the highest point. Figure 6.2 further illustrates the year-by-year distribution of visual framing patterns in *China Pictorial*. Several pronounced turning points emerge. In 1999, portrayals of the US shifted from predominantly positive to a more ambivalent configuration, with rejection frames increasing significantly. This pattern stabilised in 2006, when attraction frames regained dominance. Another inflection point appears in 2020, when attraction frames, which had long been the prevailing mode, converge with rejection and wavering frames. These representational turning points – 1999, 2006, and 2020 – were therefore also selected as sampling years.

Second, I selected years that were identified through major political, diplomatic, military, and cultural events in China-US relations, as well as significant shifts in Chinese media policy and domestic political transitions, as shown in Figure 5.1. This figure documents key bilateral and domestic developments from 1985 onward – the earliest possible point for sampling *South Review* – and categorises these events by type. Such years carry substantial analytical value because moments of geopolitical tension, policy reorientation, diplomatic visits, or cultural confrontation often intensify media attention and reshape the discursive and ideological functions of US imagery. They are therefore included as sampling years in this study. For events spanning more than three years, the sampling includes the

onset year, a midpoint year during which the event reached a critical or heightened stage, and the concluding year. For example, in the case of the Iraq War (2003-2011), only the years 2003, 2008, and 2011 were coded. As the COVID-19 pandemic had not yet concluded at the time of this project, only the year 2020 was sampled, corresponding to the moment when the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the outbreak a public health emergency of international concern.

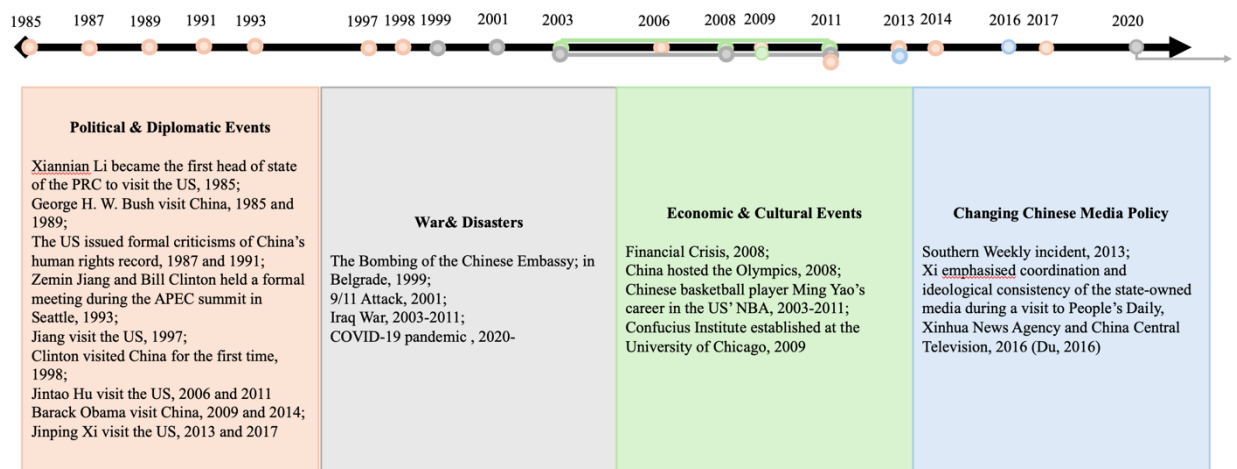


Figure 5.1. Key events between China and the US.

Integrating the two considerations outlined above – namely, years identified as significant through empirical fluctuations in *China Pictorial*, and years marked by major political, diplomatic, military, and cultural events (as shown in Figure 5.1) – this study selected the relevant years as sampling years for *South Review* and *Sanlian Life Week*. The complete lists of sampling years and corresponding rationales are presented in Table 5.3. The following subsection details the data collection procedures for these two magazines.

Table 5.3. Sampling years and rationale of *South Review* and *Sanlian Life Week*.

Magazines	Sampling Year	Sampling Reasons
<i>South Review</i>	1985	Political & diplomatic events
	1987	Political & diplomatic events
	1989	Political & diplomatic events

	1991	Political & diplomatic events
	1993	Political & diplomatic events
<i>South Review</i> and	1996	Lower visual quantity
<i>Sanlian Life Week</i>	1997	Political & diplomatic events
	1998	Political & diplomatic events
	1999	Visual framing turning point; war & disaster
	2001	Higher visual quantity; war & disaster
	2003	War & disaster; economic & cultural events
	2006	Political & diplomatic events; visual framing turning point
	2008	War & disaster; economic & cultural events
	2009	Political & diplomatic events; economic & cultural events
	2011	War & disaster; political & diplomatic events; economic & cultural events
	2013	Political & diplomatic events; media policy
	2014	Political & diplomatic events
	2016	Media policy
	2017	Political & diplomatic events
	2020	Visual framing turning points; war & disaster

The sampling frame for *South Review* consists of 480 issues across 19 purposively selected years, as shown in Table 5.3, yielding 1,717 US-related images. Missing issues include Issue 4 in 1989; Issues 11 and 12 in 2001; and all issues in 2006. As with *China Pictorial*, I manually reviewed, identified, and recorded all US-

related images. Data were organised and analysed using SPSS and Excel. The archival materials consulted include CD-ROM editions (available only for the early years from 1985 to 1990, when physical issues are difficult to obtain), physical issues, bound volumes, and scanned digital copies.

The sampling frame for *Sanlian Life Week* consists of 604 issues across 14 purposively selected years, as shown in Table 5.3, resulting in 4,623 US-related images. Missing issues include Issue 11 in 1998; Issues 4, 17, 19, and 40 in 2001; and Issue 40 in 2006. I likewise manually examined every available issue, identifying and recording all US-related images using SPSS and Excel. The archival sources for this magazine include physical issues, scanned digital reproductions, and the *Sanlian Life Week* digital editions available through the Sanlian Zhongdu (三联中读) mobile application (launched in 2017) (Sanlian Life Week, 2022).

Total Corpus

In total, the three datasets constitute a substantial visual corpus of 8,884 US-related images, as summarised in Table 5.4.

Table 5.4. A corpus of US-related images from *China Pictorial*, *Sanlian Life Week* and *South Review*.

	<i>China Pictorial</i>	<i>Sanlian Life Week</i> (sampling)	<i>South Review</i> (sampling)	Total
US-related Images Corpus	2544	4623	1717	8884

5.6 Analytical Frameworks and Methodological Procedures

Visual Content Analysis

In order to identify the dynamic shifts in the visual representation of the US across different periods and across the three magazines, visual content analysis provides the quantitative foundation for detecting patterns in the salience,

distribution, and compositional features of US-related images. This method enables the study to trace long-term historical trajectories in visual portrayals. To operationalise this analysis, I developed a detailed codebook, as shown in Appendix A, that specifies the variables, categories, and coding rules used to capture the measurable features of US-related images in Chinese magazines. The coding scheme was developed through an iterative process that combined theory-driven constructs with inductively derived categories. The initial set of categories was informed by the visual grammar framework of Kress and Van Leeuwen (2020), particularly concepts such as point of view, social distance, and visual modality. A pilot coding exercise was subsequently conducted using a subset of images from *China Pictorial* (121 US-related images drawn from selected issues published in 1950, 1972, 1974, 1989, 1992, and 2006), *Sanlian Life Week* (95 images from issues published between 2007 and 2022), and *South Review* (80 images from issues published between 2007 and 2022). Based on the pilot results, I identified ambiguities in category application, and refined category definitions and coding values. Categories that appeared infrequently or had limited relevance to the research questions, such as gaze direction, were removed. Conversely, new categories that emerged as analytically important, including the salience of US and Chinese national symbols, were incorporated. Detailed information about the pilot process is provided in Appendix B, Pilot Coding Summary.

The final coding scheme included the following categories:

- (1) Magazine title
- (2) Issue date
- (3) Page number
- (4) Unique image ID

(5) Image position (on the page/in the magazine)

(6) Image size

Drawing on Parry's (2010, 2020) coding schema, this study assesses image size by measuring each image's proportion of the magazine page. Because the physical dimensions of the magazines vary, there is no single absolute measure of display size. Instead, image size is operationalised through a relative comparison that classifies images into defined size categories, thereby capturing their comparative salience or noticeability (Bell, 2001).

(7) Headline and caption

(8) Image type

(9) Image source

(10) Image subject/theme

This category consists of two components. The first concerns content themes, which were inductively coded into nine thematic categories, such as political, economic, military, and cultural. Examples of the types of content included in each thematic category are provided in the codebook in Appendix A. Categorising image themes enables the analysis to identify the substantive agenda of each magazine by highlighting which issues are most frequently associated with the US. For example, the distribution of thematic categories makes it possible to observe the prominence of political topics in US-related imagery and to classify how the US is depicted across different domains – politics, economics, culture, and beyond.

The second component focuses on the subject roles assigned to individuals appearing in the images. This coding identifies the social and professional identities represented, such as politicians, businesspeople, soldiers, students, or scientists, and documents whether these roles pertain to Chinese or US subjects. The inclusion of

this category was motivated by the pilot coding phase, during which recurrent contrasts between Chinese and US subject identities were observed. These contrasts enrich the interpretive potential of the analysis by revealing how magazines construct comparative national personas and attribute specific forms of agency, authority, or symbolic value to each country. Coding subject roles therefore contributes to a more nuanced analysis of national identity in visual representation.

(11) Angle

Vertical angles of the shot represent differences in power. And the horizontal angle of the photograph indicates “involvement” and “detachment” between represented participants and viewers (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020, p. 135). The ultra-low, oblique angle shot of the US Capitol, for example, reflects the sense of oppression and alienation under the immense power of the US.

(12) Social distance

Kress and Van Leeuwen (2020) believe the choice of distance can suggest different relationships between the represented participants and viewers. Spatial distance in images is related to emotions of intimacy and distance (Harrison, 2003). For instance, close-up attempts to build a strong sense of viewer affinity.

(13) Visual modality

Kress and Van Leeuwen (2020, p. 150) noted that modality “refers to the truth value or credibility of (linguistically realised) statements about the world.” The modality of the pictures is therefore a guide to the relative authenticity or reliability of the visual information. The higher the modality, the more natural and realistic the image information. At a certain point, however, it reaches its highest value, and thereafter it decreases again (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020). In this study, visual modality is coded into four levels of sensory modality: over, high, medium, and low.

(14) The national symbols

This category records both the frequency and the salience of US and Chinese national symbols appearing in the images. Examples of the specific visual elements coded as national symbols for each country are provided in Appendix A (Codebook). Symbols play a crucial role in visual communication because they possess the capacity to combine, compress, and transmit complex social meanings. As Peirce (1991) argued, symbolic signs evoke stronger interpretive responses than merely iconic or indexical signs, precisely because their meaning derives from culturally shared conventions rather than direct resemblance. As discussed in Chapter 4 (Section 4.2), symbolic national spaces can anchor political narratives and shape the visual imagination of the nation. The presence of US symbols within an image therefore not only enhances the recognisability of US-related content for Chinese audiences but also activates culturally embedded associations, evokes affective and ideological responses, and reinforces shared interpretive frameworks regarding the US. Meanwhile, coding both US and Chinese national symbols allows for the identification of comparative symbolic arrangements. Images that juxtapose or contrast symbolic elements from the two countries provide insight into how the magazines construct relational meanings – such as hierarchy, rivalry, partnership, or cultural distance – between China and the US.

More detailed information on the coding schema, variables and values can be found in Appendix A. All coding procedures were carried out by a single coder, who is also the author of this study. Therefore, following the methodological guidance proposed by (Bell, 2001), an intra-coder reliability test was undertaken prior to the commencement of full-scale coding. A sample of 100 US-related images drawn from all three magazines was coded across 9 variables. Descriptive metadata variables –

such as magazine title, publication date, page number, and unique image identifiers – were excluded from the reliability test because they involve no subjective judgment. After an interval of ten days, the same images were re-coded without reference to the initial coding. In order to assess internal consistency, the two sets of classifications were compared using Scott's pi (Scott, 1955). Across the sample, the coder demonstrated an observed agreement of 0.92.

The full corpus was subsequently coded in accordance with the 14 variables defined in the final codebook, and the resulting dataset was recorded and managed using Excel and SPSS database, which also facilitated subsequent queries and analytical searches. While visual content analysis establishes the quantitative structure of the corpus, a deeper understanding of how these images acquire meaning requires a shift to interpretive methods, which is addressed in the following section on visual framing analysis.

Visual Framing Analysis

Whereas content analysis identifies “what” is present in the image corpus, visual framing analysis examines “how” images organise meaning and participate in broader communicative and ideological processes. Drawing on Bock's (2020) model of visual framing (see Section 4.3, Chapter 4), this study conceptualises frames as emerging from the interaction of (1) visual creation (the photographic choices embedded within the image), (2) editorial selection (the placement, juxtaposition, and contextual packaging of images), and (3) interpretive resolution, through which viewers draw upon cultural knowledge, ideological assumptions, emotional dispositions, and learned visual conventions to make sense of the visual content. Through this approach, the analysis explores how US imagery in Chinese magazines

resonates with, reinforces, or challenges dominant nationalist narratives across different historical periods.

Building on both Bock's (2020) conceptualisation of the creation stage, where framing cues arise from the visual features embedded in the image itself, and the well-established "positive versus negative" framing index in visual framing research (Grabe & Bucy, 2009, p. 101), this study groups visual frames into five analytically distinct categories along an attraction-rejection continuum. Visual frames are classified according to the following criteria:

(1) Strong Rejection Frame

A strong rejection frame is present when the image conveys overtly negative visual cues toward the US or its representatives. Typical indicators include conflict scenes; distorted or hostile facial expressions; aggressive body language; dark, confrontational tonalities; imagery of warfare, rivalry, threat, or moral condemnation; sharply satirical cartoons; large-scale protests and violent clashes; severe casualties; or national symbols in states of desecration, such as the burning of the American flag.

(2) Weak Rejection Frame

A weak rejection frame is identified when the image communicates milder forms of negativity or scepticism. Visual cues may include tense atmospheres, symbolic decline, the US being visually disadvantaged relative to China, or subtle indications that the US is problematic or unreliable. Negative implications may arise through camera angle, colour tone, or body language, yet with less emotional intensity than in strong rejection. For example, US politicians displaying frustration or sadness, mourners at commemorations, or blurred US figures positioned behind a sharply focused Chinese subject.

(3) Wavering Frame (Ambivalence of Attraction and Rejection)

A wavering frame is assigned when the visual stance is ambiguous or when positive and negative cues coexist. Such images juxtapose admiration and critique or depict the US as simultaneously appealing and concerning. Examples include domestic US demonstrations addressing internal problems.

(4) Weak Attraction Frame

A weak attraction frame is present when the US is shown in a neutral-to-positive light without strong emotional intensity. Indicators include depictions of professional competence, modern infrastructure, friendly interpersonal encounters, and cooperative or stable China-US interactions. The US is framed as legitimate, modern, or constructive, though not idealised. Examples include smiling handshakes between leaders, Chinese students visiting US classrooms, or Americans learning Chinese kung fu.

(5) Strong Attraction Frame

A strong attraction frame emerges when images convey explicit and highly positive evaluative cues toward the US. Such cues include the portrayal of charismatic or widely admired figures, harmonious and ceremonially grand diplomatic encounters, aesthetic or technological fascination, and vibrant celebratory crowds. These visual elements tend to foreground the perceived progressiveness of the US or its alignment with China's developmental aspirations, thereby presenting the US as exemplary or inspirational. Illustrative cases include the long queues observed at the opening of China's first KFC outlet or the enthusiastic applause given to a US orchestra performing in China.

Each photograph was assigned one dominant frame code. When no clear frame is discernible, the image is coded as N/A. Captions and headlines were

separately coded according to the five framing categories. A strong rejection frame was assigned when captions employed overtly negative evaluative language to characterise the US or convey antagonistic attitudes, such as references to “US imperialism,” “aggressors,” “US bandits,” “economic collapse,” or “vulgar culture.” A weak rejection frame captured negative but less emotionally intense or confrontational expressions, including phrases indicating decline, concern, or criticism without overt hostility, such as “falling public approval,” “economic downturn,” or “uncertainties within the Democratic Party.” A wavering frame was used for captions expressing ambivalence, neutrality, or a juxtaposition of praise and critique, for example: “Americans oppose their government’s war against China,” or “the rise and fall of Detroit.” A weak attraction frame denoted captions that communicated positive or cooperative sentiments toward the US but without strong emotional intensity, such as “seeking mutually beneficial solutions in China-US relations” or “the China-US intellectual property agreement.” By contrast, a strong attraction frame was assigned when captions employed explicitly laudatory or celebratory language, for example: “cutting-edge technological design by US companies,” “Michael Carmack receives the Chinese Government Friendship Award,” or “everyone loves Coca-Cola.” In all cases, each caption or textual component was assigned one dominant frame code, with N/A applied when no frame could be clearly identified.

Semi-Structured Interviews

To gain insight into the processes underlying visual framing – particularly the selection of images, the role of magazine workers in shaping visual narratives, and the ways in which they navigate tensions between Party-state control, market forces, and limited professional autonomy – this study employs semi-structured interviews

as a supplementary qualitative method. Interviews provide opportunities for direct dialogue in which participants articulate their perceptions, professional routines, and interpretive frameworks, while the semi-structured format allows flexibility to probe and reorder questions as needed (Bryman, 2012).

A total of 9 staff members in roles were interviewed across the three magazines, with three participants from each outlet. Their professional roles include editors, photo editors, cover designers, art editors, photojournalists, and journalists. Because respondents' job titles and magazine affiliations could make them identifiable, complete anonymity was not always feasible; identifying information is therefore disclosed only with the explicit consent of the individuals concerned. For participants who were uncertain about being identifiable, only a general description of their professional role is provided, and their identities have been anonymised. Ethics approval for this project was granted by the Faculty of Arts, Humanities & Communications Research Ethics Committee (FAHC 21-145, October 24, 2022) and is documented in Appendix C. The Participant information sheet and consent form are also included in Appendix D and E, respectively.

Accessing interview participants at *Sanlian Life Week* proved particularly challenging: all staff members in the photo department declined to participate, and individuals who initially agreed withdrew after senior management instructed them not to accept interviews from researchers affiliated with foreign universities. As a result, my interview strategy was adjusted to focus on 3 anonymised news reporters from the magazine. Although these journalists are not directly responsible for image selection or photo editing, their insights remain valuable for understanding editorial decision-making, censorship practices, news planning routines, and the broader professional logics that shape visual content. Their accounts also illuminate the

structural relationships between text and image, since photographic themes are often determined by the narrative direction of written reporting.

Efforts were also made to contact former employees who worked at the magazines in earlier decades; however, these attempts were unsuccessful. With the exception of two senior editors at *China Pictorial*, most participants had fewer than ten years of professional experience. Also, respondents tend to recall recent events more clearly, whereas questions concerning longer historical periods may not yield fully accurate or comprehensive accounts. As a result, the interview data primarily illuminate contemporary practices and are used only to support the analysis presented in Chapter 9.

The interview protocol and main guiding questions are presented in Table 5.5.

Table 5.5. Interview questions and target respondents.

Main Interview Questions	Target Respondents
Warm-up questions	
1. What is the process of the weekly selection and review meetings?	All types of magazine picture workers, such as photographers, photo editors, graphic designers, caption writers, print and engraving specialists and others
2. What are the criteria for picture selection, especially for the US images selection? And what has changed between eras?	Photo department leaders; Experienced editors
3. What steps does a photograph have to go through before it is published?	Photo department leaders
4. Where are the main sources of US-related images? Stock images, image library or photo agencies? What do you need to consider when selecting and reusing the images?	Photo department leaders; Experienced editors
5. Will the choice of US pictures be influenced by the US-China relationship at the time? Where did the influence come from? Are there any relevant examples?	Photo department leaders; Experienced editors

6. Which image of US do you find most appealing or most memorable? Why?	All types of magazine picture workers
7. Questions about special wording in US photo captions (using examples)	Caption writers
8. Are there any US pictorial works that had a significant impact on your later career?	All types of magazine picture workers
9. Select a few representative US images that have been published in the magazine and ask questions about the content of the images; the process of photographing, selecting, cropping, reviewing and finally publishing them; and the interviewees' perceptions and knowledge of the images...	All types of magazine picture workers
10. Ask them to prepare some pictures of the US that they think are representative before the interview as well. Why did you choose these pictures? What are the differences from the ones I chose?	All types of magazine picture workers
11. What are the qualities of an ideal US photo that will make a splash in the magazine?	All types of magazine picture workers
12. Did the magazine do any audience analysis? If so, is it possible to share some data?	Photo department leaders

5.7 Limitations and Reflections

Fieldwork in China constituted one of the most significant challenges in this study. My initial experience in Guangzhou was relatively smooth. Shortly after arriving, I was able to interview the Photo Editor of *South Review*, Jialiang Guo, who helped arrange interviews with other members of the visual department, including one associate visual director (responsible for cover design) and one photojournalist. These participants agreed to be interviewed using their real identities, and together they represented almost the entire visual team of *South Review*. I visited their office on a warm March day in Guangzhou, a modest and somewhat dated space that included a small exhibition room, an open office area with fewer than ten desks, and a fully enclosed meeting room for weekly editorial discussions. During the first interview, I felt noticeably nervous. After asking my questions, I often became preoccupied with my next point and failed to listen carefully or follow up on

participants' responses. Reflecting on this afterwards, I adjusted my approach in later interviews, paying closer attention to what participants said and allowing their answers to guide further questions. This shift proved far more productive than strictly following my interview guide. This experience highlights the importance of interviewer reflexivity and the iterative development of interviewing skills, while also suggesting that early interviews may be less analytically rich.

A different kind of difficulty arose in a later interview at *China Pictorial*. One participant spoke at length about the magazine's history and political mission, often in a highly detailed and continuous manner. While this provided valuable context, the conversation frequently drifted away from my research focus, and I found it difficult to interrupt or redirect her. By the end of the session, I had managed to ask only a few of my prepared questions. This illustrates the challenge of maintaining focus in semi-structured interviews and suggests that the relevance of data may vary depending on participants' communicative styles and institutional positioning.

The relative ease of conducting fieldwork in Guangzhou left me unprepared for the difficulties I later encountered in Beijing. Despite being based in Beijing, I found it extremely difficult to secure interviews there. Even when initial agreements were made, all participants later withdrew. In one case, a participant cancelled the interview the evening before, explaining that their department leadership had instructed staff not to participate in interviews with researchers from overseas universities. At one point, I seriously considered abandoning the interview component of my research altogether and began drafting an alternative design. However, unwilling to give up on a plan I had developed over more than a year, I turned to informal networks and posted a request for help in my undergraduate

alumni group. This eventually led to anonymous interviews with journalists at *Sanlian Life Week*. This experience also shifted my perspective: rather than focusing exclusively on visual staff, I came to recognise that textual journalists often have deeper insights into editorial decision-making, topic selection, and review processes, while visual workers' choices are frequently shaped by textual content. While this shift provided valuable insights, the resulting interview sample relied partly on participants who were more likely to be junior staff or individuals willing to speak under anonymity, potentially limiting access to senior perspectives and creating an imbalance in the types of professional experiences represented. These challenges show that access to participants was directly shaped by institutional control and political sensitivity in China.

Despite the similarly challenging process of identifying interview participants, my experience at *China Pictorial* was more supportive. After interviewing the Director of the general editorial office, Xin Xu, I was granted access to internal archival materials in her office, in the form of bound volumes that could only be consulted on-site. For one week, I followed the office schedule, arriving at 9 a.m. and working until 5 p.m., spending the entire day coding images in her office. She also invited me to have lunch at the staff canteen each day. Recognising my persistence, she later provided me with internal digital copies of the remaining issues, which greatly eased the challenge of collecting materials across such a long historical period. In the cases of the other two magazines, where physical copies were missing, I supplemented the dataset with CD-ROM and mobile application versions (see Section 5.5). While this access made it possible to construct a comprehensive corpus, it also introduces limitations in data consistency, as these

digital formats are themselves products of selection and reorganisation in an online context, and therefore do not fully replicate the original print editions.

Looking across these experiences, it becomes clear that data collection was uneven and contingent, shaped by where access was possible, who was willing to speak, and under what conditions. The contrast between Guangzhou and Beijing, as well as the differing levels of openness across institutions, meant that the interview data reflect not only professional practices, but also the constraints under which such practices can be discussed. Rather than offering a fully balanced account across all magazines, the interviews provide situated insights into editorial and production processes, which need to be interpreted alongside these conditions of access. Building on these considerations, the next chapter presents an overview of the dataset and provides a comparative analysis of the three magazines, focusing on the volume, framing patterns, and thematic characteristics of their US-related images across different historical periods.

**CHAPTER 6. THREE PHASES OF REPRESENTATION: SHIFTING IMAGE
OF THE US IN CHINESE MEDIA OVER TIME**

6.1 Introduction

This chapter offers a comprehensive overview of how the US has been visually represented in the three Chinese magazines from 1950 to 2021. By examining the frequency, content themes and framing of US-related imagery over time, it reveals how Chinese media's portrayal of the US has evolved in tandem with shifting political priorities, media governance structures, and national discursive needs. The central argument advanced here is that Chinese magazine imagery of the US has undergone a broad narrative transformation – from depicting the US as an ideological adversary during the Cold War, to an aspirational symbol of modernity during the reform era, and recently to a more ambivalent figure marked by strategic rivalry and selective admiration. Drawing on the pronounced temporal variation in visual framings of the US observed in the dataset, together with the five geopolitical phases of Sino-US relations identified in Section 2.3 (Chapter 2), the chapter also identifies three chronological phases in the portrayal of the US from a Chinese perspective: 1950-1971, 1972-2000, and 2001-2021. These phases provide an analytical framework for the discussion in this chapter and for the subsequent chapters of the thesis.

The chapter is organised into four sections. Section 6.2 examines the distribution of visual data in *China Pictorial*, showing that its visual framing closely tracks official diplomatic and ideological shifts, thereby suggesting a strong alignment with state discourse. Section 6.3 examines *South Review*, highlighting its trajectory from economic admiration of the US to heightened scepticism and ideological realignment. Section 6.4 turns to *Sanlian Life Week*, showing its portrayals of the US became increasingly bifurcated, combining political critique

with sustained cultural admiration. Section 6.5 then synthesises these findings through a comparative analysis, identifying both divergence and convergence in how Chinese magazines collectively constructed the image of the US across historical periods. In particular, while publications differ in the extent to which they reproduce or distance themselves from official political narratives, they converge in reflecting broader shifts in China's geopolitical positioning and nationalist discourse.

6.2. *China Pictorial* as an Instrument of State-Aligned Geopolitical Framing

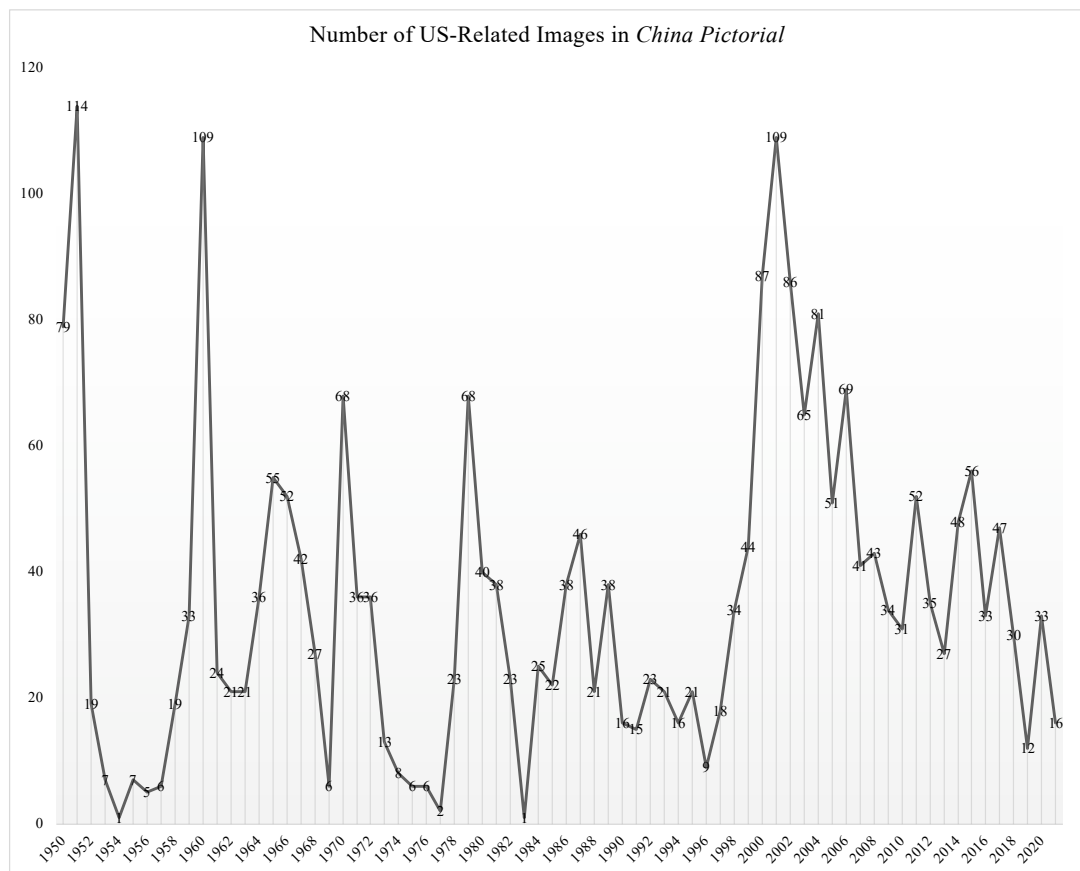


Figure 6.1. Chronological distribution of the US-related images in *China Pictorial*.

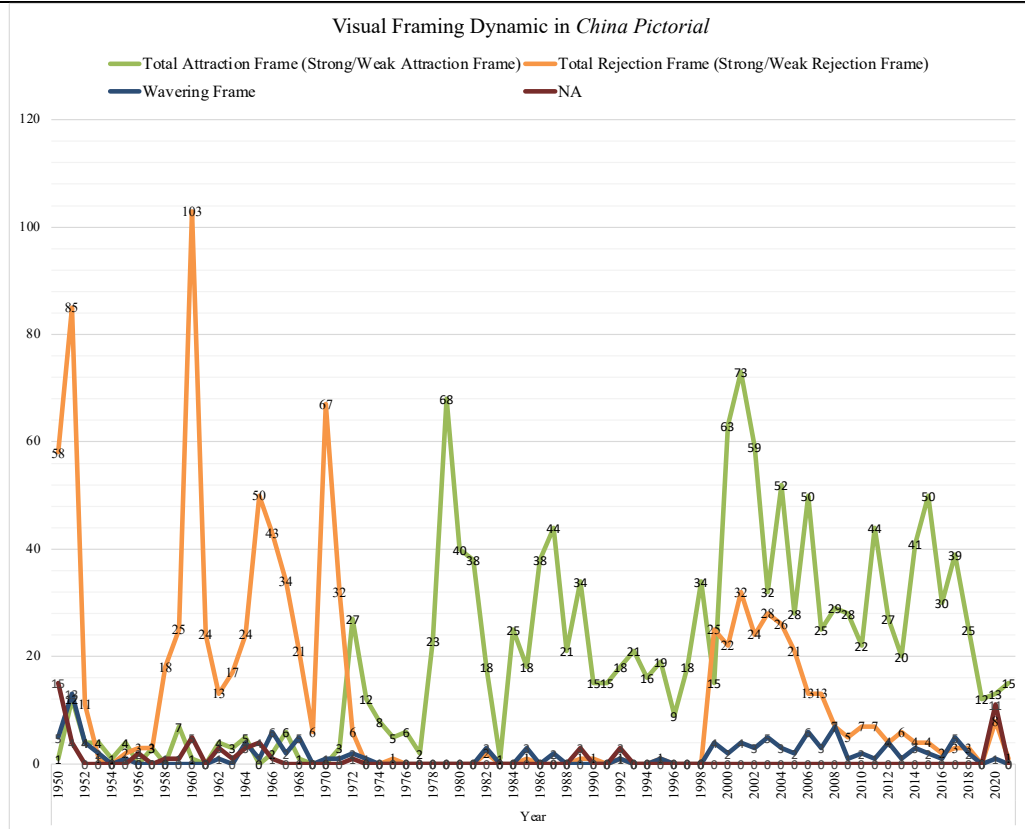


Figure 6.2. Visual framing dynamic in *China Pictorial* from 1950 to 2021.

Figures 6.1 and 6.2 illustrate the chronological distribution and visual framing dynamics of US-related images in *China Pictorial* from 1950 to 2020, offering a detailed picture of how the highly party-controlled magazine visually represented the US over time. As shown in Figure 6.1, the number of images depicting the US fluctuates continuously from 1950 to 2021. The first notable peak occurs in 1951 with 114 US-related images. This increase aligns with the broader Cold War context, particularly the Korean War (1950-1953), a period of heightened tension between China and the US, with the two nations on opposing sides. During this time, numerous images depicted the Chinese people actively participating in carefully choreographed and orchestrated denunciations and protests against the US, under the leadership of the CCP. A more detailed analysis of these representations will be provided in Section 7.2 (Chapter 7).

The off-peak period in the data from the 1950s and 1960s also cannot be overlooked. The number of US-related images drops sharply to only one in 1954, with five to seven images per year between 1953 and 1957. On the one hand, this decline reflects the conclusion of the Korean War, as the intense media focus on the US as a military adversary diminished with the conflict winding down. On the other hand, the consistently low number of US-related images during these years reflects China's internal focus on domestic political campaigns, such as the Anti-Rightist Movement (1957) and preparations for the Great Leap Forward (1958-1962). Foreign affairs, including those involving the US, took a back seat during this period of intense domestic activity (see Section 2.3, Chapter 2). Despite another peak in US-related images in 1960, which depicted global anti-US sentiment, the 1960s saw several troughs in US imagery, particularly in 1969, when only six images appeared. This coincided with the height of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), a period during which foreign influence was downplayed, and media coverage focused on promoting Maoist ideology and purging perceived internal enemies. In addition, the Chinese media system was severely disrupted during this period, with reporting practices subject to strict constraints (see Section 3.3, Chapter 3), which further contributed to the limited representation of the US. Notably, between 1950 and 1971, nearly all US-related images in *China Pictorial* concentrated on political and military themes. During this period, a total of 787 images depicted the US, with 396 focusing on political subjects and 314 on military subjects (see Table 6.1). This overwhelming focus on US politics and military actions underscores how *China Pictorial* framed the US primarily as an ideological and military adversary, reinforcing anti-imperialist and nationalist narratives.

During the 1950s and 1960s, the US was consistently portrayed in a negative light, as shown in Figure 6.2, with the visual framing dominated by rejection frames. From 1950 to 1971, the strong rejection frame overwhelmingly characterised US-related images in *China Pictorial*, primarily depicting US military aggression and domestic opposition to US actions. This anti-US sentiment was not only embedded in visual representations but also reinforced through textual framing, as shown in Figure 6.3. The textual and visual frames during this period closely aligned, jointly producing an overwhelmingly negative representation of the US. This coherence between text and image was structurally embedded in the magazine's institutional role. As discussed in Section 3.2 (Chapter 3), *China Pictorial*, following the Soviet model of media control and operating as a political propaganda tool, openly employed emotionally charged rhetoric to shape public perception.

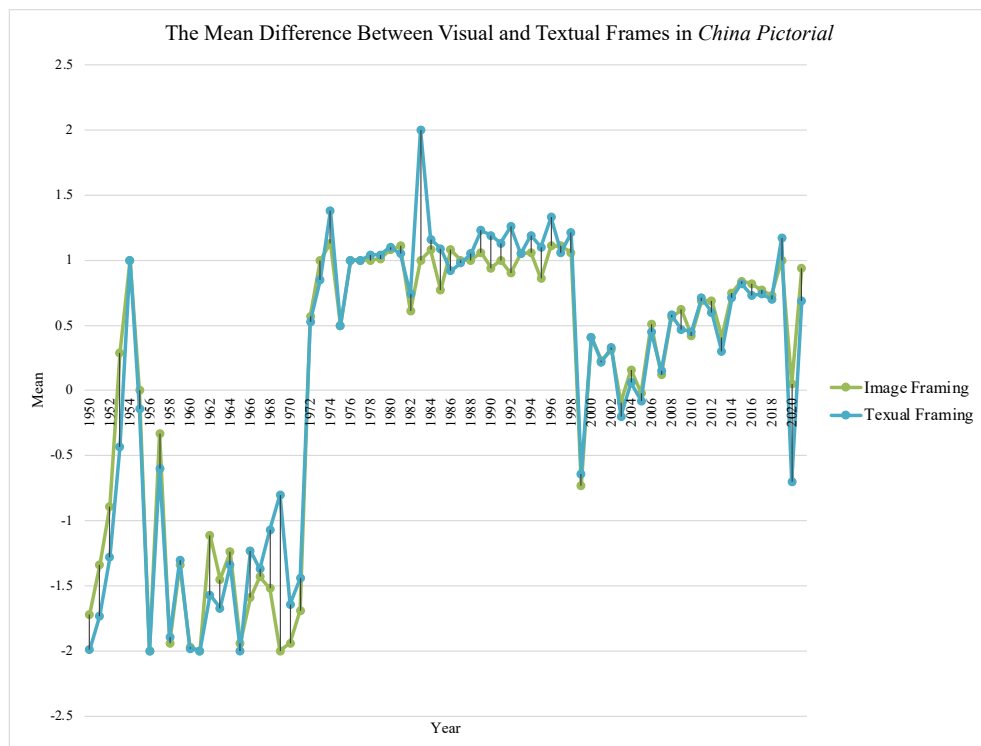


Figure 6.3. The mean difference between visual and textual frames in *China Pictorial*.

Notes: Scales range from Strong Attraction Frame (2) to Strong Rejection Frame (-2), Wavering Frame as (0).

The intensity of this rejection framing reached its peak in 1960, when 103 out of 109 US-related images visually conveyed a strong rejection frame, as shown in Figure 6.2, and the textual frame in the same year echoed this pattern by overwhelmingly articulating similarly strong adversarial narratives, as illustrated in Figure 6.3. This escalation can be attributed to heightened geopolitical tensions that firmly positioned the US as the foremost imperialist aggressor on a global scale. The lingering effects of the Korean War, the escalating Vietnam War (1955-1975), and the formalisation of the US-Japan military alliance in 1960 reinforced perceptions of US militarism and strategic encirclement of China. Concurrently, revolutionary movements across the Global South, including the Cuban Revolution (1959) and mounting anti-imperialist resistance in Latin America, resonated with China's ideological narrative, which framed the US as the oppressor of weaker nations. This wartime representation of the US as a foreign aggressor was deeply embedded in China's nationalist discourse, drawing upon collective memories of Western imperialism and the Century of National Humiliation, as stated in Section 2.2 (Chapter 2). This depiction of the US as an imperialist invader not only aligned with China's anti-colonial discourse but also strengthened its broader efforts to position itself as a leading force in the international socialist movement. Further analysis is provided in Section 7.2 (Chapter 7).

Since the end of the Cultural Revolution and the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, the number of images depicting the US in *China Pictorial* began to rise. Another peak of 68 images occurred in 1979, marking the formal establishment of diplomatic relations between China and the US. In Figure 6.1, the 1980s and 1990s show fluctuations in the number of US-related images, generally ranging between 20

and 50 per year. This period reflects a stabilisation in the frequency of US imagery compared to the dramatic peaks and troughs of earlier decades. The relatively steady number of images during the 1980s coincides with the early years of Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms and China's increasing engagement with global markets, suggesting a consistent but moderate media focus on the US. A notable outlier is the year 1983, when only one US-related image appeared in *China Pictorial*. This anomaly coincides with the heightened geopolitical sensitivities following the 1982 US-China Third Communiqué, under which the US agreed to gradually reduce arms sales to Taiwan (Carter, 1978). The temporary reduction in US visibility in Chinese media is consistent with a more cautious media agenda during this politically sensitive period, when extensive coverage of the US could have complicated the management of bilateral relations. This dynamic also points to the role of *China Pictorial* as a propaganda vehicle of public diplomacy.

A slight dip occurs in the early 1990s, with images ranging between 15 and 28 images per year. This period aligns with the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989, during which China's international image, including its relations with the US, was strained. A notable shift during this period was the sharp decline in political and military-themed US images compared to pre-1972 levels, a year that holds particular significance as it marked President Richard Nixon's historic visit to China and the beginning of the normalisation of Sino-US relations as discussed in Section 2.3 (Chapter 2). Between 1972 and 2000, military-related images dropped to just 16 in total. Instead, US-related images in *China Pictorial* increasingly focused on themes of entertainment, social life, culture, education, and the economy, as listed in Table 6.1, reflecting China's shifting priorities and its growing interest in Western

development models. This transformation in thematic emphasis mirrors China's broader move away from ideological confrontation toward pragmatic engagement with the world.

Table 6.1. The dynamics of content themes in US-related images of *China Pictorial*.

		Content theme											
		Political	Military	Economic	History	Culture and education	Science	Entertainment and social life	health and environment	crime and disaster	Mixed	Other	Total
Time period N (% within Time Period)	1950-1971	396 (50.3%)	314 (39.9%)	4 (0.5%)	3 (0.4%)	3 (0.4%)	1 (0.1%)	12 (1.5%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	53 (6.7%)	1 (0.1%)	787 (100.0%)
	1972-2000	136 (17.9%)	16 (2.1%)	87 (11.5%)	3 (0.4%)	105 (13.9%)	63 (8.3%)	187 (24.7%)	15 (2.0%)	0 (0.0%)	137 (18.1%)	9 (1.2%)	758 (100.0%)
	2001-2021	280 (28.0%)	112 (11.2%)	80 (8.0%)	0 (0.0%)	93 (9.3%)	76 (7.6%)	148 (14.8%)	46 (4.6%)	36 (3.6%)	122 (12.2%)	6 (0.6%)	999 (100.0%)
Total		812 (31.9%)	442 (17.4%)	171 (6.7%)	6 (0.2%)	201 (7.9%)	140 (5.5%)	347 (13.6%)	61 (2.4%)	36 (1.4%)	312 (12.3%)	16 (0.6%)	2544 (100.0%)

Table 6.2. Proportion of frames applied to images of different content themes across historical periods in *China Pictorial*.

Time Period		Content Theme								
		N (% within Content Theme)								
		Political	Military	Economic	History	Culture and education	Science	Entertainment and Social Life	Health and Environment	Crime and Disaster
1950-1971	Rejection Frame	312 (85.0%)	274 (89.5%)	0 (0.0%)	3 (100.0%)	1 (33.3%)		8 (66.7%)		
	Wavering Frame	17 (4.6%)	22 (7.2%)	2 (100.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)		1 (8.3%)		
	Attraction Frame	38 (10.4%)	10 (3.3%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (66.7%)		3 (25.0%)		
1972-2000	Rejection Frame	16 (11.8%)	12 (75.0%)	2 (2.4%)	1 (33.3%)	1 (1.0%)	1 (1.6%)	0 (0.0%)	11 (73.3%)	
	Wavering Frame	5 (3.7%)	1 (6.3%)	1 (1.2%)	1 (33.3%)	1 (1.0%)	0 (0.0%)	3 (1.6%)	2 (13.3%)	
	Attraction Frame	115 (84.6%)	3 (18.8%)	80 (96.4%)	1 (33.3%)	103 (98.1%)	61 (98.4%)	184 (98.4%)	2 (13.3%)	
2001-2021	Rejection Frame	39 (13.9%)	69 (61.6%)	15 (18.8%)		0 (0.0%)	3 (3.9%)	7 (4.7%)	30 (65.2%)	27 (75.0%)
	Wavering Frame	23 (8.2%)	13 (11.6%)	3 (3.8%)		0 (0.0%)	1 (1.3%)	4 (2.7%)	2 (4.3%)	5 (13.9%)
	Attraction Frame	218 (77.9%)	30 (26.8%)	62 (77.5%)		93 (100.0%)	72 (94.7%)	137 (92.6%)	14 (30.4%)	4 (11.1%)

Note: Blank cells indicate that no US-related images of that content theme appeared during the given period.

Alongside changes in the quantity of US-related images, their framing underwent a significant transformation. As illustrated in Figure 6.2, the visual portrayal of the US shifted from predominantly negative in the 1950s and 1960s to overwhelmingly positive in the decades following Nixon's 1972 visit. This transformation was largely driven by *China Pictorial's* increasing emphasis on US images related to economic, cultural, educational, and technological themes, which framed the US in a more favourable light. As shown in Table 6.2, between 1972 and 2000, 96.4% of economy-themed images in *China Pictorial* were categorised as attraction frames. Even more strikingly, 98.1% of images related to culture and education were presented through an attraction frame. Science-related images exhibited a similarly pronounced pattern, with 98.4% of US science images adopting an attraction frame during this period. The predominance of attraction frames in these domains reflects China's shifting priorities in the post-Mao era. With the initiation of reform and opening-up policies in 1978, economic modernisation became the state's primary objective as discussed in Section 2.3 (Chapter 2), driving an unprecedented interest in foreign investment, trade, and technological advancement. As China sought to transition from a centrally planned economy to a market-oriented system, the US was increasingly portrayed as a model of economic dynamism and technological innovation. The heavy emphasis on US-related images in economic and scientific contexts aligned with the Chinese leadership's strategic goal of acquiring advanced knowledge and expertise to accelerate domestic development. Also, the influx of US cultural products, including Hollywood films, Western music, and English-language education, contributed to a growing fascination with the US, particularly among younger generations. During this period,

Chinese leader Deng explicitly underscored one of his central objectives: to “learn from all things advanced” (Zhang, 2014, p. 15). This articulation signalled a decisive shift toward state-sanctioned openness to foreign knowledge, technology, and cultural practices, thereby establishing a broader ideological foundation for reorienting China’s external outlook (see Section 2.3, Chapter 2). Within this evolving context, *China Pictorial*’s portrayal of the US as an attractive and aspirational cultural force demonstrates that media framing was systematically aligned with state-defined priorities. This aligns closely with the institutional role of Chinese Party media, which, as mentioned in Section 3.2 (Chapter 3), is tasked with “setting the tone” for political and public discourse (Meng, 2018, p. 3). The sharp rise in attraction frames did more than acknowledge improving US-China diplomatic relations; it constituted an intentional communicative recalibration by Party-affiliated media to normalise and legitimise China’s new developmental trajectory. As China expanded its economic engagement with the international system and sought integration into global institutions, the media narrative surrounding the US adapted accordingly, emphasising themes of learning, cooperation, and modernisation. This adjustment reflected a structural synchronisation between political discourse and party media representation, corresponding to China’s gradual opening to the West and the broader easing of Cold War hostilities. In this sense, the shift in framing served both ideological and pragmatic purposes: it prepared domestic audiences for China’s outward turn while reinforcing the political logic underpinning the reform era.

By the late 1990s, the number of US-related images rose again, reaching 109 images in 2001 – a year marked by China’s accession to the WTO and the 9/11

attacks in the US. However, after this peak, the number of US-related images steadily declined. This trend coincides with escalating geopolitical and economic tensions between China and the US, including the trade war of the late 2010s, as well as China's heightened emphasis on domestic development and Xi Jinping's more assertive foreign policy agenda, which leverages China's expanding economic and military capabilities to pursue ambitious national goals, as discussed in Section 2.3 (Chapter 2). As China's economic and political ambitions expanded, the media narrative surrounding the US became more complex, balancing cooperation with competition and, at times, confrontation. As shown in Table 6.1, between 2001 and 2021, the thematic composition of US-related images in *China Pictorial* underwent a significant transformation. Compared to 1972-2000, when US-related images were predominantly focused on culture, education, and economic modernisation, the post-2000 period saw a dramatic resurgence of political and military themes. Political images more than doubled, while the proportion of military-related images rose sharply from 2.1% in the 1972-2000 period to 11.2%, signalling a renewed strategic focus on US-China relations as a geopolitical rivalry rather than just an economic partnership. This shift occurred against the backdrop of key global and domestic developments, including China's military modernisation, its growing assertiveness in global affairs, and intensifying tensions over Taiwan and the South China Sea (see Section 2.3, Chapter 2).

As illustrated in Figure 6.2, the post-2000 period saw a notable rise in negative (rejection) frames. As shown in Table 6.2, during this period, the proportion of negatively framed US images within the economic, crime and disaster themes increased significantly compared with the previous period. These themes align with

broader China-US geopolitical dynamics, particularly those emerging in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, US military interventions in the Middle East, and China's growing concerns over US influence in Asia (see Section 2.3, Chapter 2). However, despite this increase in negative framing, positive (attraction) frames still dominated the overall visual portrayal of the US, particularly in culture and education, as well as science and technology. Yet, it is crucial to note that while attraction frames continued to be prevalent, their nature fundamentally differed from those in the 1972-1999 period. Previously, positive depictions of the US emphasised economic development, cultural exchange, and scientific advancement as models for China's modernisation. In contrast, in the post-2000 era, these attraction frames coexisted with a growing emphasis on US political and military imagery as illustrated in Table 6.1, reflecting a more cautious and strategic engagement with the US. This transformation suggests that while admiration for US technological and educational achievements persisted, the portrayal of the US was increasingly shaped by the media's need to construct it as both a major global competitor and a potential security challenge in alignment with the Party's nationalist strategic needs. A more detailed analysis is presented in Section 9.2 (Chapter 9).

Overall, the evolving portrayal of the US in *China Pictorial* from 1950 to 2020 demonstrates the magazine's remarkable alignment with China's national strategy, ideological imperatives, and shifting geopolitical considerations. As a state-controlled propaganda outlet, *China Pictorial* functioned not merely as a reflection of diplomatic relations but as an active tool in shaping public perceptions of the US to serve China's broader political and ideological objectives. The highly structured and seemingly deliberate shifts in visual framing, as illustrated in Figure 6.2,

underscore this function. Before 1971, US-related images were overwhelmingly negative, reinforcing anti-imperialist and nationalist narratives in the context of the Korean War, Vietnam War, and Cold War tensions. After 1972, with diplomatic normalisation, *China Pictorial* drastically shifted toward positive portrayals, emphasising economic, cultural, and technological engagement, reflecting China's reform-era aspirations. Since 2000, a more complex and hybrid depiction of the US has emerged. While attraction frames remain dominant in culture, science, and entertainment, as shown in Table 6.2, the proportion of rejection frames has risen, particularly in politics, economics, and crime and disaster issues, paralleling China's increasing global assertiveness and strategic rivalry with the US.

6.3. *South Review* as a Site of Critical Engagement and its Ideological Reorientation

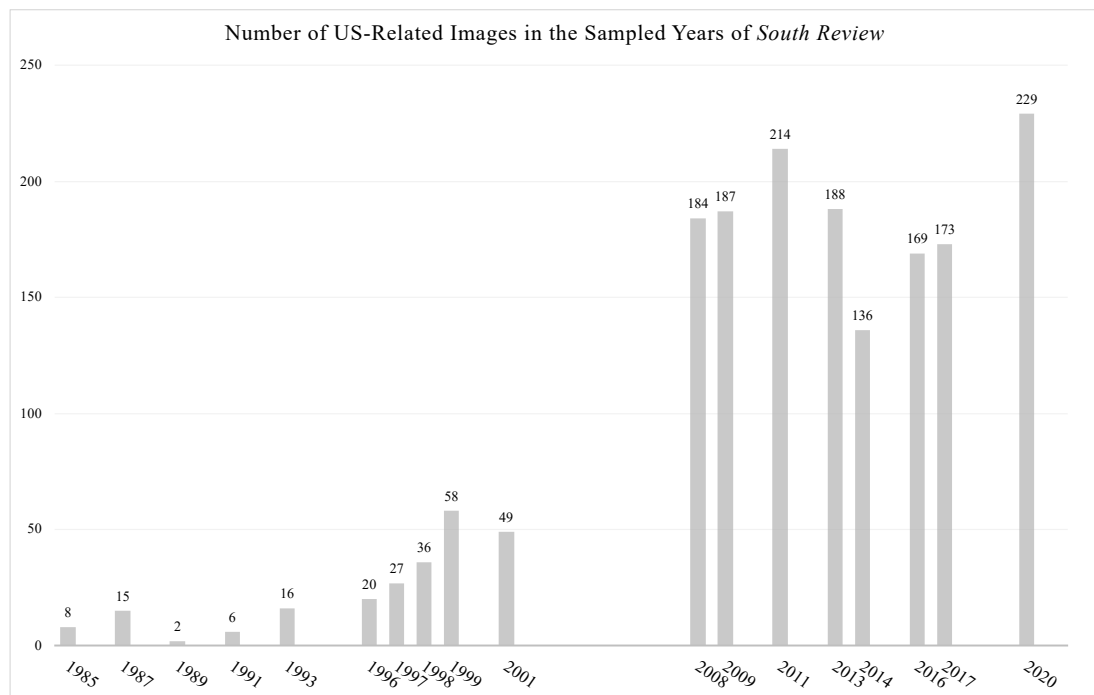


Figure 6.4. The number of US-related images in the sampled years of *South Review*¹².

¹² Because the data for *South Review* are based on sampled years, the values between sampling points cannot be assumed to follow a linear trend. Therefore, a bar chart is used here rather than a line graph, which is applied for *China Pictorial*.

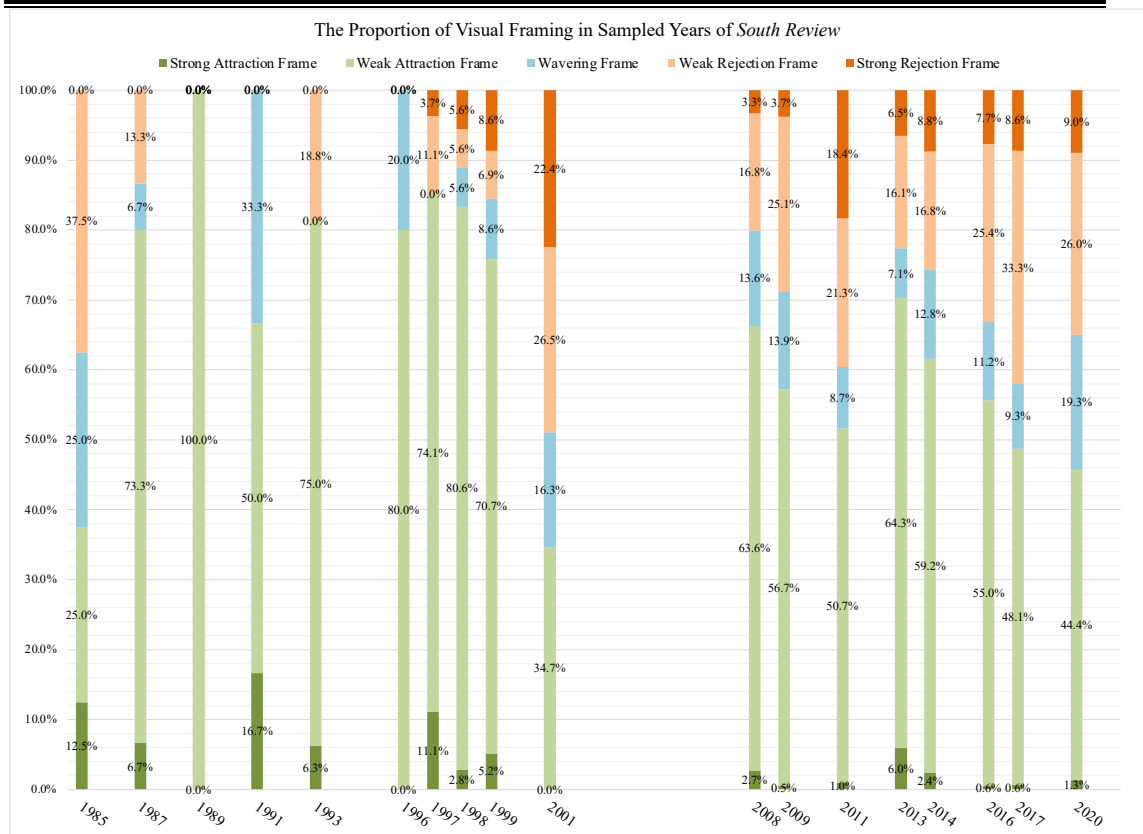


Figure 6.5. The proportion of visual framing in the sampled years of *South Review*.

In its early years, from its founding in 1985 through the early 1990s, *South Review* featured very few US-related images, as shown in Figure 6.4. This limited coverage does not necessarily reflect broader editorial tendencies, as the magazine was still in its formative stage and primarily focused on local affairs in Guangzhou, as discussed in Chapter 5 (Section 5.4). By the late 1990s, however, *South Review* had expanded its coverage of US affairs, with US-related images increasing to 58 in 1999. Between 1985 and 1999, the magazine published 188 images depicting the US, with economy (73 images) and politics (47 images) emerging as the dominant thematic categories, consistent with its positioning as a political-economic magazine (see Section 5.4, Chapter 5).

Table 6.3. Proportion of frames applied to images of different content themes across historical periods in *South Review*.

Time Period		Content Theme								
		N (% within Content Theme)								
		Political	Military	Economic	History	Culture and education	Science	Entertainment and Social Life	Health and Environment	Crime and Disaster
1985-1999	Rejection Frame	8 (17.0%)	3 (60.0%)	9 (12.3%)		0 (0.0%)	1 (33.3%)	3 (13.6%)		0 (0.0%)
	Wavering Frame	2 (4.3%)	1 (20.0%)	6 (8.2%)		1 (9.1%)	1 (33.3%)	2 (9.1%)		2 (100.0%)
	Attraction Frame	37 (78.7%)	1 (20.0%)	58 (79.5%)		10 (90.9%)	1 (33.3%)	17 (77.3%)		0 (0.0%)
2001	Rejection Frame	8 (40.0%)	1 (50.0%)	3 (23.1%)						7 (87.5%)
	Wavering Frame	5 (25.0%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (15.4%)						1 (12.5%)
	Attraction Frame	7 (35.0%)	1 (50.0%)	8 (61.5%)						0 (0.0%)
2006-2011 ¹³	Rejection Frame	66 (24.7%)	16 (59.3%)	49 (37.4%)		2 (5.3%)	1 (10%)	1 (16.7%)	13 (68.4%)	8 (88.9%)
	Wavering Frame	38 (14.2%)	5 (18.5%)	19 (14.5%)		0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
	Attraction Frame	163 (61.0%)	6 (22.2%)	63 (48.1%)		36 (94.7%)	9 (90%)	5 (83.3%)	6 (31.6%)	1 (11.1%)
2013-2020	Rejection Frame	118 (39.3%)	14 (31.1%)	30 (30.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (1.2%)	2 (7.4%)	7 (10.1%)	22 (47.8%)	22 (95.7%)
	Wavering Frame	46 (15.3%)	8 (17.8%)	11 (11.0%)	1 (100.0%)	2 (2.4%)	2 (7.4%)	4 (5.8%)	8 (17.4%)	1 (4.3%)
	Attraction Frame	136 (45.3%)	23 (51.1%)	59 (59.0%)	0 (0.0%)	81 (96.4%)	23 (85.2%)	58 (84.1%)	16 (34.8%)	0 (0.0%)

Note: Blank cells indicate that no US-related images of that content theme appeared during the given period.

¹³ Due to the missing of the complete 2006 *South Review* magazine dataset, only image data from 2008 to 2011 can be presented here.

In 1985, *South Review* featured only eight US-related images, the majority of which carried negative framing. This contrasts sharply with *China Pictorial*, which almost exclusively portrayed the US in a positive light during the same period. The negative framing in *South Review* largely focused on social insecurity in US society, though it also acknowledged economic success, particularly highlighting brands like Coca-Cola. However, like *China Pictorial*, *South Review* shifted toward more positive framing after 1985 (see Figure 6.5), reflecting growing emphasis on admiration and engagement with the US. This rise in US-related content coincided with the Clinton administration's diplomatic and economic engagement with China, fostering closer bilateral ties. Throughout this period, economic, political, and entertainment/social life-themed images in *South Review* were predominantly positively framed, as shown in Table 6.3. However, given the relatively small dataset, the overall representativeness of these trends remains limited.

In 2001, *South Review* transitioned into a half-monthly publication, increasing the number of issues. However, rather than expanding its US-related coverage, the number of US images decreased to just 49. This contrasts with *China Pictorial*'s heightened visual focus on the US that year, particularly in its coverage of 9/11 and its aftermath. To better understand this discrepancy, I examine the relationship between visual framing and content themes in this exceptional year of 2001. While the difference partly reflects the limited scope of the digital archive compared with print editions from other years, the thematic composition of the images also differs. As shown in Table 6.3, I found that, unlike *China Pictorial*, *South Review* appeared less inclined to amplify narratives surrounding US crises, with only 8 images related to crime and disaster in 2001, significantly fewer than

those focusing on political and economic themes. This pattern is consistent with its editorial positioning as a political and economic magazine. Despite the decline in the overall number of images in 2001, the proportion of strong rejection frames increased, as shown in Figure 6.5, with *South Review* exhibiting a higher proportion of strong rejection frames than other magazines in 2001. This marked the first time that negative depictions of the US (strong rejection frame at 22.4% and weak rejection frame at 26.5%) together accounted for nearly half of all US-related images in *South Review*. As shown in Table 6.4, these negative frames appeared primarily in crime and disaster-related themes. In contrast, political-themed and military-themed visual frames were more evenly distributed between positive and negative portrayals, while economic-themed images remained overwhelmingly positive. The smaller sample size raises concerns about the stability of frame distribution ratios, as percentage fluctuations may be amplified. Nevertheless, the data suggests that *South Review* moved away from the predominantly positive portrayals of the late 1990s. The following excerpt, written by Editor-in-Chief Qin Shuo in the April 2001 issue, provides insight into *South Review*'s complex stance on the US during this period:

I studied in the jungle of US magazines and rushed through snowy days in New York, visiting *Time* and *Newsweek*. Even when I couldn't find the right people to meet, I was willing to stand for a while in front of the offices of *BusinessWeek* and *Harvard Business Review*. At the reception desk of the latter, an impatient phone operator muttered the word 'soliciting'... Why was I soliciting? Because when you realise that the total advertising revenue of all Chinese magazines combined is only 1% of what American magazines generate, you will

understand why I was there. I wanted to know – why are we so far

behind? Why are we trailing by such an overwhelming margin?

Swallow your pride, my motherland.

This past January, as I rushed between New York and Boston in the endless snowfall, I felt that I had found my mission in life – to build a high-quality magazine group in China, for China. That is our mission.

We are a team. For this mission, my colleagues and I are willing to endure all hardships and resist all temptations, including the lure of capital. Our goal is to be pragmatic, professional, and forward-thinking, integrating global and future perspectives with the realities of China, to create value for our readers, profits for advertisers and distributors, and returns for investors.¹⁴ (Qin, 2001, p. 1)

Established within a market-driven economy, *South Review* sought to adopt US publishing models, prioritising commercial success over ideological messaging while maintaining a pragmatic and professional stance that resisted external influences. This approach may explain why, despite its engagement with US media practices, *South Review* did not uncritically embrace the US image. The magazine recognised US's economic and technological success, as reflected in the predominance of positive frames in economic themes, yet it also exhibited growing scepticism in political and security-related coverage. The increase in strong rejection frames, particularly in crime and disaster-related depictions, suggests that *South Review* was no longer merely admiring the US as a model for China's modernisation

¹⁴ The original text is in Chinese; translation by the author.

but also emphasising its contradictions and vulnerabilities. This dual perception – viewing the US as both a benchmark for market-driven media and a symbol of capitalist arrogance – shaped the magazine’s ambivalent stance, balancing respect for US efficiency and innovation with a critical awareness of its global dominance and limitations. Further discussion and image examples are presented in Section 8.3 (Chapter 8).

The year 2008 serves as a pivotal moment in *South Review*’s increased attention to US affairs. As shown in Figure 6.4, the number of US-related images surged to 184, marking a dramatic increase compared with earlier years. As illustrated in Table 6.3, the period from 2008 to 2011 witnessed a substantial rise in negative framing within military, economic, and crime and disaster themes, surpassing the levels observed in previous periods. The shift in economic theme suggests a growing disillusionment with the US economic model, as China’s previous admiration began to wane. The global financial crisis of 2008, which severely impacted US economic credibility, played a crucial role in this transformation. While the crisis exposed systemic weaknesses in the US financial system, China emerged from the downturn relatively unscathed, reinforcing confidence in its state-led developmental approach. As China’s economic resilience and international standing grew, particularly after the success of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, its earlier sense of admiration toward the US began to erode, giving way to a more sceptical and assertive attitude, as discussed in Section 2.3 (Chapter 2).

This period of growing Chinese self-assurance coincided with *South Review*’s increasingly critical portrayal of the US, with the proportion of negative visual framing expanding across multiple themes. By 2011, *South Review*’s critical stance

had intensified, with the number of US-related images rising to 214, marking a minor peak in coverage. The strong rejection frame increased to 18.4%, a notable rise from previous years. The rise in negative framing in military themes during this period can also be understood within this broader context of changing global power dynamics. The US's ongoing military engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan were increasingly viewed as symbols of strategic overreach and declining hegemonic capacity, providing fertile ground for critical portrayals in Chinese media. Similarly, the growing salience of global environmental and public health issues, such as climate change, pollution, and disease outbreaks, created new discursive spaces in which the US could be framed negatively, especially as China sought to position itself as a responsible global actor and contrast its approach with perceived US shortcomings (see Section 2.3, Chapter 2). The official end of the Iraq War in 2011 further shaped these portrayals. The war had long been criticised in both international and Chinese media for its unilateralism and destabilising effects on the Middle East (Li, 2003; Su & Hao, 2017). Against this backdrop, *South Review's* portrayal of the US as an aggressive global power, whose actions often led to chaos and instability, became more pronounced. This convergence of rising national confidence, shifting geopolitical conditions, and critical evaluations of US foreign policy developments helps explain the pronounced increase in negative framing during this period.

In 2013, *South Review* underwent a major editorial shift, marking a turning point in its coverage of US affairs. Following the Southern Weekly New Year's Greeting Incident, *South Review* – a publication under the Southern Media Group – moved from a liberal-leaning stance to a more conservative orientation (see Section

5.4, Chapter 5). This transition led to a decline in sharp criticisms of the Chinese political system, as the magazine's editorial focus shifted away from domestic issues and became more aligned with official state narratives, particularly in its portrayal of foreign affairs. Consequently, *South Review*'s thematic and framing patterns became increasingly similar to those observed in *China Pictorial*. As shown in Table 6.3, political, crisis- and disaster-related issues were more frequently framed negatively, whereas entertainment, social life, culture, and education continued to be represented predominantly through attraction frames. By 2014, the number of US-related images declined to 136, a shift that reflected broader realignments in Chinese media agendas. During this period, China's strategic focus turned inward and regionally outward, most notably with the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative, as discussed in Section 2.3 (Chapter 2). As China sought to assert itself as a dominant regional and emerging global power, *South Review*, much like *China Pictorial*, reduced its emphasis on the US at this stage. However, its critical tone remained more pronounced – reflected in higher proportions of negative frames across most content themes compared with *China Pictorial* – owing partly to the magazine's tradition of political commentary and partly to the new editorial constraints that redirected critique toward foreign rather than domestic targets.

This shift also coincided with Xi Jinping's consolidation of political authority, characterised by intensified ideological discipline, tightened control over the press, and a more assertive foreign policy, especially in relation to the US. At the same time, US-China tensions escalated due to the Trump administration's confrontational trade policies, sanctions targeting Chinese technology firms, and mounting disputes over Hong Kong and Taiwan (see Section 2.3, Chapter 2). These

developments further shaped *South Review*'s representational stance, reinforcing its tendency to portray the US through a critical geopolitical lens. In 2020, the number of US-related images rose again to 229. However, contrary to what one might expect, the COVID-19 pandemic did not lead to a dramatic increase in health-themed images or negative framing. This pattern is likely attributable to the sampled dataset ending in the early months of the pandemic, before health-related visual narratives had fully developed in media coverage.

Overall, *South Review*'s visual coverage of the US – from economic admiration in the late 1990s to growing scepticism in the 2000s and more formulaic criticism in the 2010s – reflects the complex interplay between geopolitical dynamics, efforts to adopt journalistic professionalism, market-driven demands, and the Party's ideological reinforcement.

6.4. *Sanlian Life Week* and the Bifurcated Representation of the US

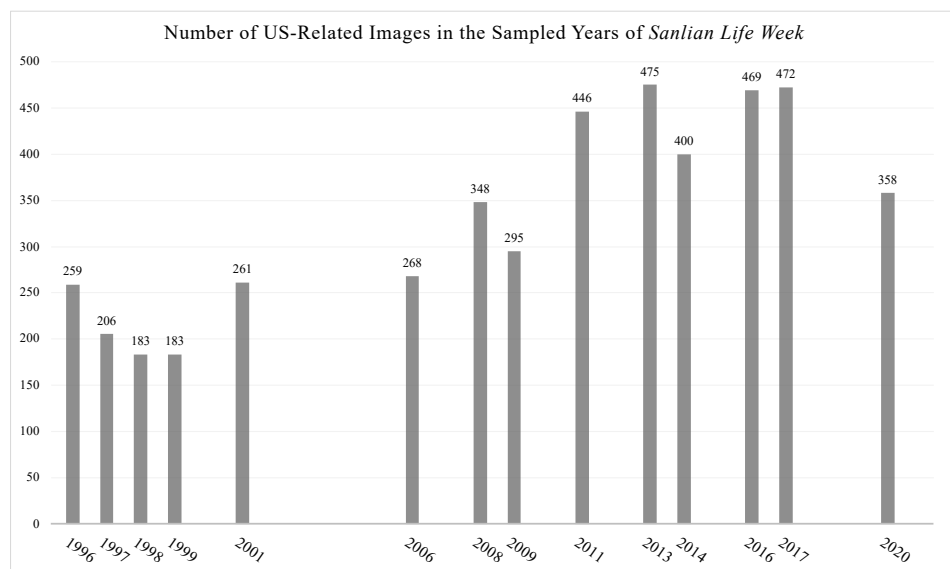


Figure 6.6. The number of US-related images in the sampled years of *Sanlian Life Week*.¹⁵

¹⁵ Similarly, because the data for *Sanlian Life Week* are also derived from sampled years, a bar chart – as in the case of *South Review* – is used to present the results.

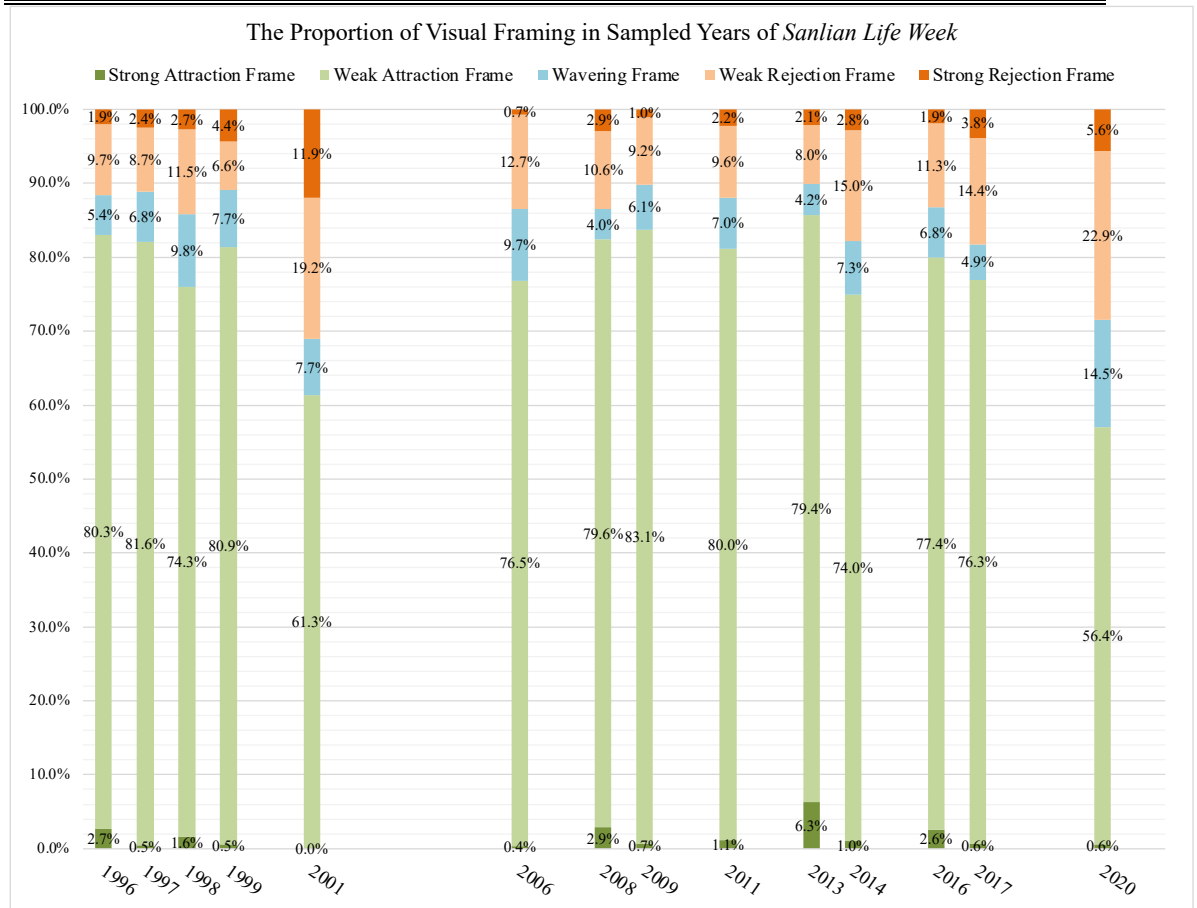


Figure 6.7. The proportion of visual framing in the sampled years of *Sanlian Life Week*.

As illustrated in Figure 6.6, between 1996 and 1999, *Sanlian Life Week* experienced a gradual decline in US-related imagery, decreasing from 259 images in 1996 to 183 in both 1998 and 1999. This trend stands in stark contrast to the other two magazines analysed, which saw a steady increase in US images during this period. This decline coincided with frequent changes in *Sanlian Life Week*'s editorial leadership in its early years, as well as intermittent suspensions and relaunches. Despite the reduction in visual coverage, the magazine's framing of the US remained predominantly positive, as shown in Figure 6.7. *Sanlian Life Week* placed significant emphasis on cultural and social news content (see Section 5.4, Chapter 5). Table 6.4 shows that the majority of US-related images in *Sanlian Life Week* are centred on

entertainment and social life, culture and education topics. Attraction frames overwhelmingly shaped US portrayals, particularly within these thematic categories. As illustrated in Table 6.4, between 1996 and 1999, 94.5% of US-related images in the entertainment and social life theme carried positive frames. Likewise, 94.4% of images related to culture and education were identified as attraction frames. However, in political coverage, negative frames accounted for nearly half of the images, and in crime, disaster, and military-related themes, negative portrayals outnumbered positive ones. Nevertheless, the overall number of images in these categories remained significantly lower than those depicting culture, social life, and the economy. As a result, from 1996 to 1999, the general representation of the US in *Sanlian Life Week* remained largely positive. This period coincided with China's deepening economic reforms under Deng's Reform and Opening-up policy (Garnaut et al., 2018). Similar to the other two magazines, *Sanlian Life Week's* relatively favourable portrayal of the US reflects China's early phase of global economic integration, during which the US was admired for its technological advancements, economic strength, and cultural influence.

Table 6.4. Proportion of frames applied to images of different content themes across historical periods in *Sanlian Life Week*.

Time Period		Content Theme								
		N of images (% within content theme)								
		Political	Military	Economic	History	Culture and education	Science	Entertainment and Social Life	Health and Environment	Crime and Disaster
1996-1999	Rejection Frame	21 (43.8%)	14 (56.0%)	9 (5.8%)		1 (1.4%)	0 (0.0%)	5 (1.5%)	14 (40.0%)	29 (60.4%)
	Wavering Frame	4 (8.3%)	1 (4.0%)	12 (7.7%)		3 (4.2%)	6 (9.0%)	13 (3.9%)	5 (14.3%)	9 (18.8%)
	Attraction Frame	23 (47.9%)	10 (40.0%)	135 (86.5%)		68 (94.4%)	61 (91.0%)	312 (94.5%)	16 (45.7%)	10 (20.8%)
2001	Rejection Frame	2 (18.2%)	24 (64.9%)	10 (15.6%)		1 (6.3%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (1.6%)	6 (60%)	32 (94.1%)
	Wavering Frame	4 (36.4%)	7 (18.9%)	5 (7.8%)		0 (0.0%)	1 (7.7%)	1 (1.6%)	1 (10%)	1 (2.9%)
	Attraction Frame	5 (45.5%)	6 (16.2%)	49 (76.6%)		15 (93.8%)	12 (92.3%)	62 (96.9%)	3 (30%)	1 (2.9%)
2006-2011	Rejection Frame	29 (15.8%)	15 (17.9%)	55 (19.8%)	0 (0.0%)	3 (3.2%)	1 (1.3%)	4 (1.0%)	9 (14.3%)	35 (72.9%)
	Wavering Frame	17 (9.2%)	20 (23.8%)	17 (6.1%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	3 (3.8%)	10 (2.5%)	7 (11.1%)	6 (12.5%)
	Attraction Frame	138 (75.0%)	49 (58.3%)	206 (74.1%)	1 (100.0%)	92 (96.8%)	75 (94.9%)	391 (96.5%)	47 (74.6%)	7 (14.6%)
2013-2020	Rejection Frame	141 (30.7%)	25 (26.3%)	42 (16.9%)		8 (2.9%)	3 (1.5%)	10 (2.1%)	50 (28.2%)	61 (81.3%)
	Wavering Frame	54 (11.8%)	15 (15.8%)	21 (8.5%)		5 (1.8%)	1 (0.5%)	6 (1.3%)	26 (14.7%)	6 (8.0%)
	Attraction Frame	264 (57.5%)	55 (57.9%)	185 (74.6%)		266 (95.3%)	193 (98.0%)	455 (96.6%)	101 (57.1%)	8 (10.7%)

Note: Blank cells indicate that no US-related images of that content theme appeared during the given period.

The year 2001 marks a turning point for *Sanlian Life Week* as well, as the number of US-related images rose to 261, forming a peak in this early phase of the magazine's history, as shown in Figure 6.6. This year is notable not only for the increase in visual coverage but also for a significant rise in negative framing. Figure 6.7 shows that the strong rejection frame reached its highest point during this period at 11.9%, a shift that likely reflects broader global events, particularly the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent US-led War on Terror. Table 6.4 indicates that the proportion of rejection frames for US images within the crime and disaster theme reached 94.1% in this year, higher than in any other period for this theme and exceeding the level observed in *South Review* during the same year. Unlike *South Review*, which tended to downplay disaster narratives, this crisis event received extensive attention in *Sanlian Life Week*. Disasters and terrorist attacks possess a form of inherent news value – drama, conflict, and emotional intensity – that aligns with the commercialised media logic of *Sanlian Life Week*. The prominence of 9/11 coverage thus reflects not only geopolitical significance but also the magazine's pursuit of compelling storytelling that meets audience expectations for vivid, affective reporting. It is also important to note that images covering disasters and terrorist attacks inherently carry negative connotations. The extensive visual reporting of the 9/11 attacks, which dominated global news cycles in 2001, likely contributed to the rise in negative frames associated with the US in *Sanlian Life Week*. This heightened focus on crisis and violence naturally portrayed the US in a less favourable light.

Between 2006 and 2011, as shown in Table 6.4, the proportion of positive frames increased across most thematic categories, with the exception of the rise in

negative framing within economic themes driven by the global financial crisis.

Unlike the other two magazines, *Sanlian Life Week* not only maintained the early Reform-era admiration for the US during this period but, in some respects, even intensified it. The critical representations of the US related to the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, as well as the diminished sense of US prestige that appeared in *China Pictorial* and *South Review* following the 2008 Beijing Olympics and China's rise in national confidence, appear to have had limited influence on *Sanlian Life Week's* portrayals.

A deeper examination of the structural and institutional conditions helps to explain this divergence. As discussed in Section 5.4 (Chapter 5), this period marked an important editorial shift for *Sanlian Life Week*, which moved away from a strong news-oriented profile toward a more comprehensive, culturally oriented format. This shift was partly driven by market demands for lifestyle, human-interest, and cultural content, and partly by the need to navigate an increasingly restrictive regulatory environment by reducing overt political risk. This repositioning had several implications for its representation of the US. First, the magazine's growing emphasis on culture, lifestyle, social trends, and human-interest reporting tended to produce more positive portrayals, since these genres highlight innovation, creativity, and everyday social vitality – areas where the US historically served as a key reference point in Chinese popular imagination. Second, by reducing explicit political critique within domestic reporting, *Sanlian Life Week* also avoided using the US as a foil for negative political commentary – a strategy increasingly adopted by more politically oriented outlets such as *South Review* – thereby cultivating a distinctive position within a competitive magazine market. Third, the magazine's positive portrayals of

the US should not be understood solely as expressions of admiration; they also function as a means of evoking cultural resonance and tempering nationalist sentiment during periods of intensified geopolitical tension. A more detailed analysis is provided in Section 9.4 (Chapter 9). Thus, the rise in positive framing across political, military, cultural, and health-related themes reflects not simply an editorial preference but a deeper convergence of market logic, regulatory pressures, and genre conventions, all of which encouraged *Sanlian Life Week* to sustain and amplify a narrative of the US grounded in cultural appeal and lifestyle imagination rather than geopolitical rivalry or ideological confrontation.

The number of US-related images peaked in 2013, reaching 475 – the highest recorded in any sampled year. Notably, as illustrated in Figure 6.7, 2013 also saw a significant spike in positive framing, with the strong attraction frame rising to 6.3%, the highest in any year analysed. This brief moment of favourable portrayal reflects the diplomatic and economic events that emphasised US-China cooperation. During this period, bilateral talks between President Xi and President Obama focused on collaboration on global challenges such as climate change, economic stability, and security, as discussed in Section 2.3 (Chapter 2). These interactions temporarily reinforced a cooperative narrative that resonated within *Sanlian Life Week*'s visual framing. However, this positive shift proved short-lived. From 2014 onward, the proportion of weak rejection frames in the magazine began to show an upward trend. As shown in Table 6.4, the proportion of negative framing within political, military, health and environmental, and crime and disaster themes increased significantly during the 2013-2020 period compared with earlier years. Although entertainment and social life, science, and culture and education themes continued to exhibit

predominantly positive framing, their overall share of coverage declined relative to previous periods. Between 2013 and 2020, the number of US political images surged, for the first time nearly matching the traditionally dominant entertainment and social life category that had long defined *Sanlian Life Week*'s editorial identity. This shift indicates a gradual erosion of the magazine's distinctive cultural-lifestyle positioning, as its thematic focus increasingly converged with that of the other two magazines analysed.

This transformation must be understood within the broader context of China's domestic political realignment under Xi Jinping. Xi's ascent to power in 2013 marked a decisive turning point, characterised by heightened emphasis on political narratives, strengthened ideological discipline, and intensified media control. In foreign policy, the leadership moved away from Deng's strategy of "hide your strength, bide your time" toward a more assertive and nationalist diplomatic posture (Ghosh, 2024, p. 227). As argued in Section 2.3 (Chapter 2), this shift manifested in China's growing assertiveness in multilateral forums and its strategic competition with the US in Asia.

The expansion of negative framing in *Sanlian Life Week* also coincided with a period of escalating US-China tensions driven by a series of external shocks. As discussed in Section 2.3 (Chapter 2), the US-China trade war, initiated in 2018 under the Trump administration, created substantial economic friction between the two nations. This period was further marked by escalating tensions over the South China Sea, renewed frictions surrounding Taiwan, and intensifying disputes in the technology and security domains, as well as the global crisis triggered by COVID-19. Against this backdrop, *Sanlian Life Week*, like the other two magazines,

increasingly portrayed the US as a power in relative decline, particularly within political, military, and crisis-related domains. This shift reflected both changing geopolitical realities and the structural transformation of China's media environment under Xi, as intensified state oversight encouraged greater alignment with Party-defined strategic narratives (see Section 3.3, Chapter 3). However, this recalibration did not occur uniformly across all thematic areas. Entertainment and social life, science, and culture and education themes continued to exhibit predominantly positive framing, sustaining long-standing patterns of admiration for US cultural vitality, technological innovation, and social creativity. This divergence produced a fragmented or bifurcated image of the US within *Sanlian Life Week*: one that combined increasingly critical portrayals of US power and governance with persistent appreciation of its cultural and scientific appeal. Rather than a wholesale shift toward negativity, the magazine's evolving representation thus reflects a selective realignment, in which political narratives became more standardised and ideologically constrained, while softer cultural domains retained greater editorial autonomy and pluralism.

The following section builds on the above chronological analyses of *China Pictorial*, *South Review*, and *Sanlian Life Week*, identifying three main phases to better facilitate comparison across the three magazines and synthesising the overarching narrative through which Chinese magazines have collectively constructed the image of the US.

6.5. From Divergence to Convergence: Comparing Narrative Trajectories of the US across Chinese Magazines

The preceding sections have provided a detailed account of the visual representation of the US across *China Pictorial*, *South Review*, and *Sanlian Life Week*, highlighting temporal changes in both the quantity and framing of US-related images. Several shared turning points emerge from these data, which help delineate distinct phases in the evolution of the US image. First, the data from *China Pictorial* indicate that prior to 1971, representations were overwhelmingly characterised by a negative framing (see Figure 6.2), corresponding closely to the period of diplomatic estrangement and wartime relations outlined in Section 2.3 (Chapter 2). Second, during the period 1972-2000, despite *South Review* and *Sanlian Life Week* still being in their formative stages, all three magazines exhibited a predominance of positive framing of the US. This pattern aligns with the phase of diplomatic normalisation and the post-Cold War context discussed in Section 2.3 (Chapter 2). Third, another prominent turning point across all three magazines emerges in 2001. Marked by the events of 9/11, this year saw a surge in negative framing, which, although moderated in subsequent years, remained more pronounced than in the preceding period. This shift again corresponds to the phases of pragmatism and disagreement, as well as great power cooperation and rivalry, identified in Section 2.3 (Chapter 2). Therefore, these shared shifts in visual framing across the three magazine datasets, and their close alignment with the broader Sino-US geopolitical context, provide the basis for dividing the analysis of the US image in Chinese magazines into three distinct periods: 1950-1971, 1972-2000, and 2001-2021. This chronological framework enables a more systematic comparison of the evolving representations of the US across the three publications. The following three chapters are also structured accordingly.

Meanwhile, I acknowledge the limitations of this chronological typology.

The evolution of the US image in Chinese media is the product of complex interactions that unfold gradually rather than abruptly, and these representational shifts are not always confined to clearly bounded time periods. In addition, some magazines cannot fully represent the entire temporal span examined here due to their founding dates. For example, *South Review* began publication in 1985, while *Sanlian Life Week* was founded in 1995 (with sampled data beginning in 1996), meaning that their data cannot fully capture the 1972-2000 period. These constraints are addressed with caution in the subsequent analysis. Nevertheless, such a chronological framework remains analytically essential. It enables the identification of dominant representational logics within specific historical conjunctures and facilitates systematic comparison across periods characterised by distinct geopolitical alignments, policy orientations, and media environments. By foregrounding temporal change, this approach clarifies how shifts in visual framing correspond to broader transformations in China's relationship with the US and in the structure of the Chinese media system.

Across the three periods, Table 6.5 first presents the overall relationship between content themes and framing strategies across the three magazines, while Table 6.6 and Figure 6.8 subsequently illustrate how these thematic emphases and framing patterns evolved across different historical periods. A comparative reading of these representations reveals a triadic transformation in China's mediated imagination of the US: from a threatening ideological adversary (1950-1971) to an aspirational symbol of modernity (1972-2000), and, in the period 2001-2021, to a declining global power against which Chinese national confidence is articulated.

Table 6.5. Overall distribution of visual framing across content themes in the three magazines (percentage within content theme).

		Content theme							
		Political	Military	Economic	Culture and education	Science	Entertainment and social life	Health and environment	Crime and disaster
<i>China Pictorial</i>	Rejection Frame	46.9%	81.8%	10.3%	1.0%	2.9%	4.3%	67.2%	75.0%
	Wavering Frame	5.7%	8.3%	3.6%	0.5%	0.7%	2.3%	6.6%	13.9%
	Attraction Frame	47.4%	9.9%	86.1%	98.5%	96.4%	93.4%	26.2%	11.1%
<i>South Review</i>	Rejection Frame	31.5%	43.0%	28.7%	2.3%	10.0%	11.3%	53.8%	88.1%
	Wavering Frame	14.4%	17.7%	12.0%	2.3%	7.5%	6.2%	12.3%	9.5%
	Attraction Frame	54.1%	39.2%	59.3%	95.5%	82.5%	82.5%	33.8%	2.4%
<i>Sanlian Life Week</i>	Rejection Frame	27.5%	32.4%	15.5%	2.8%	1.1%	1.6%	27.7%	76.6%
	Wavering Frame	11.3%	17.8%	7.4%	1.7%	3.1%	2.4%	13.7%	10.7%
	Attraction Frame	61.3%	49.8%	77.1%	95.5%	95.8%	96.1%	58.6%	12.7%

Table 6.6. Comparison of thematic composition of US-related images across magazines, time periods, and content themes.

			Content theme					
			Political	Military	Economic	Culture and education	Science	Entertainment and social life
Time Period N of images (% within each magazine's time period)	1950-1971	<i>China Pictorial</i>	396 (50.3%)	314 (39.9%)	4 (0.5%)	3 (0.4%)	1 (0.1%)	12 (1.5%)
	1972-2000 ¹⁶	<i>China Pictorial</i>	136 (17.9%)	16 (2.1%)	87 (11.5%)	105 (13.9%)	63 (8.3%)	187 (24.7%)
		<i>South Review</i>	47 (25.0%)	5 (2.7%)	73 (38.8%)	11 (5.9%)	3 (1.6%)	22 (11.7%)
		<i>Sanlian Life Week</i>	48 (5.8%)	25 (3.0%)	156 (18.8%)	72 (8.7%)	67 (8.1%)	330 (39.7%)
	2001-2021	<i>China Pictorial</i>	280 (28.0%)	112 (11.2%)	80 (8.0%)	93 (9.3%)	76 (7.6%)	148 (14.8%)
		<i>South Review</i>	592 (38.7%)	75 (4.9%)	249 (16.3%)	158 (10.3%)	39 (2.6%)	76 (5.0%)
		<i>Sanlian Life Week</i>	654 (17.2%)	216 (5.7%)	590 (15.6%)	390 (10.3%)	289 (7.6%)	940 (24.8%)

¹⁶ *South Review* (1985) and *Sanlian Life Week* (1995) do not fully capture the 1972-2000 period, as their sampled data begin in 1985 and 1996, respectively.

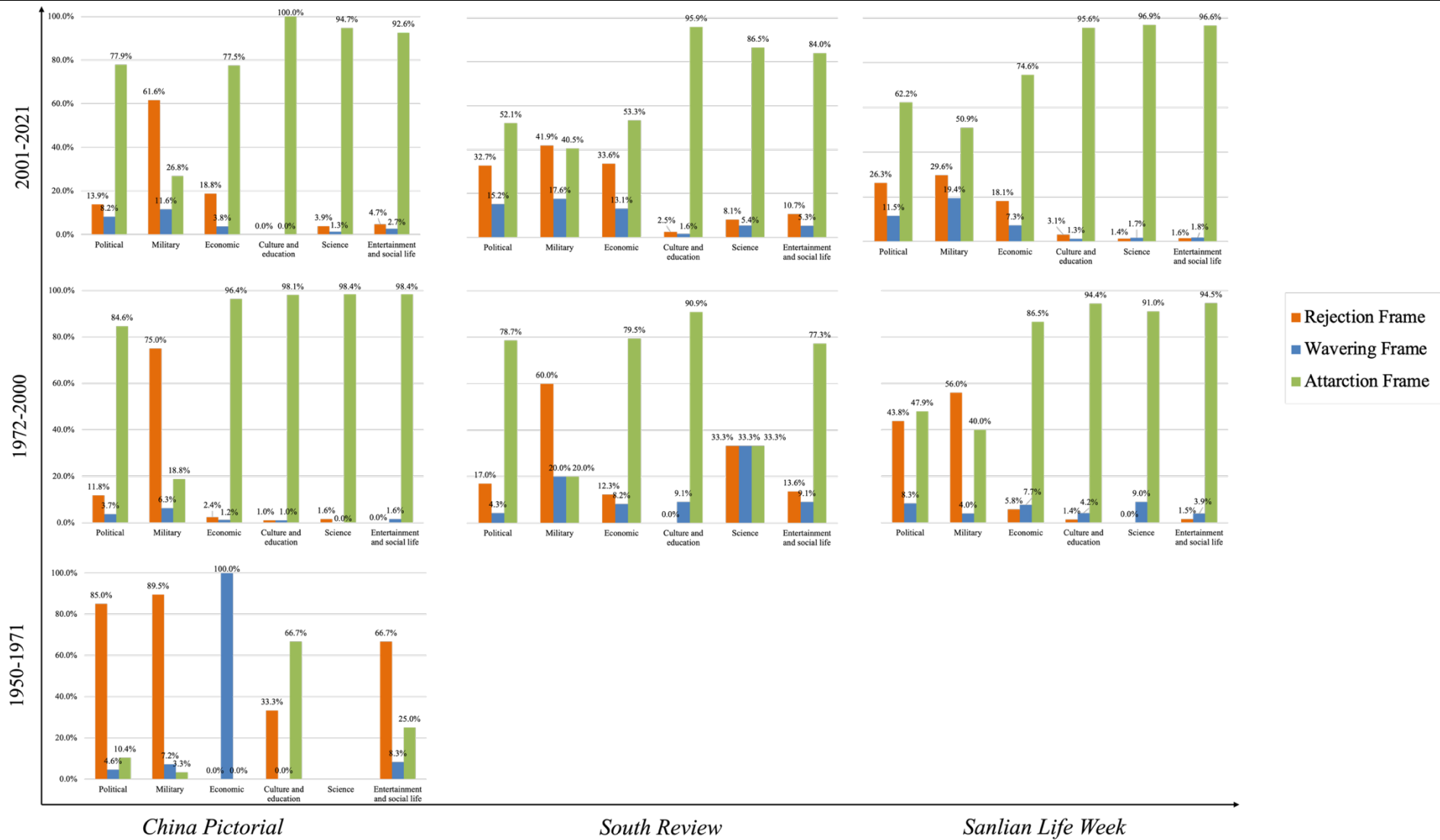


Figure 6.8. Comparison of visual frames in US representations across content themes, time periods, and magazines (% within content theme).

As shown in Table 6.5, several remarkably consistent associations between content themes and visual framing emerge across the three magazines despite their different institutional affiliations and editorial orientations. In all three publications, culture and education, science, and entertainment and social life were overwhelmingly framed through attraction, whereas crime and disaster was consistently dominated by rejection framing. Although part of this consistency reflects the inherent affective characteristics of particular themes – for example, crime and disaster naturally lends itself to negative representation, whereas entertainment and scientific achievement more readily evoke positive evaluation – the high degree of convergence across the three magazines suggests a shared pattern of selectively representing different aspects of the US. The US was portrayed as a source of scientific innovation, educational achievement, cultural influence, and economic development, while threatening or unstable in military and conflict-related contexts. However, political and military representations showed comparatively greater variation. While political images in *China Pictorial* exhibited an almost even balance between rejection and attraction frames, attraction framing became increasingly dominant in *South Review* and especially *Sanlian Life Week*. Differences were even more pronounced in military representations. Whereas *China Pictorial* overwhelmingly framed US military affairs through rejection, reflecting its emphasis on military confrontation and national security, *Sanlian Life Week* predominantly adopted attraction framing, showing a greater tendency to approach military issues from the perspectives of technological capability, strategic analysis, or international affairs rather than ideological confrontation. This pattern suggests that Party press continued to foreground ideological vigilance and geopolitical rivalry in its portrayal

of the US, whereas the commercialised magazines adopted more diversified representational strategies that extended beyond ideological contestation. The following analysis therefore examines how these overall patterns developed across different historical periods.

As shown in Table 6.6, during the period 1950-1971, US-related imagery in Chinese media was dominated by political and military themes. *China Pictorial*, the only magazine with coverage from the early period, focused almost exclusively on such content, which was consistently framed through a hostile, rejectionist lens, with more than 85% of political and military images exhibiting negative framing (see Figure 6.8). This configuration reflected the publication's nature as a Party-run propaganda instrument during Cold War ideological confrontation. The US was visually constructed as a threatening force – militaristic, imperialist, and morally degenerate.

This ideological rigidity, however, began to loosen between 1972 and 2000, as China's reform and opening-up policies ushered in a new phase of pragmatic and instrumental engagement with the West. During this transitional era, as illustrated in Table 6.6, cultural, educational, and entertainment imagery began to emerge and became dominant components of coverage, particularly the entertainment and social life theme in *China Pictorial* and *Sanlian Life Week*. The US was no longer framed primarily as an ideological other, but rather as a compelling model of modernity and technological advancement. Cultural icons, entertainments, consumer lifestyles, and innovations in science and education became central motifs, depicted predominantly through attraction-oriented frames, as shown in Figure 6.8. This period witnessed the emergence of a new visual grammar of aspiration, wherein the US functioned

symbolically as a proxy for China's own developmental ambitions. A particularly revealing phenomenon during this phase was the reconfiguration of *China Pictorial*. Despite its identity as a state propaganda outlet, the magazine gradually abandoned its wartime hostility and came to feature the highest proportion of positively framed US imagery among the three publications (see Figure 6.8). This shift at the central level suggests a state-led reorientation away from ideologically driven nationalism toward the promotion of modernisation through more favourable representations of the foreign, a pattern that resonates with the discussion of nationalism in Section 2.2 (Chapter 2). As scholars have noted, Chinese nationalism has never been a purely top-down ideological project but has been repeatedly rearticulated through media practices that balance political signalling, audience appeal, and commercial logic (Callahan, 2010; Gries, 2004). Importantly, as nationalist sentiment proved to be both politically potent and commercially viable, it increasingly took the form of "popular nationalism" (Gries, 2004, p. 116), which was appropriated and amplified by market-oriented media with greater editorial flexibility, such as *South Review*. Empirically, this dynamic is visible in the data. While party magazine *China Pictorial* moderated overt nationalist framing in favour of modernisation-oriented narratives during the 1972-2000 period, magazines such as *South Review* exhibited a modest yet non-negligible level of negative framing across most content themes (except culture and education), typically accounting for around 15% (see Figure 6.8). This negative framing primarily took the form of critical reflections on US commercial culture and excessive entertainment, as well as concerns over the impact of foreign influence on Chinese national industries. These representations transformed nationalism into a form of consumable media content, aligning

nationalist sentiment with audience expectations for conflict-driven and emotionally resonant narratives. In this sense, nationalism functioned as a commercialised sentiment, selectively amplified by commercially driven outlets (see Section 8.3, Chapter 8 for detailed visual analysis). Meanwhile, all three magazines exhibited dominant rejection framing in military-related imagery during this period. This pattern is consistent with broader geopolitical tensions, including US-China frictions over Taiwan (particularly following the 1995-1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis).

In the 2001-2021 period, there was a marked resurgence of US political and military imagery across all three magazines. This return to politicised framing was often characterised by ambivalence or overt critique. In both *China Pictorial* and *South Review*, the proportion of negative framing within political themes increased. These shifts mirror broader discursive developments in Chinese domestic politics and foreign policy, particularly following Xi's rise to power, as revolutionary antagonism gave way to pragmatic cooperation and subsequently evolved into a more assertive and competitive stance vis-à-vis the US (see Section 2.3, Chapter 2). At the same time, the tightening of party control over the Chinese media system further reinforced convergence in reporting across different outlets, especially in political coverage. However, the proportion of negative framing in *Sanlian Life Week's* political and military US image declined, suggesting a distinct strategy of ideological softening (see Section 9.4, Chapter 9 for further discussion). In addition, the increasing prevalence of negative framing in US economic coverage across all three magazines during this period is closely associated with the global financial crisis of 2008, through which the image of the US as a declining global power became increasingly salient. While geopolitical crises often coincide with an uptick

in negative framing, the interpretive work performed by media institutions is shaped by editorial imperatives, ideological mandates, and audience expectations (Stockmann & Gallagher, 2011). Chapter 9 builds on this argument by drawing on interview data with media practitioners to further unpack how these institutional constraints and professional judgments shape framing decisions in practice.

In general, each historical period not only captures how Chinese media visually frames the US, but also how these representations align with broader geopolitical developments, nationalist discourse, and the structure of the Chinese media system. From 1950 to 2021, the visual framing of the US in Chinese magazines has transformed from adversarial to aspirational, from cooperative to strategically competitive. The imagery circulated through these publications, therefore, offers more than representations of a foreign power; it functions as a narrative mechanism through which China articulates its own positioning within the global order.

The next chapter proceeds to the first period, 1950-1971, which examines how early visual representations of the US were shaped by wartime ideology and revolutionary nationalism.

**CHAPTER 7. ANOTHER IN A LONG LINE OF WESTERN INSULTS:
WARTIME IMAGES OF THE US, 1950-1971**

“US imperialism is the mortal enemy of the Chinese people... The invasion of Korea by the US imperialists and their bloody atrocities have incited boundless anger among the 475 million people of the entire nation! The nationwide hatred, contempt, and disdain for US imperialism, along with the concrete actions of the people’s resistance against US and support for Korea, defense of the homeland and family, are being carried out on a vast and profound scale across the entire country.”¹⁷ (China Pictorial, 1950, p. 10)

7.1 Introduction

As established in Chapter 2 (Section 2.1), national identity is profoundly constituted through narratives of the past. In the Chinese context, collective memories of the Century of Humiliation under Western imperialism – within which the US occupied a central position – served as a foundational ideological resource shaping both Chinese nationalism and media representations of foreign powers. These historically sedimented narratives provided a key interpretive framework through which the US was evaluated and symbolically positioned in Chinese political discourse.

This process of meaning-making unfolded within a media system that operated under comprehensive party-state control from the founding of the PRC in 1949 to the early 1970s (Section 3.2, Chapter 3). Media institutions, functioning as integral components of the ideological apparatus, were tasked with political education, mobilisation, and the articulation of China’s international stance. Media content, including visual materials, was produced and circulated within a highly

¹⁷ All quotations from the magazines cited in this chapter are translated from the original Chinese by the author.

centralised institutional environment, ensuring close alignment between representational practices and official ideological objectives.

These media practices were further conditioned by the geopolitical realities of the early Cold War. Between 1950 and 1971, China's relationship with the US was shaped by sustained military and strategic confrontation, including the Korean War (1950-1953), heightened Cold War tensions surrounding the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962), and the Vietnam War (1955-1975). As discussed in Chapter 2 (Section 2.3), these conflicts unfolded alongside prolonged diplomatic isolation, comprehensive economic embargoes, and entrenched ideological antagonism between the two countries. These historical, institutional, and geopolitical conditions constituted the broader context within which representations of the US were produced in Chinese media during this period.

Against this backdrop, the primary objective of this chapter is to empirically examine how the US was visually represented in *China Pictorial* between 1950 and 1971, and to analyse how these representations contributed to broader processes of national identity construction and ideological positioning. The central argument advanced here is that visual depictions of the US during this period were organised around a coherent ideological logic that simultaneously delegitimised US imperialism, naturalised global opposition to US power, and elevated China as a morally superior revolutionary subject aligned with oppressed peoples worldwide, including marginalised groups within US society.

It is important to clarify the empirical scope and methodological focus of this chapter. The analysis is based exclusively on visual materials published in *China Pictorial* during the period from 1950 to 1971. *South Review* and *Sanlian Life Week*

were not yet established during this period. Empirically, the chapter demonstrates that visual representations of the US in *China Pictorial* between 1950 and 1971 exhibited three interrelated characteristics. First, the US images were overwhelmingly framed through strong rejection and moral condemnation, with 81.9% of US-related images employing a strong rejection frame and fewer than 10% conveying positive evaluations. Within these visual narratives, the US was constructed as an aggressive and morally bankrupt imperial power, often depicted through metaphors connoting shamelessness and the loss of humanity. These representations consistently invoked collective memories of Western humiliation, thereby embedding contemporary geopolitical conflict within a longer historical continuum.

Second, this negative assessment of the US was not merely a Chinese phenomenon but was visually framed as part of a broader, globally recognised anti-imperialist sentiment. Images of both domestic and international protests against the US were deliberately curated, prominently displayed, and actively foregrounded. This strategy visually amplified the legitimacy and universality of anti-US movements, framing opposition to US imperialism as both morally justified and globally shared.

Third, against this backdrop of widespread anti-US sentiment, China was visually represented as achieving moral and spiritual victories through its wartime resilience and ethical conduct. Chinese media consistently highlighted the strength, bravery, and industriousness of Chinese citizens and soldiers, alongside their humane treatment of prisoners of war. Furthermore, *China Pictorial* explicitly differentiated China's moral stance from that of the US by emphasising compassion, sympathy, and

support towards ordinary US citizens. US citizens were portrayed not as enemies but as victims suffering under their own government's expansionist ambitions and capitalist oppression. This ostensibly humanitarian categorisation of the US further underscored China's moral and spiritual superiority. Particular emphasis was placed on African Americans and left-wing (proletarian) intellectuals and writers, who were depicted as compassionate allies whose values resonated deeply with Chinese ideological positions. Crucially, these individuals were not represented as part of the US Other, but rather as ideological partners engaged in struggles closely aligned with China's own revolutionary and anti-imperialist narratives. Through expressing solidarity with marginalised and oppressed groups within US society, Chinese media reinforced China's moral legitimacy and provided ideological validation for its position in the global ideological confrontation. The following subsections will elaborate on each of these dimensions in greater detail.

7.2 The US as a 'Thick-Skinned' Aggressor

Between 1950 and 1971, rather than directly depicting scenes of military confrontation or wartime destruction involving the US, *China Pictorial* more frequently constructed this adversarial image through symbolic and satirical visual strategies. The magazine made prominent use of caricatures and political cartoons, as demonstrated in Table 7.1. While such visual forms constituted less than 1% of US-related imagery in other historical periods, they accounted for 6.9% of such content between 1950 and 1971. In addition to these visual strategies, *China Pictorial* employed a discursive repertoire of highly critical captions and ideologically charged labels. The US was routinely referred to as "US imperialism" (美帝国主义), "US

bandits” (美国强盗), “US devils” (美国鬼子) and “US paper tiger” (美国纸老虎)¹⁸,

thereby reinforcing its symbolic role as an existential antagonist. As illustrated in Table 7.2, this discursive pattern is further substantiated through textual framing analysis, which reveals that 84.3% of US-related image captions during this period adopted a strong rejection frame – significantly surpassing the proportions observed in all other historical intervals.

Table 7.1. Proportion of comic and cartoon-type images of the US across different periods in *China Pictorial*.

Time Period	Comic and Cartoon
1950-1971	54 (6.9%)
1972-2000	0 (0.0%)
2001-2021	5 (0.5%)
Total	59 (2.3%)

N of images (Percentages of images)

Table 7.2. Textual framing of the US across different periods in *China Pictorial*.

Time Period	Strong Attraction Frame	Weak Attraction Frame	Wavering Frame	Weak Rejection Frame	Strong Rejection Frame	Total
1950-1971	7 (0.9%)	33 (4.2%)	77 (9.9%)	5 (0.6%)	655 (84.3%)	777 (100.0%)
1972-2000	68 (10.2%)	548 (82.4%)	12 (1.8%)	9 (1.4%)	28 (4.2%)	665 (100.0%)
2001-2021	55 (5.1%)	676 (62.5%)	70 (6.5%)	171 (15.8%)	110 (10.2%)	1082 (100.0%)

N of images (Percentages of images)

Figures 7.1-7.3 collectively illustrate how *China Pictorial* employed caricatures to perform symbolic and satirical functions during the Korean War, portraying the US as a grotesque and morally deviant enemy fundamentally opposed to the Chinese self-image. Figure 7.1 literalises Mao Zedong’s famous metaphor of the “paper tiger” (Mao, 1977, p. 499), translating an abstract ideological claim into a

¹⁸ The term refers to something or someone that claims or appears to be powerful or threatening but is actually ineffectual and unable to withstand challenge. The expression became well known internationally as a slogan used by Mao Zedong, former chairman of the CCP and paramount leader of China, against his political opponents, particularly the US.

visual argument: US imperialism appears ferocious only on the surface, while internally it is fragile, combustible, and already in decay. The central tiger's body appears partially consumed – its torso and chest have already been burned through, leaving behind only the limbs. Notably, the tiger's tongue is visibly scorched, and its teeth, once imagined as sharp and threatening, are now jagged and uneven. These visual details symbolically strip the tiger of its predatory power. What remains is not a threat, but a hollow and disintegrating spectacle – a paper shell on fire. A tattered US flag, also symbolises the broken legitimacy of US imperialism. In visual framing terms, this image performs a process of radical de-contextualisation (Bock, 2020), whereby caricature assembles and exaggerates symbolic elements to intensify framing effects, thereby guiding viewers toward a preferred moral and political interpretation.



Figure 7.1. The US paper tiger and warmongers: Harry Truman, Douglas MacArthur, and Dean Acheson. December 1950, *China Pictorial*¹⁹.

¹⁹ Unless otherwise indicated, all image captions in this chapter are translated from the original Chinese by the author.

The depiction of US political elites in this image further consolidates this moral critique. Riding atop this flaming beast are grotesquely exaggerated caricatures of three key US figures: President Harry Truman, General Douglas MacArthur, and Secretary of State Dean Acheson. They are demonised through caricatured features, including monstrous fangs and unnatural green or dark purple skin tones, which visually mark them as morally corrupt and inhuman. The exaggeration of oversized noses further accentuates their radical otherness, reinforcing a stark boundary between self and enemy (Callahan, 2023). Through these visual strategies, the US is constructed as the antithesis of the Chinese self-image. At the cultural level, this oppositional construction functions within China's imagined community, where collective identity is produced relationally through the imagination of other (Anderson, 2006). The fire in Figure 7.1 serves dual symbolic purposes. On the one hand, it can be read as representing the internal combustion of imperialism, a system portrayed as devouring itself through greed and aggression. On the other hand, it functions as a more implicit articulation of Chinese identity, evoking revolutionary purification and casting the Communist world as a cleansing force that burns away the remnants of Western domination.



Figure 7.2. Only by stopping the aggressive actions of US imperialism can we proceed with peace and construction. February 1952, *China Pictorial*.

Figure 7.2 articulates this Sino-US identity binary with striking visual clarity, portraying a muscular Chinese industrial worker in a blue uniform who forcefully subdues a grotesque, monstrous figure by raising an exaggerated, powerful fist. The creature clutches a missile in one hand and wears a top hat patterned with the US flag, clearly marking it as a representation of the US. Once again, the US adversary is rendered in deeply dehumanising terms: its skin is an unnatural shade of green, its nose is bulbous and bright red, and its clawed hands drip with blood. Its distorted face and kneeling posture signify both physical submission and moral degradation. Through animalistic, caricatured, and monstrous features, *China Pictorial* frames the US enemy as not only evil but subhuman.

The contrast between the Chinese worker's enormous, clenched fist and the bloodied claws of the US figure dramatises the moral and physical superiority of socialist resistance. In the upper left portion of the image, a vast expanse of orderly,

pink-toned smokestacks and factory buildings rises behind the worker, signalling industrial strength and collective effort. This scene starkly contrasts with the lower right corner of the composition, where the defeated creature crouches amidst smoke, rubble, and the shattered remains of war. This spatiotemporal juxtaposition between the ruins of imperialist destruction and the structural clarity of socialist construction performs a binary opposition between chaos and order, war and peace, imperialism and socialism. It is not merely background detail but a spatial allegory of historical direction.

The composition centres the Chinese worker, both visually dominant and physically elevated above the US figure. The constructed act of restraining the US figure's missile-wielding hand with a large, muscular grip signifies the defence of peace. In pairing productive labour with military resistance, the image enacts the Maoist ideal of the "worker-soldier" – a subject who simultaneously participates in industrial production and national defence (MacFarquhar & Schoenhals, 2006, p. 53). This figure materialises a vision of national development structured around a clear causal sequence, in which resistance to US aggression is depicted as a necessary condition for peaceful socialist construction, as stated in the accompanying caption. The US is represented as an external force of disruption and violence that obstructs China's developmental trajectory, while the Chinese worker-soldier embodies a countervailing force that simultaneously defends the nation and enables productive labour. Through this contrast, the image constructs Chinese national identity around a dual commitment to defence and construction, echoing the broader narrative of overcoming national humiliation and pursuing rejuvenation (see Section 2.2, Chapter 2). Defence is framed as necessary to resist external

domination, while construction represents the forward movement toward socialist modernity, thereby linking past subjugation to a future-oriented project of national renewal (Callahan, 2010).



Figure 7.3. Long live the victory of the Korean People's Army and the Chinese People's Volunteers! February 1952, *China Pictorial*.

Figure 7.3 transforms bilateral confrontation into a collective socialist victory. The compositional logic established earlier in Figure 7.2 is retained but scaled up: the defeated US soldiers are pushed to the margins and bottom of the frame, while Chinese and North Korean soldiers occupy the dominant visual space. Their mirrored posture, synchronised expressions, and shared red banner fuse individual bodies into a single revolutionary subject. Unlike the grotesque instability of US figures, these soldiers are rendered through heroic realism – youthful, composed, and resolute. The rifles held butt-forward signify triumph without excess brutality, reinforcing the moral restraint attributed to socialist force. The

performative pointing gesture of the Chinese soldier toward the tattered US flag identifies the defeated enemy, while simultaneously positioning the Chinese figure as the guiding force within the alliance, both militarily and ideologically. The defeated US troops, at the right corner of the image, are once again drawn with unnatural skin tones, large hooked noses, contorted facial expressions, and visible injuries. The crumpled map of China beneath the fleeing US troops explicitly links military defeat to the frustration of imperialist ambition by showing US intentions to invade Chinese territory.

These three images encapsulate the visual rhetoric of the early 1950s PRC: a synthesis of righteous proletarian heroism and a clearly delineated opposition to the demonised US enemy. In all three images, US figures are drawn with exaggerated noses and unnatural skin tones. As Callahan (2023) has shown, the depiction of oversized noses in Chinese visual propaganda during the Korean War was a semiotic device used to differentiate the enemy. It mobilised a symbolic dichotomy between “good” and “bad” noses to incite specific emotional responses – hatred, disdain, and contempt toward the US. The chromatic coding throughout the image reinforces ideological binaries. US figures are consistently depicted in sickly shades of green, blue or black, connoting disease, corruption, and inhumanity. Chinese bodies, by contrast, are rendered in natural, warm tones. The use of colour here is a political act that paints morality into flesh. At a time when most of *China Pictorial* was printed in black and white, the allocation of scarce colour printing resources to this caricature signifies its elevated propagandistic importance. As Hung (2011) argues, colour in revolutionary China was never merely decorative; it was a politically charged element of visual rhetoric. Here, colour and noses function to sharpen the visual

contrast between the two nations, depicting the US as grotesque and threatening, while affirming the Chinese ideological legitimacy and moral authority.



Figure 7.4. Atrocities Committed by US Imperialists in China.

Top-Right Image: Fifty years ago, US and Japanese military officers who invaded Chinese territory and slaughtered the Chinese people posed for a photo inside the imperial palace after occupying the Qing imperial palace [known as the Forbidden City]. Today, the US is once again supporting Japanese militarism and is invading the territories of China and Korea.

Middle-Centre Image: After the Eight-Nation Alliance occupied Beijing in 1900, their iron hooves marched into the Qing imperial palace.

Bottom-Left Image: Before the “liberation” [that is, the establishment of the PRC under CCP leadership in 1949], the US imperialist military forces stationed in China committed countless bloody crimes, including shootings, beatings, rapes, and robberies. This photograph is a record from the Qingdao Police Bureau archives,

documenting a specific case in which a US military truck killed a Chinese child named Liu Xiaoqing.

Bottom-Right Image: Before the “liberation”, the US imperialist military – colluding with the bandit clique of Chiang Kai-shek – freely established command posts across our sacred territory, using them as bases for the invasion of China. This photo shows the US Navy occupying Chinese property in Qingdao before its liberation.

December 1950, *China Pictorial*.

While the previous caricatures rely on grotesque distortion and symbolic exaggeration to vilify the US as a morally degenerate enemy, another visual strategy deployed during this period turns to historical reference. Figure 7.4, the series of historical photographs, published in the December 1950 issue of *China Pictorial* exemplifies how the early PRC mobilised visual framing to embed contemporary geopolitical conflict within a longer narrative of national humiliation, as discussed in Chapter 2 (Section 2.2). Formally, the composition of each image contributes to this ideological work. The first photograph in Figure 7.4 (the top-right image), depicting US and Japanese military officers posing inside the Qing imperial palace, functions as a visual tableau of conquest. Drawing on archival records of early twentieth-century US military attire (Cole, 2007), the officer positioned at the visual centre – wearing a khaki uniform and campaign cap – can be identified as a US officer, suggesting the leading role of the US in the imperialist occupation. The open leg seated posture of the front-row officers enlarges each individual’s spatial footprint, functioning as a subtle but effective nonverbal expression of territorial claim. Crucially, this performance of dominance unfolds within the symbolic space of the Forbidden City, a site historically associated with Chinese imperial sovereignty (Gao, 2016). By staging foreign military authority within this sacred national setting, the image visually enacts the violation of China’s political and cultural integrity. Through such compositional choices, the photograph documents a historical moment

of US invasion and actively participates in constructing a collective memory of humiliation, one that aligns past imperial incursions with contemporary antagonism (Wang, 2012). In this way, historical imagery is mobilised as a visual frame that links foreign aggression across time, reinforcing a nationalist narrative in which the US appears as a recurring agent within a longer continuum of Western aggression.

The centre image, a panoramic photograph of the Eight-Nation Alliance entering the palace grounds, extends the narrative logic established in the preceding image by translating foreign aggression into spatial terms. Organised along the architectural axis of the Forbidden City, the image foregrounds a ceremonial pathway that traditionally embodied imperial order and moral hierarchy. The dispersed presence of foreign soldiers across this space disrupts its visual symmetry and symbolic coherence, transforming the palace grounds into a scene of occupation, undermining their original ritual authority. The photograph appears to have been taken from the Inner Golden Water River²⁰ area, just in front of the Meridian Gate²¹, as indicated by the white marble bridges at the bottom of the image and the Huabiao²² visible along the right edge of the frame. The intrusion of foreign troops into this site of moral-political virtue can be read as a metaphor for the disruption of the traditional Confucian order. The elevated camera angle reinforces this reading by positioning the viewer as a distant witness (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020). While the

²⁰ The Inner Golden Water River is an integral part of the drainage system within the Forbidden City. Spanning the river are five white marble bridges, which symbolise the five cardinal virtues in Confucianism promoted by the emperor: benevolence (仁 ren), righteousness (义 yi), propriety (礼 li), wisdom (智 zhi), and fidelity (信 xin).

²¹ The Meridian Gate (Wumen) serves as the main entrance to the Forbidden City. Located at the centre of the southern wall, it is the largest of the four gates and the tallest structure within the palace complex.

²² Huabiao is a type of ceremonial column used in traditional Chinese architecture. Huabiao are traditionally erected in pairs in front of palaces and tombs. The prominence of their placement have made them one of the emblems of traditional Chinese culture.

sweeping perspective conveys the scale of the incursion, it simultaneously produces a sense of powerlessness: the viewer is compelled to observe the desecration of a space historically reserved for sovereign authority, yet remains unable to intervene, thus participating in the visual construction of national humiliation.

The third photograph (bottom-left image) of Figure 7.4 shifts the scale of violence from symbolic space to the vulnerable body. Documenting the death of a Chinese child caused by a US military vehicle, the image condenses imperial aggression into an intimate scene of suffering. The focus on bodily harm, especially involving a child, mobilises a powerful emotional register of innocence violated, collapsing geopolitical conflict into a morally legible encounter between aggressor and victim. This image illustrates Sontag's (2003) argument that images of suffering and violence position viewers ethically rather than merely informing them. Within the visual sequence, this image anchors abstract narratives of imperialism in lived and corporeal experience.

The final photograph (bottom-right image), depicting a US naval headquarters installed within a prominent building in Qingdao, introduces a quieter yet enduring form of domination. This image visualises the normalisation of foreign control through spatial appropriation. The building's central placement within the frame asserts visual authority, while the oblique and slightly low-angle perspective situates the viewer outside the space of power. As Kress and Van Leeuwen (2020) suggest, such perspectives visually encode distance, subordination, and exclusion, reinforcing the sense that what was once Chinese space has been rendered inaccessible and foreign. In general, the series of historical photographs in Figure 7.4 derive their political force from its deliberate recontextualisation of the past within

the communicative structure of *China Pictorial*. In Bock's (2020) terms, this process of image selection and re-contextualisation aligns historically disparate images with a shared ideological frame, transforming archival material into a coherent visual narrative. Within this narrative, the US is framed as a recurring imperial antagonist – an enduring agent of foreign aggression that links past invasions to present conflict. Through this reframing, moments of foreign intrusion, bodily suffering, and spatial occupation are sutured into a culturally resonant imagination of national humiliation, reinforcing the boundaries of an imagined political community defined through shared historical injury, moral grievance, and opposition to an external other.



Figure 7.5. Left Image: More than fifty years ago, US and Japanese imperialists colluded in the 1900 Allied intervention against China. This is a group photograph of US and Japanese officers after their desecration of the Imperial Palace in Beijing.

Fifty years later, US imperialism is again scheming to arm Japan for a war of aggression.

Right Image: During the occupation of Beijing by the Allied forces, US and Japanese invading troops commanded Qing soldiers to publicly massacre Chinese civilians in the streets.

March 1951, *China Pictorial*.

Just three months after the publication of Figure 7.4, *China Pictorial* reiterates the same mode of visual selection and re-contextualisation in March 1951, as shown in Figure 7.5, reinforcing a historically continuous imagination of foreign

aggression. Most notably, the left image in Figure 7.5 is a direct reprint of the top image from Figure 7.4. The recurrence of this photograph underscores its elevated symbolic status within the magazine's visual repertoire and signals its function as a visual shorthand for imperial humiliation. Through the caption's explicit temporal markers, such as the juxtaposition of "fifty years ago" and "fifty years later", the image is re-embedded within a renewed narrative context, drawing a direct line from the Eight-Nation Alliance invasion of 1900 to the geopolitical situation of the early 1950s. This act of repetition again exemplifies what Bock (2020) conceptualises as the re-contextualised image: an image is extracted from its original historical moment and repeatedly mobilised to serve shifting ideological needs. The visual effect is one of anachronistic continuity, in which distinct historical episodes are collapsed into a single, uninterrupted trajectory of imperialist aggression. As scholars of propaganda have noted (Taylor, 2003), such temporal flattening is a common technique in revolutionary media, used to legitimise current policies by projecting them as responses to perennial threats. The US, thus, is framed as a recurring imperial force whose presence links past humiliation to present threat.

By foregrounding the bodies of Chinese civilians wrapped in death shrouds, the right image in Figure 7.5 once again translates geopolitical conflict into a moral drama of victimisation and violence, echoing the visual logic established in the bottom-left image of Figure 7.4. The compositional division between armed soldiers wearing military hats and unarmed Chinese civilians without head coverings visually stabilises a binary moral order, in which foreign military power is associated with orchestrated brutality and the Chinese population with collective suffering. The image reiterates an established visual grammar that inscribes civilian death into the

broader narrative of national humiliation. In summary, Figure 7.5 demonstrates how *China Pictorial* relied on repetition, selective reuse, and strategic re-contextualisation to consolidate a coherent visual narrative across issues. Within the framework of China's imagined political community, such recurring images function as "imperial debris": the lingering material and emotional residues of imperial violence (Stoler, 2008, p. 191). These images operate as mnemonic devices that continually reactivate a shared memory of humiliation. Through this process, the US is consistently framed as a persistent imperial antagonist, reinforcing the symbolic boundaries of the imagined community by positioning national identity against an external and historically recurrent other.

In sum, *China Pictorial* during this period mobilised a repertoire of visual and discursive strategies – most notably grotesquely exaggerated cartoons, emotionally charged language, and the selective reuse of historical photographs – to construct a consistently antagonistic image of the US in wartime. At the institutional level, this editorial orientation reflected the magazine's function as a tightly controlled propaganda organ operating under the auspices of the CCP within a highly centralised media system (Zhao, 2012). At the level of visual framing, the deliberate recontextualisation of archival photographs depicting foreign occupation and military atrocities from earlier decades extended this antagonism beyond immediate geopolitical confrontation. By repeatedly embedding these historical images within contemporary narratives of conflict, the magazine collapsed temporal distance and visually sutured the Cold War present to a longer history of imperialist aggression. Within China's imagined political community, this strategy activated a culturally sedimented memory of national humiliation (Anderson, 2006; Wang, 2012),

positioning the US not merely as a situational adversary, but as the symbolic heir to a lineage of Western domination. The resulting enemy image depicts the US as an enduring agent of imperialist aggression that is morally degenerate and indifferent to human suffering. As discussed in Chapter 2 (Section 2.2), metaphors such as “thick-skinned” depicted the US as constantly and shamelessly aggressive, continuing its actions despite opposition and thus positioning it as a hostile force against “us”. This representational logic was not unidirectional. Media depictions and nationalist sentiment operated in a mutually constitutive relationship: propagandistic representations intensified collective emotions of grievance and moral outrage, while these sentiments, in turn, legitimised and sustained the continued use of highly polarised visual and rhetorical forms. The following section examines this global dimension of critique in greater detail.

7.3 From Abroad to Within: Constructing the US as a Global Antagonist through Worldwide Protest Imagery

This section examines how *China Pictorial* constructed the US as a global antagonist in its Cold War visual propaganda. Through an evolving set of visual strategies, including monumentalism (as discussed in Chapter 4, Section 4.2), montage, and geographic breadth, *China Pictorial* transformed protest imagery, whether domestic or international, into a choreographed narrative of anti-imperialist struggle. Beginning with highly orchestrated images of mass demonstrations within the PRC, and extending outward to represent global outrage – from Cuba and Latin America to Japan, Egypt, and even within the US – the magazine fused visual form with ideological content.



Figure 7.6. A nationwide mass demonstration by militias opposing the US.

Top-Left Image: Militia of the capital city in a large-scale anti-US demonstration.

Top-Right Image: Chairman Liu Shaoqi, Premier Zhou Enlai (centre), and Ke Qingshi, First Secretary of the Shanghai Municipal Committee of the CCP and Mayor of Shanghai, reviewing the militia units of Shanghai.

Middle- Left Image: Shanghai

Middle-Centre Image: Tianjin

Middle-Right Image: Shenyang

Bottom-Left Image: Guangzhou

Bottom-Centre left Image: Xi'an

Bottom- Centre right Image: Anti-US demonstration by youth militia of various ethnic groups in Urumqi

Bottom-Right Image: Militia from Qianlou, Fujian
June 1960, *China Pictorial*.

Figure 7.6, published in the June 1960 issue of *China Pictorial*, serves as a paradigmatic example of the orchestrated visual propaganda used during the early Cold War era in the PRC. This highly choreographed photo montage performs ideological work by projecting an image of national unity, and mass mobilisation in opposition to US imperialism. The collage is prominently dominated by a panoramic top-left image capturing an extensive militia demonstration in the Forbidden City, Beijing. The vast scale of demonstrators – organised in impeccably uniform rows

stretching towards historical architectural landmarks – communicates collective power, discipline, and purpose. The choice of a high vantage point accentuates the visual magnitude and unified precision, deliberately invoking the aesthetics of military parades rather than spontaneous public demonstrations. This image performs a symbolic function akin to Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1935), in which the sheer scale and geometric precision of the crowd aestheticise the regime's power and unity (Sontag, 1975; Welch, 2001).

The top-right image frames key Party leaders – Liu Shaoqi, Zhou Enlai, and Ke Qingshi – reviewing militia formations. Their gaze from above and the raised hand legitimise the demonstration as state-sanctioned and ideologically correct. Unlike Tilly and Tarrow's (2015) conceptualisation of contentious politics as bottom-up challenges to authority, these demonstrations are performances of obedience rather than resistance. As argued in Chapter 4 (Section 4.2), they are spectacles from above, institutionalised rituals designed to stage consent. The middle and lower rows of the montage represent various regional demonstrations: Tianjin, Shenyang, Xi'an, Urumqi, Guangzhou, Shanghai, and Fujian. Together with Beijing in the topmost image, these cities represent key urban centres across North, Northeast, Northwest, South, and Southeast China, respectively. This geographical breadth constructs a visual narrative of national simultaneity and cohesion. Demonstrators consistently appear in orderly lines or collective formations, their bodies disciplined and synchronised. Common visual elements include raised fists, symbolic of resistance and unity, uniform clothing (often military or worker-style), and coherent, orderly marching formations. Many individuals are seen carrying rifles or standing beside artillery, but no acts of violence are depicted. This deliberate visual choice

underscores China's capacity for armed struggle while simultaneously preserving a sense of moral dignity and restraint.

Each photograph contributes to a mosaic of patriotic fervour, reinforcing the idea that the entire nation – across ethnic, regional, and professional divides – is unified in opposition to US imperialism. This coherence constructs a sense of unity mobilised against a common enemy, reflecting the nation being imagined as “a deep, horizontal comradeship” (Anderson, 2006, p. 7). In addition, the repetition of orderly protest scenes aligns with Billig's (1995, p. 93) emphasis on the routine “flagging” of the nation, as national identity is reinforced through recurring and standardised symbolic forms. Within this coherent visual grammar, China is portrayed as a unified, disciplined, and morally awakened body politic standing in opposition to the imperialist enemy represented by the US. While the US is cast as the antithesis of moral and political legitimacy – a hostile external force that stands in contrast to China's internal harmony and ethical resolve. The conspicuous absence of physical violence in these representations serves to reinforce China's position as a righteous defender of global justice.



Figure 7.7. The Chinese people fully support their Cuban brothers.

Top-Left Image: In recent days, people from across the country have carried out large-scale demonstrations to resolutely support the Cuban people's just struggle against US imperialist aggression and in defence of Cuba's sovereignty and independence. The image shows citizens and militia members of the capital gathered in front of Tiananmen, raising their fists and chanting slogans such as "Support the Cuban Government's Five Just Demands!" and "The US Must Not Be Allowed to Intervene in Cuba Through the United Nations!"

Bottom-Centre Image: Advanced producers from various ethnic groups at the Seven-one Cotton Textile Factory in Xinjiang write a letter on behalf of all factory workers to the Cuban people, firmly supporting Prime Minister Castro's televised address and public statement defending Cuba's sovereignty and independence.

Bottom-Right Image: People from all walks of life in Shanghai hold a powerful demonstration to express solidarity with their Cuban brothers.

December 1962, *China Pictorial*.

Figures 7.7 to 7.11 further showcased transnational solidarity and global outrage in response to US imperialism. Figure 7.7 presents the PRC's moral and ideological solidarity with Cuba in opposition to US imperialism. The most prominent image – featuring a large-scale demonstration in Tiananmen Square – depicts participants raising clenched fists and holding multiple portraits of Friedrich Engels. However, as noted in an interview with Liwei Huang, Director of the *China*

Pictorial Image Centre, many of the portraits and slogans visible in images from this period were not physically present during the actual events (author interview with Huang, March 30, 2023). Instead, they were inserted during post-production editing to achieve a clearer and ideologically potent visual effect. This is particularly evident in the bottom-right image of the layout, where the inserted portrait of Engels and the textual slogans appear with striking clarity, sharply contrasting with the photographic grain and resolution of the surrounding visual field. According to Huang, people were often instructed to hold blank placards during filming to facilitate such insertions during the editorial process (author interview with Huang, March 30, 2023).

This practice foregrounds the image as a deliberately constructed visual artefact designed to serve specific ideological functions. The post-production insertion of Engels' portrait operates as a semiotic anchor (Barthes, 1977), stabilising the meaning of the scene and linking the anti-US demonstration to the revolutionary mission that Engels symbolises. Through the integration of Engels' iconic visage with carefully choreographed mass formations, a contingent political event is recontextualised as part of a historically sanctioned ideological struggle, thereby transforming protest into a manifestation of revolutionary continuity. This visual strategy also mirrors the monumentalism and socialist realism, which sought to aestheticise political legitimacy through images that glorified collective will and idealised the revolutionary mission. Monumentalism, as discussed in Chapter 4 (Section 4.2), refers to the use of scale, visual symmetry, and meticulously orchestrated mass formations to generate a timeless and awe-inspiring image of state authority. Socialist realism, the officially sanctioned aesthetic doctrine of the Soviet

Union from the 1930s onward, did not aim to represent life as it was, but instead projected life as it should be – depicting the Party’s ideological trajectory as historically inevitable and morally righteous (Rieser, 1957).

This strategy is further illustrated in the bottom-centre image, which features ethnic minority textile workers from Xinjiang participating in a letter-writing campaign to express their support for the Cuban cause. The workers are gathered in a disciplined formation, their gazes aligned, and their composition carefully staged to project both political awareness and collective resolve. The inclusion of women and ethnic minority figures reinforces the Party-state’s effort to construct a vision of inclusive, pan-national revolutionary unity. Positioned behind the group is a prominently displayed banner that reads, “The US Will Be Defeated, Cuba Will Triumph” (美国必败，古巴必胜). The slogan and the carefully staged composition operate not only as articulations of internationalist uniformity and anti-imperialist commitment, but also as a rhetorical affirmation of national cohesion: it suggests that even China’s geographic and ethnic peripheries are ideologically synchronised with the centre’s anti-US narrative. The harmonious integration of gender and ethnic difference further contributes to the portrayal of a morally unified and ideologically purified revolutionary body politic.

As a whole, these images employ monumental visual scale, aesthetic orderliness, and ideological saturation to depict a unified revolutionary fervour that speaks on behalf of other oppressed nations in condemning the US. The use of terms “Cuban Brothers” in the accompanying titles further extends this logic by symbolically incorporating foreign revolutionary subjects into China’s imagined community, thereby expanding its boundaries through ideological kinship. In doing

so, the images recast political protest as a stabilised visual narrative of transnational solidarity, framing anti-imperialist resistance as a common moral and political project that transcends national boundaries. By visually linking contemporary Chinese demonstrators to the iconic visages of Marxist predecessors – and by incorporating regional and ethnic diversity into the visual field – the Party-state situates present-day mobilisation within a continuous revolutionary lineage while presenting the nation as internally unified. The US's moral failure is not directly depicted, but becomes the focal point of collective denunciation.



Figure 7.8. Fury against US Imperialism burns across Latin America.

Top-Centre Image: On September 2, the Cuban people held a national mass rally in the capital city of Havana to support the revolution and to oppose US imperialist aggression and interference. The image shows a corner of the rally venue.

Top-Right Image: The Cuban people enthusiastically support the government's nationalisation of American enterprises. Workers from the nationalised US-owned Cuban Telephone Company carry a coffin, symbolising the burial of US imperialism.

Middle-Left Image: On September 21, the people of Panama held a demonstration in the Canal Zone to protest against the occupation of the Panama Canal Zone by US imperialism and to demand the complete restoration of sovereignty over the Canal Zone.

Middle-Centre Image: In the capital of Puerto Rico, San Juan, tens of thousands gathered in a mass rally to oppose the control of Puerto Rico by US imperialism.

Middle-Right Image: Peruvian workers held a strike meeting to oppose the plundering of Peru's petroleum resources by US monopoly capital.

Bottom-Left Image: The crude interference of US imperialism in Mexico's internal affairs has aroused the anger of the Mexican people. The image shows students staging an anti-US demonstration.

Bottom-Centre Image: The Colombian people's struggle against the plundering of petroleum resources by US imperialism has further intensified. They support the struggle of the government and workers of the state-owned oil company and demand the revision and abolition of contracts with US companies that harm national interests. Pictured are a group of striking oil workers in the oil city of Barrancabermeja.

Bottom-Right Image: "We want Cuba, not Yankees" – this is the slogan of the people of Santiago, the capital of Chile, during a rally expressing their support for Cuba and opposition to US imperialist aggression.

October 1960, *China Pictorial*.

Figure 7.8 marks a further expansion of *China Pictorial's* visual strategy by extending anti-US contention into a transnational register. Drawing on images from multiple sites across Latin America, the magazine frames geographically dispersed protests as manifestations of a unified global struggle against US imperialism. Through this act of visual aggregation, local demonstrations are stripped of their contextual specificity and recontextualised as evidence of a structurally exploitative and globally opposed hegemon.

Figure 7.8 relies on repetition to frame the protests. The persistent depiction of large crowds, raised arms, and protest banners produces a recognisable visual syntax of popular resistance (Tilly, 2006). This visual grammar accentuates both the magnitude and spontaneity of anti-imperialist sentiment, projecting an image of revolutionary fervour that is at once visceral and immediate. Its significance becomes clear when contrasted with the aesthetics of Chinese anti-US mobilisation (Figures 7.6 and 7.7). Reflecting the institutional role of Party media, representations of domestic demonstrations in *China Pictorial* employ compositional symmetry and

disciplined choreography to project unity and political authority in line with the Party's aesthetic orientation. These features serve as visual markers of state-guided unity and political maturity. By contrast, the Latin American protests are framed as emotionally charged yet visually unordered. Placards are hand-painted and individualised, bodies appear loosely coordinated, and spatial arrangements are irregular. This contrast extends to typographic treatment. The headlines in Figures 7.7 and 7.8 similarly reveal a distinction between standardised printed typeface and rough, handwritten lettering. Even the layout design reflects this ethos: some images in the bottom two rows are tilted diagonally – a visual feature rarely, if ever, employed in depictions of Chinese domestic protest, where images are aligned with precision to convey order, authority, and political legitimacy.

Importantly, this contrast in *China Pictorial* performs a dual ideological function. On the one hand, it affirms solidarity with struggles in the global South by visually situating them within a shared anti-imperialist front. On the other hand, it implicitly elevates China as a politically advanced revolutionary actor whose disciplined mobilisation exemplifies the successful institutionalisation of revolutionary will. The US, by contrast, is rendered visible only through the scale of opposition it provokes: an absent yet structuring other, not directly shown but essential to the organisation of meaning, whose presumed moral failure unifies otherwise disparate movements across space. To sum up, through selective image choice and strategic recontextualisation, Figure 7.7 and 7.8 construct a layered geopolitical message in which anti-US resistance appears universal, and China emerges simultaneously as comrade-in-struggle and vanguard-in-experience within an international socialist imaginary.



Figure 7.9. Cut off the claws of US aggressors.

Central Section (4 images):

Top-Left Image: On April 21, ten thousand people held an anti-US demonstration in Mexico City to fervently celebrate the Cuban people's victory over the US' mercenary forces. Pictured here are students participating in the protest.

Top-Centre Image: On April 18, workers and labourers in Moscow marched in groups to the US Embassy to protest against the US invasion of Cuba. This image captures the crowd protesting outside the US Embassy.

Middle-Left Image: On April 21, the African Association in Cairo convened a meeting to denounce the crimes of US imperialist aggression against Cuba and to celebrate the Cuban people's victory. This image shows attendees unanimously passing a resolution protesting the US invasion of Cuba.

Middle-Centre Image: On April 19, 12,000 workers and citizens in Tokyo held a mass rally to protest the US's armed aggression against Cuba and to support the Cuban people's struggle against US imperialism.

Right Vertical Section (3 images):

Top-Right Image: The Cuban rebel army and revolutionary militias captured a large cache of US weapons. This image shows a US Sherman tank seized near the landing zone at Playa Girón (Bay of Pigs).

Middle-Right Image: Captured US mercenaries are being escorted into the Cuban interior.

Bottom-Right Image: The son (pictured right) of the Cuban counterrevolutionary leader Miró Cardona, who had fled to the US, was also taken prisoner by the Cuban revolutionary forces.

Bottom Horizontal Section (3 images):

Bottom-Left Image: In the days leading up to the invasion, US mercenaries at a base in the Caribbean reviewed plans to carry out an armed landing.

Bottom-Centre Image: On April 16, at a US mercenary recruitment centre in Miami – an operational base for the invasion of Cuba – fugitives assembled by the US were undergoing physical examinations.

Bottom-Right Image: A simplified map showing the situation in Cuba.
June 1961, *China Pictorial*.

Figure 7.9 adds a new dimension to the visual narrative of global opposition to the US by shifting the emphasis from protest alone to the visualisation of imperial failure and culpability. The spatial organisation of the images across the page becomes a vehicle for political meaning-making, guiding the viewer through an ideologically structured narrative arc. The layout is divided into three principal zones – an upper central block, a right vertical column, and a bottom horizontal strip – which together produce a visual trajectory that moves from collective resistance, to imperial defeat, and finally to an evidentiary documentation of US militarism.

The clustering of protest scenes at the centre of the page, like the images that have been discussed before, aggregates geographically dispersed demonstrations into a single visual field of simultaneity. Such aggregation aligns heterogeneous events within a shared ideological frame, transforming protest into evidence of global moral consensus. This visual consensus is then placed in deliberate contrast with images of defeated or captured agents of US power positioned along the right margin. The composition establishes a clear moral hierarchy, placing popular resistance at the centre and relegating US power to a peripheral, isolated, and discredited position. The accompanying captions reinforce this moral framing, using language such as

“crimes,” “mercenaries,” and “captured” to construct a binary between Cuba’s righteous resistance and the US’s illegitimate aggression. The US is thus framed as both militarily unsuccessful and ethically compromised in the judgment of the international community.

The bottom strip of the layout presents what is framed as documentary evidence of US aggression. In contrast to the emotionally charged protest imagery above, these photographs adopt a more observational and documentary stance, emphasising logistical detail and bureaucratic process. The images are presented with vignette-style shadowing and are deliberately tilted, giving the layout the appearance of a scrapbook or fragments of found imagery. This visual treatment disrupts symmetry and lends the layout a quasi-archival quality, presenting the images as assembled evidence. Maps, recruitment scenes, and administrative procedures are selectively visualised to instruct interpretation, positioning US intervention as premeditated and morally indefensible. For example, the simplified military map of Cuba serves an overtly pedagogical function. Maps are not neutral artefacts but are embedded with ideological intent (Harley, 1989). Annotated with directional arrows marking the sites of US invasion, landing operations, aerial bombardment, and subsequent defeat, the map reduces the complexity of spatial dynamics into a didactic schematic that accentuates the aggressive posture of the US and the defensive orientation of Cuban forces.

Overall, Figure 7.9 demonstrates how *China Pictorial* deploys spatial composition as a framing device that transforms disparate photographs into a coherent ideological text. Through this spatial choreography, global protest, imperial defeat, and moral exposure are woven into a single visual argument. Situated within

the broader geopolitical context of Cold War antagonism between China and the US, this layout does not simply depict opposition to US interventionism; it visualises a world order in which US power is delegitimised, revolutionary resistance is universalised, and China's alignment with global anti-imperialist struggle appears both natural and morally justified.



Figure 7.10. On November 27, 1965, tens of thousands of people from more than forty US states marched in a massive protest in front of the White House against the escalation of the war. They carried the flag of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam (left) and the national flag of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (right), expressing the US people's support for the Vietnamese people courageously resisting US aggression.

January 1966, *China Pictorial*.



Figure 7.11. The wave of struggle led by US youth and students against the war of aggression in Vietnam, against racial discrimination, against indoctrination in education, and in defence of democratic rights for students grew ever stronger. This image shows university students in Oakland, California, courageously confronting police forces sent to suppress their protest against the US government's war in Vietnam.

July 1968, *China Pictorial*.

China Pictorial also paid particular attention to protests within the US itself.

Figures 7.10 and 7.11, published in January 1966 and July 1968 respectively, appeared at the height of the Vietnam War (1955-1975), a period marked by escalating US military intervention in Southeast Asia and intensifying domestic resistance to the war. Their selection was therefore not incidental: at a time when US claims to moral leadership rested heavily on the legitimacy of its intervention in

Southeast Asia, images of internal dissent provided especially potent visual material for challenging that legitimacy.

In Figure 7.10, the prominent display of the flags of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam within a protest on US soil performs a precise ideological function. In the context of the Vietnam War, these flags signify the symbolic presence of the war's principal adversaries at the centre of the imperial power itself. Paired with the headline – rendered in bold, enlarged characters – “The US People Have Spoken!” (美国人民说话了!), the image frames the protest as evidence that opposition to the war originates from within US society. Responsibility for condemning US militarism is transferred to “the US people,” enabling *China Pictorial* to distinguish between the US state as an imperial aggressor and segments of its population as potential moral allies. This distinction resonates with research on blame attribution in political communication, which demonstrates that mediated discourse frequently separates political elites or state institutions from “the people” in order to reassign moral agency and responsibility (Hameleers et al., 2017). In this framing, *China Pictorial* shows an implicit moral contrast in which Chinese political discourse positions itself as aligned with popular justice rather than US state violence.

Figure 7.11 sharpens this argument by foregrounding confrontation between protesters and state authority. Police officers are confined to the upper-left corner of the image background and rendered visually marginal, while protesters occupy the central and dominant portion of the frame. This spatial hierarchy privileges the presence of the protesters and directs the viewer's attention toward popular resistance. The compositional opposition between unarmed protesters and a helmeted

police formation equipped with batons and other instruments of force establishes a stark visual contrast. Within the geopolitical context of the Vietnam War, *China Pictorial* visually frames US state power as being deployed against actors positioned as morally justified resisters.

Figures 7.10 and 7.11 illuminate *China Pictorial*'s sophisticated visual strategy during the 1960s, wherein images of US domestic dissent were recontextualised as indictments of imperialism and validations of global revolutionary consciousness. These images collectively chart a spectrum of US protest – from organised, mass demonstrations to immediate, corporeal confrontations with state violence. Their publication first exposed the internal contradictions and political instabilities of the US, and second incorporated US anti-war resistance into a broader imaginary of transnational anti-imperialist solidarity. *China Pictorial* thus reinforced the legitimacy of global socialist resistance while simultaneously delegitimising the moral authority of US hegemony.

In general, the anti-US protest images published in *China Pictorial* between 1950 and 1971 reveal a consistent visual pattern shaped by ideological priorities, in which the US is positioned as the antithesis of socialist ethics, revolutionary unity, and global justice. Across domestic and international contexts, *China Pictorial* deployed divergent aesthetic modes – ranging from the rigid symmetry of Chinese militia parades to the spontaneous fervour of Latin American uprisings and the embattled resistance of US youth – to construct a layered, transnational visual narrative of anti-US opposition. The stylistic contrasts between ordered and disordered protest, discipline and spontaneity, do not disrupt the ideological coherence of the visual corpus; rather, through editorial selection and visual re-

contextualisation, these differences are rendered intelligible within a single narrative of anti-imperialist struggle, one that frames China as a politically advanced and organisationally mature participant in a global movement against domination. It is precisely this internal coherence, shaped by the Chinese party-state media system, that enables the images to function effectively within the geopolitical context of Cold War China-US antagonism, collectively casting US imperialism as morally bankrupt and widely condemned. The following section, therefore, examines how *China Pictorial* shifted from visualising opposition to affirming China's own moral authority, articulating Chinese spiritual victories through images of wartime resilience, ethical conduct, and transnational humanistic solidarity.

7.4 Chinese Spiritual Victories

As Sontag (1975) suggests, the official art of communist regimes often serves to promote an idealised vision of political virtue, framing politics not merely as governance but as the highest form of moral and aesthetic expression. As discussed in Chapter 2 (Section 2.2), China's self-representation was shaped through a continual narrative of cleansing historical humiliation and pursuing national rejuvenation, a process that relied on constant comparison with other nations, and China always wins (Gries, 2004). This section examines how, during periods of wartime tension with the US, *China Pictorial* deployed visual strategies to celebrate Chinese resilience, collectivism, and humane conduct, particularly toward US prisoners and marginalised groups within the US, thus reinforcing a narrative of China as the moral victor in a US-China contest of ideologies.

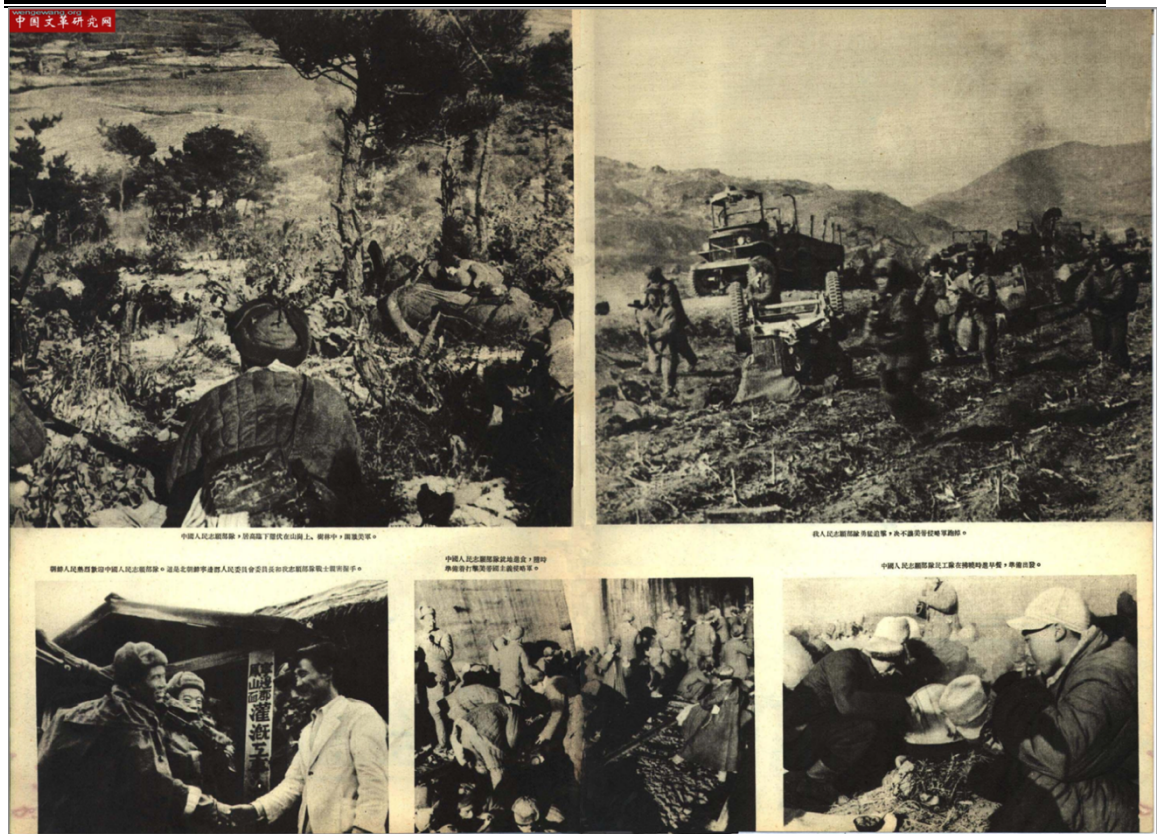


Figure 7.12. *Top-Left Image:* The Chinese People's Volunteer Army (CPVA), attacking from elevated terrain and forested areas, encircled the US forces.

Top-Right Image: Our CPVA courageously pursues, never allowing the US imperialist troops to escape.

Bottom-Centre Image: The CPVA was eating on the spot, always ready to strike against the US imperialist invaders.

January 1951, *China Pictorial*.

Figure 7.12 constructs the US as an adversary without direct depiction. While US troops do not appear in the images themselves, captions and compositional cues anchored in the Korean War consistently position US forces as the unseen target of Chinese military action. This representational logic exemplifies how *China Pictorial* mobilised visual framing to transform absence into ideological presence, placing the US as a threatening but ultimately defeatable imperialist other. The top-left photograph foregrounds Chinese military superiority through compositional cues that align vision, terrain, and movement with moral and strategic ascendancy. As Kress and Van Leeuwen (2020) argues, visual angle is intrinsically tied to power;

here, elevated vantage points and downward gazes place Chinese soldiers in positions of control, naturalising dominance through visual angle and spatial hierarchy. The use of dense foliage and rugged terrain furthers the narrative of intelligent adaptation to the environment. Such framing aligns with Maoist guerrilla discourse, in which strategic ingenuity, environmental adaptation, and collective discipline compensate for material inferiority (Mao, 2000). Within this cultural context, Chinese soldiers are mythologised as resilient, wise and morally grounded actors, implicitly contrasted with an enemy characterised by technological dependence and imperial arrogance. This implied contrast is reinforced in the top-right image that foregrounds forward movement and abandoned enemy equipment. The presence of discarded vehicles functions as visual evidence of retreat and failure, while the advancing Chinese column signifies persistence and resolve. Through captioning that stresses refusal to allow the enemy to escape, the images shift the narrative from defensive resistance to justified pursuit. The image reaffirms the dichotomy of moral strength versus imperialist cowardice, a pervasive trope in revolutionary and wartime Chinese visual culture (Hung, 2011).

The lower images narrow the focus from battlefield tactics to everyday practices of endurance and discipline. Although the bottom-left and bottom-right images do not explicitly reference the US and are therefore excluded from my dataset, their significance within the broader visual framing of the Korean War remains illuminating. Scenes of soldiers eating in place or preparing for combat at dawn foreground bodily regulation. The body is not presented as a site of indulgence or rest, but rather as an instrument of revolutionary struggle – dedicated to a higher ideal. This disciplined collectivism reflects the socialist ideal of ascetic sacrifice

(Leese, 2011). By portraying ethical virtues of self-sacrifice and perseverance – characterised by a willingness to endure hardship and engage in tireless labour – the image reinforces a narrative of spiritual victory, through which moral excellence is presented as a decisive advantage in the struggle against the US.

In addition, the bottom-left image, portraying North Korean local representatives welcoming Chinese troops, further situates military action within a framework of popular consent. The act of greeting and handshake functions as a performative affirmation of legitimacy, visually aligning armed intervention with the will of local communities. Such imagery resonates with the mass-line principle, in which political and military authority is represented as deriving from the people themselves (Schurmann, 1966). Within the context of the Korean War, this visual logic casts Chinese military presence as protective and solidaristic, in contrast to the imperial aggression attributed to the US. In all, by foregrounding discipline, sacrifice, and popular alignment, Figure 7.12 constructed a moral environment in which confrontation with the US appeared not only ethically justified but also destined to succeed.



Figure 7.13. *Top-Left Image:* The US aggressor soldiers who fought for the big bosses of Wall Street have laid down their arms; this is the path to saving their lives.

Centre top-Left Image: A large number of captured US soldiers; they will have the chance to go home and see their families.

Centre bottom-Left Image: The US soldiers who fled in disarray during battle were taken to detention centres where they had hot water to wash their faces.

Bottom-Left Image: They have sufficient food.

Centre-Right Image: They are treated generously; medical workers inspect the sanitation of their quarters and care about their lives.

Bottom-Right Image: Ironclad evidence of the US using the Japanese: US imperialists employ former Japanese troops in the Korean War. Pictured is Japanese reconnaissance soldier Taniyama Yoshio, captured by the CPVA.

February 1951, *China Pictorial*.

Figure 7.13 constructs China's moral superiority in wartime through a carefully orchestrated visual framing of humanitarian governance. The image juxtaposes the treatment of prisoners by the Communist Chinese forces with the implied moral corruption of their US counterparts. The top-left photograph depicts captured or surrendering US soldiers escorted by Chinese troops. Chinese soldiers, depicted pointing their rifles at a column of US prisoners of war, are endowed with absolute visual authority. Meanwhile, US soldiers are framed as ordinary individuals misled by capitalist elites, a distinction explicitly articulated through captions that attribute responsibility to "Wall Street bosses". This representational strategy again mobilises a mode of blame attribution in political communication, discussed in relation to Figures 7.10 and 7.11, which separates state institutions from "the people" in order to reassign moral agency and responsibility. It also reflects a Maoist dialectic of class struggle that distinguishes imperialist leadership from rank-and-file soldiers, framing the latter as politically misled and therefore potentially transformable through socialist re-education (Mao, 1961; Schurmann, 1966). Within this framework, captivity is presented as an opportunity for moral redemption through socialist re-education. The humanisation of enemy soldiers, therefore, functions as a politically charged demonstration of socialist moral virtue.

Scenes depicting prisoners' daily routines – washing, eating, and receiving medical care – further reinforce this moral framing. By foregrounding order, hygiene, and care, the images construct the Chinese People's Volunteer Army (CPVA) as a rational, disciplined, and morally advanced organisation. In Bock's (2020) model, such imagery completes the visual frame by encouraging viewers to cognitively and emotionally resolve the scene in favour of Chinese civilisational

superiority, contrasting socialist governance with the perceived moral bankruptcy of capitalist warfare. The prominent inclusion of female medical personnel in the centre-right image of Figure 7.13 intensifies this moral claim. Three Chinese female medical workers are positioned in the foreground, their Red Cross armbands conspicuously displayed. They hold folders and pieces of pristine white fabric, likely bed linens, symbolising practices of record-keeping, evaluation, and hygienic maintenance. This image foregrounds sanitary inspection and welfare provisioning. Scholars have long observed that media and state apparatuses have consistently mobilised representations of women's nurturing and caring qualities (socially constructed attributes) to frame governance as benevolent and humane, particularly during periods of political tension or conflict (Lake, 2019; Rose, 2022; Yuval-Davis, 1998). In this context, *China Pictorial* strategically draws upon socially constructed ideals of femininity to project an image of Chinese national compassion and moral legitimacy, positioning China as a benevolent caregiver in contrast to the US.

Through depiction of a captured Japanese soldier, the image in the bottom-right corner marks a striking tonal shift – from one of benevolence to one of accusation. This shift is further underscored by its distinctive framed layout, which sets the image apart from the surrounding visuals and reinforces the accusatory tone. This visual rupture reactivates collective memories of Japanese wartime aggression and repositions the Korean War within the longer historical narrative of East Asia's subjugation under foreign imperialism. Through this visual and textual insertion, the image positions the US as a neo-colonial power complicit in the resurrection of Japanese militarism. This is a particularly potent indictment in post-war Asia, where memories of Japanese wartime brutality remained vivid and unresolved. By visually

and narratively associating the US with the resurgence of Japanese militarism, the image implicates it in a broader project of imperialist collaboration. Within China's imagined community of Century of Humiliation, this association carries profound emotional and moral weight, transforming the contemporary conflict into a continuation of historical injustice. In this sense, Figure 7.13 does not simply propagate China's humane treatment of prisoners. Instead, it mobilises image selection to integrate wartime conduct, historical memory, and national imagination into a coherent moral narrative. The degradation of the US image and the elevation of China's moral authority are achieved simultaneously through this process.

China Pictorial also presents a visual strategy of seeking identification from within the US itself as a means of constructing China's moral and ideological superiority during the Cold War. Figure 7.14 -7.15 serve as artefacts illustrating how Chinese propaganda visually encoded solidarity with groups marginalised or antagonised within the sociopolitical context of the US. These groups, including African Americans and leftist intellectuals, were reframed in Chinese media as righteous and sympathetic actors within a broader anti-imperialist struggle led by revolutionary China.



Figure 7.14 portrays a group of African Americans participating in a protest.

²³ *Quotations from Chairman Mao* (毛主席语录), first published in 1964 and widely used during the Cultural Revolution, is a collection of Mao Zedong's speeches and writings edited by the People's Liberation Army under Lin Biao's direction. Designed as a political manual to promote Maoist ideology, it became one of the most printed books in world history, serving as both a personal guide and a tool for political mobilisation.

conventionally functions as the domain of the ideal, and Zang (2025) argues that, in traditional Chinese culture, the left was historically regarded as a superior position of honour associated with the sun. Drawing on these visual and cultural conventions, this compositional arrangement constructs Mao's image and text as sources of moral clarity and revolutionary ideological guidance, projecting their significance beyond China's national boundaries. Most of the other figures in the image peer from behind, crowding closely together as they strain to face the camera. Their collective action of craning toward the camera lens suggests a dual movement: an eagerness to bear witness and a physical manifestation of communal solidarity under pressure. This sense of unity is born not merely of ideological agreement, but of shared vulnerability and mutual reliance in the face of systemic violence. The red textual overlay on the left of Figure 7.14, quoting Mao's 1963 statement in support of African American liberation, plays a decisive role in completing the visual framing of China's spiritual victories. By highlighting Mao's words in red, *China Pictorial* explicitly anchors the photograph within the ideological discourse of socialist internationalism. This textual-visual coupling exemplifies how images are recontextualised within media narratives to serve specific political ends (Bock, 2020). The image articulates China's spiritual triumph not through the conquest of others, but through its capacity to inspire and morally uplift those marginalised and oppressed within imperialist structures. It becomes visual proof of China's ethical leadership in global struggles against oppression.



Figure 7.15. On the night of last year's National Day celebrations, on the Tiananmen rostrum, the progressive US writer Anna Louise Strong requested Chairman Mao to autograph her copy of the *Quotations from Chairman Mao*. This "red treasure book" includes the famous assertion that "imperialism and all reactionaries are paper tigers," a statement Chairman Mao had first made during a conversation with Strong more than twenty years earlier in Yan'an.
December 1967, *China Pictorial*.

Figure 7.15 extends China's spiritual triumph by depicting Mao signing a copy of the *Quotations from Chairman Mao* for Anna Louise Strong. Strong was a prominent US journalist and longtime sympathiser with socialist movements, so she became a target of intense governmental scrutiny. She was placed on the US Department of State's security watchlists and was repeatedly denied passport issuance (Schrecker, 1998). In dominant US discourse, Strong was frequently depicted as naive and dangerous – an individual accused of consciously overlooking

the authoritarian dimensions of communist regimes in favour of an idealised, romanticised vision of socialism. Set against the backdrop of Tiananmen, Figure 7.15 shows Strong, wearing a Red Guard²⁴ armband, appearing reverent and deeply engaged. Holding the *Quotations* open with both hands. Mao, smiling gently and responding to Strong's gaze, appears as the benevolent source of wisdom, while Strong occupies the role of a receptive and reverent interlocutor.

Strong's depictions in Figure 7.15 serve a dual function. First, it legitimises her as a Western intellectual who has seen through the hypocrisies of imperialism and has consciously chosen ideological alignment with socialist China. Second, it symbolises a category of individuals largely cast out from Cold War US legitimacy: the communist sympathiser, the intellectual dissenter, and the so-called "un-American" voice marginalised within the dominant Cold War discourse. Yet Chinese media reclaims these figures of the US leftists as morally coherent and righteous actors within China's imagined revolutionary community, while Maoist China's role as the guiding force of this community becomes clear. The signed *Quotations* thus becomes a tangible symbol of ideological conversion and moral clarity. It sanctifies the text as an instrument of global justice, one to be wielded not only by Chinese citizens but also by the righteous among the Western intelligentsia.

Figures 7.13, 7.14, and 7.15 contribute to a coherent visual narrative that reconstructs the power geography of the Cold War world by redefining power as moral authority capable of reversing historical humiliation. In this visual order,

²⁴ The Red Guards (红卫兵, Hongweibing) were mass student-led paramilitary social movements mobilised by Mao Zedong during the early phase of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). Comprised primarily of high school and university students, the Red Guards aimed to purge alleged "bourgeois" elements, enforce ideological conformity, and defend Maoist orthodoxy through direct action, often involving violent campaigns against perceived enemies of the revolution.

power is no longer anchored in economic wealth or military supremacy, but in moral legitimacy and revolutionary solidarity. African Americans and leftist Western intellectuals – figures marginalised within US society – are reframed as bearers of historical truth and ethical insight. By embracing them, China asserts a claim to ethical and spiritual ascendancy. The image of China is constructed as a source of moral guidance, while the corresponding image of the US is portrayed as being abandoned by its own people.

7.5 Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that between 1950 and 1971 – an era of acute Sino-US confrontation in the early Cold War – Chinese visual propaganda, exemplified by *China Pictorial*, constructed an unrelentingly antagonistic and morally polarised image of the US. Under conditions of direct military conflict and ideological rivalry, this period exhibited the highest proportion of negative visual framing, with the strong rejection frame overwhelmingly dominant.

Within this geopolitical context, three principal visual strategies structured the rejection of the US. First, through grotesque caricatures and satirical captions, Chinese media constructed the US as a shameless aggressor who repeated the historical pattern of Western imperial humiliation. By visually linking contemporary US actions to earlier episodes of foreign domination, these images embedded the Cold War conflict within China's longer historical memory of the Century of Humiliation, rendering US aggression as a continuation of imperial injustice.

Second, the US's image as a global imperialist power was reinforced through the curated display of both international and domestic resistance. *China Pictorial* presented anti-US protest as a worldwide phenomenon, integrating domestically

organised demonstrations, international revolutionary movements, and scenes of dissent within the US itself into a unified ideological narrative. Through these visual framing practices, the US appeared increasingly isolated and morally discredited, while China was positioned as the vanguard of global anti-imperialist struggle.

Third, the chapter demonstrated how China claimed moral superiority within the contest with the US by visually framing its wartime conduct as humane, disciplined, and spiritually elevated. Images of Chinese resilience, ethical restraint, and humanitarian treatment of prisoners were contrasted with representations of US moral decay. Particularly significant was the strategy of aligning China with oppressed groups within US society, such as African Americans and leftist Western intellectuals. By incorporating these marginalised figures into China's revolutionary narrative, *China Pictorial* framed internal US contradictions as evidence of the moral bankruptcy of US imperialism.

These visual strategies were enabled and stabilised by the institutional logic of the Chinese media system, which, during this period of intense Party control, prioritised ideological clarity and discipline. Within this system, *China Pictorial* functioned as a key ideological apparatus tasked with setting the tone of revolutionary discourse, ensuring that representations of the US fully conformed to Party ideology. Ultimately, during this period, *China Pictorial* constructed a consistently hostile image of the US as aggressive, immoral, and globally isolated. This enemy image was not an end in itself, but a mirror through which China affirmed its own self-image as righteous, humane, and morally superior, positioning itself as a legitimate leader of global anti-imperialist struggle.

**CHAPTER 8. A NEW AND GLAMOROUS WORLD: TAKING US
CULTURE BY STORM, 1972-2000**

*“In the past 100 years, the influence exerted by the US on the Earth has been greater than that of any other country. The past 100 years can indeed be called the ‘US Century’... What important things of the 20th century have not been marked by the US? Looking towards the future, in various fields, the efforts of the superpower to establish a unipolar system will inevitably stimulate greater efforts by other strong nations to promote global diversity, surpassing the US Century.”*²⁵ (Sanlian Life Week, 1999, p. 1)

8.1 Introduction

This editorial reflection, published at the close of the 20th century, succinctly captures the ambivalence with which China viewed the global ascendancy of the US. While acknowledging the unprecedented cultural, technological, and political influence exerted by the US during the 20th century, it also gestures toward a future in which emerging powers, including China, would actively reposition themselves as counterweights to US-led global dominance. This tension between admiration and resistance is emblematic of the broader media environment in China between 1972 and 2000, a period during which US-China relations experienced a profound transformation.

As discussed in Chapter 2 (Section 2.3), this shift began with President Richard Nixon’s historic visit to China in 1972. The visit symbolised the thawing of diplomatic relations, inaugurating a period of strategic alignment against the Soviet Union and initiating new avenues for US-China economic and cultural engagement

²⁵ Unless otherwise stated, all quotations from the magazines cited in this chapter are translated from the original Chinese by the author.

(Goh, 2005; Tao, 2016). Following Mao Zedong's death and Deng Xiaoping's rise to power, China's policies of reform and opening up not only introduced an era of economic pragmatism in which US popular culture, technological progress, consumer lifestyles, and developmental paradigms were selectively appropriated to serve China's modernisation goals (Zhang, 2014), but also precipitated structural transformations within China's media system.

China's economic reforms stimulated the commercialisation of the media sector (Section 3.2, Chapter 3). This shift gave rise to a burgeoning landscape of market-oriented publications, including *South Review* and *Sanlian Life Week*. The commercialisation and rapid expansion of media outlets during this period granted the Chinese public unprecedented exposure to global cultural flows. US popular culture, epitomised by Hollywood cinema and global icons such as Michael Jackson, began to captivate Chinese youth and reshape everyday cultural imaginaries. As the media landscape evolved from a tightly controlled ideological apparatus to a competitive field of economic entities, the logic of representation itself was altered. In the pre-reform era, the construction of strategic narratives concerning the US was indisputably a top-down process directed by state propaganda organs (Liao, 2017). Following the reforms, however, the rise of commercially driven publications introduced new narrative variables and alternative framings of the Sino-US relationship.

Against this backdrop, I examine the visual representation of the US in Chinese magazines between 1972 and 2000. During this period, *China Pictorial* covered the entire span, while *South Review* provided sampled data from 1985 onward, and *Sanlian Life Week*, due to its later founding, offered content only from 1996 forward. The visual data from these publications reveal two major trends: First,

in contrast to the overwhelmingly strong rejection frames observed in earlier periods, this era saw a sudden and marked shift toward a dominant weak attraction frame in visual depictions of the US across all three magazines. In particular, economic themes reached their highest level of positive framing during this period across all three magazines (see Section 6.5, Chapter 6). Second, the content of visual portrayals of the US shifted markedly, from an emphasis on politics and military affairs to a focus on economics, technology, culture, and entertainment. *China Pictorial* and *Sanlian Life Week* featured a predominance of cultural and entertainment-themed visuals, while *South Review* concentrated more on economic themes (see Chapter 6).

This chapter, therefore, examines how different types of Chinese media constructed distinct but interrelated narratives around the US during this period. Drawing on visual and discursive evidence, it identifies three dominant narrative orientations. First, party media, *China Pictorial*, portrayed Sino-US cultural exchanges in which Americans admired Chinese high culture, reinforcing China's cultural sovereignty and civilisational centrality. Second, market-oriented publications, including *South Review* and *Sanlian Life Week*, responded to audience demands by extensively featuring US popular culture and commercial imagery, while maintaining an ambivalent tone that both indulged and critiqued the glamour, vulgarity, and excess of the capitalist West. Third, across both state and commercial outlets, there emerged a shared fascination with Chinese Americans who had achieved global success in the arts, sciences, and business. These figures were portrayed as symbolic extensions of national excellence abroad, giving rise to a discourse of "us among them" that reasserted the Chinese imagined community through the celebration of diaspora achievement.

8.2 “Chinese Learning as Substance”²⁶: State Narrative and Cultural

Sovereignty

“My family and I feel that our trip to China was one of the most important learning experiences of our lives. Each of us gained immensely from being immersed in China’s ancient yet modern civilisation.” (Wilson, 1981, p. 42)

Under full Party control and serving as an explicit instrument of state propaganda, *China Pictorial* granted unprecedented visual space to images of US culture during this time, particularly in the domains of education, science, entertainment, and social life. From 1972 to 2000, images related to these themes accounted for nearly 50% of all visual depictions of the US in *China Pictorial*. In stark contrast, prior to 1972, such themes constituted a mere 2% of US-related imagery in the magazine (see Table 6.1, Chapter 6). Importantly, this shift did not signal a wholesale embrace of US cultural hegemony. Rather, *China Pictorial* employed a visual grammar that foregrounded intersubjective exchange and cultural hybridity. A key strategy involved embedding Chinese subjects within US cultural images, effectively framing US cultural presence as a site of mutual admiration and transnational engagement. As the data in Table 8.1 further demonstrates, more than

²⁶ It is a well-known slogan of the Self-Strengthening Movement in late 19th century Qing China: “Chinese Learning as Substance, Western Learning for Application” (中学为体, 西学为用). This expression came to symbolise a strategic epistemological synthesis later described by scholars as ti-yong-ism. Emerging in the mid-nineteenth century amid mounting political and military pressure from Western imperial powers, the formulation was first systematically articulated by Feng Guifen in 1861 following the Second Opium War. Feng advocated the selective adoption of Western military technology, scientific knowledge, and industrial methods as a means of national self-strengthening, while insisting on the preservation of core Neo-Confucian moral and social values. The ti-yong doctrine drew upon earlier ideas found in Wei Yuan’s *Haiguo tuzhi* (Illustrated Treatise on Maritime Countries), particularly the notion of “using the techniques of the barbarians to defeat the barbarians” (师夷长技以制夷). Over time, this framework evolved into a broader ideological strategy: the pragmatic adoption of Western material capabilities under the enduring sovereignty of Chinese cultural essence (Pohl, 2018).

half of the US cultural images published in *China Pictorial* during this time included Chinese individuals, indicating that US culture was more often embedded in Sino-US interaction than depicted in isolation. These images constructed a narrative foregrounding cultural exchange and mutual engagement, frequently depicting US individuals interacting with Chinese counterparts, and at times, participating in or even admiring traditional Chinese practices. Figures 8.1-8.4 visually exemplify this pattern.

Table 8.1. Representation of Chinese subjects in *US Cultural Images*²⁷ in *China Pictorial*.

	<i>US Cultural Images</i> with Chinese Subjects	Total <i>US Cultural</i> <i>Images</i>	Percentage Featuring Chinese Subjects
1950-1971	4	16	25.00%
1972-2000	182	355	51.27%
2001-2021	81	317	25.55%



Figure 8.1. A piece from across the ocean – American magician Mark Wilson in China.

Top-Left Image: Principal performers of the Mark Wilson Magic Troupe—Mark Wilson, Nani Darnell, and Greg Wilson—along with dance assistants Jean Truesdell, Donald Franz (positioned behind Nani), and Sandy Chanley.

²⁷ *US Cultural Images* include US images of culture and education, science, entertainment and social content themes.

Top-Right Image: Professional magician Greg Wilson performs at the Capital Theatre in Beijing, assisted by Sandy Chanley, Susan Bonser, and Donald Franz.
Bottom-Left Image: During a holiday celebration, Mark Wilson performs a magic act atop the Great Wall.
Bottom-Centre Image: Mark Wilson presents one of his signature illusions.
Bottom-Right top Image: Mark Wilson and Nani Darnell perform a silk illusion on the stone steps of the Sun Yat-sen Mausoleum in Nanjing.
Bottom-Right bottom Image: A performance held in a rural commune in Wuxi. September 1981, *China Pictorial*.²⁸

Figure 8.1 presents a collage of images featuring the Mark Wilson Magic Troupe's 1981 tour of China, depicting US illusionists performing sleight-of-hand tricks traversing symbolic Chinese landscapes. As established earlier (Chapter 4, Section 4.2), Chinese spaces, especially Tiananmen Square and the Great Wall, function as symbolic sites through which political authority and national memory are visually materialised. By situating foreign performers within these symbolically charged spaces, the images render the foreign presence a medium through which Chinese cultural geography, institutional authority, and aesthetic values are reaffirmed. The top-left and top-right images depict stage performances characterised by spotlighting, metallic backdrops, and carefully orchestrated choreography, all of which evoke the performative language of Western modernity. However, the accompanying text explicitly identifies the venue as Beijing's Capital Theatre, a state-affiliated cultural institution. It anchors the spectacle within the curated institutional space of Chinese state performance culture, thereby reframing what might otherwise appear as an autonomous display of Western theatrical modernity as a culturally incorporated and administratively sanctioned event. The spatial interplay between foreign performance and Chinese landscape evokes the production of space theory (Lefebvre, 1991), that space is not neutral geography but

²⁸ Unless otherwise indicated, all image captions in this chapter are translated from the original Chinese by the author.

a socially and politically constructed field. The natural and architectural environment transforms the act's meaning by embedding it within a national symbolic order.

A more explicitly symbolic spatial logic of incorporation unfolds in the bottom-left image, where Wilson performs atop the Great Wall. The Great Wall operates as a metonym for historical continuity, civilisational endurance, and national sovereignty, condensing centuries of territorial defence and cultural resilience into a single monumental signifier (Scobell, 2015). Through the lens of Bock's (2020) concept of image creation, the compositional arrangement is particularly consequential: the Great Wall is positioned in the upper half of the frame, aligning with Kress and van Leeuwen's (2020, p. 186) notion of the "ideal" zone in visual grammar, where culturally elevated and ideologically privileged meanings are typically located. This vertical hierarchy is not incidental. The monumental architecture visually dwarfs the magician, subordinating the foreign performer to the symbolic gravitas of Chinese history. The bottom-centre image reiterates this motif, again staging illusion against the Wall. The repetition across images strengthens the de-contextualised reality (Bock, 2020): the meaning of the US performance is stabilised as one of participation within Chinese civilisational space.

The final two images in the bottom-right quadrant are also revealing. The upper image is anchored by the caption, which identifies the location at the Sun Yat-sen Mausoleum²⁹ in Nanjing, a location deeply associated with Chinese nationalist

²⁹ Sun Yat-sen was a Chinese physician, revolutionary, statesman, and political philosopher who founded the Republic of China (ROC) and its first political party, the Kuomintang (KMT). As the paramount leader of the 1911 Revolution, Sun is credited with overthrowing the Qing imperial dynasty and served as the first president of the Provisional Government of the ROC (1912) and as the inaugural leader of the KMT. Sun Yat-sen Mausoleum is the burial site of Sun Yat-sen and includes an affiliated complex of commemorative structures.

memory and the intellectual legacy of the Republic. That a US performance takes place on the monumental steps of this site is highly symbolic: it stages a respectful foreign engagement with the Chinese revolutionary tradition. The magic act, involving traditional Chinese materials like silk, appears as homage to Chinese traditional culture. In the lower image, the scene shifts to a rural commune in Wuxi. The side-angle, wide-shot perspective is particularly consequential: it foregrounds the scale of the audience, visually amplifying the collective presence of spectators. The magic act thus signifies not merely popularity, but integration into the quotidian rhythms of socialist agrarian life. The audience, composed of workers and farmers, represents the visual vocabulary of proletarian authenticity. The US performer becomes a temporary contributor to socialist life, embedded within the ideological community.

In general, Figure 8.1 exceeds the function of documenting a cultural visit. Through repeated spatial and compositional patterns that reveal clear editorial intentionality at the level of image selection, the foreign performances are recontextualised within symbolically saturated environments that pre-structure interpretation. Viewers complete the frame through shared historical and cultural understandings attached to these spaces. These include the Great Wall (as a metonym for historical continuity), the Capital Theatre (as a site of socialist cultural authority), the Sun Yat-sen Mausoleum (as a locus of nationalist memory), and the rural commune (as a signifier of class solidarity). These selections affirm Chinese cultural depth and historical durability while transforming US cultural performances into gestures of reverence and alignment. Chinese tradition appears as the primary symbolic foundation, upon which foreign culture depends for visibility and meaning.

US culture is presented as dynamic and technically sophisticated, yet ultimately contingent upon Chinese spaces, norms, and audiences for legitimacy.

This framing indicates that *China Pictorial*, as the mouthpiece of the Party, does not position China as a passive consumer of US culture during this period. Instead, it casts China as the organising authority of intercultural exchange, where foreign cultural capital is legitimised only through spatial and symbolic incorporation. Within this logic, cultural openness during this time does not imply ideological neutrality. It represents controlled inclusion under Party supervision. Chinese spatial settings function as regulatory containers: Western performance is acknowledged, but visually subordinated to the institutional and historical architecture of socialist China. The images, therefore, communicate openness while maintaining symbolic sovereignty.

美国旧金山举行祭孔活动场景



Figure 8.2. A scene from a Confucius commemoration ceremony held in San Francisco, US.

August 1991, *China Pictorial*.

Figure 8.2 shifts the geographic location to a US city, but does not alter the hierarchy of symbolic cultural authority established in the preceding figure. The image captures a Confucian commemoration ceremony held in San Francisco, in which Chinese cultural tradition is present and even actively revered by US participants. At the level of image creation, the portrait of Confucius occupies the compositional centre and is spatially elevated, directing the viewer's gaze upward. It is also the brightest element within the frame: light is concentrated upon the portrait, while the surrounding environment recedes into relative shadow. This contrast in luminosity produces a clear hierarchy of visual salience and authority. The inscription "Most Sage and Foremost Teacher" (至圣先师,) is clearly legible within the image itself, further codifying moral stratification at the moment of visual production. The phrase metaphorically casts China as the cultural teacher in the US as its attentive pupil. The image constructs a transnational scene in which Chinese civilisational authority is acknowledged and affirmed abroad. The imagined community of China is thus articulated not only through internal cohesion but also through external recognition. The US, seen as a global cultural hegemon at the time, is here repositioned within a moral-civilisational hierarchy that privileges Chinese tradition.

马可饰演的川剧丑角，时不时流露出美国式的幽默。



来自美国的陈氏太极拳爱好者，与中国拳师交流技艺。 摄影 / 王子龙

Figure 8.3. Mark, playing the *Chou* role³⁰ in Sichuan opera, occasionally displays a touch of US humour.

February 1997, *China Pictorial*.

Figure 8.4. Tai chi enthusiasts from the US exchange techniques with Chinese martial artists.

Jan 1993, *China Pictorial*.

Figures 8.3 and 8.4 materialise cultural hierarchies through more explicit actions. The metaphor of China as cultural “teacher” and the US as “pupil” is no longer merely allegorical, but inscribed through posture, costume, gesture, and compositional arrangement. In Figure 8.3, a US performer adopts the Chou (丑) role in a Sichuan opera - a genre widely regarded as a refined and highly codified form of traditional Chinese performance art. The Chou, typically a comic or satirical subordinate figure, is characterised by exaggerated facial features and gestures, with ironic detachment. This image situates the foreign body within a pre-existing aesthetic and cultural hierarchy defined entirely by Chinese tradition, thereby the visual framing centres cultural authority in China and positions the US within a

³⁰ The Chou is the clown role in Chinese opera. The Chou usually plays secondary roles in a troupe.

subordinate representational category. The memory of the Century of Humiliation has rendered questions of hierarchy and civilisational standing central to national consciousness. By depicting a US performer inhabiting a subordinate dramatic role, the image symbolically reverses historical asymmetry.

Figure 8.4 furthers this logic in the domain of martial arts. The image depicts US tai chi practitioners learning directly from Chinese martial artists in an informal, outdoor setting. The spatial composition conveys a clear pedagogical hierarchy. A Chinese master is positioned slightly elevated on one side of the frame, with an arms-crossed, wide-legged stance posture, presiding visually over the group. The US is once again positioned as the cultural learner, embodied in figures carefully practising martial arts movements under Chinese instruction. Such depictions of US people engaging with Chinese traditional culture were not isolated instances. Visuals of US individuals studying Chinese opera and martial arts appeared frequently in *China Pictorial* in 1980, 1985, 1986, and 1993, and often occupied substantial editorial space. These recurring representations suggest a routinised media narrative that foregrounds foreign engagement with Chinese heritage as a form of deferential apprenticeship. These images emerged in the immediate aftermath of Deng's 1979 visit to the US. During which, Deng called for people to "learn from all things advanced" (Zhang, 2014, p. 15), the state explicitly encouraged learning from Western, particularly the US, models of economic and technological modernisation (see Section 2.3, Chapter 2). However, the images in *China Pictorial* present an inverse symbolic order. While China pursued technological advancement from the West, the visual narrative foregrounded Americans studying Chinese opera and martial arts. This asymmetry is revealing. For a Party propaganda media, such

representations functioned to preserve national “face”³¹ by reaffirming cultural centrality even as the state acknowledged developmental gaps. The US might serve as a model in science and industry, but within the visual sphere of cultural heritage, China remained the epistemic source. China thus could embrace Western modernisation without reinscribing narratives of civilisational inferiority rooted in the memory of the Century of Humiliation. This may be read as another instance of what Gries (2004, p. 42) describes as national self-assurance that “China always wins.” I would argue, however, that it operates as a symbolic reconciliation of economic pragmatism with a nationalist sensibility marked by historical insecurity. In this sense, the imagery functions as what I term a “compensatory nationalist imagination” that China can modernise by learning from the West while simultaneously imagining itself as the enduring civilisational centre. The visual frame thus preserves national “dignity” at precisely the historical moment when the state most visibly acknowledged the necessity of learning from others.

In general, these images do more than depict a moment of intercultural openness. Through these images, Chinese party media constructed a visual discourse of Chinese cultural dominance, a mode of representation in which the legitimacy of foreign cultural forms is contingent upon their respectful insertion into Chinese spatial, aesthetic, and ideological systems. The US in these images is consistently portrayed as learners, guests, and admirers. This visualisation of the US marks a significant departure from the geopolitical agenda of China’s reform and global integration era, during which Western modernity was frequently cast as a universal benchmark of

³¹ Goffman’s (2017) notion of “face” refers to the presentation, maintenance, and negotiation of social dignity in interpersonal interaction. The concept has since been extended to the collective level, where Gries (2004) uses national face to refer to a nation’s perceived dignity, prestige, and status in the international arena.

progress and civility. In contrast, *China Pictorial* foregrounds China as the source of cultural refinement, and US engagement becomes evidence of deference and admiration. At the same time, this strategic construction of symbolic hierarchy is also about selective omission. While *China Pictorial* emphasised US engagement with traditional Chinese arts and values, it deliberately marginalised representations of US consumer culture. Icons of US popular capitalism, such as the NBA, Disney, Coca-Cola, McDonald's, and KFC, appear rarely in the magazine's visual repertoire, despite their increasing visibility and popularity in China during the same period. Notably, these cultural commodities formed a dominant part of US representations in commercial media outlets such as *Sanlian Life Week* and *South Review*. This divergence in visual strategy between state-controlled and commercial media is further examined in the following section, which analyses the contrasting representations of the US in *Sanlian Life Week* and *South Review*.

8.3 “Western Learning for Application”³²: Commercial Narrative and Cultural Ambivalence

“Two-thirds of the Earth is seawater, and the remaining one-third is Coca-Cola.” (Sanlian Life Week, 1999, p. 6)

The selected images from *South Review* and *Sanlian Life Week* offer a compelling lens through which to examine how market-oriented Chinese media during the 1990s visually navigated the cultural storm of the 20th-century US. As discussed in Chapter 5 (Section 5.4), both magazines emerged in the wake of the

³² The phrase translates the late 19th-century Chinese concept 西学为用 (*Xixue wei yong*), refers to the selective adoption of Western knowledge for utilitarian purposes. For further explanation, see the preceding footnote.

post-1978 reform and opening-up era - *South Review* in 1985 and *Sanlian Life Week* in 1995 - as products of the state's broader media commercialisation reforms.

Although still operating under the ideological guidance of the CCP, they were required to be financially self-sustaining and thus compelled to attract and retain readership in an increasingly competitive information economy (Stockmann, 2013; Zhao, 1998). This dual imperative gave rise to pragmatic nationalism (Zhao, 2004) (see Section 2.2, Chapter 2), a media logic wherein the US consumer culture and industrial icons were visually embraced for their commercial and emotional appeal while simultaneously reframed within a discourse of national consciousness, cultural resilience, and moral introspection.



Figures 8.5. *Top (Michael Jordan):* US NBA basketball, another dish on the table for the Chinese. *Bottom (McDonald's):* US fast food chain McDonald's rapidly blooms in China's large cities.

September 1999, *Sanlian Life Week*.

Figures 8.6. *Top (Kodak):* Cultural industries represented by Kodak and Coca-Cola enter China. *Bottom (Clothes shop):* The rugged style of US clothing appeals to Chinese tastes.

September 1999, *Sanlian Life Week*.

Figures 8.5 and 8.6, both published in *Sanlian Life Week*, depict the mundane and aesthetic integration of US cultural symbols into Chinese urban and consumer life. In Figure 8.5, the top image presents a local restaurant where a large poster of Michael Jordan dominates the wall. The alignment of US athletic celebrity with domestic cuisine suggests the internalisation of US soft power as an ordinary component of Chinese daily life. The bottom image, showing workers installing a McDonald's sign, further emphasises the infrastructural embedding of foreign consumer brands within Chinese cities. Similarly, Figure 8.6 continues this narrative. A towering Kodak advertisement looms over the city skyline, signifying the extent to which transnational corporate culture has come to shape the visual and spatial contours of urban modernity in China. Unlike the earlier visual strategies employed by *China Pictorial*, which emphasised the superiority of Chinese culture in the context of Sino-US cultural exchange, *Sanlian Life Week* adopts a different approach. Through the prominent display of oversized brand logos, US flags, and supportive textual commentary, these images normalise and celebrate US consumer culture, presenting it as fashionable, aspirational, and harmoniously integrated into the emergent urban lifestyle of contemporary China. This editorial positioning reflects *Sanlian Life Week*'s broader commercial imperative: to appeal to a readership composed of urban professionals and middle-class consumers who increasingly identify with global consumption trends. While the representations may appear to foreground US cultural dominance, they simultaneously subtly reassert national agency by incorporating phrases such as "entering China" or "tailored to Chinese tastes." These expressions articulate a domestication narrative, suggesting that US products become ubiquitous through a process of localisation and selective appropriation within the Chinese context. In doing so, the magazine articulates a

contemporary variant of the “Chinese learning for substance, Western learning for application” discourse, embedding US cultural artefacts within a broader framework of pragmatic nationalism (Zhao, 2004).

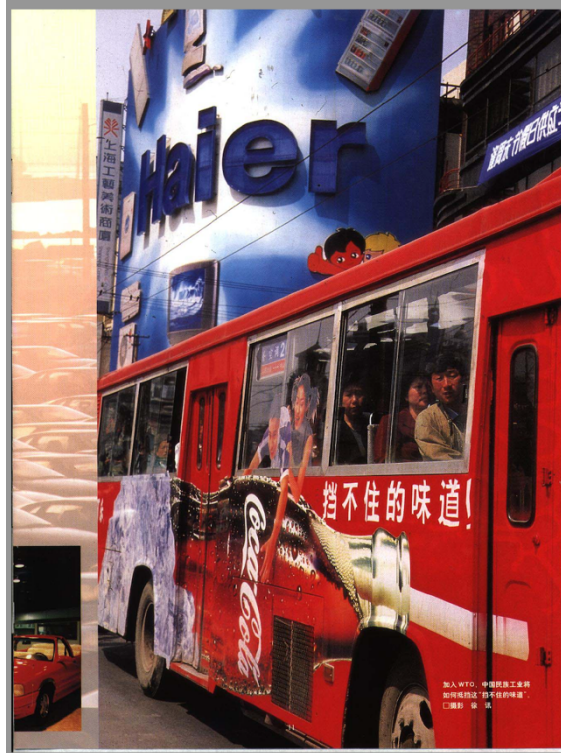


Figure 8.7. After joining the World Trade Organisation (WTO), how can China’s national industries withstand this “irresistible taste”?
July 1999, *China Pictorial*.

In contrast to the aesthetic and commercial tone of *Sanlian Life Week*, Figure 8.7, published in the party media *China Pictorial*, offers a more ideologically inflected representation of US consumer culture. The image features a Coca-Cola advertisement wrapped around a red city bus, parked in front of a Haier³³ billboard, a symbol of Chinese national industry. The slogan printed across the Coca-Cola ad, “The irresistible taste”, suggests both the appeal and the unstoppable encroachment of Western commercial power. Visually, the dynamic mobility of the bus contrasts

³³ Haier Group Corporation is a household appliance company in the PRC and the largest home appliance manufacturer in the country. It was founded in 1984 in Qingdao, Shandong Province, with a focus on the production of refrigerators, freezers, and related refrigeration products.

with the static billboard, producing a metaphorical staging of global capital in motion confronting a stationary national industry - an emblem of the Party's defensive visual nationalism. It acknowledges the presence and appeal of Western commercial power, but frames it within a visual structure that underscores tension, competition, and the necessity of national self-strengthening.



Figure 8.8. Coca-Cola has already set its sights on the next generation. October 1999, *South Review*.

By comparison, *South Review*'s Figure 8.8 adopts a more nuanced visual approach. The image captures a group of school-aged children eagerly reaching for Coca-Cola cups at what appears to be a brand-sponsored promotional event. The high-angle perspective visually subordinates the children while simultaneously emphasising the enthusiastic upward reach of their bodies – a symbolic gesture of desire, aspiration, and ideological vulnerability. As the youth of the nation, framed by state discourse as the literal and symbolic future of China, become mesmerised by a foreign brand, the image generates a potent visual tension. The depiction of minors in such a context evokes a heightened sense of cultural unease, as children are conventionally associated with innocence, malleability, and vulnerability. They are

depicted here as targets of an opportunistic US commercial culture. Childhood becomes a “relay of anxiety” (Katz, 2008, p. 5), a symbolic site where national fears over globalisation, cultural erosion, and the uncertain future are projected and negotiated. However, *South Review*, unlike *China Pictorial*, does not employ overt ideological didacticism in the caption. Instead, it allows the visual content itself to provoke interpretive uncertainty. In this way, the image exemplifies the logic of pragmatic nationalism that acknowledges, and at times even admires, the appeal of foreign commercial success, while simultaneously casting doubt on its long-term implications for national identity and social cohesion through carefully constructed visual tension (Zhao, 2004).

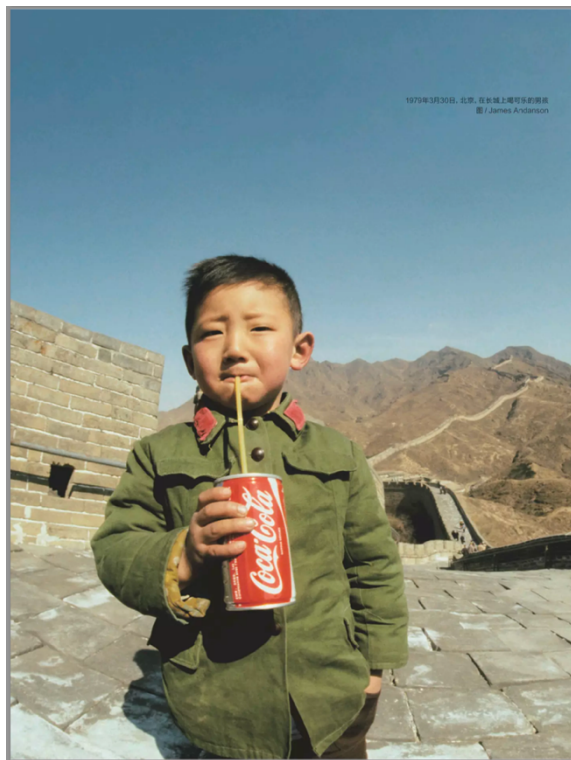


Figure 8.9. A boy drinking coke on the Great Wall, 30 March 1979, Beijing. September 2019, *South Review*.

Interestingly, two decades later *South Review* published another photograph depicting a child with Coca-Cola, as shown in Figure 8.9. The image was originally taken on March 30, 1979 by Western photographer James Andanson, but it was not

published in *South Review* until September 2019. Although this publication falls outside the temporal scope of this chapter, it is included here due to its thematic continuity with earlier Coca-Cola imagery in the same magazine. Its delayed publication constitutes a deliberate act of recontextualisation: a photographic record of the reform era is inserted into a later historical and ideological moment, thereby serving a new narrative purpose.

The 2019 presentation adopts a similar visual strategy to *China Pictorial*, as discussed in Section 8.2. Both the visual composition and accompanying text explicitly anchor the scene within the Great Wall, a space saturated with symbolic meanings of historical continuity, civilisational endurance, and national sovereignty. The Coca-Cola can, an emblematic product of US consumer capitalism, is thus placed within a distinctly Chinese civilisational landscape. Instead of signalling US cultural penetration, the Coca-Cola can is framed against the expansive landscape of the Great Wall, so that the US brand appears small, ordinary, and spatially subordinated to China's historical terrain. The boy's posture reinforces this framing. He stands confidently alone atop the Wall, one hand placed in his pocket and the other holding the Coca-Cola can with a straw between his lips. His buttoned military-style jacket also gives his body a structured and disciplined appearance. His relaxed, confident posture and disciplined appearance stand in marked contrast to the spontaneous excitement and crowding evident in earlier reform-era images (Figure 8.8) of children encountering Coca-Cola. The long depth of field keeps both the beverage in his hand and the sweeping Great Wall landscape sharply visible, visually connecting the act of consumption to China's enduring civilisational space. Meanwhile, the slightly low-angle perspective positions the viewer below the boy's eye level, subtly elevating his figure against the vast backdrop. These compositional

elements produce not a sense of longing or fascination, but one of composure and quiet authority. The drink is not coveted; it is comfortably consumed. Visually, the relationship to US consumer culture shifts from fascination to mastery.

The temporal and political context sharpens this transformation. The year 1979 marked not only the early stage of the Reform era but also the normalisation of diplomatic relations between China and the US. Coca-Cola became one of the first international consumer brands to re-enter mainland China following diplomatic normalisation (Coca-Cola China, n.d.), making it a highly visible symbol of China's reopening to the outside world. Captured by a Western photojournalist, the original gaze was external, documenting China's early encounter with global consumer culture. Its publication in 2019 coincided with the fortieth anniversary of Coca-Cola's return to mainland China, providing an immediate commemorative occasion for revisiting the photograph. However, its appearance in *South Review* also occurred amid escalating Sino-US trade tensions and a more assertive Chinese diplomatic posture (see Chapter 2, Section 2.3). Within this altered political context, the image no longer simply recalls an episode of early reform but reorganises its historical meaning. By embedding Coca-Cola within the monumental landscape of the Great Wall, the framing in Figure 8.9 symbolically integrates an early encounter with US consumer culture into a narrative of civilisational continuity and national confidence. Anderson (2006) reminds us that nations are imagined through shared narratives that link past, present, and future into a coherent historical trajectory. The Coca-Cola in both Figures 8.8 and 8.9 thus becomes a temporal bridge, symbolising China's movement from tentative engagement with US cultural influence in the late twentieth century to assured cultural self-possession in the twenty-first. What may once have signified curiosity, aspiration, or cultural asymmetry is rewritten as

evidence of absorption and containment. Thus, Figure 8.9 allows us to recognise, by contrast, that within the historical scope of this chapter (1972-2000), the visual construction of the US in *South Review* reflects a transitional phase in China's imagined community. During this earlier period, US culture exerted a powerful and often irresistible attraction, but that attraction was accompanied by deep cultural anxiety about modernity, dependence, and identity. The US functions as a powerful cultural reference point whose influence provokes both desire and apprehension within China's evolving national self-imagination.

是由赵明自己动手撰写，标题新颖别致，内容与真正的新闻稿大无二致。文章不管选取什么角度，总是在尽力淡化商业味，既侧重文化交流，又使客户和大众得到业务沟通。



百事公司斥资5亿美元，为百事可乐包装“变色”大搞公关活动，其中支付世界名模克劳蒂亚·席弗的出场费高达350万美元

Figure 8.10. PepsiCo spent \$500 million on a major public relations campaign to “change the colour” of Pepsi packaging [in Chinese, the phrase “change the colour” has a double meaning of changing colour and becoming sexual], including a \$3.5 million appearance fee for supermodel Claudia Schiffer.

May 1996, *Sanlian Life Week*.

Figure 8.10, from *Sanlian Life Week*, pushes this narrative of apprehension to its limit. It features German supermodel Claudia Schiffer, a global icon of Euro-American beauty standards in the 1990s, posing with a Pepsi can in a lavishly

decorated, Western-style interior. The analytical focus lies in the magazine's deliberate activation of gendered insinuation through the term *bianse* ("change the colour") in the caption. The phrase *bianse* is semantically layered in Mandarin. Beyond its literal reference to rebranding, it carries colloquial connotations of transformation, flirtation, and, in certain contexts, moral or sexual suggestiveness. The ambiguity of the term invites interpretive play. By foregrounding this semantically loaded expression, the magazine directs readers toward a reading in which glamour, erotic appeal, and moral compromise become intertwined. The model's bathrobe and stylised pose are presented within this interpretive frame. Such attire does not inherently constitute obscenity. However, once filtered through the highlighted ambiguity of *bianse*, the visual composition is framed as suggestive excess. The image is thus re-contextualised to intensify latent cultural suspicions surrounding eroticised advertising and aligns the image with broader anxieties about US commercial morality. In this way, the magazine transforms a corporate branding strategy into an illustration of the US consumer culture's perceived vulgarity. The spectacle of celebrity glamour, the emphasis on massive financial investment, and the semantic play on "changing colour" converge to construct a moralised narrative. Gendered allure becomes a vehicle through which commercial capitalism is portrayed as dependent upon calculated sensual provocation. The critique thus emerges from the media framing itself: the suggestive dimension is amplified in order to position US commercial culture within a discourse of excess and superficiality.



Figure 8.11. Encountering the “overconsumption era”: a problem we are still reluctant to admit but one that we are undeniably facing.
May 1998, *Sanlian Life Week*.

Figure 8.11 offers a further critique of the excesses and exploitative tendencies of US commercial culture. The cover of the May 31, 1998 issue of *Sanlian Life Week* features a caricature of the Titanic, overloaded with various cultural goods, including US brands such as McDonald's, Nike, jeans, Coca-Cola, and even the Oscar statuette, heading towards an iceberg. The issue was published shortly after the *Titanic* film entered the Chinese market on March 27, 1998; by May 4, national box office revenue had reached 240 million yuan, approximately one quarter of the total annual box office revenue for 1997 (Kuang, 1998). The timing situates the cover within a moment of intense public fascination with US cinematic spectacle and commercial success.

The use of the Titanic as the central metaphor is richly layered. Historically, the Titanic was a British vessel, the largest, most luxurious ocean liner of its time,

marketed as unsinkable. Its tragic demise has since become a global symbol of technological arrogance, imperial overreach, and the fatal illusion of invulnerability. The Titanic was bound for New York City, and over time, its narrative has become entangled with the mythology of Western progress, the US model of capitalist development, technological dominance, and cultural spectacle. The cover headline - “A problem we are still reluctant to admit but one that we are undeniably facing” - shifts the critique inward, trying to sensitise national consciousness to the dangers of blind imitation and misplaced confidence. The iceberg does not threaten only the West. It implicitly confronts China’s own accelerating embrace of consumerist modernity in the late 1990s. This suspicion and vigilance toward US culture are anchored in China’s imagined community. The historical memory of humiliation has produced a heightened sensitivity to forms of external cultural expansion that appear seductive yet overwhelming (see Section 2.2, Chapter 2). US commercial modernity, marked by spectacle, scale, and commodified desire, easily maps onto this inherited narrative of intrusive power. As a result, Chinese media scepticism converts cultural anxiety into symbolic vigilance during this period.



Figure 8.12. The US century. September 1999, *Sanlian Life Week*.

This sceptical orientation is further intensified in Figure 8.12, the 15th September 1999 cover of *Sanlian Life Week*, which layers together a dense archive of US cultural symbolism. The hamburger functions as a compressed visual model of the rapid, saturating, and synthetic US-led globalisation. Echoing the notion of “McDonaldization of society” (Ritzer, 2016), the hamburger symbolises the compression of cultural difference into digestible, mass-produced units that prioritise efficiency over complexity. The bun, crowned with Uncle Sam’s top hat and Mickey Mouse ears, is not appetising but bloated. The filling, stuffed with disparate US icons - IBM, Marilyn Monroe, the Statue of Liberty, and the Empire State Building - becomes an unruly collage of cultural signifiers. Technological power, celebrity glamour, national myth, and entertainment spectacle are stacked into a single consumable object. The result is a hyper-compressed portrait of US soft power, visually overloaded and symbolically excessive.

The hamburger, then, serves as a visual allegory of acceleration and disposability – the core logics of fast capitalism and global consumer culture. Just as fast food is engineered for rapid production and instant gratification, the symbolic US Century is shown here as producing cultural meaning at a speed that precludes depth, continuity, or local specificity. It is a form of ideological consumption that is both seductive and structurally malnourishing. The nutritional metaphor is apt: fast food is filling but not nourishing, pleasurable but not sustaining – a perfect analogue for the critique of US cultural exports as dazzling but hollow. As Adorno and Horkheimer (2002) argue, the culture industry standardises cultural production while disguising this uniformity as choice, offering pre-digested pleasures that require no critical effort and reduce experience to repetition. Moreover, the hamburger's compressive form – its ability to contain, layer, and mass-distribute various ingredients – mirrors the logic of cultural imperialism under globalisation. It collapses complexity into a standardised, easily reproducible product. That IBM can exist alongside Monroe, the Statue of Liberty, and Disney within the same edible frame speaks to a broader anxiety: that in the US Century, culture is flattened into commodity, icons are stripped of history, and difference is swallowed into uniformity. Placed alongside the Titanic cover, the hamburger reinforces a recurring warning about accelerated modernity. Both metaphors depict excess – one through overload, the other through compression. They together visualise anxiety about the consequences of emulating Western consumption patterns. The question implied is not whether global brands are attractive, but what is eroded when identity is shaped through rapid ingestion rather than reflective incorporation.

This discloses the structural logic of the Chinese media system in the Reform era. Operating under dual pressures – market attraction and ideological containment,

commercial news magazines could not ignore the visibility and appeal of US consumer culture, yet neither could they reproduce it without mediation. The solution was allegorical framing: US symbols were displayed, but visually recoded as excess, compression, or impending crisis. The ambivalence toward US consumer culture is embedded in a media system whose institutional logic is inseparable from nationalist imagination. Commercial publications' interpretive framing of global symbols remained anchored in the broader narrative of safeguarding national dignity and cultural subjectivity. In this sense, institutional constraint and nationalist ideology are mutually constitutive. The media system does not simply manage exposure to Western modernity; it organises how that modernity is seen, evaluated, and domesticated. Visual ambivalence, simultaneously attracted to and cautioning against US consumer culture, thus reflects a system in which market openness operates within an ideological vision shaped by China's imagined community.

In general, Figures 8.5-8.12 offer a composite view of how Chinese media during the 1972-2000 period negotiated the rising tide of US consumer culture. In contrast to the direct ideological messaging of the Party magazine, which frequently appealed to nationalist sentiment by urging the protection of domestic industries, market-oriented publications such as *South Review* and *Sanlian Life Week* employed a more complex visual and editorial logic. While they affirmed the everyday integration and aspirational appeal of US commercial culture, they also navigated the tension between market imperatives and national discourse through the visual strategy of pragmatic nationalism (Zhao, 2004). This strategy enabled these publications to capitalise on the symbolic power and sensory appeal of global brands, while embedding layers of critical ambivalence, cultural unease, and moral ambiguity within their visual narratives.

Although I was unable to conduct interviews with individuals who worked at *South Review* or *Sanlian Life Week* during that period, an interview with Shao Mujun, then editor-in-chief of *World Cinema*, published in *Sanlian Life Week* in December 1995, offers compelling evidence of broad-based unease toward US cultural hegemony in China. This form of nationalist anxiety extended beyond official Party discourse and permeated professional, intellectual, and media circles. As Shao observed:

“When it comes to how we should regard Hollywood films, I believe that cinema is not an individual art form. For many years, opposition to Hollywood has stemmed from four main aspects: First, from the standpoint of commercial culture. This is why in Europe, where traditional culture is deeply rooted, opposition to Hollywood has been particularly intense. Second, from a moral perspective, critics believe that the lifestyles and moral values promoted by Hollywood films are entirely unacceptable. Third, from an economic standpoint, Hollywood has suppressed the development of many national film industries. And fourth, from political and ideological perspectives.”
(*Sanlian Life Week*, 1995, p. 7)

This commentary illustrates the climate in which *South Review* and *Sanlian Life Week* operated – a context where embracing foreign cultural forms required media producers to address entrenched concerns about identity, morality, and national autonomy. Within this context, the two magazines recontextualised the US consumer culture image, presenting it as a hallmark of modernity while simultaneously inflecting it with subtle cues of discomfort regarding cultural erosion,

generational influence, and ideological vulnerability. These commercially driven outlets thus crafted a mode of representation marked by fluctuation and ambivalence, inviting fascination with global modernity, while preserving a space for critical reflection on its implications.

8.4 Cultural Return: Us Among Them

“The name of Chinese-American scientist Yuan Tseh Lee is now familiar to all descendants of Yan and Huang. On December 10 of last year, at the age of fifty, he received the Nobel Prize in Chemistry at the Stockholm Concert Hall. Following Chen-Ning Yang, Tsung-Dao Lee, and Samuel C. C. Ting, he became the fourth Chinese person to ascend the highest stage of international science.” (Kong, 1987, p. 36)

During this period, one particularly compelling strand of nationalist discourse I observed in Chinese magazines was the symbolic reabsorption of overseas Chinese, particularly those residing in or affiliated with the US, into the moral and symbolic order of the nation. This strategy constituted a discursive reclaiming of diasporic subjects within foreign systems as intrinsically Chinese: individuals who, despite their geographical distance, remained morally tethered to the homeland. Both *China Pictorial* and *South Review*, two magazines primarily oriented toward political reportage, began to devote increasing attention to diasporic individuals, especially ethnically Chinese scientists, artists, and intellectuals. These figures were cast as representatives of national continuity, linking personal achievement to the preservation and extension of Chinese cultural identity beyond national borders. Through carefully curated visual and textual representations, *China Pictorial* and

South Review contributed to the imagination of a borderless national body, one that transcended citizenship to reassert cultural bloodlines and moral kinship.



毛泽东主席五月三十日会见来华探亲、访问的美国物理学家李政道博士，同他进行了极为亲切的谈话。
会见时在座的有朱光亚、罗青长、王海容和唐闻生。
图为毛主席同李政道博士谈话时情形。

Figure 8.13. On May 30, Chairman Mao Zedong met with Dr Tsung-Dao Lee, a US citizen physicist visiting China to see relatives and conduct a visit. The two engaged in an extremely cordial conversation. Present at the meeting were Zhu Guangya, Luo Qingchang, Wang Hairong, and Tang Wensheng. The photograph shows Chairman Mao speaking with Dr Tsung-Dao Lee.

August 1974, *China Pictorial*.



Figure 8.14. On June 28, Party and state leaders Wang Hongwen, Ye Jianying, Zhang Chunqiao, Deng Xiaoping, and Guo Moruo met with Dr Chen-Ning Yang, a US citizen physicist visiting China to see relatives and conduct a visit. They held a very cordial conversation. Also attending the meeting were Dr Yang's relatives, Du

Yuming and his wife Cao Xiuqing. The photograph shows a group photo taken during the meeting.
September 1974, *China Pictorial*.

Figures 8.13 and 8.14 depict formal but emotionally charged meetings between senior Chinese leaders, including Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping, and US citizen Nobel laureates Tsung-Dao Lee and Chen-Ning Yang in 1974 in *China Pictorial*. Callahan (2010, p. 151) shows that mainland nationalism has repeatedly cast expatriates as “bridges” linking China to global science, technology, and capital, Sinicising and developing modern civilisation for the motherland, while maintaining an enduring ambivalence about their political allegiance. Overseas Chinese are simultaneously imagined as indispensable carriers of modernity and potentially unreliable subjects whose loyalty must be secured. Within that ideological architecture, Figures 8.13 and 8.14 in *China Pictorial* do not frame these meetings as routine diplomatic visits. Instead, they stage a nationalist solution to the diaspora problem by narrating identity return as both intimate and historically inevitable. The repeated captions in both images, “extremely/very cordial”, shift interpretive emphasis toward kinship and moral proximity, aligning with a nationalist logic that recruits overseas Chinese to “rejuvenate the Chinese race” by binding “overseas Chinese brothers and sisters” to the national project (Callahan, 2010, p. 128).

In Figure 8.13, a set of symmetrical armchairs, the warm-toned lighting, and a single teacup might indicate a shared drink placed at the centre of the table, subtly transforming what might have been a staged diplomatic exchange into a scene suggestive of familial reunion. The arrangement implies a moment of shared comfort and symbolic communion. Tsung-Dao Lee’s attire – a dark Zhongshan suit³⁴ –

³⁴ The modern Chinese tunic suit is a style of male attire originally known in China as the Zhongshan suit after the republican leader Zhongshan Sun. Sun introduced the style shortly after the

further reinforces his cultural alignment and integration into the visual language of revolutionary China. Figure 8.14 employs a similar strategy through both familial inclusion and spatial composition. The image includes Chen-Ning Yang alongside his relatives, producing a portrait that closely resembles a multi-generational family photograph. Their presence foregrounds a sense of genealogical and symbolic continuity. The backdrop, filled with framed traditional Chinese paintings, reinforces a cohesive cultural context and shared civilisational heritage. These visual techniques collectively suggest the reintegration of diasporic figures into an unbroken national lineage, converting transnational modernity into national belonging. They symbolically stabilise what Callahan (2010, p. 144) identifies as an “unstable” expatriate identity by re-embedding diaspora achievement within an unbroken civilisational lineage and a morally intelligible community.

The geopolitical context of the 1970s made this visual operation particularly consequential. In the context of Sino-US rapprochement (see Section 2.3, Chapter 2), China needed channels to international prestige and technoscientific authority without overly conceding symbolic dependence to the West. As an ideological apparatus of the Party-state, *China Pictorial*, therefore, performs a double recruitment. It appropriates the scientists’ global status as evidence of China’s international standing, and domesticates that status by reclassifying it as a return to origins rather than an outcome of US incorporation. Under this nationalist optic, diaspora modernity becomes a national resource, and identity return becomes a representational mechanism for national rejuvenation.

founding of the Republic of China (1912-1949) as a form of national dress with distinct political overtones. The four pockets are said to represent the Four Virtues of propriety, justice, honesty, and shame; and the five buttons the branches of China’s former government (Executive, Legislative, Judicial, Examination, Control)

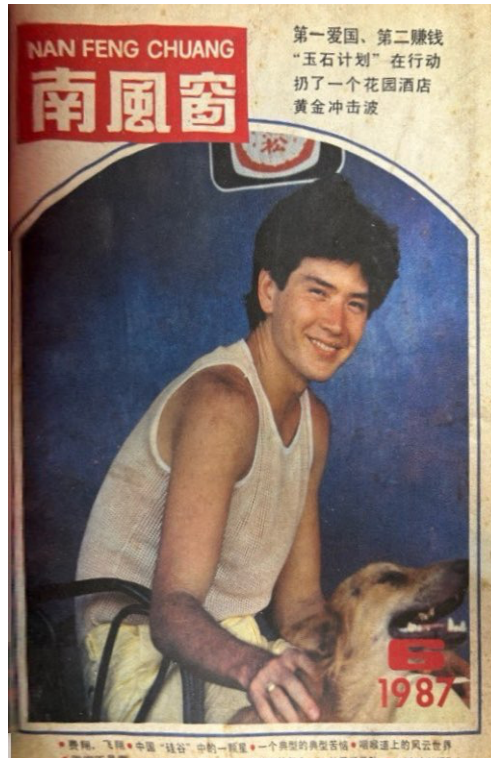


Figure 8.15. Fei Xiang, flying high.
June 1987, *South Review*.

Like *China Pictorial*, *South Review* also demonstrated a sustained interest in the Chinese American community. In Figure 8.15, the 1987 cover of *South Review*, presents Taiwanese-born American pop icon and singer Fei Xiang (Kris Phillips) as relaxed, casually dressed, and seated with a dog against a neutral background. This aesthetic ease conceals a nationalist visual narrative. Fei Xiang's biracial heritage (Chinese mother, American father) could have rendered him culturally ambiguous. Instead, Chinese media constructed him as an icon of soft cultural return. His performances, particularly through the song *Clouds of My Hometown* during the 1987 Spring Festival Gala, activated "simultaneity": millions of viewers simultaneously experienced shared longing and identification (Anderson, 2006, p. 24). The lyric "Return, return, oh wandering son of the seas" ("归来吧，归来哟，

浪迹天涯的游子”)³⁵ transformed individual biography into collective memory. In this mediated moment, belonging was constituted not by citizenship or residence but by emotional alignment with the imagined homeland. His popularity thus contributed to the construction of a horizontally imagined cultural community in which emotion operated as the primary binding force. Under conditions of media commercialisation, nationalism does not recede; rather, it is rearticulated in aestheticised and market-compatible forms (Zhao, 2008). Operating within a commercialising media sphere, *South Review* framed a transnational figure emotionally tethered to China, thereby maximising both emotional identification and market reach. In commercial terms, a star who could be consumed as both globally sophisticated and intimately connected to the homeland possessed greater narrative value than a culturally detached foreign celebrity. Diasporic identity was thus transformed into symbolic capital. It satisfied readers’ aspirations toward global modernity while simultaneously reassuring them of cultural continuity. Market logic and nationalist imagination thus converged: emotional kinship was not opposed to commercial viability but constituted one of its enabling conditions.

In sum, between 1972 and 2000, Chinese media constructed distinct nationalist narratives around Chinese Americans, differentiated by institutional positioning and editorial function. *China Pictorial*, as a representative of the party-state propaganda apparatus, transformed diasporic modernity into a form of national capital and recast return as a symbolic affirmation of rejuvenation. Global scientific prestige was thus reabsorbed as evidence of China’s modern capacity and historical

³⁵ One of the most famous lyrics from the song *Clouds of My Hometown*. In June 2019, the song was selected as one of the “Top 100 Outstanding Songs Celebrating the 70th Anniversary of the Founding of the PRC.”

continuity. In contrast, *South Review*, as a commercialised media during the reform era, framed diasporic belonging through emotional resonance and symbolic kinship, and translated transnational identities into emotionally consumable narratives.

Interestingly, during the same period, *Sanlian Life Week*, a commercial magazine oriented more toward everyday cultural and intellectual life, rarely engaged in such narratives. This absence may be attributed to its editorial focus on lifestyle, arts, and global cultural trends. *Sanlian Life Week* tended to foreground US cultural subjectivity during this era, thus downplaying the nationalist imperative of reclaiming diasporic identity.

8.5 Conclusion

Between 1972 and 2000, Chinese magazines produced the most positive visual image of the US across the periods examined. In contrast to Mao-era media representations that cast the US as an existential enemy, this period framed the US as a dazzling vision of modernity. Consumer abundance, entertainment spectacle, corporate brands, and technoscientific prestige circulated as its principal signifiers. This shift corresponded to the geopolitical reorientation inaugurated by the 1972 rapprochement and consolidated by Chinese reform and opening-up policy (see Section 2.3, Chapter 2), which normalised cultural contact and made American goods, styles, and imaginaries newly available for representation. Meanwhile, the chapter demonstrates that attraction was mediated rather than unconditionally embraced. Even in commercial magazines that celebrated the fashionable integration of US symbols into Chinese urban life, the US was often coded as a culture of excess, acceleration, and seduction – appealing yet potentially corrosive. The result is a weak attraction configuration: admiration, curiosity, and aspiration coexist with caution, scepticism, and the impulse to domesticate.

This representational ambivalence mirrors the deeper logic of China's imagined community during the Reform era. Global integration did not dilute China's national self-imagination. Rather, it required that US attraction be reorganised within a historically sedimented narrative structure shaped by dignity, vulnerability, and resurgence. The memory of past humiliation rendered questions of hierarchy and status particularly sensitive, while the aspiration for national rejuvenation generated a forward-looking desire for strength and recognition (Callahan, 2010). Geopolitics also acts as the contextual condition that made these framings necessary and plausible. Rapprochement and strategic alignment against the Soviet Union expanded representational space for US culture (Goh, 2005); Reform-era pragmatism increased the legitimacy of learning from "advanced" countries (Zhang, 2014); and the late-1990s intensification of globalisation sharpened anxieties about cultural penetration and industrial vulnerability (Tao, 2016). Thus, the visual framing of the US was grounded in cultural anxiety and a perceived crisis of national "face", generated by the reform-era imperative to learn from the US.

Party media, *China Pictorial*, answered by visualising cultural hierarchy reversal – Americans learning Chinese opera, tai chi, and venerating Confucius – thereby preserving national "face" and affirming Chinese civilisational centrality at the very moment the state endorsed outward learning. This reflects what I called "compensatory nationalist imagination", in which engagement with foreign culture is accommodated while national dignity is symbolically maintained. US culture is granted visibility primarily when it can be recontextualised as a respectful insertion into Chinese symbolic space, or when diasporic achievement can be reclaimed as national capital. Commercial magazines, *South Review* and *Sanlian Life Week*,

answered differently: they exemplified pragmatic nationalism by foregrounding the everyday integration of US consumer signs but repeatedly inserted cues of scepticism and discomfort – youth vulnerability, sexualised advertising, overconsumption – to keep fascination tethered to evaluative distance. In this sense, the US functions as a mirror through which Chinese media negotiate the terms of China's own modern trajectory: how to pursue development without repeating a historical experience of subordination. This pattern suggests a theoretical refinement to understandings of Chinese nationalism, in which, alongside mobilisation and antagonism, nationalism here operates as an attraction-management practice, capable of circulating US modernity while simultaneously moralising, domesticating, and limiting its interpretive authority.

Overall, the US in 1972-2000 was framed as a glamorous modernity that China could neither ignore nor fully trust. These images register a China that sought development through global integration while insisting on symbolic sovereignty. Nationalism functioned as a mechanism of selective incorporation, moral sorting, and representational control. Under Reform era geopolitics and media commercialisation, Chinese magazines learned to visualise the US in ways that preserved national dignity: by reversing cultural hierarchy in Party media, staging ambivalent attraction in commercial outlets, and selectively reclaiming diaspora success as evidence that US modernity could be absorbed without surrendering the imagined community's narrative primacy.

**CHAPTER 9. AFTER CRISES: IMAGINING US DECLINE IN THE SINO-US
POWER CONTEST, 2001-2021**

“US, having reached the pinnacle of hegemony, has simultaneously paved the way for its own downfall.” (Sanlian Life Week, 2002, p. 2)

“However, the disenchanted US and the faltering process of globalisation both require a rescue, reconstruction, and rectification.”³⁶ (South Review, 2020, p. 23)

9.1 Introduction

As outlined in the preceding chapter, the late twentieth century saw a brief but intense fascination with US culture in China. However, this fascination was soon eclipsed by renewed efforts within Chinese state media to revive and promote the value of traditional Chinese culture as a bulwark against what was increasingly portrayed as the cultural hegemony of the West. Concurrently, Chinese commercial magazines began to reflect critically on US commercialism, exposing its limitations and contradictions. This ideological repositioning took on a more assertive tone in the early years of the twenty-first century, as a convergence of global and domestic events cast a long shadow over Sino-US relations.

Several pivotal incidents solidified this shift. The US bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade on 8 May 1999 and the mid-air collision between a US EP-3 surveillance plane and a Chinese fighter jet over the South China Sea on 1 April 2001 were both interpreted within China as clear manifestations of US hostility and aggression, despite diplomatic divergences in narrative. These events reinforced the perception among many Chinese commentators and media outlets that the US was

³⁶ All quotations from the magazines cited in this chapter are translated from the original Chinese by the author.

willing to undermine China's sovereignty through any means necessary (Zhao, 2004). In addition, as discussed in Chapter 2 (Section 2.3), the ascension of Xi Jinping to the General Secretaryship in 2012 marked a decisive turn toward a more confident and assertive diplomatic posture. Backed by China's expanding economic and military capabilities, the Xi administration articulated grand strategic ambitions, contributing to a further deterioration in Sino-US relations. This antagonism reached new heights during the presidency of Donald J. Trump, whose administration openly designated China as a strategic competitor in its 2017 National Security Strategy (United States, 2017).

Against this geopolitical backdrop, the years spanning 2001 to 2021 witnessed a discernible rise in the use of negative visual framings of the US, compared with the preceding era of 1972-2000 (See Chapter 6). The 2001-2021 period also marked a resurgence in Chinese magazines' attention to the US political themes. In both *China Pictorial* and *South Review*, the proportion of negatively framed US political images rose, whereas *Sanlian Life Week* experienced a decline in negative political framing (see Figure 6.8, Chapter 6).

This reorientation should also be understood in the context of the CCP's tightened control over the media sector in the twenty-first century (see Chapter 3, Section 3.2). The relative autonomy enjoyed by commercial outlets such as *South Review* and *Sanlian Life Week* reached its peak in the early reform years but became progressively constrained thereafter. For instance, in 2009, the government reportedly censored *Southern Weekly's* interview with Barack Obama, excising references to sensitive topics such as human rights and freedom of expression (Landler, 2014). The subsequent 2013 "New Year Editorial Incident" (see Chapter 5,

Section 5.4) further signalled the limits of reformist media within China's increasingly centralised propaganda system (Jun, 2020). Following these events and coinciding with the rise of Xi Jinping, media governance reforms decisively shifted toward recentralisation. Under the principle that "the Party's media must bear the Party's surname" (Du, 2016, p. 1), state authorities reasserted control over editorial direction, curtailing spaces for independent journalism and integrating previously semi-autonomous media into the formal propaganda apparatus (see Chapter 3, Section 3.2). So, during this period, *China Pictorial* continued to function as a mouthpiece for the Party's ideological messaging. Meanwhile, commercial publications such as *South Review* and *Sanlian Life Week* were subject to heightened regulatory scrutiny. *South Review*, in particular, faced stricter control due to its focus on political and economic reporting and its affiliation with the Southern media group, which was implicated in the New Year Editorial Incident (see Chapter 5, Section 5.4). This increasingly centralised media system narrowed the range of acceptable geopolitical narratives and heightened the political sensitivity of US-related coverage. In such a regulatory environment, representations of the US were more likely to align with officially sanctioned themes of rivalry, strategic competition, and ideological contrast.

Against this backdrop, the divergent editorial strategies observed in the three magazines become more intelligible. During this period, *China Pictorial* and *South Review* intensified their focus on visual content related to US politics. This emphasis was most visibly manifested in the extensive use of images depicting Chinese and US political leaders. These images collectively constructed a dominant visual narrative of geopolitical rivalry: the rise of China challenging the global hegemony

of the US, and a morally compromised, increasingly beleaguered US attempting to contain China and obstruct its rightful ascent on the world stage. In contrast, *Sanlian Life Week*, which maintained a more commercially driven editorial orientation, appeared to adopt a markedly different approach. Its editors pursued a strategy of ideological negotiation and softening, often centring on individual stories or non-political cultural features while deliberately avoiding comparative frameworks that could be interpreted as ideological commentary. This cautious narrative orientation was a calculated response to two intertwined dynamics: Party censorship and the commercial media's sensitivity to the rising tide of online nationalism (Section 2.2, Chapter 2). The following sections will provide a more detailed analysis of these divergent editorial strategies through close examination of visual data and interview materials.

9.2 Visualising Political Leadership in *China Pictorial*: China's Dominance and Soft Power

As indicated in Table 9.1, the period from 2000 to 2021 witnessed a marked increase in the representation of US political figures in Chinese magazine imagery. Compared to the earlier phases of 1950-1971 and 1972-2000, the proportion of US-related images featuring political leaders grew substantially in all three magazines. Some visual geopolitics scholars argue that national leaders function as embodied condensations of state identity and geopolitical intent (Constantinou, 2018; Peake & Parks, 2008). Danielson and Hedling (2022) found that national leaders' visual performances at virtual diplomatic summits are often deliberate acts of status-seeking, strategically staged to signal international standing. Leaders' bodies, gestures, and spatial positioning do not merely represent individual authority; they

stand in for the nation itself, transforming complex interstate relations into legible, personified narratives of rivalry, hierarchy, and alignment (Zang, 2025). Therefore, such leader-centric imagery enables audiences to imagine abstract structures of global power through the familiar grammar of personal interaction and embodied sovereignty.

Table 9.1. Proportion of US-related images depicting US political figures across different periods in *China Pictorial*, *South Review* and *Sanlian Life Week*.

	<i>China Pictorial</i>	<i>South Review</i>	<i>Sanlian Life Week</i>
1950-1971	48 (6.1%)		
1972-2000 ³⁷	121 (16.0%)	42 (22.3%)	36 (4.3%)
2000-2021	262 (26.2%)	428 (28.0%)	507 (13.4%)

N of images (% of the total number of images per magazine in each period)

During this period, the Party magazine, *China Pictorial*, drew on vivid diplomatic photojournalism to visually articulate relative status, and moral and cultural authority between Chinese and US leaders, extending these hierarchies to the broader image of the two nations.

³⁷ *South Review* (1985) and *Sanlian Life Week* (1995) do not fully capture the 1972-2000 period, as their sampled data begin in 1985 and 1996, respectively.



Figure 9.1. (left image) Thirty years of US-China engagement - commemorating the 30th anniversary of the *Shanghai Communiqué*³⁸. February 2002, *China Pictorial*.

Figure 9.2. (right image) Winter warmth - Premier Wen Jiabao's visit to the US. January 2004, *China Pictorial*³⁹

Figure 9.1 and Figure 9.2 both feature portraits of Chinese and US leaders on the cover of *China Pictorial*. At the level of image creation (de-contextualisation), the photographs isolate a moment of diplomatic encounter from its broader political and strategic complexities (Bock, 2020). The handshake between Chinese President Jiang Zemin and US President George W. Bush in Figure 9.1 is extracted from the dense diplomatic choreography of a state visit and re-presented as a distilled symbol of bilateral harmony. However, as Lutz and Collins (2014) and Messaris (1997) argue, photographic realism often conceals compositional hierarchies embedded in

³⁸ Formally titled *Joint Communiqué of the United States of America and the People's Republic of China*, issued on February 28, 1972, was a diplomatic statement jointly released by the US and the PRC at the conclusion of President Richard Nixon's historic visit to China. It laid the foundation for the normalisation of US-China relations by acknowledging areas of both agreement and disagreement, most notably reaffirming the One China principle while allowing strategic ambiguity on contentious issues such as Taiwan (US Department of State, 2006).

³⁹ Unless otherwise indicated, all image captions in this chapter are translated from the original Chinese by the author.

angle, gaze, and bodily alignment. Jiang's frontal orientation toward the camera establishes direct visual address, symbolically aligning him with the viewer. Bush's profile position and diverted gaze, by contrast, reduce his power within the frame. The asymmetry in bodily alignment and eye contact subtly elevates Jiang's symbolic centrality within the frame. Figure 9.2 makes the hierarchy in representational status even more conspicuous. Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao is foregrounded, bathed in soft, warm lighting, and shown smiling serenely. In contrast, President George W. Bush appears blurred in the background, his facial features rendered indistinct. The juxtaposition of facial clarity and spatial focus functions as a semiotic device that assigns narrative primacy to Wen, positioning him as the principal actor and relegating Bush to the role of a contextual presence (Aiello & Parry, 2020).

The image not only communicates dominance, but also ethical steadiness and civilisational confidence of China. Nye (2004) conceptualises soft power as the ability of a state to shape the preferences of others through attraction rather than coercion or payment. Attraction, in this formulation, derives from culture, political values, and foreign policy when they are perceived as legitimate and morally authoritative. The visual coding of warmth in Figure 9.2, through warm yellow tone, serene facial expression, and the headline "Winter warmth", constructs a narrative of benevolent diplomacy. It aligns with a soft power strategy by portraying China as emotionally composed, morally grounded, and relationally considerate.

The visual representation of dominance and soft power should be interpreted within the broader cultural framework of China's imagined community (Anderson, 2006). Within the long historical narrative of the Century of Humiliation and National Rejuvenation (see Section 2.2, Chapter 2), representations of encounters

with Western powers are never ideologically neutral. Visual cues of dominance, such as foregrounding, clarity of focus, frontal orientation, and compositional centrality, acquire meaning insofar as they resonate with the collective desire to transcend historical inferiority. Meanwhile, the incorporation of soft power aesthetics, warm lighting, calm facial expression, and accompanying text, signals not aggressive triumphalism but civilisational maturity. It visually articulates a nation that is no longer reactive or defensive, yet equally not destabilising or coercive. *China Pictorial* thus performs the ideological function of “setting the tone” (Meng, 2018, p. 3), imaging China’s dominance vis-à-vis the US as a form of dignified centrality, in which soft power becomes a visual confirmation of ethical authority.



Figure 9.3. On January 18, Chinese President Hu Jintao arrived at Andrews Air Force Base in Washington for a state visit to the US. US Vice President Joe Biden welcomed him at the airport. July 2010, *China Pictorial*.

In Figure 9.3, the capture of President Hu Jintao’s arrival at Andrews Air Force Base, where he is greeted by then-Vice President Joe Biden, also provides a carefully framed asymmetrical power. Through the prominence of Hu’s raised hand

and the central placement of the Chinese national flag and aircraft, the photograph constructs a scene of calm Chinese authority and symbolic sovereignty. The Party media's repeated use of such "on-site" imagery offers a grounded, realist visual rhetoric to portray China's dignified ascent and increasingly equal - if not superior - position in the US-China relationship.



2017年11月9日，习近平主席与特朗普总统在北京人民大会堂共同会见记者。 中国日报 供图

Figure 9.4. On November 9, 2017, President Xi Jinping and President Donald Trump jointly met with the press at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing. December 2017, *China Pictorial*.

Figure 9.4 extends this grammar into the Xi era without fundamentally altering its underlying logic. Although the gestural roles change, Hu waves in Figure 9.3, whereas President Donald Trump waves in Figure 9.4, the underlying construction of power relations does not invert. The staging clearly centres Xi behind the podium. The setting, rich with ceremonial decor, stages China as the architect of the event, choreographing the diplomatic encounter within its sovereign space. Although scholars frequently cite the Xi era as marking a shift toward a more assertive and sometimes confrontational foreign policy, often labelled as “wolf

warrior diplomacy” (Sullivan & Wang, 2023, p. 68), such aggressiveness is conspicuously absent in the visual rhetoric of this official image. Instead, Xi appears calm, warmly smiling, and restrained, projecting an image of measured and ceremonial authority. This contrast is further accentuated by Trump’s raised hand and stern expression, which together convey a more assertive, controlling presence.

A stylistic repetition is evident between Figure 9.2 and Figure 9.4, particularly in the warm yellow tonal palette, the gentle facial expression of Wen Jiabao in the former and Xi Jinping in the latter, and the framing of benevolent China’s dominance. Within a soft power framework (Nye, 2004), such warmth functions as a visual articulation of attraction: China is presented as emotionally stable, ethically self-assured, and relationally considerate in its engagement with the US. The image thus contributes to the ongoing rearticulation of pride and status within the imagined national narrative. The theoretical linkage between Nye (2004) and Anderson (2006) becomes clearer when one recognises that soft power presupposes a stable and compelling national self-image. A state cannot credibly project attraction externally if its domestic narrative of identity remains fractured or insecure. Externally, such visual performance aligns with Nye (2004)’s logic of attraction by crafting an image of ethical authority and relational warmth. Internally, it reinforces the imagined community’s evolving narrative of Century of Humiliation and National Rejuvenation, transforming humiliating historical memory into present kindness. The image reassures domestic audiences that China’s rise is not merely material but also cultural and moral.

In general, through the framing of diplomatic photojournalism, Chinese Party media construct a “realist” narrative of national ascent from 2001 to 2021: a China

that appears composed, gracious, and morally elevated, and a US that is comparatively diminished in status and sometimes portrayed as less accommodating. This visual pattern mirrors the concrete geopolitical background of US-China trade disputes, technological rivalry, and intensifying strategic competition during this period, alongside China's post-financial crisis economic expansion and the more confident diplomatic posture that followed. *China Pictorial* also utilise these images to contest Western discourses framing China's rise as a "China threat" in the twenty-first century (Broomfield, 2003, p. 265). This configuration stabilises the imagined community's self-understanding of national rejuvenation. China is depicted neither as a resentful victim nor as an aggressive revisionist power, but as a mature global actor whose authority derives from cultural depth and sovereign control over diplomatic space.

9.3 "Photogenic" US Leaders in *South Review*: Allegory and Satire

This section examines how *South Review* constructs the image of US political leadership within the contemporary configuration of China's media governance, where commercial incentives coexist with intensified Party supervision. This dual positioning becomes particularly visible in its visual treatment of US presidents, whose images serve as sites of ideological alignment and commercial differentiation. Drawing on interviews with senior visual editors, this section integrates image analysis with institutional context. The interviews reveal a tightly regulated workflow that shapes what can be published. Within these constraints, however, *South Review* develops a distinctive satirical visual style. Figures such as Barack Obama and Donald Trump are repeatedly reworked through allegory, caricature, and digital manipulation.

Unlike *China Pictorial*, which draws upon visual documentation of “real” diplomatic events to assert China’s rising status in relation to the US, *South Review* uses allegory, caricature, and digital manipulation to deconstruct presidential authority during this time. This strategy afforded the increasingly ideologically constrained commercial magazine a sharper critical register. Visually pointed critiques of US politics extended an earlier market logic of catering to nationalist sentiment (see Chapter 8, Section 8.4) and enhanced commercial appeal. Metaphor-rich and dramatised imagery proved more engaging than ritualised, ostensibly harmonious diplomatic photographs that tended toward visual repetition. Moreover, visualisation of US politicians sometimes produces visual noise that diverts regulatory attention away from the more subtle textual commentary on domestic issues.



Figure 9.5. Left-cover image: Can a new face revive the US spirit?
October 2008, *South Review*.



Figure 9.6 Right-double page spread: Can a new face revive the US spirit?
October 2008, *South Review*.

Figure 9.5 presents a highly symbolic cover illustration in *South Review*, featuring a stylised image of George Washington’s face on the US dollar bill being painted or repaired by silhouetted figures. From the perspective of visual framing

theory, Figure 9.5 represents a clear departure from realist diplomatic photography and instead mobilises allegorical abstraction. The stylised image of Washington de-contextualises the US historical figure into a symbolic object. His presence on the US dollar operates metonymically, condensing US political ideals, economic dominance, and liberal democratic legitimacy into a single iconic surface. Recontextualised within the political and economic climate of its publication, this fractured icon is associated with the 2008 financial crisis and the contemporaneous rise of Barack Obama. The act of repair is depicted as ongoing and uncertain, framing the US as vulnerable and incomplete.

Under the same headline (on a double-page spread), Figure 9.6 intensifies this framing logic through compositional contrast. A row of oversized portraits - George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and others - evokes historical gravitas and foundational authority. Their neoclassical stillness constructs an image of institutional solidity. Obama's portrait, however, disrupts this visual continuity. Rendered in pale tones, with contorted features, his face appears out of sync with both the solemn demeanour and the vivid colouration of the preceding presidential portraits. He is depicted mid-shout, with furrowed brows and a strained neck, introducing instability into an otherwise solemn historical sequence. The stylistic incongruity visually encodes uncertainty again: he is neither seamlessly integrated into the lineage nor positioned as its assured renewal. The question in the headline - "Can a New Face Revive the US Spirit?" - is thus visually echoed by the compositional tension. The phrase "new face" clearly references Barack Obama, who, at the time of publication, was the Democratic nominee for the 2008 US presidential election. His visual portrayal, however, offers no affirmative answer to

that question. The geopolitical context of 2008 is crucial. The global financial crisis significantly undermined the perceived inevitability of US economic leadership. For Chinese audiences, the crisis coincided with narratives of China's relative economic resilience and expanding global influence. The US is thus framed as unstable, uncertain, and potentially in decline.

It can therefore be argued that *South Review* adopts overt allegory to articulate a more direct and pointed evaluative stance. The critical orientation of such imagery develops within a discursive environment in which Party media had already “set the tone” (Meng, 2018, p. 3) for a more competitive geopolitical narrative. Commercial sharpening of this stance can be understood as a response to market demand. Chinese commercial publications remain embedded within Party supervision, and commercialisation in China is often harnessed to support state narratives and reinforce regime stability (Stockmann, 2013). Within this structure, the interaction between commercial incentives and political constraints creates space for more visually explicit and rhetorically forceful critiques that differentiate commercial outlets from ceremonially restrained Party publications, while remaining within state-sanctioned boundaries. In a competitive media environment, such explicit visual framing resonates with popular nationalist sentiments, which carry significant audience appeal and commercial value (Neo & Xiang, 2022), and can therefore be amplified through market mechanisms without destabilising the overarching ideological framework.



中美关系会是一种完全新型的、以双方自身发展为主导的双边关系。图为北京一场影展上，国家主席胡锦涛与美国总统奥巴马的巨幅画像被并排展示。

Figure 9.7. China-US relations will constitute a completely new type of bilateral relationship, one primarily guided by the respective development trajectories of both nations. Shown here is a pair of monumental portraits of Chinese President Hu Jintao and US President Barack Obama displayed side by side at a photography exhibition in Beijing.

January 2011, *South Review*.

A similarly painted portrait of Obama appears in *South Review* in 2011, as shown in Figure 9.7, and this time it offers a more direct visual comparison between Chinese and US leadership. While the accompanying caption explicitly frames the image pair as symbolic of a “new type of bilateral relationship” grounded in mutual development, the visual composition subtly subverts this ostensible symmetry. Hu’s face is brightly illuminated, his expression steady, composed, and faintly smiling. In contrast, Obama’s portrait is enveloped in deeper shadow, his features tightened, gaze directed upward and away from the viewer. The use of light-dark contrast and asymmetrical facial expression encodes a latent differentiation between the national images embodied by the two leaders: China is associated with clarity, stability, and forward-looking confidence, whereas the US appears introspective, burdened, and unsettled.

In sum, across these figures, the US is framed as a republic in decline, burdened by crisis and diminished authority. This portrayal visually satirises US instability and economic vulnerability, particularly in the aftermath of the financial crisis. By drawing on the greater symbolic latitude of illustrative artwork, together with tonal contrast and the uneven facial expressions, *South Review* moves beyond subtle differentiation toward a more explicit critique of US decline. Critique is not merely politically permissible but also commercially functional, enabling *South Review* to differentiate itself from the more ceremonially restrained visual discourse of Party media. At the level of cultural imagination, it functions as a comparative mirror: US uncertainty implicitly reinforces a Chinese self-conception of continuity, stability, and historical momentum toward rejuvenation.



Figure 9.8. Why are prices in China higher than in the US? February 2011, *South Review*.

Despite its outward focus on the US, another interesting finding is that visual metaphors and satire used to depict US political leaders in *South Review* serve an

inward-facing function, providing a vehicle for implicit critique of domestic governance within the constraints of media regulation. Figure 9.8 exemplifies this strategy. The image is presented without a caption, but it accompanies an article titled “Why are prices in China higher than in the US?”, which investigates a perplexing yet widespread phenomenon at that time whereby many Chinese-manufactured products are sold more cheaply overseas than in domestic markets. The photograph depicts a canvas tote bag prominently displayed in a Chinese retail store. The bag features Obama dressed in a Maoist uniform, emblazoned with Mao’s calligraphic script “Serve the People” (为人民服务). The image deliberately fuses two historically and ideologically incompatible figures. This incongruous grafting produces a caricature-like distortion of Obama, displacing his political identity for satirical effect. Yet the satire does not stop at parody. When this hybridised icon, combining Maoist socialist revolutionary ideology with a US president, is printed on a mass-produced tote bag and displayed for sale, both ideological authority and political leadership are reduced to commercial surface design. Revolutionary symbolism and liberal democratic imagery alike are absorbed into consumer logic.

When interpreted alongside the article’s investigation of domestic pricing structures, the image redirects its critical force inward. The problem is not merely that ideology is commodified; it is that such commodification does not translate into equitable benefit for domestic producers or consumers. Chinese-made goods are sold more cheaply abroad than at home, exposing an economic arrangement in which symbolic production and material labour do not proportionally serve the national collective. The slogan “Serve the People,” originally rooted in socialist egalitarian ideals (Turiel et al., 2019), becomes ironically hollow when the very people invoked

by the slogan face higher domestic prices. This irony introduces a subtle nationalist dimension. Within the broader cultural narrative of national rejuvenation, economic development is expected to enhance collective welfare and restore historical dignity (see Chapter 2, Section 2.2). The image implicitly questions whether the gains of global integration are distributed in a way that truly “serves” the nation. In this sense, the image adds a new dimension to the national rejuvenation imagination: nationalism here is not outward-facing like before - asserting status vis-à-vis the US - but inward-facing, demanding that economic achievements translate into social justice. The critique, therefore, extends the logic of national rejuvenation from geopolitical ascent to distributive legitimacy.

By deploying this kind of imagery, *South Review* engages in a form of criticism that avoids confrontation with political authorities. By foregrounding satirical depictions of US political figures - an approach that did not contradict the broader ideological positioning against the US - the magazine redirects regulatory scrutiny away from its more nuanced textual commentary on domestic issues. In this sense, Figure 9.8 operates as a calculated diversion, creating limited space for manoeuvre within an increasingly restrictive media environment. This approach reflects what Stockmann (2013, p. 254) characterises as “responsive authoritarianism,” whereby media in China operate not as platforms of open critique but as semi-autonomous arenas that signal public discontent through indirect cues, satire, or symbolic framing. Similarly, Zhao (1998, p. 1) conceptualises the Chinese media system as navigating “between the party line and the bottom line,” allowing commercial outlets limited discursive flexibility provided they do not challenge the legitimacy of party rule. So, operating under the dual pressures of political constraint

and market competition (Pan & Lu, 2003), *South Review* employs visual irony both as a protective mechanism against censorship and as a strategy for attracting attention in an increasingly competitive media landscape. As discussed in Chapter 3 (Section 3.2), Repnikova (2017) argues in her study of China's media ecology, commercial publications developed a repertoire of improvisational expressive strategies that combined symbolic negotiation with political caution. This included the strategic use of metaphor, visual allegory, and intentionally ambiguous framing that enabled critique to pass through censorship filters while still inviting discerning readers to read between the lines. She notes that ambiguity in such contexts becomes not a limitation, but a "rhetorical device" (Repnikova, 2017, p. 163), allowing editorial voices to express political scepticism without overt transgression.

特朗普面具下的中国制造业

单就人工成本而言,目前美国工人时薪是12美元,折算成人民币为80元左右。而中国的时薪一般为8-9元,制造业回流美国,绝非易事。

文 | 特约记者 傅岩



浙江金华浦江有家“怪物工厂”，专做动漫面具产品畅销欧美。特朗普是下一届的美国总统，这也给工厂带来巨大商机。今年他的面具订单已超过50万只。

11月9日，剧情堪比“纸牌屋”的 儿还得让中国人干，钱还得让中国人去挣。

必过的一个节，从而走上了生产这一节日所需面具和摆饰品的道路。

而20年来的技术积累，为她这次赢得特朗普面具大量订单立下“汗马功劳”。

“我们的开发和设计能力是没说说的。就拿特朗普面具来说，他的特性非常鲜明，特别是头发非常有意思，而我们只要在网把他的照片调出来，就能抓取他一些独有的特性并把他雕刻出来。”

实际上，仅特朗普面具，她的公司就开发生产了多款产品。在她狭窄的生产车间里，堆放着200多种面具产品和摆饰品。

每逢美国大选，周爱玲的公司都会生产一些总统候选人的面具，但像今年这么大的生产尚属首次。为此，为了在大选结束前把这些货送到美国消费者手上，公司全员加班加点。

Figure 9.9. In Pujiang, Jinhua, Zhejiang Province, there is a “monster factory” that specialises in producing anime masks exclusively for the European and US markets. With Trump poised to become the next President of the US, the factory has seen a significant business opportunity-this year alone, orders for his mask have already exceeded 500,000 units.

December 2016, *South Review*.

The earlier strategy of using visual ambiguity to enable inward-facing reflection proved short-lived. It gave way to a more overtly demonising and caricatural treatment of Trump as a figure onto whom anxieties about US decline and unpredictability could be projected. Following Donald Trump's election to the US presidency in 2016, *South Review* increasingly mobilised visual strategies that satirised, deconstructed, and symbolically recoded the US president as a manipulable icon within China's imagined geopolitical narrative. Figure 9.9, published in December 2016 shortly after Trump's electoral victory, documents a worker in a small factory in Pujiang, Zhejiang Province, meticulously making a row of identical Trump masks. The photograph stages a layered irony. On one hand, it foregrounds China's embeddedness in global manufacturing networks: even the symbolic face of the US presidency is materially produced within Chinese industrial circuits. On the other hand, it visually diminishes the aura of presidential authority. Trump's face, ordinarily associated with executive power and national sovereignty, is reproduced en masse, suspended in rows like interchangeable effigies awaiting export. Through serial repetition and industrial setting, political charisma is stripped of singularity and transformed into low-cost merchandise. This visual logic intensifies the commodification motif observed in Figure 9.8 but redirects it outward. Rather than exposing contradictions within domestic economic structures, the image externalises critique by deflating US leadership itself. The "most powerful man" in the Western political order is framed as materially dependent on anonymous labour in the Global South. Authority becomes surface, and sovereignty becomes an export commodity. The accompanying caption's reference to the factory as a "monster factory"

amplifies the satirical register, metaphorically casting Trump as grotesque or manufactured abnormality.

This shift from inward to outward critique is closely tied to both domestic political tightening and escalating geopolitical rivalry. After Xi consolidated power in 2012, state control over the Chinese media intensified, and Party- and government-run outlets were more explicitly defined as propaganda fronts (see Chapter 3, Section 3.2). Meanwhile, China adopted a more assertive diplomatic posture, while the Trump administration departed from prior engagement frameworks by openly designating China a strategic rival (see Chapter 2, Section 2.3). In this environment, the earlier use of visual ambiguity for inward reflection receded. Accordingly, the visual satire in *South Review* returned to a more explicit comparative and even demonising narrative, in which US leadership appears grotesque, theatrical, flattened and emptied. By staging Trump's image as mass-produced in a Chinese factory, the photograph symbolically subordinates US political authority to China's manufacturing infrastructure. The deflation of US presidential aura thus mirrors a Chinese self-image of industrial centrality and structural indispensability, visually affirming China's ascent through the reduction of its rival's symbolic power.



Figure 9.10. *Left image:* Rethinking Trump: What exactly does Trump intend to do? We need to see through him.

July 2018, *South Review*.

Figure 9.11. *Right image:* Will Trump be re-elected? He is an agitator, a divider, and also a stigmatised victim. His do-or-die battle will shake the US.

January 2020, *South Review*.

The process of visual satire during this period in *South Review* is a product of editorial intention and systemic negotiation. This becomes particularly evident in an in-depth interview conducted with Li Xuehui, the deputy visual director of *South Review*, who was directly responsible for the production of Figures 9.10 and 9.11. Her reflections illuminate how US political aesthetics are crafted through both technical manipulation and institutional regulation. Li stated candidly that photographs of Trump were particularly well-suited for magazine covers: “To be honest, I think Trump is actually quite photogenic. I do not mean he is good-looking, but his image always makes for a striking and impactful cover” (author interview with Li, March 23, 2023). This comment points to an important dimension of visual framing: framing emerges from the interaction between editorial intention and the

semiotic affordances of the image (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020). Trump's highly theatrical facial expressions and gestures provide visually charged material that can be readily detached from its original context and reinserted into alternative narratives (Bock, 2020). In other words, Trump's "photogenic" quality, as Li described it, is not about attractiveness but about frameability. His image is visually pliable. It enables more dramatic recontextualisation and supports stronger narrative coding with fewer technical interventions.

Figure 9.10 features Trump holding a blank, white mask beside his face, staring directly at the viewer. According to Li Xuehui, this cover was "composed of a front-facing photo of Trump and a separate photo of a hand holding a mask" (Li, personal communication, March 23, 2023). She acknowledged that the hand was not convincingly realistic – "Honestly, I didn't do well in Photoshopping the hand." But the more important manipulation was the eye contact: "Trump's eyes were not originally facing the camera; we digitally altered his gaze to create the effect that 'he is staring directly at you'" (Li, personal communication, March 23, 2023). This technical intervention is ideologically consequential. In visual communication, the gaze establishes relational power between subject and viewer (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020). By digitally forcing eye contact, the design collapses the distance between the foreign leader and the Chinese reader, transforming Trump from distant geopolitical actor into immediate presence. The mask, conventionally associated with concealment and deception, suggests duplicity; the imposed gaze intensifies confrontation. However, the more fundamental shift lies at the level of authorship. While Trump appears to manipulate appearances by holding a mask, the point here is not an interpretation of the image's internal meaning, but of its production: it is the

Chinese editorial apparatus that constructs and controls his image. Visual

sovereignty thus shifts from the depicted subject to the producing apparatus.

The most visually radical intervention appears in Figure 9.11. Trump is depicted in full Joker makeup: chalk-white face, exaggerated red lips, and blue eyeshadow extending across his eyelids. Li Xuehui described the image as “one of my favourite covers”, elaborating that the design involved extensive postproduction. “Of course, Trump was not wearing Joker makeup. I photoshopped it onto him using elements taken from stills of the Joker film – white face powder, signature lipstick corners, and blue eye shadow, all replicated from cinematic makeup” (author interview with Li, March 23, 2023). The creative choice to portray Trump as a clown was not hers alone; she noted that “this idea was proposed by our leader (referring to the President and Editor-in-Chief⁴⁰ of *South Review*)”, aligning with the current media discourse around the 2020 US presidential election and the popularity of the Joker film in China (author interview with Li, March 23, 2023). It underscores the nature of media production in China: aesthetic strategies were not a designer initiative but aligned with broader editorial and political direction during a period of intensifying Sino-US confrontation. Li explained that they experimented with both front-facing and profile photos, ultimately settling on the latter because “a frontal photoshop would appear too artificial; the profile view allowed a more convincing transformation” (author interview with Li, March 23, 2023). She also pointed out that “we changed the background and cut out the face from the original image to create a new cover composition” (author interview with Li, March 23, 2023),

⁴⁰ In China’s media system, editors-in-chief operate under Party supervision and are responsible not only for editorial management but also for ensuring alignment with official ideological directives.

indicating a high level of editorial control over both form and content. What emerges from these practices is not merely satire, but a form of state-sanctioned semiotic warfare. By transforming Trump into a Joker – a symbol of chaos, instability, and anarchic threat – the visual discourse positions the US president not only as laughable but as dangerous. The clowning of Trump presents the US as a polity on the edge of absurdity and collapse. For the Chinese imagined community, this image offers ideological reassurance that chaos is a US problem, and that China, by contrast, is a site of order and control.

Crucially, the power to produce such images lies not in the hands of individual creators but within a structured editorial apparatus. As Li candidly acknowledged, “The direction of all cover designs is set by the leadership. You cannot go off on your own, otherwise they may reject the direction altogether” (author interview with Li, March 23, 2023). Her statement captures the internal logic of China’s media system: innovation is permitted, but only within predetermined ideological contours. Visual satire becomes not a challenge to authority, but an extension of it, deploying creativity in service of symbolic regulation.

To sum up, during this period, *South Review*, operating under regulatory guidance, consistently framed US political leadership as unstable, declining, and comparatively disadvantaged in relation to China’s political strength. The US was not merely depicted as a rival but as a polity marked by disorder, theatrical excess, and structural vulnerability. At the same time, driven by market considerations, *South Review* cultivated a distinctive style of visual satire to capture audience attention. It increasingly relied on painted or digitally manipulated images with greater semiotic elasticity, and on figures, particularly Donald Trump, whose expressive

physiognomy offered rich framing affordances and lent itself to exaggeration, distortion, and caricature. As a result, among the three magazines examined, *South Review* exhibited the highest proportion of negative framing of the US during this period (see Figure 6.8, Chapter 6). The grotesque and pathologised framing of US political figures functions not only as critique but as comparative narration. The destabilisation of US leadership mirrors a Chinese self-imagination structured around order, coherence, and historical momentum toward national rejuvenation. If the US polity appears chaotic and theatrically excessive, China is implicitly cast as disciplined, rational, and structurally grounded. The visual deflation of US presidential authority thus reinforces an imagined Chinese community that understands itself as stable, sovereign, and increasingly central within a shifting global hierarchy. Yet this overtly ideological mode of visual representation was not uniformly adopted across Chinese magazines. As the following section demonstrates, *Sanlian Life Week* pursued a more negotiated visual strategy, softening political confrontation through cultural and social representations of the US.

9.4 Negotiated Visualisations of the US in *Sanlian Life Week*: Softening Ideology through Culture

While *China Pictorial* projects ceremonial sovereignty and *South Review* engages in satirical comparison, *Sanlian Life Week* adopts a markedly different visual strategy in its construction of the US during 2001-2021. The US's political visibility is selectively reduced and redirected into cultural, intellectual, and social domains. This section argues that such visual moderation reflects the media's negotiated adaptation under intensified state regulation and rising nationalist sentiment in China during this period. In this context, *Sanlian Life Week* develops a strategy of strategic

depoliticisation: narrowing overt political signification while sustaining market viability and professional credibility. To clarify this adaptive logic, the analysis proceeds in two steps. It first examines the magazine's institutional positioning and how it translates into a visual framing strategy that narrows geopolitical visibility and redirects attention toward less ideologically charged domains. Second, this section draws on interview materials to explore why and how journalists operationalise this strategy in everyday editorial practice, negotiating pressures from both regulatory authorities and nationalist audiences.

Between 2001 and 2021, *Sanlian Life Week* diverged clearly from *China Pictorial* and *South Review* in its visual treatment of the US. Portraits of US political leaders appear far less frequently, and politically themed images constitute a smaller share of its overall US coverage. Quantitative coding shows that *Sanlian Life Week* contains the lowest proportion of politicised US imagery (see Table 6.6, Chapter 6), and the highest proportion of positive framing among the three magazines (see Figure 6.8, Chapter 6).

This empirical pattern is closely related to the magazine's institutional positioning. Within the Chinese media system, *Sanlian Life Week* maintains a relatively autonomous editorial posture, rooted in its organisational affiliation with the Sanlian Bookstore and its longstanding emphasis on cultural inquiry. Established in the post-reform era, the magazine represents a strand of Chinese journalism oriented toward intellectual debate and cultural commentary. Following successive rounds of media reform in the 2000s and 2010s, it retained company-based ownership and gradually consolidated a distinctive identity centred on cultural journalism (see Chapter 5, Section 5.4). Within the post-reform restructuring of

China's media landscape, commercialisation expanded revenue pressures without displacing Party supervision. As Stockmann (2013) demonstrates, market mechanisms operate within continuing political oversight. For a culturally oriented magazine like *Sanlian Life Week*, this configuration generates a particular survival logic: maintaining intellectual credibility and market appeal while avoiding confrontation with politically sensitive domains.

Sanlian Life Week thus operates a dual editorial system, dividing responsibility between the Society Department and the Culture Department, as an organisational response to this structural tension. The Society Department handles political-economic topics subject to tighter oversight, while the Culture Department focuses on education, intellectual life, and cultural figures (see Chapter 5, Section 5.4). An anonymised intern journalist, Interviewee 3, explained the main US topics in the two departments in *Sanlian Life Week*:

In the Society Department, US-related content would be less frequent.

It mainly focuses on big political and economic events that attract global attention, such as Federal Reserve interest rate hikes... The Culture Department covers topics like US universities, and occasionally important cultural figures, such as Michael Jackson or Bob Dylan. These figures are introduced as a way to find some kind of spiritual support in a rapidly changing era, or to look at how people in the past dealt with uncertainty and social transformation... It is almost like a history book, the magazine introduces these individuals so that contemporary readers can draw lessons or inspiration from them (author interview with Interviewee 3, April 16, 2023).

These media practices reflect a pronounced framing effect, shaping which aspects of the US become thinkable and how audiences are guided to interpret them. Political content related to the US is restricted, while artists, university campuses, and biographical narratives emerge as dominant visual and thematic referents. This framing blurs the imagined community boundary at the level of cultural memory (Anderson, 2006; Brennen & Hardt, 1999). US cultural icons, once symbols of Western modernity, are now more a part of shared generational experiences. They evoke recollection, nostalgia, and personal identification rather than geopolitical comparison. In a media environment where evaluations and comparisons concerning Western affairs can easily trigger nationalist backlash, the emphasis on individual stories reduces the likelihood that coverage will be interpreted as ideological endorsement or criticism. This point is further corroborated by the perspective of Interviewee 2 in the following section. Cultural biography thus functions as a pragmatic editorial strategy within *Sanlian Life Week* under the dual pressures of political censorship and market appeal. It enables sustained engagement with US-related subjects while avoiding activation of a binary geopolitical logic or the intensification of nationalist emotions among audiences.

Because the Society Department and the Culture Department alternate in determining the weekly cover story (see Chapter 5, Section 5.4), and the cover image is selected in accordance with that thematic choice, this dual editorial system directly shapes the magazine's visual presentation. Selected examples of cover images from 2001 to 2021 illustrate how *Sanlian Life Week*, under the dual editorial system, visualises the US. Figure 9.12 corresponds to the Society Department's cover selection, while Figures 9.13-9.15 correspond to that of the Culture Department.

Although their themes differ, both departments mobilise historical and cultural memory as a framing device, recalibrating how the US enters China's imagined narrative space.



Figure 9.12. Thirteen participants' firsthand details: China and the US from ice-breaking to diplomatic normalisation.
January 2009, *Sanlian Life Week*.

Figure 9.12 presents a historically significant diplomatic encounter between Premier Zhou Enlai and President Nixon during the latter's 1972 visit to the PRC, a pivotal moment in the process of diplomatic normalisation (see Chapter 2, Section 2.3). The issue was published on January 1, 2009, marking the thirtieth anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and the US. The selection of a historical photograph from 1972 activates collective memory and emotional resonance (Brennen & Hardt, 1999), inviting readers to recall and interpret the China-US relationship as a longstanding narrative of proximity and engagement. The banquet scene, raised glasses, reciprocal toasts, direct eye contact, and bodily

proximity, visually encodes intimacy and interpersonal engagement. Moreover, the headline foregrounds “thirteen participants’ firsthand details,” also emphasising a lived recollection. Diplomatic normalisation is thus framed as a commemorative narrative of encounter, which reduces the antagonistic charge of interstate politics by privileging moments of personal diplomacy and historical rapprochement over structural conflict. This temporal and affective reframing depoliticises contemporary tensions, narrowing the space for nationalist interpretation and recasting bilateral relations in terms of continuity and mutual recognition.



Figure 9.13. Left image: Dylan’s reality and our dream: the answer remains blowing in the wind.

April 2011, *Sanlian Life Week*.

Figure 9.14. Right image: The lonely king: Michael Jackson.

June 2014, *Sanlian Life Week*.

The Culture Department’s covers intensify this strategy. In Figures 9.13 and 9.14, Bob Dylan and Michael Jackson are presented as global cultural figures embedded in generational memory. The close-up composition in Figure 9.13 isolates Bob Dylan’s face, accentuating age, texture, and his closed eyes, which symbolise a

posture of recollection. By incorporating the possessive pronoun “our” in the headline, the magazine symbolically expands the scope of collective identification. The imagined community is subtly rearticulated: cultural belonging exceeds national borders, allowing readers to incorporate US popular icons into a shared emotional repertoire. The phrase “Blowin’ in the Wind” directly invokes Dylan’s iconic lyrics, activating shared emotional attachments and collective memory. The US is hence mediated not as a geopolitical other but as a source of collective cultural experience. Figure 9.14 echoes this interpretive framework through its portrayal of Michael Jackson’s iconic dance posture. The headline, “The Lonely King,” foregrounds sympathy, nostalgia, and recognition, inviting readers to engage with the figure through shared emotional resonance. These covers together demonstrate how cultural biography can momentarily loosen the primacy of national identity, replacing geopolitical distance with emotional familiarity.

In general, Figures 9.12-9.14 demonstrate how photographic images operate as mediators of collective memory. Photographs are important carriers of collective memory. By bringing the past into the present, they shape how societies remember and interpret historical events (Brennen & Hardt, 1999). By selecting iconic moments of China-US diplomatic events, alongside globally recognisable figures such as Bob Dylan and Michael Jackson, and embedding them within reflective and commemorative headlines, *Sanlian Life Week* activates this mnemonic function. The imagined community in these cases is not activated through national differences and contrast, but temporarily suspended in favour of shared cultural and generational reference points. Much of the literature on Chinese nationalism and former media representations of the US emphasises a trauma-centred narrative, in which images of

foreign powers are always anchored in memories of historical humiliation and reinforce a rejuvenation-oriented national consciousness (Callahan, 2004; Wang, 2012). In that paradigm, the US frequently appears as a symbolic antagonist or competitive benchmark against which China defines its ascent. The case of *Sanlian Life Week* complicates this dominant interpretation. Here, the US cultural figures and commemorative diplomatic moments are framed as shared memory and lived experience. In this sense, *Sanlian Life Week* contributes a distinctive visual logic to the study of nationalism in contemporary China. Its depoliticised imagery, centred on specific life stories and emotional resonance, suggests that representations of the foreign other are not activated solely through trauma or rivalry. They can also be negotiated through memory, emotion, and cultural familiarity, revealing a more elastic and situational mode of imagining the national self in relation to the outside world.

While the preceding sections have analysed how visual representations of the US differ across magazines, explaining these variations requires moving beyond the published images themselves to the institutional contexts of their production. The following section therefore draws on interviews with editors and journalists from both *South Review* and *Sanlian Life Week* to examine the everyday editorial practices through which visual content is negotiated, selected, and constrained. By foregrounding the perspectives of magazine practitioners, this analysis demonstrates how editorial work is shaped by the intersecting pressures of Party-state control, market imperatives, and limited professional autonomy.

9.5 Inside Chinese Magazines' Newsroom: "Between the Party Line and the Bottom Line"

Understanding the role of magazine practitioners requires looking beyond editorial outcomes to the decisions and negotiations that precede publication. The discussion begins with *South Review*, where editorial negotiations are embedded in formal procedures of image review and political risk management. It then turns to *Sanlian Life Week*, where journalists describe a more fluid negotiation involving Party oversight, audience nationalism, and professional judgement.

Within Institutional Boundaries: South Review's Safety-First Logic in Visual Censorship and Editorial Strategy

In an interview, Guo Jialiang, Deputy Director of Photography at *South Review*, offered a detailed account of the procedures involved in image selection and approval. Following a major internal reshuffling in 2016, Guo, who joined *South Review* in December of that year, became the most senior member of the magazine's visual department. "In fact, we always prioritise safety above all else," he explained. "If we are publishing something, safety definitely comes first"⁴¹ (author interview with Guo, March 23, 2023). A central concern is the security of image provenance. As my interviews revealed, none of the three Chinese magazines under study (*China Pictorial*, *South Review*, and *Sanlian Life Week*) maintain foreign correspondents. Consequently, they rely almost exclusively on state-approved sources such as Xinhua News Agency, or domestic commercial image banks including Visual China Group (VCG) and IC Photo. These platforms also licence materials from global news agencies such as Getty Images and Reuters. As Guo explained:

⁴¹ All quotations from interviews cited in this chapter are translated from the original Chinese by the author.

Many of the foreign images on Visual China are actually sourced from Getty, which serves as a distributor. If there is an image we need that is not available directly through VCG, we request it from Getty via Visual China. Once we provide the image code, they internally conduct their own review. After editorial approval, the image becomes available for our use... For sensitive images, People's Daily may be involved in the vetting process, and such images will bear a watermark labeled 'People Visual,' indicating that they have passed this additional layer of censorship (author interview with Guo, March 23, 2023).

Despite these procedures, Guo expressed concern that such routes still carry risks: "Mistakes do still slip through" (author interview with Guo, March 23, 2023). Here, "mistake" refers to the inadvertent selection or publication of images that may be politically inappropriate, ideologically misaligned, or insufficiently vetted. For this reason, he noted, the most trusted and secure source remains Xinhua News Agency: "Ideally, we use images from Xinhua News Agency, which at the very least are safe" (author interview with Guo, March 23, 2023). When it comes to images involving China's top leadership, the rules are even stricter. Only materials sourced from the so-called "Three Main Outlets" – People's Daily, Xinhua News Agency, and China Media Group – are considered sufficiently secure for publication.

In addition to provenance restrictions, all published visuals must align with themes either issued by higher-level authorities or explicitly approved by them. This ensures conformity with the ideological directives of the state. Such procedures reflect that Chinese market-oriented media still operate within a tightly controlled

propaganda framework. Within this system, the role of photo editors is not to exercise editorial independence, but rather to perform aesthetic alignment; that is, to select images that visually support predetermined narratives. As Guo noted, the visual production team at *South Review* is more commonly referred to by colleagues as the “post-production department,” highlighting the procedural, rather than creative, nature of their work (author interview with Guo, March 23, 2023). Beyond image sourcing, a rigorous internal review system governs all visual content prior to publication. Every image must undergo the Three Rounds of Review and Proofreading protocol (see Section 3.5, Chapter 3), a procedure that editors at both *China Pictorial* and *South Review* confirmed in interviews.

In general, these interview materials illuminate the structural conditions under which the satirical representations of US political leaders in *South Review* were produced. The visual caricatures of Donald Trump or earlier depictions of Barack Obama do not emerge from unregulated creative freedom, but from a tightly institutionalised process of sourcing, vetting, and ideological alignment. The reliance on state-approved image banks, the preferential use of Xinhua News Agency materials, and the additional vetting mechanisms involving outlets such as People’s Daily demonstrate that visual production is embedded within a vertically structured propaganda system. Even commercially oriented magazines operate within these bounded channels of circulation. The “Three Rounds of Review and Proofreading” procedure further confirms that satire is subject to layered scrutiny, in which political orientation and ideological implication are evaluated alongside layout and copyright clearance.

It is necessary to acknowledge that the interviewees' emphasis on strict compliance, safety prioritisation, and multi-layered approval procedures may partly stem from a self-protective stance, constituting a performative affirmation of institutional discipline shaped by the political sensitivity of the research context. Nevertheless, the control mechanisms they describe are consistent with Zhao's (2012) and Stockmann's (2013) analyses of China's media system, in which market-oriented practices coexist with, and remain subordinate to, overarching Party control. Within such a system, the grotesque, theatrical, and commodified portrayals of US leaders can be understood as forms of stylistic experimentation and market responsiveness operating within predetermined ideological contours. The visual department's characterisation as a "post-production department" underscores this logic; creativity is procedural, subordinated to narrative discipline. These interview accounts explain why *South Review*'s visual representations remain politically consistent despite their satirical style. Editorial work is organised around minimising political risk through approved image sources, multiple review procedures, and strict institutional routines. Yet these formal mechanisms represent only one dimension of contemporary magazine production. Interviews conducted at *Sanlian Life Week* reveal that editors also negotiate a different set of constraints arising from changing audience expectations and an increasingly nationalist media environment.

Navigating State Regulation and Nationalism: Editorial Practice in Sanlian Life Week

I encountered the most significant barriers to interview access at *Sanlian Life Week*. The head of the visual department prohibited all members of the department from participating in interviews with me as a researcher studying overseas. This

restriction itself underscores the heightened sensitivity in *Sanlian Life Week*, and suggests that image-making, even within a culturally oriented commercial magazine, remains closely monitored. Consequently, I redirected my fieldwork toward anonymised interviews with journalists engaged in text-based reporting (see Section 5.6, Chapter 5). According to Interviewee 3, most of the images in *Sanlian Life Week* are selected in alignment with written features (author interview with Interviewee 3, April 16, 2023), therefore insights into textual editorial practices are still relevant for understanding visual decision-making. These conversations reveal a layered terrain of negotiation shaped by three intersecting pressures: Party oversight, intensified nationalist sentiment among audiences, and professional commitments to journalistic credibility.

One Social Department journalist, who requested anonymity and is here referred to as Interviewee 1, elaborated on their working dilemma from the perspective of state intervention. Interviewee 1 described the newsroom's awareness of censorship protocols and their calculated approach to circumventing them: "Sometimes we know the piece will not pass review, but we publish it anyway, even if only for an hour. It is better to get it out briefly than not at all" (author interview with Interviewee 1, April 13, 2023). Interviewee 1 introduced it as a "publish first, delete later" tactic, a strategy for navigating China's temporally staggered censorship apparatus, which parallels patterns identified in studies of Chinese social media governance (King et al., 2013). Journalists knowingly take advantage of the short window between publication and removal to ensure that the information can be disseminated, downloaded, or shared before being censored. While journalists adopt practical tactics to navigate censorship, they also rely on informal strategies to

manage the emotional strain such work entails. Interviewee 1 noted that colleagues jokingly refer to the Publicity Department as “Xuan Xuan,” a diminutive derived from the Chinese word “xuanchuan” (宣传 propaganda). This seemingly light-hearted nickname functions as more than humour. It creates a shared subcultural code among journalists, allowing them to symbolically domesticate an omnipresent authority. In a system where ideological oversight structures professional life, such linguistic play functions as a micro-level coping mechanism. As Interviewee 1 described, colleagues would sometimes remark, half-jokingly, “Xuan Xuan has given the word again,” implying that a higher authority has stepped in and issued instructions, whether requiring revision, adjustment, or withdrawal (author interview with Interviewee 1, April 13, 2023). This ironic remark allows them to lightly mock their own constrained position while acknowledging the omnipresence of ideological supervision. Such humour creates a united newsroom identity under conditions of persistent oversight.

However, the pressures confronting journalists extend beyond top-down regulation. One intern, anonymised as Interviewee 2, remarked that coverage of the US has significantly declined in recent years: “If you look through past issues of *Sanlian Life Week*, especially in the last few years, you will find that the frequency of US-related cover stories has dropped. These topics are rarely chosen anymore” (author interview with Interviewee 2, April 14, 2023). Interviewee 2 attributed this shift not solely to top-down censorship but also to changing audience interests and ideological sensitivities:

The angle from which you approach the US is crucial. Either you report on very specific topics, like interest rate hikes or economic

policy, or you frame the US within broader international reports. But even international content is less common now. I would not say this is entirely because of censorship. It is also because readers are no longer that interested (author interview with Interviewee 2, April 14, 2023).

This comment reveals a fundamental shift in the epistemic position of the US in the Chinese imagination at the time of the interview. In earlier decades, US stories were often seen as aspirational or comparative, reflecting a desire to learn from or measure against a perceived global standard. However, Interviewee 2 noted that such comparisons have now become suspect: “People used to see the US as something distant and worth understanding through the media. Now, readers no longer feel that way. If you write about the US, they assume you are implying ‘the moon is rounder on the other side’ – that you are suggesting foreign countries are inherently better. They accuse you of smuggling in pro-Western values” (author interview with Interviewee 2, April 14, 2023). Interviewee 2 acknowledged that *Sanlian Life Week* has become a frequent target of nationalist criticism online: “*Sanlian [Life Week]* is now seen by many ultra-leftist netizens as one of the main ‘reactionary’ publications. I often see people on Weibo⁴² accusing us of harbouring anti-China sentiments” (author interview with Interviewee 2, April 14, 2023). This testimony reveals a significant transformation in the communicative environment. In addition to formal censorship, journalists now confront what might be described as a bottom-up disciplining effect. Intensified nationalist sentiment within digital publics constrains

⁴² Weibo is a Chinese microblogging platform established in 2009, functionally comparable to Twitter, that facilitates public discussion and content sharing. It ranks among the largest social media platforms in China, with more than 582 million monthly active users and roughly 257 million daily active users in September 2025, and functions within China’s regulated digital communication system (Statista, 2025).

editorial choices, as accusations of being insufficiently patriotic can lead to reputational damage, online harassment, or market loss. This development signals a consolidation of a more vigilant and emotionally charged national self-understanding during this period. The boundaries of acceptable discourse are no longer enforced solely by institutional gatekeepers but also by segments of the imagined community itself.

In this environment, journalists have to carefully calibrate their reporting to avoid triggering online backlash. According to Interviewee 2, the editorial strategy has been to focus on “concrete individuals and specific stories,” thereby minimising ideological comparisons:

If we report on the US at all, it has to be about something very specific and apolitical... We try to emphasise individual people and their stories... We steer clear of abstract evaluations or political contrasts. There is no longer space to praise or criticise. Even saying nothing can be risky, because people read meanings into everything.
(author interview with Interviewee 2, April 14, 2023).

This testimony directly corresponds to the visual pattern identified in Figures 9.12-9.14. The insistence on “concrete individuals and specific stories” and the avoidance of “abstract evaluations or political contrasts” are not merely journalists’ strategies in news reporting; they structure visual representation as well. By narrowing the semantic range of both text and image, the editorial process reduces the risk that viewers will complete the frame in antagonistic terms in their minds (Bock, 2020).

Consequently, the editorial strategy for representing the US at *Sanlian Life Week* emerges from the interaction of three pressures: Party oversight, professional commitments to journalistic credibility, and intensified nationalist sentiment among audiences. The convergence of top-down governance and bottom-up nationalist mobilisation narrows the discursive space available for engagement with the US, shaping both textual and visual practices within the magazine's institutional setting. In general, interview evidence suggests that editorial work in Chinese magazines is shaped by continuous assessments of political sensitivity, audience reception, and institutional risk. Although *South Review* and *Sanlian Life Week* adopt different editorial strategies, practitioners in both magazines describe their work as a process of deciding what can be published, how it should be presented, and when particular topics or images are better avoided altogether. These findings indicate that magazine staff exercise professional judgement, but only within boundaries defined by Party-state regulation, market considerations, and, increasingly, nationalist public opinion.

9.6 Conclusion

Between 2001 and 2021, the US re-emerged in Chinese magazines less as a glamorous model of modernity than as a contested rival whose authority was increasingly questioned. In both *China Pictorial* and *South Review*, the US was framed through a heightened politics of crisis: a hegemon at risk of decline, a disruptive actor in world order, and a source of ideological and institutional instability. Visually, this period marked a prominence of political themes and leader-centric representations, translating abstract power competition into legible interpersonal scenes of hierarchy and confrontation.

In *China Pictorial*, diplomatic photojournalism is selected and recontextualised to stabilise an image of China's dignified centrality, using recurrent visual cues (frontal orientation, salience, focus hierarchy, ceremonial space) that reliably guide interpretation toward Chinese authority and soft power. In *South Review*, editorial teams exploit the "frameability" of US leaders, especially Donald Trump, to detach photographs from their original referents and reinsert them into allegorical or grotesque narratives. In *Sanlian Life Week*, the selection logic narrows political signification by visualising the US through cultural biography and commemorative memory, thereby reducing the probability that viewers complete the frame through antagonistic geopolitical binaries. These patterns underscore that the image of the US during this period is an outcome of editorial selection and interpretive management, enacted differently across institutions.

This chapter contributes to refining how imagined communities are constructed in contemporary Chinese visual discourse. Existing scholarship on Chinese nationalism identifies the narrative of historical trauma, rejuvenation as a durable interpretive framework that renders foreign powers symbolically meaningful through humiliation memory and competitive ascent (Callahan, 2004; Callahan, 2010; Wang, 2012). This logic is evident in *China Pictorial*'s images of leader diplomacy, which depict China's power and status as prevailing in comparison with the US within a broader narrative of national resurgence. It is similarly apparent in *South Review*'s satirical deflation of US leadership. However, the *Sanlian Life Week* case complicates a trauma-centric account by demonstrating that national boundaries can be strategically de-emphasised. Through commemorative diplomacy and cultural biography, photography's mnemonic authority is mobilised to evoke shared memory

and emotional familiarity. In this sense, the chapter's theoretical novelty lies in identifying an elastic, situational mode of imagining in which foreignness is rendered culturally legible and emotionally containable without being converted into an explicit nationalist contest.

This chapter also clarifies how China's media governance configuration structures these divergences. The interviews and workflow descriptions in *South Review* demonstrate that visual satire is an institutionalised practice of bounded innovation: sourcing from approved channels, multi-level vetting, and adherence to safety-first routines shape what kinds of satire are feasible and where it can be directed. The result is not uniform propaganda, but differentiated strategies: Party-organ outlets "set the tone" through ceremonially disciplined diplomatic imagery (Meng, 2018, p. 3), while commercial magazines compete for attention by deploying visually forceful devices, allegory, caricature, and spectacle, that remain broadly compatible with sanctioned external positioning. Importantly, *Sanlian Life Week* illustrates a different institutional solution: risk allocation through internal topic rotation (Society versus Culture departments) and a strong preference for concrete individuals and specific stories. This strategy is a pragmatic response to the joint pressures of party control and online nationalism.

Geopolitical dynamics provided the broader context for these representational shifts. The post-1999 and post-2001 crises (bombing of China's embassy; US-China air collision over the South China Sea) reinforced negative framing of threat and sovereignty violation, while the 2008 financial crisis enabled depictions of US decline that commercial outlets could amplify through allegory and caricature in line with an increasingly competitive media tone. After Xi came to power in 2012,

tightened Party control and a more assertive diplomatic posture narrowed the boundaries of visual expression.

Overall, the US again functions as a mirror, through which Chinese media articulate a heightened self-imagination: China appears orderly and confident in its soft power, in contrast to a declining and unstable US rival. The variation across magazines reveals that nationalism in this period does not operate only as direct antagonism. It also structures degrees of emphasis, satire, and strategic avoidance, shaping how rivalry is visualised, softened, or intensified within China's evolving media system.

CHAPTER 10. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

10.1 Introduction

From 1950 to 2021, Chinese magazines depicted the US first as an imperial aggressor, later as a symbol of modernity, and more recently as a declining rival. Yet these shifting mediated images consistently reflected China's own national trajectory. The US served as a reflexive mirror through which China's collective self was articulated across the long durée. This enduring logic is anchored in the nationalist narrative of a century of humiliation and the aspirational discourse of rejuvenation that presupposes a once-central world order against which the nation's return is imagined (Zhao, 2021). This study analysed 8,884 images related to the US published in Chinese pictorial magazines between 1950 and 2021. Drawing on Bock's (2020) model of visual framing, the analysis shows that, regardless of whether the US was framed positively or negatively, its image was consistently organised in relation to China's evolving national trajectory – from revolutionary challenger, to development pursuer, and later to a global power increasingly confident in its role.

Understanding these framing patterns requires situating them within three intersecting contexts (see Figure 1.2, Chapter 1). First, the changing geopolitical relationship between China and the US structured which aspects of US society became visually salient at different historical moments. Second, representations of the US were embedded within the nationalist narrative that links the historical experience of humiliation with the aspiration of national rejuvenation, shaping how foreign power is interpreted in relation to China's imagined community (Zhao, 2021). Third, these visual frames were produced within the institutional configuration of the Chinese media system, where Party-organ and commercial magazines operated under shared political oversight while navigating different

degrees of editorial flexibility and market pressure (Pan & Lu, 2003; Zhao, 2012).

One useful way of further interpreting these findings is through Callahan's (2020) distinction between visibility and visuality. While visibility draws attention to how political meanings are constructed and communicated through what is made visually present, visuality directs attention to the wider cultural and political work that images perform within particular social contexts (see Section 4.3, Chapter 4). This distinction is useful for the present study because the analysis concerns not only changing representations of the US, but also how these representations were used to position China in relation to war, modernity, development, and geopolitical status. In this sense, images of the US did more than make particular versions of the US visible: they provided visual resources through which changing understandings of China itself could be articulated.

This chapter synthesises the findings of the dissertation to address the central question of how Chinese media framed the US over time and how these framings reflected and rearticulated China's imagined national community. It first answers the key research questions of the project, and then discusses the broader theoretical implications of these findings for understanding visual framing, nationalism, and media governance in the context of China-US relations. The chapter concludes by outlining the study's research contributions, limitations, and directions for future research.

10.2 Answers to the Research Questions

Central Question: How have Chinese picture magazines visually framed the US over time? And how have these framings both reflected and rearticulated the imagined Chinese national community?

Between 1950 and 2021, Chinese media portrayed the US through markedly shifting frames: from overwhelmingly negative representations during the period of wartime confrontation (1950-1971), to predominantly positive portrayals in the Reform era (1972-2000), and eventually to a mixed configuration in which positive and negative frames coexisted, with positive framing remaining slightly more prominent in the modern context (2001-2021). Correspondingly, the image of the US evolved from that of a morally corrupt imperialist aggressor, to a dazzling vision of modernity, and later to an unstable rival perceived as entering a phase of relative decline.

However, the US consistently functioned as a reflexive mirror through which China articulated its own imagined national community across the *longue durée*. During the wartime confrontation era, negative depictions of US imperialism were anchored in the historical memory of national humiliation, constructing China as a morally righteous and collectively mobilised leader of anti-imperialist struggle. In the Reform era, positive portrayals of US modernity were selectively incorporated into a compensatory nationalist imagination, enabling China to pursue development while symbolically maintaining cultural centrality. In the twenty-first century, the coexistence of positive cultural imagery and negative political framing reflects a more confident narrative of national rejuvenation, in which China is positioned as an orderly and confident power capable of projecting soft power relative to a seemingly unstable US.

RQ1: What were the dominant images of the US in Chinese pictorial media across different historical periods from 1950 to 2021, and how did they change over time?

Across the three historical periods examined, the image of the US in Chinese pictorial media shifted from a consistently demonised enemy, to a mediated symbol of modernity, and later to a politically contested rival.

Between 1950 and 1971, Chinese pictorial media, represented by *China Pictorial*, portrayed the US almost exclusively through negative visual frames. The dominant image was that of a morally corrupt imperialist aggressor. Visual strategies included grotesque caricatures of US leaders, satirical captions accusing the US of warmongering, and photographs of large-scale anti-US protests staged in China and abroad. These images frequently linked contemporary US military actions in Korea and Vietnam to earlier episodes of Western imperial intervention in China, thereby placing Cold War confrontation within the longer historical narrative of foreign humiliation.

Between 1972 and 2000, representations changed sharply. Following the Sino-US rapprochement and the reform and opening-up policy, Chinese magazines presented the most positive visual representation of the US across the entire period studied, relatively speaking. The US was frequently depicted as a dazzling vision of modernity, associated with consumer abundance, technological advancement, corporate success, and popular culture. These images circulated most prominently in commercial magazines such as *South Review* and *Sanlian Life Week*. However, attraction was often accompanied by visual cues suggesting excess or cultural unease. Photographs of advertising and cartoons saturated with symbols of US consumer culture were sometimes framed as signs of social acceleration, moral looseness, or consumerist excess. The US, therefore, functioned as a developmental reference point through which Chinese media negotiated the challenge of pursuing modernisation while avoiding renewed subordination.

Between 2001 and 2021, the US appeared more as a politically contested rival. Visual representations were increasingly centred on leader politics and crisis narratives. Diplomatic encounters between Chinese and US leaders became a recurring motif, particularly in *China Pictorial*, where official diplomatic photographs emphasised ceremonial hierarchy and China's international authority. In *South Review*, US political figures, especially Donald Trump, were frequently reframed through caricature, ironic montage, or satirical graphic design, turning leader imagery into commentary on political disorder in the US. Although some coverage, particularly in *Sanlian Life Week*, routed US visibility toward cultural biography and historical memory, such cases remained secondary to the broader pattern. Within this visual landscape, the US appeared as an unstable competitor against which China's growing authority, order, and soft power could be emphasised.

RQ2: How did portrayals of the US differ across the selected Party-organ and commercial magazines, and why?

China Pictorial, as a Party-organ publication, consistently functioned as a tone-setting outlet that aligned closely with official ideological priorities. During the wartime confrontation period, it published highly stylised propaganda images portraying the US as a morally corrupt aggressor. In the Reform era, when US cultural modernity became more visible in commercial magazines, *China Pictorial*, in contrast, recontextualised US elements within Chinese cultural and symbolic frameworks. Images of Americans studying Chinese opera, practising tai chi, or visiting Confucian sites were used to place the US within a narrative of Chinese cultural authority. In 2001-2021, *China Pictorial* relied heavily on official US-China diplomatic photographs to portray the US. Through composition, gaze direction, and

spatial hierarchy, these images consistently foregrounded Chinese leaders as the central actors in bilateral encounters.

Commercial magazines such as *South Review* and *Sanlian Life Week* displayed greater stylistic diversity and editorial flexibility. These outlets frequently integrated US cultural symbols into narratives of urban modernity and everyday life during the Reform era. However, this aspiration coexists with caution, scepticism, and the impulse to domesticate, as the appeal of the US was organised within a historically grounded nationalist narrative shaped by national dignity, vulnerability, and resurgence. In the twenty-first century, a period of heightened geopolitical tension, commercial magazines adopted differentiated framing strategies. *South Review* often employed satire, caricature, and allegorical imagery to question the authority of US leadership. By contrast, *Sanlian Life Week* tended to soften geopolitical tension and political judgment by foregrounding cultural biography and historical memory of the US, thereby reducing the risk of nationalist backlash from the audience.

These differences emerge from the institutional configuration of the Chinese media system, which combines Party oversight with market competition. Party-organ media prioritise ideological consistency and diplomatic signalling, thereby constraining visual framing within narratives aligned with state objectives. Commercial media, while operating under the same regulatory framework, compete for audience attention and support, and thus adopt more visually striking and narratively flexible framing strategies. However, this flexibility remains structurally bounded by Party oversight, including constraints on image sourcing, editorial hierarchy, and regulatory review. As a result, variation across magazines reflects differences in framing style and narrative strategy, rather than fundamental

divergence in ideological orientation. Meanwhile, the persistence of certain similarities across these outlets can be briefly understood by situating media practices within a broader multi-layered framework. While the media system explains variation, shared patterns arise from the interaction of visual framing practices, nationalist narratives of the imagined community, and shifting geopolitical contexts. Across both Party and commercial media, the US is repeatedly positioned as a reflective mirror through which China's national identity – whether defined by resistance, development, or rejuvenation – is articulated. Thus, despite differences in style and tone, representations converge in their deeper function: they contribute to the ongoing visual construction of China's national self.

RQ3: What do the constructed visual frames reveal about the evolving dynamics of China-US relations, and how do they engage with the enduring nationalist narrative of China's humiliation and rejuvenation?

The visual frames identified in this study closely follow the shifting geopolitical relationship between China and the US, while consistently engaging with the longer nationalist narrative of humiliation and rejuvenation. Across different historical moments, the US image functions as a mirror through which Chinese media articulate changing understandings of China's own historical position and international status.

Between 1950 and 1971, when China and the US confronted each other militarily and ideologically in the early Cold War, visual representations constructed the US as an imperialist aggressor. Through montage, symbolic juxtaposition, and the reuse of historical imagery, contemporary conflicts were visually linked to earlier episodes of foreign invasion. In doing so, Chinese media collapsed Cold War rivalry into the historical memory of the Century of Humiliation, reinforcing a narrative in

which China appeared as a morally righteous and collectively mobilised actor resisting recurring external domination. Here, visual framing did not merely depict conflict, but reactivated historical trauma to legitimise political resistance.

Between 1972 and 2000, the geopolitical relationship shifted from confrontation to rapprochement and pragmatic cooperation. The normalisation of diplomatic relations and the opening of China's economy expanded the space for representing US society and culture. However, the visual framing of US modernity was carefully managed. Images highlighting US advancement were frequently recontextualised within Chinese symbolic spaces or balanced by cues emphasising Chinese cultural depth and civilisational continuity. In addition, representations of US modernity were often accompanied by critique and reflection on a culture of excess, acceleration, and seduction. This framing strategy enabled Chinese media to acknowledge the appeal of US development while avoiding a re-inscription of historical inferiority. In this sense, visual representations participated in what can be understood as a compensatory nationalist imagination, in which learning from the West was made compatible with maintaining national dignity.

In the period between 2001 and 2021, China-US relations increasingly shifted toward strategic competition. Events such as the 2008 financial crisis, growing geopolitical rivalry, and heightened political tensions reshaped the visual representation of the US. Visual representations of the US became more differentiated but remained anchored in the narrative of national rejuvenation. In *China Pictorial*, diplomatic imagery consistently foregrounded Chinese leaders through spatial hierarchy and compositional centrality, visually asserting China's rising status in global affairs. In *South Review*, satirical portrayals of US political figures introduced a contrasting but complementary framing, in which the authority

of the US was symbolically destabilised. By contrast, *Sanlian Life Week* de-emphasised the narrative of national trauma and rejuvenation by visually framing China-US commemorative diplomacy and the biographies of US cultural figures.

In general, changes in bilateral relations provided the historical conditions that shaped which aspects of US society could be represented and how they were framed. The narrative of humiliation and rejuvenation, in turn, provided the interpretive lens through which these representations were made ideologically meaningful, ensuring that shifting images of the US were consistently aligned with China's evolving sense of historical experience, national dignity, and future trajectory.

RQ4: What roles did magazine staff play, and how did they navigate the tensions between Party-state control, market forces, and their limited professional autonomy?

Interviews and editorial workflow descriptions show that magazine staff exercised limited but consequential agency in shaping visual representations of the US. Editors rarely produced original photographs of US political events. Instead, they relied on images supplied by state-approved sources, such as the core Party media (e.g., Xinhua News Agency) or international agencies authorised for use by them, including Getty Images and Reuters. Their primary area of discretion lay in selection, cropping, layout design, and captioning. Through these decisions, the overall tone of political imagery remained largely determined by Party media.

However, editors and visual producers did not simply reproduce official propaganda. They actively navigated a complex environment shaped by Party oversight, commercial competition, and audience expectations. Interviews with editorial staff reveal that visual production involved a series of practical strategies

designed to manage political risk while maintaining editorial distinctiveness. One key strategy involved frameability. By selectively cropping, sequencing, or contextualising images, editors could introduce satire, irony, or critique without violating formal censorship rules. This strategy was particularly evident in *South Review*, where images of US politicians with exaggerated facial expressions or unusual gestures were particularly valued because they could be reframed through graphic design. A second strategy involved the use of caricatures of US political figures to generate visual noise, thereby deflecting regulatory scrutiny and redirecting attention away from critical commentary on domestic issues. Another strategy involved editorial selection. In *Sanlian Life Week*, editorial staff often reduced political risk by redirecting US-related material into cultural topics. When US politics became particularly sensitive, editors preferred to publish stories about US literature, universities, or historical figures. This topic routing allowed the magazine to maintain international coverage without directly engaging in politically charged framing.

The possibility of public backlash or accusations of insufficient patriotism also constituted a boundary condition shaping editorial decisions. As a result, editorial autonomy remained constrained by both top-down Party supervision and bottom-up audience nationalism. This finding is important because it complicates an understanding of visual control as operating only from the Party-state downward. Editors also anticipated how readers might respond to particular representations of the US. The avoidance of certain political topics in *Sanlian Life Week*, for example, was not explained by formal censorship alone; editorial staff also described concerns that particular representations could be interpreted by audiences as insufficiently patriotic. Audience nationalism therefore entered the editorial process before

publication, influencing decisions about which US-related subjects were considered publishable and how they should be framed. Visual material was typically reviewed by multiple editors before publication, and all magazines relied heavily on approved image sources. Chinese magazine staff thus functioned as interpreters operating within clearly defined institutional boundaries. Their role was to organise available visual material in ways that remained politically acceptable while still attracting readers and maintaining each publication's editorial identity.

In summary, the findings of this study support the integrative framework proposed in Figure 1.2 (Chapter 1), which conceptualises the visual representation of the US in Chinese magazines as the outcome of multiple interacting forces. At the level of *visual framing practices*, editorial choices regarding image creation, selection, and their effects on viewers' interpretations shape how particular meanings are visually constructed and communicated. These framing practices are embedded within broader *Chinese nationalist narratives*, particularly the enduring discourse of national humiliation and rejuvenation, through which representations of the US are often mobilised to articulate China's evolving national self-understanding. At the same time, the *institutional dynamics* of the Chinese media system, including Party leadership, regulatory oversight, professional autonomy, and varying degrees of commercialisation, establish structural boundaries that shape which images can be published and the diversity among magazines. Finally, these representational practices unfold within the shifting *geopolitical relationship* between China and the US, which provides the historical context that influences the thematic focus, tone, and interpretative possibilities of US imagery in Chinese media. In combination, these four dimensions interact in complex and contingent ways, with their relative influence shifting across historical periods, to shape the evolving visual construction

of the US. The following section discusses the theoretical and empirical contributions of this study.

10.3 Research Contributions

The study contributes theoretically and empirically to research in this field.

Conceptually, the study develops a theoretical model for analysing foreign visual representation in media, particularly within media systems characterised by strong political control, as illustrated in Figure 1.2 (Chapter 1). In this framework, visual framing practices shape how images organise and communicate meaning; national imagined community provides the deeper cultural structures through which these meanings are interpreted and internalised; the media system determines who can speak and how representations can be produced; and geopolitics influences what can be represented at particular historical moments. The findings also extend Callahan's (2020) distinction between visibility and visibility in a historically grounded way. The study shows that changing representations of the US did not simply make different versions of America visible. Rather, these representations were repeatedly mobilised to narrate China's evolving national self. This suggests that the visibility of the foreign other is historically inseparable from the construction of the national self.

By focusing on the Chinese media system, characterised by strict media control and censorship, this study challenges the US centrism of much mainstream research on international image construction, which has predominantly examined Western media contexts. By taking Chinese magazine media as the primary research object, the study expands the geographical and political scope of visual communication research. This shift enables a different understanding of how international images are produced and function. Rather than emerging primarily

from journalistic norms of objectivity or market-driven competition, visual representations in the Chinese context are shown to be shaped by the interaction of state ideology, controlled professional practice, and selective market logics. This perspective reveals that images of foreign countries are not simply tools of external communication, but are deeply embedded in domestic processes of meaning-making, particularly in relation to nationalism. It thus highlights how representations of the US operate less as neutral depictions of an external other and more as resources for articulating China's evolving national identity, historical consciousness, and political legitimacy.

Theoretically, the empirical analysis enriches existing understandings of Chinese nationalism. First, in examining the Reform era configuration of nationalism, the study identifies what may be described as a “compensatory nationalist imagination”. Within this framework, China could pursue modernisation by learning from the West while simultaneously imagining itself as the enduring civilisational centre. This form of nationalist imagination functioned as a way to preserve Chinese face (dignity) at a historical moment when the state openly acknowledged the necessity of learning from others. In this respect, it differs from earlier scholarly interpretations of Reform era pragmatic nationalism (Hughes, 2006; Zhao, 2004), which emphasise instrumental state strategies, as well as from the long-standing narrative of national self-assurance often summarised as a form of nationalism in which “China always wins” (Gries, 2004, p. 42). Instead, compensatory nationalist imagination highlights a symbolic balancing mechanism through which modernisation and civilisational confidence could coexist. Second, the visual case analysis and interviews reveal that Chinese media are not merely straightforward transmitters of nationalist ideology. In response to rising online

nationalist sentiment, some magazines strategically mobilise nostalgia and emotional familiarity to frame foreign figures and events, thereby narrowing the space for overtly confrontational nationalist interpretation.

Methodologically and empirically, the study contributes an extensive longitudinal dataset and multi-method research design. A visual content and framing analysis was conducted on 8,884 US-related images drawn from three influential Chinese magazines. The dataset includes the complete visual record of *China Pictorial* from 1950 to 2021, providing one of the longest historical spans currently available for analysing the evolving representation of the US in Chinese media. This long-term perspective extends existing research on the dynamic construction of the US image in China. In addition, the study incorporates in-depth interviews conducted within Chinese magazine newsrooms with visual editors, photojournalists, and reporters. These interviews provide first-hand insight into image sourcing, visual production, and editorial review processes, offering rare empirical evidence on how visual representations are selected, produced, and regulated within the Chinese media system.

The study's longitudinal perspective also contributes to visual politics by providing a historical baseline against which contemporary transformations in visual communication can be understood. Although digital platforms, social media, and meme culture have fundamentally changed how political images circulate, the findings suggest important continuities with earlier magazine culture. Interviews show that editors already anticipated audience reactions and adjusted visual framing accordingly, indicating that audience pressure did not emerge with digital media but has become more immediate, visible, and consequential in platform environments. This historical perspective demonstrates that the significance of earlier magazine

culture lies not only in documenting a previous media system, but also in revealing the longer visual repertoires through which the US has been understood – as an imperial threat, a model of modernity, or a politically contested rival. These repertoires predate the digital turn and continue to provide resources that can be reproduced, reinterpreted, or contested in contemporary media. By tracing these longer historical trajectories, the study contributes to visual politics and international relations by showing why historical visual structures remain essential for understanding the increasingly fragmented and participatory circulation of political images today.

Overall, the study demonstrates that the visual representation of the US in Chinese media is shaped by the interaction of framing practices, nationalist narratives, institutional media dynamics, and shifting geopolitical relations. By integrating these dimensions within a single analytical framework and supporting them with long-term empirical evidence, the research provides a more comprehensive understanding of how foreign images are constructed within politically regulated media environments. Its historical perspective also shows that contemporary transformations in visual communication should not be understood as a complete rupture from earlier media cultures. Although digital platforms have altered the speed, scale, and actors involved in image circulation, many of the visual categories through which the US has been interpreted have longer historical trajectories. Recovering those trajectories helps clarify what is changing in contemporary visual politics, as well as what continues to be reproduced through new media forms.

The next section discusses the limitations of the study and directions for future research.

10.4 Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be kept in view. First, archive biases are likely. Rights restrictions, missing issues, and shifts in editorial style may overrepresent regulation-safe images. In addition, the magazines were founded in different years, so the available data and historical span are uneven; very early periods are not always comparable across outlets. However, these safety-first controls and the uneven temporal spans across outlets are themselves faithful traces of the evolution of China's media ecology, revealing how shifting institutional constraints, political priorities, and marketisation processes have selectively structured what can be visually represented, circulated, and preserved over time. Also, the large volume of material in *South Review* and *Sanlian Life Week* necessitated sampling (Section 5.5, Chapter 5). To address this, I drew on two principled filters: key-event years and years that aligned with maxima or minima observed in *China Pictorial*. Although this strategy sacrifices some aggregate precision, it concentrates analytic attention on theoretically informative moments and improves cross-outlet comparability at points of substantive interest.

Second, coding visual frames inevitably involves interpretive judgment. I developed a codebook with explicit decision rules and anchored each category with exemplars, as shown in Appendix A. Even so, it is challenging to measure fine-grained balances among multiple cues when images operate simultaneously through caption, composition, and context. Boundaries between weak attraction and wavering, or between weak rejection and strong rejection, can be especially delicate. To manage this, I adopted a mixed-methods design in which quantitative content analysis establishes patterns and qualitative framing analysis explains them (see Section 5.2, Chapter 5). Because the coding relies on an experienced coder to weigh

cues within the Chinese textual and visual context, I did not run a formal inter-coder reliability test. Instead, I mitigated subjectivity through an audit trail, recoding random subsamples after cooling-off intervals, and systematic memo-ing of edge cases. This approach follows the spirit of Matthes and Kohring's (2008) emphasis on reliability and validity via transparent specification of frame elements, while acknowledging the interpretive labour that political imagery requires.

Third, interviews were more difficult to secure than anticipated. The sensitivity of Sino-US topics and concerns about speaking with a researcher based abroad produced higher-than-expected resistance in on-site fieldwork. After multiple refusals, including a categorical refusal from the entire visual desk of *Sanlian Life Week*, I interviewed three anonymous text reporters from that outlet instead. As a result, the interview dataset does not provide a fully balanced or directly comparable perspective across the visual departments of all three magazines. Nevertheless, these conversations added a valuable perspective: in many Chinese magazines, visual desks routinely follow the agenda of text commissions, so hearing from reporters about topic selection, audience concerns, and review pressures clarified the pipeline that ultimately shapes image use. In addition, the interviews were not able to include staff who had worked at these magazines during earlier historical periods, meaning that the interview data primarily represent newsroom practices in Chinese magazine media since the early twenty-first century.

Fourth, this study focuses on media production and published visual content only; it does not assess audience reception or effects. Questions concerning how audiences interpret or respond to these visual representations remain beyond the scope of the present analysis and therefore provide a clear agenda for future research. Relatedly, historical differences in printing technology, colour reproduction costs,

and layout conventions likely influenced compositional choices in ways that cannot be fully separated within a historical corpus. In this study, such differences are addressed by interpreting composition relative to contemporaneous editorial standards and by focusing on within-period comparisons wherever possible.

Finally, all interview quotations and all citations, image headlines/captions from Chinese magazines were transcribed and translated by me. Despite careful verification, minor semantic drift remains possible. The advantage of doing the transcription and translation myself is consistency in terminology across chapters, tight control over de-identification for ethics, and immediate alignment between the wording of quotes and the coding categories used in the analysis. Where nuance mattered, I retained key Chinese terms in brackets in my notes and cross-checked with informants when feasible.

Future research can move in four practical directions. (1) Building on the non-Western perspective advanced here, future studies could examine whether similar visual constructions of nationalism emerge in other geopolitical contexts beyond China. For instance, analysing how countries with different historical trajectories and media systems visually construct national identity and foreign relations would help clarify which aspects of compensatory or restorative nationalism are context-specific and which may reflect broader dynamics in global media cultures. (2) Future work could explore how the conceptualisation of nationalism itself may need to be rethought in light of non-Western visual regimes. Specifically, comparative research could investigate whether the humiliation-rejuvenation narrative identified in this study represents a distinct model of nationalist imagination or a variation of more general processes of mediated identity construction. (3) The findings also invite inquiry into how visual representations

operate across different media infrastructures. With the increasing prominence of digital and platform-based media, future research could examine how algorithmic curation, platform governance, and artificial intelligence reshape the production, circulation, and visibility of politically sensitive images. (4) Relatedly, emerging generative artificial intelligence technologies introduce new dynamics into visual politics by enabling the rapid creation, manipulation, and dissemination of images. Future studies could investigate how such technologies affect the credibility, emotional resonance, and geopolitical framing of visual content, and whether they amplify or destabilise established nationalist narratives.

To conclude, the images examined in this thesis, spanning more than seven decades, demonstrate that representations of the US in Chinese media have never been static reflections of geopolitical reality. Rather, they have functioned as cultural and political instruments through which China has negotiated its own historical memory, national identity, and place in the world. As recent images from the confrontation involving the US, Israel and Iran spread across global media, missiles intercepted across the night sky, devastated residential neighbourhoods, and maps tracing the layered history of territorial disputes, they serve as a reminder that contemporary geopolitics is often encountered first through images, and that those images are always interpreted through national narratives and historical memory. The images studied here also form part of a longer historical conversation about power, memory, and representation. They remind us that international relations are not only negotiated through diplomacy and strategy but are also imagined, circulated, and contested through visual culture. In this sense, the evolving visual portrayal of the US in Chinese media is ultimately a story about how a nation sees the world, and how, through that act of looking outward, it continues to redefine how it sees itself.

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APPENDIX A. CODEBOOK

(Code for Mixed if more than one category is focused on throughout the image. Code for Other if owning a unique category, but does not fit into any listed categories. Code for NA if not available)

Descriptive identifier

1. **Magazine:** *China Pictorial*; *Sanlian Life Week*; *South Review*
2. **Date** (*China Pictorial* is a monthly magazine, so the dates default to the 1st of the month)
3. **Page number**
4. **Unique image ID:** for statistical and storage purposes in data analysis software, e.g. SR2007010101A indicate 1st January 2007, page 1, first photo/image A, *South Review*. While *China Pictorial* is a monthly magazine, so the dates in its ID defaults to the 1st of the month, e.g. CP1950070101A indicate July 1950, page 1, first photo/image A, *China Pictorial*.
5. **Image position:**
 - (1) **Position on the page:** Top; Middle; Bottom
 - (2) **Position in the magazine:** Magazine cover; Inside page
6. **Size:** It depends on the proportion of the page rather than an exact measurement. The categories of image size and their descriptions are provided in Table A.1.

Table A.1. Coding categories for image size

Variable	Description	Categories
Size	Image size less than an eighth of a magazine page	Small
	Less than a quarter but more than an eighth	Medium
	Between a quarter and half page	Large
	Over half a page	Extra Large

7. **Headline and caption:** Images with a headline/caption are coded with their full headline/caption; images not related to any textual headline or caption are coded

as NA (not applicable); if multiple images belong to the same caption, the first image will be coded normally, and subsequent images will be coded as “see ID (number)”.

For example, if CP19500701A and CP19500701B belong to the same title, CP19500701A will be coded as the original title, and the headline/caption of CP19500701B will be coded as “see CP19500701A”. In addition, supplementary issues of the magazine are distinguished by adding (Sup) to the ID code. For example, CP1972040106A (Sup).

8. Image type: photograph; map; chart; comic; painting and sketch; poster; mixed; other

9. Image Source: US media source; the magazine’s own source; Party media, national news agencies in China; local media, self-media in China; other; NA

10. Image subject/Theme:

(1) US subject role present in the picture:

Table A.2. Coding categories for US subject role

Variable	Description	Categories
US Subject Role	Including US political activities and facilities	Politician/political figures
	Element such as US businessmen, corporations, products, brands, foreign investors, capital input	Businessmen/brands/foreign investors
	Including product or service customers, users, or travel visitors	Consumers/users/visitors
	Elements such as US soldiers, weapons and injuries caused by the US	Forces/soldiers
	Including US technology products, teachers, schools, writers, designers, etc.	Academics/scientists/technical support
	Elements such as US films, newspapers, magazines, books, etc.	Media/journalists

US workers, farmers and unspecified persons	General public/masses
Including celebrities in cultural, artistic, and sporting activities	Athletes/actors and actresses
Including students participating in educational environments	Students
Not included in the above	Other
Two and more roles; the US country itself, where the various roles are assembled	Mixed
	NA

(2) Chinese subject role present in the picture: politician/political figures; businessmen/corporations/products/brands; consumers/users; forces/soldiers; academics/scientists/technical support; media/journalists; general public/masses; entertainers/actors and actresses; other; mixed; NA

(3) Content theme:

Table A.3. Coding categories for content theme

Variable	Description	Categories
Content Theme	Pictures featuring US political figures, political activities, and US-China foreign affairs, etc.	Political
	Involves warfare, weapons, military deployment, troops, soldiers, etc.	Military
	Portraying economic data, cases, economic and trade events, etc.	Economic
	Image that describes historical events, issues, etc. in the US history	History*
	Cultural activities related to entertainment, education, media, arts, etc.	Culture
	For example, aerospace, medicine, internet and other scientific and technical fields	Science
	Activities of social organisations, daily life of the people, etc.	Social life

Contains two or more themes	Mixed
Not included in the above	Other

*It is important to note that the history is relative to the date the image was published.

11. Angle: “High direct”; “Medium direct”; “Low direct”; “High oblique”; “Medium oblique”; “Low oblique”; “Not Applicable”

12. Social distance: extreme close-up, close-up, medium close shot, medium shot, medium long shot, long shot, very long shot

“the close shot (or ‘close-up’) shows head and shoulders of the subject, and the very close shot (‘extreme close-up’, ‘big close-up’) anything less than that. The medium close shot cuts off the subject approximately at the waist, the medium shot approximately at the knees. The medium long shot shows the full figure. In the long shot the human figure occupies about half the height of the frame, and the very long shot is anything ‘wider’ than that” (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996: 130).

13. Visual modality: citing the typology by Bell (2001)

Table A.4. Coding categories for visual modality

Variable	Description	Categories
Visual Modality	Image uses highly saturated colours naturalistically; representation of pictorial detail	High sensory modality
	Image uses, for example, less saturated, “washed out” or “ethereal” use of pastels	Medium sensory modality
	Image is monochrome (black-white) only; abstraction	Low sensory modality
	Image uses over-saturated, mythic, bright and sharp colours	Over sensory modality
		NA

“The point of highest modality does not coincide with either extreme of the scale: naturalistic modality increases as articulation increases, but at a certain point it

reaches its highest value, and thereafter it decreases again.” (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996: 130)

14. The abstract symbols:

Symbols of the US include: the US flag; the bald eagle; the national anthem; iconic buildings, statues; celebrities and politicians; cultural symbols such as Coca-Cola, Disney, etc.

Symbols of the Chinese include: the Chinese flag, the dragon, the Great Wall, the national emblem, iconic buildings and landmarks such as the Forbidden City and the Temple of Heaven, cultural symbols like the panda, Chinese Kungfu and traditional Chinese calligraphy and so on.

(1) **Number of the US symbols:** None; 1-3 symbols in the image; more than 3

Table A.5. Coding categories for salience of US symbols

Variable	Description	Categories
Salience of US Symbols	A conspicuous place in the composition, in the foreground, or made extra conspicuous by lighting, contrast in tone or colour, high sharpness of focus, etc.	Highlighted
	Moderate location, size, colour, light, sharpness of focus, etc.	Standard
	Marginal location, in the background, small size, pale colour, lack of light, Unfocused, etc.	Weakened
		NA

(2) **Degree of the salience of the US symbols:**

(3) **Number of Chinese symbols:** None; 1-3 symbols in the image; more than 3

(4) **Degree of the salience of the Chinese symbols** (use the same table as US symbols salience above)

Visual framing analysis

Building on both Bock’s (2020) conceptualisation of the creation stage, where framing cues arise from the visual features embedded in the image itself, and

the well-established “positive versus negative” framing index in visual framing research (Grabe & Bucy, 2009, p. 101), this study groups visual frames into five analytically distinct categories along an attraction-rejection continuum. Visual frames are classified according to the following criteria:

1. Strong Rejection Frame

A strong rejection frame is present when the image conveys overtly negative visual cues toward the US or its representatives. Typical indicators include conflict scenes; distorted or hostile facial expressions; aggressive body language; dark, confrontational tonalities; imagery of warfare, rivalry, threat, or moral condemnation; sharply satirical cartoons; large-scale protests and violent clashes; severe casualties; or national symbols in states of desecration, such as the burning of the American flag.

2. Weak Rejection Frame

A weak rejection frame is identified when the image communicates milder forms of negativity or scepticism. Visual cues may include tense atmospheres, symbolic decline, US side being visually disadvantaged relative to China, or subtle indications that the US is problematic or unreliable. Negative implications may arise through camera angle, colour tone, or body language, yet with less emotional intensity than in strong rejection. For example, US politicians displaying frustration or sadness, mourners at the commemoration, or blurred US figures positioned behind a sharply focused Chinese subject.

3. Wavering Frame (Ambivalence of Attraction and Rejection)

A wavering frame is assigned when the visual stance is ambiguous or when positive and negative cues coexist. Such images juxtapose admiration and critique or

depict the US as simultaneously appealing and concerning. Examples include domestic US demonstrations addressing internal problems.

4. Weak Attraction Frame

A weak attraction frame is present when the US is shown in a neutral-to-positive light without strong emotional intensity. Indicators include depictions of professional competence, modern infrastructure, friendly interpersonal encounters, and cooperative or stable China-US interactions. The US is framed as legitimate, modern, or constructive, though not idealised. Examples include smiling handshakes between leaders, Chinese students visiting US classrooms, or Americans learning Chinese kung fu.

5. Strong Attraction Frame

A strong attraction frame emerges when images convey explicit and highly positive evaluative cues toward the US. Such cues include the portrayal of charismatic or widely admired figures, harmonious and ceremonially grand diplomatic encounters, aesthetic or technological fascination, and vibrant celebratory crowds. These visual elements tend to foreground the perceived progressiveness of the US or its alignment with China's developmental aspirations, thereby presenting the US as exemplary or inspirational. Illustrative cases include the long queues observed at the opening of China's first Kentucky Fried Chicken outlet or the enthusiastic applause given to a US orchestra performing in China.

Each photograph is assigned one dominant frame code. When no clear frame is discernible, the image is coded as N/A.

Captions and headlines were likewise coded according to the five framing categories. A strong rejection frame was assigned when captions employed overtly negative evaluative language to characterise the US or convey antagonistic attitudes,

such as references to “US imperialism,” “aggressors,” “US bandits,” “economic collapse,” or “vulgar culture.” A weak rejection frame captured negative but less emotionally intense or confrontational expressions, including phrases indicating decline, concern, or criticism without overt hostility, such as “falling public approval,” “economic downturn,” or “uncertainties within the Democratic Party.” A wavering frame was used for captions expressing ambivalence, neutrality, or a juxtaposition of praise and critique, for example: “Americans oppose their government’s war against China,” or “the rise and fall of Detroit.” A weak attraction frame denoted captions that communicated positive or cooperative sentiments toward the US but without strong emotional intensity, such as “seeking mutually beneficial solutions in China-US relations” or “the China-US intellectual property agreement.” By contrast, a strong attraction frame was assigned when captions employed explicitly laudatory or celebratory language, for example: “cutting-edge technological design by US companies,” “Michael Carmack receives the Chinese Government Friendship Award,” or “everyone loves Coca-Cola.” In all cases, each caption or textual component was assigned one dominant frame code, with N/A applied when no frame could be clearly identified.

APPENDIX B. PILOT CODING SUMMARY

A total of 350 US-related images from three magazines are selected for pilot coding in this section. 121 US-related images are from part of *China Pictorial* issues in 1950, 1972, 1974, 1989, 1992 and 2006; 95 US-related images are from part of *Sanlian Life Week* issues in 2007-2022; 80 US-related images are from part of *South Review* issues in 2007-2022.

The following points were identified during the pilot coding process, and the codebook is adapted accordingly:

1. The coding for the image gaze has been removed. Eye contact/ Direction of gaze in images is only most valuable for images with single dominant people or objects, such as portraits of politicians. The magazine has a rich and varied range of US-related images, so the gaze codes are in many cases invalid and produce very little meaning.
2. Pictorialist photography and advertising have been added to the coded values of the image type. Pictorialist photography, as a unique non-realistic documentary method of photography with a focus on subjective expression, has been used several times in *China Pictorial*. It is necessary to capture it as a separate category because of its unique and rich research significance. Advertisements relating to US products have also appeared in all three magazines several times.
3. In contrast to the US symbols, Chinese symbols have been added to the coding of the symbols. During the pilot process, I found it interesting that some of the images of the US contained far more Chinese symbols than US symbols, and some of them even contained only Chinese symbols. To some extent, the piling up of a large number of Chinese symbols is a reinforcement of patriotic sentiments and a way of highlighting a strong rejection and resistance to the US.

Therefore, the number and salience of Chinese symbols in US images are also of unique research interest.

4. Corrected the problem of non-exhaustive in the variables Angle and Social distance. Two values have been added, NA and mixed.
5. Media source has been refined into: US magazine/newspaper source (from page); other US media source; the magazine's own source; Party media, national news agencies in China; local media, self-media in China; other; mixed; NA. This gives a fuller picture of the reliability of the source and the degree of the one-sidedness of the magazine's views. Also, *Sanlian Life Week* and *South Review* often have images featuring US magazines/books. It is good to note that down in the Media Source code.
6. The culture category in the Content theme code has been updated to Culture and education, making the label clearer and more comprehensive. Also, added Health value to the Content theme in order to cover topics about disease and treatment, food safety, health and medical care, etc.
7. Date and Image ID are precise to the day (e.g. originally *China Pictorial* July 1950 issue → now *China Pictorial* July 1, 1950 issue)
8. The coding of image subjects has changed to two new codes: (1) the US subject role present in the picture; and (2) the Chinese subject role present in the picture. The formal image subject categories (people; environments; events; objects; ideological symbols) were blurred and meaningless. The new codes not only allowed for the marking of diverse subjects, but also for the positioning of China and the US in the images. Rather than standing on their own, many US images in Chinese magazines, to some extent, serve to highlight certain Chinese image.

Such coding facilitated a better understanding of the respective roles of China and the US and the relationship between the two roles. The attitude towards the US implicit in the pictures of Chinese content has also become visible through this coding.

9. Visual frames has changed into five main categories: Strong Attraction to the US frame (Strong Attraction frame); Weak Attraction to the US frame (Weak Attraction frame); Both Attraction and Rejection of the US frame (Wavering frame); Weak Rejection from the US frame (Weak Rejection frame); and Strong Rejection from the US frame (Strong Rejection frame). Instead of the “Attraction frame” and “Rejection frame” with “Strong”, “Weak”, and “Wavering” tone codes. Because I found that it is hard to distinguish the “wavering attraction frame” and the “wavering rejection frame”.
10. Added a new value of “Magazine supplement” to the magazine position code. In Chinese magazines, a magazine supplement is a temporary addition to a newspaper or magazine when a special need arises. Supplements to the public press are generally used to publish special reports, collections or commemorative special issues.
11. Clarified what kind of images are not included in the sample:

The following images will not be included in the sample: headshots of US journalists/writers in the magazine

APPENDIX C. ETHICS APPROVAL

Subject: FAHC 21-145 - Conditional Study Approval Confirmation
Date: Thursday 13 October 2022 at 11:48:42 British Summer Time
From: AHC Research Ethics
To: Ziyi Zang
CC: Katy Parry

Dear Ziyi

FAHC 21-145 - Portraying the US In Chinese Magazines: A Visual Framing Analysis of the United States Image in China Pictorial, Sanlian Life Week, and South Reviews

The above research ethics application has been reviewed by the Faculty of Arts, Humanities & Communications Research Ethics Committee (AHC REC) and I can confirm a conditional favourable ethical opinion based on the documentation received at date of this letter and *subject to the following condition/s which must be fulfilled prior to the study being implemented:*

- 1. *Consent Form - Applicant's official University of Leeds email address should be used on the consent form.***

The study documentation must be amended where required to meet the above conditions and submitted for file and possible future audit. *Once you have addressed the conditions and submitted for file/future audit, you may implement the study and further confirmation of approval is not provided. Please note,* failure to comply with the above conditions will be considered a breach of ethics approval and may result in disciplinary action.

Please retain this email as evidence of conditional approval. Once you have met the conditions and submitted for file/audit, the study may be implemented with immediate effect.

Please notify the committee if you intend to make any amendments to the original research as submitted and approved to date. This includes recruitment methodology; all changes must receive ethical approval prior to implementation. Please contact the Research Ethics & Governance Administrator for further information (AHCResearchEthics@leeds.ac.uk)

Ethics approval does not infer you have the right of access to any member of staff or student or documents and the premises of the University of Leeds. Nor does it imply any right of access to the premises of any other organisation, including clinical areas. The committee takes no responsibility for you gaining access to staff, students and/or premises prior to, during or following your research activities.

Please note: You are expected to keep a record of all your approved documentation, as well as documents such as sample consent forms, risk assessments and other documents relating to the study. This should be kept in your study file, which should be readily available for audit purposes. You will be given a two week notice period if your project is to be audited.

It is our policy to remind everyone that it is your responsibility to comply with Health and Safety, Data Protection and any other legal and/or professional guidelines there may be.

I hope the study goes well.

Very best wishes,

Sou

On behalf of Professor Robert Jones (AHC REC Chair)

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**Sou Sit Chung, Research Ethics Administrator**, The Secretariat, University of Leeds, LS2 9NL,  
[s.chung@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:s.chung@leeds.ac.uk)

Please note my working hours are Monday to Friday 9am – 12.30pm

**APPENDIX D. PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET**



## Portraying the US In Chinese Magazines: A Visual Framing Analysis of the United States Image in *China Pictorial*, *Sanlian Life Week*, and *South Reviews*

*You are being invited to participate in a research study. Before you decide whether to participate, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and feel free to ask us if you would like more information or if there is anything that you do not understand. I would like to stress that you do not have to accept this invitation and should only agree to take part if you want to.*

### What is the purpose of the study?

This research includes interviews with magazine staff from *China Pictorial*, *Sanlian Life Week* and *South Review*. The interviews will explore the workflow of magazine workers in the selection, editing, review and publication of images, especially those related to the United States. The interviews will also seek to understand the work requirements and standards of the magazines over the years. Moreover, I will invite you to tell the stories before and after cartoons as well as photos' publication by looking back at some of the classic images.

In this interview, you will be invited to review your past work as photographers, image editors or photo department leaders in a face-to-face interview.

The research will be a review and summary of participants' past work, the interviews will enable you to share professional experiences and account for the visual cultures of the US in Chinese magazines.

### Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep (and be asked to sign a consent form) and have at least a week to fully consider the implications of participating in the study to decide whether to continue or withdraw after reading the information sheet. You do not have to give a reason. Following the interview(s), you will have three months to decide whether to withdraw after reading the interview transcription, and without there being any negative consequences.

### Why have I been chosen to take part?

You have been approached as a member of experienced magazine professionals. I am interested in your thoughts and practices when dealing with images involving the USA. I am interested in you due to your work in shaping and spreading the US image, and so someone who can bring valuable experiences to our research.

### What will happen next if I take part?

You are invited to take part in a **face-to-face interview** in public spaces near your workplace. and will last for around **1.5-3 hours**. A second interview will be conducted when you want to supplement or change your answers. The exact time and location of the interview will be confirmed with you at least one week in advance.

You are being invited to discuss your experiences and stories of processing US-related images in magazines as a photographer or photo editor or caption writer or leader. Whilst the US-China relationship topic may be involved, I will avoid the politically sensitive issues, and will give you

further warning on the day before introducing any potentially upsetting content.

### **Are there any risks in taking part?**

I do not foresee any risks or hazards for participants taking part in this research. However, if you should experience any discomfort or disadvantage as part of the research, you should let the researcher(s) know immediately.

### **What are the benefits of taking part?**

I hope that you will find the experience enjoyable and rewarding – there are no right or wrong answers and I welcome all comments. This interview will provide you with an opportunity to look back and take stock of your work journey, which may guide and inspire you in your future work. The benefits of your participation also include contributing to awareness about the profession, the understanding of Visual Cultures and the significance of your roles in the production of US images.

### **Will my participation be kept confidential?**

All data from the interviews will be stored securely at the University of Leeds. Only the named researchers will have access to personal data, and only the named researcher can access the recordings for interview transcription and translation. All the contact information that I collect about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential and will be stored separately from the research data. Your identifying information will be shared after receiving your explicit consent.

### **Will I be recorded and how will the recordings be used?**

Interviews will be audio recorded only for research purposes. No other use will be made of them without your written permission. The audio data will be converted to interview transcription and send to you for confirmation. You will have three months to decide whether to withdraw

after reading the interview extracts. You can request to check the full interview transcripts.

### **What will happen to the results of the study?**

Research data, (for example, the content of the interview), may be used in publications, reports, and other research outputs. Your name, title and workplace will be shared after receiving your explicit consent. If you would like us to let you know about future publications connected to this project, please tell me and I will inform you. (Your contact details will be stored securely until I can inform you of the publication and its accessibility).

### **Who can I contact if I have further questions?**

If you would like further information on this study, or have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me, Ziyi Zang (PhD student in the University of Leeds). The contact details are Email: [me19zz@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:me19zz@leeds.ac.uk); Tel: +86 17701045199

Thank you in advance for your invaluable contribution to the study!



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**APPENDIX E. PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM**



**Consent to take part in 'Portraying the US In Chinese Magazines: A Visual Framing Analysis of the United States Image in *China Pictorial*, *Sanlian Life Week*, and *South Reviews*'**

This study is a PhD research project by Ziyue Zang at the Arts, Humanities and Cultures Faculty, the University of Leeds

Add your initials next to the statement if you agree

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |  |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|
| I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated <b>05/07/2022</b> explaining the above research project and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |  |
| I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my participation, by informing the researcher up to three months following the interview, and without there being any negative consequences. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline.<br>The researcher is called Ziyue Zang and she can be contacted at <a href="mailto:me19zz@leeds.ac.uk">me19zz@leeds.ac.uk</a><br>(Any personal data already provided would be destroyed, and any contribution would be excluded from research outputs (journal article, website) following participant withdrawal from the project.) |  |
| I understand that the named researcher may have access to my personal data and responses in the interview, and only the named researcher can access the recordings for transcription and translation. I understand that my name, title, and magazine affiliation may be identified or identifiable in the reports that result from the research. I understand that I can request a vague description of my role so I cannot be identified.                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |  |
| I understand that my anonymity might not be guaranteed as my job title and workplace could be linked to my name. I consent to disclose identifiable information such as my name, title and workplace in this study.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |  |
| I understand that I will have at least a week to fully consider the implications of participating in the study to decide whether to continue or withdraw after reading the information sheet. I can also withdraw this agreement up to three months after reading the interview extracts, without any negative consequences. I understand that I can request to check the full interview transcripts.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |  |
| I agree to take part in the above research project and will inform the researcher should my contact details change.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |  |

|                         |  |
|-------------------------|--|
| Name of participant     |  |
| Participant's signature |  |
| Date                    |  |
| Name of lead researcher |  |
| Signature               |  |
| Date*                   |  |

\*To be signed and dated in the presence of the participant.



Once this has been signed by all parties the participant should receive a copy of the signed and dated participant consent form, the letter/ pre-written script/ information sheet and any other written information provided to the participants. A copy of the signed and dated consent form should be kept with the project's main documents which must be kept in a secure location.