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5/30/2013



Media’s Agenda setting and China’s National Image

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# 1 Abstract

National image is can be seen as the brand of one country which reflects the nation’s politic, economy, culture, history, reality, people’s living style and the value of its society. With the development of the globalization, communication among countries is extending drastically. Thus, national image is playing an important role in affecting the international relations. Gaining a good national image is beneficial for attaining respect and trust in the international community. Therefore, Chinese government has put massive efforts and money on its overseas publicity. However, the formation of a national image is a double-way process, means that the West does not view China’s image in the same way as the Chinese people and the Chinese government.

As the national image is connected with the mass media, the thesis views China’s national image from the communication perspective by applying agenda setting theory. This theory is used to analyse media’ communication-effect and how the media influences the public’s opinion or attitudes. Thus, news, reports and other information about China given in western media, to a great extent, contributes to the understanding of China’s national image by the audience. In others words, media sets agendas for the audience with the journalists or the editors attitudes which may deviated from the objective reality.

Different cultures, media systems as well as publicity discourse also lead to the misunderstanding of China’s national image. The Confucian value of Zhongyong which means always keep a calm and harmonious attitude towards everything, has embedded in the Chinese media. Meanwhile, with the controlling and censoring of the Chinese government, the Chinese media hardly express something else other than the government’s will. The inappropriate news language with strong ideological colour which has been used in the Chinese media also poses obstacles in the building of China’s national image. On the contrary, the western media is private. It holds a critical attitude towards all the issues and aiming at gaining more audience and making the biggest profit. The Chinese government should realize that the official ways are not effective enough to build the national image as well as the overseas publicity lacks of localization.

**Key words: China’s national image, agenda setting, publicity, cultural difference**

# Introduction

## Presentation of Topic

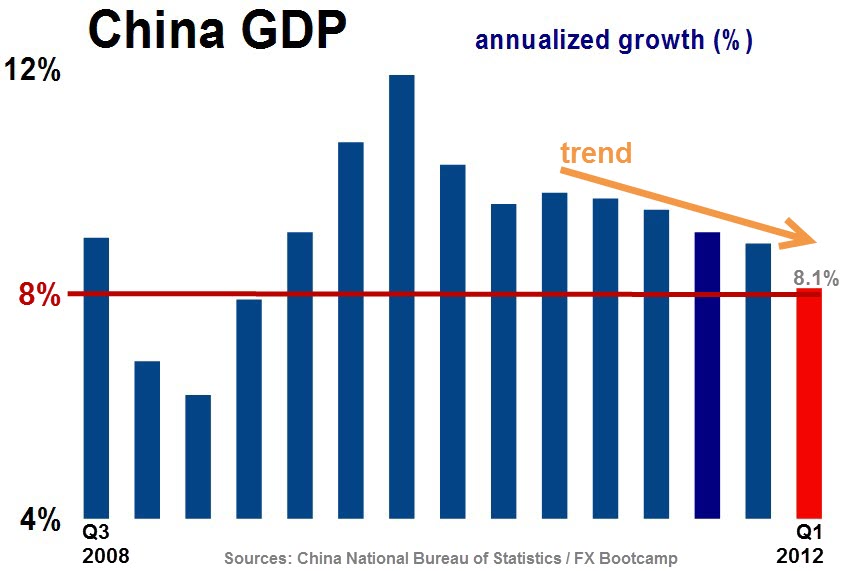
“*China’s greatest strategic threat today is its national image (…). How China is perceived by other nations – and the underlying reality that perception reflects — will determine the future of Chinese development and reform*.” (Ramo, 2007)

* Joshua Cooper Ramo, *Brand China*, 2007.

In this age of globalization, national image has become critically important for nation states. The increasing interdependency among nations means that a nation’s interests rely not only on its own capability, but also on its national image, or reputation in the eyes of other countries. As an emerging nation with distinct political and social conditions compared with the current big powers in the world, China requires a relatively favorable international environment for its development.

It is mostly the surging economy that makes China attracting the attention of the world. Indeed, the world has witnessed an incredible progress of the nation in the recent decades, especially after China switched from a planned economy to a market economy with the adoption of the reform and opening-up policy in 1978.

Figure 1



(National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2012)

As the graph shows, from 2008 to 2012, China’s GDP growth rate has kept over 8%. Although the growth rate will not continue keeping its speed, the general economic power of China is still impressive. Furthermore, China has gained increasing influence in the international arena and is now a member of almost all the important decision-making bodies. This *“socialist country with Chinese characteristics”* is now regarded as one of the most important actors in the capitalist world system.

However, “*power and reputational capital don’t go hand in hand.”* (Ramo, 2007, p. 27) The national image of China hardly keeps up with the pace of its surging economy. According to a Washington Post poll in Feb. 2012, 54 % of the U.S. Citizens think negatively of China, while 37 % think highly of the country. (Xiao, 2012) According to the 2011 Anholt-GfK Roper Nation Brands Index (NBI), one of the most recognized surveys on national brand[[1]](#footnote-1), which is conducted among citizens in 20 major countries, including 11 developing countries and has measured the international image of 50 countries annually since 2008, China's image ranked 26th in 2008 and 22nd in 2011. Meanwhile, while the image of China’s cultural heritage ranked 3rd, the image of its governance ranked low. (Liyao, 2012)

## Observation

The formation of a national image, like that of any other kinds of images or esteem, is a double-way process. The image of a nation can refer to the *“self-image”* of a nation as well as the image forged in the eyes of *“others”*. In other words, the real problem about China’s national image is that the West does not view China’s image in the same way as the Chinese people and the Chinese government. There is a big contradiction between the *“self-esteem”* of China by the Chinese and the image of the country in the eyes of others. Joshua Cooper Ramo names this problem China’s *“image emergency”* and points out that *“China’s image of herself and the world’s image of China had become disharmonious (buhexie). Madness was inevitable (bukebimian).”* (Ramo, 2007, p. 7)

This disharmony exists in two levels: the first is the difference between the world’s image of China and the image of China expected by the government. The second is the difference between the world’s image of China and the image of China in the common Chinese people’s mind. However, considering the fact that the Chinese national image building is mostly government-led and the image in people’s mind is the result of governmental propaganda, this thesis mainly focuses on the discrepancy between the national image expected by the government and China’s image in the eyes of the rest of the world.

National image is a complex concept. Schooler, R. D. published a paper on national image in 1965, contending that national images are influenced by historical and environmental factors, which could affect the assessment of a nation. (Schooler, 1965, pp. 394-397) Akira Nagashiman mentioned that the formation of national images depends on nations’ features, economic and political backgrounds as well as their representative merchandises or agencies. According to him, if national images are consistent with images from the mass media, it would be conducive to nations’ developments. (Nagashiman, 1970, pp. 68-74) But perhaps the most basic and general definition of national image is given by William Scott: *“Conceived of within the framework of cognitive theories, an image of a nation (or of any other object) constitutes the totality of attributes that a person recognizes* *(or images) when he contemplates that nation”*. (Shimko, 1991, p. 12) and this is the concept of national image applied in this thesis.

Figure 2

 (GfK Custom Research, 2012)

National image is also frequently referred to as nation brand but the term *“nation brand”* is more related to marketing and business. The NBI examines the nation brand through six aspects: people, culture and heritage, investment and immigration, governance, and export. This index indicates the reputation of a nation, which is closely connected to the success of its business, trade and tourism efforts, as well as its diplomatic and cultural relations with other nations.

## Background of China’s National Image Building

### Historical Review

One distinctive feature of China’s national image building is that it is government-led. The media and other organs of publicity are all under the supervision of the government and the foreign policies are often the guidelines of the national image building. China’s national image has experienced several major stages under the guidance of its foreign policies. In the Mao-era, the national image building focused on getting rid of the label of *“the sick man of East Asia”* and on setting up a new image for the People’s Republic of China. Mao advocated a thorough reform of China’s image to discard the old image and build a brand new one. The political, economic, and cultural images all needed to be reformed. (Zedong, 1986)

The foreign policies put forward by the Communist Party of China (CPC) after the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) including *“make a fresh start”* (Ling Qi Lu Zao), *“lean to one side”*, and *“do not invite guests before cleaning up the rooms”* (Da Sao Gan Jing Wu Zi Zai Qing Ke) have tried to set up the image of China as an independent socialist country with alliance with the Soviet Union. (Men Honghua, 2012, pp. 8-15) However, in this stage national image had not been emphasized greatly since the government regarded that the domestic affairs should be dealt with first. China will not start changing its focus to foreign relations until the domestic affairs are properly dealt with.  
 More emphasis was put on China’s national image in Deng Xiaoping’s era but the main policy he put forward was still inward-oriented. Deng made several statements about China’s national image: “*We need to protect our images as independent, do not believe in superstition, do not fear about ghosts*”. And “*No matter what we should show to the people and to the world as a reformed and open country.*” (Men Honghua, 2012, pp. 8-15) In 1984, he said that: *“the image of China should be a peaceful, united country and even a model country for peace and unity*” (Xiaoping, 1993) One thing that has to be mentioned in this era, is the famous *“Reform and Opening-up Policy”* which influenced the national image building of China as well as the country’s overall development. But it was not until Jiang Zeming came into power, the issue of national image building was taken into account as part of the national foreign policies and developed into a system. On February 27th, 1999, Jiang Zemin stated in the National Foreign Publicity Meeting that: “*we should enhance and maintain the image of socialist China in the international arena and set up a positive image of our country*”. (Zemin, 1999)

In Hu Jintao’s time the efforts in national image building became more specific. In July, 2009, Hu stated, in the 11th meeting of meeting of diplomatic envoys that China should

*“…hold high the banners of ‘peace, development, and cooperation’, continue to balance the conditions in China and out,(…) make all efforts to make China become more influential politically, more competitive economically, in terms of national image more friendly and morally more inspirational*” (Lian, 2009)

The notions raised by this generation of leaders, concerning China’s foreign policies include *“Peaceful Rise”* and *“Harmonious World”*. Peaceful Rise was a response to *“China Threat Theory”* advocated by some Western scholars and policy makers. *“China Threat Theory”* suggests that China’s emergence at the beginning of the 21st century is similar to Germany’s bristling, angry rise at the start of the 20th century. (Ramo, 2007, p. 8)

*“Harmonious World”* is a phrase, which encapsulates China’s contemporary diplomatic goals. It marks a new age in the development of China’s foreign policy and is regarded as China’s new guidelines in foreign diplomacy. The notion was first introduced by Hu at the World Summit and the 60th General Assembly of the United Nations (UN) on September 15, 2005. This concept was, thereafter, quoted and elaborated on by several leaders as well as Chinese scholars. The concept applies the Confucius notion of *“harmony”,* demonstrates China’s commitment to global peace and stability as well as its determination to construct a more just international system. The aims of the *“Harmonious World” f*oreign policy contain five aspects:

* *­“Politically, all countries should respect each other and promote democracy in international relations on an equal footing*
* *Economically, countries should cooperate to advance economic globalization of balanced development and share benefits and win-win progress*
* *Culturally, countries should learn from each other and respect the diversity of the world to advance human civilization*
* *In security, countries should trust each other and settle international disputes by peaceful means to safeguard peace and stability*
* *On non-traditional security issues such as energy and climate change, countries should assist and cooperate to take good care of the Earth.” (Qing, 2012, p. 24)*

Hu also put emphasis on the importance of social equity. He said that social equity and justice is the key to bring people's creativity and initiatives to the best since people will not feel happy if they are unequal. It is important to balance different interest groups and ensure equality in all aspects, including personal rights, opportunities, game-playing rules and wealth distribution. (People's Daily Online, 2005)

China has to learn to deal with the domestic problems and shoulder international responsibilities. Currently, China's economic wellbeing remains its highest national and political priority. (TOK, 2007) However, this would not be possible without a good international environment. China still needs a peaceful international environment for domestic development.

Traditionally, Chinese diplomacy is the extension of policies towards internal affairs. Nowadays, China is trying to build an image of a responsible nation in the world. It is trying to synchronize its internal and external outlooks so that its international action is the extension of its self-belief and domestic policies. The concept of *“Harmonious World”* appears to be an appropriate departure from the previous *“peaceful development”* rhetoric. As the section *“Historical Review of the Government’s Efforts in National Image Building”*, has presented, China is trying to build an image of *“peaceful development”* and the government has pledged to contribute to a *“Harmonious World”*. (TOK, 2007)

### The Ideal National Image Expected by the Chinese Government

In order to see what images the Chinese contemporary government is trying to project of China and investigate whether the perceptions of China by others is consistent with what is expected by the government, a graph is showed below, which summarizes the ideal national image of China expected by the government.

The Ideal Chinese National Image

Table 1

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Political Image | Democracy, human rights, rule-by-law, Socialism with Chinese characters |
| Economical Image | Energy-saving, environmental-friendly, knowledge-intensive, put people first, consider both efficiency and fairness, sustainable development |
| Social Image | Stable, free, civilized, advanced, harmonious |
| Cultural Image | Classical and modern, harmonious and diverse, humanistic and technological, absorb the world’s civilization and stimulate innovation |
| Diplomatic Image | Peaceful, cooperative, mutual-beneficial, self-dependent, tolerant, responsible |
| Military Image | The army of justice, of people, of technology and of power and dignity (bravado) |
| People’s Image | Benevolence, unrighteousness (justice), courtesy, wisdom, integrity |

(Youzhong, 2009)[[2]](#footnote-2)

### The Use of media to build the China’s national image

The media, as the platform of publicity, has set the agendas in the building of the national image. With the development of the Internet, the discourse structure of China has been changed fundamentally. The state supervised media can no longer monopoly information. Although the government is still trying to set agendas by controlling the information channel through many means, a more transparent information system is on its way.

When Xi Jinping payed a visit to Guang Dong in December, 2012, videos of him waving hands and talking with officials appeared on *“Weibo”* (Chinese Twitter), posted by ordinary citizens and was then spread on the Internet, before it appeared on CCTV or any traditional media. The new media with common citizens as participators has shortened the distance between the leaders and the common people. (Tingting, 2012)

Another example of multi-media publicity of China’s national image is the Official film on National Image. On January 17th, 2011, a 60 second long video promoting China’s national image appeared on the huge screen in the Plaza of New York Times. The video, made by the State Council Information Office, is a big project of China’s national image building. The video features 59 successful people from different fields, such as NBA basketball star Yao Ming, pianist Lang Lang, film director John Woo, hybrid rice scientist Yuan Longping, etc. It also features ordinary Chinese from across the country. (Chen Weihua, 2011)

However, China Daily, one of China’s authoritative media, provides some positive comments of the audience saying: “*It’s a very good effort*” and it showed “*how much China has progressed during the years*” (Chen Weihua, 2011). The comments of ordinary Chinese people differ. Here are some comments made by the common citizens on the website Youku, the most popular Chinese video websites identical to Youtube:

*“Is this the image of China? Does China only rely on these people? …After watching this, I feel being ignored. This video did not show the pride which should be owned by every one of us… In fact we do not have this sense of honor. That’s why… This so-called video on Chinese image is just a misshaped product.”*

*“It is all about how grand and great China is. Does the government really care about the common people who need caring most? The video is just like the country— only blasting about the achievements without caring about the people.” (Netizens, 2011)*

The Americans didn’t go for this efforts of the Chinese government. Some of them said that “*the ad is boring*” (Staff, 2011) and others just observed it with their stereotype towards China. With the tough audience, “*the ads may just fall flat or seem altogether harmless”.* (Epstein, 2011)

*“It is a not uncommon practice in China to say something to overseas audiences or do something in overseas that is actually done with a view to the effect the message or the action will have when it echoes back into China.”* (Wolf, 2011)

*“The ad seemed like the ad was trying to say “look at us – we’re strong, beautiful, and rich, so you’d better make friends with us.” And if it was designed to make friends, I would bet the government will learn pretty quickly that it failed to work as promised.”* (Wolf, 2011)

Wang Lijun, assistant to the chairman at Shanghai Lowe & Partners, the advertising firm behind the production, said those *“elites”* were chosen "*because they represent the optimistic, upwardly mobile spirit of contemporary China*". (Chen Weihua, 2011)

The greatest weakness of China’s image propaganda is probably dishonesty. Only the elite is chosen to represent China’s image and the common people are ignored. This is also because China’s image building is too official. The authority does not care about grass-roots and they only show the world the most developed aspects of China while the *“advanced aspects”* are extremely limited. This dishonesty, however, greatly impairs the effect of national image construction. Just like another comment on Youku made by a common person: “*We always say others do not understand us. But wearing a beautiful mask just reduces the chances of others to know us”.* (Netizens, 2011)

Just as Joshua Cooper Ramo contends, the best, and perhaps the only solution is to create a system that talks frankly about Chinese cultural, political and economic life so that foreigners can find their own path to an understanding of China.(Ramo, 2007, p. 46) If the country cannot be tactful, then being honest is perhaps the best policy. To protect ourselves in disguise only increases the chances of being misunderstood.

Another feature of China’s image construction is that the government put a lot of emphasis on the grand history of China. This can be seen from the opening ceremony of the 2008 Olympic Games in which many of the performances aimed at highlighting China’s grand history. However data suggests that most people in the world already know China has an old and complicated culture.(Ramo, 2007, p. 46) China needs to have something new to show to the world.

The case of China’s national image film can also be seen as the government’s effort to increase China’s influence in the world. For a long time, mainstream media has been controlled by western countries while Asian and African media are rarely influent.

Most of China’s major media, including CCTV (China Central Television) and CRI (China Radio International), are owned by the government. However, these media do not have big influence internationally. Even though the Chinese government has spent 45 billion Yuan to expand the overseas department of some media, including CCTV, Xinhua News, People’s Daily, etc., western media, including the Wall street Journal, New York Times, the Economist, and the Guardian are the most popular media in the world.

Although the Chinese government has used such measures to set agendas for China in other countries, the reality is that in international communication process, 90 percent of the news has been monopolized by the United States and the European countries. (Manli, 2008) Moreover, 70 percent of the communication channels have been monopolized by the large transnational cooperation. (Manli, 2008) The developed countries included the US, UK, Germany and Japan have exported hundreds of thousand programs to other countries and they have ranked the top of the world’s media field. The US which controls 75 percent of the producing or making of the TV programs, has outputted more than 200000 hours TV programs to around 160 countries in the world. (Manli, 2008) The TV programs of many developing countries are imported from the US, they are just like the relay stations of those programs. Meanwhile, 80 percent of the current information in the cyber world is provided by the US, as well as 80 percent of the internet users are from the developing countries. (Manli, 2008) The information that originally comes from the developing countries cannot compare with the huge amount which is created and shared by those developed countries. So in the international society, the developed countries are setting agendas for the whole world and the principles that they are using to decide what kind of news and information to give can be seen as supremacy of their interest.

## Problem Formulation

As mentioned above, national image is a complex concept which include many elements, and every individual understand one country’s image in different ways through varies of channels. Thus, it is difficult to judge what kind of opinions the western have hold in their mind towards China’s national image. Due to this, thesis talks about national image with a communication perspective and the agenda setting theory will be applied, as well as the causes which have led to the status quo of China’s national image will be analyzed in the context of agenda setting, so the problem of the thesis is expressed as following:

**What is China’s national image in western[[3]](#footnote-3) eyes in the context of agenda setting?**

**What has led to the status quo of China’s national image according to the agenda setting theory?**

# Methodology

## Approach

The research is largely based on a qualitative analysis but quantitative methods are also applied to provide direct evidences. Besides, a deductive approach is utilized. Communication perspective will be taken throughout the thesis. The classic communication theory: agenda setting theory will be applied in the five sections of the analysis part and the application will lead to the answers of the problem formulation. The agenda setting theory is used for measuring the effects of the mass media and how the media influences and shapes the public’s opinion.

The analysis towards China’s national image will be divided into five aspects. These aspects are the overview of China’s national image in western eyes, China’s political image, economic image, cultural image as well as agenda setting from different cultural perspective. In each part of the analysis, multiple specific research methods will be used to match different cases in the thesis. The analysis on political image will adopt a comparative method to explain the difference between the agenda which has been set by the western media and the reality towards the case of the human rights in China. In this part, some of the communication techniques will be used such as an interview which provides vivid and authentic evidence for the application of the theory. Moreover, the thesis will use some key words to draw a picture of the western media’s attitude about some China’s controversial issues or sensitive topics during 30 years. For the economic image part, the emphasis will be the new agenda which has been set by the western media in order to lead to an image of China threat and collapse. The method of case study will be taken in the cultural image section. The thesis will analyze how China’s national image have been built by the cultural event Shanghai Expo and the building of Confucian institutes around the world. After the analysis about these three aspect, the author will discuss the media’s agenda setting from difference cultural perspective. The concept “Zhongyong” will be used to explain how the Confucian philosophy embedded in Chinese society and media, as well as the features of the western media will be presented to compare with that of the Chinese media. Meanwhile, how different ideologies have influenced the national image through the news language will be analyzed with a speech given by Hu Jintao. In sum, as the thesis is deductive, the conclusion will be given after all aspects of the analysis.

## Commentary on Data, Material and Sources

As mentioned above, this project will be a combination of qualitative and quantitative analysis. Most of the data will be secondary data, either in the form of raw data or compiled data. Each section in the analysis applies multiple sources. The political image, economic image as well as cultural image section balances between quantitative and qualitative data. Figures and statistics are applied to make the analysis clear and vivid. In order to avoid biased data, sources from both Chinese and western sides are applied, including US and European official surveys as well as different kinds of western media, thus ensuring the accuracy and objectiveness. The data applied are also carefully selected and re-organized by the author, only the most appropriate data and those matching the analysis and theories best are used. In particular, because of the communication perspective of the thesis, and the object of the research is the western media’s agenda setting, so many authentic sources from the western media have been chosen by the author although the Chinese government’s censorship has blocked amount of western websites.

Besides media’s news or reports, government’ documents, white papers and videos, a wide range of sources including reference books, articles translated from Chinese, lecture notes as well as encyclopedia articles have been referenced. Furthermore, some blog essays written by journalists and editors have been helpful. The thesis applies the latest news and information on China’s national image reform, making the analysis up-to-date.

## Structure presentation

The following picture is showing the structure of the analysis part of the thesis.

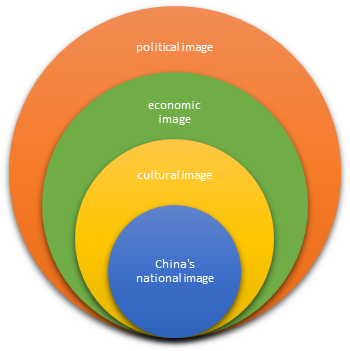


Figure 3

In this thesis, China’s national image has been analyzed in three aspects: the political image, the economic image and the cultural image. However, as the two arrows are pointing to the opposite directions, the national image which the Chinese government wants to build through the publicity is different from that in the western audience’s opinion which is influenced by the media’s agenda setting. The gap between the cultures and ideologies will be analyzed later as the causes which lead to the misunderstanding of China’s national image.

# Theory

## The agenda setting theory

### Introduction of the theory

*“The things the public is reading in newspapers and the things people are hearing from the radio or watching from the TV are the things that the whole nation are talking about.”* (McCOMBS, 2005) The Agenda Setting Theory is based on the precondition that people’s “agenda” of daily information for discussion depends on what the media wants them to talk about. Agenda Setting was an early theory given by Lippmann and later improved by McCombs and Shaw. The theory has declared that media content set the agenda for public discussions (Wilcox, et al, 2003, p.213) and the media did not specifically tell the people what to think about a particular subject, just which subjects they should form an opinion of. This theory is considered as detrimental to politicians and other public figures. Moreover, in nowadays international society, it also contributes to shape the national image. (Manli, 2008) Sometimes the media plays a more crucial role in leading the public opinion in the society rather than just reporting the news. It gives the public serious topics that are put under people noses on a daily basis. The information is put there for a reason whether most people are aware of or not. The Agenda Setting theory has its positive side for the society because it puts the information out there in front of the public. However, the negative side is that the information which has been given to the people is biased and doesn’t allow the people to select what is really important or meaningful in their minds.

### History of the theory

The foundation of the agenda setting theory is the concept of pseudo-environment. “Pseudo-environment” has been put forward in Lippmann’s book *Public Opinion.* Lippmann, the founder of communication studies, has explained that human beings are lack of the ability to *functionally perceive and accurately interpret the world:* “*The real environment is altogether too big, too complex, and too fleeting for direct acquaintance*”. (Lippmann, 1922) He is the first one who has used the word “pseudo-environment” in the communication field. “Pseudo-environment” is not the “mirror” of the reality, it always deviate from the reality with bias understandings. But at the same time, it based on the real environment which people live inside. Hence, people “*live in the same world, but think and feel in different ones*”. (Lippmann, 1922) People’s understanding of the world is influenced by their pseudo-environment, and also, people’s behaviors or the ways of thinking are the reflections of their pseudo- environment. Lippmann set out that there are three levels of the realities. The first one is the objective reality, the second one is the “reality” which the mass media give to the public. In other words, the media has made a kind of “reality” which is different from the real reality. Meanwhile, the media’s reality is already edited by the journalists and have the function of influencing the public opinion’s trend or shaping the audience’s way of thinking. The last level is the “subjective reality” which is created in every person’s mind with strong imprinting of the media.

Figure 3

Lippmann (1922) states in his publication that the media is shaping people’s perceptions about the outside world. People’s opinion about the reality are the product of what they have received as information from the different mass media channels and the received stories and knowledge influence their mind. He even goes further, as concludes that: “*the priorities of the media strongly influence the priorities of the public*” (Lippmann, 1922:2) Later on, researchers have found that every journalist, editor and every member of particular media influence the opinions which is perceived by the audience. This is not made by purpose, but it is a result from the decisions made by each member. For example, some topics have been highlighted as “hot” topics, which deserve the attention of the public, and other have been neglected. During the same research, the scientists have examined the effects of the influence by conducting interview research with few ordinary people form the audience. The aim of this research was to uncover the role of the news media in the process of shaping the view of its audience. Example is given with the election process held in North Carolina, US. The voters have been asked to point the main topics which were important in their minds for each day, week or month during the last six months. The received answers have been so close to the agenda from the information presented by different media channels, such as newspapers, televisions, magazines, that there was no doubt about the crucial role of the mass media’s influence on the audience. (MacCombs). According to MacCombs, more than 300 researches have been published all over the world to emphasize how the mass media have shaped the perceived information in this period. Moreover, he has proposed in his paper a quantitative approach with which the scope and the coverage of this influence can be measured. This approach is based on the rating or the grade of importance, as it can be seen from one hand that how the news are graded by its importance and on the other hand the rating of the audience. The final outcome is that the media (newspapers, magazines, television) impact the audience’s opinion about the defined problems.

“The agenda-setting influence of the news media is not limited to this initial step of focusing public attention on a particular topic. The media also influence the next step in the communication process, our understanding and perspective on the topics in the news.” (McCOMBS, 2005) The first step of the media’s agenda setting is to give the decided topic to the public, its influence depends on how many times the media has given the news and how important and popular the media’s brand has been. After the first step, the media trends to lead the thinking way for people to go through. Along with the reality which have been given by the reporters or journalist, their attitude is also showed in the language of the text or the manner of speaking. Thus audience’s opinion are shaped by the media’s attitude towards the agendas. In other words, “the pictures in people’s minds about the outside world are significantly influenced by the mass media, both what those pictures are about and what those pictures are.”

### Status quo of the theory

During the last few decades the internet have become the new research target towards the traditional agenda-setting effects. Obviously the internet have changed the communication landscape revolutionarily in various new ways. Online newspapers, E-magazines and social network websites have represented different ideologies and personal niche, thus the communication behaviors of the people all around the world have been the new academic research sector. There are large number of agendas in recent society and most of them are available to acquire for each segment of the public. Consequently, some social researchers have predicted that the end of the traditional agenda setting is coming. The extreme vast quantity of information and news online has constructed the agenda individually fragmentally and compositely. These idiosyncratic personal agendas will be a public agenda characterized by particular variety and the scattering of public attention. But how many people are there to tune in to those blogs and to all the other websites which have offered their agendas of news, information and commentary to the public? “*To a considerable degree, traditional news media has thrived on the public’s daily habits. From this point of view, similar habits do not seem to have been established among large numbers of users of online news and other websites. Use of the Web still seems to be more an occasional thing for most people.”* (McCOMBS, 2005)In other words, the traditional media still plays an important role in today’s society even though the cyber world have developed fast and have taken some places of people’s daily life.

There is a study comparing the effects of the agenda- setting by the internet with the traditional media. James Hamilton (2004) have presented that the five largest American newspapers, Wall Street Journal , USA Today, New York Times, Los Angeles Times, and Washington Post have occupied 21.5 percent of the circulation among the top 100 daily newspapers. However, he found that the top five newspaper websites which includes three of those newspapers, USA Today, New York Times, and Washington Post along with the Detroit News and Seattle Times account for 41.4 percent of the total links found on the Internet to the top 100 newspapers. Meaning attention on the internet is even more concentrated than in the print material. This situation is analogous to another traditional media, television, where most people have access to many different channels, but only very few channels tend to catch their attentions. Although “*the agendas to which people are exposed on the Web are highly divergent rather than the highly redundant agendas found in the traditional news media*.” (McCOMBS, 2005)But lots of the famous news websites are subsidiaries of traditional media, in other words, they are the online versions of newspapers, magazines, television networks, and cable TV news channels. The research has showed that these popular news websites have the majority click rate, that is to say, the situation in the cyber world is the same as in the traditional media era that the mainstream media set the agendas for the public. *“It would hardly be surprising to find that online sites present agendas that largely match the agendas of traditional news media and that the online sites show considerable resemblance to each other.”* (McCOMBS, 2005)

## Application of the theory

The research of the national image belongs to the study of communication, since the image of one country, to some extent, is the reflection of the communication effects. Thus, the crucial important theories in the communication field, agenda setting theory will be applied in this thesis. The national image of a country in people’s minds are constituted by many elements. According to the agenda setting theory, the mass media, to considerable extent, has shaped the image of the nation by giving international news, reports and information. In general, the national image reflects a nation’s history, politic, economy, culture, reality, people’s living style, value of the society. However, because of the realistic reason, people cannot gain the primary information from that destination country. Taking the example of China, even some people have been there, but most of the foreigners are mainly for traveling or short term trip which cannot get the overall and objective image. For this reason, the mass media is the major channel which can provide the public more knowledge about other countries. That is why the agenda setting theory will be applied for analyzing the causes for the recent national image of China in the western eyes.

In the analysis part, the agenda setting theory will be used in all the five sections, the overview of China’s national image in the eyes of the west, political image, economic image, cultural image and cultural difference between Chinese media and the western media. In the beginning of the analysis, the thesis will give a summary of China’s image in western eyes, the new concept of China threat will be mentioned, this concept is an agenda set by the scholars and policy makers in US and then widely spread in the western media, in fact, it influences the national image of China. Then the author will talk about the image of China’s politics in the western media which is mainly constituted with bad human rights condition, lack of transparency of the government and corruption. Then coming “China has definitely nothing in its favor right now” is the economic image according to some western media, which is the main idea of the China collapse presumption, as well as China’s economic threat will be talked about. Then the cultural image will be analyzed by using the case of Shanghai world Expo and the building of Confucian institutes. Last but not least, there will be a comparison between different cultures in the process of agenda setting.

# Analysis

## China’s national image in western eyes

China’s rapid development include economic growth as well as military modernization have made China’s rival, the US, put forward a new theory called “China threat”. Scholars, strategic and policy makers have started to make their plans to “containing” China and do not accept China’s “peaceful rise”. Some scholars have stated many reasons for the anxiety. Robert Kagan argued that China’s development will not be peaceful as it has said from the historical perspective.

He has presented *“the history of rising powers…and their attempted ‘management’ by established powers provides risen without sparking a major war that reshaped the international system to reflect new realities of power.”* Others have considered China as *“the most serious national security threat the US”* (Al-Rodhan, 2007)and the threat not only exist at present but also will continue and get stronger to the future. *“The reason Americans should take the threat from the people’s republic of China so seriously is that it puts at risk very national existence of America.”* (Al-Rodhan, 2007)

The quadrennial defence review report from the government of the United States presented that *“China has the greatest potential to compete militarily with the United States and field disruptive technologies that could over time offset traditional US military advantages.”* (Al-Rodhan, 2007) Different governments has their different attitudes on China’s threat image For example, George W bush’s period has seen China as a powerful competitor. However, the previous administration has hold the different opinion. Bush’s think tank has argued against the policy of engaging with China from the Clinton administration: *“even if there is an argument for economic interaction with Beijing, China is still a potential threat to stability in the Asia-pacific region.”* (Al-Rodhan, 2007)

The public opinion surveys have given the attitude from the US public towards the “China threat theory”, it could be seen from the survey that the people who believe that China will threat the world were in the majority. Taking the data from “*a public opinion survey of Canadians and Americans about China, 2005”* for example, 31% of the investigators believed that *“China will soon dominate the world”* meanwhile 54% thought that *“the emergence of China as a superpower is a threat to the peace of the world.”* (Al-Rodhan, 2007)

The “China threat” theory has been studied in different levels. Different scholars have debated on “*power politics and China’s intentions and capabilities in the future”.*  In the article “*structural realism after the cold war*”, Kenneth Waltz mentioned that China will become a threat as a rising power even without hard working so long as it remains politically and economically competent. (Waltz, 2000) Many researches have made conclusion from the historical experiences, for example, Kagan has declared that China, which has big ambition is like all rising powers in the past history, and wants to reshape the international order to suit its own interests or achieve its own aims. (Al-Rodhan, 2007) Other American scholars have given the same explanation that China is looking for opportunities to replace the US and become the dominant power in East Asia. (Al-Rodhan, 2007)

Realist theory have argued that *“states are not satisfied with a mere balance of power because there is no room in the international system for status-quo powers; states have strong incentives to increase their relative share of power at the expense of their competitors.”* (Al-Rodhan, 2007)John Mearsheimer said that the two goals of a great power is *“to dominate its region and to prevent other powers to dominate other regions”.* (John Mearsheimer, Zbigniew Brzezinski, 2006) From this point of view, Measheimer have briefly summarized China’s threat as follows:

It is obvious that the most hazardous situation the US will face in the 21th century is China’s rising and replacing America to be a hegemon in Asia. But China’s development mainly based on its speed and quality of its economic growth. If the social development and the modernization process could keep stable, China would certainly become the wealthiest country in the world. (John Mearsheimer, Zbigniew Brzezinski, 2006) Meanwhile, it will use the wealth to build a powerful military machine and that is the way to be the dominator of the region, “*just as the US did in the western hemisphere during the nineteenth century.”* (Al-Rodhan, 2007)

The China threat theory has been first put forward by the scholars and researchers in the US, and then spread widely in the western media, means that the western media has set agenda of China threat to its audience, the attitude of the western media always like “if without containing, China sooner or later will dominate Asia.” “China now for the US is the same like the USSR in the cold war.” (Mearsheimer, 2006) However, China’s threat is more challenging than the USSR. The reason is *“if China were to become a giant Hong Kong, it would have somewhere on the order of four times as much latent power as the US does, allowing China to gain a decisive military advantage over the US in Asia.”* (Al-Rodhan, 2007)In short, the “China treat” theory has framed with the combination of ambitions and capabilities of China.

## Political image

The image of the China’s politics in the western media is mainly made up of bad human rights condition, lack of transparency of the government and corruption.

The criticizing of China’s human rights is one of the hottest issues in the western media when it refers to China.

*“Expressing your opinion in China can result in jail, torture or death. People are silenced and what happens in China is clouded in secrecy. Restricting the internet helps the Chinese Government to hide the true extent of human rights abuses like the death penalty, torture and detention without trial and the persecution of human rights defenders.”* (Uncensor, 2011)

The western media has set the agendas that China is extreme weak on protecting the human rights. Most of the people in the other countries cannot get the primary data about the human rights condition from China by themselves, so that the media become the major channel for them to gain the information. But the information which has been published by the media sometimes is bias according to the topics which have been chosen by the editors or the journalists. Because of the personal emotional factors and consideration of some interests, always the negative news appears on the TV, newspapers as well as internet. People’s comments on the internet are reflecting the result of agenda setting. Some people claimed that “*The Chinese communist government wants to control the minds of its citizens. The government doesn’t want their citizens to have freedom of speech and rights of any sort and is thus curbing from any free flow of information from around the world.*” (Aguirre, 2010)

Taking the Tibet issues for example, the western media has given an impression to the public that the Chinese government treat the Tibet people with very cruel measures.

*“Human rights abuses documented in Tibet include the deprivation of life, disappearances, torture, poor prison conditions, arbitrary arrest and detention, denial of fair public trial, denial of freedom of speech and of press and Internet freedoms. They also include political and religious repression, forced abortions, sterilization, and even infanticide.”* (US State Department, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 2009 Human Rights Report: China (includes Tibet, Hong Kong, and Macau), March 11, 2010)

It is not objective that the large amount of articles or reports on the internet or printed media lead the public to the opinion which already been shaped. The Chinese government’s efforts to prove the living condition for the people over there are rarely given through the media. Official data shows that 90 percent of the Tibetans, around 1 million people were homeless in 1950s and at that time more than one thousand families lived by begging. Till the year 2006, with the government help, over 570000 people have moves in their new apartments or houses which cost 1.3 billion Yuan totally. Before the founding of new China, less than 2 percent of school aged children had opportunities to have school education and the illiteracy rate was more than 95 percent. During the year 2007 to 2012, the government has spent 8.22 billion for the education in Tibet and the nine-year compulsory education has covered 90.2 percent of the school age children.

“*For the economy, The Tibet economy has been growing at an annual rate of 12 percent or more over the past seven years. In 2007, the region´s gross domestic product (GDP) was 34.2 billion Yuan (about4.88 billion U.S. dollars), about 12,000 Yuan per capita - double the 2002 figure. The per capita net income of farmers and herdsmen posted double-digit growth for the fifth consecutive year and reached 2,788 Yuan in 2007.”* (Xinhua, 2008)

For the religion, before 1949, the old Tibetan law accepted Buddhism for the only legal religion, comparing with nowadays freedom of religion is the fundamental right for every Chinese citizens which was protected by the constitution law. Moreover, the central government has spent more than 700 million to maintain their religion and cultural relics. Such achievements cannot be easily found in the western main stream media. The public just believe what they have read and heart from the media. Sometimes only by on-spot-investigation, the audience hardly access the truth. Dubrule, chairman and founder of the leading multinational hotel group Accor Group, has spent three months having trip in Tibet and his opinion towards Tibet has been completely changed by this experience. *"Compared with those talking about Tibet in the French media but never setting foot in the region, I think I have more things to tell,"* he said. Before arriving there, he thought that the local Tibetans were suffering from the repression from the Chinese government as most of the westerners thought. But during his trip, he found out that the local people were satisfied with their living conditions. He explained: *“Their life was not as good as in France but I found they were benefiting from the economic development."* (Xinhua, 2008)

China’s minority issues are the typical agenda that the western media always set to create the pseudo-environment. Professor Lv Xiaoxun, form School of Literature and Journalism, Central University of Nationalities has chosen news and reports from the two famous western newspaper: The Times and New York Times, to explain how the media build the national image of China. (Xiaoxun, 2009) Selecting the key words is an important process of the analysis, therefore, Professor Lv has considered many elements of the topics and chose “China minority”, “China nationality”, “Tibet”, “XinJiang”, “China Tibet”, “China XinJiang”, “Dalai lama”, “China inner Mongolia” and few other words, totally 11 words to search for the related news and reports during 1978-2008 30years on Access World News data base, ProQuest data base and The Times Digital Archives data base. (Xiaoxun, 2009) The results which have been chosen are not only matched the key words, but also reflected the journalists, editors or the authors’ attitudes. (Xiaoxun, 2009) By careful selection, Professor Lv has found 455 news and reports from The Times and the annual average is 11.6, as well as the peak number is 107 which was in the year 2008. Comparing with The Times in the UK, the influential printed media the New York Times has 565 valid news and reports while the average is 14.3, but in 2008, the number of the reports have reached 136. (Xiaoxun, 2009)

Figure 4[[4]](#footnote-4)

The thesis has concluded some features of these reports. Firstly, the agenda setting is based on the same model that all the disturbance happened in the minority areas are caused by the government’s trampling on human rights, democracy and freedom. This kind of logic has made a pseudo- environment in which the bias opinions are superior to the truth itself. Secondly, these reports always mentioned the history of Tibet and Xinxiang, most of the description are about how the Chinese government persecuted or used violence to treat people from these areas. However, because of the language and cultural barriers, the readers unable to check if the history on the newspapers are true or not, and the public just believed the agendas which the media has set. Even if the media always gives the real story, the one-sided reality could lead the public to the attitudes which the media want to build for them. Thirdly, because of the difference of the ideologies, keeping the opposite attitudes is the thinking set of the western media. This is why the focus of the two newspapers are always on the denouncement of the China’s politic. The following table is the main ideas of the news and reports on the two newspapers related to the key words which the thesis has mentioned above. (Xiaoxun, 2009)

Table2

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Main ideas of the news and reports (Xiaoxun, 2009) | | |
| sections | Topics | Attitudes and opinions |
| Politic | Tibet | The Times: “the Tibetans are suffering from the despotism of the Chinese government and the CPC, people live there have no human rights.” “since 1989, 1993 was the year that the Chinese government exert the most serious political persecution”  The New York Times: “the Chinese government has broken the promise of improving the human rights’ condition. It can be seen from the persecution towards the Tibetans, the CPC will never consider to take the human rights issue seriously, although it has made the commitment for dealing with this issue.” |
| Xinjiang | The Times: “the Uighurs are suffering from the Han Chinese’s threat”, “the fight between the Uighurs and the Hans are the efforts put by the Uighur extremists who are struggling for building their own country.”  The New York Times: “The Chinese government uses violence to deal with the Uighurs’ issues.” |
| Economy | Qinghai-Tibet railway | The Times: “the Qinghai-Tibet railway benefits for the Tibetans.”  The New York Times: “the completion of the Qinghai-Tibet railway will bring high economic development for Tibet.” |
| Religion and culture | Tibet | The Times: “Dalai lama criticizes the Chinese government has applied a cultural genocide policy towards Tibet.” |
| Xinjiang | The Times: “the CPC has learnt how to deal with the relation between the Uighurs and Hans, therefore, the Uighurs is looking forward to more religious liberty.”  The New York Times: “the religions are always hiding inside China, and the international human rights organisations are continuously criticizing the lack of religious liberty of China, as well as the Chinese government uses violence to treat the Catholics, Tibetan Buddhists and the Moslems in Xinjiang province.” |
| Tourism | Tibet | The Times: “during the period of the Beijing Olympic games, the Beijing opera and the Tibetan opera had given impressive shows to the audience.”  The New York Times: “Beijing has built a museum for exhibiting Tibetan cultural relics.” |

## Economic image

Since 1979, it is estimated that the economy of China has grown at about 9 percent every year, which led to tripling of its GNP. (Al-Rodhan, 2007) Research found that 66 percent of the people in the US thought that China is posing a serious threat to working opportunities in their country, and 54 percent showed the concern about the level of Chinese investment in America. (Al-Rodhan, 2007) Except the US, people in other developed countries such as the European countries have expressed the same sentiments. Taking the UK for example, research has showed that in 2006 about 79 percent of the British people considered China as the biggest challenge to their economy. (Al-Rodhan, 2007)

There are few main aspects which the public of the US and other modernized countries, some policy makers as well as scholars have concerned towards China’s threat. To start with, every year China’s violations against the intellectual property rights has been estimated to cost the United States industries more than 2 billion US dollars. (Gertz, 2005) Some observers claimed that the great violator who steal the technology from America to benefit China’s economy and development is the China’s government. This problem has been putting forward long time but still hasn’t been solved, moreover, this is not the only case which caused the economic friction between the two counties. (Gertz, 2005) Second, the cheap labor of China is grabbing the job opportunities in the US. *“Outsourcing to China has become a political wedge issue in the US”.* (Al-Rodhan, 2007)Economically, China’s cheap labors have been universally recognized and many transnational companies have made decisions to reduce the cost by hiring Chinese labors. Meaning there is loss of manufacturing and industrial working opportunities in the US. Information showed that China has contributed to the industrial working opportunities decline in the US. Third, during the past many years, the US has kept a continuous trade deficit with China, “*which made China become its biggest creditor*”. (Al-Rodhan, 2007) China’s foreign reserves were 2.3bilion in the year 1977 and grew to 3.31 trillion dollar by the end of 2012. (PBOC, 2013) This enormous increase has made the US vulnerable if China decides to “dump” its holding of the money. (Al-Rodhan, 2007)

Beyond China’s threat image, there is another judgment towards China’s economic image: the collapse of China’s economy. China’s economic growth was characterized with impressive and stable since the opening up policy has been put forward, and there were many discussions about if the situation will maintain the same in the coming future. However, many western media has claimed that from this decade China will start with a massive negative transition, defying such judgment.

“*The negative transition will take roots in political institution, demography and export markets, the very elements that have carved the success story of China*.” (Moghe, 2012)

As China is the largest Communist political system which has followed the principle *‘growth at any cost.’* This rule has largely made China to grow at ‘*double digit pace’.* However, *“It has fuelled ire in China’s population for the regime as human rights are often disregarded, no check is in place on growing inequality, government spends less on social welfare, and the country has no such thing as ‘voice of the people.’”* (Moghe, 2012)

The western media presented that the growing wealth gap is one of the main features of China’s economic image. The huge gap between the rich and poor could lead to crime, which threatens the stability of the society and the public security. The mentality of *“bitterly cynical toward the rich”* is common in China’s big cities. In international metropolis such as Beijing and Shanghai there are too many different social hierarchies. The privileged people who have political power or big amount of assets are in the top of the society and it is not unusual that they own houses and expensive cars and live an extremely luxurious life.

At the same time, an overwhelming majority of labor in the big cities are migrant workers. China is now experiencing the largest migration of people from the countryside to the cities. It is estimated that, in 2010, 230 million Chinese — three-four times the number of people who emigrated to the U.S. from Europe over a century — have left the countryside and migrated to the cities in recent years. About 13 million new people join the group every year. The number is expected to reach 250 million by 2012 and surpass 300 million, probably even reach 400 million, by 2025. (Hays, 2012)

Andrew Jacobs comments on this problem in the New York Times:

“*Known derisively as “waidiren,” or outsiders, the migrants are the cut-rate muscle that makes it eminently affordable for better-off Chinese to dine out, hire full-time nannies and ride new subway lines in places like Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen.”* (Jacobs, 2011)

He also refers to the statistics of the Beijing Bureau of Statistics saying that more than one-third of Beijing’s 19.6 million residents are migrants from the China’s rural areas, a figure that has grown by about 6 million since 2000. *“The middle class hates to see that kind of poverty, but they can’t live without their cheap labor,”* said Kam Wing Chan, a professor at the University of Washington, who studies China’s rural-migrant policies.(Jacobs, 2011)

Many of these migrants are poorly paid construction workers, cooks and security guards who have little choice but to settle in low-rent *“migrant villages”*. Such villages are often built on cheap land, which the government has designated for construction projects. These kind of communities is vulnerable to any short-notice demolitions. (Hays, 2012) Joshua Kublantzick, a scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for Peace, describes a group of them who were searching for job, in *Los Angeles Times*:

*“Dressed in torn jeans and dirty shirts and carrying thermoses of tea, they push towards the exterior fence, jostling for the attention of a site manager who hands out short-term jobs...Finding no work they trade tea for large bottles of beer, which the gulp down. Many of them soon stumble in circles.”* (Hays, 2012)

Some of the migrants stay in basements because the rent can be as little as $42 a month. Some even share beds with workers who has different working hours so they can sleep at different times of the day. Others, having nowhere else to go, sleep in open areas in public parks. For those who are really desperate, chairs at Internet cafes can be rented for only $2 a night. In Beijing, this kind of workers is frequently seen squatted on the sidewalks having their lunch, which is often a tin bowl containing cheap soup available for 14 U.S. cents. (Hays, 2012)

With parents gone searching for jobs in big cities, many children are left behind to be brought up by their grandparents or other relatives in their hometowns. The parents can only be reunited with their children once a year on Spring Festival and even then, sometimes they are required to work at their factory or construction site, meaning this only chance can be cancelled. Children of migrant workers often do poorly in school without proper care and supervision of their parents. They are also reported to have discipline and psychological problems. A school principal and some counselors commented on this in an interview in Los Angeles Times:

*“Most of these students tend to become antisocial and introverted. But in times of conflict, they tend to explode and react in violent extremes.”* (Principle) (Hays, 2012)

“*These children are so sad. They have to learn early to fend for themselves. There’s one family where the grandparents are taking care of four children from three of their sons. All of them are away at work. At best they can make sure the kids are clothed and fed. But they can’t fill the emotional emptiness.”*(Counselor) (Hays, 2012)

Every citizen is, to some extent, representatives of a nation. Lacking equality and the feeling of happiness, the underprivileged people cannot even keep favorable images for themselves, let alone by the country.

Except the huge wealth gap, according to the agenda setting of “China collapse”, China, as the world biggest exporter, with great trade surplus, the blooming period is on the way to its ending. Since the aging process has become faster, more and more jobs positions are vacant; as a consequence, the salary of the labor will increase and the “cheap labor” will be not cheap any more. Following the higher wages, the prices of products cannot stay in the same low level like before, which may lead to a devastating effect on the export markets of China.

The surge of retired people caused by the fast-getting-old population is the other damaging result. Because of the one child policy and the low growth rate of population, the youth is declining rapidly, it will be a difficult time for China as it will face the challenge of paying to a large amount of pensioners at a period that productivity and export is on the descending. Meanwhile, another challenge which will appear at the same time is the mass protest against the Chinese government and the CPC. *“Chinese govt. will try to stabilize political institution, suppressing protest by spending more on public welfare keeping economic growth at stake.”* (Moghe, 2012)

All in all, the agenda setting of China collapse from the western has given an image that *“China has definitely nothing in its favor right now*”. “*The deadly trio that is the social problems caused by the huge wealth gap, an aging population, and the rise in prices leading to decline in exports may cut China’s three-decade long growth streak.”* (Moghe, 2012)

The harsh social problems mentioned above cannot be avoided in one country’s social transition period. In other words, when the western countries were on their road to reach their mature social development model, they also faced the same social problems. The huge wealth gap even still exist in some western countries nowadays, let alone few decades ago. The western countries are capitalist countries, which have already been developed countries for a long time. Moreover, ever since the industrial revolution, those countries have become stronger by colonizing weaker countries through importing raw materials and exporting manufactures. During one hundred years, the countries without their own territorial sovereignties were still fighting for their independence, but at that time, the capitalism countries were on their way to the “core position” in the world by developing their capitalist economy and society. Meanwhile, the inequality problem during that period was the same like that exist in China now.

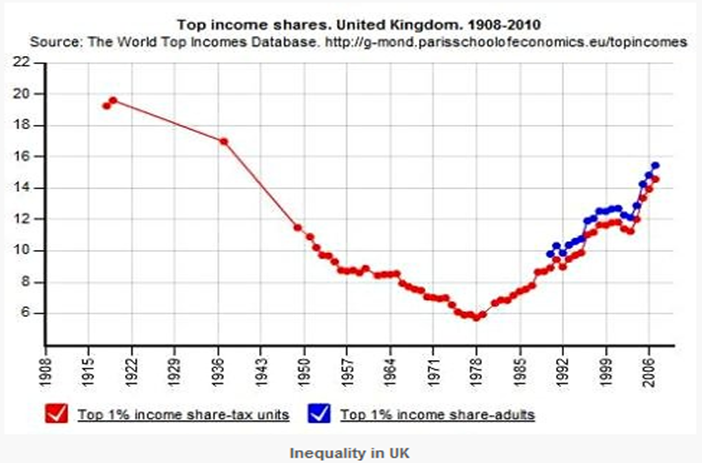
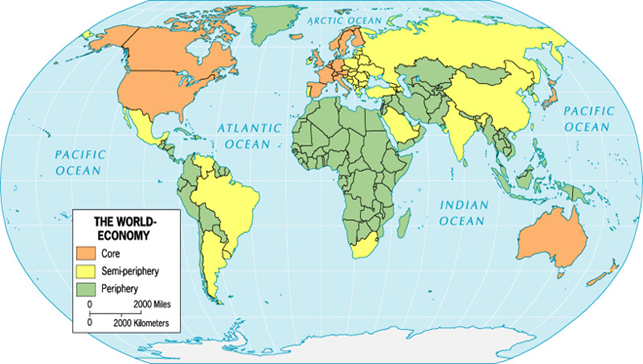


Figure 5

The above figure (Povertysite, 2012) shows that in UK the inequality kept a high degree between 1915 and 1936 due to its [monopoly](app:ds:monopoly) [capitalism](app:ds:capitalism) transition period. In 1970s, when the society became more stable, the gap between the rich and the poor was in the lowest degree. If the western media makes a hypothesis like this: the social problems will lead China to collapes, in the same logic, when the western countries experience serious social problems, they won’t have abilities to develop anymore. However, in fact, instead of collapes, the western countries are maintianing in the “core zone of the world”. The core, as marked by red in the following figure, mainly contains developed capitalist regions including Europe, North America, Australia, New Zealand and Japan. This group is characterized by high wages, high investment, and welfare services. (Baylis, 2008, p. 148)

Figure 6

(APHG, 2012)

## Cultural image

Comparing with political and economic images, China’s cultural image has not been criticized as much as the previous two aspects. Except the long history and rich culture which already have been known by the western, some cultural events also contribute to the process of the agenda setting of China’s cultural image.

Taking Shanghai World Expo for example, this big event in 2010 has attracted 246 countries to participate. Till 31th, October, 2010, the Expo has welcomed 730840000 visitors, and 397000 visitors per day averagely. (Ke, 2010) Totally 700 foreign media and more than 13000 journalists have involved in reporting news. (Ke, 2010)Professor Guo ke who is the dean of the college of journalism and communications in Shanghai international studies school, has done research by collecting data from LexisNexis, Factiva database and some newspapers’ web edition about the news and reports of Shanghai World Expo. The following bar graph shows the numbers of the foreign media’s news and reports from 20th April, 2010 to 10th November, 2010.

Figure 7[[5]](#footnote-5)

It is can be found that Shanghai Expo has successfully raised the attention of the western media about China. Although many media from different countries have pointed out that this is the event of the year 2010, there are not a small quantity cases when the Chinese organizers received criticism about the Shanghai World Expo from the western media. An article of the British media Guardian posted few weeks before the Expo described few facts about the organization of this event which included few appreciated sentences. However, after this, the critical writing took bigger part. According to this article, the Chinese government used the event to divert the Chinese citizens away from other serious problems inside the country, such as corruption, unemployment, and the increasing prices of the real estates in China and so on. (Branigan, 2010) Although this was pointed as a major problem, it is bias to connect the domestic problems with the holding of the World Expo.(Branigan, 2010) The World Expo is considered as the Cultural Olympic Games, whose aim is to make the World integrated and to build a bridge for helping the people live in the Global Village understand each other more, as well as to exhibit the best technologies and advanced culture of the human being. Even though the host country can use this opportunity to present itself, keeping the purpose and value of the World Expo should be the unchangeable principle.

Journalist from Guardian conducted an interview with one of the Expo visitors. Obviously this visitor had a profound impression from the fact that such a glorious event was held in Shanghai. However, the police appeared everywhere led the observer to the conclusion that the event lacked sense of harmony. Furthermore, the critical analysis continued with the fact that more than 18 000 residences have been kicked out from their homes because of the building of the Expo Park. (Branigan, 2010) It mentioned that a Chinese woman complained to the media that the Chinese Government tore down her house and threatened her in case that she speak in front of the media. (Branigan, 2010)

Another media, Politics Daily, put forward a dilemma: the compatibility between the Expo values and the Chinese government’s censorship and information control. (Clark, 2010)Forbes continued the line of the criticism of Shanghai Expo, as it added a lot of new points, such as “*Nationalism is far from over. China is still the most interesting thing to the Chinese people. The number one pavilion is…well, guess. The most expensive one and the biggest one are both…The China Pavilion*!” (Carmosky, 2010)

The above media’s opinions suggested that the negative comments were not toward to the ideas that the organization was with poor quality, the buildings were not creative, the infrastructure in the country was bad, the event did not respond to the topic: “better city for better life” or the Shanghai Expo was lack of visitors. On the contrary, the negative comments pointed to the Chinese Government. Shanghai Expo was considered by the Chinese government as an important process to build a good national image in front of the world. In fact, to some extent, it do help China to exhibit a new image, the western know more about China through the ubiquitous Chinese elements. In other words, the cultural image of China have been increased by this Expo, but on the other hand, cultural image is only one part of the whole national image. From the analysis it can be understood that the western media sets agendas for the political area through the cultural event, therefore, the good national image which the Chinese government expected to build by the Shanghai Expo couldn’t reflect on the western media or deliver to the western public.

Establishing Confucian institutes is another effort that the Chinese government has put to improve China’s national cultural image. The Confucian institutes are non-profit educational organizations which Sino-foreign cooperatively establish in foreign countries. Its mission is to promote cultural exchange and cooperation between China and other countries as well as to develop the friendship between China and foreign countries. Its goal is contributing to the diversity of the global culture and building a harmonious world. (HanBan, 2013) Till October, 2010, there have been 322 Confucian institutes and 369 Confucian classes in the world, totally the number is 691. These institutes or classes spread over 96 countries. (HanBan, 2013)

However, the Confucian institutes have become controversial in western countries. In the US, citizens in some states have held an opinion that the Confucian institutes are brainwashing tools which deliver communist ideology to the American students, even they protested on the street to against the Confucian institutes. (Bu, 2012) In one Canadian report, the Confucian institutes even have been considered as cultural spy agencies. (Jian, 2010) Education counsellor in Chinese consulate general in Los Angeles Chen Zhunmin said that the Confucian institutes don’t have any political overtones at all. These institutes have built a platform for the foreign students to learn Chinese language and Chinese culture. However, the Chinese culture which the students learn from the Confucian institutes are with traditional philosophy which have already existed in the Confucian period, 2000 years ago. In other words, the Confucian institutes are nothing to do with the communist ideology. (Bu, 2012)

*“The Confucius Institute, has been attacked as a propaganda tool that could lead to self-censorship by universities fearful of jeopardizing China’s generosity. Dr. Nancy Romig, associate director of Michigan State University’s CI program, one of the oldest and most well-established, said that “There has never been any case whatsoever of Hanban (the agency operating the Confucius Institute) trying to censor or control what we’re saying,” she says. “There’s nothing like ‘You need to do this, you need to do that.’””* (Helen, 2012)

Hu Jintao said in his speech in 2007 that the building of Confucian institutes is a way that China exert its soft power[[6]](#footnote-6). (Helen, 2012) As Dr Nancy said, the acceptation and approval of the Confucian institutes need a long term, as well as the process of the building of China’s national image. (Helen, 2012)

## Media’s role influenced by different culture

The two different ways of thinking of Chinese and western impose barriers in the understanding of the national image. As the Chinese society is strongly influenced by the Confucian value, the Confucian philosophy also embedded in the media area and its agenda setting.

The Confucian value of Zhongyong (the golden mean of the Confucian school) is the traditional classic philosophy since ancient China. (Qiubai, 2000) Its aim is to guide people to be in harmony with each other and with the nature. It presents that people should always keep calm, never become over emotional, *“which means the way to behave and to handle matters should be reasonable and moderate, without going extreme or leaning to either side.”* (Changzhong, 2010)This value based on the Confucian humanity principle. Always maintaining a gentle attitude towards others is Confucian way to keep a good relations between family members, relatives and even strangers. (Xiaoqing, 2002) Confucius said that *“never do to others what you would not like them to do to you*” (Confucius, 2006). Later Mencius said that people should love others as well as to be friendly and integrate with the nature. (Changzhong, 2010) Meanwhile, the concepts of scientific outlook on development and the harmonious society which is the core idea of Hu jintao’s speech on the 17th CPC national congress is essentially affected by the principle of Zhongyong. (Xiaobo, 2007)

Zhongyong also makes the Chinese culture more tolerate than other cultures. (Xiaoqing, 2002) Recent years Chinese media has changed its style to be closer to the western because the western model is leading the development of the World’s media, and the other reason is to integrate to the international society as well as to response to the western’ doubts and critiques towards China. However, in general, the media in China prefers to give positive news than negative, and to respect the variety of the cultures and opinions from other countries. (Lee, 2012) It is rare to see on the news that China hold a very strong attitudes to comments the affairs in other countries. Even for the territorial disputes or the disagreements of the national interests, China still use very peaceful words to give its objections. For example, facing the continuous charge of China’s cyber-attacks by the US, the foreign minister spokesman of China responded with a peaceful and friendly attitude that groundless accusations is harmful to the efforts which the two countries have put to develop their relationship and also could damage the atmosphere of the dialogue between the two countries. (Lei, 2013) Therefore, it can be concluded that the Chinese media set agendas basing on the principle of Zhongyong. In other Confucius’ words, Zhongyong also means “*harmony with diversity”* (Confucius, 2006)*.* Moreover, this concept is suitable to explain Chinese media’s attitudes. Critique could never be the Chinese media’s approach, as the Confucian said, “*Gentlemen seek harmony but not uniformity.”* (Confucius, 2006)Even though China has different opinions with other nations, it just expresses its opinions politely and tries to keep the harmony atmosphere among countries, neither be critical nor be assimilated. The previous Prime Minister Wen jiabao gave a speech in Harvard University using this concept to introduce China’s value towards nowadays international relations. (Xiaobo, 2007)

The critique of zhongyong states that the key point of the golden mean of the Confucian school is to tolerate, which is harmful to the Chinese people and the Chinese society. (Dihua, 2008) From the surface, Zhongyong is the way to grasp the “middle attitude” and to avoid the extreme behaviors or attitudes. But to judge the “golden middle position” is difficult, at the end, sometimes Zhongyong equals to compromise or don’t show the real opinion. Hiding the real attitudes and not showing the emotion directly become China and Chinese people’s character. This character also appears on the Chinese media[[7]](#footnote-7), Zhongyong become an excuse for some media which dares not to criticise and has lost their social responsibilities. This phenomenon leads to the result that the media lose their ability of censoring. During the previous years, there are many cases that because of the media lacking their duty, the public cannot get the truth of some negative social events. In order to keep the “middle attitudes”, the media is good at explaining the things with a Zhongyong attitude. (Dihua, 2008) When meet some serious problems, the media usually try to use moderate or even ambiguous words to express the news or reports. Sometimes it balances the bad news with dialectic analysis. Taking the environmental pollution for example, in the beginning, the media hided the reality of hazardous air pollution in Beijing in front of the people. But under the pressure of the international media and the local people’s voices, the media finally pressed the report of index PM 2.5 of Beijing. However, in order to keep balance, the news also gave news about how the Beijing government improve the environmental condition by putting a lot of efforts. In the 7pm official Chinese news, in the beginning it always gives that the construction of the country has achieved impressive result and the building of the harmonious socialist society has reached a new level. With the high leaders visiting some cities or towns, the people there are showing their happiness and appreciation. Later on, the news will give some advanced deeds or touching stories aims at setting good examples to the ordinary people or to make people believe that their society is full of love and hope. Although the news also reports something bad, it usually uses euphemistic expressions and costs short time. Therefore, it can be seen that the good and bad things in the Chinese news are always hands in hands to keep a Zhongyong principle. And this is the most obvious difference between the Chinese and the western media. (Zhihong, 2007)

Different from the Chinese media which has been influenced by the Chinese culture of Zhongyong, to be critical is one of the most important features of the western media. (Donghai, 2012) By knowing the features of the western media can help the Chinese to understand why China’s image has been set by the western media in such a way. If using the Chinese thinking way to see the western media’s attitudes towards China, there will be strong doubts: China is always friendly to others and not harmful to anybody, why does the west hold such attitudes towards China?

Unlike the Chinese media who is led by the government, the western media is private and its operation is no different from other commercial activities. (Zhihong, 2007) There are different media companies competing in the free market, therefore, gaining more benefits is their aim. Selling more newspapers or other printed materials and winning more audience are their motivation to publish news or reports. Moreover, “Sensory stimuli” is the way for these companies to beat their rivals. This is why the modern western media trended to become more critical approach. (Donghai, 2012)

As Pulitzer Prize winner Walter Lippmann said in his collection of essays, *Liberty and the News*, *“There can be no higher law in journalism than to tell the truth and shame the devil.”* (Heyntsen, 2013)The most important job of the journalist is to seek the truth. In the west, investigative journalism is very important in the working of media. The essential process is to discover the hidden truth and to publish these news to the audience, since people have the right to get the true information of the World which they live in. “*As writers who investigate and report information with the purpose of facilitating change, investigative reporters are behind many of the reforms that we see today.*” (Heyntsen, 2013) Therefore, behind the critical news or reports there are aims of reminding related agencies or organizations to deal with the social problems and to make better lives for people.

Different ideologies is another element that affects the building of China’s national image. The styles of the news language are the reflection of the different ideologies. As the Chinese media is led by the central government, when it publishes political news in English channels or English version newspapers, it has to use the official translation which is characterized with strong ideological color. As language plays a very important role in the agenda setting process, if it sounds strange or not unacceptable to the audience, it could bring negative impression to the audience. Obviously the English channels or printed media are mainly for the English-speaking people, and most of these audience are from the countries which have different ideologies from China. Thus, some political news language is hard for them to understand and accept.

In CCTV English news channel the audience can hear the news about Hu Jintao’s report at 18th Party Congress. The news gives the theme of the congress which was described by Hu:

*“to hold high the great banner of socialism with Chinese characteristics, follow the guidance of Deng Xiaoping Theory, the important thought of Three Represents and the Scientific Outlook on Development, free up the mind, implement the policy of reform and opening up, pool our strength, overcome all difficulties, firmly march on the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics, and strive to complete the building of a moderately prosperous society in all respects.”* (Jintao, 2012)

This typical discourse language embodies several distinctive features of the Chinese political discourse. “*Hold high the great banner*” is a political metaphor, which means stick to a certain ideology, or take a certain ideological guidance as a motto. This metaphor, however, bears strong Chinese characteristics and differs a lot from the expression in native English language. Hence it is unusual, or hard to win consonance from the western readers. Besides, “*pool our strength, overcome all difficulties”* and *“firmly march on the path”* are also expressions that bear the traces of *“the revolutionary language”* which reflect the deeply rooted Chinese mentality that China has and is still being suppressed by imperialism and capitalism and should make every efforts to protect itself from being harmed from.

As official measures of building China’s national image is still the dominate way which may continue a long term, the idea that the government uses for create good national image should be more intimate to the western culture and the western audience. Therefore, it should transfer the Chinese thinking way to be more localized such as to change the political news language in order to avoid the clash of the different ideologies. In 2013, there is a new TV program broadcasts in CCTV international channel named Foreigners In China which represents a new try of the Chinese media to build China’s national image. This program aims to show the ordinary foreigners’ lives in China. In each episode there will be several foreigners who work in every field telling their true stories in China. Compared with the advertisement which showed in Time Square only showing the famous people, this program focuses on average people’s real feeling. By speaking by the foreigner themselves, the audience around the world could easier to believe than the Chinese people speaking for themselves.

# Discussion

This thesis mainly talks about China’s national image from the communication perspective by applying the agenda setting theory. Even though media has played an important role for helping the public to form a country’s image, there are also other elements affect the national image. For example, the domestic problems have a strong impact on national image. On one hand, with the agenda setting by the western media, numerous social problems of China have been exhibited in front of the western public, and these agendas lead to an unsatisfied image of China. On the other hand, the thesis admits that China does have quite a lot of serious domestic problems, such as the hazardous environmental pollution, rampant corruptions which exist everywhere in the society, unsound legal system which make the country lack of equality, etc.

Meanwhile, citizens’ quality very much influences the national image. Every citizen is the representative of his nation, especially people abroad, whose behaviors strongly affect the national image. Taking Chinese tourists for example, in fact, they have won the label of *“worst tourist”*. (Palmer, 2012) It is frequently reported that Chinese tourists are being warned about their bad behaviors including littering, spitting, using toilets without flushing, ignoring no-smoking rules, and even taking off shoes and socks in public. Some of the tourists also lack the respect for other people and they take photographs of unwilling foreigners and guests and disrespect local cultures. (Kwo, 2006)

Despite the bad habits of personal behaviors, some of the unfavorable deeds of Chinese tourists have resulted from the social condition of China. Within China, the large population has led to the fight of limited resources and people take it for granted to grab as much as they want. Therefore, some people are seen jumping queues when shopping, bargaining in shops that sell things at fixed prices, taking more food than needed at buffets and walking off with things in hotels.The lack of a quiet environment in China also leads to people’s habits of making too much noise in public places like restaurants and hotels - speaking loudly over the phone, shouting at friends, and playing games. (Kwo, 2006)

Seen from the cases above, because of the domestic problems, obviously, China is still far away from its aim of building a harmonious society. Therefore, even though the Chinese government has a good intention to contribute to the *“Harmonious World”*, other countries do not trust China and doubt the country’s purpose and efforts. To some degree, it is not hard to understand that western media has considered the Chinese government and CPC as being too weak to maintain an equal and just society. As regarded by the international society, there is a low possibility that a country lacking credibility can have a high sense of responsibility. This is why China cannot get a good image before it has solved its domestic problems.

In addition, there exists dialectic relation between the domestic conditions and publicity in national image building. Domestic conditions and publicity are correlated. If publicity is crucial, the domestic condition is fundamental and a good image in other’s eyes comes from their true experiences and knowledge of the country’s domestic conditions as well as its responsibility in the world.

Publicity does play an important role in national image building, but the root of national image building lies in the domestic conditions. Domestic conditions decide and publicity assist. In nowadays world, China needs a better image in order to be integrated. However, if the residents can see that the government is making every effort to raise the common people’s living conditions and welfare, and to build a society ruled by law with transparent governance, the happiness of the people and a better image of the country will naturally be conveyed to the rest of the world. Otherwise even if the publicity is strong, the national image will not be as good as what has been expected by the government and the people.

# Conclusion

The thesis has drawn a picture about China’s national image from the perspective of Communication Studies by using the classic communication theory: agenda setting theory. The analysis of this thesis responds to the problem formulation in the beginning. For the first question: **What is China’s national image in western eyes in the context of agenda setting?** The thesis has answered this question in three aspects by applying the agenda setting theory. Politically, bad human rights condition, lack of transparency of the government and corruption are the main national image of China in some of the western eyes. As negative news about China’s politic has occupied most of the western media, and according to the agenda setting theory that the media creates a pseudo-environment which is different from the real reality, thus, audience are influenced by the “media’s reality” forming their own opinion which is subjective and deflected from the truth. Therefore, in the western eyes China is a country with one party dictatorship and citizens live inside the country without basic human rights and freedom. Economically, the western popular media has set the agendas of China threat theory and China collapse theory. The first judgment gives an impression to the western audience that China’s raise is dangerous to them and if this big power won’t been contained, it will be like another USSR and perhaps, even lead to the consequence similar to the cold war. The other claim which states that China will collapse in the coming few years create a “media’s reality” that China’s domestic problems are incurable and considerable turmoil will happen in Chinese society. These news or reports present either a hostile image or a hopeless image of China. Culturally, media’s agenda setting towards Chinese culture or cultural events are not so “cruel” as the previous two aspects, but the building of China’s cultural image is still controversial. Because of the clash of the different ideologies, China’s efforts for cultural communication achieves misunderstanding or resistance from the west. Such as the Confucian institutes are considered like tools or spy agencies delivering socialist ideology. In short, China’s national image in the eyes of the western is not as the Chinese government’s imagination after their pouring of money. In other words, Chinese government’s endeavor didn’t work on the western, instead of building a favorable national image, the western voices of doubt and critique have emerged in endlessly.

For the second question: **What has led to the status quo of China’s national image according to the agenda setting theory?** The answer is the following:

China’s image in western eyes, to a large extent, depends on the agendas set by the western media. According to the agenda setting theory, the media shapes people’s attitudes by create a pseudo-environment of many social issues as well as the image of one country. However, the recent world’s media is still controlled by the western countries, in other words, it is impossible for China to build its national image only by publicity or itself’s media’s agenda setting. The publicity measures that China has used to set agenda for its image couldn’t work effectively because the western media has the initiative in hands. Since the Chinese media and publicity are guided and supervised by the central government which means the discourse system is very different from the western, as well as China applies a publicity discourse that maintains strong socialist color and traces of revolutionary features, it therefore resisted by the western that still dominates the mass media communication. Furthermore, the Chinese effort is too official lacking focus on grass roots and common people as well as newness in the country. Meanwhile, ignoring the importance of the localization is another defect of Chinese publicity.

However, due to the different social development processes and the underprivileged foundation of China’s domestic condition, China is still suffering from many problems including a large population and equality between the rich and the poor, etc., by which its national image is gravely affected. Besides, the thriving of China in recent years is now challenging the existing world order dominated by the capitalist countries. China, as a socialist country with an increasing market, is resisted by the old powers. This is why, China is experiencing extra difficulties in national image building compared with the western countries. The Chinese government has high expectations of China’s image and makes efforts in publicizing its ideal image of China but its efforts, from time to time, turns out to be merely actions to gain a glorious face (Mianzi) in front of the world. Actually what the Chinese government did is more for themselves to gain the trust and confidence from the Chinese people, it has used the same way of thinking as it always do the publicity inside the country. Although the government puts huge amounts of money in publicizing, especially in the mass media, but they forget that China’s national image is not what the government-led publicity says it is; it is what other people say it is. China’s official publicity is just like a “mask” covering the reality but it cannot convince the rest of the world because people in other countries have multiple means of getting proper information about China such as from their own media. In order to integrate with the world, China should get used to the critical approach of the western media and try to change its own media system by abandon the old style news language and strong ideological color, as well as learning the advantages from the western media.

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1. The concept of national brand will be presented later [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Translated by the authors of this paper from the original Chinese version [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. There are different definitions of “western countries”, this thesis defines the western countries as the “G7 countries”. G7 is short for “group seven” which include 7 capitalist countries include: the US, UK, Japan, Italy, France, Germany and Canada. The leaders of these 7 countries have summit every year since 1975. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Figure 4 is made by the author based on the data given by Professor Lv Xiaoxun. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Figure7 is made by the author based on the data which given by the research done by professor Guo Ke [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Soft power is a concept put forward by Joseph Nye, dean of Kennedy School of Government. Soft power is the ability of a country that can use its culture and idea to gain international influence. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Chinese media in this thesis means the media in China mainland. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)