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Understanding China's Stance on the Russia–Ukraine War

Discourse Power, Propaganda and Political Cartoons

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ABSTRACT: The Russia–Ukraine war (2022–) has widely been considered a conflict of discourse and narratives. This is true not just for Russia and Ukraine but also for China, which has regarded the war as a 'lesson' to enhance its discourse power or *huayuquan* (话语权). Since the outbreak of the war in February 2022, China has presented a 'neutral' albeit very complex stance. On the one hand, Beijing has refrained from criticising Russia and signed a 'comprehensive strategic partnership' with Moscow, while recurrently calling for respecting Ukraine's right as a sovereign nation on the other. The official verbal/textual discourse remains 'ambiguous', but political cartoons on the war published in Chinese state media are more revealing of China's stance. Arguing that the Russia-Ukraine war elucidates important developments in China's quest for building its discourse power, this paper seeks to understand China's stance on the war through an analysis of 300 political cartoons on the subject published in Chinese state media from 2022 to 2024 using Charles S. Peirce's hypoiconicity. The answers to three questions are sought: First, how does the Russia–Ukraine War feature in China's quest for building its discourse power? Second, is China as supportive of Russia as believed? Third, what aspects of the war in the Chinese discourse are emphasised and which ones are muted?
KEYWORDS: China, Russia–Ukraine War, Discourse Power, Propaganda, Political Cartoons

China's Stance on the Russia–Ukraine War

The Russia–Ukraine War broke out on 24 February 2022 when Russian President Vladimir Putin announced the commencement of a "special military operation" against Ukraine

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after months of military build-up that began in April 2021 (Wilson Centre, 2024). The objective of the invasion was defined as not occupation but "demilitarisation and denazification" of Ukraine, with the trigger described as the latter's quest for possessing nuclear weapons and joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), which threatened Russia's security (TASS, 2022). Describing the invasion as an attack on the "very principles that uphold global peace", the United States criticised the "unprovoked and unjustified attack on Ukraine", followed by the announcement of economic sanctions against Russia and a defensive aid package of 650 million USD to Ukraine (White House, 2022a).

Soon, China came under fire, since President Putin visited Beijing to attend the opening ceremony of the 2022 Winter Olympics which faced a concerted diplomatic boycott from Washington and its allies over an alleged genocide in Xinjiang. During Putin's visit, the two sides not only condemned the United States' 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy and NATO expansionism in the region but also described Sino-Russian ties as a "no limits" partnership with "no forbidden areas of cooperation" (Roth & Ni, 2022).

However, China's response to the war turned out to be more complex. While it abstained from condemning Russia in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and refused to abide by "unilaterally launched" economic sanctions against Moscow (Reuters, 2022), China supported Ukraine's territorial integrity. In February 2023, China further clarified its position on the issue through a 12-point action plan, which demanded all sides respect each other's sovereignty, refrain from imposing unilateral sanctions and "long arm jurisdictions against other countries" and abandon a "Cold War mentality" (FMPRC, 2023). Despite responding positively to China's efforts, neither Russia nor Ukraine agreed to end the war (AFP, 2023).

While claiming to maintain a "neutral" stance on the war, China elevated bilateral ties with Russia in March 2023, raising it to a "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Coordination for New Era" (State Council, 2023). This fuelled speculations among many in the West about its active monetary and military support for Russia, including Ukrainian President Zelenskyy blaming China for "disrupting peace settlements" on Russia's behalf at the Shangri La Summit held in Singapore in June 2024 (Sheftalovich, 2024). China's denial of such claims has done little to resolve tensions surrounding its relationship with Russia. The Washington Declaration, passed at the 75th anniversary of NATO in July 2024, defined China as a "systemic challenge" to "Euro-Atlantic security" and a "decisive enabler of Russia's war against Ukraine" (NATO, 2024). China "strongly opposed" the declaration for "hyping up tensions in the Asia-Pacific region" (SCIO, 2024). In May 2024, China and Brazil jointly presented six principles for a peaceful negotiation of the conflict, which oppose the division of nations into "isolated political and economic groups" and emphasise de-escalation based on the three principles of "no expansion, no escalation and no provocation" (Government of Brazil, 2024). The exact nature of China's stance on the war, however, continues to puzzle analysts, leading to divergent interpretations.

Most analysts outside China have defined Beijing's position as pro-Russia, guided by factors that range from the growing authoritarian nature of its political regime, the need to counter the United States and NATO with parallels seen between Russian security concerns and those of China, and concerns over how the Ukraine conflict might fare for Taiwan (Chestnut Grietens, 2022).

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Phillipp Ivanov (2023) writes that among other factors, the "aggrieved superpowers" are brought together by shared narratives of "humiliation" and "unequal treatment" at the hands of the West. Increasing cooperation between Beijing and Moscow has also been read as a collaboration fuelled by mutual interests in Central Asia (Umarov and Kassenova, 2024). Some even claim that the partnership is "no more equal", with Russia already in a subservient position to Beijing (Bicker, 2024). While many see this as furthering China's geopolitical interests and presenting opportunities for its "desired redesign of the post-Cold War security architecture" (Kusa, 2022), others see the war as appearing at an "inopportune time" for China as it furthers an "irrational" foreign policy which will end up worsening its challenges (Inoue, 2022).

Analysts from China have focused more on the threatened security situation that the eastward expansion of NATO has created in the region, 'prompting' Russia to launch the invasion. Interestingly, to many Chinese analysts, the "hybrid war" (*hunhe zhanzheng* 混合战争) is as much a fight for setting a discourse as about guarding one's sovereignty and national interests, which serves as a "lesson" for China (Lin, 2023; Huaxia, 2022). Chen Fei et al. (2022) note how Russia could stand up to Western attempts at 'muffling' its voice by strengthening its discourse on military affairs, made possible by a streamlined media landscape that worked in close coordination with Russia's Ministry of Defence. While applauding Russia's decision to narrate its side of the story and focus on "positive propaganda and reporting" through Western social media platforms such as Telegram, the authors highlight the importance of keeping oneself in the central position (*yi wo wei zh* 以我为主) in information dissemination. Further emphasising the importance of strengthening one's discourse power while highlighting Russia's deficiencies in this regard vis-à-vis the United States, Chen Honggang (2022) believes that public opinion became a "second battlefield" in the war where Western powers, particularly the United States, exploited their "hegemony" in public opinion not just to attack Russia but also "malign China's image". Shen Guolin and Yi Ruotong (2023) explain how Western hegemony over globally influential media as well as educational and cultural institutions secures their hegemony over public opinion, which has been "infiltrated" by Western values and ideologies, making them the "mainstream values" of the international system.

China is not alone in describing the conflict as a discourse war. In March 2022, Zelenskyy urged nations to use the Ukrainian spelling "Kyiv" instead of the Soviet "Kiev", with the United States and allies soon supporting the move as a "political statement" (CBC News, 2022). With the war being described as a 'lesson' for China's discourse power and communications strategy, understanding China's stance on the Russia–Ukraine war must start with developing an understanding of the Chinese perceptions of discourse power.

Discourse Power in China

Michel Foucault, one of the foremost theorists of discourse, linked it to power. Foucault (1981) noted,

> In every society, the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality. (p.52)

Among Marxist scholars, Antonio Gramsci's contribution to discourse remains unparalleled. In his *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci (1999) noted how ruling classes sustain

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their hegemony through a set of ideas that favour their class interests and maintain their 'cultural hegemony' over the have-nots. Louis Althusser also noted how hegemony is maintained through various forms and a complex network of institutions that penetrate the public and private domains of individuals forming an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA). Without controlling the ISA, the ruling class cannot hold on to power for long; for it is here that the "know-how" of a society is learnt (Althusser, 1970; Althusser et al, 2014) and a discourse created. The understanding of discourse in China under the Communist Party of China (CPC) is captured only partially, and not entirely, by these theoretical models.

The Chinese term for discourse power, *huayuquan* (话语权), holds two meanings, first, 'discourse power' and second, 'the right to speak', as the term *quan* (权) means both 'power' (*quanli* 权力) and 'right' (*quanli* 权利). Such a description implies that there exist two elements in society, the "listeners" (*qingtingzhe* 倾听者) and 'speakers' (*yanshuozhe* 言说者); with power resting with the one who speaks. Jie Xiao and Chen Zhuowu write that such a power rests more on a nation's ability to "influence" rather than "coerce" others as "threatening discourses" often result in resistance from listeners (2013, p. 68).

There is a wide consensus among Chinese scholars studying discourse power about its close relation to a nation's ideology and the ability to disseminate it to other countries. It is believed that the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the capitalist turn of the erstwhile Soviet republics of Eastern Europe weakened the Marxist ideology on one hand while strengthening liberalism and capitalism on the other. It is believed that the resulting theoretical strength and well-developed knowledge systems of the West, particularly of the United States, gave it an upper edge in international discourse power over China, leading to the emergence of the concept of "the West is strong, we (China) are weak" (*xi qiang wo ruo* 西强我弱) (Jie and Chen, 2013; Cao, 2014; Zhang, 2024).

Describing China as the "birthplace" of "international discourse power" (*guoji huayuquan* 国际话语权), Zhang Zhizhou (2024) writes that the term was used for the first time in 2006 by Li Changchun, a former member of the CPC's Politburo Standing Committee while addressing the plenary session of the 8th National Committee of the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles and the 7th National Committee of the China Writers Association, where Li closely associated "international discourse power" with China's "going out strategy" (*zouchuqu* 走出去) and the need to enhance its soft power.

One of the most significant episodes of developing discourse power in the history of the CPC is described as the evolution of the Mao Zedong Thought (Jie and Chen, 2013; Cao, 2014; Qi, 2023), when Mao emphasised the importance of interpreting Marxism–Leninism according to China's unique socioeconomic conditions and described blindly imitating the Soviet model as "whittling our feet to fit the shoes...that will hurt our feet" (Mao qtd. Schram, 1969). Jia Wenshan (2021) describes Mao's period (1949–1976) as the first phase in the development of China's discourse power which placed class struggle at the "central position" in the battle against Guomindang forces, remnants of feudalism and imperialism as well as Western hegemony, giving rise to the theoretical international outlook of the "Three Worlds" (*Zhongyang Xuanchuan bu,* 2021).

The second phase of discourse power saw Deng Xiaoping resorting to a policy of "hiding China's abilities and biding time" by softening the discourse on class struggle to expand cooperation with the West and ensure the success of the Reform and Opening Up. This

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continued for the next two generations of leadership under Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, when Western media was effectively used in a "Grand External Propaganda Campaign" to portray China as a cooperative and amicable partner (Jia, 2021; Diresta et al, 2020, p. 9). Jia (2021) describes Xi Jinping's period as the third phase where "cooperation (with the West) is taken as the foundation and sought through struggle and competition". According to Xi, Western media's deliberate attempts to "spread pessimistic narratives about China" can only be countered by strengthening China's discourse power and "telling China's story well" (*jianghao Zhongguo gushi* 讲好中国故事) i.e. by propagating the "real" positive narratives about China and the CPC leadership. This is further linked to the need to strengthen Beijing's soft power (CAC, 2022).

The increased importance of discourse power under Xi has been variously understood. While Diresta et al. describe it as a "discourse war" against all negative portrayals of China (2020, p. 10) Jia (2021) notes that Xi differs in his approach because, unlike Mao, contemporary China neither seeks confrontation with the West nor, unlike Deng, would tolerate Western hegemony that targets it in the name of "China Threat Theories". Moreover, initiatives like the Community of Shared Future for Mankind, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) etc., show that China no longer shapes its discourse power vis-à-vis particular international events but has widened its horizons to include issues such as global governance. With the belief that Western developmental models have further aggravated, rather than resolving, the problems faced by humankind, lessons drawn from China's successful developmental story described as "Chinese wisdom" (*Zhongguo zhihui* 中国智慧) and "Chinese solutions" (*Zhongguo fang"an* 中国方案) are projected as the cure (Xi,2017,9) (Zhonglianbu, 2013), forming crucial aspects of China"s discourse power in the present age.

According to some Chinese scholars, Xi also leads a theoretical innovation in discourse politics. Qi Diaolan, for instance, describes discourse power under Xi as a "phase of comprehensive innovation in the Marxist discourse in the New Era", which restores the centrality of ideology and seeks to enhance Marxism-Leninism's popular appeal (2023, p. 29). The "New Era" is understood as a "new historical point for China's development" (Chen, 2019) which presents a logical historical progression that began with the establishment of Socialism with Chinese characteristics following the Reform and Opening Up in 1978, and more specifically since the 18th Party Congress in 2012 after the system had been in place for more than three decades. It is believed that while the Reform era policies have made China rich and comprehensively strengthened its Comprehensive National Power (CNP), they have also created wide socioeconomic disparities and the problem of unbalanced and inadequate development, which act as the principal contradiction to be resolved (Chen, 2019). Zhou Xiangjun (2021) writes that the "newness" of the New Era stems from five interlinked factors, the new changes that occurred in the principal contradictions, the emergence of new theoretical innovations in the Party, the establishment of new goals for the Party and the nation, the emergence of a new situation for the relationship between China and the world and the emergence of a new appearance of the Party owing to the above listed changes (Zhou, 2021).

Of particular importance is how the 'New Era' has shaped China's place in the world which is defined as the "five unprecedents" that include "the unprecedented changes in the global economic landscape, unprecedented demand and fierce competition brought by a new round of scientific and technological revolution and industrial transformation, unprecedented revolutionary changes in the balance of international power and the incompatibility and asymmetry of the global governance system". These are understood

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as simultaneously presenting "never seen before" opportunities and challenges for China (Zhou, 2021). Zhang Zhizhou (2024) writes that to resolve the present situation of "the West is strong and China is weak", China must strengthen its discourse power by developing its theoretical and knowledge institutions and communication strategies that match its increasing CNP.

Given its close association with soft power and communication strategies, the Chinese understanding of discourse power cannot be holistically understood without understanding its channel of communication, i.e., the Chinese concept of propaganda.

Propaganda and Political Cartoons in China

Generally understood as "the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions and direct behaviour to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist" (Jowell and O'Donnell, 2012), propaganda holds pejorative underpinnings in Western societies but not in Socialist systems like China. Unlike liberal Western societies that began seeing the political use of propaganda negatively, particularly since the Second World War 1935–1949 (Clews, 1963, p. 3), Lenin understood it as "the starting point" of developing class consciousness among the working classes and expanding the Party organisation (1901, p. 20). In his *What is to be Done?* Lenin further emphasised the need of propaganda as a "political exposure", which could unveil the hidden class nature of political and socioeconomic developments and incite the masses into action (1902, p.413). Propaganda in Socialist systems hence become a medium of inculcating self-discipline, eliminating prejudices, dispelling ignorance and inspiring the populace to produce a novel outlook on the world, one that follows the line of the revolution (Bukharin and Preobrazhensky, 1922, p. 296). In his *Party Organisation and Party Literature*, Lenin (1905) stressed the leadership role of the Communist Party in guiding propaganda such as Party literature. With the development of Socialist Realism by the 1930s, Soviet leaders noted how propaganda must be "Socialist in content, national in form" (de Graaf, 2017, p. 303) and focus on unifying the masses and inculcating hope for a better future (Gorky et al, 1934). Koray Sevindi explains how the Soviet Union's approach towards propaganda was three pronged, first, as "information propaganda", it focused on "improving people's worldview" by "spreading ideas, values and knowledge"; second, as "political propaganda", it focused on "explaining ideologies and principles" cherished by the State; and third, as "counter propaganda", it focused on "fighting anti-State and anti-Communist propaganda" (2021, p. 596–597).

The Chinese term for 'propaganda', *xuanchuan* (宣传), never held any pejorative underpinnings and has historically held the meaning of 'publicising', 'transmitting' and 'spreading' information with the chief purpose of educating the masses. The character *xuan* (宣) depicts the chamber of the royal palace where edicts were issued and hence, it came to be associated with "dissemination" among the masses. The character *chuan* (传) similarly symbolises 'passing on' or 'transmitting'. The influx of the Soviet understanding of propaganda' and its positive role in inculcating class consciousness among the masses inspired Chinese Communist leaders. In his *Talks at the Yenan Forum on Literature and Art*, Mao (1942) emphasised the need to raise a "cultural army" of artists and writers to fight bourgeois ideas on the path to revolution and noted that art must reflect not just Chinese forms but also the needs and aspirations of the peasantry, the proletariat and the armed forces by countering the enemy while also raising the morale of the revolutionary classes. In his famous *Hunan Report*, Mao (1927) saw cartoons as an interesting form of

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propaganda with their "widespread and speedy effect among the peasants", which was similar to "attending political schools". The role of cartoons in disseminating information and inculcating class consciousness among the rural populace with low literacy levels was indispensable.

Cartoons or *manhua* (漫画), a term which indicates "a drawing by and for an unrestrained mind" (Chu, 2021, p. 3), has a long history in China. Although cartoons entered China as one of the many foreign influences in the 19th century, cartoons like facial and bodily exaggerations date back to the Yangshao Dynasty (c.5000–3000 BCE), and brush paintings served as satirical tools for exposing social injustice and imperial corruption during the Qing dynasty 1644–1911 (Lent and Ying, 2017). As the idea of Chinese nationhood evolved in the 1920s and 1930s, emerging full-time cartoonists began speculating about the intersections between politics, humour and international relations, resulting in the proliferation of cartoon comic strips or *lianhuanhua* (连环画) (Lent and Ying, 2017).

Satire and humour, expressed through cartoons in the popular media, have for long being used as political tools. Post the 1917 revolution in the Soviet Union, for instance, Anatoly Lunacharsky, the People's Commissar of Education, defined laughter as a "reasonable instrument" in furthering the Bolshevik ideology and worldview by unleashing a harsh criticism of the "external enemies" such as the "upper classes, bourgeoisie and the social democrats". While satirical works were seen as important forms of propaganda and agitation since the early days of the Revolution of 1917, it was with the adoption of the decree of the Press Department of the Central Committee of the All Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) on 14 May, 1927 that this role of the satirical magazines was further streamlined and made to focus on particular readership groups. While *Krokodil* and *Begemot* were to cater to "politically mature workers", *Smekhach* was to target employees, *Lapot* peasantry, and *Buzoter*, was to focus on the trade unions (Ryabova, 2021, p. 139–141).

Given the CPC's emphasis on the primacy of politics and the centrality of ideology in socio-political life, cartoons in China inevitably carried political shades. Two kinds of cartoons emerged as the class nature of art began to be emphasised following Mao's Yenan Talks—one, depicting the "enemy" and the other, *zanmei manhua* (赞美漫画) or "praise cartoons" celebrating the legacy and leadership of the CPC (Chu, 2021, p. 4). The former was prevalent during the pre-Reform period (1949–1978), particularly during the "Resist America, Support Korea" (1950–53) campaign which demonised "American Imperialists" as well as during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) when "capitalist roaders" within the Party were vilified. An interesting feature of cartoons in contemporary China is their subtle but conspicuous critical tone against the Party Cadre or local government authorities, as reflected in the cartoons of the anti-corruption campaign (Chu, 2021). While the need for some form of self-criticism and self-rectification on the part of the regime is reflected, greater commercialisation and pluralisation have made mass media more consumer-oriented and the Party finds it in its best interests to tolerate some criticism before it turns into deeper disenchantment that challenges the authority of the Party State (Zhang, 2011).

Given their topical nature, cartoons play a major role in setting discourses and narratives. In their seminal work, Medhurst and DeSousa (1982) enlist four main functions of cartoons: entertainment, aggression reduction, agenda setting and framing. Political cartoons act as sources of entertainment by mocking events or personalities, and thus

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have a role in aggression reduction which averts most, if not all, differences from erupting into conflicts. Cartoonists often employ distortion and exaggeration to highlight the incongruities of human life that besides criticism, also mock and entertain the audience (Pozzi, 2014). They set an agenda for discourse and provide frames of reference about issues in a spatio-temporal plane, thus conveying to readers the intended meaning (Streicher, 1967) by acting as powerful tools of discourse creation.

Methodology

This paper uses Charles S. Peirce's concept of hypoiconicity to analyse political cartoons. This concept has been widely applied to studying art, architecture, embodiment, metaphors, sign taxonomy, diagrammatic reasoning and cartoons (Chu, 2021, p. 2). Peirce identified three interrelated elements in an image, a sign, an object, and an interpretant. The sign refers to the element that most closely signifies an Object. For instance, the image of a dove is universally recognised as a sign of peace. The Object thus becomes what is best thought to be signified (here, peace). The interpretant, a unique contribution of Peirce, becomes the understanding that relates the sign to the object (here, dove = peace). He further notes,

> A Sign may be iconic, that is, may represent its object mainly by its similarity, no matter what its mode of being. If a substantive be wanted, an iconic Representamen may be termed a hypoicon . . . Hypoicons may roughly [be] divided according to the mode of Firstness which they partake. Those which partake the simple qualities, or First Firstnesses, are images; those which represent the relations, mainly dyadic, or so regraded, of the parts of one thing by analogous relations in their own parts, are diagrams; those which represent the representative character of a representamen by representing a parallelism in something else, are metaphors. (Peirce as qtd. in Chu, 2021, p. 2)

Hypoiconicity thus consists of three elements namely, "resemblance relation", i.e., when an object resembles something, "diagrammatical reasoning", i.e., a recognisable component in the projection of interpretant, and "metaphoric displacement", i.e., shifting to an entirely different form of iconicity or retaining the iconic formation while shifting it in an entirely different cultural context, or by combining both (Peirce, 1868; Ruthrof, 2022). This paper analyses 300 political cartoons published since the start of the war in February 2022 to July 2024 in major Chinese State media including Cartoons Weekly or *Fengci yu youmo* (讽刺与幽默), CGTN, China Daily (and its Chinese language website, *Xinmanwang* 新漫网), Guangming Daily, China Radio International (CRI), and Xinhua. Only a few cartoons from Global Times have been used since it does not necessarily represent the voice of the CPC (Fish, 2017; Ramchandran, 2023).

Analysing Cartoons

The cartoons are analysed under the following dominant themes:

a. China's Perceptions of Russia and Ukraine

Neither Russia nor Ukraine feature as culprits. While Russia is shown as a sturdy and innocent polar bear or brown bear, Ukraine is generally portrayed either as a pawn exploited by the United States and NATO in a ruthless geopolitical game of expansionism (People's Daily, 2022a) or as a war-torn nation left to struggle on its own. Two interesting

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cartoons published in 2022 portray the two parties to the conflict more clearly. One portrays Russia as a burly man engaged in a fistfight with a lean and meek figure who resembles Zelenskyy. Although portraying Russia to be more powerful, the cartoon does not indicate a decisive victory for any side (*People's Daily*, 2022b). The other shows how Russia and Ukraine, described as "once close brothers", are provoked to fight by the United States (*People's Daily*, 2022c).

Another cartoon shows a troubled Zelenskyy helplessly holding a broken bowl labelled "Ukraine" as the United States, depicted as Uncle Sam, directs the military aid away from the bowl to a businessman sitting in his pocket (*China Daily*, 2023). Many cartoons similarly highlight how the US uses the war to benefit arms dealers. Interestingly, even Zelenskyy's open criticism of China is overlooked as a "US influence" owing to the former's "dependence" on Washington and the occasion is used to clarify China's position rather than launching a seething criticism of Zelenskyy (*China Daily*, 2024a). Numerous cartoons highlight Washington's 'hypocritical' 'anti-China' stance in its criticism of Beijing. They show the US as obstructing China's efforts to initiate peace talks and slamming it for buying sanctioned crude oil from Russia despite the US and its allies shown as doing the same indirectly.

Contrary to general assumptions, political cartoons in the Chinese news media do not show any support for Russia in the war. While China and Russia, portrayed as a giant panda and a brown bear respectively, are shown standing together unbothered by attacks levelled by the United States and other Western powers, the context never shows any support being granted for the war (*People's Daily*, 2022d).

Interestingly, political cartoons appear more revealing than the verbal discourse in their criticism of Russia. A 2022 cartoon shows a battered bald eagle and a brown bear, representing the United States and Russia, respectively. The cartoon, which demands "both parties to show their willingness to embrace peace", hence shows Russia to be as beaten in the conflict as the United States (*People's Daily*, 2022e). Almost all cartoons portraying Ukraine highlight the plight of innocent civilians and how the war has rendered them homeless. While such cartoons do not explicitly blame Russia, they do emphasise the huge cost of the war. A 2023 cartoon published in CGTN presents one of the most pronounced criticisms of Russia. It shows the United States and Russia engaged in arm wrestling labelled as the "great power game" which leads to many innocent lives being "crushed" (CGTN, 2023). Here, Russia is portrayed as equally destructive a power as the United States.

b. Western and American Hegemony

Political cartoons 'expose' two aspects of hegemony—the 'evil intentions' of the Western powers and their 'failed' strategies of hampering China's and Russia's interests. The autonomy of Washington-led organisations such as G7 and NATO are recurrently questioned as they are portrayed as masking American hegemony behind the guise of multilateralism. Often portrayed as a shirt or a glove worn by the United States, NATO is also depicted as a dying old man surviving solely on war. Another cartoon similarly portrays the G7 as a tattered inflatable muscular suit put on by Uncle Sam to hide his unilateral acts (*China Daily*, 2022a). Several cartoons highlight NATO's intention to hurt Russia. One shows how the "Ukraine Crisis" casts a concealed shadow of the "Cold War". The other uses the allegory of the Pacman video game to show how NATO's eastward expansion is meant to "gobble" Russia (*People's Daily*, 2022e). NATO expansionism is

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further emphasised through a depiction of Uncle Sam riding on the back of a monstrous NATO asking Russia (depicted as a Matryoshka doll) if it would "become its neighbour" (*Xinhua*, 2022a).

Cartoons also highlight how the US profiteers from the War while innocent lives are lost. A multi-panel cartoon published in 2022 attempts to "expose" Washington's "real" agenda behind participation in the war. Panel 1 shows it "accelerating" the sale of "outdated weapons" with the sole aim of profiteering, as depicted by the dollar signs in Uncle Sam's eyes. Panel 2 blames it for "lying" (as depicted by the use of Pinocchio's long nose) and "heightening the tone of warmongering". Panel 3 shows Uncle Sam turning the war into an excuse for boosting NATO's power. Panel 4 shows the United States leading the five-nation intelligence sharing alliance, Five Eyes (composed of the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand and Canada), which China has recurrently criticised as "completely a product of the Cold War" (*People's Daily* 2022e; *Nikkei Asia*, 2021).

An exciting aspect of such cartoons is the way they segregate between the hegemons and the victims among Western powers. While the US, NATO, and Five Eyes are shown as scheming during the war, the European Union is always portrayed as the victim. Several cartoons published by *Xinhua* in 2022 showed how the US has reduced the EU to its puppet, leaving it to struggle through the energy crisis alone. Washington is often portrayed as backstabbing European nations, and pulling out stars from the EU flag to add to the American flag, emphasising the destruction of the EU's autonomy (*Xinhua*, 2022b). Several cartoons also portray the United States as 'fooling' other NATO member states. While they tirelessly lead the war, Washington is shown standing at the back unaffected. Interestingly, the US is depicted as 'abandoning' not just its allies but also Americans. A 2022 cartoon shows Uncle Sam going away with 40 billion USD in military aid to Ukraine, leaving behind a hungry baby and her tormented mother (Readmeok, 2022).

c. 'Hypocrisy' of Western Ideals

The cartoons present a scathing criticism of Western media and social media platforms for 'minting fake news' on the war and twisting the discourse in favour of the West. News websites such as *Bloomberg*, and *New York Times* and social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, etc., are specifically targeted. Western social media platforms are often described as an 'American alt' used by Uncle Sam to spread positive messages about itself. The US and other Western nations are shown forming cliques to suppress the 'truth' about the war and using the 'freedom of speech' narrative to muffle such voices from exposing their 'evil intentions' and 'hypocrisy'.

Cartoons criticise liberal democracy on two fronts: first, its hollow rhetoric, which brings nothing but suffering for the majority of the people, and second, the alleged covert attempts by Western nations to use it in destabilising other political systems. Here, the role of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), a quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisation working in close coordination with the US government, is specifically criticised. The Chinese government considers NED a "tool" for Washington to "weaponise democracy, to undermine democracy (elsewhere)", "breach sovereignty of other nations", and "incite division", causing "catastrophic consequences" (FMPRC, 2022a; 2022b). NED is often portrayed as a 'Trojan horse' that hides chaos and 'colour revolutions'. Several cartoons similarly criticise the Western discourse on human rights as a covert way of targeting China and other non-liberal political systems. This 'hypocrisy'

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is further highlighted by exposing the racist attitude among Western nations while welcoming migrants fleeing Ukraine. A 2022 cartoon published in *People's Daily* noted how non-White third-world nationals were debarred from entering Western nations, which exclusively allowed White people access (*People's Daily*, 2022f).

Conclusion

Political cartoons act as windows to China's perceptions of an ever-changing world and to the complexities and dynamics that characterise its discourse politics, with *huayuquan* considered important for availing the 'unprecedented opportunities' presented by the 'New Era' while simultaneously overcoming the challenges it poses.

The overarching theme in the cartoons on the Russia-Ukraine War remains Western, particularly American, hypocrisy. Many in China have held the belief that being the only socialist power to survive the Cold War, China's rise has unsettled Washington's "deep rooted ideological dissensions" and the "quest for global hegemony" to the extent that "containing China has already become the fundamental national policy of the United States" (Song et al, 1996, p. 2). While such views did not immediately guide policy action, they have registered into the CPC's concerns over the years. China considers the US's strategic moves in Asia as directly targeting itself (Feng, 2020, p. 15) and the shift from Obama's pivot policy to Trump's recognition of Beijing as a "strategic rival" has hardened this belief (Feng, 2020, p. 10), which has been further aggravated by Washington's 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy that labels Beijing's behaviour as "harmful" (White House, 2022b; *Xinhua*, 2022c). While Xi (2014) had previously indirectly condemned American military presence in Asia, he went on to explicitly criticise "Washington-led attempts" to "contain, encircle and suppress" China, described as posing "serious challenges to Beijing's development" in his 2023 Two Sessions speech (Xi, 2023). In political cartoons, such threats are portrayed in both tangible forms, such as NATO's eastward expansion, and intangible forms such as attempts to destabilise non liberal regimes through NED, negative media portrayals, etc. An analysis of political cartoons reveals how from China's perspective, the United States continues with the 'Cold War mentality' of targeting political systems that do not abide by its ideology.

What appears to irk China the most is that the United States neither accords China the "epistemological right" nor the level of respect it believes it deserves, which is linked to the bitter memories of the "Century of Humiliation" (Gao, 2018, 1). It seems that the threat of a renewal of past humiliation broadly shapes its approach towards discourse politics as Xi noted how for China, "falling behind means being defeated" and "losing its discourse means being abused" (*luohou jiu yao aida...shiyu jiu yao aima* 落后就要挨打。。。失语就要挨骂) (Xinhua, 2016). Strengthening its discourse power is hence seen as the only way to avoid this miserable situation. At least on the Russia-Ukraine War, the Chinese leadership appears to be more concerned about being overpowered in the realm of discourse politics than overpowering others.

Amid this, a major challenge for the CPC is also the "widespread and serious existence of pro-American public opinion" in China pointed out by Leftist scholars such as Zhang Zhikun and Li Guangman, which they attribute to deeply entrenched American influence since the Reform era (Adlakha, 2023). As the regime sees the United States diametrically aligned against China's core interests, political cartoons become an important tool of propaganda and discourse power to 'expose' the United States' 'real' motives.

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Concurrently, this paper presents Chinese perspectives of concepts such as discourse power and propaganda, which in many terms are different from their Western understanding.

This paper presents a novel perspective on China's stance on the war while countering widely held beliefs about China's proximity to Russia. While more cautious in the verbal discourse, the Chinese state media does not hesitate to criticise Russia on several crucial aspects in political cartoons. Russia is supported against what China sees as Washington's hegemonic attempts, but not against Ukraine; which despite its leadership's criticism of China, is portrayed as the victim. Through such strategies, political cartoons shift the discourse from blaming either of the parties to criticising what China considers 'real' and 'invisibilised' actors. Even as China's contribution to Russia's war effort remains debatable, the paper shows that its support to Moscow is conditional and goes only so far as it aligns with Beijing's security concerns about the United States and the 'meddling' nature of Western values.

Another interesting feature of the cartoons is their silence on the UN's inability to either prevent the war or bring it to an end. Despite American dominance in the organisation and the UN's failure in honouring its role as a peacekeeper, China views it as one of the few Western organisations that offer Beijing an equal footing as the United States and hence acts as a "core" in bringing true multilateralism (*China Daily*, 2024b). Furthermore, by not only holding onto a complex and differentiated stance on the Russia–Ukraine war without succumbing to pressure from either side but also openly conveying its criticism of both the West and Russia through its political cartoons, China shows the growing, pronounced nature of discourse power vis-à-vis the Reform period when discourse was softened to prioritise cooperation with the West. A hardening discourse power in China, however, presents serious threats to global peace, for it makes cooperation elusive. Alleviating tensions thus requires a nuanced understanding of how China perceives the world it lives in, making the introduction of new vantage points in discourse studies on China extremely significant.

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