

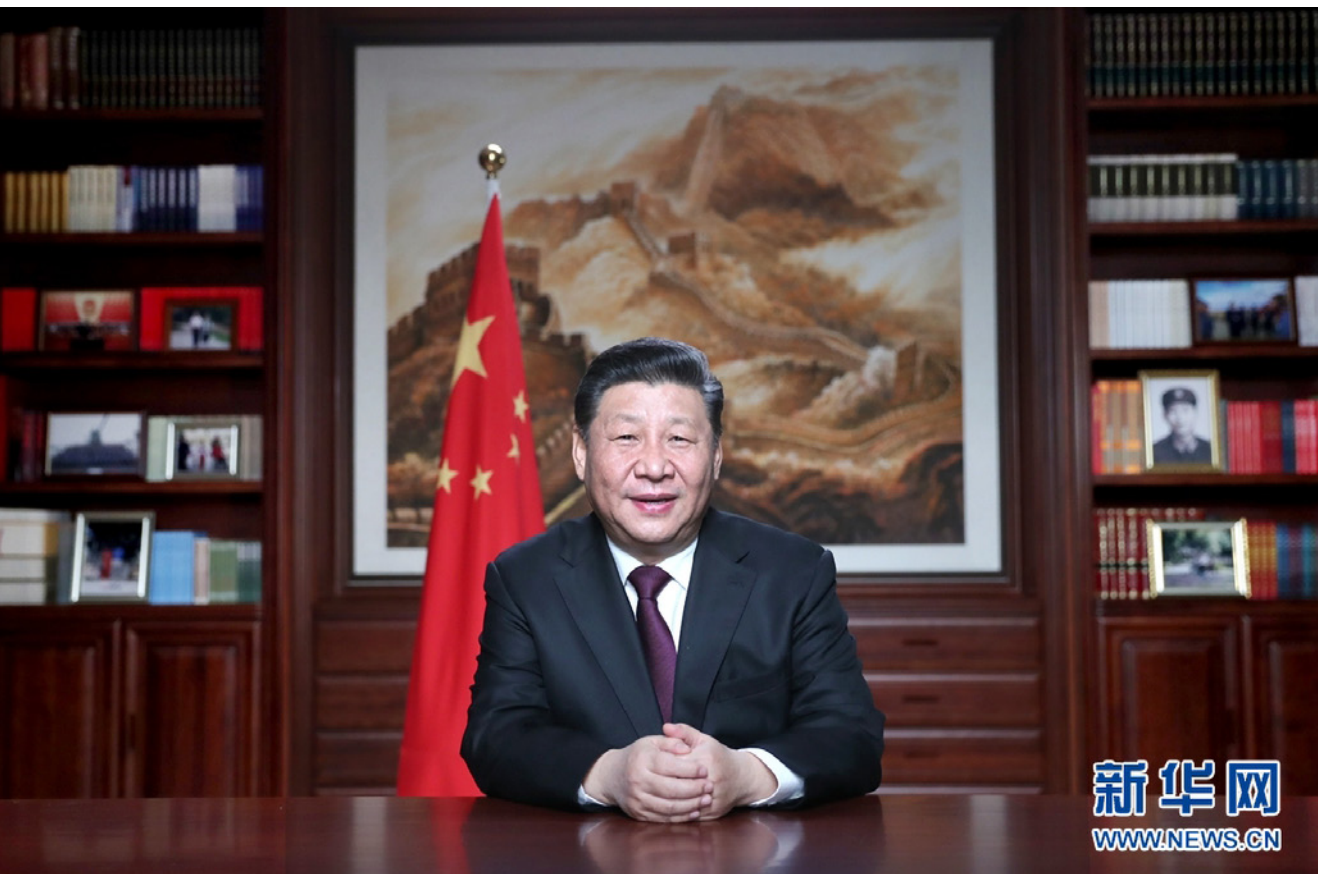


Clingendael
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Stories to rule the world

China's narrative strategy and
European soft power



For decades, China's PR-management was mostly defensive and aimed at a domestic audience. Since Xi Jinping took office as Secretary-General of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 2012, all that has changed. Beijing is actively seeking presences in foreign media outlets, runs its own CNN-like global channel, and has developed a narrative strategy that aims to prepare the world for China to take the lead.

China's narrative strategy is perhaps the most undervalued aspect of its global power. This Clingendael Alert highlights the four main metaphors through which the People's Republic of China under Xi Jinping is shaping global discourse, namely the *Century of Humiliation*, the *Road to Rejuvenation*, the *China Dream* and the *New Silk Roads*. It argues two things: first, that China is reaching out to

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a global audience; second, that China's narrative strategy creates a zero-sum game, as it actively seeks to diminish Europe's soft power.

Here are China's stories to rule the world.

Humiliation and rejuvenation: the stories of modern China

In 2012, the newly appointed secretary-general of the CCP Xi Jinping delivered a speech at the re-opening of a museum-exhibition. It was the National Museum's *The Road to Rejuvenation*.

The exhibition casts China as a reluctant hero. China, so the exhibit shows us, was torn out of the harmony of the ancient era, into the chaos of the modern world in 1840, when European empires decided to force an opening-up of the Chinese market by way of military force, degrading China to "a semi-colonial" state. What follows is a century of humiliation, encompassing civil war, famine and foreign occupation – an injustice made possible by China's innocence, caused by Western imperialism.

That is not the end of the story, though. China's *Century of Humiliation* is the challenge that allows it to transform into a hero. It learns to master the tricks of the modern age – first, modern statecraft, and second, capitalism – and uses those powers to breathe new life into its ancient civilization. China's rise starts, when, devastated by the second world war, an unexpected hero comes to show the way forward. That hero is the CCP. So, in 1949, when the People's Republic was founded, the century of humiliation ends and China's *Road to Rejuvenation* begins.

This story may appear to be deeply nationalistic in substance, but it taps into post-colonial sentiments that resonate far beyond China's borders. Since Xi Jinping took office, China is indeed selling its ascendancy to great-power status as a story of emancipation to Asian, Middle Eastern, and especially African audiences. Xi's ambition in this sphere is evident from

Chinese investments in global media, in which it differentiates clearly between the West and the Rest.

In the West, Chinese media-influence is focused on the publication of China-Watch supplements in more than a dozen daily papers such as the Daily Telegraph. It fits the bill of China's old, defensive narrative strategy, in which it chiefly aims to frame specific issues according to its own interests. [In Africa, China is investing heavily in online-content and -channels](#). The China Global Television Network (CGTN) – an English-language news channel run by the Chinese state broadcaster – stands out: in 2012 it was the first international investment in a \$6.6 billion global plan to strengthen China's global presence. CGTN is now ubiquitous across the African continent, spreading the message that China's road to rejuvenation is not just China's, but the world's.

According to its own story, China's rise implies an emancipation of the non-Western world. This way, China aims to link its geopolitical and geo-economic interests to the dreams of the emerging global middle classes in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. This becomes even clearer when looking at the two grand visions of the Xi Jinping-era: the *China Dream* and the *New Silk Roads*.

Dreams and Roads: two stories to rule the world

Thomas Friedman of the New York Times may not have guessed that when he challenged China to come up with its own version of the American Dream, China would answer. But it did. Only a month after the publication of his column, freshly appointed [president Xi said this](#):

We must ... strive to achieve the Chinese dream of great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.

The *China Dream* has since become the principal meme of Xi's reign. A catch-all phrase, it is used broadly as a lifestyle-ideal for the new middle classes, that includes high-tech consumerism, ecological

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awareness, entrepreneurship and hard work, conservative family values and Party-patriotism.

By mirroring the American Dream so clearly, Xi shows that the Chinese middle-class aspires to be the socio-cultural standard bearer for the emerging markets of the 21st century, as America was to post-war Europe. [As Xi says himself:](#)

China Dream is closely linked with the dreams of people in other countries ... China's development is facilitated by the development of the world, and it will bring about greater impetus and opportunities for the common progress of all countries.

It's important to understand that even though these stories may be about the West, propagating an anti- or post-western model of development, they are not primarily aimed at Western audiences. The story of China's rejuvenation is tailor-made to resonate with the billions of people that will make up the [brand new global middle class](#) that will emerge in the coming decade – again, mostly in Asia, Africa and the Middle-East. They may all share in the “China Dream”, according to Xi.

China's most powerful metaphor, its best story, and its most far-reaching geopolitical instrument is about just that: China spreading its dream to the world. The strategy is called the *Belt and Road Initiative*; the story behind it is that of the *New Silk Roads*.

[This video](#) by the CGTN summarizes Xi's grand vision best. It begins by appealing to a nostalgic longing for times before Western hegemony, when China was at the heart of a deeply connected, harmonious world. Then, however, Western-led modernity came around. At this point, the video shows images of the European migration crisis, terrorism in London and the crash of Lehman Brothers.

Countries once prosperous, are now riddled with crises and conflicts...

...the video says. Luckily, the old, benign hegemon, our hero China, is finally in a position to complete the circle and reconcile

the best of both worlds: Chinese harmony and modern prosperity.

Peter Frankopan of Oxford University illustrates the narrative impact of [China's Silk Road-discourse](#): Silk Road institutes, clubs, museums and societies are popping up like wildflowers all across the world. The hero's old world has become rejuvenated; what was once the new world has now become the old one. That, of course, is Europe.

Europe needs to get its stories straight

China's four main narratives share the following features: they are designed both in substance and in form to appeal to a global audience, and to the new middle classes of Africa, Asia and the Middle East in particular; and they consistently frame Europe, and Western modernity as an idea, as forces antithetical to a harmonious, prosperous and vigorous world order.

[A piece in the Guardian](#) pithily sums up what's behind China's narrative offensive, by saying that

[it] is above all an ideological and political struggle, with China determined to increase its “discourse power” to combat what it sees as decades of unchallenged western media imperialism.

The question remains how successful China's narrative strategy will be in the end. Will it be able to sway global popular support in its favour, winning the hearts and minds of the new global consumer classes? And will it be able to transform that soft power into economic gains and geopolitical leverage?

More fundamentally perhaps, China's emergence as a storyteller on the global stage challenges Europe to reflect on its own narrative strategies – not in the last place vis-à-vis China itself. European leaders often frame China's presence in Africa as being imperialistic, appearing to be tone-deaf to the hypocritical resonance that statement may have with African

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audiences, and appearing blind to the way China is able to put that European frame to its own use.

As a soft power union in a hard power world, Europe's image in the eyes of its southern and eastern neighbours is as important to its hard interests as ever – and as China's story spread across the globe, Europe's soft power will not go unchallenged. Europe need to get its story straight. China certainly has.

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Clingendael – the Netherlands Institute of International Relations – is a leading think tank and academy on international affairs. Through our analyses, training and public debate we aim to inspire and equip governments, businesses, and civil society in order to contribute to a secure, sustainable and just world.

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