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Political slogans as instruments of international government communication – the case of China

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ABSTRACT

Political slogans are understudied in political communication and this conceptual paper aims at broadening the understanding of political slogans as it investigates how governments use political slogans in the context of international political communication. Drawing on the slogan literature in business, marketing and advertising, the paper outlines major characteristics and develops a taxonomy of political slogans. It then uses political slogans utilised by the Chinese government to communicate with foreign audiences to discuss advantages and disadvantages of political slogans as a communicative device for governments. It is argued that the specific characteristics of political slogans make them the prime instrument for government communication, but at the same time the same characteristics make them the most vulnerable instrument as well.

KEYWORDS

Political slogans; government communication; international political communication; public diplomacy; China

Introduction

The usage of slogans in political communication is as old as politics. Examples include Julius Caesar's *Veni, vidi, vici*, Lenin's promise *Peace, Land and Bread*, the *Evil Empire*, *Yes, We can* or, most recently, *Make America great again* and *Stronger Together*. Despite their omnipresence in political communication, political slogans are surprisingly understudied and the few existing accounts discuss political slogans almost exclusively as instruments used in election campaigns. This conceptual paper aims at broadening our understanding of political slogans as it takes a closer look at political slogans used by governments in the context of international political communication. While the simplification of complex phenomena into slogans is questionable for political analysts, I argue that the specific characteristics of political slogans make them a prime instrument of international government communication. At the same time, however, political slogans are the most vulnerable instrument of international

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government communication, as they are particularly prone to the biggest communicative challenge a government faces, namely the issue of credibility. The paper uses the case of the Chinese government and purposefully selected examples of its slogans for international consumption to illustrate advantages and disadvantages of political slogans.

The paper proceeds as follows: it first conceptualises government communication before analysing political slogans as one instrument of government communication. Drawing on the slogan literature in business, marketing and advertising and the few existing accounts in political communication, the paper outlines the major technical characteristics and develops a taxonomy of political slogans. Due to their characteristics, political slogans can highlight a topic or issue and thus put it on the political agenda. This, in turn, links political slogans to agenda-setting theory which postulates a relationship between the most often covered issues in the media and what the audience will consider important (Blumler 2015). In order to work out the advantages and disadvantages of political slogans as a communicative device for governments, the paper then turns to selected political slogans used by the Chinese government to communicate with foreign audiences. The paper concludes with a discussion of slogan specifics and how they relate to communicative practises of governments today.

As this study is exploratory in nature, a note on the analytical approach and method is in order here. This study is qualitative in nature as it relies on linguistic rather than numerical data and employs meaning-based interpretive rather than statistical forms of data analysis. It is situated within the domain of political discourse analysis. Although critical discourse studies broadly recognise a political dimension to language use in the sense that ‘language must be seen (and analyzed) as a political phenomenon’ (Pelinka 2007, 129), political discourse analysis focuses on the language of politicians and the linguistic and discursive dimensions of political text and talk more broadly (van Dijk 1997; Hodges 2014).

While the discussion of slogan technicalities draws on the existing slogan literature, the proposed taxonomy is developed from a purposively selected sample of slogans chosen from the relevant literature and information about slogans available in the media. Akin to grounded theory, purposive sampling involves identifying themes, concepts, and indicators through observation and reflection by the researcher to understand a specific phenomenon of interest (Patton 2002; Schutt 2006). The slogan sample was selected purposively as it is not intended to offer a fully representative sample¹ but rather to hone in on the particular nature of political slogans as a phenomenon of political communication. The selection is not based on any political ideology or affiliation, but on the author’s reflection which slogans are exemplary for the proposed taxonomy. The method to evaluate the selected slogans is informed by rhetorical criticism, which helps understand how people ‘use symbols to influence one another’ (Campbell and Burkholder 1997 quoted in Zhang and Benoit 2004, 163). Unlike content

analysis, ‘rhetorical criticism examines the relationship of context and message’ (Zhang and Benoit 2004, 163).

The People’s Republic of China (or simply China in what follows) is chosen as a case study because political slogans are a constant feature in Chinese politics (Schoenhals 1992; Xiang 2010a, 2010b; Barmé 2012; Link 2013) and until today ‘political slogans are a key to governing’ in China (Tiezzi 2013). This leads to a multitude of political slogans, but in order to work out advantages and disadvantages of political slogans in international political communication, the paper focuses on the most important and authoritative slogans for international consumption, namely the *Chinese Dream* (*Zhongguo meng*), *Peaceful Development* (*heping fazhan*) and *Harmonious World* (*hexie shijie*).

Conceptualising (international) government communication

Political communication refers to ‘the flow of information and the exchange of messages among political actors, citizens and the media’ (Esser and Pfetsch 2016, 2) and thus includes 1) all forms of communication undertaken by politicians and other political actors for the purpose of achieving specific objectives; 2) all communication addressed to these actors by non-politicians such as voters, newspaper columnists or protest groups; and 3) all communication about these actors and their activities in the media (McNair 2011).

One essential actor in political communication are governments which communicate to achieve specific objectives. So far, government communication is an under-researched field of political communication with no established definition (Canel and Sanders 2012). The topic is addressed occasionally in political marketing (Firestone 1970; Young 2007; Gouliamos, Theocharous, and Newman 2013), public administration (Glenny 2008; Howlett 2009; Liu, Horsley, and Levenshus 2010) and in political public relations (Liu and Horsley 2007; Gelders and Ihlen 2010; Dolea 2012; Hong 2013).

According to Strömbäck and Kiouisis (2013, 12) government communication is ‘one core area of political public relations’ which in turn refers to the

‘process by which an organisation or individual actor for political purposes, through purposeful communication and action, seeks to influence and to establish, build, and maintain beneficial relationships and reputations with its key publics to help support its mission and achieve its goals’ (Strömbäck and Kiouisis 2011, 8).

For Canel and Sanders (2012, 85–86) government communication refers to ‘the aims, role and practice of communication implemented by *executive* politicians and officials of public institutions in the service of a political rationale’. Government communication, then, consists of government advertising and publicity as well as chief executive communication (Canel and Sanders 2012, 87) and serves as a means to engage with various stakeholders such as other governments, citizens, public officials, service users, trade associations, labour unions, minority

groups, political parties, and regulatory bodies (Canel and Sanders 2011). Howlett describes the aims of government communication as influencing and directing policy actions ‘through the provision or withholding of ‘information’ or ‘knowledge’ from societal actors’ (2009, 24). This understanding echoes the government communication process proposed by Hiebert (1981) which identifies four information strategies public officials can use to enhance their agency’s image: withholding information, releasing information, staging special events, and persuading the public (see also Liu and Horsley 2007).

While not explicitly spelling it out most definitions refer to a domestic communicative setting. This includes governments at different administrative levels communicating with each other, with their residents, or with the media. Nowadays, however, it is increasingly important for a government to communicate beyond its borders to achieve its objectives which makes government communication international and turns it into one component of public diplomacy Strömbäck and Kiousis 2011; Golan, Yang, and Kinsey 2015; Vanc and Fitzpatrick 2016).

Public diplomacy, broadly understood, is a country’s engagement and communication with foreign publics (Wang 2011) and can be described as ‘political communication for foreign consumption’ (Pamment 2012, 6). There is also no universally agreed definition of public diplomacy (Fitzpatrick 2010) but it may be described as ‘communication-based activities of states and state-sanctioned actors aimed at non-state groups in other countries with the expectation of achieving foreign policy goals and objectives’ (Sevin 2015, 563).

Traditionally public diplomacy was carried out by the state and its organs, but in course of globalisation it is generally accepted nowadays ‘that, while government is still the driving force behind public diplomacy, the onus can no longer fall on the nation-state government alone’ (Wang 2006, 94). This changing perception is captured in the literature with the notion of the new public diplomacy (Melissen 2005). New public diplomacy focuses on non-state actors and a shifting style of communication away from a one-way flow of information and the ‘narrow idea of influencing public opinion’ (Pamment 2015, 190) towards reciprocity and two-way communication as a means to develop more relational strategies and dialogue (Zaharna et al. 2013).

While this paper acknowledges these new developments, it nevertheless argues that governments still play an important role in public diplomacy. First, because governments around the world are still the major source of public diplomacy funding; second, because governments give instructions and provide the frame for state-sanctioned actors to communicate with foreign publics; and third because governments themselves communicate with audiences abroad, be it through interviews in foreign media, op-eds in foreign media or public speeches abroad. While one may criticise this traditional form of communication characterised by a one-way flow of information and no interaction between the sending and receiving side, it is

obvious that one important means to get the message across in this settings is political slogans.

Conceptualising political slogans

A slogan is either ‘a word or phrase used to express a characteristic position or stand or a goal to be achieved’ or ‘a brief attention-getting phrase used in advertising or promotion’ (Merriam Webster Online Dictionary). It originated from the Scottish Gaelic *sluagh-ghairm* (*sluagh* meaning people, folk or army, *ghairm* meaning cry) and described either a banner cry in peacetime or a battle cry in wartime. Slogans are still used in this way as a token of identity, or group solidarity, and self-assertion (Hare 1993), for example by soldiers going to war, sport fans supporting their team, or as will be outlined below, by political supporters supporting their candidate or party.

Slogans should be easy to remember, easy to repeat and chant, and therefore have to be simple and contain only few words. The most easily remembered slogans ‘are those which are unique, witty, or involve a play on words’ (Denton 1980, 18). It is furthermore helpful if the slogan is not bland, generic or hackneyed (Foster 2001). The problem, however, is that attributes such as witty or hackneyed are rather subjective notions and what one may label as witty might be silly for someone else.

In the 20th century slogans became increasingly important in the commercial world (Whittier 1955) and are therefore mainly discussed in marketing and advertising literature (Reece, van den Berg, and Li 1994), in the fields of tourism and branding, either referring to corporate branding (Kohli, Leuthesser, and Suri 2007; Dass et al. 2014) or destination and/or nation branding (Supphellen and Nygaardsvik 2002; Kaneva and Popescu 2011; Gali, Camprubi, and Donaire 2016). Political slogans are rarely discussed with a few exceptions being discussions of election/campaign slogans (Mavrogenis 2008; Koc and Ilgun 2010; Cwalina and Falkowski 2013; Hodges 2014). While some do not see big differences between commercial and political slogans, as both sell a product (either a commercial product or a politician) (Colberg 2012; Cwalina and Falkowski 2013), others argue that there is quite a difference between a commercial slogan and a political slogan communicating a political entity’s goal or aim (Koc and Ilgun 2010).

A political slogan can be defined as ‘a brief, memorable, and striking phrase that may include labelling and stereotyping as a repetitive expression, idea, or purpose’ (Koc and Ilgun 2010, 208). The most important function of a political slogan is the simplification of complicated and complex ideas, issues, or ideologies (Denton 1980). Political slogans, then, provide shortcuts through the problems of communication. They ‘simplify the tasks of communicators and audiences in conditions when there are many ideas competing for a place on the political agenda, and a great deal of noise from competing messages’ (Sharansky 2002, 75).

Next to the simplification of ideas, political slogans should create attention and interest and they should raise consciousness about an issue or emphasise a specific point or topic. In this regard political slogans not only highlight topics, but they also ‘often contain hopes, dreams, and goals of the future’ and thereby ‘create expectations in the mind of the general public’ (Denton 1980, 17–18). Here it is important to remember that it ‘may be in the nature of successful slogans that they promise more than they deliver’ (Sharkansky 2002, 77)² and that they ‘may be more attractive than the policies they promote’ (Sharkansky 2002, 79). This makes political slogans a specific form of ideographs, understood as ‘a high-order abstraction representing collective commitment to a particular but equivocal and ill-defined normative goal’, and guiding ‘behaviour and belief into channels easily recognised by a community as acceptable and laudable’ (McGee 1980, 15).

Related here are two issues which indicate the vulnerability of slogans as devices of political communication. First, in order to be persuasive political slogans should not be pretentious but should be believable and thus have to be credible in order to persuade their audience (Foster 2001). This, however, contradicts with the just mentioned tendency of overstating potential promises. Another issue concerns the question of clarity and ambiguity of political slogans. The literature on commercial slogans highlights that slogans should be clear and simple (Dass et al. 2014; Gali, Camprubi, and Donaire 2016) and that ‘deliberate ambiguity’ should be used with caution (Kohli, Leuthesser, and Suri 2007, 418). For political purposes, however, slogans may be deliberately ambiguous and thus amenable to multiple interpretations and adaptable to multiple audiences (Lu and Simons 2006).

Taken together then, a political slogan is a phrase that is easy to remember and is used by a political group, organisation or individual politician to attract attention and to communicate certain information and/or an agenda. Understood as ideographs, political slogans ‘serve as simplified representations and reminders of ideological beliefs’ (Lu and Simons 2006, 267).

The potential to attract attention in the (global) information space links political slogans to agenda-setting theory as theories of agenda-setting suggest that the media ‘drives the public’s issue priorities [and] thereby tells people not ‘what to think’ but ‘what to think about’” (Norris et al. 1999, 16). The dominant understanding of agenda-setting refers to the transfer ‘of salience from the media agenda to the public agenda as a key step in the formation of public opinion’ (McCombs and Valenzuela 2014, 1). While agenda-setting theory has evolved over the years, ‘its core proposition has remained consistent: the transfer of salience from one agenda to another’ (Ragas, Kim, and Kioussis 2011, 258). When applying this broader understanding and replacing ‘the media’ or the ‘media agenda’ with other political actors such as political groups, organisations or individual politicians and their respective agendas, it becomes clear that political slogans can be understood as a means of setting a specific agenda by highlighting and emphasising a particular topic those political actors want to stress. Thanks

to their technical characteristics, political slogans may be an instrument which help these actors to transfer the salience of their issue to the public.

Political slogans in use – taxonomies and examples

Starting from this working definition, one can group political slogans into the following categories: 1) slogans used to communicate or brand a nation; 2) slogans used by the concerned public and/or political organisations (normally non-parliamentary) to signal protest or disagreement; 3) slogans used by politicians or political parties during election campaigns; and 4) slogans used in office to communicate policies, information or a political agenda.

(Political) Slogans and nation branding

Nation branding applies concepts and techniques of corporate marketing to countries to enhance their image and standing in international relations (Aronczyk 2013). The concept is criticised for its ideological nature reflected in the marketisation of nations characterised by competition based on visibility and distinctiveness in globalised markets (Edwards and Ramamurthy 2017). Varga (2013, 836) for example sees nation branding as a danger of democratic processes and highlights the problematic ‘dependence upon a plain monolithic slogan that is taken to represent the population’.

While one can criticise the reduction and may question whether a country can be represented with a single slogan, one can, on the other hand though, also argue that today ‘nations compete like businesses’ (Wang 2013, 1). Seen from this perspective, slogans are one crucial instrument to present nations globally, or in an agenda-setting understanding, to transfer a country’s salience to potential tourists, investors or international students. Slogans, then, may not tell people ‘what to think’ about a country, but to make sure that people think about a country at all. Slogans in this category range, for example, from *Amazing Thailand*, *Cool Britannia*, *Any decent doctor would prescribe Norway* (Supphellen and Nygaardsvik 2002) to *Incredible India* (Edwards and Ramamurthy 2017) to *Romania: Simply Surprising* or Bulgaria’s branding campaign with the slogan *Open Doors to Open Hearts* (Kaneva and Popescu 2011). Some of these slogans appear rather generic due to their interchangeability as, for example, any country could describe itself as being ‘attractive’ or ‘cool’ which undermines the hoped-for uniqueness. The important point, however, is that such slogans do normally not contain a political message per se but are clearly political as they have a political aim, be it to attract tourists and foreign investment which has economic implications, to shape the image of the nation internationally or to support political intentions like joining the EU. The role of governments is here normally limited to fund external organisations such as global advertising agencies to develop slogans and respective campaigns.

Protest slogans

Clearly political are slogans which are used to signal protest or disagreement. Those are normally used by social movement, non-parliamentary political organisations or simply groups of like-minded people. Examples would include, amongst many others, the slogan *Democracia Real Ya!* (Real Democracy Now!), Used in the 2011 Spanish protests or the slogan *Wir sind das Volk!* (We are the people!), Chanted during the peaceful political protests against the government of the German Democratic Republic in East Germany in 1989. Another famous protest slogan emerged during the protests against the Vietnam War. *Hey! Hey! LBJ! How many kids did you kill today?* Was the slogan referring to then-US President Lyndon B. Johnson who, in the opinion of the protesters, did sacrificing American male youth and approved the death of children in South and North Vietnam during the war.

The Egyptian revolution of 2011 produced numerous protest slogans targeting the rule of President Hosni Mubarak and illustrated how Egyptian public political discourse changed dramatically (Al Masaeed 2013; Lahlali 2014). One of the most recent protest slogan was *Not my President* chanted by thousands of protesters in cities across the United States to show their frustration with newly elected President Donald Trump in late 2016 and early 2017.

Those slogans are not only political as they convey a political message, but also because they target individual politicians or political institutions. Therefore, protest slogans are a prime device for McNair's (2011) second dimension of political communication as they exemplify communication addressed to political actors by non-politicians such as voters or protest groups. The Occupy Wall Street movement slogan *We are the 99 percent*, for example, was shorthand for an issue 'that within weeks vaulted onto the national agenda, capturing the attention of citizens, journalists, and policymakers' (Perloff 2014, 119). The slogan quickly spread to other cities, 'capturing the media agenda and offering a frame for economic equality' and thus illustrates the potential agenda-setting function of political slogans (ibid.).

Campaign slogans

The most commonly used form of political slogans are campaign slogans. They are especially prominently used in the United States and are a key element in every election campaign as they are intended to transfer salience from the candidate's agenda to the public agenda. Despite their crucial role in political communication, campaign slogans are hardly researched. Mavrogenis (2008) analyses campaign slogans in Greek politics, Hodges (2014) looks at Obama's *Yes We Can* and Quinnell (2007) provides a short overview of US campaign slogans throughout US history.³

Presidential elections in the United States illustrate two insights into slogans as a campaign device. First, in the course of one campaign there are normally several slogans in use and some phrases are technically not the official campaign slogan but more campaign chants. While the slogans tend to be more conventional and rather dull, the accompanying chants tend to be more gripping, punchy and appealing. In 1992, Bill Clinton used rather conventionally slogans such as *For People, for a Change* and *Putting People First* while the phrase probably best remembered is *It's the economy, stupid*. This tagline was originally one of several phrases meant for Clinton's campaign workers only as one of the three messages to focus on (Kelly 1992). Similarly Barack Obama's now famous *Yes We Can* was a 2008 campaign chant whereas the campaign slogan was *Change we can believe in* or simply *Change*.

Donald Trump's official campaign slogan in the 2016 US presidential election *Make America Great Again!* Was similarly a rather conventional tagline (already used by Ronald Reagan in 1980), aimed at painting the United States in dark colours to bring across the message that he alone could make the country great again. Much more to the point, unique and punchy were his two infamous campaign chants *Built that wall* and *Lock her up*. The former referred to Trump's plan to build a wall along the border between the USA and Mexico to keep out illegal immigrants, terrorists and drugs. The latter referred to democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton and the desire to put her in jail as she was portrayed by Trump as the symbol of backroom deals, political egoisms and alleged corruption. Both chants became the unofficial slogans of the Trump campaign and 'morphed into a cultural icon, rallying cry and, at times, punchline' (Johnson 2016; Stuart 2016).

Without judging their messages one has to note that those lines created lasting impressions and may be enshrined in the pantheon of campaign slogans. Next to their uniqueness they are much closer to the original meaning of slogans as rhetorical device to express and create a sense of identity, group solidarity, and clearly self-assertion of the Trump supporters. In this regard they met the very same needs as the *Not my President* slogan by anti-Trump protesters after the election.

Second, Trump's official slogan *Make America great again* was also deliberately ambiguous as it could mean pretty much everything to everyone as it is not clear whether it is about the economy, US values or standing in the world, or conservative principles and it remained unanswered when the United States were actually great. A similar vagueness can be ascribed to Hillary Clinton's *Stronger Together*-slogan.

Slogans used in office

Similar to campaign slogans, slogans used in office are one communicative device used by politicians and other political actors to achieve specific objectives (McNair 2011). While the objective of the former is to get elected, the objective

of the latter is to communicate, explain and clarify policies or political agendas after being elected, or coming to power differently.

While campaign slogans are understudied, there is even less material available dealing with slogans used in office. One explanation may be the very nature of liberal democratic political systems. These systems are characterised by separation of powers, different branches of government, opposition parties and countless other actors in the political sphere in which, as McNair's (2011) trisection of political communication indicates, everyone communicates crisscross for different purposes and objectives. Therefore it seems that political communication is 'turning into a Babel' with 'nothing more but grey noise of meaningless and disjointed messages nobody is listening to' (Brants and Voltmer 2011, 1). While one may assume that the slogan would be the preferred communicative device to cut through this diversity of voices, or cacophony of voices, it seems that it is hard, if not impossible, in western liberal democracies to constantly summarise policies into one catchy slogan representing a whole government.

This, however, is not to say that governments in democracies do not use slogans at all as the following two examples from the United States illustrate. One such slogan was *Don't Mess with Texas*, used for a campaign to reduce littering on Texas roadways by the Texas Department of Transportation in the mid-1980s. Another slogan in this category is the *Three-Strikes and You're Out*-slogan, describing a criminal justice law in the United States where three-time violent felons receiving life imprisonment without parole. It has been described 'a good political slogan to reduce crime, but a failure in its application' (Shinbein 1996, 175).

The problem with these slogans is that only very few are remembered by the audience beyond the respective constituency like Texas, which may also explain the spare academic engagement with political slogans used in office in domestic contexts. A political slogan used in office to communicate, explain and clarify policies is normally noticed more broadly when it has an international orientation.

During the 2013 Australian federal election, the conservative coalition campaigned on a policy that, if elected to government, it would 'stop the boats' and would launch a border protection operation aimed at stopping maritime arrivals of asylum seekers to Australia. The operation commenced in September 2013 after the election and was accompanied by a communication campaign with the slogan *No Way. You will not make Australia home* which made international headlines and caused international criticism.

Another famous political slogan with international orientation was Ronald Reagan's *Evil Empire* slogan with which he described his hard-line stance against the former Soviet Union. In 2002, George W. Bush coined the like-minded slogan *Axis of Evil* to describe the governments of Iran, Iraq, and North Korea that his administration accused of sponsoring terrorism and seeking weapons of mass destruction. The *Axis of Evil* was used to pinpoint

these common enemies of the United States and rally the US populace in support of the *War on Terror* which in itself was a political slogan to legitimise military action against Saddam Hussein after 9/11 at home and abroad (McNair 2011).

These examples illustrate the ideographic nature of political slogans as simplified representations and reminders of ideological beliefs as they express universal binaries (good vs. Evil, threat vs. Opportunity) and help to identify (and securitise) threats (Vucetic 2011). These examples furthermore illustrate that political slogans used in office are targeting both domestic and international audiences. While campaign and protest slogans are mainly used in specific domestic contexts, the above mentioned slogans exemplify that political slogans can reach domestic and international audiences at the same time with strikingly different messages. The Australian No Way-campaign, for example, clearly targeted potential refugees with the message not to come to Australia while at the same time sending strong signals to Australian citizens that the government is capable of acting and protecting their home land.

In order to better understand the international dimension of political slogans as a communicative device for governments, the paper now turns to the case of China. It first outlines the importance of political slogans for Chinese politics before analysing the three most important political slogans for international consumption: the *Chinese Dream*, *Peaceful Development* and *Harmonious World*.

Political slogans in China

Political slogans are a constant feature in Chinese politics as they play an important role in legitimising political action (Schoenhals 1992; Kluver 1996; Lu 1999; Xiang 2010a, 2010b; Barmé 2012; Link 2013). The overwhelming majority of political slogans⁴ in China therefore falls under the above outlined category of political slogan used in office. Such slogans can of course be further divided into sub categories. In his analysis of family planning slogans, Xiang (2010b, 98) identifies seven slogan types, namely advocacy, promise, explanation, warning, echo and threatening.

Mao Zedong essentially 'ruled the country by campaign slogans' (Li 1995, xxv) and from the 1950s to the 1980s thousands of political slogans introducing communist ideology and class warfare were posted and broadcasted through the mass media, billboards, or even as home decorations (Lu 1999). Various slogans were formulated in form of instructions by the leadership to illustrate to the people that their leaders care for. A timeless slogan in this regard is *Serve the People* (*wei renmin fuwu*) which was first used in the 1940s and is still in use today. Another famous slogan is to *Seek Truth from Facts* (*shishi qiushi*) which essentially means that facts rather than ideology should be the criterion of the correctness of a policy and that policy has to work in practice. This slogan is the leitmotif of the reform era since the late 1970s, known as *Reform*

and *Opening Up* (*gaige kaifang*), a political slogan itself. Still today ‘political slogans are a key to governing’ (Tiezzi 2013) and every leader chooses slogans that define his term in office.⁵ Jiang Zemin’s *Three Represents* (*sange daibiao*) officially opened the Communist Party for business people and entrepreneurs while Hu Jintao’s *Harmonious Society* (*hexie shehui*) and *Scientific Outlook on Development* (*kexue fazhan guan*) outlined socioeconomic development agendas for the country.

Slogans in Chinese politics not only refer to abstract ideas and concepts of ideology, but also target problems of everyday life. A prime example here are slogans promoting family planning which have, as Xiang shows, undergone a transformation from being ‘intimidating and forceful’ during the Mao era to much ‘more humanistic’ nowadays (Xiang 2010b, 95). Another example the slogan *Save Energy and Cut Emissions* (*jienerg jianpai*) to support the promotion of a low-carbon economy which was adopted in the 11th Five Year Plan in 2006. *Jienerg iianpai* became a ubiquitous slogan in public spaces – in subways, on buses, in newspapers and magazines, on television – and is still in use today as it can be found inside or outside plants and factories (The Economist 2016). The currently most famous political slogan is the *Chinese Dream* (*Zhongguo meng*), promoted by current leader Xi Jinping. The dream essentially means that the Chinese leaderships strives for ‘national rejuvenation, improvement of people’s livelihoods, prosperity, construction of a better society and military strengthening’. The *Chinese Dream* is furthermore a prime example for the binarity of slogan-audiences as it targets both domestic and international audiences.

The international dimension of Chinese political slogans

While the usage of slogans ‘is common in China’s domestic sphere’, Beijing has recently been deploying them ‘in a more sophisticated way for foreign audiences’ (Callahan 2007, 787; Shambaugh 2013). Similar to the domestic sphere, there are various political slogans for global consumption but the article focuses on the *Chinese Dream* and the slogans *Peaceful Development* (*heping fazhan*) and *Harmonious World* (*hexie shijie*). These are the most prominent political slogans targeting international audiences as they are directly linked to President Xi Jinping (*Chinese Dream*) and former President Hu Jintao (*Peaceful Development* and *Harmonious World*).

Chinas message to the world: dreaming of a peaceful and harmonious world

In late 2012, Xi Jinping began to promote the *Chinese Dream* when he noted that ‘achieving the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation has been the greatest dream of the Chinese people since the advent of modern times’ (Xi 2014, 38). The goals of

the *Chinese Dream* are to achieve national prosperity, the revitalisation of the Chinese nation and people's happiness. While analysts note that the slogan's main context refers to domestic politics (Zheng 2014), the slogan also has an international dimension. In 2013, Xi noted:

To realise the Chinese Dream, we must pursue peaceful development. We will always follow the path of peaceful development and pursue an opening-up strategy that brings mutual benefits. We will concentrate both on China's development and on our responsibilities and contributions to the world as a whole. We will bring benefits to both the Chinese people and the people of the whole world. The realisation of the Chinese Dream will bring the world peace, not turmoil, opportunities, not threats (Xi 2014a, 62).

The message that China sticks to peacefulness and that it sees itself as a contributor to global prosperity is a recurring theme in China's slogans for international consumption. Xi spells this recurrence out as he explicitly refers to China's *Peaceful Development*, one of the foreign policy slogans of his predecessor Hu Jintao.⁶

In December 2005, China released a White Paper entitled 'China's peaceful development road' that explained the inevitability of Beijing pursuing peaceful development (State Council Information Office 2005). Referring to the fears that China as a rising power could behave like revisionist powers of the past, the White Paper stresses that 'China's road of peaceful development is a brand-new one for mankind in pursuit of civilisation and progress, the inevitable way for China to achieve modernisation, and a serious choice and solemn promise made by the Chinese government and the Chinese people' (ibid.). The White Paper further declares that 'China's development will never pose a threat to anyone; instead, it can bring more development opportunities and bigger markets for the rest of the world' (ibid.). In 2011, China issued a second White Paper on 'China's Peaceful Development' (State Council Information Office 2011) which points out that China 'is committed to upholding world peace and promoting common development and prosperity for all countries' and again declares that 'the central goal of China's diplomacy is to create a peaceful and stable international environment for its development' (ibid.). Moreover, while China is developing, it 'strives to make its due contribution to world peace and development. It never engages in aggression or expansion, never seeks hegemony, and remains a staunch force for upholding regional and world peace and stability' (ibid.).

Next to *Peaceful Development* Xi Jinping also frequently refers to the slogan *Harmonious World*, put forward by Hu Jintao in 2005 referring to China's goal to build a 'harmonious world with lasting peace and common prosperity' where countries with different values, cultures and political systems co-exist in peace (Hu 2005). Such a world should be based on multilateralism, mutually beneficial economic cooperation and respect for political and cultural difference, and

would ensure lasting peace and prosperity. At the same time, the idea of a *Harmonious World* calls upon other countries to ‘respect each other and treat each other as equals, and work together to promote democracy in international relations’ (State Council Information Office 2005).

Taken together the slogans *Harmonious World*, *Peaceful Development* and the *Chinese Dream* undoubtedly aim at invalidating threat perceptions of China abroad and to assuage concerns about the uncertain impacts of China’s rising influence in international affairs, thus presenting a better global image of China.

The problems of China’s slogans for international consumption

The outlined characteristics clearly qualify the *Chinese Dream*, *Peaceful Development* and *Harmonious World* as political slogans. While neither involving play on words nor being witty, they fulfil the technical requirements as they are simple, short and thus easy to remember. The Chinese leadership furthermore constantly uses the slogans in a mantra-like manner which echoes the necessity of slogan repetition.

What is more, they fulfil the key criteria of political slogans as they neatly encapsulate a political entity’s idea or aim in a memorable way: the entity here is the Chinese leadership which aims to convince the world of its benign intentions. In this regard these slogans are short-cuts to simplify China’s position in the complex international order and help to create attention not only for China’s position in the world, but also for what China is contributing to the well-being of the globe. All three slogans express a conciliatory message which is to assuage international audiences about the benign nature of China’s development and China’s good intentions to contribute to world peace and prosperity. This is, from a communicative point of view, a message that is hard to reject which makes all three slogans smartly chosen communicative devices for international government communication. At the same time, however, these slogans also exemplarily illustrate two sets of slogan-related problems directly affecting the practise of slogans as tools for government communication.

One set of problems revolves around the issue of complexity vs. Simplicity and the notion of deliberate ambiguity whereas the second problem concerns the most fundamental issue of any government communication, namely that it has to be backed by adequate political behaviour.

A number of experts are highly critical of using slogans as a means to communicate messages about China’s foreign policy (Suettinger 2004; Glaser and Medeiros 2007). It is argued that such slogans ‘are decidedly unsatisfying, prompting confusion and worry among many external observers’ (Medeiros 2009, 2). The problem is not that the goals those slogans imply ‘are patently untrue or a clever prevarication about Beijing’s *real* intentions [...]’; rather, they are insufficient to explain the multiplicity of Chinese interests and actions’ (ibid., Emphasise in original). Tang (2006, 129) argues in a similar

way noting that ‘while these new [...] slogans may seem attractive for the outside world, they are not [...] very helpful for understanding China’s foreign policy.’ Tang further argues that while these slogans ‘may serve the purpose of projecting certain images of China [...], they do not necessarily drive China’s foreign policy’ (ibid.).

While this simplification of complex phenomena into political slogans raises the hackles of foreign policy analysts, it is precisely this simplification which makes those slogans a prime instrument for the Chinese leadership to communicate with international audiences. Precisely because of the simplicity these slogans present a plain and clear message about how China wants to be seen and how it sees the future ideal world. In our media rich societies, characterised by a constant information overload, decreasing attention spans and the desperate urge to compress everything into 140-character messages, any attempt to reach an audience calls for simple messaging because ‘mass audiences respond to conclusions, not reasons; to slogans, not complexities [...] and to facts created through suasion, not suasion based on facts’ (Sproule 1988, 474).

The reduction of complexity also fuels the ambiguity of the messages. And here I follow Lu and Simons (2006) that ambiguity may be deliberate as political slogans are amenable to multiple interpretations and adaptable to multiple audiences. The prime example in this regard is the slogan *Harmonious World*. While the slogan conveys a world-embracing idea, it also carries a more strategic dimension which is not decoded easily when non-Chinese audiences hear about China’s aim to contribute to a harmonious world.⁷ While one objective is to illustrate that China has ‘no intention to challenge the existing U.S. centric international system’, it is undeniable that China’s call for democratic international relations, tolerance of distinct social systems increased support of multilateralism ‘are directed, in part, at the U.S.’ (Blanchard and Guo 2008, 5). Zhang (2007, 3) similarly notes that *Harmonious World* ‘reflects a thinly veiled dissatisfaction with the current unipolar world order dominated by a perceived increasingly hegemonic United States’ while Zhao (2010, 366) argues that *Harmonious World* should be understood ‘in response to US promotion of Western values such as human rights and democracy.’

The *Chinese Dream* on the other hand illustrates that political slogans may be used deliberately for different audiences. The international dimension of the *Chinese Dream* clearly refers to its preceding slogans in the sense that China sticks to peacefulness. A closer reading of the official texts, however, reveals that the *Chinese Dream* and the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation are described in the light of the miseries brought to China by Western powers during the Century of Humiliation that started with the Opium War in 1840 (Hartig 2016). In this regard the slogan aims to please both domestic and international audiences with quite strikingly different messages.

The fundamental question then is whether political slogans may actually win over their audience. While it is beyond the scope of this conceptual paper to

engage with the audience-side of things, it is worth noting one aspect which potentially hampers those attempts. As any other political message, slogans need a channel to reach its audience. And even though the range of those channels is steadily increasing, in order to reach international audiences governments still rely on international mass media. The problem with the discussed slogans, however, is that western media tend to dismiss them as mere rhetorical window-dressing which in turn undermines the messages China wants to impart. The described reduction of complexity leads to the situation that everyone may interpret the slogans in a particular way, wittingly or unwittingly different from the messenger's original intention.

After analysing 40 news stories from major English news media on the *Chinese Dream*, Zhong and Zhang (2016, 61) find that the 'majority of the stories expressed concerns that the Chinese Dream campaign is yet a new attempt to project China's rising nationalism and its military power'; it is interpreted as yet another communist propaganda device to maintain one-party rule and as a 'hollow slogan that ironically contrasts with the unpleasant reality of China' (Zhong and Zhang 2016, 63). The English news media's interpretation of the *Chinese Dream* shows the media's 'anticommunist ideology', while at the same time some non-Western English media interpret the slogan in a more positive way (Zhong and Zhang 2016, 64–65).

Another fundamental problem concerns the question of slogan credibility which refers to the dichotomy between slogan believability and pretentiousness. As Sharkansky (2002, 79) reminds us, it 'may be easier to craft an attractive slogan than to assure successful policymaking and programme implementation' which points to the principle crux whether political slogans sustain comparison with concrete political actions. The best political slogan, then, does not succeed as a communicative device if rhetoric is not turned into action. With regards to China, Glaser and Medeiros (2007, 306) correctly note that 'mere rhetorical refutation of the 'China threat theory' and verbal pledges that China will not strive for hegemony are insufficient to persuade China's neighbours.' It is one thing to propagate peaceful development and to argue in favour of the creation of a harmonious world; it is, however, a completely different story to pick quarrels and arguments with neighbouring countries or building up artificial islands in disputed sea territories. In the case of China this dichotomy is reinforced because western media – whether one assumes anti-communist sentiments or not – is still increasing 'anxieties about China's economic growth and military expansion' (Okuda 2016, 133).

Political slogans: the best and the poorest tool of government communication

In the information age with its constant information overload, decreasing attention spans and ever increasing communicative noise, political slogans are the

perfect instrument for government communication, no matter a government communicates with audiences at home or abroad. They are the means to communicate complex policy plans as they condense those plans or abstract political ideas to a structural phrase that tells people at the most fundamental level what the government aims for and what its policies are all about. In this regard political slogans have the potential to tell an entire story in an easy to understand manner and thus they may have the potential to transfer salience from the government agenda to the public agenda. Exactly the same condensation, however, makes political slogans the most vulnerable instrument of government communication for two reasons.

First, due to the simplicity political slogans increase the possibility that the sender loses control over its message. The capacity for loss of political actors' control over messages has been enhanced beyond anything seen in the pre-internet era (McNair 2011; Farrar-Myers and Vaughn 2015) and decreases with a message everyone either seems to understand or interprets in very different ways as the interpretation of the *Chinese Dream* slogan by English media illustrates.

Second, the simplicity furthermore puts the credibility of any slogan message under a magnifying glass. While it is essential for all government communication, either targeting domestic audiences or international audiences in the context of public diplomacy, to be credible in the sense that words should be consistent with actions, the vulnerability of the political slogans lies in the simple but crucial fact that their intended message can easily be matched with reality. Because they break down complex policy ideas into easily remembered phrases, anyone can easily compare them with what a government is actually doing. It is much easier to see whether Donald Trump will actually *Build that Wall* and *Make America great again* than to judge a seemingly jejune policy proposal dealing with a modification of specific building regulations, for example. And it is much easier to judge and question a political slogan like that used by the Chinese leadership which aims to build a *Harmonious World* than it is to judge the influence of long term public diplomacy initiatives like exchange programmes of cultural organisations.

In this regard, political slogans, if taken seriously, urge politicians not only to carefully craft slogans from a PR point of view, but also urges them to consider carefully what future scenarios to promise. Overall, political slogans can be a fitting tool for government communication, but they can also be the most vulnerable tool due to their specific nature and features.

Notes

1. An example for the study of a representative sample of slogans would be the work by Xiang (2010a, 2010b) who analyzed China's family planning slogans and posters in China's 31 provinces.

2. The problem that slogans may promise more than they deliver is clearly not limited to politics but is also an issue in the commercial world. German car maker Audi's famous corporate slogan *Vorsprung durch Technik* (meaning 'Progress through Technology') clearly has a negative connotation since the Audi emissions testing scandal. This negative connotation became even more evident with regards to the slogan *Truth in Engineering* used by Audi in the United States since 2007 and which was lambasted for being discordant with the reality of the scandal.
3. An overview of all Presidential campaign slogans is provided by Roberts, Hammond, and Sulfaro (2012).
4. In Chinese two terms, *tifa* and *kouhao*, are used to describe slogans and there is no clear-cut difference between the two in the related scholarship (Callahan 2007; Barmé 2012). The literal translation for *tifa* is 'the way something is put; formulation; manner of presentation; wording' while *kouhao* more clearly is translated as 'slogan; watchword' (New Age Chinese-English Dictionary 2010, 1510, 891).
5. Without digging too deep into the specifics of the Chinese unitary socialist one-party state, it should be noted that in what follows 'leader' refers to the PRC's President who is head of state and simultaneously General Secretary of the Communist Party of China which makes him the de facto head of the government although formally this is Premier of the State Council. The current Chinese President is Xi Jinping, who assumed office in March 2013 succeeding Hu Jintao (2003–2013) who in turn succeeded Jiang Zemin, how came to power in March 1993.
6. The original slogan was *Peaceful Rise* (*heping jueqi*). But while China emphasised 'peaceful', the world primarily took note of the 'rise' which is why the slogan was changed into 'Peaceful Development'. The Chinese leadership's decision was 'fundamentally a question of terminology and thus preserved China's strategy for reassuring other nations' (Glaser and Medeiros 2007, 291).
7. This paper does not discuss the intercultural dimension of slogans, but acknowledges the fact that the language used for slogans may influence their messages. For the highly complex issue of what harmony means in China, see Nordin (2016).

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