



Nele Noesselt (Ed.)

Visualized Narratives

Signs, Symbols and
Political Mythology
in East Asia, Europe and the US



East Asian Politics

Regional and Global Dynamics

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Edited by
Nele Noesselt

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Preface: Approaching the Complexities of Visual Global Politics

Roland Bleiker

Visuality plays a key role in global politics. Scholars and practitioners—from diplomats to NGO workers—meanwhile recognize that visuals are political and politics is visual. Academic books and articles have begun to engage the issues at stake. They offer valuable insights about the power of visuals to reveal the political world around us and, at the same time, shape it in profound and lasting manners. At the same time, we are in many ways only just beginning to grapple with the diverse, complex and interactive dimensions between the political and the visual. This is in part the case because rapidly changing technological developments—from communication methods to the algorithms that drive big data—are constantly transforming how images are taken, circulated and received. These ongoing shape-shifting transformations not only render images ever more global but also amplify and alter the political roles they play.

Visualized Narratives offers insightful contributions that enter the key debates from a series of different vantage points. These contributions illustrate the exceptionally multifaceted relationship between the visual and the political. William A. Callahan, in his contribution to this book, highlights the power of visual art to provide us with both new insights into politics and a form of politics itself. Taking Ai Weiwei's art and activism as a focal point, Callahan situates the links between visuality and the political in the manner in which art offers a unique way of witnessing the political and, in doing so, a form of resisting repression. While Callahan focuses on artists, other contributors, such as Niko Switek, Han Xie, Lionel Fothergill and Andrea Riemenschneider, examine the links between the visual and the political in popular television

programs, reality shows, series and movies. They reveal how popular culture is both omnipresent and highly political, even in instances when they do not seem to engage the political in explicit manners.

Visual politics happens anywhere across the spectrum that ranges from high art to popular culture. It is, in fact, precisely through mundane and seemingly apolitical representations that popular culture becomes political. This is the case because popular culture establishes and rehearses the kind of narratives that we live in, the ones that tell us who we are—as individuals and collectives—and what kind of values drive our attitudes and interactions. In this sense, popular culture provides the background against which politics takes place. Han Xie, in the contribution to this book, explores how Chinese entertainment shows are part of larger visual and verbal patterns that promote and legitimize a discourse of victimhood and anti-colonial national sentiment.

These visualized narratives, as the book appropriately calls and depicts them, become more explicitly political in the realm of photojournalism, advertisement and in the role of documentaries, as is explored in the book by Alex Heck, Lucy Xu Yang, Nele Noesselt, Tanja Eckstein, Elizaveta Priupolina and Tanja Walter. Central, here too, is how visuals contribute to depicting and entrenching particular notions of identity and nation building. And here, too, we see how various media representations not only represent but also constitute the political: they show us how the world around us and the many more worlds that lie far away function; they provide us with insights into the lives and fates of others and, in doing so, influence how we see, perceive, react to and interact in this world.

Diplomats have, for long, been acutely aware of the power of visuals. And, as a result, they have made conscious and strategic use of visuals and their efforts to project power. Iver B. Neumann's contribution illustrates the issues at stake in a particularly insightful manner. He illustrates how "the visual has always been, and remains, an inevitable aspect of diplomacy." These forms of visual diplomacies have multiple dimensions and multiple purposes. Face-to-face negotiations are set in surroundings designed to optimize their outcome. Joint press

conferences are publicly staged for a range of purposes, including to influence audiences at home.

One aspect is clear, then: the interactive dimensions between the visual and the political are exceptionally diverse and complex. The visual is a source of insight and a form of politics itself. And it is a form of politics that operates in countless different realms, from media representations to private photographs circulating on social media, from the use of videos by terrorist organizations to the visual projections of state ideologies during national holiday celebrations. But the visual also acquires political dimensions in and through many other realms, including maps, cartoons, video games, surveillance cameras, drones and satellites. Add to this that the visual is not just about two-dimensional images but at least as much about three-dimensional artefacts and performances, from national monuments to military parades and diplomatic ceremonies.

Given the complex nature of visual politics, a second aspect is equally clear: that we need a wide range of methods to understand how images and visual artefacts/performances become political and shape politics. One needs to understand how visuals emerge, how their content projects meaning, and how this meaning then shapes people and political dynamics. Understanding these completely different aspects of the visual requires an equally diverse and complex set of methods, including interviews, ethnographic field research, semiotics, content and discourse analysis and quantitative surveys. Then there are a range of more specific methods that are useful, from photo elicitation to visual autoethnography. The contributors to this book jointly offer a nice illustration of the wide range of methods required to understand visual politics. They range from Switek's quantitative coding of movie databases and viewer ratings to Lucy Xu Yang's narrative analysis and the close hermeneutic investigation of Fothergill and Riemenschnitter.

This is, in many ways, the key insight that *Visualized Narratives* offers: the recognition that visual politics is so complex that it can only be understood through a diverse set of approaches and insights. Promoting such diverse inquiries is essential even if—or perhaps precisely because—they might generate forms of insights that are seen as incompatible. There is no one right way to understand all aspects of

the relationship between visibility and the political. What we can do though is exactly what *Visualized Narratives* does: embrace the ensuing complexities and continue to grapple with the difficult challenge of understanding the ever changing nature of visual politics.

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Visualized Narratives: Signs, Symbols, Political Mythology in East Asia, Europe and the US¹

Nele Noesselt

With the “pictorial” (Mitchell 1986; 1994) (also labeled as “visual,” and “iconic”) turn(s), the decryption of visual signs and (iconic) symbols has emerged as an additional level of analysis across disciplinary boundaries (inter alia: Bleiker 2018; Callahan 2015; Elkins 2003; Elkins and McGuire 2013). This turn implies that images and visual artefacts are expected to “speak” for themselves. They are thus regarded as objects of analysis beyond, or complementary to, “texts.”² Images convey meaning(s) and (aesthetical, emotional) messages. Newsreel images, pictures, and cartoons as well as artwork not only depict and document reality but—via the choice of perspective³ and the editing and arrangement of the visual context—embed single events into a coherent narrative speaking to (and incrementally shaping) the addressed audience’s collective memory.

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- 1 Special thanks go to Lucy Xu Yang, Dr James Powell as well as Dr Connor Malloy for their outstanding and dedicated support in the final editing and formatting rounds of this volume.
Research on the topic of visualized narratives (as well as the case study by Noesselt/Eckstein/Priupolina presented in Chapter 7) has been kindly supported by the DFG Project “Role Change and Role Contestation in the People’s Republic of China: Globalization of ‘Chinese’ Concepts of Order?” (Project number 238920157; PI: Noesselt).
 - 2 Some authors insist that the visual turn in IR should include a decryption both of images/visual artefacts as independent unit of analysis as well as element of a communicative act, which can only be understood if one takes the broader context, i.e., the way an image is constituted and communicated, into account (Heck and Schlag 2013: 895).
 - 3 On the “poetics of perspective” in art history and beyond, see: Elkins (1994).

Peace and conflict as well as securitization studies responded to this change of the medium of communication (and interaction) and turned from text- and speech-based research to the interplay between narrative frames and visual representations (Williams 2003; Crilly et al. 2020). Enemy images, triggering security spirals, are thus regarded as not only created via powerful narrations but communicated via the skillful visual representation of the moral “self” and the evil “other(s)” (e.g., Winter 2020).⁴ Apart from promotion and recruitment videos by transnational actor groups such as the Islamic State, enemy images can also be found in the worldwide entertainment sector (i.e., movies, graphic novels, PC games)—visual public culture and political perceptions (and related “enemy” narratives) are hence mutually re-enforcing (Valeriano and Habel 2016).

Media images and visual representations not only observe and comment on past or contemporary socio-political events, but they can also cause political actions—as the Danish Muhammad caricature crisis (Hansen 2011) or the Charlie Hebdo attacks (*The Guardian* 2015) evidence. Investigative photojournalism as well as newsreel coverage of political events do not only shape public opinion but are also widely believed to impact on political decision-making (“CNN effect”), as these visual real-time representations of developments raise demands for immediate response by national governments or international institutions (inter alia: Robinson 2002; Gilboa 2005). The way political events—e.g., wars (Seib 2005), the global refugee waves (Bleiker et al. 2013), or the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong (Tang 2015)—are visualized and framed via the official media triggers emotional responses of the audience and thus impacts on public opinion—and related policy preferences and moral convictions.⁵ Photographs (or other visual representations of “concrete” events), sometimes, become iconic images, meaning that one photograph is perceived and remembered as reliable (historic) account of political reality, potentially challenging the official storyline. The “hooded man photo” from Abu Ghraib which

4 On the various streams of conceptualizing “self” and “other” in international relations: Neumann (1996).

5 For an excellent overview article on the often overlooked role of emotions in world politics, see: Bleiker and Hutchinson (2008). On images and emotions, see: Schlag (2018).

questioned the US narrative of a “just war” against global terrorism is just one of the most prominent examples (Andén-Papadopoulos 2008; Hansen 2015).

Especially in times of elections or when preparing for passing policy reforms, politicians are extremely concerned with the visual images associated with their campaigns, as the visual symbols created or used by mass media impact on people’s perceptions. Mass media could hence generate visual storylines that would run counter to the messages communicated (and visualized) by political parties or individual politicians (Schill 2012).

While liberal democracies generally guarantee freedom of opinion and thus cultivate a pluralist media landscape, autocracies are known for censoring and controlling—or at least steering—public opinion and for setting up unified, orthodox storylines, circulated via state-owned media channels (Stier 2015). The coining of iconic images forms part of these systems’ propaganda—publicly displayed when hosting prestigious international events, such as the Olympic Games, or when celebrating key events of national history. Modern autocracies, however, seek to present themselves as enlightened political regimes dedicated to rational realism instead of ideology. State media in these countries hence display a strong focus on newsreel- and documentary-style views on politics (including political history), claiming to document and archive political “reality.”

Images and visual representations can be consciously coined and integrated in a sublime, highly emotional(ized) narrative.⁶ In this vein, the symbols and icons created form part of “strategic narratives” (Miskimmon et al. 2013; Crilley 2015), coined to justify political actions via the creation of “political myths” (Bottici 2009; Flood 1996). Strategic framing and visualization techniques are also powerful tools used by contestation movements (e.g., transnational pro-environmental movements such as Fridays for Future) or by individual activists—leading to a battle over ideas, images, and meanings between the various players involved.

6 See, inter alia, the visual framing of China’s maritime New Silk Road: van Noort (2020).

Apart from these consciously coined visualized narratives, however, images used to illustrate the news or visual artefacts and representations in the realms of arts and public entertainment might also contribute to the formation or re-confirmation of “myths” and (re-)constitute or challenge societal order—but not necessarily as planned and intended outcome.

The chapters compiled in this volume address the phenomenon of visual(ized) narratives from a multi-actor perspective, ranging from top-down communicated strategic (political) narratives to the realms of public culture and visualizations in the fields of literature and arts. Furthermore, contributions also reflect on visual codes and rituals, and contemplate on methods and coding schemes to assess visual and non-visual layers as well as the realms of image perception and (emotional) image interpretation.

The volume opens with a preface by **Roland Bleiker**, followed by chapter I, focusing on the visual modalities of diplomacy,⁷ by **Iver B. Neumann**. Moving beyond obvious examples of staged performance of diplomacy—such as the APEC summits’ official group picture for which all state leaders are wearing costumes that represent the customs and traditions of the host country—, Neumann elaborates on the often-overlooked meaning of aesthetics in political interactions and shared imaginations of beauty across the boundaries of nations and civilizational spheres in diplomatic-cultural exchange. Neumann postulates that successful diplomacy is based on diplomats’ ability to interact in a way that is “visually pleasing” to the counterpart targeted. However, diplomats engage in visual routines not only vis-à-vis significant others, but their performance is also watched and evaluated by the polity (the institutionalized “self”) they formally represent. Neumann acknowledges the diversity and heterogeneity of the multiple audiences targeted—and identifies a remaining hegemony of certain “Western” diplomatic practices, partly due to the fact that their diplomatic services are equipped with the resources and professional personnel (including proficient photographers and a professionally trained team for feeding social media). Apart from the (pre)dominant hegemonic

7 For a book-length analysis of the history of diplomacy and related performative actions, see: Neumann (2020).

streams and ritual visual performances of diplomatic codes as celebrated by the world's liberal democratic powers, Neumann's study also addresses the persistence of national or anti-hegemonic (visual) diplomacy. In ancient times, as Neumann's reference to the historical antecedents of the Opium Wars illustrates, empires were following their distinct diplomatic practices—such as the performance of the kowtow demanded from all foreign delegations seeking to exchange “tributary” goods with the Chinese son of heaven—and refused to comply with the diplomatic practices and ritual performances of their counterparts, hence drawing a visible line between the “self” and the “other.” In the 21st century, rising powers, by contrast, are seeking to rise within a globally intertwined system which is dominated by norms and visual rituals of its post-WW II architects and thus centered on the US. They are thus copying and mimicking the predominant rituals and visual codes (Johnston 2008), hoping to become accepted and treated as “equals.” Symbolic recognition, as Neumann stresses, plays a very important role in diplomacy.⁸ Covertly questioning the hegemony of Western diplomatic performances, however, when hosting multilateral meetings, rising powers might add some local, traditional elements to the otherwise global architecture and the staging of the meeting space—as China's hosting of the G20 Summit in Hangzhou (2016) exemplifies. Nonetheless, apart from the symbolic signs and signifiers of traditional Chinese cosmology (round and square architectonic elements representing heaven and earth), the general setting and the ceremonial arrangement of the meeting followed universal, global patterns of diplomacy. A recent example of obvious discontent with the formally established diplomatic rituals—not addressed in Neumann's chapter that is dedicated to the discussion of the abstract, timeless patterns of visual diplomacy rather than their episodic manifestations—would be the diplomatic efforts by the Taliban government to gain recognition and support from the international community without transforming local political-religious customs. The media coverage of the Taliban's spokesperson's encounter with Western journalists or diplomatic envoys clearly illustrates the tensions between performances reflecting the expectations of the political body's “self” and the demands of the

8 On recognition in international politics, see also: Lindemann and Ringmar (2014).

addressed “other.” Thus, Neumann’s philosophical meta-reflections on the foundations of visual diplomacy empower the reader to decrypt some often-neglected visual subtitles of global diplomacy and, potentially, also to identify shifts and rifts of diplomatic encounters before they become officially verbalized.

While Neumann’s chapter assesses the visual modalities of diplomacy and diplomats’ performative obligations vis-à-vis governments as well as societies, the contribution by **Niko Switek** turns to the meta-perception and representation of (world) politics in popular TV movies and films. While TV series relating to concrete political events or presenting a fictionalized story embedded in a “realist” national political context—thus reflecting the organizational patterns and principles of parliaments or governments of the depicted state (or international organization)—have to entertain in order to reach their respective audiences, they also shape spectators’ interpretation and imagination of “real” world domestic and global politics. Neumann and Nexon thus summarize the causal interplay between popular (media) culture and states’ foreign behavior as follows: “[if we can assume that] a state’s foreign policy is driven by its national identity we can look to popular culture to get a better handle on the content of that national identity” (Neumann and Nexon 2006: 15). Fictionalized visualized narratives of (domestic or global) politics can hence be expected to contribute to people’s mind maps and their judgment of political institutions and actions. Switek’s study questions the empirical validity of studies that engage in a mapping of popular culture via collecting and coding the views and perceptions of select audiences before and after having watched the movie/TV series. He instead develops a quantitative coding scheme based on data retrieved via the Internet Online Movie Database that also includes user reviews and ratings, which allows him to identify dominant patterns of perceptions and imaginations underlying people’s popular culture-inspired views and judgement of politics—including political developments and foreign affairs of “other” countries.

Lionel Fothergill and **Andrea Riemenschmitter** add an empirical case study of the manifestation and transformation of popular culture in literature and arts by examining the Ming dynasty novel *Shuihuzhuan* and one of its TV series adaptations. They trace the evolution and

development of one of the novel's most iconic characters, Lu Zhishen, undertaking an in-depth semiotic, hermeneutical analysis of select episodes in the novel as compared to the visualized re-interpretation presented in the CCTV series *The Water Margin* (1998). Based on a thoughtfully compiled set of quotations (translated from the Chinese originals), Fothergill and Riemenschmitter identify a literati resemanticization of Lu Zhishen during the late Ming era—the knight-errant personality was ascribed an additional (Zen) religious layer. The CCTV adaptation in the 1990s, however, removed this Zen connection and references to what the party-state would have classified as religious superstition. In the analysis, the authors hence discuss the various modifications and supplements to the original storyline before the backdrop of party politics and socio-economic changes in the PRC. They conclude that the state discourse on the role of religion in modernity (i.e., as modernized religion without superstition) indirectly informed the re/presented form of religion in *The Water Margin*. Their analysis reveals the political importance of the *Shuihuzhuan* as a narrative concerned with the legitimization of violence and revolution and its symbolic value as “national heritage.”

The tracing of the (silent) adding and removing of select story components and processes of resemanticization by Fothergill and Riemenschmitter demonstrates not only how the political context impacts on the literary re-interpretation and re-imagination of Chinese tales, but also allows conclusions regarding the remaining diversity, fragmentation, and heterogeneity of popular culture in China.

The chapter by **Han Xie** turns to a Chinese TV production in-between fiction and political history, looking at the entertainment reality show *Who's the Murderer* and the fictionalized allegorical coverage of the Second Sino-Japanese War in Season 6/Episode 11. While this show is produced by Mango TV, a private media channel, it has, as Han Xie emphasizes, to comply with the official media regulations issued by the Chinese party-state. S6/E11 of the TV show includes a fictional(ized) story about the war between two imaginary countries named *Mang country* and *Jia country*. *Jia*—the pronunciation of this Chinese character reminds, as Han Xie points out, the audience of the first country syllable of “Ja”-pan—invades *Mang*. The fictionalized invasion story also includes a female intelligence agent from *Jia*, expressing her

view that the invasion is “inhumane,” confessing the wrongs of *Jia*’s doing in front of others—obviously, if one follows the reading of the TV show proposed by Han Xie, resonating with the CCP government’s never-ending public remembering of the war crimes committed by Japan. Han Xie doubts that the inclusion of this fictionalized episode was just for attracting more viewers in China. Instead, he draws a connection between the entertainment show’s discovery of political history episodes and the PRC’s Patriotic Education Campaign and related efforts to promote patriotic sentiments. To substantiate and validate this assumption, Han Xie circulated an anonymized questionnaire among Chinese netizens. The answers to the survey questions generally confirm his reading of the depicted war scenes as visualized (and abstracted) representations of the Second Sino-Japanese War, but they also illustrate that those answering the questionnaire had ambivalent feelings regarding the fictionalized confession of war crimes by the intelligence agent of *Jia*—as China is hence presented not only as victim of aggression but also as victorious as its contemporary positions and demands vis-à-vis Japan are recognized in the fictionalized episode, thus deviating from the official perception of Japan as a country denying its historical responsibilities and its war crimes. Strikingly, however, the majority of the rather young fans of the entertainment show answered that they would like to see more events of “real” political history covered in future episodes. Obviously, the orthodox coverage of history by official Chinese state media—including fictionalization via history dramas and movies—did not make the younger generation turn away from these official (visualized) narratives but paved the ground for additional “private” entertainment channels’ re-interpretations and variations of the historical material (in line with orthodox historiography). These “visual memorials” constructed via (fictionalized) history dramas are far more flexible and responsive to changes in politics (and political culture) than stone monuments and memorials on core events in Sino-Japanese history—such as the September 18 Memorial in the Chinese city of Shenyang, commemorating the military invasion of China by Japan, or the Nanjing Massacre Memorial, re-iterating the national humiliation and victimization of China, or the Yasukuni Shrine, imagined in the official Chinese debate as a place for worshipping Japanese war criminals (though this

place has far more meanings and layers, see: Callahan 2017). While stone monuments and memorials often require additional inscriptions or explanatory texts, visualized memorials and fictionalized, imagined iconic representations of history trigger feelings and emotions—even the more if the narrative is coined and visualized in line with the audience’s visual socialization and visual consumer behavior.

State media, especially in non-democratic systems, are generally expected to just reproduce the official (master-)narratives and to provide illustrating pictures and images bolstering these official storylines. One could hence be tempted to regard TV news and political documentaries broadcast via these official channels as mere propaganda. The analysis of these visual documents nonetheless allows one to gain insight into the unspoken narratives of self-identity and the role claims underlying these actors’ political decision-making. The chapter by Lucy Yang as well as the one by Nele Noesselt, Tanja Eckstein, and Elizaveta Priupolina examine China’s *daguo* (great power/major power) role-identity articulations as narrated and visualized in CCTV documentaries.

Lucy Xu Yang, looking at the documentary via the lenses of National Role Theory (NRT), decodes China’s self-imagination as *daguo* in the realms of global economic governance by focusing on pivotal events around three major fora: World Economic Forum (WEF), G20 Summits, and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meetings. Moving beyond the international debate that mainly conceives of China as a rising economic superpower, seeking to replace the US as global hegemonic power and to challenge the post-WW II (liberal) international order, Yang also outlines the frictions and fragmentations across the various intellectual camps and inner-party factions with regard to China’s future development strategy and its global positioning. Given this (invisible) heterogeneity and diversity of ideas, one should obviously be eager to learn more about how the CCTV documentary manages to coin (and visualize) role-identities that bridge the widening gap between these competing camps. The episodes coded by Yang via tools of narration analysis indicate that the PRC is not depicting itself as a challenger but as a responsible stakeholder and contributor to global (economic) governance. The metaphors used in Xi Jinping’s speeches at the WEF, G20, and APEC meetings are universal ones—

hence signaling to the world that the PRC is willing to integrate itself into the existing order. Nevertheless, the documentary subtly promotes a shift from US-led institutions toward policy-making platforms in which China holds discursive power. Addressing the various domestic audiences, the documentary, as Yang argues, presents various layers of China's political and business elites, all linked to specific role fragments or auxiliary roles—but united under the umbrella of the “economic growth—global recognition—global bargaining power”-nexus.

The chapter by **Nele Noesselt**, **Tanja Eckstein** and **Elizaveta Priupolina** excavates Chinese role-identity claims as visualized and narrated in the 2006 CCTV documentary *Daguo Jueqi* (*The Rise of Great Powers*) vis-à-vis the US and the Soviet Union/Russia. In the Chinese (academic and political) debate, both serve as reference and, simultaneously, counter-models to the Chinese case. While the Soviet Union is generally regarded as a failed socialist experiment, Chinese analysts are nevertheless interested in the lessons to be learnt from the observation of the Soviet case. Likewise, the US is classified as a hegemonic (and, during the Mao years, imperialist) power, incompatible with China's self-identity as a modern *daguo*. The visualization of the US and the Soviet Union/Russia in *Daguo Jueqi*, however, goes far beyond these stereotypical classifications of “self” and “other.” Tracing the economic development strategies of the US and the Soviet Union and their modifications over time, the documentary visualizes the core ideas underlying the PRC's post-Maoist reform policies as lessons learnt from the historical experiences of other powers. The chapter finally connects the coding results of the 2006 documentary to the *daguo* role-identity frames visualized in *Daguo Waijiao* (2017), narrating the successful rise of China to global *daguo* status under the leadership of Xi Jinping.

Tanja Walter undertakes a cross-continental comparison of the visual narratives of military recruitment campaigns in the PRC and Germany. Her dataset consists of recruitment posters issued during the years 2015 and 2016. After a short sketch of the historical and contemporary role of the military in both countries, Walter introduces the reader to her framework of analysis consisting of elements of narration theory complemented by core assumptions of branding and marketing approaches. Applying Nina Janich's coding scheme to the analysis of