

# Exploring solutions to the international communication dilemma in the post-truth era: a case study of China-Malaysia co-produced

Ran Cui<sup>1\*</sup>, Yixuan Yan<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Xi'an International Studies University, Xi'an, China

\*Corresponding Author. Email: cecenier666@163.com

**Abstract.** The communication dilemma of the post-truth era presents both new challenges and opportunities for China's international communication efforts. In this era, emotions tend to override factual logic, making Western content with ideological biases more easily disseminated; cultural discount in cross-cultural exchanges becomes harder to mitigate; the imbalance in global discourse power restricts communication; and the implementation of domestic communication strategies remains suboptimal. On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations between China and Malaysia, this paper analyzes two co-produced documentaries—*The Story of Time: Water Flows Unbroken* and *A Joyous Union of Lotus and Lychee*—as representative case studies. It examines how these documentaries accurately identify the needs of foreign audiences, tell China's stories effectively, and promote the international dissemination of Chinese culture and the positive construction of the national image in the post-truth era. The paper proposes feasible approaches to overcoming communication dilemmas and further advancing the building of a shared future for mankind.

**Keywords:** post-truth era, communication dilemma, co-produced documentaries, international communication, China-Malaysia community of shared future

## 1. Introduction

The term post-truth has existed for quite some time, but as media power continues to evolve amid the tides of the times, the term has gradually expanded from political studies to the field of journalism and communication. Since The Oxford Dictionary selected “post-truth” as its Word of the Year in 2016, the “post-truth era” has increasingly become a hot topic in both academic and professional circles. The Oxford Dictionary defines it as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” [1].

Based on a variety of research findings, the post-truth era can be regarded as a socially co-occurring phenomenon driven by the development of new technologies. Under such artificially constructed contexts, individuals are more likely to be influenced by their own subjective emotions and beliefs than by objective reality during the process of receiving and evaluating information, thus making them more susceptible to externally designed, intention-driven narratives. As a result, truth is often ignored or even eliminated. The characteristics of the post-truth era have inevitably posed new challenges for China's international communication efforts. However, identifying suitable communication strategies in response to these changes may also present new opportunities.

## 2. The dilemma of international communication in the post-truth era

### 2.1. Western ideological bias and selective narratives

Western media often exhibit strong ideological bias in shaping China's image and have long been influenced by hegemonic thinking. Whether for domestic audiences or when conveying China-related information to other countries, Western outlets frequently engage in selective and one-sided reporting. Although China has consistently advocated for building a community with a shared future for mankind and implementing initiatives such as the Belt and Road to promote global peace and development, Western media have vilified these efforts by distorting China's narratives through agenda-setting and biased reporting. These outlets deliberately misrepresent China's image and portray these globally beneficial initiatives as part of China's attempt to assert socialist dominance and seek international hegemony in the 21st century, thereby inciting skepticism or hostility toward China in

some countries. This reflects a clear cognitive bias against China and a lingering Cold War mindset characterized by the “China threat theory” [2]. Such selective reporting and biased interpretation by the Western world are not limited to the political domain—they extend to economic, cultural, and other areas as well. This impairs the international community’s ability to form an accurate understanding of China and raises the difficulty of constructing a truthful and objective national image abroad.

## 2.2. Cultural discount and misinterpretation of discourse

In the post-truth era, personal emotions and beliefs are more influential than objective facts in determining the effectiveness of communication. Audiences are more inclined to accept information aligned with their emotional and ideological predispositions, while objective facts that diverge from their worldview are often disregarded. This has exacerbated the phenomena of cultural discount and discourse misinterpretation. Cultural discount refers to the diminished appeal and comprehension of cultural products when they cross cultural boundaries due to differences in background and levels of cultural familiarity. When audiences encounter unfamiliar cultural content, their interest and interpretive capacity are often reduced, which disrupts the transmission and reception of information [3]. In international communication, the target audience’s own cultural background and value systems are typically more familiar and trustworthy to them than foreign ones. Consequently, when local media manipulate narratives or set specific agendas, audiences are more likely to believe the information delivered through domestic channels. Conversely, when receiving information from foreign media sources, audiences tend to evaluate it through stereotypical lenses based on their preconceived notions of the originating culture. For instance, in some Sino-American co-produced films, significant cultural differences, divergent values, and ideological divides have resulted in a pronounced cultural discount during cross-cultural communication.

Furthermore, in the post-truth era, the devaluation of factual accuracy has increased the likelihood of information loss during the encoding and transmission process, often leading to discourse misinterpretation in intercultural exchanges—sometimes resulting in misunderstandings or even conflict. Meanwhile, emotionally charged fake news and disinformation have become increasingly infectious in today’s media landscape, spreading rapidly and widely—often to an overwhelming extent. This not only erodes the credibility of the communicated content but also seriously hampers efforts to promote China’s national image abroad. Therefore, to reduce cultural discount and discourse misinterpretation in the dissemination of Chinese narratives, it is imperative to develop new communication strategies and pathways that can effectively address the challenges posed by intercultural differences, transmission loss, and misinformation.

## 2.3. Imbalance in the global discourse power structure

With the continuous growth of China’s economic strength and international standing, the imbalance between its international discourse power and its national power has become increasingly apparent. International discourse power refers to a country’s ability to express its positions, viewpoints, and interests on the global stage. This includes not only the right to speak but also the influence and effectiveness of that speech [4]. At its core, international discourse power is a matter of power relations and the outcome of interest negotiations among countries. Its scope is derived from a country’s comprehensive national strength, encompassing but not limited to hard power, soft power, and international communication capability. Despite significant efforts over time that have led to notable improvements, China’s international discourse power remains constrained by Western discourse hegemony. This has created a highly imbalanced global communication landscape, seriously undermining the effectiveness of China’s international communication.

Moreover, with the rise of the internet and social media, the traditional media-dominated communication structure has undergone significant transformation. New media platforms now play an increasingly vital role in global communication. However, many Chinese media platforms face severe suppression from the West. Western media—particularly American outlets—maintain an oligopolistic position in global media, which results in overseas audiences primarily obtaining information about China through Western sources. For example, widely used social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook are American-owned, while China’s major overseas platform, TikTok, faces strong resistance and bans in several countries. Most foreign audiences receive information about China that has been filtered through algorithms or deliberately distorted narratives, with few accessing content directly from Chinese media. This severely hinders the objective and fair construction of China’s national image and the promotion of the community with a shared future for mankind. Opposing Western discourse hegemony is essential to building a more reasonable and just global communication order and is a necessary step toward enhancing international discourse power not only for China but also for humanity at large.

## 2.4. Urgent need to improve China’s international communication practices

The report of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China emphasized the need to “promote the building of international communication capabilities” as a strategic priority. This has led to key theoretical developments and substantial progress. However, given the ongoing challenges in the global communication landscape—where audiences differ significantly in their cultural backgrounds and media reception across nations—the traditional broad-brush, top-down approach to propaganda is no longer effective. Drawing on the outcomes of China’s previous international communication efforts, scholars have proposed

innovative strategies such as targeted communication and stratified dissemination. Yet, practical implementation of these strategies still requires significant improvement.

At present, China's external communication suffers from a lack of specificity and insufficient localization, resulting in limited breadth and depth of audience reach. For instance, due to shifting geopolitical dynamics and the strategic need to promote a shared future for humanity, Southeast Asia—with its geographic proximity and cultural affinity—has become a key region for China's international communication efforts. However, overly generalized communication, insufficient localization, and overly abstract themes have significantly weakened the impact of such efforts on local populations, making it difficult to achieve desired outcomes. In addition, language differences among countries pose a major barrier to effectively telling China's story abroad. In practice, China's international communication often remains constrained by domestic discourse frameworks, failing to adapt localized language use and communication styles to suit the linguistic and cultural norms of target audiences. This lack of effective discourse translation and failure to overcome language barriers has severely hampered the effectiveness of China's communication with the world.

### **3. Co-produced documentaries between China and foreign countries embody new opportunities**

In the post-truth era, the international community is witnessing an increasingly distorted perception of China in certain countries, driven by Western bias and hostility, the prevalence of emotional appeals over rational discourse, and the imbalance in international public opinion [5]. These factors pose unprecedented challenges to China's international communication. Professor Hu of Nanjing University has noted that the post-truth era represents a disruption of the traditional social information system and order [5]. While it signifies disruption, it also presents new opportunities for promoting China's narrative globally and shaping its international image. These opportunities offer fresh perspectives for exploring more effective strategies to break the deadlock in global communication. Among them, co-produced documentaries between China and foreign countries have begun to play a significant role due to their unique advantages.

#### **3.1. Collaborative production mechanism and synergistic advantages**

In general, using documentaries for international communication and national image building involves two dimensions: self-representation and external representation. However, past experiences suggest that both approaches encounter difficulties, often failing to produce the desired impact. External representation refers to how a country's image is shaped by external forces or media. Such portrayals are often influenced by the political, economic, and cultural contexts of the portraying party, and are prone to distortion due to preexisting biases, leading to public misunderstanding. On the other hand, self-representation refers to a country's own efforts to present an objective and authentic image through media. Yet, due to cultural differences and the imbalance in international public opinion, foreign audiences may misinterpret the content or question its authenticity and objectivity.

When both paths face challenges, co-produced documentaries that blend the strengths of self- and external representation offer a promising alternative for constructing and disseminating national image. Through cross-national collaboration, co-produced documentaries combine perspectives and narrative styles rooted in two distinct cultural backgrounds, often achieving a complementary effect. External representation contributes by presenting the subject country's image from the standpoint of the target culture, thereby reducing intercultural misunderstandings and unwarranted skepticism. Meanwhile, self-representation enables empathetic storytelling from a personal and micro-level perspective, avoiding intentional defamation or stigmatization. The dialogue between self and other thus facilitates a multidimensional construction of China's image.

#### **3.2. Targeted strategies for addressing communication challenges**

On a practical level, co-produced documentaries between two countries can significantly correct international stigmatization of China on certain issues. These documentaries engage with mainstream discourse, set positive agendas, and adopt precise communication strategies to involve audiences from both countries. By leveraging the foundation of bilateral cooperation and friendship, they contribute to reshaping collective memory. From agenda setting and content filming to the construction of narrative structure and logic, China's official media are actively involved in every step to ensure the presentation to foreign audiences remains accurate and balanced. Meanwhile, on the content production side, mainstream media from the partner country also participate actively in the creative and distribution process. They utilize content and expressions that are more easily understood and accepted by local audiences, helping to minimize inevitable intercultural differences and conflicts. Furthermore, relying on the credibility of mainstream media in both countries, these documentaries help shape online discourse and public opinion, increasing the perceived authenticity and trustworthiness of the content among target audiences. In the post-truth era, co-produced documentaries apply targeted communication strategies to foster dialogue and interaction across different cultural contexts, reducing misinterpretation, enhancing mutual understanding, and addressing the current imbalance in international public opinion.

From a value perspective, the co-production model enhances communication effectiveness and furthers the implementation of the concept of a community with a shared future for mankind. As a global vision that transcends the boundaries of nation-states, the community of shared future for mankind reflects China's aspiration for a better world and its sense of responsibility in addressing global challenges. It also offers a new paradigm for human development and social progress [6]. China has consistently

advocated for this vision. However, given the cultural diversity across countries, efforts to promote this vision through specific communication practices often encounter obstacles. Thematic and narrative choices in co-produced documentaries, however, enable in-depth cultural and social engagement, helping to bridge gaps and deepen mutual understanding in the process of joint development.

#### 4. The problem-solving model of China-Malaysia co-produced documentaries in the post-truth era

##### 4.1. A livelihood-oriented approach to national image: bridging audience perception gaps

In the post-truth era, foreign audiences often express skepticism toward content disseminated by Chinese official or mainstream media outlets, resulting in a “cultural discount” [7] and a perceptual gap concerning the sentiments and humanity of the Chinese people. Historically, China’s official external communication has prioritized grand narratives and state-centric discourse. In contrast, China-Malaysia co-produced documentaries adopt a partial grassroots perspective, bringing narratives closer to the people and integrating personal storytelling with national discourse to achieve a livelihood-oriented portrayal of China’s national image.

A key feature of China-Malaysia co-productions is the representativeness of the individuals featured. These documentaries include not only relatively official figures but also draw upon voices from various social sectors. While “credible” authoritative figures help establish the narrative tone, a significant number of “relatable” everyday individuals—those with roles familiar to the general public—are included to promote identification through popularized storytelling.

By capturing specific and personalized micro-level details, the documentaries construct a composite narrative that merges personal character with national identity. The subjects featured span a wide range of social groups and reflect shared values, thereby effectively addressing the foreign audience’s limited understanding of the Chinese people. For example, in the documentary *The Story of Time-Water Keeps Flowing*, when Malaysia’s tourism industry was severely affected by the “Malaysia Airlines incident,” and stage production came to a halt, Chinese director Wang did not abandon the project. Instead, she responded with understanding and expressed her perseverance with bold optimism. Her actions earned praise from the Malaysian producer, who described her as loyal and principled—traits aligning with the collectivist values embedded in Chinese culture. Additionally, the documentaries portray the Chinese people’s aspiration for harmony and their deep respect for kinship. In *Bound by Lotus and Lichee*, part of the documentary series marking the 50th anniversary of China-Malaysia diplomatic relations, whether recounting the story of the “Two Countries, Twin Parks” initiative or focusing on the Qinzhou Industrial Park, Kuantan Port, and the East Coast Rail Link, the documentaries highlight individuals such as Fais, who witnessed Kuantan’s transformation from a fishing village into an industrial hub, and Zeng, who devoted himself to constructing the Genting Tunnel. Their vivid and heartfelt stories reflect the character and national identity of both Chinese and Malaysian people.

Overall, co-produced documentaries use the narratives of ordinary individuals to reflect broader historical contexts and demonstrate how personal growth resonates with national development. The fragmented and diverse structure of individual stories adds vibrancy, intimacy, and relatability to the narrative, reducing the “cultural discount” commonly encountered in cross-cultural communication and improving the overall effectiveness of international dissemination.

##### 4.2. Narrating China’s story from the perspective of the “other”: co-constructing a diverse and multifaceted image of China

In the process of disseminating China’s story, cultural barriers and misalignments often arise due to ideological and other contextual influences. As different countries possess varying aesthetic preferences and cultural perceptions, the transmission of culture is subject to disparities. This manifests in differing interpretations and understandings of the same cultural content among diverse individuals, thereby diminishing communication effectiveness and complicating the construction of China’s image. Co-produced documentaries between China and other countries often adopt the perspective of the “other” in narrating Chinese stories—a narrative approach more readily accepted and trusted by international audiences, as it aligns better with their cognitive habits.

In the China-Malaysia co-produced documentaries, the “other” perspective helps present a multidimensional and nuanced image of China. Politically, the documentaries objectively construct the image of a peaceful, friendly, and proactive major power engaging in diplomacy. For instance, in *A Story of Time—Unceasing Flow*, the narrative unfolds from the viewpoint of Malaysian former Senate President Tan Sri Michael Chen, a direct witness to the establishment of China-Malaysia diplomatic relations. Beginning with the Afro-Asian-Latin American Friendly Table Tennis Invitational Tournament, the documentary depicts China’s active and amicable diplomatic efforts with authenticity and objectivity. The storyline is further advanced through the perspective of Malaysia’s former ambassador to China, Zainuddin Yahya, whose personal journey guides viewers through the deep and longstanding political ties between the two nations. Culturally, the documentaries portray an inclusive, open, and mutually enriching cultural image. One notable example is the adaptation of *Journey to the West* in which Malaysian primary school students perform the story using entirely local artistic styles and languages—an approach that generated widespread attention in Malaysia while keeping the original storyline intact. Economically, the documentaries construct an image of economic collaboration rooted in mutual benefit and cultural connectedness. Both *A Story of Time—Unceasing Flow* and *Blossoming Bonds of Lychee and Lotus* tell the cross-border love story of Malaysian youth Andy and Chinese woman Erica, highlighting how the “Two Countries, Twin

Parks” initiative has deepened economic ties and propelled the bilateral relationship to new heights. These portrayals underscore China’s openness and its commitment to fostering shared development.

Compared with China’s purely self-shaped narratives, the China-Malaysia co-productions utilize a dual perspective that combines internal and external focalization. By alternating these viewpoints, the documentaries enrich both character and national imagery. Moreover, multiple documentary characters express appreciation for the outcomes of China-Malaysia cooperation, indicating international recognition of China. In adopting the Malaysian public’s perspective—the “other’s” view—the narrative conveys attitudes and perceptions toward China. This subtly integrates China’s discourse and storytelling framework, jointly constructing multifaceted political, cultural, and economic images of China, thereby enhancing audience credibility and presenting China’s image in a more objective, authentic, and three-dimensional manner.

#### 4.3. Optimizing audience reception to reduce cultural misinterpretation

The international audience’s perception of China often diverges from reality. Co-produced documentaries, by virtue of their form and expression, optimize the way China constructs its external image. Due to persistent smears by certain countries and entrenched biases within the international community, shaping China’s image abroad remains a challenging task. Additionally, the media significantly influence public value judgments. In the post-truth era, information on social media is chaotic, and news perspectives vary widely across countries. In Malaysia, for instance, audiences are primarily exposed to limited perspectives offered by international media and Chinese-language newspapers. Information obtained via platforms such as TikTok tends to be fragmented, superficial, and inconsistent. As a result, audiences may develop unfriendly or biased foundational views of China.

Video, categorized by McLuhan as a “hot medium,” offers higher resolution and visibility than text—a “cold medium”—and is thus better suited to breaking traditional misconceptions and gaining audience acceptance. Documentaries, characterized by realism, act as mirrors reflecting the past, present, and future of a nation and its people. China-Malaysia co-produced documentaries focus on individuals from diverse fields in both countries. Through on-site interviews and visits, they serve as tangible carriers of national image, extending to a collective narrative through a tapestry of characters, thereby presenting a distinct and relatable portrait of China. This form of documentary aids in understanding the reality of China’s development and Malaysia’s progress through its cooperation with China.

In *A Story of Time—Unceasing Flow*, a central figure appears on camera to thread the narrative together. This role is taken by Zainuddin Yahya, who presents his story primarily through direct on-screen narration. He experiences first-hand the developments in Malaysia resulting from China-Malaysia diplomatic relations and shares his observations through ongoing dialogue and engagement with others. The use of a walking, experiential narrative approach allows the audience to follow his footsteps across different domains, fostering a sense of intimacy and resonance with local development in Malaysia.

#### 4.4. Targeted and segmented communication for constructing a multi-dimensional national image

Targeted communication is a vital support for enhancing international communication capacity and improving communication effectiveness [8]. Documentaries employ dissemination methods tailored to different regions, countries, and audiences, focusing on content relevance while segmenting audiences and pushing content precisely, thus embodying the accuracy of communication. In the post-truth era, where unjust and inaccurate reports about China often dominate international discourse, the use of targeted communication strategies in both form and content has played a positive role in improving the credibility and effectiveness of dissemination.

##### 4.4.1. Multilingual precision communication

As a targeted communication approach to reach Malaysian audiences, the China-Malaysia co-produced documentaries employ Chinese narration, Malay hosting, and interviews conducted in either English or Chinese, skillfully blending three languages to create a multilingual communication environment. This multilingual setup broadens the audience base to some extent, reduces resistance among viewers, and makes the content more acceptable and accessible to foreign audiences, thereby increasing its reach. Language serves as a window into a people and their culture; behind each language lies a unique cultural context and set of values. The use of multiple languages helps better interpret and convey the deeper meanings behind cultural expressions and transmits shared values.

##### 4.4.2. Promoting empathetic communication

Empathy arises from communication contexts that align with one’s own values. The documentaries delve into local social systems, cultural customs, lifestyle habits, and audience preferences, offering a certain degree of profiling of potential viewers. On the one hand, the documentaries incorporate value systems familiar to Malaysian audiences into their narratives, facilitating emotional resonance. On the other hand, they present diverse communication scenarios and models, showcasing lifestyles, worldviews, and emotional expressions from different cultural backgrounds. This multi-angled approach helps audiences better understand and appreciate the complexity and depth of cross-cultural interactions, expanding the viewer base and deepening emotional connection.

## 5. Conclusion

Co-produced documentaries not only highlight the fruitful outcomes of international cooperation but also present China's comprehensive national strength to the world. In external communication, one must strike a balance—neither excessively emphasizing national power nor over-catering to the target audience's preferences. Instead, it is crucial to delineate the boundary between “propaganda” and “communication” [9]. China-Malaysia co-produced documentaries showcase the friendly exchanges between the two nations in political, economic, and cultural realms and serve as exemplary models for international cultural exchange and cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative. By optimizing targeted communication strategies, building scientifically sound and reliable “audience profiles,” and gaining insights into overseas audience preferences [10], it is possible to avoid homogeneous, formulaic, and overly commercialized production models. Communicators must leverage the characteristics of the post-truth era, identify emotional resonance points with audiences, adopt appropriate narrative perspectives, and be willing to expose challenges and shortcomings. Greater attention should be given to the positive outcomes of communication. Using the documentary format to refine dissemination pathways can empower more precise international communication.

## Authorship

Ran Cui and Yixuan Yan contributed equally to this work and should be considered co-first authors.

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