

Cold War and New Cold War Narratives

Special Issue Editor's Introduction

KENNETH PAUL TAN

Abstract

The historic Cold War, although formally concluded by 1991, continues to widely and to deeply influence, even shape the contours of, the way we think and talk about geopolitics and geoeconomics in the present time. Foreign policy professionals, journalists, scholars, and producers and consumers of popular culture readily turn to tropes, frames, and mental models derived sometimes very literally from this grand-historic episode. Thus, we tend to understand developments in Sino-US relations today, in the first instance at least, through comparisons with the intense superpower rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union in the bipolar world of the Cold War. By referring to the articles in this special issue on narrating cold wars, its guest editor describes how such frames, models, and mentalities, as they are realized in and conveyed through narratives, can be challenged in a variety of ways.

Keywords: The Cold War and New Cold War, Sino-US relations, narratives, narration, historiography, Cold War themed films, television series

It is 2022. The historic Cold War ended just over three decades ago. But its fascination for people all over the world continues, not only among foreign policy professionals, whose grand-strategic perspectives on geopolitics

and geoeconomics are still often anchored to Cold War mentalities and the narratives through which they are vividly expressed but also in journalism, academia, as well as popular culture and the arts. This special issue of *Global Storytelling* centers on the narratives and narration that have featured in the ways that people during the Cold War made sense of their world for themselves and for others, in the ways that people today try to understand the Cold War of the past, and in the ways that people today think about their contemporary world and where it might be headed.

When Mikhail Gorbachev, the Soviet Union's last president before it collapsed in 1991, died on August 30, 2022, news media from all over the world put out extensive obituaries of the reformist Soviet leader under whose colorful rule the USSR crumbled and the Cold War ended bloodlessly. There was no shortage in the news media of reports carrying soaring tributes from the global elite; some reports were more nuanced, but all recognized his world-historic role at the "end of History."¹ Russian president Vladimir Putin, however, blamed Gorbachev for the failure to prevent the fall of the Soviet empire, pointing out that most of this high praise had come through the Western media.² China's coverage of Gorbachev's death was noticeably "low-key," indicating the Chinese leadership's aversion to political reform and cautious attitude toward economic liberalization. The lesson learned from the historic role Gorbachev's *perestroika* and *glasnost* had played in the USSR's fall affirms a fast-rising China's commitment today, enforced by the strong hand of its president Xi Jinping, to asserting, even tightening, political and economic control.³

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1. Just within a couple of days of Gorbachev's death, for instance, Archie Bland, "The death of Mikhail Gorbachev"; and Martin Farrer, "Mikhail Gorbachev: Tributes Pour in for 'One of a Kind' Soviet Leader," *Guardian*, August 31, 2022; Marilyn Berger, "Mikhail S. Gorbachev, Reformist Soviet Leader, Is Dead at 91," *New York Times*, August 30, 2022; "One of a Kind': World Reactions to Death of Mikhail Gorbachev," *Aljazeera*, August 31, 2022.
 2. Kevin Liffey, "West Mourns Gorbachev the Peacemaker, Russia Recalls His Failures," Reuters, September 1, 2022.
 3. Mimi Lau and Guo Rui, "China Offers Tributes to late Soviet Leader Mikhail Gorbachev for Fostering Beijing-Moscow Ties," *South China Morning Post*, August 31, 2021.

The Western and Eastern Blocs, and the hard political and ideological line dividing them, no longer exist formally thirty years after the end of the Cold War, but the global elite's attitudes and behaviors reveal that their ghostly presence haunts us today. Current events, it would seem, continue in large part to lie in the shadow of Cold War geopolitical division, binary and polarizing logic, and rhetorical styles. In this last decade especially, news reports and commentaries often reference the Cold War in analysis of current geopolitics and geoeconomics, particularly in trying to make sense of Sino-US rivalry. We are—as many would point out, and some without reservation—at the start of a New Cold War, essentially the same script and same narrative, but some of the roles are played by different actors, wearing different costumes. British historian Niall Ferguson, for instance, describes a “Cold War II,” where “the roles [between China and the original Soviet Union] have been reversed. China is now the giant, Russia the mean little sidekick. China under Xi remains strikingly faithful to the doctrine of Marx and Lenin. Russia under Putin has reverted to Tsarism.”⁴

Historiography

Today, the historic Cold War features prominently in undergraduate syllabuses and graduate dissertations in the fields of history, international relations, political science, area studies, as well as cultural, media, and film studies. Scholars continue to engage in lively debate over the details, evidence, concepts, methods, assumptions, theories, literatures, predictions, policy recommendations, and academic gatekeeping that shape and are in turn shaped by academic studies of the Cold War. Almost twenty years ago, American sociologist Craig Calhoun described how the field of Cold War studies was dominated by two approaches. A “traditional” approach, favored

4. Niall Ferguson, “Cold War II Has America at a Disadvantage as China Courts Russia,” *Boston Globe*, January 20, 2020.

by the US establishment, placed the responsibility for the Cold War on an aggressively expansionist Soviet Union eager to advance worldwide Communist revolution. According to this orthodox approach, it was the Soviet Union's provocative actions that forced the United States out of isolationism to contain but also to counter Communist insurgencies around the world, including through the reconstruction of its allies' postwar economies via a massive foreign aid plan. Challenging this official US version was a "revisionist" approach that shifted responsibility for the Cold War onto the United States. This more critical view emerged during the Vietnam War at a time of rising public skepticism—at home and abroad—of America's role in world affairs.⁵

A third approach, which Calhoun briefly described then as an emerging "post-revisionist" approach, has today become more widespread. Much less interested in assigning blame, post-revisionist scholarship appears more balanced, nuanced, and complex. It is more concerned with rigorous contextualization and rethinking of all relevant parties' motivations, perspectives, actions, and accomplishments during the period. *The Free World: Art and Thought in the Cold War*, authored by Harvard English professor Louis Menand, is exemplary in this respect.⁶ In his review of Menand's book about American artistic and intellectual achievements during the Cold War, Stanford professor Mark Greif identified its central argument in this way: "Artistic success owes little to vision and purpose, more to self-promotion, but most to unanticipated adoption by bigger systems with other aims, principally oriented toward money, political advantage, or commercial churn. For the greatness and inevitability of artistic consecration, Menand substitutes the arbitrary confluences of forces at any given moment."⁷

5. Craig Calhoun, "Cold War," in *Dictionary of the Social Sciences*, ed. Calhoun (Oxford University Press, 2002).

6. Louis Menand, *The Free World: Art and Thought in the Cold War* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021).

7. Mark Greif, "The Opportunists," *Atlantic*, June 2021.

This special issue of *Global Storytelling*, assembled around the theme of narrating cold wars, begins with an article by Menand. In it, he reflects on the historiographical considerations involved in the decade-long research and writing process leading to the publication of his critically acclaimed *The Free World*. These include, among others, establishing the appropriate time frames for analysis; determining the meanings and implications of big ideas like “freedom” for different parties in different contexts; uncovering the consequences of faulty evidence, misinterpretation, and misattribution in well-established scholarship; and decentering conventional reasons offered to explain artistic achievement. All the while, Menand recognizes the challenge of self-consciously maintaining an awareness of his own subjectivity as a product of the history he was trying to write.

An article on historiography of this kind clearly belongs to this special issue on narrating cold wars because history writing most often requires establishing narrative linkages so that available facts of the past, once verified, can be configured to tell a story that is continuous, logical, coherent, plausible, comprehensible, transmissible, and significant. Since ancient times, history (and some philosophy) has been a form of storytelling. Classic history tends to follow typical plots found in literary genres.⁸ Traditional and revisionist accounts of the Cold War often narrate the past by organizing materials into adversarial relationships between protagonists and antagonists, each with destinies to fulfill and problems to overcome, and the motivation, potential, and means to do it. They have become the grand narratives of the Cold War, through which historical explanations, interpretations, and criticisms of not only the past but also the present and even the future might be enabled but also, at the same time, constrained.

Metanarratives of history attempt to tell us something even more abstract than historical grand narratives. They try to reveal the logic, shape, direction, and even purpose of History (with a capital “H”), connecting

8. Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

past, present, and future in one dynamic and meaningful trajectory. For instance, American political scientist Francis Fukuyama famously wrote *The End of History and the Last Man* at the momentous end of the Cold War, arguing triumphantly that History was coming to an end since capitalist liberal democracy seemed to have triumphed over Fascism and Communism.⁹ In the historical battle of ideologies, all political communities in this diverse world would transition into capitalist liberal democracies according to their own path and pace, at which stage all human and social needs will be met through the practical and collective application of reason and there will be equal and reciprocal recognition of everyone's right to freedom. Fukuyama's metanarrative of history, built upon Platonic and Hegelian philosophical foundations to arrive at what seem obviously to be liberal conclusions, was in many respects a renewed version of modernization theory, dominant though already controversial in the 1950s and 1960s. It was a theory—made intelligible, persuasive, and exciting through a metanarrative of human enlightenment and progress—that linked economic growth and development, urbanization, industrialization, and mass education with the rise of a middle class and a transition from “traditional” authoritarian to “modern” democratic systems.¹⁰

Just as histories often find their most meaningful and emotionally satisfying expression through narrative and narration, so too do philosophies of history through metanarratives and metanarration. Fukuyama's philosophy of history in 1992 intersected with momentous world events in the years leading up to it, to create a declaratory moment in which celebration and hyperbole seemed appropriate. In the decades that followed this declaration, it has become all too clear that History is nowhere close to ending. In established liberal democracies, poverty remains persistent, inequality has

9. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

10. Seymour Martin Lipset, *Political Man: The Social Basis of Politics* (New York: Doubleday, 1960), contested most recently by Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, “Non-modernization: Power–Culture Trajectories and the Dynamics of Political Institutions,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 25, no. 1 (2022): 323–39.

deepened along many different axes, and corporate capital increasingly controls the levers of power in ways that reduce democracy to a mere sham, as capitalism grows mostly unfettered. Right-wing populism has risen in both authoritarian and democratic countries. Autocratization is now being reported as a rising trend around the world.¹¹ And the rise of China has buoyed talk about an “Asian century”—even a “Chinese century”—poised to replace Pax Americana with Pax Sinica.¹² Without the emergence of more satisfactory narratives and metanarratives to explain our still-tumultuous history, the Cold War narratives that brought so much meaning (as well as violence and turmoil) to ordinary people’s lives and livelihoods from 1945 to 1991 will persist and continue to prevail, endangering all corners of the world with a constant threat of devastating war and the inability to cooperate internationally in the urgent pursuit of implementable solutions for global problems of the most existentially critical kind.

Popular Culture and the Arts

One powerful way in which Cold War narratives persist and prevail is through their production, circulation, consumption, and reappropriation in popular culture and the arts. Cinema and television continue to feature Cold War themes, character types, settings, and styles for entertaining today’s audiences. For example, in *The Odyssey of Communism: Visual Narratives, Memory and Culture*,¹³ a collection of essays edited by Michaela Praisler and Oana-Celia Gheorghiu, both academics at the University of Galați, one finds interdisciplinary analysis of films that present Communism in terms

11. V-Dem Institute, *Autocratization Turns Viral: Democracy Report 2021* (Gothenburg: University of Gothenburg, 2021).

12. Hal Brands, “The Chinese Century?” *National Interest*, February 19, 2018; William Rees-Mogg, “This Is the Chinese Century,” *(London) Times*, January 3, 2005.

13. Michaela Praisler and Oana-Celia Gheorghiu, eds., *The Odyssey of Communism: Visual Narratives, Memory and Culture* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2021).

that range from the most hellish to the rosiest. The book, which suggests that an insufficiently interrogated Communist past demands revisiting, is reviewed by Isabel Galwey in this issue.

Over the last five years alone, there have been numerous critically or commercially successful films as well as television drama and comedy series that are variations on Cold War themes and narratives. Many of them are popularly available on streaming platforms like Netflix and Apple TV+. A broad-ranging sample of such shows might include:

- *Milada* (2017, directed by David Mrnka, Czech Republic/United States): A biographical film about Milada Horáková, who struggled as a political activist in Czechoslovakia to advance freedom, democracy, and human rights, opposing first the Nazis and then the Communist Party. She was executed under fabricated charges. The film ends with the caption: “Over 2 billion people live under dictatorships around the world today. We dedicate this movie to their fight for freedom.”
- *A Very Secret Service* (season 1 in 2015, season 2 in 2018, directed by Alexandre Courtès, France, Netflix): A comedy series, full of parody and wit, about André Merlaux, who is recruited into the French Secret Service during the height of the Cold War. He undergoes training and undertakes outlandish missions while, in the background, France is confronted abroad by decolonization and by countercultural developments at home.
- *Cold War* (2018, directed by Paweł Pawlikowski, Poland/United Kingdom/France/Belgium): A bleak arthouse film about a doomed pair of lovers, Wiktor and Zula, who are a poor match but unavoidably attracted to each other. Over the 1940s to the 1960s, their story moves from Poland, to Germany, to Yugoslavia, to France, and then back again to Poland, where—at the end of the film—they attempt suicide. The background is saturated with Cold War politics, in many ways responsible for making their already troubled union impossible and their happiness unattainable.

- *Traitors* (2019, created by Bathsheba Doran, United Kingdom, Netflix): A television drama miniseries set in postwar London, where a brilliant young woman, Feef Symonds, agrees to spy on her own government for the Americans, who convince her that there is a Soviet spy in the UK Cabinet Office.
- *For All Mankind* (three seasons since 2019, created by Ronald D. Moore, Matt Wolpert, and Ben Nedivi, United States, Apple TV+): An “alternate history” television drama series exploring what could have happened—from the 1960s to the 1990s—if the Soviet Union were, counterfactually, to have put a man on the moon ahead of the United States and if the “space race” never ended.
- *Operation Buffalo* (2020, directed by Peter Duncan, Australia, Netflix): A satirical comedy-drama television series based on British nuclear bomb tests (code named Operation Buffalo) carried out from a secret military base in the remote outback of Australia in the 1950s. A caption at the beginning of each episode reads: “This is a work of historical fiction, but a lot of the really bad history actually happened.”
- *Da 5 Bloods* (2020, directed by Spike Lee, United States, Netflix): A film about a group of four African American Vietnam War veterans, who return to Vietnam in their old age. Their objective is to locate and bring home to the United States the remains of their squad leader, who had fallen in battle. They also aim to retrieve a chest of gold bars that they had found and buried while on duty there.
- *Gloria* (2021, directed by Tiago Guedes, Portugal, Netflix): A television thriller series about a young man in the Portuguese village of Glória do Ribatejo, João Vidal, whom the Soviet Union recruits as a spy to undertake risky missions at the height of the Cold War.
- *Autumn Girl* (2021, directed by Katarzyna Klimkiewicz, Poland, Netflix): A musical film about Kalina Jedrusik, a singer and actress in 1960s Poland, who resolves to maintain her free-spirited lifestyle and sex-symbol image in a socially and culturally conservative Communist

- society, where men in power use their access to state levers to advance their sexual desires over attractive women like Jedrusik.
- *18½* (2021, directed by Dan Mirvish, United States): A dark comedy film about a White House transcriber, Connie, who finds the only copy of the missing eighteen and a half minutes of President Richard Nixon's politically scandalous tapes and, together with a journalist Paul, tries in vain to turn over the information.
 - *Stasikomödie* (A Stasi comedy) (2022, directed by Leander Haußmann, Germany): A comedy film about famous author Ludger Fuchs who, as a young man in the 1980s, was recruited by the East German Secret Police (the Stasi), and then deployed to spy on subversives living in a bohemian part of Berlin. In their company, he eventually became a talented poet and then the face of resistance to the Communist German Democratic Republic.
 - *Kleo* (2022, created by Hanno Hackfort, Bob Konrad, and Richard Kropf, Germany, Netflix): A television drama series, with dark comedy elements, about Kleo Straub, a quirky and highly skilled former agent of the East German Stasi, who—after the fall of the Berlin Wall—is released from prison and takes “Tarantino-style” revenge on those who betrayed her.

Out of this broad-ranging sample, a few of the shows have clearly been constructed literally from old Cold War narratives, reinforcing them in many ways. Others “replay” these narratives with highly self-conscious irony or a parodic sensibility that bestows a pleasurable (and perhaps even eye-opening) strangeness upon the Cold War tropes that have become so normalized in everyday life. Others focus on the tragic elements of Cold War narratives, as a direct and perhaps cathartic mode of critique. With stories set in the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany (East and West), Czechoslovakia, Poland, Australia, and Portugal, several of these shows reveal not only the intricately global effects of the historic Cold War, but also how globally entertaining these Cold War narratives have been and can be to audiences everywhere.

Also interesting to note is the presence of strong female protagonists in many of these recent shows: a charismatic activist in *Milada*, who is executed for her commitment to freedom, democracy, and human rights in Communist Czechoslovakia; a skillful and, at first, thoroughly loyal agent of the Stasi in *Kleo*, who takes revenge on the people who betrayed her, including those within the Communist system; a sexually liberated performer in *Autumn Girl*, who asserts her independence, creativity, and free-spiritedness in Communist Poland; a British spy in *Traitors*, working for the United States to identify a Soviet spy in the British political establishment; a White House transcriber in *18½*, who almost manages to expose the missing eighteen and a half minutes of Nixon's infamous tapes; and heroic female US astronauts in *For All Mankind*. While none of the Cold War-era films and television shows discussed in the articles of this special issue feature strong female protagonists, it may be a stretch to suggest that these more recent shows that do indicate an emergence in popular culture of feminist modes of resistance to a Cold War patriarchy—after all, some of them end up reinforcing Cold War masculinities. But they do nevertheless present avenues for reimagining the affective power of narratives to reshape conditions of possibility for a truly post-Cold War world.

The United States and the Communist Bloc

The first three articles in this special issue on narrating cold wars revolve around the United States. As discussed earlier, Louis Menand's article, "Notes on Cold War Historiography," reflects on the historiographical considerations behind the writing of his *The Free World*, a book that challenged academic orthodoxies surrounding American artistic and intellectual achievements in the "cultural Cold War."

In her article, "Tales from the Hot Cold War," Martha Bayles, a humanities professor at Boston College, analyzes three Korean War films and thirteen Vietnam War films—that is to say, films about the proxy wars

in Asia—produced from the 1950s to the 1980s by what she calls the “Washington-Hollywood pact.” She discusses the implications of this evolving partnership between the US political and foreign policy establishment and the American movie industry, which she says behaves like “an old married couple who quarrel at home but are deeply united in their outward-facing dealings with the world.” This pact was responsible for some of the most vivid and even inspiring cinematic storytelling to justify war, at home and abroad. However, Bayles argues that this pact is, today, in dire need of repair, as Hollywood seems more willing to compromise its independence for a bigger—though illusory—share of the global, especially the Chinese, market.

The topic of Hollywood’s relationship with China’s gigantic movie industry is also the subject of *Hollywood in China: Behind the Scenes of the World’s Largest Movie Market*, a book by Ying Zhu, who is a Hong Kong Baptist University film professor and Professor Emeritus at the City University of New York.¹⁴ Zhu’s nuanced depiction of the Sino-Hollywood dynamic is a post-revisionist treatment of the Cold War and its cultural legacies. The book is reviewed by Yongli Li in this issue.

In her article, “Bomb Archive: The Marshall Islands as Cold War Film Set,” film curator and researcher Ilona Jurkonytė discusses how the logic, modality, and resources of Hollywood were extended to the urgent task of audio-visual documentation of American nuclear bomb testing within the coral reef in the Marshall Islands commonly known as Bikini Atoll (though Jurkonytė uses the Marshallese transliteration “Pikinni”). Jurkonytė explains how a “bomb archive” was thereby produced and then used to construct “scientific” and “technological” narratives to justify what she argues were in fact efforts by the United States to expand its direct influence into oceanic spheres. Thus, she argues, “the production and circulation of the bomb archive is at the core of nuclear colonial injustices,” in which Marshall Islanders were subjected to relocation, resettlement, and dangerous levels of

14. Ying Zhu, *Hollywood in China: Behind the Scenes of the World’s Largest Movie Market* (New York: New Press, 2022).

radioactive exposure. Jurkonytė provocatively urges the reader to view the Marshall Islands not just analogically but literally, as a film set to produce archival materials that have gone into the global weaving of stories that obscure what she argues is, in fact, neocolonial expansion.

If the first three articles question—in their own different ways—the (popular) cultural achievements of Cold War America, the fourth article in this special issue critiques a popular East German television series, *Das unsichtbare Visier*, as propagandistic storytelling. Tarik Cyril Amar’s article is cheekily titled “*Das unsichtbare Visier*—A 1970s Cold War Intelligence TV Series as a Fantasy of International and Intranational Empowerment; or, How East Germany Saved the World and West Germans Too.” In it, the history professor at Koç University discusses how the Cold War has engendered a type of character in popular culture—the intelligence agent, fictional and thoroughly heroic. Best known among them is the United Kingdom’s Agent 007, James Bond, who has not only survived but thrived as a movie franchise well beyond the original Cold War. In East Germany were the Stasi agents featured in *Das unsichtbare Visier*, a series that was televised during the 1970s. These agents were stylized as cosmopolitan sophisticates, moving around the world to save innocent people, in both the East and the West, from the evils of capitalism (but also from neo-Nazism and neo-Fascism) and from its ruthless elite. *Das unsichtbare Visier* is an elaborate fantasy of Communist virtue, sophistication, and heroism, disproportionate to East Germany’s stature in the Cold War world. As Amar notes, “Like Britain’s James Bond, these were agents of an at best middling power doing major things in the world at large.”

Nonalignment

The first four articles in this special issue feature principal participants of the historic Cold War: the US superpower helming the capitalist-liberal-democratic West (the so-called First World) on the one hand and, on the other,

East Germany, a key member of the Soviet-led Communist bloc (the Second World). In between these two blocs were numerous countries—mainly newly independent nations of the so-called Third World—that chose to be politically and ideologically “nonaligned,” forming an international movement to express and defend this position.

The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) is the central subject of the fifth article in this special issue, titled “To Whom Have We Been Talking? Naeem Mohaiemen’s Fabulation of a People-to-Come.” Its author, Noit Banai, is an art historian and professor at Hong Kong Baptist University. Her article is a critical analysis of Bangladeshi filmmaker and Columbia University professor Naeem Mohaiemen’s 2017 film installation *Two Meetings and a Funeral* and his 2019 and 2021 performance-lecture *The Shortest Speech*. Banai’s article locates in Mohaiemen’s work the difficult question of whether NAM was ever able to surpass or even transcend the colonial Western models of society and state that had been so deeply imprinted in the former colonies and the mindsets of its nationalist elite. Banai notes how Mohaiemen’s film uneasily juxtaposes two highly contrasting registers: the visionary speeches given by these towering nationalist leaders at the early NAM conferences and the “fragmented streams of consciousness about a miscarried past” characterizing the voices of present-day commentators whom the film engages to make sense of that strangely heroic past. The speeches at these NAM conferences, captured and disseminated on television, were—Banai explains—a form of “fabulation,” as Gilles Deleuze uses the term. They were an act of “legending,” a minority’s counter-narration to create a people-to-come.

The sixth article in this issue explores a different kind of nonalignment. The British colonial administration in Hong Kong had put in place, for the sake of securing political stability, an active practice of film censorship that would give their colony the appearance of neutrality toward the United States (with whom Britain had a special relationship) and US-backed Taiwan on the one hand and Communist China (whose subversive activities Britain was highly apprehensive about) on the other. In “The Man Without a Country: British Imperial Nostalgia in *Ferry to Hong Kong* (1959),” Kenny K. K. Ng,

a film professor at Hong Kong Baptist University, closely analyzes the star-studded but commercially and critically unsuccessful British film *Ferry to Hong Kong*, which was also a sort of British-American “joint venture.” As Ng argues, “*Ferry to Hong Kong* is taken as an imaginary battleground in Britain’s ideological war against the forewarned Communist intrusions into the Crown colony.” Just as it was constrained by the considerations of Cold War politics, the film also reflected a deep sense of imperial nostalgia and of loss for the British empire, confronted at the time by pressures for decolonization and a decline in its international prestige and influence.

The New Cold War

While the first six articles in this special issue focus mainly on events that happened during the Cold War period, its final article considers the legacies of the Cold War for geopolitics today. Marina Kaneti, an international affairs professor at the National University of Singapore, examines the possibility of international cooperation to tackle the climate crisis today, in the context of a “New Cold War” between the United States and China. In her article, “Imagining Cooperation: Cold War Aesthetics for a Hot Planet,” Kaneti performs a visual analysis of popular magazine covers in the United States and the Soviet Union, noting how the public today remembers the space race during the Cold War principally through the lens of “competition,” even though there was substantial cooperation at the time. Drawing insights from the politics of aesthetics, Kaneti considers the affective power of images to orientate/disorientate the common sense basis of legitimating collaborative action to deal with the climate crisis, even, as she describes, “in times of extreme hostility and ideological opposition.”

Indeed, extreme hostility is by no means a hyperbolic description of Sino-US relations in the present time. Harvard political scientist Graham Allison theorized that a rising China that threatens to displace US global hegemony in a unipolar, post-Cold War world will create enough stress in

the international system to increase significantly the likelihood of war. This much-cited “Thucydides trap” was based on Alison’s study of sixteen historically similar case studies, out of which twelve had led to war.¹⁵ Today, there are a number of provocative issues that could further heighten these chances of war, such as territorial disputes in the South China Sea; human rights issues in Tibet and Xinjiang; tense relations with North Korea, Hong Kong, and Taiwan; cyber espionage; and trade and tech wars.

The narrative of China’s rise begins in the late 1970s, when major economic reforms led to continuous economic growth at a consistently impressive level. Even if we recognize the many weaknesses of China’s economy today, it is still predicted to overtake that of the United States to become the world’s largest this century. Under President Xi, many have observed a more nationalistic China, its “wolf warrior diplomacy” appearing to replace former assurances of a “peaceful rise.” The “wolf warrior” term comes from a series of commercially successful Chinese patriotic action films. The tagline of one of these films was, “Even though a thousand miles away, anyone who affronts China will pay.”¹⁶ Oxford University history professor Rana Mitter finds a connection between China’s “new nationalism” and a shift in the state’s direction of war narratives and memories: its war against Japan during World War II, once viewed through a narrative of victimization, has now become a founding myth. His book *China’s Good War: How World War II Is Shaping a New Nationalism* is reviewed by Zuo Fuwei in this issue.¹⁷

Meanwhile, the narrative of American decline and its struggle to retain its preeminent status in the world includes pessimistic accounts of economic stagnation, unaffordable military commitments around the world, the rise of authoritarian populism, cultural-intellectual exhaustion, institutional decay,

15. Graham Alison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap?* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017).

16. Ben Westcott and Steven Jiang, “China Is Embracing a New Brand of Foreign Policy. Here’s What Wolf Warrior Diplomacy Means,” CNN, May 29, 2020.

17. Rana Mitter, *China’s Good War: How World War II Is Shaping a New Nationalism* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Belknap Press, 2020).

and dysfunctional domestic politics. America has become a victim of its own success.¹⁸ Its former president Donald Trump has often named China as the number one threat. Continuing that approach, current president Joe Biden is determined to do everything he can to prevent China from becoming number one.¹⁹ In a public appearance in July 2022, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) director described China as the “biggest long-term threat to our economic and national security,” citing examples that included massive-scale cyber espionage, technology theft, interference in domestic politics and elections, and a possible invasion of Taiwan. China’s Foreign Ministry spokesman warned him not to “hype up the China threat theory” with “irresponsible” remarks to “smear and attack China,” also advising him to “cast away imagined demons” and his “Cold War mentality.”²⁰

What we now have is the beginnings of a new and already very tense superpower rivalry between a declining United States and an emerging China, the start of a New Cold War that is likely to continue spawning Cold War–style narratives that will repolarize the world, with either/or ways of thinking to mobilize for “us” and against “them,” often through the demonization of “them” into an “enemy-other.” In these times of extreme hostility, can new and affectively powerful narratives expressed through popular culture (films, television, visual art, etc.) reorientate the mindsets of peoples of democratic and less democratic countries to demand that their leaders pay more attention to those problems that legitimately and urgently require global cooperation to solve? These problems include environmental degradation, poverty, inequality, social justice, and several other issues identified, for example, in the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals.²¹

18. For example, Ross Douthat, *The Decadent Society: How We Became the Victims of Our Own Success* (New York: Avid Reader, 2020).

19. “Joe Biden Is Determined That China Should Not Displace America,” *Economist*, July 17, 2021.

20. Gordon Corera, “China: MI5 and FBI Heads Warn of ‘Immense’ Threat,” BBC News, July 7, 2022.

21. Kenneth Paul Tan, *Movies to Save Our World: Imagining Poverty, Inequality, and Environmental Destruction in the 21st Century* (Singapore: Penguin, 2022).

Narrating a Cold War Conference

The articles in this special issue were selected from more than sixty papers presented at a three-day conference on narrating Cold Wars, which ran from November 11–13, 2021, and was organized by Hong Kong Baptist University’s School of Communication (and Film), in collaboration with the Academy of Visual Arts and the Department of Government and International Studies. I had the pleasure of curating the conference and would like to place on record my thanks to members of the organizing committee: Noit Banai, Jean-Pierre Cabestan, Alistair Cole, Cherian George, Mateja Kovacic, Daya Thussu, and Ying Zhu. Videos of all conference sessions can be viewed at <https://www.hkbu.online/narratingcoldwars/>.



In my opening remarks at the conference, I asked, “Is the Cold War an old specter that tenaciously haunts our world, begging to be exorcized and therefore liberated from our collective lack of imagination? If so, then we might want to think of these three days as an exorcism, a ritual of diverse liturgies to summon the ghosts of the Cold War so that we may set them, and us, free at last.” It is my hope that the articles in this special issue will contribute valuably to a long but necessary ritual to rid us of that debilitating Cold War specter.