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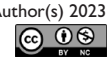
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Visualising state biographical narratives: A rhetorical analysis of Chinese and North Korean propaganda photographs

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Abstract

Biographical narratives generate a continuous sense of political community across the state's past, present and future, and provide the state with ontological security. Building on growing International Relations scholarship that highlights the power of visuals in shaping global politics, our article proposes *visual rhetorical analysis* as a tool to interrogate how governments employ images to tell their biographical narratives. The rhetorical approach transcends the methodological divide in the current 'visual turn' literature between the cognitive psychological and poststructuralist perspectives. We illustrate the analytical value of the rhetorical approach through an empirical study of how the totalitarian regimes of China and North Korea communicate their biographical narratives – the 'rightful great power' narrative and the 'family state' narrative, respectively – through propaganda imagery of their leaders. To this end, we develop a close semiotic reading of selected photographs of Xi Jinping and Kim Jong-un in different narrative settings.

Keywords

biographical narratives, China, constructivism, North Korea, photographs, visual semiotics

Introduction

In recent years, the field of International Relations (IR) has experienced both a 'narrative turn' (Roberts, 2006) and a 'visual' or 'pictorial turn' (Mitchell, 1986). Building on insights in literary studies and cognitive linguistics (Fludernik, 2009; Sarbin, 1986; White, 1987), the growing body of scholarship on narratives in IR argues that we are all 'story-telling beings' (Devetak, 2009: 795) who think, communicate and make sense of our environment through narratives. Such narratives are thus central to human cognition

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and (political) community building (Patterson and Monroe, 1998). This includes the state, which is constituted discursively through the narratives that are being told about it (Ringmar, 1996). At the same time, a similarly vibrant area of IR research explores the enhanced role of visuals for the fabric and practice of international politics (for an overview, see Bleiker, 2018). This scholarship suggests that technological revolutions in mass communication and electronic media have pushed world politics into an 'age of images' (Williams, 2003: 527), in which visual representations become ever more salient reference points that shape how we experience, understand and recall international politics.

Despite obvious points of intersection, however, these two fields of IR scholarship have largely developed independently from each other. Only recently has scholarly attention focused on the relationship between visuals and narratives, analysing visuals as powerful instruments of strategic storytelling (Hellmann and Oppermann, 2022a; Van Noort, 2020) and discussing how visuals obtain meaning as part of broader narratives (Freistein and Gadinger, 2020, 2022). Along these lines, we contend that bringing the study of narratives and visuals together promises a fuller understanding of visual storytelling in international relations.

The purpose of our article is to contribute to such efforts by exploring the role of images in communicating state *biographical narratives* (Berenskoetter, 2014). We introduce *visual rhetorical analysis* as a particularly useful framework for analysing visual storytelling by strategic actors and apply this framework to an empirical investigation of how the totalitarian regimes of China and North Korea use propaganda photographs of their respective leaders – Xi Jinping and Kim Jong-un – to visualise their state biographical narratives of 'the rightful great power' (China) and 'the family state' (North Korea). We focus on photographs of state leaders because these individuals play a heightened role in crafting state biographical narratives and, to an extent, embody such narratives – in particular, in totalitarian political systems. Photographs of state leaders may thus function as 'shortcuts' to state biographical narratives and as 'a crucial reference point of collective identification' (Berenskoetter, 2021: 1060).

We develop our argument as follows. The first section relates state biographical narratives to visual storytelling. We then develop the rhetorical perspective on the study of visual storytelling in international relations. Moving on to our empirical case, the third section introduces the state biographical narratives of China and North Korea, highlighting both similarities and differences. This prepares the ground for our subsequent visual rhetorical analysis of how the two regimes use photographs of their leaders to communicate their respective state biographical narratives. We provide a close social semiotic reading of selected photographs that depict Xi Jinping and Kim Jong-un in various settings – each presenting particular challenges for visual storytelling. The article ends with short reflections on the promise and limitations of visual rhetorical analysis in bringing together the study of narratives and visuals.

Biographical storytelling through photographs of the state leader

Based on the premise that humans are storytelling animals, narratives have become a widely used concept in IR and an increasing number of studies explore their formation, strategic projection and/or resonance on a diverse range of topics, including foreign policy, national identity and public support for war (e.g. Browning, 2008; De Graaf et al., 2015; Hønneland, 2010). While definitions can be more or less demanding, narratives

consist, at their core, of a set of characters acting out a plot that unfolds in a particular setting (Roselle et al., 2014; Shenhav, 2006). The narrative structure makes what happens in a story intelligible by placing events in a temporal sequence and causal relationship (Spencer, 2016).

Biographical narratives are understood as narratives that states tell about themselves. They make sense of a state's past (the experienced space) and imagined future (the envisioned space), orientating it in terms of meaningful horizons of (past) experience and (future) possibilities (Berenskoetter, 2014). In other words, state biographical narratives generate a continuous sense of political community across the state's past, present and future, and provide it with ontological security (Berenskoetter, 2021; Subotić, 2016).

The construction of state biographical narratives is a political project involving purposeful actors. The ability of actors to shape such narratives is a significant source of political power (Berenskoetter, 2021: 1058). Like all narratives, state biographical narratives are necessarily selective and foreground some elements of the 'national story' while backgrounding others (Berenskoetter, 2014: 278–280). Although narratives 'cannot be made up of nothing' (Roselle et al., 2014: 78) and are constrained by pre-existing intersubjective understandings, political actors still have agency to craft state biographical narratives strategically. Specifically, 'narrative entrepreneurs' (Subotić, 2016: 615) can seek to mould narratives in ways that project a particular view of the state and use them as a political tool to 'expand their influence, manage expectations, and change the discursive environment they operate in' (Miskimmon et al., 2013: 2). This is the case, in particular, for the highest representatives of the state who – as 'narrator[s]-in-chief' (Krebs, 2015: 49) – occupy a unique position in articulating state biographical narratives. To this purpose, the agency of state leaders should be greater in fluid narrative contexts, in which competing stories about the state coexist, and more closely circumscribed in 'settled narrative situations', in which a particular biographical narrative of the state is already dominant (Krebs, 2015: 32–36).

State biographical narratives, moreover, operate at both the domestic and international levels (Berenskoetter, 2014: 262). They are simultaneously inward and outward facing. Domestically, state biographical narratives foster collective sentiments of national identity and serve to generate legitimacy for the state and the political regime (Berenskoetter, 2014: 280). Internationally, state biographical narratives project a continuous 'national image' (Boulding, 1959) that serves to cultivate favourable views of the state among foreign audiences (Miskimmon et al., 2017). Governments communicate these narratives to foreign publics through their public diplomacy, with the aim of building up understanding and support for their values and interests (see Gilboa, 2008; Melissen, 2005; Tago, 2018). Ultimately, they seek to forge their international storytelling into powerful 'public diplomacy narratives' (Melissen, 2013: 448) that enhance their soft power on the international stage (Nye, 2008). We know from existing research that states in East Asia – China in particular – place much emphasis on this rationale for 'strategic public diplomacy' (Manheim, 1994) as a soft power tool (d'Hooghe, 2011: 163–164).

The domestic and international dimensions of state biographical narratives, in turn, are inexorably linked. For state biographical narratives to be effective, the two arenas of storytelling must avoid contradicting each other, not least because – in practice – they can often not be kept entirely separate (Melissen, 2013: 449; also see Yang, 2020). Storytelling discrepancies between the two arenas will likely weaken and undermine the narratives in both arenas, whereas consistent storytelling may generate positive feedback effects between them. In particular, the international storytelling of governments threatens to

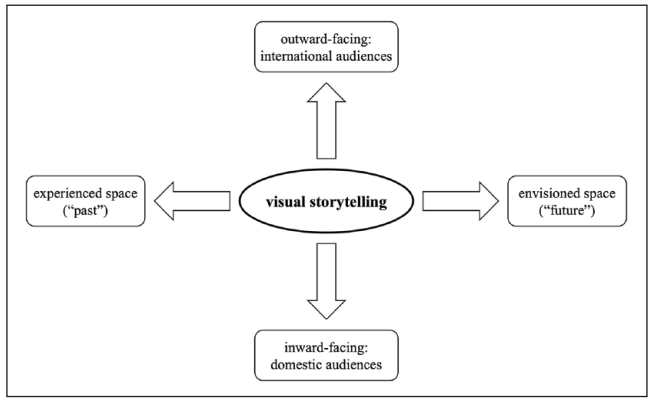

Figure 1. Visual storytelling in biographical narratives.

undermine their domestic legitimacy if it veers too far from domestic storytelling, but can be turned into an internal legitimacy resource if it complements the domestic story. In other words, the outward facing dimension of state biographical narratives is to some extent 'entrapped' (Schimmelfennig, 2001) by their inward facing dimension and vice versa. It is the strategic task and challenge of narrative entrepreneurs at the intersection between the domestic and the international to construct and disseminate state biographical narratives that are coherent across the two dimensions (Berenskoetter, 2014: 262).

To this end, visuals can be a powerful means. Specifically, from a storytelling perspective, photographs can be understood as 'moments frozen in time. Something always comes before and something always follows after' (Goodnow, 2020: 271). An important insight of 'visual turn' scholarship in IR is precisely that images perform communicative acts that are distinct from verbal communication. Most notably, three properties set visual communication apart from verbal language. First, audiences typically see images – especially photographs (Barthes, 1977) – as 'visual quotations' (Bleiker and Kay, 2007: 140) and direct copies of reality. Second, because they convey a sense of authenticity, images have the ability to evoke powerful emotions. As Bleiker summarises, 'There is clearly something unique about images. They have a special status. They generate excitement and anxieties' (Bleiker, 2018: 9). Third, compared with verbal language, visual images 'travel' more easily across linguistic and cultural boundaries (Hansen, 2011: 55).

Given the general properties of visual communication, photographs should be particularly effective in disseminating state biographical narratives to both domestic and international audiences, evoking affective responses to such narratives and creating bonds of identity between the main characters and target audiences. We therefore conceptualise visual storytelling – through photographs of state leaders – as a powerful resource in the construction and communication of state biographical narratives (see Figure 1). The following section introduces visual rhetorical analysis as a particularly useful approach to explore the role of photographs in visualising and communicating state biographical narratives.

Visual rhetorical analysis

The growing 'visual turn' literature in IR has been dominated, broadly speaking, by two methodological perspectives: the cognitive psychology approach and the poststructuralist

approach. For reasons that we will discuss in this section, we believe that both approaches have limitations when it comes to analysing the visualisation of biographical narratives. We therefore introduce visual rhetorical analysis as a more appropriate tool to unpack visual strategic storytelling – a methodological approach that has so far received little attention in IR.

The cognitive psychology approach is based on the premise that the human brain – for evolutionary reasons – prioritises visual over verbal information. To navigate social complexity, humans rely on visual cues that contain information on others' behavioural intentions and affective motivations. Crucially, the processing of visual cues 'is so efficient that basic recognition and emotional response occur well before registration in conscious awareness' (Grabe, 2020: 54). In other words, our attitudinal and affective responses to new information are often instinctively activated by visual cues rather than by purposive thinking. Within these parameters, research has explored two questions in particular. For one, scholars have analysed how news media employ visual cues to frame issues of international politics. Notable examples include refugees (e.g. Parrott et al., 2019; Zhang and Hellmueller, 2017) and violent conflict (e.g. Fahmy, 2010; Hellmann, 2020). Moreover, studies have tackled the question of how visual cues shape how citizens think about foreign policy – including, for example, with respect to military intervention (Soroka et al., 2016), defence spending (Caverley and Krupnikov, 2017), anti-terrorism measures (Gadarian, 2010), pariah states (Hellmann and Oppermann, 2022b) and the use of drones (Scharrer and Blackburn, 2015). The underlying assumption is that the visual cues under investigation have universal meaning; they produce different types of individual-level effects (attitudinal, behavioural or affective) by triggering neuroscientific or biobehavioural mechanisms that are wired into our brains. The direction and strength of effects are thought to be mediated by third factors, such as audiences' political knowledge or partisan identity.

In contrast, the poststructuralist perspective on visual analysis is thoroughly anti-foundationalist. Whereas the cognitive psychology approach assumes that – through the persuasive function of visual cues – the sender of a message can exercise power over the receiver, poststructuralism theorises that power is not owned by agents, but instead operates through discursively constructed knowledge.[1] In line with this premise, poststructuralist IR is mainly interested in the question of how visual images, by contributing to the creation of 'knowledge' and 'truth', shape political and social power relations. Critical security studies, in particular, has significantly added to this body of research, showing how visuals – ranging from iconic photographs (Hansen, 2015; Heck and Schlag, 2012) and satellite images (Shim, 2013) to cartoons (Hansen, 2011) and video games (Power, 2007) – securitise certain issues, thereby empowering governments to take extraordinary measures to address these 'threats'. Another notable research direction concerns the role of visual images – including images of poverty (Dogra, 2015), climate change (Manzo, 2010), corruption (Hellmann, 2019) and HIV/AIDS (Bleiker and Kay, 2007) – in perpetuating colonial discourses that place the Global South in an inferior position vis-à-vis the North. Meanwhile, other studies have analysed different forms of visual language – such as the infamous Abu Ghraib pictures (MacKenzie, 2020), photographs of grieving military wives (Zarzycka, 2016) and populist campaign posters (Freistein and Gadinger, 2020) – with a focus on gender norms and power dynamics.

To interrogate how visuals construct knowledge of the world, poststructuralists typically take into consideration the wider discursive environment in which audiences make sense of images. This is underpinned by the assumption that 'our interpretation of images

depends on historical context and our cultural knowledge – the conventions the images use or play off of, the other images they refer to, and the familiar figures and symbols they include' (Sturken and Cartwright, 2018: 33). That is to say, audiences are believed to read new images by reference to broader verbal discourses ('interextuality') as well as other visuals, especially iconic images ('inter-visuality') (Freistein and Gadinger, 2022; Hansen, 2011: 54–55).

While both the cognitive psychology approach and the poststructuralist approach have done much to improve our understanding of how visual images shape global politics, we believe that neither offers a fully satisfactory framework for analysing visual biographical narratives. As discussed in the previous section, governments employ such narratives strategically to situate the nation state in an experienced and envisioned space, with the aim to construct a stable collective self-identity and a sense of ontological security. Seen from the perspective of the cognitive psychology approach, the question of how governments – through visual storytelling – participate in the construction of social 'reality' lies outside the boundaries of positivist epistemology and can therefore not be studied empirically. Meanwhile, the poststructuralist approach does not offer suitable tools for the analysis of strategic visual storytelling either, because its underlying assumption – that the meaning of an image is determined by the historical and cultural context – denies political actors the strategic ability to employ visuals as a means to further their own agenda.

To address these limitations, we propose visual rhetorical analysis as an alternative perspective for the study of biographical narratives (and strategic narratives more generally). However, at the outset, we want to emphasise that visual rhetorical analysis is not an entirely different way of making sense of non-verbal communication; instead, it borrows ideas from both the cognitive psychology and poststructuralist approaches. This complements previous efforts, above all in media and communication studies, to transcend methodological divides. In particular, we acknowledge frameworks for the analysis of visual news framing that seek to bridge positivist and anti-foundationalist positions (e.g. Rodriguez and Dimitrova, 2011). However, we feel it is important to maintain a clear conceptual distinction between frames and narratives. Specifically, narratives – consisting of characters, plot and setting – are broader than frames and represent a larger unit of discourse. While frames may work as a 'brick' that contributes to the emplotment of narratives, frames themselves lack narrativity (Coticchia and Catanzaro, 2022). Frames also perform mainly analytical tasks in that they 'select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text' (Entman, 1993: 52). Narratives, in contrast, are more bound up with meaning-making and collective identity formation, often encouraging audiences to form an emotional relationship with the main characters. Based on this conceptual understanding, we believe that visual rhetorical analysis can make a distinct contribution to the 'visual turn' in IR.

According to the rhetorical approach,

> What turns a visual object into a communicative artefact – a symbol that communicates and can be studied as rhetoric – is the presence of three characteristics . . . The image must be symbolic, involve human intervention, and be presented to an audience for the purpose of communicating with that audience (Foss, 2005: 144).

The first requirement – that of symbolic communication – 'means studying the surface level (the image itself) *and* looking at the image . . . *beyond* the immediate visual image itself' (Patton, 2020: 127, emphasis added). Applied to visual storytelling, the rhetorical analysis thus highlights two different planes of analysis. On the first plane, images may

contain narratives *within themselves*. These narratives can be revealed by analysing the surface level – in particular, by identifying characters, describing the visible environment and observing actions performed by the characters. On the second plane, the rhetorical approach asks us to look beyond 'face value' storytelling devices to expose how images work to *support* wider identity narratives (Gries, 2020). Specifically, in relation to biographical narratives, we are encouraged to investigate how photographs and other images bring the nation state's identity 'to life' – for example, by evoking emotions or by activating imaginary relationships with people depicted. As visual rhetoric scholars argue, 'images are processed through feeling before they are understood at a cognitive level' (Danesi, 2017: para. 4).

Second, the production of visual rhetoric 'involves the *conscious* decision to communicate as well as *conscious* choices about the strategies to employ in areas such as colour, form, media, and size' (Foss, 2005: 144, emphasis added). Here, it is important to emphasise that governments employ a whole range of media to communicate biographical narratives; photography is only one item in the storyteller's toolkit. Moreover, compared with photographs, many other media types – in particular, when they combine (sequential or moving) images with text, such as documentaries (e.g. Benabdallah, 2021) and TV dramas (e.g. Son and Schwak, 2022) – offer many advantages when it comes to crafting biographical narratives. While photographs have the ability to create a sense of authenticity and trigger strong emotional responses in viewers, they can only ever provide a snapshot of a narrative. As such, images function primarily as a memory aid, allowing audiences to remember cued narratives.

Finally, the third characteristic involved in visual rhetoric is the presence of an audience. Importantly, the rhetorical approach endows viewers with agency, acknowledging that 'the meaning of an image in the eyes of an audience member . . . can be a completely different interpretation than the meaning assumed by the originator' (Patton, 2020: 127). Against the background of photography's specific narratological function sketched out in the previous paragraph, it is reasonable to assume that – to decode photographic images as intended by the strategic storyteller – viewers need to be at least passingly familiar with the biographical narrative that the photograph is meant to illustrate. Likewise, researchers seeking to reveal how photographs support biographical narratives ought to analyse photographs through the lens of these very same narratives.

To unlock the meaning of images, visual rhetorical analysis relies on a number of research methods, but most frequently employs semiotics – in particular, *social semiotics*. Following the seminal work of Roland Barthes, semiotics emphasises that the meaning of visual images is layered. The layer of denotation corresponds to the immediate or literal meaning of an image. The first step in analysing photographs thus 'involves careful scrutiny of what is in the photo' and identifying 'details that are missing' (Tinkler, 2013: 21). The level of connotation, on the other hand, corresponds to the symbolic meaning of an image. For Barthes (1977: 17), symbolic meaning is created through 'naturalised' cultural codes and conventions. It is at this point that social semiotics departs from Barthesian semiotics. While Barthes – in agreement with poststructuralist thought – believes that the 'supplementary' message of a photograph is a product of the culture the photograph is a part of, social semiotics claims that 'choices of visual elements and features do not just represent the world; rather, they constitute it' (Cobley and Machin, 2020: 141). Here, it is important to note that social semioticians do acknowledge that meaning-making is deeply embedded in cultural norms; however, they stress that image producers always have a *repertoire* of semiotic resources and techniques available from which they can make strategic choices (Aiello, 2020).

According to the influential framework by Kress and van Leeuwen (2020), these semiotic resources and techniques can – regardless of the cultural context – be organised according to the metafunction they perform. First, the *representational* meaning of an image is conveyed by people, places or objects depicted. Second, *interactive* meaning is created through rhetorical techniques that position the viewer in relation to the world inside the picture. Third, images project *compositional* meaning by means of the layout – that is, how different visual elements are placed in the frame. Importantly, social semioticians do not analyse these metafunctions in isolation. Instead, the assumption is that an image's connotative meaning emerges from the ways in which the different metafunctions relate to each other (Rose, 2016: 109). That is to say, whereas the cognitive approach breaks images into their smaller parts, the rhetorical approach analyses images as a whole.

Seen through the lens of social semiotics, photographs can be powerful devices to communicate state biographical narratives. Most fundamentally, the socio-semiotic framework by Kress and van Leeuwen (2020: chapter 2) helps us understand that – on the level of representation – photographs can be classified as containing either *narrative* or *conceptual* information. The narrative type not only creates action – either transactional or non-transactional – by connecting participants through *vectors*, but also visualises the circumstances in which action is performed, which may include the setting, secondary participants and the tools used to execute action. Moreover, the representational narrativity of action photographs can be supported through semiotic resources and techniques on the interactive and compositional levels of meaning – for example, by positioning the viewer in a way that signifies a particular social relationship with the main participants or by foregrounding certain participants at the expense of others.

For the remainder of the article, we use the visual rhetoric approach to show how China and North Korea employ official news agency photographs to visualise their respective state biographical narratives. While democratic regimes also engage in visual storytelling (e.g. Adler-Nissen and Tsinovoi, 2019), our empirical focus on autocratic regimes is motivated by two considerations. First, the study of totalitarian visual propaganda is closely bound up with the history of the IR discipline. As Williams (2018) convincingly argues, the classic IR approaches – realism and liberalism – emerged as rational, scientific responses to the 'aestheticisation of politics' and the manipulative power of visual language that had led to the rise of totalitarianism in the first half of the 20th century. By seeking a 'deeper reality' behind international relations – a reality that aesthetics would be unable to access – it was these approaches that long kept non-verbal communication off the IR research agenda. Second, and closely related, 'the visibility of power has always been indispensable for dictatorships and still is today' (Conze et al., 2018: 453). More specifically, research has already confirmed that autocratic regimes in East Asia place a particularly high value on strategic public diplomacy (Melissen, 2011: 248–252) and that the regimes in Beijing and Pyongyang employ visuals to communicate with domestic audiences (e.g. Chang and Ren, 2018; Hellmann, 2021) as well as with international audiences (e.g. Cho, 2017; Hellmann and Oppermann, 2022a; Van Noort, 2020).

Characters, setting, plot: Comparing the biographical narratives of China and North Korea

Existing academic work, drawing on official party propaganda and historiography, has labelled the Chinese and North Korean state biographical narratives – in more or less these words – as 'the rightful great power' and 'the family state', respectively.[2] In what

follows, we use the tri-partite narrative framework to draw out and compare the key structural elements of the two narratives, showing that they display important similarities in terms of the main characters but diverge when it comes to their plot structures and settings.

Characterisation refers to the process of 'ascribing information to an agent in the text so as to provide a character in the storyworld with a certain property or properties' (Jannidis, 2009: 21). Depending on the distinctive characteristics with which agents are presented in the story, it is possible to classify them according to generic categories. Perhaps the most traditional character classification – going back to folktales and fairy tales (see Propp, 1968) – is the one between hero and villain. Whereas the villain is morally corrupt and guilty of causing misfortune to other characters, the hero represents positive moral values and alleviates others' misfortune. State identities are being constructed and stabilised precisely through practices and narratives that instantiate an antagonism between 'good' and 'bad' actors, setting the good and virtuous self against the bad and dangerous other (Campbell, 1998: 53–72; Homolar, 2022).

When this framework is applied to the state biographical narratives of China and North Korea, it becomes apparent that both narratives anthropomorphise the ruling party as a revolutionary hero and cast foreign countries in the role of the villain.[3] Theses narratological parallels can be attributed to the regimes' foundational origins. Both regimes are based on revolutionary movements that combined Marxist-Leninist ideology with nationalistic aims. While the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) – established in 1921 – sought radical transformations that would overthrow semi-feudal landlordism at the same time as the semi-colonial apparatus in coastal China (Karl, 2010: 25–26), the Worker's Party of Korea (WPK) traces its lineage back to 1930s underground guerrilla troops that fought Japanese colonialism from bases in Manchuria (Armstrong, 1995). To emphasise heroic virtue, regime historiographies downplay the role of other actors in bringing about the success of these movements. In the case of China, official accounts of the historical past skip over the fact that the Japanese invasion of East and Southeast Asia during World War II not only fatally weakened Western colonial rule across the region but also tipped the balance in the Chinese Civil War, thus allowing the CCP under Mao Zedong to drive the rival – and severely debilitated – *Kuomintang* (KMT) off the mainland in 1949 (Wang, 2012: 88). Meanwhile, North Korean historiography minimises the fact that Manchurian guerrilla groups were formally integrated into the CCP army (Lankov, 2015: 206) and casts Soviet troops merely in a 'supporting role' when describing the liberation of the northern part of the Korean peninsula in 1945 (Tertitskiy, 2018).

While the two regimes' state biographical narratives thus share a striking resemblance in terms of character development, they differ with regard to *emplotment* – that is, the process through which a narrative 'transforms the succession of events into a meaningful whole' (Ricœur, 1984: 67). The Chinese narrative follows a Cinderella-like 'fall and rise' plot (Zerubavel, 2003: 19) – or what Booker (2004) calls the 'rebirth' plot. In this particular emplotment mode, a central figure 'falls under a dark spell which eventually traps them in some wintry state [. . .] Then a miraculous act of redemption takes place, focused on a [hero] who helps to liberate the [figure] from imprisonment' (Booker, 2004: 194).

Boiled down to its essential elements, the story is fairly simple: China had long been a proud and powerful nation, but – due to the 'corruption and incompetence' of the Qing rulers and the KMT regime – the country fell into a 'century of humiliation' that was marked by repeated sufferings at the hands of foreign imperialism. Examples of these sufferings include the two Opium Wars of 1839–1842 and 1856–1860, the Sino-Japanese

War of 1894–1895, the Boxer Rebellion of 1900, and the horrors of Japanese occupation during World War II – in particular, the Nanjing Massacre of 1938 (Gries, 2004: 45–52). Against this narrative background, the CCP presents itself as the hero who will lift the 'dark spell' that has been cast over the country: 'Only the Communist Party of China can save China; only the party can develop and rejuvenate China' (Wang, 2012: 138).

In contrast, the state biographical narrative of North Korea employs the 'overcoming the monster' emplotment strategy. Generally speaking, stories of this type

> show the hero being called to face and overcome a terrible and deadly personification of evil [. . .] As the story is usually presented, there is a long build-up to the final decisive confrontation [during which] the monster is miraculously dealt a fatal blow (Booker, 2004: 194).

According to North Korean historiography, 'the ceaseless and heroic struggle of the Korean people against foreign aggressors' (Ch'oe, 1981: 518) is a thread that connects the ancient kingdom of Goguryeo (37 BC to 668 AD) – which, unlike neighbouring kingdoms, refused to serve as a Chinese or Japanese vassal state – to events in more recent history, such as the destruction of an armed US merchant ship on the Taedong river in 1866 and the unsuccessful popular uprising against Japanese colonial rule in 1919. Furthermore, the story suggests that, while the Korean people have shown great bravery and determination in fighting the 'monster' of imperialism, it was only through Kim Il-sung's strategic genius and the WPK's organisational discipline that independence from foreign intervention was achieved – first by ousting the Japanese colonial rulers, then by defeating the United States in the Great Fatherland Liberation War (known in the West as the Korean War) (Lim, 2015: 78–82). Hence, whereas the Chinese 'rebirth' narrative signals a sharp break between a period of decline ('century of humiliation') and the CCP taking power, the North Korean 'overcoming the monster' narrative places the regime in a long line of resistance against foreign domination, thereby emphasising historical continuity rather than historical discontinuity.

Finally, the two state biographical narratives vary as to the *setting* – that is, 'the background against which the action of a narrative [. . .] takes place' (Holman, 1980: 413). To fully understand these variations, it is important to know that – from the perspective of narratological analysis – the spatial setting of a narrative does not just refer to the 'immediate surroundings of actual events' but also to the space 'mapped by the actions and the thoughts of the characters' (Ryan, 2009: 421–422).

This nuanced conceptualisation of space allows us to see that North Korea's collective memory narrative is set in a world of hyper-competitiveness – a world in which states are driven by one single goal: expanding their power. This means that the Korean people – under the guidance of the WPK – may have succeeded in expelling Japanese and American forces; however, given that the international system continues to be governed by natural, unchangeable laws that incentivise power maximisation, this victory is highly precarious. As Armstrong (2009) puts it, the North Korean regime generates 'a collective sense of anxiety and fear of outside threats' – or, in the words of French (2014: xvii), 'a constant state of paranoia'.

Against this backdrop of a dangerous and hostile world, the North Korean regime portrays itself as a 'family'. As Armstrong (2005: 391) explains, 'The leader is the father, the party is the mother and the people are the children'. Specifically, the image created for the leader is that of a 'benevolent' and 'amicable' parent rather than that of a stern and distant patriarch (Lim, 2015: 86). The unshakable bonds of family thus provide warm protection against the perils of the outside world: while relations between states at the

international level are governed by natural laws of competition, relations between the North Korean leader (parent) and society (children) are characterised by love and care.

In contrast, China's state biographical narrative is situated not in a world that is naturally dangerous, but in a world that is constituted by human agency. According to official accounts, history before the 'century of humiliation' provides evidence that the anarchic Westphalian state system is not a natural law of global politics: before the arrival of European colonial powers, international order in East Asia had, for centuries, been maintained through the *tianxia* system – a Sino-centric tribute system governed according to Confucian principles of benevolence (see Krolikowski, 2018: 921–922). Under this model of governance, order was maintained 'under the aegis of a benign hegemonic state personified by the emperor as Son of Heaven, and administered for the benefit of all under heaven' (Dreyer, 2015: 1016). Crucially, official Chinese historiography continues, the collapse of the harmonious *Pax Sinica* was only partly due to Western aggression. Equally, if not more, important was the self-serving and corrupt behaviour of the Qing rulers and the KMT regime, which weakened China from within and made it vulnerable to foreign exploitation (Callahan, 2010: 27). In other words, according to the 'rightful great power' narrative, the Sino-centric world order did not break down because of deterministic evolutionary dynamics and the inherent superiority of the Hobbesian logic of survival; instead, blame is placed on political regimes that came before the CCP.

The state biographical narratives of North Korea and China not only make sense of the past, but they also imagine future possibilities for the state. When the two regimes were first established in the 1940s, it was Marxist-Leninist ideology that set out ambitions for the future. However, prompted by the thawing of the Cold War and the demise of the Soviet model in the 1980s, regime elites in both North Korea and China gradually abandoned the utopian communist vision of a classless society. Instead, current policies and imagined futures are increasingly framed with reference to the past.

In the case of North Korea, the state biographical narrative – by stoking mistrust of the outside world – serves to justify *juche* as the regime's official ideology. Put simply, juche aspires to achieve economic self-sufficiency, political sovereignty and military self-reliance. Juche defines a uniquely North Korean form of nationalistic socialism that owes more to social Darwinistic ideas of 'the survival of the fittest' than to the class theory of Marxism-Leninism (Armstrong, 2003: 221). In addition to providing an ideological framework for policymaking, juche also serves to legitimise the patrilineal model of hereditary succession that characterises the North Korean political system: only direct descendants of Kim Il-sung, the genius theoretician of juche, are capable of guiding the Korean people in the practical application of juche, because only direct descendants possess the 'filial piety' that is needed to defend and carry on Kim Il-sung's intellectual legacy (Buzo, 1990: 119).

After Kim Il-sung's death in 1994 and Kim Jong-il's official instalment in power four years later, the 'military first' (*songun*) doctrine was incorporated into juche ideology. Through songun, the military receives privileged treatment in the allocation of public resources and enjoys 'the status of equal to or slightly above the position of the party' (Roehrig, 2013: 56). The songun doctrine – which is an even stronger signal of North Korea's distrust in other countries than juche – is used by the regime to justify military activities as legitimate forms of self-defence, including the development of nuclear weapons (Kim, 2016). According to Armstrong (2005: 392), songun 'may mark North Korea's final ideological break with Marxist-Leninist socialism', as it 'explicitly places nation over class'.

In China, the CCP has employed the state biographical narrative to legitimise far-reaching reforms that have transformed the country's centrally planned economy into a

market-oriented economy. Essentially, the party argues that the 'century of humiliation' can be traced back to the fact that China had fallen behind other global powers. As Wang (2012: 238) summarises, '[m]any Chinese believe that China has been bullied by foreign powers in modern times only because China was poor and weak during that specific period'. The CCP's argument continues: because Mao Zedong Thought and Marxism-Leninism failed to bring about the economic growth needed to catch up with Western countries, China needs to embrace market reforms and open its economy to global trade; only by dismantling the command economy and ditching trade isolationism can the nation overcome the shame of humiliation and take its 'rightful' place as a superpower (Wang, 2020). The biographical narrative thus supports a unique 'Chinese way' of economic development that combines elements of socialism and capitalism with institutions of one-party rule (Lams, 2018).

Chinese foreign policy, too, is couched in terms of the state biographical narrative. In particular, since Xi Jinping took office in 2013, Beijing has been making heavy use of references to the historical past when drawing up visions of China's role in international politics. According to Xi's 'Chinese dream' (*zhongguo meng*) concept, China is in a process not only of economic growth but also of rejuvenation on the global level. More precisely, this means 'that China under Xi aims to take on more international responsibilities, but also to "shape" the international system to a higher degree and increasingly present Chinese ideas and solutions to international conflicts and crises' (Sørensen, 2015: 65; Zhao and Tan-Mullins, 2021: 288–289). Core elements of the 'Chinese dream' as a foreign policy template are 'peace' and 'harmony' – ideals that are juxtaposed with the Western zero-sum vision of world politics. Furthermore, the narrative goes that China is uniquely positioned to create a future global order based on a different set of principles not only because the idea of a 'harmonious world' runs like a thread through China's civilisational history, but also because China – unlike other superpowers – has experienced violence and exploitation at the hands of foreign aggressors (Hagström and Nordin, 2020: 513).

Xi Jinping and Kim Jong-un as storytellers: A visual rhetorical analysis

The importance of narrative probability

Biographical narratives are relatively complex discursive constructions that generate a continuous sense of collective identity by connecting the state's past experience with its imagined future. Because of this complexity, it is impossible to communicate biographical narratives in one single image. However, photographs can still function as a powerful media cue and trigger the recall of biographical narratives previously stored in viewers' minds. At the same time, it is these recalled narratives that guide viewers in decoding the photographs' (intended) meaning.

In what follows, we reveal, through an application of visual rhetorical analysis, how biographical storytelling informs the production of Chinese and North Korean propaganda imagery. Specifically, we show that photographs of Xi Jinping and Kim Jong-un – produced and distributed by the respective news agencies, Xinhua and the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA)[4] – perform three narratological functions. These functions map onto the formal narrative components: characters, plot and setting. First, photographs visualise the leader as the embodiment of the state (i.e. the main *character* in the biographical narrative): while Xi Jinping – to symbolise the 'rightful great power' – is imbued with qualities of power and authority, Kim Jong-un – as the visual manifestation of the 'family state' – plays the role of a compassionate and caring 'parent'. Second, propaganda photographs dramatise

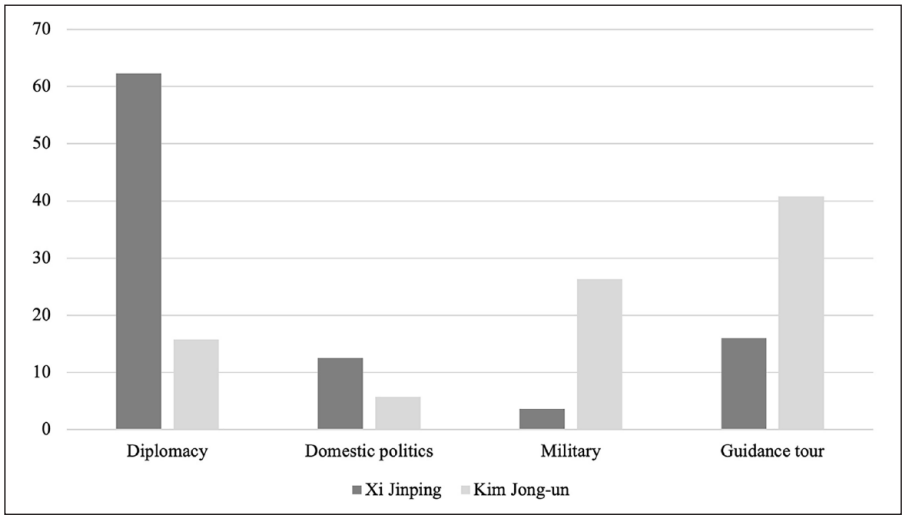

Figure 2. Content analysis: frequency of settings (in percentage).

the *plot* of the biographical narrative: whereas China's 'fall and rise' plot requires that photographs communicate a clear break with the past, North Korea's 'overcoming the monster' plot calls for imagery that creates an illusion of historical continuity. Third, photographs make reference to the *setting* in which the biographical narrative unfolds. They do this by conveying different emotions to audiences: the 'rightful great power' narrative, which is set in a world that is being reshaped by Chinese political ideas, evokes a sense of pride; the 'family state' narrative, in which the regime protects the people against hyper-dangerous world, engenders a feeling of calmness.

In producing photographs that visualise the respective biographical narratives, Chinese and North Korean propaganda authorities are constrained by the principle of *narrative probability*, according to which any photograph – to be believable – must align with what we know to be true of the world (Goodnow, 2003: 6). The setting in which a photograph is taken – akin to a stage set in a theatre play – has a particularly important role in influencing how viewers judge the photograph's narrative probability. For example, while armed soldiers and military machinery can be used as visual rhetorical devices to project power and authority, a photograph that shows Xi Jinping visiting an elementary school would be deemed to have low narrative probability if it included armed soldiers and military machinery. Similarly, while children may serve as visual signals of compassion and empathy, a photograph that depicts Kim Jong-un overseeing a military exercise would not meet the standard of narrative probability if the scene featured children. In short, for a photograph to be considered a believable visualisation of a state's biographical narrative, the narrative *within* the photograph needs to be consistent.

It follows from this that certain settings make it easier to visualise a state's biographical narrative, while other settings present considerable challenges for strategic storytellers. In fact, a basic quantitative content analysis of almost 2000 photographs distributed by the regimes' news agencies (see Appendix 1 for more details) uncovers clear differences in the frequency with which Chinese and North Korea propaganda authorities employ the setting as a rhetorical tool (Figure 2). While Xi Jinping is portrayed primarily in the context of international diplomacy (62.3% of images), Kim Jong-un is predominantly visualised on so-called 'on the spot' guidance tours (40.8% of images). As we will

show in the subsequent analysis, these settings – through the mechanism of narrative probability – are particularly conducive for visualising the 'rightful great power' and 'family state' narratives, respectively. Other settings, meanwhile, place greater demands on visual storytelling. For example, how do Chinese propaganda organs communicate the 'rightful great power' narrative when Xi Jinping inspects farms or meets ordinary citizens? Similarly, how do North Korean authorities narrate the 'family state' story when Kim Jong-un supervises military operations or partakes in diplomatic activities? It is above all in these challenging settings that the full breadth of the visual rhetorical toolkit becomes apparent.

'Easy' settings for maintaining internal consistency

Seen against the requirement of narrative probability, photographs of diplomatic meetings provide a particularly effective means to add drama to China's biographical storytelling. As can be illustrated by a Xinhua photograph of Xi Jinping hosting South Korean president, Moon Jae-in, in December 2017 (Figure 3), diplomatic meetings – because of what viewers expect to see – make it relatively essay to produce photographs that visualise the three core elements of the 'rightful great power' narrative in a believable manner. First, the photograph of Xi and Moon is replete with visual symbols that transfer connotations of political power and authority onto the Chinese leader – most importantly, the business suit, the soldiers and the flag. Compositional decisions, by creating a sense of structure and order, further support this connotative reading: key elements in the frame have been organised with mathematical perfection and straight lines dominate the composition (e.g. carpet edges, bayonets, columns). Second, the photograph communicates a clear break with the past: while the 'century of humiliation' saw China suffer under colonial exploitation and foreign subjugation, the image of Xi Jinping hosting another state leader can be taken as evidence that the CCP has succeeded in re-establishing China as a sovereign nation. Third, the photograph generates a feeling of pride – not only through elements already discussed, but also through the body language exhibited by the Chinese participants (Xi, soldiers).

In short, beyond the immediate narrative unfolding in the scene depicted (Xi Jinping and Moon-Jae-in meeting for talks in Beijing), the photograph serves to trigger the 'rightful great power' narrative in viewers' minds: the CCP (character) has successfully rejuvenated China (plot) and now seeks to reshape the world according to Chinese ideals (setting).

While Xi Jinping is predominantly photographed at diplomatic meetings, North Korean propaganda photographs most commonly capture Kim Jong-un on guidance tours. Based on Kim Il-sung's ideas of 'anti-bureaucratism', guidance tours became routinised and institutionalised in the 1970s. They are meticulously planned in advance and take the leader to enterprises and organisations that are of high priority to the North Korean regime, such as factories, agricultural co-operatives and educational institutions. Guidance tours provide the KCNA with ample opportunities to generate internally consistent visualisations of the 'family state' narrative.

The photograph in Figure 4 (bottom), which shows Kim Jong-un during a visit to a military-operated farm, provides an illustrative example. The viewer gets a glimpse of Kim as he inspects uprooted sweetcorn plants that are displayed on a table in front of him. Several soldiers and lower rank officials are grouped around the North Korean leader. The photograph serves as a cue that helps viewers recall the 'family state' narrative, first, by portraying Kim Jong-un as a compassionate father figure who shares his wealth of

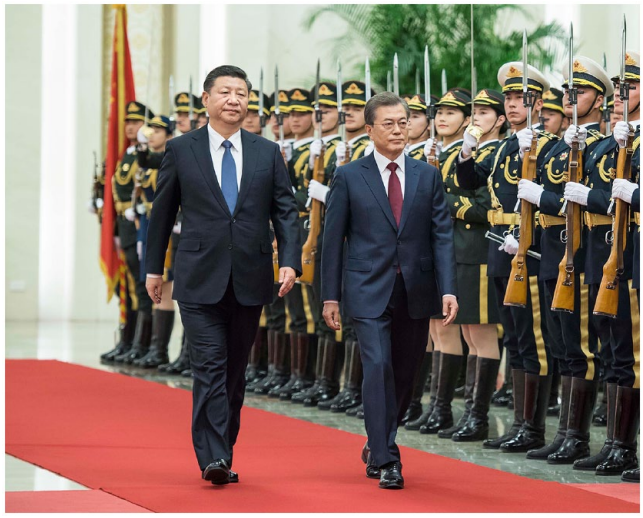

Figure 3. Xi Jinping hosts the South Korean president. © Li Tao/Xinhua/Alamy Live News.

Figure 4. Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-un visiting co-operative farms. © KCNA/Xinhua/Alamy Live News (bottom).

knowledge with citizens (the children). Various visual elements work together to create this particular semiotic reading, including Kim's actions (checking the plants' texture and firmness), the actions of other participants (noting down the leader's thoughts) and Kim's informal outfit (a simple, white short-sleeve shirt and a straw hat). Second, the choice of wardrobe also helps to provide a sense of continuity with the past, as Kim Jong-un bears striking visual similarities with his grandfather, Kim Il-sung (Figure 4, top). The sense of continuity is further reinforced by what we do *not* see in the photograph. In particular, because there are no signs of agricultural mechanisation, the scene appears to be stuck in time. Third, the image creates an atmosphere of calmness – not only through Kim's friendly facial expression, but also through the loose composition. For example, the soldier's hat is cut off and the symmetry of the table is underutilised, which makes the photograph look spontaneous and relaxed.

Hence, to sum up, visual semiotics allows us to look beyond the surface-level narrative (Kim Jong-un inspecting a farm) and decode how the photograph functions as a memory cue for the 'family state' narrative: the WKP under the leadership of Kim Il-sung and his descendants (character) continues the Korean people's long heroic struggle against foreign aggressors (plot) and provides paternal love in a world governed by a 'survival of the fittest' mentality (setting).

'Challenging' settings for maintaining internal consistency

Xi Jinping, too, regularly embarks on guidance tours – an institutionalised practice that goes back to Mao's 'mass line' (*qunzhong luxian*) method of political leadership. However, as our content analysis demonstrates, the share of guidance tour photographs (16.6%) is much smaller when compared with the North Korean sub-sample (Figure 2). To some extent, this may reflect the challenges of visualising the 'rightful great power' narrative in guidance tour settings. Still, as can be exemplified by photographs of Xi Jinping visiting farms and schools, Xinhua propagandist have available rhetorical resources that allow them to maintain storytelling coherence even in challenging settings.

In Figure 5 (top), we see Xi Jinping inspecting an agricultural co-operative in China's northern Heilongjiang province. The Chinese leader stands hip-deep in a field of grain, speaking to a local official to his right. The whole scene is bathed in warm late-afternoon light. However, this is not a romanticised rural landscape. Instead, behind Xi, we see a fleet of modern combine harvesters, lined up with military precision. The red colour of the vehicles is – unmistakably – a reference to China's flag.

The photograph carries connotations of power and authority, first of all, through the actions performed by participants. The vectors that link Xi Jinping and the local official – that is, the lines that are created by Xi's shoulders (perpendicular to the local official's shoulders) and angled arm as well as the eyelines between the two men – suggest that Xi is asking questions. The image thus communicates to the viewer that farming is not Xi's core area of expertise; politics and diplomacy is. In addition, power and authority are also projected through the clothes worn by participants. As is typical for his guidance tours, Xi is wearing his trademark navy blue, zippered windbreaker. Generally, Xi's windbreaker 'invokes the same spirit as the Mao suit: frugality, practicality, proximity to the people' (Buckley, 2016). However, in this particular picture, the windbreaker also delivers connotations of conformity and obedience: not only does the local official wear a similar jacket, but the windbreaker also resembles the work uniforms of the men operating the combine harvesters. Finally, the formal composition of the image further adds to the

Figure 5. Visualising the Chinese biographical narrative. © Xie Huanchi/Xinhua/Alamy Live News (top left), Xinhua/Alamy Live News (bottom left).

'great power' symbolism. Not only is the frame dominated by straight lines (e.g. the path through the field, the combines' cutter bars, the line of trees in the background), but the positions of the combine harvesters – which provide the backdrop for the photograph – have been organised with mathematical perfection. Hence, in terms of its formal compositional language, the photograph is not too dissimilar from images that portray Xi Jinping at diplomatic meetings (Figure 3).

The composition also serves to communicate a break with the historical past. Xi Jinping and the local official are placed at the right end of the frame, which – based on the fact that modern simplified Chinese is read from left to right – implies forward movement. This effect is further enhanced through the positioning of the combine harvesters along a diagonal line, with the harvester closest to the viewer located at the right edge of the frame. What is more, the combine harvesters – as visual objects – symbolise technological progress and modernisation. By using a relatively small aperture setting, the photographer created a large depth of field, allowing the viewer to notice small details on these high-end agricultural machines. In addition, by shooting the scene from a long distance, the photographer was able to capture the whole fleet of harvesters, which adds more weight to the 'fall and rise' narrative. The modernised agricultural economy pictured in the photograph is a far cry from Chinese farming practices in the mid-20th century. When the CCP took power under Mao Zedong's leadership, farms still relied on manual labour and traditional tools to produce food (see Figure 5, top right).

Finally, through the red colour of the combine harvesters, the photograph is imbued with sentiments of nationalistic pride. The harvesters are turned into patriotic symbols –

much like the flag and the military regalia in Figure 3 – and the humble practice of farming becomes a source of glory.

Other rhetorical strategies can be illustrated through an analysis of the bottom left photograph in Figure 5. Here, we observe Xi Jinping during a visit to an elementary school in the city of Chongqing, southwestern China. The photograph freezes the moment when Xi walks into the school's kitchen with his entourage and engages with canteen staff who are in the middle of preparing food. Traits of power and authority are transferred onto Xi through a number of semiotic resources. First, the photograph's composition creates a contrasting colour palette. Before Xi and his entourage entered the kitchen, the frame would have been dominated by lighter white (tiles, kitchen uniforms) and grey tones (tables, cooking bowls and utensils). Through the arrival of Xi and the other men queuing up behind him, a large dark element is introduced that comes to dominate the centre of the frame. It is clear that these people do not belong here; they are visually disconnected from their surroundings and the women who work in the kitchen. Moreover, similar to the top left photograph in Figure 5, the arresting sight of Xi and his entourage wearing matching windbreakers carries connotations of hierarchy, leaving no question as to who wields power in the scene depicted. At the same time, however, Xi Jinping interacts with kitchen staff in a very respectful manner. His sympathetic smile and demure body language (hands folded across his stomach, head slightly tilted forward) fill the room with admiration and gratitude. 'You feed China's children, that's something to be proud of', Xi appears to be saying. What is more, the photograph constructs a feeling of sharp discontinuity with the past. The white tiles and kitchen uniforms as well as the many metal objects give off a futuristic aesthetic, setting up a sharp contrast with images of Chinese kitchens in the mid-1900s (Figure 5, bottom right). The composition's heavy reliance on diagonal lines further contributes to the sense of dynamism and movement.

What these two examples illustrate is that, compared to diplomatic meetings, mundane everyday settings – such as schools and farms – make it comparatively harder to visualise the Chinese 'rightful great power' narrative. Yet, propaganda authorities still have rhetorical devices available to imbue the CCP – personified by Xi Jinping – with attributes of power and authority (character), communicate a steep trajectory of socio-economic progress since the 'century of humiliation' (plot) and promote feelings of pride in the 'Chinese way' of economic development, which provides an alternative to the dominant Western model of liberal democratic capitalism (setting).

For North Korean propaganda organs, as already discussed above, ordinary settings make it relatively easy to produce photographic representations of the 'family state' narrative that adhere to the requirement of narrative probability. Rather, official storytellers in Pyongyang face an altogether different challenge: How do we visualise the 'family state' narrative when Kim Jong-un attends diplomatic meetings? The issue with state visits is that they follow a formal, ritualised protocol – a protocol that is designed to ensure ambiguity and vagueness in the exchange of messages between governments (Jönsson and Hall, 2005: 76). As Cohen (1987: 143) explains,

> [s]tates are fiercely sensitive to the slightest aspersion on their status and honour [. . .] When even 'a couple of inches missed off a red carpet' may generate outrage it clearly becomes impractical to manipulate protocol, in its strict sense, to communicate a message.

In other words, international diplomatic protocol sets very tight constraints for the production of visual images.

Figure 6. Visualising the North Korean biographical narrative. © UPI/Alamy Stock Photo (top left), IMAGO/Xinhua (bottom left).

In Figure 6 (top left) we see Kim Jong-un welcoming the South Korean president, Moon Jae-in, at Pyongyang airport. While Moon wears a Western business suit with a tie, Kim opted for a more utilitarian Mao-style suit. With Moon's official aircraft parked in the background, the two leaders walk down the red carpet towards the viewer. Military officials and civilians in formal attire are lined up along the carpet, applauding in a respectful manner. Kim and Moon are joined on the red carpet by their wives, Ri Sol-ju and Kim Jung-sook.

While certain visual elements, such as the red carpet, pay reference to official diplomatic protocol, the photograph makes use of a number of semiotic resources that portray Kim Jong-un as the parent of the 'family state'. For one, Kim and Moon – who are connected by an eyeline vector – interact in a relaxed and almost casual manner: both men are laughing and appear to make small talk, ignoring rules of physical reservedness that typically govern diplomatic meetings. Thus, in contrast to diplomacy photographs produced by the Chinese regime (see Figure 3), which are mere captures of official protocol, the KCNA image records a more personal moment between two state leaders, portraying Kim Jong-un as approachable and sociable. Kim's qualities as a 'family' man are further emphasised by the presence of his wife and through visual references to Kim-Il-sung. It is not only the Mao-style suit that makes Kim Jong-un look like his grandfather, but also his hairstyle and thick-frame glasses (see Figure 6, top right). In addition, by shooting the two leaders close up, the photographer places the viewer in an almost intimate relationship with Kim Jong-un. Finally, the composition is very loose, making the photograph appear like a spontaneous 'snapshot' rather than a carefully planned propaganda image. In particular, the photograph violates two rules of what constitutes a 'good' picture: the horizon is tilted to the right and the composition is poorly balanced, as those

objects with the heaviest visual weight (Kim and Moon) are crammed into the left half of the photograph. In short, the authenticity and intimacy of the KCNA image are properties that we usually associate with photographs in a family album, not with photographs of diplomatic meetings.

From what has been discussed already, it should be clear that it is through Kim Jong-un's appearance that the photograph connotes continuity with the past. By copying the wardrobe and style of Kim Il-sung, propaganda authorities aim to communicate that Kim Jong-un is determined to continue the state founder's political work: he is the loyal grandson who will protect his grandfather's ideological legacy. At the same time, the Mao-style suit serves as a visual reference to juche. Originally designed to project a new, confident China, the Mao suit – or, more correctly, the Zhongshan suit[5] – helps Kim Jong-un stand out against other state leaders who typically wear Western-style business suits. Through his outfit, Kim thus makes it clear that North Korea is self-sufficient and remains committed to fending off external influences.

Finally, while Kim Jong's smile and casual body language help portray Kim Jong-un as an authentic and approachable leader, the same rhetorical devices also promote a sense of calmness. Despite the harsh realities of international politics, we witness Kim Jong-un interacting in a friendly and confident manner with the president of South Korea – a country that is commonly described as a 'Yankee colony' by North Korean propaganda.

The KCNA employs similar semiotic resources when telling the 'family state' narrative through photographs of Kim Jong-un in military settings. In Figure 6 (bottom left), we see the North Korean leader supervising a missile test in August 2014. The interaction between Kim Jong-un and the military officers is cheerful and friendly; the scene makes it seem as if Kim and the officers are connected through family ties rather than through hierarchical, top-down organisation. Some of the soldiers hold notepads in their hands, ready to write down the leader's thoughts and ideas. The notepad is a rhetorical object that the KCNA draws on regularly (see Figure 4, bottom); it symbolises Kim Jong-un's expertise and wisdom, ranging from sweetcorn to ballistic missiles. One semiotic function of the notepad is thus to assign clear roles in propaganda photographs: Kim Jong-un is the knowledgeable parent, other participants are the inexperienced children. Furthermore, notepads allow the KCNA to inject a strong dose of calmness into photographs of Kim Jong-un. The message is simple: the supreme leader's wisdom will protect us against the hyper-hostile world out there. What is more, by capturing Kim Jong-un in outdoor surroundings, the photograph creates a line of continuity between the past and the present. Specifically, by setting up a desk that features computer screens and a telephone 'in the field', propaganda producers clearly want to establish parallels with images that show Kim Il-sung leading troops during the anti-Japanese and anti-American wars in the mid-20th century (Figure 6 bottom right). The photograph thus implies that, while the North Korean people may have succeeded in defeating imperialist aggressors, North Korea continues to be at war and the threat of invasion remains high.

In sum, these two applications of semiotic methods demonstrate that, even in settings of international diplomacy and military drills, North Korean propaganda planners are able to produce photographs that communicate the 'family state' narrative while maintaining high internal consistency. Specifically, propagandists strategically deploy a range of rhetorical resources to portray the regime – embodied by Kim Jong-un – as a 'caring and knowledgeable parent' (character), create a visual connection to earlier episodes of anti-imperialist struggle (plot) and invoke feelings of calmness amidst the dangers posed by the outside world (setting).

Conclusion

Our article contributes to a stronger dialogue between narratives and visuals – two fields of IR scholarship that have become more prominent in recent years but have developed largely independently from each other. Specifically, we introduce visual rhetorical analysis as an approach to interrogate the role of images in communicating state biographical narratives. We illustrate the approach through an analysis of how the regimes in China and North Korea use photographs of Xi Jinping and Kim Jong-un to visualise their state biographical narratives.

Beyond state biographical narratives, we argue that visual rhetorical analysis is a promising perspective on strategic visual storytelling in IR more broadly. For one, rather than breaking images into isolated cues, the rhetorical approach treats images as integrated and independent units, focusing on how the interplay between different semiotic resources creates meaningful narrative action. At the same time, visual rhetorical analysis does not assume that the meaning of a given image is determined by the wider discursive context, but instead retains the strategic intentionality of image producers.

However, the visual rhetoric approach also has its limitations. In particular, it focuses on decoding the meaning that image producers *intend* to convey, but has less to say about how audiences respond to those same images: Do target audiences read imagery in intended ways? In respect to our own study, we know, for example, that social media users in China lampoon the government by using Xinhua photographs to draw comparisons between Xi Jinping and the animated cartoon character Winnie the Pooh. Likewise, KCNA photographs of Kim Jong-un 'looking at things' are regularly mocked in Western news outlets and on social media. Nevertheless, if researchers keep this limitation in mind, visual rhetorical analysis provides rich insight into how political actors can strategically employ images to make meaning in global politics.

Our own article highlights the value of the rhetorical approach for the interrogation of biographical narratives and strategic storytelling in IR. In addition, we believe that the rhetorical framework can be fruitfully applied to any constructivist subfield in IR that endows agents with intentionality, including research on identity construction, norm promotion and the articulation of national and shared interests. To reiterate, the strength of visual rhetorical analysis is that, by focusing on the purposefully crafted interplay between semiotic resources, it allows researchers to interrogate how actors (typically powerful ones) can construct international relations through visual images.

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Notes

1. This goes back to Foucault (1995: 27) who argues that 'power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations'.
2. For example, the 'rightful great power' label can be found in Pu (2019); the 'family state' label is used in Kwon and Chung (2012).

3. On different types of revolutionary narratives, see Selbin (2010). On the emplotment of hero characters in different narrative genres, see Spencer (2016).
4. Both Xinhua and the KCNA news agencies are mere government 'mouthpieces' and operate under tight regime control (see Brady, 2008: 36; Yonhap News Agency, 2002: 421).
5. Despite its commonly used name, the Mao suit was, in fact, first introduced by the Nationalist revolutionary Sun Yat-sen (Sun Zhongshan) in the early 20th century.

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Appendix 1

Put in simple terms, quantitative content analysis 'is based on counting the frequency of certain visual elements in a clearly defined population of images, and then analysing those frequencies' (Rose, 2016: 88). Detailed research protocols for the application of content analysis are provided by Neuendorf (2016) and Riff et al. (2014).

As we aim to compare media content distributed by two separate news agencies, our analysis lends itself to a strategy of *cluster* sampling – that is, selecting units of analysis (photographs of Xi Jinping and Kim Jong-un) from groups of content. For each news agency, we constructed a sample that stretches from the year after the respective leader took power – that is, 2013 for Xi and 2012 for Kim – until the end of 2018. To ensure that our sample includes photographs aimed at *international* audiences, and to overcome the technical limitations of the Xinhua and Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) websites, we followed different strategies: for Xinhua photographs, we turned to Google image search, using the search term [site: xinhuatnet.com xi jinping]; for images of Kim Jong-un, we employed search engines provided by international news agencies that distribute photographs on KCNA's behalf – specifically, Associated Press (https://apimages.com), ITAR-TASS (https://tassphoto.com) and Yonhap (https://yna.co.kr). On all three sites, the search term used was [KCNA kim jong-un]. In cases where the same photograph appeared on more than one news agency site, the photograph was only included in the sample once. Where news agencies published more than one photo of the same event, all photographs of that event were added to the sample. We based this decision on the logic that, if Xinhua and KCNA distributed several photographs of the same event, they deemed the event to be particularly important.

The sample of photographs was coded on four binary variables, indicating the presence (value = 1) or absence (value = 0) of the following visual elements:

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Variable: *diplomacy*

Does the photograph show the leader engaging in diplomatic activities (for example, visiting other countries, hosting foreign politicians, attending multilateral summits and other events)?

0. No
1. Yes

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Variable: *domesticpolitics*

Does the photograph show the leader participating in domestic government meetings?

0. No
1. Yes

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Variable: *military*

Does the photograph show the leader wearing a military uniform, visiting troops, inspecting weapon systems, overseeing manoeuvres, parades and other military operations (for example, natural disaster relief), or bestowing medals and promotions?

0. No
1. Yes

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Variable: *guidancetour*

Does the photograph show the leader on 'guidance' tour (for example, visiting farms, factories, schools, museums, local government agencies)?

0. No
1. Yes