

The Politics of Pity Under Authoritarianism: How Government-Controlled Media Regulates Audiences' Mediated Experiences of Distant Suffering

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The Western-centric and often highly normative field of studies on distant suffering centers on the mediation of human vulnerability as a cause for action in contexts of need and risk. This article makes a significant and necessary contribution to the ongoing process of “de-Westernization” within this field by undertaking an empirical investigation into the mediation of distant suffering through Chinese authoritarian television. Employing a mixed-method approach that incorporates multimodal analysis, critical discourse analysis, and audience reception study, the findings indicate that, although Chinese authoritarian television coverage offers audiences relatively intense mediated experiences of humanized distant suffering, it is heavily influenced by cultural and political orientations. Consequently, it falls short in fostering cosmopolitan dispositions that would enhance audience receptiveness and reflexivity, instead reinforcing national discourse and identity politics. This study possesses the potential to broaden the epistemological and ontological horizons of distant suffering studies in a multipolar world.

Keywords: audiences, authoritarianism, cosmopolitan dispositions, de-Westernization, distant suffering, mediation, refugee crisis

The media are among the most powerful of societal sense-makers, as they have transcended the limitations of time and space, propelling the projection of distant stories to every corner of the world (Robertson, 2010). As a consequence, significant recent scholarship has shown a growing interest in studying normative questions related to the care and obligations for geographically, socially, and culturally distant sufferers who only appear to us within the media (see, *inter alia*; Chouliaraki, 2013; Huiberts & Joye, 2019; Joye, 2015; Kyriakidou, 2020, 2021; Orgad & Seu, 2014; Scott, 2014; Silverstone, 2006; Weikmann & Powell, 2019; Xu, 2023). These scholarly works focus on the mediation of human vulnerability as a cause for action in contexts of need and risk and have appeared under the banner of media and morality, which

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has been identified as representing a “dramatic moral-ethical turn” in media studies (Ong, 2009, p. 449). Such a moral turn urges scholars to predominantly explore a *problématique* of whether the media can cultivate cosmopolitans with a sense of social responsibility toward others of whom they know nothing and will never meet (Beck, 2009; Chouliaraki, 2006).

Undeniably, a rich and coherent cluster of research has effectively revealed the dissonance and asymmetry between moral power and geographical regions and exposed the patterns of economic and political agency that continuously produce global inequality, injustice, and poverty (Orgad & Seu, 2014). However, a plethora of studies have tended to concentrate on Western democracies (with a notable exception in Ong, 2015), with an a priori assumption that human vulnerability and suffering occur in the Global South and are outside the direct experience of most of the public in the Global North (Ong, 2015; Schieferdecker, 2021). This assumption overlooks the deterritorialized nature of today’s global interdependency crises and risks, which are pawned by globalization and the changing geopolitical situation in line with economic and political transformations (Joye, 2013). Although there have been pleas for more “de-Westernizing” studies (Joye, 2013; Kyriakidou, 2021), we know little about non-Western contexts—especially authoritarian contexts—that are characterized by different social realities, political phenomena, and media ecologies.

This article makes a significant and necessary contribution to the ongoing process of “de-Westernization” within this field by undertaking an empirical investigation into the mediation of distant suffering through Chinese authoritarian television. China is an especially vital context for providing a representative case since it is a typically non-Western authoritarian nation. China is also the most rapidly growing global power, with a rapidly industrializing economy, a distinct sociocultural and geopolitical context, and a most quintessential form of government-controlled media parallelism (Repnikova, 2017; Zhao, 2012). This study concentrates on a single but illustrative Chinese television news documentary about the “European refugee crisis” since 2015. Textual analysis of the documentary is carried out using multimodal analysis and critical discourse analysis. This analytical approach is combined with a bottom-up interpretative focus group study that exposes 81 respondents to the news documentary. The analysis shows that the Chinese authoritarian media therefore fails to foster cosmopolitan dispositions, in the sense of making audiences more hospitable and reflexive, and instead consolidates the national discourse and identity politics. In presenting these empirical findings, this study possesses the potential to broaden the epistemological and ontological horizons of distant suffering studies in a multipolar world.

Literature Review

The Mediation of Distant Suffering

Sonia Livingstone (2009) theorizes that mediation is the way “the media mediate, entering into and shaping the mundane but ubiquitous relations among individuals and between individuals and society” (p. 7). It particularly underscores media’s transformational capacities toward social processes (Couldry, 2008), thereby emphasizing the nature of the “mediapolis” (Silverstone, 2006, p. 39) as a mediated public space of appearance (Arendt, 1958) in contemporary societies, where the materiality of the world is constructed through electronically communicated public speech and action. In this regard, Roger Silverstone

(2005) requires media scholars to address the dialectical processes of communication as both “institutionally and technologically driven and embedded” (p. 189). Silverstone (2005) is here “enriching the cycle of communication” (Siapera, 2010, p. 73) by synthesizing technologically the medium evolution, forces of capitalism and modernity, processes of production and representation, and psychosocially and socioculturally contextualized media reception.

Within the media ethics literature more particularly, the mediation theory is generally preferred because it can capture the complex ways the media are implicated in the relationship between audiences and distant others and can offer a new and exciting analytical space to think through the social and moral consequences of the media (Kyriakidou, 2020, 2021; Schieferdecker, 2021; Xu & Zhang, 2022). Using discourse analysis, visual analysis, content analysis, thematic analysis, and general impressionistic analysis, a rich and diverse body of work, under the direction of “textual ethics” (Ong, 2015, p. 48), has focused on unearthing the pedagogical potential of the texts of mediation for evoking and distributing the “politics of pity” (Boltanski, 1999, p. 7). That is to say, scholarship has focused on the ways in which various media and their semiotic resources morally produce meaning about distant human misfortune, thus arousing the emotion of the spectators and inviting their impartial deliberation on how to act upon the misfortune (Chouliaraki, 2006; Moeller, 1999; Orgad, 2012; Robertson, 2010; Silverstone, 2006).

These text-focused studies helpfully provide signposts for analyzing precisely how media texts chart patterns, trends, and conventions to help us recognize certain regimes of Foucauldian meanings and to diagram representational behaviors. These elements constitute recommendations for audiences to interact with the distant suffering and influence whether they commit to helping alleviate the suffering (Orgad & Seu, 2014). The most striking example is arguably Moeller’s (1999) compassion fatigue hypothesis. Moeller argues that the audience’s indifference and apathy result from the highly formulaic, repetitive, decontextualized, and sensationalized news media coverage of wars, famines, and humanitarian crises. Likewise, Chouliaraki (2013) argues that the politicization, marketization, and technicalization of humanitarianism breeds a what’s-in-it-for-me ethics of posthumanitarianism among the public. The beliefs of such a narcissistic public relatively lessens the consideration of the political factors and socioeconomic mechanisms underpinning the suffering, sustaining an apolitical and individualistic conception of humanitarianism. This has inevitably failed to convert into a more radical and egalitarian action to implement political practices of global solidarity.

However, the potential of text-analytical approaches to account for the mediated relationships between texts and audiences is limited and oversimplified (Ong, 2009). As Cottle (2009) argues,

different “regimes of pity” may or may not register and resonate with actual audiences . . .
 . when audiences do respond to calls for compassion embedded into news packages and visuals of human suffering they may be doing so in differentiated and quite distinct ways.
 (p. 137)

More importantly, it failed to effectively resolve a dialogical process of mediation as required by Silverstone (2006), in which the mediated experiences of suffering should be regulated by both the media text and audience reception. To this end, scholars argue that it is necessary to empirically verify the extent

to which the normative frameworks and assumptions contained in textual analysis remain relevant when applied to the study of people's mediated everyday lives (Joye, 2013). The recent upsurge in reception-focused studies has been proverbially called for, ranging from the qualitative interpretative approach of social constructionism (Kyriakidou, 2017; Ong, 2015; Scott, 2014) to the quantitative deductive-nomological approach of realist positivism (Huiberts & Joye, 2019; Weikmann & Powell, 2019). Existing audience studies, though limited in number and scope, along with textual studies, have so far driven a greater degree of methodological holism in mediated suffering studies.

More importantly, these empirical audience studies help us to unwrap the ways audiences engage with distant suffering in their diversity and particularity. Kyriakidou (2017, 2020), Ong (2015), and Schieferdecker's (2021) scholarly accounts argue that ignoring the variety and nuance in audience reactions across different national sociohistorical and sociocultural contexts is a potential blind spot in the field. They provide a reminder that audience reception of distant suffering can be approached as a problem of civic culture as much as a problem of mediation, thus providing an opportunity to challenge Western assumptions based on a slice of context-specific cases. For instance, by anthropologically investigating the "lay moralities" of national audiences in the class-divided Philippines, Ong (2015) demonstrates that power also traverses viewing relationships within the Global Southern sphere, between the suffering working class and the wealthy middle classes. This ethnographic study in a non-Western context concludes that the proximal and internal sufferers remain others beyond reach and forces scholarship to reevaluate key sociological categories, such as otherness and proper distance.

Authoritarian Media Systems as Mediapolis?

Media systems play a critical role as intermediaries in mediating distant suffering and the global production and distribution of images and stories related to humanitarian crises (Lindell, 2015). Current empirical studies on distant suffering predominantly focus on Western media systems found in developed capitalist democracies, such as the "hybrid," polarized-pluralist Mediterranean and democratic-corporatist models (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Humprecht, Herrero, Blassnig, Brüggemann, & Engesser, 2022).

On one hand, the reason for this focus may be rooted in the initial hope that Western media would foster more progressive forms of cosmopolitan politics, functioning as a mediapolis that cultivates a media culture promoting openness and cosmopolitanism among its audience (Silverstone, 2006). On the other hand, this concentration may stem from a field that originated from explicit criticisms of Western media practices and stereotypes in the representation of others' suffering (Joye, 2013). These criticisms encompass issues such as the disconnect between moral authority and geographical regions, the influence of economic and political agencies spanning globally influential regions, as well as considerations of geographical and cultural proximity, or the (neo)colonial traditions of Western superiority (e.g., Chouliaraki, 2013).

Compared with these "most similar systems" (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 6) in Western Europe and North America, the Chinese media system is one of the "most dissimilar systems" reflecting the non-Western empirical reality (Zhao, 2012, p. 8). While scholarly accounts about the Chinese media are as diverse as it is extensive, it is possible to highlight that the most popular depiction (or unified understanding) of it in past decades has been that of an absolutely loyal agent or mouthpiece of the party state under political

ensorship (Repnikova, 2017; Zhao, 2012). The Chinese mass media, which has long served as the Communist Party's mouthpiece, has the highest degree of political instrumentalization, displaying all the features of a quintessential government-controlled media parallelism. Although this authoritarian media system has faced challenges from commercialization, capitalization, and market-driven expansion, the impact of new information and communication technologies, and the globalization of ideas, it still formidably propagates the official ideology and political programs to the Chinese public sphere (Cantoni, Chen, Yang, Yuchtman, & Zhang, 2017). For instance, substantial evidence indicates that the Chinese mass media has always been used by authoritarian regimes to bolster their domestic legitimacy and the superiority of the Chinese political system by invoking longstanding nationalistic ideological traditions (Weiss & Dafoe, 2019). The negative framing of racial discrimination, rampant violence, and other violations of human rights in Western countries by the Chinese media has been levied primarily to justify China's controversial human rights situation (Zhou, Chen, & Wu, 2012). Similarly, much of the criticism of the double standards perceived in Western free-speech ideologies by the Chinese media has been mobilized primarily to neutralize China's poor domestic record concerning media freedom (Song, Lee, & Huang, 2019).

Theoretically, such an authoritarian media system seems to contradict Silverstone's (2006) idea of a mediapolis that harbors a media culture fostering sensibilities of openness and cosmopolitanism among its public. However, we cannot speculate narrowly that government-controlled media inevitably fail to act as the key agents of cosmopolitan socialization to promote transnational solidarity or the egalitarian action of political practices of global solidarity in Chinese public life. Instead, through an analytical lens of studies of distant suffering, the task of this article is to empirically evaluate whether the government-controlled media can cultivate a sense of cosmopolitan responsibility toward distant suffering among the Chinese public.

Keeping the aforementioned theoretical considerations in mind, we posed two research questions to structure the data collection and analysis:

RQ1: How do government-controlled media regulate audiences' mediated experiences of distant suffering?

RQ2: To what extent do audiences adopt the positions in relation to distant suffering which an application of the textual analysis suggests that government-controlled media invite them to adopt?

Methodology

Case Selection

The selected case study involves what has been widely described as the "European refugee crisis," in which, since 2015, billions of people in the Global South have been forced to flee their homes because of war, oppression, or disastrous economic circumstances, while European societies have been mired in a heightened environment of terrorist threats. The refugee crisis highlights the main features of what Cottle (2011) defines as a global interdependency crisis—"endemic, constantly emergent or even enduring critical events and threats that emanate from within today's global (dis)order and that range across and interpenetrate within different realms of global interdependency" (p. 79). However, in China, vulnerable

refugees and asylum seekers are usually perceived as distant sufferers and are mediated, since for most Chinese, the connection with them still primarily exists as the consumption of their images from various media accounts (Jiang, d'Haenens, & Zhang, 2021). More importantly, the diversity of sufferers (Southern refugees and Western victims) allows for an investigation of the multivalences of power relations between the Chinese public and others—as outlined above—in particular geopolitical contexts.

This article focuses on Chinese television texts. Either in traditional or digital streaming forms, television remains one of the most potent forms of government-controlled media available to authoritarian regimes, despite the increasing complexity of media ecosystems and fragmentation of audiences (Chadwick, 2017). For instance, although Chinese Central Television (CCTV), China's predominant public broadcaster operated by the National Radio and Television Administration, has "grown from a primitive channel of state-funded polemic drudgery to an aspiring player in China's newly commercialized media industries" (Zhu, 2014, p. 18), it remains the most quintessential form of government-controlled media parallelism (Zhao, 2012).

Rather than investigate the routine television news in the channel's 24/7 footage flow, the study mainly focuses on magazine-type news documentaries broadcast on the CCTV program *World Weekly*. The first reason for this is that the *World Weekly* can be deemed a prototypical example of the authoritative commentary representing the political viewpoint of the authoritarian government on international issues and societies. It can drive an authoritarian public consciousness of international news and events (Zhu, 2014). The second reason is that the *World Weekly* contains a comparable level of both explanation and emotional force that is normally lacking in regular news items. As Scott (2014) argues, we can learn more about how television influences audiences' mediated experiences of distant suffering if we expand our focus beyond the peak moments of television news coverage during disasters (Robertson, 2010).

The Analytics of Mediation

To learn what dispositions to feel, think, and act toward sufferers emanate from the sampled television program, the analytical approach adopted in this study closely follows Chouliaraki's (2006) analytics of mediation. This elaborate analytical framework enables the mediation process to be conceptualized, while allowing the analyst to explore how media text, semiotic-discursive structure, and aesthetic practice reproduce hierarchies of place and human life and affect audiences' abilities to engage with distant suffering. Chouliaraki (2006) indicates that existing narratives about the cosmopolitan potential of media are polarized between two contrasting states: optimism and pessimism. The dual process of mediation—"passing through the medium" and "overcoming distance" (Tomlinson, 1999, p. 154)—may lead to a "utopianism" faith that media could restore the democratization of responsibility and global connectivity, or it may lead to a skepticism faith that media cannot generate genuine concern for distant sufferers. The crux of the analytics of mediation is to examine how three paradoxes of mediation that exist between these two contrasting narratives are seemingly resolved within individual media texts.

The first paradox of mediation focuses on technology, which refers to the technology simultaneously establishing and destroying global connectivity, leading to a sense of immediacy or indifference. The second paradox focuses on distance, which refers to how mediation situates spectators too

far from sufferers, leading to depersonalization and indifference, and at the same time, it brings spectators close to the sufferers, leading to intimacy and connection. The third paradox focuses on the in/action, which refers to how mediation situates spectators both as passive onlookers to the scene of suffering and as active, involved actors. To investigate these three paradoxes, Chouliaraki (2006) incorporated understandings of mediation as a process involving both immediacy and hypermediacy (Bolter & Grusin, 2000); these ideas maintain a sense of mediation as passing through the medium and overcoming distance while also exploring each of these three dimensions of mediation.

Table 1. The Analytical Toolkits of the Analytics of Mediation (Compiled by the Author From Chouliaraki, 2006).

Paradox to be resolved	Level of analysis	Analytical toolkit
Paradox of technology	Multimodal analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mode of presentation (perceptual, categorical, or ideological realism) • Verbal-visual relations (indexical, iconic, or symbolic) • Aesthetic quality (pamphleteering, philanthropy, or sublimation)
Paradox of distance	Critical discourse analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The complexity of space-time (spatiotemporal concreteness, specificity, multiplicity, and mobility) • Historicity/causality
Paradox of in/action	Critical discourse analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The degree of humanization of sufferers (motion, gaze, voice, and condition) • The orchestration of the benefactor and persecutor figures

To analyze mediation in terms of immediacy and hypermediacy, Chouliaraki (2006) integrates two levels of analysis by capitalizing on the poststructuralist views of meaning and power (see Table 1). The first level is multimodal discourse analysis, which helps us analyze how meaning-making about distant suffering occurs on the media screen as a hypermediated accomplishment. The second level is critical discourse analysis (CDA), or the critical study of media technologies as being embedded in existing power relationships of viewing, which helps us analyze how the media text brings forth emotions and wishes for engagement with the distant suffering as an immediate reality for the audience (Fairclough, 2003; Van Dijk, 2008). The combination of the two analytical levels provides an integrated account of how the television text seemingly positions audiences vis-à-vis distant suffering and considers “the embeddedness of media texts both in technological artefacts and in social relationships” (Chouliaraki, 2006, p. 153).

However, Doboš (2019) argues that the spatiality of the analytics of mediation is only structured by news discourse, and the question of how spatiality can structure the discourse itself has been omitted. At the heart of such an argument is the question of how space produces communication and not just how communication produces space. In this sense, mediation processes do not exist in a media and societal vacuum but rather as part of a broader and enveloping sociocultural and geopolitical context already plied by China’s nativist and authoritarian ideologies. Therefore, the analytics of analysis for specific contexts would benefit from paying attention to the underlying realism of context and geography.

Research Participant Recruitment and Procedure

To verify the arguments developed within the above textual analysis, 90-minute focus groups were conducted on 18 separate occasions with 81 respondents in total ($N = 81$). These focus groups were conducted in China between June and July 2021, as part of a larger study of authoritarian audiences of mediated suffering. All respondents were recruited through snowball sampling. A few initial contacts (seeds) were enlisted using social networks on the basis of fitting the research criteria. Sampling usually continues until data saturation. The respondents varied in terms of gender (53.1% female, 46.9% male), educational level (60.5% bachelor's degree or higher, 39.5% some high school education), and age (18–34, 35–64, 65+; $M = 33.9$, $SD = 11.2$), and were a geographically diverse group from urban and rural areas of China.

The group conversations were structured around relatively similar age groups with an even gender mix to encourage positive group dynamics and deliberately avoided mixing both the youngest and oldest media users, as these have demonstrably different media habits (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018) and cosmopolitan dispositions (Scott, 2015). In terms of the sociodemographic variables related to locales and educational level, we maintained homogeneity within each individual group but aimed for diversity across the different focus groups. This strategy can provide an open environment in which differences of opinions can be celebrated and discussed freely, and respondents' complex behaviors and motivations can be sighted thoroughly, particularly when discussing the morally sensitive topics of distant suffering (Kyriakidou, 2021).

During the first step, respondents were shown the sampled television program. Following this viewing, they were asked about the program and their ideas about the perceived message, and their thoughts, emotions, sense of personal responsibility, and ability to help (Seu & Orgad, 2017). All discussions were anonymous. Data were originally recorded in Chinese Mandarin, and texts have been translated by us and checked by a native speaker to ensure the accuracy of the translation.

Data were analyzed thematically and discursively. The analysis is data driven, and the coding is a recursive process using NVivo 11. In particular, our analysis largely involved clustering relevant audience data into the three paradoxes of mediation. In most instances, based on the authenticity principle, the quotations were selected because they provide the most illustrative, noteworthy, and representative representation of audiences' discussion on a particular subject, not because they provided the most extreme examples.

Results

Humanitarian Texts Under Authoritarianism

Resolving the Paradox of Technology: Considering Multimodality

The cased television text primarily focuses on documenting various anecdotes depicting the circumstances of civilians displaced by war and poverty, as well as their living conditions in Europe. It employs categorical realism as its mode of presentation, aiming to evoke emotions and stronger feelings to portray a reality. For instance, the text frequently uses iconographies of the border spectacle, showcasing vulnerable refugees and asylum seekers risking their lives to cross newly installed barbed-wire border fences

and the Mediterranean Sea. These iconographies serve to elicit empathy, particularly through close-ups of starving children or images of women seeking shelter while on the run (Chouliaraki & Stolić, 2019; Joye, 2015; Orgad, 2012).

However, there is also strong evidence of ideological realism, or a reality of our deep-seated certainties and beliefs about the way the world is or should be. Ideological realism is produced through an appeal to a sense of justice, which in this case takes the form of explicit appeals by an ethical judgment directed against the "humanitarian securitization at Europe's borders" (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2017, p. 159) and the inherent inequality of social resources distribution among the host country's population and the refugees. For example, there are instances in the voiceover suggesting that the never-ending refugee crisis has revealed "Europe's structural flaws and political antagonisms," which ultimately leads to "Brexit, intra-European antagonisms, the surge in support for right-wing populist governments in Western Europe" and the rise in "Italy's governing populist Five Star Movement" (CCTV, 2020, 12:50). Such judgment becomes more apparent in the closing remarks of the anchorman at the end of the program: "Nothing has really changed for the better since 2015, politicians have only boasted about their border policies instead of thinking about the global problems that cause people to flee" (CCTV, 2020, 24:10).

We suggest that these judgments carry highly political orientations, which have been partly entangled in Chinese politics in a discourse and mentality belonging to the long-sustained nationalistic ideological traditions of negatively framing the West. As Jiang et al. (2021) found, Chinese media often negatively portrayed the antirefugee continuum of public attitude politics in Europe. This is evident in the anchorman's exaggerated or highly colored and emotive presentation: "Wealthy Western countries are hiding behind their closed doors, ignoring victims of war and violence being displaced" (CCTV, 2020, 24.50) Such narratives may provide a symbolic means to recall and activate symbols of national and politicohistorical memory to fuel the emotional discontent and "anger" with the Western hegemony in the international system among the Chinese public. The language of anti-imperialism is often a crucial element in the Chinese imagination about the global refugee crisis and the securitization of terrorism, thereby framing a claim that Western hegemonic diplomacy in the Middle East and Africa is the root cause of the refugee crisis (Guan & Liu, 2019; Zhang, 2019). As a result, two dimensions of the aesthetic quality are juxtaposed. On the one hand, as the result of the main storyline conveying the emotional reality of refugees' misfortunes, it is suggested that the main reactions that audiences are invited to adopt are ones associated with philanthropy or moral emotions of tender-heartedness toward the vulnerable refugees. On the other hand, this emotional aesthetic quality is pamphleteering along with the geopolitical ideology against imperialism.

Resolving the Paradox of Distance: Considering Space-Time

About the question of space-time in the representation, the television text is concretized, multiple, and specified, while mobility is absent. First, space-time is concrete in that the visualization of events introduces audiences to the concrete spaces of suffering or the life-world where refugees live and act. Second, the space-time is rendered multiple in that the linguistic referents and visual montages enable audiences to experience multiple spaces consisting of many contexts of suffering events and philanthropic actions. Third, the space-time is specific in that the linguistic referents progress toward increasingly precise names and details of geographical locations, from a country to a city to some high-profile specific places.

Visual specificity involves individualized images of the refugees on which the plot of the news narrative is focalized. However, we cannot seem to locate any evidence of space-time mobility or links between the life-worlds of audiences and distant others. Mobility is at the core of the complexity because it is often considered a key constituent of a cosmopolitan disposition, which is necessary for forming a global civil society. As Szerszynski and Urry (2006) argue, a sense of mobility can "create an awareness of interdependence, encouraging the development of a notion of 'pan-humanity'" (pp. 117–118).

The main temporality of the television text is the past when billions of people in the Global South were being forced to flee their homes because of oppression or disastrous economic circumstances. Theoretically, references to the past certainly contextualize the global refugee crisis in the logic of explanation, thereby reinforcing the historicity of events. However, a broader explanation of the geopolitical turmoil in the Global South and the asymmetry of power between North and South are selectively erased from the narrative in this program. Such selective information disclosure and decontextualized portrayal may deflect attention away from the complex nature of proliferating and interpenetrating global crises and ultimately leave audiences with a severely limited understanding or cognitive bias of the causes of the refugee crisis that favors a specific party-state standing. The program, in this sense, may fail to present the refugee crisis within a "logic of causality" (Chouliaraki, 2006, p. 99) or as being a product of long-term consequences and a broader historical and sociocultural circumstance. In summary, although more complicated space-time can lessen the "othering," which invites audiences to observe distant refugees as proximate, the audience is still positioned outside the scene of action.

Resolving the Paradox of In/Action: Considering the Agency

From the perspective of represented agency, the dominance of the agency of sufferers is represented in humanized and individualized formations. The process of identity construction endows refugees with the power to do something about their suffering condition. At the same time, the physical and psychological pain of individual sufferers is a strong point of identification for the audiences, as the idea behind the politics of pity suggests, which may instigate empathetic connections between the audiences and others. For example, the refugee boy is no longer the figure of the voiceless refugee in the humanitarian imaginary whose voice is banished to the margins of media and discursive networks (Chouliaraki & Stolić, 2017; Stavinoha, 2019). Instead, the boy's voice is heard discussing politics and their predicament, and speech gives him the potential to articulate conceptions of fairness and injustice, which "allows for the space of the political to emerge" (Nyers, 2008, p. 163). The consequences of the acts of citizenship given by voice may make refugees become visible and audible political subjects (Stavinoha, 2019).

However, refugees are also occasionally portrayed as half-naked, exposing emaciated rib cages, arms, and legs, such as in the images of a half-naked refugee who appears exhausted while swimming in the Mediterranean and a dirty hand holding relief food in the Moria refugee camp. Captured on camera as the refugees sit passively in a row, the parts of their vulnerable bodies construct a form of dismantling, to fragmentation. They do not reflect real human bodies but curiosities of the flesh that mobilize "a pornographic spectatorial imagination between disgust and desire" (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 110). Such fragmentation is a technique of representation that, in reducing humans to their parts, turns them into objects of fetishism (Hall, 1997). In so doing, such "shock aesthetics" have established a

social relationship anchored on the hierarchy of human life and premised on the maximal distance between audience and sufferers (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 110). This is the paradoxicality of the agency of refugees, represented in the humanization and individualization of human figures and the fetishization of biological machines: Simultaneously, it appeals to a moral connection with the audiences and distances them from the unfamiliar refugees.

The “Western world,” with specific emphasis on the German host society, assumes a multifaceted role, fulfilling the functions of both benefactors and persecutors. On the one hand, the benefactors are the boat crews of German nonprofit and civil search and rescue organizations with strong professional medical and military skills, and the implementers of the refugee integration policy, such as German language trainers. However, the humanitarian campaigns depicted in the benefactors’ story are highly characteristic of “paternalistic, charity-based and frequently neocolonial development practices and projects” (Cameron & Haanstra, 2008, p. 1478), in which the poor depend on the rich, and the Global South depends on the West.

On the other hand, it was also intimated to the audiences that the Western countries and societies act as persecutors. Right-wing populist parties, and those who express outright xenophobic and racist indignations across Europe, are portrayed as hegemonic persecutors who construct refugees as a “problem or a financial/economic burden” (Vollmer & Karakayali, 2017, p. 3), or as an “evil-doing threat” (Chouliaraki & Stolić, 2017, p. 3) to the welfare state. As the ideological idea of anti-imperialism and antihegemony has persisted and continued to expand in Chinese political culture since the end of the Cold War (Guan & Liu, 2020), the antithetic relationship between the Chinese public and Western imperialism may be intensified by this portrayal of imperialist persecutors. In this way, the symbolic figure of the Western benefactor has the potential to become the secondary actor in the humanitarian theatre. Taken together, these instances of blurring the categories of benefactor and persecutor with fixed attributes unsettle the politics of pity. Consequently, the twofold orchestration in the spectacle of suffering might impact the audience’s perception and identification of the benefactors and persecutors involved. Additionally, this orchestration has the potential to evoke and activate symbols of national and cultural tradition, which may, in turn, incite hostility toward the West.

Audience Reception Under Authoritarianism

A surprising amount of evidence emerged from discussions to suggest that the most study respondents did indeed regularly adopt the morally acceptable, philanthropic responses that have been identified in the textual analysis. Evidence of tenderhearted actions and emotions among respondents, especially the female respondents, could be found in their affective language to describe the refugees and asylum seekers, as well as their emotional reactions to the benefactors’ humanitarian actions. For example, the references to “tears” and the “upsetting” scenes in the quotations below were symptomatic of the frequently emotional responses to the visualities and narratives depicting distressed refugee women with their starving and malnourished children and the scenes of civil search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean.

It actually brought tears to my eyes . . . It was really sorrowful because of the unknown future waiting for these displaced refugees . . . My heart was broken when I saw a mother who had held her child cross the iron curtain. (Focus group 2, 33 years old, female)

The scenes of rescue activities in the Mediterranean are too unforgettable for me. Those refugees crowded into a small rescue boat, and even going to the toilet became the biggest problem . . . It was very upsetting . . . leaving a profound sense of sadness and helplessness in my heart, as I witnessed the immense struggles. (Focus group 7, 25 years old, female)

By contrast, there was little evidence of any explicit accusations or fits of anger toward persecutors' actions and behaviors, such as European "rejection of immigrants" and the securitization at Europe's borders identified in the textual analysis. Instead, respondents' discourses associated with pamphleteering often took the form of either "mild disapproval or begrudging acceptance" (Scott, 2014, p. 11) of their actions. For instance, in the first quotation below, the securitization at Europe's borders was understood as just something that sovereign nation states do as part of their civic dispositions of proactive protection. In the second quotation, the European "rejection of immigrants" and xenophobia represents just a normal grassroots public opinion that embodies "human nature," and not something to get particularly angry about.

I have to say that it is inhumane to close borders and even suppress refugees by force. But I can also understand that the whole of Europe is mired in the alarming danger of terrorism . . . their border policies are just to protect their citizens. (Focus group 6, 45 years old, male)

From the perspective of human nature, this xenophobia fully demonstrated the selfishness of human nature . . . this is human nature . . . it's normal . . . we lack any grounds to pass judgment on them . . . You see these behaviors everywhere in our daily lives. (Focus group 12, 32 years old, male)

There is no clear trace of antagonism toward anti-Western hegemonies in the data set, except on the few occasions where respondents regard the misfortune of the refugees in the Global South as seen as a consequence of political games and the capitalist economy of plunder between superpowers. Interestingly, on several occasions, respondents instead accept and (re)interpret a globally circulated discourse of Western populist nationalism about the securitization of terrorism (Guan & Liu, 2020), as reflected in the distancing of refugees as a "way of shifting focus away from the humanitarian tragedies" (Höijer, 2004, p. 524). For example, when respondents spoke about emaciated refugees in refugee camps who need urgent medical care, with emphasis on grassroots and personal storytelling, references to the problem being "too far away" appeared in all group discussions and was the most agreed-upon perspective. Although a significant degree of spatiotemporal complexity was established in the news text, respondents did not experience a greater proximity or immediacy to distant others.

What happened to those poor Syrians or Afghans was too far from my everyday life. I couldn't feel it when I saw refugees crowded into an ill-equipped relief station . . . being born in China is the most supreme stroke of luck. (Focus group 14, 26 years old, female)

This representative quotation also alludes to the fact that the sense of mobility that connects the life-worlds of audiences and distant others was absent in respondents' public talk, just as was suggested in the textual analysis. Instead, the interaction between audiences and sufferers is manifested in dichotomous comparison rather than cosmopolitan connectivity, which is ultimately limited in a clear polarized opposition between the Chinese homogenous ethnic community and its ethnocultural other, embodied typically by the figure of Global Southern refugees. Enormously diverse racial, ethnic, and religious refugee groups were homogenized as a collective whole and then figured as lazy, welfare-dependent, and prone to crime. Striking examples of this impression included the following quotations: "they are terrorists, and as long as they come in, terrorist attacks and explosions will occur" (Focus group 17); "they are inherently unreliable, as they are a race prone to breaking the law" (Focus group 17); "they are very ill-bred" (Focus group 18). These "threatening" others a priori refer to young male migrants with dark skin whose presence and dispositions pose an alleged threat to women and societies, especially when respondents repeatedly mentioned the incidents of alleged sexual assaults in Cologne, Germany, and smoldering memories of domestic terrorist attacks by extremist Muslims.

The demonization and vilification of Muslim masculinity are ultimately symptomatic of a process of dehumanization, failing to situate those sufferers within their historical context. Such inherently exclusive popular assertions can be interpreted as part of Chinese cultural stereotypes and prejudices associated with nationalist populism and exclusionary nativism. They represent a contemporary mutation of the globally imagined racial hierarchies in Sinocentric cosmopolitanism or Sino-civilizational supremacism (Rofel, 2012; Zhang, 2019), akin to broader ideas of Western superiority and the strong culture of Western-Orientalism, as well as prejudices based on narrow definitions of national culture (Kyriakidou, 2020). These interpretations and articulations suggest that audiences in authoritarian contexts are also using national sociohistorical and sociocultural contexts with broader political and public discourses that frame audiences' understanding of the social world to make sense of distant suffering (Kyriakidou, 2017, 2021; Schieferdecker, 2021), rather than relying solely on the moment of mediation.

Conclusion

This article assesses whether Chinese government-controlled media can cultivate cosmopolitan dispositions in the public sphere through an empirical study of the mediation of the distant refugee crisis and audience reception in authoritarian China. First, in applying Chouliaraki's (2006) analytics of mediation to an episode of the *World Weekly*, we have provided evidence to suggest that this particular Chinese television program offers audiences intense experiences of humanized distant sufferers. However, by subtly claiming that the West should pay reparations for most of the misfortunes around the world, selectively disclosing the cause of the refugee crisis, and blurring the categories of Western benefactors and persecutors, the program still reiterates China's political identity and sets it against the West. In this case, the politics of pity have given way to a more geopolitical representation of the refugee crisis, with humanitarian urgency being partly qualified by the power and ideological competition and antagonism

between China and the West. Second, the results of focus groups suggest that the anticipated audience responses are, to some extent, borne out in talk about this program. For example, overall, an indulgent sentimentality is favored over reflection and judgment. However, the most important finding is that the audience did not repeat the explicit anti-Western sentiment in the news text but instead reinterpreted the asymmetry of power relations to dehumanize and distance refugees.

Our textual research relies on a single-sample qualitative pilot study. Our audience study relied on snowball sampling, which is criticized for its lack of external validity; social-desirability bias was still present in group discussions. As a result, our findings have little or no statistical generalizability.

However, this exploratory study remains within the broader de-Westernizing efforts, compelling us to revisit the paradigmatic conceptualization of the mediation of distant suffering. Given the analysis, and in stark contrast to the dual-pairing power relation between the Western societies and the others that are interpreted solely within the West and non-West binary, the geopolitical realities of China are at least situated within a triangular power relationship. If the polarized power relations that are central to the Western societies run along the line of Western-Orientalist cultures, then the Chinese society may reinterpret and instrumentalize the self-other axis to construct a "threatening" and "barbaric" non-Western other in relation to China's ethnoracial identity, and a "hegemonic" Western other in relation to China's political identity (Zhang, 2019). These more sophisticated power relations are rooted in China's global imaginaries and geopolitical rivalry, and they are intricately intertwined with more broadly national discourse and identity politics. Unfortunately, as is obvious in the intellectual description of distant suffering studies, such triangles are not to be found in the existing scholarship. This is why it is necessary to de-Westernize work in this field, to provide researchers with distinctive epistemologies and empirical insights beyond the Western context. This means that the general goal at the moment is not to develop a universally applicable model that can be applied to every context but to increase the diversity of concepts, variables, and analytical frameworks. Against this backdrop, more transnational dialogues and collaborative partnerships around the globe are necessary. Such action would not only avoid a narrow de-Westernization that could lead to new versions of intellectual parochialism in communication studies (Waisbord & Mellado, 2014), but would also expand the epistemological and ontological horizons of distant suffering studies in a multipolar world.

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