

Original Paper

The Local Logic of Constructing China's Anti-Drug Narrative System

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Abstract

This paper examines the local logic of China's anti-drug narrative system through the three core frameworks of "home-state isomorphism" narrative, "people's war" narrative and "responsible great power" narrative. With the help of narrative theory and critical discourse analysis, this paper analyzes how these frameworks are rooted in the historical experience of China's Opium War, the cultural logic of traditional countries, the mobilization of revolutionary masses and the evolving global role. Studies have shown that although these narratives have strong domestic mobilization capabilities and contribute to China's participation in global drug governance, they also face significant challenges in international communication, including cultural particularities, stigmatization of drug users, and excessive dependence on abstract data. In order to enhance cross-cultural adaptability, this paper proposes several narrative optimization strategies: de-essentialization and re-contextualization of the home-country narrative; change the narrative of "people's war" from mobilization to participation and co-governance; shift the "responsible power" narrative from data-centered to story-centered; turn public diplomacy from monologue mode to dialogue and cooperation mode. This paper argues that optimizing China's anti-drug narrative system is crucial to maintaining its unique cultural and political roots while enhancing the effectiveness of international communication.

Keywords

Anti-narcotics narrative system, Family-state isomorphism, People's War narrative

Introduction

China's anti-drug narrative system provides a unique case, which is deeply rooted in the country's

unique historical experience, cultural traditions and political system. The most prominent features of this system include three core narrative frameworks: the “home-state isomorphism” narrative, the “people’s war” narrative and the “responsible great power” narrative. The “family-state isomorphism” narrative promotes the drug problem from the level of personal health to the level of national destiny, constructs a sense of moral urgency with the help of the historical trauma of the Opium War, and connects the destiny of individuals, families and countries (Yongming Zhou, 2016). The narrative of “People’s War” emphasizes the participation of the whole people and the prevention and treatment of the masses, and mobilizes the society through the grid management system (Guanyao Mo & Minju Du, 2018). At present, the system includes more than one million anti-drug volunteers and more than 700 anti-drug social organizations across the country (National Narcotics Control Commission, 2023). The “responsible power” narrative highlights China’s positive contribution to global drug governance, including the first implementation of the entire category of fentanyl substances in the world (Office of the National Narcotics Control Commission and Narcotics Control Bureau of the Ministry of Public Security, 2020). Joint anti-drug action in the Mekong River Basin and the “Golden Triangle” alternative planting project (Yunling Zhang & Xinyu Zhou, 2023).

The “Family-State Isomorphism” Narrative

The core metaphor of China’s anti-drug narrative is the historical connection between “drugs” and “national calamity”. This narrative framework elevates the drug problem from the level of personal health to the level of national destiny, and constructs a sense of moral urgency expressed by “banning drugs, benefiting the contemporary era and contributing to the future.” The historical memory of the opium war was activated as a collective traumatic narrative: in 1837, the import of opium exceeded 3.02 million kilograms, and about 10 million people smoked opium. The resulting silver outflow triggered a national fiscal crisis (Institute of Modern History, 2017). In 1949, the country’s opium poppy cultivation area exceeded 1 million hectares, about 20 million people were addicted to opium and other drugs, and up to 500,000 people were engaged in drug trafficking and trading (Wei Gao, n.d.). These data constitute the historical basis of China’s anti-drug narrative and are also emotional resources for mobilizing society to participate in the fight against drugs.

“Home-country isomorphism” is one of the core characteristics of Chinese traditional culture. In this cultural framework, home and country are isomorphic: home is the epitome of the country, the country is the amplification of the home; family ethics can be extended to national ethics, and national responsibility can also be implemented as family responsibility (Meiping Fei, 2026). Applying this cultural logic to the anti-drug narrative, a “three-in-one” narrative structure of “individual-family-state” is generated: individual drug abuse not only endangers their own health, but also destroys family happiness, thus threatening national security; drug control is not only the responsibility of the government, but also the responsibility of every family and every citizen (Yongming Zhou, 2016). This narrative structure transforms abstract “national interests” into perceptible “family interests” and

“personal interests”, thus enhancing the appeal and persuasion of anti-drug mobilization.

From the perspective of narratology, the narrative of “home-country isomorphism” uses two rhetorical strategies: “metaphor” and “metonymy” (Xuechun Tan, 2009). The association of “drug-national disaster” is a metaphor, which compares the drug problem with the national crisis and gives the former great moral and political meaning. The progression of “individual-family-state” is a kind of metonymy, in which part (individual) refers to the whole (state), and concrete (family) refers to abstract (nation).

However, the limitations of the “home-country isomorphism” narrative in cross-cultural adaptation are also obvious (Xianhong Chen, 2025). First, in an individualistic society, the mobilization effect of the “state-nation” framework is weakened (Wei Chen, 2020). Western society emphasizes individual rights and free choice, and is wary of collective mobilization in the name of “national interests” (Wei Cheng, 2025). In this cultural context, the narrative of “home-state isomorphism” may be interpreted as an expression of “authoritarianism,” rather than a continuation of cultural traditions. Second, the particularity of historical memory may hinder universal resonance (Huanyu Wu & Jiangang Zhu, 2024). The Opium War is a unique historical experience in China, and it is difficult for audiences in other countries to resonate emotionally. Over-reliance on this historical narrative may limit the effect of China’s anti-drug discourse in international communication. Third, overemphasizing the “national calamity” may strengthen the “other’s perception of Chinese exceptionalism”. If China’s anti-drug narrative always emphasizes its own special history and special national conditions, it may leave the impression of “China is an exception” to the international community, which is not conducive to the international promotion of China’s anti-drug experience.

The direction of narrative optimization is “de-essentialization” and “re-contextualization”. De-essentialization means that “home-country isomorphism” is not regarded as a fixed cultural essence, but as a product of historical context (Xianhong Chen, 2024). Any country in the face of drug abuse, will produce a similar collective defense mechanism, China is no exception. The anti-alcoholism movement in the history of the United States and the contemporary response to the opioid crisis also reflect the collective mobilization logic of the “state-society” linkage. By demonstrating this universality, we can dispel the stereotype of “Chinese exceptionalism” and enhance the cross-cultural comprehensibility of China’s anti-drug narrative. “Recontextualization” refers to the connection between the “national” narrative and the “human” narrative, showing the universal contribution of China’s anti-drug experience to global drug governance.

From the perspective of communication studies, the international communication of the narrative of “home-country isomorphism” needs to use the strategy of “frame transformation.” Frame theory points out that the same issue can be presented through different frames, resulting in different communication effects (Dong Li, 2023). Facing Western audiences, we can transform the “home-country isomorphism” framework into a “public health” framework, emphasizing the threat of the drug problem to public health and social welfare; for developing country audiences, the “home-country isomorphism” framework can be transformed into a “development” framework, emphasizing the harm of the drug

problem to economic development and social stability. This kind of frame transformation is not a negation of the original narrative, but to adjust the way of expression on the basis of maintaining the core value to adapt to the cognitive habits of different audiences (Xianhong Chen, 2024).

The “People's War” Narrative

“People’s War” is a symbolic discourse of China’s anti-drug work, and its connotation is far beyond the literal meaning of military metaphor (Guanyao Mo & Minju Du, 2018). This narrative framework originates from the successful experience of the Chinese revolutionary war period, emphasizing the overwhelming advantage of relying on the strength of the masses and mobilizing the participation of the whole society in the struggle against the enemy (Shunan Wang & Zongxian Wu, 2016). Applying this framework to the field of drug control has produced a mobilization model of “national drug control”: drug control is not only the work of professional law enforcement agencies, but also the common responsibility of the whole society (State Council Information Office, 2021).

At the organizational level, the “people’s war” narrative is embodied in the working mechanism of “party committee leadership, government responsibility, social coordination, public participation, and rule of law guarantee” (Jing Zhang, 2019). This mechanism clarifies the roles and responsibilities of various actors in the anti-drug work: the party committee is responsible for top-level design and overall coordination; the government is responsible for the specific implementation and resource guarantee; social organizations are responsible for professional services and social mobilization; the public is responsible for active participation and active cooperation; the rule of law is responsible for institutional guarantee and code of conduct. This multi-subject collaborative governance structure not only ensures the unified leadership and effective organization of anti-drug work, but also mobilizes the enthusiasm and creativity of all sectors of society (Guanyao Mo & Minju Du, 2018).

At the practical level, the narrative of “People’s War” is reflected in the grid management system covering urban and rural areas. At present, there are more than 1 million anti-drug volunteers and more than 700 anti-drug social organizations nationwide, forming a network of anti-drug work covering urban and rural communities (National Narcotics Control Commission, 2023). Anti-drug volunteers go deep into communities, schools and enterprises to carry out drug prevention education, drug addicts “assistance and anti-drug information collection. Anti-drug social organizations provide professional services, such as drug rehabilitation counseling, family support, employment training, etc. Grid management implements anti-drug responsibilities to every community and every grid, and realizes the refinement and full coverage of anti-drug work.

At the discourse level, the “people’s war” narrative is embodied in the slogan of “no bystanders in the fight against drugs, you and I are all practicing people” (Office of the National Narcotics Control Commission, 2021). This slogan incorporates every citizen into the category of anti-drug actors, emphasizing that anti-drug is everyone’s responsibility and obligation. The media’s presentation of this narrative is highly stylized: the report usually follows the fixed structure of “superior deployment,

grassroots response, mass participation, and remarkable results”, using war vocabulary such as “Thunder Anti-drug Action”, “Battle”, and “Anti-drug Campaign” (Jing Zhang & Zongxian Wu, 2022). The function of this narrative mode is to strengthen the legitimacy of social control and the visibility of governance effectiveness, but it also brings some side effects.

From the perspective of critical discourse analysis, the narrative of “people’s war” reflects specific power relations. Van Dijk’s discourse manipulation model points out that the media guides the audience’s cognition to a specific direction through strategies such as theme selection, local meaning, style and rhetoric. In the “People’s War” narrative, the theme selection focuses on government deployment and mass response, and pays less attention to the voice and needs of drug addicts; through the use of war words, the local meaning constructs anti-drug as a “struggle between ourselves and the enemy” rather than a “social problem”; the style adopts grand narrative and collectivist discourse, emphasizing unified will and collective action; rhetoric uses metaphor and contrast to portray anti-drug workers as “heroes” and drugs and drug addicts as “enemies” (Dan Wang, 2023). The comprehensive use of these discourse strategies strengthens the specific discourse order and power relations.

The main cost of the “People’s War” narrative is that it strengthens the stigmatization of drug users. Under the framework of “war”, drugs are positioned as “enemies”, and drug addicts are more likely to be positioned as “enemies” or “captives” than “patients” who need help (Xihai Li & Shuhe Wang, 2022). This positioning may lead to the systematic neglect of the rehabilitation needs of drug users and the obstruction of social integration. Research shows that stigmatization is an important factor that prevents drug users from seeking help and achieving successful rehabilitation (China Association for the Prevention and Treatment of Drug Abuse, 2023). When society regards drug addicts as “moral corruptors” or “social enemies”, drug addicts are more likely to conceal their condition and avoid treatment, thus exacerbating the severity of the problem.

The coping strategy is not to abandon the core value of “people’s participation,” but to enrich its expression. First, show the autonomy of anti-drug social organizations. There are many independent anti-drug social organizations in China, which, with the support of the government, carry out activities independently, provide professional services and advocate policy improvement. By demonstrating the independence and professionalism of these organizations, we can respond to the question of “lack of diversity” (Yongxiang Xu & Guohui Cao, 2022). Second, tell the individual story of volunteers. Every anti-drug volunteer has his own motivation and experience. By telling their personal stories, the abstract “masses” can be reduced to concrete “individuals”, thus enhancing the appeal and credibility of the narrative. Third, show the decision-making process of community consultation. Many communities carry out anti-drug work through residents’ consultation and democratic decision-making. By demonstrating these processes, we can respond to the question of “lack of voluntariness” (Zhuo Chen and Yang Liu, 2023).

The core of narrative transformation is to transform “mobilization” narrative into “participation” narrative and “co-governance” narrative (Rong Hu & Chao Chen, 2022). The “mobilization” narrative

emphasizes top-down mobilization and organization, which is easy to be interpreted as “mobilized” and “organized”; the “participation” narrative emphasizes bottom-up voluntary participation, which can better reflect individual initiative and voluntariness. The “co-governance” narrative emphasizes the equal cooperation between the government and the society, which can better reflect the democracy and diversity of governance (Keping Yu, 2023). Through this narrative transformation, we can enhance the adaptability and acceptability of international communication while maintaining the core value of “universal anti-drug.”

The "Responsible Major Country" Narrative

The narrative of “responsible power” is the dominant framework of China’s international spread of drug control. The core proposition of this narrative framework is that China not only does its own anti-drug work well, but also provides public goods for global drug governance (Yunling Zhang & Xinyu Zhou, 2023). The identity of China as a “responsible power” is not only a confirmation of China’s comprehensive national strength and international status, but also an expectation that China should assume more responsibilities in international affairs. In the field of drug control, the “responsible power” narrative emphasizes China’s positive contribution to global drug governance, including institutional contribution, action contribution, development contribution and knowledge contribution.

In terms of institutional contribution, China took the lead in implementing the whole category of fentanyl substances in the world, providing institutional innovation for the governance of new psychoactive substances in the world (Office of the National Narcotics Control Commission and Narcotics Control Bureau of the Ministry of Public Security, 2020). On May 1, 2019, China officially implemented the whole category of fentanyl substances, becoming the first country in the world to adopt such measures. This institutional innovation has effectively plugged the loopholes in evasion of regulation through structural modification and has been widely recognized by the international community. Since then, China has extended the whole category of train control model to synthetic cannabinoids, further enriching the institutional toolbox of global governance of new psychoactive substances.

In terms of action contribution, China has actively participated in international anti-drug cooperation and carried out a series of joint anti-drug actions. The “Safe Mekong River” joint anti-drug operation is a regional cooperation mechanism jointly carried out by China and the countries of the Mekong River Basin. Since its launch in 2013, it has successfully conducted numerous joint patrols and law enforcement operations, effectively combating drug-related crime in the Mekong River Basin. During the “Safe Mekong” operation in 2024, 35.5 tons of drugs were seized in a single operation, exceeding 136 % of China’s total domestic drug seizures in the whole year (Mekong River Basin Countries Drug Control Cooperation Center, 2024). It fully demonstrates the remarkable results of regional cooperation. The China-Australia “Flame” joint anti-drug operation is a model of bilateral cooperation. The law

enforcement agencies of the two countries jointly combat transnational drug crimes through intelligence exchange, joint case handling and joint action.

In terms of development contribution, China's alternative planting projects in the "Golden Triangle" region have made important contributions to local economic and social development (Office of the National Narcotics Control Commission, 2024). Up to now, China has implemented more than 270 alternative planting projects in Myanmar, Laos and other countries, with a total area of more than 10.3 million mu (about 687,000 hectares) (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), 2023), helping local farmers shift from poppy cultivation to the production of economic crops such as rubber, sugarcane and tea. These projects not only reduce the supply of drugs from the source, but also promote local economic development and people's livelihood improvement, and achieve the organic unity of anti-drug and poverty reduction, development and security. The alternative planting project is hailed by the international community as the "China Program" and is a successful example of South-South cooperation.

In terms of knowledge contribution, China shares anti-drug experience and technology with other countries through training and technical assistance. Up to now, China has trained more than 3,000 anti-drug officials for neighboring countries (Office of the National Narcotics Control Commission, 2024), covering satellite monitoring technology, laboratory testing technology, drug rehabilitation methods and other fields. Chinese scientists have helped countries in the "Golden Triangle" to monitor opium poppy cultivation through satellite technology, providing a data base for the precise implementation of alternative cultivation policies. China also provides anti-drug equipment assistance to some developing countries to help them improve their drug control capabilities. These knowledge contributions reflect China's responsibility as a "responsible power" and contribute Chinese wisdom to global drug governance.

However, the optimization space of the "responsible power" narrative lies in concretization and storytelling. At present, China's anti-drug international communication tends to use macro data and abstract expressions, such as "invest 300 million yuan", "train 3,000 experts", "seize 35.5 tons of drugs", etc. (Yuqiang Zhang & Kuo Huang, 2023). Although these data can show the scale and effectiveness, it is difficult to arouse the emotional resonance and deep recognition of the audience. International communication research shows that individualized stories are more touching and influential than abstract data. Paul Zack's research found that stories that resonate with the audience's emotions can significantly increase oxytocin levels, thereby enhancing the audience's sense of identity and trust in the protagonist of the story (Zak, P. J., 2015). Therefore, the international dissemination of China's anti-drug needs to shift from "data narrative" to "story narrative".

Specifically, optimizing the anti-drug narrative can adopt specific and story-based strategies: transforming "investing 300 million yuan" into "the change of individual fate of a Lao farmer's monthly income from less than 100 yuan to more than 1,000 yuan"; the "training of 3000 experts" is transformed into an interpersonal narrative of "ten years of friendship between a Chinese agricultural

technician and a Burmese villager” (Office of the National Narcotics Control Commission, 2024); The “joint anti-drug operation” is transformed into an action narrative of “six countries’ police fighting side by side, life and death together”. Through this concretization and storytelling, the abstract “great power responsibility” is transformed into a perceptible, resonant and memorable story unit, thereby enhancing the appeal and communication effect of the narrative.

The successful experience of the documentary “Global Public Enemy” also provides a useful reference. The film, produced by China International Television (CGTN), shows China’s contribution to global drug governance by telling the story of China’s cooperation with the international community in combating drug crimes (China Global Television Network (CGTN), 2023). The film does not adopt the traditional grand narrative, but presents the real face of China’s anti-drug work through specific characters, events and scenes. It tells the story of the cooperation between Chinese police and foreign police, the story of Chinese agricultural technicians helping foreign farmers, and the story of Chinese scientists using technology to serve international drug control (Juan Li, 2024). These stories are vivid and touching, with strong appeal and persuasiveness.

The success of “Global Public Enemy” lies in grasping the narrative rules of international communication: First, it is character-centered. The documentary focuses on specific characters and presents the theme through their experiences, emotions and choices. This character-driven narrative method is more likely to trigger the audience’s emotional resonance. Second, take the story as the carrier. The documentary conveys information by telling a complete story, rather than simply listing facts and data. The story has a natural attraction, which can bring the audience into the situation and enhance the understanding and memory. Third, highlight the details. The documentary focuses on detail presentation and enhances realism and credibility through specific scenes, dialogues and actions. These narrative skills are worth learning and promoting in the international spread of China’s anti-drug. From the perspective of public diplomacy, the narrative of “responsible power” needs to move from “monologue mode” to “dialogue mode” and “cooperation mode” (Qizheng Zhao, 2022). Traditional public diplomacy emphasizes one-way information dissemination and regards the foreign public as a passive recipient; modern public diplomacy emphasizes two-way communication and communication, and attaches importance to listening and feedback; the ideal public diplomacy emphasizes the joint development of cooperative projects and the construction of shared meaning and trust relationship through cooperation (Yizhou Wang, 2023). The international spread of China’s anti-drug should learn from this evolution trend, not only to “tell a good Chinese story”, but also to “tell a story with the world”, and to construct a shared anti-drug narrative through joint action.

Through the above analysis, the local logic of China’s anti-drug narrative can be summarized into three core frameworks: “home-state isomorphism” narrative, “people’s war” narrative and “responsible great power” narrative. The narrative of “family-state isomorphism” elevates the drug problem from the level of personal health to the level of national destiny, and constructs the moral urgency of anti-drug work. However, its cross-cultural adaptability is limited and needs to be optimized through

“de-essentialization” and “re-contextualization”. The narrative of “People’s War” emphasizes the participation of the whole people and the prevention and treatment of the masses, forming a grid management system covering urban and rural areas. However, it faces the challenge of stigmatization and “democratic deficit”, and needs to enhance the adaptability of international communication through narrative transformation. The “responsible power” narrative highlights China’s positive contribution to global drug governance, covering four dimensions: system, action, development and knowledge. However, it is necessary to shift from “data narrative” to “story narrative”, so as to enhance the appeal and persuasion of narrative (Yuqiang Zhang & Kuo Huang, 2023). These local narrative frameworks are not only a unique symbol of China’s anti-drug discourse, but also a key link that needs to be adjusted and optimized in international communication.

Conclusion

This article examines the local logic of China’s anti-drug narrative system through three interrelated frameworks - the “home-state isomorphism” narrative, the “people’s war” narrative, and the “responsible great power” narrative. These frames are not just rhetorical choices; they are deeply rooted in the historical experience of China’s Opium War, the traditional cultural logic of family-state relations, the revolutionary legacy of mass mobilization, and the evolving identity as a major power in global governance. Together, they constitute a unique narrative system that elevates counter-narcotics from a technical or public health issue to a moral, political and national security concern. This system has shown a strong mobilization force in China, enabling China to establish a comprehensive anti-drug network covering the country, society and individual citizens.

However, as this paper shows, the advantages of these narratives in the domestic context may become obstacles in international communication. The narrative of “home-country isomorphism” rooted in the presupposition of Chinese traditional culture may be interpreted as culturally specific or even authoritarian in a society that attaches importance to individual rights and is skeptical of collective mobilization. Although effective in mobilizing broad social participation, the narrative of “people’s war” may reinforce the stigmatization of drug addicts and evoke negative historical associations related to mass movements in Western discourse. Although the “responsible power” narrative is based on China’s real contribution to global drug governance, it often relies on abstract data and grand expressions, lacking the emotional resonance and persuasion of individual stories.

In order to cope with these challenges, this paper proposes several narrative optimization strategies. The narrative of “home-country isomorphism” can be improved by de-essentialization and re-contextualization, so that its logic is not presented as a fixed cultural exception, but as a historical response to common challenges. The narrative of “people’s war” can be transformed from a mobilization-centered discourse to a discourse centered on participation and co-governance, emphasizing the autonomy of social organizations, the initiative of individual volunteers and the democratic process of community decision-making. The narrative of “responsible power” can be

strengthened by shifting from data-centered to story-centered communication, replacing abstract numbers with concrete characters, events and scenes that can resonate across cultural boundaries. In addition, China's anti-drug communication should move from the monologue mode to the dialogue and cooperation mode, so that China not only tells its own story, but also constructs a shared narrative with the international community through joint action.

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