April 2019

China’s Rise and the World’s Response: How is Chinese Expansion Portrayed in Media?

Chase Womack

University of North Alabama

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China in the South China Sea: How are Chinese Claims Portrayed in Media?

Research Question
Six countries—China (PRC), Taiwan (ROC), Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Brunei Darussalam—claim sovereignty over the South China Sea, a marginal sea that is linked to the Pacific Ocean (see map). China (PRC) has been especially aggressive in asserting its claims to the region. How are Chinese sovereignty claims in the South China Sea portrayed in print media? Do different media sources emphasize different aspects of these disputed claims? This research project uses a content analysis to help identify different themes in media reporting on the South China Sea.

Methods
I selected five major newspapers, each with a significant regional and international readership: The New York Times (United States), The Economist (United Kingdom), The Straits Times (Singapore), South China Morning Post (Hong Kong/China/PRC), and China Daily (China/PRC). After an initial search of articles in each newspaper’s online edition using the keywords “South China Sea,” I identified four major themes in reporting on the region: 1) Chinese sovereignty claims, 2) Non-Chinese responses to Chinese claims, 3) United States/China conflict, and 4) United States/China agreement or cooperation. Using each newspaper’s online database, I located all stories responding to the same keywords (“South China Sea”) from the period January 1, 2018, to March 17, 2019, and categorized each story by one of the four themes. The results of this content analysis are shown below.

Conclusion
Print media coverage of the South China Sea dispute varied substantially across five newspapers in four countries. Newspapers in non-regional actors such as the United States (The New York Times) and the United Kingdom (The Economist) emphasized non-Chinese responses to the territorial dispute, whereas Chinese newspapers, the South China Morning Post and especially the government-owned China Daily, emphasized Chinese sovereignty claims. The major Singapore newspaper (The Straits Times) emphasized both conflict and regional pushback to Chinese expansion. Clearly, newspaper readers in different places are being exposed to different interpretations of the South China Sea dispute.

Sources
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Acknowledgments
I thank my faculty mentor Dr. Michael Pretes for his help, and the Department of Geography at the University of North Alabama for support.