



Article

'Seizing the Window of Strategic Opportunity': A Study of China's Macro-Strategic Narrative since the 21st Century

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Abstract: Since the turn of the 21st century, China has leveraged the international environment in its favour to achieve a spectacularly rapid rise, a success that Chinese strategic policymakers attribute in part to 'seizing the strategic window of opportunity'. How has China perceived the international environment and shaped the narrative of its macro-strategy? What impact has it had on China and the world? The article explores the evolution of the strategic narrative of the 'window of opportunity' in three stages since the 21st century and explores its impact in terms of quantity and keyword mapping by analysing the narrative texts of China's 'discourse coalition' (government, official media and intellectual elites). The study found that China's macro-strategic narrative is primarily driven by the official political and semi-official intellectual elites and places a premium on domestic political persuasion rather than external displays of strategic intent. It combines classical and modern philosophical thinking and methodology with the two core objectives of 'maintaining peace' and an 'economic priority'. Over 20 years, the trend of narrative production of the 'strategic opportunity period' has shown a concentrated emergence and fluctuating decline, and its narrative elements have been enriched, interlinked and aligned with the narrative of the CPC's core policies. The narrative of the 'strategic opportunity period' has been a powerful force in building domestic legitimacy, guaranteeing partial fulfilment of strategic objectives and offering lessons for other countries to learn from. Inevitably, the narrative faces a number of dilemmas and challenges.

Keywords: strategic opportunity; narrative; China; discourse; international relations; economic strategy



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1. Introduction

At the end of the twentieth century, the Cold War came to an end with the victory of the United States, and the international strategic rivalry de-escalated, with 'peace and development' becoming the theme of the times. In the optimistic atmosphere of the liberal world, the US gradually adjusted its approach to China and tried to integrate it into the US-led international order, and the thawing of relations between China, Japan and South Korea in the early 1990s and the financial crisis in Southeast Asia in 1997 made Asian countries realise that a strong China would help promote their common interests. All these created a positive neighbourhood environment for China. The world seemed ready to embrace a more open and promising China. China's leadership was keenly aware of the strategic opportunities that were on the horizon, and in 2001, when China joined the WTO (World Trade Organisation), its export quotas were broken, and China was fortunate to have a ticket to participate in an open and fair game of international trade. The following year, at the 16th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC), the Chinese leadership first introduced the concept of a 'strategic opportunity period' and actively adjusted its policies to make the most of this valuable opportunity. The phrase 'strategic opportunity period' has appeared in every major meeting of the CPC since then to adjust macro-strategy, as well as in important speeches by leaders.

The strategic narrative of 'seizing the window of opportunity' gradually took shape and influenced China's macro policy for the next 20 years. It is constantly reinforced and

increasingly enriched with narrative elements, rendered by the dominant public discourse system comprising the government, official media and relevant research institutions. Unfortunately, the study of strategic narratives has not been given sufficient attention by mainstream theory, and the analysis of narrative mechanisms and strategies is mostly fragmented (Cao 2021). Academic research on China's political discourse and strategic narratives is inadequate, mainly covering those strategies and slogans that are repeatedly mentioned by leaders, such as 'One Belt, One Road', 'Peaceful Rise' and 'Harmonious World'. The seemingly vague but far-reaching strategic narratives have been neglected, one of which is the 'strategic opportunity period' narrative. It rarely appears in the discourse of external interaction and is, therefore, simply used as a domestic political persuasion slogan. Moreover, 'seizing opportunities' implicitly means 'focusing on one's own affairs'; it does not refer to a specific country and does not directly affect the interests of a particular actor; as a non-offensive narrative, it is difficult to attract the attention and discussion of scholars from other countries.

Under the influence of this narrative, China has placed greater emphasis on foreign trade and economic development. In 2011, China overtook Japan to become the world's second-largest economy. The Chinese capital, having completed its initial accumulation, accelerated its urbanisation process at home and its outward investment abroad, starting to carry out acquisitions and mergers and acquisitions around the world. China's GDP has grown from USD 1.47 trillion in 2002 (4.2% of total global GDP) to USD 15.6 trillion in 2021 (17.4% of total global GDP).

The Chinese development miracle seems to be a de facto confirmation of the existence of the 'strategic opportunity period'. The macro narrative has been mainly at the national level, where this 'narrative power' has helped China to achieve its policy goals to a certain extent. In support of this argument, this article looks at the narrative logic and projection process of China's macro development strategy since the 21st century and the effects of this narrative in practice. More specifically, its main concern is: How has China perceived the international environment and developed its macro-strategic narrative? How has this strategic narrative shown continuity and variation over time? What impact has it had on itself and on the world order?

The article begins with a short overview of narrative theory and how it works, based on the relevant literature. Then, in order to link theory and evidence, the article builds an interdisciplinary analytical framework that integrates political science and communication studies, dividing China's macro-strategic narrative of the 21st century into three stages. In terms of methodology, in terms of methodology, the article presents a textual interpretation and a timeline analysis of the original policy texts of the CPC. Government documents, official media articles and academic statements on the 'strategic opportunity period' over a 20-year period are also counted to explore the impact of the narrative in terms of quantity and keyword mapping.

2. Concepts and Analytical Framework

2.1. Concept of Strategic Narrative

Narratives are narrators who influence the perceptions or behaviour of their audience by telling them specific stories that resonate with them (Hagström and Gustafsson 2019). As a form of expression, narrative is used to create a shared meaning for a phenomenon among a group of people (Chang 2021), thus giving people a direction to develop a course of action based on the context. In general, the role of narrative in international politics has long been acknowledged (Nye 2014); however, the nature of narrative and the mechanisms by which it is constructed by producers and perceived by recipients have not been thoroughly explored (Chang 2021). Another concept—'discourse'—is similar to that of narrative in that discourse is a vehicle for narrative expression, but narrative can also be presented through non-verbal forms (pictures, dance or artefacts (Burke 1969; Liu 2004). A narrative, like a play, requires the following elements to support it: firstly, it needs a setting and environment, or a stage for the narrator to perform; secondly, it needs to have actions and

‘dramatic conflicts’, i.e. a plot for the ‘actors’ to perform in a given situation; thirdly, it needs to present a clear goal and intention to the ‘audience’ (Burke 1955). An effective narrative connects all these elements in the storyline, such as actors, events, plot, time and setting, using causal mechanisms (Miskimmon et al. 2013). From a process perspective, mainstream narratology broadly divides this into three stages: ‘formation’, ‘projection’ and ‘reception’.

In the political sphere, ‘strategic narratives’ are described as a tool and means by which states or relevant actors ‘shape the behaviour of domestic and international stakeholders by constructing shared meanings of the past, present and future’ (Miskimmon et al. 2013). Such narratives usually unfold in a specific context, constructing positive or negative identities of themselves and other actors in response to a threat (Hagström and Gustafsson 2019) and conclude with strategic planning and policy recommendations for the future (Jones and McBeth 2010).

The strategic opportunity period is a comprehensive concept. From the perspective of political science, it is a specific historical period that provides a good opportunity for a country’s development, given objective and favourable subjective factors, so that its national strength, competitiveness and influence can be expected to continue to rise and have a global, long-term and decisive impact on its historical destiny (Men 2020). When synthesising the views of Chinese academics, there are three main dimensions of criteria to determine whether a country is in a period of strategic opportunity. (1) Objectively, a country’s external environment is relatively stable and faces a low risk of war, thus facilitating the development of comprehensive national power, and the country has sufficient internal development potential and supporting resources. (2) Subjectively, a country’s strategic decision-makers have the strategic wisdom and foresight to sharply capture and effectively utilise favourable internal and external situations to develop national power. The bureaucracy has sufficient strategic decision-making power, execution power and willpower (Xu 2014). (3) In terms of effectiveness, a country’s absolute power and international status are enhanced over a certain period of time, thus enabling it to achieve national strategic goals and strategic interests more efficiently.

In fact, not all countries are able to seize the strategic window of opportunity. There are often many crossroads in a country’s development journey (Laszlo 1991). When faced with a choice of development paths, countries have only two fates: development or decline. The post-Cold War evolution of the international political landscape and the deepening of economic globalisation have created a more favourable environment for most countries to develop, while some countries have not had the strategic vision or strength to do so and have therefore missed valuable windows of opportunity, stagnating or even failing.

2.2. Narrative Participants and Production Process

Narratives play a crucial role in understanding China’s political behaviour (Semenov and Tsvyk 2021), and in practice, China’s narratives are aimed more at the domestic population than at the international community (Jacob 2020). In political practice, states usually make predictions about the international situation over a certain period of time through official documents and use them as important arguments for pursuing macro-strategies. In contemporary China’s strategic narratives, the government, official media and academics together form a ‘discursive alliance’ (Zhang and Orbie 2021), playing different roles in the construction of the strategic narrative process.

Step 1, strategy makers discursively construct a macro-narrative scenario of the context of the times and the international situation, setting up the state as a player in the scenario and taking some strategic actions in response to specific missions and goals, which completes the production of the narrative core and logic.

Step 2, the official media convey the party or government documents that populate the narrative text, a process that involves the policy elite. Unlike in some Western countries, when Chinese leaders propose new discourses, they do not always define them clearly and in detail (Zeng et al. 2015) and leave room for media speculation and elaboration.

Step 3, Chinese academics and policy circles have filled in the substance behind the strategic narrative in a gradual and subsequent manner (Zeng 2017), i.e. the intellectual class in official and semi-official think tanks, relevant research institutions and universities will again construct and flesh out the narrative, using certain theories and techniques to make it more nuanced and relevant to the lives of ordinary people. While academics usually consider themselves to be transcendent observers, in reality, they, like all social actors, are both products and producers of the narrative without exception (Hagström and Gustafsson 2019).

Step 4, the packaged political narratives are projected to the people's groups through various unofficial platforms and media. People have conveyed two types of information 'who we are' (identity) and 'what we want' (interests) (Berenskoetter 2014), shaping group-specific values and policy preferences and reinforcing them in shared collective memory. This also contributes to the successful implementation of a strategy or policy. Figure 1 allows for a better understanding of the production process of strategic narratives in China.

Government	Official media	Academia	Unofficial platform
Strategist	Policy elite	Intellectual class	The masses
Narrator	Transmitter	Expositor	Narrative receiver
Shaping narrative logic	Fill narrative texts	Add narrative skills	

Figure 1. Production process of strategic narratives.

2.3. Mechanisms of the 'Strategic Opportunity Period' Narrative

First, it underpins the core narrative and consolidates the foundations of ruling legitimacy. Successive CPC leadership teams have had their own governing line around which the core narrative has been built. Over the past 20 years, the core narrative of Chinese politics has gone through the 'Three Represents', the 'Scientific Outlook on Development', the 'Chinese Dream' and the 'New Era'. An early formulation of legitimacy was '(the CPC) represents the fundamental interests of the broadest range of people' in the 'three represents', which later evolved into the 'well-off society'—the people support the government's leadership because of their increasing well-being. Furthermore, the strengthening of national power will enhance China's international status and image, further strengthening nationalist self-confidence and increasing the stickiness of the people's collective identity. Thus, the legitimacy of the later period came more from the realisation of the 'Chinese dream' and the sense of national honour of 'national rejuvenation'. The prerequisite for all this is the successful 'seizure of the strategic opportunity window' and the increase in national power. Economic development enhances the well-being of the people, which in turn enhances popular acceptance of the core policies and thus consolidates the legitimacy of the CPC from the bottom up.

Secondly, it is interconnected with other strategic narratives and constitutes a narrative network. Strategic narratives can be divided into international, national and issue levels according to the scale of the narrative context and the different narrative objects. Specifically, descriptions of the nature and trends of the international system constitute a systemic narrative of the macrocosm as a whole, role-setting about oneself and other actors constructs an identity narrative, and narratives about some thematic and contextual issues constitute an issue narrative (Miskimmon et al. 2013). Together, these three levels of narratives form the network of political narratives in China. The 'theme of the era of peace and development' and the 'era of great change' belong to the international level, from which

they form the temporal and spatial background and logical basis for the narrative of the 'strategic opportunity'. In turn, the 'strategic opportunity period' becomes the policy basis for the next level of narrative, such as 'urbanisation' and 'economic system reform', which guide specific government policies towards economic development. Meanwhile, there are competing narratives. For example, in the face of serious external provocations, the narrative discourses of 'safeguarding national dignity at all costs' and 'safeguarding territorial integrity and national unity' have an overwhelming advantage due to their urgency and political correctness, which becomes a threat to the 'strategic opportunity period' narrative. Often in such cases, policymakers judge short-term gains and long-term losses to decide whether to suppress such competing narratives.

Thirdly, it helps to persuade the narrative's audience, enhancing domestic identity and reducing external hostility. The two core objectives of the 'strategic opportunity period' narrative are 'economic development' and 'maintaining peace', which correspond to two narrative audiences, domestic and foreign. On the one hand, the period of strategic opportunity helps the government to politically mobilise within the country, convincing everyone to agree and support the policies and to use the limited strategic resources for economic development. In order to seize the fleeting 'window of opportunity', China had to make changes that were detrimental to the interests of some members of the system. Under the urgency of this narrative, some tentative reform initiatives were justified, a certain amount of sacrifice and concessions were tolerated, and some of the internal resistance to reform was reduced. On the other hand, the narrative of strategic opportunity and the associated policies of 'harmonious world' and 'win-win cooperation' has reduced strategic hostility from the international community. China has demonstrated a cooperative, open, flexible and friendly stance towards the outside world and has focused its efforts mainly on mutually beneficial economic and trade cooperation rather than on military and ideological exports that tend to arouse the hostility of its strategic rivals. This is evidenced by Chinese leaders' announcements of disarmament (Xi 2015), arms reductions, China's active participation in UN peacekeeping operations (He and Zhou 2021), and its substantial implementation of international development aid and commitment to economic and trade cooperation with all countries. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Commerce website and official media actively promoted these stories. There is also a narrative of foreign propaganda that the Belt and Road Initiative is China's attempt to share the dividends of the 'strategic opportunity' and enable countries to realise the 'common destiny of mankind' through win-win cooperation.

Fourthly, it is a timely corrective to possible strategic drift, based on the credo of 'economy first'. The strategic opportunity narrative is a constant reminder to policymakers and the public that economic development is the priority. In the event of disruptive factors or risky contingencies, the narrative can curb the risk-taking impulses of policymakers and prevent national macro policies from deviating from their stated trajectory. For example, the South China Sea dispute that erupted in 2012 presented China with the dilemma of war and peace. Previously, both Jiang and Hu had maintained a moderate foreign policy, releasing goodwill and seeking cooperation from Southeast Asian countries under Deng Xiaoping's initiative of 'setting aside disputes and developing together'. However, in 2012, the Philippines arrested Chinese fishermen in the waters around Huangyan Island, triggering a maritime confrontation between China and the Philippines. This ignited nationalist sentiment in China, with a large number of netizens pressing the government to use force to defend national honour, and online public opinion evolved into two voices: the 'moderate' and the 'hardline' (Zhou 2013). One of the main arguments of the moderates is the narrative of the 'strategic opportunity window'. The official newspaper People's Daily, while stating China's principled position, also emphasised the need for a peaceful resolution of the dispute. The spokesperson of the Chinese Embassy in the Philippines, Zhang Hua, also stated that China was willing to resolve the matter amicably through diplomatic means (Xinhua net 2012). This is, in effect, a restraint on the hardliners. In the end, in order to maintain the 'opportunity window' from being interrupted by war,

China did not choose to go to war with the Southeast Asian countries but paid a certain price and defused the crisis by clever means (Gong 2012). China has balanced the need to maintain power and stability while simultaneously engaging in a ‘re-framing’ narrative on the South China Sea (Cao 2022). Likewise, in the Sino-Japanese island dispute in 2012 and the Sino-Indian border conflict in June 2017, China restrained its impulse for strategic risk-taking and adopted a moderate policy of diplomacy rather than military.

3. Temporal Logic and Textual Analysis

As early as the 1980s, Chinese leader and strategist Deng Xiaoping set the scene for the narrative of China’s ‘strategic opportunity window’. He pointed out that peace and development were the two core issues of the world, which were of global and strategic significance (Deng 1993), and that ‘opportunities exist, the problem is to grasp them well’, and that ‘[we] must grasp the centre of economic construction and not lose the opportunity to make use of the opportunity to develop China’.

At the beginning of the 21st century, China’s strategic decision makers made an in-depth assessment of the situation at home and abroad and formally put forward the narrative of the ‘Strategic Opportunity Period’. The official reports of the 17th (2007), the 18th (2012), followed this formulation, and the 19th (2017) National Congresses of the CPC further consolidated this narrative. In October 2020, the 5th Plenary Session of the 19th CPC Central Committee again stressed that ‘China’s development remains in an important strategic opportunity window during the current and future period’. The official documents of the Chinese Communist Party are known for their rigour, and minor adjustments to individual terms are based on new judgments of the international and domestic situation at different times and are a continuation and addition to this strategic narrative. The narrative of China’s strategic opportunity can be divided into three stages, according to the cycle of change in China’s political leadership and the timing of adjustments to strategic perceptions (Table 1).

Table 1. The three stages of China’s ‘strategic opportunity period’ narrative (2002–2022).

	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3
Time period	2002–2011	2012–2017	2018–present
Leadership	Hu Jintao	Xi Jinping	Xi Jinping
International system narratives	An era of peace and development	An era of opportunities and challenges	An era of unprecedented change
Self-identity narratives	A participant in the international system	A builder and maintainer of systemic order	A reformer of the old order
Main targets of strategic narrative	Economic empowerment	Enhancing international status	Rise peacefully

3.1. Stage 1 (2002–2011)

In addition to a favourable international environment, a number of landmark events have contributed to the formation of China’s strategic opportunity window. One popular view is that 9/11 was a critical point and that the resulting global war on terror launched by the US diverted US strategic attention in the Asia-Pacific and distracted US strategic resources from the Middle East quagmire for a long time, which bought China a valuable decade of development. The Chinese leadership’s positive signals to the US to cooperate in the fight against terrorism in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 further reduced US strategic hostility. At the end of that year, China concluded a lengthy negotiation and review process and formally joined the World Trade Organisation, a sign of its success in seizing the opportunity. The year 2002 saw a new generation of policymakers under Hu Jintao take power at the 16th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, which also saw the first appearance in official Chinese documents of the ‘period of strategic opportunity’.

It was also at this conference that the narrative of the ‘Strategic Opportunity Period’ first appeared in Chinese official documents.

‘Looking at the overall situation, the first two decades of the twenty-first century, for China, is an important strategic opportunity period that must be grasped tightly and can make a big difference. . . . We need to focus our efforts in the first two decades of this century, to comprehensively in the first two decades of this century, we must focus our efforts on building a higher level of well-off society that will benefit more than one billion people’. (Jiang 2002)

The efforts of the new Chinese leadership collective to explore and create a new political discourse can be seen in the official texts. There is a lack of convincing evidence as to how the length of the 20-year opportunity period was arrived at. However, it is clear from this text that the purpose of the strategic opportunity period was to focus on economic development in order to achieve a ‘moderately prosperous society’. During this period, China judged the overall international environment to be dominated by ‘peace and development’ and positioned itself as a player in the international system, particularly in the economic sphere, trying to adapt to the new rules of the game and seize every opportunity to grow. At the 17th Congress of the CPC in 2007 and at the 5th Plenary Session of the 17th Central Committee in 2011, Hu Jintao again referred to this narrative.

‘The world today is undergoing extensive and profound changes, and contemporary China is undergoing extensive and profound changes. The opportunities are unprecedented and the challenges are unprecedented, and the opportunities outweigh the challenges’ (Hu 2007); ‘judging the international and domestic situation, China’s development is still at an important strategic opportunity period where we can make great achievements, facing both rare historical opportunities and many foreseeable and unforeseeable risks and challenges’. (Hu 2011)

Despite the global economic crisis and the accumulation of internal problems, China’s strategic decision makers still judge that ‘the opportunities outweigh the challenges’ and need to judge international trends more carefully, integrate more deeply into the international system, and draw on them for their own development. This decade has seen China’s economy grow by leaps and bounds, and the strategic narrative has been confirmed and consolidated by China’s success. In his last work report during his tenure, Hu Jintao concluded.

‘During this decade, we have seized and used the important strategic opportunity period for China’s development, overcome a series of major challenges. As we enter the new stage of the new century, the international situation is changing and the competition for comprehensive national power is unprecedentedly fierce, we are deepening reform and opening up, taking our accession to the World Trade Organization as an opportunity to turn pressure into motivation, turning challenges into opportunities’. (Hu 2012)

3.2. Stage 2 (2012–2017)

In 2012, China entered the second stage of its strategic narrative with the renewal of its leadership and the entry of Xi Jinping into the centre of power. Against the backdrop of the global spread of the financial crisis, the world entered a period of turbulent adjustment. Obama’s ‘Asia-Pacific rebalancing’ strategy created a series of frictions between China’s neighbouring countries and China. As the external balance was disturbed, China had to shift from passively responding to ‘exogenous opportunities’ to actively exploring ‘endogenous opportunities’. In the face of a changing international environment, China has tried to change its narrative role.

‘Based on the basic features of China’s development environment in the 13th Five-Year Plan period, China’s development is still in a period of important strategic opportunities, but also faces many contradictions overlapping and

serious challenges of increasing risks and hidden dangers. We should accurately grasp the profound changes in the connotation of the strategic opportunity period, deal with various risks and challenges more effectively, continue to focus our efforts on getting things done'. (Xi 2015)

In order to maintain the continuity of the strategic narrative, Xi Jinping inherits it, suggesting that despite facing more severe challenges, China is 'still' in an important strategic window of opportunity while emphasising the need to 'focus on getting its own affairs right', not to be distracted by strategic rivals, and to avoid strategic miscalculation or strategic overdraft. He reiterated the core objectives of China's diplomatic strategy, namely to safeguard national sovereignty, security and development interests and create an international environment conducive to peaceful development on the one hand, and maintain and extend the strategic opportunity period for China's development on the other (Xinhua net 2014), which is summarised as the 'two safeguards'. In the second stage, China's role has changed from that of a builder of the system to that of a defender of order, with a greater emphasis on reshaping its national identity. China not only wants to become economically strong but also to gain international respect and recognition. China, therefore, strives to enhance its 'soft power' and to project a 'strong and responsible' national image.

3.3. Stage 3 (2017–Present)

The third stage of the strategic narrative begins in Xi Jinping's second term. During this period, China witnessed three waves of counter-globalisation, the maintenance of the existing pattern of globalisation and the new globalisation crashing into each other (Feng 2018). Many disruptive events, not seen for at least the length of the past century, such as the 'Trump Shock', the 'New Pneumonia Global Pandemic' and the Russo-Ukrainian War, have combined with changing the course of international politics, even permanently. In China's political narrative, this period has been summarised as 'a period of unprecedented change'. The US strategy towards China shifted from 'engagement plus containment' under Clinton and Bush, to 'containment plus engagement' under Obama, to 'containment but not engagement' under Trump, with increasing strategic tensions between the two sides. In Trump's 'trade war' against China, the gains China has made since joining the WTO have instantly become a strategic liability, and China's foreign trade and investment have been severely impacted. Worse still, as the country where the new epidemic was first discovered, China's adherence to the principle of 'the right to life is the greatest human right' has led to the sacrifice of economic development in order to safeguard the lives of its people, and the stagnation of the industrial chain and unemployment caused by the quarantine and containment has added to the economic pressure on China. The very basis of the narrative of the 'strategic opportunity window' seems to have been seriously challenged. At the Fifth Plenary Session of the 19th Central Committee of the CPC in late October 2020, the strategic decision makers led by Xi Jinping made a remedial statement on this strategic narrative.

'... According to the profound and complex changes in the development environment faced by our country, the current and future period, China's development is still in an important strategic opportunity period, but there are new developments in both opportunities and challenges ... we need to enhance awareness of opportunities and risks, based on national conditions, maintain strategic determination, do our own business, understand and grasp the laws of development, establish bottom-line thinking ... good at nurturing opportunities in crises, opening up situations in changes, seize the opportunity to deal with the challenge'. (Qiushi net 2020)

The narrative 'patch' is intended to convey to the public that there are more adverse external factors at this stage that could lead to the interruption of the strategic opportunity period and undermine the trend of China's rapid economic development and the expected plans for China's rise. This is inevitably a cause for concern. What China needs to do is not to benefit from the strategic opportunity as easily as before but to shape and maintain

it proactively, having to fight against disruptive factors. While challenges are faced, and they are equal for every country, China is still one of the most capable of dealing with them, even ‘turning crises into opportunities’, and that with the right response, the country can continue to rise. In the third stage, the systemic narrative becomes more fraught with uncertainty and difficult challenges, and the international environment is not as optimistic as it once was. In the identity narrative, China is portrayed as the representative of the majority and reformer of the old irrational order, while the US is the order breaker and ‘troublemaker’, and the story becomes one of China leading the vast number of exploited countries against US hegemony. This is reflected in China’s efforts to break through the US strategic encirclement and its strategic determination in spite of the US trade war, the war of public opinion on the origin of the epidemic (Louie and Viladrich 2021) and the ‘Indo-Pacific strategy’. China has steadily promoted the ‘Belt and Road’ initiative, signed the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) with many countries in the Asia-Pacific region, and signed the China–Europe Trade and Investment Agreement with Europe. The statement that the period of strategic opportunity still exists continues and consolidates the strategic narrative of the last 20 years, injecting confidence into the sceptics and avoiding the breakdown of political myths that could lead to ideological confusion.

4. Empirical Research

Vertical and horizontal communication between the Chinese Communist Party and the government bureaucracy in the design and implementation of policies is considered a difficult process to clarify due to the particular decision-making mechanisms of the Chinese macro-strategy (Schubert and Alpermann 2019). As a result, reliable resources and evidence on how the narrative of the ‘strategic opportunity period’ emerged, developed and became dominant in Chinese foreign policy discourse remain scarce (Zhang and Yang 2020). In this section of the article, the three types of actors that make up the ‘discourse coalition’ (government, official media and semi-official academic research institutions) are used as the subjects of empirical research. Official and unofficial data are collected and analysed in an attempt to map the evolution of this narrative.

4.1. Analysis of Narrative Quantity

Using a thesis literature search tool, we crawled CNKI.net (the most authoritative and largest knowledge platform in China) for articles on the topic of ‘strategic opportunity period’ and eliminated some irrelevant literature. Among them, 1121 are academic journal papers, 12 are dissertations, 37 are conferences, and 432 are newspapers. These contain both official policy texts, as well as semi-official and unofficial papers, research reports and news texts. Chinese newspapers and magazines are basically run under official guidance, especially authoritative newspapers that deliver important decision-making documents and official discourse to the people. In terms of official narration, among the retrieved newspapers and periodicals, 25% of the official policy texts were published by the people’s daily, China’s most authoritative newspaper and its affiliated platform ‘people’s forum’, and 27% of the literature came from newspapers in the economic field. It can be seen that the government pays more attention to economic development in the ‘opportunity period’. China’s policymaking institutions and propaganda system have consciously absorbed political public relations, mass communication, social psychology and other modern methods of mass persuasion commonly used in modern Western democracies and adapted them to China’s specific realities. There is reason to believe that China’s current political narrative system is scientific, high-tech and market-friendly (Brady 2009). As a strategic judgement based on the macro environment, the ‘strategic opportunity period’ narrative appears to be hollow and vague, lacking specific and detailed content and policy guidance. As recipients of the narrative, some interviewees felt that when vague slogans repeatedly appear in the top-level design, they become self-fulfilling prophecies over time, and its macro-narrative would be populated by micro-narratives produced by various

layers of actors, spontaneously generating logic and fleshing out narrative details—the narrative then has a tendency to evolve into a political myth.

It is worth noting that narratives from the general public are rarely represented in the ‘strategic opportunity window’ stories. In general, civic articulation efforts are often officially encouraged, and their messages are more persuasive. However, because the narrative deals with macro issues of national strategy, there is not much interest or enthusiasm among the people to discuss such serious issues. Therefore, the people outside the elite seem to receive it passively, and their production of narrative content is at a low level in terms of quantity and quality. In order to find evidence of this, a search of Sina Weibo (weibo.com), China’s largest private online forum, yielded only 496 tweets containing the phrase ‘strategic opportunity period’, most of which were reproduced from official documents and the media, suggesting that the topic is poorly discussed and that original views from the public are scarce.

Therefore, we obtain more narrative texts from semi-official research institutions and universities. By echoing the policy discourse through theoretical discourse, intellectual elites are able to generalise, sublimate or transform the narrative, making it self-contained and ensuring a certain level of logic, abstraction and scientificity (Zhou 2016). Parastatals have more freedom in interpreting policy. Through multiple and flexible narrative perspectives, they can combine specific events and areas of expertise to narrate success stories of strategic opportunities, blending values and identities into stories that are more likely to resonate with the public. A change in the quantity of the narrative texts can be seen in Figure 2.

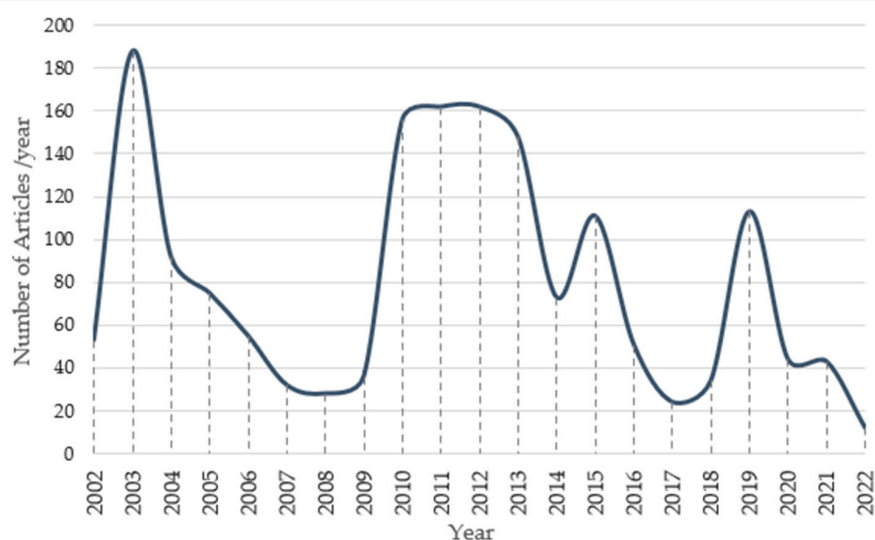


Figure 2. Annual production of the ‘strategic opportunity period’ narrative in Chinese academia (2002–2022).

Among the retrieved papers and research reports, 45.53% came from the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and Party schools around the country, 33.62% from universities and 20.85% came from the government and its affiliated research institutions. In terms of changes in the timing of publication, there is some synchronization between the peak in the amount of academic elaboration of the strategic narrative and the release of official documents from the country’s highest meetings. The official strategic narrative was updated at the 16th Communist Party Congress at the end of 2002, the 18th Communist Party Congress at the end of 2012, the 5th Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee in 2015, and the 19th Communist Party Congress at the end of 2017, which triggered a refinement and addition to this narrative in academia in the following year. The years of leadership change in China in 2002 and 2012 saw two peaks of academic production of the strategic narrative, as the need to consolidate the previous political narrative was necessary to ensure a smooth transition of power. However, the years 2007–2009 and 2017–2018 show a trough in narrative production

as they were in the middle of Hu Jintao's and Xi Jinping's reigns, with no change of power or narrative renewal. Since 2020, the COVID-19 epidemic and the complex changes in the international environment have distracted academic attention from this topic. Uncertainty about the continuation of the 'strategic opportunity period' and the lack of narrative material have both affected the addition and innovation of this narrative, which has led to a decline in the number of texts over the last two years. Overall, the number of narratives on 'strategic opportunities' has shown a trend of an initial surge and a slowly fluctuating decline in the later years, in line to some extent with the life cycle of narratives.

Chinese government departments also incorporate narrative material from a variety of sources into their promotional frameworks. A search of the official website of the Chinese Ministry of Commerce using the keyword 'strategic opportunities' yielded 1302 articles for the period 2002–2022. These include more than half of the government documents and speeches by officials, which relegate the top government's strategic narrative to the provincial and ministerial levels. Hundreds of press releases on Chinese outbound investment projects and international business cooperation refer to 'strategic opportunities', reflecting the potential influence of this narrative in Chinese economic practice. Hundreds of papers from academic journals are also reproduced, which refer to the 'strategic opportunity period' narrative in the context of China's economic macro-strategy and specific policies.

4.2. Analysis of Narrative Keywords

Another direction is to analyse the content of a large number of texts, which will help to understand how the 'strategic opportunity period' relates to other political narratives. By importing the retrieved literature into the Citespace document analysis tool (Chen and Song 2019) and conducting a keyword co-occurrence mapping analysis, it is possible to find out the timing and frequency of discourse innovation on the narrative.

Figure 3 shows that the narrative discourse of the 'strategic opportunity period' was enriched during the two peak periods of narrative innovation in 2002 and 2012, with keywords such as 'moderately prosperous society', 'expanding domestic demand' and 'seeking progress in a stable manner' reflecting more often the 'strategic opportunity period'. Keywords such as 'moderately prosperous society', 'expanding domestic demand' and 'seeking progress in a stable manner' reflect the fact that the narrative of China's 'strategic opportunity window' is more oriented toward the domestic population and focuses on the economic sphere. After the initial peak of narrative production when it was first proposed, the production of the discourse generally tended to decline over the next two decades.

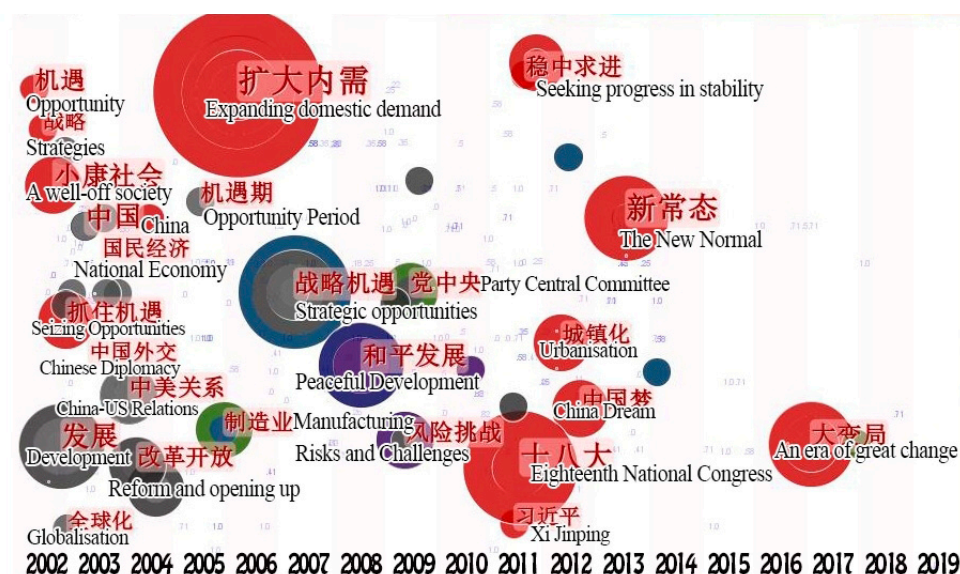


Figure 3. Keyword co-occurrence in the narrative of the 'strategic opportunity period' in Chinese academia.

In order to consolidate and continue this strategic narrative, during the second round of narrative production in 2011–2013, a large number of governing ideas from the new leadership were added, such as the ‘Chinese Dream’ and ‘Harmonious Society’ narrative elements proposed by Xi Jinping. In addition, some more current narratives were incorporated, such as ‘the era of great change’, ‘community of destiny’ and ‘all-round prosperity’, which made the narratives more relevant to people’s lives and more compelling and persuasive.

The size of the circles in the diagram represents the frequency with which the term ‘period of strategic opportunity’ appears together with the keyword, representing the strength of the relationship between them. There are three main categories: (1) terms derived from the strategic opportunity period (e.g. ‘seize opportunities’, ‘risks and challenges’). (2) Terms describing the context and strategic stage of the times (e.g. ‘new normal’ and ‘era of great change’). (3) Words about macroeconomic policy proposals (e.g. ‘expanding domestic demand’, ‘developing manufacturing industries’, ‘moderately prosperous society’). In terms of the number of new terms emerging, the production and innovation of the narrative occurred mainly during the Hu era and declined rapidly during Xi’s second reign. It has to be admitted that the ‘strategic opportunity period’ narrative inherited from Hu Jintao and the new series of political narratives proposed by Xi Jinping still need to be logically connected more subtly before they can be integrated into the political narrative system of the ‘Xi era’.

Summing up the above empirical results, we find that the ‘strategic opportunity period’ narrative is a discourse system constructed by a ‘discourse coalition’ of political and intellectual elites. It is interlinked with other strategic narratives of the government and acts sideways and indirectly. It works in tandem with mainstream policy for political advocacy and persuasion, and together they build an organic network of narratives.

5. Discussion: Narrative Philosophy and Dilemmas

The creative practice of China’s strategic narrative has both subtly influenced the direction of domestic policy and brought fresh thinking and experience of ‘non-Westernism’ to global political advocacy. As we enter the information age, humanity is undergoing a transition from a materialist to a post-materialist phase (Zhang 2020). High-cost, low-return warfare is no longer the way to establish order, and discourse and the political narratives it constructs have become a new space for inter-state games. In recent years, with the Trump shock, the world has become increasingly sceptical of the liberal narrative led by the US since World War II (Qin 2021), and the world has gradually returned to a utilitarian route of ‘de-narrativisation’. However, after the fading of the US story, the West was no longer keen to supply narratives—humanity seemed to have entered an era of ‘dominant narrative absence’ (Zhang 2020). China’s international political narrative has broken out of the trap of ‘dichotomy’ thinking and advocates a ‘harmonious world’ based on a ‘community of human destiny’ through win-win cooperation. It has become increasingly attractive to developing countries as an alternative to the Western model.

5.1. Philosophical Basis of ‘Strategic Opportunity Period’ Narrative

Both classical and modern sources of thought form the philosophical basis of this narrative. Classical Chinese philosophy supports the identity of the ‘strategic opportunity period’ narrative from within, while modern, Western-derived Marxism provides critical thinking for policy design. A large number of narrative texts draw on classical Chinese philosophical statements, which originate from two main sources: Taoism and Confucianism.

The Taoist ideology, on the one hand, emphasises the necessity and rationality of ‘seizing the window of opportunity’. The founder of Taoism, Laozi, advocated following the laws of the universe: ‘动善时’ (one should be good at acting at the right time) (Shi 2015). The Zhou Yi argues that everything in heaven and earth is in constant movement and change, in which opportunities arise, and that a gentleman should ‘藏器于身，待时而动’

(accumulate strength and wait for the right time to act). ‘顺之者昌逆之者亡’ (following the trend will lead to prosperity, defying the law will lead to perdition) is deeply rooted in the Chinese cultural DNA, and it is considered wise to seize favourable trends. In the history books, the phrase ‘机不可失时不再来’ (the time to lose is never to come again) also warns future generations about the serious consequences of missing a window of opportunity.

On the other hand, Confucian philosophy provides a methodology for exploiting ‘strategic opportunities. Three of the four classical Confucian books refer to ways of seizing opportunities. The *Shangshu* emphasises the need for careful thought and judgement before an opportunity arises (‘虑善以动，动惟厥时’). In *Zhongyong*, the concept of timing is elaborated, making the mastery of timing more explicit and proposing the strategic line of the moderate and golden mean (‘君子之中庸也，君子而时中’). *Mencius* argues that a country’s strategic opportunities can only be exploited by the coupling of three core elements, namely, ‘Tian Shi’ (external current conditions), ‘Li Di’ (internal strategic endowments) and ‘Ren He’ (strategic decision-making and execution) (Yan 2020). In addition, Confucianism advocates that ‘和为贵’ (peace is precious) by shaping a peaceful environment to achieve goals at minimal cost, avoiding the risk of falling into war.

Marxism provides Chinese policymakers with a modern and critical approach to strategic thinking. As the current dominant official Chinese ideology, it provides theoretical guidance to the designers and participants of China’s strategic narrative. Marx’s historical materialism holds that the ultimate cause and driving force of all-important historical events is the economic development of society and that one should recognise the historical situation, seize the moment and dare to change. The Marxist dialectic of contradiction has been applied to the formulation of China’s strategy. In 1981, the 6th Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the CPC proposed that the main contradiction in Chinese society was ‘the contradiction between the growing material and cultural needs of the people and the backward social production’, the root cause of which was economic underdevelopment. The ‘strategic opportunity period’ narrative provides policy legitimacy for China’s macro policy shift from ideological struggle to economic development. In order to resolve the primary contradiction, China should seize all favourable conditions to maintain the window of opportunity and proactively build its strength. The dialectic of contradiction also argues that strategic opportunities can easily flip into strategic risks driven by certain factors, requiring policymakers not to be blindly optimistic and to be ready to adjust their policies. Marxist philosophy and the ‘strategic opportunity period’ are covered in compulsory political courses in Chinese universities. As mentioned above, Marxist philosophy enhanced the logic of the narrative and made the story more acceptable to the public.

The above philosophies have resulted in two separate paths of thinking: a reactive and passive one, i.e. a ‘reactive’ strategic thinking path in response to external threats. It is based on utilitarian rationality and establishes strategic objectives by assessing strategic adversaries and external threats. By ranking sub-objectives, strategic plans are developed and implemented without actively demonstrating strategic intent. The other is proactive and positive, the ‘me-focused’ strategic thinking path. It guides decision-makers to focus on core strategic objectives, concentrate on solving domestic economic and social problems, accumulate winning factors and avoid wasting strategic resources. In external affairs, it is based on China’s unique ‘relational rationality’ to strengthen its circle of allies (Zhang 2015), proactively set the agenda in international organisations and be cautious about strategic risk-taking. These two seemingly contradictory strategic mindsets together influence China’s strategic behaviour and form the philosophical core of the ‘strategic opportunity period’ narrative.

5.2. ‘Strategic Opportunity’ Narratives: Dilemmas and Challenges

However, the narrative of China’s strategic opportunity period inevitably remains mired in dilemmas and challenges.

First of all, the principle of ‘low-key diplomacy’ is logically contradicted by the international ‘struggle’ that China has to face. As it becomes increasingly difficult for China to conceal its growing power and ambitions, countries in anxiety have concocted the ‘China threat’ narrative to promote a climate of hostility. In response, some Chinese strategists have proposed a ‘peaceful rise’ strategy to highlight the exceptions to China’s development. However, the word ‘rise’ has touched a sensitive nerve in the West because, in their experience, the successful rise of great power has invariably been accompanied by a war between the challenger and the hegemonic power. China’s successive leaders have repeatedly stated, both domestically and internationally, that China has no intention of provoking a battle for hegemony (Jiang 1999; Hu 2007, 2011; Xi 2015, 2021) and that China’s military development is entirely aimed at a low-level defence (Xinhua net 2015). Thus, leaders modified it to ‘peaceful development’ in order to demonstrate China’s harmlessness. However, such efforts have had little effect because of China’s growing size. Moreover, China is considered to have gradually deviated from the pragmatic style of ‘Tao Guang Yang Hui’ advocated by Deng Xiaoping (Chen and Wang 2011). China’s foreign policy was seen to be more aggressive, as it was unwilling to accept and tolerate the strong US suppression in the economic and trade sphere and the false narratives on issues such as human rights and Xinjiang, which touched on China’s core interests (Lan and Xu 2014). China has to maintain a stable neighbourhood that is not interrupted and concentrate on economic development while having to face increasing external resistance.

Secondly, the disconnect between grand elite narratives and the people’s daily lives and individual feelings limits their ‘narrative stickiness’. Narrative stickiness refers to the temporal characteristics of a strategic discourse that is accepted and recognised by the audience. Generally speaking, memories of significant crises have a strong narrative stickiness. In China, people’s acceptance of a political narrative is based more on trust in the government than on a thorough understanding of the narrative. This also leads to a greater tendency to be drawn to emotional discourses and stories on specific issues while ignoring reminders of the ‘strategic opportunity period’ narrative. The growing assertiveness in domestic nationalism has limited the flexibility and narrative effect of China’s strategy. For example. The Chinese Foreign Ministry was once committed to promoting pragmatic economic cooperation with Japan and South Korea to shape a peaceful, strong and integrated East Asia, which would help expand China’s window of opportunity. However, an over-reliance on the symbol of the ‘other’ and a moral identity as a victim state seeking historical redress has led to China’s political alienation from its neighbours. In this carefully crafted narrative, there is a potential conflict between China’s rational calculations in conducting pragmatic diplomacy and the domestic public’s legitimacy mandate for policy (Liao 2017). Once China follows the narrative logic of the strategic opportunity to pursue economic and trade cooperation with Japan, domestic nationalism due to historical conflicts can hinder cooperation, especially when sensitive events are involved. Objectively, this undermines China’s actual interests in the short and long term and diverts reality from the narrative trajectory of the strategic opportunity period.

Finally, all products have a shelf life, and so does the political narrative. The year 2022 is the last year of the ‘20-year opportunity period’ that China declared in 2002. If China were to announce the end of the opportunity period by then, the narrative would collapse as unsustainable, and it will undermine the long-held public confidence in the CPC or indirectly affect the implementation of economic policies—which is fundamentally not in China’s interest. However, there is a tradition of strong continuity and stability in Chinese policy texts. The core political concepts and ideological legacies of successive leaders have been recorded in the CPC party constitution. A large proportion of the texts in the communiqués of successive CPC congresses are a repetition, confirmation and repair of previous political narratives. This policy inertia is also reflected in specific political narratives, including the narrative of the ‘period of strategic opportunity’. Jennifer Lind found that narrative structures have certain inertia and that viewers persuaded by a narrative develop a particular narrative inertia mindset over time (Lind 2020). In the short

term, therefore, the narrative is likely to continue in some form, even in the face of changing external circumstances. This requires strategic decision-makers to re-evaluate the situation and organise the narrative discourse to update the context and logic of the 'strategic opportunity period' narrative, which is a new issue for China's 'discourse coalition'.

There are three possibilities for the future development of China's 'strategic opportunity period' narrative: it may remain in official documents, it may slowly disappear into the political narrative system, or, more likely, it may be overwritten by a new 'strategic opportunity period 2.0' narrative. Either way, the narrative will continue to operate as long as China maintains sustained economic development, maintains the legitimacy of its ruling regime, and maintains its identity and overall consensus without fragmentation.

6. Conclusions

The third decade of the 21st century saw a relative decline in US power and the loss of absolute dominance in the international system (Ikenberry 2020), which was accompanied by a decline in the US liberal global narrative (Amitav 2014). In an era of undersupplied and fragmented world political narratives, ethnic groups within sovereign states have instinctively begun to return to distinctive internal narratives in search of identity and to satisfy lower survival needs (Zhang 2020). In the context of the return of statism, political narratives that project the domestic population within their own country will become increasingly common. The best narratives are not likely to be long or obscure political propaganda but rather a simple, easily communicated cause-and-effect narrative of 'believe it or lose it' (Zhang 2020), and the strategic opportunity period is such a simple, direct and encouraging narrative. How to seize the opportunity is a long-term task fraught with uncertainty, and it is reflected in broad policy preferences. This narrative is a small baton rather than a strategic guidebook. The 'strategic opportunity' narrative, therefore, does not directly influence the specific issue narrative nor provide detailed guidelines but leaves enough room for adjustment in strategic practice. It allows for the overall allocation of strategic resources to flow to the economy and to those sectors that are conducive to the efficient use of opportunities.

Assessing the policy effectiveness of a macro-strategic narrative is not easy. 'Winning' a narrative battle is not easy either; the reception and impact potential of a given strategic narrative varies, and the degree to which external strategic narratives resonate with internal political myths determines the effectiveness of strategic narratives (Schmitt 2018). While there is no direct evidence of a strong direct influence of strategic narratives on policy direction, a range of tendentious policies still side-step the weak association between the production of economic miracles and the narrative of strategic opportunity. In terms of narrative projection effects, China has gradually constructed a stable political narrative system over the past two decades. This system relies on detailed and highly organised modern techniques and technologies of mass persuasion to maintain public confidence in the performance of the government (DiPalma 1991). The 'strategic opportunity period' narrative is a political persuasion and narrative dissemination dominated by the political and intellectual elite. Even if the grassroots at large are not much involved in content production and narrative feedback, the CPC relies on high rates of trust and support over time to help project this strategic narrative successfully, and steady economic growth and rising living standards for the vast majority of the population have convinced the public of the story, providing long-term positive feedback to the strategic narrative.

After analysing the official texts, the deeper connotations of the narrative of China's 'strategic opportunity period' have been uncovered. (1) In terms of narrative logic, it bridges the two political narratives of history and the future. China's seizure of the precious opportunity for development to raise its national status is both a necessary process to clear the memory of a hundred years of humiliating history of invasion and a necessary path to the 'great rejuvenation' of the Chinese nation in the future. The logical chain of 'humiliating history'–'strategic opportunity'–'bright future' is connected. (2) In terms of narrative philosophy, classical and modern narrative philosophies are integrated. Taoist philosophy

emphasises the necessity of ‘seizing opportunities’, while Confucian philosophy provides a methodology for ‘how to make use of opportunities’. Modern Marxist philosophy provides concrete guidance for the elaboration of policy texts. (3) In terms of temporal logic, the three stages of the strategic narrative show a progressive relationship in time. In the neo-Marxist ‘edge-centre’ structure of the world economic system, China gradually moves from the semi-edge to the centre during the period of opportunity and tends to form a ‘bicentre’ structure that includes China and the US. China’s identity narrative moves from ‘system participant’ (stage 1) to ‘system defender’ (stage 2) to ‘system reformer’ (stage 3). The semi-official narrative reveals a shift in China’s approach to the strategic opportunity window, from ‘passively conforming’ to the trend (stage 1) to ‘actively tracking’ the opportunity (stage 2) and finally ‘actively shaping’ the trend (stage 3). (4) In terms of narrative techniques, the various layers of the Discourse Coalition play different roles. The official discourse is more boilerplate, with a top-down narrative ‘point of view’ that makes projection less effective and therefore requires ‘secondary processing’ by unofficial narrators. With the detailed and skilful embellishment of media and scholars, the strategic narrative becomes vivid and convincing.

The narrative of China’s ‘strategic opportunity period’ has profoundly influenced the course of China’s development over the past two decades, contributing to the perpetuation of the myth of the ‘China model’ narrative and providing useful lessons for the rest of the world’s political narrative practice. ‘The next decade will be a decade of profound reshaping of the world economy, the international landscape and the global governance system’. (Xi 2018), as President Xi Jinping describes the new phase of strategic opportunity that China is about to experience, and China will face many challenges during its rapid rise, such as material structural pressures, legitimacy dilemmas, the temptation of strategic overdraft and self-identity reconstruction bias (Zhang 2019). The competing narratives of China and the US are also seen to be prone to the self-fulfilling prophecy of the so-called ‘Thucydides trap’ (Allison 2017). The key to coping with the multiple crises of the present is state capacity, social trust and leadership (Francis 2020), all of which are China’s strengths. Thus, in a relative sense, China will benefit from the crisis, which is an important basis for the Chinese strategic community to argue that the ‘opportunity period’ is still alive and well. China has always cautioned its increasingly impulsive nationalists at home not to be disrupted in their economic development by the discourse and threats of external forces when faced with strategic provocations, let alone being kidnapped and blinded by competing ideological narratives. Will China be able to convince its people and maintain its strategic resolve, maintain the domestic system and further unleash its economic development potential and perpetuate the narrative myth of the ‘strategic opportunity period’? It has to be acknowledged this is a highly challenging task.

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