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What Is Most Important for My Country Is Not Most Important for Me: Agenda-Setting Effects in China

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What is This?

What Is Most Important for My Country Is Not Most Important for Me: Agenda-Setting Effects in China

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Abstract

Employing a public opinion survey and a content analysis of local media, this study sets out to examine of the agenda-setting effect in China. China is highlighted in this study because it is a collectivist, socialist nation whose mainstream media is largely controlled by the state. Data from this study reveal that (a) Chinese people make clear distinctions between issues of personal importance (their personal agenda) and issues of national importance (their social agenda) and (b) the agenda-setting function of Chinese media was only observed when considering one's social agenda; the personal agenda was not related with the Chinese media agenda. These findings hold true when comparing across different demographic groups on variables such as age, education, news source, and one's ability to critically analyze news. This article contributes to agenda-setting scholarship by providing empirical evidence of agenda-setting effects in a political and media structure substantially different from the Western structures usually examined in such research.

Keywords

agenda-setting, public agenda, media agenda, China

Agenda-setting research has abundantly shown that news media can set the agenda for public attention on key public issues (e.g., Dearing & Rogers, 1996; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Peter, 2003). News media not only provide the public with factual information about

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public issues but also shape extent to which the public considers these issues important (McCombs, 2004). However, two aspects of agenda-setting research are worthy of closer examination: the generalizability of the theory outside of Western culture and the assumption that public agendas—that is, the agendas of the members of the public at large—are largely uniform. Most agenda-setting research has focused on developed countries, especially the United States. The preoccupation on developed countries may affect the generalizability of agenda-setting theory, as often developed nations have populations with a higher socioeconomic status that tends to mitigate the effects of agenda-setting both indirectly through their effect on media usage and directly by affecting comprehension of information (cf. Wanta, 1997). Unfortunately, efforts to apply agenda-setting theory to developing countries remains inadequate in explaining how these processes would affect populations in emerging nations such as China; an issue of particular importance in this age of globalization. In addition, when examining the impact of media agenda on the public agenda, agenda-setting research often treats the public agenda as uniform (even semantically referring to "the" public agenda rather than the potential for multiple public agendas). While this makes sense in that agenda-setting theory attempts to explain effects at a macro, societal level, in some situations differentiating public agendas may be a prerequisite for better understanding the agenda-setting effects on individuals. One example of this is the distinction between agenda issues that might be personally salient compared with issues thought to be socially salient, we refer to these as one's *personal agenda* and one's *social agenda*. While theirs was a methodological study examining the effect of question-wording on self-reported agenda-setting research, the notion that intrapersonal agendas can be split has implications for understanding agenda-setting at the individual and societal level. This reasoning is also reflected in some of the earlier work by Shaw and McCombs (1974), in which one's need for orientation (driven by perceived relevance and uncertainty) played a factor on how individuals processed news information; this need for orientation might also be influenced by whether an issue is seen as personal or social in nature.

This distinction between the personal agenda and the social agenda might be of particular interest to research on more collectivist nations such as China. Simple logic would suggest that individuals subscribing to a more collectivist approach to societal welfare would tend to focus more on issues of societal rather than personal salience, as these issues would speak more to the general welfare of the people. Compounding this thinking is the fact that, as a socialist nation, mainstream news media in China are strictly controlled and regulated such that little variance exists in terms of the media's agenda, causing both a monolithic, consistent platform for expressing media agenda as well as restricting individual's exposure to alternative views (Zhao, 2008). In addition, individuals in collectivist cultures are usually thought to possess a low level of potential for interpersonal influence (Alves et al., 2006), which would weaken their ability—perceived or actual—to hold influence over others' agendas; to some extent, this is conceptually similar to the mechanics of the two-step flow model of communication (cf. Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). Thus, as past research suggests that power distributions—in terms of both political regimes and social controls—play a major role in the form and function of the agenda-setting effect (e.g., Howlett & Ramesh,

1995), studying these processes in a collectivist, socialist regime become of particular interest to broadening our understanding of the agenda-setting process.

Consequently, this study has two goals. First, it probes whether there is evidence of agenda-setting effects in China, the largest developing country in the world with the second-largest economy behind the United States (*Bloomberg News*, 2010). The Chinese government has long emphasized the roles of news media in shaping and guiding public opinion, and the concept of agenda-setting has been widely discussed as linked to effective propaganda or opinion steering. However, empirical studies on the effects of Chinese agenda-setting remain few, especially in international scholarly communities. This study attempts to fill in this gap. Second, to specify agenda-setting effects in China, this study tries to demonstrate that it is necessary to differentiate the public agendas in terms of the issues' national importance and personal importance, especially in a more collectivist and socialist regime where agenda-setting mechanics might work differently due to invariance in the media agenda coupled with a weakened (perceived) ability for one's personal agenda to influence others. This approach not only meets the tradition and reality of Chinese politics but also contributes the development of agenda-setting theory.

Agenda-Setting in China

When McCombs and Shaw (1972) first proposed the agenda-setting hypothesis, China was at the peak of the Cultural Revolution, which aimed at removing "liberal bourgeois" elements in the Communist Party as well as the society at large by mobilizing the thoughts and actions of Chinese young people. Looking back on history, the agenda-setting function of Chinese mass media seemed to be utilized to its fullest extent for serving this movement (Fang, 1996; Tong & Cheng, 1993; Zhao, 1993). However, under the malevolent manipulation of political figures, Chinese mass media were largely full of bias, lies, distorting information, and propaganda materials, thus losing their credibility and their resulting role in the agenda-setting process (Fang, 1996; Yu, 1996; Zhang, 2002). In fact, by the late 1970s, Chinese leadership ended the revolution that had resulted in nationwide chaos and economic disarray and adopted a policy of reform and openness. For the mass media, this resulted in a shift from a blunt propaganda model to more objective news coverage—a shift which also saw the introduction of more Western communication theories into the country, including agenda-setting theory.

Since the 1980s, agenda-setting theory has widely been discussed in China, appearing in all major textbooks and some research articles on journalism and communication (Chen & Yan, 2007; Guo, 1999; He, 2009; Tong, Zhan, & Guo, 1999; Zhang, 2002). The main reason for its popularity is that it suggests powerful political influence on mass media, which meets the tradition and needs of the ruling Communist Party in using news media for political ends. In particular, Chinese researchers tend to link the concept of agenda-setting to effective propaganda or public opinion steering. Li (2009), for example, argues that agenda-setting can play an important role in manufacturing the consensus in important public issues, guiding public opinion in natural disasters or civic disorders, and helping the

governments to implement domestic and foreign policies. Zhao (2009) suggests that Chinese news media create an opinion environment favorable to political stability and economic development and improve the effect of propaganda by presenting a picture close to the reality rather than only reporting the good news as before. Furthermore, Zhang (2001) argues that agenda-setting is such an effective tool to guide public opinion that guiding public opinion toward the desired outcome can be largely achieved by the careful control over the media agenda.

However, despite of the increased popularity of agenda-setting research in China, many Chinese researchers have neglected important theoretical and practical aspects of theory. For example, they tend to focus on interpreting the issues or agenda emphasized by the mass media alone rather than seeking to establish the statistical correlation of media agenda and public agenda; that is, the observed effect of media agenda on public agenda (He, 2009). Put another way, Chinese scholars tend to address the function of agenda-setting in a purely argumentative way rather than using scientific methods to explore the issue in a more empirical fashion (Li & Zhang, 2002).

Differentiating and Impacting the Public Agendas

The heart of agenda-setting research is establishing the relationship between media agenda and public agenda. Methodologically, the media agenda is often measured by analyzing the content or issues emphasized in the news media coverage, and the public agenda is commonly assessed by public surveys that ask some variation of the long-standing Gallup poll question "what is the most important problem facing this country?" (McCombs, 2000). Furthermore, social scientists find that audiences distinguish between items on the media agenda in terms of personal salience and societal salience and that the media agenda is more able to influence the public agenda when the audience perceived the news stories as personally relevant (Boninger, Krosnick, & Berent, 1995; Miller, 2007). The problem is that agenda-setting scholars often overlook the difference between "the relevance to themselves" and "the relevance to the society/country." For the audience in countries like China, what is most important for their country may be not most important for themselves, especially given that (a) personal sacrifice for the greater good might (and often does) come at great physical, emotional, and financial expense and (b) the opportunity to engage in free dialogue in support of one's personal agenda is discouraged both through informal social controls and formal government assertion. While on one hand this might lead Chinese scholars (or agenda-setting scholars studying the phenomenon on China) to disregard the personal agenda as irrelevant or weakened, on the other hand we see this distinction between the personal and societal agenda—and potential discrepancies between both—to be of particular relevance to a developing country such as China.

It should first be pointed out that the United States, where agenda-setting theory originated, has a quite different culture from China. In the United States, people often place individualism above collectivism, private property above state intervention, and personal interests above social causes (Triandis, 1995). Individuals are assumed to enter into society to pursue their own interests or demand the right to serve their own interests without taking

into account the interests of society. The governments are thus structured to help the individuals to pursue self-interests, and if they governments fail to do so individuals have the right to alter them (Becker, 1958). A logical extension of American individualism is such that an individual tends to think what is important for him or her is also important (if not more important) for the government or country; and that that individual rights should not be sacrificed in the name of common good, public interests, or national interests. Current examples of this individualistic bent included the debates over intrusive airport security screenings (Martin, 2010), cell phone bans while driving (Weinstein, 2009), and smoking bans in public places—all these issues are debates over individual rights to privacy, communication, and pleasure can be trumped by the state's right to keep the collective healthy and safe. At the same time, communication scholars have found that if an issue emphasized by the news media has an intervening impact on personal interests, this issue may also be perceived with national importance by the public (Miller, 2007), thus suggesting the potential for convergence between personal and social salience in individualistic cultures. This notion was confirmed methodologically to some extent by Min, Ghanem, and Evatt (2007), who used a split-ballot method to ask participants to recall "the most important problem facing the country today?" and "the most important problem that is personally relevant to you?" and found respondents' answers to be strongly and positively correlated.

Due to historical, cultural, and political reasons, however, Chinese people emphasize collectivism over individualism, and at least ideologically they agree that individual citizens should sacrifice their personal interests for the sake of common goods or national interests (Shih, 1999; Triandis, 1995). They can quickly distinguish what is important for the country from what is important for self, and tend to hold issues of societal importance separately from issues of personal importance. One example of this could be the overwhelming opposition to Taiwan independence movement by many mainland Chinese, thought to have been cultivated through propaganda campaigns since the foundation of the PRC in 1949. Yet, while many mainland Chinese have strong negative feelings about Taiwan independence, most have no personal interest closely related to the issue. Moreover, in cases where dissent might be felt among individuals, the collectivist nature of the society is an inhibitor to their sharing such information, as interpersonal influence is perceived as quite low. Borrowing from Noelle-Neumann (1974), we might further expect individuals in such cultures who perceived their personal agenda as a deviating from the norm to be particularly sensitive to social and official sanctions and thus not share such agendas, resulting in a spiral of silence regarding personal agendas.

In situations such as the one specified above, we might expect a strong correlation between the media agenda and one's social agenda, as (a) a high need for orientation due to seeing an issue as important for the national welfare drives attentiveness, (b) the message presented is uniform from one media outlet to the next due to state control of the media agenda, and (c) alternative agendas or interpretations—if they do exist—are not shared due to social and governmental sanctions. Such an environment is a recipe for a strong agenda-setting effect on one's social agenda. Conversely, the relationship between the media agenda and one's personal agenda should be minimal, as issues of personal salience are

simply not discussed in the media agenda of collectivist, socialist nations such as China; as well, individuals are not accustomed to sharing these private agendas.

> *Hypothesis 1 (H1):* The agenda-setting effect in China should be such that the correlation between the media agenda and an individual's social agenda will be stronger than the same correlation with an individual's personal agenda.

Furthermore, as we understand the personal and social agenda as separate concepts, any empirical relationship between them is spurious. This being said, it is unlikely that no correlation exists between these two agendas, as they are both sides of the same individual.

For example, Min et al. (2007) found that media agendas that state the personal relevance of a societal issue are most effective in influencing the personal agenda, which suggest significant interplay between both agendas. Yet, this study (and similar others) were conducted in more individualistic nations with a broader media scope; in (media) cultures such as China, there might be little focus on issues of personal importance as it is assumed that people are subscribing to the societal agenda as a collective; such a situation suggests that no significant correlation should exist between the personal and social agenda. Moreover, Min et al. (2007) was not a study on the agenda-setting effect per se so much as it was a study on the robustness of the different metrics used in agenda-setting research; particularly, question wording and frame of reference. In their study, Min et al. (2007) focused on understanding the effect of frame of reference ("the country" compared with "personally relevant") on rating one particular issue (for establishing measurement reliability), and the study was not concerned with how these frames affected responses to a variety of emergent issues for understanding differences in personal and social agendas. Data from Min et al. (2007) not only established the validity of agenda-setting measures but also opened the door for further explanation of issue salience among the public by addressing the issue of studying varying levels of personal and social issue salience (McCombs, 2005). Nevertheless, these opposing viewpoints do not allow us to make predictions; rather we question the interplay between an individual's personal and societal agenda in a collectivist, socialist nation.

> *Research Question 1 (RQ1):* Is there a meaningful correlation between an individual's personal and social agenda?

Finally, as is important in agenda-setting research, certain personal characteristics have to be controlled for. For example, aforementioned work by Wanta (1997) argues that demographics such as age, education, and income all influence agenda-setting directly and indirectly by influencing media consumption. As well, media literacy programs (cf. Potter, 2008) are centered on teaching individuals how to analyze and evaluate media messages, in part as a defense for the oft-duplicitous end goals of some media messages (i.e., unethical advertising or biased news coverage). Knowing of the potential influences of these factors, for all hypothesis testing three control variables were considered: demographic factors, news sources, and critical ability.

Method

Public Survey

A local random telephone survey was conducted in China through the month of November 2000 for determining the public agenda and the audience characteristics including demographic factors, news sources, and critical ability. Specifically, a random number table was used to select a telephone number from a directory of residential telephone line subscribers in Shanghai, the largest city in China with a population of more than 19.2 million. Trained by one of the authors, telephone interviewers were undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in an advanced communication class at a large public university in China. While 835 respondents were contacted through our random number table, a total of 351 complete responses were used in data analysis; our response rate using American Association of Public Opinion Research's RR2 calculation (which includes partial interviews as respondents) was 42% (American Association of Public Opinion Research, 2011).

The basic demographics for the respondents were as follows: 55% were male and 45% were female; 30% were 18-25 years old, 38% were between 26 and 45, and 22% were above 45. In terms of occupation, 23% were students, 13% were blue-collar workers, 12% were technical professionals, 10% were corporate executives, 9% were retirees, 7% were unemployed, (3.5) 3% were civil servants, and so on. In terms of socioeconomic status, 38% of the respondents indicated that they received higher education and 40% said that they earned at least 4,000 Yuan (RMB) monthly. Our sample seems to differ somewhat from the general Shanghai population according to UNESCO (2000), with our sample containing more males (sample sex ratio = 122.22, population sex ratio = 105.74) with more college-educated respondents (sample higher education = 38% ± 5.08, population higher education = 22% ± 2.57). Comparisons with age, employment, and income were not available due to differences in data collection, although the number of unemployed respondents did not differ between the samples (sample unemployed = 7% ± 2.67, population unemployed = 3.5% ± 1.14) and the number of students in the sample (23% ± 4.40) did not differ significantly from the rate of college-educated respondent in the population.

The survey included a variety of questions all aimed at testing our main hypothesis. The first two questions were designed to measure aggregate audience issue priorities. Each respondent was asked the following two open-ended questions: "What do you think is the most important problem facing *the country* nowadays?" and "What do you think is the most important problem facing *yourself* nowadays?" Developed from the Gallup poll question used to assess public agendas, the former intended to probe respondents' judgment on the issues' national importance (their social agenda) while the latter on the issues' personal importance (their personal agenda). The main measure of the issue salience among the public was the frequency of mentions of any particular issue in answer to each of the questions.

The next two questions probed respondents' main news sources. The third question read as follows: "What do you rely on most for news and public affairs information: mass media sources (e.g., newspapers, television, and the Internet) or non-mass media sources

(e.g., friends, family, and organizations)?" The fourth question asked, "What do you rely on most for news and public affairs information: *People's Daily*, *Jiefang Daily*, *Xinmin Evening News*, or other sources?" This question was important, as in the content analysis of this study, these three newspapers were used as our sample for determining the media agenda.

Both of the fifth and sixth questions were to probe respondents' critical ability. It is argued that people with critical ability are less likely to be affected by media coverage. So this survey asked the following two questions related to people's critical ability: "To what extent do you think news media reflect the real world: completely/largely, somewhat, not much/not at all?" and "Do you agree that the more media coverage an issue receives, the more important it is: yes, no, or not sure?"

Finally, we also asked several questions to collect the demographic information of the respondents, as showed earlier. Two of them, age and education, would be used in the statistical analysis. Age was coded into three levels: (a) 18-25; (b) 26-45; and (c) above 45 (respondents below 18 were excluded since this study focused on the adult population). Education was coded into three levels: (a) no or elementary school; (b) middle or high school; and (c) college education or above.

Content Analysis

The media agenda was measured through a content analysis of three most popular newspapers in Shanghai, China. They included (a) *People's Daily*, which is the organ of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and published worldwide with a circulation of 3 to 4 million; (b) *Jiefang Daily*, which is the organ of the Shanghai Committee of Communist Party of China and has a circulation of approximately 700,000; and (c) *Xinmin Evening News*, a mainly market-oriented local newspaper covering local news, sports, business, jobs, and community events with daily circulation of approximately 998,000.

The time frame for determining the media agenda was May 1 to December 1, 2000, with a time lag of 6 months before and extending through the public survey as recommended by previous research examining the content of news magazines (cf. McCombs, Becker, & Weaver, 1975; Stone & McCombs, 1981). While more recent research has suggested that shorter time lags may be more optimal for seeing agenda-setting effects (cf. Wanta & Hu, 1994), even these studies have acknowledged that newspaper effects tended to have stronger long-term effects, particular national newspaper such as those used in the current study. We sampled each of three newspapers every 6 days within the 7-month observation period, resulting in a total of 114 sample issues. All news stories (6,406 in total) in the sample issues were then content analyzed, among which 38% of the stories were obtained from *People's Daily*, 26% from *Jiefang Daily*, and 36% from *Xinmin Evening News*.

In this study, issue salience was measured as the number of news stories in which a particular issue was mentioned. Each news story was analyzed by three trained coders. The story was coded the way two or three coders agreed. If there was no agreement at all, the story was dropped. The kappa coefficient of intercoder agreement was $\kappa = .92$. The media agenda was determined by the rank order of issue salience in the media coverage.

Identifying the Major Issues

Our research focuses on general patterns of broad issue salience as represented in the media and correlated with personal and national importance. Thus, rather than focusing on the individual issues themselves (of which there are likely hundreds), our study examined issue salience at the aggregate level rather than the individual level. The process to determine the major issues involved several steps. First, as discussed earlier, we asked two open-ended questions in the public survey to probe which issues people considered as most important for their country as well as for themselves. Public responses resulted in a total of 56 possible issues, ranging from such broad categories as foreign affairs and national economy to such detailed subissues as personal career development and the U.S. presidential election. Then, we went further to developed exhaustive and mutually exclusive categories, which reduced or list from 56 to 13 potential issues. However, for the purpose of agenda-setting analysis, we felt that it was necessary to further collapse these 13 issues and produce a smaller number of general categories that encompassed each, while still providing us with orthogonal categories. For example, anticorruption, political reform, and ideological advancement were originally coded as separate issues but were found to be closely associated and thus collapsed into one category—political development. The final determination of seven major issues was based on these considerations and on our own understanding of Chinese economic, political, and social environment. The final list of seven major issues used in analysis was (a) political development, which involved political reform, anticorruption, and the advancement of political ideology; (b) economic problems, which involved sustainable economic growth, unemployment, housing reform, and the development of Western China; (c) transportation and environment problems; (d) public safety; (e) Taiwan; (f) health care reform; and (g) China's entry to the WTO. These issues served as the respective media and public agendas for statistical analysis.

Results

Hypothesis 1 predicted that the Chinese media agenda should be significantly correlated with Chinese citizen's social agenda but not their personal agenda. Table 1 presents the rank order of an issues' prominence in the media and its importance in an individual's personal and social agenda on the aggregate level. The media agenda was determined by the rank ordering of frequencies of mention for each of the seven major issues by three sample newspapers. Taking into account the entire sample of 351 respondents, the personal agenda was determined by the rank ordering of frequencies of mention of a particular issue by respondent when they answered "What was the most important problem facing yourself nowadays?" Likewise, the social agenda was determined by the rank ordering of frequencies of mention of a particular issue in response to the question: "What was the most important problem facing the country nowadays?"

Following the model of McCombs and Shaw's (1972) original study, we then used Spearman's rank-order correlation to examine whether the correlation between the media agenda and an individual's social agenda will be stronger than the same correlation with an

Table 1. Rank Ordering for Media Agenda and Two Overall Public Agendas

Rank order	Media agenda (%)[a]	Personal agenda[b] (%)[c]	Social agenda[d] (%)[e]
1	Economic problems (24.6)	Economic problems (40.5)	Economic problems (30.0)
2	Political development (7.4)	Health care reform (13.7)	Political development (18.5)
3	Transportation & environment problems (7.2)	Transportation & environment problems (11.7)	Transportation & environment problems (9.7)
4	Public safety (5.0)	Political development (7.3)	Taiwan problem (6.3)
5	Taiwan problem (1.0)	Public safety (7.1)	Health care reform (6.0)
6	Health care reform (0.6)	China's entry to WTO (2.8)	China's entry to WTO (4.8)
7	China's entry to WTO (0.2)	Taiwan problem (1.4)	Public safety (3.1)

Note: See text for question and item wording and coding.
a. The percentage of newspaper articles covering the target issue.
b. The overall public agenda on the issues' personal importance.
c. The percentage of survey respondents considering the target issue the most important one for themselves.
d. The overall public agenda on the issues' national importance.
e. The percentage of survey respondents considering the target issue the most important one for the country.

Table 2. Rank Order Correlations Between Two Public Agendas and Between Media Agenda and Public Agenda for the Entire Sample

		1	2
1	Media agenda		
2	Personal agenda[a]	0.54	
3	Social agenda[b]	0.79*	0.53

Note: See text for question and item wording and coding. Difference in correlations in column 1 is $t(348) = -8.06$.
a. The overall public agenda on the issues' personal importance.
b. The overall public agenda on the issues' national importance.
*$p < .05$.

individual's personal agenda (H1). As predicted, there was a strong, positive, and significant relationship between the media agenda and social agenda ($r = .79$, $p < .05$), yet there was no significant relationship between the media agenda and the personal agenda ($r = .54$, *ns*); moreover, the differences between these correlations was significant using Blalock's (1972) *t*-test formula for comparing correlations from one sample, $t(348) = -8.06$, $p < .01$. Furthermore, no meaningful correlation was found between an individual's personal and social agenda ($r = .53$, *ns*). All correlations are displayed in Table 2.

Table 3. Rank Order Correlations Between Two Public Agendas and Between Media Agenda and Public Agenda for the Partitioned Samples

	Percentage	PA[a] to SA[b]	MA to PA	MA to SA
What is your age?				
18-25	30.0	0.39	0.64	0.71*
26-45	36.8	0.57	0.46	0.68*
46 or above	22.4	0.71*	0.54	0.5
Total	89.2[c]			
What is your education level?				
No or elementary school	4.8	0.89**	0.66	0.75*
Middle or high school	57.5	0.57	0.54	0.89**
College education or above	37.0	0.36	0.57	0.68*
Total	99.3[c]			
What do you rely on most for news and public affairs information?				
Mass media	61.0	0.39	0.54	0.75*
Non mass media	23.6	0.68*	0.66	0.96***
Total	84.6[c]			
What do you specifically rely on most for news and public affairs information?				
At least one of three sample newspapers	50.1	0.49	0.56	0.75*
Any other sources	36.5	0.52	0.61	0.79*
Total	86.6[c]			
To what extent do news media reflect the real world?				
Completely or largely	48.8	0.32	0.57	0.75*
Somewhat	35.4	0.42	0.45	0.77*
Not much or not at all	13.7	0.75*	0.54	0.86**
Total	97.9[c]			
Do you think that the more media coverage an issue receives, the more important it is?				
Yes	18.6	0.65	0.49	0.75*
No	10.6	0.51	0.62	0.76*
Not sure	69.5	0.58	0.47	0.79*
Total	98.7[c]			

Note: See text for question and item wording and coding.
a. The public agenda on the issues' personal importance for the partitioned sample.
b. The public agenda on the issues' national importance for the partitioned sample.
c. Does not sum to 100% because of missing data.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Visual inspection of the rank-order agenda issues shows us that economic issues play a prominent role for all three agendas; following this, the media and social agendas mirror each other in rank order until the fourth issue, where pairings are less clear. For the personal agenda, relationships fall apart after the second issue (health care reform for the personal agenda, political development for the media and social agendas). These data

support our prediction that the Chinese media agenda would be significantly associated with individual's social agendas but not their personal agendas. With respect to our research question, there seems to be no solid relationship between Chinese respondents' personal and social agendas.

Several scholars have argued that the agenda-setting effect may be contingent on audience characteristics such as demographic factors, news sources, and critical ability (cf. Kosicki, 1993; McLeod, Becker, & Byrnes, 1974; Semetko, Blumler, Gurevitch, & Weaver, 1991). Therefore, hypothesis tests above were replicated examining the potential influence of these variables. As shown in Table 3, the significant correlation between the media agenda and an individual's social agenda remained constant for most or all subgroups. As well, the correlation between the media agenda and the personal agenda was nonsignificant, as was the intercorrelation between an individual's personal and social agenda. Thus, in contrast to earlier theorizing and work, demographic factors, news sources, and an individual's ability to critically analyze the news do not seem to have an effect on the predicted strong, positive, and significant correlation between the Chinese media agenda and Chinese citizen's social agendas. This being said, we should note that our study used aggregate data in which the unit of analysis was the unit itself (a methodology similar to Shaw, 1992) rather than individual's acute opinions on each issue (cf. Wanta, 1997). While our data tell us much about broad relationships between those issues emphasized in the media and the public's resulting opinions of the importance of these issues, we recognize that more research is needed to examine the individual-level processing of the Chinese media agenda

Discussion

Applying agenda-setting theory to China, we set out to investigate whether one's personal agenda and social agenda differed from one another and whether Chinese media could influence one (or both) of these agendas. Employing a telephone survey of residents of Shanghai and a content analysis of three popular Chinese newspapers, we found that (a) Chinese citizens do distinguish between issues of personal and national importance and (b) Chinese media is highly correlated with individuals' feelings regarding issues of national importance but not correlated with individuals' feelings regarding issues of personal importance. The above findings replicated when considering demographic variables, news sources, and individuals' critical ability to read the news. This was essentially consistent with the Chinese political and cultural tradition that emphasizes the distinction between national interests and personal interests and more specifically encourages the suppression of personal interests to national interests.

Our data are particularly intriguing in light of the dearth of research on agenda setting in nations such as China, which emphasizes the collective over the individual. Finding that state-run media agendas are influential in determining one's social agenda is interesting in that these agendas are likely more often to be shared. That is, while Chinese individuals appear to maintain separate personal and social agendas, they seem to act more often on the

social. In most cases, issues of national importance are not likely issues that the common Chinese national has great experience, and this coupled with an increased need for orientation related to national issues in a collectivist culture are conditions ripe for agenda-setting.

While our data generally point to support for our predictions and suggest no correlation between an individual's personal and social agenda, a few anomalies draw our attention. For example, when only considering respondents aged 46 years or older, we see a strong, positive, and significant correlation between the personal and social agenda ($r = .71$, $p < .05$). A similar correlation is found for respondents with no formal education ($r = .89$, $p < .01$), individuals who do not rely on media for news ($r = .68$, $p < .05$), and individuals who do not think that the media reflects the real world ($r = .75$, $p < .05$). These patterns are telling but are not antihypothetical. Having been raised in a collectivist, socialist society, an older, uneducated individual might have lost the necessity to distinguish between the personal and social agenda; perhaps finding the personal agenda to lack relevance and representation, both in the mass media and in society. For the infrequent media users, what is most telling is the correlation between the media and public agenda ($r = .96$, $p < .01$), which suggests that when media is used by these people, the effect is strong and universal.

Perhaps the main limitation of this study was that the data were collected more than 10 years ago. While we do not have any reason to feel that the political system, and specifically the media system, has changed substantively over the last decade, we still acknowledge that reported data should be replicated in current time and compared with our findings. For example, it is plausible that state-run media—such as the newspapers sampled in this study—might be covering more global issues in part due to the more recent emergence of China as a world economic force. Related to this, more U.S. investments in the country might also be influencing the issues and stories Chinese state-run news media might be covering, such as General Motors manufacturing and selling cars domestically in China (*Daily Mail*, 2011; *People's Daily Online*, 2011). Of particular interest for agenda-setting scholars would be examining domestic coverage of global events such as the Beijing Olympics, where outside media's coverage of domestic issues such as pollution (*People's Daily Online*, 2008a) and human rights violations (*People's Daily Online*, 2008b) might force state-run media to adjust their agenda in response, at least in the short term. A second limitation is concerned with the survey methodology employed. While our data confirm the existence of a correlation between the media agenda and one's social agenda, they do not establish causality between these agendas. One common way to establish causality in agenda-setting research is to correlate media and individual agendas in a cross-lagged correlation method employed by Maxwell and McCombs (1972), and this method should be considered in replication. A third limitation of our study, as is often the case with agenda-setting research, is our limited sampling frame. This early study focused on three popular print media in Shanghai, but future research should incorporate both broadcast and print media and include different regions of the country. A fourth limitation of our study would be its focus on seven broad issue categories rather than a larger list of specific issues. We chose to focus on broad categories because our research question is not so much focused on specific individual-level agenda items as it is the existence of broader issue topics and how

the presence of these broad topics in the media influence the importance individuals place on these topics, both publically and privately. For example, our finding that issues related to health care reform appear infrequently in Chinese national newspapers and on Chinese nationals' public agendas yet are of chief concern on citizen's private agendas is an informative one in and of itself as it suggests (a) a very strong influence of the Chinese national media on the expressed thoughts of individuals living in a collectivist society and (b) a disconnect between an individual's shared and private agenda. Knowing that the specific concern for water safety is more or less represented in the media and one's public and private agenda is not as informative to us at this stage in the research. This being said, we fully acknowledge that our research should be extended to focus on specific issues, perhaps coupling an understanding of individual-level variables with specific agenda items to get a more intimate view of the potential agenda-setting process at the local level. A final limitation would be the role of interpersonal relationships in the agenda-setting process. While we have made assumptions regarding the low perceived influence of personal agendas resulting from subscribing to collectivist norms, neither did we consider respondents own perceptions of their interpersonal influence nor did we consider their general social connectedness—both variables to be considered in future research.

Conclusions

This article contributed to agenda-setting scholarship in two ways. First, it partly confirms the existence of agenda-setting effects in China, a country that has historically emphasized the role of using news media in shaping public opinion toward official state policy. Second, in the context of a collectivist, socialist nation such as China, this article found substantial variance between two distinct forms of an individual's agenda—their personal agenda (issues of personal importance) and their social agenda (issues of national importance). This distinction is particularly important, as the observed agenda-setting effect was only found in relation to one's social agenda; their personal agenda was seemingly unrelated to the media agenda. This finding is particularly important to a (media) culture such as China's, as the social agenda is the one that individuals are likely to share publically—an agenda sharply in line with the desires of state-run media.

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