

Is the agenda set? State of agenda-setting research in China and Korea

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ABSTRACT

Agenda setting is one of the most recognized communication theories. This thematic analysis aims to provide an overview of agenda-setting publications in China and Korea. Results indicated that the output of agenda-setting research was impressive in both countries. Korean studies mirrored U.S. studies in terms of topical focus, but research in China narrowly concentrated on social issues. Chinese agenda-setting research was typically a-theoretical and lacking in methodological diversity, while such problems were less acute in Korean studies. More studies have moved on to the Internet and social media in both countries. Implications are discussed and new directions for future research are suggested.

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The importance of agenda setting

The academic field of communication research has been keenly interested and anxious about media effects. In the early days, the mass media were conceptualized to have powerful effects, with prevailing thoughts centered on concepts such as the magic bullet theory and the hypodermic needle theory. Then, the claims of minimal effects took over, after researchers failed to document oft-focused behavioral effects such as voting behavior changes (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944; Klapper, 1960). But media produced much more than behavioral effects: they could affect attitude, perception, cognition, and affection. As thinking shifted, conceptualization of media effects oscillated back to moderate, if not powerful effects. Subsequently, many mid-range communication theories came into being. Among these, one of the most prominent was agenda-setting theory, proposed by McCombs and Shaw (1972), out of a study on the 1968 U.S. presidential election. Agenda setting has been a stable topic in communication journals, being cited the often, and is easily one of the few communication theories to carry currency even among industry professionals and the politically concerned citizenry.

In its 40-plus years, agenda setting has matured from a hypothesis to a theoretical perspective, extending from politics, to other areas of concern such as economy, health,

sports, and global warming. The theoretical contour of agenda setting has continuously evolved with the advent and proliferation of new communication technologies such as the Internet and social media (Conway, Kenski, & Wang, 2015; Rashi & McCombs, 2015; Rogstad, 2016; Yun et al., 2016). In a recent meta-analysis of agenda-setting research in the West (Kim, Kim, & Zhou, 2015), it was found that the number of agenda-setting studies has increased over time, inclusive of all first-, second-, and third-level agenda-setting research, and important concepts such as need for orientation, agenda melding, inter-media agenda setting, agenda policy, and agenda building. Agenda-setting research has also expanded from political communication to other topical areas, as well as from traditional, vertical media to horizontal media (Shaw, Hamm, & Terry, 2006), offering strong evidence that traditional agenda-setting research is still robust in the current Internet age and social media landscape.

The evolution of agenda-setting research is looking positive in terms of trends, topics, media, method, and use of other theories to enhance its explaining and predictive power, in spite of some concerns that agenda setting may lose some of its relevance in an ever fragmented media environment when media may not have the unifying ability to set the public agenda. Less is known, however, about agenda setting in the Asian setting (Luo, 2013). There is enough talent within the Asian communication community to do sophisticated, cutting edge studies. However, we wonder if the studies in Asia and those in the West are any different. Are there different patterns of research in Asia? Are there theoretical developments in Asia that are different?

Arguably, the political factors and media systems in Asia differ greatly from those in the U.S. where the original agenda-setting study was conducted. As such, some of the assumptions of agenda setting may not hold, and some of the mechanisms of agenda setting may not operate exactly the same. Since Asia is a large region, we chose to focus on China and South Korea, two of the most developed countries in the region. These two countries have some similar social and cultural characteristics such as geographical proximity, rapid economic development, Confucian and collectivistic culture (Chung, 2008). The geographical and cultural settings of these two Asian countries in which agenda-setting effects of the media occur have created a strong contrast with those of the U.S. It is also important to make a comparison of agenda-setting research in China and South Korea because they have different political and media systems despite some similarities. As McCombs (2004, p. 37) suggested, agenda-setting effects most likely occur 'when there is a reasonably open political and a reasonably open media system.' In the Chinese authoritative political and media system, the Chinese media are under the direct control of the Communist Party. As such, the media may not exactly dictate salience of covered issues, and it is likely that media salience may not translate into public salience as people may take many other cues from hierarchy and interpersonal channels. On the other hand, South Korea is a democratic republic where freedom of the press is generally guaranteed and respected in practice. However, the South Korean media were under heavy censorship till the early 1990s, and pressure tactics from the government and the business community are still major concerns (Jang & You, 2004). So, the assumption that media hold the power to make us think about issues may not be sustained in these settings. In the Internet age, South Korea is known for its lead in Internet penetration (Takeda, 2012). As such, South Koreans may have the most fragmented media, and it is questionable whether media are still able to tell people what to think about.

The goal of this study, therefore, is to provide an overview by reviewing the theoretical and methodological trends of agenda-setting studies through a thematic analysis of research publications. By doing so, this study serves as a review of agenda-setting studies in China and South Korea, and provides new directions for future research by examining what agenda-setting research has been and where it is heading in these settings.

Agenda setting as a theory

Agenda setting theory insists that the mass media have great influence on audiences by their choice of what stories to consider newsworthy and how much prominence and space is given to those stories (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Nisbet, 2008). The central point of agenda-setting theory is the media's ability to transfer their agenda to that of the public and make their issues a priority to the public (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Nisbet, 2008; Shaw & McCombs, 1977). Agenda setting theory was introduced by McCombs and Shaw (1972) as a correlation between the rate at which the media report on a story and how important the public believes that story to be. There are three main components of the agenda-setting process: the media agenda, the public agenda, and the policy agenda (Tan & Weaver, 2007). It is a process as the three are interconnected (Rogers, Dearing, & Bregman, 1993), influencing one another. While the first two are often researched together, the third is an implied outcome and is more often studied by political scientists and sociologists.

The media agenda is the set of issues addressed by media sources, and the public agenda are issues the public consider important (Nisbet, 2005). The media can influence the public agenda because they can influence the salience of issues on the public agenda (Tan & Weaver, 2007). This influence does not seem to be lessening with the advent of new types of media like the Internet but actually appears to be growing (Coleman & McCombs, 2007). In a study conducted by Coleman and McCombs (2007), they found that the younger generation (18–34-year-olds) is actually more influenced by the media than are the older generations. Even though this generation used traditional types of media such as newspapers significantly less, they were still more influenced by the media (Coleman & McCombs, 2007). In fact, media influence was at its highest with the younger end of the 18–34-year-old age group, the same demographic that uses the Internet most heavily to obtain news information (Coleman & McCombs, 2007). A similar study by Kiousis, McDevitt, and Wu (2005) found results that also indicated the power of agenda setting among youth is as strong as or stronger than with older generations. Indeed, for decades, agenda setting has been developed, expanded, and employed in numerous studies as an analytical tool that affords an understanding of how political, cultural, and economic realities are formulated, but also how they can be manufactured (Matsaganis & Payne, 2005). The effects of agenda setting are well established in regard to the news media among the American public (Holbrook & Hill, 2005).

In the U.S., agenda setting by the media is at its strongest in politics (Matsaganis & Payne, 2005). The media's power to set the public agenda has grown over the past two decades (Entman, 2007). The extent of media agenda setting can be seen in several different instances. A study conducted by Latimer (1987) concluded that the media have the ability to affect vote switching, or that covering certain issues or candidates extensively can alter how people were intending to vote. The extent of this power and growth of

the media was analyzed in a study conducted in 1996 by Miller and Wanta, titled ‘Sources of the public agenda: The president–press–public relationship.’ Their study concluded that although the president is a powerful indicator of the public agenda, the media is actually the more powerful indicator (Miller & Wanta, 1996). Maximum power, in this case, was achieved when both the president and the media indicated that an issue was important, but when taken as individual entities, the public was more swayed by the press (Miller & Wanta, 1996). This is especially evident in regard to the Iraq War. Public opinion for the war was at its lowest when the media were no longer writing positive stories about the war. Furthermore, the White House’s spin on the war was less powerful than the media’s position on it (Christie, 2006). In fact, the media’s ability to set the agenda swayed the campaign strategies of candidates to fit what they believed the media thought was important (Ridout & Mellen, 2007). In an attempt to receive as much positive press as possible, candidates even moved away from issues they found important, and altered their agenda to be in line with the media agenda (Ridout & Mellen, 2007).

Aside from politics, agenda-setting effects has been documented in many other areas, including health, cooperate reputations, professional sports, education, and religious beliefs (McCombs, 2005). In terms of theory development, agenda setting has also evolved, from first-level, to second-level, and now a third-level agenda setting, or network agenda setting (Guo & McCombs, 2011).

The first level of agenda setting was the original McCombs and Shaw’s (1972) hypothesis that the mass media agenda for political campaign would influence the salience of the political issues in the mind of undecided voters. Attribute agenda setting was proposed soon after in Shaw and McCombs’ (1977) follow-up study, theorizing that not only the salience of news objects would transfer to public perception, but also the attributes salience of the news issues. That is, the characteristics of the object as well as the affective components associated with these objects, such as tones (positive, negative, or neutral) of coverage would affect how the public perceives the news objects. Later, Ghanem and Evatt (1995) used the term ‘second-level of agenda setting’ to explain the transmission of attribute salience from media agenda to public agenda.

The third-level agenda setting theorizes that the objects and attributes salience transfer in bundles between agendas (Guo, 2012; Guo & McCombs, 2011). In other words, the news media not only tell us ‘what to think about’ (first-level agenda-setting effect), and ‘how to think about it’ (second-level agenda-setting effect), but also tell us ‘what and how to associate’ (Vu, Guo, & McCombs, 2014, p. 669).

As the theory is being refined, newer, and more pertinent concepts also continue to emerge. To explain the media’s influence on segments of the population, the concept of ‘need for orientation,’ for example, was introduced by McCombs and Weaver (1973), to account for substantial moderation on second-level agenda-setting effects. Years later, Shaw, McCombs, Weaver, and Hamm (1999) also proposed the idea of agenda melding, which incorporated the idea of group identification to study a deeper level of agenda-setting effects: individuals join groups with similar agendas, and the media move people closer or farther away from groups. That is, the media have the ability to increase group consensus among individuals who often use news media, whether it be television, Internet, or newspapers (Koch-baumgarten & Voltmer, 2015). Thus, the media have the ability to increase group consensus within the larger social and political system, implying that the media can increase homogeneity.

In sum, agenda setting as a hypothesis and a theory has stimulated scores of investigations via documenting correlations, finding empirical evidence of issues rankings and perceived salience, establishing time order of media agenda over public agenda, discovering moderators and mediators, and taking into account audience characteristics, needs, and consumption settings. Questions have been raised, including the time sequence among media agenda, public agenda, and political agenda (Kosicki, 1993); other non-media, environmental contributing factors to public agenda (Megwa & Brenner, 1988); lacking explanatory mechanisms in current research (Takesta, 2005). However, As McCombs and Shaw (1993) himself stated, a successful theory usually is capable of generating a steady growth of its literature, able to integrate and accommodate a few other theories, and is applicable in many areas. Agenda setting is certainly one of the few in communication attaining such status. As a theory, it is being used, investigated, refined, and applied in many domains and international settings. Given the different Asian settings mentioned above, it is significant that we understand where research on this theory stands in Asia, and whether and how researchers are utilizing the theory, and/or developing this theory.

We are doing this research with an eye toward extending scholarship by looking at what research trends are prevalent in Asia, what media channels are the main focuses, what topical areas have been looked at, what methodologies are employed, and what theoretical perspectives are incorporated so as to shed light on the status of agenda-setting research in China and Korea, and to articulate a host of paths for future empirical studies. Specifically, we ask the following research questions regarding agenda-setting research in China and Korea:

RQ1: What are the prevalent trends in agenda-setting research?

RQ2: What are the topical areas most studied in agenda-setting research?

RQ3: What are the media studied most often in agenda-setting research?

RQ4: What methods are used most often in agenda-setting research?

RQ5: What other theories are used in agenda-setting research?

Method

Population and sample

To examine theoretical trends of agenda-setting studies published in China and Korea, we conducted a content analysis of research publications about agenda setting in China and Korea from 1972 to 2015. The time frame for data collection was chosen based on the time of seminal study of agenda setting by McCombs and Shaw. To identify articles on agenda setting published in China and Korea, respectively, two search key words, 'Yicheng Shezhi (议程设置)' and 'Yiti Shezhi(议题设置),' for Chinese agenda-setting studies and a search key word, '의제 설정,' for Korean agenda-setting studies were used in our data collection. The search key words we used are translated as 'agenda setting' in English.

Using the search key words, the Chinese agenda-setting articles were retrieved from a Chinese academic database, CNKI (www.cnki.net), one of the two most comprehensive full-text databases in China. The Korean articles were retrieved from a Korean academic

database, *DBpia* (www.dbpia.co.kr), as it is recognized as the most prominent knowledge platform of Korean academic journals including 1.8 million articles in 2015. Since the Chinese and the Korean academic databases used in this study include articles from one of different sources such as academic journals, conference proceedings, professional journals, e-books, WebDB, and so on, we included only full-text articles on agenda setting published in academic journals. Hence, articles that were not related to agenda-setting theory or effects were excluded, including book reviews, editorials, corrections, and commentaries. Articles not written in native languages (e.g. Chinese or Korean) were also excluded.

In the Chinese search at CNKI.net, four academic fields were selected including (1) literature/history/philosophy, (2) politics/military affairs/law, (3) education and social sciences, and (4) electronic technology and information science. Each academic field under investigation has several sub-fields, which covers a wide range of areas, including but not limited to journalism and media. All other disciplines were excluded. Using the two key phrases the search generated 2186 full-text articles. We then sampled the articles via a systematic sampling method by selecting every fifth article for inclusion, resulting in the final 436 articles in the sample. In a similar fashion, 384 articles from the Korean academic database were retrieved. But many were not directly related to agenda setting and many did not focus on the influence of medium in agenda-setting research. As a consequence, we did not retain those non-qualifying articles. In the final analysis, 106 articles published in Korea were used in the study.

Coding scheme

First, we recorded some basic information about the articles including title of the article, title of the journal, name of the author, year of publication, and country. Then, all important coding categories were assessed according to the following criteria.

Research trends

Research trends were established according to McCombs' (2005) categorization of agenda setting: basic agenda-setting effects, attribute agenda setting, psychology of agenda-setting effects, sources of the media agenda, and consequences of agenda-setting effects. Based on this conceptualization, we established nine stages of agenda-setting research trend including (1) first-level agenda setting, (2) second-level (or attribute) agenda setting, (3) need for orientation, (4) agenda melding, (5) inter-media agenda setting, (6) third-level (or network) agenda setting, (7) agenda policy, (8) agenda building, and (9) other research trends. If the article includes more than one research trend, all identifiable and focused trends used in the study were coded.

Research topic

Research topic was coded based on the dominant topic of the article. 'Dominant' denoted what the main subject or topic the article is focused on. Ten main topics were included in this category: (1) social issues (e.g. social welfare, insurance, and crime), (2) politics (e.g. policy issues, elections, candidates, political corruption, political processes, democracy, and government operation), (3) economy (e.g. job, marketing, corporate, and finance), (4) education (e.g. school issues and educational issues), (5) environment (e.g. disaster,

pollutions, and nature), (6) health (e.g. medical issues and health-related issues such as tobacco and drugs), (7) technology and science (e.g. new technology development), (8) military (military operations and issues), (9) international issues (e.g. international conflict and international affairs), and (10) other (e.g. food, sports, and research per se). If the article included more than one research topic, only the dominant topic was coded.

Medium or channel

This category looked at whether a particular medium was the focus of the study, including (1) newspaper (e.g. daily, weekly, and tabloid newspapers), (2) TV (e.g. local and/or national television, and cable television), (3) radio, (4) magazine, (5) press release (e.g. party release, state speech, and publication of the organization), (6) Internet websites (e.g. candidate's campaign website, online community, and independent online news sources such as Sina news, Google news, or Yahoo news), (7) online presence: online counterparts of traditional media outlet such as a newspaper, a radio station, a magazine, and a TV station (e.g. online newspaper, and online news), (8) social and mobile media (e.g. Weibo, WeChat, Kakao Talk, Line, blog, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter), and (9) other media (e.g. other media not included in the categories above). If the article included more than one medium, all of the media used in the study were coded.

Research method

Research methods used in the agenda-setting studies included (1) content analysis, (2) survey, (3) experiment, (4) case study, (5) network analysis, (6) secondary data analysis, (7) interview, (8) focus group, (9) meta-analysis, (10) textual analysis, (11) critic or review, (12) comparative analysis, (13) ethnography, (14) panel survey, (15) historical analysis, and (16) other (e.g. citation analysis).

Incorporated theories

Theories used to explain, support, and extend agenda setting were also taken into account. Typically, in theory development and in theoretical work, other relevant theories were also incorporated to motivate studies or to propose hypotheses or research questions. These 'background' theories were coded when the article actually explicated them to be used as rationales for the study. The theories included (1) framing (e.g. framing, framing building, and reframing), (2) priming (e.g. priming and cognitive priming), (3) construction of realities, (4) information-processing theory (e.g. information-processing theory, dual-process model, and theory of affective intelligence), (5) third-person theory, (6) two-step flow theory, (7) cultivation theory, (8) gatekeeping theory, (9) spiral of silence, (10) uses and gratification, (11) cognitive dissonance, (12) media dependency theory, and (13) other theories (e.g. issue ownership theory, social capital, mobilization, and corporate social responsibility).

Coding procedures

Two teams composed of four trained coders participated in the coding process. Two coders were native Chinese speakers and two coders were native Korean speakers. All four were bilingual, being fluent in English to work on the project. The two Chinese coders examined journal articles in Chinese, while the two Korean coders examined

journal articles in Korean. To ensure reliability among the four coders, several training sessions were held with all coders using the same code book to check agreement among coders. After the coder training sessions, the two Chinese coders analyzed 80 journal articles of agenda setting (about 18% from the overall sample), and the two Korean coders analyzed 19 journal articles of agenda setting (about 18% from the overall sample). The intercoder reliability was tested using Cohen's kappa, which results in a reliability of .867 for trend, .825 for media, .725 for method, .825 for topics, and .670 for theories. While the last one was a bit low, all were deemed satisfactory.

Results

From the sampling period, we retrieved 2816 articles in China and 106 articles in Korea related to agenda setting. The number of Chinese articles was much more than that of Korean counterparts. When we plotted these articles using those in the sample, the number of publications in both countries is shown to increase since the first publication in 1997. While Korean agenda-setting research has increased steadily over time since 2002, Chinese agenda-setting research witnessed a noticeable rise since 2012. In fact, more than half of the Chinese agenda-setting articles were published since 2012 (Figure 1).

Research trend of agenda setting

The first research question asked about the research trend of agenda setting. Overall, agenda-setting articles published in China and Korea tended to focus on first-level

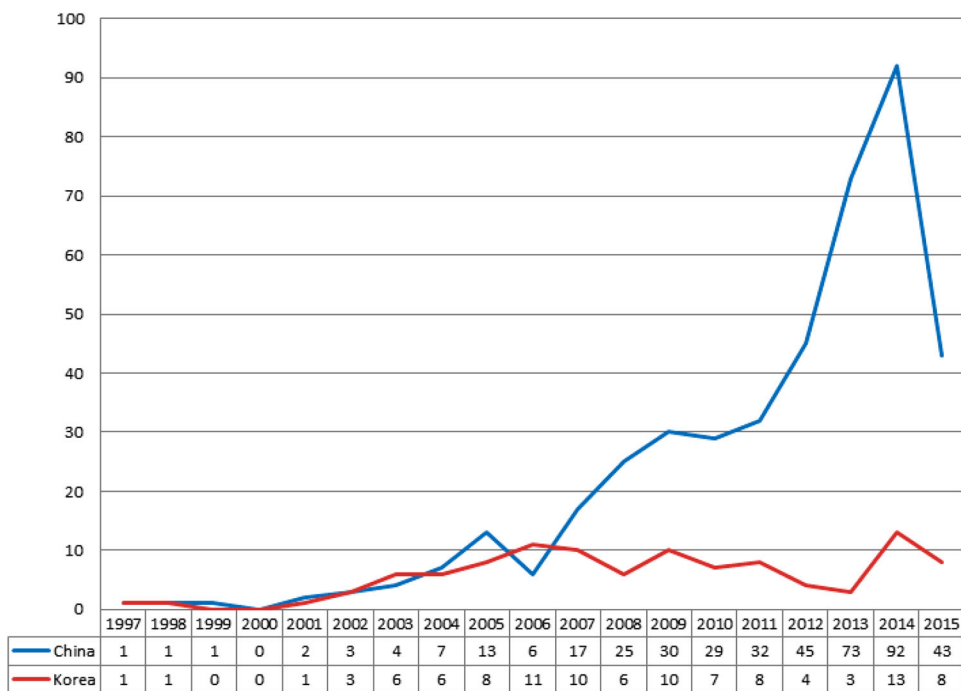


Figure 1. Agenda setting publication trend in China and Korea.

Table 1. Research trend of agenda setting by country.

	China (%)	Korea (%)	Total (%)	χ^2
First-level agenda setting	247 (58.3)	37 (34.9)	284 (53.6)	18.588***
Second-level (or attribute) agenda setting	18 (4.2)	24 (22.6)	42 (7.9)	39.331***
Inter-media agenda setting	7 (1.7)	16 (15.1)	23 (4.3)	36.917***
Agenda building	10 (2.4)	10 (9.4)	20 (3.8)	11.691***
Need for orientation	3 (0.7)	3 (2.8)	6 (1.1)	3.414
Agenda policy	0 (0.0)	5 (4.7)	5 (0.9)	20.190***
Third-level (or network) agenda setting	3 (0.7)	1 (0.9)	4 (0.8)	0.063
Agenda melding	4 (0.9)	0 (0.0)	4 (0.8)	1.008
Other research trends	1 (0.2)	15 (14.2)	16 (3.0)	56.084***

Notes: Because some articles had more than one research trend while others mentioned agenda setting without focusing on specific research trend, the sum of percentage was not 100%.

*** $p < .001$.

agenda setting (53.6%), followed by second-level (or attribute) agenda setting (7.9%), inter-media agenda setting (4.3%), agenda building (3.8%), and other research trends (3.0%). Very few focused on need for orientation (1.1%), agenda policy (0.9%), third-level (or network) agenda setting (0.8%), and agenda melding (0.8%) (see Table 1). Chi-square analyses demonstrated statistically significant differences between Chinese and Korean agenda-setting studies in this regard. Chinese agenda-setting articles (58.3%) addressed more first-level agenda-setting issues than their Korean counterparts (34.9%). On the contrary, Korean agenda-setting articles were more likely to be focused on other types of research trends, i.e. second-level agenda setting (22.6%), inter-media agenda setting (15.1%), agenda building (9.4%), and agenda policy (4.7%) than Chinese agenda-setting articles. These findings indicate that unlike Chinese agenda-setting articles focusing mainly on first-level agenda setting, Korean scholars tended to address a variety of trends.

Research topics of agenda setting

The second research question explored research topics of agenda setting. Table 2 shows that while social issues (19.2%) and politics (17.0%) are the most prevalent topics in the two countries, others were diverse by country. A series of chi-square analyses presented statistically significant differences in politics, economy, and other topics between Chinese and Korean studies. Korean articles focused a lot on politics (35.8%) and

Table 2. Research topic of agenda setting by country.

	China (%)	Korea (%)	Total (%)	χ^2
Social issues	87 (20.5)	15 (14.2)	102 (19.2)	2.213
Politics	52 (12.3)	38 (35.8)	90 (17.0)	33.460***
Education	11 (2.6)	2 (1.9)	13 (2.5)	0.177
Economy	1 (0.2)	10 (9.4)	11 (2.1)	35.301***
Environment	6 (1.4)	4 (3.8)	10 (1.9)	2.548
Health	3 (0.7)	1 (0.9)	4 (0.8)	0.063
International issues	2 (0.5)	1 (0.9)	3 (0.6)	0.335
Technology and science	1 (0.2)	0 (0.0)	1 (0.2)	0.250
Military	1 (0.2)	0 (0.0)	1 (0.2)	0.250
Other topics	17 (4.0)	14 (13.2)	31 (5.8)	13.028***

Notes: Because some articles had more than one research topic while others mentioned agenda setting without focusing on specific research topic, the sum of percentage was not 100%.

*** $p < .001$.

economy (9.4%) than their Chinese counterparts (12.3% and 0.2%, respectively). These findings indicated that Korean scholars followed closely with the Western agenda-setting research (Kim et al., 2015), in contrast to the Chinese research devoting only a small amount of attention on politics.

Medium or channel studied in agenda setting

The third research question investigated the medium or channel examined in agenda-setting research. As shown in Table 3, newspaper (20.8%) was the most likely medium to be studied in both countries, followed by social and mobile media (17.5%), Internet websites (14.2%), TV (9.4%), online presence (8.7%), press releases (0.8%), and radio (0.2%). It is noticeable that Internet-based media such as social and mobile media, Internet websites, and online presence received much attention in agenda-setting research in both countries. Further, a series of chi-square analyses revealed statistically significant differences for some noticeable media. Compared to Chinese articles, Korean articles were more likely to study newspapers (39.6% vs. 16.0%), Internet websites (25.5% vs. 11.3%), TV (23.6% vs. 5.9%), online presence (17.0% vs. 6.6%), and press releases (3.8% vs. 0%). The findings indicated that Korean agenda-setting research looked at a wider variety of media than their Chinese counterparts.

Research method of agenda setting

The fourth research questions asked about research methods used in agenda-setting research. In the entire sample of both countries, critiques or reviews (35.7%) were the most popular method, followed by content analysis (19.2%), case study (8.1%), survey (4.3%), and experimental design (3.0%) (see Table 4). Chi-square analyses showed statistically significant differences in research methods between Chinese and Korean agenda-setting studies. Chinese agenda-setting articles (42.9%) were more likely to be critiques or reviews than the Korean counterparts (6.6%). In contrast, Korean agenda-setting articles tended to use a variety of research methods such as content analysis (50.0% vs. 11.6%), survey (17.9% vs. 0.9%), experimental design (15.1% vs. 0%), secondary data analysis (5.7%), and other methods such as panel survey (5.7%), interview (3.8%), network analysis (2.8%), historical analysis (1.9%), comparative analysis (0.9%), and

Table 3. Medium or channel used in agenda-setting research by country.

	China (%)	Korea (%)	Total (%)	χ^2
Newspaper	68 (16.0)	42 (39.6)	110 (20.8)	28.680***
Social and mobile media	80 (18.9)	13 (12.3)	93 (17.5)	2.556
Internet websites	48 (11.3)	27 (25.5)	75 (14.2)	13.978***
TV	25 (5.9)	25 (23.6)	50 (9.4)	31.055***
Online presence	28 (6.6)	18 (17.0)	46 (8.7)	11.522***
Press release	0 (0.0)	4 (3.8)	4 (0.8)	16.122***
Radio	1 (0.2)	0 (0.0)	1 (0.2)	0.250
Magazine	—	—	—	—
Other media	10 (2.4)	1 (0.9)	11 (2.1)	0.836

Notes: Because some articles had more than one medium or channel while others mentioned agenda setting without focusing on specific medium or channel, the sum of percentage was not 100%; No agenda-setting articles published in both China and Korea focusing on magazine were found.

*** $p < .001$.

Table 4. Research method of agenda setting by country.

	China (%)	Korea (%)	Total (%)	χ^2
Critic or review	182 (42.9)	7 (6.6)	189 (35.7)	48.757***
Content analysis	49 (11.6)	53 (50.0)	102 (19.2)	80.639***
Case study	38 (9.0)	5 (4.7)	43 (8.1)	2.050
Survey	4 (0.9)	19 (17.9)	23 (4.3)	58.904***
Experimental design	0 (0.0)	16 (15.1)	16 (3.0)	65.992***
Secondary data analysis	0 (0.0)	6 (5.7)	6 (1.1)	24.275***
Panel survey	0 (0.0)	6 (5.7)	6 (1.1)	24.275***
Interview	0 (0.0)	4 (3.8)	4 (0.8)	16.122***
Network analysis	1 (0.2)	3 (2.8)	4 (0.8)	7.620**
Historical analysis	0 (0.0)	2 (1.9)	2 (0.4)	8.030**
Comparative analysis	0 (0.0)	1 (0.9)	1 (0.2)	4.008*
Focus group	0 (0.0)	1 (0.9)	1 (0.2)	4.008*
Meta-analysis	–	–	–	–
Textual analysis	–	–	–	–
Ethnography or field research)	–	–	–	–
Other methods	–	–	–	–

Notes: Because some articles had more than one research method while others mentioned agenda setting without focusing on specific research method, the sum of percentage was not 100%; No agenda setting articles published in both China and Korea using meta-analysis, textual analysis, ethnography, or others as its research method were found.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

focus group (0.9%) than did Chinese articles, which hardly used these methods at all. Given that traditional agenda-setting studies used content analysis and survey most often, these findings suggested that Korean agenda-setting research mirrored more of the traditional agenda-setting studies while Chinese agenda-setting articles did not.

Incorporated theories in agenda-setting research

The fifth research question asked about the use of relevant theories incorporated in agenda-setting research. Table 5 reveals that agenda-setting research in both countries

Table 5. Background theories combined with agenda setting by country.

	China (%)	Korea (%)	Total (%)	χ^2
Framing	7 (1.7)	14 (13.2)	21 (4.0)	29.763***
Priming	3 (0.7)	11 (10.4)	14 (2.6)	30.832***
Two-step flow theory	10 (2.4)	2 (1.9)	12 (2.3)	0.085
Information-processing theory	6 (1.4)	1 (0.9)	7 (1.3)	0.145
Construction of realities	4 (0.9)	1 (0.9)	5 (0.9)	0.000
Spiral of silence	3 (0.7)	1 (0.9)	4 (0.8)	0.063
Cognitive dissonance	2 (0.5)	2 (1.9)	4 (0.8)	2.267
Gatekeeping theory	1 (0.2)	2 (1.9)	3 (0.6)	4.107*
Third-person theory	1 (0.2)	0 (0.0)	1 (0.2)	0.250
Cultivation theory	–	–	–	–
Uses and gratification	–	–	–	–
Media dependency theory	–	–	–	–
Other theories	0 (0.0)	2 (1.9)	2 (0.4)	8.030**

Notes: Because some articles had more than one background theory while others mentioned agenda setting without other background theories, the sum of percentage was not 100%; No agenda-setting articles published in both China and Korea using cultivation theory, uses and gratification, media dependency theory as background theories combined with agenda setting were found.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

paid little attention to the use of other theories. Only a small number of articles (13.9% of the total sample, or 33.9% of the Korean sample, and 8.7% of the Chinese sample) used other theories. Theories other than agenda setting that were used to motivate research objectives included framing (4.0%), followed by priming (2.6%), two-step flow theory (2.3%), information-processing theory (1.3%), construction of realities (0.9%), and others. Chi-square analyses indicated statistically significant differences in theory use between Chinese and Korean studies. Korean articles incorporated more theories, such as framing (13.2% vs. 0.7%), priming (10.4% vs. 0.7%), and gatekeeping theory (1.9% vs. 0.2%), than the Chinese counterparts. Despite the statistical significances, the number of articles with components of theory exploration was still very small.

Conclusions and discussions

We are doing a thematic analysis on the research trajectory and status of a particular communication theory in China and Korea in the hopes that we review what has been done and speculate what the future holds for this line of research. At the very outset, we speculate that the political and media environments are so different in China and Korea from those in the States, that some of the agenda-setting research in these settings may have to come back to the drawing board to first study its assumptions and to further explore whether the mechanisms of the theory operate any differently. In addition, a host of new concepts, and new perspectives have been brought into agenda-setting research, particularly in the States, that Asia may follow suit. A thematic analysis on the research status of a particular theory, in this case, agenda setting, may offer much insight into the state of research in the discipline, so we know where contributions and credits are due and where improvements are needed. As an added bonus, such a study may also reveal the applicability and expansion potential of a particular theory.

Findings in this study indicated that in general, agenda-setting studies are on the rise in China and Korea. In fact, the number of agenda-setting articles in China is increasing exponentially while that in Korea keeps a steady, positive pace. These are good signs, as it may indicate that research is being valued, theory is being used, and that theoretically guided studies are being conducted. However, one cannot be pleased if serious scholarship is in question, because other signs are pointing to the lack of sophistication, theory development, and methodological adroitness and diversity.

There is evidence that agenda-setting research in the West is expanding, and rapidly (Kim et al., 2015). On top of first- and second-level agenda setting, there is increasing research attention to third-level agenda setting, inter-media agenda setting, agenda building, and moderator explorations. Consistent with McCombs' (2005) predicted revision and expansion of agenda-setting theory in new contexts and domains, researchers also found that topical areas of agenda setting have moved to many other areas in spite of the predominant focus on politics and public opinions. For example, researchers have ventured into many new domains such as vertical and horizontal media to tease out the theoretical nuances and implications of agenda setting in today's fragmented media environment. Newer methodologies such as network analysis and big data are being employed to understand agenda setting. Our findings in this study, however, indicate that much is still needed to improve the status of agenda-setting research, and research in general, in Korea and China, especially the latter.

First, regarding research trends, first-level agenda setting is the dominant research trend in Chinese and Korean agenda-setting research. As the original research approach, first-level agenda setting was largely explored or mentioned in Chinese agenda-setting articles, addressing the Chinese media's agenda-setting effects. A few studies examined other trends with emphasis on second-level agenda setting and inter-media agenda setting. For example, Bao (2005) analyzed the attribute agendas in Xinhua news reporting of migrant workers from 1958 to 2002, arguing that the changing attribute agendas over the past 15 years indicate that the Chinese media have a more comprehensive and less discriminatory reporting of migrant workers, which could influence the attitudes of urban residents toward migrants. In spite of a lower overall number of articles, Korean scholars are doing a much better job in this category, and a good number of projects have looked at second-level agenda setting, inter-media agenda setting, agenda building, and agenda policy, among others, in contrast to Chinese colleagues who barely move beyond first-level agenda setting.

Second, social issues and politics are two major research topics in Chinese agenda-setting articles, and the order is reversed for Korean articles, which is similar to American agenda-setting research that mostly focused on elections in the discussion of politics. Chinese scholars mainly examine the media's role of propagating party ideologies and government policies, rather than election politics. For instance, Ji (2014) examined the agenda-setting strategies in the reporting of role models, which is 'a unique type of news reporting in socialist countries that has the dual nature of being journalistic and propagandistic' (p. 1). To serve the political needs in different historical times and social contexts, the Communist Party has created various role models to propagate party ideologies and policies. In order to increase the effectiveness of the role model reporting, Ji (2014) suggested that journalists make use of agenda-setting theory to improve the relevance and credibility of role model reporting in order to make the media agenda resonate with the policy agenda and the public agenda. However, most of the topical attention is on social issues, such as morals, religion, ethnic issues, and values, or lack thereof. Little investigation efforts are exerted in areas such as education, environment, technology, and military, for example.

In Korea, the focus on agenda-setting effects on politics is in line with the US tradition. Also, the Internet as a political campaign tool in Korea first emerged during the 2002 Korean presidential election. Then former president Roh Moo-hyun swept to victory in the election (Han, 2009; Lim & Park, 2013; Watts, 2003) due to his successful use of online campaigning in 2002. Politicians, celebrities, and activists began to actively use the Internet to encourage voting in an effort to draw every possible ballot from the public (Chung, 2011). All these may have contributed to Korean scholars' ongoing enthusiasm with politics and how agenda setting can be applied beyond the traditional agenda-setting theory (Choi & Han, 2011).

Third, similar to the trend in the U.S., there is an increasing concern about the agenda-setting effects of online media, including Internet websites and social media. With the rapid growth of Internet users in China and Korea, the agenda-setting roles of online media in social and political life as well as the interactions between online media and traditional media have been widely discussed in Chinese and Korean agenda-setting articles. In a study of government microblogs, Wang and Jin (2013) analyzed the challenges government microblogs face to effectively guide public opinion in a new media environment. They

proposed some strategies to enhance the inter-media agenda-setting effects of government microblogs on the traditional media agenda and the public agenda, such as making information more transparent to increase the credibility of government microblogs and addressing issues of concern to the public in the microblogs' agendas.

In Korea, scholars remain predominantly interested in newspapers in terms of medium of study. In contrast to the more uniform media agenda in China, Korean newspapers are different from one another in many aspects including ideological stance (Lee & Lee, 2005). Regarding sensitive political issues, newspapers typically provide different perspectives from one another in accordance with their editorial stance (Lee & Lee, 2005). The ideological cleavage extended in multi-media environments (Lee & Hahn, 2014). While online versions of the mainstream offline newspapers (e.g. Chosun.com, Donga.com, Joins.com, and Hani.co.kr) imitated the content of the offline versions, independent online news media (e.g. OhmyNews, Pressian, and Ddanzi Ilbo) and Internet portal sites (e.g. Naver and Daum) also provide ideologically different perspectives (Lee & Lee, 2005). This rich media landscape explains Korean scholars' interest in newspapers, as well as other outlets. Aside from newspapers, medium interest is more evenly distributed in Korea, in contrast to China in which social and mobile media and Internet website, aside from newspaper, are more or less the media of interest, with very little attempt to look at TV and radio.

Fourth, regarding methodology, Korean scholars are much more likely to use research tools in the traditional agenda-setting repertoire. For their Chinese counterparts, due to the non-empirical tradition in journalism and communication research in China, the majority of agenda-setting articles are critiques or reviews, although a few studies have started to empirically test agenda-setting effects. For example, in the case of the environmental issue 'PM2.5,' Gao and Zhou (2014) examined the interrelationships among the real-world index, the policy agenda, the media agenda and the netizen's agenda.

Lastly, very few background theories were mentioned in the sample articles, in both countries. The case is particularly acute in China, only a small handful, or less than one-tenth of the sampled articles mentioned other theories, suggesting the a-theoretical nature of Chinese agenda-setting research. The importance of theory in research cannot be overemphasized, as it drives and guides research, but the lack of such is alarming. Korean scholars are somewhat doing better, but not much, as less than a quarter of the articles attempt to use other theories.

We understand that the field of communication research is still at its early stage of development, especially in China. It is very positive to see the high number of articles published just on this particular theory. But beyond the rosy surface, one cannot be pleased about the state of research in both countries, especially in China. For example, compared to Korean agenda-setting scholars, Chinese scholars are more likely to use agenda setting at its face value by utilizing the term to make statements, recommend propaganda practices and policies, and draw inferences without empirically examining the effects or the process of agenda setting. Of the sample articles, the majority of them mention 'agenda setting' as a general term without using it as theoretical motivation to develop research questions or hypotheses. Korean scholars, however, are less likely to do so.

Rigorous methodologies in research ensure reliability and validity of any investigation. While Korean scholars are doing a lot better in this department, Chinese scholars still have a long way to go. Of the sampled articles, we have not seen an experiment, which is one of

the best to draw causal conclusions and to explain theory. Even the traditional content analysis and survey in agenda setting are used only in one-fifth of all the publications. Opinions matter, but it is time to move away from impressionistic observations and analytical argumentations. After all, substantiated 'opinions' are the most argumentative and persuasive.

Being a content analysis itself, this study does not really delve into the state of theoretical development in Korea and China. For example, we do not have a mean to assess the validity of newer concepts and newer technologies used in these studies. It is likely that some cutting edge studies are being conducted but they may have evaded the categorical scrutiny of this analysis. Also, we are limited by the structure of the Korean and Chinese databases. We may not have retrieved some older articles not included in the databases because of the slow digitization process. While there is no strong reason to suspect sampling errors, we do not know the structures of the databases well enough to know if indeed there is systematic sampling error involved in our study.

It is encouraging to see that agenda setting is developing to be a fertile area of research in these two countries. Its vitality and richness will undoubtedly contribute to agenda-setting research. With added rigor, stronger theoretical components, and a well-trained generation of young researchers, the sky is the limit.

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