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**International media coverage of China: Chinese
perceptions and the challenges for foreign journalists.**

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Table of contents

Introduction

Chapter 1 Pigs climbing trees? The evolving relationship between China and the international media

Chapter 2 Living with the international media: Chinese perceptions

Chapter 3 Covering China: Foreign journalists' views

Chapter 4 Survey results: Some preliminary observations

Chapter 5 Conclusion: China and the international media – food for thought

Acknowledgments

Appendix 1 Chinese student survey questions

Appendix 2 Foreign correspondents: Semi-structured interview questions

Introduction

International media coverage of China inevitably plays a vital role in shaping perceptions of that nation around the world – and media organizations from around the world have, over recent decades, devoted ever greater resources to reporting ‘the China story’. Yet recent years have also seen a growing rhetoric within China criticizing international media organizations and, in particular, the ‘western media’ (often presented in such arguments as a single, cohesive entity) for being fundamentally biased against China – and, indeed, frequently depicting foreign media as being part of a wider plot to discredit China and its people (something often portrayed as simply a continuation of historical ‘bullying’ of China by the west). Such criticisms have received a high profile in official Chinese media – but have also been echoed by ordinary Chinese citizens in online debates.

So are international media organizations, even as they invest heavily in covering China, actually playing a role in alienating Chinese people, and thus contributing to tension between that country and the outside world, in particular the west? How far do ordinary Chinese people share their government’s criticisms and suspicions? And how much justification is there for such criticisms – or has the Chinese government in fact misunderstood (either inadvertently or willfully) the intentions and methods of foreign media organizations?

This study seeks to answer some of these questions by soliciting opinion from both sides. After highlighting a number of cases in which foreign media have come in for criticism (Chapter 1), it then looks at how, and to what extent, ordinary Chinese people come into contact with international media reporting of their country (Chapter 2). A small survey of Chinese university students then offers a snapshot of the opinions of an influential sector of Chinese society towards the international media, and also seeks to ascertain whether any negative views of the international media on the part of the respondents could affect their wider attitudes towards the outside world.

In Chapter 3, interviews with foreign correspondents who are, or have been, based in China reveal their perspective on the issues raised in the survey, as well as some of their own concerns – giving an insight into the challenges these journalists feel they face in reporting China and

‘getting the story right.’ (These include factors relating both to their own media organizations, and to the Chinese authorities’ treatment of foreign journalists.)

Chapters 4 and 5 offer some analysis of the results of these surveys, and ask what lessons there are, both for China, and for international media organizations. Such questions may be particularly relevant at a time when China is investing billions of dollars in a campaign to expand the global reach of its own media, partly in an attempt to counter what it sees as the unfair image of the country reflected in foreign media coverage.

It is hoped some of the findings will be beneficial both for international journalists and editors involved in covering China – and also potentially for those inside China interested in the factors that shape the way in which foreign media organizations report their country.¹

¹ Initial work on this paper, including the interviews with foreign correspondents and survey of Chinese students, was conducted in 2011-12. Chapters 1, 4, and 5 were updated in early 2015, to take into account developments in 2013 and 2014.

Chapter 1

Pigs climbing trees? The evolving relationship between China and the international media

“The Sino-foreign conundrum seemed partly to derive from the simple impossibility of each side according the other sufficient dignity, or understanding when the other felt wronged, or else in perceiving slight when none was offered.”²

Rising tensions

Differences in perception between China and the outside world are nothing new. The quote above, from the historian Robert Bickers, refers to tensions, and problems in communication, between China and the west during the late Qing dynasty, following the Opium wars of the mid-19th century. Such mutual suspicion continued for much of the 20th century, reaching a peak during the early decades of Communist rule in the 1950s and 60s.

Yet over the past three decades, links between China and the international community have expanded to an unprecedented degree – and foreign interest in, and reporting of, China has followed suit. International media organizations have invested ever-growing amounts of funding and personnel in covering China – there are now more than 600 foreign journalists, from both mainstream and specialist media, based in the country, covering many different aspects of its society, economics, politics and culture. A number of leading international media organizations, including the BBC, Financial Times, Wall Street Journal and New York Times have also set up

² Robert Bickers, *The Scramble for China – Foreign Devils in the Qing Empire, 1832 – 1914*, London, Allen Lane, 2011, p. 15

Chinese-language websites.

Logically then, with communication expanding so fast, tensions and misunderstandings might have been expected to diminish. But the past few years have seen a growing rhetoric inside China, not only in the official press but also in online comments and blogs, attacking foreign media – and the ‘western media’ in particular – for biased and often inaccurate coverage of the country. An article in the official English-language newspaper the Global Times, in September 2010, typified this tendency. It discussed international media reports of an incident in which a Chinese fishing boat was intercepted, and its crew detained, by Japanese forces, in waters disputed by the two countries. Under the headline “The Chorus of China-bashing continues,” it argued:

“In their coverage of China, some Western media outlets are seemingly dominated by a mindset that everything China does is wrong, and it can be seen as a threat. The supposedly open and diversified western media is showing surprising conformity [when] facing a stronger China – on some issues, such as the Dalai Lama, some of the West’s media persistently refuses to see things from other perspectives.”³

Shortly afterwards, a commentary in the same paper accused the Wall Street Journal of “deliberate distortions” in a report on iPads and piracy in China. This kind of “trick”, the author argued, was “not novel”: other western media, he suggested, “report China in a similar fashion. They are looking for the news they need.” And he quoted approvingly a reader’s comment which suggested that this was “a deliberate policy of the WSJ – mouthpiece for the Western ‘I’m so superior party.’”⁴

A ‘dark China’?

Such views resurfaced in spring 2012, in official Chinese responses to international coverage of the suspension of politburo member Bo Xilai, and the detention of his wife Gu Kailai on suspicion of involvement in the death of British businessman Neil Heywood. A New York Times story reporting allegations that Mr Bo might have tapped the phones of other senior officials

³ “The Chorus of China bashing continues’, Global Times, September 27th 2010

⁴ Ding Gang, ‘Wall Street Journal’s deliberate distortions’, Global Times, 25th November 2010

provoked a furious reaction from the Global Times, which accused it of publishing unsubstantiated “tittle tattle”, and added: “it is clear that some foreign media outlets like the New York Times are seizing every possible chance to narrate a politically bizarre China, including reports on some Chinese dissidents and the latest Bo case. It is high time for them to think twice about the habit of insisting on depicting a ‘dark’ China.”⁵

Later that year, when the New York Times published a story alleging that the family of Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao had amassed enormous wealth, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Beijing echoed such views. “Some reports smear China and have ulterior motives,”⁶ it announced. In response, the New York Times website – including its new Chinese-language site – was immediately blocked in China, while the paper itself later reported concerted hacker attacks on its computer system, which it said had emanated from China.⁷

Such rhetoric from official Chinese sources has become increasingly commonplace in recent years: in this narrative, critical foreign media coverage is portrayed as being one element of a wider plot aimed at discrediting China and negating its recent development. (This perceived plot is, itself, often depicted as an extension of the west’s history of invading and bullying the country since the Opium Wars – a topic which forms a key part of the patriotic education curriculum taught in Chinese schools and colleges over the past two decades.)⁸

This argument regarding the western media has also been expounded in Chinese academic circles. In 1996, Professor Liu Kang, now Dean of Humanities at Shanghai Jiaotong University (and also a Professor at Duke University in the US), and Professor Li Xiguang of Peking University published a well-known book entitled “Behind the demonization of China”, which accused the US media of bias in the post-Tiananmen era.⁹ The topic was revisited in a recent book edited by young academic Zhang Zhi’an, then at the prestigious Journalism School of Shanghai’s Fudan University, which featured interviews with a number of foreign journalists about how they

⁵ Chen Chenchen, ‘New York Times dips into rumor mill’, Global Times, 29th April 2012

⁶ ‘China Condemns NY Times Wen Jiabao wealth story ‘smear’’, BBC News, 26th October 2013

⁷ ‘Hackers in China attacked the Times for last 4 months’, New York Times, 30th January 2013

⁸ See e.g. Julia Lovell, *The Opium War – Drugs, Dreams and the Making of China*, London, Picador, 2011, pp. 342-348

⁹ An abridged version of the book was published in English under the title ‘Demonizing China: A critical analysis of the US press’, in *Contemporary Chinese Thought* 30.2, Winter 1998

reported China, and featured on its cover, the question: “Have they ‘demonized China’?”¹⁰

In his introduction to the book, Professor Guo Ke, Dean of the School of Journalism and Communication at Shanghai International Studies University, suggests that “foreign journalists have, in Chinese history and contemporary society alike, always been rather political... This may be because the reports they file are generally connected to sensitive aspects of China’s national politics, economy and culture etc (such as human rights, Tibet and the question of Taiwan).” He acknowledges that there are some “fair and objective reports”, but adds: “there is also no shortage of reports which, in the eyes of China and the Chinese government, are un-objective, negative or even intentionally wounding.” To such eyes, he says, foreign media stories are more than just “news reports” – rather they are “often linked to China’s international image and international opinion towards China.” And many Chinese observers see such reporting as reflecting “foreign journalists’ ideological prejudices.”¹¹

The argument that foreigners focus to a disproportionate extent on subjects such as human rights, Tibet and Taiwan, is often levelled at foreign journalists in China, both by officials and, sometimes at least, by ordinary people too – and not only by those who always accept their own government’s line unquestioningly. “The first thing I did when I came to England was log onto the BBC Chinese Website, because it’s blocked in China,” recalled a Chinese university student at an academic conference in the UK in 2011, before going on to express disappointment that, despite her desire to read blocked information, “I found that all the stories were very negative.”¹²

A chequered past

The roots of official suspicion of the international media in China arguably go back to the time of the Communist Revolution in 1949. In that ideologically charged era, many mainstream western media organizations were instinctively opposed to Communism – though many foreign

¹⁰ Zhang Zhi’an and Ye Liu (eds.) *Zhongguo Zenmoyang – Zhuhua waiguo jizhe ruhe jiangshu Zhongguo gushi?* (‘What’s China Like – How do foreign journalists tell the China story?’), Southern Daily Publishing House, Guangzhou, 2009

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² Audience comment during panel discussion on Sino-UK relations, at ‘Britain and China: Pasts, presents and futures’ conference, University of Bristol, 26th August 2011

journalists had also previously been critical of corruption under the former Nationalist regime.¹³ And regardless of their views, most members of the original ‘foreign press pack’ who had reported from the country before 1949 either pulled out or were soon ordered to leave.¹⁴

The journalists who remained were mainly from media organizations from socialist countries, or other nations seen as sympathetic to China. The few western journalists who did stay on, primarily from AP, AFP and Reuters, found themselves regarded with increasing suspicion, a phenomenon which reached its apex in the Cultural Revolution, when the Beijing correspondent of Reuters, Anthony Grey, was held under house arrest for more than two years, from 1967-69, and publicly accused of spying.¹⁵ During this period, most international media reporting about mainland China was carried out from Hong Kong or even further afield.

From the later 1970s on, foreign media organizations were again allowed to open news bureaus in Beijing, but their staff remained objects of suspicion. Journalists required the approval of China’s Ministry to work in the country (as they still do today). They were not allowed to report from other parts of China without specific permission from the local authorities in the areas they planned to visit; and when they did travel, they were supposed to be accompanied by local government minders. They were also initially required to hire assistants provided by an organization affiliated to China’s Foreign Ministry, enabling the authorities to keep tabs on their movements – and they were sometimes physically followed as well.

Nevertheless, their presence undoubtedly contributed to the beginnings of China’s emergence into the global mainstream. While some foreign media reports emphasized aspects of China’s political and social system which seemed alien to many in the outside world, as the 1980s progressed, many reporters increasingly focused on the early aspects of reform, which arguably began to make China seem, on the surface at least, less ‘different’ to international readers and

¹³ See e.g. Emma Green, ‘When Western Journalists Loved China’s Communists’, *The Atlantic*, 25th October 2013

¹⁴ Paul French, *Through the Looking Glass – China’s Foreign Journalists from Opium Wars to Mao*; Hong Kong, Hong Kong University Press, 2009, p. 267

¹⁵ See e.g. University of East Anglia, Anthony Grey Archive listing: <https://www.uea.ac.uk/is/collections/Anthony+Grey+Archive+listing>, which notes that his detention “was in retaliation to the detention of Chinese news reporters in Hong Kong”. When Grey returned to China in 1988, the Foreign Ministry “awarded him a special commemorative plate acknowledging his earlier work as a foreign correspondent in China during the Cultural Revolution”; see <http://www.anthony-grey.co.uk>

audiences.¹⁶

Indeed, some journalists who worked in China in the 1980s have suggested that, for a period before 1989, the excitement about China's opening was such that there was pressure from editors in the west to paint the country's reforms in as positive a light as possible.¹⁷ Some Chinese leaders, meanwhile, briefly even became willing to engage in direct dialogue with foreign reporters (something which rarely occurs today).¹⁸

Yet the Tiananmen protests and subsequent crackdown in 1989 again put the Chinese state and international journalists in an adversarial position. The presence of foreign journalists in Beijing in spring 1989 – in particular TV crews who had arrived in China to cover the visit of the then Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev – was believed by the Chinese authorities to have exacerbated and prolonged the protests. Two western journalists, John Pomfret of AP and Alan Pessin of Voice of America, were accused of violating martial law and expelled from the country, with Pessin specifically accused of 'inciting counterrevolutionary rebellion.'¹⁹ Those who remained in China in the months after the June crackdown were kept under even closer scrutiny.

The 1990s: Normalization?

As the 1990s progressed, the situation relaxed, in some respects at least. From the middle of the decade, foreign news organizations were granted permission to open offices outside Beijing – first in Shanghai, Shenzhen and Guangzhou, and later also in the inland city of Chongqing. Surveillance became generally less obvious and intrusive, though it could of course now be carried out increasingly easily by electronic means. By the late 1990s, many foreign journalists based in these cities were travelling routinely to other parts of China without seeking advance permission from local authorities, even though in theory they were still required to do so. Indeed, in the early years of the new century the increasingly open financial centre of Shanghai

¹⁶ See e.g. John Gittings, *China Through the Sliding Door - Reports from China*, London, Simon & Schuster, 1999; Lynn Pan, *The New Chinese Revolution*, Chicago, Contemporary Books, 1988; Fox Butterfield, *Alive in the Bitter Sea*, London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1983

¹⁷ Jasper Becker, former Guardian correspondent, speaking at 'China Britain' conference, Bristol University, August 2011; John Gittings, former Guardian China editor, author interview, 2011

¹⁸ James Miles, 'Recalling better days', Economist Analects blog, 13th November 2012, (<http://www.economist.com/blogs/analects/2012/11/congresses-past>)

¹⁹ See e.g. John Pomfret, *Chinese Lessons*, New York, Henry Holt, 2006, pp. 163 – 4; for Pessin, see Josh Chin, 'China Takes Heat in Reporter Affair', Wall Street Journal, 8th May 2012

effectively seemed to drop its requirement for foreign journalists based in other parts of China to seek such permission before visiting the city.

There were still tensions: two German journalists were expelled in the second half of the 1990s, and a Japanese journalist in 1998 – in each case after making critical remarks or investigating particularly sensitive issues.²⁰ Other journalists were sometimes summoned by China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (or their editors summoned to Chinese diplomatic missions abroad) and criticized for reports they had written, or for programmes and articles by others which had been broadcast or published by their media organizations. One Time magazine correspondent was both forced to undergo lectures by a Chinese journalism professor, and targeted in a lawsuit in the US, after the local authorities in Shanghai objected to an article she wrote alleging a cover-up of cases of SARS in the city during the epidemic in 2003.²¹

The precise mood seemed to vary depending on the current political situation: tensions rose, for example, during crackdowns on a fledgling democracy party (1998) and on the banned Falun Gong movement (1999), and after the NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade (1999). But overall the atmosphere grew at least a little more open: more and more media organizations were permitted to open offices in China, the country's own media also began to develop, and some officials at least seemed to accept that the international media was here to stay – and that it could not be expected to file only reports which pleased the Chinese government.²²

There was further confirmation of this at the beginning of 2007, when China officially began to implement the pledge it had made in 2001, as part of its bid to host the 2008 Olympics, to allow foreign journalists with valid journalist visas to report from anywhere in the country – with the

²⁰ Henrik Bork of Germany's Frankfurter Rundschau was expelled in 1995, Juergen Kremb of Der Spiegel in 1998 – though Kremb had already effectively left China and had returned to pick up his belongings when his expulsion occurred; it was seen as a mainly symbolic punishment for his frequent reports about dissidents. Yukihiisa Nakatsu of Japan's Yomiuri Shimbun was expelled on state secrets charges.

²¹ See comments by Hannah Beech, in 'China's Treatment of Foreign Journalists, Roundtable before the Congressional-Executive Commission on China', 11th December 2013, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, 2014, p. 17; and Hannah Beech: 'Foreign Correspondents in China do not censor themselves to get visas', Time, 11th December 2013, and 'Shanghai SARS cases a state secret', Time, 24th April 2003. (In 2011, Beech told the Congressional Commission, she was also forced to undergo a lecture on the history of Tibetan Buddhism before getting her visa renewed, after reporting on self-immolations in Tibetan-populated regions.)

²² Author conversations with various Foreign Ministry officials, Beijing, 1997 - 2000

exception of Tibet, for which all foreign visitors need special permission – without having to seek permission from local governments. Chinese officials hailed the move as a sign that China was now both more open and more willing to accept the inevitability of international reporting, in a world where the media was now so influential.²³

And there were certainly some in China who seemed to welcome the international media. For decades, many of the country's educated elite had listened to shortwave broadcasts by the Voice of America or the Chinese language service of the BBC World Service, in the hope of obtaining relatively objective information about the outside world, and about their own nation. In the 1970s, to listen to such broadcasts – by what were still officially described as 'enemy stations' – was to take quite a risk. But by the 1980s and early 1990s it had become commonplace.

And even though China's own media began to open up considerably during the 1990s, many citizens continued to turn to foreign news sources, which were now becoming far more easily accessible via the Internet. (Various foreign media websites have been blocked in China at times, notably, for many years from the late 1990s, that of the BBC; in the run-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics, however, several sites, including the BBC's, were unblocked. After the Games, the Chinese-language section of the BBC website was blocked again, but other Chinese language websites, including the (non-paywalled) sites of the Financial Times and Wall Street Journal, generally remained accessible, with only occasional short-term blockages – at least until 2014, when WSJ Chinese began to experience continued blocking. Many major English-language media websites have also remained accessible, though, for reasons which will be discussed later, those of the New York Times and Bloomberg News were blocked in 2012 – and subsequently the English site of the Wall Street Journal too – while other media, including the Guardian and the BBC, were also temporarily blocked in 2014.)

As connections between China and the global media grew, and new technology spread reports further and faster, there were also a number of cases where international media coverage of Chinese issues appeared to have some direct impact on China's own policy. Foreign media's follow-up coverage on reports by a few bold Chinese media organizations of the SARS

²³ Verna Yu, 'Foreign Press allowed into Tibet as China relaxes media rules for Olympics', AFP, 2nd December 2006

respiratory syndrome epidemic in 2003, for example, led to pressure from the World Health Organization, which made it far harder for Beijing to cover up the scale of the problem.²⁴

Reports in the New York Times and other international media on the plight of villagers in Henan province, who had contracted HIV after selling their blood to illegal blood stations, also led to global pressure on the Chinese authorities to ameliorate the situation.²⁵

The run-up to the Beijing Olympics: Suspicions resurface amid Tibet tension

Still, suspicions remained and surfaced sporadically, particularly when China was at odds with the west. After the NATO bombing of China's embassy in Belgrade in 1999, for example, some foreign journalists reporting on protests outside NATO embassies in Beijing found themselves the target of angry criticism, and in a few cases, physical violence, from people in the crowds. This event also seemed to play a significant role in fuelling wider Chinese suspicion of the west, including among an educated, relatively cosmopolitan elite.²⁶

And despite moves towards greater openness linked to the Beijing Olympics, the notion of improving relations between China and the international media was dealt a major blow in spring 2008, in the run-up to the Games. The tension followed rioting by ethnic Tibetans in the region's capital Lhasa in March. The violence came several days after monks took to the streets – reportedly in protest against Chinese rule – and were then confined to their monasteries by the authorities, who pledged to 'strike hard' against what they termed illegal activities.²⁷

James Miles of the Economist, who was on an officially-arranged reporting trip to Lhasa at the time and was the only western journalist present, suggested that the immediate spark for the riots may have been a clash between police and two monks; however he also argued that the trouble appeared to stem in part from dissatisfaction among locals who felt they were not doing

²⁴ See e.g. Yanzhong Huang, *The SARS epidemic and its aftermath in China: A political perspective*, National Center for Biotechnology Information; <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK92479/>

²⁵ Elizabeth Rosenthal of the New York Times won the Asia Society's Osborn Elliott Prize for her groundbreaking reporting on the Henan scandal. See 'Asia Society Announces First Winner of the Osborn Elliott Prize for Excellence in Asian Journalism', [asiasociety.org](http://www.asiasociety.org), 12th May 2003

²⁶ See Julia Lovell, *op. cit.*, p. 247

²⁷ Jonathan Watts, 'Hundreds of Monks protest in Tibet', *The Guardian*, 11th March 2008

as well out of economic growth as more recent Han Chinese arrivals in the city.²⁸

The Chinese authorities, apparently shocked by what had happened, initially accused the exiled Tibetan leader the Dalai Lama of stirring up the trouble. But a few days later they began to focus their anger on a less predictable target, launching an unprecedented, high profile campaign against the international media, accusing it of biased reporting and errors in its coverage of events in Lhasa.

Most major Chinese media outlets carried the same report from the official Xinhua news agency, which ran in the official English-language China Daily under the headline “Lhasa Riot Reports Show Media Bias in West.” It accused CNN, the BBC and others of “untrue reports about the riots.” In particular, it highlighted several photographs which it said had been either deceptively cropped or captioned, or both – adding that these “illustrate[d] how news can be manipulated.”²⁹

The evidence presented included a picture from the BBC website which, as Xinhua put it, “clearly shows an ambulance bearing the red-cross symbol,” but was captioned: “There is a heavy military presence in Lhasa”. Another image, from CNN.com, showed Chinese military trucks on the streets of Lhasa. Xinhua said it had been deliberately cropped to remove part of the image showing a crowd of Tibetan rioters throwing rocks at the trucks – thus making Chinese soldiers appear to be aggressors rather than victims.

There were also several cases of apparent misattribution: Fox News was criticized for showing a picture of Indian police detaining a protester, with a caption stating “Chinese troops parade handcuffed Tibetan prisoners in trucks”. Several German media organizations, along with the Washington Post, meanwhile, were accused of publishing pictures of Nepalese police using batons against Tibetan protesters in Kathmandu, but “claiming that the officers were Chinese police.”³⁰

One German broadcaster later apologized for its error (see note 36 below). In the case of the

²⁸ James Miles, ‘Trashing the Beijing Road’, The Economist, 19th March 2008

²⁹ Ye Jun, ‘Lhasa Riot Reports Show Media Bias in West’, China Daily, 22nd March 2008

³⁰ “Chinese experts condemn biased reports on Lhasa riot by western media”, China Daily (via Xinhua) 24th March, 2008

Washington Post, the situation was arguably less clear-cut than Xinhua suggested: the photograph of Nepalese police beating demonstrators was used on the Post's website as the front page of a picture gallery headlined "Protests erupt in support for Tibet" – the title of which seemed to imply fairly clearly that these protests occurred *outside* China. The written summary of the contents of the gallery, inserted below the picture, did however refer to Chinese police rounding up demonstrators in Lhasa, and the paper later replaced the contested cover picture with another from the gallery, along with an editor's note which read: "The caption for an earlier version of this slideshow was incorrectly associated with a photo from Nepal."³¹

The situation later grew more complex, with reports from other Tibetan-inhabited areas of western China that some local authorities had used force against protesters demonstrating against the arrests in Lhasa.³² In Lhasa itself, though, eyewitness accounts did suggest that it was Tibetans who began the large-scale violence by attacking Chinese shops – while the Chinese authorities, at least for the first day or so, seem to have done relatively little to stop them.³³ Yet some western observers (including some of the journalists interviewed for this paper, as discussed later) agreed that some international media reports of the protests, especially in the first few days, could have given casual readers or viewers the impression that the trouble had begun after Chinese authorities had used force against peaceful protesters in central Lhasa.

Whether this impression (or the cases referred to above) was the result of intentional distortion was less clear-cut. Some western observers suggested that editors may have jumped to the wrong conclusion, perhaps based on preconceptions stemming from previous violent suppressions of protest, not only in Beijing in 1989, but also in Lhasa the same year, when the Chinese army is reported to have shot protesters³⁴ – events which left a sharp image in the minds of many in the west. The fact that foreign journalists, who travelled to Lhasa to investigate the aftermath of the riots, were quickly expelled from the city may also have done little to dispel the suspicions of outsiders that China had something to hide. (Indeed one senior Chinese official subsequently acknowledged that "It was a mistake to forbid foreign journalists

³¹ 'Protests Erupt in Support for Tibet', Washington Post, 14th March 2008

³² Tini Tran, 'Tibet protests spread to other provinces', Associated Press, 16th March 2008

³³ see .e.g 'Transcript: James Miles interview on Tibet', CNN.com, 20th March 2008

³⁴ see e.g. Barbara Crossette, 'Tibetan's Tale: Unrest, Explosion, Crackdown', New York Times, 13th April 1989

from entering Tibet as soon as possible—this caused misunderstanding across the world”.³⁵)

Many journalists with experience of working in international media organizations, meanwhile, saw simple carelessness in the cropping of pictures and captioning of images – by, for example, overworked picture editors or sub-editors with limited knowledge of China or Asia – as an equally likely cause of any errors.

China’s message, though, was blunt: the foreign media were deliberately seeking to portray the authorities as the perpetrator, rather than the victim, of violence. Some media organizations, including Germany’s RTL TV station, did apologize for errors.³⁶ But this did little to dispel the wrath of many Chinese Internet users, some of whose comments were reported in the country’s official media:

"To tarnish China's image, the West is doing whatever they [sic] can, no matter how mean and vicious," the China Daily quoted one citizen as saying.

"I used to think the Western media were fair. But how could they turn a blind eye to the killing and arson by rioters?" demanded another.³⁷

Such anger grew further after attempts by supporters of Tibetan independence to disrupt the Olympic torch relay in Paris and other cities around the world. (Members of international journalists’ rights group Reporters Without Borders had also interrupted a speech by a senior Chinese official during the ceremony for the lighting of the torch in Athens in late March, unfurling a banner protesting against restrictions on press freedom.³⁸)

Yet an attempt by the Chinese government to put its side of the Tibet story to the international media, by inviting a selected group of Beijing-based foreign correspondents to visit Lhasa two weeks after the riots, only served to fuel tensions, after several monks slipped notes to

³⁵ Liu Binjie, Minister of General Administration of Press and Publication, quoted in R.L. Kuhn, *How China's Leaders Think*, John Wiley, Singapore, 2010, p. 409

³⁶ ‘German news television regrets error in covering Tibet riots’, Xinhua, 24th March 2010; the BBC also acknowledged an incorrect photo caption: see Lily Hindy, ‘China Slams Media Coverage of Tibet’, Associated Press, 3rd April 2008

³⁷ As note 26 above

³⁸ Helena Smith and Tania Branigan, ‘Pro-Tibet protesters strike as the Olympic Flame is lit’, The Guardian, 25th March 2008

reporters visiting a monastery, in which they complained that they had been locked up by the authorities, and criticized Chinese rule.³⁹

Once again, the Chinese authorities were angered by reporting of this incident. Shortly afterwards, personal contact details, including mobile telephone numbers, of several of the foreign journalists who had been on the Lhasa trip were published on a Chinese website, along with criticism of their reporting. These reporters began to receive messages and phone calls denouncing them – and in some cases threatening violence and even death.⁴⁰ At least two of the journalists affected were later briefly withdrawn from the country by their editors.⁴¹

‘Anti-CNN’

Around the same time, the Chinese government responded furiously to comments by CNN commentator Jack Cafferty, who, when asked for his views on China, responded that “they’re basically the same bunch of goons and thugs they’ve been for the last 50 years.” Cafferty later said that his remarks had been a criticism of China’s leaders rather than the Chinese people as a whole, but many in China took them as a slur on the nation, and the government in Beijing took the unusual step of publicly demanding an apology from CNN for these comments.

An initial apology for what CNN called a “misunderstanding” was not accepted; it was not until almost a month later that China accepted a second, more formal apology by CNN President Jim Walton.⁴² In the meantime, CNN’s Beijing bureau received many threats – and a group of young people set up a web forum named ‘anti-cnn.com’, which soon attracted hundreds of thousands of posts denouncing not only CNN, but western media coverage of Tibet in general.⁴³ A Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman was quoted as saying that the website “represented unprompted efforts by Chinese people from all walks of life to condemn and criticize Western media for their

³⁹ Charles Hutzler, ‘Tibet Monks Disrupt Journalist Tour’, Associated Press, 27th March 2008

⁴⁰ Christopher Bodeen, ‘Foreign media in China harassed on Tibet’, Associated Press, 7th April 2008

⁴¹ Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ.org), ‘Foreign Journalists Report Threats Before Olympics’, 30th April 2008

⁴² David Barboza, ‘China: CNN apologizes over Tibet comments’, New York Times, 16th May 2008; ‘CNN apologizes for Jack Cafferty’s remarks on China’, China Daily/ Xinhua, 15th May 2008

⁴³ Christopher Bodeen, ‘China summons CNN Beijing chief over commentator's remarks’, Associated Press, April 17th 2008

irresponsible and unethical reports.”⁴⁴

To what extent the Chinese government genuinely saw foreign media coverage of the Lhasa riots and related events as part of a concerted plot remains unclear. Some observers have suggested that the focus on the western media may have been intended in part to deflect public attention away from underlying tensions in Tibet.

But the strategy certainly represented a striking shift in policy: it was the first time that the Chinese authorities had given so much publicity to negative foreign reporting of the country; in the past, official media had tended not to mention foreign criticisms at all.

A new approach?

The angry mood seemed to dissipate somewhat within a couple of months, particularly following the devastating Sichuan earthquake in May 2008, in which more than 68,000 people died. In the immediate aftermath, many foreign reporters went to the scene of the disaster, and undoubtedly played a part in eliciting international sympathy for China.

And while there were some run-ins between the authorities and foreign journalists once the Olympics began – particularly when international media sought to report on protests by activists in Beijing during that period⁴⁵ – the Chinese government nonetheless did decide, to the surprise of some, to extend the relaxation of its travel restrictions for China-based foreign journalists after the Games finished. This meant that reporters could, in theory, continue to visit any part of the nation (apart from Tibet) without prior permission from local authorities.

The following year brought further evidence that Beijing had learned some lessons from events in Lhasa. In July 2009, violent riots erupted in Urumqi, capital of the north-western region of Xinjiang, home to the Uighur minority and a number of other Muslim ethnic groups. Almost 200 people, most of them Han Chinese residents of Urumqi, were killed. Yet while the violence was far bloodier than that in Lhasa, the authorities had, by the next day, set up a temporary press centre in Urumqi, and actively invited foreign reporters to come and see the situation for themselves (though their movements were still somewhat restricted, officially for security

⁴⁴ Qin Gang, quoted in ‘CNN, What’s wrong with you?’, chinadaily.com.cn, 2nd April 2008

⁴⁵ ‘Journalists Protest After Correspondent’s Detention’, Wall Street Journal, 13th August 2008

reasons).⁴⁶

Nevertheless, foreign media once again soon faced accusations of anti-China bias in their coverage of the violence in Urumqi.⁴⁷ Anger was aroused partly by their reporting of the views of exiled Uighur groups – but foreign journalists were also accused of focusing more on the killings of two Uighurs in southern China the week before (which had sparked the violence), than on ethnic Chinese victims in Urumqi. In fact, some western journalists did make a point of writing about the tragedies of individual Han Chinese victims,⁴⁸ but once again a number of western journalists were reported to have received threats, including death threats, from people angry at their reporting.⁴⁹

Hardening attitudes

A series of events over the next couple of years, however, seemed to contribute to a hardening of official Chinese attitudes towards the foreign media. This change may have been linked partly to a growing nervousness within China's political establishment about social tensions resulting from inequality, corruption and the risk of economic slowdown following the global financial crisis of late 2008 – and possibly to fears that foreign media coverage of such issues would only exacerbate these problems.

Such concerns seem to have been compounded by the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to the jailed dissident intellectual Liu Xiaobo in October 2010. The Chinese government saw this as a particularly direct attempt by the west to influence its domestic politics; it responded with a flurry of articles in official media denouncing the west – and in some case western media specifically – for anti-China bias and trying to undermine the country.⁵⁰

Suspicious had also been in evidence earlier in 2010, when four staff of the Australian minerals

⁴⁶ Chinese officials seemed proud of taking a more open approach – and stressed they had learned lessons from the Tibet crisis of the previous year. See e.g. State Council Information Minister Wang Chen, in R.L. Kuhn, *op. cit.* p 410

⁴⁷ 'Stay calm in face of western media's reports', *Global Times*, 15th July 2009

⁴⁸ See e.g. Tania Branigan, 'Young Bride whose life was torn apart by hatred in Urumqi riots', *The Observer*, 12th July 2009

⁴⁹ Malcolm Moore, 'Journalists in China get death threats', *The Telegraph*, 16th July 2009

⁵⁰ 'Liu Xiaobo's Nobel Prize win comes amid western countries' push for values: Chinese scholar', *Global Times/Xinhua*, 15th October 2010; 'Liu Xiaobo's Nobel Prize 'farce' yet another western slap at China', *Global Times*, 9th December 2010

giant Rio Tinto went on trial for bribery and stealing commercial secrets in Shanghai. Western media organizations, including the BBC and CNN, were accused in the Chinese press of “loaded reports” and “ignoring” the fact that the main defendant, Stern Hu, had admitted to bribery. Rather than criticizing the legal process, said one report, foreign journalists should be happy that “cracking down on bribes would help clean the field for doing business in China.”⁵¹

‘Don’t use the law as a shield’

Official anger at foreign media seemed to reach a new peak in March 2011, after calls on a US-based Chinese language website for citizens in Chinese cities to take to the streets in a protest movement inspired by the ‘Arab spring’ uprisings in north Africa and the Middle East. A massive police presence appeared to limit the number of protesters to a few hundred in Beijing and Shanghai, but the Chinese authorities also took tough action against journalists who went to the locations identified as venues for the protests over several weekends: a Bloomberg cameraman had to seek hospital treatment after being beaten by plainclothes officials in Beijing, in full view of uniformed police; several other journalists were roughed up, and many others were detained or subsequently summoned for questioning.⁵² Some of them were filmed by the authorities during these meetings, and warned that their visas would be cancelled if they attempted to cover such protests again.

When foreign journalists complained that such warnings contravened the rules which now allowed them to report freely around the country, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson responded:

“Don’t use the law as a shield... The real problem is that there are people who want to see the world in chaos. They want to make trouble in China. For people with these kinds of motives, I think no law can protect them.”⁵³

The Chinese media were generally instructed not to report on these events, but they were referred to in an article in the Global Times, headlined “Western reporters yearn in vain for

⁵¹ Jin Dou, ‘Rio Tinto reports misguided’, Shanghai Daily, 30th March 2010

⁵² Damian Grammaticas, ‘Calls for protests in China met with brutality’, BBC News, 28th February 2011; China says police ‘properly’ handled case of assault on foreign reporters’, Bloomberg, 2nd March 2011

⁵³ David Bandurski, ‘The Law should be a shield for all’, China Media Project (cmp.hku.hk), 21st March 2011

revolution in China.” Echoing the Foreign Ministry’s tone, it suggested that “some overseas media reported the event as though it were a massive popular movement, and could hardly disguise their anticipation for turmoil in China... Such careless sensationalism,” it added, “is more a forgery of news than journalism.”⁵⁴

Ongoing rhetoric of suspicion – and fear of foreign influence

Since these events, official criticisms of the international media for its coverage of China seem to have become increasingly commonplace, and are sometimes echoed by angry remarks posted by Chinese citizens in the comments sections of foreign news websites. Even the *Nanfang Zhoumo* (Southern Weekly), the Guangzhou-based newspaper seen as one of the country’s more liberal media outlets, appeared to join in the criticism in April 2011, when it published an article celebrating the BBC World Service’s decision to axe its Mandarin radio broadcasts as part of budget cuts. The BBC Chinese Service, the article suggested, was the “product of a Cold War mentality” – and it implied that the closure of the broadcasts was an admission by the BBC that it had been wrong all along.⁵⁵

During the London Olympics in 2012, meanwhile, there was much online comment in China accusing the British media of bias – and racism – for reporting the suspicions of an American swimming coach, among others, that the sensational gold medal-winning performances of Chinese swimmer Ye Shiwen might have been drug-assisted; it was pointed out that no such allegations were made about a young and unheralded Lithuanian swimmer who also won a gold medal. The US journal *Nature* eventually apologized to Ye for one such article.⁵⁶

As noted above, foreign media analysis of the Bo Xilai scandal in 2012 was also attacked, primarily for allegedly over-emphasizing political power-struggles; one commentator argued that “many foreign media outlets are more interested in creating political drama than producing

⁵⁴ ‘Western reporters yearn in vain for revolution in China’, *Global Times*, 25th February 2011

⁵⁵ ‘*BBC zhongwen guangbo zao gai guanle*’ (‘The BBC’s Chinese broadcasts should have stopped a long time ago’), *Nanfang Zhoumo* (Southern Weekly), 31st March 2011

⁵⁶ Editors’ Note, *Nature*, 6th August 2012; Tan Yingzi, ‘*Nature* apologizes to Ye Shiwen’, *chinadaily.com.cn*, 7th August 2012

solid analysis.”⁵⁷

There were similar criticisms of coverage of the case of Chen Guangcheng, a blind legal activist who was first jailed, then held under effective house arrest in his village in Shandong province, before fleeing to the US embassy in Beijing (and eventually leaving for the US) in April 2012. Tensions had surrounded the case for some time – journalists who had sought to visit Mr Chen’s village were prevented from doing so, and in some cases roughed up. (When such a fate befell a CNN team trying to bring Hollywood actor Christian Bale to the village, China’s Foreign Ministry said Mr Bale was seeking to “create news”, and should be “embarrassed”.)⁵⁸

One Chinese commentary argued that by trying to visit Mr Chen, foreign reporters were putting “huge pressure on a local government which lacks experience to deal with such matters”.⁵⁹ Another suggested that foreign media tended to “encourage confrontation” by giving a high profile to cases like Mr Chen’s.⁶⁰

One article, which argued that Mr Chen’s case had been “hyped as a dark reflection of China”, also suggested that, as a result of such reporting by the international media, critical views of China’s system were now “often echoed by Chinese members of the public”. This revealing statement seemed to reflect official fears that foreign coverage could have a significant domestic impact in China.⁶¹ Another commentary emphasized this, arguing that, in general, the Western media was helping “to raise some unrealistic [domestic] demands about human rights in China.”⁶²

Further evidence that suspicion of foreign media was now engrained in the thinking of at least some officials came in late 2011, after residents of the village of Wukan in Guangdong province

⁵⁷ Cases blown out of proportion by sensationalism’, Global Times, 9th May 2012

⁵⁸ ‘China tells off “Batman” star Bale for “creating news”’, Reuters, 21st December 2011

⁵⁹ ‘Don’t turn village into a pressure cooker’, Global Times, 12th October, 2011

⁶⁰ ‘Chen case is nothing but a colorful bubble’, Global Times, 21st May 2012

⁶¹ ‘Chen no longer real activist but unwitting tool’, Global Times, 3rd May 2012

⁶² ‘Nation’s human rights progress has no shortcut’, Global Times, 4th May 2012 (Another commentary also argued that “the west is using globalization to spread false recognition that is opposite to China’s real situation among the Chinese public. It is time for China’s public to wake up.” See ‘Public’s shared fate ensures stake in country’s rise’, Global Times, 6th April 2012)

rose up against local corruption and ejected officials from their village – and then encouraged visits and reporting by foreign journalists. The conflict was eventually resolved when the provincial government stepped in and promised to discipline corrupt officials. However, in a subsequent televised discussion, the Communist Party secretary of the surrounding Shanwei district admonished representatives of the villagers for talking to “rotten” foreign media organizations.

“If foreign media reports are reliable,” he told them, “then mother pigs can climb trees!” (This phrase is the Chinese equivalent of ‘pigs might fly’).⁶³

In another case in rural Shaanxi province in June 2012, relatives who protested when local family planning officials forced a woman to abort a seven month-old foetus were, according to one family member, later confronted by banner-wielding demonstrators (apparently organized by local officials), who “shouted and shouted, saying we were ungrateful and traitors, since the government had promised to solve this matter but we still talked to foreign media.”⁶⁴

Journalists excluded – and assaulted

Distrust of the international media, particularly at the local level, has been further evident in a series of cases which have undermined the credibility of the authorities’ pledge to allow foreign journalists to report freely from around China in the post-Olympic years. Journalists have been denied access to areas where, for example, protests were taking place, often on the pretext that it would be unsafe for them to be there. This has occurred in ethnically Tibetan areas of other western Chinese provinces, among others. (As discussed below, some journalists seeking to report on problems in Xinjiang in 2013-14 similarly found access barred.⁶⁵)

There have also been a number of cases of journalists being assaulted: in 2009, a Financial Times correspondent and his colleagues were punched several times, at least once in full view of a policeman, by people they believed were “local officials,” as they tried to interview a woman

⁶³ ‘Guangdong extends a firm hand to Wukan villagers’, China Media Project (cmp.hku.hk), 21st December 2011

⁶⁴ Zhuang Pinghui, ‘Forced-abortion case husband goes missing’, South China Morning Post, 26th June 2012

⁶⁵ See e.g. AFP, ‘China offers rewards for Xinjiang’s most wanted’, South China Morning Post, 3rd July 2013

whose child had died in the Sichuan earthquake the previous year. (A Finnish journalist was also reported to have been assaulted in the region.)⁶⁶

In 2011, a reporter and cameraman of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation were pushed and shoved when they tried to film men who had been following them in the southern city of Wenzhou, where they were seeking to report on the popularity of unofficial churches.⁶⁷ The following year, a French TV reporter was punched and his assistant hit on the head with a camera as they attempted to film a story on rural protests.⁶⁸

Chinese officials typically respond to such incidents by saying that the aggressors are simply ordinary local people who are unhappy with the presence of foreign journalists. However, the Foreign Correspondents' Club of China has identified what it says is a pattern of local intimidation against foreign journalists seeking to cover sensitive topics.⁶⁹ In August 2012, the Foreign Correspondents' Clubs in Beijing, Shanghai and Hong Kong issued an unprecedented joint statement calling on the Chinese authorities to end harassment of foreign reporters, citing a series of incidents in the preceding month, including one in which German TV reporters were "attacked by a mob, accused of being spies, and forcibly detained for nine hours."⁷⁰ Subsequently, in early 2013, a German TV crew filming a report on urbanization in a village near Beijing was attacked by thugs who first tried to ram the crew's van, then smashed its windscreen with baseball bats.⁷¹

Pressure on Chinese news assistants

Chinese security officials have, in a number of cases, also put pressure on Chinese news assistants working for foreign journalists, sometimes summoning them to meetings (known as

⁶⁶ Jamil Anderlini, 'Sichuan quake zone reporters assaulted', Financial Times, 6th May 2009; 'Caution needed in Sichuan after three violent incidents', FCCChina.org, 6th May 2009

⁶⁷ Stephen McDonnell, 'Foreign Correspondent: True Believers', Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 17th May 2011

⁶⁸ 'Foreign reporters attacked while covering China protest', AFP, 17th February 2012

⁶⁹ 'Travelling to sensitive areas', in 'Reporting and Travelling Safely', fccchina.org (<http://www.fccchina.org/reporters-guide/reporting-and-traveling-safely/>)

⁷⁰ 'Foreign Correspondents' Clubs in China jointly express extreme concern over abuse of journalists', FCC Hong Kong, 21st August 2012.

⁷¹ 'Foreign correspondents in China call for inquiry into assault on German TV crew', The Guardian, 28th February 2013

‘drinking tea’), where they are asked questions about the foreign journalists’ activities, and, in some cases, reportedly pressurized to encourage their employers to avoid sensitive topics.

In a survey of 123 China-based foreign correspondents in 2014, approximately half the respondents said their news assistants had been harassed or intimidated in the previous year – up from 35% in 2013. In several cases the assistants’ families had reportedly also been put under pressure.⁷²

Expulsion resumed?

Concrete evidence of hardening official attitudes towards the foreign media in China came in spring 2012, when China effectively expelled Melissa Chan, the Beijing correspondent for Al Jazeera’s English channel. Foreign journalists based in China are normally given one-year visas, which are renewed at the end of each calendar year. At the end of 2011, however, Ms Chan was given only a short-term visa, and was then told that, as of May 2012, this would not be renewed.

It was the first time since 1998 that an accredited foreign correspondent based in China had been refused permission to carry on working in the country. Neither the Chinese government nor Al Jazeera publicly explained the reasons for her ejection, but there was speculation that it was due to Chinese anger at a documentary shown on the channel (not made by Ms Chan) on the topic of prison labour in China.⁷³

Some observers also suggested that the move was designed to send a warning to other media not to step too far out of line, and that Al Jazeera was chosen as a relatively soft target. According to the Foreign Correspondents’ Club of China, Ms Chan’s expulsion was "the most extreme example of a recent pattern of using journalist visas in an attempt to censor and intimidate foreign correspondents in China". The FCCC highlighted several other cases where journalists had had issuance of their visas delayed or rejected, apparently due to dissatisfaction

⁷² Foreign Correspondents’ Club of China, Position Paper on Working Conditions for Foreign Correspondents in China, September 2014; for background see Eric Fish, ‘Interview: Chinese news assistants react to arrest of colleague Zhang Miao,’ *asiasociety.org*, 16th January 2015

⁷³ Rosanna Xia, ‘Journalist can’t explain expulsion from China’, *LA Times*, 14th May 2012

with their reporting.⁷⁴ (In the same month, the authorities reportedly warned foreign journalists that their visas would be revoked if they tried to enter a Beijing hospital where activist Chen Guangcheng was staying after leaving the US embassy, without first applying for permission.)⁷⁵

A commentary in the official Global Times, however, dismissed foreign complaints.

“Interfering with foreign media's reporting is a retrograde act,” it proclaimed, adding that “the Chinese government's ability to accept criticism is greater than ever”. It suggested, however, that Ms Chan must have done something to deserve her expulsion, and accused her of taking an “aggressive political stance.” Foreign journalists in China, it said, should “abide by journalistic ethics,” and “reflect on China's complexity, which is well-known to almost all foreigners in China. However, some media are only keen to show the wickedness of China to the world.”⁷⁶

Yang Rui, the host of ‘Dialogue’, China Central Television’s flagship English-language programme for debate between Chinese people and foreigners, further fuelled the controversy when he accused Ms Chan of being “a foreign shrew” who had demonized the country.⁷⁷

2012: Crossing the red line?

Official Chinese anxiety about the international media appeared to have been heightened by other developments in 2012: one was the revelation, by the Wall Street Journal, that the family of politburo member Bo Xilai was implicated in the death of British businessman Neil Heywood, a fact the Chinese authorities had not yet announced. The other was the publication, in the aftermath of revelations of corruption and abuse of power involving Mr Bo and his family, of two major investigations into the personal wealth of the families of other senior Chinese leaders.

Reports on such topics, though not uncommon in Chinese language media in Hong Kong and elsewhere, had rarely been published by major international media. But in July 2012 Bloomberg News published a report alleging that the extended family of Xi Jinping, then China’s Vice-

⁷⁴ Michael Wines, ‘China expels Al Jazeera Channel’, New York Times, 8th May 2012

⁷⁵ *ibid.*

⁷⁶ Shan Renping, ‘Chan case not a sign of growing tensions with journalists’, Global Times, 10th May 2012

⁷⁷ Josh Chin, ‘China state TV host Yang Rui responds to controversy over ‘Foreign Trash’ remarks’, Wall Street Journal China Real Time Report, 22nd May 2012

President and soon to be confirmed as Communist Party Secretary General, had assets of more than two hundred million dollars.⁷⁸ The article did not suggest any wrongdoing, nor link any of the assets directly to Mr Xi himself. Within days, however, Bloomberg's websites were blocked in China.⁷⁹

And in October 2012, shortly before the Communist Party's key five-yearly Congress, the New York Times published a report alleging that the family of then Premier Wen Jiabao, generally seen as a man of the people, had "controlled assets" worth more than two billion dollars, with much of the wealth concealed behind other names.⁸⁰ The New York Times' website, including its new Chinese language site, was immediately blocked.

The paper subsequently accused China of conducting a massive campaign of hacking against its computer systems; it said this appeared to be targeted primarily at the journalist who wrote the story, Shanghai correspondent David Barboza, and another of its reporters who had formerly worked in Beijing.⁸¹

Other newspapers including the Washington Post and Wall Street Journal soon alleged that they too had been victims of hacking, which appeared to originate in China. (Indeed, the allegations were the latest in a series of cases of foreign journalists reporting attempts either to hack their email accounts or infiltrate their computers with malware, over several years).⁸²

China denied the allegations, just as it denied that its failure to issue a journalist visa to would-be New York Times Beijing correspondent Chris Buckley at around the same time was politically motivated. China's Foreign Ministry said Mr Buckley's former employer, Reuters, had not formally notified it of the termination of his employment; it accused people who made a link

⁷⁸ 'Xi Jinping millionaire relations reveal fortunes of elite', Bloomberg News, 29th June 2012

⁷⁹ 'Bloomberg sites blocked in China days after Xi family wealth story', Reuters, 4th July 2012

⁸⁰ David Barboza, 'Family of Wen Jiabao holds a hidden fortune in China', New York Times, 25th October 2012

⁸¹ As note 6 above

⁸² See eg 'Journalists report Yahoo e-mail accounts hacked in China', Committee to Project Journalists, 31st March, 2010; 'Targeted malware attack on foreign correspondents based in China', China Digital Times, 28th September 2009

between the delay and the Times' report on Mr Wen's family of looking at China through "colored lenses".⁸³

Not all bad news?

It's worth noting, however, that there are still many stories by international media organizations which do not arouse the ire of the government. Indeed several high-profile stories in 2012 provided a reminder that foreign journalists do not only target the Chinese authorities for challenging reporting and tough questioning, but sometimes also apply the same approach to those who have been critical of China. A case in point was the investigation by Rob Schmitz, Shanghai correspondent of American Public Media's 'Marketplace' programme, of a much publicized expose of labour practices in the production of Apple's iPhones in China, which had been broadcast on his show's parent station, National Public Radio.

The expose, by actor and comedian Mike Daisey, on NPR's 'This American Life', accused Apple's supplier Foxconn of using child labour, dangerous labour practices, and having armed guards at its factory in Shenzhen in southern China. It was based on Daisey's successful stage-show on the topic, which had provoked widespread anger against Apple and its labour practices. Feeling that some of the details Daisey related did not fit with his own observations, Schmitz travelled to Shenzhen, where he discovered that the actor's broadcast contained a number of cases of invented, exaggerated or borrowed information. Following Schmitz's investigation, 'This American Life' issue an unprecedented retraction of the entire episode of the programme.⁸⁴

Future prospects: Conciliation or cold war?

When President Xi Jinping took over as Secretary General of the Chinese Communist Party in autumn 2012 there was some hope that relations with the media might take a turn for the

⁸³ 'China says it didn't expel NYT Reporter', Shanghai Daily, January 5th, 2013. By early 2015, Mr. Buckley had still not received a visa to report from China, and was working out of Hong Kong.

⁸⁴ This American Life no. 460, 'Retraction', National Public Radio, 16th March 2012. See: http://podcast.thisamericanlife.org/special/TAL_460_Retraction_Transcript.pdf

better. Following his unveiling at the CCP's Party Congress that year, for example, Mr. Xi made a point of thanking foreign journalists for their reporting of the event.

And despite the tensions, many Chinese officials, particularly in cities like Shanghai and Beijing where foreign journalists are based, remained generally courteous and friendly to reporters, in some cases helping to facilitate interviews and access to events.

In Shanghai, for example, the municipal government's Information Office in 2012 began arranging opportunities for journalists to interview local officials on economic, cultural and social issues, and visit municipal projects, under the banner 'Touch Shanghai'. It also set up a website of the same name offering information and contacts, and provided journalists with contact names and numbers for spokespeople and officials in all local government departments – information which was not always easily accessible in the past.

Yet the underlying suspicions of some in the system towards the international media were highlighted by a long essay published (in Chinese) in May 2012, by the website of the official People's Daily. Written by three international relations experts, it was entitled 'Understanding how western media create and blacken the image of China', and sought to set out a theoretical, systematic basis for such suspicions.

Western journalists who were "selected" to report on China, the authors wrote, "must have views that conform with mainstream Western values." They explained that Western media "have noticed that their audiences like seeing negative news about China, and they work to accommodate their audiences." The result, they said, was "a vicious circle, so that the image of China being portrayed is further and further from the truth." The article acknowledged that, "on the surface, Western media are independent of the government", but suggested that in practice governments exert much "control" over what the media write, and that media outlets are consequently "quite complicit with governments."⁸⁵

⁸⁵ *Jiemo xifang meiti ruhe suzao mohei zhongguo xingxiang* ('Revealing how the western media form and blacken China's image'), People's Daily Online, 23rd May 2012

(That there was now an instinctive distrust of foreign coverage of China in some quarters was highlighted later the same year when the Chinese writer Mo Yan won the Nobel Prize for Literature: the Global Times newspaper felt it necessary to highlight the fact that some sections of the international media did *not* immediately criticise the award, despite Mo Yan's links to China's cultural establishment. (He is a Vice-President of the official Chinese Writers' Association.) "Surprisingly", the paper wrote, "the mainstream Western media this time basically held similar views as the Swedish Academy, acknowledging Mo's achievements in literature."⁸⁶)

And in June 2013 there was, perhaps for the first time, public criticism of foreign journalists from the very top of the Chinese establishment. Soon after the New York Times published stories accusing a Chinese military department based in Shanghai of being behind hacking of the computer systems of a number of US corporations⁸⁷, Xi Jinping, by then also China's President, visited the United States for his first summit meeting with President Obama. At a news conference with his US counterpart, Mr. Xi openly "chastised US media", for reporting on alleged Chinese hacking but not reporting "equally on [cyber] attacks made against China."⁸⁸

Such views were echoed soon afterwards by the official People's Daily, when the US sought to extradite the Internet-surveillance whistleblower Edward Snowden from Hong Kong. "A few American politicians and media outlets," it suggested, "not only... lack the least bit of self-reflection but... also arrogantly find fault with other countries for no reason at all."⁸⁹

A sense that mistrust of the foreign media was now engrained at the highest levels was further underlined when the president of the official Xinhua news agency, Li Congjun, wrote, also in the People's Daily, that "some hostile Western forces and media do not want to see a prospering

⁸⁶ 'Dissidents alone in ruining Mo-ment', Global Times, 13th October 2012. (Mo was however subsequently criticized in a number of international media articles for having cleaved to the official line on several occasions.)

⁸⁷, David E. Sanger, David Barboza and Nicole Perlroth, 'Chinese army unit is seen as tied to hacking against US', New York Times, 18th February 2013

⁸⁸ 'US-China summit ends with accord on all but cyber-espionage', The Guardian, 10th June 2013

⁸⁹ Jonathan Kaiman, 'China's state newspaper praises Snowden for 'tearing off Washington's sanctimonious mask', The Guardian, 25th June 2013

socialist China,” and were seeking to promote “separation and color revolution” by “creating rumours to attack and vilify” the nation.⁹⁰

Visa tensions

Ostensibly, the Chinese government continued to engage with international media organizations. In October 2013 it hosted, for the second time, an event known as the World Media Summit, in the city of Hangzhou. This was reportedly attended by representatives of major international media including AP, Reuters, the BBC, the New York Times and Al Jazeera⁹¹ – despite being hosted by the same Li Congjun who had recently been so critical of the international media (and despite the fact that some observers saw the event as designed primarily to boost China’s influence in the global media sphere).⁹²

But in the months that followed there were a series of further reminders of underlying tensions: in November, an American journalist, Paul Mooney, who had worked in China for more than a decade, was refused a visa to work for Reuters in Beijing. He speculated that this may have been a punishment for having reported regularly on human rights issues, and also because he had briefly worked on a book with the blind legal activist Chen Guangcheng.⁹³

And at around the same time, renewal of visas became a major issue in Sino-US relations for the first time in recent memory, after both the New York Times and Bloomberg – which had published the most sensitive stories about the wealth of Chinese officials’ families – announced that the normal annual year-end visa renewal process for their China-based journalists appeared to have been put on hold by the Chinese authorities. This occurred soon after the New York Times published a further report into the finances of the family of recently retired Premier Wen

⁹⁰ ‘Head of Xinhua accuses western media of pushing revolution in China’, Reuters, in South China Morning Post, 2nd July 2013

⁹¹ World media leaders meet on new challenges, Xinhua, 10th October 2013

⁹² David Bandurski, ‘Your only report on the World Media Summit’, China Media Project (cmp.hku.hk), 11th October 2013

⁹³ Emily Parker, ‘China’s government is scaring foreign journalists into censoring themselves’, New Republic, 9th December 2013. Other journalists had previously been refused residence visas, notably Andrew Higgins, who was expelled from China in 1991 while working for Britain’s Independent, and was later refused accreditation as the Washington Post’s Beijing bureau chief between 2009 and 2012. See e.g. Elizabeth M. Lynch, ‘The Widening Gyre: The Changed Power Dynamics of Journalists Visas’, China Law and Policy, 23rd December 2013

Jiabao, in which it raised questions about the relationship between a consultancy run by his daughter under an alias, and the US investment bank JPMorgan.⁹⁴

(That China appeared to be having serious doubts about renewing the journalists' visas was underlined by "a senior Chinese diplomat" who told New Yorker correspondent Evan Osnos that "the *Times* and Bloomberg were seeking nothing short of removing the Communist Party from power, and that they must not be allowed to continue.")⁹⁵

The situation prompted an expression of concern from US Vice President Joseph Biden during a visit to China.⁹⁶ His appeals for the journalists' visas to be issued were initially side-stepped by the Chinese authorities, but eventually, shortly before the renewal deadline of the end of December, the two media organizations' correspondents in China were allowed to extend their visas. However, attempts by either organization to accredit new journalists to China made no progress – leaving Austin Ramzy, a former correspondent with Time in Beijing who was hoping to switch to the NYT, no choice but to leave China after his original visa expired in late January 2014. A White House spokesman said the US government was "deeply concerned that foreign journalists in China continue to face restrictions that impede their ability to do their jobs."⁹⁷

There was also controversy in late 2013 after the New York Times alleged that Bloomberg News had spiced another story on Chinese leaders' wealth, apparently after senior editors became fearful that this might lead to the organization's expulsion from China.⁹⁸ Bloomberg's editor-in-chief denied the claim, saying the story was simply "not ready for publication."⁹⁹ However two senior editors resigned in apparent protest soon afterwards, while Michael Forsythe, one of the

⁹⁴ David Barboza, Jessica Silver-Greenberg and Ben Protess, 'JPMorgan's fruitful ties to a member of China's elite', *New York Times*, November 13th 2013

⁹⁵ Evan Osnos, 'The meaning of China's crackdown on the foreign press', *The New Yorker*, 6th December 2013

⁹⁶ David Nakamura and William Wan, Biden forcefully complains to Chinese leaders about crackdown on foreign news media, *Washington Post*, December 5th 2013

⁹⁷ 'New York Times Correspondent Leaves China in Latest Setback for Foreign Journalists', Congressional Executive Commission on China, March 4th, 2014

⁹⁸ Edward Wong, 'Bloomberg News is said to curb articles that might anger China', *New York Times*, 8th November 2013

⁹⁹ Demetri Sevastopulo, 'Bloomberg suspends reporter over China leak', *Financial Times*, 17th November 2013

journalists who had worked on the unpublished story (as well as on the earlier one about the wealth of President Xi's family), was initially suspended, and later left the company.¹⁰⁰

All these developments led to a number of articles and commentaries in US media warning that fear of losing visas might lead to self-censorship by foreign journalists based in China—or in some cases might already have done so. As veteran China watcher and former journalist James McGregor commented in one such article, “As the Chinese reaction gets more and more aggressive, foreign reporters in China get more and more wary. These are people with wives and husbands and children in school, and to not get your visa renewed can upset your whole life. It's in the back of people's minds.”¹⁰¹

2014: Heightened tension – the new normal?

A reminder of China's continuing willingness to respond to unfavourable media coverage came in early 2014, when the websites of Britain's Guardian newspaper and several European media organizations including Germany's Sueddeutsche Zeitung, France's Le Monde and El Pais of Spain were temporarily blocked, in most cases for the first time ever. This followed their publication of the results of a joint investigation with the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, which listed the names of Chinese citizens, including relatives of top officials, who it said had made use of offshore companies in the Caribbean tax haven of the British Virgin Islands.¹⁰²

The Guardian protested against the move, with an editorial entitled 'Don't Shoot the Messenger', addressed to China's leaders, but it took several months before its website was unblocked on all Chinese servers.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ 'New York Times strikes a blow to China's efforts at censorship', Washington Post, 25th April 2014; James Fallows, 'Another Bloomberg editor explains why he has resigned, over its China coverage', The Atlantic, 25th March 2014

¹⁰¹ See note 95 above

¹⁰² Tania Branigan, 'Guardian blocked in China after story about leadership's offshore wealth', The Guardian, 22nd January 2014; 'China censors reports about elite's hidden funds', rsf.org, 24 January 2014

¹⁰³ 'China's elite: don't shoot the messenger' - editorial, The Guardian, 22nd January 2014

There was also an angry response to a documentary film by the BBC's economics editor Robert Peston on potential risks in the Chinese economy – not least because of its title, 'How China fooled the world'.

One Chinese media commentator suggested that “any news about China on western media like CNN or the BBC will definitely be bad news,” and said such media reported on China with a sense of “Schadenfreude”.¹⁰⁴ Another analyst said western media were not only biased but confused, since they espoused “both the ‘China threat’ theory and the ‘China collapse’ theory”, even though these were mutually contradictory.¹⁰⁵

Anger over terrorism coverage

The undercurrent of official Chinese anger at Western media coverage surfaced again in early March 2014, after a bloody attack at a railway station in the south-western city of Kunming, in which black-clad assailants hacked 31 people to death and wounded more than 100 others. The Chinese government announced almost immediately that the attackers were ethnic Uighur Islamic separatists from Xinjiang. And Chinese media soon began criticizing a number of major western media organizations for their reporting of these events, in particular for what was seen as an initial reluctance to accept immediately the official description of the attackers as terrorists, and also for what some saw as an excessive focus on the grievances of Uighurs in Xinjiang.¹⁰⁶

The use of speech marks around the word “terrorist”, or the use of the alternative phrase “attackers” provoked particular anger. Some western observers suggested that possible reasons for the reluctance to use the word “terrorist” unequivocally may have included a traditional caution over use of the word on the part of a number of western media organizations — and, possibly, initial uncertainty about whether the provenance and identity of the attackers had been reliably proven in the first hours after the attack.

¹⁰⁴ Huo Jiwu, ‘*Gai ruhe miandui waimei ‘changhsuai zhongguo’ xianxiang?*’ (How should we respond to the phenomenon of the foreign media badmouthing China?) www.cnhubei.com, 2nd August 2014

¹⁰⁵ ‘*BBC jilupian cheng ‘Zhongguo yunong shijie’: Wuhan guanmei touban fanji*’ (Wuhan official media reject BBC documentary’s claim that ‘China fooled the world’) sohu.com, 29th July 2014

¹⁰⁶ ‘Western media coverage of Kunming’s terror attack shows sheer mendacity and heartlessness’, People’s Daily Online, 4th March 2014.

However official Chinese media expressed fury at such coverage. “If the Chinese media had used quotation marks for terrorists after the 9/11 attacks, how would American society feel?” asked the Global Times.¹⁰⁷

One commentator in the People’s Daily accused the western media of “sheer mendacity and heartlessness,”¹⁰⁸ while another writer went further, saying foreign media had not only “downplayed the deadly attack,” but were also “hyping ethnic hatred in China.”¹⁰⁹

The criticisms were echoed by the official All-China Journalists’ Association, which, unusually, issued a statement accusing western media organizations of “double standards”. It said they had turned a blind eye to terrorism” and “violated the principle of being objective”—and thus “lack[ed] professional ethics in journalism.”¹¹⁰

CNN was, once again, singled out for criticism. The Global Times described its coverage as “like chuckling at someone’s funeral”, saying CNN had “crossed the bottom line of media ethics” and behaved like “a clown”.¹¹¹

“CNN has tainted western values” and “always shows sympathy towards China’s terrorists rather than their victims,” it said, and argued that the organization represented “a part of American society which takes pleasure in the Chinese people’s misfortune.” The sense of conspiracy was emphasized by the People’s Daily, which suggested that foreign coverage “appeared to be directed by ulterior motives”.¹¹²

(There had been similar, though less concerted, criticisms in November the previous year, when a jeep containing three people from Xinjiang crashed through security railings in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square, and ploughed into crowds on the pavement, killing two tourists and injuring

¹⁰⁷ UN Condemnation leaves CNN red-faced, Global Times, 3rd March 2014.

¹⁰⁸ As note 108 above

¹⁰⁹ ‘Kunming attack shows terrorists now hitting softer targets’, interview with Fan Shouzheng, Global Times, 3rd March 2014

¹¹⁰ Xinhua, ‘China journalist association slams Western media on Kunming attack coverage’, Global Times, 4th March 2014

¹¹¹ *ibid*

¹¹² As note 108 above

thirty-eight. The three people inside the vehicle also died, in what the authorities said was a suicide attack.

An analysis piece by a US academic, published by CNN, provoked anger after suggesting that the attack could have been a “cry of desperation” at repression in Xinjiang and the displacement of people from “traditional lands” for the purposes of development.¹¹³ The Global Times described the article as being of a “vile nature”, and “way out of line”, and suggested that “Western media likes [sic] expressing their sympathy and support for Xinjiang’s violent terrorists.”¹¹⁴)

Increased difficulties in reporting from Xinjiang

Whether because of suspicions of the motives of foreign reporters, or out of concerns about public discussion of tensions in Xinjiang (where a number of other attacks took place that year), as 2014 went on there appeared to be an increasingly concerted strategy to make it difficult for foreign journalists to report from the region. An American correspondent who visited the city of Shache wrote of being tailed constantly by police, “whose intimidating presence ensured that no one would talk openly to us.”¹¹⁵ Another American journalist and his colleagues were detained twice while travelling around Xinjiang, and eventually forced to leave the region.¹¹⁶ And an Australian TV crew were not only “harassed relentlessly”, as they put it, but told in one town that if they didn’t have an “interview permit” (something which, in theory, does not exist) they would be guilty of “conducting illegal interviews”.¹¹⁷

The Foreign Correspondents’ Club of China, in a position paper on journalists’ working conditions, said that such interference was now routine, and that journalists traveling to Xinjiang were thus “effectively blocked from free reporting.”¹¹⁸

¹¹³ Sean R. Roberts, ‘Tiananmen Crash: Terrorism or cry of desperation?’ CNN, 31st October 2013

¹¹⁴ ‘CNN disrespects itself with terror sympathy’, Global Times, 4th November 2013

¹¹⁵ ‘In Xinjiang, China, journalists work in the shadow of censorship’, Julie Makinen, LA Times, 26th October 2014

¹¹⁶ Simon Denyer, ‘China’s war on terror becomes all-out attack on Islam in Xinjiang’, Washington Post, 19th September, 2014

¹¹⁷ Stephen McDonnell, ‘Crackdown’, ABC Foreign Correspondent, 30th September 2014

¹¹⁸ Foreign Correspondents’ Club of China, ‘Position paper on working conditions for foreign correspondents in China’, September 2014

...and beyond

The FCCC's summer 2014 report also highlighted other areas of concern. It described Tibetan-inhabited areas of China outside the official Tibet Autonomous Region as now being "effectively off-limits to foreign reporters". And it said there had been "multiple reports of physical violence" by security officials against foreign journalists who tried to report on the trial of civil rights lawyer Xu Zhiyong in Beijing in January 2014.

The report also noted that a number of foreign reporters were summoned to police stations in the run-up to the 25th anniversary of the Tiananmen crackdown in early June the same year. In meetings that were videotaped by the authorities, they were warned of "serious consequences" if they attempted to carry out what were described as "sensitive interviews" on the subject. One of these journalists subsequently received a visit from police officers, who videotaped the proceedings for what they described as "internal use."¹¹⁹

In total, the FCCC report said, two-thirds of respondents to its survey said they had "experienced interference, harassment or violence" relating to their work over the previous year, including ten percent who said they had been "subjected to manhandling or use of physical force." It said there had been a "notable increase in threats and use of violence" towards journalists since 2008.

It also noted that half of all respondents said their local news assistants had been "harassed or intimidated" over the previous year – 79 cases in total – a rise from 35% in 2013. The number of reported cases of harassment of interviewees also more than doubled in the same period. And overall, 80% of reporters surveyed felt that their working conditions had either "worsened or stayed the same" in the preceding twelve months – up from 70% in the previous year's survey.¹²⁰

Tensions continued following protests against China's plans for political reform in Hong Kong in late September-October. As well as blocking social media sites, including Instagram, to prevent the spread of information about the protests, China also eventually blocked the BBC website

¹¹⁹ *ibid.*

¹²⁰ *ibid.*

again, for the first time in more than two years.¹²¹ A BBC crew, which tried to report on a Beijing gathering of artists seeking to express sympathy with the Hong Kong protesters, was forced to leave the scene, and the journalists' press cards were temporarily confiscated.¹²²

And a Chinese citizen who had worked as a researcher for Germany's *Die Zeit* (– though she had not been officially registered with the authorities as a staff member) was also detained after seeking to attend such an event in Beijing, and subsequently held on suspicion of “inciting public unrest”.¹²³ The magazine's Beijing correspondent, Angela Koeckritz, was questioned repeatedly by police and state security officials, who at one point accused her of organizing protests in Hong Kong, and warned her that she could have problems renewing her visa if she did not cooperate. She chose to leave the country permanently instead.¹²⁴

More criticism from Xi Jinping – and the Chinese media

In this climate it was perhaps not unexpected that tensions over media coverage would surface when President Obama visited Beijing in November 2014 for the APEC summit and a subsequent state visit. During a joint news conference with President Xi Jinping, President Obama called on a New York Times reporter to ask a question, and the journalist asked President Xi about, among other things, “the denial of residency permits to several news organizations... including the New York Times”.

Mr Xi began his response to this and a subsequent question by noting that “It's perfectly normal for there to be different views expressed about us in the international media,” and commenting, “I don't think it's worth fussing over these different views.” However, “media outlets need to obey China's laws and regulations”, and if there had been “a problem... there must be a reason”, he said, adding, “perhaps we should look into the problem to see where the cause lies”.

Mr Xi concluded by quoting a Chinese saying which literally means, ‘Let he who tied the bell on the tiger take it off’ – a phrase officially translated as “The party which has created a problem

¹²¹ BBC's website is being blocked across China, BBC News, 15th October 2014

¹²² Celia Hatton, ‘Hong Kong protests: China police bar BBC from artists' event’, BBC, 2nd October 2014

¹²³ Angela Koeckritz, ‘They Have Miao’, *Die Zeit*, 14th January 2015

¹²⁴ *ibid.*

should be the one to help resolve it”.¹²⁵ This appeared to send a clear message that if the New York Times had had difficulties getting visas for its staff, the problem was one of its own making.

The newspaper itself commented in an editorial that Mr Xi’s words were a confirmation that foreign media organizations were now being “penalized for unfavorable or controversial news coverage.” It insisted, however, that it had “no intention of altering its coverage to meet the demands of any government – be it that of China, the United States or any other nation,” and added: “A confident regime that considers itself a world leader should be able to handle truthful examination and criticism.”¹²⁶

Despite this open disagreement, there was no repeat, at the end of 2014, of the previous year’s large-scale brinkmanship over the annual renewal of journalist visas for correspondents from the New York Times and Bloomberg News. Yet while visas for their correspondents were renewed, as of early 2015, the two media organizations were still unable to accredit new correspondents to China – and an article in the official China Daily in early January 2015 made it clear that the problems had still not simply faded away.

Entitled “Deadly arrogance of the ‘Grey Lady’”, it told its readers that the New York Times had, during the Xi-Obama talks in November, “rudely criticized the host country because of troubles it met in getting China visa [sic], which was a bitter fruit it sowed and reaped”. What’s more, it said, the paper’s coverage of Tibet and Xinjiang had “called white black [a literal translation of a Chinese phrase meaning ‘to turn the truth on its head’], turning a blind eye to basic journalist ethics.”¹²⁷ It railed at the paper’s “arrogance... presumptuousness [sic] and prejudice,” and concluded “If ‘The Grey Lady’ fails to stop acting in an unscrupulous manner and restore its credit, it will never rebound from the ‘worst times’ in its over-one century history.”

New pressures – and ‘hostility’

¹²⁵ ‘Amid US-China talks, tough words from Xi Jinping for foreign press’, Committee to Protect Journalists, 12th November 2014; The White House, ‘Remarks by President Obama and President Xi Jinping in Joint Press Conference’, 12th November 2014

¹²⁶ ‘A response to President Xi Jinping’, Editorial, New York Times, November 13, 2014; see also Suman Varandani, ‘NYT Responds to Xi Jinping’s comments, says will not alter coverage to please China,’ International Business Times, 13th November 2014

¹²⁷ ‘Deadly arrogance of ‘The Grey Lady’’, China Daily, 4th January 2015

For journalists from other foreign media, there was also some frustration at the increasingly long-drawn out visa renewal process: Beijing-based correspondents had to leave their passports with the authorities for three weeks, making it impossible for them to travel out of China during this period, which in some cases interfered with their plans for Christmas holidays.¹²⁸ And at least one correspondent whose reporting had irritated the Chinese authorities in 2014 said he had faced tough questioning from Chinese officials before his visa was renewed.¹²⁹

In 2014, a number of international media organizations also reported receiving visits and communications, at their headquarters in their home countries, from Chinese consular officials, who complained about their coverage of China. The FCCC found that what it called this “unusual Chinese government pressure” had affected the editorial headquarters of a quarter of the journalists who responded to its questionnaire.¹³⁰

And following the attack on the offices of the French satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo in early January 2015, some critics on Chinese social media accused western media organizations of double standards over their coverage of the attack, and compared this to their reporting of the previous year’s attack at Kunming station:

“After the Kunming attack, did Western media say, ‘Today, Kunming is the capital of the world’?” asked one Internet user.¹³¹ When international journalists held a vigil in a Beijing bookshop for those who had died in Paris, police mingled with the crowds and videotaped those taking part.¹³²

And in general, 2014 saw increased warnings from Chinese officials and state media about the threat of “hostile foreign forces” to China’s sovereignty, culture, and political system. The

¹²⁸ Foreign Correspondents’ Club of China, op. cit; see also Carrie Gracie, ‘China Week: Peng Mama and Can-do spirit’, BBC News, 5th December 2014

¹²⁹ Author conversation with Beijing-based correspondent, January 2015

¹³⁰ Foreign Correspondents’ Club of China, op. cit. Such visits had previously been rare.

¹³¹ Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, Rachel Lu, ‘Where’s our unity march, China wants to know’, Foreign Policy, 12th January 2015

¹³² Mark Magnier, ‘Police shadow journalists’ Charlie Hebdo gathering in Beijing’, Wall Street Journal China Real Time Report, 9th January 2015

phrase, which dates back to Maoist times, is generally interpreted to refer not only to foreign governments and political organizations, but also often to sections of the international media as well. It had been used relatively rarely in the previous two decades – and its revival was a reminder of the continuing potential for tensions between China and media organizations seen as representing western values.¹³³ (It was notable, for example, that new rules relating to the behaviour of Chinese journalists, published in June 2014, expressly forbade them from sharing information with foreign correspondents.)¹³⁴

Who will control China's image?

One practical result of official Chinese suspicion of international coverage of the country has been the launch of a massive campaign aimed at boosting the influence of China's own media around the world. The motivation is, in part, to wrest control of China's image from the foreign media, which is seen as having presented an unfair picture of the nation. As one Chinese academic put it in 2010, "it's the western media that mainly instigated western countries to adopt a hostile attitude toward China."¹³⁵

Li Congjun, the head of the Xinhua news agency, added in 2013, "Overall, global opinions are still dominated by Western media outlets, and China's capacity to make its own voice heard fails to match its international standing."¹³⁶

Such perceptions seem to derive partly from the tensions surrounding Tibet in the run-up to the 2008 Olympics, and from a sense that China had failed to get its message across on some of the issues closest to its heart. One senior official stressed soon afterwards that China needed to improve what he called "our external publicity", because, he said, "one of [exiled Tibetan spiritual leader] the Dalai Lama's significant advantages is that he is fluent in English... [He] understands Western values and culture, and is thus easy to communicate with." He described

¹³³ Peter Ford, 'China targets 'hostile foreign forces' in crescendo of accusations', *Christian Science Monitor*, 9th November 2014; the rise of such warnings coincided with a growing clampdown on Chinese civil society, and more liberal sections of China's domestic media.

¹³⁴ *Foreign Correspondents' Club of China*, op. cit.

¹³⁵ Bi Yantao, 'Media hurdle to intercultural relations', *China Daily*, 23rd March 2010

¹³⁶ See note 92 above.

this as “China’s weak spot.”¹³⁷

The head of China Central Television also suggested that “China must compete confidently in the global marketplace of ideas,”¹³⁸ while former President Hu Jintao warned of “an increasingly fierce struggle in the domain of news and opinion.”¹³⁹

To this end, the government in 2009 allocated an estimated \$8.7 billion dollars to four of the country’s major media organizations. These included China Central Television, which subsequently set up news channels broadcasting in English in both North America and Africa (CCTV America and CCTV Africa); the China Daily, the country’s official English language newspaper, which now publishes weekly editions in Europe and the US; the official Xinhua News Agency, which also received significant sums to set up its own English language TV station (CNC World) in the US, and China Radio International.¹⁴⁰ The Global Times newspaper, owned by the official People’s Daily, also began publishing in the US in early 2013.

These outlets have generally yet to make major inroads in mainstream western media markets in terms of audience or readership. In Africa, however, the offering of Xinhua news agency content for free, along with a greater focus on African issues often neglected by western media, is reportedly helping Chinese media to win a growing audience share.¹⁴¹

And the relative wealth of these Chinese media organizations suggests they may have the potential to exert a greater impact in future. They have already been able to hire a number of experienced western and international journalists, at a time when media in many other countries have been cutting staff and budgets. CCTV America’s on-air presenters and reporters, for example, are generally non-Chinese veterans of networks in the US and other western countries. China Radio International meanwhile now broadcasts in more languages than the BBC World Service, and is expanding its network of FM stations, both in Southeast Asia, and in Latin America, where it has launched Spanish-language FM stations in Mexico and other countries.

¹³⁷ Leng Rong, quoted in R.L. Kuhn, op. cit., p. 409

¹³⁸ Jiao Li, quoted in R.L. Kuhn, op. cit.. p. 405

¹³⁹ Banyan: ‘The Chinese are coming’, *The Economist*, 4th March 2010

¹⁴⁰ David Shambaugh, ‘China flexes its soft power’, *International Herald Tribune*, 7th June, 2010

¹⁴¹ see e.g Andrew Jacobs, ‘Pursuing soft power, China puts stamp on Africa’s news’, *New York Times*, 17th August 2012.

And in another hint of a shift in the balance of economic influence, newspapers including the Telegraph in the UK, and the Washington Post in the US, have begun to include 'China Watch', a monthly supplement of mainly cultural stories about China, provided and paid for by the official China Daily. Similar arrangements are in place with a number of newspapers in Southeast Asia.¹⁴² It's a further reminder that the western media's monopoly on content could face fresh challenges in the future.

Critics and defenders on both sides

It is also worth noting that criticisms of the western media for focusing overly on 'negative aspects' of China do not come uniquely from within China. During the tension over the coverage of Tibet in the run-up to the 2008 Olympics, for example, International Olympic Committee Chairman Jacques Rogge was quoted by the China Daily as saying: "The West must stop hectoring China over human rights... It took us [the West] 200 years to evolve from the French Revolution. China started in 1949." The paper said Mr. Rogge also noted that for much of this period, Britain and other European nations were also busy expanding their colonies, "with all the abuse attached to colonial powers".¹⁴³

In 2010, a survey commissioned by Germany's Heinrich Boell Foundation also concluded that German media coverage presented an overly negative coverage of China¹⁴⁴ (– though the report aroused some criticism from German journalists based in China.) [See also Chapter 3].

In his introduction to a 2012 book on China, meanwhile, the Indian writer Pankaj Mishra argued that "most coverage of China in the mainstream [western] press aims to alert the West to the promise and perils of rapid economic growth in the country," and suggested that "most journalists, especially correspondents of business periodicals, don't aim very high... Not surprisingly," he added, "their writings reveal very little about how most Chinese live or see themselves and their world, but very much about how certain ideological assumptions and

¹⁴² See e.g. Patrick B. Pexton, 'Caving to China's Demands', Washington Post, 24th February 2012

¹⁴³ 'Rogge tells West: Be fair to China', China Daily, 28th April 2008

¹⁴⁴ 'Die China-Berichterstattung in den deutschen Medien' ('The state of reporting on China in the German media'), Berlin, Heinrich Boell Foundation, 2010

prejudices of the west... have overwhelmed many journalists in Britain and America.”¹⁴⁵

There has also been some soul-searching on the part of western journalists. When the artist Ai Weiwei was detained by the Chinese authorities for several months in 2011, for example, Pulitzer-winning New York Times correspondent Ian Johnson wrote a reflective piece asking whether the international media had reported too much on Ai’s confrontational approach to the Chinese authorities, and might therefore have played a part in setting him on the collision course which led to his arrest.¹⁴⁶

On the other hand, it’s also true that there are some in China who are broadly supportive of the western media’s often challenging coverage of the country. The writer Murong Xuecun, for example, in 2012 argued that “there’s nothing negative about reporting bad news. By exposing atrocious behaviour, results and traditions, we will be able to alert viewers, who can then stay away from them instead of copying these.”¹⁴⁷ It is also striking that the few books on China by foreign journalists which have been translated and published in the country – such as those by former New Yorker correspondent Peter Hessler – have attracted much attention from educated Chinese readers.

Equally noteworthy is the fact that, not long after the controversy over the New York Times’ reporting on the financial affairs of then Premier Wen Jiabao in 2012, the Southern Metropolis Weekly, one of China’s more liberal news magazines, published an in-depth and broadly positive story about the New York Times and its coverage of the country, featuring interviews with several of the paper’s correspondents in Beijing. The article made no direct reference to the story about Mr. Wen’s family – but described 2012 as a “rich year for New York Times reports on China”, and commented, “though it may encounter some interference or restrictions while reporting, the New York Times is still interpreting China one story at a time.”¹⁴⁸

Other indications of respect for the international media have continued to surface occasionally.

¹⁴⁵ Pankaj Mishra, Foreword to Angilee Shah and Jeffrey Wasserstrom (eds), *Chinese Characters*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2012

¹⁴⁶ Ian Johnson, ‘China Misunderstood: Did we contribute to Ai Weiwei’s arrest?’, New York Review of Books blog; 22nd April 2011

¹⁴⁷ Murong Xuecun, ‘Translation: One author’s plea for a gentler China’, Tealeaf Nation blog, 30th July 2012

¹⁴⁸ ‘*Niuyue Shibao’ ruhe baodao shibada* (‘How the New York Times reported the 18th Party Congress’), Southern Metropolis Weekly magazine (Nandu Zhoukan), 30th January 2013

After reporting on the annual sessions of the Chinese legislature and its advisory body in March 2014, one Chinese journalist wrote that “The wonderful nature of the two sessions’ press conferences lies in the bold questioning by non-mainland reporters, which exposes the disadvantage of mainland media and demonstrates the aggressiveness of their outside counterparts.”¹⁴⁹ And following the disappearance of Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing, with 152 Chinese nationals on board, later the same month, there was some criticism within China, in both social and mainstream media, of how China’s domestic news organizations were covering the story. Their reporting, said the China Daily, contrasted with that of major international media, which, it said, “have been providing most of the key information on the missing Flight MH370... Chinese media outlets seem to lag behind their Western counterparts, especially when it comes to timely coverage of big global events.”¹⁵⁰

Facing new challenges

Nevertheless, it’s clear that, due to a number of factors – not least continuing official suspicion, and the growth of the Internet – the international media is likely to face ever-closer scrutiny within China of its reporting of the country. At the same time, the growing economic clout of China’s own media could mean that, in the longer term, western and other overseas media organizations will no longer have the field all to themselves when it comes to shaping international perceptions of China. Thus the challenges for international journalists, and the pressure on them to ‘get the China story right’ – not least in the eyes of Chinese citizens – are likely to grow. So how do these two groups – foreign correspondents and ordinary Chinese people – see the key issues and challenges for the international media?

¹⁴⁹ Zhang Zhouxiang, ‘Time for Chinese media to come of age’, China Daily, 20th March 2014

¹⁵⁰ Shan Renping, ‘Taboo questions expose mainland media’s disadvantage’, Global Times, 3rd March 2014.

Chapter 2

Learning to live with the international media: Chinese citizens' perceptions

1: Background

Chinese citizens' access to international media: Direct

There can be no question that ordinary Chinese citizens' exposure to foreign media is greater than ever before. While it is safe to assume that the majority of Chinese citizens still do not regularly consume international media directly, the websites of most of the world's major media organizations [with a few exceptions, as discussed below] are now accessible online to those who can read foreign languages; perhaps equally significantly, several major international media organizations have set up Chinese language sites aimed at mainland Chinese readers. As discussed in Chapter One, some such sites, including the BBC's Chinese news site and, since October 2012, that of the New York Times, have been blocked by China's 'Great Firewall', but others, including the websites of the Financial Times and (until 2014) the Wall Street Journal generally remained accessible¹⁵¹, as were a wide range of Chinese language sites from Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore. And while most Chinese homes do not have satellite TV, which is in theory not permitted without a special license (though a significant minority of the population in some parts of the country does have illegal satellite dishes), citizens have in recent years been able to access a growing range of foreign TV programmes online, notably via domestic video-streaming websites such as Youku Tudou, Sohu and iQiyi.¹⁵²

... and Indirect

¹⁵¹ FTChinese.com, for example had around 2 million registered users. Its site has also been blocked on occasion, however, usually following the publication of particularly sensitive China-related stories.

¹⁵² Censorship of e.g. foreign TV dramas was less strict on China's Internet than on its mainstream TV networks, at least until new rules in late 2014; some foreign TV news sites are also accessible online.

At the same time, coverage of news about the rest of the world in China's own media has also grown significantly in the past two decades. (Much, though not all, foreign news is now reported broadly factually by the Chinese media, where once the authorities would have worried about negative ideological aspects of each story.) And this development has gone hand in hand with growing interest in, and attention to, how the outside world reports on China. The pioneer of such international coverage is Reference News (*Cankao Xiaoxi*), operated by the Xinhua News Agency and still officially China's biggest selling newspaper, with a circulation estimated at more than three million in 2011.¹⁵³ For decades, the paper has been translating international news stories from media around the world – including some foreign reports on China (though these sometimes have the most sensitive sections edited out).¹⁵⁴

Since the 1990s Reference News has had a new competitor, the Global Times (*Huanqiu Shibao*), a tabloid newspaper launched by the publisher of the People's Daily, the traditional mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party. The Global Times both translates foreign articles, and publishes its own stories and commentaries summarizing international media debates and coverage, particularly when these relate to China. The paper is often quick to highlight cases where it believes China has been unfairly treated internationally, or unfairly portrayed by the foreign media. (Since 2009 the Global Times has also published a separate English language edition, which has frequently published commentaries criticizing the international media, as discussed in the previous chapter; many, though not all, of these articles first appeared in the paper's Chinese language edition.)

Equally significantly, stories from these newspapers, like those from all Chinese media outlets, now tend to spread quickly around the country via the many Chinese news portals which repost stories from the mainstream media – and also via social media sites, which are now used by well over half of China's more than six hundred million Internet users.

Thus Chinese citizens are potentially exposed, either directly or indirectly, to significant amounts of information relating to foreign media coverage of the country, sometimes with added

¹⁵³ 'Top 10 daily newspapers in China', China.org.cn, 31st October 2011

¹⁵⁴ See e.g. 'The world according to *Cankao Xiaoxi*', translator Bruce Humes' analysis of how the publication edited and 'repackaged' a New York Times story on Xinjiang; Danwei.org, 23rd December 2005

commentary either from media editors, or from ordinary citizens who repost such stories.

A fascination with foreign reporting on China?

The degree to which the Chinese public pays attention to foreign media reports is arguably also amplified by the fact that China's government, and many of its people, have long been keenly interested in how the nation is perceived by the outside world. History appears to be one factor in this – particularly the sense in China that, since the 19th century, the country has had to struggle to be accepted, and to consolidate its place, in the wider world. Thus it can sometimes seem that many Chinese citizens are eager to find evidence that the nation is being taken seriously internationally.

This phenomenon may manifest itself in different ways, including excited reactions to recognition from the outside world: once, when I interviewed the editor of a Guangzhou newspaper group for the BBC, I was surprised to find that one of the group's more populist papers (whose editorial office I had not actually been permitted to visit) subsequently ran a photograph of the interview on its front page, with the headline: "The BBC pays attention to our newspaper".¹⁵⁵

But it can also lead to an angry official response to criticisms, even those made by obscure international media outlets, which in many other countries would probably pass without comment. (Indeed, some commentators have argued that many in China are overly concerned about how foreigners perceive their country.)¹⁵⁶

This focus on how others see China has arguably been amplified in recent years by greater access to information from abroad – and also by a perception that foreign attitudes to China have not fully caught up with the nation's growing economic influence. Another factor in such attitudes may be the patriotic education campaign, highlighting past foreign maltreatment of China, referred to in the previous chapter. (The Chinese historian Yuan Weishi has likened this

¹⁵⁵ 'BBC guanzhu benbao' ('The BBC pays attention to our newspaper'), Nanfang Dushi Bao (Southern Metropolis News), March 2nd 2002

¹⁵⁶ See e.g. Han Han, 'Let's not get in a rage so easily', in *This Generation*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 2013, pp. 47-51

type of education to “growing up on wolf’s milk.”¹⁵⁷) As the British historian Robert Bickers puts it, “The memory of the era of National Humiliation is embedded... in the state’s very articulation of itself... It is also present in the way its diplomats react to foreign criticisms of China’s foreign or domestic policies, and the way individual citizens debate their sense of their country’s place in the world, and in the inflamed world of the chatrooms and blogs.”¹⁵⁸

The sinologist Susan Shirk, a former US Under Secretary of State, meanwhile, has argued that commercialization of China’s media outlets (which now largely have to attract readers and advertisers to pay their way) has encouraged some newspapers to take a particularly strident line on issues of national interest. “Like editors everywhere, Chinese editors seek to attract audiences by dramatizing international news events, exaggerating threats, and emphasizing conflict over cooperation,” she suggests, adding that they have to do so “without challenging the current government line.” Such reporting, she argues, influences public attitudes to the outside world – and sometimes government policy too: “The interaction of these two drivers – the market and CCP control – has produced mass media that stir up nationalist sentiments that feed back into the foreign policy process in a kind of echo chamber.”¹⁵⁹

She also suggests that this ‘echo chamber’ may influence perceptions of the international media, recalling that when she asked an official of China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs why the authorities had been so critical of foreign media coverage of the Tibet issue in the run-up to the 2008 Olympics, the official replied: “We had to. The people on the Internet weren’t just criticizing the bias of the Western media, they were criticizing us for allowing it.”¹⁶⁰

Critical responses over-emphasized?

¹⁵⁷ See e.g. David Bandurski, ‘Rigid Thinking Beggars China’s Soft Power’, China Media Project, (cmp.hku.hk) 24th May 2012

¹⁵⁸ Bickers, op. cit, p. 10

¹⁵⁹ Susan Shirk, ‘Changing Media, Changing Policy’, in S. Shirk (ed.) *Changing Media, Changing China*, Oxford, OUP, 2011, pp .226-7. Shirk argues that the Global Times “best illustrates the way China’s commercialized but politically guided media mobilize public opinion on foreign policy, and then feed it back into the foreign policymaking process.”

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., p247. It could also be argued that official discourse at the time helped create such public anger – and it is worth noting that, at other times, Chinese officials and editorial writers have frequently dismissed extreme views expressed online as being unrepresentative of those of society as a whole.

In practice, however, as suggested in the previous chapter, there is also evidence of some diversity in Chinese people's views of the foreign media. While critical opinion clearly exists, and has gained a high profile in recent years, there are other responses too: not only have some writers suggested that critical coverage can benefit China, but it is also not uncommon for foreign reporters to be approached by ordinary Chinese people who believe (rightly or wrongly) that coverage of their problems by international media organizations will help them to get these problems resolved. The case of Wukan, the village in Guangdong whose residents so annoyed local officials in 2011, not only by rising up against them but also by setting up an effective press operation to pass on information to foreign media, is just one example.

Respect for the foreign media is also indicated by the fact that some Chinese news editors admit privately that they sometimes take material from foreign news agency reports to spice up their own coverage of international stories – despite a rule that most Chinese media must only use information from official Chinese sources.¹⁶¹

2: Survey of student attitudes

In an attempt to gauge how deeply official criticisms of the international media are echoed by ordinary people, a small sample survey of Chinese university students – the group generally seen as most vocal in their criticisms of foreign media over recent years – was undertaken. The survey sought to establish how respondents gained information about the foreign media and its coverage of China, and also solicited their opinions on the quality of this coverage. As a control, it asked them how fair they believed Chinese media outlets were in their reporting on foreign media coverage of China – and in their own coverage of foreign countries. And it concluded by asking them how supportive they were of the idea of foreign journalists working in China.¹⁶²

Responses: Respect mixed with concern

¹⁶¹ Author conversations with Chinese editors

¹⁶² For the survey questions, see appendix 1

The survey was based on a small sample, and there was a certain degree of self-selection among the respondents: several dozen surveys were sent out to students at several universities; sixteen people replied. The results therefore cannot be seen as more than a sample or snapshot of the opinions of some young Chinese people. Despite this caveat, however, the responses appeared sincere, nuanced, and often thought-provoking. As will be seen below, they revealed a generally high level of interest in the international media and its reports on China, and also a significant, (some might say surprising), degree of underlying respect for many major international media organizations.

At the same time, there was also clear concern about the content of foreign media coverage on China, particularly the choice of topics covered. While some such criticisms – including of coverage of Tibet – seemed to echo the viewpoint of the authorities, others, significantly, came from people who seemed generally well-disposed towards the international media.

It was also striking, however, that many of those who expressed dissatisfaction with foreign coverage nonetheless strongly supported the principle of the foreign media being permitted to report from China.

i High interest in, and respect for, the international media

The respondents surveyed were, by definition, a highly educated group. Many were post-graduates, and around half specialized in the field of media studies. Most were studying at universities in Shanghai, while a few were studying in other parts of China, or in the UK (where they received the survey through Chinese student networks).

Their exposure to foreign media and general level of media literacy were both fairly high. Several said they received some information about foreign media content from Chinese sources, such as Reference News or the Global Times, or from translations and articles online, but almost half said specifically that they did not read such ‘second-hand’ sources – and most said they looked at international media outlets themselves regularly; around one-third of the respondents said they read foreign news sources every day or almost every day, another third every week, and the remainder occasionally.¹⁶³

¹⁶³ One respondent did not specify how often.

Several mainly used the Chinese language websites of international media organizations such as the Wall Street Journal, the Financial Times or the BBC¹⁶⁴, or Chinese-language media outlets from outside mainland China, including Hong Kong based Phoenix TV and Singapore's *Lianhe Zaobao* newspaper. More than three-quarters, however, said they routinely accessed foreign media directly in English, either online or via satellite television. Most commonly viewed were the BBC (9 respondents out of 16), the New York Times (5), CNN, the Economist, the Financial Times, Time (4 each), and the Wall Street Journal (2). Other choices included Bloomberg News, Foreign Policy, National Geographic, Reader's Digest – and the official website of the NBA.¹⁶⁵

Respondents' reasons for selecting these media outlets generally emphasized respect for their journalistic values and credibility. While almost a third did acknowledge that practising their English was also a factor, they, like the majority of respondents, cited other motivations too – that these media were “authoritative” (5 respondents) and “fast” in their reporting (4); that they were “famous” (3), “comprehensive” (2), or “influential”, and provided “quality reporting”, or that they simply represented “the mainstream attitudes of the [international] media”, as one respondent put it.

Several respondents emphasized that these media offered them more information than China's domestic media outlets: “Since China's media is controlled, they help me to get the facts of some big events”, said one. “Coverage in China [‘s own media] lacks the truth. Sometimes we just feel that we can get the real information only from foreign coverage,” added another. A third said she was interested to read viewpoints that were “different from [China's] domestic media,” and to “compare western and international views of topical issues.”¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁴ While the BBC's Chinese site is blocked in China, respondents were presumably able to access it either by using Virtual Private Networks (VPNs), or because they were abroad.

¹⁶⁵ N.B.: These responses were given before the blocking of the websites of Bloomberg News and the New York Times in China in 2012.

¹⁶⁶ The phrases quoted in this paragraph and the one above it are the respondents' own; they were not selected from a range of multiple choice options.

There was also much interest in what the international media had to say about China: just over two-thirds of respondents said they were 'extremely interested' in foreign coverage of the country; several others were 'a little interested'; only one respondent was 'not very interested'.

ii Concerns about coverage of China

Quantity

Yet the respondents' reactions to the foreign coverage they saw were not so uniformly enthusiastic. Almost half felt that the international media did not devote enough space to coverage of China – though more than a third felt the quantity was about right, while two even said, without explaining why, that there was 'too much' coverage of their country. One respondent sought to explain the former perception: "From a Chinese point of view, of course the coverage is not enough and not thorough," she said, "but on the other hand, this is natural since they are foreign media – their focus is not on China."

Relevance

As for the choice of topics covered by foreign media, almost half the respondents felt that these were only 'sometimes' relevant, while a further quarter felt they were 'not often relevant'. Another quarter did think they were 'often relevant' – but no-one chose the option 'always relevant' (though one respondent did suggest that what foreign media organizations reported was "right from their own point of view.")

Objectivity

There were also mixed feelings over the objectivity of foreign media coverage of China. Just over half the respondents felt it was either 'objective' (2) or 'mostly' objective (7). But almost one-third (5), however, said it was 'not objective enough', and one respondent felt it was 'not objective at all.' Another respondent said she believed that foreign journalists "try to be" objective – but added that she wasn't sure "how much information they have".

Accuracy

Dissatisfaction with the accuracy of foreign reporting of China, meanwhile, was particularly pronounced. More than half (9) of those surveyed said they felt coverage was generally 'not

accurate enough'; just over a third believed it was either 'accurate' (3 respondents) or 'mainly accurate' (3), while one said foreign journalists were "doing their best".

There were some nuances to these views, however. Almost half of those who felt that foreign reporting on China was 'not accurate enough', for example, nevertheless believed that such coverage was 'mostly objective', while more than half of them still felt it was 'sometimes' or 'often' relevant. The implication seems to be that at least some of this group did not see this perceived 'inaccuracy' as the result of deliberate conspiracy or bias.

Specific concerns

The respondents (approximately half the total) who chose to expand on and explain their views on the above issues cited several areas of suspicion and dissatisfaction with the foreign media. While one respondent was broadly positive, praising international media coverage of a fatal high-speed rail crash near Wenzhou in southern China in 2011 (when the authorities initially sought to muzzle domestic reporting of the details of the crash) and arguing that "only the foreign media" provided "complete information" about what had happened, the others raised various grounds for concern:

Overly critical?

Some respondents who were generally quite conciliatory in their attitude to the international media nonetheless felt that there was, as one put it, "quite a lot of critical coverage" in foreign reporting of China. One suggested that the "International media have great interest in China, especially when it comes to democracy and human rights issues. The image of China reflected in Western media is not very positive."

Tibet coverage: "Uglifying China"?

Coverage of Tibet was a topic raised by several respondents – perhaps not surprisingly, given the anger in China in 2008 over foreign coverage of the riots in Lhasa. One critical respondent said that "CNN's reports on Tibetan independence were denounced by Chinese people." Another said it was "unprofessional" for major media organizations to say they had simply "used the wrong picture" when reporting on the Lhasa riots (see Chapter 1), while a third said the western

media had “double standards,” and asked: “Have these journalists who report on Tibet and Xinjiang actually been to these places?”

One of the most critical respondents, who accused the international media of “intentional distortion of the 14th March incident [riots] in Tibet”, also described what he saw as general biases in foreign coverage of China. “Some of these are the result of these country’s interests”, he suggested, while “others result from foreign media’s lack of understanding, and the dominance of long-held preconceptions.” (In the case of Tibet coverage, he argued, the latter was the key factor.) There was, he said, a tendency to “over-uglify (sic) China and emphasize the China threat.” (Strikingly, though, he also suggested that foreign media were, at other times, guilty of writing “empty words, and over-prettyfying China,” though he did not give any examples of such coverage.)

Not enough in-depth or ‘human’ coverage?

Respondents also expressed concern about several other aspects of foreign coverage. One suggested that many international media organizations covered economic and social issues well, but political and human rights issues poorly. There was too much “subjective comment” and not enough on-the-ground reporting and interviews, she said, arguing that this “gives one the overall feeling that [the reporting] is not very objective”. She also suggested that foreign journalists should “report more on ordinary people’s lives and stories, instead of the democracy and social movement issues.”

Indeed, the depth of coverage was a concern for several of those surveyed – including some who were broadly well-disposed to the foreign media. One, who generally saw foreign media reporting as ‘professional’ and ‘accurate’, nonetheless noted that “some coverage lacks first-hand information, [and] seems like a collection of other media’s reports... Maybe it is not easy for foreign journalists to do interviews in China,” she suggested.

Another respondent also complained about superficial reporting, commenting: “I really can’t stand reports on China by CNN – not that they are biased or anti-China, but just because they are too shallow. In-depth investigative reports, such as the reports by Evan Osnos for the New Yorker, are,” he suggested, “more useful for understanding what is happening in China.” And he called for more coverage of “the non-political side of China,” adding, “Yes, it exists!”

iii Negative impact: on foreign attitudes to China – and on Chinese attitudes to the outside world

Regardless of their views of the quality of reporting, all the respondents, without exception, felt that international media coverage of China had a negative impact on foreign people's attitudes towards the country. One respondent, who had complained of intentional distortion over Tibet, said this impact was 'very negative'; the remainder saw it as 'a bit negative.'

One respondent, who had praised foreign media for covering topics China's own media could not, did suggest, however, that this negative impact was simply a reflection of a relatively negative reality, adding that her own attitude towards the international media itself was actually 'slightly more positive' as a result of its coverage of China.

Just over half of those surveyed, though, said that what they saw as the failings of foreign coverage of China affected their own views of the international media 'a bit negatively' (though more than a third said these had 'no impact').

A quarter of respondents, meanwhile, also said that such perceived failings had a 'slightly negative' impact on their views of foreign countries in general. More than two-thirds, however said foreign reporting of China had 'no effect' on their views of the outside world, while one respondent – as noted above – said it had a 'slightly positive' impact.

iv Critical attitudes towards Chinese media coverage too

Strikingly, the responses to the 'control' questions in the survey suggested that many of the respondents, while critical of aspects of foreign coverage of China, were far from being unquestioning in their acceptance of the Chinese government line. Asked whether China's own media provided accurate reports of what foreign media wrote or said about the country, all but three of those surveyed replied in the negative. Two said Chinese media reports on the topic were 'mostly accurate'; and one had no opinion. The remainder, however, thought domestic media reports on this issue were either 'not accurate enough' (11 respondents), or 'not accurate at all' (2 respondents, both of whom were, overall, moderately critical of western media reporting).

More broadly, their views of China's own media coverage of foreign countries in general also reflected a similar cynicism. Asked how such coverage compared to foreign media reporting of China, only one respondent (who was generally the most critical of the foreign media) replied that Chinese coverage of international affairs was 'a bit better'. Almost two-thirds (10) felt it was 'about the same'; while the remainder felt it was 'a bit worse' (3), or 'much worse' (2). In other words the majority of respondents felt that the failings they saw in foreign coverage of China were at least echoed in Chinese media coverage of the outside world.

One respondent, who had criticized the foreign media, for example, described Chinese media's reporting of international news as 'similar', suggesting that "they all just focus on negative news about the other side".

Another, who had been critical of foreign media for lacking objectivity (especially regarding Tibet), argued that "many Chinese reports about foreign countries are subject to political guidance and controls, so it's hard to avoid bias, especially in major mainstream media."¹⁶⁷

A third respondent, meanwhile, said she felt that mainstream Chinese media were "more likely [than foreign media] to be neutral when introducing news from abroad," but added that "when the outside world does something to China which is seen as damaging the nation's interest or image, the Chinese media will step up criticism, and will sometimes even be too biased." As evidence, she cited Chinese media reports criticizing France in the run-up to the 2008 Olympics.

One respondent went further, suggesting that most Chinese coverage of foreign news was biased, and noting that: "Chinese media often tells us that it's very dangerous and tumultuous in foreign countries, and China is the most peaceful country in the world."

Another, who was generally sympathetic to international media, argued, however, that "basically, each country and each media has its own standpoint – from this point of view, there is not much difference, as they just speak for their allies".

¹⁶⁷ The respondent suggested, for example, that "there was obvious bias in the [Chinese] reports on Gadhafi" during the Libyan uprising in early 2011, when Beijing for a long time maintained a supportive attitude towards the late Libyan leader.

v Support for foreign media reporting on China – and influencing China too?

As an extra control question, designed to further assess their fundamental attitude to the international media, respondents were asked whether they supported the idea of foreign correspondents being allowed to be based in, and report from, China. All but one said they did support this notion – indeed almost one-third (five respondents) said they ‘greatly supported’ it. No-one opposed the idea outright; only one respondent, who was generally critical of the foreign media, said he had ‘no view’.

There was an even more adamant response to the follow-up question, which asked whether it would be better if foreigners only gained their information about China from Chinese media sources. Over two-thirds of respondents (11) said this would be ‘much worse’; three said it would be a ‘bit worse’. Two respondents said the end result would be ‘about the same’, but no-one felt that such a situation would be ‘better’.

Even the potentially controversial suggestion that the international media might sometimes have a positive impact in changing China found support from almost two-thirds (10) of the respondents, including two people who ‘strongly supported’ the idea. Only one opposed the idea outright; the remainder (5) expressed no view, though one suggested that it was not the job of media organizations to try to change China, saying they should just get on with reporting.

Summary: Food for thought

Overall, the sample survey suggests a nuanced picture. Many of the respondents retained a fair degree of underlying respect for the international media, and welcomed both its presence in China, and at least some of the information it provided on China. Some also felt that its reporting could sometimes be beneficial to China’s long-term development. Many respondents were also critical of how China’s own media reported on foreign coverage of the country, and on the outside world in general.

At the same time, many respondents shared concerns about foreign coverage of China. Around a quarter felt it was strongly biased (with the question of coverage of Tibet in 2008 prominent among their concerns).¹⁶⁸

Many others, who were less fundamentally suspicious of – or even broadly favourable to – the international media nevertheless had doubts about the accuracy and relevance of foreign reporting (though, interestingly, they had fewer concerns about its objectivity). Similarly, many felt that a greater effort needed to be made to show the ‘human face’ of the country.

Furthermore, there was a widespread sense that foreign media coverage had a negative affect on some foreigners’ views of China – and evidence that the issue also had a negative effect on at least some Chinese people’s perceptions of the outside world.

Thus the apparent residual goodwill towards major international media organizations was undermined both by worries that in their coverage of China, they did not always ‘get the story right’ – and more broadly, by concerns about the impact of such reporting on perceptions both inside and outside China.

¹⁶⁸ It is perhaps worth noting that, among those with the strongest views, on for example, issues like Tibet, were respondents who read the foreign media themselves only occasionally. These included the only respondent who specified that they read *Cankao Xiaoxi*, or Reference News, the traditional official source of information about the outside world. (This respondent listed his main direct foreign media sources as Singapore’s *Lianhe Zaobao* and the website of the NBA.)

Chapter 3

Covering China: Foreign journalists' views

To find out more about how those reporting from China saw some of these issues, I interviewed eight journalists who were, or in one case had previously been, based in the country. For their own convenience, I will not name them, but four were American and four European, and they all worked for major mainstream media organizations (three newspapers, one magazine, two news agencies and two broadcasters). Five worked in English, the remainder in other European languages.

On average they had worked in China for more than nine years. Two had been in the country, at least on and off, since the mid-1990s, while all but one had reported from China in 2008, the year of the controversies surrounding the Olympics and the Tibet riots, and of the Sichuan earthquake. Most of them spoke fairly good Chinese before they began working in the country; the other two had picked up at least functional spoken Chinese since taking on their jobs.

Three were expected by their employers to focus primarily on economics and business-related stories, whilst the others covered a wider spectrum of social, political and other news – though all seemed to share a desire to report as broadly as possible and, as will be seen, several sometimes chafed at the limitations of the remit given them by their editors.

I sought their views on a variety of issues including the types of subject they covered and wanted to cover, the influence of editors over their coverage, their views on the question of balance, other factors affecting their reporting in China, and their feelings about the quality of international media coverage of China in general.

Their answers were detailed and often revealing. Most felt that there was often excellent reporting about China by the international media, and dismissed the idea of a concerted plot against the country. At the same time they also raised a variety of concerns. These included obstacles thrown up by China's official system, but also issues related to these journalists' own editors – and in some cases broader anxieties about the way the media worked in general.

Aims and ambitions in covering China

Telling a broad story:

The journalists had varying perceptions of exactly what their role as a journalist entailed, but they generally expressed a desire to make sense of China for their audiences around the world. “I think of my job as trying to explain what’s happening in China and how it relates to people back in the US,” was how one put it, adding that his ideal was to write “a story which tells you why what’s going on here is really significant, and why you need to care about it.”

All seemed keen to present as diverse a picture of China as the limits of their jobs allowed. Of those with an economic focus, one also sought to cover as many environmental issues as possible, while another stressed that even if one’s job was officially to report on the economy, it was impossible to avoid writing about politics too, because “in China they’re so closely connected.”

Another, who had spent his career as a business journalist, had become interested in “all aspects: society, business, environment, human rights” since arriving in China. It was a “very very interesting” place, he said, its society in particular:

“You have the feeling that you’re at the centre of something big. I’m especially interested by the conflicts between generations due to the rapid changing of mentalities,” he explained. “It might be the wedding market that illustrates how parents are desperate to find a husband with a good background and income for their children, while the children want to take more time to choose Mr. or Mrs. Right; or the story of women married to gay men, who didn’t know their husband was gay before marrying him.”

Another journalist also emphasized that it was China’s capacity to throw up unexpected new stories which was the biggest attraction for him: “The best part of reporting China is when you travel to some place and discover a completely new story that you haven’t heard about before,” he said, “or you learn something new, some insight.” The country was developing so fast, he noted, that “you can stumble across phenomena which are completely new and surprising.”

Focusing on the human side:

And many of the interviewees emphasized their desire to put a human face on the stories they reported. One business journalist defined his role as reporting on the “Chinese economy at the macro level, told from the personal level”. He explained that he loved “original personal stories which are indicative of a bigger truth,” adding that even when covering the economy, it was necessary “to get into people’s homes to really understand what’s happening” (and, he said, in as many different parts of the country as possible.)

Another correspondent with a long-term economic focus also said that the stories he liked best contained “elements of profile”, and gave him the chance to “talk to somebody in depth.” He noted, for example, that many media often covered stories such as labour unrest largely by quoting analysts, but argued: “if you want to write a story about workers you should go and talk to them – they have much to say and are very interesting.” He had talked to workers “who’d been on strike or were about to go on strike, and asked them how much they made, what benefits they had, where they were from, why they came here,” he said, “and I felt it made it a better story than just quoting [human] rights analysts.”

He agreed there could be pitfalls in choosing “one person to represent 1.3 billion people... If you just go and get one quote from someone and use that, then the discussion is not very deep,” he said. “But if you really talk to someone and understand [their situation] I feel it can make it a better story.”

And another long-time reporter stressed that the most fascinating aspect of China’s economic development (“the biggest story of the century”, in his words) was in fact the human aspect. “You can talk to everyone,” he said. “You can talk to CEOs who all have amazing stories because they all built their businesses with their own hands.” It fitted well, he added, with his own principle that “you always try to find characters which tell the story – we’re not talking about news here, it’s a story, and you have to have a character.”

As an example he cited a story he wrote which he “really loved” about a man suing Chinese bookstores for selling a Chinese dictionary which he said was riddled with errors: it was a profile piece which also gave the reader an insight into the development of China’s legal system, he explained.

A job well done?

In general, many of those interviewed seemed to have a broadly positive view of the overall standard of foreign media coverage of China. “I think the breadth of coverage is reasonable,” said one veteran journalist, adding that he felt that things had improved from the early days of the western media’s presence in post-Mao China, when, as he put it, “everything was new and fresh”, and many journalists wrote what he saw as clichéd stories about “a mystical China – the ‘everything is amazing’ type story which was common in the 1980s: cricket fighting or tai-chi in the park,” he noted. “Every correspondent who came in would revisit those. Now thankfully we’re beyond that.”

Another American reporter agreed that “a lot of journalism is really good... I think it’s got better in the last five years,” he added. “Now there are more journalists who speak the language here, and the system has become more transparent too.”

Another journalist with long experience in China, meanwhile, also felt that “the coverage has got better. In fact I think it’s pretty damn good,” she said. “We’re all looking at what each other is writing, and I think there are a lot of good people out here, and I think people are pretty responsible about what they’re doing.”

As examples, she cited in-depth “quasi-business features” by media such as NPR, Reuters or Bloomberg which, she said, “painted a really nice picture of the situation on the ground,” and added “a new angle, new information, or more depth.”

Yet some respondents did express anxieties: one correspondent for a major English-language newspaper concurred that there was now “an incredible amount of good reporting about China, and information available to anyone who wants it, in terms of blogs, and experts,” but added that “if you only limit yourself to the major international papers, magazines and TV, I think you’re going to have a very narrow view of China, you just couldn’t get a deep understanding of the country.”

It was a hint at the concerns of many of the journalists I interviewed, some of which are discussed below.

Factors hampering coverage:

Many of those I spoke to agreed that there were a number of factors which limited their ability to cover all the stories they wanted to, or to report in the depth they wished to. These included practical areas such as funding, the time given to them to work on a story, the availability of space or airtime for their reports, and also factors such as the attitudes of the editors they worked with.

i A lack of resources

A shortage of funds was seen by several respondents as a significant problem, since this either meant limits on how much travelling they could do around China – or simply led to relatively short-staffing, which meant they had less opportunity either to be away from their offices for long periods, or indeed to work on more creative stories outside the day to day news agenda.

One European journalist who liked to travel widely, for example, noted that his editors were affected by tight budgets: “They’re constantly downsizing and being depressed!” he observed. “They’re interested in my story ideas, but the problem is they buy too few of them – they don’t have that money.”

Another reporter, who worked for a major international media organization, complained that budgets had become much tighter than they were in her early days in China, when she felt she was free to “just choose a topic” and work on it as she wished. Now it could be hard even to get permission to go away from her home base for a day, she said. “It’s just getting harder now because we have fewer and fewer people,” she explained. “Our resources are so limited now, the feeling is we must discipline ourselves to put our energy, time, money into whatever is going to matter the most.”

Editors still wanted “impact and depth,” she said, “but they don’t want to spend the money or allow the person the time to do it... The money situation is so tight that you have to convince them that you’ve got an exclusive, something super high impact.”

A third journalist agreed that “the issue is really time to do a good story,” while several shared the view of one respondent who argued that technological advances over the past couple of decades, notably the arrival of the internet and rolling TV news, with their demand for instant

updates, had also increased pressure to write stories “too fast.” Another respondent added that readers’ greater ease of access to information, via the internet, also meant that journalists now had to work harder to “provide the level of detail and information” required in stories today: “It was easier before the internet era,” she said. “The content demand has really changed now. People are better informed, they already know the basics – so there’s more digging to be done, it’s more labour intensive – at a time when we have fewer hands to do the work.”

(And the same correspondent also stressed that she felt it was necessary to set aside time each week to “read a big chunk of newspapers in Chinese. I skim some, and read some articles, which are sometimes very interesting,” she said, adding, “I think my bosses would say ‘you’re wasting your time – someone else should be reading those.’ But I’m sorry, I think you have to do it yourself – otherwise you’re just missing so much.”)

ii Shortage of space

Several of the interviewees also expressed concern about their media outlets not providing them with enough space or airtime to do justice to the stories they worked on. As one broadcast journalist put it, “It’s hard. I work on a feature for so long and they always cut it down for time – and they usually cut a lot of the good stuff out.” A news agency journalist also complained that editors often “took a lot out” of features he’d spent a long time researching, and frequently “didn’t want so much detail or colour.” It meant, he said, that stories sometimes became so short that they were at risk of “falling into clichés.”

A few news [and newspaper] magazines were praised by respondents for continuing to run long-form features – but at the same time one interviewee noted that the space for “medium-long” stories in his newspaper had shrunk over the years – meaning that reports now tended to be either “very short or very long.”

Indeed, one respondent suggested that it was now a “worldwide issue” that reports in newspapers were tending to become shorter. “I always like to read a longer newspaper story, but the papers are now trying to compete with the newswires more,” he said, “[so] you’re not getting it any more... I think it’s lowered the overall quality of the coverage – I really miss a long, well-researched newspaper story.” And it was particularly an issue where coverage of China was concerned, this journalist suggested:

"China, dare I say, is more difficult," he argued. "I think it often needs explaining to western readers more than a story about somewhere else, so you need a little more space."

lii The pressure of competition

Several interviewees linked their concerns about coverage to what they saw as heightened competition between media organizations in recent years. One news agency reporter suggested that their agency's agenda was now "driven so much more by news," to the detriment of other types of reporting. And a business journalist who liked to do in-depth, human-focused stories suggested that he was often prevented from doing so because his media organization wanted him to do what he described as "unoriginal following the wires kind of bullshit... It's the curse of any financial journalist," he said. "You're battling this machine that just wants you to be a [news] reporter."

Another journalist with an economic focus, meanwhile, expressed even deeper worries about the impact on creative reporting: "There's just so much competition between the media, and so much effort to ensure that 'if they had it then we've got to have it too'," he said. "Nobody can seem to have a story that goes unmatched, and because China's such a complex story I think that's sort of a disservice: if the goal is to match everybody else, that really limits the ability to tell what's got to be one of the most complicated stories in the world." The situation was made worse by the fact that "there's only so much time or space or airtime to devote to stories... The paper's only going to run one China story today, and say we know that our rivals are going to have a story about this, so we feel that we should definitely have it too," he explained, "instead of spending more time on a feature story about something that nobody else knows anything about... I find it's harder and harder to propose a feature story as just something out of the blue."

His own ideal, he added, was to write "counter-intuitive" feature stories. "I think people do have a lot of preconceived notions about China," he suggested, "and if I'm going to spend a lot of time reporting something, I want to cover a subject that I think people couldn't imagine, something that really challenges what they think." In practice, however, he felt the pressures described above led to reporting which was sometimes "simplistic", sometimes "somewhat unbalanced or even sensational, certainly shallower."

One reason for this growing competition, among financial media outlets at least, was China's increased global economic significance: "Ten years no-one paid any attentions to Chinese statistics," he recalled. "Now coverage is very statistic driven, because China is affecting financial markets around the world, and it's a major business story.... So it's all parsed much more carefully and gets widespread coverage. And it becomes an issue, when newspaper editors in Washington have got to be saying, 'well, where's our story about this trend?'"

It sometimes led, he said, to what he called "echo chamber" reporting, with what he saw as an excessive emphasis on "financial markets, comments from analysts, movement in markets, corporate statements, prices of things, things that lend themselves to very short term trading opportunity type stories – and feature stories that just elaborate on those themes." There was a place for such journalism, he agreed – but argued that "it's not always a great view of the country – it would be like telling the US story by only looking at the stock price or the Dow industrial average."

The end result, he suggested, was that coverage was now often driven by what he saw as relatively minor news events "which I think when I first came here [a decade earlier] would be just anecdotes to include in your big feature story, rather than a daily story." Such an approach, he said, didn't "always allow a lot of opportunity to step back and really understand what is fundamental."

The influence of editors

The influence of editors was generally agreed to have a great influence on the quality of the interviewees' reporting – and the type of story they were able to cover. Sometimes this was a general issue, relating to the culture of the particular media organization. One of the interviewees, for example, emphasized that his editors generally allowed themselves to be guided by his opinions on what kind of story should be covered: "My editors want my view, that's why they have a correspondent," he said. Even the business editors he had worked with had allowed him a lot of leeway in the type of topic he had covered: from their point of view, a business story "was anything involving money", however tangential.

But others had more ambivalent relationships with their editors. One news agency reporter, for example, was fairly critical of their influence: “These people have to have a justification for their jobs, and want to be in control of setting the agenda to a certain extent – [and] if you have one person in a decision making position, and that one person is very idiosyncratic, it can mean that certain aspects of coverage get short shrift.”

This reporter cited a tendency to focus on facts and figures rather than personalities or trends as evidence of a rather ‘macho’ bias among the organization’s editors, adding “we don’t do enough social stuff, we don’t do enough lifestyles and features: the assumption is that these are sort of superfluous because ‘we are serious people doing serious news’.” As a result, the reporter added, “there’s not so much in the way of getting out there and telling the story of ordinary Chinese people. That stuff is interesting, and people want to read it. But unfortunately my experience has been that many news editors are not looking at the whole news report.”

Another correspondent, meanwhile, expressed concern about how his editors would sometimes “just unilaterally take things out of your script” without consulting him. They would think fairly carefully before making such cuts, he acknowledged, but added: “but I think it’s dangerous.”

i Increasing awareness of China

Some aspects of editorial influence, meanwhile, were China-specific. On the one hand, there was an acknowledgement that editors were in some respects better informed about China than they had been in the past, and that, sometimes at least, this could be beneficial. One European reporter said it was “amazing” how much more his editors knew about China now, compared to a decade earlier:

“In 2000 I contacted an editor of a [European] business daily to offer him some stories, and said I’ll give you my email and my mobile number,” he recalled. “And he wrote back and said ‘Ha ha, email and mobile phones won’t work in China!’ And I think China was already the world’s biggest mobile market at that time!” he added. Nowadays, on the other hand, editors “would very specifically say ‘we want a story on the new accounting law, or the shareholders of [telecoms company] Huawei’.”

A second reporter agreed that things had changed, adding that it was “much easier to deal with editors who know about China than those who don’t, or who have a preconceived notion.”

Another journalist, however, saw his editors’ greater access to information about China as a double-edged sword, suggesting that sometimes this only encouraged preconceived ideas: “The main change with editors is that they’ve all been to China and they’ve all been reading China stories for years, and now they’re the China experts!” he said. As a result, he added, “they have more confidence to offer their opinions, suggest or demand stories, kill stories, change leads, or heavily edit. That’s good and bad: some are really well educated, but there are others who maybe have been to China a couple of times, and are playing catch up, and have all kinds of, well, stereotypical views about stuff.” The result, he suggested was that “more and more stories fit in with their preconceptions.”

And one respondent also argued that growing general knowledge about China in the outside world had eroded the autonomy and influence of the journalists working in the country, something she saw as a negative:

“When I first moved to Beijing in the 1990s, none of our editors back home was paying that close attention to China, and they didn’t have the slightest clue what the story was, so they would never try to tell us what to do,” she explained. “So I was very lucky – there was very little second-guessing. Sometimes people would ask for features, but generally they were just grateful for whatever they could get – and that’s not the case anymore!”

ii The language question

At the same time some journalists expressed concern about some editors’ continuing willingness to send journalists to work in China who did not speak the language when they arrived. Several veteran China correspondents agreed that, as one put it, “some people do extremely good work even though they don’t speak Chinese,” one noting that “it can be good to look at something with completely fresh eyes.” Another reporter, who had worked in a number of countries in Asia, also stressed that “it’s not always possible to speak the language – most of the countries where I work I don’t speak the language and I think I’m still a good journalist.”

However, he acknowledged that speaking the language certainly helped him understand China – while another reporter, who had arrived not speaking Chinese, felt that this had made his work “very very difficult.” And a correspondent who had come to the country without speaking the language some years earlier emphasized that “The more I understand the more it’s helped me to know what going on,” he said, “to catch the drift of a conversation, watch the body language of the person speaking or those around – it’s definitely hugely important.” Noting drily that “It would be hard to report on the US not speaking English”, he suggested that “I don’t know if I could get my job now – there are enough young people out there now who can speak great Chinese.”

One experienced reporter acknowledged that someone who didn’t speak the language “may be able to do a good job if they have amazing assistants and are able to use them really well,” but added that she felt it would be hard “to do groundbreaking journalism in this country without the language.” And one interviewee stressed that working through a translator presented particular difficulties in a country where news assistants were officially employed by the government, and could face pressures of various kinds. “Sometimes the mistakes are small, sometimes they’re big,” he said. “But you’re going through another layer for communication. And it’s not only that the translation might be bad, but the information is being filtered through another person who might have their own viewpoint. I’ve definitely noticed this”

lii Fear of complexity?

Several journalists also expressed frustration that their editors sometimes seemed to be daunted by the complexity of China, and lacked the confidence to confront this. For one American reporter, this was reflected in his editors’ obsession with there being a US angle in all the stories he reported. “They’d say I’m covering China, but from the stories they want, I’d say they see my job as reporting American news from China,” he said. It meant, he explained, that he sometimes felt as if he was actually “covering America through a Chinese lens. I really feel our listeners don’t want this,” he argued. “I think they want real stories about China, and I’m pretty sure they’d appreciate some stories that don’t even have one mention of the US!” But he felt that his editors “truly believe in their heart of hearts that American listeners just cannot understand stories [purely] about China.”

A European journalist, meanwhile, felt that his editors “should have much more coverage about China, because China’s so important,” but said that, while this had improved a little, “It’s still very hard to do stories about how China actually works, the party and the state... They find it confusing, something they don’t know about.” Their attitude, he felt, was that such stories were “complicated... and no-one wants to read about this when they’re having breakfast.”

And even when editors did commission more complex stories about China, he said, they still tended to use over-simplistic headlines, which often undermined his report. He cited a story he had written about China’s system of Communist Party Schools, which train officials and managers of state enterprises. “I wrote that the party had studied the collapse of the USSR and said we need a more professional bureaucracy,” he recalled, adding that he felt this strategy had ensured that not only had China “not collapsed”, but that it was now “thriving.”

His editors, however, had headlined the story: “These people stop China collapsing,” which he felt was too negative: “They [i.e. the editors] always go for ‘China may collapse’,” he said, adding that this had “become a genre story – that China’s on the brink of collapse and has been for 20 years now. Maybe it will, but that wasn’t my emphasis in this story.”

It was a reminder, he said, that the media tended to “often confirm our image of the world rather than doing something new.” He had had similar problems, he added, when he wrote about the Internet in China: “They always want: ‘people refuse to be silenced and get around the restrictions’,” he said, “when actually my story was that the machine does quite well at keeping the lid on.”

Iv A focus on the negative?

And one European broadcast journalist, a freelancer, felt that editors’ preconceptions sometimes had an even more fundamental affect on his work. In some cases, he said, there was what he described as “a problem between what you see and what editors want in the newsroom back home.” In particular, he said, he had worked for one editor who he felt was “not balanced,” and who often wanted to focus on the “the China threat,” in economic terms at least: “It was always some cliché, like how workers work twenty hours a day, for example,” he explained, adding that such attitudes were the result of lazy thinking: “China frightens people in

Europe,” he said, “and especially at a time of economic crisis some editors will, for example, prefer the traditional story of how China simply copies all our home made products.”

Such attitudes meant, he said, that it was often harder to report on what he described as “so-called positive” stories. “If you want to show some “good” initiatives from the Chinese authorities, something changing, maybe the migrants’ situation improving in some cities, or different ways to deal with pollution, it’s always more difficult to sell,” he noted, recalling that he had “tried to sell a report about how China tries to create ‘cleaner’ coal burning power plants, but that was quite difficult.”

Not all editors were so narrow-minded, he emphasized, adding that there were also ways of getting around such obstacles, either by selling reports on these topics to specialist programmes focusing on areas like the environment or health. And he stressed that “I’ve never done an angle that I don’t want to do. Most of the time I succeed in bargaining with the people – when they ask for a report and say we want you to talk about migrants in such and such a way, I say it’s not exactly like that, you don’t live in the country, I’m going to explain a few things... and they do listen.”

However, he acknowledged that the attitudes of editors did mean that “the stories I sell are not always the ones that I feel are the most interesting in China. You have to relate to your clients, and I pitch the stories which can be more easily sold.”

And several other journalists also suggested they were concerned that their editors did sometimes over-emphasize certain types of story, particularly those relating to human rights issues in China. One reporter felt that some media did “heavily weigh human rights stories. And it’s not just the volume,” he added, “—it’s the emphasis given to them, deciding whether to make something a news alert, for example.”

He cited the focus on the story of the artist Ai Weiwei after he was detained by the Chinese authorities for several months in 2011: “the idea that one must have something [on the story] every day,” as he put it. (Another journalist, though, suggested that the focus on Ai Weiwei was

partly of the authorities' own making. "If you don't want bad press then don't kidnap your most famous artist," he said. "What did the guy do? He was helping parents whose children were crushed when a school collapsed on top of them," he said, referring to Ai's campaign to document the names of all the children killed in school buildings during the Sichuan earthquake of 2008.)

Nor did the first reporter feel that "every single Tibetan monk or nun who tried to self-immolate"¹⁶⁹ should become headline news, not least, he argued, "since it's not original reporting: they [news agencies] are either quoting Xinhua or Tibetan human rights groups. If you just relentlessly hammer on about human rights stories you turn into Radio Free Asia," he added.¹⁷⁰ "You need a balance of types of story."

The correspondent who had expressed concerns about "echo-chamber journalism" also suggested that human rights stories did tend to be replicated in the media on a particularly large scale.

"I think there's a little bit of that when it comes to those 'How is Chinese society being pushed around today by the government?'-type stories," he said. "There's competition not to be beaten on those stories, or at least not to not have those stories – they have to be covered."

As for the question of coverage of Tibet in 2008, one European journalist also suggested that some editors back home "were pretty uninformed about what really happened in Lhasa – they had their clichés in mind," while another added that there was "a sense of editors hearing about the Lhasa riot and then putting two and two together and making six."

As an example, he said that one western news agency had sent a photographer to an exhibition of weapons used in the riots – and recalled that the pictures were later "captioned as weapons used against Tibetans," when in fact they were weapons which had been "taken from Tibetans."

¹⁶⁹ A series of self immolations in ethnic Tibetan regions is reported to have begun in 2009, leading to dozens, possibly more than 100 deaths.

¹⁷⁰ Radio Free Asia was set up by an act passed by the US congress in 1994, with the aim of 'promoting freedom' in Asia in the aftermath of the Tiananmen crackdown in 1989; it broadcasts in 9 languages including Chinese and Tibetan.

v Preconceptions not always negative

Yet while the above might appear to provide fuel for those who see anti-China bias in some media, there was also evidence that the determination of (some) editors to impose their own views on coverage of China did not always lead to negative coverage. One American journalist with a primarily economic focus noted, for example, that he had proposed a trip to Xinjiang following the 2009 riots in Urumqi, to reports on the impact and aftermath of the unrest (topics which could have raised issues considered sensitive by the Chinese authorities). However his editors rejected the idea, because they did not think it was relevant to either the US or the “global economy”. The same applied to his proposal to cover the Wenzhou high speed rail crash in 2011, which led to a storm of criticism of the authorities online and in the Chinese media. Similarly, he said, “I wouldn’t pitch a story about Tibetans burning themselves to death unless I could really make a strong case that there was an economic reason it was happening!”

Another journalist also noted that he had been unsuccessful in attempts to persuade his editors to allow him to travel to ethnic Tibetan regions of China to report on the tension there, because they were unwilling to cover the costs of the trip.

And despite the criticisms of ‘negative’ coverage of China in the German media in the 2008 report commissioned by the Heinrich Boell Foundation (see Chapter 1), one German journalist argued that there was in fact a period in the last decade when editors in that country were primarily interested in ‘good news’ stories about China.

“There was a time between 2002 and 2006 maybe, where everyone in Germany especially was really excited and really positive about China,” he said. “In 2002 [the news magazine] Der Spiegel had a cover story about Shanghai being ‘the city of the future,’ and soon everyone was celebrating Shanghai as the future. This was a time when a lot of media discovered that China was much more than Beijing,” he added. “And we had the new economy bubble bursting in Europe, so people were fed up with the crisis and were looking for hope, and they saw that hope in China, and were really positive about everything happening here.”

He had been a freelance reporter at the time, he said, “and you can’t believe who called me – literally every magazine in Germany was doing a cover story about China – and the stories they asked me to do were nearly exclusively positive for years.”

Even amidst the tension of the run-up to the Olympic Games in 2008, he noted, the editors of his business section had devoted a lot of space to coverage of China’s economy, adding: “I noticed they wanted more positive things. They never tried to guide me in one particular direction,” he said, “but I noticed they liked stories which told about growth and how things were changing. They didn’t like pure dissident stuff much, and they thought it’s interesting to focus on a positive side of China – they wanted to see another side of China’s growth.”

vi Conspiracy theories rejected

Several of the interviewees also went out of their way to reject the allegation, common in some circles in China, that there is a ‘foreign media conspiracy’ against the country.

As one put it: “There are two criticisms of the foreign media in China that I take issue with: one is grouping the foreign media as ‘the foreign media’ – you can’t put all these very different organizations together. The other is mistaking incompetence or mistakes for a political agenda. Yes a photo may be captioned incorrectly – but it’s captioned incorrectly out of ignorance, not because someone is trying to demonize China. It’s a rushed photographer or editor doing a sloppy job...”

Another made the same point more succinctly: “There is no conspiracy against China,” he said. “It’s not like China, we’re competing companies!”

Finding a balance:

So how did the reporters themselves perceive the question of balance in their coverage – given that this has been such a hotly contested issue?

i Basic principles

On a basic level they generally agreed that, as one news agency reporter put it, it was necessary for “an individual story to be balanced – we do that on the micro level at each stage of each story” (i.e. in terms of choosing who to quote and which points of view they represent).

ii Diversity of views

In terms of balance in their coverage of China as a whole – in other words in the choice of stories they reported over a period of time, and the type of image of China which these stories, taken together, presented – their views were more varied, however. Some respondents, for example, suggested that maintaining a balance of different types of stories wasn’t necessarily something they spent much time worrying about. As one TV reporter put it, “I really just try to sell everything I find interesting.”

A newspaper reporter agreed that “there’s just too much going on [to worry about this question]. I’m happy if I’ve done a feature or even just a quick spot news story with some broader context in it,” he said. Within his stories, he said, “I’m trying to present a fuller, more balanced view of what’s going on,” but, he added, “We shouldn’t over-emphasize the balance, we should emphasize the context.” His aim, he said, was simply to “put some meat on the news,” to show “that there’s something behind the headlines, [and] try to put into some context why and how the decisions are made here.”

Whether the stories came out negative or positive was not his concern, he suggested: “To me, it’s not good or bad – it’s just fascinating to try to understand how the trends work in this country, there’s just so much below the surface.” And, he added, “sometimes that means that actually their decisions are more reasonable than you might think, and other times that it’s so much worse than you can imagine – such as the corruption issue.”

One magazine journalist also felt that the complexity of China militated against a total balance in terms of the range of stories covered, suggesting that journalists, “by definition... can’t paint an accurate picture of everything” happening in any country, and adding that “in China especially it’s not possible because you always have areas where you have droughts, and at the same time you have floods in other provinces!” Consequently, he said, his aim was “not to cover

everything, but to give a well-informed view of a few topics. I think we always have to pick our little topics, and do them in a way no-one else can.”

Another correspondent, on the other hand, stressed that her ideal was indeed to present “a general picture of China – to show it in all its complexity,” though she added: “I don’t know if ‘balanced’ is the right word.”

And a third reporter went further, emphasizing that he did indeed believe that, as the only correspondent for his organization in China, he had a duty to respond to the nation’s complexity by ensuring that he covered as wide a range of stories as he could, in order to present the most balanced possible picture. This applied not just to the types of stories he reported, but even to where he reported from:

“I think it’s important,” he said. “I think about it a lot: I look at what I’ve done and the issues I haven’t done, at what I have and haven’t covered – I’m always thinking about what I’m not covering. Even geographically: I have a map in my office and put pins in where I’ve reported from, just so I can make sure I’m covering stories from different regions of China.” This was particularly important, he said, because China was so diverse: “It’s not as homogeneous as the US, and I think it’s important to get that flavour into the coverage.”

He believed that, so far, “I’ve covered the topics I think are really important right now,” but said there were social issues, such as health care, which he needed to do more work on. Getting the balance right, he said, was “really difficult” – and required systematic planning. “China’s a great place to be a reporter,” he said: “It’s got so many stories, so many people. But I think you have to be pretty disciplined in how you cover things. I’m pretty disciplined about what I do, because otherwise in this huge country I’m just going to get lost – it’s so easy just to be torn from one place to another.”

And one reporter felt that there was sometimes a lack of emphasis in media coverage on aspects of the Chinese system that worked relatively well. “The system does deliver in some ways,” he said. “It delivers a system with highly educated technocrats who have in many ways delivered, economically for example, or in building a rudimentary health system. You can say a lot of bad things about it,” he added, “but they’re still doing it – and I think we’ve been bad at

telling how that system works.” (He did, however, note that he felt that there are sometimes also cases of “abuses [in China] which are not being reported” either.)

Another veteran reporter agreed that there was a risk of presenting a one-sided image of the country if one was not careful. He recalled a case some years earlier when his editors had asked him to write a story about sick babies being abandoned in plastic bags in a Chinese city, after a tabloid newspaper in his home country had covered the story. He had felt very uncomfortable about doing so, he said, because he found his editors’ attitude to the story to be simplistic and stereotyping. “Yes, some Chinese people had abandoned those babies,” he noted, “– but other Chinese people had taken them out and rescued them.”

lii Covering the ‘negative side’ – human rights and social problems

Nevertheless, even those respondents who were most concerned about balance still reserved the right to quote critical voices and cover the kind of stories which the Chinese authorities would be likely to consider negative, if they felt it appropriate. As one reporter put it, “I’m not going to go out of my way to find negative things to report, but when I find a good meaty ‘look what they did’ story, I’m going to dig in with my teeth and claws and go after it because I think it’s worth doing.” She added that “I have a little trouble with the idea that, if we report on something [critically], that’s somehow unfair to the Chinese government, which is perfectly capable of speaking for itself, and has ample resources to do its own propaganda.” (She also noted that, by the same token, if the Chinese government did something newsworthy, this would in turn be reported.)

Another journalist, who had expressed a desire to cover a breadth of stories, echoed these views, suggesting that “if you see some really abusive thing going on, balance is maybe not the right way to tell the story – you’ve got to offer other opinions [i.e. from those of the government].”

And a third offered an even more robust defence of the right of journalists to cover ‘negative’ stories. “There are a lot of stories which I think we have to do as the core of our duty,” he said, “things like human rights stories – they’re part of the definition of our job: the most important part of what we do is to focus on what’s hurting, to really report about problems in societies and to report if things go wrong.”

Such critical reporting was not specifically targeted at China, he stressed, but could be found in mainstream western media coverage of all countries: “If you look at the big business papers or the big news magazines, the reporting of nearly everything is pretty negative,” he said, “because that’s our job. No-one questions positive things – we don’t question that there’s no pollution, we only question if there is pollution!”

That this questioning approach was not only applied to China or the Chinese authorities was also emphasized by one European journalist who noted that he had written critically about the “failures in China” of a major company from his home country. Another reporter also noted that he was frequently criticized by business-people from his home country for writing about problems relating to their various projects in China.

“I have this discussion everywhere I go,” he said. “They [business-people] say ‘your stories hurt the interests of our nation’s industry’. Well, I’m sorry,” he went on, “but it’s really not important for me, I couldn’t care less if it hurts their interests.”

Jasmine ‘baloney’?

One incident which provoked some of the harshest official criticism of foreign journalists for excessive negativity in recent years followed the call, via Chinese language websites based outside the country, for North African style ‘Jasmine’ protests on the streets of major Chinese cities in early 2011. The demonstrations, over several weekends, turned out to be very small in scale, and there was a massive police presence at the locations specified for the protests, designed to deter anyone who did want to take part. But a number of international media organizations sent their correspondents to observe, and the Chinese authorities responded by detaining many of these reporters, and sent out general warnings to foreign journalists in China not to cover this topic.

Several interviewees who had attended the venues defended their right to be there. One reporter, who had been asked to attend by her editors, said that personally she had found it an “annoyance, and in a way a big waste of my time” to have to be there, not least perhaps because it was the weekend. However, she defended her editors’ right to make this decision, saying “that’s part of my job. If they want me to cover it I have no problem with that.”

And while the protests were small, she felt that they were genuine and thus did deserve to be covered. “My impression was that there were quite a lot of people out there making a very subtle statement just by showing up,” she said. “I just know how risky it is for people to do a real protest in this country.”

Another correspondent, who had stressed the duty of reporters to investigate society’s problems, said he and his colleagues had debated whether or not to attend. Finally, however, he said, “we decided we should go because it’s really our duty to be there and watch, even if we don’t report about it. We thought it could get out of control so I had to be prepared.” In practice, he said, he had not actually written about the protests, because he felt that “it was nothing.” However, he argued that the authorities’ demands that journalists should keep away had helped to convince him to attend: “When the government tells you not to go somewhere it’s really a duty to be there, I think,” he suggested.

Another reporter said he had visited the proposed scene of the protests in Beijing out of curiosity. However, he felt that there were only “a few people and it was not indicative,” and therefore decided not to write about the event, which he described as “baloney... not even a story, or at least not one which deserved to continue [to be reported] for three weeks.”

His editors, however, had eventually “forced” him to write about the protests, he said, after they read about them in a major US newspaper. Yet this correspondent added that he had later spoken to the journalist who had written that newspaper story, who said that he himself had been pushed to report on the protests by his own editors, after they had seen reports on the story by a news agency.

The journalist said that this incident, which seemed to be an example of the ‘echo chamber theory’, demonstrated what he called the “ignorance” of editors who “thought the Chinese government was unstable.”

Maintaining standards:

Yet whatever their views on this particular case, or on the question of balance in general, all of those interviewed, without exception, emphasized that they had their own standards which they applied before they decided to report on, for example, an anti-government protest. As one

put it, “We apply the same analysis and criteria for those situations [the Jasmine protests] as we would for other kinds of protests – those involving home owners, environmental protests against pollution and so on: ‘Is it new? Is it news? Is it making a difference?’”

She cited the example of labour protests at factories. She had covered one such protest, she said, which she felt was “emblematic of what seemed to be a new upsurge of labour unrest, tied to the economy slowing down and various other factors – so it made sense to go and cover it quite energetically.” But, she added, if there were then “six dozen more protests in the next few weeks”, these would “become progressively of less news interest, because it will be like situation normal in China... Unless something really remarkable happened, we wouldn’t cover them all or give them so much attention.”

The same applied, she said, to the protests, increasingly common in China, against forced demolition, or by home owners against the management of their residential compounds. “Home owner protests are a dime a dozen,” she argued. “So you mention them in some stories, you cover some of them [individually] – but you’re not going to be covering each of them as though it’s the world’s biggest news, because our audience already knows that people in China are upset because their homes are being knocked down.”

(She applied similar standards to her coverage of official government statements, she noted: “If they do something that really is news, we report it – and if it’s not news, however desperately they want it to be news, we don’t [report it].”)

Another journalist echoed her views. “The news value of relocation protests is really negligible, because there are so many now,” he said. The cases which were widely reported, such as the anti-government uprising in Wukan village in Guangdong in late 2011, were “a bit different because they escalated,” he suggested. In general, he said, “When you get a level of violence, destruction of property, police cars etc, that’s news. I hate to sound callous but you can’t cover everything.”

‘Their own worst enemy’? Government news management and official obstacles

There was however a widespread perception among the interviewees that the actions of the Chinese authorities did not always encourage the type of positive media coverage they hoped for.

Restricting access – and pledges of greater openness

Several correspondents referred specifically to the case of the Lhasa riots in 2008, when the authorities initially banned reporters from Tibet. One suggested: “I think... they’d have had a much better outcome from their point of view if they’d just let the media come there.”

Another, who conceded that his editors were “pretty uninformed about what had really happened in Tibet,” added that “we couldn’t get ourselves very informed because we weren’t allowed in – and if they say ‘you’re not allowed in, but believe us, we didn’t do anything bad’, it’s just not very convincing!”

As previously noted, the Chinese authorities did subsequently declare that they had learnt their lesson from this case, and intended to be more open when similar incidents occurred in the future (– though, as discussed earlier, this does not appear to have been the case following the series of self-immolations by Tibetans over the past few years, when journalists have again generally been barred from ethnic Tibetan-inhabited regions).¹⁷¹

And several of the interviewees did suggest that, overall, the situation in terms of access to official information had become, as one put it, “better than before” in recent years, at least in theory.

“Government departments have spokespeople, governments and even the police sometimes put out statements on *Weibo* [China’s Twitter-equivalent], so it has improved,” she noted.

(This is in addition to the regular briefings by China’s foreign ministry, which are now daily on weekdays, rather than twice a week as was the case a decade ago. The Ministry of Foreign

¹⁷¹ See e.g. Baptiste Fallevoz, ‘Tibetan monks protest Chinese rule’, France 24, 9th April 2012

Affairs and State Council Information Office also organize some reporting trips, mainly on economics themes.)

And overall, several respondents noted that the dawn of the Internet era has made some types of information more easily available in China in recent years. One also pointed out that control of China's own media "has loosened to the degree that they can break some stories themselves," adding: "It's so much easier to cover the economic news now compared to ten years ago – companies have websites, the government has websites, they're a little beholden to shareholders if listed abroad, so it's more transparent."

Difficulty in obtaining comment

Yet in practice, many of those interviewed felt that the authorities' traditionally secretive attitude to information still had a powerful influence, with officials still highly cautious about speaking out, particularly on sensitive topics. One respondent suggested that "You do sometimes find people who will talk in various departments, but when you have an urgent situation and you need a comment, you're not going to get it."

Another grumbled that "none of the spokesmen actually 'speak' – it's really difficult to get information out of those people."

And indeed one reporter felt that, if the Chinese government machine had become more carefully managed and media aware in recent years, this was not necessarily a positive development. In the past, she said, "we used to go to the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference [the annual session of the advisory body to China's legislature] and get good access to the local legislative guys. But now, forget it – for the last eight or ten years it's become worthless."

She did express hope, however, that there would be improvement in the future, suggesting that while "older bureaucrats" did have a "certain ostrich in sand" mentality, "I think the younger generation [of officials] will be better. They're so much more media interactive that it's going to seem stupid to them to say 'no we won't talk to you', when they're used to seeing the way the world works."

Nevertheless, many respondents remained particularly frustrated by the lack of access to senior officials. As one reporter put it, “You never get the Prime Minister or President – you might get the vice-vice-minister.”¹⁷² And he also felt that when senior officials did speak on the record, they said frustratingly little. Consequently, he said, he had now more or less “given up interviewing senior [Chinese] politicians, because I’ve never really read an interesting interview with them.”

(In contrast, he said that in rural areas, where the propaganda machinery was often less powerful and grassroots concerns more pressing, he had had “amazing talks with some local officials.” In one village, where many inhabitants were suffering from cancer, he recalled that the local party secretary had told him: “If you and your photographer find out why we all have the same kind of cancer, we’ll build a temple in your honour with four metre high effigies of you’!”)

Missed Opportunities?

Several journalists suggested that the continuing obstacles to contact between journalists and officials had negative consequences for the Chinese authorities – and indirectly, for the country’s image. One made the point in general terms, suggesting that “any company or government agency which refuses to make itself available to provide its side of the story is missing an opportunity to help shape the story.”

Another reporter was more specific about the risks for the authorities of not going on the record, emphasizing that “the government’s reluctance to come out and speak about something, when it would be in their own interest to make a statement” was, in his eyes, “the main problem.” He added, “If you don’t come out and say something it seems evasive, like you’re already guilty.”

The consequences of such official reluctance to engage with the media were far-reaching, according to one respondent, who said it often meant that “we only cover one side” of the

¹⁷² In practice, China’s top leaders give very occasional interviews, to selected media, often those of a country to which they are about to make an official visit. Questions for such interviews are required to be approved in advance.

Chinese political story. “If you write about politics you never really know what’s happening,” he said. “You’re never really close to the people who make decisions – it’s a lot of guesswork, almost like astrology.”

The result, he said, was that journalists tended to be steered towards other topics and other sources when it came to political stories: “You can mainly only write the sad side, about dissidents and arrests,” he suggested.

Another journalist, who had worked in China for many years, said he still felt that the official attitude to media openness was “astounding”. He shared the perception that the authorities’ reluctance to provide information “probably does lead to more negative coverage, because you often find yourself questioning or doubting the integrity of a system that closes itself off, or tries to be opaque.”

And, like several other respondents, he felt that the authorities were missing opportunities to show that some things were in fact changing within the system.

“The story is probably more nuanced than comes across,” he suggested, “because they do breed suspicion with their opacity. They probably have a much better story to tell, even at the upper reaches of the government – in terms of how the president is picked – than they’re willing to allow anyone to understand.” In fact, he said, “they’re their own worst enemy when it comes to how the system works... Not to defend them as holders of democratic ideals or anything like that, but it probably is a little more democratic than the view is from the outside.”

A European interviewee shared the sense that the authorities did not always know how to capitalize on opportunities to improve their, or the nation’s, image. Noting what he saw as the relatively favourable attitude to China among editors in the German media during the middle of the past decade (referred to earlier), he suggested that “the Chinese government really didn’t know how to work with that.”

He recalled that he had once proposed to China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs that he should be allowed to write what he felt would be “a really cool story” about then Prime Minister Zhu Rongji, which would portray Mr Zhu, widely seen as a dynamic and determined economic reformer, in a positive light.

“I said, let’s take photos of him sitting on his desk with his sleeves rolled up, pushing things forward – and I showed them similar stories with Brezhnev in the 80s, and said ‘Let’s do that’,” he remembered. “But there was absolutely no chance [that they would accept]!”

Official nervousness about engaging with the media sometimes even seems to apply to topics which appear to fit well with the authorities’ attempts to promote their ‘official line.’ One reporter said he had proposed a trip to Tibet, with the intention of writing what he felt would be a fairly “critical story” about the exiled Tibetan leader the Dalai Lama, who was about to visit his home country. “I felt that he [the Dalai Lama] was idealized a lot in Europe, but he’s only a man – I wanted to show the side people don’t know,” he explained, citing tensions in the exiled Tibetan community. He also wanted to “speak to former slaves” and investigate the role of slavery in Tibetan history, something the Chinese authorities regularly refer to when criticizing the Dalai Lama and traditional Tibetan society.

However, despite applying to numerous government departments “for weeks and weeks, we didn’t get permission.” Finally, after he had written and published the story, without visiting Tibet, he received a phone call from the government inviting him to the region.

“I was so pissed off,” he recalled, “that I just hung up the phone!”

Continuing controls on journalists – a further irritant

As noted in Chapter 1, concerns also remain about the implementation of the new rules, introduced in the run-up to the Beijing Olympics, which in theory allow accredited journalists unlimited access to visit all Chinese regions (except Tibet), without applying for permission in advance.

Several interviewees said they had been denied access to areas they were trying to visit – including areas of Sichuan after the 2008 earthquake, and ethnic Tibetan-inhabited regions of other Chinese provinces. In most cases they were told that this was for their own safety, either because of dangerous natural conditions, or the risk of unrest and violence.

One respondent, however, had also faced intrusion from local authorities when attempting to report what he thought were completely apolitical stories. He had, for example, made a trip to

one province to report on the local wig manufacturing industry, which supplied wigs made from human hair to shops all over the world.

It was meant to be a “fun” story, he said, but as soon as he and his colleagues arrived in the province they began receiving “phone calls every five minutes from the local propaganda bureau, which said it wanted to meet us, and told us we must register with the local police... When we told them that journalists no longer had to do this [register when visiting different provinces], they finally told us that wig manufacturing was a state secret!”

Such paranoia, the reporter suggested, was particularly common in rural areas, where officials seemed nervous about any bad publicity emerging from their region, for fear that this would embarrass them in the eyes of their superiors.

The same journalist said he had also experienced threats from people in plain clothes, when seeking to visit areas of the country where protests were taking place.

And another reporter noted that, despite [or perhaps because of] the change in the rules, he now felt “an increased risk” of experiencing physical threats.

“It’s not just the possibility of running into the police,” he said, “but an added risk now of running into thugs or unidentified people who are linked to the government or some interest groups who could actually do you bodily harm.”

The same reporter also cited a further source of irritation, which was raised by several interviewees – the routine scrutiny of their activities (including in their home cities) by the local authorities. This might take the form of visits by the local police to their offices, or as one put it, official “attention to different forms of communication.”

However, he described such intrusions as “just an annoyance that you have to learn to work with and work around – if you let it bother you then you’re compromising yourself as a journalist, and you’ll also slowly drive yourself crazy!”

Negative consequences – ‘them and us’

Nevertheless, several journalists did feel that, as one who had arrived in China relatively recently put it, “the controls don’t help good coverage.” He referred in particular to “police controls, and a huge bureaucracy that makes things very complicated.”

Another respondent felt that official attitudes contributed to a sense of ‘them and us’ – that reporters and the authorities were somehow on opposing sides.

He described this as “a big obstacle,” adding, “I think generally the reporting about China would be more positive if the journalists didn’t have the feeling that a big part of their work, a big part of their time, is fighting against the bureaucracy. Everything seems to be a fight against the authorities.”

Over-reaction to criticism?

A further source of negative coverage was identified by another respondent, who suggested that the Chinese authorities did not help themselves by their sometimes angry responses to critical coverage of the country (often issued by a Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson at one of the regular media briefings in Beijing). He felt that this sometimes led to relatively minor incidents being blown out of proportion – and also causing tension between the authorities and the media.

“You have to accept some criticism,” he said. “You can’t expect everything to be 100% positive – and if you can accept the criticism gracefully, or counter it in your own way, that’s much better than pouting or pontificating about it. Who wants to be harangued by a foreign ministry spokesman saying ‘you have upset the feelings of the Chinese people!’ [a phrase commonly used by officials when angered by a perceived slight from abroad]?”

In practice, however, this respondent felt the authorities still “don’t seem capable of doing this: it’s all or nothing, black or white. Maybe it’s just a question of good PR coaching,” he suggested. “It’s not the message itself but the way it’s being delivered. If you want to be seen as a great or rising international power, then you have to act more in accordance with international norms when it comes to communication.”

One respondent did have some sympathy for China's sensitivity to criticism, however, arguing that "we must realise China's sense of past victimization, which means it's much easier for them to accept criticism from other Chinese people than from abroad."

Public attitudes towards the foreign media

Given the tensions over the role of the foreign media since the later years of the last decade, the attitudes of ordinary Chinese people to foreign journalists can, as stated earlier, be revealing.

Even before these tensions began, many ordinary Chinese citizens had long been anxious about the possible risks of talking to foreign reporters – though many observers felt that such concerns had faded significantly over the past two decades, at least prior to 2008. So how did journalists feel they were regarded now?

Olympic fallout fading

One correspondent observed that the negative publicity surrounding foreign journalists before the Beijing Olympics had had a significant impact on his life.

"It was a difficult time for me personally – I literally had friendships break up because people who I thought were open-minded said 'you foreign journalists all hate China!'" he recalled.

Since then, however, he felt that the trend towards a more open attitude to foreign journalists had generally continued.

"When I came here first even my friends would ask me 'Are you a spy?' A lot of people asked me that," he said. "But I haven't had that for a while now – so I hope things have become a little bit better."

Another interviewee suggested that people's attitude to foreign reporters varied depending on what kind of issues were in the news at the time.

"Before the Olympics, people were a bit annoyed," he agreed. "But then they got angry with the government about rising food inflation and corruption – and they ultimately see you as on the

other side of that.” This meant, he said, that people were now often willing to “complain about economic grievances” to foreign journalists.

Continuing anxiety

But persuading people to talk openly on the record could still be a challenge, with anxiety about the repercussions of doing so sometimes still a factor, according to several respondents.

Not only were “local governments and state companies... not very open to foreign media,” one noted, but even some people who were willing to go on record about their problems to Chinese domestic media organizations remained unwilling to talk to foreign reporters, because, he said, they felt this could have greater negative consequences.

Another agreed that nervousness sometimes remained. “In Japan you can tell people right away you’re a journalist,” she said. But in China, even though “many people are very nice... you don’t start conversations that way! If you say ‘I’m a journalist,’ it’s like putting up a red flag and saying don’t talk to me!”

And another interviewee suggested that this reticence on the part of ordinary people was in part connected to the negative official publicity about the international media.

“It’s not that these people necessarily fear retaliation,” he said, “but that they have a preconceived idea that you’ll say something bad about China, so they’re more careful about what they say.” His own feeling was that China’s official propaganda machinery had become increasingly effective in recent years, and had influenced what interviewees, particularly in the business world, were prepared to say to the media:

“It’s easier to get someone to speak and say something on the record today than it was ten years ago,” he said. “But I think people actually give a lot less of their own opinion... It’s probably that the party or state media apparatus’ ability to get its message across is so much better [than before]... So now people know what to say or, sometimes, how to say nothing!”

Urban - rural divide?

Some respondents suggested, however that interviewing ordinary people was “easier... in the countryside”, because, as one put it, “rural people are more curious.” Another agreed that

“people talk more easily especially in remote, poor areas” – while there was more “distrust” in bigger towns and cities.

One reporter suggested that this was because people in the countryside were actually less interested in official propaganda: “At the rural level they don’t care,” he said. “Farmers are businessmen – they see you as a person not a symbol.”

Residual – and exaggerated – belief in the power of foreign media

There was certainly still a sense that a significant number of ordinary people continue to hope that foreign journalists can help them resolve their difficulties with the government. One journalist recalled walking down a street in Beijing where “there was a big sign in the window of one of the shops, saying ‘Please foreign reporters, read this’ – with a family’s tale of how they were being forcibly relocated.” It was, he said, a sign of what he called the “naïve idea that foreign reporting can help.”

Another correspondent also noted that “It’s not unusual for us to get calls or visits from people who have problems with the government, or have been abused, who want us to advocate for them.” Yet while “many people come to us and think it will change their lives,” she said, in many cases “we can’t help or advocate – we’re a news organization.”

Indeed, one reporter argued that attitudes to foreign journalists – positive or negative – were often too extreme:

People “either put too much trust or too much distrust in me,” he said. “Some ordinary people think you can solve all their problems, some are the first to call the police when you arrive! I just don’t think there’s a really good understanding of what you’re doing,” he added, “or your power either way, to help them or to hurt them – it’s exaggerated at both ends.”

Another interviewee agreed that “many [members] of the Chinese public have a misconception about the power of the foreign media,” adding that “it has less power than before to change things in China – and even before maybe it was over-rated.”

Nowadays, he argued, China's domestic Internet was a far better channel for people to get their grievances resolved – though he noted that “we do still get a fair amount of people contacting us.”

Journalists' dilemma – putting interviewees at risk

This continuing public faith, combined with the awareness that speaking to the international media can sometimes still have repercussions for ordinary Chinese citizens, can also pose a dilemma for journalists. Several respondents noted that they sometimes had to warn people who were determined to have their stories told in the foreign media that they could be running a risk by doing so:

“We had a whistle-blower who wanted us to go with him,” one journalist recalled, “and we had to tell him: ‘Do you understand how much trouble you’ll get into?’” If someone was truly aware of the risks, and still wanted to go ahead, then she might sometimes consider reporting their story, she said, “but I don’t want to encourage people to take risks.”

Indeed, many of those interviewed felt a certain anxiety at what might happen to people they spoke to on sensitive topics. One said he had “concerns about detentions of people who are sources, or people you’re talking to.” Another explained that “you have to be careful to protect your sources”, since such people were sometimes “naïve and don’t understand the gravity of what they’re doing.”

One journalist noted that a colleague had interviewed someone who was later jailed. Such cases, he said “make you queasy – do I want to destroy someone’s life for a quote in my local newspaper?”

Chapter 4

Survey results: Some preliminary observations

The responses of both the Chinese students and the international journalists surveyed reflect a number of key issues which, in the view of this author, are and will remain relevant to the work of foreign correspondents in China. On the one hand, many people in China clearly have a keen interest in what foreigners, including international media organizations and journalists, are saying about the country. Translated books about China by foreign writers – including in recent years *Country Driving* by the journalist and former New Yorker correspondent Peter Hessler, and *The Age of Deng Xiaoping* by the academic Ezra Vogel – have been among the nation’s best-sellers. (As one Chinese publishing industry insider put it, “Hessler sees things about China that we can’t.”)¹⁷³

Putting hopes – and pressure – on the international media

¹⁷³ Author conversation with publishing industry professional, May 2013

It's also clear that some ordinary Chinese people continue to pin their hopes on the foreign media. In May 2012, for example, after the rural legal activist Chen Guangcheng (see Chapter 1) left China for the US, following a brief stay in the US embassy in Beijing, his brother Chen Guangfu defied warnings from officials in their home village not to talk to the international media, and gave an interview to Reuters news agency. His aim was to give his version of an incident at his home, which had led to his son being charged with attempting to murder local officials. Mr Chen said his son had actually been trying to defend the family against attack, and clearly hoped that telling his story to the international media might help his son [who was later sentenced to 39 months in jail.] ¹⁷⁴

The continuing belief of some Chinese citizens that foreign journalists can help them solve disputes with the authorities can, as some of those interviewed noted, be both a source of interesting information, but also sometimes of pressure on foreign media organizations, particularly when they have to disappoint people who are hoping to see their story reported.

Doubts about foreign coverage

At the same time, criticisms and concerns about foreign coverage of China clearly remain, and come not only from the authorities but from at least some ordinary citizens too. Much of this has to do with the thorny question of balance. It was striking that while only a relatively small proportion of the correspondents I interviewed said they spent much time thinking about the overall balance of their coverage of China as a whole, several emphasized their desire to focus more on personal stories about individuals – which echoed at least one of the criticisms raised by the Chinese survey respondents, several of whom called for a more human portrayal of their country.

Not all Chinese criticisms of western media focus on this angle, or even on the most sensitive political topics. Professor Liu Kang, of Duke University in the US and Shanghai's Jiaotong University, who was one of the authors of the original 1990s' text accusing the foreign media of 'demonizing China', has suggested that the international media is obsessed with "personal, moving stories, sad stories in particular," but not so good at covering "big, abstract, strategic things... Sometimes you have to have the big picture in mind," he said. For example, Professor

¹⁷⁴ 'Chen Guangcheng: nephew Chen Kegui sentenced', BBC News, 30th November 2012

Liu argues that while the human suffering caused by the relocation of residents to make way for the construction of the massive Three Gorges Dam on the Yangtze River has been widely reported, along with concerns about its environmental impact, the benefits of the dam, which provides electricity to major cities including Shanghai, have been under-reported.¹⁷⁵

Grand scale

There's no doubt that, as several respondents suggested, the scale of China and the pace and scope of its current development mean that to do full justice to what is going on in the country is a challenge for any individual journalist, whether foreign or Chinese. Contradictions are inherent, with countless positive changes and serious problems coexisting, and journalists thus have to make choices from a wide range of potential subject matter – particularly if, as is the case for many foreign correspondents in China, they are working alone or as part of a very small team.

Limits of the news agenda – and the role of editors

Several of the foreign correspondents surveyed noted that the news agenda of mainstream media organizations can sometimes feel quite limited – or limiting – to a reporter surrounded by massive social transformation on such a scale.

For some journalists, editors also clearly have a significant impact on their coverage. In this author's experience, good editors can provide a useful, objective perspective for a journalist who may sometimes be so close to 'the story' that they can't always see it in a wider, perhaps global, context. Over the years I have worked with many editors whose suggestions and advice were helpful and constructive. But editors may also attempt to impose their own preconceptions. During the years I worked for the BBC World Service, I was lucky to be working for an organization with a global audience and a correspondingly broad interest in China: almost any story I proposed on social issues or trends in China was accepted, even if these were not necessarily obvious news topics. But I have also met an editor elsewhere, who said outright that he was mainly interested in human rights stories about China.

¹⁷⁵ Author conversation with Professor Liu Kang, November 2011

At the same time, as demonstrated by the answers of several respondents, editors' preconceptions about China are not always negative. I too have encountered an editor who seemed primarily interested in reporting 'good news' about the Chinese economy, and was less interested in more negative comments about the economic situation made by Chinese interviewees.

Headline headaches

As one respondent noted, editors may also exert an influence on the perception of a story's audience, in print media in particular, via their choice of headlines. Headlines inevitably reduce a story to its barest bones, but occasionally they may also be downright misleading. In some cases, this is likely the result of editors or sub-editors having limited time to read a story carefully. The headlines they choose may also reflect their own preconceptions.

In 2009, for example, Jonathan Watts, then China correspondent of the Guardian, wrote a story on the impact of the Internet on Chinese society. His article emphasized that, despite ongoing restrictions, Chinese citizens were using the Internet net to carve out greater space for expression. "Competing public opinions – unheard of 10 years ago – are becoming familiar in China these days," he wrote, "as the world's biggest censor struggles to cope with the explosive growth of the Internet."

Yet, in direct contradiction to this point, the story was accompanied not only by a headline which read 'Behind the great firewall', but by a sub-heading which concluded that: 'instead of spreading freedom, the net has been tamed by Beijing's iron grip'.¹⁷⁶

Sensational tendencies

It can of course also be argued that the news media, by its nature, often tends to seek out the sensational. Indeed, some Chinese respondents surveyed suggested that this also applied to at least part of China's own media's coverage of foreign countries, with many reports focusing on disasters, political scandals or bizarre events.¹⁷⁷ Still, such tendencies can certainly militate

¹⁷⁶ Jonathan Watts, 'Behind the great firewall', The Guardian, 9th February 2008

¹⁷⁷ The Chinese media, for example, gave copious coverage to the BBC's problems following the revelations about sexual abuse by former presenter Jimmy Savile in 2012

against attempts to present a balanced picture. In June 2013, for example, a story which, in one newspaper at least, was headlined, “Chinese dad ‘sewed up daughter’s mouth’”, was widely reported in the British media. While it was clearly a shocking case of abuse, it might also be argued that such a story was more likely to be published, or receive prominent coverage, than equally valid reports on, for example, the less sensational fact that many young Chinese parents now treat their children with far greater respect for their individuality than in the past.

Similarly, in 2007, some Chinese observers felt that the coverage of the news that some children’s toys made for export in Chinese factories contained lead focused largely on portraying Chinese factory bosses as villains, and might give foreign readers the impression that Chinese people in general did not care about such problems – when in fact many urban Chinese parents were equally concerned about such issues.¹⁷⁸

In the same year the German news magazine *Der Spiegel* also caused some concern when it ran a cover story about Chinese industrial espionage under the headline “*Die Gelben Spione*” (‘The Yellow Spies’). Many observers felt this wording was racist, with echoes of the phrase ‘Yellow Peril’ – used to stir up fear of Chinese people in the 1920s – and it provoked protests outside the Spiegel offices.¹⁷⁹

Avoiding stereotypes

Indeed given continuing Chinese sensitivities about historical foreign attitudes towards China, as detailed earlier, it could be argued that journalists sometimes need to employ particular care in the wording they use in their reports on the country. In my own reporting I have tended to avoid using the commonly employed phrase ‘the Chinese’, preferring to use phrases such as ‘the Chinese people’ or ‘people in China’ where necessary. In my view, the phrase ‘the Chinese’ not only seems to encourage sweeping generalizations, but could also play into traditional stereotypes of the Chinese people as an undifferentiated mass, rather than a collection of individuals with divergent views and opinions.

¹⁷⁸ Author conversations with Chinese nationals, 2007

¹⁷⁹ ‘*Die Gelben Spione*’ (The Yellow Spies), *Spiegel* 35, 2007

And a number of journalist interviewees expressed frustration at stereotyped views, including from editors, and suggested that they did feel there was sometimes a greater interest in stories about the extremes of China – whether human rights problems, or the nation’s economic miracle, or threat, depending on editors’ perspectives – rather than the more nuanced picture which these correspondents hoped to present. The Guardian’s former East Asia editor and China specialist, John Gittings, has also written of what he describes as a “tendency to over-dramatize China.”¹⁸⁰

Beyond the news agenda

Yet several of those interviewed had taken steps to redress this balance – and to respond to the appeal of the Indian writer Pankaj Mishra, who has argued that “honoring [China’s] complexity is the fundamental task of any contemporary writer about China”¹⁸¹ – by writing books about the country, allowing them to go into greater depth than is possible in much regular news reporting. Indeed, the fact that a significant number of past or present China correspondents – notably (in English) Jasper Becker, Lesley Chang, James Fallows, Rob Gifford, John Gittings, James Kynge, Alexandra Harney, Peter Hessler, Ian Johnson, Richard McGregor, Evan Osnos, Philip Pan, John Pomfret and Jonathan Watts – have written serious books about Chinese society over the past decade or so could be seen as evidence that, whatever problems in coverage may exist, many journalists remain genuinely committed to telling the ‘China story’ in as much detail as possible. (This author also published a book, looking at how ordinary people have coped with and adapted to the vast social changes that have accompanied China’s economic transformation.)¹⁸²

It is also worth noting – if only because the fact is sometimes overlooked by Chinese critics of foreign media coverage of their country – that many major international media organizations also cover China in ways other than simply through their news correspondents. Beyond the news agenda, the BBC, for example, has made many documentaries about various aspects of China in recent years, including the series ‘Wild China’, on the country’s spectacular natural

¹⁸⁰ John Gittings, ‘Looking at China’, *Soundings*, no. 30, 2005

¹⁸¹ Pankaj Mishra, Foreword, in *Chinese Characters*, ed. Angilee Shah and Jeffrey Wasserstrom, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2012, p. xii

¹⁸² Duncan Hewitt, *Getting Rich First – Life in a changing China*, London, Chatto and Windus, 2007

environment to food and travel programmes, and in-depth reports on a number of social issues. Some of these programmes have been presented by writers, comedians and other celebrities, offering not just a broader picture of the country, but also a perspective which may be different to that of a news reporter. Other media, including many newspapers and magazines, also regularly feature China in their food, travel, arts and design sections.

The role of the government

Beyond the successes and failures of foreign reporting, there is also the question of whether the Chinese authorities – and indeed the Chinese system – do a good job at engaging with the international media, and thereby in playing a part in shaping the messages about China which are communicated to the outside world.

As mentioned earlier, China does now have an infrastructure that, in theory, allows journalists to apply for interviews with officials, and provides spokespeople from some government departments to talk to the media. China's Foreign Ministry briefings, previously held twice a week in Beijing, are now held daily, for example. Some innovations have also been made, such as Touch Shanghai, an online platform operated by the Shanghai Government Information Office, which sends journalists news releases and invitations to reporting trips and news conferences, and includes a website with contacts for officials from different local government departments.

Still, many of the correspondents surveyed expressed frustration at the difficulty of getting officials to comment on breaking news stories, let alone make interesting statements. Indeed, it has been argued that the Chinese system often militates against this. According to the Chinese academic Yiyi Lu, "China's bureaucratic system does not reward officials who actively engage the media, but may well punish those who make mistakes when talking to the media." This, she suggests, means that officials tend to think that, "if one does nothing, then one won't make any mistake."¹⁸³

¹⁸³ Yiyi Lu, 'Challenges for China's International Communication', University of Nottingham China Policy Institute, July 2009, p6

Thus, even if local officials are implementing social or economic innovations, for example, systemic suspicion of the international media means that it may not in their best interests, in domestic political terms, to talk to foreign journalists about these topics. Revealing internal political debates to foreign reporters, meanwhile, is even more taboo. And in general, control on discipline among Communist Party members and officials has become even tighter since Xi Jinping became head of the Party in 2012.

In fact, it could be argued that, as the Chinese authorities have become more aware of how the international media works over recent years, they have sometimes made it harder for journalists to interact with officials in a meaningful way. A number of the journalists interviewed for this paper, for example, complained that it was harder to get one-to-one interviews with officials at the annual meeting of China's legislature than it had been a decade earlier. And when ministers and senior officials do give news conferences at the legislative session, cordons of security officials now shield them from the scrum of journalists who used to surround them at the end of these events, thus preventing them from talking directly with reporters – and from having to answer potentially awkward questions.

Indeed, when one western journalist, who had recently moved to Shanghai, asked local officials in 2012 whether the city's mayor held breakfast meetings with foreign journalists, as was the case in Latin America, where he had previously worked, the question provoked a rather awkward reaction: in recent years the city's senior officials have in fact had relatively little interaction with foreign journalists, certainly less than when I moved to the city at the turn of the century. At that time, Shanghai's then mayor, Xu Kuangdi, who had studied at the London School of Economics, not only gave an unscripted 30 minute television interview (in English) to the BBC's Hardtalk programme, but also sent top city officials out to chat with reporters before the start of his annual news conference – and accepted journalists' questions without these having to be vetted in advance, as is now the case.

And one reporter interviewed for this paper also argued that government attempts to block journalists from reporting on specific stories, as described in Chapter 3 above, would actually encourage him to try to investigate such topics, to see what the authorities were trying to hide.

Telling China's story

My own observation is that officials at the local government level often have interesting things to say, if one gets the chance to talk to them (and what they do not say can sometimes also be revealing). Yet despite all the news conferences and official websites, there is sometimes a sense, as several of the correspondents interviewed argued, that the Chinese authorities do not always take opportunities to get their perspective across. This applies not only to their willingness or otherwise to give interviews or to comment on issues in the news, but sometimes also to their awareness of what kind of topics could ‘make a story’ for the international media. My own experience, for example, suggests that, either through caution or a lack of a broader perspective on the part of the authorities, the chance to tell a ‘good news’ story is sometimes missed.

Lack of expo-sure

A case in point is Shanghai’s construction of its metro system – a massive underground rail network that grew to be bigger than London’s, but was built in little more than fifteen years, between the mid-1990s and 2010. There was a particularly rapid expansion in the years leading up to the city’s staging of the 2010 World Expo; according to the Expo’s chief planner, a German trained Chinese architect, this was the result of a conscious attempt on his part to speed up construction of the subway and reduce the city’s dependence on cars. Yet despite their eager desire for coverage of the World Expo, Shanghai officials did almost nothing to publicise this spectacular development, or its environmentally friendly motivation, to the international media. The only opportunity for many journalists to hear the story from the Expo planner was at an event organized not by the local government but by a German technology company.

Similarly, the first chance in many years to actually witness the construction of the city’s massive network of new subway tunnels – a spectacular sight – came when the central government in Beijing organized a visit to Shanghai shortly before the Expo opened, primarily for a group of Beijing-based reporters.

On the one hand this may be a reminder that local officials in China are often simply unaware of just how dramatic their country’s expansion is in a global context (– and possibly also that Shanghai officials are sometimes anxious to avoid being seen as bragging about their city’s development by officials in Beijing, since Shanghai has had a traditional rivalry with China’s

capital.) But it also hints at a more general anxiety at engaging with international media in anything but the most formal ways.

At the time of the Shanghai World Expo, for example, local officials and scholars expressed some disappointment that there was not more worldwide media coverage of the event. Yet for many news journalists the set-piece event had limited news value, beyond its grand scale (– the Chinese authorities pledged in advance that it would attract 70 million visitors, leading to huge, slow-moving queues outside many of the Expo pavilions.)

At the same time, the authorities' inability – or unwillingness – to highlight the truly newsworthy was, for this author, emphasized on the Expo's last day. While a rather bland 'Shanghai Declaration' on urban sustainability was given headline coverage by the Chinese media, little publicity was given to some genuinely interesting and often quite critical comments about China's urbanization at the Expo's closing forum, made by notable figures including film director Chen Kaige, heavyweight foreign academics, and even former Shanghai mayor Xu Kuangdi.

Thus the image presented to the outside world was a predictable one of bland agreement and relatively little debate, when in fact officials had actually permitted more discussion than might have been expected (– though by this stage in the six-month Expo, many foreign journalists were apparently so jaded that relatively few chose to attend.)

'Own worst enemy' syndrome

This may be an example of what the veteran journalist and former China correspondent James Fallows (and some of the interviewees for this paper) identified as China's 'own worst enemy' syndrome: in an essay written shortly after Beijing hosted the 2008 Olympics, Fallows argued that China had failed to take full advantage of the staging of the Games to dispel widely held perceptions of the country's obsession with state control. The nation, he suggested, suffered from "insularity and sheer stupidity in delivering the genuine good news about its own progress."¹⁸⁴

¹⁸⁴ James Fallows, 'Their Own Worst Enemy', *The Atlantic*, 1st November, 2008

The sociologist Yiyi Lu has also noted failures by the Chinese authorities to get their message across, despite what she calls their “craving for international approval.”¹⁸⁵

And at least one journalist interviewed also made the point that the Chinese authorities’ often sharp reaction to foreign criticism can have a counter-productive impact on the nation’s international image.

Grappling with a free press

Indeed, the veteran British journalist and long-term China-watcher Isabel Hilton, who founded the bilingual website China Dialogue in order to promote greater exchange between China and the outside world on environmental issues, suggests that Beijing still has some way to go in its understanding of the international media. While she acknowledges that some foreign commentators “tend to project their own ideological views onto reports about China”, she emphasizes that Chinese officials should not necessarily feel that they have been singled out for criticism.

“The Chinese embassy used to come round [to see us] after [the Olympics in] 2008 and ask, ‘Why is the British press so hostile to the Chinese government?’” she recalls. “And I would say, ‘Have you looked at what the British press is saying about [then Prime Minister] Gordon Brown? They’re not singling out the Chinese, that’s what the press do – they’re being far ruder about our own leaders than they are about yours. If you don’t understand that you can suffer from an unwarranted sense of being persecuted!’”¹⁸⁶

In part, this perception may result from the Chinese authorities’ lack of experience of a relatively free press. The idea of ‘constructive criticism’, or that journalists might see their role as speaking up for those who do not have a voice, or ‘speaking truth to power’, without this implying politically motivated opposition to the government of the day, remains unfamiliar and uncomfortable for many Chinese officials, who tend to equate any criticism with being ‘anti-government’.

¹⁸⁵ Yiyi Lu, op. cit., p 9

¹⁸⁶ Isabel Hilton, conversation with author, September 2011

(In fact, some Chinese officials have in recent years been ill at ease with a tendency towards more critical reporting in their own country's state-controlled media. Xi Jinping has notably tightened controls on news reporting. And some Chinese conservatives have even attacked certain Chinese media outlets, accusing them of being too 'liberal' and unpatriotic, in terms strikingly similar to those used by right-wing commentators in the US against journalists from America's liberal media.)¹⁸⁷

The difference between commentators and op-ed writers – who are more likely to express partisan views of one stripe or another – and news reporters who, from their own perspective at least, are generally seeking to be objective, is also something which may sometimes be lost on some Chinese officials.¹⁸⁸ Indeed, it could be argued that China's tradition of the media speaking for the state may lead the authorities – and some ordinary people too – to attach undue importance to the opinions of foreign media commentators, and to see these as more than just the views of individual writers, but rather as representing the attitude of the media outlet as a whole, or even, on occasion, of their nation's government.

Cultural sensitivities

Knowledge of the particular concerns of other countries, which may explain certain critical attitudes, may sometimes also be lacking. For example, in 2010 concern was expressed in China at a survey which suggested that only 30% of Germans had a positive opinion of China. This result was blamed in part on 'negative' coverage by the German media, particularly around the time of the Beijing Olympics. However, one German journalist argued that Chinese officials failed to take into account Germany's own history, in particular the experience of the way the Nazis had exploited the 1936 Berlin Olympics. This, he said, meant that Germans were

¹⁸⁷ Peking University professor Kong Qingdong said in 2011 that if journalists at these media "were all lined up and shot... I would not feel heartache for a single one of them"; David Bandurski, 'Are Chinese media a public nuisance?' China Media Project (cmp.hku.hk), 26th December 2010

¹⁸⁸ Equally, few Chinese officials are likely to be aware of the fact that some foreign journalists who report on China have actually had the experience both of being criticized by the Chinese authorities or Chinese citizens for being 'anti-China', and, at other times, of finding themselves attacked for being 'pro-China' or 'soft on China', by readers in the west who feel they should be *more* overtly critical of China's political system.

particularly sensitive to any hint of mass sporting events being used to send a populist or nationalistic message, and were more likely to take a cynical attitude to events such as the grandiose opening ceremony of the Games in Beijing.¹⁸⁹

Some observers have also noted that there is a tendency, conscious or otherwise, among Chinese officials and some Chinese commentators, to “confuse anti-government and anti-Chinese” – in the words of Isabel Hilton – and thus to denounce any such criticisms as being racially biased.

On occasions this may serve official propaganda purposes. Nevertheless, at least two of the journalists interviewed suggested that it is important for foreign correspondents to be aware of why China might be particularly sensitive to criticism from abroad. It is striking, for example, that there has sometimes been an angry reaction in China to foreign media reports that are no more critical of the country than articles that have been published in China’s own media without arousing the same degree of outrage.

One foreign journalist respondent related this to China’s sense of having been victimized by the west in the past. And he added: “I think there’s some truth [in the idea] that we don’t always get China and the way that people there see things.”

One of the Chinese students surveyed also suggested that the sometimes “aggressive” reaction to “so-called negative stories against the Chinese government” occurred partly because the nation was “not confident enough” to take criticism. This respondent argued that concepts of “the family, the nation and the state and the government are all mixed together in China... We see the country as our mother and father: in a family you might criticize your parents all the time, but you wouldn’t allow others to criticize them.”

Indeed, as I have previously argued¹⁹⁰, given the degree to which China’s education system emphasizes the country’s history of being badly treated by the outside world since the Opium Wars in the 19th Century, it’s not too hard to see why foreign criticism of, for example, China’s

¹⁸⁹ Author conversation with German journalist, August 2008

¹⁹⁰ Duncan Hewitt, ‘20 years on – Understanding China’s youth a more complex challenge for the outside world’, Newsweek ‘China Calling’ blog, 4th June 2009

policies in Tibet, might produce a negative reaction, even among people who are not normally particularly supportive of the government. (As a comparison, if a group of liberal German human rights activists had criticized Britain's handling of the troubles in Northern Ireland in the 1970s, for example, their intervention might not have received a particularly warm welcome from at least some sections of the UK's press or society, given the history between the two countries in the previous six decades.)

Getting used to criticism

Yet whatever the justifications for angry Chinese reactions to foreign coverage of the country, one of the journalists surveyed suggested that these might have a less than positive impact on foreign correspondents based in China. Indeed, sociologist Yiyi Lu has argued that shrill responses to foreign media reporting may cause "deep frustration" among journalists, and could ultimately add to the likelihood of them producing stories "casting China in a less than favourable light."

Many journalists, as one interviewee emphasized, arguably do their best to set such frustrations aside and get on with reporting as objectively as possible. Yet some in China have called in recent years for the country to acquire a thicker skin when it comes to dealing with criticism from abroad. The famous young blogger and social commentator Han Han, for example, satirized extreme reactions to foreign criticisms in his blog posts at the time of the Beijing Olympics:

"Why is our national self-respect so fragile?" he asked, adding, "sensitivity and frailty are two major traits that we Chinese are expected to have, as a way of distinguishing ourselves from other nationalities. A country needs friends," he went on, "but our people seem to want only friends who can say nice things about us... We're a nation that insists on not airing our dirty laundry, and we shoulder our burden in the hope of winning other people's praise. When that praise is not forthcoming, the weight of our burden gets dumped on their heads."

(Indeed, Han Han suggested, Chinese people’s ability to perceive slights was such that “if one day extra-terrestrials were to announce that we earthlings are all fools... it will be the Chinese who will take this most to heart.”)¹⁹¹

Han Han’s hope, he said, was “that one day, when a foreigner says something insulting... we won’t need to have everyone from the highest diplomat to the attendant in the Laundromat make a statement about it, and the population at large won’t have to all blow their tops... As I see it, when others take you to task over some practical issue, all you can do is reason with them. If we can manage not to work ourselves into a fit of hysteria... when somebody criticizes us, we’ll be doing well,” he added, concluding: “Let’s not get in a rage so easily.”¹⁹²

And while Han Han’s views clearly represent the urban, liberal end of China’s social spectrum – and he has come in for criticism for his attitudes – his writings have nonetheless attracted millions of followers online, and are echoed by some in Chinese society. As one Chinese journalist told this author:

“Who cares what foreigners say or write about China? It’s up to them, why do they have to write the story in the same way Chinese people would think about it?”¹⁹³

Chapter 5

Conclusion: China and the international media – food for thought

¹⁹¹ Han Han, op cit., pp. 35, 28-9

¹⁹² *ibid.* p. 51

¹⁹³ Author conversation with Chinese journalist, 2011

As highlighted in Chapter 1, recent developments have provided ample reminders that, despite some attempts to improve China's relations with the international media, tensions between the Chinese authorities and foreign journalists are real and ongoing. So what messages and lessons – for media operating in China, or the Chinese authorities – can be drawn from the results of this paper's research?

Chinese views of the foreign media: Nuanced – but continuing concerns

Overall, the survey of Chinese students – admittedly a small snapshot focusing on a relatively educated group – found that opinions were often more complex than the official line as presented in China's media, but that many respondents still had concerns about foreign media coverage of their country.

In general, the respondents' attitudes were quite nuanced, and in some cases surprisingly liberal. Only a relatively small percentage seemed to echo the more strident sections of China's media and take a generally hard-line view of foreign reporting. Many respondents retained some respect for the international media, and a majority supported the idea of foreigners being allowed to report from China, and also agreed that the foreign media could sometimes play a positive role in influencing China's development.

Furthermore, many respondents were critical of the way in which China's own media (in particular the mainstream outlets which are seen as representing the views of the Communist Party) reported on foreign countries, and also of how these media reported foreign coverage of China). The implication, therefore, was that some of the problems these respondents saw in foreign media coverage of China were not unique to international media, but were a feature of journalism in general.

Nevertheless, there were continuing concerns, even among those Chinese respondents who were relatively well disposed to the international media, about how China is portrayed around the world, and how this might affect international perceptions of the country.

Areas of particular concern included the accuracy, breadth, quality and (in some cases) quantity of foreign media coverage of the country. As previously noted, one key complaint was that the proportion of stories about ordinary people's lives was not as high as it should be.

The survey also suggested that these perceived failings coloured respondents' views of the international media, and of its fairness and objectivity – and in a small number of cases also negatively affected their view of the outside world as a whole (though the majority of respondents seemed able to separate these two issues).

Foreign Reporters: Committed, but facing space constraints, editorial pressure – and official obstruction

The interviews with foreign journalists, meanwhile, revealed much contemplation about their role, along with a significant level of commitment to attempting to present an accurate and diverse picture of developments in China to the outside world. However the respondents also raised some deep-seated concerns about factors (economic, editorial and bureaucratic) that, they felt, sometimes made it hard for them to report as they would wish to.

Many of the interviewees felt that there was much excellent reporting on China in the international media, and generally agreed that new technology had made access to information in the country easier. At the same time, a number of those surveyed expressed frustration at limitations of time, space, or funding imposed on them by their media organizations – and also at the pressures resulting from growing competition within the media, which some felt had been made worse by the advent of new technology, with the internet adding to demands to produce more stories more rapidly. Several respondents felt that these limitations often militated against them telling the 'China story' in as much depth or breadth – or with as much creativity or originality – as they would have liked.

There was also a general desire for more opportunity to tell the stories of individuals in greater depth – and in some cases to cover a wider geographical area of the country. It was also striking that many of those interviewed made the point that they saw China, and its current social, political and economic situation, as particularly complex, and thus felt that more space was required to explain the country clearly.

Some concern was also expressed at the tendency of editors to impose their own preconceptions on coverage. Respondents agreed that some editors were well-informed and offered constructive ideas, and/or were willing to respect their views, but they also noted that, in some cases, editors had a relatively stereotyped view of China, something which did not

necessarily encourage nuanced coverage of the country. Several reporters said they had had to deal with editors who were particularly focused on human rights topics, or on more 'sensational' aspects of China, and that this had reduced their opportunities to publish other types of story. (Some interviewees also complained about the 'echo chamber' syndrome, in which correspondents are asked simply to report on stories that their editors have read about in other media.)

Nevertheless – and possibly contrary to the suspicions of some in China – there was also evidence that editors' preconceptions and stereotypes did not always lead to negative coverage of the country, but sometimes had a positive bias. And several of the interviewees made a point of rejecting the idea that there was any kind of 'foreign media conspiracy' against China.

Still, most of those interviewed robustly defended their right to cover sensitive topics in China when they considered there to be a news value in doing so – and several argued that it was often a journalist's responsibility, or indeed duty, to carry out such reporting. At the same time, all the interviewees made it clear that they and their media organizations had thresholds and criteria which they applied to all types of story – including anti-government criticisms or protests.

Consequently, they stressed, they would not simply report such issues unquestioningly – and in some cases would not report them at all. Indeed, several correspondents suggested that they often had to disappoint Chinese citizens who believed their own problems with the authorities would be resolved if they could have them reported in the foreign media. (This phenomenon is also a reminder that some Chinese citizens, at least, do not regard the international media simply as a 'hostile force'.)

And while several interviewees said that the stories they chose to cover were simply a response to whatever was happening within their journalistic beat at any given time, others emphasized that they thought carefully about the overall balance of their coverage of China as a whole – and all of those interviewed reiterated that they sought to make each individual story as balanced as possible.

Many reporters, however, felt that the Chinese authorities did not always make it easy for them to provide accurate and informed coverage of the country – either due to restrictions on access,

and attempts to prevent them reporting sensitive topics, or simply by making it difficult to interview senior officials. There was an acknowledgement that the situation had become slightly better in some respects over the past two decades, but many respondents felt that the fundamental problem had not been resolved.

There was also a sense that when officials did give interviews, the nature of China's political system, with its emphasis on caution and not speaking out of turn, often made it hard for them to say much of great interest. Many of those surveyed expressed significant frustration at this situation – and at least one interviewee suggested that a lack of access or information made it likely that, when for example covering political stories, not only might the official viewpoint not be represented fully, but opposing or critical voices might sometimes be given greater space or airtime.

Challenges for the international media

Thus there is clearly much for both the Chinese authorities and international media organizations reporting on China to consider.

The responses of the Chinese students surveyed suggest that while there is plenty of goodwill towards the international media, it still has to work to convince even those who are generally fairly well-disposed towards it of the quality and credibility of its reporting. The Internet has also made it easier for Chinese people to identify areas where they feel the foreign media has fallen short, by giving them the chance to read foreign articles for themselves.

International media organizations, some of which have cut back their spending on coverage of China in recent years due to economic concerns,¹⁹⁴ may also be given pause by the assertion of several correspondents that reporting China requires relatively greater resources than in some other countries – not least in terms of the time given them to work on a story and the space provided to publish it.

¹⁹⁴ Some media organizations, notably the New York Times and the BBC, have continued to expand their reporting teams in China in recent years – but many others have scaled back: the Washington Post and LA Times, for example, have closed their Shanghai bureaus and now report only from Beijing.

Some sections of the Chinese media have also continued to improve the quality of their own reporting, thus providing alternative sources of information. As detailed in Chapter 1, the Chinese government has also devoted increasing investment to boosting the country's own media output in English and other languages. While the quality of Chinese media in foreign languages varies, its increasing presence internationally and online may pose a growing challenge to the monopoly held by foreign media over coverage of China.

Challenges for the Chinese government

At the same time, it is clear that some in China still see the international media as a valuable source of information about their country, and remain sceptical about the credibility of domestic media.

And for the Chinese authorities, who are increasingly concerned about the nation's international image, there is further food for thought: the comments of the foreign journalists interviewed suggest that Chinese officialdom still has some way to go in its understanding the workings of the international media, and thus in 'telling China's story' effectively.

And a number of correspondents argued that a more open approach to communicating with foreign media would benefit China – as would a more relaxed official response to at least some critical reporting.

Understanding each other's concerns

With China's growing economic significance and growing role in international affairs, it is clearly important that developments in this vast nation should be presented as accurately and fairly as possible to the outside world, not only to 'enhance mutual understanding', but also to avoid unnecessary and potentially dangerous misunderstandings.

Given the differences between China and other countries, in terms of official attitudes towards the media – particularly regarding coverage of sensitive topics, as discussed in Chapter 1 – tensions between the Chinese authorities and the international media are unlikely to end suddenly. Yet it is hoped that some of the ideas raised in this paper, both by international journalists and Chinese citizens, might provide some pointers for reducing some of these tensions.

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Appendix 1

Student Questionnaire

SURVEY ON FOREIGN MEDIA COVERAGE OF CHINA

有关外国媒体对中国的报道的调查

QUESTIONS: 问题

(Please fill in answers where appropriate. In multiple choice questions you can either highlight or write in the number of the answer you agree with, or delete the ones you disagree with. Many thanks!)

Your age: (optional)
您的年龄(可选):

Your hometown (optional)
您来自中国什么地方? (可选):

Your current university? (optional)
您现在读的学校(可选):

Your area of academic study (optional):
您的专业(可选):

1: Do you read/watch any international media? 您平时阅读或者接触国际媒体吗?

If yes: 如果是

a) - how often? (every day/ most days/ every week/ most weeks/occasionally) 什么频率? (每天 / 几乎每天 / 每周 / 几乎每周 / 偶尔)

b) - do you read them in Chinese and/or English or other foreign language (please specify)
您通过什么语言读国际媒体? 中文, 英文还是其他语言 (请指出)

c) - Through which platform do you access international media? (print, online, radio, TV)
您通过什么媒介接触国际媒体? (印刷媒体, 网络, 广播, 电视)

d) - Which are the three foreign media organizations you read most frequently? 列出您最常阅读的三个国际媒体名称

e) - Why do you choose to read these foreign media? (please give up to three most important reasons?) 您为什么选择阅读这些媒体? (请给出三个理由)

f) - Are you interested in what they write about China? (1. Not at all, 2, Not very 3. A bit; 4 a lot ; 5. Very much) 您对国际媒体对中国的报道感兴趣吗? (1, 根本不; 2, 并不是很感兴趣; 3, 一点儿; 4, 很感兴趣; 5, 非常)

2. a) Do you read translations of foreign media reports on China, or stories reporting what the foreign media is saying about China, on Chinese websites or in Chinese newspapers? 您读不读国际媒体报道中国的翻译文章, 或者国内网站和报纸所写的有关国际媒体如何报道中国的文章?

b) If yes, please say which media/websites you use for this purpose

如果是, 请列出您读的是哪些媒体 / 网站?

3: Your impressions of coverage of China in the international media: 您对国际媒体报道中国的印象:

a) - Is there enough coverage of China in foreign media? A) 国际媒体中有足够的有关中国的报道吗?

(1. Far too little; 2. Not enough; 3. About right; 4. Too much 5. Far too much) (1, 远远太少了; 2, 不够多; 3, 差不多; 4, 太多; 5, 极其多)

b) - is it objective? B) 您觉得这些报道客观吗?

(1. not at all objective, 2. not objective enough, 3. mostly objective, 4. objective, 5. very objective) (1, 一点不客观; 2, 不够客观; 3, 大多数客观; 4, 客观; 5, 非常客观)

c) - Is it accurate? C) 这些报道精确吗?

(1. not at all accurate, 2. not accurate enough, 3. mostly accurate, 4. accurate, 5. Very accurate) (1, 根本不精确; 2, 不够精确; 3, 大多数精确; 4, 精确; 5, 非常精确)

d) - Is it relevant – ie do you think it covers the right aspects of what's happening in China? (1. Never; 2. Not very often; 3; sometimes; 4. Often; 5. Always)

D) 这些报道能反映中国正在发生的事件的正确方面吗？（1，根本不；2，不经常；3，有时候；4，经常；5，一直是）

Optional: What do you think is missing from this coverage – and why do you think this is the case? (answer below – or at the end of the survey if you need more space)

(可选): 国际媒体的中国报道中有什么缺失吗？您觉得为什么是这样子？（您可以直接在这里回答；若需要更多空间，可以在下面最后的问题以后回答）

e) - Can you give examples of any stories or subjects which you think the foreign media has reported particularly well (professionally, accurately), or particularly badly (unprofessional, inaccurately)?

E) 请您列举出一些您觉得国际媒体报道得非常好, 或者非常不好（指不专业与不精确）的新闻或者题（指专业和精确）

f) - How do you think foreign coverage affects the attitudes of foreigners towards China? (1. very negatively, 2. a bit negatively, 3. no effect, 4. a bit positively, 5. very positively)

F) 您觉得外国媒体对中国的报道怎样影响了外国人对中国的态度？（1，非常负面；2，有些负面；3，无影响；4，比较正面；5，非常正面）

g) - How does foreign reporting of China affect your attitude towards the international media? (1. very negatively, 2. a bit negatively, 3. no effect, 4. a bit positively, 5. very positively)

G) 外国媒体对中国的报道怎样影响了您对国际媒体的态度？

（1，非常负面；2，有些负面；3，无影响；4，正面一些；5，非常正面）

h) - towards the countries where those media are based? (1. very negatively, 2. a bit negatively, 3. no effect, 4. a bit positively, 5. very positively)

H) 外国媒体对中国的报道怎样影响了您对这些媒体所在国家的态度？

（1，非常负面；2，有些负面；3，无影响；4，正面一些；5，非常正面）

4. Do you think the Chinese media report accurately what foreign journalists are writing/saying about China? (1. not at all accurately, 2. not accurately enough, 3. mostly accurately, 4. accurately, 5. Very accurately)

4, 您觉得中国媒体对国际媒体怎么报道中国的报告精确吗？)

(1, 根本不精确; 2, 不够精确; 3, 大多数精确; 4, 精确; 5, 非常精确)

5. How do you think Chinese media reporting about foreign countries compares to foreign media reporting of China?

您觉得中国媒体对外国国家的报道与外国媒体对中国的报道比起来

(1. much worse, 2. a bit worse, 3. about the same, 4. a bit better, 5. much better)

(1, 差很多; 2, 差一点; 3, 差不多; 4, 好一点; 5, 好很多)

(Please explain/ give examples you think are relevant (below – or at the end of the survey if you need more space) ? (请给出理由和例子 – 您可以直接在这里回答; 若需要更多空间, 可以在下面最后的问题以后回答)

6. How much do you support the idea that foreign journalists should be based in China and report events from the country?

您对外国记者应该有机会在中国常驻以及报道中国新闻这个观点怎么看?

(1. greatly oppose, 2. oppose, 3. no opinion, 4. Support, 5. Greatly support,)

(1, 强烈反对; 2, 反对; 3, 无所谓; 4, 支持; 5, 强烈支持)

7. Do you think reporting of China in the foreign media can ever help to change China in a positive way? [directly / indirectly]

您觉得外国媒体的对中国的报道能帮助中国朝一个积极的方向而改变吗?

(1. greatly oppose, 2. oppose, 3. no opinion, 4. Support, 5. Greatly support,)

(1, 强烈反对; 2, 反对; 3, 无所谓; 4, 支持; 5, 强烈支持)

8. If foreigners could only read stories about China from Chinese sources, would this be?

若外国人只能从中国国内的媒体消息来源中读到关于中国的报道, 这将会是?

(1. much worse, 2. a bit worse, 3. about the same, 4. a bit better, 5. much better)

(1, 差很多; ; 2, 差一点; 3, 差不多; 4, 好一点; 5, 好很多)

Appendix 2

Questions for semi-structured interviews with foreign correspondents

What aspects of China are you particularly interested in covering?

Do you feel you are generally able to report the stories you want to / to what extent do your editors influence coverage?

Are there types of story you would like to cover, but which you find it harder to persuade editors to take? (egs) If so, why?

Do you think about 'balance' in your coverage of China as a whole – ie the mix of types of story you might cover in, say, one year – or do you simply approach it story by story?

Do you feel that the coverage of China you see in international media outlets as a whole generally brings out the nuances and complexity of the country?

Are there significant domestic factors in China which militate against accurate or in-depth coverage?

What do you feel is the attitude of ordinary Chinese people to foreign media/ journalists?

Is there a problem that the western idea of journalists seeking to give a voice to the powerless is less widely understood in China – so while foreign correspondents may feel they're reporting on problems because they care about China and/or its people, the authorities here will assume that any criticism is ill-intentioned and designed to cause trouble for China?

How important do you think it is for correspondents to be able to speak some Chinese?