

The quest for balanced reporting on China in the EU media: Forces and influences

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Abstract

Local media in any country that is the target of soft power actions is usually the most influential force in shaping public opinion and perceptions of the other country, its culture and its people. Therefore countries should pay particular attention to foreign journalists working within their borders. This study begins by looking at the Chinese point of view and then examines some of the forces and influences at work behind the scenes that affect the coverage of China in European media, such as conditions for EU journalists working in China, lack of transparency and access to information, pressures from the audience, editors and owners at home, as well as the diverging views on the role of journalists in Europe and China. Finally, it presents some insights on how what appears to be a deteriorating relationship can be improved for the benefit of all concerned.

Keywords

Access to information, censorship, Chinese media, country perceptions, fair and balanced reporting, foreign journalists in China, journalistic ideals, journalistic values, media bias, transparency

Introduction

All over the world, governments are focusing more and more on the soft power of their countries and how they can wield this intangible influence in their political, commercial and cultural relations with other countries. While the most important element of soft power is the attractiveness of a country, which is in turn mainly influenced by how that country behaves, in terms of policies, achievements and value systems, it is beyond any doubt that the media plays a key role in how this

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soft power is conveyed to and perceived by others. And more importantly, it is inevitably the local media in the country that is the target of the soft power actions that is most influential in shaping public opinion and perceptions of the other country, its culture and its people. Therefore countries should pay particular attention to the foreign journalists working within their borders and do their utmost to facilitate and ‘encourage’ them to achieve balanced and accurate reporting in their coverage of their host country.

All too often European journalists and EU media outlets, as well as other so-called ‘Western media’ are criticized, mostly by the Chinese authorities or through the official Chinese media but also, and increasingly, by the Chinese general public and the Chinese diaspora around the world (especially in the comment sections of online media), for some form of bias or deliberate negativity in their reporting on China, especially when reporting on topics that are considered ‘sensitive’, such as Human Rights issues or anything related to the Tibet Autonomous Region.

The EU media, for their part, claim that it is difficult to achieve balance in China reporting when they are often impeded in their work by a lack of transparency or access to information. In this article, we will begin by looking at the Chinese point of view and then we will examine some of the forces and influences at work behind the scenes that affect the coverage of China in European media. We will focus on the following issues: first, working conditions for EU journalists in China; second, lack of transparency and access to information; third, the home front: Audience, editors, owners; fourth, the role of journalism – ideology and values. Finally we hope to provide some insights on how what appears to be a deteriorating relationship can be improved for the benefit of all concerned.

The Chinese point of view

A Google search using the keywords ‘Western media’ (‘xifang meiti’) ‘China’ (‘zhongguo’) and ‘negative report’ (‘fujian baodao’) throws up over 300,000 results. Another search of ‘Western media’, ‘distorting report’ (‘waiqu baodao’) reveals 172,000 results. To any neutral reader, the overwhelming impression that one gets from trawling through even the first few pages of these results is that the dominant opinion in China’s mainstream media, especially the official media, as well as in academic papers by Chinese scholars, is that the EU and other Western media (in particular the US) are biased in their reporting on China.

According to research from the China Institute of International Studies:

In recent years, China’s rising national strength and international influence have drawn more and more Western mainstream media coverage. Overall, the Western media give recognition to China’s economic achievements and rich heritage of history and culture. However, it vehemently attacks China’s political system, military build-up, social conflicts, national quality and so on (Li et al., 2012).

Feng Zhongping, Head of the Institute of European Studies at the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations, had the following to say on the subject:

I find the Western prejudice kind of depressing. You can hardly get them to adopt an objective stance, understanding China based on its real national condition. Ignorance together with differences in culture, political systems and economic development contribute to unbalanced reporting. Except for a few major media like BBC and FT, most press lack professional practitioners for China-related media products (Feng, 2008).

In general, there are fewer complaints in Chinese media about EU media coverage of China's economic achievements or cultural heritage. However, the Chinese political system, the military, social conflicts, food and product safety, currency exchange rates, environmental pollution and trade issues, as well as human rights, are seen as areas where negative reporting by EU media feeds the 'China threat theory' and other anti-China rhetoric (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2009).

In 2013, an article in *China Journalists Magazine* about the image of China in French-speaking European media complained that EU media has long been biased against China in its news coverage: 'In contrast to China's vigorous reporting on Western civilization, the European media mainly focus on the dark side of Chinese society and turn a blind eye to our achievements and good efforts' (Xinhua, 2013).

This last statement might well be the most representative of Chinese mainstream media's perceptions of EU media coverage of China.

In general, EU and Western media are accused of three deadly sins, which will be elaborated more in detail below.

Selective agenda setting

Foreign journalists are accused of having a selective agenda, basically choosing negative topics while ignoring positive ones. In addition to telling people what to think, the media are also accused of telling them how to think about it.

An article published in *Youth Journalist Magazine* in 2013 entitled 'Brief Analysis of Agenda-Setting in International Communication' comments:

In most of the media coverage of major events concerning China, such as the Diaoyu Islands dispute and the South China Sea disputes, the Western media purposely set the agenda to shape a negative international opinion of China. While Western media has its truthful and objective side, due to ideological differences, cultural differences, conflicts of interests and other factors, the overall reporting on China is filled with pride and prejudice, turning a blind eye to China's achievements and contributions or even presenting fallacies. (Qian, 2013)

Distorting the truth

Mainstream media in China believe that some EU media have distorted the truth when reporting about certain issues, most notably the 2008 unrest in Tibet.

The *People's Daily* published two feature pages in 2008 and 2009 analyzing this phenomenon, claiming that some EU media used edited or inaccurate images to defame China in reporting Tibet-related issues. For example, a photo of Nepalese policemen chasing a Tibetan protester accompanied the headline 'Hundreds of Tibetans die, should we boycott the Beijing Olympics?' in an article by *Bild* (*People's Daily*, 2009).

Critical discourse

Some Chinese commentators find that even when EU or other Western media respect the accuracy of the facts when reporting on China, their wording may contain a negative slant, which can lead the audience to think in a critical way about China. The hidden prejudice sets a tone of fear and caution. For instance, the critical discourse often reflects worries about China's growing economic might as a threat rather than a boon to Europe's jobs and economy.

A research article entitled 'New Features of China-related Media Coverage by German Media in 2012 – A Case Study of *Der Spiegel*' examined the China-related coverage of *Spiegel Online*, *Der Spiegel* and *Manager Magazine* in 2012, and found that the 770 China-related articles in general manifest a surprised and worried attitude of the German media towards China:

Among economic-related reports, few have given recognition to the production capacity, technological innovation and product quality of Chinese enterprises in the true sense. Most reports criticize China's copyright problem, dumping, blind competition and trade protection with a mocking tone. Some reports on cross-border acquisitions of Chinese companies have expressed a degree of surprise and panic, and in the end are often redirected towards political issues. (Chen, 2012)

It continues later: 'With China's rapid economic development, the German media are not only surprised by the success of the "Chinese model", but also panic and worry about the rise of Chinese enterprises' (Chen, 2012).

In researching this article, the author conducted a series of anonymous interviews¹¹ with a selection of EU correspondents from different countries and media working in China. While the vast majority of them maintained, as we will see later, that any imbalance in their reporting was mostly due to restrictions on the part of the Chinese authorities, one journalist in particular stood out as agreeing almost entirely with the Chinese viewpoint:

I don't think foreign (Western: European, US, etc.) journalists can achieve balance in their reporting on China. First of all, they do not even want to achieve balanced

journalism; their goal or task is not to come up with a 'balanced view'; however most of them try to act like they are balanced, representing (mentioning in a way) the 'official view' too. That's because many of us see ourselves as human rights or environmental activists, or even 'freedom fighters', instead of just being correspondents. Many of us do not just want to understand, transfer or explain the information, situation, phenomenon, but also to become an active part of it, with his or her opinion, sometimes creating, instead of following the news story. (Interview with the author, 2014)

He too accuses the European media of the sin of omission:

We [foreign journalists] report only part of, but not the whole 'truth', and we do not even try to show a big part of this existing and developing power or the logic of their [Chinese] system; and we do not try to 'translate' or to make more understandable the language they use (for their own citizens), the way they think, the motivation behind their acts. We do not really try (or want) to understand what is happening and why it is happening in this huge country, in which direction it is heading, and where it could end up. (Interview with the author, 2014)

It is a dissenting but important voice where China correspondents are concerned, and it certainly adds fuel to the debate over the ability of European journalists to find balance in their reporting on China.

Now that we have set out the stall from the Chinese point of view, we would like to examine some of the factors that may be at play from the EU media and journalists' point of view.

Working conditions for EU journalists in China

For over a decade now, China has become more and more important on the world stage and this has caused increased interest among the general public in Europe which in turn has resulted in more and more European media organizations sending correspondents to be based in China, mostly in Beijing. Accession to the WTO as well as winning the bid to host the 2008 Olympics brought China ever closer to the outside world following the period of doldrums in the years after Tiananmen.

While foreign media working in China were traditionally heavily restricted, needing special permission to interview people or organizations as well as to travel anywhere outside of Beijing, the hosting of the Olympic Games offered a chance for an easing of these restrictions with promises from the Chinese authorities (Foreign Correspondents Club of China (FCCC), 2008a).

Wang Wei, secretary-general of the Beijing Olympic Games bid committee, in lobbying for the right to host the event in 2001 declared: 'I think we will give the media complete freedom to report when they come to China. . . We have made our guarantees in our bid document so all the world's media will be welcome to come to China' (*China Daily*, 2001).

As promised, in the run-up to the Olympics then Premier Wen Jiabao signed a decree temporarily relaxing the existing reporting restrictions from 1 January 2007 until 17 October 2008 ‘to facilitate reporting activities carried out in accordance with the laws of the People’s Republic of China by foreign journalists in China to advance and promote the Olympic Spirit during the Beijing Olympic Games and the preparatory period’ (State Council of the People’s Republic of China, 2006).

The most important element of these new rules was Article 6 which stated: ‘To interview organizations or individuals in China, foreign journalists need only to obtain their prior consent.’ (State Council of the People’s Republic of China, 2006) This effectively meant that foreign journalists were now free to report anywhere in China, although it was later clarified by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that foreign journalists would still be subject to existing Chinese laws, such as rules barring foreigners from visiting Tibet without special permits.

These new regulations were widely welcomed by the community of foreign correspondents in China albeit with some reservations as to how the laws would be implemented, especially at a local level in the provinces. This was borne out by a report totalling 338 incidents of reporting interference of some form or another against foreign journalists between the coming into force of the new rules and December 2008 (FCCC, 2008b).

Despite several major events in the run-up to the Beijing Olympics, including the Sichuan earthquake and the outbreak of violence in Tibet, for which foreign journalists received heavy criticism, as mentioned previously, the new temporary rules were nevertheless made permanent on 17 October (Regulations of the People’s Republic of China Concerning Reporting Activities of Permanent Offices of Foreign Media Organizations and Foreign Journalists, 2008).

Then President Hu Jintao also pledged his full support: ‘We will continue to make government affairs public, enhance information distribution, safeguard the legitimate rights and interests of foreign news organizations and reporters, and facilitate foreign media coverage of China in accordance with China’s laws and regulations’ (Hu, 2009).

However these new reporting regulations continued to be enforced unevenly, particularly, but not exclusively, in the provinces, according to the FCCC, which carries out annual surveys of reporting conditions of foreign journalists in China. In 2009, the FCCC said its members ‘noted improvements in freedom to travel, frequency of news conferences, and feeling of empowerment by new regulations for foreign media. Many expressed concern that harassment of Chinese staff and sources appeared to be increasing.’ (FCCC, 2009) In subsequent surveys, the FCCC has consistently reported a deterioration in reporting conditions in China (FCCC, 2013).

One particular incident stands out as it resulted in an amendment of sorts to the new rules to add an additional administrative barrier to reporting freely anywhere around China. At the end of February 2011 there was a brief and not widely supported period of silent pro-democracy protest inspired by the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia that was spreading across the Arab world at the time. The

anonymous organizers of these protests merely called for supporters to come out and stroll up and down the main shopping thoroughfare in Beijing on 27 February. On the day, according to many reporters, there seemed to be more police (and foreign journalists) on the street than protesters (Johnson, 2011). Several journalists were physically beaten by unidentified men in plain clothes and others were detained by the police (FCCC, 2011a).

But what was most interesting is that in the days that followed this incident, reporters were informed by the authorities that they needed to get permission to interview from the administrative unit that has jurisdiction over the location where they wished to conduct an interview with a consenting individual. This represented a new interpretation of the rule and something of a rollback. A rule prohibiting interviewing, taking pictures or causing crowds to gather was posted on a Dongcheng District government website in March (Beijing Municipality, 2011). The so-called Wangfujing Management regulation was dated 1 January, but search engine forensics carried out by the FCCC show it was posted just 1 week previously.

One European journalist commented:

Wangfujing was a turning point. Sometimes it's more difficult to find people willing to talk to us, especially face to face. A professor who had agreed to be interviewed was denied permission to meet with foreign journalists by his university. Authorities [are] less co-operative. We are left in limbo about what we can and cannot do. (FCCC, 2011b)

Reporting conditions for EU journalists in China had deteriorated to such an extent that during a visit of Premier Wen Jiaobao to Berlin in June 2011, Chancellor Angela Merkel called on the visiting Chinese leader to 'ensure appropriate working conditions for German journalists in China' (Weiland, 2011).

One journalist quoted in an FCCC survey the same year had the following comment:

In fourteen years reporting in China this is by far the most violent period. The nature of physical harassment is much worse. Across the board, uniform and plain clothes police, local authorities and even private citizens now feel it is possible to prevent foreign reporters from doing their work. (FCCC, 2011b)

Other barriers to reporting include visa denials and threats of visa denials in an effort to indirectly censor reporting, according to data collected by the FCCC (2013).

It reports that there is increasing use of interference and intimidation, especially when it comes to linking media coverage to whether journalists will have their visas renewed or not, with the clear message being that if the powers that be do not like the content or subject matter of a journalist's reporting, said journalist may find him or herself barred from working in China (FCCC, 2013).

In 2012, for the first time since 1998, China expelled an accredited foreign correspondent, Melissa Chan, a US citizen working for Al Jazeera TV (FCCC, 2012).

The FCCC points out that although in 2013 the vast majority of foreign journalists received their new press cards and visas without any problems or delays:

This year [2013] it became more obvious than ever that the Chinese authorities abuse the press card and visa renewal process in a political manner, treating journalistic accreditation as a privilege rather than a professional right, and punishing reporters and media organizations for the content of their previous coverage if it has displeased the government. (FCCC, 2013)

The authorities withheld new press cards and visas until the very last moment from all foreign employees of the *New York Times* and *Bloomberg*, which had both published exposés on the private finances of relatives of leading members of the government. In the absence of any official explanation for the protracted delay in the issuance of their accreditation and visas, that delay would appear to have been intended to put pressure on the bureaus concerned (FCCC, 2013).

And this pressure appears to be working in some cases. At the end of 2013, *Bloomberg's* China correspondent, Michael Forsythe, was suspended and subsequently resigned after leaking news that *Bloomberg* had decided to spike investigative articles for fear of reprisals from the Chinese authorities. And in March 2014, Ben Richardson, an editor at large at Bloomberg News in Asia, announced his resignation, citing the company's mishandling of this issue (Somayia, 2014).

Recently in a speech in Hong Kong Peter T Grauer, the chairman of Bloomberg, was quoted as saying that the company should have reconsidered articles that deviated from its core of coverage of business news, because they jeopardized the huge sales potential for its products in the Chinese market (Gough and Somayia, 2014).

Evan Osnos, a former China correspondent for the *New Yorker*, recently commented that 'this is the Chinese government's broadest effort in decades to roll back unwelcome foreign coverage – and that raises the stakes for news organizations that are struggling to figure out how to handle China' (Osnos, 2013).

Another former China correspondent, *Guardian* journalist Jonathan Watts, analysed the treatment of foreign journalists in China as follows: 'There are other cultural, linguistic and ideological issues that affect coverage, but I believe the government's controls on foreign journalists have one of the biggest and most negative impact on the overseas image of the country' (Watts, 2008).

He continued:

China, I suspect, sometimes gets more negative coverage than it deserves because its old system of restricting the activities of foreign correspondents pushes them into taking sides. To do a sensitive story in the provinces, journalists used to have to choose between going officially and getting an overly rosy view of what was happening, or sneaking in without permission and hearing only the views of disgruntled peasants – many of whom have a financial incentive to exaggerate their woes because they want to use the media to seek compensation. The problem was that there was

very little middle ground – and in many cases that is where the truth is probably to be found.

Forced to choose, most journalists often gave the benefit of the doubt to the little guy up against the system. With the domestic media often muzzled and the courts in the pocket of local officials, there was no other outlet for the voices of the oppressed. I try to get the official view too by calling the relevant government departments, but the spokesman's system – despite a much heralded reform and expansion in 2003 – is not very helpful. Phones often ring unanswered or are quickly hung up. (Watts, 2008)

Lack of transparency and access to information

Hand in hand with the reporting restrictions on foreign journalists in China go the lack of transparency and access to sources of information. One of the most obvious examples of this is the almost total ban on foreign journalists being allowed free access to report in Tibet, with only a few tightly controlled visits of selected foreign journalists organised by the foreign ministry each year (FCCC, 2010).

According to one journalist surveyed by the FCCC:

Even when we have 'access' it is generally only access to what they want us to see and report. The fact that we cannot go there independently and set our own agenda means we rarely (legally) obtain realistic or balanced reporting from there. (FCCC, 2010)

As was noted previously, no other issue has so polarized the debate in China on the lack of balance in EU or Western media as that of coverage of issues related to Tibet, and in particular the uprising of March 2008. That month, Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Qin Gang commented: 'It is the irresponsible and unethical reports [of Western media] that infuriated our people to voice voluntarily their condemnation and criticism' (Chinese Foreign Ministry, 2008).

The foreign journalists will counter that due to the lack of access to Tibet itself and sources inside Tibet, they are forced to either report the Chinese government line or accept second-hand accounts from Tibetan exiles and contacts in other parts of China who may have their own agenda or may simply not have accurate information themselves. One German journalist at the time lamented the lack of information available from the Chinese authorities:

At present, we can only get information from Tibetans in exile and actually we don't like it, but we cannot get more information from competent authorities of China. We do want to check the information with local authorities so as to report objectively, but it's very difficult. (Chinese Foreign Ministry, 2008)

In June 2010 the FCCC conducted an e-mail questionnaire of correspondent members on reporting conditions in Tibet. The majority of respondents, 86 percent, said it was not possible to report accurately and comprehensively on Tibet. When

asked the question ‘What obstacles prevent journalists from doing accurate and comprehensive reporting about Tibet?’ correspondents listed travel restrictions and the reluctance of sources to speak freely as the top obstacles to reporting, along with the inability to verify conflicting information (FCCC, 2010).

One respondent to the survey commented: ‘If sources cannot speak about any subject without fear, it is not possible to do accurate and comprehensive reporting. I have no idea what a majority of Tibetans think, and I doubt anyone else in the world does either’ (FCCC, 2010). Another said: ‘Knowing it’s hard to get in, many people are deterred from going. That leaves us reliant on exiles and government propaganda’ (FCCC, 2010). The message here is that even two second-hand accounts of the story from opposing sources cannot replace the first-hand experience of being on the ground where the action is happening. And this lack of transparency is also relayed to audiences back in Europe, thereby fomenting distrust and reinforcing the notion that China has something to hide.

The coverage of unrest in Tibet that began in March 2008, just a few months before the Beijing Olympics, is seen by some as a ‘turning point’ in relations between the Chinese authorities and foreign journalists (Van Pinxteren, 2013).

A former Dutch China correspondent expressed the view on the downturn in the treatment of foreign journalists as stemming precisely from coverage of this news event by foreign media, suggesting that in the eyes of the authorities in Beijing the foreign press had ‘disappointed China’ (Van Pinxteren, 2013).

Whereas before 2008 the Chinese government saw foreign correspondents as crucial in creating more understanding of China abroad, after the Tibetan riots the Chinese government changed track. Since then, the government has felt that the role of promoting China abroad was better left to the Chinese media and journalists, since the foreign press had disappointed China and would undoubtedly do so again. It was time for China’s voice to be heard abroad directly, through Chinese media organizations. (Van Pinxteren, 2013)

Indeed the comments of the Foreign Ministry spokesperson at the time certainly lend some credence to this view:

The Lhasa incident is over. Our country will have a better future, and so will Tibet. But it leaves us with a legacy, a mirror to see the true face of some people out there. It is also a textbook of bad examples, and it helps our people discern clearly the essence of the much-vaunted “justice” and “objectiveness” by some western media. What happened in Lhasa is bad and unfortunate; but if there’s anything good about the Lhasa incident, this will be one. (Chinese Foreign Ministry, 2008)

While it is certainly true that in recent years China has spent billions of Renminbi in its efforts to make its state media, notably Xinhua and CCTV, a global media force to be reckoned with, there is scant evidence to show how successful this strategy has been (Penna, 2012). The fact still remains that in Europe, at

least, most people still read local newspapers and watch local news broadcasts on TV, most often in their own language, which mix local issues that affect their immediate lives with some international stories that while important still maintain a comfortable distance from their daily concerns.

Therefore it would seem at the very least counter-productive to China's efforts to completely ignore foreign media and rely solely on its own media to tell the story of China to the rest of the world. And indeed this does not appear to be the case. Coverage of China in the international media remains as important for the Chinese authorities, if not more important than ever, as China takes its place among the leading nations of the 21st century and as it attempts to project its desired image of China to the outside world.

If anything we have seen an increase in the use of foreign media, especially in the form of op-eds, by Chinese leaders and diplomats. Whole ministries have become more communicative towards the foreign press corps, in particular not only the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which has increased its press briefings from three per week to daily Monday–Friday in recent years, but also the Ministry of Commerce among others.

However, much of this communication is one-way, with the Chinese authorities happy to make statements and pronouncements but less available to answer detailed questions. Many EU journalists working in China still complain about their inability to ensure balance in their reporting not only due to impediments in getting access to non-governmental sources but also to getting the views and opinions of the Chinese authorities.

As one British journalist, currently working in China, told the author:

We certainly strive for it (balance), but at the end of the day the problem is that the balancing comment we so often need from the government is impossible to get, thanks to the government's general refusal to answer questions from foreign reporters. (Interview with the author, 2014)

All this said, and despite the FCCC reports that reporting conditions for foreign journalists have gone steadily downhill since the 2008 Olympics, the very long-term trend is still positive. As one journalist put it: 'Reporting conditions are about the same as a year ago, worse than five years ago, better than ten years ago, and way better than 15–20 years ago' (FCCC, 2012).

The home front: Audience, editors and owners

So far we have examined the role of EU journalists in China, who are at the coalface of this discussion. But another factor in this debate is the audience for the news stories that they are filing. And different media have different audiences. A reader of the *Financial Times* will demand different news content and style than a reader of the *Daily Mail*. Editors will usually demand of their journalists that they write for their audience.

It is very rare that a story that appears in the *Financial Times* will make it into the pages of the *Daily Mail*. The only one the author remembers clearly from the recent past is the Bo Xilai case, which had all the elements to interest almost a universal European audience (Brady, 2013; Hille, 2013). And not just a European audience but audiences all over the world, not least in China. As one Chinese user on Sina Weibo commented on the case:

A cops and robbers movie became a detective flick, which became a melodrama, which became a feature film, which in turn became a love story. This evolution really isn't easy. I don't know if afterwards it will become a comedy film. (Chen, 2013)

What is clear from the above is that there is certainly an appetite for news on China across the board in European media, but according to the majority of the EU correspondents that we contacted for this study, their editors are looking for *interesting* stories rather than *negative* stories. As one UK journalist told the author:

You are likely to have much more interest in the story of a Chinese person paying 3 million euro for a pair of Tibetan mastiffs rather than the jailing of some human rights defendant. Most people just are not that interested in human rights stories. (Interview with the author, 2014)

When we posed the question as to whether he felt any pressure from his editors to write in a certain way about China, another European journalist answered:

Not really. If anything there can be a bit of pressure at times *not* (emphasis mine) to do as many human rights/negative stories as are out there because there are so many and it's a relentless drumbeat. But that pressure, if it exists in our news organisation's case, is applied in the interest of providing as full and balanced a picture of China as possible. (Interview with the author, 2014)

One more factor in the mix is the politics of the owner of the media organisation, but the bias here can also work in favour of China. The example that we would like to take is of Hungarian politics and media. In spring of 2008 when the riots broke out in Tibet, with the former socialist party MSZP in power in Hungary and the current governing party Fidesz in opposition, the *Magyar Nemzet*, a newspaper close to Fidesz, published articles denouncing China and calling for the MSZP to make a stand for human rights and minorities in Tibet (*Magyar Nemzet*, 2008).

Meanwhile, in 2011, during the visit of former Premier Wen Jiabao to Hungary, when Fidesz was now in power, the same newspaper published an article on the country's burgeoning relations with China (*Magyar Nemzet*, 2011). In this case the perceived negativity of the first article was not to denigrate China, and not even directed at China, but was instead used as a political cudgel to bash or at least embarrass the other political party.

Fundamental values

The preamble of the Code of Ethics of the Society of Professional Journalists states:

Members of the Society of Professional Journalists believe that public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy. The duty of the journalist is to further those ends by seeking truth and providing a fair and comprehensive account of events and issues. Conscientious journalists from all media and specialties strive to serve the public with thoroughness and honesty. Professional integrity is the cornerstone of a journalist's credibility. Members of the Society share a dedication to ethical behaviour and adopt this code to declare the Society's principles and standards of practice. (Society of Professional Journalists, 2014)

It goes on to list the following goals: first, seek truth and report it; second, minimize harm; act independently; fourth, be accountable. Meanwhile, the Pew Research Journalism Project has set out what it calls nine core principles of journalism (Pew Research Journalism Project, 2009), which include: first, journalism's first obligation is to the truth; second, its first loyalty is to citizens; third, its essence is a discipline of verification; fourth, its practitioners must maintain an independence from those they cover; fifth, it must serve as an independent monitor of power; sixth, it must provide a forum for public criticism and compromise; seventh, it must strive to make the significant interesting and relevant; eighth, it must keep the news comprehensive and proportional and ninth, its practitioners must be allowed to exercise their personal conscience. That all European journalists manage to adhere to all of these principles all of the time is highly unlikely. But these are the aspirations of journalism in the European and Western tradition.

One of the journalists the author interviewed for this study said: 'I think one of the fundamental problems is that the Chinese don't understand what Western journalism is all about' (Interview with the author, 2014). And it is certainly true that in China it is different. For instance, for the first time in 2014 Chinese journalists were required to take an ideology exam in order to have their press cards renewed (*South China Morning Post*, 2013).

According to China's General Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television, the goal of the test is to 'educate and lead news gatherers to uphold the Marxist journalistic ideals more consciously, to better serve the people, socialism, the work of the party and the country' (Bree and Li, 2013). In order to prepare for the test, journalists are encouraged to read a 700-page study guide so that they will understand directives like not permitting 'reports to feature any comments that go against the party line,' and knowing that 'the relationship between the party and the news media is one of the leader and the led' (*South China Morning Post*, 2013).

On the difference between Chinese and Western journalistic ideals, the textbook states:

There is variety on the road to modernization, and therefore it is normal for the East and the West to have differences. There is no one fixed model or one same road to

development. Modernization is not Westernization, and definitely not Americanization. (Bree and Li, 2013)

It continues:

Unlike Western countries, the most important function of news media in our country is to be the ears, eyes, throat and tongue for the party and the people. In order for this function to be carried out, news media in our country must be loyal to the party, adhere to the party's leadership and make the principle of loyalty to the party the principle of the journalistic profession. (Bree and Li, 2013)

This principle clashes directly with the Western journalistic ideals of independence and impartiality as set out above by the Society of Professional Journalists and the Pew Research Journalism Project. For example, during the 2014 terror attack in Kunming where 29 people were brutally murdered by knife-wielding assailants, the State Council Information Office issued the following order to all Chinese media:

Media that report on the knife attack incident that occurred March 1 at the Kunming railway station must strictly adhere to Xinhua News Agency wire copy or information provided by local authorities. Do not treat the story with large headlines; do not publish grisly photos. Please respond to confirm that you have received this message. Thank you. (Greenslade, 2014)

While many governments in Europe and the West would probably secretly relish such power over the media, this sort of control would be simply impossible in the European context. And this very fact may be one of the main reasons for the friction between foreign journalists and the Chinese authorities, who either don't understand the ethos of foreign journalists or cannot accept it under their understanding of what the role of journalists should be.

Conclusions

One of the major recurring themes in this study is that of lack of transparency and access to sources being a major hindrance in EU and other foreign journalists achieving balance in their reporting on China.

According to the Pew Research Journalism Project:

Journalists rely on a professional discipline for verifying information. When the concept of objectivity originally evolved, it did not imply that journalists are free of bias. It called, rather, for a consistent method of testing information – a transparent approach to evidence – precisely so that personal and cultural biases would not undermine the accuracy of their work. The method is objective, not the journalist. Seeking out multiple witnesses, disclosing as much as possible about sources, or

asking various sides for comment, all signal such standards. This discipline of verification is what separates journalism from other modes of communication, such as propaganda, fiction or entertainment. (Pew Research Journalism Project, 2009)

Therefore, it begs the question that if journalists cannot fulfil one of their most important functions how can they achieve real balance? And if the entity impeding them in this task is also the one criticizing them about their lack of balance, then where is the logic in that?

Surely the bare minimum could be to at least attempt to answer journalists' questions. One solution perhaps could be creating a spokespersons service like we have in the EU institutions, with specialized teams of spokespersons and press officers from the various government ministries and agencies answering questions from journalists in a timely manner. The least this would do would be to put the Chinese point of view across. This would also serve to silence some of the foreign journalists' complaints about lack of transparency and access to information.

Another positive outcome for China of more transparency would be that it might eventually lead to a paradigmatic shift in the well-worn narrative of the 'China threat'. One of the biggest fears of human beings is fear of the unknown. Although China has been going along the path of opening up and reform for 35 years now, there still remains plenty that is seen from afar by European audiences as deliberately opaque and secretive. A change in behaviour towards a more open and engaging attitude as regards foreign media would send a message through them to the world that China is not some bogeyman to be feared. This in turn may help to change the perceptions of the European audience to stop seeing China from a stereotypical and entrenched viewpoint.

As a colleague of the author, George Cunningham, previously noted,

The apparent general remoteness of Chinese leaders during the Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao period has not helped their cause, especially at press conferences. The media sees them as more used to delivering highly controlled set speeches and operating in the most restricted circumstances. Their ability to reach out beyond this, to the EU man in the street, for linguistic, cultural and other reasons, is therefore highly restricted. (Cunningham, 2012)

China can use the EU media to educate EU citizens about the new China. But it will be difficult to do this without the EU media, which is respected and, more importantly, well received as a trusted source of information by EU citizens. So far, Chinese media in Europe does not seem to have gained a sufficient foothold as a trusted source to be used as a conduit for this type of messaging. The danger for China would be having its message received as propaganda, and thus not credible in the eyes of the European public.

The question of ideology is a thornier issue because the idea of what journalism is in China seems to go against all the tenets of what it is for Western democracies,

namely to serve a single organisation. Is it possible to have journalism with Chinese characteristics?

Glenn Mott, managing editor of the Hearst Group in the United States, firmly disagrees:

I don't think there is such a thing as 'Chinese journalism'. There is either the journalism practiced with professional principles that we all recognize and understand, or there is not. It's like physics. Physical laws are universal. You can't have 'Chinese physics', or 'physics with Chinese characteristics'. (Lee, 2009)

A final thought concerns the sensitivity of countries to criticism, whether internal or external. Although no study has been done on this, we would wager that the EU receives much more criticism and negativity in the European media, particularly the UK press, on a daily basis than China does. But we accept this as part and parcel of being a major political and economic actor in the world.

Some Chinese voices are also aware of this. For example, an article in the *Southern Metropolis Daily* headlined 'Foreign journalists criticism does not equal worse image of China' maintained that:

European media like to criticize any authority. In Europe, the political system is the separation of legislative, executive and judicial powers, making sure that no one becomes too powerful. Media is often called the fourth estate; it is their right to criticize all the over-strong institutions. Now as China becomes more and more powerful, the European media coverage on China also increases, thus there is more criticism. This does not mean being critical towards China, it is just because European media are paying attention to China. (*Southern Metropolis Daily*, 2009)

Hong Junhao, a professor of communications at the State University of New York, likewise commented:

Almost all the people in China, from farmers, workers, university students to intellectuals and officials care about what Western media report about China. In recent years the US media coverage about China has become a heated topic. The fact is that, the US is a country that values empirical study. Statistics have shown that the general day-to-day media coverage in the US is negative, which is indisputable. Due to differences in political systems, social structures, media theories and cultural tradition, the U.S media tend to criticize China but it does not mean demonization. (Quoted in Xu, 2012)

China also needs to be careful in casting the first stone in this debate as its own media's record of balance towards other countries, particularly Japan but also the US, is not necessarily so exemplary (Agence France Presse, 2014). Again, it is proving difficult to escape from history and ideology.

As Michael Pettis, an economics professor at Peking University's Guanghua School of Management, was quoted as saying:

I have been telling my students for years that as China becomes a world power, there is going to be a lot more scrutiny and criticism. Just as Americans have learned to deal with it, the Chinese are going to have to learn to deal with it. My hope is that after the anger there will be some reflection on the complexity of these issues. (Quoted in Drew, 2008)

All that being said, in the same way that the rise of America was the greatest story of the 20th century, the China story is shaping up to be the greatest story of the 21st century. It is an epic tale with all the harmonies and contradictions, good and evil, joys and sorrows, tragedy and comedy that course through the veins of humanity. It is a story that deserves to be told in its entirety, uncensored, warts and all. But China, as a rising world power, also needs to be prepared to take some criticism in its telling.

Author's note

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Note

1. In order to conduct research, the author did a series of interviews in March 2014 and many of the quotes in the text are from the interviews. On request of the interviewees, the interviews are kept anonymous.

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