

## **Viewing through Silenced Eyes: a Look at American Media Portrayal of China**

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### **Abstract**

*For years, the citizens of America have had a seemingly negative image of the People's Republic of China painted for them by the news media. However, there is a gap in the literature regarding the American perception of China as created by the portrayal of China by the media. In light of the current political debates surrounding our country, it is important for us to realize that our country has potentially developed an inaccurate and unfair view of the people of China and their culture. This paper seeks to find the public opinion of Americans regarding the news media's depiction of China, its accuracy, and its fairness. This research provides details of how the American perception of China is built largely through the media, both American and Chinese, and this ultimately affects how we react and treat Chinese citizens.*

**Keywords:** China, America, Media, Ethnocentrism

### **1. Introduction**

This paper seeks to find the public opinion of Americans regarding the news media's depiction of China, its accuracy, and its fairness. With this apparent situation of misinformed citizens in China due to a controlling government, one is left to wonder if Americans are deluded about China as well – not due to a controlling government in America but instead due to an inaccurate portrayal by American media. Are Americans in the United States mislead and misinformed about China nearly as much as those within the borders of China because of this portrayal? Another question that arises within this topic is whether or not the Chinese government news filter is keeping Americans from being accurately and fully informed?

Realistically, the issue surrounding American media's portrayal of China is a combination of all of the above. The purpose of this research, however, is to ask the question: is the American media giving China an accurate and fair portrayal? Research finds that American media focuses mainly on negative issues about China, choosing to only cover stories about poverty, disparage, and the discontented (Dodd, 2008), causing Americans to have a negative, inaccurate, and unfair view of China (Li, 2008). This paper discusses this issue, by discussing the following areas: China and media, Chinese government control on media, Chinese and American trust in government and business, Governmental/media control conflict of interest, China misleading Media, American media, and American media China portrayal.

Author's Andre Gunder Frank and Barry Gills state in their book *The World System: Five Hundred Years or Five Thousand* that "No centrism based on the temporary historical "glory" of any nation or region should any longer be allowed to distort our universal human understanding of our one world history" (Frank, 1993, p. 307). With that in mind when looking at American people's general opinion of China, research such as this is necessary to remind our own (American) culture that while we have a skewed view and unfortunate things do happen in China (and all around the world, including America) that the people living in China are exactly that – people. They may have a different way of life than those in America but it is important and necessary for American culture to realize that it is, in fact, viewing China through shielded eyes.

## **2. China and Media**

### **2.1 Chinese Government Controls on Media.**

For years now, the Chinese government has held a strong hand around the throat of Chinese news media. This government does not only dictate China-produced media outlets but also seeks to monitor and dictate what outside new sources hope to slip through the filter and into the minds and lifestyles of Chinese citizens. In recent interviews, Charles Eastman, Professor of Communication with the University of Shanghai, spoke of times when the Chinese government has exercised great control on the media. The first example Eastman offers of Chinese governmental control on media is the well-known Tiananmen Square incident, where many college-age students were killed while conducting a peaceful protest by Chinese military forces.

The Chinese government set out after the incident to prevent its citizens from discovering what really happened that day. They have actually done such a good job at shielding this information that if an enlightened international visitor were to ask a Chinese citizen about the massacre, he or she would only know that the government did the right thing. This response by citizens would merely be the result of them being taught that information throughout the years (Eastman, 2008). More than that, however, is the fact that the average Chinese citizen, while surfing the internet, is unable to find information about Tiananmen Square because the government has blocked both internal and external websites offering information on the topics to keep its citizens from learning what really happened (Miller, 2008).

A more recent even, according to Eastman, of which the Chinese government has tried to control information is the Tibetan rioting and fighting with China. The government is monitoring both internal and external information sources, hoping to keep its people uneducated by outside sources (Eastman, 2008). One other, even more relatable, example of Chinese governmental control of media is the Chinese government's internet deal with Google.com. The United States was shocked to learn that Google, in an effort to tap into the vast Asian market of consumers, was giving in to the Chinese government's stipulation demands (Thompson, 2006). This agreement angered some - considering China is viewed by other cultures, American culture included, as having too much control on the news media and thus spinning news in the government's favor to the belittlement of its people.

Chinese government already has a strong hold on internet usage, guarding what its citizens choose to view. It cannot be 100% successful in dictating what its citizens view or read online due to hackers. However, through the government's implementation of electronic monitors that stay on a person's screen, monitoring each site the user visits, it can control the internet media outlet (Mure, 2006). Though some westerners might view this as corrupt and inappropriate, Google goes a step further in agreeing to monitor the sources of web message and now allow certain banned messages to be viewed by Chinese citizens using the search engine.

### **2.2 China Misleading Media.**

It seems clear at this point that China's citizens are misled by a government which controls the national media. If other nations, including the United States of America, were receiving news regarding China from Chinese media, there would be great concern for America's informed feelings and thoughts about China. However, Americans sometimes receive news regarding China from American news correspondents in the region. Yet, is that news coverage accurate still?

Consider even the current news of Tibetans revolting against what is perceived to be Chinese oppression. During March 2008 Tibetans began actions to regain a better social status in Asia, especially in the eyes of China. Riots from the Tibetans and military put-downs by the Chinese make for media frenzy.

Xinhua, a Chinese newspaper, says that according to Reuters, the shooting of Tibetan protestors did in fact occur (BBC, 2008), though the numbers reported dead by China does not match that of Tibet. There are also discrepancies regarding the description of the overall upheaval - some report calmness and some report extreme tenseness (BBC, 2008). In an effort to show the world its side of the story, the government of China released footage of Tibetan attacks on Chinese businesses (The Associated Press, 2008). As of March 22<sup>nd</sup>, China confessed to the Tibetan death numbers due to the disagreement to be at 22 people, yet the Dalai Lama argues a death toll of 99 (Newser, 2008). However, at times even more newsworthy than the riots is the apparent misleading of Asian media (Barboza, 2008). According to David Barboza of the International Herald Tribune out of the Asia-Pacific branch, it seems that China is finally, however, relinquishing some of the accurate information surrounding both sides of the dispute.

During the month of March, China went so far as to ban international journalists from the region (Barboza, 2008), stating organizations such as CNN were distorting the news and siding with the Tibetans (The Associated Press, 2008). One is left to wonder, is China telling the truth and American media just making them seem untruthful and all-around bad people, or is the Chinese government really attempting to withhold the truth from the world?

## **2.2 Governmental/Media Control Conflict of Interest.**

Many researchers have investigated the overall truthfulness of the media in China. Any time an information-telling organization is owned or overseen/dictated by a government or any organization it covers, there is a conflict of interest (Fink, 1995). The possessing organization or government has a choice of how to handle this conflict of interest and the Chinese government, according to Guardian.co.uk writer David Gos, has been handling it inappropriately (Gow, 2008).

As stated by Justin Velten, Assistant Professor of English and Communication with Faulkner University, such instances of conflict of interest in media are commonplace in some situations. As acting advisor for a collegiate student-produced newspaper, there is a constant awareness of appeasing the overseeing collegiate administration with newspaper content. Student newspapers, at least in part, report on their respective campus events and such. These newspapers seek truthfulness and fullness of depth within their stories, yet school administrations assume editing rights over what is written in an attempt to guard its public image. This kind of exercise of authority over a media outlet stifles its investigative reporting and ability to seek hard stories (Velten, 2008).

According to Ryan Campbell, long-time American missionary to China, there are two main reasons why Chinese government controls the media to the point of untruthfulness. First of all, and most importantly, it is because China is a communist society, where government controls everything, so it only makes sense that the government would even control the media. Secondly, is China's reliance and dependence on the system of *guanxi* (Campbell, 2008), a kind of social system designed to give people a group to depend on and interact with at a high level of closeness (Feng, 2005). The first reason proposed by Campbell, that it only makes sense that media be controlled by a communist government, is one worth much merit.

International radio, often short-wave, allows listeners the privilege to listen to news coverage in a tasteful manner. Meaning that since there are so many broadcasters sending messages through short-wave international radio, a person can simply change the station to hear the same news, yet with a more appealing slant (Hatchen & Scotton, 2007). Yet, where news media sources in authoritarian places, such as China, are "less independent of official controls, [and] often serve as unquestioning conduits of political communication from their own governments" (Hachten and Scotton, 2007 p. 167). Media sources in such situations are not even faced with the ethical dilemma of running propaganda – they simply do it, because they are told to (Hatchen & Scotton, 2007).

Campbell recounts one visit to Beijing where he found tens of thousands of people honoring Mao, "almost exalting him as a god" (Campbell, 2008). Americans know this man as one responsible for the deaths of many during his reign, yet since Chinese government has never made public the death toll, over ten million, he is praised by his own ignorant people (Campbell, 2008).

## **2.3 Chinese and American Trust in Government and Business**

In a country such as China where media is stifled by government ownership, blogging is an effective way to disseminate more accurate and up-to-date information to the public. However, in the United States, where media has the constitutional right to freedom of press and speech, traditional news media forms are seen as more trustworthy than bloggers (Harris Interactive, 2005). There are mixed reviews of the level of trust Americans in particular hold regarding the news media.

Yet, according to a 2005 study conducted jointly by Harris Interactive and the Public Relations Society of America regarding media trust, less than half of the general consumers in the United States think that news media is "accurate and unbiased" (Harris Interactive, 2005). Interestingly, however, is the upturn in societal trust in media less than one year after the Harris Interactive survey. In an early 2006 survey conducted and released by Reuters, BBC, and Media Center ten nations were polled regarding media trust. The results showed that at least two nations, the United States and Britain, carry a significant increase in media trust (Britain 18%, United States 7%) (Globe Scan, 2006).

According to the 2007 Edelman survey of 18 countries, many large nations have a significantly higher level of trust in business over media (Creevey, 2007). In other words, media is not trusted near as much as business in some parts of the world.

One reason why business is so trusted in China is because Chinese government has now limited the amount of investigative reporting it allows regarding itself, yet encourages news media to incorporate regular investigative reporting into Chinese businesses (Hatchen & Scotton, 2007). Some might speculate that such encouragement on the part of the government might be an effort to subtly take attention off government.

The results of the Chinese government withholding investigative powers on themselves, yet encouraging it on other sources are interesting – less trust of Chinese government. Though media is now kept away from the government, this law has not increased the countries support of its government. Maybe it is true that if any organization has nothing to hide and allows outside investigation on a regular basis that consumers and stockholders are more likely to trust such an organization.

## **2.4 Internet restrictions in China.**

Social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, are currently some of the most predominately used forms of media. One of the amazing things about social media is how quickly it can connect us to the world around us. As of now, however, most all “world-wide” social media platforms are banned in most parts of China. The Chinese government, in the past, has justified blocking social media platforms because of the potential of rumors about the country beyond spread within the country and beyond (Mathew, 2014). China does provide access to their own forms of media, such as Sina Weibo, that allow its citizens to interact with other Chinese citizens.

While this seems like a nice thing for the government to do for its citizens, it also pushes the idea of a “controlling Chinese government” into the heads of outside viewers.

In America citizens have the freedom to say almost anything and the censorship of our speech online is rarely seen. In China, however, citizens are not only prohibited from using world popular social media websites, they are censored on the platforms they do use. Two ways that citizens are censored are internet searches being filtered to exclude results pertaining to sensitive topics and messages/posts about sensitive topics being deleted (Bamman, 2012).

One example of this is seen from a traffic accident that occurred at Hebei University. The student, Li Qiming, killed one person and injured another due to driving under the influence of alcohol. He responded after the accident on a social media platform by saying “Go ahead, sue me if you dare. My dad is Li Gang!” Li Gang was a deputy police chief in the area. This response spread quickly and sparked outrage about “government corruption.” This led to censorship of the occurrence to prevent spreading “hype regarding the disturbance at Hebei University” (Bamman, 2012).

The government does not necessarily want to block the idea of China being great from the rest of the world, however. Recently, Chinese President Xi Jinping opened a Facebook account to detail his first official trip to America. Users of Facebook could choose to follow Xi to get detailed information about his trip and see images of him visiting with President Obama and attending other events, and even get information about the “history of US-China relations.” Xi’s visit to the states even became somewhat of a trending topic with #XiUSAVist. Chinese citizens are still not able to view these posts (Yan, 2015).

## **3. American Media**

### **3.1 Ethnocentrism.**

Ethnocentrism is a major problem throughout the world, though often in minor ways. One culture may hold its value set and quirks in high esteem when considering the differences of other cultures. When pondering one culture, one is forced to remember how similar routine activities are carried out in his or her home culture, a culture that may or may not allow more freedom and flexibility. When one culture is different from that of one’s own, he or she tends to make assumptions as to why it is the way it is, and assume their culture is better because it is what they know. Often times, however, people of one culture do not have a well-educated idea of what the other culture is truly like. Actually, they often do not fully understand their own culture and place in it, so the study of another culture leaves them confused and unsure.

Yet, in times when people of one culture wish to learn about the acts, responsibilities, and even daily routines of that of other cultures, the news media tends to be the venue by which this information flows freely. Considering our world is becoming even more interconnected, the levels of ethnocentrism within cultures are rising – which is also leading to an increase in hate, prejudice, and aggression between cultures (Butcher, 2008).

When this idea is taken into consideration, it is important to realize that an increase in aggressive tendencies due to an increase in ethnocentrism paired with an already skewed perception of a country could be a formula for even more distain to develop. This leads to the question of whether or not the distorted American media portrayal of China is due to the media itself being ill-informed because of China's media practices or if because the media chooses to depict China in such a manner that would feed the American attitude of being great.

### **3.2 American perception of Chinese economy.**

One common topic over China that is in the news is the growing Chinese economy. The general consensus of China's economy seems to be that they are a strong economic force that potentially threatens the "American way of life." According to research completed in 2015 by the Pew Research Center, a large percentage of American's are concerned with things such as America's debt to China, the loss of jobs to China, and America's trade deficit with China (Wike, 2015). After considering the other ways that news about China is potentially distorted, one is left to wonder if news about the Chinese economy is distorted as well – or if it is, in fact, a thriving, wealthy economic threat.

In fact, the topic of China's booming economy has been a popular one in the most recent presidential election. It seems as though an easy way to gain favorable marks with voters has been to notion at the idea of taking jobs away from China and giving them back to American's and lower our debts with China. Practically all of the candidates can be quoted saying something involving China, their economy, and how they are going to lower trade with them or bring jobs back to America. This rhetoric that is viewed all across America through a variety of media outlets further skews the idea that China is a powerhouse that is out to destroy the United States.

According to an article citing statistics from the Bureau of Labor Statistics on The New Yorker factory jobs in the United States are on a rise whereas factory jobs in China are on a decline. Also, investments in China from foreign sources have fallen flat within the last year (Rothfeder, 2016). When this information is taken into consideration, it appears that China is not necessarily as massive of an economic threat as the presidential candidates and the media makes it out to be.

### **3.3 American media China portrayal.**

Dr. Carley Dodd, Professor of Communication with Abilene Christian University, was recently selected by the University of Shanghai as one of the world's top 30 intercultural communication scholars. The 30 selected are charged with the task of aiding the University of Shanghai in developing an intercultural communication program. After Dr. Dodd's time in China, as well as multiple past visits, it is clear to him that China does, in fact, receive a distorted depiction by American media. According to Dodd, this happens for two main reasons.

First, visiting media only travel in the larger cities, places where most of the countries influence and power lie, missing daily life or ordinary, friendly people of smaller villages. Secondly, as most would observe as a rule of media, the media chooses to only cover what is stimulating to their viewer/readership. In other words, instead of covering a story on good working relations between U.S. and Chinese manufacturers, the media chooses to cover any sort of conflict (Dodd, 2008). This is all too true in American media as pointed out by Suzanne Braun Levine in an article for the UTNE Reader online. Levine points to the fact that in American media, even though a topic may be very relevant to the medium's audience, it is less likely to be covered if it is not controversial (Levine, 2000).

As Dodd would point out, in the words of Marshall McLuhan, "The medium is the message," meaning "each medium, independent of the content it mediates, has its own intrinsic effects which are its unique message" (The Estate of Marshall McLuhan). With American media's depiction of China, "all we hear, read, or see is what the camera, editor, or reporter select" (Dodd, 2008).

Dr. Haitao Li, Assistant Professor of Operations Management with Troy University at Montgomery Sorrell College of Business, was a citizen of China until recent. He and his wife left China seeking education, now both holding doctorate degrees. Dr. Li's early observation is that, for one, Chinese media does not give an accurate picture of American life.

From "Making Sense of China's New Media Environment", an article written by James F. Paradise, and posted online by the UCLA Asia Institute, one learns of China's governmental control of even the information getting to its citizens regarding other countries (Paradise, 2004). Such regulations must cause an incorrect view of western civilization, distorting Chinese citizens of what is everyday life in the United States. A disillusionment that can be dangerous.

Dr. Li considers the U.S. to be “a great nation in the world”, however that is not the picture portrayed by China’s media. Yet, being a resident and citizen of China for many years, Li also has a great view of American media inaccuracies related to China, citing CNN as often reporting the “dark” side of China – “its poverty in the rural areas, abandoned children by parents, uncontrollable diseases, false drugs, etc.”. Li also notices that American media avoids reporting on the lighter side of China, including the strong economic growth and the loving, friendly people, a side that would put China in a more positive light in the eyes of viewing and listening Americans. According to Li, the irony of the situation is that when citizens from both cultures visit the other, there are feelings of great pleasure and enjoyment, often not exactly what were expected due to the inaccurate depiction of foreign life by homeland media (Li, 2008).

According to *the World News Prism: Global Information in a Satellite Age*. Many news organizations are minimizing foreign correspondence offices. Now, when a major international news event occurs, American media organization send in one or a slew of reporters for a brief period of time to get the scoop (Hatchen&Scotton, 2007). Jerry Atkinson, long-time public relations worker in America, states that in order for a reporter to get an accurate and full story, the reporter must gain a full understanding of background information surrounding the story in order to offer the audience an accurate picture (Atkinson, 2008).

So, the lack of incorrect media information in America regarding China could be contributed to one of two things: the Chinese government is giving faulty information to its citizens and foreign journalists or American reporters are not getting an accurate picture, either by choice or unknowingly because of lack of cultural understanding. As stated by multiple sources, there are many great things about china, including the people, the places, and all, yet the media only chooses to focus on the negative, the conflict that is newsworthy. Then, because of the limited exposure of Americans about china, Americans are left thinking that china is all bad and connects china to conflict. As the infamous quote goes, “The media could set the agenda by telling citizens what to think about, but it couldn’t tell them what to think” (Meyer, 2005). Yet, now even that influence is changing.

Philip Meyer, Knight Professor of Journalism at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, wrote in *USA Today* that newspapers are losing their ability to set public agenda. Media used to be able to publicly ignore their down-falls, but with the increased number of average American bloggers, media is forced to be more truthful in reporting. If media does not report the truth, the truth is likely to be found through the social network and conversations of bloggers (Meyer, 2005).

In an April 2008 Montgomery Advertiser article out of Montgomery, Alabama, local residents discuss their insight into American media portrayal of China. Xiang Zhang, Professor of Chinese at the University of Alabama, and past president of Beijing, still has family in the region. He is excited about the Olympic Games coming to Beijing, hoping the news coverage will bring to light “a country being treated unfairly by the national media” (Klass& Tate, 2008).

According to Yuan Tian, Chinese Students, and Scholars Organization President at Auburn University, American media viewers are receiving only one side of the story when it comes to China news. He says that his American friends only get their information about China from television, and that is not the real picture. Tian states that American media only focuses on the negative topics of China, which damages the image of China in America (Klass& Tate, 2008). Local church leader Joshua Chang also voiced his view that American media portrayal of China has its inaccuracies. When it comes to governmental and economic growth in China, according to Chang, American media must base decisions on what was happening 20 years ago. Chang thinks that reporters often do not see a positive change in China’s political views and the like because these reporters come in for a short period and do not do the research to realize that China’s economy is making positive changes (Klass& Tate, 2008). China is already projected to replace Japan within 25 years as the world’s second largest economy (Lehman, 2002). It is difficult for someone from the American economy to visit that of another culture and see how the other culture is doing (Klass& Tate, 2008).

Instead, the reporter will tend to compare the foreign culture’s economy to that of America. An example of this, says Chang, is that the Chinese government is talking more about politics right now than it was only 10 years ago, a positive thing about which the world should know, yet stories of Chinese military killing protestors is instead in the media. According to Montgomery Advertiser article, the dramatic story of China and the issues brought to the forefront by American media do not carry much clout in other nations. In other words, the China stories are just unimportant to other countries, so American media may be sensationalizing Chinese issues for the American people (Klass& Tate, 2008).

#### **4. Conclusion**

This research makes clear that Americans have a view of China, and that this view may be somewhat distorted. According to this research, this view is distorted because of inaccurate and unfair news media regarding China. Reporters may not have a good grasp on China historically, causing these reporters to only see what is currently happening in China without relating those events to China's past (Klass & Tate, 2008). It is evident that the Chinese government works to keep its citizens uninformed about issues that might make the government look bad. Knowing that, it might also be that Americans have a slanted view of China that is based on information the Chinese government wants to get out to the public. Chinese residents now living in America, as well as American scholars who have visited China agree that China is getting unfair coverage by American media (Campbell, 2008; Dodd, 2008; Li, 2008). Newsworthy events regarding China usually deal with brutality and wrong, neglecting the stories that would inform Americans about the kind and gentle people of China who are enjoying economic growth (Li, 2008).

In conclusion, there is clear reasoning for further research into the area of American media depiction of China. Chinese government has kept much pertinent information from its citizens while encouraging media investigation into Chinese businesses (Hatchen & Scotton, 2007). This has, in turn, increased Chinese citizen lack of trust in their government, yet increased trust in business (Creevey, 2007). The same government has also tried to keep information from other countries, as well as keep information from other countries from getting to its citizens (Eastman, 2008). This lack of accurate information to outside countries, as well as inaccurate and unfair reporting from American media to Americans about China, has caused American viewers to have inaccurate and unfair assumptions about China and has also led to an increased level of mistrust between the countries. The assumptions that American citizens have of China also have the potential to lead to prejudice, anger, and hateful actions towards Chinese citizens. It is important to understand that this behavior should not be acceptable considering Chinese people are exactly that – people. If our world ever wants to begin taking a greater step toward peace and understanding, we have to have a clear and accurate image of the other cultures throughout our world.

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