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Zhang, Shixin Ivy and Zhang, Xiaoling (2017) Foreign Correspondents: a case study of China in the digital and globalization age. *Journalism Studies* . pp. 1-21. ISSN 1461-670X

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# **Foreign Correspondents: A Case Study of China in the Digital and Globalization Age**

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## **Abstract**

While western foreign correspondence is retreating, Chinese central media and correspondents, bestowed by the government's financial backing for media's role in public diplomacy, are taking the opportunities to expand overseas bureaus, hire experienced local employees, enhance the quantity and quality of international news reporting, use digital technologies in newsgathering and dissemination, and receive western-style trainings. Against this backdrop this paper studies the identities, media cultures and journalistic practices of Chinese foreign correspondents as well as the international news output, media-audience and media-foreign policy relationship. In doing so we propose a new theoretical model with six levels - (1) journalists' identities; (2) cultures; (3) practices; (4) news output; (5) news dissemination, reception and audiences' interactions, and (6) the impacts of international news coverage. Based on semi-structured interviews with Chinese resident journalists over seven years, we argue that the media-audience and media-foreign policy relationship in China have become more interactive, dynamic and complex.

**Key words:** Foreign correspondents, China, identity, media culture, journalistic practice, audience, foreign policy

## Introduction

Foreign correspondence, as a profession closely linked to the unprecedented changes in modern journalism, deserves more attention from media scholars. Foreign correspondents set the international agenda (Willnat and Martin 2012), act as the principal source of information from far-flung lands (Sambrook 2010), and serve a public purpose in bearing witness to major events through eyewitness reporting (ibid). However, studies on foreign correspondence suffer from two limitations.

Firstly, much of the research on foreign correspondents and their work has centered on foreign press corps in and from the EU countries and the USA. It leads to the view that foreign correspondence is in a state of retreat, decline and/or crisis (e.g., Hamilton 2009; Sambrook 2010). It believes that driven by economic pressures, globalization or global interdependence, technological innovations (Hamilton and Jenner 2004; Sambrook 2010) and market demands (Altmeyden 2010; Hess 1996), this downward trend gives rise to the unintended and unwanted consequence -- the news media is unable to uncover evolving crises and provide in-depth and reliable background reporting, which is problematic for conflict prevention (Otto and Meyer 2012). Other scholars challenge this orthodox view. "All of the talk of extinction is, in fact, exaggerated," argue Hamilton and Jenner (2004). They believe what the trends really show is that mass media are unlikely to increase the number of foreign correspondents they send abroad but, instead, will look for cost-saving alternatives such as dispatching parachute foreign correspondents (ibid). Sambrook (2010) also argues that foreign correspondents are by no means redundant. Instead they will be very different from their predecessors and work in very different ways to serve the digital news environment of 21<sup>st</sup> century. He believes eyewitness reporting at the heart of international journalism has been and will remain of crucial importance but in the digital news world it can be achieved in ways different from the traditional. Archetti's study (2013) of foreign correspondents in London goes further in suggesting that foreign correspondence is indeed evolving, but for the better rather than for the worse. They pursue exclusive news angles and deliver fuller values with the use of new communication technologies. In spite of the disagreement, both are West-centered and ignore the changes in developing countries, which will have long-term consequences for the global flow of information and the character of public debate (Sambrook 2010). Take China for an example. In contrast to what is happening to the West, Chinese foreign correspondent networks are undergoing an explosive expansion (ibid). Because of China's "going global" strategy, the government has invested US\$6 billion on state media (or central media) (Zhang 2013). Recipients of this funding include Xinhua News Agency (Xinhua), China Central Television (CCTV), *People's Daily*, China Radio International (CRI) and *China Daily* (Shambaugh 2013, 227). The official websites of the four news outlets show that by June 2016 Xinhua has 180 overseas bureaus; CCTV 63; *People's Daily* 39, CRI 32, and *China Daily* more than 40. In addition, many of the market-oriented media outlets in China have dispatched abroad reporters, the so-called "parachute correspondents", to cover major international news events in order to sustain and enhance their competitiveness in the domestic market (Zhang 2013).

More importantly, these studies suffer from the lack of an inclusive model that has the power to explain the work and role perceptions which should work in today's changing media environment marked by digitalization and globalization. A more integrative theory of "journalism culture" is much needed (Willnat and Martin 2012).

In filling the identified gaps this paper proposes a new framework in the study of foreign correspondents. It then applies the framework to the case of China. In filling an important

missing link in scholarly literature through a new theoretical framework and empirical rigour, we thus address the much understudied question of foreign correspondence in other parts of the world on the one hand and make important steps towards theorisation on the study of foreign correspondents on the other.

### A new framework to study foreign correspondents

In building a framework to study the up-to-date status of foreign correspondents, we draw on Stephen Hess’s (2005) three questions essential in understanding journalists – who are the correspondents? How do they work? What do they report? As foreign correspondence is understood to influence the world public opinion and the foreign policy making process, we propose to add a fourth dimension: “What are their reports’ impacts?” On the basis of these four questions, a new framework is proposed below to study the contemporary foreign correspondents.

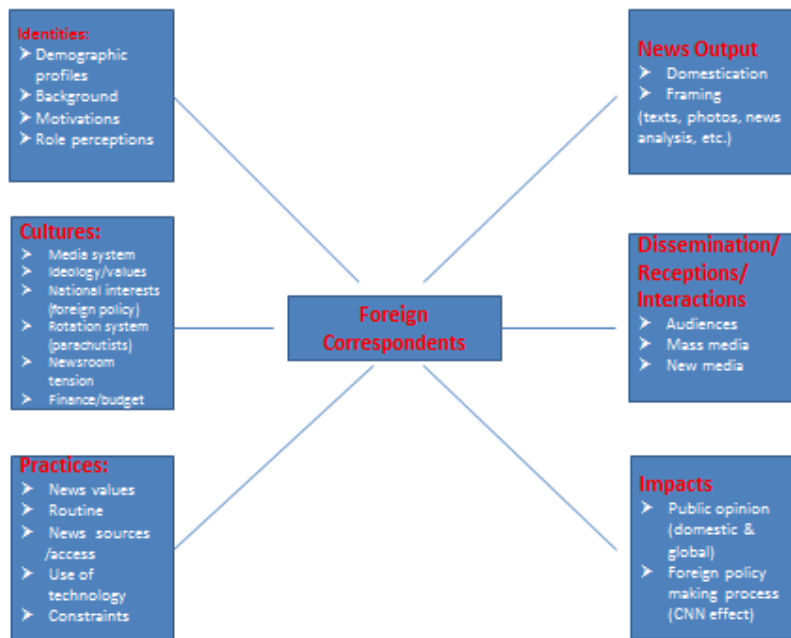


Figure 1: A new model to study contemporary foreign correspondents

As Figure 1 indicates, we propose to study foreign correspondents from six levels. On the left side of the diagram, journalists’ identities, media cultures and practices are the focuses of study that are meant to answer the questions of “who are they?” and “how do they work?”. On the right side, the three focuses are news output, news dissemination, reception and audiences’ interactions, and the impacts of international news coverage. They are meant to answer the questions of “what do they report?” and “what are the impacts of their reports?”. Below we will discuss each level in more detail.

#### *Who are they?*

Correspondents’ identities including their demographic profiles, professional backgrounds, motivations and role perceptions are examined to reveal who they are. Only by knowing who

they are, what drives them to be a foreign correspondent and how they perceive their roles can we understand their cultures, practices and impacts of their work. This is therefore one of the main areas researchers focus on. For instance, Hess (2005) conducted a comprehensive survey of 439 foreign correspondents in 1999 and found that the number of foreign correspondents in the US increased greatly in the second half of the 20th century. The average foreign correspondent was 42 years old and they had been posted in the US for about four years. Full-time male correspondents outnumbered female correspondents three to one. Archetti (2013) found that foreign correspondents in London are younger people who are working alongside a few veterans. They understand their role as explaining what events in a foreign country actually mean.

### ***Cultures***

This level of exploration focuses on the societal, political and organizational values and cultures. Specifically ideology/societal values, national interests/foreign policies, rotation system/parachutists, tensions between headquarters and overseas bureaus, as well as the budget and financing sources are addressed. Examinations of the macro context and media cultures are essential. Willnat and Martin (2012) point out that researchers need to foster a more sophisticated understanding of foreign correspondents' work based on cultural differences in press systems, the media climate as well as political systems and national cultures that influence journalists' roles and reporting methods. Shoemaker and Reese (1996) also include organization level, extra-media level, and ideological level in their influence model to examine factors that affect media content. After all, "when covering international events, media construct the meanings in ways that are compatible with the culture and the dominant ideology of societies they serve" (Gurevitch et al. 1991, 206). Within the news organizations, there is a distinctive culture in foreign correspondence that informs the behavior of all involved – news organizations, staff reporters, and stringers (Hess 1996, 47). The journalistic culture is manifested in the hierarchy of prestige, the patterns of assignments and job changes, management and editorial practices, the personalities the business encourages, and the particular problems the organizations and their personnel face (ibid).

### ***Journalistic practices***

Correspondents' news values (news worthiness), routine work (their daily practice), news sources and access to these sources, constraints they encounter, as well as the usage of digital technology are examined at this level. Anthropologist Ulf Hannerz's study (2002) of foreign correspondence examined the everyday practices of correspondents, the constraints, and the leeway for maneuver and initiative and revealed important insights on the classic question of "how to strike the proper balance between structure and agency" (ibid). Archetti (2013) found that the correspondents' everyday practice, in the context of a proliferation of sources, audience segmentation, and opportunities for collaborative and non-linear newsgathering, is variegated and diverse. In addition, communication technology advances not only have an impact on a journalist's everyday routine, but are also creatively appropriated by reporters for newsgathering purposes (ibid).

### ***International news output***

The debate on convergence or divergence of foreign news is still on. Scholars commonly believe foreign news tends to be reported in divergent ways, reflecting the interests and identity of the home nation. But such a statement is challenged by recent studies that argue for global conformity driven by forces such as dominance of a small number of international news agencies, the emergence of a transnational journalistic culture and the hegemony of market liberal thought (Curran et al. 2015). Despite the debate, domestication is an essential

process in world news coverage. “Domesticating the foreign” means delivering foreign events in a way comprehensible and relevant to domestic audiences (Gurevitch et al 1991). The process of “domestication” indicates the dichotomies of a tendency featuring both “universal” and “particular”, “convergence” and “diversity” aspects. As Biltreyst (2001, 48) argues, “foreign items tend to be marginalized, domesticated, personalized and made relevant” in order to cope with the declining audience’s interests and increasing competition. At the micro level, foreign correspondents frame news, i.e. selecting and organizing news texts and photos to convey a story line. Framing and priming information is an inevitable and necessary process (Clausen 2003).

### ***News dissemination, reception and audience interactions***

Technological innovations have facilitated the dissemination of international news from diverse sources via multiple platforms – mass media, new media and social media. New media technologies have the potential to “bring brand new, even improved ways, to inform citizens of the world about the world” (Hamilton & Lawrence 2010). The way foreign news is reported and consumed has been changed (Hamilton & Jenner 2004). Audiences have unprecedented access to international news through the Internet and 24-hour news channels but those who rely on online news aggregators may encounter the same news stories from the same dominant media organizations. Only the most engaged and interested consumers of online news will encounter foreign news that is not produced by leading media conglomerates (Willnat and Martin 2012). The role of audience has also changed from being monolithic, generalized and passive in the past to being fragmented and active now. The audience is “far better able to choose and even shape the news” (Hamilton & Jenner 2004).

### ***Impacts***

Previous studies have demonstrated that exposure to foreign news has an impact in setting at least part of the public agenda, and on attitudes and opinions concerning foreign countries (Goodrum, Godo, & Hayter, 2011). In addition, media is a controlling, constraining, intervening or instrumental actor in the policy making process (Gilboa, 2002). The debate surrounding the CNN effect – meaning news, especially visual news, can influence and drive foreign policy that leads to the Western countries’ humanitarian interventions – is still on. Supporters argue that media impact is profound and it has transformed foreign policymaking and world politics (e.g. Shaw, 1996). Skeptics suggest that the CNN effect has not changed the media–government interaction and the CNN effect has been exaggerated. But nearly all scholars acknowledge that the media is an actor in international politics.

To conclude, the new model can be used to delineate a comprehensive and up-to-date status of contemporary foreign correspondents and to address related issues and debates today. In the following section, this model will be applied to the case of China to answer the questions below:

Q1: Who are the Chinese foreign correspondents today?

Q2: What are the media cultures that influence Chinese correspondents’ work?

Q3: How do the Chinese correspondents cover international news?

Q4: What are the impacts of the Chinese correspondents’ news reports?

## **Methods**

Qualitative approach is employed drawing on evaluation of secondary literatures and empirical research based on semi-structured interviews. A total of 17 interviews were conducted with resident correspondents based in the Middle East, Africa and London from 2007 to 2014. The majority of interviewees work at Xinhua and CCTV. All interviews were conducted face to face and each interview lasted an average of one hour. All the interviewees are anonymous. We acknowledge the small number of interviews and thus do not claim a general view about Chinese correspondents. However, we believe that our findings offer a good starting point for further study on Chinese overseas correspondence.

### Identities

Regarding Chinese correspondents' demographic profiles, Jiang and Chen (2015) conducted an email-based survey among Chinese foreign correspondents to evaluate the status-quo and effects of Chinese correspondents' participation in China's public diplomacy efforts. Their survey covered the period from the end of November to the mid-December 2014. It yielded 41 valid samples. Respondents include those from Xinhua, CCTV, CRI, *People's Daily*, Zhejiang TV Station and *The Economic Daily*, and *The First Finance Weekly*. More than half of the reporters acted as staff correspondents who had resided in two or more foreign countries. Other details are listed in Table 1 below:

<b>Gender</b>	Male	Proportion	Female	Proportion	Male/Female
No. of respondents	24	59%	17	41%	1.4:1
<b>Residence term</b>	1-5 years	6-10 years	>11 years		
No. of respondents	23	13	5		
<b>Journalistic experiences</b>	1-5 years	6-10 years	11-15 years	16-20 years	>21 years
No. of respondents	2 (5%)	12 (29%)	7 (17%)	16 (39%)	4 (10%)

Table 1: Chinese foreign correspondents' demographic profiles generated from the 2014 survey by Jiang & Chen (2015). (N=41)

Table 1 indicates that there are more male correspondents than female correspondents. The majority of correspondents resided in foreign countries for less than 10 years. Most correspondents have journalistic experiences of six to twenty years. However what was absent in this survey were correspondents' age and their education background. The number of respondents (N=41) in the survey is also limited.

Demographic profiles of interviewees in this research are indicated in Table 2 below.

<b>Age</b>	25-30 yrs old	31-39 yrs old	40-49 yrs old	50-59 yrs old	>60 yrs old
No. of respondents	3	11	1	0	2
<b>Gender</b>	Male	Proportion	Female	Proportion	M/F
No. of respondents	12	71%	5	29%	2.4:1
<b>Residence term</b>	1-5 years	6-10 years	>11 years		
No. of respondents	14	1	2		
<b>Journalistic experiences</b>	1-5 years	6-10 years	11-15 years	16-20 years	>21 years
No. of respondents	2	7	5	1	2

Table 2: Chinese foreign correspondents' demographic profiles based on the interviews from 2007 to 2014 (N=17)

Table 2 demonstrates some similarities and differences with Table 1. The similarities are that there are more male correspondents than female correspondents. The majority of correspondents resided in foreign countries for less than 10 years (1-5 years in particular in Table 2). Differences lie in the fact that correspondents' journalistic experiences are spreading over the scale ranging from 2 years to more than 20 years. In addition, Table 2 shows that most resident correspondents are young people in their late 20s and 30s. They work alongside with the veterans at some outposts. In terms of educational background, most interviewees have a BA and even a MA degree in journalism or a foreign language, and/or international relations. They have the language facilities and knowledge about the countries they reside in. Most of them grow fond of the culture and people in the country they reside.

Putting the results from Table 1 and Table 2 together, the sketch of a typical Chinese foreign correspondent is a male correspondent in his 30s who has worked in journalism profession for about 10 years. He has resided in foreign countries for about 5 years. He can speak English quite well and he may also have a degree in a second foreign language such as Arabic or a degree in International Relations. The young journalists tend to have a cosmopolitan outlook. This finding coincides with Gagliardone & Pál (2016) who find that Chinese correspondents in Africa are a cosmopolitan group who tend to be young, fluent in English, and sometimes foreign-trained. Many are well travelled and display an interest in foreign ways of living but their reporting is not very different from reporting produced by those before them (ibid).



What motivates Chinese correspondents to work overseas? For war correspondents, a subcategory of foreign correspondents, Zhang (2013) finds that the motivating forces include curiosity, adventure, fascination with exotic history and culture, life-experience enrichment, fierce market competition, audiences' increasing demands, a sense of duty, and state interests. Further interviews by the authors also show that they consider working overseas an important step in moving upward on their career path. Generally speaking, excitement, the desire to use the language skills, quicker upward mobility in their career and the knowledge of the local culture and history in the host country/region are the main factors that influence the journalists' decision to work as foreign correspondents. For instance, a 27-year-old male correspondent who has worked at Xinhua for 5 years after obtaining his BA degree in Arabic in China explained why he worked at the Israeli-Palestine bureau for two years as below:

“After I joined Xinhua for one year, I was posted to the Middle East General Bureau in Egypt as an editor. My ideal is to be an international news reporter. I volunteered to go to the conflict zones. Thus I was assigned to Gaza. The chief correspondent at the Gaza bureau was a 37-year-old female editor who also studied Arabic. Palestine-Israel was the most well-known conflict zone. I wanted to experience it. (Personal communication, 2014)

Regarding the role perceptions, previous work (Zhang, 2013) and more recent interviews find that Chinese correspondents perceive their complex mix of roles as objective reporter, interpreter, propagandist, diplomat and information gatherer. They downplay the critical and participant roles due to their lack of comprehensive knowledge of the complex situation and China's nonparticipation in overseas conflicts. Jiang & Chen (2015)'s research finds that 90% correspondents recognize that they play the main role in China's public diplomacy initiatives and explaining a true China to the foreign public. They believe the foreign public has cognitive deviation towards China. For instance, “foreigners believe that China today is still the same as in the 1970s”, and that “Uyghur Muslims received unfair treatment”. “They ask why Chinese eat dog meat, monkey brains and insects” and “why China dominates South China sea”; and “why China sells fake medicines to Africa”. In these cases, the majority of Chinese correspondents would explain what they see as the real situation (ibid).

Jiang & Chen (2015)'s survey also shows that while 37% respondents provided evidences that they participated in the government-level public diplomacy activities, 63% respondents think they have never participated in the government-sponsored public diplomacy activities. Some correspondents even believe it is the government officials' responsibilities to practice public diplomacy and they are “busy with news reporting and have no time to attend to other affairs. The primary task for a correspondent is news reporting”. The survey demonstrates that “the foreign correspondents as a community have different perceptions towards their involvement in the public diplomacy activities” (Jiang & Chen, 2015).

Working for national level overseas media outlets also means correspondents work for the government to gather local information. While working for CCTV in Europe in 2007, for instance, one interviewee informed the researchers that he would go to Greece to investigate how the Olympic Games was hosted, what lessons were to be learned, etc. They work very closely with the Chinese Embassies in the resident countries for information gathering.

Hence it is fair to say that Chinese foreign correspondents partly perceive their roles as objective reporter, which is no different from their western counterparts. What makes Chinese correspondents distinctive is that they also play the roles of propagandist,

information gatherer and (cultural) diplomat by propagating and explaining China's domestic and foreign policies as well as participating in China's public diplomacy activities and promoting understanding about China among the foreign public.

## **Cultures**

In this section, both the macro-level media cultures including media system, ideology and national interests (foreign policy) and the meso-level newsroom cultures including rotation system, newsroom tensions and finance will be addressed.

All media organizations in China were state organs until the reform period started in the late 1970s and gathered momentum in early 1990s (Hadland & Zhang, 2012). Since the late 1980s, Chinese media have undergone commercialization, globalization and professionalization processes. Institutionally journalism reform involves "the introduction of market forces into news operations without a fundamental change in the communist political system" (Pan 2000). Journalists play the dual roles of propaganda and profit-making. On one hand, they are professionals, as reflected by the required training and the criteria for professional excellence. On the other, they are "party propagandists" and required to toe the party line. The Chinese media have undergone transformations from being a state propagandistic vehicle only to also "serving the interests of the global as well as the local audiences"; and from a state-owned media institution to "a media of capitalistic body with socialist characteristics". (Wu & Ng, 2011)

In terms of ideology and values, Pan (2000) states that the center of China's party-press system is constituted by the "central value system" of communist ideology and the apparatus that enforces it. After the reform and opening up policy was established in the late 1970s, the Chinese government continued to immerse itself in the ideology of the Cold War, even after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Zhang 2012). Since the outbreak of SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) in 2003, the Chinese government recognised the importance of information transparency in effective governance and image building, hence it changed from the anti-capitalism and anti-imperialism rhetoric to that of "mutual benefits", "cooperation" and "joint efforts" when speaking to foreign media (ibid). In October 2009, former President Hu Jintao delivered a speech at the World Media Summit in Beijing emphasising "Asian Values" of social harmony, partnership, concern for welfare over rights and respect for authority (Sambrook 2010). There is a continuing clash between Asian values and Western values. Where the Asian media is a project of the state and largely expected to promote social stability, Western media is expected to hold power to account. Human and civil rights simply do not hold the same position in Chinese culture or media as they do in the West (ibid).

Chinese foreign correspondents have the tradition of playing a diplomatic role and fulfilling the mission of serving the national interests. Even today, "the news media in China are instruments of the government and foreign news are an extension of its foreign policy" (Lin, Lo, & Wang, 2011). Zhang (2013) also argues that upholding China's state interests overseas is justified and highlighted in journalists' news coverage even though it leads to news bias. So what are exactly China's national interests? And what are the major changes in China's foreign policies in recent years?

China's relationship with other countries would no longer be decided by ideology (socialism/capitalism), but rather by national interests (Chen 2005). In recent years, the concept of "national interests" in China has expanded from security (domestic and external) interests to include "development interests" (Zhang 2015) and "individual Chinese citizens'

interests” (Chen 2005). According to China’s 2011 Peaceful Development White Paper, China’s core national interests are defined as “state sovereignty, national security, territorial integrity and national reunification, China’s political system established by the Constitution and overall social stability, and the basic safeguards for ensuring sustainable economic and social development” (Chen 2005). After Xi Jinping came to power in late 2012, China’s foreign policy has entered a new phase of “peaceful rise 2.0” featuring a more purposeful and assertive pursuit of China’s national interests whilst seeking to maintain a peaceful external environment. As Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi claimed, safeguarding “offshore China”, China’s growing overseas economic presence that forms an important part of Chinese national interests, is becoming a core task of China’s foreign policy. In addition, Chinese government has placed a greater emphasis on the promotion of the overseas interests of individual Chinese citizens. It has developed a new doctrine, the so-called “human-based diplomacy” (人本外交), to protect Chinese citizens’ rights and interests abroad (ibid).

For Chinese correspondents, their main job is to uphold China’s state interests and keep their news reporting in line with China’s foreign policy. China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs hold regular press conference each week and informs media organisations of the “publicity guidelines” (宣传口径) on major international events. Such guidelines or principles are embedded in the official media’s editorial policies and implemented via censorship and self-censorship.

“It is clear that no matter which organisation you work for, a western or eastern media, Chinese or American media, you are under the influence of the foreign policy of the home country. The difference lies in the extension of the impact. It affects the way we write. There are some things we don’t dare to write about.” (Personal communication, 2014)

Regarding the newsroom culture, the rotation system might be one of the most distinctive features of foreign correspondence. For staff or resident correspondents, the rotation system is intended to “avoid an excessive familiarity with the host culture, which might lead to a shift in the correspondent’s perception of news values” (Palmer & Fontan 2007). However, in reality, journalists cannot avoid forming emotional bond with the host culture and people. One interviewee from CCTV published a book on the customs and practices in the country he just left after five years; one female Xinhua journalist, who spent three years in Africa, shared her fond memories with the researchers. Another one also expressed her wish to extend her work period if her application could be granted. In China, most central state media outlets implement the rotation system. Chinese journalists were assigned to a foreign bureau for two to four years based on their personal willingness/preference, language ability and the demands of the overseas bureaus. Experienced journalists are usually based in a foreign bureau for much longer. For instance, one of our interviewees was a resident correspondent in Israel twice for a total of 11 years, four years at one time and seven years at another time. Another interviewee worked in Syria three times for 12 years, about four years at a time. Small bureaus are usually staffed with one or two correspondents (occasionally a married couple).

Normally based in the capital cities, Chinese correspondents maintain good relationship with the government of the host country and they receive protections from the military and the government. They have developed a personal network of contacts and they are good at writing in-depth news analysis. Since 2008, state media’s foreign bureaus, Xinhua in particular, increasingly hire local media workers, fixers and stringers to assist the resident

correspondents and to enhance the quality and quantity of news reporting. The local employees, defined as “proxy journalists” and additional relay point in the process of mediated communication (Palmer & Fontan 2007), are able to get news fast and cover news stories in different forms and languages. Some of them are experienced journalists who used to work for other international news agencies such as BBC or CNN. This new practice, as part of the news agencies’ institutional reforms and expansion, is facilitated by the availability of financial resources, avoidance of dangers and risks for resident correspondents, and the competition with the Western media outlets.

Within the organizations, many Chinese journalists believe relative freedom from the headquarters are the main advantages of their postings (Gagliardone & Pál 2016). Still conflicts and tensions often occur due to correspondents and editors’ different roles. While journalists tend to report what they see and hear on the spot, editors make sure the news copies conform to the editorial policies. For instance, a journalist claims:

“I write as an observer. But editors may edit the articles based on their own thoughts or the instructions they have received from the Central Propaganda Department. Editors have their preferences and implement self-censorship” (ibid).

In the time of clash between frontline reporters and newsroom editors, Zhang (2015) argues that objectivity is a value that Chinese correspondents use to justify their news coverage and their version of the truth.

With Chinese government’s financial backing, the big four media (Xinhua, CCTV, *People’s Daily*, *China Daily*) are able to expand their overseas bureau around the world, send more journalists overseas, hire local employees and equip the bureaus and correspondents with advanced devices and technologies (Zhang, Wasserman & Mano 2016). Journalists start to call for institutional reforms. One interviewee from Xinhua said, “In fact, what we need to change is the administrative management. It should be flexible. Currently everything, however small, goes to the leaders of the Agency.” (Personal communication, 2014) Yet the government’s allocation of US\$6 billion to a few selected central state media looks unfair to other media outlets. “We are all in competition in the market economy,” said one correspondent from a central state newspaper. “For print publications, we have to make many more efforts to compete in the market. News competition becomes fierce. In the past, the funding we received (at the branch bureau) was nearly the same as that of Xinhua. Today Xinhua’s funding is ten times of ours. They hire many more correspondents, both freelancers and local journalists.” (Personal communication, 2014)

### **Practices**

As for news values in international news reporting, the current literature indicates a mix of positive reporting, focus of social significance, objectivity and balanced reporting. These values are tied with Chinese foreign correspondents’ roles, domestic situations, and professionalization. Wu and Ng (2011) revealed that the Chinese broadcasters no longer avoided news of a negative nature but still a larger percentage of the news events reported by CCTV-4 was positive rather than negative. They argue that Chinese journalists, as the government’s nation-building partners, use a harmony-oriented, supportive editorial stance in managing international news to project an image of a peace loving nation (ibid). However Massey and Chang (2002) pointed out that Asian journalists tended to report positively on their home events but primarily use negative reporting in their coverage of international news events. Through examining Chinese correspondents in Africa, Gagliardone & Pál (2016)

argue that the idea of positive reporting and China angle have been touted as distinctive of Chinese media but it has appeared difficult to operationalize. The coverage of conflicts and crises pursued by Chinese media in Africa does not seem to differ from that of their Western competitors. Based on her analysis of CCTV's "Africa Live" and "Faces of Africa", Zhang (2013) also argued that while "African News" does not follow the usual practice of prioritising positive reporting, the documentaries of "Africa Live" about African fashion and inspiring stories of support, sharing and love, not only effectively balance out the unusually negative reports on Africa in the news programme but also give a social and cultural perspective to the African narrative.

Rather than focusing on the positive/negative dichotomy, Zhang, Shoemaker and Wang (2013) compared the news values of the USA and China in the coverage of international terrorism and found that Chinese journalists put more emphasis on perceptions of events' social significance (political, social and public) than their American counterparts. They argued that Chinese newspapers cover fewer international terrorism events and domesticate terrorism-related news due to Chinese media's lack of an extensive network of foreign correspondents overseas, emphasis of unity in Chinese culture, and China's domestic ethnic tensions (ibid). For Chinese war reporting, Liang (2011) finds that in the Iraq War, Chinese news media such as CCTV international channel have changed their news format and applied news values such as "balanced reporting". Zhang (2015) develops a term of Chinese-style pragmatic objectivity to mean that Chinese war correspondents use objectivity as a pragmatic value and a practical ritual to practice war journalism that does not involve China.

As for the work routine, the acceleration of the news cycle and the arrival of digital technology started to challenge the routines and exclusivity of international reporting (Sambrook 2010). China is not an exception. Liang (2011) finds that CCTV introduced innovations in the coverage of Iraq War. Live studio interviews and the use of satellite transmission were adopted and routinized driven by competition, political environment and leadership. Zhang (2013) finds that digital technology influences Chinese correspondents in the war zones as they use micro-blogging in their daily routine and production processes, satellite phones and Google Earth as new reporting tools, as well as multi-platform reporting for the purpose of disseminating news to the widest audience and market branding. Meanwhile new media technologies also help overseas bureaus report in line with the centre in Beijing. For instance, CCTV Africa staff members have a daily online meeting and get detailed instructions as to how to report on an event or how to translate a word from Chinese into English (participant observation, 2012).

News sources are particularly important for foreign correspondents that are non-natives without in-depth knowledge of the local society (Cheng & Lee 2015). Sources that correspondents often access include officials, experts, foreign diplomats, other journalists, members of the public or media sources (Archetti 2013). In China, Lin, Lo & Wang (2011)'s study finds that foreign news was mostly sourced from the head of states as well as other government officials. It is consistent with China's political culture that the top leaders' pronouncements always carry great weight and the roles of non-official, non-governmental, and grassroots voices are very limited. However, this research demonstrates that Chinese foreign correspondents do not solely rely on government officials. Their news sources are diverse ranging from local employees, local media, international media, official channels, to personal friends. For overseas bureaus in different countries or regions, the sources journalists use might be different. One veteran correspondent from Xinhua based in

Damascus, Syria said his primary sources are local employees and other media. He commented:

“Local employees are very well-informed. They have integrated in the news circle in Syria. They know everything that happens. It is difficult for Chinese people to get into that circle. Beyond that, I have personal friends for daily news reporting. I keep an eye on local media, Syrian News Agency and a few big websites in particular. Xinhua and Syrian News Agency exchange news. Occasionally I read newspapers but I don’t use them as sources. Western media including BBC, Reuters, AP, Al-Arabia as well as Al-Jazeera are must-reads.” (Personal communication, 2014)

For correspondents based in Israel, official sources and local media are two main news sources. Interviewees claim they would register at the Foreign Correspondents Association and press offices upon their arrival in Israel. These official organizations keep all correspondents updated in Hebrew and English on a daily basis via messaging services. News information from the official channels is extremely useful for journalists who can speak English only. Local media include Israeli radio and army radio, two English-language newspapers (Jerusalem Post and Harrats) and Quds from Palestine. Though the correspondents keep an eye on BBC and CNN, they believe “local media are much faster than the western media.” (Personal communication, 2012)

As for constraints, Chinese correspondents have to deal with difficulties shared by foreign correspondents such as cultural barriers, lack of organizational support (Cheng & Lee 2015), home-office politics and national stereotypes (Hess 2005), as well as access to sources. Meanwhile they face particular institutional, organizational and personal obstacles: communicating a clear identity, competing with fast-growing and more professional national media, testing new styles (Gagliardone, & Pál 2016), loosened political constraints (Liang 2011), state foreign policies, military constraints, political orientations and editorial policies of news organizations, editorial procedures (censorship and self-censorship), and journalists’ personal experiences and values (see Zhang, 2015 for further discussions).

### ***News output***

Foreign correspondents play a critical role in news domestication process and they bring the relevant news information to the national audiences. Previous studies have addressed the news domestication and news framing of Chinese media in different world media events. Zhang, Shoemaker and Wang (2013) analyze the newspaper articles on terrorism and argue that terrorist events that are of high political significance are likely to translate into media coverage in China. Regarding the news coverage of the Arab Spring uprisings, Du (2016) finds that mainland Chinese media remained neutral toward the uprisings and the news framing emphasize the efforts of the governments to restore social stability. Those involved in the protests were framed as troublemakers. The role of the Internet and social media was rarely mentioned. Such framing is determined by the ideology and press system. Dai and Hyun (2010)’s framing analysis demonstrates that Xinhua domesticated and framed the North Korea nuclear issue by promoting a negotiation principle in solving the conflict. National political interests impact the construction of frames as seen by Xinhua’s emphasis on the negative impact of the threat on China-North Korea’s former friendship. In another comparative discourse analysis involving China, Hayashi et al (2016) examine news coverage of the opening of 2012 London Olympic Games in five countries and discover divergent framing of the same event in relation to geopolitics and political ideologies. Chinese media

presented a negative image of London. The market-oriented Dragon TV was less propagandistic in its reporting, focusing on the events and athletes, whereas CCTV framed the Olympic Opening Ceremony as an opportunity for political diplomacy (Hayashi et al, 2016). Lastly, Zhang (2016) examined the news framing of *People's Daily* and *Global Times* on conflicts in Libya, Syria, Afghanistan, and Palestine-Israel. She concluded that different titles framed the conflicts differently in terms of focus, tone and use of languages. While the central media like *People's Daily* were more rigid in war reporting, the peripheral media like the *Global Times* were sensational and dramatic. The core ideology seemed to be anti-West in defiance of the hegemony of the US-led Western powers and the bias of the Western media and Al Jazeera.

The afore-mentioned studies indicate that Chinese foreign correspondents and editors domesticate and frame significant news events that occur outside China in a particular way. News domestication and construction of frames are closely tied to China's politics, diplomacy, national interests, ideology, growing power, nationalism and press system, which leads to bias in Chinese media's reporting.

### ***News dissemination, reception and audience interactions***

Empowered by the digital technology, Chinese correspondents use multiple platforms to disseminate news to the widest audience and interact with audiences. Their news reporting 'shapes audience reception and perception as much as it is shaped by them' (Boyd-Barrett 2004: 26). Foreign correspondents need to read media users' reaction socially and politically. After all, how the media conceive of their audience will directly affect their media responsibilities and decision-making strategies (Wang, 2016). Our interviews reveal that Chinese correspondents hold three main attitudes towards the readers/audience and their reactions – responsive, skeptical, and indifferent.

*Responsive.* Some journalists perceive their role as interpreter and they employ subtle tactics to shorten the media-audience distance. One interviewee, while covering Palestine-Israel conflict, said: 'This region (the Middle East) is far away from Chinese readers. Most readers are in a spectator's mindset. They may not be very interested in where an explosion happens or what sets the fire...The most important thing is to explain what happens and what lies behind the conflict in succinct language.' She continues: 'We receive customers' feedback after our news copies are released. The newsroom will contact journalists directly. Some customers, mostly media outlets, think we have the pro-Israel or pro-Palestine tendencies. Their judgement may not be accurate. But customers are the foremost. Customers are God. Given their responses, we will make some adjustment.' (Personal communication, 2012) Another veteran Israel-based journalist works at a national newspaper, which, according to him, targets at government organizations and intellectuals. He embeds meanings in his reports and lets the readers read between the lines and decode the meaning. 'My reports are popular because I use a hidden and subtle writing style to write about something young journalists do not dare to. I present facts only but do not draw any conclusions. When people read it, they would smile and they know what is actually going on.' (Personal communication, 2014). The quotes here suggest a tacit mutual understanding between journalists and readers.

*Skeptical.* Journalists are skeptical about the audience' demands for serious and significant news. A paradox exists between the high culture, high ideal of professional journalists and the perceived low culture, low standards, and low tastes of readers. A paradox also exists

between the truth the journalists cover and the truth readers want, recognize, or accept (Zhang, 2016:183). In our interviews, a young journalist said the readers are biased and what he wants to cover and what the readers want to read are different. ‘There is a gap between documentary and news. For readers, the war and death become hot topics... The web users left comments on my photos. Their comments are biased. I have tried to do all-round coverage but the photos I take on normal days do not attract readers’ attentions. (Personal communication, 2014). Here journalists’ skepticism and mistrusts towards audience are evident. According to Guo & Li (2011), since mass media are regarded as official apparatus, the Chinese audience ‘approach media content with skepticism and a readiness for critique’. In this sense, both journalists and readers are skeptical of each other and critical towards each other.

*Indifferent.* Some journalists show little interest in the feedback of the audience. The central state media outlets are not market-oriented. They receive strong financial and policy backings from the government. Journalists want nothing but to get their job done. ‘We are like hens laying eggs. What people eat has nothing to do with us. People may dislike what I write but that is my job, a tool for me to make a living’. (Zhang, 2016:183). Another interviewee said she had no idea about audience’ reactions towards her reports. ‘We don’t keep in direct contact with the readers or netizens. Our influence is small. I don’t pay much attention to other people’s comments. I just do my job.’ (Personal communication, 2014)

### ***Impacts***

Today central state media focus on becoming credible sources of information and opinion about the world, setting agendas rather than merely reacting to those set by the West (Gagliardone & Pál, 2016). The media-foreign policy relationship has become more interactive and symbiotic (Wang & Wang, 2014).

Based on a case study about Sino-Japan relations, Wang & Wang (2014) argue that Chinese media, new media and social media in particular, helps shape the agenda for foreign policy makers, narrow down policy options, change the pace of policy-making and implementation, and influence the direction of the final decision. But the government still controls and regulates the reporting on foreign policy issues. Acknowledging the lack of transparency of the Chinese foreign policy-making process and the difficulty of obtaining data to study media–state relations, the two authors draw a tentative conclusion: the media is one of the domestic variables that could impact Chinese foreign policy (ibid).

Our interviews also indicate the power imbalance between media and the foreign policy. On one hand, Chinese correspondents’ coverage is indexed to and conforms to China’s foreign policies and positions. For instance, interviewees state that their news reporting is under direct influence of China’s foreign policy.

‘We are not only journalists. We are Chinese in the first place. While doing interviews, we shall show the demeanor as Chinese journalists. Our news coverage in photography and print shall reflect China’s foreign policy. We serve China’s foreign policy...Regarding the impact of China’s foreign policy, we are a Party newspaper. Frontline journalists can write whatever they want. But I am aware of the editorial principles back at home. So when I write, I do not sing a different tune (唱反调) too much.’ (Personal communication, 2014)



‘Xinhua News Agency is an official media outlet. Its reporting must conform to the state foreign policy. News reporting is also different from diplomacy.’ (Personal communication, 2014)

‘Foreign policy is imposed in the post-production process. During the interviews, I can’t control or manipulate my interviewees. I have the tendency. For example, in Libya, I give more voices to the officials. I leave it to the editors to control (the news copy). Or when I am writing up, I deliberately elevate or emphasize certain details. It is an issue of balance. I highlight the China perspective through events thus to form a contrast with the West.’ (Personal communication, 2014)

On the other hand, Chinese correspondents and news outlets influence China’s foreign policy in a more ‘hidden, internal, and institutional manner’ (Zhang, 2016: 93). Chinese correspondents impact China’s foreign policy by the means of internal reference (IR) (内参). IR refers to reports that are not written for mass media but for distribution among state leaders and state departments. Interviewees commented: ‘The only way we influence the policy making is that our news reports are included in the internal reference.’ ‘We often write IR. There is an IR division that puts together the opinions.’ ‘We all write IR. It is a bit deeper than the public copy.’ (Personal communication, 2014)

## **Conclusion**

Employing the newly proposed framework and in-depth interviews in addition to literature review, we have revealed the identities, media cultures, journalistic practices, news outputs, media-audience relations and media-foreign policy relations in the digitalized and multilateral world. Findings show Chinese correspondents, while sharing many similarities with their western counterparts, keep distinctive features of their own.

At the level of identities, there are more male than female correspondents who are in their 20s and/or 30s. Many of them have resided in foreign countries for about 5 years. They tend to be young, well-educated, fluent in English and probably another foreign language, and have a global and cosmopolitan outlook. A young journalist also has a good chance to work with a veteran at the outpost. They work on assignments at overseas bureaus out of fascination and excitement of the job, considerations for their career path, as well as the duty and ideal of being an international news reporter. Chinese correspondents perceive their roles as a mixture of observer and interpreter (professionally), information gatherer as well as diplomat and public diplomacy facilitator (politically).

Regarding media cultures, with China’s journalism reform, news outlets, though state-owned, have transformed from serving the Party solely in the past to serving the Party and the local and global audiences today. The societal ideology and values emphasize social harmony, stability, partnership, and respect for authority. Historically Chinese foreign correspondents had the duty of serving national interests. With China’s foreign policy becoming more purposeful and assertive after Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, China’s “national interests” has expanded from security to include economic and individual citizens’ interests abroad. These interests and foreign policies are what the Chinese journalists uphold in their foreign news reporting. The organisational cultures feature rotation systems and home politics, which are similar to that of the Western media outlets. The difference is that the Chinese state media outlets, the recipients of government’s finances as part of the grand outward strategy, replace

the Western media and increasingly hire local employees in a foreign country or region, thus enhancing the quantity and quality of their news reporting.

For journalistic practices, news values for Chinese correspondents range from positive reporting, China angle, focus of social significance, to adherence to the principles of objectivity and balanced reporting. The emphasis of “positivity” and “social significance” coincide with China’s dominant ideology and social values of “harmony”, “stability” and “unity”. Meanwhile existing studies also demonstrate the “negativity”, “objectivity” and “balanced reporting” in China’s coverage of crisis and conflicts overseas, which is no different from the Western media’s reporting. Chinese journalists’ work routine, news sources and constraints also share many similarities with their western counterparts. As Pan (2000) observes, Chinese journalists do not differ from their western counterparts in the work routines. What sets them apart are the political and economic factors defining the organizational settings and the macro environment for their activities.

As far as news output is concerned, international news is domesticated and framed in a particular way conforming to China’s diplomacy, national interests and press system. Inwardly the news reporting style varies between the central state media and commercialized media. While the central media outlets appear to be rigid in following the official guideline, market-oriented media outlets tend to be less propagandistic and more sensational.

At the level of audience, as Chinese media have shifted their focus from leaders to readers, a new dynamic and dialectical relationship is formed between the media and audience. With the use of digital and social media, Chinese audience tend to choose more soft news rather than hard news and to get involved in agenda setting. However, Chinese foreign correspondents hold mixed attitudes towards the audience, varying from responsiveness, skepticism to indifference. It suggests that journalists from central media and domestic audience may have mutual understanding in certain scenario but in most cases they treat each other with skepticism and mistrust.

Regarding impacts, the media-foreign policy relationship in China has changed from being static and top-down to being interactive and symbiotic but the power imbalance in media-foreign policy relationship still exists. The state still controls and regulates international news reporting. The new/social media seem to impact foreign policy process openly and publicly whereas mass media, foreign correspondents in particular, influence China’s foreign policy in a hidden, internal, and institutional manner.

In conclusion, China’s particular press system and media cultures have defined and influenced the perceived roles, news values, news coverage of Chinese foreign correspondents as well as the media-audience and media-foreign policy relationships. The Chinese correspondents are learning from the western correspondents’ corps and become more professional. Meanwhile they maintain their own features and complexities. While the western foreign correspondence is retreating, Chinese central media and correspondents, bestowed by the government’s financial backing for media’s role in public diplomacy, are taking the opportunities to expand overseas bureaus, hire experienced local employees who used to work for western media, enhance the quantity and quality of international news reporting, use digital technologies in newsgathering and dissemination, and receive western-style trainings. They all have implications for the Chinese media and correspondents in their confrontation with the challenge of “finding and communicating a clear identity” and “testing

new styles” (Gagliardone, & Pál, 2016) as well as building reputation, winning trust and increasing their influence in the contra global news flow.

Future research on foreign correspondents in a cross-cultural context is needed to further test the newly proposed model. A mixture of quantitative and qualitative research methods such as online and offline questionnaire surveys, semi-structured interviews and digital ethnography can also be used. Only with a systematic comparative analysis taking history, culture, practice, news output, media-audience and media-foreign policy into consideration can we truly understand the transformation of global press corps.

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