

Chinese State Media Going Global

ZHANG Xiaoling*

China has greatly increased its investment in the media sector to air China's views, break the Anglo-American monopoly, enhance China's international influence, and showcase its rise as a great power in a non-threatening and non-confrontational manner. China's state-centred model has demonstrated many advantages: Chinese state media at all levels can be centrally coordinated and managed to work together for the expansion of activities abroad. However, they also face many challenges.

CHINA HAS BEEN making big investment in its “go global” (also called “go-out”) project, including launching multi-language satellite TV channels and websites, staging heritage exhibitions and art and cultural performances overseas, sponsoring overseas students to study in China and paying for Chinese-language programmes abroad. By August 2009, 212 Confucius Institutes (67 in Asia, 55 in Europe, 19 in Africa, five in Australasia, 65 in North America, and one in South Latin America) have been set up worldwide.

* ZHANG Xiaoling is Lecturer in Contemporary Chinese Studies, School of Contemporary Chinese Studies, The University of Nottingham.

China considers its media an important part of this effort. It has therefore expanded its communication channels rapidly. Organisations such as Central China Television (CCTV), Xinhua News Agency and *People's Daily* could reportedly receive up to RMB 15 billion (US\$2.19 billion) respectively for ambitious schemes geared towards enhancing China's international influence. Take the English Channel of CCTV, *CCTV International*, for example. Within just a few years, it has claimed its stake in the global communication landscape, covering 98 per cent of the world's landmass.

The Chinese media are thus providing an alternative to the dominating Western voice by presenting China's own version of issues and events happening inside China, Asia and the world. Compared with CNN and BBC, they report more on the developing countries. Analyses also show that they do not have a hidden agenda and do not try to sell any particular political and social "values" to the world. They maintain their neutral stand on global issues.

China used to have a strong track record in the field of political propaganda with far-reaching control over communication channels. However, while China's one-actor model has promoted its influence and helped to advance its soft power in international politics, it also has inherent disadvantages such as the media's limited autonomy and their low credibility due to their nature, and thus its success is mixed.

China's Changing Goals and Strategies

Although it was not until 2004 that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs set up its Division of Public Diplomacy, the practice of public diplomacy in China is not new. It can be traced within the Chinese propaganda system, which includes overseas publicity, exchange activities and communication.

From 1949 to the late 1970s, China's overseas publicity was largely limited to the "socialist camp" and some developing countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America, characterised by strong political and ideological content.

The main vehicles in that period were branches of the Xinhua News Agency in these countries with publications such as *People's China* and *China Construction*, and *China Radio International* (CRI). Overseas publicity activities for TV stations (the first one was set up in 1958) in that period simply meant exchanging news documentaries with communist TV stations in other countries.

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With China's growing confidence that comes with its rapid economic development, from 2005 China started to build an "all-dimensional, multi-channelled, wide-ranging and deep-levelled grand framework of overseas publicity", a centrally managed and coordinated framework for influencing worldwide public opinion.

It was in the early 1990s that China began to promote overseas publicity activities actively. This first phase of the rising popularity of public diplomacy in China was born out of the necessity to address negative foreign perceptions after the June 4th crackdown in 1989. China was criticised internationally for its lack of human rights and democracy.

Throughout the 1990s, China focused on improving its capacities for building a favourable image overseas. The Central Foreign Propaganda Group was revitalised in March 1990 and in 1993 it was renamed the Central Foreign Propaganda Office, more commonly known as the Information Office of the State Council. It has become China's international public relations department, projecting China to the world in a positive light.

In the past decade, China, in response to the scepticism of China's rise in some parts of the world, launched another image-building campaign to show its progressiveness and competency as well as emergence as a great power in a non-threatening and non-confrontational manner. This apparently marks the second phase of China's enhanced public diplomacy and the beginning of China's pursuit as an emerging soft power.

At the 16th Congress of the CCP in 2002 China proposed the concept of "peaceful rise", an attempt to soften China's global image as an aggressive rising power. This involves shifting the focus from purely economic co-operation to other more subtle areas such as culture.

China's public diplomacy activities have thus evolved from being a product of necessity to one of forward-looking foreign services concerned with establishing relationships with the foreign public. With the implementation of the "grand framework of foreign propaganda" and with the expansion of communication channels, the infrastructure (i.e., the social, political and technological conditions) necessary for China's rise as an emerging soft power is ready.

Expanding Communication Channels

For a very long time, leaflets, magazines and pictorials such as *Beijing Review*, *China Pictorial*, *China Today* and *People's China* were the main vehicles for publicising China to the outside world. Newspapers such as *China Daily* and China's overseas radio broadcaster, *China Radio International*, were other important platforms for overseas publicity.

However, in recent years, China has been actively exploiting innovations in information and communication technologies to reconstruct its image, from the use of personal computers to more mass-directed satellite television.

The Internet was inaugurated in China in late 1994, bringing a whole new dimension to public diplomacy. From 1995, news media, publications, radio and TV stations have started to run their own websites.

In 2001 government-controlled news websites were developed and launched on a

massive scale. They consist of national and provincial key news websites, many of which originated from traditional media and business gateway sites. They largely become key public diplomacy outlets to project China's voice in mainstream Western society and to break the Western media blockade.

In addition, sites specifically designed for overseas publicity were created. For instance, the *China National Network* (china.com.cn) was created in 1997 as the key national overseas publicity website. These websites are multi-lingual with specific topics and different layouts for the target regions, giving China a new medium for publicising itself to the world.

In the early 1990s, the launch of satellite TV channels for international broadcasting marked a new phase in China's efforts to reach out to the foreign public. They became effective vehicles for reconstructing China's image and broadcasting China's voice to the world.

In 1992, *CCTV-4*, China's first international channel in Mandarin, began its broadcasting service for overseas Chinese. CCTV launched the 24-hour English channel *CCTV International* (also known as *CCTV-9*) in 2000, the *E&F* channel (Spanish and French) in 2004, which started to run separately from 2008, the *CCTV-Arabic* and *CCTV-Russian* channels in 2009 and is expected to launch a Portuguese channel in 2010.

The Chinese government has also implemented many measures to help satellite signals move from coverage to landing. It has opened up some of its TV markets in Guangdong to a number of foreign media companies including News Corp, AOL Time Warner and Music Television owned by Viacom in exchange for carrying *CCTV-9* in their country. As a result, *CCTV International* currently covers 98 percent of the world's landmass and has more than 45 million subscribers outside China.

With China's growing confidence, the target audiences have also changed. Although overseas Chinese remain important, the focus is now on mainstream society in the US, Europe and neighbouring countries. Therefore, "of all the channels for the promotion of soft power, the most important are those in English and other foreign languages". Table 1 gives an idea of CCTV's strategic spread in different regions of the world.

The Great Wall TV Platform, which was set up in 2004, is another example of the centrally managed and coordinated endeavour to enlarge and enhance the Chinese media's penetration into the world media market. It is a TV package under CCTV with government-approved satellite channels mostly from mainland China (i.e., CCTV and provincial satellite channels). It has so far launched its direct-to-home satellite service in the US, Europe, Canada, Asia, Africa and Latin America.

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Chinese State Media: Winning the Hearts and Minds of Foreign Public?

The Chinese media present China's own version of issues and events happening inside China, Asia and the world. They have been increasing coverage of world events in addition to its focus on China. Compared with CNN and BBC, they also report more on the developing countries.

The news reports are largely on sports, cultural activities and business, especially on China's achievements in the business and economic sectors to give an image of prosperity and societal success. This is not surprising as it is economic success that has given China the confidence to assert itself as a global player.

Culture is the main source of attraction. The "Chinese New Year Gala" on CCTV is such as an example. Since its first appearance in 1983 this entertainment programme

TABLE 1 CCTV'S WORLDWIDE STATIONS AND REPORTER STRENGTH

	Region	City	Number of reporters
Three locations	Hong Kong	Hong Kong	8
	Macau	Macau	2
	Taiwan	Taipei	1
Asia	Thailand	Bangkok	2
	Japan	Tokyo	2
	India	New Deli	2
Europe	Belgium (EU)	Brussels	2
	Germany	Berlin	2
	France	Paris	3
	Europe Headquarters	London	12
Eurasia	Russia	Moscow	2
Australia	Australia	Sydney	1
America	US (UN)	New York	2
	Canada	Toronto	2
	America headquarters	Washington	12
Africa	Egypt	Cairo	3
	South Africa	Johannesburg	1
Latin America	Brazil	Rio de Janeiro	2

Source: Compiled by the author from information on <http://cctvenchiridion.cctv.com/01/index.shtml>, accessed on July 18, 2009

has been institutionalised as part of the ritual of the Chinese New Year celebrations. Over the years, this event has been broadcast on *CCTV-4* to overseas Chinese. From 2006, the event has also been broadcast on all foreign language channels, linking audiences from different ethnic backgrounds throughout the world as one harmonious family.

The Chinese media also show an active defence of sensitive issues for which China is often criticised, giving much prominence to China's environmental protection, political and social stability, national cohesion (especially on the issue of Taiwan and Tibet), anti-corruption, human rights and reduction of poverty. The notions of "peaceful development", "mutual benefits of China's rise" and "harmonious society" are also priorities on the overseas publicity agenda.

Challenges for Chinese Media

The advantages of centrally managed and coordinated public diplomacy activities in China are obvious: Chinese TV stations at all levels can work together for the expansion of activities abroad. CCTV, which has always been at the centre of shaping the domestic political environment, takes up the leading role again for the construction of a positive image of China while TV stations at all other levels are required to supply it with programmes. A national conference on "TV Foreign Propaganda Coordination" is held annually to ensure that this happens.

Similarly, all local websites are required to support and provide information to the *China National Network*. In December 2001 the *China National Network* signed a cooperation agreement titled "Building a Common Network Platform for Foreign Propaganda Agreement" with 28 local news websites. Under the agreement, all the websites are to share information resources, which primarily serve to enrich the information content of the *China National Network*.

However, surveys conducted in the UK in 2007 (involving 106 informants from 13 countries and regions) and 2008 (involving 126 informants from 14 countries and regions) on the impact of China on changing global information flow showed less than five percent audience penetration of Chinese state media.

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TABLE 2 10 MAIN INTERNATIONAL NEWS CHANNELS COMPARED

	AJA	AJE	BBCW	CCTV-9	CNNI	Euronews	France24	Press TV	Russia T	Telesur
Nature of funding	State	State	Mixed	State	Commercial	Mixed	Mixed	State	State	State
Main operations base	Doha	Doha	London	Beijing	Atlanta	Lyon	Paris	Tehran	Moscow	Caracas
Main language	Arabic	English	English	English	English	Various	English	English	English	Spanish
Annual budget (USD)	120m	n.a.	130m	n.a.	>200m	75m	127m	n.a.	40m	10m(e) ¹
Overseas bureaux	65 ²	65 ³	72	19 ⁴	30 ⁵	0	0	12	6	11
Reporters worldwide	600 ⁶	600 ⁷	650 ⁸	61 ⁹	170 ¹⁰	0	150 ¹¹	26	n.a.	>20
Main target countries	M. East	World	World	World	World	Europe	World	World	Europe/US	Lat. Am.
Weekly audience	>40m	n.a.	78m	n.a.	>100m	7m	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	<1m (e)
Reach (Household)	>100m	113m	161m	45m	200m	200m	80m	n.a.	9m	2-3m

¹ Estimated figure

² Combined totals for AJA and AJE.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Figure for overseas bureaux for the whole CCTV station.

⁵ Overseas staff correspondents, not US bureaux.

⁶ See Note 2.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Includes BBC World Service overseas reporters

⁹ See Note 4.

¹⁰ See Note 5.

¹¹ France24 can call on correspondents from Radio France International, Agence France-Presse and others.

Source: James Painter, Counter-Hegemonic News: A Case Study of Al-Jazeera English and Telesur (RISJ Challenges, University of Oxford: 2008), p. 11. Information on CCTV and CCTV International is updated by the author.

the US but not as good as that of Japan. The surveys reveal that English-speaking informants hold less favourable views of China than those who speak Chinese. One possibility is that *CCTV International* is not having an influence on this group.

Indeed, in this era of satellite TV channels and websites, the explosion of information which is demand-driven rather than supply-driven has posed many challenges to China's state media. Unless China starts to deal with these challenges to reach out to the foreign public, one wonders how long the state can keep up its huge investment in these activities.

First, as Table 2 shows, China has to compete in a very crowded global media sphere with the already established transnational companies such as BBC and CNN and the newly emerging ones such as Al-Jazeera and France 24 to have its voice heard.

Second, all governments today suffer to some extent from a credibility problem in communicating with foreign audiences. Many nations' most effective public diplomacy activities are often independent of their governments. Yet the role and mission of Chinese state media are obvious: to tell China's story to foreign audiences. With generally low official credibility, China's state media have a hard time winning over a sceptical audience. Although the State Council recently announced the creation of entertainment, news and culture companies with less government backing, and to open state-owned groups to outside financing, one exception is likely to be news programming, which falls under the control of the Communist Party.

Third, the nature of Chinese media goes against the nature of real-time global communication which requires accuracy, objectivity and above all timeliness. Although reports on the earthquake in Sichuan in May 2008 and the unrest in Xinjiang in July 2009 have shown signs of improvement, as a routine, the Information Office of the State Council first drafts the press reportage and then seeks approval from the Central Government and the State Council before disseminating the news to the outside world.

Another challenge comes from the contradictions of the state-centred model and the marketisation of the media in China. China's reach for the international audience is primarily a government undertaking driven by the party-state's political imperatives rather than the economic benefit of the cultural and media industries. Yet as the state no longer holds the purse string, it becomes harder for it to coordinate and manage the endeavour.

As China set in process the marketisation of media, each level of media became profit-driven with advertising as their main source of revenue, constituting almost 90

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percent of total income while the government subsidised only 10.7 percent in 2004. This means local level TV stations and websites lack commercial incentives to invest in resources to produce programmes for overseas publicity.

Fourth, a notice was issued in 2004 stipulating that the “go global” project should be planned and managed only by the SARFT (State Administration of Radio, Film and Television) and that without its approval no radio or TV stations are allowed to rent or buy air time on radio and television channels or to establish radio and television stations outside China. This regulation effectively prevents any TV or radio stations from expanding outside China on their own.

Therefore, although China’s media have been professionalised over the years, the level of professionalism continues to be low as they have been compelled to act under the constraints of the Chinese party-state in addition to the dictates of the market. Chinese media, with very limited autonomy, are not competing on an even-playing field with other transnational media companies.

Finally, setting up channels of communication is not enough. What is more important is the message that is getting across. It is true that in recent years foreign interest in China and its culture have blossomed worldwide as a result of its growing presence in the world economy and China’s continued efforts in promoting its culture and language around the world. However, China’s advocacy of a harmonious world with its core value of respecting authority and order is hard to achieve. China has yet to offer to the world a set of distinctive and attractive cultural and political values. ㊦