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Information Control and Political Impression Management: A Dramaturgical Analysis of the Chinese Premier's Press Conference

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This study takes a dramaturgical approach to explore the mode of political impression management as a result of the interactions between the Chinese government and journalists at the Chinese Premier's Press Conference (CPPC) over the past 20 years. It argues that an overall script for every role is planned at the backstage to avoid uncertainty and help set up what might be performed and expected on the front stage. Notwithstanding, some flexible arrangements at the front are also specifically designed to deal with accidents. This art of impression management by the Chinese government means the received knowledge generated by the traditional propaganda model that is often linked to China's internal and external behaviors needs to be revisited. This study offers longitudinal evidence to rethink how and why the Chinese government manages public information and its impression at the international level.

Keywords: political impression management, symbolic interaction, dramaturgy, press conference, China

Given the development of mediated politics, politicians are increasingly expected to appear and perform before large audiences at multiple stages, for example, in media interviews, debates, and press conferences (Craig, 2016). As public encounters between politicians and journalists is important to political life today, what has been said and what kind of image has been presented are always carefully managed at those stages (Edwards, 2007; Kumar, 2003). This study seeks to explore such information control and impression management processes in a Chinese-specific context, with a focus on the Chinese Premier's Press Conference (CPPC) since 1993.

The adaption and development of the political leader's press conference in China does not exist in a vacuum. It can be tied to calls for "a more open and transparent government" that coincides with the development of a prosperous economy (Chen, 2011, p. 77). Within this context, the CPPC, first introduced

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in 1988, attempted to use Western governmental techniques to coordinate external propaganda and has been institutionalized as an annual media event since 1993 (Yi & Chang, 2012). On this stage, the Chinese premier is the lead actor while other Chinese political figures and journalists are actors with discrepant roles. Of course, the interaction between Chinese authorities and journalists not only occurs in those few moments of the press conference at the front stage but also occurs backstage for preparations. This is particularly true for the CPPC because almost every question at the conference is preselected backstage. Why do Chinese political leaders adopt the form of a press conference but also seek to control the information delivered at the conference backstage? How do Chinese officials organize the CPPCs? And to what extent does the interaction between Chinese officials and journalists determine the performance at the front stage?

This study seeks to explore backstage interaction between the Chinese government and various journalists, and their public behaviors on the front stage, to understand how Chinese political images have been managed through press conferences over three premiers and four administrations[2] from 1993 to 2012. Informed by a sociological perspective on politics, especially a dramaturgical one (e.g., Borreca, 1993; Welsh, 2006), I consider the performance at the CPPCs as a social process of organizing resources and information. Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore the Chinese political leader's public activities and the organization of Chinese political life from a another aspect; that is, how Chinese political power is converted into authority through controlling, influencing, and sustaining definitions of a situation in the context where others can also only act in a prescribed manner.

A Dramaturgical Analysis of Political Impression Management

In Goffman's (1959) classic dramaturgical work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life,* he proposes a theatrical analogy to explore how performers present themselves to particular audiences and attempt to control the definition of the situations for impression management. For Goffman (1959), the definition of the situation is a collective and interactive one, so everyone has to adopt more or less the same definition of the situation and change their behavior to ensure that the performance goes on. In other words, people have their own expectations of social reality and the constraints they will encounter in their interactions. At the same time, people are able to actively adapt their plans to various situations, even though their expectations may not be fulfilled, or they can refuse to accept the definition of the situation and break off interaction. Thus, the impression management process builds up in an interaction order that is "predicted on a large base of shared cognitive presuppositions" (Goffman, 1983, p. 5).

Goffman's sociological dramaturgical approach advances impression management studies in two important aspects: first, impression management is studied within social interaction so that it is considered as a complex interactive process rather than a static state; and second, the impression management process involves not only rules and institutional mechanisms but also cognitive and moral underpinnings (Riggins, 1990). The importance of emphasizing the cognitive and emotional rules during the interaction is that it leads to an active conception of the actors. According to Goffman (1959), to

[2] From 1993 to 2012, the CPPC has gone through three premiers and four administrations: Li Peng, Zhu Rongji, and Wen Jiabao (Wen had two administrations).

sustain a particular definition of the situation to manage impressions, the performers may actively make use of various defensive or protective tactics to save the show. For example, in the case of the CPPC, how to choose journalists as partners to follow the designed script to ask questions and how to keep this "secret" from the public audience constitutes important tactics for Chinese officials in impression management. This is not an easy task, however. Journalists from different places and media organizations have different preliminary definitions of the particular CPPC based on the information that is available to them. Some of them may seriously challenge the official censorship of questions and so may be unwilling to work in the ways proposed by organizers. How do the Chinese official organizers and journalists, as participants, understand the performance of the CPPC? How do they achieve temporary agreements for the front stage performance through their communication backstage? Those are interesting questions in regard to the CPPC impression management process and its cognitive and emotional bases. Considering such questions directs our attention away from traditional views of organizational activities, which usually focuses on formal, routine, and taken-for-granted rules (Mangham & Overington, 1982) and toward informal and interactive factors.

However, for impression management in the political field, the Goffmannian approach has limitations. As Tuchman (1978) argues, since Goffman is interested in an individual's moods and gestures from one situation to another, he does not identify organizational and professional resources in organizing experience (p. 195). According to Hall (1972), political impression management involves "two processes of power": (1) information flow control, which refers to process of gathering intelligence, maintaining secrecy, and preparing the performance; and (2) symbolic mobilization of support, which includes using symbols for persuasion (pp. 54–69). This occurs in situations that are characterized by collective goals, consensus, and cooperation rather than those characterized by private goals, dissensus, and competition (Hall, 1972). Take the CPPC, for example. Its organization is affected by a network of organizational relationships, especially the changing Chinese state–press relations. How do the media organizations' different structural relationships with the Chinese government and their organizational resources influence on their questioning opportunities at the CPPC? Why do some journalists have more opportunities than others over the past 20 years? This study also seeks to answer those questions.

In sum, I view the impression management at the CPPC as a process of achieving a particular kind of collective interaction order through negotiation or interaction between the Chinese officials and journalists at the back and front stages. To find out how information control operates backstage and how the performance is delivered frontstage, three sets of research questions are asked:

RQ1: *The context. Why is the information control process important for the impression management of the CPPC? How do the structural relationships between the Chinese government and journalists influence the impression management of the CPPC? How do journalists from different places view the conference differently?*

RQ2: *Backstage and preparation. What kind of preparation is done before the conference? How are the roles assigned to different journalists? How is the script prepared for different roles?*

RQ3: Performances at the front. How is the front stage set? To what extent does the backstage preparation determine the frontstage performance? How do Chinese officials manage the performance on stage? What happens if accidents take place on stage?

Method

The evidence of this study was interweaved from in-depth interviews with domestic and foreign journalists and relevant government officers. In total, 35 journalists who have attended or taken part in reporting the CPPC and two important government officials related to the organization of the CPPC were interviewed in the past three years. These 35 journalists come from 32 different media organizations, of which 10 were Chinese government-affiliated media organizations, seven were local Chinese media organizations, and 15 were foreign news agencies. Among them, 21 journalists have attended the CPPC more than once, and 10 of them have asked questions to the premier at the conference. All the interviews were face to face, except for one case that was done by telephone. Most of the interviews took place in coffee shops or restaurants near the journalists' place of work. Generally, the interviewees selected the locations. With the promise of confidentiality, I taped the conversations, except for those of two informants. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted between 45 and 150 minutes. The language of the interviews was either Mandarin Chinese or English, depending on the preferred language of interviewees. The interviews of journalists mainly aimed to address their preparation when attending the CPPC, including how they obtained invitations, prepared questions, and received an opportunity to pose a question. Interviews asked for their perspectives toward the change of the CPPC over the years as well (see Appendix).

The two government officials I interviewed held or used to hold positions as directors of relevant government departments. They have many years of experience in organizing these conferences for the state leaders and are very familiar with the rules and procedures of such conferences. To gain their trust, I met my interviewees many times and engaged in conversations during tea or dinnertime, when they felt most comfortable. I was able to conduct two interviews with one of them, each of which lasted over 60 minutes. The interviews of officials focused on the organization of the CPPC, referring to the cooperation and conflict among political organs while organizing conferences, and the official considerations of the CPPC, including how to control questions and manage uncertainty.

I took interview notes for each interview and transcribed the recorded raw data within a week after each interview. After all these interviews, I compared all responses about the same subject and developed a theme, for example, negative feelings of foreign journalists toward opportunities to raise questions, when multiple answers were pushing one interpretation of reality. I highlighted those themes in different colors so I could return to the evidence when I needed them.

The CPPC Context for Impression Management

Behaviors always occur in overlapping contexts, within which both the actors' embedded structural relationships and their awareness and interpretation to those situational conditions are included (Maines & Charlton, 1985). Referring to the CPPC's case, because officials and the media stand in different

positions for interpreting the press conference, multiple factors, such as shared or conflicting goals, differential access to resources, and rule ambiguity, all work together to influence the impression management at the CPPC.

The Structural Contexts

In post-Mao Chinese politics, a very pragmatic strategy of "performance legitimacy" has been developed (Zhao, 2009; Zhu, 2011). Such performance legitimacy consists of three major bases: "moral performance," "economic performance," and "the defense of national interest" (Zhao, 2009, p. 424). Thus, it pushes Chinese top officials to work harder to ensure high-speed economic development and expand benefits to the public, on the one hand, while behaving like moral leaders of society, on the other hand. In this context, "public opinion" has been increasingly emphasized, and the ways and forms of the Chinese government to manage press relations have changed accordingly (Hung, 2012).

Although it is generally accepted that the Chinese media serves as a tool for the government to mobilize the public (e.g., Chang, 2002; Lee, 1994), it is reductive to conclude that this is still the case in today's environment. In fact, the media have increasingly gained latitude to pursue self-interested goals and may bargain with authorities in some areas within the context of the ongoing reform era (Pan, 2010; Zhang, 2011). For instance, Huang (2007) argues that media regulations in China have transited from "a rigid totalitarian state control mode" to "a state–media–market–society negotiation model" (p. 405). Here, negotiation can be understood as a bargaining process, with each side having to more or less consider the others' interests and possible reactions before making its own decision (Huang, 2007). This became truer as a result of the SARS crisis in 2003, from which the government learned the lesson that strict control of information in mainstream media is not practical in the Internet era (Tai & Sun, 2007). As a result, the impact of structural factors on the Chinese state–press relationship have become more situational, diverse, and defused.

On the other hand, it is also incorrect to regard the foreign media in China as an extremely critical power in relation to the Chinese government, despite the fact that their issue priorities collide concerning some sensitive topics, such as June 4, Tibet, Xinjiang, and Chinese dissidents (Fackler, 2007). In fact, the governing logic of Chinese security authorities' concerning foreign correspondents is quite simple: They are allowed to do their jobs as they like most of time, unless they cross a sensitive line (Epstein, 2012). As a foreign reporter shares:

> In the past, when a crisis happened, the usual way of the Chinese government in managing news was limiting our accesses to news sources in China. After several events, for example, the Tibet Riot, I think, the government understands that cutting off news sources can no longer prevent a big story from getting out to the rest of the world. (Informant F02, personal communication, July 25, 2011)

As a result, the Chinese government is using more sophisticated public relation techniques to manage relationships with foreign correspondents, creating formalized channels for conversations, and providing news sources (Brady, 2008). The CPPC can also be viewed as such a public relations technique.

As a formalized platform for the Chinese premier to communicate with foreign and domestic journalists, the CPPC has undergone a change from the preinstitutionalized process, during which its happenings depend on the personal characters of the Chinese premier and on specific historical context, to the semi-institutionalized stage, where both formal structure and informal relationships have been involved since 1998 (Yi, 2016). In other words, today's CPPC operates according to those institutional patterns that have evolved over time and rely on personal communication backstage to determine some aspects regarding the control of information.

The Situational Contexts

Because the CPPC has been the only annual press conference regularly held by Chinese political leaders for both international and domestic media, its organization has been set very strictly. The attendance of journalists is by invitation only, and their questions to the premier are prearranged. Every named journalist can ask a maximum of two questions, and follow-up questions are not allowed. On average, the CPPC lasts about one to two hours, with about 11 or 12 opportunities for questioning the Chinese premier at the conference. In other words, only 11 or 12 journalists can directly raise their questions to a Chinese premier in a public space once a year.

However, the Chinese journalists and foreign journalists have shown respectively different attitudes over the definitions of the situation projected by the Chinese government, due to their different structural relationships. For the Chinese media and journalists, most of them consider the question opportunity an honor and a chance to improve their own images. As a journalist from a Chinese medium recalls, "It surely makes a difference if the premier would allow us to ask a question at the press conference. We will highlight our newspaper's name in the news title, like: 'premier answered the question from a Newspaper X journalist" (Informant J17, personal communication, May 7, 2012). On the one hand, the commercial reform of Chinese media in recent years has resulted in Chinese media impressions playing a prominent role in markets. On the other hand, the Chinese media's overall properties and positions in relation to the core power system limit their roles at the CPPC. As another journalist from a Chinese central media organization points out:

> To decide what to ask, we would, firstly, hold an internal meeting to discuss the year's hot issues. After this, we submitted three to four topics and they replied us a few days later. Surely, we have to follow their suggestions even though I personally preferred not to. Then, we held another internal meeting to focus on questioning skills, which my boss considered more important for our media organization. (Informant J19, personal communication, May 11, 2012)

It is another story for foreign media organizations. Although they fundamentally challenge the logic of news censorship in China, they still have to follow such settings as a part of the rules of the game if they want to ask questions at the CPPC. As an experienced foreign correspondent said, "It is good for us to ask questions, but it is not central. Because generally, if I don't ask, someone will still ask similar questions because these are points of interest for the Western media" (Informant F04, personal communication, August 1, 2011). Thus, it is more important for a foreign journalist to ask the question

that he or she intends to ask. As another foreign correspondent puts, "I wouldn't change the question to be allowed a question. I wouldn't compromise my journalistic ethics or journalistic standards" (Informant F16, personal communication, May 12, 2012).

In sum, the situational context involves multiple and complicated considerations by participants. Because the acts of giving a question opportunity to a journalist has different meanings for different media organizations and journalists, it is important for the Chinese officials, the on-stage performers, to carefully design every role for the overall script to avoid incidents in impression management.

Backstage and Preparation

In the performance of a press conference, journalists play an important role in controlling the message. Take the U.S. presidential press conferences as an example; aggressive questions from journalists have brought various challenges to the on-record president (Clayman & Heritage, 2002). It forces the president to use some informal mechanisms, for instance, the daily gaggle between the reporters and press secretary, to predict questions and maintain a sense of control over the interaction (Eshbaugh-Soha, 2013; Kumar, 2007). For the CPPC, the Chinese premier and his officials prepare the roles and the script backstage, where secrets are kept from the audience.

Preparing the Roles

In a performance, roles are discrepant in terms of their function, information available, and regions of access (Goffman, 1959, p. 145). Thus, once an audience is allowed backstage, his or her role is changed. According to Goffman (1959), there is a role called "shill," who acts as an ordinary audience member but in fact works with the performers (p. 146). In the case of the CPPC, because the organizer wants every question from journalists to be prearranged, the role of "shill" is specially needed for the show. However, not every journalist may agree right away with Chinese officials to play such a role, so multiple rounds of interaction between the two sides usually occurs backstage.

Initially, the Chinese official organizer will divide 11 to 12 question opportunities at the conference into several approximate categories: four to five for well-known media organizations from developed countries, one for Hong Kong and one for Taiwan, and leaving the last four to five opportunities for the Chinese media or some otherwise excluded candidates. After that, the corresponding governmental departments will contact journalists through a bureaucratic structure. For example, officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) are responsible for foreign correspondents while the Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office (HKMAO) and Taiwan Affairs Office (TWAO) take care of journalists from those regions, respectively. However, lacking a fully institutionalized structure (Yi & Chang, 2012), this process of choosing journalists largely relies on past experience and personal relationships that correspondent officers possess.

Table 1. Top 15 Media Organizations That Have Mostly Asked Questions at the CPPC, 1993–2012.

Rank	Media	Countries or Regions	# of Questions Asked at the CPPC
1	CCTV	Mainland	18
2	Xinhua	Mainland	15
3	People's Daily	Mainland	12
4	CNN	U.S.	10
4	FT	UK	10
5	China National Radio	Mainland	9
6	Lianhe Zaobao	Singapore	7
6	AFP	France	7
6	Wall Street Journal	U.S.	7
7	Reuters	UK	6
7	TASS	Russia	6
8	TVB	Hong Kong	5
8	NHK	Japan	5
8	Phoenix	Hong Kong	5
8	UDN	Taiwan	5

As a result, such opportunities turn out to be centered on just a few media organizations over years (see Table 1). Overall, journalists from CCTV have asked 18 questions over those 20 years of the conference, which means that the Chinese premier has taken questions from CCTV journalists almost every year with the exception of two years. Xinhua News Agency and *People's Daily* represented the other two top central media organizations in Mainland China that also have a high number of opportunities to ask questions. As a Chinese journalist recalls, "Usually, the three top central media representatives are guaranteed question opportunities while other central Chinese media will take turns to ask the remaining question for Chinese media every year" (Informant J12, personal communication, July 18, 2011). This selection process mirrors the pecking order of the Chinese media. But more important, the questions from central media can be trusted to avoid accidents that may damage the impression of the premier.

At the same time, we find similar patterns in foreign journalists' questioning opportunities as well. CNN has had 11 opportunities and the *Financial Times* 10, which means that every two CPPCs would have at least one question from these two media organizations. Going through the list of foreign media organizations that have asked questions at the conference, journalists from developed countries—especially from popular financial media organizations—have had more opportunities than those from undeveloped countries and small media organizations. However, those media organizations that are considered to be unfriendly to China, such as *The New York Times*, BBC, and *The Times* of London did not

get opportunities to ask questions. The relationship between the media organization and the Chinese government plays an important part here. As a journalist who has asked questions at a CPPC recollects:

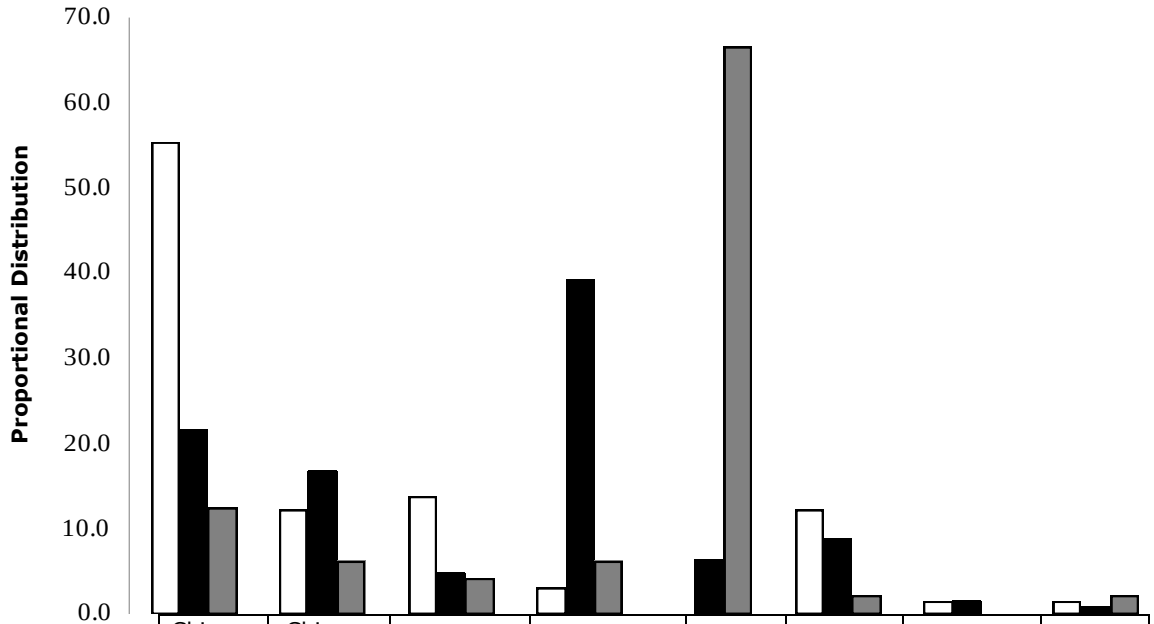
> I know another media organization has asked for question opportunities for many years through "official" channels, that is, their leaders communicate with those governmental departments. But I got it done through my personal way by accident. These are basically two different methods to get those opportunities. (Informant J18, personal communication, May 10, 2012)

Therefore, rather than choosing a new partner to partake in the performance together, Chinese officials tend to choose journalists they have become familiar with over years. This explains why the now retired CNN Beijing Bureau Chief Jaime FlorCruz, the longest serving foreign correspondent in China, has had the most question opportunities at the CPPC over the past 20 years. As Goffman (1959) argues, one important defensive attribute for impression management is to choose a teammate that is loyal and disciplined. Thus, this selection process mainly depends on a general framework of the performing team. As an official points out, a general unwritten selection rule probably includes "the coverage," "the audience" and "the authority" of that media organization (Informant G01, personal communication, May 15, 2012). However, selecting some short-listed media organizations or journalistic candidates only means a start of negotiations. The selection framework keeps change while the interaction goes on. At this point, the script for every role must be taken into consideration before making a decision.

Preparing the Script

How journalists play their roles in the performance is firmly related to what questions they may ask. For Chinese officials organizing the CPPC, these questions represent the messages that have to be delivered to both the international and domestic public. All questions are carefully prescreened and have gone through discussions between the two sides many times. To probe the journalists' interests, Chinese officials do not limit the range of topics and ask journalists to provide three to four questions that they are interested in. In fact, once journalists agree to reply, they have already made a concession to the officials because they are offering multiple choices for the officials to retain the power to make decisions. To choose this one question from a particular candidate, Chinese officials rely on their judgment of the character of the media organization in question and gradually develop a list of topics as a whole, but with continued revisions in tune with the interaction. As an experienced foreign journalist recalls:

> We knew some topics ahead of time at the coordinated meeting for candidates, which was held one or two days before the CPPC. But we did not know which questions would be asked by whom because it would be changed even in the last minute. (Informant F05, personal communication, Aug 11, 2011)



	Chinese economic policy	Chinese political affairs	Government activities	International relations	Regional policy	Social issues	National law	Others
Media from Mainland	55.4	12.3	13.8	3.1	0.0	12.3	1.5	1.5
Size (*n*)	36	8	9	2	0	8	1	1
Foreign Media	21.6	16.8	4.8	39.2	6.4	8.8	1.6	0.8
Size (*n*)	27	21	6	49	8	11	2	1
Hong Kong and Taiwan Media	12.5	6.3	4.2	6.3	66.7	2.1	0.0	2.1
Size (*n*)	6	3	2	3	32	1	0	1

Figure 1. Different concerns between different media, 1993–2012.

Figure 1 displays the different patterns of topics of questions asked by Hong Kong and Taiwan media, domestic media, and foreign media organizations at the CPPC over the past 20 years. For Chinese journalists, over 50% of their questions are about Chinese economic policy. But at the same time, few of their questions refer to international relations or regional issues. Questions about international relations are designed to be assigned to foreign correspondents whereas journalists from Hong Kong and Taiwan are limited to the topics about regional policies (66.7%).

Furthermore, topics about Chinese political affairs, governmental activities, and social issues, which might contain some sensitive topics, have also been carefully arranged. For example, only 12.3% of Chinese journalists' questions are concerned with Chinese politics while foreign journalists have asked more about such topics, but still only account for 16.8% of their questions in total. This does not mean that journalists are not interested in Chinese political affairs. Instead, it shows that topics related to political issues in China have been strictly manipulated and designed through the presubmission process backstage. However, it is wrong to say that the Chinese government is afraid to answer political questions, because sometimes we can find that the organizers themselves have introduced such topics into the conference. As an informant provides:

> Sometimes, I could not imagine that journalist from the central media would ask about such sensitive topics at the conference. But later, I heard that it was not an accident but due to a special agenda from a political leader. (Informant J01, personal communication, July 2, 2011)

However, questions contain not only topics but also frames. It is unsurprising that the officials and the media share different "frames" toward a particular question topic because they may have different definitions of the situation that affect their interests in performing at the CPPC. Some tactics are used by journalists to avoid the official side's manipulations. As a journalist says, "You could just submit some general topics but try to hide some sensitive meanings. When you raise the question on the spot, you could revise it or add meanings through some words without changing the topic" (Informant F10, personal communication, September 1, 2011).

Therefore, a journalist may not completely follow the commitments made with the officials backstage before the conference. The official side, to avoid uncertainty as much as possible, has to carefully select people as representatives and position them with a proper topic in a friendly form. However, to settle these matters, a balance between "who can ask" and "what to ask" is difficult to achieve. As a foreign correspondent recalls,

> The MFA officer called my cell phone directly and asked if I would attend the conference. I said I was attending and he asked if I would like to ask a question. Later, I e-mailed them a question about democracy and direct election and he called me back a few days later and asked if I could change the question. I said it was the only question I wanted to ask, and he said he would discuss it with the premier's office and let me know later. Later, he let me know that the premier would be happy to answer the question. So I asked it. (Informant F16, personal communication, May 12, 2012)

This story highlights a dilemma for the Chinese government in negotiating with foreign journalists in that journalists from well-known media organizations in Western countries do not consider the opportunity as a favor and will not compromise their journalistic principles. Thus, to include these journalists in the CPPC performance, the officials have to lay down their restrictions on question topics. However, most of the time, it is difficult for the officials to sacrifice partners with whom they have good relationships.

As I mentioned before, opportunities are divided according to groups of media organizations. In addition to the guaranteed opportunities to each group, there are also some alternative opportunities to ask questions that are not determined according to the group within which the media organization is located, but the relationship between the media organization and the organizers. Lacking even unwritten rules at this point, in some cases, many decisions might be revised at the last minute. As an informant recollects:

> That year there were already four Chinese media and one Hong Kong media organizations. One more opportunity was intended to be given to another Hong Kong media organization, but the night before the conference it was changed to a Chinese journalist who did not show up at the coordinating meeting. Because there had been no time to prepare answers to new questions, that journalist asked those questions submitted by that Hong Kong media organization. That Chinese journalist must have used a very strong public relations tactic to do this. (Informant J19, personal communication, May 11, 2012)

This demonstrates the different meanings of "who can ask" and "what to ask" for participants in the situational context: foreign journalists pay more attention to the content (what kind of questions they can ask) while the Chinese journalists consider the form (question opportunity) as more important. Chinese media organizations would sacrifice the topics they want to ask about rather than lose the opportunity to show themselves off to the public. It is because many other candidates might be assigned topics that the official side is able to balance between the role and the script.

Therefore, the official side is not simply targeting a balance only of "who can ask" and "what to ask" separately, but constructing a convincing script as a whole. Retaining their power and resources in decision making, it is more crucial for the official side to choose partners with whom they might make deals with next time, as the topics themselves can be arranged according to several methods—for example, by asking another journalist to ask a question or by managing the ways it might be answered.

Performances at the Front

The interdependence of back and front regions is explicitly explained in Goffman's region model, where any onstage performance depends on the existence of the backstage for preparation and rehearsal. To avoid these failures in impression management, the performing team usually maintains the range of backstage on the one hand and formalizes the onstage behavior according to the agreed-upon order on the other (Meyrowitz, 1990).

Setting the Front

As a "collective representation," Goffman (1959) argues that every social front is distinguished from other fronts through the use of three main elements: "setting," "appearance," and "manner" (pp. 22–27). The concept of "setting" is taken directly from the theater, which consists of all the physical scenery and props used to construct the background and stage on which the performance is presented.

"Appearance" refers to all stimuli that tell us of the performer's social status, and "manner" is the way the performer walks, talks, and postures, which "warns us of the interaction role the performer will expect to play in the oncoming situation" (Goffman, 1959, p. 24).

All these elements of the CPPC are quite different from those employed at press conferences of political leaders in other countries. Every CPPC is held in the Great Hall of the People, which has consistently been an important venue for Party and state affairs and diplomatic activities. During the era of Premier Li Peng, when only four or five questions were allowed from journalists at the time, the premier and other vice premiers stood on the stage to answer questions, which is similar to the format of U.S. presidential press conferences. In the era of Premier Zhu Rongji, because more time was left for journalists to ask questions and the length of the conference became longer, officials remained seated on the stage with hundreds of journalists seated in the audience. This has remained the setting ever since.

Usually, in the first years after the election of new leaders for the State Council from the National People's Congress (NPC), vice premiers will also attend the CPPC and sit on the stage. Except for those particular years, the stage normally has only five people, all sitting. They are (1) the moderator of the conference, who is usually the spokesman of the NPC; (2) a translator for the premier; (3) a member of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), who is usually the spokesman of the MFA; (4) a member of the premier's office; and (5) the premier, who sits in the middle. Although the different personal styles of the premiers have led to slight discrepancies in their appearances and manners, the overall front of the CPPC has become highly institutionalized, regardless of who is sitting at the main table and what is being conveyed.

As the CPPC format has become increasingly formalized and normalized however, not everything at the front has been set. The remaining, flexible part of the proceedings is mainly handled by the moderator of the conference. Because of the presubmission of questions, the Chinese premier seldom selects journalists to ask questions directly; this is done by the officer from the MFA or the premier's office. Because of the coordination meeting backstage, officials can meet with journalists who are going to ask questions at the CPPC. To further ensure that the right people are named, some governmental officials also sit in the audience with the questioning journalists. As a foreign journalist recalls, "There surely would be no accident, because they would reserve the seat for me, with two governmental officials sitting on my left and right side" (Informants F12, personal communication, April 25, 2012). Such procedural restrictions place a clear imprint on who is in charge. In this mediated format, another rule is to unmistakably create an aura of authority around the premier.

Interestingly, the order of questions is not always set long before the conference. As one journalist points out, "It was not until the morning I was guided to a seat next to a government official that he told me that I would be the third person to ask a question" (Informant F05, personal communication, August 11, 2011). However, another journalist states,

> I knew I could probably ask a question at the conference, but I did not know when my turn was. It made me so nervous every time the premier was about to end his

> responses. Thus, on that morning, I felt like I was on a rollercoaster. As last, I asked a question as the fifth journalist. (Informant J19, personal communication, May 11, 2012)

Thus, in addition to the first three questions set backstage before the conference, the order of other questions is managed by the moderator according to the situation. This is particularly true of the last two or three questions, for which no confirmed commitments are made to the journalists before the conference. Such is the art of managing a performance in China—leaving some flexibility and space to back up.

Dealing With Accidents

Allowing flexibility is different from allowing uncertainty. The former is a strategy to make a performance vivid without breaking its order, whereas the latter brings challenges to performers to maintain order. The backstage is a place where the order is prepared with some flexibility; but strategies for dealing with uncertainty are also planned. Thus, officials usually seek to make commitments with journalists at the end of their negotiations backstage. As an informant recollects, "We had several conversations about the questions' topics, question tones, and so on. Lastly, they entrusted me to follow what we have communicated to ask a question at the conference. They especially reminded me not to ask a different question" (Informant F05, personal communication, August 11, 2011).

But why do journalists have to follow their commitments? What happens if journalists break their commitments? Referring to their structural relationships, it is easy to understand why Chinese journalists do not break commitments. However, foreign journalists, although there surely have been cases where they have broken their backstage commitments, also follow these rules most of time because they are aware of the definition of the situation and seek to maintain good relationships with the Chinese government. As a foreign correspondent summarizes:

> It does not make much sense to break this commitment. For one thing, even though you asked a very tough question on the spot, the premier could choose to answer it very simply. Another thing is that it would have a very bad impact on your relationship with the officials in the future. (Informant F14, personal communication, May 7, 2012)

These words demonstrate that the preservation of power to define the situation is the reason the official side can deal with uncertainty at the conference. A significant example can be found from Premier Wen's conference in 2006. About halfway through the two-hour conference, a Taiwan reporter brandished his walking cane above his head in the audience and demanded loudly to be given a chance to ask a question, which made much of the audience stand up and watch him. In this case, Premier Wen unexpectedly acceded to his request, saying, "That reporter over there was very emotional. We can probably give him the opportunity." It is believed that this was unplanned because his question was quite different from other, presubmitted questions. He asked a question about the severe environmental problems of water pollution in China and criticized Premier Wen as follows:

> So I have this idea: No matter what kind of achievement you can score in terms of industry development—if the water in the city is no longer suitable for drinking, your achievements at the end of your term of office will probably be strongly compromised. This is my question. Thank you. ("Full Text of Chinese Premier's News Conference," March 14, 2006)

The premier took notes very carefully before he replied to the journalist. He began his answer with a smile: "You have won a right to speak because of your tremendous courage." From another perspective, the premier's words could be seen to imply that the CPPC runs on a well-designed script because "unchosen journalists" would not have won that right to speak at the conference if they do not contain enough courage to break the orders at the front. At the same time, it is hard to find anything else that is unusual in his answer to the question, which reflects the ability of the Chinese leader to handle any kind of question. This case indicates an interesting point to us: It is not because of the leadership's inability to answer questions that determines the presubmission procedure, but the requirement of the Chinese political structure that any public discourse be discussed with the collective leadership team, particularly for something as important as the CPPC for China's international and political communication. As a journalist recounted of her experience in attending the CPPC,

> I think there would be no accidents at today's CPPC since the preparations are done in so much detail and the discussion with a journalist on his or her question has undergone more and more revisions. Everyone strictly follows the scenario. (Informants F12, personal communication, April 25, 2012)

As mentioned before, some journalists may change their frames or tones to ask a specific question when the press conference is broadcasting live. To reduce such occasions, negotiations with journalists on "what to ask" have involved discussion of more details. For example, another journalist recalls,

> After we produced a series of question topics, the Chinese official would call us back to approve one of them. In further discussions, they suggested we cut down the length of the question on the one hand and take a more professional perspective in asking such a question on the other. (Informant J18, personal communication, May 10, 2012)

All the above organization of the CPPC reminds us of an interactive view of change. It is the relationship between negotiation and constraint, which "operate in a state of tension," that influences how change is likely to take place (Fine, 1992, p. 94). Constraints onstage provide more resources for officials negotiating with journalists backstage. In turn, these negotiations open up possible change on stage, in the direction of more predictable and consensual patterns.

Conclusion

By exploring the interactional processes between Chinese officials and journalists both backstage and frontstage according to dramaturgical viewpoints, this study has found various strategies of Chinese

officials in making a planned image at the CPPC. Backstage, officials carefully choose journalists as their teammates. To avoid accidents, officials heavily depend on their past experience and personal relationships, so that those "old friends," with whom they are familiar, will not betray their secrets of the backstage and are frequently chosen. As a result, the question opportunities are given to a limited number of media organizations, for example, the three top central Chinese media and popular financial media outlets from developed countries. On the other hand, the script is also specially designed for each journalistic role according to the characteristics of their media organizations. However, to achieve the balance between "who can ask" and "what to ask," each side may compromise on their interests in order to actually perform at the conference.

The backstage preparation helps to set the frontstage and avoid uncertainty during the performance, but it does not mean that there is no flexibility. Instead, every actor on the spot may create contingent events that deviate from plans so that the Chinese official side would also make flexible arrangements in addition to those institutionalized frontstage settings. At the same time, Chinese officials will continue to refine their organization, deepening their negotiations with journalists backstage to manage flexibility and further setting the frontstage arrangements in detail. However, I argue that the Chinese officials, who organize the conferences, constantly maintain the power to define the situations of these conferences in spite of their sacrifice on some issues in some particular situations. For example, sometimes they allow sensitive political topics, although they are relatively difficult to answer. On the other hand, Chinese officials are facing more difficulties in information control. Today's information is increasingly globalized and digitalized, and as a consequence, secrets can hardly be kept to the backstage, and intrusive surveillance increasingly impinges upon public spaces. For example, there have been more news reports of overseas media releasing facts about information control at the backstage of the CPPC (e.g., Lao, 2013; Sze, 2005).

Therefore, the impression management of the CPPC leads us to rethink the ways in which the Chinese government seeks to manage public information as well as its impression. As Wu (2014) states, a more "sophisticated propaganda" model has been adapted by the Chinese party-state to meet the new requirements of globalization and political economic developments occurring in China today. The overall organization of the CPPC is firmly related to the "soft power" strategies that China seeks to pursue in international politics, in step with its rise to great power in the world. For instance, China has made use of a series of global events or media events, including the Asian Games, Olympic Games, Fortune Global Forum, and other various large-scale cultural activities overseas, to promote a new international image and win more friends (e.g., Liang, 2010). All of these practices share similar symbolic meanings with the CPPC that boost the Communist Party and the Chinese government's ruling legitimacy on the one hand, and cultivate China's international images on the other (Li, 2009; Wang, 2011). Hence, going beyond the CPPC case, it needs to be further asked why and how is there more of a preoccupation with the use of information control and symbol manipulation by the Chinese government on both domestic and international audiences? Under what kinds of social conditions is political impression management likely to be used more frequently in China? Future studies should tackle these questions.

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Appendix

Interview Guide for Journalists

Part 1: Individual and Organizational Background

1. How many years have you been working in the office based in mainland China? What kind of news are you responsible for in your office?
2. How important is news about China to your media organizations?
3. Have you ever reported the NPC and the CPPCC (or *Lianghui*)? If so, how many times have you been?
4. How many reporters in your office are allowed to report *Lianghui* on the average every year? What are their different tasks in reporting these conferences?

Part 2: Preparation Before the Press Conferences

1. How important is the news about *Lianghui* and the CPPC for your media organization in reporting China?
2. How does your office get the invitation for the CPPC?
3. Before the CPPC, what kind of information do you expect to get from the conferences?
4. Do you do any preparation before the conferences? For example, prepare the questions, search related information, briefing conferences in your office?

Part 3: Practices at the Press Conferences

1. What do you think of the organization of the CPPC by the Chinese government?
2. What is the most important task for you in attending this conference?
3. About the questioning:
   (1) Have you ever asked questions at the Chinese Premier's Press Conference?
   (2) How did you get that opportunity?
   (3) Does it matter if you don't get the opportunity to question? Why?
   (4) How do you consider the questions asked by journalists from other organizations? Did they ask the questions that you intended to ask?
   (5) Do you find any difference between the questions at the CPPC and those in other press conferences, for example, the press conferences regularly held by the MFA?
4. What do you think about the answers from the premier? Did they meet with what you expected?
5. How do you consider the impact of the premier's personal characteristics on the press conferences?

Part 4: About Change

1. Have you seen any changes at the CPPC over the years?
2. Do you think the CPPC has tackled more important topics in your fields of interest? If so, how do you consider this change?
3. Would you like more CPPCs in China? If so, why? Do you predict there will be any more CPPC outside the context of *Lianghui*? If so, why?