

## **Mission Impossible? Soft Power, Communication Capacity, and the Globalization of Chinese Media**

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Recent media policy statements made by the Chinese Communist Party's leadership invariably stress the importance of strengthening Chinese media's "communication capacity," but how communication is understood by the CCP leadership remains somewhat unclear. Engaging a range of perspectives from critical media and communication studies, this article examines a dominant view of communication held by the Chinese leadership and explores a number of ways in which that view shapes the direction of Chinese media's efforts to "go global." Through the prism of media events, including the CCTV's coverage of the Sichuan earthquake, news, and current affairs, this article argues that, despite the increased quantity of Chinese media content overseas, the sphere of disagreement between Chinese media and its international counterparts — over what kind of stories should be told and how to tell these stories — seems insurmountably vast.

In December 2008, in celebration of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of China Central Television (CCTV), Li Changchun, the propaganda chief of the Communist Party of China (CCP) and a senior member of the Politburo Standing Committee, made an important speech. Among many other things, the speech stressed the importance to the Chinese media of strengthen its "communication capacity" (chuanbo nengli), saying that Chinese television should start producing internationally well-known programs and products, and should increase the competitiveness and impact of China's television, both domestically and internationally:<sup>1</sup>

We must go "global," strengthening our foreign language channels, expanding our partnership with foreign television organizations, vigorously pushing for the international

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transmission of our television programs, so that our images and voice can reach thousands of homes in all parts of the world.<sup>2</sup>

Li's statement is underscored by a vision for expansion. This vision includes a dramatic increase in the quantity of Chinese-produced content in the global arena. It also has as one of its outcomes the considerable growth of the size of Chinese media's international audience. Finally, the goals and ambitions expressed in Li's statement are undergirded by a concept of a new, extended electronic frontier, whereby the entire world, not just the domestic space of the PRC and the diasporic Chinese space, is brought under the purview of Chinese media's ideological or cultural dissemination. But it would be wrong to assume that size, quantity, and distance is all the Chinese authorities strive for. Equally important in Li's statement is a recognition of the urgent need to enhance the appeal (xi ying li), affinity (qin he li), impact (gan ran li), and credibility (gong xin) of Chinese media content:

In reporting important events inside and outside China, we must aim to be timely, open, and transparent. We want to adopt a pro-active approach, trying to be the first to get our voice out and communicating our own perspectives. We must work hard to enhance the authoritativeness and impact of our mainstream media. We must conduct in-depth studies of foreign audiences' mindsets and viewing habits, be attentive to the international needs for Chinese news and information, and understand foreign audiences' ways of thinking. Taking advantage of modern communication technologies and techniques, we must adopt a style and language which is acceptable and intelligible to foreign audiences.

"Communication" and "communication capacity" are key words in Li's speech, but what does Li Changchun mean by "communication capacity," and indeed how is communication understood by the CCP's leadership? What kind of understanding of the function and nature of communication underscores, and is implied in, Li's statement, and how will such a view of communication determine the shape and direction of Chinese media's efforts to "go global"? Knowing the answers to these questions is significant, as it will help us make sense of the range of current measures and strategies which have been adopted by the Chinese media in its push to "go global." It will also assist us in identifying the challenges and difficulties confronting the Chinese media in these processes, thereby more accurately assessing just how achievable the Chinese media's attempt to enhance the appeal, affinity, impact, and credibility of its news media. Finally and most importantly, the search for answers to these questions presents itself as a specific prism through which we can begin to understand the modus operandi of China's "soft power" approach.<sup>3</sup> Defined as a form of power which is constituted by one's cultural resources rather than through military or economic strength, "soft power" has the ability to influence others to accept the powerful nation's own

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<sup>2</sup> Li's full speech, made on December 20, 2008, can be accessed from [http://www.gxcic.net/News/shownews\\_83527.html](http://www.gxcic.net/News/shownews_83527.html). The translation of Li's speech quoted in this paper is mine.

<sup>3</sup> Despite the fact that Chinese "soft power" has become a most often used catchphrase in journalistic terms, scholarly literature is just beginning to emerge. For a comprehensive literature review (both in English and Chinese languages) of the concept in the Chinese context, see Hunter (2009).

normative values, media, business practices, education, and language (Nye, 1990). While “soft power” is both central to the CCP’s strategic development of China’s “comprehensive national strength” in a global context (Zhao, 2008, p. 109) and a “growing imperative to project China’s cultural power abroad” (p. 121), how this can be achieved at the level of media and cultural content remains unclear. If, as Yuezhi Zhao succinctly puts it, the “soft power” approach adopts a “going global” strategy which aims to “forge internationally competitive Chinese cultural enterprises through the coordinated effort of government support and cultural entrepreneurship” (p. 121) to achieve such aims (as Li’s speech makes clear), the need to figure out how to grow cultural power has acquired a renewed sense of urgency.

As I shall demonstrate, my search for these answers is informed by three related perceptions of the role of communication in modern societies, which I present here in ascending order of importance and relevance to my discussion. The first perception takes communication to be a form of symbolic power, which, like other forms of power, refers to the “ability to act in pursuit of one’s aims and interests, the ability to intervene in the course of events and to affect their outcome” (Thompson, 1995, pp. 13-14). Drawing on Michael Mann and others, John Thompson identifies four main types of power, namely “political power,” “economic power,” “coercive power,” and “symbolic power.” Thompson observes that these types of power engage different kinds of activity, drawing on different kinds of resources to exercising said power. But Thompson also stresses that, although different from one another, these different types of power often overlap in complex ways. The view of the connection between various modalities of power is also echoed in Yuezhi Zhao’s work on communication in China, which observes that, in the view of the CCP, politics, economics, and culture are “mutually interpenetrating” (Zhao, 2008, p. 108).

The second sees communication as a credibility-gaining process, one whereby journalists establish a normative order of credible sources, thus effectively maximizing the “sphere of consensus” (Hallin, 1986, pp. 116-117) — in both moral and ideological terms — between media producers and media consumers. In this credibility-gaining process, journalists negotiate the three spheres,<sup>4</sup> which Hallin calls “concentric circles.” These are the sphere of consensus (the least controversial and beyond partisan disputes), the sphere of legitimate controversy (appropriate subjects of partisan disputes), and the sphere of deviance (which the political mainstream rejects as unacceptable and unworthy of being heard). Following Hallin, Allan stresses that the three concentric circles “contain internal gradations,” with the boundaries between them being both relatively “fluid and changeable” (Allan, 2004, p. 64). Nevertheless, as both authors point out, it is possible to generalize that the further away a potential source is from the political consensus, the less likely it is to be viewed as credible.

I appropriate this concept of credibility-gaining process to argue that where the Chinese media manages to achieve credibility is where the sphere of consensus can be maximized, and the sphere of controversy can be minimized. In order for this concept to work in the new context that I am discussing

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<sup>4</sup> Following Hallin’s concept of the “concentric circle,” Allan (2004) also describes these three spheres as “regions” (pp. 63-64).

here, an intercultural dimension needs to be introduced. In other words, I am concerned with the relationship between the Chinese state and the opinions that are held about it internationally, rather than between the journalist and the public, within a given national context. Nevertheless, taking cues from both Hallin's and Allan's configurations, it is important to note that, when we gauge the effectiveness of the official Chinese media, the three regions are differentiated but also overlap in domestic and global orders. This differentiated but overlapping nature helps to explain, as we shall see in the following discussion of the Chinese media's coverage of a range of events and issues, how and why some media strategies and campaigns have succeeded in striking global resonance *in addition to* promoting national unity, while others failed to do so.

The last, and for the purpose of this discussion, most crucial perception is a view of communication as narrative, which sees communication as a cultural process whereby "reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed" (Carey, 1989, p. 18). This approach explores communication as part of the process of story-telling (Carey, 1988), as human interest stories (Hughes, 1968), as myths (Knight & Dean, 1982), and as "culturally specific story-telling codes," and as such, it produces "vital, myth-repairing narratives" (Bird & Dardenne, 1988, p. 74). This view of communication represents a radical critique and departure from what Carey calls a "transmission view of communication." Writing about the industrial age of modern America, James Carey observes that the transmission view of communication, defined by terms such as "imparting," "sending," "transmitting," and "giving information to others," concerns itself with the speed and effect of messages as they travel across space, aiming to transmit signs or information over distances for the purpose of control. As I show in this paper, Li's vision of the function of communication is remarkably resonant with a transmission view of communication, which, according to Carey, is prevalent in the modern, industrialized societies such as North America. The media and communication strategies adopted by China's current push to "go global" are mainly concerned with a process by which messages are transmitted and distributed in space for the control of people at a distance. These strategies have, so far, largely failed to take the symbolic dimension of communication into consideration, and yet this symbolic dimension is crucial to China's promotion of soft power — i.e., its ability to produce, store, and circulate symbolic materials which are, as Thompson puts it, "meaningful for the individuals who produce and receive them" (1995, p. 11).

In this article, I seek to bring these predominantly Western and historically specific perspectives on communication to bear on the contemporary Chinese reality, and in doing so, to demonstrate that a range of insights in critical communication — though engendered mostly in the age of national media two or three decades ago, and mostly in Western contexts — have assumed renewed relevance in the contemporary era of increasing media globalization. Furthermore, the discussion here poses, but perhaps does not address, a significant challenge to students of Chinese media and communication. If communication in China should be treated "not only as a key dimension of Chinese politics, but also as an increasingly important sector of the Chinese economy" (Zhao, 2008, p. 11), how do we also understand the relationship between political power, economic power, and symbolic power, with the latter referring to the ability to communicate across different symbolic universes, now rendered urgent and paramount by the Chinese authorities' mission to "go global"?

In what follows, I first examine a range of expansionist measures adopted by the Chinese state media in recent years. I then focus on a campaign mounted by the Chinese state media concerning the Sichuan earthquake that occurred in the lead-up to the Beijing Olympic Games and seek to understand some of the reasons behind the much touted — both inside and outside China — appeal and impact of the Chinese media's coverage of this catastrophic natural disaster. Finally, moving from media spectacles to routine news and current affairs, I consider some of the main challenges that lie ahead for Chinese state television in its efforts to "go global."

### ***More, Farther, and Faster***

Li's speech should not be dismissed as yet just more empty official talk. Instead, it effectively constitutes the CCP's mission statement about the role of media and communication and provides key principles for determining the future allocation of human and economic resources within particularly important media institutions, such as the official Xinhua News Agency and CCTV. For those interested in following the trajectory of China's ascent in the global order, this statement gives crucial clues to the strategies and goals of the Chinese media's attempt for global outreach in the next decade or so.

The timing of Li's speech is also not simply fortuitous. In more than one sense, 2008 represents an important watershed for China. After an earlier, humiliating defeat, in 2001, Beijing finally won the bid to host the 2008 Olympic Games; China became a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in December in the same year, and new leadership under Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao in the following year ushered in another phase of economic reform underpinned by an emphasis on social harmony and a people-oriented ethos of development (Lin, 2006). Until recently, the world has witnessed steady, double-digit economic growth in China. A post-Olympics China is seen to have graduated into the status of "world power," and in addition to that, has re-asserted its deep commitments to a vision of a return to national glory (Finlay, 2008). However, despite the global consensus about China's growing status as the next economic and political powerhouse, and despite the surge of national pride in China and in the Chinese diaspora, the Chinese government and its people were surprised and angered by the "hostile" media coverage of China, especially during the times leading up to the Beijing Olympic Games. International media stepped up its scrutiny of the Chinese government's human rights records. One unsavory incident followed another, starting with the deaths of several construction workers at the Bird's Nest Stadium, then Steven Spielberg's protest over China's position on Darfur, the persecution of the Falun Gong, and accusations that Chinese media was suppressing news of Tibetan riots. The Western media's coverage of these pro-Tibetan riots was seen by the Chinese government to be decidedly anti-Chinese. On April 9, 2008, following a series of demonstrations and conflicts between pro-Tibet and pro-PRC protesters in a number of U.S. cities, Cable News Network (CNN)'s *Situation Room* host Jack Cafferty commented that Chinese products were "junk," and that the Chinese people were "basically the same bunch of goons and thugs they've been for the last 50 years." Cafferty's remark incurred widespread condemnation, not least from the Chinese government. Due to overwhelming pressure, CNN was forced to issue a public apology ("CNN", 2009). At one level, the CNN incident can be seen as what has become a perennial story of a persistent and seemingly irreconcilable tension between a Western perception of China as a rogue, Communist regime which does not play by the international rule, and an awareness of China's ascent as a political and economic power on the global stage. The Chinese government and its people — including

many now living outside China — were angry when Western media and individuals displayed a willful determination to misunderstand China on issues such as Tibet and the Falun Gong. This anger manifested itself in a series of emotional confrontations between pro-China and pro-Tibet protesters in a number of cities outside China in the months leading to the Beijing Olympics.

The lesson that the Chinese government has learned from the West's media reactions to these events is twofold. Firstly, China's ascent on the global stage as an economic and political power does not automatically bring about a more favorable perception of China in the international community; it has, in fact, given rise to a higher level of anxiety or even disapproval. Secondly, China cannot wait for the Western media to change its critical perspectives on China; it must be proactive, "go global," and push Chinese perspectives and voices into the international arena in order to contest the discursive power of the West. This understanding is clearly evidenced in Li's speech:

With China's rapid economic and social development, our status in the international community has become more prominent. However, our capacity to communicate to the international community is lagging behind. To strengthen our communication capacity is a matter of urgency. It concerns the international standing of China; it concerns the growth of China's cultural soft power; and it concerns the place and function of Chinese media in the international community of public opinion. Our first and foremost mission from now on is to strengthen our communication capacity inside and outside China. Everyone should be aware of this responsibility and mission.

China's current international media push is funded by a total sum of US\$6 billion ("Kuoda ruan shi li", 2009). Its strategy of expansion can be characterized by an aggressive drive to transmit more media content within the shortest possible time, over the largest possible distance, and to the largest possible audience. Li's speech, alongside numerous policy statements and major media organizations' accounts of their own exponential expansion, seems premised on a conviction that technological innovation is the key to realizing the CCP's vision for more, faster, and farther transmission. A perusal of CCTV's official Web site ("Yangshi chunwai", 2009) clearly demonstrates an unbridled enthusiasm for new ways of transmitting television content using the "latest," the "most advanced," and the "most sophisticated, high-end" technologies. Enumerating CCTV's (China's official television network) successes in reaching a record number of viewers for its flagship program, the annual Spring Festival television gala, the network's transmission is "live, global, multi-lingual, and multi-modal." The gala event in 2009, according to the Web site, adopted four modes of transmission — Internet TV, mobile TV, transmission via mobile telephony, and Internet Protocol Television (IP TV )— to reach 200 million viewers in 140 countries, using the most advanced technologies of P2P for live transmission and CDN for distribution ("Yangshi chunwai", 2009). This modernist, technocratic faith in the power of technology is unambiguously articulated in Li's speech, which states that, "in this day and age, whoever has the most advanced communication technology will have the means to transmit their culture and values widely and achieve global impact."

Technological innovation aside, the CCP has also adopted a range of pragmatic collaborative pathways which aim to integrate Chinese media content into transnational mediated spaces, thus enabling

international consumption of media products from the PRC to take place on a quotidian basis. This pragmatic approach is evidenced in CCTV's individuated arrangements with various overseas service providers. The quantity of media content, the size of territorial coverage, and the modality of transmission of CCTV have been growing day by day. CCTV now claims to have achieved global coverage with its CCTV-4, a Mandarin-language channel targeting overseas Chinese-speaking viewers which reaches around 10 million viewers outside China in 93 countries, and with CCTV-9, a foreign-language channel (English, French, Spanish) finding some 40 million viewers overseas in 94 countries ("Zhongyang dianshi tai", 2009).

China's key media networks also actively seek joint ventures with foreign local media content providers. Subscribers to Foxtel cable television, for instance, can access a limited number of Chinese-language television channels (including CCTV-4) brought by Australia's Telstra. Similarly, the Hong Kong-based BTV also brings Chinese television (including CCTV and a few other provincial and regional Chinese networks) into the homes of Australian and New Zealand viewers. CCTV's Great Wall TV Platform was launched in North America in 2004, and it now carries an enormous amount of program content from China's national and provincial channels, as well as having now pushed into the Asian region, including Vietnam, Thailand, South Korea, Myanmar, Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan (Wong, 2009; "China Launches Satellite", 2009). It is estimated that the network also controls about 75% of Chinese-language television stations in North America (Zhu, 2009). Starting on July 25, 2009, CCTV launched its Arabic language programs, which, through Arabsat and Nilesat transmissions, are beamed into 300 million viewers in 22 Arabic-speaking nations in the Middle East and North Africa, thus adding another important foreign language service to English, French, Spanish, and Chinese. Despite these outreach initiatives, however, CCTV no longer has a monopoly over China's overseas television market. Starting from July 2009, Xinhua News Agency, China's official news agency, in collaboration with more than ten European broadcasters, started to transmit 90 minutes of English-language television news programs in a selection of supermarkets, as well as on television screens outside the Chinese embassies in various European locations ("Kuoda ruanshili xinhuashe", 2009).

This pragmatic approach is also evidenced in the exponential expansion of China International Radio (CRI), China's official radio broadcaster. Started as early as 1941, CRI currently broadcasts in 43 foreign languages and dialects to the whole world, using a range of transmission methods, including FM, AM, Internet radio, satellite, and podcast. To ensure maximum outreach outside China, CRI, like CCTV, has adopted a range of initiatives which testify to the Chinese state's growing capacity to export Chinese media content via a range of pragmatic pathways, including joint ventures with foreign local media content providers. CRI now has 117 international FM radio partners, as well as 32 AM radio partners in Asia, Africa, North America, Europe, and Oceania. In North America, for instance, CRI broadcasts can be heard on the medium-wave AM band in many areas, including the Baltimore-Washington metropolitan area, via WUST, formerly a rhythm and blues station in Washington, D.C. which also now broadcasts brokered foreign language programming ("CRI launches, 2006). CRI can also be heard on WNWR, a multicultural station in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (WNWR, n.d.). As well, CRI makes extensive use of international content brokers, such as the World Radio Network (WRN), a private London-based company that provides transmission services for radio and television broadcasters worldwide. World Radio Network creates and distributes its own branded radio channels which aggregate daily and weekly programs from

national public broadcasters (including CRI), which, in turn, are distributed using international satellite radio networks, mobile platforms, and local FM and AM re-broadcasters. Starting in 2000, WRN, in partnership with U.S. National Public Radio (NPR), brought CRI to American radio listeners ("World Radio Network, 2000).

Other expansion initiatives dovetail with the entrepreneurial impulse of transnational Chinese business élites. CRI's transmission in Australia provides a good example. Tommy Jiang is one of many such local entrepreneurial individuals. After an unsuccessful initial attempt to interest SBS (Australia's multicultural national broadcaster), CRI looked to local ethnic Chinese-language media networks for collaborative opportunities. Jiang, a Melbourne-based migrant from north China, is the owner of five Chinese-language newspapers in Australia, as well as the owner of Australia's first-ever Chinese radio station, 3CW, which has been in operation since 1999. A couple of years ago, Jiang expanded his business to Perth, the capital city of Western Australia, now home to around 100,000 Chinese-speaking migrants. Jiang started Perth Chinese TV, Perth Chinese Radio 104.9 FM — Perth's first and only free to air, 24-hour commercial Chinese-language radio station — as well as taking over, in 2008, *Oriental Post*, one of the Perth's widely circulated English and Chinese bilingual newspapers. In 2007, Jiang secured a deal with CRI to transmit CRI content in Perth, and then in Canberra, the capital of Australia.

CCP's international media expansion is not limited to the electronic media. Apart from the overseas edition of English-language national the *China Daily*, the CCP's mouthpiece newspaper, the *People's Daily*, recently launched the English-language *Global Times*, marking the internationalization of China's mainstream Chinese media. Promoting its mission to "Discover China, Discover the World," the daily paper markets itself as the "unofficial" voice in China — unlike the *China Daily* — and is seen by Chinese intelligentsia to be a newspaper which aims to give foreigners' direct access to Chinese voices and perspectives on both Chinese and international affairs ("Huanqiu shibao", 2009).

### ***Affinity, Appeal, and Impact?***

It is clear by now that the desire for faster, farther, and more transmission underscores both the rhetoric and action of Li Changchun, policy makers, and China's key media organizations. However, communication entails more than simply putting in place a material, technological infrastructural order marked by production, trade, and political economic relations. It is, more importantly, about putting in place a process whereby values, beliefs, and sentiments can be shared and maintained. Here, I suggest, lies the key to understanding the difficulties, challenges, and opportunities confronting the Chinese media's attempt to "go global." In order to achieve affinity with, and acquire appeal to, international (especially Western) audiences, Chinese media must overcome distance in the geographic sense, but more importantly, it must overcome distance in the cultural sense, producing media content which, both in style and substance, resonates with audiences whose reality is shaped by a profoundly different symbolic process. In other words, in the effort to increase the "communication capacity" of Chinese media, communication should be understood not only as *transmissive*, but also as *ritual*. "A ritual view of communication is directed not toward the extension of messages in space, but toward the maintenance of



society in time; not in the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs" (Carey, 1989, p. 18).

One media format which provides a good prism through which to examine communication as both transmission and ritual is the spectacle of television events, or "media events," which, according to Dayan and Katz, are national events, rituals, and ceremonies in which national unity, strength, and prosperity can be visualized for television audiences, both at home and abroad. To qualify as media events, events have to be, on the one hand, live and remote from the television audiences, yet on the other hand, they are interruptive but also pre-planned. These events celebrate reconciliation, not conflict, and they speak to very large audiences and are necessarily "hegemonic." Furthermore, media events follow three basic "scripts" — contest, conquest, or coronation (Dayan & Katz, 1992).

Over the past decade or so, the Chinese state media have become increasingly savvy in promoting patriotism offshore via satellite technology through a series of media events, including the ceremony of the Hong Kong handover, the successful launch of the Shengzhou Space Shuttle, and more recently, the Beijing Olympic Games. These events, together with the annual Spring Festival television gala, demonstrate the ingenuity of the Chinese state in reinventing ways of addressing viewers as national audiences — including both domestic and diasporic viewers (Sun, 2007). The state media's coverage of the Sichuan earthquakes in 2008 further suggests that tragedies, as well as triumphs, present opportunities for television to promote national unity at home and repair the state's international image abroad. As Katz and Liebes (2007) observe in their more recent rethinking on media events, we now witness a retreat of integrative media events, and an emergence of media events which are marked by disruptions and upstagings. As the case of CCTV's coverage of the Sichuan earthquake suggests, while clearly a disruptive event, it also functioned to unify the nation and became, arguably, an exemplary nation-(re)building event in contemporary Chinese history on and through the media.

On May 12, 2008, an earthquake measuring 8.0 on the Richter Scale hit Wenchuan and its neighboring towns in Sichuan Province, killing upwards of 70,000 people and leaving millions homeless. Contrary to its normal practice of minimizing natural disasters in the media, the state media acted quickly and decisively. Within an hour or so after the first quake, live coverage of the disaster started, kicking off a massive, sustained media campaign. What unfolded in the following two weeks in the Chinese media was unprecedented on many levels and impressive by most people's accounts, marking a number of major breakthroughs in the history of Chinese media, particularly in relation to its coverage of emergencies and natural disasters. For two weeks after the quakes, CCTV covered the rescue and relief efforts live, 24 hours a day.

The coverage was marked by an exceptionally high degree of "transparency" (*tou ming du*) on a range of matters. CCTV ran a round-the-clock update on the death toll, the number of the injured, the size and scale of the aftershocks, the number of people missing and homeless, the logistic difficulties encountered in rescuing efforts, the potential danger the earthquake posed to the dams and irrigation systems, the kind of epidemic diseases which were likely to occur in times like this, the kind of psychological traumas that could be expected, and the various types of help that were needed. The actual format of coverage was also innovative. The Chinese national audiences were immersed in a new media

experience — a hybridized media representation with elements of reality TV, social realism, news and current affairs, and background briefing all rolled into one.<sup>5</sup> The end result was 10 days of intense drama, high rhetoric, and heightened emotion. At any given time during the live coverage, figures and statistics appeared at the bottom of the screen, CNN-style, updating the latest death toll and other information.

Furthermore, the earthquake was covered with a distinct human-interest angle. Television not only showed the will and determination of the Chinese government and its leadership in the rescue efforts, but also the humane side of the country's top leaders. Wen Jiabao, the commander-in-general of the rescue committee, was in the affected area the day after the event, directing rescue work. More importantly, he was shown numerous times on camera to be speechless with sadness, tears streaming down the face, holding the hands of starving children, telling people that "We will take care of you. You will not be left alone." Wen acquired the nickname "Premier Warm" thanks to the coverage, as his surname Wen also means warm, and he certainly succeeded in matching his image with his name through his exposure to the national audience by showing his vulnerability and compassion.

Most innovatively, by providing therapeutic space and time for the population to cope with loss and grief, CCTV tried something new not only in the history of media in the PRC, but also in the world. At 2:28 P.M. on May 19, 2008, China stood still for three minutes, with the haunting sound of sirens and horns reverberating throughout the nation. This is the first time mourning of this scale was represented as a "media event." For the first time, a Chinese media event was organized around the themes of grief, deaths, and loss, instead of conquest and success. However, because of this, not in spite of this, it represented an exceptionally powerful and memorable moment in the history of Chinese television (Sun & Zhao, 2009). Judging by numerous media reports, international spectators found the ceremony to be haunting and moving, and being accustomed to perennial media coverage of China's poor human rights record, many seemed genuinely impressed by the state media's display of compassion for ordinary Chinese people. For the Chinese, including those now living outside China, the ceremony provided a virtual (but nevertheless, effective) time, space, and occasion for people to mourn, to reach for some kind of closure, and to move on.

Prior to the three-minute silence, viewers also received instruction on television on how to conduct themselves in the three minutes.

If you are walking, please stop and stand still. If you are driving, please pull up by the road. If you are seated, please stand up. Wherever you are and whatever you are doing, please stop still for three minutes to pay respect to the dead. (2008)

Such instructions to viewers in China and the diasporic communities all over the world may be seen by some as yet another of the state's attempts to intrude into the private lives of citizens "Big

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<sup>5</sup> It should be pointed out that, during the day or so after the earthquakes, CCTV heavily relied on local media organizations and non-media professionals — "netizens" equipped with mobile phones and Internet connections — for footage and information. However, as time went on, CCTV's coverage became increasingly formulaic and orchestrated.

Brother" style. Perhaps it was. But in reality, it did succeed in giving the Chinese people, particularly those living overseas, a chance to feel included in a national ceremony. If this was propaganda moving offshore, it was something that people seemed only too happy to be a part of. They felt grateful that they were given this opportunity to share this ritual as a member of the Chinese nation, and to be included and spoken to as Chinese nationals, to express their sorrow and condolences in a Chinese way. Unlike the Beijing Olympic Games, whereby audiences were treated to spectacles of celebration, this one was marked by the very absence of spectacles. Its designed silence and deliberate non-action was nevertheless powerful, striking a profound resonance among its population. It is a good example of appropriating televisual language, which is global, to speak to a very Chinese pathos. This is particularly important, given that many of the people killed by the earthquake could never hope to have their bodies identified and found.

It goes without saying that the media was successful in turning a natural disaster media story into an opportunity for social engineering.<sup>6</sup> In comparison, "man-made" tragedies are felt to be less suitable occasions. The outbreak of SARS in China a few years ago, the death of several construction workers at the Bird's Nest Stadium, and more recently, the death and sickness of babies who had taken baby formula containing melamine, and the collapse of a number of mining sites have all been more sensitive issues. Despite the smaller number of casualties, they raise much more controversial and sensitive questions as to who is the guilty of, or responsible for, these tragedies. Earthquakes, on the other hand, have no known human culprits. In comparison, it is easier to maximize widespread, even global consensus.

Natural disasters are hard to predict and are beyond human control, but ways of covering them are always political. On the second day after the earthquake, CCTV broadcast U.S. President George Bush's condolences to the Chinese President Hu Jintao and his intention to attend the Olympic Games in Beijing. The media also lost no time in telling its national audience that the newly-elected President of Taiwan had sent condolences and offered monetary and logistic support. For those who are well-versed in the intricacy of Sino-Taiwanese politics, the symbolism of this announcement cannot be missed. In hindsight, it is clear that the Chinese government's response to the earthquake and the media's openness in its coverage were also instrumental in turning around a hitherto largely hostile international media. CCTV provided a round-the-clock summary of the major headlines from international media, praising the Chinese government and its media for its impressive relief and rescue efforts, and for its extensive, honest, and truthful media coverage. Obviously, the media campaign targeted both domestic and global audiences, and it was suitably gratified with the overwhelmingly positive assessments from the international community. Some China-watchers are tempted to speculate that the way Chinese media operated during the earthquake coverage was a sign that China had finally mastered the art of soft power and had become an integrated part of the world's media, as well as of the global economy and international politics (Hunter, 2009).

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<sup>6</sup> Here, I do not at all suggest that the Chinese government acted disingenuously, nor for the sole purpose of scoring political points. In fact, like all the Chinese spectators, I was moved beyond words by the amount of compassion as well as by the scale of human tragedy.

***Opportunities or Challenges?***

The effectiveness of the Chinese media's coverage of the Sichuan earthquake can be accounted for on a number of fronts. Viewed from a transmission view of communication, the media campaign marshalled the most advanced technology for transmitting messages, thereby traversing space and distance to gather an audience of seemingly impossible size. At the same time, viewed from a ritual view of communication, the television coverage also fulfilled an extremely ancient cultural role — that of a religious leader or tribal elder in helping their people to heal — so that viewers, including both Chinese and non-Chinese, could share the mourning of human loss and affirmation of human dignity. Finally, contrary to its previous practices, CCTV's coverage of this natural disaster adopted the *appearance* of an open, transparent, and objective style of news reporting — a style which is intelligible to the Western viewers — and for this reason, the Chinese state television succeeded in generating an impressive amount of affinity, impact, and appeal to international viewers. This does not necessarily mean its coverage was truly open, transparent, and “objective.”<sup>7</sup> In fact, a number of issues were studiously avoided,<sup>8</sup> not to mention that there was a startling lack of pluralism in the coverage, as it was compulsory for all local and provincial television stations to relay CCTV's coverage of the earthquakes instead of producing their own. In other words, apart from the powerful pathos generated, it also derived its success from strategically adopting the *appearance*, as well as the *ritual* of objective news reporting.

Natural disasters feature pre-determined, clearly identified, and often bifurcated actors and opponents — nature versus culture, death versus survival, etc. Natural disasters also provide occasions for the fully realized narrative, consisting of initial crisis, conflict, and closure. They are “perfect” news genres, whereby the relationship between the so-called “reality” and “story” is seen to be most natural and unproblematic (Manoff, 1987). To media spectators across different cultures and societies, natural disasters provide dramas of life and death, emotional involvement and identification, and a clear and unambiguous trope of human compassion and empathy, as well as, finally, the satisfaction of narrative closure — taking stock of human losses as well as the affirmation of human resilience. For this reason, the Sichuan earthquake presented itself as safer, and thus, more suitable, material (than other big stories) for experimenting with an alternative style of reporting, since it held out the possibility of maximizing the “sphere of consensus,” not only among the Chinese communities, but also among the non-Chinese international communities. Despite the existence of some “awkward” facts mentioned earlier, on the whole, the appearance of objectivity is easier to achieve in reporting natural disasters than in representing issues and incidents of more politically sensitive or fraught natures, such as man-made accidents (mining accidents or food poison), epidemic threats (SARS), social and political unrest (workers protests, riots in

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<sup>7</sup> I do not wish to suggest that news in the Western media is objective, or more objective than Chinese media. Rather, I suggest that news media in the West routinely adopts the canon, ritual, or protocol of objective reporting. For a body of works which address this complex issue, see Allan (2004) and Hackett and Zhao (1998).

<sup>8</sup> These include the questions of whether lives were lost unnecessarily due to the collapse of sub-standard school buildings (built without due approval), whether some local officials absconded from their posts in times of crisis, and if local government was prepared to compensate parents whose children died when school buildings collapsed.

Xinjiang and Tibet), or China's human rights record, as well as issues of national sovereignty, including the status of Taiwan. From the perspective of the Chinese authorities, these issues inhabit the space of a "no-go" zone, ranging from, at best, the "sphere of legitimate controversy," which would require handling with caution and top-down guidelines, to, at worst, the "sphere of deviance," which would require absolute censorship and control.

However, the dramatic nature of news reporting we see in the Chinese media's coverage of Sichuan — life and death — and the clear narrative structure of storyline — disasters, rescue, and survival (or death) — cannot be easily transferred to, or duplicated in, news and current affairs. Most noticeably, tensions and conflicts, which would make up the staple diet of political news in a liberal democratic system, are mostly kept away from the Chinese media and the public for the sake of "unity" and "stability." Instead, political news on Chinese television mainly consists of policy achievements and announcements of the outcomes of political processes, not the processes *per se*. The Great Hall of the People in Beijing (where most of the national meetings are held), unlike the floors of Parliament or Congress, is a place to showcase national consensus rather than political squabbling and point-scoring, and it is represented in the media as being so. A considerable amount of the news involving governance and government officials is taken up with high-level meetings, where policy documents are read out verbatim (Chang, 2002). The appearance of stability and unity is seen to be crucial in securing and maintaining political legitimacy, which is of paramount importance to the CCP and the party-state. For this reason, while reasonably-detailed or even critical in its coverage of most of international news, Chinese national television adopts the ritual of partisan, positive, and consensual reporting in covering domestic issues and incidents.<sup>9</sup>

Returning to Li's speech, which itself began this discussion, we can begin to appreciate the "mission impossible": Globally, the Chinese state media needs to convincingly present itself as a player whose values, ethics, and sensibilities are compatible with, if not superior to, its international counterparts. Domestically, it needs to avoid "chaos" at all cost, including heavy-handed censorship, in order to ensure social stability and national unity. These two sets of agendas do not always concur, as they did to a large extent in the case of Sichuan earthquake. While Chinese state television has had few problems cloning global television phenomena such as *Survivor* or showbiz formats such as *American Idol* (Fung, 2009), the crisis of credibility confronting the Chinese news media in the international public opinion shows no signs of being resolved. In terms of both form and content, its news media is profoundly different from, and unfamiliar to, the media that Western audiences expect, and therefore, Chinese media do not create and constitute a cross-cultural and cross-societal sphere of consensus where beliefs, values, sensibilities, and sentiments are shared.

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<sup>9</sup> A popular commentary, admittedly exaggerated and obviously tongue-in-cheek, gives a caricatured account of *Xinwen Liaobo*, CCTV's news and current events program. As the commentary goes, the first 10 minutes of the program tells viewers how busy the top leaders are, the second 10 minutes tell viewers how happy the Chinese people are, and the last 10 minutes tell viewers how miserable the people in the rest of the world are.

In May 2009, Yu Guoming, a particularly influential media academic in China and Director of the Research Institute of Public Opinion at People's University in Beijing, went public with his view that the format of CCTV's flagship news program, *Xinwen Lianbo*, needed systematic reform. Yu believes that news on national television is too "serious" and "restrained," and is in need of change, so as to adopt a different outlook, mindset, sensibility, and way of speaking to the viewers. Yu argues that CCTV's news program should not just be the mouthpiece of the CCP; it should assume multiple roles, including those of an opinion leader, an information manager, and a social commentator. In order to perform these roles, *Xinwen Lianbo* should adopt a more professional and individualistic approach to interpreting news. Furthermore, *Xinwen Lianbo* will have to dramatically reduce the amount of coverage dedicated to top national leaders. Such changes, argues Yu, should be implemented gradually and incrementally, not in the way of a radical, overnight overhaul ("Dujia zhuanfang", 2009).

Although consistent with Li's vision for change, Yu's call to CCTV to reform its news and current affairs format in order to adopt a more lively and global style of reporting has proven to be "easier said than done," and, so far, it seems to have already met with bureaucratic resistance.<sup>10</sup> It remains to be seen whether, without reforming the political system, a genuine reform of the news and current affairs is indeed feasible. Meanwhile, while nationalism has proven to be a potent cultural resource in forging a sense of "commonality," "association," and "fellowship" (Carey, 1989, p. 18) among the Chinese,<sup>11</sup> including the former Chinese nationals now living overseas, and to a lesser extent, the "Chinese geo-linguistic markets" such as Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan (Tay, 2009), it has not engendered a symbolic process which presents a reality that can be shared by a wider audience beyond the greater Chinese community. In fact, it may leave the majority of Western audiences unaffected. Furthermore, such a nationalist strategy may even risk entrenching a perception of difference and incompatibility. As David Bandurski, a Hong Kong-based observer of Chinese media, observes pointedly:

China's deficit of soft power has little to do with its "communication capacity" or the hostile attitude of the foreign press and everything to do with its failure to recognise the basic nature of soft power: the articulation of values that the rest of the world can aspire to and emulate. (2009)

In the absence of an oppositional style of politics, which bears a homologous relationship to its style of news reporting, it is difficult, if not impossible, for the Chinese party-state and its media to present a convincing picture of openness, transparency, and objective media outlook in a sustained and systemic way, despite the occasional windows of opportunity, such as the Sichuan earthquake. To put it in another way, in cases concerning matters of political sensitivity, it is not only impossible for the Chinese media to be truly objective, open, and balanced, but it may be next to impossible for the Chinese media to even assume the *appearance* of being objective. The challenge of the Chinese media's global outreach is not its lack of communication capacity, or its inability to understand the viewing habits and mindset of international audiences. Instead, it lies in its inability to adopt a set of institutionally-sanctioned news

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<sup>10</sup> Personal communication with a Chinese media practitioner, July 2009.

<sup>11</sup> For another example of how nationalism can provide a cultural resource for consensus building, see Yu (2009). Also, see Guo (2004) for nationalism as a cultural resource.

values and news-gathering practices which are truly independent of political and ideological control and constraints. Media professionalism, innovative media practices, and creative use of technologies may go some way toward improving the appeal of media content — as evidenced in the recent launch of *Global Times*, which prides itself on professionalism and the CCTV's coverage of the earthquakes — but hopes of a much more open and accountable media remain illusory, especially since the Chinese state is prone to jeopardize its own soft power efforts by taking a hard-line approach to a range of sensitive issues on the international stage.<sup>12</sup> For instance, in March 2009, Li Changchun, as part of his official visit to Australia, told the ABC — Australia's national broadcaster — that China was "concerned" with the Western media's reporting of Tibetan issues, and requested that it adopt a "comprehensive, well-balanced, fair, and objective manner" (Stewart, 2009). Li's action somewhat backfired, as it was widely seen by the Australian media as an example of China wielding its political and economic power to situate a more favorable treatment in the symbolic domain.

### **Conclusion**

The Chinese government's all-out push to increase its communication capacity is driven by an acute realization that the international perception of China is largely shaped by Western media coverage, and that such coverage is, more often than China likes, unfavorable. Gaining the "discursive power" (huayu quan) — i.e., effectively contesting and competing with Western media — has now become a catch phrase often used by China's top-level media policymakers, including Li Changchun. Underlying this push is a reconfigured sense of scale, which is at the heart of the transmission view of communication. In the same way that, as Carey points out (1989), the moral meaning of transmission to early American settlers was for purposes of establishment and extension of God's kingdom on Earth, the current Chinese media push for wider, global transmission also has a moral dimension. If China entered the new millennium debating whether it should let the "wolves" — transnational media corporations — into the Chinese media market,<sup>13</sup> a post-Olympic polity is clearly preoccupied with the question of how to push the Chinese media out onto the global mediasphere. As Li Changchun's speech makes abundantly clear, the overriding goal of Chinese media in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is to ensure that China is able to spread its beliefs and values far and wide, on a global scale.

However, as the case of the CCTV's coverage of the Sichuan earthquake makes clear, while the "natural" nature of this tragedy enabled China's national television to effectively exploit existing cultural resources, thus maximizing the sphere of consensus and minimizing the sphere of controversy on a global, as well as national, scale, it is difficult, if not impossible, to achieve widespread appeal and resonance as a matter of routine, especially given that most conflicts and crises have a human and social — as opposed to natural — cause. While much has been, and is being, done to increase the quantity of Chinese media content overseas, the sphere of disagreement between Chinese media and its international counterparts — over what kind of stories should be told and how to tell these stories — still does seem insurmountably vast. It therefore remains to be seen if the so-called "communication capacity" can be significantly

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<sup>12</sup> The recent attempt of the Chinese government to stop Rabiya Kadeer, the Uighur human rights activist, from entering Australia is but one example.

<sup>13</sup> See Zhao (2008), Chapter 3, for an account of this debate.

enhanced or augmented if the widespread and deep-rooted perception of the Chinese media as entities of control and censorship remains firmly in place in the realm of international public opinion. Despite its emphasis on technological innovation, as well as scale and quantity of growth in technical and infrastructural terms, China's media globalization is facing a crisis of credibility. The desire to resolve this by taking shortcuts — wielding political and economic power — may result in reinforcing an association of China with coercive, rather than soft, power.



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