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Gagliardone, Iginio; Pál, Nyíri

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# Freer but not free enough? Chinese journalists finding their feet in Africa

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**Iginio Gagliardone**

University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa

**Nyíri Pál**

Vrije Universiteit, The Netherlands

## Abstract

The high-profile appearance of Chinese media organizations in Africa has attracted considerable attention. How Chinese correspondents in Africa actually go about their work is, however, little understood. A posting in Africa gives journalists at Xinhua News Agency or China Central Television a degree of freedom not experienced in China combined with greater local visibility than a posting in the West and more market opportunities. At the same time, it carries the rather heavy responsibility to act as a pioneer of a new, distinctive global voice for China envisaged by the Chinese government. Based on interviews and observation at several Chinese media organizations in three African locations and in Beijing over the course of 3 years, this article suggests that Chinese correspondents in Africa are unable to make use of the opportunities their postings offer. While the greater investments of Chinese media in Africa have been framed to date as a challenge to their struggling competitors, in reality, journalists working for Chinese media not only feel some of the constraints that have characterized international journalism in the past decade but also face additional ones: the problem of finding and communicating a clear identity; of remaining relevant in a space where national media are growing fast and becoming more professional; of testing new styles without appealing only to a niche.

## Keywords

China–Africa relations, Chinese media, global media, international broadcasting, positive reporting, transformation in journalism practices

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## Corresponding author:

Iginio Gagliardone, University of the Witwatersrand, 3179 Senate House, East Campus, Johannesburg, 2050 South Africa.

Email: [iginio.gagliardone@wits.ac.za](mailto:iginio.gagliardone@wits.ac.za)

Chinese media's foreign correspondent networks are undergoing an explosive expansion even as many Western media are dismantling their own. Eighteen American newspapers and two entire newspaper chains have recently closed down all their overseas bureaus 'driven by economics and a wrongheaded belief that Americans don't care that much about foreign news' (Keller, 2012). European media, notably the long-revered BBC, have been experiencing similar if not more severe cutbacks. But even as a mood of irrelevance and imminent demise of the traditional foreign correspondent – one of the intrepid explorer figures associated with high modernity – spreads, Chinese media have embarked on building up an unprecedented network of foreign bureaus in an attempt to shape global interpretations of both Sino-foreign and foreign-foreign encounters.

In 2007, the Shanghai-based financial newspaper *21st Century Business Herald* sent a correspondent to New York. This was the first overseas correspondent for the so-called commercialized (市场化, i.e. non-subsidized) Chinese media, soon followed by others. For these financial media, the decision to set up overseas bureaux was driven by the evolving needs of their readers: businesspeople, managers and economic policymakers affected by China's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) and a growing upper middle class with business or personal interests abroad.

At the same time but on a much larger scale, the news organizations funded by central party and government organs – Xinhua News Agency, China Central Television (CCTV), China Radio International (CRI), *People's Daily* and the English-language *China Daily*, often referred to as 'central media' in Chinese – began receiving large amounts of extra funding, variously reported to be around \$2 to \$9 billion (e.g. Shambaugh, 2013: 227), to expand their foreign networks. This funding came as part of a broader government effort of creating internationally competitive media conglomerates in China that would make 'China's voice heard internationally'.

This expansion has attracted attention as an additional symbol of China's new geopolitical role at a time when traditional international actors are struggling to maintain their presence abroad. It has encountered scepticism that the institutional style characterizing central media could appeal to audiences used to the more assertive tones of channels such as Al Jazeera. It has also raised criticism because of the perceived risk that the authoritarian style characterizing China's media system could spill beyond China's borders (Cook, 2013; Nelson, 2013).

A question that has not yet been asked is whether the concrete experiences of Chinese journalists and editors abroad could offer an opportunity to experiment with new styles and modes of engagement and ultimately represent an opportunity for innovation extending beyond foreign media outposts. As other studies have illustrated (Chang et al., 2002; Liang, 2012; Pan, 2000), innovation in the Chinese media has often taken place in the peripheries, where they pose a lesser threat to central power. Limin Liang (2012) has illustrated how even a tightly controlled media outlet like CCTV could seize the opportunity offered by the war in Iraq to introduce substantial innovations, including live reporting and the ability of offering counter-narratives to news media coming from the United States, for example, by interviewing Iraqis and other voices normally excluded from shaping the meaning of the ongoing events. Rebecca MacKinnon (2008), when discussing the role of bloggers and drawing inspiration from a provocation by novelist and blogger Yang Hengjun, has suggested looking at the Internet in China as a 'special

political zone', emerging in the footsteps of the 'special economic zones' created by Deng Xiaoping to test more liberal economic policies with a smaller population. Haiqing Yu (2011) has explained how j-bloggers (journalist who have opened their personal blogs and use them to experiment with less institutional forms of reporting) have seized this space to renegotiate journalistic standards.

Our analysis extends these earlier studies in a new direction, by analysing not only how journalists play at the margins but also how they interface with different journalistic traditions, interacting with foreign colleagues in an attempt to provide a common reading to events from outside of China for Chinese and non-Chinese audiences. By focusing on a subset of Chinese media expansion abroad, namely those outlets that have extended their operation in Africa (especially CCTV Africa, Xinhua and *People's Daily*), we examine in particular which kind of changes are occurring at the borders of China's media expansion and their implications for Chinese, African and international media.

This article is based on 24 interviews and observations carried out with and among current and former English- and Chinese-language journalists in Nairobi, Addis Ababa and Harare and editors in Beijing between 2012 and 2014. We collected testimonies of how Chinese journalists and some of their African colleagues explain and justify their work and, building on their words, we sought to capture prevailing trends that are characterizing the renewed engagement of Chinese media with the African continent.

We found that the processes through which journalists working for CCTV Africa, Xinhua, China Daily, People's Daily and CRI select news, adopt specific styles of reporting, and relate to the environment that surrounds them are characterized by a series of contradictions. Despite the extraordinary financial resources the Chinese government has channelled in developing its foreign media, this exceptional support seems to have not been enough to shield Chinese media from the chaotic transformation journalism is undergoing globally. The retreat of the 'traditional' foreign correspondent is not only simply the result of shrinking budgets but also of a dramatic redefinition of how information is sourced, interpreted and conveyed to audiences. The entrance of Chinese media into Africa has to be understood as part of this crisis, rather than as separate from it, or as simply exploiting the difficulties encountered by other media.

As our study indicates, Chinese journalists are inevitably caught in the turmoil and may be forced to address additional challenges as they seek to redefine their style of reporting to compete with international and an increasingly popular and successful national media. The simplistic narrative put forward by Chinese journalists and editors, but also by diplomats and government officials that Western media are biased and new voices are needed to tell both the African and the Chinese story collapses when, in everyday practice, Chinese journalists and their African colleagues are forced to adopt the very practices that have characterized Western media in order to compete and attract new audiences. While the avowed goal is to provide a distinctive Chinese alternative to Western media perspectives, on the whole, their reporting is not more 'positive' than that of their Western counterparts, and a 'Chinese angle' is hard to discern except when it comes to covering China–Africa relations. Furthermore, many Chinese correspondents express admiration for the kind of investigative journalism valued in English-language journalism, even though institutional constraints and lack of personal interest prevent them from carrying it out.

In the following sections, after having described the forces and narratives that have accompanied the expansion of Chinese media in Africa, we focus on three of these contradictions. All are related to the tensions between opportunities to exploit a changing global media landscape where traditional actors have lost terrain and the risks of being caught in these very transformations, they respectively refer to: the emphasis on the idea of positive reporting and the complexity of applying it in practice; the challenge of building truly Sino-African media operations with distinctive and relatively cohesive corporate identities; and the absence of tangible signs that a new generation of reporters characterized by better command of foreign languages, greater exposure to international influences and a deeper understanding of the role new media is actually influencing a new style of reporting.

### **Emboldening claims to ‘soft power’**

Expanding China’s ‘soft power’ has been increasingly important for China’s leaders since the early 2000s. As the director of the State Council’s Information Office, Wang Chen, said in 2010,

a leap in our country’s international media development ... is a necessity. The purpose is to improve international society’s understanding of China ... actively participate in international cultural competition; recognize the necessity of enhancing our country’s soft power; defeat the Western monopoly on public opinion [...]. (Shambaugh, 2013: 222–223)

But though Wang was taking his cue from a 2007 speech by former Party Chairman Hu Jintao, actually allocating a budget to the media – as well as, for example, to publishers producing books and periodicals for the foreign market and to universities running degree programmes in international journalism – was likely related to China’s WTO entry, which created the spectre of international media groups entering China’s domestic market.

Xinhua, People’s Daily and a few other central media had maintained foreign correspondent networks for many decades and undergone an earlier expansion in the 1980s, but their visibility and impact had been limited because, as 21st Century Business Herald foreign desk editor Luo Xiaojun quipped, they had focused on the question ‘What do leaders like?’ rather than ‘What do readers like?’ Now, they were being told to think about readers, both foreign and Chinese, and focused on finding ways to become credible sources of information and opinion about the world, capable of setting agendas rather than merely reacting to those set by the West. In the words of a senior *People’s Daily* foreign correspondent,

In the past, People’s Daily followed the New York Times and other Western media too much: whatever they thought was important we wrote about too. On many issues, we had no stand (立场) of our own; we unconsciously reported the Western position. This is why people didn’t take us seriously (不重视), why *People’s Daily* had little credibility, and Chinese media have little voice (话语权) [internationally].

Under its new director, Li Congjun, a former Propaganda Department official, Xinhua has made “‘professionalisation’ and global market share a priority while claiming to

undergo what the Director General of Xinhua Europe, Wang Chaowen, described as a ‘strategic transformation’ (战略转型) with the purpose of ‘getting closer to the reader’ (更贴近受众). This transformation has close ties to China’s international ambitions. As Li Congjun further clarified, in a 2013 article, the ambition, ‘enthusiastically promoting the policies of our Party and government, energetically criticizing the untruthful discourse of Western media, [and] strengthening [our] international discursive power’ (积极宣传我党和政府的政策, 主力批驳西方媒体不实言, 增强在国际上的话语权) as the main task for the agency’s ‘discourse work’ (舆论工作). Although such statements are driven by the broader agenda to strengthen China’s ‘soft power’ as defined by the work of Joseph Nye, the power Liu refers to here is closer to the ‘symbolic power’ that Bourdieu (1991) describes as ‘the power to make people see and believe, to get them to know and recognize’. (p. 221). The news doctrine of ‘three getting-closers’ (getting closer to reality, the masses and life; 贴近实际, 贴近群众, 贴近生活) announced by Hu Jintao back in 2003, and the trend to ‘speak human language’ (说人话) was bolstered by the ‘mass line’ (群众路线) espoused by the new Party leader, Xi Jinping (Davies, 2013). Xi is credited with introducing a more lively and idiomatic style to official communication, which has been picked up by main Party media such as People’s Daily and Xinhua (Zheng, 2014).

In Africa, more than in other continents, China’s media expansion has connected with broader processes, including the expansion of Chinese investments in infrastructure, agriculture and resource extraction and the increasing movement of entrepreneurs, workers and migrants driven by long-term plans to develop their lives and businesses on the continent. China’s Africa media strategy over the past few years has been characterized by a series of variably interconnected initiatives. CCTV Africa launched on 12 January 2012, becoming the largest non-African TV initiative in Africa, employing more than 100 journalists, mostly African, between its headquarters in Nairobi and reporting from across the continent. Building on its considerable resources, CCTV Africa became the only international TV initiative to guarantee 1 hour of original reporting from Africa every day, targeting African and global audiences. One year later, this was increased to 1 hour 30 minutes, split into two tranches and featured globally on CCTV News. In Kenya, CRI has launched its own local FM stations in three East African cities, broadcasting in English, Mandarin and Swahili, and it has AM channel coverage across the country (Wu, 2012). In 2012, the same year CCTV Africa started operating, the state-controlled English-language newspaper China Daily launched its Africa Weekly edition, the ‘first English-language newspaper published in Africa by a Chinese media enterprise’ (*China Daily*, 2012). State news agency Xinhua, whose presence in Africa dates back to the 1950s, also significantly expanded its scope and reach in Africa in the 2000s and 2010s. In sub-Saharan Africa, Xinhua has 27 bureaux, the largest coverage of any news agency, and its news stories have begun to appear regularly in national newspapers. Reflecting the primary goals of the agency’s global expansion – strengthening China’s ‘voice’ and gaining a higher market share – Xinhua’s African regional bureau in Nairobi sends out 200–300 stories in English a week, typically sold to media in African countries, compared to just 80–100 stories in Chinese. In other words, the main target of Chinese media in Africa is African and global audiences.

At a seminar on Chinese–African media cooperation in 2013, China’s Ambassador to Kenya called the monopoly of ‘the international media discourse’ by a ‘small number of

countries' an 'ongoing conspiracy'. He then went on to define a 'Chinese perspective' in an unusually specific and direct way. He declared it was

[...] unacceptable to continue to portray Africa as a continent overtaken by poverty, war and turmoil. It is also unethical to force a bad image on China-Africa relations. Indeed, China and Africa should flatly refuse to be part of this insincere scheme. [...] [M]ore and more Chinese media groups are setting camp in Africa. They have gradually changed the rules of the game and created a regime, in which Africa is positively presented to the world. I call this 'the Chinese perspective'. [...] [O]ur media should report China-Africa friendship positively. [...] It is normal for others to both admire and be suspicious about the current China-Africa relations. But this must not be in the case among the Chinese and African media players. (Liu, 2013)

As the next sections illustrate, while this spirit of renewed engagement and common purpose against an hegemonic 'West' has been positively received by both African and Chinese counterparts, it has struggled to find concrete incarnation in the everyday practices of journalists, ultimately failing to generate a style of reporting that is both distinctive and appealing to African and global audiences.

## Positive reporting and its contradictions

When asked to explain the role Chinese media could play in Africa, central media's editors tend to refer to the need for a different voice, one that could counterbalance Western media's emphasis on the ills of the continent and offer a more balanced view on the opportunities Africa offers. Most of them refer to positive reporting, a style of journalism that focuses on collective achievements, rather than divisive issues or sensational news. Some claim the need for a new form of developmental journalism, one that could provide information that can be directly incorporated in activities beneficial for a country's growth.

The emerging analyses of the content that is offered by Chinese media, at least to their English-speaking audiences, seem to indicate that this ambition has not taken root in reality. Zhang's content analysis of CCTV News coverage between January and April 2012 showed that, despite claims that Africa deserves a better portrayal in the international media, the majority of news items on Africa were either neutral or negative (Zhang, 2013). Marsh's comparison of the African news bulletins of CCTV and BBC World News corroborates this image, indicating actually that CCTV tends to place an even greater emphasis on security and war than its competitor (Marsh, 2014). When asked to explain this incongruity, the director of CCTV Africa responded that

We want to cover the good things and the bad things alike. Every day we have to balance between the positive and the negative. We have made clear that we are not here to dig up dirt and we are consistent to that. But many of our journalists had a Western education and they report according to a Western tradition. And we respect that. Only if I see that we have just too much on the negative side, I may intervene and ask for greater balance.

This contradiction, however, seems to have deeper roots than the simple need to balance between positive and negative may suggest. At CCTV Africa, though a similar

argument can be extended to other Chinese media outlets, African and Chinese journalists appear engaged in a difficult quest to find a distinctive space and voice, as part of a negotiation that is taking place on multiple fronts. On the internal, institutional, front, a demarcation of responsibilities and authority is needed to ensure reporting can happen smoothly and regularly, avoiding clashes between Chinese management and the station's African journalists or between CCTV Africa and headquarters in Beijing. At the external global level, the negotiation is with other media outlets, which are perceived both as models and adversaries.

A view from CCTV Africa's newsroom seems to indicate that it is African journalists working for the channel who lead in the selection of news on Africa. Even if our perspective is limited, and only one of us had the opportunity to observe a few editorial meetings at CCTV Africa,<sup>1</sup> African editors and journalists appear to be offered ample room to decide what to cover. When it comes to *how* to cover a story, however, a more complex picture emerges. In the CCTV newsroom, the desire to chart new paths is palpable and attempts to experiment and break free from the dominance of US- or UK-based media are encouraged. As Beatrice Marshall, CCTV Africa's leading anchor, remarked, 'We borrowed heavily from the West. But sometimes we ask ourselves, is this the right way to do journalism? Why shall we not try a different way?' She added, 'I have my traditional values and I do not want to leave them behind'. The desire to chart a distinctive path, however, is often accompanied by an opposite concern that experimentation may lead African journalists too close to the upbeat and celebratory tones that have characterized China's central media. As CCTV Africa's news desk editor remarked 'We do not want to be looked at as people who sold out to China. And also our Chinese colleagues learned to give us freedom, they adapted quickly. We want to be recognized for our objective reporting'. Caught among these two poles, changes in reporting, at least in the period and among the media initiatives we observed, have appeared timid and lack the character of a visible, distinctive entrance of a game changer. As we remarked elsewhere (Gagliardone, 2013), the idea that positive reporting may resonate with the desire of offering a new image of Africa, while it may challenge certain established notions of the Western liberal model of journalism in the medium to long term, has not yet had a major impact. Channels such as the BBC or Al Jazeera continue to define quality journalism and are still able to force competitors to engage with their standards if they do not want to remain marginal players.

Chinese journalists are engaged in an additional layer of negotiations involving the headquarters in Beijing, and which become more cumbersome, explicitly or implicitly, when reports are meant for Chinese audiences back home. The room for manoeuvring varies across media outlets and according to the type of news reported. Xinhua is the most strictly controlled and least flexible with reporting styles, whereas CCTV has in some ways been the most flexible. People's Daily is strongly constrained by its role as the central party paper, but, because of the limited size of its newsroom, journalists do not have a whole locally based pyramid of managers looking over their shoulders. When it comes to the type of news, paradoxically, those involving Chinese official visits or international issues on which the Chinese government has a clearly identified stand, appear the easiest to navigate. Room for manoeuvring is limited and a template approach is expected to be followed, offering detailed descriptions of protocol and quotes from



officials. These are the cases in which positive reporting is most clearly identifiable in its modes and tones, but when Chinese media are also criticized by their competitors and by international observers for being too openly biased towards their ownership.

Things become more complex when journalists have to report on issues that are not directly tied to China's core interests, both for African and Chinese audiences. The low priority assigned to, and the limited knowledge about, Africa among China's media censors seems to offer journalists more room to experiment. Many of the Chinese journalists we interviewed listed in fact the relative distance and freedom from the headquarters as one of the main advantages of their postings. When it comes to testing the boundaries of this space for experimentation, however, institutional constraints seem still able to prevent journalists from departing too far from existing practices. An experienced Xinhua reporter admitted having misjudged the limits of critical reporting: a story she wrote about a slum was 'killed' by editors who said it was too negative and harmful to the image of Kenya, which, after all, is China's friend. On the other hand, a CCTV reporter proposed what she felt was a positive story on Moroccan women that would have stressed their emancipation displayed in such things as lack of head covering. This story was first approved, but then 'killed' by a higher official within CCTV who felt it may offend Muslims. The same correspondent admitted feeling that Chinese were often discriminated against or singled out for extortion in Africa, and that some of this was caused by the behaviour of some Chinese migrants. 'Of course', she added 'none of this is reported because it is not in the national interest. And what would it change if we reported it? We report that both sides are very good to each other'.

Journalists tend either to gloss over such conflicts or to reproduce Chinese government rhetoric. Reports on opposition to Chinese investment in Africa have been extremely rare, largely limited to blog posts or articles invited by Western foundations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) by journalists for commercialized print and online media on short trips (cf. Li and Rønning, 2013). As a Xinhua bureau chief put it: 'We don't do critical'. Xinhua and China Daily have privileged access to Chinese officials and state enterprises and therefore often know more than others about the background of such cases, but face a more or less explicit, though unwritten, policy that prohibits the reporting of criticism of China or Chinese companies abroad; exceptions to this are only made when an event has been widely reported in social media, and then only if the senior 'leadership' authorizes it. Otherwise, such reporting can only take the form of 'internal reference briefs' (*neican*) written for government officials – and even these, as one Xinhua bureau chief put it, cannot be too negative, as journalists must consider the sensitivities of various officials. Some foreign correspondents consider such briefs the only way to influence policy making and write them often on their own initiative; others have no interest in producing them and only do so when pressured by their superiors. Xinhua's overseas bureaux are also beginning to produce custom-made reports for Chinese companies abroad.

Pressing the journalists on why their reporting appears to omit critical elements has resulted in a variety of answers that suggest a combination of different factors: why report the negative if biased Western media are doing it already (a CCTV reporter); it would be a waste of everyone's time since the editor would cut them out anyway (a *People's Daily* correspondent and a Xinhua bureau chief); it would be unethical to reveal

confidential information from corporate sources (a Xinhua correspondent); corporate pressure on the editor makes such reporting difficult, and maintaining a good relationship with them is important both for the paper and for the individual correspondents who need sources (correspondent for a market-oriented paper); there is a lack of organizational support, there is not enough time and reader interest is limited (correspondents across the full range of media).

### **‘The Chinese’ and ‘the locals’**

Despite the complexity of finding an original and coherence style, from a more practical point of view, the unprecedented investments in Chinese media abroad have created a sense of opportunity for both African and Chinese journalists working for China’s expanding media outlets. Some of the best Kenyan journalists have been attracted to CCTV Africa not just by the prospect of earning a better salary but also being able to count on resources other media cannot offer for covering stories from the continent. Chinese journalists, for their part, have enjoyed a freedom to operate that would not be allowed in the headquarters, as well as the chance to gain first-hand experience of a continent about which still little is known back in China. During casual conversations with Chinese journalists posted to Africa, it was possible to capture how many personal journeys had started with concerns from family members that their sons or daughters were being sent in countries marred by conflict, war and poverty. Some journalists confessed that this had also been the image they had of the continent until they were given the opportunity to live in Africa and to know what ‘real’ Africa looked like. One of them went so far as to say that, despite the expectation to work in a foreign post only for a limited number of years – usually three – he was planning to ask to extend his stay in the continent.

What China’s expanding media operation seems to have been unable to create yet is a shared sense of belonging, a corporate identity that binds Chinese and African journalists. When interviewing Chinese journalists, the most common expressions used to refer to their African colleagues was ‘the locals’. Likewise, African journalists, even those most enthusiastic about their jobs with a Chinese media outlet, referred to their bosses and co-workers as ‘the Chinese’. Building a sense of a common purpose among colleagues with dramatically different backgrounds is a difficult endeavour for any media operation, but in the case of Chinese media, specific features seem to have made this challenge particularly complex.

The first element is rather practical and depends on the structure of the posting of journalists in the central media. Working for a foreign outlet is, to some extent, still seen as a diplomatic posting with a rotation system than a job driven by a vocation or a chosen lifestyle. For most central media reporters, foreign postings are steps in a career progression that will lead to higher administrative jobs in China. The most coveted postings are those in the United States not only because of the anticipated comforts and the fascination the country holds for most Chinese but also because the importance of the United States for Chinese media is such that correspondents there have the most visibility within organizations for both upper management and audiences. While some Chinese journalists declared to have learned to like working on and in Africa, others honestly admitted

they would have preferred working for the American offices of their respective media, but the competition was too high and it was easier to get a position in Nairobi or Addis Ababa instead. This system has the result of creating a two-track reward system between Chinese and African colleagues, the first still responding to more or less implicit rules that govern career advancement within and potentially across central media organizations, the latter with a more limited perspective and interest in developing their career beyond Africa.

The second challenge is ideological. At the time of Zhou Enlai's visits to Africa in the 1960s, the anti-imperialist rhetoric was at one of its highest moments, and the calls for a media that could represent African interests rather than those of the (former and current) colonizers could find wide resonance across the continent. In the 1970s and 1980s, the attempts to create a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) also coalesced with the efforts of different countries to find an alternative to the unbalanced flow of information from the North to the South. Today, an overarching narrative that could rally African and Chinese journalists behind a common purpose seems to be lacking. As illustrated above, the uneasiness towards the ways in which some international media portray Africa is indeed a shared feeling, and positive reporting has been advanced as a possible response, but these have not coalesced towards a distinctive model of reporting that could offer a radical alternative. Chinese media in Africa seem to have accepted the rules of the game set by other players before their emboldened engagement with the continent and it is not clear yet, possibly to the journalists themselves, what the next move is going to be: either towards greater professionalism and specialization, leading audiences to tune on Chinese channels for information on economy and finance, for example, or towards a more radical view of the world.

### **A new kind of reporter, a new kind of reporting?**

Ten years ago, the overseas bureaux of central news organizations were largely manned by senior journalists, mostly men, for many of whom the comparatively well-paid and stress-free postings were a reward for years of work in China. Today, most overseas correspondents are around 30, and many are female. Even some Xinhua bureau chiefs in Africa are under 30.

Because overseas postings are typically around 3 years, Xinhua replaces 200–300 correspondents every year. The international department, which used to have a monopoly on foreign posts, is far short of these numbers; therefore, for those working in other departments but with a good command of a foreign language, it is relatively easy to go abroad. The same is true for CCTV and CRI. The dramatic demographic change among foreign correspondents is not only due to the shortfall of language-proficient senior staff, however. It is also related to the latter's reluctance to be away from headquarters, as it may mean weakening of important personal networks or worse, missing promotions to positions of leadership. The expansion of foreign correspondent networks has, therefore, ironically coincided with a weakening of foreign correspondence as a career path. The decreasing attractiveness of foreign correspondence may be one reason why so many correspondents are unmarried women: they may be under less pressure to seek a stable, high-earning career.

Nor are overseas postings leisurely any longer. All news organizations now implement a point-based bonus system, in which points are calculated on the basis of the number, type and sometimes quality and audience data of the stories filed. Apart from CCTV, most require correspondents to operate across media: many Xinhua and CRI journalists are expected to produce photo and video reports as well as texts for online publication. Every month, Xinhua produces a chart for every bureau, showing how many clients picked up each story and photo.

CRI issues a point-based monthly ranking of all journalists. Bonuses can make up 50 per cent of a journalist's income, and laggards who do not meet the minimum standard also face criticism and sometimes fines. Most foreign correspondents still make more money abroad than they would at home, but since living costs tend to be higher and access to supplementary incomes and non-monetary benefits (free or cheap meals, health care etc.) lower, this makes foreign postings less attractive. In the early 1990s, a People's Daily foreign correspondent's salary was 10 times that of a domestic correspondent; today, it is twice that.

The strengthening of foreign correspondent networks has had another unintended effect. Most new correspondents for Xinhua, CCTV and CRI were hired for the foreign-language services. Some correspondents pointed out that – despite their political tasks – these tend to be more commercially oriented, have more relaxed controls on content, have more open-minded editors and, overall, a more *laissez-faire* atmosphere than the Chinese services. Yet many correspondents end up filing as many or more stories in Chinese than in English or French, raising the possibility that their usually more cosmopolitan attitudes may have an effect on the stories Chinese audiences are exposed to.

Restrictions on private interaction with foreigners have not been completely lifted: People's Daily reporters are prohibited from having amorous/sexual relations with them, while both they and Xinhua staff are technically required to obtain authorization from the organization before talking to them about their work, a requirement not everyone complies with strictly. Even so, the personal habitus of Chinese correspondents is increasingly cosmopolitan. Not only is their range of interactions with local society broadening – a significant change compared to 10 years ago is that correspondents for Xinhua and People's Daily are now allowed to take families with them, resulting in children being enrolled in local or international schools – so is their ability and desire to transcend a national framework when reflecting on their own or others' lives. Some want, and do, tell their readers about foreign lifestyles. And a few actively embrace what Ulf Hannerz (2012) in his study of foreign correspondents called 'compassionate cosmopolitanism': the young Xinhua bureau chief whose slum story was 'killed' by her editors does volunteer work every weekend in a slum and wants to write about it so Chinese readers may be moved to help – and so Chinese companies become better at their 'social responsibility' work (p. 27). Yet, the cosmopolitan persona projected by many correspondents sometimes appears hard to square with formulaic stories that reproduce official speeches – even if such stories now account for only a small proportion of their writing.

Although many correspondents said they were personally interested in social and cultural issues, a common refrain was that Chinese audiences were not, so these were hard to report on. After returning from Nairobi, Eric Gui (2012), a Xinhua editor, published a book entitled 是非洲 – a pun that can be roughly translated as 'The truths and untruths

about Africa' – with the explicit aim to counter Chinese stereotypes of Africa: 'Are Africans really lazy and stupid? How do Africans see aid? Is African democracy a mess?' (p. 9). Yet during his tour of duty in Africa, there had been little room for reporting along these lines. In his book, Gui lamented that many of his colleagues had never been to a slum, a charge made by several other correspondents eager to promote a deeper engagement with Africa. The Xinhua bureau chief in an African country is proudest of a story on elephant poaching: even though the story avoided linking the issue to demand from China, it was, he says, successfully used in an online campaign in China to dissuade people from buying ivory. In contrast, his colleague in another country filed a story about a Chinese ivory smuggler who was sentenced to a prison term. After she heard from a high-ranking Chinese diplomat that the ivory trade was an embarrassment for China, she thought it was important for people in China to realize that the ivory trade harmed China's image. Still, the editors 'killed' the story. Then, later, after the Chinese government burned a stockpile of confiscated ivory, an editor called her, saying that she could now report on the topic. The stories on poaching, as long as they did not publicly implicate China, were welcome because they corresponded both to government interests and to the interests of the young urban middle class.

## **Conclusion**

Chinese media operations in Africa have the potential to act as incubators of change that can then reverberate to other media. The amount of resources invested in setting up and maintaining overseas channels is unprecedented. The aspiration to be relevant for local audiences encourages reporting on a broad variety of topics that are relatively distant from the core interests of editors and censors in Beijing, leaving room for experimentation. And the desire to create an alternative to still dominant Western media seems to be shared by both Chinese and African journalists.

This potential, however, seems to have been only marginally exploited to date. Not only Chinese journalists and editors but also their African colleagues seem to be still wrestling to find a distinctive voice and to more firmly grasp in which direction experimentation can actually take place. In our article, we have identified three sets of contradictions that appear to be playing a particularly relevant role in preventing Chinese media in Africa from finding a clear position and voice in an increasingly crowded market.

First, we explained that, despite the inclination of both Chinese and African correspondents to offer an alternative to the reporting coming from channels such as the BBC, Al Jazeera and CNN, the idea of positive reporting that has been touted as distinctive of Chinese media – and instrumental to support a different African narrative – has appeared difficult to operationalize in ways that are appealing to both journalists and audiences. While the coverage of conflicts and crises pursued by Chinese media in Africa does not seem to differ from that of their competitors, news with a positive spin lack the militant spirit that characterized mass communication during decolonization, when Chinese and African leaders shared the view that the media should act as a tool for state and nation building.

Second, according to official pronouncements, Chinese media in Africa wish to create partnerships with African journalism and have indeed created job opportunities for

African journalists in their English-language programming. But Chinese media professionals appear to be holding African journalists to standards of professionalism shaped by Western media ideals and display limited interest in what some African media professionals and scholars claim to be local traditions of journalism. While it is impossible to identify a distinctive and coherent African conception of journalism, ethnographers who have conducted fieldwork in the newsrooms of leading African media outlets have emphasized how some of the key principles that guide journalists' everyday choices may be very different from those informing reporting in the West. Jennifer Hasty (2006), for example, who conducted extensive research in the newsroom of Ghana's state-owned Daily Graphic, explained that:

Meaning is not objectively embedded in an event and uncovered by the autonomous individual, as in the Western logic, but rather meaning is collectively generated by the participants in an event—including the journalist. And the social meanings of events are not rooted in conflict, impact and novelty, but rather emphasize cooperation, legitimate authority and redemptive development. (p. 85)

Paradoxically, despite some of these practices showing similarities with some of the normative principles characterizing Chinese central media, Chinese reporters have shown little curiosity towards them.

Third, Chinese journalists in Africa tend to be young, fluent in English, and sometimes foreign-trained, and most work for the foreign-language services of their media organizations, which tend to be less conservative and to operate under more lenient government supervision. Many are well travelled and display an interest in foreign ways of living – though not necessarily in Africa. In this respect, they are a much more cosmopolitan crowd than their predecessors 10 years ago. Yet in the end, because of a combination of institutional constraints and personal choices, their reporting is not very different from reporting produced by those before them.

The greater space occupied by Chinese media in Africa and globally has been interpreted to date as a process by which China can supplant or at least radically challenge Western media that are struggling or retracting. As we argued instead, journalists working for Chinese media feel not only some of the constraints that characterize international journalism in general but also additional ones: the problem of finding and communicating a clear identity; of remaining relevant in a space where national media are growing fast and becoming more professional; of testing new styles without appealing only to a niche.

Journalists working for Chinese media in Africa seem caught in a kind of in-betweenness. They are aware they can rely on resources that other international media outlets lack or are losing, and that they can enjoy greater freedom than their colleagues in Beijing or at more sensitive foreign posts, and yet they seem unable to seize this opportunity. This contradiction appears all the most striking when one considers the vibrant online media output that Chinese in Africa and elsewhere produce. When news from Africa suddenly makes headlines in China, they tend to come from such online sources. This was the case when Ghana conducted raids on Chinese gold miners in 2013, and again in 2015, when a story about a Chinese restaurant in Nairobi banning African customers

made waves in Kenyan and Western media. On that occasion, the widest-circulated account – apart from those translated from Western media – was one posted by a young Chinese businessman living in Nairobi. China-South Dialogue (中南对话), for example, a website associated with an NGO incubator in Nairobi named China House, has taken a critical view of both mainstream Chinese reporting and Chinese migrants' attitudes to local societies. The site publishes investigative reporting, including a story on the role of Chinese in the illegal ivory trade. Both China House and the website were launched by young Chinese who graduated from US universities and are now engaged in social enterprise projects in Kenya. As Chinese media and audience expectations evolve and as more educated, mobile Chinese engage with the world in different capacities – for example, as part of a growing global corps of expatriate managers – the emergence of similar media will be a crucial new trend to watch in China's foreign reporting. But while non-professional journalists have seized their experience as an opportunity to experiment with a distinctive style, professional journalists are still struggling to find their voice, caught in between opportunities and institutional constraints.

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## Author biographies

Iginio Gagliardone is Lecturer in Media and Communication at the University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa and Associate Research Fellow in New Media and Human Rights at the University of Oxford, UK.

Nyíri Pál is Professor of Global History from an Anthropological Perspective at the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, The Netherlands.