NEWS OR PROPAGANDA?

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In November 1981, six Australian journalists went to Beijing for a four-day meeting with Chinese journalists. The meeting, the first 'Sino-Australian Press Seminar', was the first of its kind ever held between Chinese journalists and those of another nation. The Australians were Warwick Bracken, economics writer for The Canberra Times*; John Balfour Brown, editor of* The Weekly Times*; Andrew Clark, editor of* Australian Business*; Ian Perkin, financial editor of* The Australian*; Terry Stayte, an editor-in-chief of Australian Associated Press; and Jane Sullivan, feature writer for* The Age*. They were joined at the meeting by Australia's resident correspondents in Beijing, Tony Walker of* The Age *and Richard Thwaites of the Australian Broadcasting Commission. The Chinese party of thirteen included journalists from the Beijing Institute of Journalism,* Renmin ribao *(People's Daily),* Jiefang ribao *(Liberation Daily),* Guangming ribao *(Enlightenment Daily), the* China Daily *and Xinhua (the New China News Agency). Steve Keen helped to organise the meeting.*

As we drove into Beijing some of the young Chinese journalists accompanying us took a wry pleasure in pointing out what the West once knew as 'Democracy Wall'; it is now a neon-lit row of advertisements and exhortations to produce and to export. For some Western correspondents the Wall's fate sums up the recent history of freedom of expression in China: springing to life when the power struggle at the top created a stricture-free interregnum, blossoming as Deng Xiaoping's forces encouraged the people to vent their feelings about the Gang of Four, it was trampled once Deng was assured of ascendancy.

Some of the present Beijing press corps extended this cynicism to our mission, a four-day discussion of journalism with Chinese journalists. Yvonne Preston, the *Sydney Morning Herald* correspondent from 1975 to 1978,

told us before our departure from Australia that from her experience the business of our Chinese counterparts was not news but propaganda: their papers were directly linked to the Party, and they propagated the official line regardless of the truth. She later wrote in *The National Times* that 'In theory, this [meeting] is a wonderful, hands-across-the-sea gesture. In practice it would seem almost so obvious as to need no emphasis that journalists in China and journalists in Australia are not in the same profession at all'.

That opinion was undoubtedly true six years ago. But there have been many changes since then, not all of them as fleeting as Democracy Wall's brief fame. While the fate of the Wall shows that Deng is no more committed to free speech than were his predecessors, he *is* committed to China's modernisation. And the sustained drive towards modernisation depends upon reliable assessment of current performance and future options, providing a sound economic rationale for accurate reporting by journalists and statisticians alike. Eulogies to Dazhai and Daqing were fine when ideology mattered more than output, and shortfalls in production could remain concealed within China's closed economic and political system. But a China bent on growth and commercially open to the West can neither afford, nor effectively conceal, such deceits. Thus, independence from the Party, in the sense of freedom to report results and activities in conflict with the Party line, is a precondition for successful modernisation. This applies not just to measures of output, but also to the performance of bureaucrats and managers: the press has a critical role to play in assisting necessary bureaucratic and managerial reform by drawing attention to incompetence and corruption. It is these considerations, rather than the introduction of Western liberal ideas, which will guarantee the evolution of a more objective journalism in China.

Journalism as a profession made significant gains amidst the turmoil surrounding the overthrow of the Gang of Four. Many of these gains were lost as the new leadership asserted its authority: there were many journalists who fell into old patterns and willingly continued to propagate the edicts of the new Party rulers. But the young, and in particular the old journalists purged by the Gang, were bound to want to consolidate their new independence and improved status. It was clear long before we arrived in China that Chinese journalists hoped the meeting with their Australian counterparts would make a major contribution to their campaign. Negotiations between the All-China Journalists' Association (ACJA) and the Australia-China Council were conducted with unusual frankness and speed.

The meeting, titled the first 'Sino-Australian Press Seminar' by the ACJA, was a major departure from the 'friendly exchange of views' model, and was in fact the first of its kind that Chinese journalists had ever held with

journalists from another nation. Much discussion of journalism at international meetings proceeds in the absence of evidence, often reducing debate to the exchange of supposition and ideology. The evidence was the focus here: over 2000 A4 pages of clippings of Australian coverage of China for 1980-81, and of modernisation since 1978; and a more modest but comprehensive collation of articles on Australia in the Chinese press. As well as examination of press coverage of each country by the other, there were papers on the history, structure and role of the press, on major economic issues in each country, and on the practical problems facing Australia in reporting on China.

Terry Stayte of AAP described the establishment in 1803 of Australia's first newspaper, set up at the behest of the governor and carrying no criticism of the government, since all proofs were censored by the governor's secretary. Over the next half century various settler-publishers battled for freedom from censorship, with the result that Australia now has an exclusively privately-owned press, free from government direction though subject to a number of legal and legislative constraints.

The Chinese press began some thirty years later than in Australia, with a monthly news-sheet published by a German missionary. Many more papers appeared in the nineteenth century, but the mould for today's newspapers was cast after the defeat by Japan in 1895, as nationalist papers were established to campaign for the overthrow of the Qing dynasty. Papers advocating Marxism sprang up after the May 4 Movement, with the Communist Party starting several after 1921. After Liberation in 1949 the press became either collectively- or state-owned; there are now 382 papers at national and local levels, or devoted to the interests of particular industries.

Discussion began somewhat tentatively, each side unsure of the other's approach. The Chinese at the meeting seemed concerned initially that the Australians might concentrate too heavily on state control of the press. The Australians were wary that the Chinese would attempt to avoid important or controversial issues. We had expected questions on how privately-owned papers could be guaranteed to report responsibly, but the Chinese showed little interest in this. Their main concern was a professional one: 'What is the criterion you use to choose the news that you are going to publish in your newspapers?'. Ian Perkin started discussion with his humorous contribution 'News is news is news is news', and the conference kept returning to the topic over the next three days. The question of what is news is a perennial issue among journalists in Australia; that it is clearly a major concern of Chinese journalists too removed much of the tension from the meeting.

Discussion of the papers on the role of the press also served to dispel some early reservations. The exposition of the media's role in China began

with the statement that 'The general task of the Chinese press is to serve socialism, serve the people, [and] disseminate the principles, policies, laws and decrees and instructions of the Communist Party and government'; and as one Australian embassy official commented, six years ago it would have ended there. But Qian Xinbo went on to mention a further function, that of reflecting public sentiment; and he placed considerable emphasis on the need for accurate reporting: 'The media ensures a positive role through accurate and correct reporting, while inaccurate and exaggerated reporting leads to a negative role.' He cited coverage of the 'Learn from Dazhai' campaign in agriculture as an example of damaging distortion in the past. And while acknowledging the tendency to report good news when the overall message is bad, he referred to accurate reporting of the recent Sichuan floods as evidence that this is changing. Qian drew out clearly the major difference between Australian and Chinese papers: editorials in Australia reflect the opinions of the editorial staff, whereas in China they 'not only reflect the opinions of the editorial staff, but also the intentions of the Party and government'.

The Australians did not attack the press' role as spokesman for the Party, but pressed the potential for conflict between the functions of spokesman and reporter when a factual item calls into question the Party line, or reveals adverse consequences of Party policy. They cited the results of the recent 'promote light industry' campaign, which increased light industrial output but led to a 7.4 percent fall in heavy industry: Xinhua did not report this drop. The Chinese acknowledged Xinhua's omission as an example of a practice they hoped in time to stamp out, and stressed that the decline in heavy industrial output was reported by the *Workers' Daily* within the week. But they clearly appreciate the dilemma that these twin duties present.

Speaking on the role of the press in Australia, Warwick Bracken saw cost constraints and legal hindrances as far more serious threats to press integrity than either government control or proprietorial interference. Cost constraints force the pooling of news sources, and lead to over-filtering of news. Papers lack the time and the staff expertise to analyse many events adequately, and often become 'clients' of government or large companies in areas such as foreign policy and industrial relations. Formal constraints such as the law of defamation and 'freedom of information' legislation severely limit the press' ability to publicise wrongdoing by individuals, corporations and governments.

Two full days were spent assessing Australian coverage of China, and Chinese coverage of Australia. It had been an eventful period for China, with only Poland rating more highly as a news source in the Western press. The period surveyed covered the trial of the Gang of Four, the dissident movement, the continuing modernisation saga complete with the third renegotiation of contracts with Japan and the beginning of the 'readjustment'

phase, the offshore drilling rig disaster, Baoshan Steel's woes, the Sichuan floods, grumblings from the PLA over its reduced status, the first moves against Hua, and the border war with Vietnem. It began as a period of relatively liberal access for Westerners and Western correspondents, and closed with a slight chill as the Chinese gaoled a woman engaged to a French diplomat. During this period Australia's morning broadsheets averaged up to two articles a day on China.

The Chinese party was overwhelmed by the bulk of Australian coverage of China, and impressed with its fairness. Most issues of importance were reported, although the Chinese felt that articles on agriculture were accorded too little space and concentrated too heavily on the implications for Australian farmers. The major complaint against coverage of economic and social change was that any deviation from strict central planning was portrayed as 'China's taking the capitalist road': the Australians readily conceded that this was a highly inaccurate description of China's attempts to introduce market forces into its economy.

Political coverage was generally praised, although there was some criticism. The Australians were unwilling to accede to the Chinese claim that it was 'wrong to describe the readjustments to the Party as a "power struggle" '; and they rejected the suggestion of a *People's Daily* commentator that China's invasion of Vietnam should have been described as 'China's defensive counter-attack'. An Gang, deputy editor of the *People's Daily*, later chided this delegate for 'speaking like a commentary'.

Though high-ranking Chinese have access to Western press coverage of China through translations in *Reference News*, this was the first time that Chinese journalists had studied one Western country's China coverage in detail. A potent case for increased Western access to China emerged: intensified contacts since the fall of the Gang of Four had clearly not led to more hostile reporting. Some of the few reservations the Chinese had about Australian coverage – complaints, for example, that reports of the trial of the Gang of Four had not fully conveyed public revulsion towards Jiang Qing, or that there were not enough articles dealing with everyday life in China – could be attributed to lack of access to 'ordinary' non-official Chinese.

The Australians found Chinese coverage of Australia straightforward and remarkably free of ideological bias: but the scope was limited, and reports were selective. Too much emphasis was given to Australia's anti-Soviet foreign policy, with little reference to the points at which Australian and Chinese policy diverged. Chinese papers reported Australia's derecognition of Pol Pot, but failed to mention the reasons for the decision; similarly, Andrew Peacock's resignation from Cabinet was reported, but reasons were omitted. Coverage of Australia's economy was too flattering: the Australian journalists surmised that this reflected over-reliance on government press

releases, and urged the Chinese to have their Australian correspondents tap alternative sources of comment on the economy.

Overall, the Chinese at the meeting approached analysis of the press clippings in much the same way the Australians did, judging reports on the basis of accuracy, objectivity, depth and scope. Their questions, and objections, were in the main those of professional journalists. Tony Walker, *The Age* correspondent in Beijing and a prolific contributor to the Australian coverage of China, had in the past frequently been chastised by some members of the Chinese delegation for particular articles, and was somewhat apprehensive at the prospect of a comprehensive assessment of his work. In the event, as one of the Australian party put it, he was 'whipped with a feather': there were complaints about the odd article, but general praise for his accuracy and balance.

Tony spoke on the problems facing a foreign correspondent in China. While emphasising that conditions had greatly improved since Margaret Jones' time in Beijing as *The Sydney Morning Herald*'s representative, he criticised the limited access journalists are allowed to both leading officials and 'ordinary' Chinese, the obstructive attitudes and actions of some bureaucrats, and the way in which Chinese xenophobia can inhibit reporting. Tony had originally declined to give a paper: it was a sign of the success of the meeting that in the end he consented.

In sum, the Australians found that while some on the Chinese side were certainly more propagandists than journalists, in the main, and contrary to Yvonne Preston's belief, their Chinese counterparts were indeed members of the same profession. And while there were some elements of the Chinese system that the Australians could never accept, notably the state's dominance of the press, it was clear that the system is evolving towards a more professional journalism.

Writing in a recent column in the *Far Eastern Economic Review*,[1] Mochtar Lubis, director-general of the Press Foundation of Asia, commented that the current debate on the 'New International Information Order' was unlikely to contribute to better reporting of the Third World by the West, or better journalism in the Third World itself. He felt that the real way forward was 'to increase the professionalism of the journalist in Asia'. He argued for 'special programmes to inform Asian journalists about. . . social, economic and political problems in the developed world' and 'special seminars to acquaint Western journalists with Asian cultures, civilisations and current economic, social and political issues through the best-informed Asian observers and thinkers'.

This seminar showed that Lubis' idea could be put into practice in perhaps the most difficult case, between journalists from a capitalist Western nation and a socialist Third World one. The task for the future is to translate the success of the seminar into better reporting from both Australia and China.

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1 *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 22 January 1982, p.22.