



The University of
Nottingham

China Policy Institute

Briefing Series – Issue 52

CHALLENGES FOR CHINA'S INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATION

Yiyi LU

July 2009

International House
University of Nottingham
Wollaton Road
Nottingham NG8 1BB
United Kingdom
Tel: +44 (0)115 846 7769
Fax: +44 (0)115 846 7900
Email: CPI@nottingham.ac.uk
Website: www.chinapolicyinstitute.org

The China Policy Institute, part of the School of Contemporary Chinese Studies at The University of Nottingham, was set up to analyse critical policy challenges faced by China in its rapid development. Its goals are to help expand the knowledge and understanding of contemporary China in Britain, Europe and worldwide, to help build a more informed dialogue between China and the UK and Europe, and to contribute to government and business strategies.

Executive Summary

1. Major events in 2008 have significantly re-shaped China's international image and pointed to challenges it faces in international communication.
2. The government and people's responses to the mid-year earthquake in Sichuan, and the relatively successful Olympics have won China much praise, while events such as the handling of the riots in Tibet and the scandal of contaminated milk, stoked controversy or damaged China's reputation.
3. By the end of 2008, China's overall international standing may have actually declined rather than improved. A BBC World Service poll in 21 countries showed that public views of China slipped considerably in 2008.
4. Factors hampering China's international communication include: (1) political and institutional constraints; (2) differences in cultural and media traditions; and (3) deficiencies in knowledge and skills.
5. Political and institutional constraints include the Chinese government's lack of openness in dealing with international media and bureaucratic inertia that lead to slowness and protraction when offices respond to public demand for information.
6. Differences in cultural and media traditions between China and other countries mean that Chinese officials are not used to the working style of foreign media. They often fail to harness international media to get China's messages across.
7. Chinese culture attaches great importance to winning foreign approval. This means that China sometimes tries too hard to present a perfect image to the world.
8. Not understanding China's obsession with "face" however, foreigners may actually be alienated from rather than won over by China's carefully prepared positive messages about itself, dismissing them as propaganda.
9. China still lacks sufficient knowledge of foreign countries and the habits of foreign audiences, which often seriously compromises or hinders the effectiveness of its external communication.

10. China also suffers from a severe shortage of public relations skills. Chinese officials lack training in dealing with international media.
11. Two popular views may prove unhelpful in improving China's external communication. The first holds that the West will be prejudiced against China as long as China remains a communist country. Therefore there is no point in trying to change western perception through communication and PR.
12. The second holds that China's image problems are a direct consequence of actual situations in China being imperfect. Therefore, this view holds there is no use investing in PR and communication; China should instead focus on solving actual problems on the ground.
13. China's decision-makers are gradually appreciating the importance of international communication. There have been reports that the Chinese government intends to inject billions of dollars to create China's own international media organisation that can compete with the likes of CNN.
14. Whether China's communication capabilities can match its status as a rising global power remains to be seen. But Western commentators are generally sceptical, pointing out that Chinese state-controlled media are unlikely to establish their credibility as objective news sources.

Challenges for China's International Communication

Yiyi Lu*

Reshaping China's International Image

- 1.1 A series of major events in 2008 have significantly re-shaped China's international image. The biggest event was no doubt the Beijing Olympics. Widely seen as China's "coming out party," the nation spared no effort to make it an unparalleled success. The tragic earthquake in May that caused over 80,000 deaths also captured international headlines for weeks. Tibet was another big story in 2008 as the riots in Lhasa in March sparked diplomatic rows between China and western governments.
- 1.2 Finally, the scandal of contaminated milk that broke out in September implicated China's entire dairy industry and once again sounded alarm bells around the world about the safety of Chinese products. Following the scandal, as the BBC reported, "China's dairy exports have all but ground to a halt." China's response to the earthquake and the overall organisation of the Olympics may have won China much praise. Other events, however, stoked controversy or damaged China's reputation. If, at the beginning of 2008, China still expected the Olympics to raise its image to a historic height, by the end of 2008, China's international standing had actually declined.¹ A new BBC World Service poll in 21 countries showed that public views of China slipped considerably in 2008.²
- 1.3 Problems with China's international image are partly caused by China's poor international communication. Many factors have made China's external communication ineffective. These include political and institutional constraints, differences in cultural and media traditions between China and other countries, and China's insufficient knowledge of foreign audiences and underdeveloped international public relations skills.

* Yiyi Lu is Research Fellow at the China Policy Institute (CPI). The author would like to acknowledge Zhengxu Wang, Research Coordinator and Senior Research Fellow of the CPI, as editor of this paper.

¹ I was asked this question by the journalist while he was doing research for the article.

² "Views of China and Russia decline in global poll", BBC press release, 6 February 2009, available at http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2009/02_february/06/poll.shtml

- 1.4 As China attracts more and more attention in global affairs, its decision-makers clearly appreciate the importance of strengthening its communication capabilities. Since January 2009, there have been reports that the Chinese government intends to inject billions of dollars to create China's own international media that can compete with mainstream western media.
- 1.5 Western commentators, however, are generally sceptical that China's efforts will be successful. They point out that Chinese state-controlled media will have a hard time establishing their credibility as objective news sources. Foreign audiences will not trust media that are controlled by the Chinese Communist Party, but the Party is mostly unlikely to give up its control of the media.

Problems with China's International Communication

- 2.1 Many foreign observers³ think that China's international communication skills remain seriously underdeveloped. Its international public relations work is very poor. It does not know how to deal with independent media. It lacks experience in influencing opinions outside its borders, especially in dealing with criticisms and negative opinions. It is completely at a loss when targeted by single-issue advocacy groups. As one interviewee commented on China's handling of the Olympics-related publicity: "It is supposed to be a coming-out party, but China is just not ready to come out yet."
- 2.2 Similarly, Chinese media practitioners and scholars share many of these views. Factors that hamper China's international communication can be divided into three broad categories: (1) political and institutional constraints; (2) differences in cultural and media traditions; and (3) deficiencies in knowledge and skills. What follows is a discussion of some key issues in each category.
- 2.3 The Chinese government often complains that western media have a deep-rooted bias against communist regimes, which result in unfair coverage of Chinese affairs. Its suspicion of western media is one of the factors that have contributed to the Chinese government's lack of openness in dealing with

³ Interviews were conducted between January and September 2008 with over 30 foreign journalists, public relations professionals, businesspeople, NGO campaigners, diplomats and academics. Interviews were also conducted with China media practitioners, officials and academics.

international media. Foreign journalists complain that they often face obstruction when pursuing stories in China.

- 2.4 The constant perception of obstruction and intervention by the Chinese authorities can cause deep frustration among foreign journalists, which may then be reflected in the news stories they produce, casting China in a less than favourable light.
- 2.5 The Chinese government's lack of openness has eroded its credibility. When denied access, the Western journalists' first instinct is to conclude that the Chinese authorities "must have something to hide."⁴ Once they have this suspicion, they will not trust information released by the Chinese government. This means the Chinese government will have difficulty persuading international media to accept its messages.⁵
- 2.6 The lack of openness in Chinese government's public communication system is both a political and a bureaucratic issue. Many agree that Chinese officials often refuse to communicate to the media. But this is not so much because they are forbidden to do so, rather, because they follow the bureaucratic golden rule: "If one does more, then one is more likely to make mistakes. If one does less, then one is less likely to make mistakes. If one does nothing, then one won't make any mistake." China's bureaucratic system does not award officials who actively engage the media but may well punish those who make mistakes when talking to the media. This creates strong disincentives for officials to communicate with the media.
- 2.7 At a meeting early this year to discuss the 2009 Government Work Report, Premier Wen Jiabao reportedly urged government officials to log onto the Internet to answer the public's queries about government statistics.⁶ This incident indicates that even top leaders recognise the slow bureaucratic

⁴ Interview, March 2008.

⁵ When the Chinese complained that western media's coverage of the March 2008 riots in Tibet and subsequent events was seriously biased, western journalists and academics responded by pointing out that the Chinese government closed the Tibetan region off to foreign journalists after the riots. They asked: how could China accuse western media of inaccurate reporting when it did not allow the media into Tibet to find out what was going on?

⁶ Wen was reported to have urged the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security to go online to answer the public's questions. "Wen Jiabao: Ministries and commissions should speedily offer explanations when questioned online. No need to ask for instructions first", *Yangzi Evening News*, 26 March 2009, available at <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2009-03-26/020517481864.shtml>

response to public demand for information. Such bureaucratic inertia is detrimental to both domestic and international communication.

Different Media Traditions

- 3.1 An oft-cited difference points to the different functions performed by the media in China and those in so-called democratic countries. In China, the media are considered the state's mouthpiece and are used for propaganda purposes by the state. In democratic countries, on the other hand, the media are independent of party or government control and perform watchdog functions.
- 3.2 As a generalisation this is obviously very crude. The Chinese media in recent years have been increasingly active in monitoring government performance and exposing problems, and there have been many studies of media in western democracies which show that they are not so independent after all.
- 3.3 Nevertheless, there is no denying that one of the functions of the Chinese media is to propagate state policies. As a result, when such materials are fed to an international audience through China's foreign language broadcasters and publishers, they are unlikely to be well received. Foreign observers point out that China's propaganda style of communication does not appeal to foreign audiences.
- 3.4 Foreign observers almost unanimously dismiss the charge that western media prefer to report negative rather than positive news about China, arguing that they do the same when reporting on their own countries and governments. It is said that western politicians and the media have a love-hate relationship, Chinese officials, however, are not used to dealing with journalists who often have difficult, challenging, and aggressive questions.
- 3.5 Chinese officials have traditionally shied away from interviews with international media, fearing that the latter may lay "traps" for them. While not giving interviews avoids the risk of being embarrassed by the media, this also means that the Chinese government loses the opportunity to use the international media to get its messages across.
- 3.6 Recently, the Chinese government has shown more awareness of the international media being not just a threat, but also an opportunity. For

example, high-level officials have learned to use op-eds in major international newspapers to explain China's policies. Overall, however, China's utilization of foreign media to improve its international communication is still limited.

Cultural Differences

- 4.1 China's external communication can also be impeded by its cultural differences with other countries. The grandiose Olympic Opening Ceremony in 2008 was marred by the revelation that the little singer was merely miming. The real singer, a seven-year-old girl, was deemed not pretty enough for the occasion, so the directors used her voice but put a prettier girl on the stage to get a better image.¹⁰
- 4.2 While some Chinese, including the opening ceremony's directors, think this arrangement is justified in the interest of presenting a good show to the world, international media made a big story of the "fakery." Many international media reports on the incident highlighted its political dimension by reporting that direct orders from a member of the Chinese Communist Party's Politburo resulted in the lip-synching arrangement at the ceremony. But the incident also serves to illuminate certain traits of the Chinese culture.¹¹
- 4.3 The incident appears to reflect the deep-rooted Chinese desire to always present the best image to others. While every nation cares about how others perceive it, China may be prone to attaching more importance to "face" than many other countries. This is neither just a trait of the present Chinese government. The need to impress and awe foreigners is a tradition that goes back centuries. It is not just a habit of the government, either. Many ordinary Chinese people also believe in protecting China's image, even if it means hiding problems.¹²

¹⁰ "China Olympic ceremony star mimed", BBC news website, 12 August 2008, available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/7556058.stm>

¹¹ One article published on the *Guardian* website explored the cultural dimension of the incident, citing research by a University of Texas economist which showed that physical beauty was valued more in China than in the west. "Olympics: child singer revealed as fake", 12 August 2008, available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/sport/2008/aug/12/olympics2008.china1>

¹² For example, some international award winning Chinese films in the past have been strongly criticised in China for pleasing foreigners by disparaging China. A Chinese artist who staged a fashion show in Paris recently featuring various social characters in contemporary China, including corrupt officials and prostitutes, was also denounced by many Chinese netizens for "selling his own country."

- 4.4 While the craving for international approval is not a problem in itself, it often becomes a weakness in China's international communication because when it tries too hard to create a good image, such efforts may backfire. Not understanding China's obsession with "face," foreigners may actually be alienated from, rather than won over by China's carefully prepared positive messages about itself, dismissing them as propaganda.
- 4.5 More generally, certain values stemming from China's Confucian tradition may still hold much appeal in contemporary Chinese society, but once presented to a foreign audience the effects may be highly negative. Very often, therefore, content that is suitable for domestic consumption in China could be totally wrong for external communication. To achieve better external communication, China needs to become more aware of its cultural differences from other countries.

Deficiencies in knowledge and skills

- 5.1 Good communication must be based on good understanding of the habits and preferences of the target audience. Three decades after the launch of the open-door policy, there hasn't been enough knowledge and research to inform China's communication with foreign countries. For example, in 2008, China sent its national ballet troupe to London to perform at the Royal Opera House. The performances were staged at the end of July, when many people in Britain were away on holiday, hence failing to attract a big audience.¹⁴
- 5.2 Although China has its own foreign-language media,¹⁶ currently they cannot compete with mainstream western media in shaping China's international image. Therefore China must learn to manage its image through engagement with western media. Foreign observers point out that China often shows no understanding of how western media work. Chinese officials do not know the deadlines of western media organisations or the right contacts in those organisations.

¹⁴ Another interviewee also mentioned that Chinese delegations to western countries often visited during Easter, Christmas and summer holiday periods, which betrayed a lack of basic awareness of foreign customs. Interviews, February and August 2008.

¹⁶ Such as the Xinhua News Agency, the English-language channel of China Central Television Station (CCTV), and the English-language newspaper *China Daily*

- 5.3 In addition to lacking knowledge, China also suffers from a severe shortage of media and public relations skills. It lacks experts who can communicate effectively to a foreign audience. The majority of Chinese officials and media practitioners have not lived in foreign countries and are unfamiliar with the mindsets of foreigners.
- 5.4 Foreign journalists think many Chinese officials handle the media badly. They are so keen to defend China against any criticism that they come across as being too aggressive. They deny there is any problem. They lecture rather than talk to journalists. Although China has put considerable effort into establishing a press briefing system, many news briefings still involve making statements rather than answering questions.
- 5.5 China is in desperate need of officials who are well-trained in dealing with the media. In a BBC interview, a Chinese diplomat asserted that the vast majority of people in Tibet were happy with their current lives. The presenter then asked how he could know what Tibetans thought. The question put the diplomat at a loss for answers. This episode showed the Chinese diplomat had not received media training. One of the first things one would be taught in media training is never to bring up anything to which one do not have an answer.¹⁸
- 5.6 The Chinese government often responds too slowly to events. In February 2008, when the Hollywood film director Steven Spielberg resigned as artistic advisor to the Beijing Olympic opening ceremony in protest of China's policy on Darfur, China gave no official response for a day and a half. During that time, only voices criticising China were heard. Slow responses such as this are often disastrous. By the time China finally responded, the international media had moved on to other stories.¹⁹

Two Misplaced Views Within China's Communication Regime

- 6.1 Within China, one can easily find two misplaced views about international communication. The first is that, as long as China remains a communist country, the West will be biased against it and feel uneasy about its rapid development.

¹⁸ Interview, March 2008.

¹⁹ Interview, March 2009. When a Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs official was asked about this, however, he said the Chinese side thought a day and a half was already quite "timely", since it used to take even longer for China to respond to news events.

Consequently, it follows, no matter how much effort China invests in image-building, it will never be able to remove the West's suspicion and bias. This view therefore supports that there is no point in working on China's international communication and public relation problems.

- 6.2 But if there is indeed a western bias against China, there is all the more reason to step up efforts to counter the bias. Governments, politicians and companies in the West face what they consider to be a biased media and unreasonable criticisms all the time. Western companies that sponsored the Beijing Olympics, for example, came under fierce attack from the Darfur campaign.
- 6.3 When faced with such tactics, western governments and corporations typically react by engaging with their critics and public opinion rather than seeing communication as a waste of time and walking away. China needs to follow their example.
- 6.4 A second misplaced view holds that China's international image is not ideal because the actual situation in China is far from ideal. Therefore, there is no use investing in PR and communication. Instead, efforts should be directed at solving the actual problems. Once the substantive problems are solved, the derivative image problems will automatically disappear.
- 6.5 But for all the problems on the ground, very often, communication is often a part of the solution itself. In the case of the melamine-contaminated milk scandal for instance, good communication would have meant releasing sufficient information as quickly as possible. Such information would have included which dairy products were affected and which were still safe. Good communication would have answered victims' and consumers' inquiries and addressed their concerns, and informed the public what actions had been taken to contain the problem.
- 6.6 It would have further involved assuring victims that those responsible would be held accountable and explaining how the food industry and food inspection regime would be overhauled to stop unsafe food from entering the market again.
- 6.7 In short, communication is an integral part of the crisis management and problem-solving process. It must not be confused with spin. Therefore, the fact that China has many problems that do not show it in a good light is no reason

for dismissing the value of communication and PR. On the contrary, it makes a strong case for investing more in such efforts.

Efforts to Improve China's International Communication

- 7.1 China's decision-makers clearly appreciate the importance of improving its international communication. During the lead-up to the Olympics, when campaigners and protesters attacked China's domestic and foreign policies, Beijing was apparently shocked by their success. They have started to pay a lot more attention to communication.
- 7.2 Western public relations firms were contacted for advice. Chinese diplomats and journalists stationed overseas were instructed to collect information on how China was perceived and to study ways to counter negative publicity. Chinese researchers were given grants to analyse China's soft power and international image building.
- 7.3 In the past few years, a key area of work for the State Council Information Office has been training spokespersons at all levels of government. A spokesperson system has been established and government at all levels have learned to use news conferences to defend their actions and respond to criticisms.²⁰
- 7.4 Since January 2009, there have been reports that the Chinese government intends to inject billions of dollars into China's main state-controlled news organisations, including the Xinhua News Agency, CCTV and the *People's Daily*, to support their expansion overseas. Specific plans include launching a "Chinese CNN" - a 24-hour English news channel-and a new English-language newspaper. It is hoped that by developing its own international media China will be able to substantially boost its image abroad.
- 7.5 In a speech in December 2008 to mark the 50th birthday of the CCTV, the Party's top ideology official, Li Changchun, said: "In this modern era, whichever nation has advanced means of communication and powerful communication capability, it is that nation whose culture and values can spread more widely and who can more effectively influence the world...We must heighten our sense of responsibility and mission, and make the strengthening of our domestic and

²⁰ Interview with a State Council Information Office official, September 2009.

international communication capabilities the major task of our mainstream media for some time to come."²¹

7.6 Western media are generally sceptical about the chances of success for Chinese media. They point out that Chinese state-controlled media will have a hard time establishing their credibility, as foreign audiences will not trust media that are controlled by the Chinese Communist Party.²² Hence, China's challenges in international communication will continue to arise in the years to come, and whether its communications capacity can match its status as a rising global power remains a big question.

²¹"Striving to establish a modern communication system, raising domestic and international communication capacities: Speech to commemorate the birth of China's television broadcasting and the 50th anniversary of the founding of CCTV", *Guangming Daily*, 23 December 2009, available at http://news.xinhuanet.com/zgjx/2008-12/23/content_10545361.htm

²² See, for example, Calum MacLeod, "China plans media empire to boost image", *USA Today*, 2 February 2009, available at http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2009-02-18-chinamedia_N.htm; Peter Ford, "Beijing launching a 'Chinese CNN' to burnish image abroad", *The Christian Science Monitor*, 5 February 2009, available at <http://www.csmonitor.com/2009/0205/p01s01-woap.html>