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The Image of China in Australia: A Conversation with Bruce Dover

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In this conversation, *Mr. Bruce Dover*, the chief executive of Australia Network, and *Dr. Leah Xiu-Fang Li*, Associate Professor in Journalism and Communications at Guangzhou University, discuss what stories about China are of interest to Australian audiences and how this influences strategic decisions on relevant reports. They also discuss what problems journalists in Australia face when telling stories about China. Mr. Dover provides his views on China's image in Australia, the elements that largely shape this image, and the approaches to reframe it.

Dr. Leah Xiu-Fang Li: What stories about China do you think will interest Australian audiences?

Mr. Dover: People are fascinated by the development in China. China has so much proceeding. People are interested in the stories about the changes in the sort of living standard, the effect on the culture, the opening up, the reform process and what is happening in the rural provinces. They are interested in China's economic growth and what that means in terms of its place in the world.

Dr. Leah Xiu-Fang Li: How does this influence your strategic decision on reports?

Mr. Dover: The strategic decision is about how we cover and how we report on China. We need to be careful to try to make sure that our correspondents cover the positive aspects in China as well as the negative. 'Strategically' means how we try to ensure that we do not just view China and make judgments through a Western cultural prism, but actually understand that from a Chinese perspective. 'Strategically' also means that we need to think how we make sure that we do not just report events in Beijing, in Shanghai and in Guangzhou, but look at the broader picture.

We are quite keen to expand the coverage of the nation. Or maybe Chongqing, because to cover Western China

is very different from Eastern China. We need to provide and look at a sort of a more holistic picture and explain the difference between the two. There are also lots of challenges outside the big cities, about the rural development, the issues there with education and health and services. We need to make a bigger effort to explain to the rest of the world, and particularly Australia.

Dr. Leah Xiu-Fang Li: Could you explain how to keep the balance between the Chinese perspective and the Australian perspective?

Mr. Dover: We all have to make a big investment in the correspondents and the journalists who go there. We will have to make them better understand the language, then they can stay there longer, and so they can actually start to report and understand the culture, the politics and the people. Often journalists and diplomats only stay maybe two or three years. China is quite a complex place. The first year when you are there, you don't know very much. After two years, you start to understand the place. After three years, you can start to report more fairly and objectively about the situation. Then we tend to move people, to send them to the other places. That requires an investment.

Reports have to be done in a way that's fair and balanced with context. It is easy to say 'look how poor the people are'. We have to do it within the context that explains how the Chinese government lifts the living standards of 1.2 billion people. It is also easy to say that the Chinese army crushed the rebellions in Tibet or Xinjiang. But maybe what is the other side: who started it, what was the issue, what was behind it, why it is still ongoing, and why it changes. We need to explain why the Western province of Tibet or Xinjiang are important to China.

Dr. Leah Xiu-Fang Li: What are the problems the media in Australia faces when reports on China?

Mr. Dover: The Australian media love to report on the conflicts rather than the positive things that are happening in the relationships. That is the nature of the media. We need to work harder to try to get the media to focus on some positive developments, to have a better understanding of most of the shifts in power as it were, and not try to make just a black hat and white hat.

In Australia and the Australian media, there is still some stereotyping that occurs, while we report on China and the ways we report on events in Urumchi (in Xinjiang) or Tibet and so forth. It is like reporting events in Xinjiang. The Western media in Australia too easily say that the Chinese government, because communists are bad, therefore, must be wrong. So when you report a Chinese crackdown, it is always words like 'crackdown' or 'massacre'. On the other side, it is always 'freedom fighters'.

The Western media is not always sophisticated. Sometimes one journalist reports a story and everyone else follows without checking on the validity or accuracy of the original story. Because we live in a world with a 24-hour news cycle, there is an incessant, insatiable demand for information, and information is not always fact. Too often, reports in the Western media are based solely on a Western cultural viewpoint. Without an understanding of the history, the culture of China, and the language of the Chinese, Western journalists make value judgments, which are both inaccurate and misguided.

Dr. Leah Xiu-Fang Li: How do you view negative human rights coverage of China in the Australian media?

Mr. Dover: The media still looks for conflicts. It is easy to do human rights stories, the Falun Gong, and the Tiananmen Square and so forth. It is a comment on the fact that, sometimes, Western journalists go for the easiest story, and do the good news about the ways that people's lives generally have improved. When I first lived in Beijing in 1993 or 1994, people were quite afraid to have a conversation about the government, or the politics and so forth. Now you can sit in a coffee shop in China and have a quite open conversation about the situation. That is remarkable. It is a much freer place.

China's success is its worst enemy. People think that 'look at this modern sophisticated Shanghai, Beijing, and Guangzhou', therefore it must be a big Western democracy. It has come a long way in a very short time. The other institutions, say a free press or a more democratic system, are going to take time. Even in Australia, our democratic system has taken 200 years to get to this. Because our belief is that China has the trappings of Western success, of sophistication, we expect that they must be like us. They do not realise this and that is why we need to explain to the rest.

Dr. Leah Xiu-Fang Li: What do you think the average Australians think about China?

Mr. Dover: There has been a change in the last ten years. People have a more positive view of China. The Olympic Games was a very significant event because of the number of people who saw that China wasn't just a country with 1.2 billion peasants running around. It is a far more sophisticated, modern, evolving nation and

culture.

Ten years ago the two big events people knew about, perhaps, were the Cultural Revolution and June 4th. That coloured the ways the people thought. The coverage in Australia from a media perspective was quite negative after June 4th. It has taken a while to change that, to move on and to realise that China is never going to be the same as a big Western democracy. China is going to find its own model and go its own way.

There are still some apprehensions, because it is not a culture that we are familiar with in terms of the fact that we are predominantly this white Anglo-Saxon Christian society, but China is largely 'Confucianist' and a communist nation. For lots of the old generation, the idea of increasing Asian migration here, not just from China but from Vietnam and the Philippines, has changed people's perceptions. We have adapted the same way as in the 1970s and 1980s when the Japanese were investing and heading to Australia. There was a sort of a reaction and apprehension about whether we were going to become a suburb of Tokyo. Some Australians are concerned about the growth of China as an economic power. The level of Chinese investment in Australia even though is quite small compared to the US, the United Kingdom, or to Japan. But this is new and it has changed.

Australia is increasingly more multicultural. So we are becoming more open. The image of China and the Chinese is becoming more positive, as we start to see that people are becoming less threatened. We should welcome the idea that a prosperous China means a prosperous Australia. As a result, more and more Australians will take more interest in China, because their economic future is there. In fact, there are 250,000 Chinese students in Australia. Australians are getting more experiences first hand of interaction with the Chinese people. There are also more and more Australians travelling to China. So you start to build up a better and a deeper understanding. I think there is a far more positive view of China, and the comfort levels with each other are higher.

Dr. Leah Xiu-Fang Li: What do you think of the images of China in Australia in terms of the dimensions of culture, economy, politics and military?

Mr. Dover: The Chinese have been in Australia for a long time since the 1850s or earlier. People recognise that Chinese culture is quite resilient. Even the Chinese who have been here for three generations or more still retain a strong Chinese heritage. It is a 5000 year-old culture and Australia is only a little more than 200 years old. So there is a respect for the Chinese culture. Every country town in Australia has a Chinese restaurant. Most Australians feel very comfortable eating Chinese food and using chopsticks. As food is one way to export Chinese culture, this is an acceptance.

Economically, China has been through a remarkable period in the last 20 years. So that represents a massive change for a country which traditionally looked first to Europe, then to the United States, even to Japan and Korea. Now in the space of 10 years, China is our biggest single trading partner. From a Chinese point of view, Australia is a stable and safe place. It has good investment environment. Both economies have becoming more intertwined. It is a positive thing. We are still a small economy compared to China. There is complementarity there, which is important. Most Australians recognise now that Australian prosperity is linked to Chinese prosperity.

Politically, we now have vast economic interests and in some ways social interests, because the stability in this country is also tied to stability in China. So we want China to be engaged in the region. Australia is very pragmatic. While the US alliance remains very important, we recognise that the US economic power is declining. So we have to reload and change our focus. This is happening. Australia still has an important role in the region. We are somewhat independent from every other nation. That is why China finds it useful to work with us. Other nations in Asia are a bit fearful because China is such a huge market and such a massive economy. People are concerned militarily. Australia is a good friend, and we can speak sometimes on behalf of China.

On the military level, Australia and China need to improve their relationship and have the understanding that we need to work more closely together. As neighbourly relations grow, Australian and China need to look at how we could do that in the Pacific, because there is no one else there with any huge interests anymore.

Dr. Leah Xiu-Fang Li: What could be the key element that currently influences the images of China overseas?

Mr. Dover: In my view, perceptions of China by both the developed and developing nations of the world are heavily influenced by China's rapid economic and political rise. To many nations, China represents challenges in the economic realm. On the one hand China offers a major exports market, a destination for investment and production and a pool of cheap labour. On the other hand, China is also a competitor on foreign export markets and in the quest for resources and commodities; the entry of Chinese SOE (State-Owned Enterprises)'s into Western markets is regarded with trepidation for fear that these giant economic behemoths threaten the independence and sovereignty of local enterprises; and increasingly Chinese goods are consistently regarded by

consumers in both the developed and developing world as less safe than products made elsewhere.

At a time when Chinese SOE's are stepping beyond China's shores and into world markets, many nations have significant concerns about growing trade deficits with China, its trade barriers, currency policies and the enforcement of intellectual property rights. While trade with China is spurring investment and creating jobs in both developed and developing nations around the world, many are becoming uncomfortable about their growing relationship with China. They worry that what helps their wallets hurts their country politically and strategically, and the more powerful China gets, the bigger that potential danger.

In developed countries such as the United States, Europe and Australia acquisitions by Chinese companies are scrutinised heavily due to their strategic political as well as economic implications. Some countries are especially anxious about acquisitions by China that will affect national security. In contrast, Chinese investment is more welcomed in many developing countries. Investments differ from developed countries in that they are more likely to be related to natural resources and less related to technologies. However, many developing nations remain fearful of the size and scale of Chinese investment and a perception that government officials are enriching themselves by selling off public assets at the expense of the people.

To a very large extent, these negative perceptions of China spring from conflicting values, preconceived notions, a lack of knowledge of China and its values and policies – and the underlying fears of a rapidly rising economic and political power.

Dr. Leah Xiu-Fang Li: As an established media executive, what are the recommendations of how the images of China in Australia can be reframed or improved?

Mr. Dover: We need to encourage more and more exchanges between our media and our journalists, and to develop that deeper understanding with great sophistication in the ways we report on each other. If the Chinese media come here and go and report on the aboriginal situation, it can look quite bad. Australia will think 'how can they come and say that about Australia?' It is bit like me going to Tibet and saying 'look at the way...'

We need to report more about why the two countries, despite the difference in size and the difference in culture, can actually be more connected and more complementary than you would think. There is the economic connection and also the geopolitical one. A lot of Australians still think that Chinese culture is a bit alien and a bit different. We thus need to build the confidence that the two countries have more in common than we know, and maybe there are a lot of shared values.

China needs to develop a thicker skin. Look, you will get criticised. But you need to not feel sensitive to criticism, not be so defensive, but explain rationally your point of view or put your case. Do not make such a strong statement. Sometimes it sounds like the more you do that, the more people ask 'What do they try to hide?' and 'Why is there such a reaction?'

Less is more. The Chinese should try to learn to be a bit more sophisticated in the ways it deals with the Western media. Its government still believes it is necessary to respond to everything, but sometimes to make no noise is a better way of dealing with the issue. 24 hours news in the West is a monster. If you keep feeding it, it just gets bigger and bigger. So sometimes you do not have to necessarily respond. Or you can just acknowledge that 'Yes, we understand the government has its view. While we disagree with that, we accept its right.' That is to keep it.

To be believable, you've got to be credible. To be credible, you've got to be truthful. The Chinese Government has attempted to alter negative perceptions of both China and Chinese SOE's through a massive investment in excess of \$ 6.6 billion in soft or public diplomacy. State-owned media corporations have received massive government funding to take themselves and convey a positive message to the world. By most measures, this has been largely a failure. The fact that these media organisations remain under State control means they are perceived as part of a Chinese propaganda effort that therefore lack any credibility. This is impossible to make China's rise palatable and to create understanding, regard and support for its political model and policies. China, therefore, has to encourage a free and more independent media. In the end it works for them, and People start to trust them.

About

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