



The Portrayal of China in German Media

A Study by Carola Richter and Sebastian Gebauer

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Summary

With their presentation of specific topics and discourses, especially in international news reporting, the media construct specific realities that shape a society's images of other regions. Their focus on – or omission of – selected subject areas contributes to the formation of national images that can have repercussions on social and political interactions with those nations. The danger also exists that a one-sided development of discourse and argumentation patterns or their unreflected and uncritical adoption from the environments in which the media operates – such as the government or the business community – may cultivate a sense of friendship or enmity toward other societies that can weaken our mutual understanding and result in a conflict orientation in international relations.

To counteract this danger, one of the key responsibilities of the media is to present a range of subject areas and a variety of lines of argumentation in its international reporting to permit audiences to learn about the “other”. In particular, this involves the communication of knowledge, the illustration of current processes within a society, and the presentation and critical evaluation of a plurality of arguments designed to contribute to the formation of individual opinion.

With regard to China, the national image created by books and the media to date has fluctuated between the poles of excessive (historical) exuberance and reveling in the country's exotic aspects on one hand, and the construction of a disconcerting and in some respects threatening adversary to our social order on the other. The objective of this study was to scrutinize these subjective impressions empirically by presenting the journalistic variety of the German media's reporting on China, analyzing it with regard to its preferences in the selection of issues and its discourse patterns, and interviewing producers responsible for shaping the media's reporting about the development processes.

Over the course of 2008, no less than 8,766 items related to China were identified in the six studied print media (the daily newspapers FAZ, SZ and taz, as well as the weeklies DER SPIEGEL, Focus and DIE ZEIT) and information programs of the public broadcasters (Tagesschau and other dedicated information formats). The *sheer volume of attention paid to China* by the German media's opinion leaders already testifies the considerable interest in the country that distinguishes it from other regions in Germany's reporting of international news.

This particular public interest in China gives the media the opportunity to provide a wide variety of differentiated views on political, economic, social and cultural aspects of Chinese society, illuminating them in detail in media formats otherwise subject to economic constraints and the struggle for market share.

The media studied also reflect this interest in their good to excellent correspondent and editorial structures which are designed to apply regional expertise to professionalizing their reporting on China. The considerable personal contributions of the correspondents (responsible for 20.6% of all reports) which are promoted further by dedicated Asia editors (5.2%) and the comparatively low dependence on agencies (only around 20%) thus arising when selecting topics related to China is remarkable throughout the media.

Nevertheless, when analyzing all identified contributions related to China in 2008, it becomes apparent that just over half of the contributions refer to China only in allegorical and stereotype-reinforcing form. In other words, many reports do not illuminate China's relationship to the topic at hand, but merely spread images and clichés that appear to be widespread throughout society without further reflection. Common disparaging images of China – as a “supporter of rogue states”, a “cheap producer” or a country with an “enormous appetite for natural resources” tend to set the tone of the discussion, even though seemingly positive images of China as an “attractive growth market” and “interesting manufacturing location” also occur, especially in business reporting. Overall, however, it can be said in this case that the media is continuously propagating existing stereotypes based on entrenched symbols and stock phrases, rather than fulfilling its actual mission of questioning those images. A danger exists of reinforcing those greatly oversimplified and shallow clichés in the awareness of the German public due to the number of reports spreading them.

Beyond that, the 3,998 contributions that did in fact involve in-depth reporting about China were marked by an initially surprising, *unusually broad range of topics* in comparison to reporting from other regions. Around one quarter (24.9%) of all reporting covered Chinese domestic policy issues, while the 14.8% share of business news reflects China's central economic importance. Cultural aspects are also lent unusual weight with a 9.2% share of total reporting. Cultural reporting in particular is witnessing a diversification of the range of topics in an attempt to do justice to the manifold aspects of Chinese reality. It is apparent that above all China correspondents and regional editors for Asia are contributing to this greater diversity of subject matter, as they often have direct access to the internal processes of Chinese society – in many cases enhanced by language skills and personal experience – that editors less familiar with China cannot match.

Nevertheless, *significant blind spots exist in the topic agendas* of all media, as areas of such central importance to social transformation as social issues, education, science and technology are almost completely disregarded. The view toward the dynamics of these fields, and with it the associated opportunities and problems for China's internal development as well as their effects on international relations, thus remains largely blocked. Overall, it may be noted that even the strongly represented subject areas are marked by a Eurocentric perspective and that topics that are of special interest for the target country of the reporting receive preferential treatment. While the focus on topics relevant to the target audience and those that lend themselves to connections is essential to the business considerations of the media, it should not lead to the exclusion of in-depth analyses of important internal developments.

The intense focus of domestic-policy reporting on minority and territorial issues such as Tibet (11.2%) and Taiwan (1.7%) as well as the human-rights situation (3.9%) therefore appear excessive in light of the lack of analysis of developments within the political apparatus (2.3%) and urgent social issues (1.8%). Business reporting must be seen equally critically – it is largely shaped by the FAZ and SZ daily newspapers and focuses overwhelmingly on German companies and their interests, statements and actions, with only limited attention to well-founded, independent analysis of the market and overall situation in China. Learning about the other country and the dynamics of its society through the media is all too frequently replaced by an agenda marked by domestic-policy considerations that serves to filter points of view of the target region.

In addition, a long-criticized but nevertheless still-dominant media logic causes the selection of topics to be frequently determined not only by timeliness, but also news factors such as the potential for conflict, negativity and focus on elites. Despite the diagnosed quantitative diversity of subject areas, reporting on China nevertheless remains dominated by a *core agenda focused on conflicts and violence*. The tight focus on domestic policy is shaped by issues such as the Tibet conflict; reporting on international affairs tends to illuminate China's relations to so-called rogue states and criticize its actions in international organizations or Africa; with regard to the Olympics, much is made of human rights violations, doping and the drilling of athletes.

A critical and carefully reflected approach to politics, events and actors is undoubtedly one of the basic constituents of German media reporting. It is apparent, however, that this conflict-laden core agenda is also strongly shaped by Germany's self-positioning in relation to China and a competitive comparison of the systems. In particular, deeper analysis of the discourse patterns in reporting on international relations, environmental issues and the economy has

shown that the question of whether the West or China will prevail in the current competition of world order strategies is frequently central to such media attention. While a number of correspondents have emphasized in interviews that they consider the tone of condemnation sometimes used in relation to China in these topics to be exaggerated or wrong, the general direction of the German media appears to be influenced by a position characterized by the fear of one's own devaluation. The debate surrounding China's commitments in Africa made it especially apparent that an ideological perspective is being applied to the country which is founded on a double standard of socially acceptable criticism of China's colonialism and masking the decidedly neo-colonial nature of one's own interests. Despite a number of exceptions in reporting, critical information here takes the back seat to a mission of sorts.

In the studied media – in particular the daily newspapers – the debate surrounding German relations to China has also largely degenerated to a showcase race of German politicians and the highlighting of their quotable statements while lacking an actual analysis of the state of those relations in their historical and current forms. In light of the debate surrounding Germany's positioning relative to China, reporting has focused above all on the skirmishes of German domestic and party politics while almost completely ignoring the Chinese perspective of the relationship. Such reporting does not really result in a learning effect with regard to China's role in international relations or the furthering of a worthy relationship by means of the provision of new facts and viewpoints, as well as strategic and system-related considerations.

The positioning debate, which was repeatedly stoked during the Olympic year by German and European politicians, athletes, businesspersons and journalists themselves, and which was virtually evoked by the rise of China, was certainly largely responsible for the intense media attention devoted to conflict-laden domestic issues in 2008. Such topics – in particular Tibet and the debate surrounding human rights and freedom of the media – provided a basis for discussing concepts especially relevant to Western societies such as democracy, liberalism and freedom in relation to conditions in China and with regard to Western expectations of China.

When taking a closer look at the course of debate of individual topics, it becomes apparent, however, that while news factors and a certain self-centeredness played a significant role in the selection, a number of topics in the overview of the studied media and also within individual media were certainly discussed with ambivalence and internal pluralism. In particular, the extended media presence of debates such as those related to the Tibet conflict in spring of 2008 or the financial crisis in the autumn of that year prompted further-reaching analyses and investigation of their causes in the media that also took internal Chinese dynamics in all their complexity into consideration, as well as the presentation of a variety of evaluations of those

dynamics and events. While simplified illustrations did occur, for example in depicting the assumed perpetrator-victim constellation (China and the Tibetans, respectively) in the violence in Tibet, and polemical choices of words were at times apparent, all media consciously strove to provide different perspectives of the conflict – especially by calling upon experts – to do justice to the complexity of the topics. The interviewed journalists emphasize that their personal understanding of their work and that of their medium is to provide the greatest possible range of perspectives of certain events and to prompt debate, which succeeds at times but not always.

With regard to another long-running issue – the question of human and civil rights in China – reporting once again tended to focus on a political system that is perceived as despotic, to which the journalistic response was one of advocacy for the victims. In the media overview, however, the beginnings of a variety of perspectives are apparent here as well, as the studied media place a variety of lines of argumentation in the foreground. SZ and DER SPIEGEL, for example, blame the sclerotic Communist leadership for human-rights violations, while DIE ZEIT puts such problems down to the effects of modernization and transformation processes in China. Due to the media's focus on a number of central dissidents and minority issues, the particularly interesting field of tension encompassing domestic policy and social transformation, which is of key importance for civil protests in China, did not receive the emphasis that would be required for a broader understanding of Chinese realities.

However, the interviewed correspondents also point out in this regard that journalistic access to original sources and actors in China is particularly difficult, and many topics thus have fewer chances of appearing on the agenda of the German media due to their lack of originality and personalization. Reporting on sensitive topics such as protests in civil society therefore frequently suffers from a lack of protagonists among average citizens, thus compelling journalists to rely often on a small circle of easily-accessible dissidents or activists for an alternative view to the official line. The Chinese political leadership is also quite opaque. Domestic policy processes and decisions are rarely explained or put into context by the politicians themselves, so that foreign journalists generally have to rely on the state media and press releases as secondary sources. While state elites dominate coverage in the German media, they therefore remain amorphous as a “regime” or “government” and their motives remain in the dark. Especially with regard to Tibet, virtually all correspondents note that greater openness on the part of the authorities in dealing with foreign journalists would have led to coverage marked by greater accuracy and less prejudice.

In less sensitive fields such as business reporting it is also apparent that German companies, businesspersons and politicians tend to serve as the active participants and that Chinese actors mostly appear in peripheral roles or as a collective target group. In addition to the relevant argument of limited access to sources, a degree of Eurocentrism is also at work here which neglects to put Chinese business policies truly into context, thus fostering less well-founded reporting on traditional topics such as white-collar crime, China as a market, or China as an investor. The *lack of differentiation* of various actor interests and actions in China's political system is also not solely due to the prevailing lack of transparency, it is also a product of journalistic simplification.

The essential results and points of criticism contained in this study have been restated below as propositions and in some cases combined with specific recommendations designed to raise awareness for certain difficulties related to reporting about China and to provide pointers for practical journalistic work.

Propositions pertaining to the German media's reporting on China

- 1. The range of topics must be consciously expanded beyond that of a conflict-laden core agenda.**

Adhering to a media logic based on conflict, negativity, damage and violence as news factors has led to a core agenda in reporting that disregards significant aspects of the day-to-day realities of Chinese society. While Chinese cultural topics are already better represented in the media agenda than those of other regions, these initial efforts must be expanded further. In particular, topics such as social issues, education and the environment that go beyond a purely damage and violence-oriented understanding of the country must be given significantly greater weight.

- 2. This does not mean that critical, investigative reporting expounding the problems of China should be displaced – on the contrary, event-independent analysis in reporting must be strengthened.**

Comprehensive reporting that conveys knowledge not directly linked to specific events is essential to gaining a better understanding of systemic conditions in China and its political strategies and motives. Such knowledge can then provide a helpful foundation for reporting on conflict situations.

3. Breaking up the generally monolithic depiction of China would be a necessary part of such holistic reporting.

The lack of differentiation between active participants in Chinese current events and their contrary views and diverging interests (central government versus local cadres, etc.) in a great deal of political and business reporting blocks insights into the existing transformation processes in society and the possible causes for political and social conflicts that would doubtlessly be worthy of further illumination.

4. Instead, the positioning debate and central theme of a competitive comparison of systems adopted from current political discourse leads to self-centered, and in some cases ideological, reporting.

Especially with regard to international relations (Africa) and the business and environmental sectors (climate), reporting tends to be characterized by assumptions that the rise of China will bring about the decline of Germany and Europe. The anxieties and threatening scenarios vis-à-vis China thus propagated are not suitable to reducing a sense of enmity and contributing to a constructive transnational dialogue. Such self-reference should instead be qualified in favor of a contextualization of the developments in China that transcends Eurocentric concepts of world order.

5. In this regard, the strong focus on German elite individuals and companies as virtually singular actors in some parts of reporting on China is also questionable.

When international reporting is primarily realized from the viewpoint of actors in the home country and is rarely or never coordinated with perspectives from the country being reported on, this can lead to the erosion of media autonomy in selecting topics or producing discourse. A geographically diversified actors' perspective must therefore be ensured, in particular by locating Chinese sources.

6. Overall, editorial offices need to be sensitized regarding the use of stock phrases and the symbolic use of China references for the sake of not reinforcing stereotypes and clichés without questioning them.

These include both unreflected use of collective derogatory terms such as the "yellow peril" or generalizing allegories about "China" or "the Chinese". Such references are also commonly found in the headlines and captions that receive the readers' foremost attention. These categorizations and generalizations are mostly due to ignorance, lack

of sensitivity, or commercial interest in a headline with greater sales impact. They often create a cliché-ridden and at times denunciatory image of Chinese society, however.

7. The comparatively strong inclusion of China correspondents and dedicated editors for Asia fundamentally promotes diversity in subject matter and discourse as well as regional expertise, and should be maintained or expanded.

While these journalists may not be able (or necessarily willing) to displace the frequently conflict-oriented and self-centered selection of subject matter in the media, their presence on the ground often results in a wider variety of perspectives, the inclusion of Chinese voices, and a broadening of the subject areas to include social aspects. Additional correspondents with subject specializations or freelancers covering cultural and social stories could increase the diversity of topics even further.

8. A better cooperation between the media and the scientific community marked by fewer prejudices would be desirable to increase regional expertise and enrich media reporting with solid analyses and interpretation.

While the investigated media do include expert opinions in interviews and their own stories, the combination of scientific expertise and popular reporting could yet be increased on both sides. Specialized training for journalists or background talks by scientists could also be expanded.

9. Beyond that, an improvement of the working conditions of correspondents in China – especially with regard to better access to sources in politics and civil society and to the restricted territories – would improve the possibilities for an accurate, many-faceted depiction of China in the German media.

This facilitation and normalization of journalists' work by the Chinese authorities would certainly help break down many prejudices and would be in the interests of Chinese policymakers and businesses, as it would improve opportunities to present their motives and decisions in the Western media.

10. Overall, a return to greater mutual respect in reporting about the “other side” will be necessary – especially in light of the debate regarding media reporting in

2008, which took highly emotional turns on the German and Chinese sides, and its lingering effects.

Above all, this will require respect for the opposite positions without polemics – which does not mean that those positions cannot and should not be subject to criticism and interpretation.

