

## **Foreign News as a Marketable Power Display: Foreign Disaster Reporting by the Chinese Local Media**

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As Western media is cutting back on expenditures for foreign news reporting, the news organizations in China, at both the national and local levels, have been investing more resources into international news in recent years. This article provides a critical assessment of foreign news reporting by the local Chinese media. Using the 2011 Japanese earthquake as an entry point, the article analyzes the motivations and practices of foreign news reporting at two major Guangzhou newspapers. This analysis illustrates how China's desire to project its "soft power," coupled with the local media's political and economic imperatives, drove the development of a "parachute" model of foreign news reporting and led to the conception of the foreign news as a marketable power display.

*Keywords: foreign news reporting, soft power, power display, parachute journalism, local media in China, Japanese earthquake*

### **Introduction**

On March 11, 2011, a magnitude 9.0 undersea earthquake struck the Pacific coast of Japan, triggering powerful tsunami waves and inland earthquakes in Eastern Japan's Tōhoku area. The estimated human casualties included 16,000 dead, 6,000 injured, and 4,000 missing. More than 125,000 buildings were damaged or destroyed. Many international media organizations sent reporters to the site to cover the event, and the media organizations in China, a neighboring country that has profound economic, cultural, and historical links with Japan, were no exception. In addition to the national media, many local media outlets also sent reporters to the scene. The three press groups and three broadcasting groups

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from the Southern city of Guangzhou, for instance, sent a total of 43 “parachute journalists”<sup>1</sup> to Japan during the first week after the earthquake.<sup>2</sup>

While major news organizations in Europe and the United States are retreating from foreign news reporting (Hamilton & Jenner, 2004; Palmer & Fontan, 2007), the Chinese media is heading toward it. China’s newfound economic power not only heightens its desire to enhance its own international prominence, but also provides the resources for the media and other relevant institutions to do so. Some scholars have therefore suggested that the rise of foreign news reporting in China has to be understood in relation to the country’s desire to become a world superpower (Hong, 2011), and foreign news production is part of China’s efforts to project “soft power” to the international community (Kurlantzick, 2007).

Recent studies on foreign news production by the Chinese media have focused mainly on the resourceful national media organizations, most notably the Xinhua News Agency (Xinhua hereafter) (Hong, 2011) and China Central Television (CCTV) (Zhang, 2011). Missing from the literature are analyses of how and why the local media in China has joined the race to produce foreign news.

This article presents a study of foreign reporting by the local media in China using the case of Guangzhou media’s coverage of the Japanese earthquake in 2011. Our overall question is, How did the “rise of China” shape the organization, practices, and content of the Chinese local media’s foreign news reporting? We contend that China’s eagerness to project soft power, channeled through the political economy of the Chinese media system, has generated incentives for the local media to expand foreign news production while treating it as a display of power and resources. However, the local media has yet to develop an efficient system of resource mobilization for such reporting, and the basic limitations of the “parachute” model of foreign news reporting have constrained what the journalists could achieve.

Analyzing the Chinese local media coverage of foreign events will help generate a more comprehensive picture of the development of foreign news reporting in China. More generally, this study will illustrate how social and political conditions shape the purposes, practices, and characteristics of foreign news. This study will also contribute to the discussion of specific issues in foreign news reporting, especially the limitations of parachute journalism.

### **Projection of Soft Power and China’s Expansion of Foreign News Production**

The past two decades have seen a general decline in foreign news in the European and American media. Many researchers have documented the shrinking of foreign news production (Arnett, 1998; Gorney, 2002; Riffe & Budianto, 2001). The decline was partly a result of the mainstream media’s more general economic crisis. Facing chronic loss of readers/audiences and the rise of new media as competitors, concerns about the high cost of foreign news production have been raised since the early

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<sup>1</sup> It is a term often used by scholars and critics in referring to the reporters who are sent to unfamiliar places to report on stories about which they may not have much knowledge. More discussions are included in later part of the article.

<sup>2</sup> The authors consulted each news organization to obtain these figures.

1990s (Rosenblum, 1993; Sanit, 1992). As a result, major news organizations have been closing down foreign bureaus and calling back foreign correspondents. The more recent financial crisis that began in 2008 can only be expected to aggravate the problem (McChesney & Pickard, 2011).

Instead of a chronic decline, the Chinese media has increased their investment in foreign news production. In 2009, it was reported that China put aside US\$4 billion to expand the overseas presence of the core national media (Bandurski, 2009). For example, Xinhua had 123 foreign bureaus around the world at the end of 2010 (Hong, 2011), and its plan is to increase the number to 200 (The 21st Economic Business Herald, 2010). CCTV, similarly, was reported to be increasing the number of overseas bureaus from 19 to 50 between 2010 and 2012 (CCTV.com, 2009).

Such an expansion of foreign news reporting has to be understood in relation to China's desire to construct a positive image of itself in the international arena at a time when the country is on the rise. Economically, China has maintained an annual GDP growth rate of 8% over the past three decades (Xie & Page, 2010) and surpassed Germany in 2009 to become the world's third largest economy (*The Washington Post*, 2010). This development has led to an urge on the part of China to showcase its national achievements to the world. However, China is also mindful of the need to assure the world that its rise to power will be a peaceful one (Lee, 2010). These two tendencies combined to lead the Chinese government to place heavy emphasis on the notion of soft power (Kurlantzick, 2007).

Popularized by Joseph Nye (2004), "soft power" can be defined broadly as the ability of a country to influence others by persuasion and attraction via culture, values, and policies. Nye (2004) argued that, in the postmodern age, soft power is likely to be more important than "hard power" (i.e., economic and military prowess) in international relations. Since the term was introduced in China in the early 2000s, soft power has become a buzzword in China's political discourse, gaining enormous attention from political elites and international relations strategists (Wang, 2011).

Meanwhile, projecting soft power has been a general direction underlying the more specific actions and policies of the Chinese government throughout the 2000s: for example, the hosting of global mega-events (the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the 2010 World Expo), efforts to promote tourism and attract overseas students, exports of popular cultural products, establishment of Confucius Institutes around the world, and so on (Manzenreiter, 2010; Wang, 2008). Within this context, the expansion of foreign news production can also be seen as part of the country's effort to project soft power. As Nye (2005) wrote, "success [in international competition in the new millennium] depends not only on whose army wins, but also on whose story wins." To have one's own media reporting on international events is, therefore, to produce one's own stories. As Wang (2011) pointed out, China believes that "it not only has a story to tell to the world, but it is imperative for the country to do so more effectively" (p. 2).

For China, the importance of producing one's own stories is further heightened by the perception that Western power, with the aid of their media, had been deliberately destroying the image of China. "Demonizing China" became a popular catchphrase in Chinese nationalist discourse in the 1990s (Li & Liu, 1996). Most recently, the critique of Western media was reiterated by Xinhua's president, Li Congjun, in a *Wall Street Journal* article. He argued that the current pattern of international communication is

"extremely uneven" and "the flow of information is basically one-way" (Li, 2011, p. A19). Therefore, there is a need to build a "new world media order" that is "more balanced, just and rational" (Li, 2011, p. A19). China thus adopted a "going-out" policy encouraging the news media to develop foreign news reporting (Cheng & Liu, 2011).

Certainly, the above discussion mainly addresses the state's policy direction. The fact that the media would embrace this policy direction has to be understood in terms of the political economy of China's media system. Traditionally, the media in communist China was seen as an instrument of party propaganda (Lee, 1990). The process of media reform, which began in the late 1970s and accelerated in the 1990s, has, to a certain extent, redefined the state-media relationship. Commercialization has brought to the fore the tensions between the principles of the party press and market forces (Chan, 1993; Pan, 2000; Zhao, 1998), created the space for new journalistic phenomena such as investigative journalism (de Burgh, 2003; Tong & Sparks, 2009; Zhao, 2000), and generated growing interest in the Western, liberal conception of journalistic professionalism among part of the journalistic corps (Pan & Chan, 2003). However, as Zhao (2008) has argued, market forces do not always work against state control. Rather, capitalist forces and the state share the interest in maintaining a stable and "harmonious" society filled with consumers instead of citizens. Therefore, the party press has not been changed into an independent watchdog; it became what He (2000) has labeled "Party Publicity Inc.," oriented toward promoting the image of the Party while prospering in the market. The original master-servant relationship between the state and the media was transformed into a patron-client relationship (Lee He, & Huang, 2006, 2007) sustaining the operation of Party Publicity Inc. Given this patron-client relationship, media organizations are likely to have few qualms about heeding the government's call for them to extend their global reach.

### **Development of Foreign News Reporting in Local Chinese Media**

In relation to the context outlined above, foreign news in the Chinese media has long been part of the country's image-building project. Mao Zedong famously proclaimed to "let [our reporters] span the earth, let the whole world hear our voice" (cited in Nan, 1997, p. 25). In the early years of the People's Republic of China (PRC), the growth of international news reporting accompanied the growth of China's national diplomacy. Reporters often traveled with diplomats (Feng, 2001). The first international reporting team in the history of the PRC was sent in 1954 to report on the Geneva Conference, in which the PRC presented itself to the world for the first time as an independent sovereign country. One year later, another international news reporting team was sent to cover the Bandung Conference. In other words, the main purpose of developing foreign news in PRC's early years was to expose the brand-new country to the international community and to gain international support. Hence the current efforts to project soft power to the world through foreign news reporting are actually a continuation of an older tradition.

Carried out as part of the country's public diplomacy, foreign news reporting in China has traditionally been a specialty of a few national media organizations. Xinhua, CCTV, *People's Daily*, and China Radio International (CRI) in particular have arguably constituted China's "national team" of foreign news reporting. Local media were largely excluded due to limited financial resources and restrictive media policy. For a long period of time, local media's foreign news relied primarily on aggregating information from the national media and international news agencies. But in the past few years, with the deepening

media reform, the local media has also begun to invest substantially in foreign news reporting. Although most of the media outlets have not yet built any foreign bureaus, they are eager to "be present" at the sites of major international news events. Specifically, since the Iraq War in 2003 and the South Asian Tsunami in 2004, local media in China has started to send "parachute" reporters to the sites of major international news events. Nowadays, foreign news is produced by and presented in thousands of local Chinese media outlets in various ways.

The motivations behind the Chinese local media's foreign news reporting efforts will be analyzed more concretely in the following sections; however, three basic background considerations can be noted here. First, the successful operation of the local media economies in China during the recent decade means that the local media in major cities, such as Shanghai and Guangzhou, is now financially capable of running their own foreign news reporting. According to a report by the Media Economic Research Center of China, the top 10 most profitable press groups in China in 2010 were earning profits ranging from US\$25.3 million to US\$107.5 million.

Second, local media should be relatively less burdened by the "political tasks" of foreign news reporting. They may find more room to produce more "market-oriented" foreign news because they are under looser control by the state compared to the national media. In addition, studies of international news have pointed out that the news media often localizes international news to suit the interests and needs of their audience (Clausen, 2004; Cohen, Levy, Roeh, & Gurevitch, 1996; Lee, Chan, & Zhou, 2011). But as Sreberny-Mohammadi (2002) argued, existing studies often confound the "national" with the "local," and what many studies dubbed "localization" is essentially the "nationalization" of international news. In a huge country such as China, the national perspective on an international event can be significantly different from various local perspectives. Whether local media could provide distinctive local perspectives on foreign affairs is therefore an important question for analysis.

Third, although moving aggressively toward foreign news reporting, many local Chinese media organizations have yet to build any foreign bureaus. Hence, their foreign news production efforts (not including translating news stories from wire services) mainly consist of sending parachute journalists abroad. The practice of parachute journalism, however, has long been criticized by scholars and practitioners alike (Martin, 2011; Palmer & Fontan, 2007). Thrust into areas unfamiliar to them, "parachutists" often lack an understanding of the contexts behind the current events they report on, or they simply may not speak the local language. Over time, experienced parachutists may accumulate much experience reporting big events such as crises and disasters, but as Hess (1996) put it, parachute journalists may "know a great deal about covering crises but not necessarily much about the crisis they are covering" (p. 100). The possible limitations of parachute journalism have to be kept in mind when analyzing the local Chinese media's foreign news production.

### **Research Questions, Case Selection, and Data Sources**

To recapitulate, consistent with the government's policy of "going out" and supported by the growth of financial capabilities, media organizations in China are expanding their investment in foreign

news reporting. In addition to national media such as Xinhua and CCTV, local media is also entering the arena of foreign news production, including sending reporters to the scene of major international events.

There is a lack of concrete analysis in the extant literature regarding the motivations, processes, and outcomes of Chinese local media's foreign news production. This research, therefore, uses the Japanese earthquake in 2011 as an entry point for analyzing the development of foreign news reporting by the Guangzhou media. Our general concern is how China's growing international prominence and its eagerness to project soft power has shaped local media's organization, production, and presentation of foreign news. Specifically, we address three concrete questions:

1. What are the driving forces and motivations behind Guangzhou media's development of foreign news reporting in the past decade?
2. How is the reporting of major foreign news events organized and conducted?
3. How do the motivations behind foreign news reporting and the actual practices shape the characteristics of the content produced by the Guangzhou media?

We focus on Guangzhou because of its special geopolitical positions and vibrant local media scene. Known as the "Southern Gateway to China," Guangzhou is the center of the Guangdong province, the pioneering province of China's economic reform where three of the first four Special Economic Zones of China (Shenzhen, Zhuhai, and Shantou) were established. Over the years, Guangdong has built up one of the strongest provincial economies in the country, and Guangdong is closely connected with the international community. It is the home of 30 million overseas Chinese. It also borders Hong Kong and Macau, the two ex-colonies (of Britain and Portugal, respectively) that have long been serving as important contact points between China and the West.

These factors have contributed to the formation of an outward-looking and vibrant media market. In January 1996, Guangdong established China's first press conglomerate, the *Guangzhou Daily Press Group* (GDPG). Two years later, the *Southern Daily Press Group* (SDPG) and the *Yangcheng Evening Press Group* (YEPG) were established. In 2010, the GDPG and SDPG earned profits of US\$57.3 million and US\$27.6 million, respectively, and were among the 10 most profitable press groups in China.

Given this background, the Guangzhou media is, unsurprisingly, also among the local media organizations pioneering in foreign news production. During the 2011 Japanese earthquake, the GDPG and SDGP alone combined to send more than 20 reporters to Japan. The case selected should therefore be illustrative of the development of foreign news reporting by the Chinese local media.

Methodologically, this study is a case study of two typical newspapers: the *Guangzhou Daily* (GD) of the GDPG and *Southern Metro* (Metro) of the SDPG. They are both among the most economically successful newspapers within their respective press groups, and they are both leading players in developing international news reporting in the region. This research has combined the textual analysis of newspaper reportage, archival research, and in-depth interviews. The textual analysis was qualitative and

interpretative in nature. We collected the earthquake coverage in numerous Guangzhou newspapers and read particularly closely the coverage by *GD* and *Metro*. Both newspapers devoted substantial pages to the earthquake, and a significant proportion of the coverage was contributed by their own dispatched journalists. When reading and analyzing the coverage, we paid attention to the themes of the news articles, the use of specific lexicons and metaphors, headline style, and the sources being quoted. We also paid attention to the use of photos and graphics that accompanied the coverage as well as the page design.

Archival research involved collecting articles discussing foreign news reporting from the professional journals published by *GD* and *Metro* (*Grand Media* and *Southern Media Research*, respectively). We also collected relevant government documents, press releases, and articles from major national trade journals.

Last, in late 2011, we conducted in-depth interviews with six journalists. Given our focus on *GD* and *Metro*, five of the interviewees came from the two newspapers and four of them were the core members of the reporting teams in Japan (the remaining journalist was in charge of the development of foreign news for one of the newspapers). We interviewed a sixth journalist from *Guangzhou TV* (GZTV) to obtain some information and perspectives from a television journalist. In the case of the Japanese earthquake, the three local broadcasting groups also sent their reporting teams abroad. But compared to the print media, the TV reporting teams were smaller. The stations also gave relatively limited air time to the event. Therefore, we used the experience of the sixth journalist only as supplementary material. Among the six interviewees, two were in managerial positions and four were frontline reporters. There were five males and one female, and they all had experience working on foreign news reporting assignments. Some were interviewed multiple times. Each interview lasted for about 1.5 hours<sup>3</sup>.

### **Political and Economic Imperatives**

We begin our analysis by looking into the motivations and rationales behind the development of Guangzhou media's foreign news reporting. According to our interviewees, the history of foreign news reporting by the Guangzhou media dated to the late 1990s. For Mr. Zhang, director of the international news department of *GD*, the critical event was the 1997 Hong Kong handover. According to Zhang, *GD* has conventionally treated Hong Kong news as "international." It is notable that despite Hong Kong, strictly speaking, being part of the nation (at least before colonization in the 19th century and after 1997), sending a delegate to the nearby city was so unusual that Zhang named the handover as the key event in the development of international news reporting. In addition to sending a sizable reporting team to cover the event, *GD* published a special edition containing exactly 97 pages. Mr. Zhang recalled that the paper was "sold out throughout the city." For *Metro*, foreign news reporting began at almost the same time, but instead of the handover, the newspaper highlighted the death of Princess Diana as the turning point. As an editor wrote in a publication of the newspaper, the then 16-page newspaper used 3 full pages to cover the event:

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<sup>3</sup> All interviews were conducted in Mandarin. The quotes appearing in the following sections were translated by the authors. Pseudonyms are used.

*Southern Metro* has never sold so many copies. From today's viewpoint, more pages could have been printed. The page design could be better; the writing could be better; the photos could have better resolution. But that was 1997. In 1997, Guangzhou media were already leading the way within the whole country. (Liu, 2004, p. 33)

Clearly, both *GD* and *Metro* saw their coverage as significant *market success*, instead of professional or political successes. The outcome emphasized was how the papers "sold out." In fact, in our interviews and in various professional journal articles, the editors of both newspapers have recognized foreign news reporting as one of their most competitive products or "fist products" (*qūan tóu chǎn pǐn*). Such recognition of the "market value" of foreign news is based on the perception that readers are "highly" interested in foreign news. This is grounded in an image of the "cosmopolitan Guangzhou people." Mr. Zhang pointed out that following the success of economic reform in the region, the Guangzhou people are financially well-off enough to become the first group of Chinese tourists traveling around the world. In his eyes, the Guangzhou people are open to the world, and they have developed a curiosity and interest in foreign news because of frequent international encounters. "People in this place do not find the world a strange place," he remarked. Zhang's remarks also partly explain the Guangzhou media's huge interest in covering the Japanese earthquake. Japan has long been an important country in the international news pages of the Guangzhou newspapers because the country is one of the most popular tourist destinations for the city's residents.

In addition to readers, media managers believe that potential advertisers also value foreign news, not only because of its ability to attract eyeballs, but also because of its "symbolic value." This constitutes another economic incentive for the Guangzhou media to develop foreign news. Mr. Wu of *GD*, for instance, agreed that the "internationality" of foreign news gives people a feeling of being "high class," and this can become an important consideration for advertisers who want to position their products as such. It should be noted that, in contemporary Chinese media, the "sacred wall" between the editorial and advertising departments that is a crucial feature of news organizations in liberal democratic countries does not exist. It is not uncommon for journalists to interact with advertisers directly. In fact, in our interviews, news managers often talked proudly about the compliments they received from advertisers. Advertisers' positive evaluation is seemingly one important indicator of the success of foreign news coverage.

Certainly, the development of foreign news reporting in the Guangzhou media is not motivated only by commercial considerations. It is also articulated with state politics and government policies. As mentioned earlier, the Chinese government has adopted a "going-out" policy and encouraged the national media to develop their international reporting. This policy can be regarded as an attempt to project China's soft power onto the international arena. This policy constitutes an important background for the local media's development of foreign news coverage. In a speech given at the *People's Daily* in 2008, China's President Hu Jintao urged media organizations to be "more self-demanding," "more sophisticated," and "more responsible" in presenting China to the world (Hu, 2008). Echoing this call, the Guangdong government encouraged media organizations under its administration to develop foreign news reporting. As Lin Xiong, the propaganda chief of the Guangdong government, said, having one of the most influential media outlets in China is a great privilege of Guangdong. The provincial government endeavors to take



advantage of it “to promote the image of the province and boost its economic and cultural development,” especially in the international arena (China News Agency, 2010).

In the managerial discourse of Guangzhou media organizations, “going-out” is a frequently used term. In January 2010, SDGP, which owns *Metro*, sent a high-profile reporting team of seven journalists to cover the Haitian earthquake. Given that the coverage of such international disasters often requires heavy financial and personnel investment, it is common practice for the local media organizations in China to send reporters in the name of the media “Group” and share among the outlets within the “Group” the content being produced. In summarizing the Haiti experience, a news manager at *Metro* paid tribute to the government’s “going-out” policy:

As China endeavors to build a new world communication order, metropolitan media ought to make use of the advantage of its wide audience and take initiatives to engage in reporting major international events. . . . *Metro’s* idea of “going-out” is in line with the development strategy of the Southern Daily Press Group. As the director of [the Group] said: “From now on, wherever big news happens, [the Group’s] reporters shall appear.” (Nan, 2010a, p. 22)

The above extract shows how the state’s discourses are appropriated to justify the commercially driven development of foreign news reporting. “To build a new world communication order” followed closely the imperative issued by President Hu. Indeed, in our in-depth interviews, both *Metro* and *GD* reporters said that they often came across the term “going-out” in the editorial guidelines and oral communication with senior editors. For example, Mr. Li, a foreign news reporter at *Metro*, recalled that the idea was channeled to him by editors at different levels, including his immediate supervisor, the department head, and the chief editor. The significance placed by the Press Group on foreign reporting was conveyed in many ways, including the experience that, in the case of the Haitian earthquake, “Wang Chunfoo [general chief editor of SDPG] came out to talk [to us], and then . . . coming back after the reporting, Yang Xingfeng [the publisher of SDPG] treated us a dinner. . . . Very high level.”

The development of foreign news reporting in the Guangzhou media is therefore a classic example of the compatibility between political and economic imperatives driving the Chinese media to serve as Party Publicity Inc. (He, 2000). Yet motivation and rationale do not determine news content by themselves. Thus, in the next section, we turn to examining the actual process of news production related to major international events.

### **Resource Mobilization**

Given the need to “go out,” *Metro* has adjusted its organizational set-up to facilitate foreign news production, mainly by hiring reporters for the international news desk. Before 2008, the international news department was essentially a translation desk, with editors working on wire stories. Mr. Li, who was an editor in the international news department, became the department’s first reporter in 2008. As of 2011, the department has two full-time reporters. One direct implication of having full-time reporters is an increase in the number of foreign reporting assignments. Li’s work includes supplementary reporting for

wire stories when he is not out of the country, but every year he has five to six foreign reporting assignments.

The situation at *GD* is more complicated. Because of the increasing prominence of disasters and major accidents within China, *GD* established a "breaking news department" in 2005 that is in charge of covering these events. When the Japanese earthquake occurred, the breaking news department believed that the event should fall under their area of responsibility. At the same time, the international news department of *GD*, though without its own reporters, also felt that it should be in charge of coordinating the coverage. The coverage of the earthquake, therefore, involved negotiation and collaboration between the two units.

However, from the above description, one can see that foreign news reporting is still in its infancy. In 2011, *Metro*, after all, had only two full-time international news reporters, and *GD* had none. Therefore, given the strategic importance of foreign news reporting exercises and the lack of a fully established set-up, major foreign news assignments often involve the mobilization of resources from the whole news organization. As a *Metro* news manager described, every foreign reporting assignment is "a collective battle" fought by "a whole army" of journalists (Nan, 2010b).

The "collective battle" begins in the preparation stage before the reporters' departure. During the Japanese earthquake, all our interviewees acknowledged the help they received from colleagues. Take visa application, for example. For the Chinese to go overseas, visa application is usually a long and complicated procedure. Both *Metro* reporter Mr. Gong and *GZTV* reporter Mr. Bao opined that visa issues could be a major reason why local media cannot "go out." But for *Metro* and *GZTV*, connections with the embassies of foreign countries that have been nurtured by reporters become crucial in times of foreign breaking news assignments. Mr. Wu of *GD* also stated that the intra-organizational procedure of giving permits to reporters to go to foreign countries is nowadays "normalized" such that the process can be done in hours.

More generally, different interviewees have highlighted the cooperative atmosphere in the newsroom when preparing for foreign reporting assignments. Even those who are not directly involved in the assignment are willing to help. One example is equipment preparation. Mr. Gong and Mr. Li of *Metro* said that within 10 hours they got all the equipment they needed for the Japanese earthquake assignment, including specialized tents, blankets, coats, cooking facilities, instant food, and emergency medicines. The preparation was actually done by a photographer at the news organization who happened to be a member of a local hiking club.

Apart from commanding resources within the news organization, the foreign news reporters also have access to governmental resources. Since "going-out" is a government policy, the government is willing to share its overseas resources with the reporters. Mr. Li recalled that, in the case of the Haitian earthquake, his reporting was greatly assisted by the Overseas Affairs Office (OAO) of the Guangdong government, which put him in contact with the leader of the Chinese community in the Central American region. The overseas Chinese community treated the *Metro* reporters as "distinguished guests from home country" and offered various resources useful for their reporting assignment. The *Metro* reporters were

even able to hire a military helicopter to enter Haiti through Dominica with the help of a Dominican Chinese.

Li's experience in Haiti is also illustrative of the importance of the overseas Chinese community as a resource pool. As mentioned in the background section, Guangdong is the home province of 30 million overseas Chinese. In addition, with the growth of the Chinese economy in recent years, more and more Chinese people can afford going overseas to study, travel, or do business. The presence of overseas Chinese constitutes an important incentive for local media to cover foreign events. At the same time, overseas Chinese can serve as fixers, stringers, sources, or resource providers. During the Japanese earthquake, reporters from *Metro*, *GD*, and *GZTV* all mentioned that their drivers and translators were from the overseas Chinese community and that their assistance was vital because the reporters themselves did not speak Japanese.

Last, resources for foreign news reporting also come from advertisers. As discussed earlier, many advertisers in China are interested in associating their products with international news, and journalists in China often have direct contact with advertisers. It is not uncommon for journalists to accept an advertiser's sponsorship to cover part or all of the costs of overseas trips under the condition of advertising the sponsor's products in certain ways. In the case of the Japanese earthquake, a company manufacturing radiation-proof outfits heard of *GD*'s plan to send reporters to Japan and sent a set of these outfits to the reporters. In return, *GD* showed a picture of their reporters wearing the outfits. The photo became essentially product placement. The journalists themselves do not see such "cooperation" as a problem. As Mr. Wu put it in the interview, "We just showed that once in our coverage. They didn't have special requests. So I just talked to the editor and showed the outfit."

Taken together, the above description shows that resources from many directions were pooled together at times of foreign breaking news reporting assignments. Nevertheless, the discussion also shows the limitations of the current practice. In the in-depth interviews, journalists from both the international news department and the breaking news department within *GD* "complained" about the lack of clarity at the organizational level regarding which department should handle foreign disaster reporting. This lack of clarity can lead to unwanted interdepartmental conflicts. More fundamentally, the need for the organization to pool together resources from journalists involved *and not involved* in the assignment only serves to highlight the lack of a well-established support and resource management system.

### **Foreign News as Power Display**

Given the historical background, motivations, and resource mobilization processes, what are the characteristics of the content produced by the Guangzhou media in the case of the Japanese earthquake? We closely examined the content of *GD* and *Metro* during the first week after the earthquake, that is, from March 12 to 18 (reporters were called back to China after March 18 due to the nuclear crisis). Generally speaking, the earthquake was the biggest story in both newspapers. The story occupied the full front page of both newspapers on six of the seven days, combining bolded headlines and big cross-column photos. Only on March 15 did the earthquake concede its top position in the news agenda to the speech by Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao at the annual governmental meeting held in Beijing. In terms of the amount

of coverage, *Metro* devoted 11 to 22 tabloid-sized pages to the earthquake per day, whereas *GD* devoted 7 to 16 broadsheet-sized pages to the event.

Examining the bylines, the majority of the coverage in both newspapers was still provided by the international and Chinese news agencies. It was especially so in the first 2 days after the earthquake when the parachute journalists from Guangzhou had just arrived in Japan. However, the parachute journalists' bylines gradually appeared and occupied more and more news space. By March 18, *Metro* reporters had already published a total of 21 pages of news content produced by their own reporters in Japan, while *GD* had published six pages of such content. For *Metro*, the first report by their journalists in Japan was published on March 13. It was written by a health reporter who was in Tokyo originally working on another assignment. Her reportage, titled "12 Hours: *Metro* Reporter Arrived at Miyagi from Tokyo," mainly described what she saw and heard during her journey to the disaster site:

This is the second day after the quake. I got up at 6:30 in the morning, and began checking the transportation information to the disaster site. . . . Having a rough idea of the route map in mind, I packed my stuff and set off immediately to Haneda Airport in Tokyo. . . . I wanted to grab something to eat when passing a grocery store, but all food has gone and nothing left. . . . At around 8, I arrived at Haneda Airport. (*Metro*, March 13, 2011, p. A8)

In this extract, the trip taken by the reporter has itself become a news story. Combined with pictures of the earthquake victims and other articles concerning other *Metro* journalists' journeys to Japan, the reportage occupied an entire news page. Similarly, on March 15, the first report by the parachute journalists of *GD* appeared, a piece titled "Paralyzed Tokyo: *GD* Reporter Experiencing Transportation Chaos." The report also highlighted and centered on the presence of the journalists at the disaster site. Indeed, not only *GD* and *Metro*, but all seven Guangzhou newspapers that sent reporters to cover the earthquake prominently reported the "news" concerning the departure and return of their reporters, as well as their reporters' major actions during the reporting trip. Amid the coverage of the earthquake and its aftermath in the newspapers, one could find headlines such as "News Express Reporters Arriving at Japan" (*News Express*, March 12, 2011), "Thirteen Reporters of the *Southern Daily Press Group* Arriving at Japan" (*Metro*, March 13, 2011), and so on.

The presence of the parachute journalists was also highlighted visually on the newspaper page. For instance, on March 16, *GD* published four pages of content produced by their journalists in Japan. On one page, eight pictures were shown, and five of them centered on *GD* reporters working with a camera or a camcorder on the scene. On another page, a map of Japan was shown under the title "Guangzhou Daily Reporters on the Spot," with pictures of the seven reporters shown next to where they were sent. This graphic provided a visual representation highlighting the point that *GD* reporters were not just there in Japan, but also *everywhere* in Japan. *Metro* adopted the same strategy of "advertising" themselves by showing the images of the reporting team. The newspaper also used the graphic presentation of the map of Japan to showcase the locations and movements of their reporting team.

Certainly, emphasizing journalistic presence at the locations of major news events is a widely recognized strategy for the construction and maintenance of journalistic authority (Zelizer, 1992). At disaster sites, the presence of journalists is also tied to their role as witnesses. However, in the example above, what the photos and graphics visually highlighted was not so much the role of the journalists as witnesses or authoritative interpreters, but the journalists' and the news organizations' powerfulness and resourcefulness. In fact, the journalists themselves were aware of how their presence at the disaster site was a symbol of power and resourcefulness. As Mr. Wu of *GD* put it in the interview, being at the disaster site is like making a statement:

It is to tell our readers and advertisers we are a super newspaper. Look, we can go as far as Japan. We can report in the situation as tough as in an earthquake. Even though we ended up with no real stories to tell, the fact that we made it there is itself the story.

The eagerness to display power and resourcefulness is manifested not only in what was published, but also in what the reporters aimed at but failed to achieve. For *Metro's* Ms. Song, the most important stories a dispatched reporter can work on are stories from authorities of that country. Therefore, as the only person on *Metro's* reporting team who can speak Japanese, she tried various ways, though unsuccessfully, to contact Japanese government officials and get them to speak exclusively to *Metro*. Mr. Li also mentioned that one of his biggest regrets in reporting the Japanese earthquake was the lack of any opportunity to interview high-ranking Japanese officials. The emphasis on interviewing top officials is indicative of the underlying logic of the Japanese earthquake coverage: Journalists were sent to Japan not so much to witness the disaster's aftermath than to find ways to demonstrate the financial, social, human, and symbolic capital of the news organizations.

In the conceptual discussion, we argue that the local media's foreign news coverage should potentially generate news stories that truly "localize" instead of merely "nationalize" foreign events. In fact, localized stories appeared from the first day of the Japanese earthquake coverage in both *GD* and *Metro*. Beyond articles that dealt with how the earthquake would influence China in terms of diplomacy, security, economy, and tourism, the two newspapers also published articles adopting a distinctively local angle. For example, on March 12, *GD* included two pages reporting on the Chinese victims in Japan, and half of the articles were specifically about those from Guangdong. However, this localized news was produced mainly by reporters based in Guangzhou that did not leave for Japan. In contrast, while the journalists sent to Japan did produce news aimed at the domestic audience, the focus was on Chinese people in general instead of Guangdong people in particular. As *Metro's* Mr. Gong reflected, "The practical constraints were too substantial. It was difficult enough to find a Chinese, let alone one from the Guangdong province."

Notably, the need to find Chinese people is not entirely due to the need to domesticate the story; more fundamentally, because most of the journalists did not speak Japanese, having sources who could speak Chinese (or at least English) became a necessity for producing any news reports. As a result, presented in their reports were mostly stories of one after another Chinese-speaking individual experiencing and surviving the earthquake. These stories were unorganized, fragmented, and generally detached from the broader context of the disaster. In this sense, *Metro's* and *GD's* reporting on the

Japanese earthquake is an exemplary case of the limitations of parachute journalism: without adequate preparation and without journalists who understand the society and culture of the country being reported, parachute journalists often fail to present a foreign news event in a coherent and meaningful way.

### **Discussion**

In sum, this article shows that the Guangzhou media expended resources and efforts on foreign news reporting as a result of both political and economic incentives at a time when China's presence and influence in the international arena is increasing. Economically, the Guangzhou media is empowered by a successful local media economy, and foreign news is perceived to be marketable because of its symbolic value of being "high class." Journalists understand the value of foreign news partly based on their perception of a cosmopolitan Guangzhou public and partly through their interactions with advertisers. Politically, the development of foreign news reporting is encouraged by both the central and local governments, which are keen to promote the image of China in the international arena. It is consistent with the country's attempt to build up soft power and to counter perceived dominance in international communication by Western media organizations.

Of course, the local media's coverage of foreign news is not targeted at a foreign and international audience. The analysis here does not argue that the local media's coverage of the Japanese earthquake constitutes the projection of soft power. Our contention is that China's desire to project its soft power to the international community constitutes the contextual background against which the local media develops foreign news reporting. Therefore, the characteristics of foreign news reporting in the local media are likely to be shaped by the country's emphasis on international image building. More specifically, although political and economic factors have helped Chinese local media defy the worldwide trend of cutting back expenditures on foreign news reporting, these factors have also, arguably, led to an emphasis on displaying power and resources when the journalists actually work on the reporting assignments.

It is not to say that the journalists did not attempt to provide informative and meaningful stories. It is also not to say that every news article published about the Japanese earthquake exhibited the urge to display power. There were certainly typical hard news stories providing basic information related to the earthquake. But on the whole, a substantial part of the coverage, especially that produced by parachute journalists, exhibited a distinctive urge to display the reporting exercise itself. Foreign news reporting was seen as a collective battle, and the emphasis was on showcasing the capability of the news organizations and their journalists to enter the battle and win it.

As a result, one may criticize the news products for failing to deepen people's understanding of the event. The journalists we interviewed shared this evaluation of their own reporting. Nonetheless, the journalists attributed the failure mainly to the practical difficulties they encountered. In fact, our analysis shows that a foreign news reporting assignment often involves the mobilization of resources from within the whole news organization, including reporters unrelated to the assignment. This model of resource mobilization also highlights the lack of institutionalization. There is no established system of support for the journalists sent abroad, and hence the parachute journalists faced huge practical difficulties when they

were in the field. This inevitably affected what coverage they could achieve. At the same time, it remains questionable if the coverage would have been much more meaningful even if the journalists had had more support and achieved what they wanted to achieve, such as getting an exclusive interview with a top official. The logic of the marketable power display undermined the journalists' roles as witnesses and storytellers at the sites of natural disasters.

The logic of the marketable power display also undermined the capability of the journalists to produce localized reporting of the Japanese earthquake. As discussed earlier, producing localized, instead of merely nationalized (Sreberny-Mohammadi, 2002), stories of foreign news events may actually constitute a special contribution by local media through its own foreign reporting assignments. During the Japanese earthquake, the number of stories focusing on the Guangdong people in Japan illustrated the awareness of the Guangzhou media of the need for localization. Yet the localized stories were contributed mainly by home-based reporters. Again, while the journalists sent to Japan argued that practical difficulties made it virtually impossible for them to work on localized stories, they did not see the lack of localized stories as a major problem in their coverage. Certainly, the journalists' perceptions of themselves being hugely constrained by basic obstacles, such as access to sources and language problems, were also important. In fact, these obstacles and their detrimental effect on the quality of reporting are illustrative of the critique against parachute journalism by American scholars (Palmer & Fanton, 2007). Hess (1996) has argued that parachute journalists often do not understand the place where they are heading. Therefore, they often know a lot about crisis and disaster reporting without knowing much about the crises and disasters that they are reporting on. The same critique can be leveled against the current practice of foreign news reporting by the local media in China.

This study, on the whole, shows the distinctive characteristics and limitations of foreign news reporting by contemporary Chinese local media, and we have interpreted these developments within the broader context of China's eagerness to build up soft power (Wang, 2011). Even though the local media primarily faces a domestic instead of international audience, the broader context of China's image-building efforts is not inconsequential to what the local media does. In one sense, one important contribution of this article is that it shows that policy initiatives oriented toward the outside world can shape news practices that are ultimately oriented only to the local community.

This study has focused only on Guangzhou and not on other major centers of local media (e.g., Shanghai) in China. Although our focus on Guangzhou is appropriate for the purpose of the present analysis given the specific geopolitical positions of the city and the prosperity of the local economy and media market, analyses of the media in other localities in China are needed to further substantiate this picture. How local media from different parts of the country posit themselves in the field of foreign news reporting, whether they can break away from the urge to display power and resourcefulness, and whether they can develop a better system of resource mobilization and management are issues for researchers to continue to study.

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