

THE CLASH OF TWO IMAGES

CHINA'S MEDIA OFFENSIVE IN THE UNITED STATES

Amid flashing neon images of bottles of Budweiser and interactive games that include willing pedestrians as part of a display, there is a massive, 60-by-40-foot billboard taking the second-highest position on 2 Times Square. Millions of people see it every week. The LED sign displays images of pandas, folk dancers and natural landscapes. Unlike other advertisements that promote products, this one promotes a country.

The ad, along with high-priced office space nearby, belongs not to a tourism bureau but to Xinhua, China's state-run news service. Xinhua's choice of such a prominent location is part of its expansion in markets from America to South Africa. But at a cost of as much as \$4 million a year, is it worth it?

“The Chinese government is launching its ‘media aircraft carriers’ in the U.S. to influence the Western audience culturally and politically,” said Professor Xiaohong Xuan, managing editor of the Information Center for Social Sciences of Renmin University of China.

Xinhua's global expansion is just part of China's \$7 billion campaign to increase the country's media presence overseas. At a time when most Western newspaper and broadcasting companies are scaling back, China's state-run media organizations are fast growing and reaching into every corner of the world, especially in North America and Africa. Last year, China Central Television launched its CCTV America station in

Washington, D.C., employing nearly a hundred journalists, half of them Americans. CCTV News, a new syndication service launched in 2011, now claims 200 million viewers outside China, according to an article in *The New York Times*. The *China Daily* newspaper created its U.S. and European versions and has paid about \$300,000 a day to insert its front page in the center of *The Times*, even after *The Times* ran a story revealing former Premier Wen Jiabao's family wealth.

Ever since 2008, the state-run media outlets have become a tool of strengthening China's global influence. "The level of communication skills and technologies determines who can influence the world more forcefully and spread its culture and value more widely," China's President Hu stated at the 3rd Plenary Session of the 17th Party Congress in 2008. That statement shaped the direction and provided support of Chinese media's outreach effort.

In the United States, it is hard not to notice the Chinese media's presence. "Of course, I have noticed the media expansion," said Stephen Orlins, president of the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations. "From CCTV to Xinhua, it is a full-on media offensive."

Some see the media offensive campaign as a way to output the Chinese culture and values to the United States. Professor Xuan said: "The U.S. has been imposing its values onto the Chinese audience for too long. Only if China and the U.S. have an equal voice before the global audience, can the two countries begin a truly equal dialogue."

On the other hand, the rationale behind the media expansion is also partially based on the notion that biased Western news media have painted a distorted portrait of China, The Times reported. "Hostile international powers are strengthening their efforts to Westernize and divide us," former President Hu Jintao wrote last year in a party journal. "We must be aware of the seriousness and complexity of the struggles and take powerful measures to prevent and deal with them."

Young Chinese netizens are at times angry at what they see as Western media's biased news coverage. Michael Zhao, managing editor at Asia Society's Center on U.S.-China Relations, pointed out that, "They have formed Web sites such as 'Anti-CNN' to counterstrike at the Western influence."

Yes, it is becoming a media war. When Hurricane Sandy devastated the northeastern shore, CCTV's Washington bureau sent out five teams of crew, vastly covering the natural disaster along with criticism of the government's inability to cope with it.

Beijing's initiative to increase its volume to a global audience is raising alarms in the U.S., according to a Times report. "We are engaged in an information war, and we are losing that war," Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton warned a Congressional committee last year, citing the growing influence of state-backed outlets like Russia Today and CCTV.

Does it work?

Given such lavish and ambitious spending on media outreach efforts, is there an audience interested in reading or watching Chinese media content? If so, are Chinese media conveying their messages in a cost-effective manner?

As of now, the Chinese media outlets are facing some difficulties. First of all, global public opinion is still largely shaped or swayed by the Western media because of its established platform and credibility. On the other hand, Chinese media organizations have yet to establish their legitimacy before a global audience.

Alan Paul, author of the book "Big in China" and of the Wall Street Journal column "The Expat Life," lived in Beijing for three years and still travels there occasionally. He said credibility would only come with more objectivity. "If they (the Chinese media) continue to vilify political dissidents and mute them on critical issues, no matter how much money they spend, people won't take anything seriously," Mr. Paul said in a telephone interview.

Mr. Orlins said: "The Chinese government's goal of 'Chinese culture going global' is almost like a joke. When the government sets out to control the media, it's doomed to fail. Neither China nor the U.S. could ever achieve this goal. It is simply not something the government can control."

Mr. Orlins said that American viewers are skeptical, even resentful about CCTV because of its status as the "mouthpiece" of the Chinese government. Therefore, he doubts that a Chinese newscast could ever attract a substantial Western audience. "I ran a

cable business for 10 years," he said. "Content didn't matter with me. What mattered to me was the viewership. The customers are voting with their clicker."

Mr. Paul sees it differently. He believes that the Chinese news coverage draws interest in the U.S., because of its refreshing viewpoint, which is different from Western media. "I know that lots of the information is propaganda," Mr. Paul said, referring to CCTV and China Daily. "But I watch the news with that in mind. The coverage is still valuable to the American viewers. You always learn something about China."

Politics is not the sole purpose of China's media expansion, though. As economic ties grow stronger and deeper between the U.S. and China, the latter needs to attract investment as well as plant its business in America. Meanwhile, American business people are trying to better understand the Chinese as well.

Anthony Walton, vice chairman, Americas, at Standard Chartered Bank, believes that the Chinese media could have a sizable market in the U.S. "I love China. I travel to China often. But when I'm not there, I'd like to read about it. This vast country fascinates me." Mr. Walton said, adding that he is always interested in learning from a different perspective about the world's most populous country.

But is Chinese media content perceived positively? In 2011, prior to President Hu Jintao's state visit to the U.S., China launched an extra large billboard in Times Square displaying a minute-long publicity video as a "public diplomacy campaign," described by Xinhua. With images of Chinese celebrities like the basketball player Yao Ming and Kung Fu movie star Jackie Chan, the video touts the country's achievements in art,

culture, sports and science. However, a study conducted by Professor Yu at Renmin University discovered that the video's target audience, Americans, have little reaction to these images. Professor Yu and his team recorded the brain electrical activity of dozens of Americans while they watched the video. The readings showed that most participants did not show any excitement during the video, while a few of them only showed minor excitement at the image of Yao Ming.

"They (China's state-run media giants) need to understand and respect the American culture instead of simply imposing the message onto the Western audience," Professor Yu said.

Mr. Zhao at Asia Society believes that the Chinese government is heavily investing in the media platform rather than the content. "At a time when most Western audiences are resentful of Chinese propaganda, it's really important to have strong and personable narratives," he said. "They try to grab eyeballs, but fail to connect to our hearts."

When it comes to the billions of dollars Beijing has spent on projects like the Times Square billboard, Mr. Orlins smiled and shrugged. "It certainly wouldn't hurt, but does it work?" he said. "They have a lot more to learn."

How to make it work

Professor Yu has been the mastermind of many media outreach initiatives in China. He offered some long-term and short-term approaches.

The first is platform. "The Chinese government is not using new media wisely." Professor Yu said. He believes that the traditional media organizations in the West have been so well established that it's very difficult for newcomers to take a bite. But the new media platforms have enormous potential for niche markets. Chinese media outlets should use this opportunity to expand their influence in the global audience, he said.

One of the strategies that the Chinese media is already harnessing is the use of the Western media as its own platform. They call this strategy "to beat a strong opponent with little but smart force." CCTV-News is a new syndication service founded by China Central Television with the goal "report China to the world." Officially launched in May 2011, CCTV-News is a newborn baby in the international media world.

CCTV-News service cannot compete with The Associated Press or Reuters. But it can provide breaking news in China faster than anyone else. It can break exclusive stories that no one else has access to. Thus, it has been gradually establishing its working relationship with media outlets in Asia and North America. Now CCTV-News is delivering a news service to media organizations around the world in languages including English, French, Arabic, Russian and Spanish.

Secondly, the Chinese state-controlled newspapers and broadcasting companies have separate divisions working on two different versions of the same stories, one for a

Chinese audience and the other for an international one. In this process, lots of work is duplicative, and lots of are wasted. Professor Yu believes that the domestic news teams often are very resourceful. They have the best talent and the best equipment, and can access more sources. If there could be an organizational restructuring to merge the two divisions, the contents serving the international audience would have a much higher quality and attract more viewers.

Credibility remains the key factor. China is not merely selling products overseas anymore, it's also trying to sell its image to the global audience. But the "tariff" is credibility. If Chinese news organizations don't establish their reputation as objective and fair, however much the Chinese government invests in the overseas propaganda, the news will not be taken seriously. However, a reputation of objective media reporting will have to be established over a long period of time.

Outlook on China's media offensive

In China, media reform will have to coincide with political reform. The newly elected President Xi and Premier Li started their decade-long leadership by touting reform, from cracking down on corruption to restraining energy consumption. Chinese people are skeptically optimistic about the next 10 years.

"Xi is more likely to push for real reform than his predecessor, Hu," said Yong Zhang, a businessman who travels between Beijing and New York City. "Xi is a princeling, which will enable him to harness his political assets in order to achieve his goals, whereas Hu did not have any background in the political hierarchy."

The Chinese media is expected to open up more within next 10 years as well, said Mr. Zhang. But many people predict that real reform won't happen until 2023.

"If all goes well, Guangdong Communist Party Secretary Hu Chunhua will succeed Xi Jinping as the next party chief," Mr. Zhang said. "He will be a true reformer." Yes, even though President Xi has just begun the job, insiders suspect that the next president has already been chosen. It has become widely known that the Chinese politburo has the rule of skipping a generation, meaning that the previous administration plays a role in selecting not its direct successor, but the regime after that.

Therefore, many believe that what Hu Jintao wasn't able to accomplish, Hu Chunhua will. "So between 2022 and 2032, China will experience dramatic reform," Mr. Zhang said.

With media reform taking place in China, and Chinese media outlets establishing much stronger credibility internationally, the government will presumably have a more powerful voice around the globe.

The ordinary people in China already are seeing more opened media coverage on political issues. With Weibo being prevalent among more than 500 million users, the media is not a one-way street anymore. People enthusiastically despise or humorously criticize the government about social unfairness, corruption and air pollution, so much so that the government simply cannot ignore it.