The Global Times: China Talks to the World

By Hu Xijin

The Global Times, where I serve as editor-in-chief, is a product of the change in China’s media. The newspaper was launched in 1993, and its only boss is the People’s Daily. I am appointed by the People’s Daily, the Communist Party newspaper, which also has the right to terminate my position. Therefore, my work cannot possibly be at cross-purposes with the party’s line and the nation’s forward progress. However, I object to simplistic references to my newspaper as “state media.” All media in China are state media, but this label overlooks the close connection that exists between the Global Times and ordinary people and can very easily cause misunderstandings about our newspaper’s role.

The Global Times is published five times a week and also has an online version, Global Times Online, and an English-language edition, so the newspaper produces a substantial volume of content and responds quickly and effectively to breaking news. Every day our editorial staff has energetic discussion about where we should focus our reports. In selecting headline news each day, the Global Times applies the following standards: First, it must be important. Second, readers must enjoy reading it. Third, Chinese society must have the capacity to support and digest the information. By society I refer to readers, government officials, various special interests (including minority groups), and other sectors and industries.

Over the past 17 years, the Global Times has moved from publishing weekly to five times a week, and circulation has grown from under 100,000 copies per week to several hundred thousand, and finally to 1.5 million per day, making the paper one of China’s largest. Across China, you can find the Global Times at just about any newsstand. Without the public’s support and interest, we could not possibly sustain this level of sales. Therefore, when we say the Global Times has its roots in the public, this is not at all an exaggeration.

In our early days, Global Times reports were largely colorful features on various countries around the world, full of small-town anecdotes, including stories about the overseas experiences of Chinese stars and other personalities. As economic reforms deepened, and as international politics, with all of its complexities, came steadily into the lives of the Chinese, so the Global Times increased its political news coverage. More and more of our coverage now concerns Chinese foreign policy.

In the 1990s, foreign policy discussion was off limits. This changed in 1999, after the massive protests over the NATO bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, then the capital of Yugoslavia. At the time, the Global Times opened a discussion forum in which well-known Chinese scholars expressed their opinions on foreign policy. In the heat of the period, the viewpoints became more and more candid. The forum later turned to editorials that were at times quite pointed on issues related to China’s national development.

In terms of news reports directed to the outside world, the Global Times has broken many barriers. For example, in the past we had to be concerned that negative reports on other countries might displease those countries — these concerns were strongest for allies like Russia, North Korea and Vietnam. When foreign leaders would come to China on diplomatic missions, we would tread even more carefully. But all of this has changed. Now, we can openly express our displeasure with Russia’s attitude toward Chinese businessmen, for example, and we can report frankly on disagreements between China and its neighbors to the south, such as Vietnam.

When we report on China’s relations with Japan and South Korea, we can also be quite open and frank. Several years back, South Korean and Japanese diplomats voiced disappointment with our reports; the fact that we had cited critical South Korean newspaper reports of their own government was even criticized by the South Korean Embassy in Beijing. Their reasoning was that Chinese media were different from South Korean media, which could publish critical news reports while the Chinese media could not. We no longer hear these sorts of complaints. Indeed, I believe the level of respect for the facts in the Global Times is greater than you can expect to find in many South Korean newspapers, which often make factual errors, some of which are clearly intentional on the writer’s part. For example, even veteran South Korean journalists distort quotes from Global Times reports. These sorts of errors are not permitted at the Global Times. Of course, at times we may get certain details incorrect as a result of an editor’s inexperience, but each of these errors is dealt with seriously. I question whether South Korean
media are so conscientious. What’s more, South Korean media often print sensational stories about how this or that Chinese personality is in fact Korean, and when Chinese read these stories they simply find them comical. We have no way of knowing if the South Korean journalists are playing a joke, or whether they just got it wrong.

Foreigners often criticize the Global Times for being nationalistic. There are people inside China who level this accusation as well. But the Global Times is a newspaper that tries its best to speak the truth, and it reflects the dominant mentality of most Chinese people. Actually, any nation’s ideology could be labeled by other countries as nationalistic. According to our point of view, for example, many South Korean and Japanese media are nationalistic.

Among China, Japan and South Korea, China’s level of economic development lags the farthest behind, and Chinese people are much more in the habit of turning to the outside for examples to study than are their Japanese and Korean neighbors. Therefore, you could say that self-examination is a defining characteristic of Chinese thinking in this era of development. Chinese intellectuals continue to lack self-confidence. As a result, there are Chinese who join with foreigners in criticizing the Global Times as a nationalistic newspaper. We confront these criticisms calmly. I believe that everything we do will stand the test of history.

The expansion of the scope of Global Times news reports also benefits the mutual exchange between China and the world. Domestically speaking, the Global Times has expanded the Chinese public’s right to know. In the Global Times you can read both positive and negative editorials about China from the rest of the world, and you can also glimpse various actions by forces unfriendly to China. What the Dalai Lama does and says can be read about in the Global Times. The comprehensiveness of our news coverage gives our readers a foundation for a healthy worldview.

Chinese readers can understand through the Global Times just how complex China’s relationship is with the rest of the world. And by virtue of this coverage, Chinese people are also increasingly ready and able to accept this complexity. In 2004, anti-Japanese demonstrations erupted in China. Even earlier, in 1999, angry Chinese attacked the American embassy and consulates in China after the Belgrade embassy bombing. I think given the same circumstances today, Chinese would feel anger equally, but their accumulated experience in reading Global Times over the years would help them be more cool-headed and rational.

The Global Times has helped to release much of the anger Chinese feel toward America, Japan and European countries. This rarely happened in China’s media before Global Times. These feelings of discontent toward other countries exist in China, and they are something that Western countries must take seriously. China has left behind the days when foreign policy was entirely dominated by the government. Foreign policy decisions will increasingly be made on the basis of public attitudes. Global Times reports do their part in mitigating Western misjudgments about the views and attitudes of the Chinese public, and ensure that Chinese foreign policies are made on a more solid basis.

Serving as an editor-in-chief in China is not easy, and one must perhaps consider a great deal more things than editors in the West. The business models of Western media are already well established, and their position in the national life is stable. But in China, everything is characterized first and foremost by change itself. We know that if we drive a car in one direction at a constant speed, we can conserve energy. But when one must accelerate and change course constantly, this adds a whole new level of complexity and care. China’s economic reforms are an unprecedented project, and a number of new elements are being forged in this furnace of activity. The process is by no means smooth, but the results are worth waiting for. The future of the Chinese media is intrinsically linked to China’s broader future, both in its joys and its misfortunes. If one believes that a “China model” will emerge and find success in the world, then our international colleagues must give the unique model of China’s media the respect and consideration it deserves. This model, after all, serves 1.3 billion people, helping them see the world and themselves more clearly.

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