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Reporting China on the Rise:
A Study on the Field of Foreign Correspondence in
Contemporary China
當代駐華外媒場域研究

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Abstract

At the time of growing attention from the international community to understand and interpret China as a rising power and global order challenger, foreign press corps in China serve as the vital messengers and sense makers of this distant other for the global public. The pressure from transformation of media industry, change of global geopolitics and economy, as well as China’s tightening press control and ideology control all make it overwhelmingly intriguing as well as urgent to examine the field of foreign correspondence in contemporary China.

This study brings together Bourdieu’s notion of *journalistic field* and Shoemaker and Reese’s model of *Hierarchy of Influence* to map out the structure and dynamics of foreign correspondence in China during China’s President Xi Jinping’s first term in office (2012–2017). It applies a hierarchical analysis to examine the structure (power relations) and position of the field of foreign correspondence in China and how these power relations shape the news production practice to inform public vision on this rising power. Hallin and Mancini’s typology of media system is employed for a cross-national comparison of external pressure from larger field of power.

Drawing on an analysis of 101 online survey response, 19 in-depth semi-structured interview with current and former China correspondents, and discourse analysis of 151 news articles, assisted with secondhand literature of China correspondents’ self-accounts, this study examined the *habitus* and *illusio* of the agents, how they take up different positions, negotiating with different pressures from routines, organizational, and institutional levels, consequently projecting these power relations onto the final news product, and how national
prism, as reflected via the shaping power of media system and national interest of each home
country, still hold strong grip over the field of China correspondence.

Chapter 1 conceptualizes the theoretical framework for this study, a hierarchical
model of foreign correspondence field; Chapter 2 unpacks the boundary, historical trajectory,
and configuration of the field of China correspondence; Chapter 3 analyzes the habitus of
China correspondents in terms of their Chinese habitus and journalistic habitus, and proposes
two typologies of China correspondents based on their professional role perception and
positions in the field; Chapter 4 discusses press review as a source of pressure from routine
level; Chapter 5 examines the organizational structure and professional autonomy of China
correspondents and how these pressures impact their news production; Chapter 6 focuses on
institutional interruptive forces including censorship and repressive regulations; Chapter 7
tackles the national variance reflected on final news product through a comparative discourse
analysis of the media coverage on South China Sea from 12 mainstream newspapers in four
countries. The final chapter discusses and reflects on the key findings of this study, which
argue that the field of foreign correspondence in contemporary China is a rather
heteronomous one, subjected to huge external pressures from political and economic fields;
national variance still overtakes a “global media culture”.

The study is the first of its kind to extensively analyze China correspondents and their
work from the perspective of field theory. It advances our understanding of the mechanisms
of foreign correspondence, and sheds light on expanding the new journalistic field paradigm
in media and journalism study.