知理的民主，还是盲情的媒主？(英文原稿) = Informed Democracy, or involuntary mediacracy? (The English Origin of a Chinese Book Chapter)

Xinshu ZHAO, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
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Xinshu Zhao

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Xinshu ZHAO, Ph.D., Associate Professor and Associate Director
Center for Research in Journalism and Mass Communication
School of Journalism and Mass Communication
CB # 3365, Carroll Hall
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3365
Tel: 919-962-1465
Tel: 919-962-1204 (Central Office)
Fax: 919-962-0620
e-mail: zhao@email.unc.edu

There is always hope when people are forced to listen to both sides.

---- John Mill 1 (p. 157)

If democracy is to survive, it is the task of men of thought, as well as men of action, to put aside pride and prejudice; and with courage and single-minded devotion --- and above all with humility --- to find the truth and teach the truth that shall keep men free.

--- Franklin Roosevelt 2(p. 161)

A people that values its privileges above its principles soon loses both.

---- Dwight D. Eisenhower 3(p. 159)
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In “Media Coverage: Wen-Ho Lee, China, and Beyond,” 4 I argued that American media system has a problem: the foreign nations, especially China, are not competing effectively in the American free market of ideas, leading to misunderstanding and misjudgment by the American public and inappropriate policy decisions by the American government agencies.

After April 1 collision between the US and Chinese military planes in South China Sea, the media-public-government interactions within America and between the two nations showed again this problem and its adversary impact.

Was China Trying to Humiliate Us?
Or Was China Trying NOT to Be Humiliated BY Us?

To understand the mood of ordinary Chinese right after the collision, we might ask: In China, when you stand near someone else’s house, is there a generally accepted code of behavior? The answer is yes. Here it is:

You may pass by a house on a public road; you may park there if you want to visit one of the neighbors; you may approach the front door uninvited to ask for directions, or even to sell something. But please do not look into the windows with telescope and camera, and do not eavesdrop with listening devices. In China, such behavior is considered wrong and offensive, whether you stand inside or outside the owner’s property line, whether the local law explicitly prohibits it. In other words, what you do and your general proximity to the house are more important than the exact location of the property line.

For example, you can do regular jogs passing by any number of houses, and you may expect people to give you regular smiles and greetings. But don’t do any “regular reconnaissance drive” or “regular reconnaissance walk” near anyone’s house uninvited. I am sure some people do. But they shouldn’t expect smiles and greetings in return. There are programs, called “Residents’ Committees,” sort of a Chinese version of “Community Watch” in America, to check on those thieves, peeping Toms, or misbehaving youngsters. I witnessed neighbors asking such young intruders to leave. The youngsters did not argue whether they had been on private or public property. They agreed they were wrong. They apologized and left.

The situation would become dangerously tense if the “reconnaissance boys” are also known to play with knives, grenades, guns, and even more exotic toys. Even if the
boys don’t carry the weapons in a particular “reconnaissance outing,” the residents would be alarmed and resolve to protect themselves.

What if damages, injuries, or even deaths occur as a result of those “regular reconnaissance” in front of someone else’s house? I would expect, in any community in China, the residents be upset, angry and demanding compensation. I would expect the youngsters be apologetic and promise never do it again. While the details of the specific collisions might dictate whether criminal charges should be brought, under no circumstances would I expect the young intruders be hailed as heroes. I would expect the youngsters’ parents to show immediate and sincere concerns for the injured, the dead, and the grieving family.

What if the “reconnaissance bike” was also damaged, and the intruders decided, without the family’s permission, to park it inside the house that they were spying on? What if the grieving family had the youngsters arrested but, instead of putting them in jail, they footed the bill to put the youngsters in a hotel and fed them with local cuisines? In China, I would expect the parents of the youngsters be grateful for the forgiving treatment.

What if the parents show no concern for the injured, the dead, and the grieving family, but instead immediately asserted that the other family “must be” at the fault, and demand an immediate return of the “reconnaissance bike” and their reconnaissance boys? In China, such parents would be considered bullying. The grieving family, at this point, would become angrier, be pressured by relatives and neighbors to press charges, and to ask the dangerous boys be held without bond.

What if the grieving family asked for a simple apology in exchange for charges being dropped and boys released? What if the parents accordingly said “we are very sorry” and, immediately after the release, the parents and the boys taunted: “we never apologized” and “it was all their fault”? In China, such parents would be considered not only bullying, but also cunning and deceitful. I could not imagine the “reconnaissance bike” be ever returned to the boys after the taunting. Further, the court probably would have to assess some fine and some other punishment both to compensate the grieving family and to teach the misbehaving boys a lesson.

That was how most of the Chinese felt after a US military plane, during a “regular reconnaissance flights” along the Chinese coast, collided with a Chinese fighter jet on April 1, resulted in a missing Chinese pilot, who was later declared dead. After the incident, some of the ordinary Chinese also learned that US had conducted more than 200 such flights per year along the Chinese coast. The Chinese saw this as another incidents of Americans bullying the world, particularly China.

Were the Chinese Government and Chinese people at fault? That is, is the Chinese code of behavior so exotic that it is at odds with that of the other countries? There seems to be a consensus among American politicians and media commentators that
it was the Chinese who did not act according to the international norms. Is the consensus right?

I’d say, in this particular case, no. The code of behavior described above for China applies also in any of the American communities I lived in, be it in California, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Minnesota, or North Carolina: It is wrong and offensive to conduct “regular reconnaissance walk” or “regular reconnaissance drive” near somebody else’s house uninvited. Having traveled to other parts of the world, I’d say that the same code applies in most of the other cultures as well. As the Chinese perceive this as a generally accepted code of behavior, the American accusations about their not following the rule became a further evidence of American arrogance.

The American public, the politicians, and most of the leading journalists did not understand what or how the Chinese thought at the time. Dan Rather, in one of the first stories on the incident, attributed the Chinese anger to the propaganda by the Chinese government-controlled media. If Chinese are angry with Americans, it can’t be Americans’ fault. It must be the Chinese government, or so went the logic.

What the American media failed to understand is that the Chinese government’s control over the media has been significantly weakened in the past 15 years, as the number of media outlets within China exploded by 10 times, and web media became a major player. As the Chinese media pursue rating and advertising revenue in a fiercely competitive semi-free market, the Chinese audience now has as much influence on the media content as the government.

Aiming at avoiding another stone throwing at the American Embassy, the Chinese government, at the earliest moment, wanted to downplay the incident, hoping to find ways of getting rid of the problem quickly and as quietly as possible. The major newspapers under more tight government control released the news in the inside pages. But Western media all treated it as the top news, and they reached the Chinese audience through web sites both within and without China. Not wanting to appear defending the American intruders, Xinhua News Agency translated some of the American comments verbatim and released them quickly as straight news. The logic was simple: let the Americans explain and defend their own action to the Chinese audience.

Unfortunately, the strategy backfired. The American comments were never designed to appease the Chinese audience. As is the case in most of the international incidents, the American military, the lawmakers of both parties, and the media commentators were supposed to demonstrate their patriotism by appearing tough, especially on TV, the most influential media on the opinions of the ordinary Americans. So, under the assumption that the Chinese Government was holding the crew hostage for the purpose of exciting anti-American sentiment, they jumped on the wagon of “sending a tough message to the communists.” The message was: it was all your fault! Don’t touch the airplane! Release the plane and the crew immediately! Or else: we will punish you with regard to WTO, Olympics, Taiwan, on and on. The fact that the Chinese pilot was missing was irrelevant. The fact that the plane was engaged in military activities
along the Chinese coast far away from US was also irrelevant. We were in international water. According to the international law, we can do whatever we want.

The Chinese audience was infuriated. Our pilot is missing and likely dead. Your plane is on our land without permission and you are making all those threats?

**Can China Do What We Do?**

Some Chinese scholars looked into the international law and their findings are very different from what the American audience was told.

USA, under President Reagan, refused to sign, thereby refused to abide by the international law that Americans now say gives them the right to fly along the Chinese coast. The US plane was in what the law defined as China’s special economic zone, which is different from China’s territorial water and air space.

The section of the law that Americans cited provides that other nations’ vehicle can fly through the zone without the permission of the home country, in this case China. But was the American spy plane “flying through?” The Chinese legal scholars think not. They were there to acquire something valuable that the home country was unwilling to give, precisely the kind of activities that the law and the special zone were set up to prohibit.

Further, another section of the law states that the flying through vehicle should respect the interests of the home country. By gathering military information and colliding with the Chinese fighter jet, regardless who hit whom at the time of the impact, the Chinese legal scholars argued, that American clearly did not respect the Chinese interest, hence violated the law. Some American scholars agreed this interpretation in the op-ed pages of some newspapers in the US.

Most of the ordinary Chinese, like most of the ordinary Americans, try to understand the law with the help of common sense. The special economic zone sounds like the end of my driveway. You can drive or fly through if you have a harmless purpose. Looking into my windows, particularly looking into my windows for possibly breaking in, or even dropping bombs later, does not sound harmless.

As US lawmakers insisted on TV that China did not follow the rule, some Chinese decided to test the Americans’ sincerity. Americans flew 200 reconnaissance flights last year along the Chinese coast. What if some other countries do the same along the American coast? How would Americans like it if Iraqi Air Force fly up and down the America’s East Coast just 13 miles (12 nautical miles to be exact) offshore, 200 times a year? What if North Koreans do the same along the West Coast and Cubans do it in the South? What if one of those military airplanes collided with an American fighter jet, resulted in thedowning of the American jet and the death of the American pilot, and the foreigners landed without permission in one of the air bases in North Carolina? Would Americans treat them the same way Chinese treated the Americans? Would American
media, the lawmakers and the public pressure the White House to stop those flights by citing the international law that protects America’s interest in the special economic zone?

As someone living in North Carolina, I certainly don’t like that prospect. A plane could make a certain turn and would be over my classroom and my children’s classrooms within minutes. Even without making a turn, it could fire from there a missile deep into American inland. Who knows what kind of warhead they could put on that missile? Is White House saying those countries all have the right to get that close to the American coast, by arguing that American military planes have the right to do that along the Chinese coast?

Andy Rooney’s comments on CBS 60 Minutes on April 22, while meant to be humorous, were nevertheless seriously representative of America’ attitude: “we wouldn’t like you to do this to us, but we surely want to do this to you.” And, I might add, we are surprised and righteously angry that you don’t like our doing this, and we want to retaliate because of your bad attitude.

Did We Apologize? Did China Say We Apologized?

By now, it should not have been surprising that the pressure from the Chinese extremists was high for President Jiang Zeming to act tough: formally arrest the American crewmembers and try them. By then there was no way the Chinese government could possibly release the crew without the entire nation feeling humiliated, especially in the face of the relentless attack and threats from the American mainstream media and American politicians. Still trying to find a way to release the Americans, the cool heads won the argument within the government. On April 3, Jiang demanded a “dao qian,” translated into English as an “apology,” implying that would be enough to release the crewmembers.

In America, in the TV evening news and newspaper front pages, few politicians, journalists or TV commentators paid any attention to the legal arguments. If the Secretary of State of the most democratic and law abiding nation in the world said that a communist dictatorship violated the law, so it did. How the law was written or interpreted is just technicality, trivial if relevant at all. Some other US politicians and media commentators took an opposite attitude toward law: because we did not sign the law, we do not need to abide by it. Either way, we are right, you are wrong. The important thing is that we all know we have the right to do what we do. To the Chinese scholars who had been hearing American politicians’ lecturing China about following the American example of rule of law, that kind of attitude is called arrogance.

So in the US media the subject of the public discussion was never whether the Chinese were wrong -- that had been a foregone conclusion the minute the news broke -- but how to make China behave.

So, in America, the pressure was high on the White House to act tough. So Bush did. On the same day when Jiang demanded an apology, Bush issued his now famous
April 3 statement demanding the immediate return of the crewmembers and the plane while showing little concern for the missing Chinese pilot or his family. The statement was not immediately reported in the Chinese media; but the Chinese web users copied the English version from the Western sites and pasted it in the Chinese sites everywhere. In most cases, not a single word of comment was added. The statement was seen as an intentional slap in the Chinese face.

What Jiang wanted, a “dao qian,” is linguistically not the strongest word in the spectrum. Had he wanted, he could have chosen from “hou hui,” “hui guo,” “ao hui,” “nei jiu,” “kui jiu,” “xiu kui,” “hui zui,” “ren zui,” meaning contrition, remorse, admitting guilt, and so on. Arguably, choosing “dao qian” shows that Jiang just wanted an excuse of releasing the crewmembers without losing face, especially in the face of the attack by the American politicians and the media.

Few people in America paid much attention to the possible message implied in Jiang’s choice of words. Asked on TV why Chinese wanted an apology, James Lilley, the former Ambassador to China, asserted, “they always do that. They want to seek the moral high ground. They want to humiliate us!” And that was the near consensus interpretation of the Chinese intent by the American experts, lawmakers and media commentators at the time. Bush acted tough in response, “no apology.”

They seemed to have got stuck.

And the pressure was higher and higher on the White House to act even tougher. The families, neighbors, hometown residents of the crewmembers hung yellow ribbons everywhere. The network and local TV reported it dutifully every time a ribbon went up. The family members almost continuously appeared in the morning shows. As Fort Bragg Military Base was less than an hour of drive from the University of North Carolina, I have had military personnel as my students and neighbors. Their children have been classmates and best friends of my children. So tears came to my eyes when yellow ribbons appeared on TV during the Gulf War and every other international incident ever since.

But this one felt so different to me. The missing pilot, Wang Wei, now presumed dead, and his wife are from Hu Zhou, a quiet, beautiful, and prosperous agricultural area along the south shore of Tai Lake to the east of Shanghai. I spent considerable time there when I was a reporter in China twenty years ago. They could easily be two of those children who guided me for hours to find villagers known only by nicknames but no addresses. Their parents could be among the hundreds of peasants I interviewed, or one of those who fixed me the best meals I ever had, with rice, greens and fish reaped fresh out of their own lands and ponds. And Wang Wei’s son is just a couple years younger than my younger daughter. To me he does not feel like one of “them,” but one of “us,” no different from the military officers flying from Fort Bragg to the Gulf. Like those stationed in Fort Bragg, he appears to love his family and his country, and is willing to give his life for either. This unusual connection makes me more sensitive than usual to the uneven coverage on TV.
I did not see on American TV any yellow ribbons or any sign of prayer for the only one in the incident REALLY “missing,” Wang Wei. The US military representatives, the lawmakers, the White House and State Department representatives repeatedly described him as a reckless “hot dog.” Had this happened in American domestic politics, when one party attacks a member or a supporter of the other, you always see scores of lawyers, lawmakers, other politicians and spin doctors going on TV to defend the attacked. But Wang Wei was not only missing and presumed dead, he was also very much alone, so alone on American TV or anywhere else in the American media. That’s an institution normally takes pride in being fair, balanced, objective, and detached!

Detached they were not, especially the TV news, both network and local. When the family members of the American crewmembers were interviewed, the anchors were sometimes visibly disappointed when the family members didn’t mention that they were angry with the Chinese government. “But don’t you want your son back? Aren’t you angry that China is holding him?” I watched a couple anchors in morning shows asking. And the disappointment grew further when the interviewees said they wanted their family members back but they were not sure “angry” was the right word. And they were cut off when they started to say that they appreciated the fact that their family members seemed to have been treated well. And the anchors were usually excited and often repeatedly emphasized it when the interviewees said they didn’t want President Bush to apologize just to get their family members back.

Finally, Wang Wei’s wife, Ruan Guoqing, appeared on American TV, but not as a grieving wife, a worried mother, and a filial daughter-in-law (of which there are plenty of materials in Chinese from the web sites in China). She was not even a person with flesh and blood. She was introduced to the American audience as a puppet in the Chinese propaganda machine. A typical lead would read: “Today China’s government-controlled media stepped up their propaganda by showing on TV the grief of the wife of the fighter pilot …” Is a wife’s grief all fake just because her country happens to be ruled by the Communists?

While the pressure from the yellow ribbons on TV is getting higher, the Bush Administration was apparently getting some information from the diplomatic channels: the Chinese government would not (and probably were unable to) back down unless we give them something. Chinese were not going to release the crew when American Government continued to act tough. So Colin Powell said “regret.” Chinese said “not enough.” Bush said “regret,” Chinese said “right direction, but not enough.” They agreed to “sorry,” China said “good, but not enough.” They agreed to say “very sorry” twice. China said, “deal!”

American media said that was an apology. Was the media right? According to my office dictionary, a 1976 New College Edition of American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, “sorry” is “often used to express apology.” And everywhere in
America, parents and teachers tell children to “say sorry when you did something wrong.” So apology was one of the legitimate interpretations of “sorry.”

Remember that Jiang demanded a “dao qian.” Everyone agreed at the time that it meant “apology” in English. Now he did not exactly get an “apology.” Instead, he accepted two “very sorry” and agreed to release the crew. He obviously settled for less, right? The New York Times’ Beijing correspondent Erik Eckholm reported so, and the rest of the US media just followed suit. So the Chinese public should be unhappy, right? Mr. Eckholm speculated so in his report.

Strangely, Chinese people appeared satisfied. In fact, many of them thought, as far as the apology/sorry went, the US government said more than Jiang asked for. How could that be? The China’s government-controlled media must have lied and told Chinese people that the US government had given them a “dao qian” or even more, right? Mr. Eckholm looked for the word “dao qian” in the Chinese media stories but could not find any. So there was no evidence of lying.

So, how could this have happened?

Apparently, Mr. Eckholm had not solved this puzzle when he filed his April 11 story. The title and the lead of the story claimed that China depicts US letter as “a form of apology,” giving the impression that Chinese media lied to the Chinese public. But if you read on, you find in the seventh paragraph that the Chinese media never used “dao qian,” the Chinese word for “apology.” In the next paragraph, Mr. Eckholm stated that the word used by the Chinese government actually means “regret or apology.” How does an ambiguous “regret or apology” came to be emphasized and highlighted in the title and lead as “a form of apology?” The story never explained, but quickly added that the same Chinese word did not appear in the Chinese text prepared by the US Embassy in China, further strengthening the impression that the Chinese media lied.

The broadcasting news was more straightforward: “Chinese government told its people that US apologized!”

Ironically, the people who live on words and minds in this case failed to understand how the words work on minds. The English words “apology” and “sorry” are distinctively different in sounds and spellings, but they share similar meanings. Both mean that you feel bad. “Apology” means that you feel bad because you did something wrong: “I apologize for my mistake.” “Sorry,” as a more general term, could mean exactly the same thing: “I am sorry for my mistake.” But it could also mean that you feel bad for something that’s not your fault: “I am sorry it’s cloudy!”

Equally important in this case is that there is also a difference in formality: apology sounds more formal than sorry.
Bush emphasized he would not admit guilt therefore would not apologize, but agreed to say sorry. In the game of saving faces, however, the most important thing is that he does not spell “a-p-o-l-o-g-y” and does not utter the corresponding English sound.

Sounds and spelling, however, have absolutely no implication in another language. Strictly speaking Jiang never asked for an “apology,” he asked for a “dao qian.” “Qian,” the more important character in the two-character word, originally means “feeling bad” for a whole variety of things. So it could mean regret, sorry, or apology. “Dao” means “saying” or “expressing.” So “dao qian” literally means “expressing regret, sorrow, or apology.”

There are other verb-like characters that can go with “qian” to make similar words. “Bao qian,” for example, means “feeling qian;” “Zhi qian” means “giving qian;” “Biao qian yi” means “expressing the feeling of qian,” and so on. As the key element is the same “qian,” those words share exactly the same meaning of substance.

But they differ somewhat in the formality. “Dao qian,” which Jiang demanded, is the most formal because “dao” is an ancient expressing for “saying” and being ancient is being formal in Chinese. So “dao qian” is used more often in legal documents. If you lose a libel case in China, a judge would order you to “dao qian,” for example.

So, most Chinese-English dictionaries translate “dao qian” as “apology” and the other ways of saying “qian” as “regret,” “sorry,” “sorry or regret,” or “sorry or apology.” Considering that “sorry” can be an informal way of saying “apology,” those are probably the best ways of translating them. But, as any one who works with more than one language can appreciate, there is no exact one-to-one paring of the concepts from two languages.

Now that the US government has said “sorry” and “very sorry,” how should the Chinese government and Chinese media report it to the Chinese people? As “sorry” is a very general term that could mean different things, they had ample room to operate. According to the most authoritative English-Chinese dictionaries, “sorry” could be translated as “nan guo” (feeling bad), “yi han” (regret), “bao qian,” (sorry), “dui bu qi” (apologize), “hou hui” (contrite), “ao hui” (remorse), “nei jiu” (feeling guilty). Under the circumstance, I can not think of any fairer or more honest way of translating it than using the most general (therefore most vague) term, a simple character “qian,” which the Chinese government did.

So the Xinhua News Agency translated “very sorry” as “shen biao qian yi” (expressing a deep “qian”). Most of the Chinese media described the US letter as a “zhi qian” or “bao qian” letter (a letter expressing “qian”). Because “dao qian” has been now designated by the Americans as “apology,” the Chinese media apparently made a point of never saying that the US had delivered a “dao qian,” hence disappointing those US journalists who had expected the Chinese media to lie.
When describing the US letter, the Chinese media most often used the word “bao qian,” which most often means “sorry” but could also mean regret or apology. The US Embassy in Beijing used exactly the same word “bao qian” to translate “sorry” in its Chinese version of the US letter. The American media did not point out this fact, but instead said Xinhua News Agency version is different from the Embassy version. I have closely examined the three Chinese versions of the US letter: the Xinhua translation, the US Embassy translation, and other Chinese media’s reporting of the letter. I could not find any difference of substance between the three versions.

So Jiang had demanded a “dao qian.” They got instead something else – “bao qian,” “zhi qian” “shen biao qian yi,” and so on. Did the Chinese public care?

The Chinese public did not even notice it. And they would not have cared if they did. As long as the key character “qian” is there, there is absolutely no difference in meaning of substance between “dao qian” or any other ways of saying “qian.”. In the language context of the letter, “dao qian” would have sounded grammatically awkward so “shen biao qian yi” appears a better choice if only for grammatical reasons.

In short, all the Chinese wanted was a “qian.” The US letter gave instead two “very sorry.” After the fairest, the most honest, and the most accurate translation, they became two “deep qian”. So, it sounded in Chinese that China got even more than the equivalence of what Jiang demanded.

Yes, a “dao qian” would have been a more formal “qian.” But what could have been more formal than a “qian” written in a letter approved by the US President and hand delivered by the US Ambassador?

At the same time, Bush kept his promise to American people of not saying the word “apology” in English.

For those who are not accustomed to operate in two languages, here is a summary of how 1 plus 1 could possible become 3 without cheating, using English only:

Jiang said: “You have to give me a formal sorry.”
The translators looked up a dictionary and found that “formal sorry” means “apology.” So they told Bush: “Jiang demanded an apology.”
Bush said “I won’t give you an apology.”
The translators told Jiang: “Bush won’t give you a formal sorry.”
Jiang said “You have to.”
Bush said: “OK, I regret.”
Jiang said “Not enough!”
Bush said: “I am sorry!”
Jiang said: “Not enough!”
Bush said: “I will formally say sorry.”
Jiang said: “Not enough!”
Bush said: “I will formally say very sorry.”
Jiang said “Deal!”
Jiang told the Chinese public: “We had asked for a formal sorry. Now he said formally that he was very sorry, twice. So let’s release the crewmembers.”
Bush told the American public: “I said I won’t apologize. And I didn’t. And the crewmembers are back!”

Some years later, historians will examine this episode as emotions have subsided. And they will probably recognize this as an example of sound linguistics, honest politics and clever diplomacy. The politicians and diplomats of both sides should be congratulated for taking full advantage of the opportunities naturally existing in the languages to produce a win-win outcome in a seemingly zero-sum game. Had it worked, both nations would have come out of this with their dignity and pride intact.

It would have worked, that is, had the Mr. Eckholm and his fellow reporters solved the puzzle in time and accurately informed the American public the real story, along this line:

The Chinese government told Chinese people that US had given a formal sorry, without reminding the public that they had demanded a “dao qian,” previously translated as an apology. Surprisingly, the Chinese public did not seem to mind. It turned out that all they had wanted was a formal “qian,” which is as vague and broad in meaning as “sorry.” So they got what they had wanted, and perhaps a little more, while allowing President Bush to keep his promise to the American public.

Unfortunately, the reporters did not figure that out. Instead, the American public was told that the China told the Chinese public that Bush had apologized.

The hawks in America were immediately outraged, by Bush. “You said you would not apologize but they said you just did!”

Vice President Dick Cheney came to the defense. It was easy. Just blame the Chinese. “Don’t believe the Chinese propaganda that we apologized. We did not!”

Did the Chinese government say US apologized? Normally it is just a matter of facts. You look up the Chinese news stories and you know that they used the word “bao qian” and so on to translate “sorry.” You look up “bao qian” in a Chinese-English dictionary and you know that “bao qian” most often means “sorry.” So normally you would have concluded that Chinese government did not necessarily say US apologized. But this time it is more a matter of whom you believe in: the American media said the Chinese said that, and our Vice President said that the Chinese said that. So the Chinese said that.

Did US Government apologize? Normally it is also a matter of facts. You look up the text of Bush’s letter and you know that he said “sorry” but not “apology.” You
look up “sorry” in an English dictionary or simply think about the common sense meanings of the two words and you know that saying “sorry” could be understood as offering an apology. But in this case it is again more a matter of whom you believe in. Our Vice President said we did not apologize; the Chinese communists said we did. So we did not, period. So the Chinese lied because they said we did.

So the American media, the lawmakers, and American public were outraged, by the Chinese government: “Liar! We did not apologize but they lied that we did! They humiliated us! Let’s retaliate with arms sales to Taiwan, withholding their normal trade status, stopping them from hosting Olympics, etc., etc.”

Now this had become a truly dangerous game. The Chinese Government had just said that American government did give a couple “qian.” Accordingly China immediately released the American crew. Once the crewmembers were back, the American government denied that they apologized, and American lawmakers, TV anchors, and other media commentators condemned the Chinese government for lying by translating “sorry” as “qian.” Obviously, the Americans were denying that they ever gave “qian.” Either Americans gave no “qian” so the Chinese government must have lied, or Americans gave “qian” so Americans must have lied when they denied it. Either way, the American denials could inflame the anti-Chinese government and anti-American sentiment already strong in China. There could be massive demonstrations, stone-throwing, or even more.

The Chinese media’s solution was to block any information about this round of the American denials and condemnations.

But many of the English speaking Chinese still read it from the web sites in the west. And these Chinese, normally the most pro-America in China, were infuriated. The stereotypical view of China is too powerful in the minds of the Americans, they said. When simple facts, dictionary definitions and common meanings of the common words contradict American stereotypes of China, the Americans would rather ignore the facts and the dictionaries and even change the meanings of the common words in order, unconsciously, to keep stereotypes intact.

Further, you first acted arrogantly and blamed us publicly for everything, making demands and threats for the immediate return of the plane and the crew. Once we held our ground, you changed your attitude from arrogance to regret, to sorry, to very sorry. Once your crewmembers are released, you immediately turned around and accused us of lying. What kind of negotiation partners are you?

**Should the American Public Know What the Chinese Public Know?**

To augment this manuscript, I decided on April 18, to spend the next day, April 19, Thursday, to monitor the media easily accessible to me in Carrboro, North Carolina home. I woke up in the morning to hear a NPR radio story filed by their Beijing
correspondent. By then the crewmembers had come home and US diplomats were in Beijing discussing the cause of the collision and the status of the plane.

NPR story said that Chinese Foreign Ministry released a video that “Chinese claimed” showing that Americans fighter jet had acted recklessly. This was a tic-for-tat, the story noted, for a video released by Pentagon a few days earlier showing that a Chinese fighter jet had acted recklessly.

But no one could understand what the Chinese video was showing, the NPR story stressed, unless you are a military expert, perhaps.

I turned on TV and switched it to China Central TV through my 10-year old satellite antenna. It was showing the video. Having heard the NPR story, I expected something beyond comprehension but I was surprised that the video was very clear. For a while there was no sound (because of the satellite signal problem), but I understood immediately what the Chinese government was trying to show. That was in part because I had seen the Pentagon video a couple days earlier. I saw the Pentagon video on at least two of the three major networks as I switched between the channels. All three had played it as the leading story or at least a major story. Even though the video itself was not clear, the networks showed a high-ranking officer giving detailed explanations to what was shown through the video and audio. The network reporters added further explanations and commented that as the officer himself was a former pilot, it added credibility and clarity to the video.

To me neither the American nor the Chinese video meant much, as neither was taken on the day of the collision, but much earlier. For that I was a little disappointed when American TV gave the Pentagon video so much time and prominence as if it had been a significant evidence regarding who was right or wrong. But now that the Pentagon video had been shown, I wonder how the American TV would handle it: would they play a neutral role and show the Chinese video as prominently (and helpfully), or would they play a patriotic role and somehow discredit the Chinese video?

In the evening news, CBS did not even mention the Chinese video. ABC let it run for a few seconds in a list of “in other news” briefing, adding an almost sarcastic narration while the video was run. NBC also did not show the video in its entirety, but interrupted it repeatedly with the re-run of the Pentagon video. Now the Chinese video became truly beyond comprehension, even leaving an impression of desperation on the part of the Chinese government for producing so pathetic videos as evidence. They must have nothing better to show.

Actually, CCTV showed something else in the same episode, regarding the incident itself. Recall that the Chinese had said all along that the US plane made a sudden downward and left turn, hitting the Chinese jet. The US had said repeatedly that it was unlikely for the heavier and slower US plane to make such a turn. When the crewmembers had returned, it was reported that they were on auto pilot, and the faster jet hit from slightly below, behind, and left, hitting the underneath of the left wing tip and
left propellers of the US plane, then hitting the nose tip of the US plane. Both of the scenarios are consistent with photographed damages to the left wing, left propellers, and the nose tip of the US plane.

CCTV showed two groups of the photos that they said were “convincing” evidences. One group showed that the radar antenna under the left wing of the US plane was bent backward, as the Chinese scenario would predict, but not forward, as the Chinese said the US scenario would predict. The other group of photos showed that several propellers were damaged in the front side, but none of them was damaged in the backside, further supporting the scenario that US plane hit the Chinese jet, according to the Chinese analysis.

The same photos were quickly placed on Chinese web sites everywhere with detailed explanations in Chinese.

To my amateur understanding, this is far from “convincing” support for the Chinese story, since the American side or a third party without a vested interest has not had a chance to examine the plane searching for evidence that might support the American story. Further, there could be a third or fourth scenario that we have not heard about that could be more consistent with more of the evidence.

But the photos just shown on CCTV appeared to be material and important. As a social scientist myself, I found them filling some holes in the jig saw puzzles in my head about the accident, even though the entire picture is still far from clear. If so, I wonder, why shouldn’t American people be given the same information? A billion Chinese have seen them. Besides, the contrary American scenarios had been repeatedly broadcast to the American public, a scenario that had so far significantly influenced the public perception and opinion, which in turn had constituted visible pressure in one direction on the policy makers?

But the American people were not given access to those evidences. None of the major networks made any mentioning of those photos or the Chinese arguments based on those photos. The major print media and on-line media gave one or two sentences along the line that “Chinese government spokeswoman showed what she called ‘convincing’ evidence for the Chinese version of the collision,” with no any further information, explanations or photos. In comparison, the speculative analyses of the American military spokesperson and unnamed “western analysts” in support of the American scenario have been widely publicized in the Western media. Maybe the journalists were not impressed by the Chinese photos or analyses. But why not give American audience the information, and let them decide for them selves?

American lawmakers, other politicians, and the media have shied away from the debate on whether America has the legal right to conduct military reconnaissance flights in other countries’ special economic zone. The logic appears to be: it is important for us to conduct those flights therefore of course we have that right.
They have also shied away from the debate on whether America should conduct those flights given that we don’t want other nations to conduct the same flights along our own coast. The logic appears to be: of course we should conduct those flights, because it is important to us; and it is important to us that you don’t conduct that kind of flights along our coast.

Then the media made us to shy away also from the debate of who hitting whom. The logic appears to be: of course they hit us; ours is a slower and more stable machine; besides, we are Americans; we don’t act recklessly; besides, “a western analyst” said we are “unlikely” to make that kind of turn; the evidences from the plane are irrelevant.

An Involuntary Mediocracy?

How could democracy work this way? That is, how could people (demo) rule (cracy), when the people are not given a complete and balanced package of the information?

Information is power. Even in a system in which the power is derived from the public opinion and popular votes, the people don’t necessarily have the actual power. Those who have the information can manipulate the minds of those who don’t. Who has the information? The media. They are just not giving us the complete package. So our current system, as far as China policy or foreign policy goes, is not a democracy, at least not an informed democracy. The media rule, not the people, hence a “mediacracy.”

I understand the logic that some of our politicians and journalists knowingly or unknowingly follow: China is communist dictatorship, so we should do everything to stop it. Ends justify means. So let’s not argue about laws, ethics, or rules. Let’s not argue about who is right who is wrong on specific issues or incidents. Let’s do what ever is necessarily to finish this next Evil Empire. But should American people have the right to decide for themselves whether this indeed IS an Evil Empire, on the basis of the complete package of information?

Some Chinese scholars see American media coverage of the plane collision as another evidence that the American media and the American journalists are out there to “get China,” to deliberately incite anti-China sentiment among the American public, and to pressure the US government into more hard-line China policy. They call this “demonizing China.”

Chinese may have reasons to believe that China is, in many cases, unfairly portrayed in American media. But the journalists may not have intended to create the unfairness. In many cases, including the cases I’ve described above, there may be more innocent and benign explanations than intentional demonizing. You might call it de facto demonization, or involuntary mediacracy. In fact, it is not a rule of any deliberate individuals, because no individuals under this system are acting upon the complete amount of information. It is a rule of ignorance.
This involuntary mediacracy, or rule of ignorance, is partially responsible for the hardships in the Sino-US relations.

It was only 12 years ago when the Chinese students demonstrated for democracy, a democracy of American-style. They built a papier-mâché Goddess of Liberty, modeled on the Statue of Liberty, in the center of the Tiananmen Square. They sang in English “we shall overcome!” They cheered whenever American media crew or American travelers appeared. When the Chinese government was preparing a violent crackdown, they first ordered the American media to leave. If only our voices were heard by more of the Chinese, the dictatorship would crumble, many American politicians and political scientists confidently predicted. When the tanks rolled into the Square, the American media and American people were with the demonstrators, in spirit if not in person. When the demonstrators fled, most of them came to the United States.

Some ten years later American media complained that Chinese police had not done enough to protect the American Embassy from the stone throwing Chinese students. Few recognized the irony. The students had been incited by the Chinese government, the Americans said. Few remembered that the same government ten years earlier could not persuade the students to leave the Tiananmen Square, even under a marshal law. How did the Chinese government so significantly strengthen its persuasive power in a short ten years?

Some twelve years later, when the planes collided, the Chinese government had to reassert its previously loosened control on the Chinese media in order to rein in another surge of anti-American nationalism among the ordinary Chinese, particularly the educated youths. Few Americans recognized the irony.

While Americans in China continue to enjoy the warm welcome by the Chinese, surveys after surveys, some of which reported in the New York Times, showed that Chinese, especially the youth, now have a much darkened view of America as a nation.

How did a fan club of one billion degrade into a rival gang full of animosity in a matter of ten years? They said it was all because we were bullies. Did we, sometimes, act like bullies?

Shortly before the release of the 24 American crewmembers, the 54-member United Nations Human Rights Commission voted down another US attempt to sanction China on the issue of human rights. The vote was not on a sanction itself. The committee refused to even put it on the agenda. This was America’s 10th attempt in the last 10 years, and it was the 10th defeat in a row. How did it happen?

The US media attributed it to heavy lobbying by the Chinese. But the Americans invented the word “lobbying” back in the colonial years and wrote much of world’s history ever since on lobbying. The Chinese, by contrast, never had a parliamentary democracy. So, as of today, there is still not an exact word in Chinese for “lobbying”
because Chinese as a nation don’t quite have that concept yet. The one Chinese word that comes closest is “you shui.” It refers to the activities of diplomats more than two thousand years ago who traveled thousand miles between warring states trying to make peace or form alliances, as “you” is an ancient character for “travel” and “shui” means “say.” It is such an ancient and infrequently used word now that many of the even educated Chinese, when they encounter it today, would incorrectly pronounce it as “you shuo” or “you sui.”

So how did the Chinese defeat Americans in our own game of lobbying, 10 times in 10 years in a row? If you only get the information on the issue from the US media, you might get the impression that that was because the Committee’s member nations were either stupid or selfish: they wanted to trade with China, they had an anti-American tendency, they don’t care about human rights, or they just don’t know what they were doing.

You might even find that the defeats were really victories in disguise. “We made an important point by raising the issue,” according to some of the diplomats and media commentators. But a point made to whom? Did anyone receive the message except ourselves?

The Chinese people, supposedly the beneficiaries of Americans’ human rights effort, did not seem appreciative. In fact, surveys after surveys showed that ordinary Chinese are far more concerned with unemployment, children’s education, health care reform, housing, economy in general, and crime and corruption. According to the perception of the Chinese people, the Chinese government as a whole was working hard on those issues together with the Chinese people. And Chinese see the American rhetoric on China’s human rights record more as an effort to humiliate Chinese and to impose American values on to Chinese, than an effort to help ordinary Chinese.

Therefore, while the Americans were congratulating ourselves for making a point on China’s human rights in the United Nations, the anti-American sentiment was surging among the ordinary Chinese, a sentiment that the Chinese government and the government-controlled media barely contained despite their best effort. And the American government or the American media did not even mention ordinary Chinese’ attitudes toward US human rights effort. What the ordinary Chinese think was never a real concern or even a question for the Americans. If they like us, it is because we are great and they are smart to see our greatness. If they don’t like us, it is because they are stupid and the communist government brainwashed them. End of discussion.

The “point” was apparently never meant for the Chinese people.

So was the point meant for other nations in the world? If it was, it was not well received. In May 2001, a couple weeks after the US defeat in the UN on the issue of China’s human rights, the other nations voted the United States out of the Human Rights Committee, a committee that US initiated decades earlier.
Then why did the US politicians and the media commentators congratulate ourselves for making the “point”? Again, to whom was the point made?

The point, the Chinese critics of the American human rights policy argue, was made exclusively to the American audience. The American human rights efforts were no longer meant to help other peoples, such as the Chinese people, but to help American politicians to look good in the eyes of American public, and to help the American media to feel good about themselves.

In a US Senate Foreign Relations Committee Hearing on May 1, 2001, Douglas Paal, Director of Asia Pacific Policy Center, and a former senior director of Asian affairs on the Senior Bush Administration’s National Security Council, said: “One of the consequences of a lot of our actions in the last decade has been to drive (Chinese) people who would otherwise be quite unhappy with the (Chinese) regime into the arms of the regime in defense of the nation of China.”

Perhaps we should contemplate the possibility that we did, at least in some cases, behave in a way that have been seen by others as bullying.

But how could that be possible? Our leaders and diplomats are all well educated ladies and gentlemen. They would not have been elected or risen to the rank of importance had they behaved like bullies. And our people, the American people, are the kindest, most warm-hearted, considerate, generous, and open-minded people in the world. How could it be possible that a nation of warm-hearted individuals, represented by professionally trained diplomats, led by considerate leaders, behave like bullies abroad, as a nation?

And if you think about it, everybody was just doing his or her job. Immediately after the plane collision, the US military representatives put the blames on the Chinese. That angered many Chinese. But the officers were just doing their job. In the American system of media debate and public relation, it was their job to be partisan, to put in the best spin for their own men and women. They were not supposed to be fair to the Chinese.

The politicians and media commentators went on TV to attack the Chinese. That angered many Chinese. But the Americans were just doing their job. They were supposed to be patriotic and partisan. After all, were Chinese politicians and commentators as patriotic and partisan in China?

The media reported those attacks on the Chinese. But the media were just doing their job.

In the media, there were far more opinions against China than for China. The opinions against China got better and longer TV time, more newspaper and magazine coverage, and so on. That angered many Chinese. But that’s the way it works. The more prominent politicians get better time slots. Those who are more skillful in working with
the media get their opinions to the media more quickly and more efficiently. That’s how it works in American domestic politics as well.

The Chinese government or the Chinese people are not at all good at this American game. They did not send their news releases to the right people in the right media at the right time. They did not say the right words that would resonate with the American audience. When their views and stories did not get equal time slot or equal print space, the Chinese government officials didn’t protest at the right time to the right people in the right way, as American politicians would. Besides, there aren’t many Chinese officials and scholars who are able and willing to be interviewed on TV in English. And the Chinese government sometimes would prohibit interviews with Chinese in China. Suppose an American network wants to interview Wang Wei’s wife, Ruan Guoqing, would Chinese government allow it? If yes, what’s the chance that Ruan Guoqing is as articulate in English as the families of the US crewmembers? Does she know enough about the American audience to say the right thing to help her own cause?

In the US, the media can interview anyone without government interference, and there are plenty of skilled commentators eager to get on TV. Naturally they are almost all patriotic Americans. What can the media do about that?

When the views from one side encourage and reinforce each other, it is only natural that the near-consensus view is against China, or against other countries in other international conflicts.

Such near-consensus view affects the judgment of individual journalists as well. Journalists, including American journalists, are humans. They are not angels. They are not demons. They are good people. They want to do good things. But they have limitations. One limitation comes from their dual status, as journalists who are supposed to inform the public, and American citizens who are supposed to support their own country, especially during wars or other international conflicts.

And, as humans, they are limited in their capacity to understand China and Chinese people. They have stereotypical views of China and Chinese people. Some times, the stereotypes help their work by filling in the gap of their knowledge. Other times, the stereotypes hurt their work by clouding their judgments.

All those limitations also affect their domestic reporting. For example, it is well known that stereotypes about an ethnic group can lead to inaccurate or insensitive writings in a crime story. Journalists can also be Democrats, Republicans, liberals, conservatives, pro-life, pro-choice, etc., which can cloud their judgment in their reporting of domestic issues.

Due to the lack of efficient feedbacks across cultures and nations, the impact of such limitations may be greatly enlarged on international coverage.
While the journalists were doing what they were supposed to do with the inevitable human limitations, the American public was also doing what they were supposed to do with their limitations: form their “own” opinion on the basis of the information that they were given, and pressure the politicians to do what they thought were the right thing.

And the politicians and diplomats were also doing what they were supposed to do in a democratic system: reacting to the public pressure and act tough on China or other regimes and nations that American people don’t like.

So the causal chain traces back to the Chinese government and Chinese people: their incapability of defending and advocating themselves in the American media debate contributed to the American stereotypes and biases against them, which in turn contributed to the problematic decisions by the American government that hurts the relationship and the long terms interests of both nations. So is it the fault of the Chinese? Not really. No government or people were ever said to have the duty to defend and advocate themselves in the media debate in another country.

If everyone is doing what he or she is “supposed” to do while the outcome is harmful to everybody, there must be a problem with the system, the structural and ethical system that tells people who are supposed to do what in what situation.

So, America, a nation of nice people led by nice leaders acted like a bully, not because they wanted to be bullies, but because the nation did not know that her action was seen as bullying. It was not the fault of any individuals, but a problem in the system.

As I said in “Media Coverage: Wen-Ho Lee, China, and Beyond,” to fix this system, we must find a way to encourage and help other nations and their governments, especially those in conflict or potential conflict with America, to actively participate in the public discourse and media debate in the US. Their systems may or may not be rational. Their messages may or may not have merits. Their joy, content, sorrow, grief, or animosity may or may not be justified. But let American people be the judge, not the possible stereotypes, the ignorance, or the biases of the individual journalists.

Also, the American journalists, especially the broadcasting journalists, may need to reexamine the mission and the ethical principles that guide our coverage at the time of international conflicts. How do we balance our roles as patriotic citizens and as the nation’s information provider? We should ask, are we here to inform, or are we here to incite? If we are here to incite, should we continue to call our programs and stories “news?” Do the principles of neutrality, balance, objectivity, and detachment apply also to international coverage? To what degree? – One hundred percent? Eighty? Fifty? Or twenty percent?

International Barriers in the Marketplace of Ideas
The American media system was built on the assumption that when different ideas - desires and values, facts and interpretations, suggestions and proposals, and demands and threats - compete in a free market, the audience, as the rational consumers, would eventually adopt the best.

For this to happen, however, the market must be indeed largely FREE. This means at least three Fs: Free flow of goods and materials, Fair playground, and quick Feedback information about products’ quality. Most of the modern economists believe that government-imposed trade barriers restrict flow of goods and materials and create unfair playground, hence harm the interest of the consumers and long-term interests of both nations involved. Trade barriers are not all imposed by the governments: corruption and crime lead to unfair competition. Natural barriers and technological barriers stall feedback information.

There are also communication barriers in a market of ideas. Those barriers also hurt the three Fs: Free flow of information, Fair playground, and Feedback information about the accuracy and appropriateness of the information in the market. From the perspective of marketplace of ideas, the First Amendment can be seen as an attempt to reduce the US government-imposed barriers. But there are also barriers from other sources, such as media professionals. Like the “market makers” in a stock market, the media professionals play a keystone role in the idea market. Their ignorance, stereotypes, and biases can easily stall or destroy the free flow, the fairness, and feedback.

There are many such barriers in the domestic market. That’s why we need journalistic ethics, so that the journalists themselves would reduce such barriers on a daily basis.

Parties of interests also found it necessarily to monitor, pressure, persuade, and influence the media to their own favor. As the game became more and more sophisticated, this line of work has now become a profession, called public relations, and those professionals called media specialists. They work on the media just like coaches work on referees of a basketball game. They have to understand the written and unwritten rules. They have to know the referees well, even personally. They have to know when to explain, ask, plead, demand, shout, yell, jump, throw arms in the air, throw chairs (once or twice) into the court, or to be just quiet.

The media specialists may also be seen as lawyers working to influence the judges on behalf of their clients. Good lawyers must know the law, the unwritten norm in a certain courtroom, and know and be known to the judges in order to give their clients a best chance.

While motivated by self-interest, such activities serve an important role in the modern market of ideas in the western countries. Through self-advocating and monitoring the media (or referees and judges), they help reduce the communication barriers that harm the free flow, the fairness and feedback.
For the partisan advocate to produce desirable outcome, however, all parties must have roughly equal access to the professional help. Just imagine that a new NBA team did not have coaches, or a homicide defendant did not have a defense lawyer.

In international communication, journalists’ ignorance, stereotypes, and prejudice tend to be larger than in the domestic communication.

Also, the journalistic ethical system is significantly weakened by a simplistic patriotism in international communication. The ideals of fair, neutral, objective, detached, and comprehensive information dissemination often gives way to a simplistically patriotic treatment of the facts and opinions.

While a supposed neutral is partisan, a supposed partisan is absent – the foreign interests. Without the help of a partisan advocating and monitoring system, the foreign nations and their governments cannot compete effectively in the American market of ideas. They may be suspicious of this market for ideological or historical reasons – after all, the American media have long been known to portrayal foreign nations, especially developing nations, negatively. They may be financially incapable of participating in this expensive game. Or they simply don’t have the personal connections or the skills to survive in this market. American journalists are often surprised upon hearing that foreign nations are frustrated by the lack of access to the American media. As part of the system, it is easy for American journalists to forget how complicated the system has become, therefore how intimidating it can be to outsiders. Even American politicians, parties, corporations and other interest groups all need professional help to work with the media. How can foreign nations have even a minimally level play ground without some help from the Americans?

As is the case with the trade barriers, communication barriers could be set up from both sides of a border. The foreign governments, such as the Chinese government, often restrict American media’s access to the people and information within their borders. Foreign nations’ lack of understanding of American media system and American audience also make their messages less effective among the Americans.

As the barriers outside the American borders are largely beyond the control of the American media, we should focus on lowering the barriers within American borders. Indeed, the three factors discussed above contribute to stall the three Fs:

1) Lack of Understanding: Domestic vs. International. One obviously cannot report an event accurately without understanding it. There isn’t a large pool of journalists who have a thorough understanding of both the nation being reported and the American audience. The former is needed to pick what’s really important and report it accurately, while the later is needed to report it in a way that is interesting and understandable for the American audience. Many media organizations ended up sending correspondents abroad who write excellent English and know perfectly their audience, but have limited understanding of the nation being reported. Many of the American journalists in China
have to rely on English as the primary information-gathering tool. While the editors and anchors in the US also have a significant influence on whether and how to report an international event, their understanding of a foreign nation is even further limited. Where real understanding is lacking, one uses stereotypes and bias to fill in the gap, therefore stalls the free flow of accurate and truthful information. When, for example, the American journalists did not understand the real cause of the Chinese anger after the plane collision, they assumed it was government propaganda and reported as such. Such errors are much less likely to occur in domestic reporting because journalists understand the situations within their own countries much better.

Lack of understanding often leads to a monolithic view of a foreign people and their government, which in turn leads to the suppressing or uneven handling of the information by the media. American journalists, for example, often cite their distrust of the Chinese government as a reason for not reporting Chinese government’s views in various news stories. And the journalists often justify their distrust of the Chinese by citing a few incidents when Chinese officials lied, most notably the then State Council Spokesman Yuan Mu. Mr. Yuan claimed after the Tiananmen crackdown that no students were killed in Tiananmen Square. He further outraged the American journalists and the audience by suggesting that western TV scenes showing the killings may have been fabricated with the help of “modern technology.” (Independent investigation later suggests the possibility that indeed no protesters had been killed IN THE SQUARE that fatal night. But Yuan’s statement, if technically not a lie, was at least misleading, as the audience obviously wanted to know how many protesters and bystanders had been killed ANYWHERE in Beijing).

The Chinese critics of the American media, however, were outraged by this line of justifications for differential treatment of the views and statements from the current Chinese government. “Yuan Mu was out of power soon after. Most importantly, how does Yuan Mu’s lie have anything to do with President Jiang Zeming and Premier Zhu Rongji?” They ask. Upon hearing that, the American journalists were often puzzled “did they represent the same Chinese government?”

Technically, they did, just like President Nixon and President Carter represented the same American government, or President Clinton and George W. Bush did. The American journalists did not distrust Carter administration just because Nixon had lied a few years earlier. They also did not give Bush administration a differential treatment in their news stories just because Clinton had lied. American journalists do not have a monolithic view of the American government. The Chinese people don’t distrust President Jiang or Premier Zhu just because they distrust Yuan Mu, because they don’t have a monolithic view of the Chinese government. But many of the American journalists do have a monolithic view of China, because they have little understanding of China.

As a whole, the American public probably understands the other countries even less than the journalists do, which leads to additional barriers. In most of the domestic reporting, the audience usually has a certain understanding of the subjects being reported.
Some times they understand the issue very well. Some times, the audience is the subjects. This leads to quick, clear and accurate feedback to the media that the journalists can use to gauge the quality of their product – the reporting. If a series of stories on the issue of abortion right are biased toward either pro-life or pro-choice camp, the audience of either side or both sides plus the people in the middle may all protest. Even when there are no formal protests, American journalists have plenty of other sources of getting the feedback, e.g., family members, friends, neighbors, acquaintances’ interests in or comments on their work or lack thereof.

In most of the international coverage, however, there is no similar channel of feedback. The intended audience, the American public, would have American journalists’ ears. But they don’t know much about the foreign countries. Therefore they have no basis to evaluate the quality of the coverage or the quality of specific stories. They have the communication channel to the media, but they have no message to send regarding international coverage. Those who might have a message, however, have no channel. The people in the stories, e.g., Chinese and the Chinese government, would have some knowledge to evaluate the quality of the media products, and would be eager to cry foul if they had found the errors to their disadvantages. But many of them don’t know English. Those who read English don’t have as easy and as regular access to the American media to know quickly what had been said about them. In the few cases when they did know and did want to cry foul, they usually did not know whom to cry to, at what time, or how to do it in a way that can truly influence the future work of the American journalists. Further, even if the Chinese or some other foreigners could do everything perfectly, there is still a problem of trust and respect. In general, because of the lack of understanding of China by the American journalists, many American journalists don’t have as much empathy for Chinese and even less for the Chinese government. Consequently, the Chinese cries for foul don’t usually get much attention or respect among the American journalists.

2) Ethical Standards: Simplistic vs. Responsible Patriotism. We feel more easily for our own families, tribes, communities, races, nations and species than we feel for others. It is only human nature. Journalists are no exception. So it is only human nature that American journalists found the information in favor of Americans more agreeable than the information in favor of the others, especially when the “others” are seen as in conflict with Americans. That explains in part why, after the US-China plane collision, the American TV reported with emotion Americans’ hope for the release of the detained crewmembers while showing little sympathy for or understanding of Chinese people’s hope, anguish, mourning and even anger on behalf of their lost pilot Wang Wei.

I call this simplistic patriotism, in contrast to responsible patriotism that I will describe below. Unchecked, simplistic patriotism interferes with the media’s mission of reporting international issues in a fair and balanced manner.

As a people under democracy the Americans must have the truthful, balanced, and comprehensive information about the important issues. Some of such information may place the action of the American government or military abroad in a favorable light.
Other information may do the contrary. As those actions were taken in the name of American people, American people need to know about them. American people also need to know how other peoples and governments react to American action, as they would ultimately affect the lives of all Americans for generations to come. For the same reason, American people need to know how other peoples and governments feel about America and what they say about America, favorably or unfavorably, rightfully or wrongly.

The American public cannot get such information from any sources other than the media. It follows that American media have a duty to report all sides of the important international issues in a fair and balanced manner. While American people also depend on the media for domestic news, they also have other sources, such as their personal experiences and interpersonal channels of information, so the dependence on media is not as exclusive as is the case with regard to international news. Therefore, for the health of the democracy and soundness of American foreign policy, it is even more important for the American media to be informative, balanced, fair, and detached with regard to international news.

For now this is only an ideal, a principle of ethics that few journalists anywhere in the world practice, at least not on a consistent basis. It is, however, required by democracy and the long-term national interests. We may call it responsible patriotism, a genuine patriotism that acknowledges the unique role of the media in a democratic system. As the eyes and ears of the only superpower in the world whose might and will reach around the globe, American media should be the first to adopt it. As the inventors of such principles as fairness, balance, and detachment in domestic coverage, American journalists could well be the first to adopt it, or so should we hope.


Suppose American journalists adopt our suggestions to acquire a better understanding of foreign issues and strive to produce informative, balanced, fair and detached stories. That would be enough for a fair outcome, right?

Not necessarily.

To understand why, let’s look at the American court system. Judges are supposed to be knowledgeable and impartial, and most often they are. The juries are supposed to make informed, impartial verdicts, and most often they do. The law itself is supposed to have been made in an informed, impartial process, and in most cases it is. But that’s not enough. We still need partisan lawyers to help each side fighting it out in court debate. In fact, the lawyers’ partisan and effective work is a key factor that keeps the judges knowledgeable, the juries informed, and both largely impartial.

Let’s imagine what could happen if, in a 10-year period, all murder defendants would be tried without defense lawyers, and their testimonies and legal requests regularly pre-determined as untrustworthy and disallowed. Naturally, the prosecutions would win
almost every of such cases. Soon, the prosecutors, judges, and jurors would realize that conviction is a foregone conclusion. There would be little incentives for them to review and keep up with the related law, or to be meticulous with the facts. It would appear pointless for the judges and jurors to be neutral. In fact, soon the meaning of “neutral” would change, as the question is no long whether the next defendant is guilty, but how to punish him or her. To increase their conviction rate, the prosecutors would bring more and more murder charges. And the public would get alarmed and angered by the perceived explosion of the murder rate. And pressure would get higher and higher on the judges and lawmakers to get tougher on the murderers, real, imagined, or anticipated.

The accused and their families would be first to feel the pain. But the entire society would be going mad, too, unless the poisonous cycle is somehow stopped.

It would not be easy. As the time goes on, convictions pile up. That all such defendants are guilty would appear to be a self-evident truth. The early critics of this flawed system would face the risk of being ridiculed or ignored, be seen as opposing common sense, soft on crime, or as anti-law-and-order deviants.

Asking the judges and jurors to be neutral and knowledgeable, alone, wouldn’t stop the cycle, although it might help alleviate the injustices in some individual cases. The judges and jurors and even the prosecutors need help, from the defense lawyers, or the cycle would almost certain to continue.

This is analogous to what China experienced in the past dozen years in the American court of public opinion. Asking the journalists to be neutral and knowledgeable, alone, cannot stop the vicious cycle of de facto demonization of China and other countries among American journalists, the public, the politicians and the government. The Americans -- including journalists, the American public, the politicians and even those who truly believe China is the next evil empire to be destroyed -- need help, from American media specialists in defense of China in the American court of public opinion. Otherwise the entire process is almost destined to produce policy decisions harmful to the long-term interest of America as a nation. The cycle of de facto demonization of other nations among Americans leads to another even more vicious cycle, the cycle of misunderstanding, distrust and animosity between America and other nations. Left unchecked, it may eventually become a cycle of hatred and violence. We may be already going that direction.

We can also think of this in terms of sports competition. Suppose America would be the permanent host of future Olympics. In those future games, no foreign teams would be allowed to have coaches, except the Britains, Canadians and a selected few of other western teams. Further, most of such teams, such as Chinese, Russians, Vietnamese, Serbs, Iraqis, Cubans, North Koreans, Iranians and Libyans are assumed to take drugs until proven otherwise, and their requests and protests about the procedures are routinely disallowed. While the referees continue to do their best to be knowledgeable and neutral, virtually all the medals are going to the Americans and a few of their allies. After several of such Olympics, the audience, the players and the officials would all be
convinced that Chinese, Russians, Serbs and so on are all terrible athletes. Or how come we never saw them winning medals? Any criticism of the system would certainly draw rebuff from most of the Americans: American teams are the best, and this system has proven itself by awarding the medals to the best.

This virtual ban on the foreign participation is just fine, even the most thoughtful Americans might argue, as it would help strengthen American domination on the medals.

It would have been indeed fine, if the stake for THIS game had not been much higher than just medals and pride. If, in the American Olympics of ideas, one of the GOOD teams (ideas, opinions, information, etc.) from the world wins the gold medal in every event, America gets the peace, prosperity, and respect. Further, America gets to lead the entire world to peace, prosperity, and democracy. On the other hand, if one of the POOR teams wins the medal in any of the events, America gets the dubious honor of bullying the world, sabotaging other countries’ efforts for prosperity and democracy, and waging wars that kill millions of people.

Those events include ping pong, badminton, and kung fu, which are not dominated by Americans and their western allies. In fact, Americans rarely participate in those events. If much of the world were to be prevented from participating in those events, American teams may be guaranteed to get medals even in ping pong. According to the above rule, however, America and the world may also be guaranteed a couple disasters.

In the competition of ideas and information regarding international events, most of the topics are about other nations’ feelings and intent, and about their economic, political, and social conditions. The competition seems doomed if the international barriers are so high that the voices of those nations and their governments do not have an equal chance of reaching the American audience.

A Public Defense System for Foreign Nations in the Court of Public Opinion

Let’s suppose, after the 2001 plane collision, Chinese government had had professional help from some American media specialists who not only have an intimate knowledge of American audience, but also enjoy access, rapport, and even trust of the American mainstream media. How might that have changed the dynamics of communication and diplomacy between the two nations?

Within hours after the incident, this pro-China group could have put the message out in the mainstream American media, especially TV, that ordinary Chinese were genuinely angered by the American reconnaissance flights. They could have pointed out that the anger was there in spite of the efforts by the Chinese government and the mainstream Chinese media to play down the collision incident. They could have also argued that the Chinese anger was understandable, as many ordinary Americans would have considered it equally provocative had any other country done the same along the
American coast. The group could also have tried to put those American lawyers and legal scholars on TV to say that the international law does not seem to be on the American side.

The mere presence of such messages in the mainstream American media could directly soothe the English speaking Chinese, and could indirectly affect the general Chinese public, since Chinese were angered as much by the one-sided rhetoric in the American media after the incident as they were by the incident itself. Further, those messages could help the American politicians and other media commentators to criticize China, if they still choose to do so, with a better understanding of the Chinese public mentality at the time. Some of them could have chosen to tone down their harsh words against China had they had better information. All this might create an environment in China that would have allowed the Chinese government to quickly release the American crewmembers without publicly demanding a formal apology. At the meantime, the environment in the US would have been calmer to allow the White House to quickly apologize without appearing loosing face if they choose to do so.

When American media have showed yellow ribbons for the American crewmembers, or when they have showed American video about the aggressive behavior of a Chinese pilot, one of those media specialists could have called the right people in various media organizations to remind them of the principle of balance. He or she could have provided them with the Chinese video and other evidences in favor of the Chinese version of the story. He or she could have offered assistance if some media organizations would like to interview the surviving pilot or the family members of the missing pilot.

When the American politicians and American public were angered by the so-called Chinese lie that America had apologized, this group could have easily diffused the anger by sending a couple linguists to American TV and radio to explain that no one had lied in this linguistic incident.

Would American media admit they erred if the media specialists protested on behalf of China? Depending on whether there were indeed errors and how obvious the errors are, some journalists may, most may not. But as long as the protests were reasonable in the spirit of a free, responsible, and balanced media, they send a message to the American media: Chinese are in the game now. If the American journalists were to err again next time, they can no longer do it without thinking about it. And when they do think about it, we have to assume that most of them would try to be more objective, balanced, and neutral in most of the situations, as they do in domestic reporting.

To be sure, the adversary and even hostile relationship between China and American media have deep roots in history, ideologies, and cultures, something that probably cannot be immediately turned into a healthy working relationship even after one or two successful campaigns of media relations. But a constant presence of China (as well as many other nations) in the American market of ideas would help American journalists avoid deviating too far away from facts and balance.
How would this new dynamics in the media change the American public interests in the international news? It is well known that while the world is increasingly interdependent, the American audience’s interest in international news is in the decline. Part of the reason, we submit, is that there is no suspense in American media’s international coverage. The messages were highly uniformed, therefore seems highly predictable: the bad guys, such as Iranians, Libyans, Serbs, Cubans, and Chinese, etc, do bad things. The good guys, mainly Americans, Britains and some other western Europeans, would not let them. Good guys and bad guys went into conflict. Good guys beat the bad guys or are beating the bad guys. End of story.

Such stories could have attracted the attention of some American children had it been told in their language accompanied with color cartons. The real world is full of complexities and natural suspense that are more likely to attract the interests of adults. Is OJ guilty? Is he going to jail? Did Clinton purge himself? Should he be impeached? How should we reform the campaign finance system? Who is better for America, Bush or Gore? Which one is going to win the White House? Should the Supreme Court stop the Florida recount? Should the electoral system be replaced by direct election? Should there be more gun control? These stories are interesting in part because there are always two or more sides to each story, hence the outcome always seems unpredictable. Suspense makes a story.

As most of the foreign nations cannot compete effectively in this American game of public opinion, their side of the story is virtually absent in the media coverage. Did Chinese government attempt to corrupt the American political system? Of course! (There is little evidence to that.) Who was at fault in the incident of US bombing of Chinese Embassy in Belgrade? Of course Chinese! The Chinese students threw stones at our Embassy in Beijing! Why? Because the students were stupid. The Chinese government brainwashed the students and bused them to the Embassy! Did Chinese government steal nuclear secrets from America through Wen-Ho Lee? Of course! Oops! Maybe we did not have enough evidence to convict Wen-Ho Lee. But even if Wen-Ho Lee did not do it some body else must have. We just don’t know who. Not yet. And why do we have to know specifically who did it? China did it! Isn’t that obvious? Don’t we already know? Why should we look for evidence? Why should we even waste time reading and watching the news? We already know!

Had the Chinese side of the stories been told with the professional help of American media specialists, the stories would have appeared a lot more complicated, as they were, and there would have been all kinds of natural suspense. That would, I submit, have made the stories a lot more interesting to the American audience.

Would such changes in dialogue and dynamics translate into changes in the policies of the either nation? It probably would. But there is no guarantee. Chinese citizens don’t vote in the US. No one does except American citizens. So how the American policy might change depend entirely on how the American voters and leaders react to the additional information and the new dynamics. For example, in the plane collision incident, after learning additional impression, American people might still
decide to pressure the White House to act tough on the Chinese, or the White House might still decide to do what they actually did. Would the additional information be in vain? I would say no. The decisions, changed or not, would have been more informed ones. And that’s what informed democracy is about – rational decisions by the people on the basis of all the information available.

It might sound ironic but yes, we should encourage and help other nations, including China, to participate in our democracy for the sake of strengthening our democracy!

The question is, then, who should take the initiative to establish such an organization? From American journalists’ perspective, of course it’s the responsibility of the Chinese government. American companies, government agencies, other organizations all hire their own public relation specialists or public relation firm. Foreign nations, particularly China, should do the same.

In the minds of many Chinese and the Chinese government, there are two barriers, ideology and lack of trust, that prevent them from even cooperating or participating, not to mention initiating. Among the Chinese journalists, scholars and officials, there is currently an on-going debate about whether the media in general could be and should be neutral, objective, and balanced in domestic or international coverage. The answer from the traditional communist ideology was a categorical no. There has been no debate on the subject until recently. The debate itself is an encouraging sign of tremendous progress, although the small “objectivity” camp has yet to persuade more Chinese.

As the “objectivity” camp cites American theories and American experiences as the main justifications, there is a related debate about whether American media are indeed objective, neutral, and balanced as the American journalists, human rights activists and the Chinese “objectivity” scholars said they are. Here the “objectivity” scholars have a clear disadvantage, as the opposing camp only needs to point at the US media coverage of China in the past dozen years. The US media, most of the Chinese would agree, have been far from neutral, balanced, or objective. The “objectivity” scholars could argue that the imbalance is only limited to the China coverage or international coverage. But that’s almost the coverage that Chinese audience most cares about, and the only coverage that they feel capable of evaluating. If American media have never been balanced in more than ten years of China coverage, it truly requires a leap of faith for the Chinese to believe that American media are indeed balanced anywhere else.

So, most of the Chinese journalists still think that the media are tools of propaganda and journalists should honestly say so. When Chinese say they are propagandists, they say so with pride. They think that American journalists are being disingenuous, or even hypocritical, when Americans talk about our pride in neutrality, objectivity, and balance.
Following this logic, the famous American marketplace of ideas was only designed to fool the innocent and the naive. The game is so crooked that it is a prank. To participate in it is not only to waste time and money but also, most importantly, to make a fool out of Chinese themselves. It would legitimize a sham to demonize China.

That’s rationale behind some Chinese government policy of restricting American media’s access to Chinese people or even officials.

This cynical view of America and the American media, right or wrong, present a tremendous political risk for those Chinese leaders who want China to compete in the American game of public opinion. If they argue vigorously and win the internal debate, how would Chinese messages and messengers be treated in American market? Would they be treated fairly? Or would they be ridiculed and mocked? Probably no one, not even American journalists, knows for sure. Probably no media specialists can guarantee anything either. Can any political strategist guarantee Bush or Gore that he wins the next election? If not, how can anyone guarantee a successful campaign to China or the Chinese government, who are admittedly much less popular than any of the leading American politicians?

So, the Chinese critics asked American journalists, why don’t you take the initiative? You advertised yourself to be neutral, objective, and balanced. Why can’t you just behave as such? Why do we have to take the tremendous risk to participate in your game, when you yourself can’t guarantee a neutral, objective, and balanced outcome?

From the American perspective, this is almost like asking the American journalists to constantly watch out for the Chinese interests, like China’s public relations agents should do, while China doesn’t want to hire her own PR agents because she distrusts the entire process. It’s like asking referees to be the coaches of the Chinese team when the Chinese don’t want to take the risk of hiring their own coaches.

Hence an American dilemma: the lack of participation of foreign nations in the American court of public opinion makes the process unfair; but the foreign nations won’t participate because it is unfair.

Certainly, the journalists cannot also serve as PR agents. But the American media as a whole may take the initiative to demonstrate their sincerity about a fairer process in order to encourage the participation of foreign nations. A first step is to establish an independent non-profit PR and media relation organization. It could be funded by large media and entertainment corporations, other American-based international corporations and foreign sources. The work of such an organization may include a number of things. First, through content analysis and surveys, it should identify nations under attack in the American mainstream media who are unwilling or unable to defend themselves. Second, it should identify nations of which the news was not adequately provided to the mainstream American media. Third, it should provide services to those nations so identified, in a way that is similar to the service of public defense lawyers in the American legal system. Those services may include research, strategy design, implementation, training
of the client country’s officials and staff, and even suggestion of reform in the client country’s policy and system.

Such an organization should strive to obtain cooperation and funding from a client country. Its ultimate goal, however, is to strengthen American democracy. Therefore it should provide services to the nations most in need even without cooperation. It would be admittedly a tremendous challenge, very much like working for a defendant who does not cooperate with his own lawyers, or even does not recognize the court’s authority. It could be argued, however, that it is in that kind situation that such services are most needed, for the purpose of preserving the integrity of the American court of public opinion, the American democracy, the soundness of the American foreign policy, and the long-term interests of the American nation.

While such an American organization is likely to be seen as devils’ advocates in America, it is likely to win the trust of many foreign governments and foreign nations. Once that happens, cooperation and funding may come naturally. The training, while designed to help a client nation’s officials to handle American media for the best interests of the client, would naturally help those officials to better understand the American media and political system, therefore help them to see the merit of the American system. The messages from this organization to a client about reforming the client’s media system and democratizing its political system would be seen as suggestions intended to improve the client’s image in America. By contrast, the same message from the US government, the American politicians, the human rights organizations and even American media have been routinely seen around the world as hostile demand designed to humiliate and impose American values onto other nations. Those demands, alone, may have incited more psychological resistance, nationalism, anti-Americanism and animosity than real changes in those countries.

Under such circumstance, an effort focused on defending in America the image of a foreign system might lead to friendly suggestions of reforming that system, ending up changing that system even more effectively than the stern demands alone.

By tolerating, supporting and funding such an organization, the American media and America as a nation are demonstrating to the world their confidence in the American ideal of informed democracy. Defending other nations in the American marketplace of ideas in its self constitutes arguably the most effective defense of the American values, a defense by deeds, but not just words. And that would be a quiet challenge issued throughout the world: who would follow the American example with a similar effort in their own countries to defend the images of other nations under attack there? Would China do the same in China for America?

To the extent that this organization sticks with its principal mission of advocating its client nations in the American court of public opinion (rather than, for example, trying too eagerly to reform other nations’ political system), it will serve as a vital piece currently missing in the American democracy. Consequently, both Americans and people of other nations will reap the benefits.
This is not just for the good of other nations, but above all for an informed democracy, for the appropriateness of the American foreign policy, for the good will of other nations toward America, and for the long-term interest of American people.

Ever since the end of the cold war, the momentum pushed us to search for our next enemy. Some thought we found it in Iraq, Serbia, North Korea, Cuba, most likely China, and maybe a combination of them. Are we looking at the wrong place? As is the case for most nations, our real enemies may be within, within our border, within our head, within our system. They are called ignorance and arrogance. Not individual ignorance or arrogance, but national ones. They constantly emerge, enlarge, and explode, thanks to two holes in our media system, the simplistic patriotism and insufficient foreign participation. If we work on it, we may reduce the size of the holes, strengthen our democracy, and hopefully contain the enemies.

1 《英语名言精粹》 闫秋燕、余文、崔冰清 译，西安：世界图书出版公司 1999 年 10 月第 1 版。 Yingyu Mingyan Jingcui (Selected English Quotations) Yan Qiuyan, Yu Wen, Cui Bingyan (Eds.), Xian: Shijie Tushu Chuban Gongsai (Xian: World Book Publishing Company) 1999, p. 157.

2 《英语名言精粹》 闫秋燕、余文、崔冰清 译，西安：世界图书出版公司 1999 年 10 月第 1 版。 Yingyu Mingyan Jingcui (Selected English Quotations) Yan Qiuyan, Yu Wen, Cui Bingyan (Eds.), Xian: Shijie Tushu Chuban Gongsai (Xian: World Book Publishing Company) 1999, p. 161.

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6 Walter Lippmann (1922) Public Opinion.