CITY UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

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Shifting Prisms of China: U.S. Correspondents as an Interpretive Community, 1972-2000

中國棱鏡的遞嬗：

以美國記者為詮釋社群， 1972-2000

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Abstract

U.S. media coverage of China is determined not only by what is happening in China, but also by what is happening in the U.S. and what is happening to the U.S.-China relations. This study seeks to relate the analysis of U.S. media texts to the contextual changes of China, the U.S. and bilateral relations from 1972 to 2000. American media perceptions of China have traditionally alternated between distaste and adulation. After President Nixon’s landmark visit to China in 1972, the U.S. press corps has experienced another pendulum swing. Absent the “I” of authors in news reports as an “objectivity” code, little if anything could be learned about the change or continuity of the journalists’ attitudes and beliefs from the media texts themselves.

As such, this study probes into the books penned by these reporters, attempting to examine the self-reflexive dimension in “China Assignment” and explain the “pendulum swing” with an “interpretive community” approach that patterns many of their prisms. Specifically, this study asks: (1) what “myth structures” does the U.S. press corps invoke to forge their prisms of China as an interpretive community? (2) If the pendulum swing also characterizes these reporters’ prisms of China in their books, how does such a tendency relate to their preconceptions and local contacts? (3) What are the nuances and variations in each swing of this pendulum, and to what extent do they relate to the international context of Cold War, U.S.-China relations, transformations in China, domestic perceptions of China in the U.S., the ideological persuasion of media organizations, and individual judgment values?

This thesis argues that the ability to apply a journalistic interpretation of occurrences in China correspondence will vary by the scope and depth of their contacts in China, which, in turn, will be mediated by their preconceptions grounded in U.S. domestic perceptions of China. My investigation proceeds at two stages: (1)
patterned relations among the authors, the people, and institutions are extracted to draw the reporters’ contacts. (2) I will use Gamson and Modigliani’s (1989) “constructionist approach to discourse analysis” to distill “ideological packages” of their prisms.

This study concludes that there emerge three meta-narratives in these books from 1972 to 2000: “the virtuous New China” (1972-1979), “the promising going-capitalist China” (1979-1989), and “the ironic rising China” (1989-2000). The inscription and unlearning of these mythic categories have testified to the pendulum principle. The polarized reversal has much to do with the reporters’ persistent tendency to carry preconceptions that wished for empirical verification, and there remains a propensity to make sweeping moral judgments in light of such “enduring values” as “freedom,” “justice,” and “individualism.” Their preconceptions echo the rise and fall of institutional authority and public cynicism when facing such critical incidents as the withdrawal from the Vietnam War and the end of the Cold War. Meanwhile, the pendulum is partly the result of limited liberalization in China. From the Mao era to Deng’s reform era, China has been undergoing tremendous transformations during the historically most dynamic 1980s and in the aftermath of the Tiananmen incident. Throughout, a systematic discourse analysis shows that the U.S. press corps adapts the mythic formula partly from the fluctuating Chinese officials’ interpretations, and partly from the shifting available contacts in the field. These journalistic accounts—which are often Beijing-oriented and written from the viewpoint of a particular segment of Chinese population—are nevertheless not representative of “China’s reality.”