



How Lagos Newspapers Report China in Nigeria

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Abstract: This study is anchored on a range of perspectives regarding the traditional role of the mass media. Whitney (1975, p. 69) asserts that they inform, educate and entertain people as well as deepen their perspectives on issues, but Lasswell (cited in Popoola 2012, p.160) avers that surveillance of the environment, correlation of parts of the society in responding to the environment and transmission of social heritage from one generation to another are their topmost functions. Rao (1968, cited in Martin and Chaudhary, 1983, p. 102) says: “the mass media may not be the prime movers of development in general, but they provide part of the necessary social interactions in a development cycle.” The reports in the Nigerian media on China, a key player in global affairs, were examined with reference to these perspectives. A survey carried out across print media establishments in Lagos, Nigeria, with agenda-setting theory as the anchor, found out that a major determinant of the way China was reported by the Nigerian print media was the newsy nature of developments back home in China. The newsy nature, however, was what the Nigerian editors considered it to be.

Keywords: Reporting, print media, surveillance, correlation, framing, agenda setting, China, Nigeria.

Introduction

Development within the People’s Republic in China (PRC), following the ascension of Xiaoping and the

aftermath reforms he embarked upon, has earned China a considerable media attention in Nigeria, over and above other Asian

countries. The developments in China today have further confirmed Napoleon's observation long time ago. Quoting Kennedy (1993) through a book entitled *Preparing for the Twenty-first Century*, Hague and Harrop (2004, p. 67) say "when China wakes, she will wake the world." The truth of the matter is that China is not only awake today, it has become a powerful force, a regional power and in the words of Magstadt (p. 230) "a nascent superpower." With an estimated population of 1.28 billion and growing at 0-6 per cent per year, the country remains a political community with the highest population in the world. Her economy, according to Hague & Harrop (p. 68) has grown fourfold since 1978 and is likely to become the world's largest in the first half of the century. The country is the world's fourth largest exporter with particular strengths in assembly and manufacturing. Foreign editors of print media establishments in Lagos who are the main respondents in this study say China is constantly in the news in Nigeria as a result of her heavy presence in the various segments of the Nigerian economy, especially in the areas of health-care, commerce, communication, electrical appliances, education, arts and culture, among others.

Objective and Method of the Study

The objective of the study is to ascertain how the People's Republic of China was reported by the Nigerian press. To this end, the study used the survey method in gathering data from respondents who are senior journalists and head of foreign desks of Lagos-based national newspapers and prominent weekly news magazines. A simple open-ended questionnaire was drawn up to elicit their comments on the reportage of Chinese related stories in their medium. Open ended questionnaire, according to Sobowale (2008, p. 48) "permits the respondent to answer the question the way he wants with little or no restrictions at all." The respondent has much latitude to respond to the questions as it pleases him or her. The choice of open-ended questions was informed by the manageable small sample size of the respondents.

The population for the study comprised 57 print media establishments identified by Akinfeleye (2003, pp. 47-57) and Komolafe (2004, pp. 107-112) in Nigeria. A sample size of 20 was extracted for this study. This figure represents 64 percent of the 33 Lagos based print media. Those not sampled and no longer in circulation include: Daily Times, National Concord, Sketch, National Interest, National Mirror, The Democrat,

TNT, The Comet, Satellite, The Republic, Lagos Horizon, Classique and Tempo. The study was carried out in the month of January, 2013.

Research Questions

1. How often is China reported in the Nigerian print media?
2. What is the nature of Chinese stories reported and what informed their publication?
3. Are Chinese stories favorably or negatively reported by the Nigerian print media?
4. How is Chinese stories rated compared to other countries in the Asian geo-political zone?
5. Could the popularity of Chinese products in Nigeria, especially in the areas of health care, electronics/communications and electrical appliances be attributed to the prominence given to the Chinese community?

Conceptual Framework

Reporting

Reporting simply means to account for a situation. It is a kind of “surveillance duty” according to Iyere (2011, p.116). It is not only about accounting for a situation. It also involves relaying that account to an audience that is literate enough to decipher that account, as content availability does not automatically translate to reach (Morah, 2011, p.130). Hence, Popoola (2011, p. 4) says a reporter is a person who has undergone training in the art of information

gathering. The information, when packaged, is called news. In the context of Akinfeleye (2011, p. 95) “news is an account of what the public wants to know, what they must know, what they ought to know and as a commercial proposition.”

Print Media

Print media refers to newspapers and magazines. A newspaper is a periodic publication containing timely reports. According to Newsom and Wollert (1988) cited in Popoola (2005a, p. 138-139).

The newspaper is the medium ‘of record’. It’s what you consult to find out the most important information about everything that happened on a certain date in a community and surrounding area. Newspapers are valuable information sources. They provide clues that a reporter can investigate to find a story that was missed.

Just as newspaper offers information on happenings in a political community, the medium also provides the lead which reporters could pursue for publication. Tracing the origin of the name, Uyo (1987, p. 6) says:

There is a French word nouvelles, which through imitation in Middle English, became newes. The French also have a word papier, derived from the Latin word papyrus, the material on which people could write and print. News and papier together make up newspaper.

Magazine

Unlike newspaper, magazines are collections of various editorial materials, which are judged to be of interest to the reading public especially when public interest is conceptualized as a value that has the potential of universal application (Omojola, 2011, p.353). Attempting a distinction between newspaper and magazine, DeFleur and Dennis (1981, p. 148) say magazine “show less concern for information on the immediate day’s events and more for interpreting and correlating topics in a broader context.” Magazine is a hybrid of books and newspapers. The word ‘magazine’ is an outgrowth of the French word “magasin”, which in turn comes from the Arabic “mahkzan”, meaning a general storehouse. In journalism idiom, newspaper and magazines are known as print media because they simply involve impressing ink on paper.

Literature Review

A major problem confronting China in the post-Mao era has been how to erase the negative impression created by foreign media. Since the cold war era between the US and USSR, the Western press and their allies across the world had embraced framing when reporting communist China. The situation would become worse whenever

China was involved in certain things that ran contrary to the interests of the West. For instance, Burleigh (2009, p. 136) recalls how the

Western media portrayed Chinese sale of arms to Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO); an action which was editorially framed as a subtle support for terrorism. Here, PLO was portrayed by the West as a terrorist organization rather than a freedom fighter (Eze, 2011, p. 51). This explains why Fairclough (1995, p. 83) says “framing can be blatantly manipulative.” In the context of Hague & Harrop (p. 114), framing has to do with how an event is narrated as a coherent story:

A frame focuses on particular aspects of a problem, its origins, remedies and evaluation. It encourages viewers and readers to portray the topic in a similar way.

Quoting Entman (1993), Hague and Harrop (p. 115) further contend that “as the concept of a story suggests, the journalist must translate the event covered into an organized narrative which connects with the viewer or reader”. However, Parenti (1986, p. 220) is of the view that for framing to be effective, it must rely on truth, adding that “the most effective propaganda is that which relies on framing rather than on falsehood.” He stresses that by bending the truth rather than breaking it, through application of emphasis, nuances, innuendo and peripheral embellishments, communicators can create a desired impression without resorting to explicit advocacy and without departing too far from the appearance of objectivity.

Framing could be achieved through the manner in which news is packaged, the degree of exposure, placement of story/picture (whether front page or back, lead story or last), the tone of presentation (sympathetic or slighting), and the type of headlines among others. Hence, Baran and Davis (2009, p.322) say “news coverage can strongly influence the way news readers or viewers make sense of news events and the major actors in the events.” In this way, it is possible for the media to mislead their audience by telling them what to think about a story.

In the post-Mao era during which Dominick (2009, p. 427) says “the market place, rather than the communist party is now the major influence on the content of Chinese media,” a window of opportunity is open for Chinese media to erase some of the derogatory ways by which China has been portrayed. Dominick has observed that under the new dispensation, the country now has about 2,000 newspapers and 10,000 magazines with a combined circulation of nearly 200 million. Says he: China recently replaced Japan as the country with the largest newspaper circulation and now has 16 newspapers that rank among the top 100 in circulation. (Dominick, p. 427). Parenti (p. 131) avers that the US media mirrored the shift in official policy and suddenly discovered that “China was no longer a menacing giant nor a mindless ant-

hill but was inhabited by human beings who like to play ping-pong, sip soda, and even fall in love and do a turn on the dance floor.”

Furthermore, Parenti (p.131) asserts that the “fanatical Asian communists” were now described as “moderate.” Quoting a well-known US magazine, Newsweek in its August 29, 1977 edition, Parenti says “Peking’s post-Maoist leaders are presiding over a strongly entrenched and resolutely pragmatic government.” Quoting the New York Times in its edition of December 31, 1978, Parenti adds that “press reports still talked about mass discontent, poverty, instability, lagging production and other signs of political and economic disarray in China.”

While post-Mao reforms in China are globally applauded with commensurate publicity by the foreign media, the fact remains that framing still continues to play a prominent role in the reportage of China in the foreign media. They wait patiently for events to unfold; following which it is packaged in form of framing. Magstadt (p. 235-236) capture this trend in the following words:

China has begun suffering from an increasing crime wave. Theft and robbery have been particularly bad in the cities, while drug related crimes and prostitution are also on the increase – all representing the underside of China’s economic expansion. Corruption is also

rampant in China now. Business and politics have become tainted by routine acts of bribery, nepotism and unofficial favoritism.

Hardly is there any country in the global arena that is spared of crimes as well as the social-economic and political challenges listed in the foregoing. The problem is a global one though the proportion varies from one country to another.

Theoretical Framework

The primary obligation of the mass media in any polity is that of feeding the citizenry with information about happenings in their environment and beyond (Abubakar, 2011). Lasswell (1948), cited in Popoola (2005b p. 30), says that the three major functions of the mass media are “Surveillance of the environment, correlation of parts of society in responding to the environment and Transmission of social heritage from one generation to next.” For a better understanding of the paper, each of the three concepts could be briefly explained.

Surveillance has to do with the primary responsibility of the media with regard to combing the environment for useful information that would make life meaningful for the people. In this context, the media, especially the print brand, having professionally combed the environment could discourage any practice that does not conform to the laws of the land in the area of trade relations as well as bilateral

agreements between Nigeria and China. Correlation, on the other hand, involves interpretation of the information collected from the environment. When editorial, news analysis or commentary is published on the developments in China, the Chinese government may be forced to take some positive action to redress any ensuing problems.

Transmission of social heritage from generation to generation is the socializing function of the media through conscious education and enlightenment. It is an established tradition that newspapers and magazines must devote substantial space to foreign news in order to keep their readers abreast of development in their environment and beyond. This norm must be maintained and passed on from generation to generation; hence, the theoretical role upon which this study is erected is the agenda-setting theory of the mass media.

Reflecting on this, Dare (1997, p. 535) says “studies have indicated that the news media perform an agenda-setting function” pointing out that “those topics given the most coverage by the news media tend to be the topics the audience identify as the most pressing issues of the day. Semetko (1996, p. 271) made a similar assertion. He contends that “agenda-setting research has provided substantial support for the hypothesis that the issues that are most prominent in the news are also

the issues that are most important in public opinion.” This is exacerbated by the fact that the media, such as the press, do not exactly reflect social reality because news is filtered, chosen and shaped by reporters and their editors (Abdulrauf, 2011, p.341). Explaining further, Folarin (1998, P. 68) declares:

Agenda-setting implies that the mass media predetermine what issues are regarded as important at a given time in a given society. Agenda-setting theory does not ascribe to the media the power to determine what we actually think; but it does ascribe to them the power to determine what we are thinking about.

The fact that the media perform the agenda-setting function toward an audience is an indication of a social responsibility function. According to Adenle and Oso (2014, p. 103),

“rather than helping to reinforce or re-inscribe unpopular practices, they should...help the society realize the need for a balance in power and politics.” The social responsibility tasks of a reporter can, therefore, not be over-emphasized.

Data Analysis

This study adopted the survey method in gathering data from respondents who are senior editorial staff members of print media establishments in Lagos. Simple open-ended questionnaire was administered on the editors (foreign desks) who, by their experience, and professional placement are more suited to respond to the questionnaire items. The newspapers and magazines media whose editors were contacted are listed hereunder:

- 1. *The Guardian*
- 2. *The Nation*
- 3. *The Sun*
- 4. *The Punch*
- 5. *Business World*
- 6. *Daily Champion*
- 7. *ThisDay*
- 8. *Nigerian Compass*
- 9. *Newswatch newspaper*
- 10. *Daily Trust*
- 11. *Business Hallmark*
- 12. *PM News*
- 13. *Nigerian Tribune*
- 14. *Vanguard*
- 15. *Hallmark newspaper*
- 16. *National Daily*
- 17. *National Mirror*
- 18. *News watch magazine*
- 19. *Daily Independent*
- 20. *The News magazine*

The respondent’s responses to the items are hereby presented.

Table 1: Reporting China in The Nigerian Print Media

Item	Option	F	%
How often is China reported in the Nigerian press?	Daily	-	-
	As the need arises	20	100
	Total	20	100

Table 1 shows China is reported in the Nigerian print media whenever the need arises, meaning that any time newsworthy story comes in, it gets published after passing through the gate-keeping process of the newsroom.

On the nature of Chinese stories reported as well as what informed their publication, the foreign desk editors claimed it centered on politics, crime, economy, relations between Nigeria and China, technology, road construction, energy, sports, tourism, and agriculture, among others. The foreign desk editor of National Mirror said, while adducing reasons for the publication of Chinese stories that, “Some of the stories are irresistible and would surely serve the best interest of Nigerian readers,

especially, stories on technological breakthrough and medicine.”

The PM News/The News magazine foreign desk editor on his part says the Chinese stories got published because they were of special interest to readers. “Stories about crime, community development, disasters, Chinese government policies that could affect Nigerians in China as well as Nigerian businessmen and women in China usually receive special considerations while deciding on stories for publication”.

The foreign desk editor at ThisDay newspaper similarly contends that the Chinese steady growth, their exploits in automobile and communication technology as well as cheap products are newsworthy factors which the medium usually consider.

Table 2: How Favorable are the Published China-related Stories?

<i>Item</i>	<i>Option</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>%</i>
Are Chinese stories favorably or negatively reported?	Yes	9	40%
	No	12	60%
	Total	20	100%

From Table 2, 40% of the respondents said the Chinese stories were favorably reported while 60% disagreed. Some of the 40% respondents who claimed the stories were positively reported contended that the stories were true reflections of the situation in China. A growing

economy, an emergent regional power in Asia, as well as a country exerting enormous influence on Nigeria aptly capture this situation.

The 60% who said “no” argued that the question is “neither here nor there” as newspapers and magazines, based on their professional callings are expected to publish stories as

they come, bearing in mind that they are not makers of such stories.

Table 3: Rating Chinese Stories

	<i>Option</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>%</i>
How is China stories rated viz-a-viz other countries in the Asian Geo-political zone?	Highly rated	13	65
	Lowly rated	4	20
	Equally rated	3	15
	Total	20	100

Going by the statistical information deducible from Table 3, 65% of the respondents rated China over and above other countries in the Asian geo-political zone. The foreign desk editor of PM News/The News Magazine, for instance, argued that “China is growing in leaps and bounds and growing to become a world power in spite of the world’s economic recession.”He stressed further that “China is gradually becoming the next biggest economy in the world.”

The foreign desk editor at Hallmark newspaper said that “Chinese products are readily available, cheaper in comparison with similar

products from other Asian countries.” Some 20% of the respondents however rated Chinese stories low in relation to other Asian countries. Some of the respondents claimed that the Chinese do not advertise their products and that whenever they have problems, they don’t address them openly. The foreign desk editor of Business World newspaper said “the Chinese community still operates with the political philosophy of their country.” Some 15% of the respondents, however, said all the countries in Asia were rated equally with China.

Table 4: Popularity of Chinese Products

	<i>Option</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>
Could popularity of Chinese products in Nigeria be attributed to the prominence given to the Chinese community?	Yes	11	55
	No	9	45
	Total	20	100

On Table 4, 55% of the respondents claimed that the popularity of Chinese products in Nigeria, especially in the areas of health care, electronics among others, are as a result of the level of prominence given to Chinese community by the Nigerian print media. The respondent

at Daily Independent newspaper argued that “there is no way you can report politics, business and economy without China being a leading economy.”

The respondent at National Mirror newspaper said: “Chinese products are popular amongst Nigerians

because they are regularly educated, sensitized and enlightened about the robustness of the Chinese economy.” A similar view was expressed at the Nigerian Tribune that “China is the second largest economy in terms of the GDP and purchasing power after the USA. It is the world’s fastest growing economy with growth rates averaging 10 percent over the past 30 years. China is also the largest exporter and second largest importer of goods in the world.”

However, 45% of the respondents differed. One of them from the Sun newspaper said “a field research may be necessary to answer the question.” The answer from Hallmark newspaper equally said: “the influx of Chinese products does not mean they have any viable quality.” He opined that many of the Chinese products were of low quality. He specifically mentioned Chinese phones which many Nigerian youths are now avoiding due to its poor quality. Another respondent who shared this position is the respondent from National Daily newspaper. He said the Chinese have studied Nigerians to discover that many are below the world poverty level and therefore taken advantage of that to bring in sub-standard goods. The foreign desk editor at Nigerian Compass, however, quoted the Chinese ambassador to Nigeria Deng Boqing as saying that the “the influx of sub-standard Chinese products in

Nigeria was due to the inclination of African businessmen to opt for low prized goods.”

Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendations

The study examined the Nigerian press reported China. Nigeria, it should be noted, operates a plural media system in which government, private individuals and religious bodies are the owners of the existing media in the country. However, the print media covered by this study are all privately owned. This decision is not deliberate. The once dominant government-owned print media operating in the axis investigated such as Daily Times, Lagos Horizon and New Nigerian were out of circulation when the study was carried out in the first quarter of 2013. It is instructive to note that government-owned print media across the country have been having it rough since the return of democratic governance in Nigeria in 1999. One of the reasons for this is the content consumers’ lack of trust in what they publish.

A cursory look at the way China is reported, represented or projected in the Nigerian press can be situated within the three main functions of the mass media put forward by Harold Lasswell mentioned earlier. The first is surveillance. An undisputable fact behind the reportage of Chinese stories by all the print media covered by the study is the urge to keep the public abreast

of developments in China. That all the surveyed print media arrogated this duty to themselves is normal and should be expected. According to Glynn et al (1999, p. 382) “print and electronic news media have become a ritualized force to which we entrust much of this responsibilities”.

The second function is that of correlation. Another major influencing reason behind the decision by the surveyed press to make Chinese stories part of their media menu for their audience stems from the need to keep them (audience) in touch with what others are thinking about the happenings back home in China. There are many Nigerians in China - businessmen and women, students and so forth just as there are lots of Chinese businessmen and women in Nigeria. As a matter of fact, a Chinese town exists at Ojota, a Lagos suburb. There are also Chinese schools in Lagos as well as numerous Chinese hotels and restaurants. The correlation function therefore serves to keep in touch with one another citizens of both countries.

The second function, going by the way it has affected the operations of the Nigerian print media also has a direct connection to the third function of mass media put forward by Lasswell. This function is that of transmission or the passing of the norms from one generation of practicing journalists to another. As

some journalists on the foreign desks are disengaging, new and younger ones are being recruited and socialized into this tradition. Even though the surveyed media are privately owned, traces of censorial interference by their owners were not detected.

Going by the nature of Chinese stories published, one could assert that they were guided by professional canons of objectivity. Objectivity in this sense is in the context of Merrill (1974, p. 156) whose goal is that of “reportorial detachment and neutralism” and in the words of Omojola (2008, p. 175) where the audience of the media are not denied the “right to be seen, heard or react” to the published story.

Earlier, the study put forward five research questions in the beginning:

RQ1 asked how often China was reported in the Nigerian print media. The study found out that China was reported whenever newsy activities or development occurred. This is the position of all the foreign desk editors covered by this survey.

RQ2 sought to know the nature of Chinese stories reported. The study found out that they bothered on politics, crime, economy, sports, technology, health care, tourism among others

RQ3 asked if the reported Chinese stories were positive or negative. While 40% of the respondents said

the stories were favorable, 60% claimed they were negative. Many of such negative stories were published on front page, others on the back page and the rest published on the foreign page inside the newspapers. 2. Some of the magazines gave cover treatment to Chinese stories.

RQ4 wanted to know how Chinese stories were rated by the Nigerian print media compared to stories from other countries in Asia. Some 65% of the respondents rated China highly. Far less 20 percent rated China low and 15 percent rated the country equally along other countries in the Asian geo-political zone.

RQ5 sought to know if the popularity of Chinese products among Nigerians and especially in the areas of health care, electronics/communication and electrical appliances could be attributed to the prominence given to the Chinese community by the Nigerian print media. Some 55% of the respondents agreed while 45 % disagreed.

Consequently, the study puts forward the following recommendations:

1. Negative stories are highly injurious to the reputation of any nation-state. The need exists to control where it is possible, the outbreak of such stories. To achieve this, the paper

recommend the suggestion of Glynn et al (p. 386) that “government and other stakeholders should try to influence the press and by that the public agenda.”

2. The Chinese government, corporate bodies and other stakeholders should consciously work towards setting agenda for positive image. This is because reporters are often driven by an assumption that audiences will want to know about the stories published and consequently buy the newspaper or magazine so as to digest its contents. If deliberate efforts have been made to set agenda for positive image, it goes to suggest that when people buy the newspapers, or magazines, what they would read would be the type of positive stories they wish to see.

3. To tackle the problem of framing which the study identified, the paper recommends the need for the Chinese government to develop the context of media presentations and stories which can lead reporters to emphasize certain aspects of Chinese life or an event.

4. The various government agencies responsible for the standardization of products should step up efforts at eliminating exportation of poor or sub-standard Chinese products into Nigeria

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