

Foreign Media's Exaggeration of the Wukan Incident

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The first foreign media coverage of China can be traced back to 13th century when an Italian, Marco Polo, wrote a detailed description of the contemporary Yuan Dynasty of China. Since then, foreign missionaries, diplomats, travellers, scholars and journalists have all contributed substantially to the images of China. After Deng Xiaoping's economic reform and open policy in 1970s, the international community witnessed the emergence and rise of the Asian power. More and more attention was attracted and the foreign media coverage of contemporary China increased at an unprecedented pace. Some of this coverage provided in-depth information that elevated several issues to a broader attention. However, some of the contemporary foreign coverage often exaggerated and even intentionally fabricated. The 2011 Wukan Incident was one of the main targets of contemporary foreign media, who substantially exaggerated and fabricated the entire incident.

First and foremost, the term "foreign media" has to be clarified. Therefore, in this essay, "foreign media" refers to not only the western media, such as the media in the U.S. and the U.K. and so on (predominantly English speaking countries), but also the Hong Kong (HK) media. Although the Hong Kong media are sometimes considered as Chinese media, still they are more similar to western media due to their relatively freer political environment. Despite their differences in language, ideology and political orientation, HK media and western media still share some commonality when reporting incidents that happened in China, especially when reporting the Wukan incident.

The Wukan protest started as an anti-corruption campaign in September 2011 when officials sold land to real estate developers without properly compensating the villagers. Led

by Lin Zulian, the outraged villagers organized street marching, petitions to the central government and protests in front of several government buildings and police stations. The protest escalated in December 2011, when the police organized a siege of the town and captured several village representatives. Although the police responded fiercely at first, the central government immediately halted the police's aggressive action in order to thoroughly investigate this movement. In fact, some scholars later provided detailed insight to the essence of the anti-corruption campaign. Hua, Hou and Deng elaborate that, "the Wukan protesters made appeals within the boundaries that were established formally, but not informally, by the state" (Hua, Hou, and Deng). In other words, the protesters only protested about the corruptions but not about anything related to democracy or anything that contradicted the mainstream values of authority. Although, later, the villagers did employ democracy rhetoric in order to attract attentions from the central leadership, they soon abandoned it because they feared that the protests would be suppressed as west-supported anti-government forces (Hua, Hou, and Deng).

However, some of the HK media at that time distorted the anti-corruption campaign to be a pro-democracy one. For instance, the *Apple Daily* wrote "Wukan Democratic Uprising" in the headline of an article related to the protests and explicitly compared the Wukan protest to the June 4 movement, a movement that centered on pro-democracy (Bandurski). Moreover, the *Ming Pao* directly labeled Lin Zulian, the protest leader, as the "choice of people" and subsequently claimed that "the villagers are ready to die for democracy" (Bandurski). The general trend at that time in HK media was framing the Wukan protest as a pro-democracy movement, but it was merely an anti-corruption campaign. Nonetheless, surprisingly, the other foreign media, at that time, remained quite neutral and factual about the Wukan protest. They reported the anti-corruption campaign correctly and seldom employed democracy rhetoric. For example, the New York Times acknowledged that

the Wukan incident was “a dispute between farmers and local officials” that escalated into a full-scale confrontation (Jacobs). Democratic rhetoric could hardly be found in these articles. Still, they sharply changed their tones when the election started later.

After several rounds of negotiations and thorough investigations, the local communist leaders above agreed to expel the village officials who sold the villagers’ lands. Thus, this created an opening of the positions in village officials. Therefore, in accordance with the constitution, villagers then organized a village committee election. In 2012, they gathered in front of a government buildings and each cast their vote for the candidates. And only a few noticed that the Wukan election was not something new and revolutionary. Yang Hua, a microblogger from Shandong, represents such voice of caution and writes, “This is an election supported by detailed regulations in the constitution of the People’s Republic of China... It’s not new and it doesn’t count as reform”(Chin). That is, the direct village committee elections have already been made mandatory since the promulgation of the Organic Law of Villager Committees of the People’s Republic of China in 1998 and the Wukan election was merely one of the many direct elections in 2012. Similarly, Dang Guoying, a Chinese columnist argues, “the election was merely an ascertainment of the current Organic Law of Villager Committees of the People’s Republic of China; it was not counted as a ‘revolution’ and it did not have further implication” (Dang). In other words, the Wukan election was not something unprecedented and it certainly did not imply any cutting-edge democratic progress.

However, the foreign media again intervened and exaggerated the Wukan election as something unprecedented and revolutionary. For instance, in a news report from *Reuters* written during the election, the reporter explicitly framed the villagers as “a front line of democratic activism” and exaggerated the electoral process as “liberal and at times groundbreaking” (Pomfret). Immediately after this was published, *The Guardian* also

claimed that the election was exceptional by saying that “Wukan is conducting what seems to be one of the China’s most free polls” because the election is free of manipulation from the local Communist Party leaders (“Wukan Holds Its Election after Protests That Cowed Officialdom”). Moreover, the *Los Angeles Times* then suggested an even bolder point by linking the election to something of revolutionary implication to the central leadership: such election “was closely watched for clues of possible liberalization within the Chinese Communist Party” (Demick). Other foreign media, such as the *Wall Street Journals* subsequently quoted several fervent Chinese microbloggers who framed the election as “a model” and “the start of something new” (Chin). As these exaggerations went on, almost the entire international community, including a substantial amount of Chinese mainlanders, soon started to label the election as uncharacteristic of Chinese politics. And with little exception, most of the foreign media started to celebrate this election and arrived at the conclusion that such election was a revolutionary democratic progress of China.

Nonetheless, most of the foreign media did focus on the point that the election was exceptional because it was free of Communist Party leaders’ manipulation. In other words, they unanimously believed that the central leadership of China intervened in most of past village elections and arbitrarily selected village leaders without considering the villagers’ choices. However, such concern stemmed from the stereotypical western view of China. Most foreign media assumed that most of the past village elections were rigged and manipulated based on their observance in the general party elections and the Hong Kong elections and their constant exposures to the narrow information that framed China as a top-down authoritarian state. In fact, manipulation from the top was hardly a problem in local elections. The Carter Center in China, a U.S. organization dedicated to providing assistance and advice to Chinese election officials in standardizing village election procedures and fostering better governance since 1997, provides crucial information regarding the past

village elections in its latest report. It praises the efforts put forth by the Central Communist Party in punishing bribery. Moreover, the report confirms that the past village committee election is the “institution through which candidates can openly compete and electors can experience true electoral choice” (The Carter Center). Although the report also identifies three main problems of current village elections such as, vote buying, the lack of young voters and disallowance of villager autonomy in managing public goods, still manipulation is never mentioned (The Carter Center). Therefore, manipulation is hardly a problem for village elections. Or at least, it is not identified as a major obstacle. And the Carter Center explicitly acknowledges the past village elections as democratic and transparent. As such, the Wukan election was merely a continuation of the good tradition but not a groundbreaking incident. The foreign media were generally exaggerating the success of the Wukan election based on shallow observance and ungrounded inference and they simply ignored the successful 14-year practice of direct election.

After 4 years of peace, Wukan was again pushed back to unrest when the elected village secretary Lin Zulian was captured and sentenced to 3-year imprisonment under the charge of bribery in September 2016 (the validity of the charge remained contested). The villagers again protested and demanded the release of Lin Zulian, claiming that the charges were invalid. The foreign media again used this opportunity to twist the Wukan incident. In an article of *The Diplomat*, the author firstly introduced the Wukan election as “Wukan democratic election, a groundbreaking event in China that made global headlines”. And more provocatively, the article was even titled “China’s Wukan Democracy Experiment Comes to a Violent End”, explicitly accusing China of human rights violation and curtailing the only democracy it had (Wong). Some journalists even posted faked information about the death of an 83-year-old woman and used several old photos of Wukan protests in 2011 to frame the intensity of the current protests (“Foreign Media Fails to Trick Wukan Villagers on Rumor”).

As these exaggeration intensified, the Central Communist Party eventually responded. *Global Times*, a state-sponsored newspaper, interviewed the 83-year-old lady and confirmed that she was apparently alive and only had a few injuries. Then it went on to say that “some foreign media have been unscrupulously inciting, planning and directing chaos” (“Foreign Media Fails to Trick Wukan Villagers on Rumor”). That is, the central leadership even started to accuse foreign media of intentionally exaggerating the incident in order to incite the local citizens, as well as the larger audience in China with radical thoughts and anti-government sentiments. Although these claims were not supported by solid evidence, still the resentment towards the foreign media existed in the central leadership and several state-sponsored media. In addition, the central government also organized a complete lockdown of the village, denying any access to the foreign media. Several Hong Kong journalists were even arrested for stealing when they secretly snuck in to the village to conduct interviews. Moreover, the local police enforcement even rewarded the villagers for reporting the foreign media to local authority.

Nonetheless, some might argue that the foreign media’s coverage on Wukan incident was actually beneficial. Steve Hess, in his paper claimed that the foreign media’s coverage “revealed the potential benefits for aggrieved citizens in making international appeal” (Hess). As he further explained, “[through reporting to foreign media] citizens can bring greater pressure to bear on higher-ranking officials. In this case, the citizens of Wukan were able to place pressure on provincial officials to take long-standing local injustices seriously” (Hess). That is, the foreign media played an essential role in attracting attention to the Wukan incident. As such, the local authority, under pressure from international community, had to compromise to the villagers. However, such conclusion failed to foresee the long-term consequences of Wukan incident. As the exaggeration and fabrication intensified, the central government could no longer tolerate such behaviors and initiated a series of responses.

Instead of attracting global attention and pressuring the central leadership, the foreign media eventually irritated it. And what's worse is, the exaggeration and fabrication triggered the ultimate failure of the Wukan protests. Fearing that the democracy rhetoric might spread and cause a snowball effect, the central government had no choice but to suppress the protests, putting an abrupt end to the successful anti-corruption campaign.

However, I am not unconditionally denying that the foreign media came no aid to China in the past 4 decades. Rather, the foreign media, driven by shallow understanding and incorrect inferences, sometimes tend to exaggerate an incident or fabricate false information. And such behaviors, though can put pressure on the central leadership, sometimes over-pressure it and cause a series of negative responses.

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