

QUT China Trip 2009:

Project Evaluation

By Kathleen Calderwood

I'm sure it is felt unanimously throughout the Beijing Six, that what we expected before our trip was far different to what we were greeted with. Our presumptions of unashamed propaganda were met with subtle undertones of party policy threaded throughout news articles, and we were exposed to the definition of highly-choreographed media conferences and political communication. The superficiality of China's supposed communism became clear very quickly, as we were exposed to the commercialisation of the Chinese media and capitalistic values throughout society. These more serious notes aside, we were initially inhibited but soon comforted by the busy metropolitan city, its people, its food, its smells and its sounds.

I've chosen to evaluate this experience by discussing a few of my more significant Facebook posts (please note that for ease, I have replicated these posts in this document and consequently, I have not included them in the word count). By doing this I intend to address what I learnt and how it affected my practice and/or perception of journalism.

Firstly I'd like to discuss my post concerning the need for journalists to have a global outlook. It reads...

“A journalist it seems, to succeed, needs to be willing to look and explore outside the boundaries of their own country. Not just in terms of content but for employment as well. That's what I could gather after speaking to Annette Fuller and Alan



Simon – and I like it. Both are 'polishers' (a.k.a. Copy editors) at The China Daily, and have worked throughout the world.

Alan is one of the four journalists at The China Daily who has done time in Sydney at The Daily Telegraph. Originally, from the UK, Alan's first journalism job was as a trainee court reporter on Fleet Street. He's also worked in radio in New Zealand, and came over to China just before the Olympics last year. He says it's been the easiest move ever, as The China Daily organised his accommodation, visa, work permit, transport from the airport and even his shopping for his arrival.

Annette, from North Carolina, had worked as a reporter, columnist and editor throughout the States before she moved to Algeria a year and a half ago. There she was helping develop journalism standards in the Algerian press with the Journalism Development Group. She's only been at the China Daily for two weeks and is loving it. She received the job because a friend recommended her, and consequently she was strong in emphasising the need to establish a large number of contacts in the industry.

In the global economy of today, journalists need to look at the bigger picture, this is a point both journalists emphasised to me, Annette especially. Journalism does seem to be a globally useful skill. Obviously, certain practices vary from country to country, but Annette's work in Algeria to improve journalistic standards demonstrate the media's ability to empower people and bring about change. According to Annette, and a number of other foreign journalists working in China, journalism at its best has the ability to illustrate the complexity of an issue rather than painting it as black and white, enabling the public to formulate informed opinions.

Chris Buckley, an Australian journalist working at Reuters, also made similar comments. However, he went further on to emphasise the importance of Asia to Australian journalists. It does seem that many young Australians initially overlook our neighbours, in favour of the US or UK, but many Aussie journos including Chris say Asia is instrumental in our development and future prosperity. In China, specifically, the public acknowledges the significance of Australia, according

to Chris Rudd's visits are always high priority amongst the public. So, why is it that so often we choose to ignore the continent which is closest to us?"

I think most importantly this outlook is something that I wouldn't have gained without actually travelling to another country and participating in practical activities. One thing that has frustrated me in my university subjects, especially since returning home, is the high emphasis placed on theory.

Unfortunately, not everyone is able to take part in something like our China trip, so it is to an extent, the next best option. But I have come to realise the necessity of actually doing practical overseas experience. It's obvious simply from how wrong our expectations of China and its media were, that theory is simply not satisfactory when it comes to understanding the strange and distinct characteristics of another culture and its press. Our ability to talk to highly-experienced and travelled journalists was unique and invaluable, as were the opportunities to work with outlets like Reuters, Al Jazeera and the ABC.



The Al Jazeera English office in Beijing

As a young person and journalist, with a keen interest in global issues and travelling, it also emphasised the importance of being open-minded towards other cultures. The reality today is that we live in a global economy and society, and so the trade, stability and habits of other nations is very important to our livelihoods back home. Furthermore, the importance of China specifically was much clearer by the time I left, and I feel I have a reasonable understanding of some of the intricacies of Chinese culture. Certainly, there were things I think I will never understand or be able to tolerate, the spitting for example, but otherwise I feel my understanding of small eccentricities in Chinese culture have enlarged my overall perception



of this ancient nation and its people. Now, I feel compelled to find out more about the operations of Chinese society, and about other cultures as well.

Chris Buckley's mention of the hype Kevin Rudd receives, highlights how the Chinese people are already looking out to the rest of the world for influences and international relations.

Our ignorance of this trait is highly dis-advantageous to our future prosperity as a nation, and individually as journalists. This trip has crystallised for me that as Australians we mustn't fail to acknowledge the importance of Asia to our success. Two of the biggest populations and economies in the world are in Asia, so our perpetual tendency to overlook the continent in favour of Europe and the US is really quite naïve.

Next I am addressing two of my posts, the first concerning quality control at The China Daily and the second concerning the lack of advertising in the Global Times...

"An interesting observation I've made during my time so far at The China Daily is their almost obsessive quest to actively improve the quality of the paper. Each edition is pinned up and massaged in red marker by day's end with comments concerning content, images and layout. The foreign copy editors are employed to "polish" each article, a task which can involve as little as correcting a few spelling and grammar errors but at times may instead require the complete restructuring of an article. Previously, The China Daily had basically no competition as the country's only English-language paper, but with the introduction of The Global Times it is clear that they are striving to produce the best quality 'western-style' paper, in order to captivate the educated, upper-class audience they appear to cater for. It will certainly be interesting to see the tactics employed at the Global Times."

"One of the most noticeable things when perusing The Global Times is the lack of advertising. Even state run papers here rely on advertising to fund them, so I was quite surprised to see this. However, this applies only to the English version. The Chinese language version has a number



of ads on each page. According to Zhang Nanyi, the Deputy Managing Editor, the English version has no ads because it was only launched on April 20, so the Global Times has chosen to postpone the inclusion of advertising for a number of reasons. She said it takes time to promote themselves as a paper and similarly to decide what type of advertising is most appropriate to include. Additionally, the financial crisis at the moment makes it more difficult to acquire advertisers. The Global Times is making a significant sacrifice by operating in this way, reportedly they are set to lose 20 million yuan (\$AU3.7 million) in their first year of publication.”

Obviously the audience of the papers we were involved with would be different to the average Chinese person. We were dealing with a demographic who were more educated English-speaking Chinese people, expatriates and possibly students. Therefore that would have influenced how much they towed the party line in their reporting. This aside, as the



'representatives' of the Chinese press to the rest of the English-speaking world, the China Daily and the Global Times both endeavoured to produce high quality journalism. Their practice of daily scrutinising the paper is one I haven't experienced in Australia and I think in some cases it's probably something we should take up. As well, the Global Times' sacrifice of advertising revenue to establish themselves as a serious and worthwhile publication, illustrates that the Chinese press is trying to present themselves as quality organisations on a global scale – further emphasising the outward-looking nature of the Chinese.

Talking to reporters at both papers it was clear that they were trying to move away from the party affiliation which is inherent in Chinese journalism. The Global Times was more overtly trying to steer away from government influence. Zhang Nanyi, the editor who liaised with us, described their wishes to act as a more grassroots publication and not create another China Daily. They still had pages dedicated to outlining government policy, but

they took seriously their role of presenting issues authentically to their readers, not just to translating them into English.

At the China Daily I felt there was more of a government presence, and many of the reporters and 'polishers' emphasised this to me. One particular journalist at the China Daily said the public were aware of government influence on reporting and were relatively sceptical of the media. He said he and many of his colleagues wrote with subtleties against the government, as their way to combat their high influence. So, it's clear from their intentions to undermine government input in the media, that Chinese journalists (at an English-speaking level at least) are striving for a different type of journalism than the authoritarian model they are currently dealing with.

Finally, I'd like to discuss my post relating to artistic commercialisation....

“About three months ago, I interviewed a video artist in Brisbane named Chris Bennie. Chris, in order to combat the non-commercial nature of video art, regularly converts his humble New Farm Queenslander into an art gallery, utilising every room necessary in addition to his garage and backyard. A number of years ago he did a residency here in China, so of course in anticipation of this trip I drilled him on their art scene, to which he replied “it's really radically different.” As a video artist one of the main things he pointed out was how very commercial it was, and he expected this would have magnified post-Olympics.

Wandering through the warehouse art district that is 798 you can enter almost any gallery and buy art on a bag, plate or notebook. Collectively the space is an ultimate cultivation of artistic creativity in Beijing, and you can buy a piece of it. I actually found 798 to be an amazing place and contrary to the mentality that art which is so highly commercialised is devalued and it's impact lessened, I think it enables the average person to participate in the craft rather than idly observe. Sure, if everyone has that same bag with the same picture by the same Chinese artist, it moves away from art and toward mass production, but if the only way of enjoying someone's expression outside of the white-box atmosphere is to buy a ten-thousand dollar painting, doesn't that just create an untouchable and somewhat conceited attitude, which many

find unwelcoming and even repellent outside of the affluent, artistic social class.

However, I think to an extent this highly commercialised art scene is indicative of the nature of Chinese thought. It is a difficult contrast to decipher. In a country of producers rather than inventors, it seems worthwhile to support this creative, individual form of expression, but at the same time is buying these mass-produced pieces of art really much different from going down to the silk market and bartering for some embellished chopsticks? Although, to be fair, I think it's reasonable to assume the scale of the mass-production is vastly different. Still, does this defeat the purpose of unique expression? Through his exploration and critique of mundanely commercial things, like a Campbell's soup can, Andy Warhol created one of the most well known and sought after brands in the world. Thought to be revolutionary by many, his art was also widely criticised for its highly commercial nature. So this begs the question, at what point does an artist graduate from artist to brand?

Another issue arising from this commercialisation is sustainability. It appears that 798 has been hit reasonably hard by the 'global financial crisis', in a city where the impact isn't particularly noticeable, on face value at least. There are many empty and closed galleries. Struggling is a word often used synonymously with artist so perhaps this is just an unfortunate trait of the industry, exacerbated by an unfavourable financial situation worldwide. However, if galleries are beginning to rely too heavily on subsidiary sales and these sales drop significantly, the aforementioned sharing of expression with the masses is cut completely, including the simple idle observation. And to be perfectly honest, when I refer to the average person, I'm not sure that really includes the majority of average Chinese people. So, when people are struggling to travel and the locals can't support this valuable hub of creativity, the future may seem a bit unsteady, resulting in a turn back to the grassroots and focus of artistic expression, without the overwhelming concern for profit."

This post is significant for a number of reasons. Firstly, I am very proud of this post. Not to blow my own trumpet, but I think it was an insightful contemplation into the complexities of artistic mass production and I was very happy with the way I was able to draw upon my previous experiences as a journalist and link it in with our explorations of Beijing. Again it highlighted how my little life in Brisbane learning about art, also had a global impact on my international experience as a journalist. So I think this is probably one of the things that gave me confidence in my journalistic ability, and that is probably one of the most valuable outcomes of this trip.

Secondly, it is significant because of the cultural impact it had on me. I was not expecting a burgeoning and challenging art scene like 798 to exist in a place like Beijing. Admittedly, my knowledge of art theory and history is limited, but this definitely opened my eyes to a different kind of creative industry. As I said in my post, China is to a large extent, a country of producers not inventors, so this raging hub of creativity is one that the Chinese should cherish as it is very, very unique. For example, Ai Wei Wei a famous Chinese artist who I met when with Tom Iggulden from the ABC, has capitalised on his ability to create, in order to empower Chinese people with an individualistic sense that they don't have to submit to the orders of the government, in this case with Green Dam, to ensure a 'harmonious society'. It was an example of an artist trying to reach out to as many individuals as possible – he first did this with his art and was now doing it through creative activism. I think overall the whole art scene impacted my perception of what art is, who has the right to access it and the ways that artists can ensure this accessibility. To bring it back to journalism, this influenced my understanding of ways in which public knowledge and freedom of speech can be ensured via alternate routes when journalism isn't always at its best.

This trip to China was invaluable in a number of ways. Unfortunately 1500 words is simply not enough to describe the intense impact the trip had on my journalistic practice and life experience. Through my analysis of four of my posts, I have



highlighted my new global awareness, how it has affected my studies at university and practical experience, my understanding of what Chinese journalism is and wants to be and how art can act as a medium through which the public can be empowered. Overall, I think the trip gave me a confidence which wasn't overt before our departure. We were all shown that our aspirations to be foreign correspondents and so on aren't at all far fetched, in fact they're quite achievable. We made connections with people that I've already utilised to help my journalistic efforts, and I'm sure will continue to be of assistance. And we got the rare opportunity to live and work in a highly misunderstood culture which we all grew to embrace and I'm sure all intend to return to.
