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The Way of Independence

An analysis of Chinese TV presenter Chai Jing and her independent voice for news reporting in China

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Abstract

This paper profiles the media personality Chai Jing, who is one of the best-known faces on China's influential state media. Based upon the book *Insight* (Kanjian) written by Chai and the speech delivered by Chai as well as the comments from society, this paper includes a detailed analysis of Chai's popularity among Chinese people and an illustration of the Chai Jing's philosophy in news reporting. Drawing upon Bakhtinian perspectives, it examines the controversial social issues happened in China. Finally, in order to provide China-watcher more information, it examines the reasons of Chai Jing's resignation from CCTV and people's reaction to her departure.

Key words: Chai Jing, humanistic concern, journalistic integrity, independence thinking, CCTV.

In 2013, a book *Kanjian* (Insight, which also means what I have seen) was sold three million copies in Chinese book market (Chu, 2014). After its publication, the novel caused great repercussions in society, which has sparked the thinking of journalistic professionalism. The author of bestsellers called Chai Jing, one of China's best-known TV interviewers, who is also been viewed as "Goddess" by people in China. When we called somebody "Goddess", she should be perfect either on external or internal. Chai Jing belongs to the latter for the reason that she is considered as a truth-teller, who represents of social conscience in China. This article is going to discuss: Why Chai Jing, a TV journalist, becomes so popular? What she has done? What is Chai Jing's philosophy of news reporting? Does she map out an independent voice for news reporting in China? What is her influence to news reporting in China? Through discussing these questions above, we tend to profile Chai Jing and figure out whether "Chinese journalists are lacking in any independence from the state" (Dirks, 2014) is an anachronistic argument.

Popular "Goddess"-Chai Jing

Chai Jing, an investigation journalist and host, is one of the best-known faces on China's influential state media, China Central Television, or CCTV. Her interviewees diverse from Wen Jiabao, previous Prime Minister of China, to migrant peasant-workers, a highly sensitive group in Chinese society, and her reports demonstrated humanistic perspective and concern about 2008 earthquake in Wenchuan and illustrated homosexual issues in China. The public evaluates Chai as a journalist who stands at the peak of news independence in China. She has earned reputation in public not only because of her principles in journalistic professionalism and journalistic

integrity, but also the persona with humanity she showed as and her belief that journalists should be the stewards of the public interest and record. The following four paragraphs will make a further explanation about above-mentioned.

First deep impression people received from Chai was her professional dedication during the events of severe acute respiratory syndrome disaster (SARS). As one of the field reporters interviewed SARS in the forefront, Chai interviewed patient who had tested positive for SARS virus face to face in the hospital. In comparison with patients' pale face and thrilling atmosphere created by hand-held shots, Chai Jing's determined look, which almost covered by heavy white protective clothing, seemed to be powerful. The well-organized program made people first recognized what exactly had been happening to SARS patient and how the health system had operated to cope with this contagion. The audience rate of that episode of *News Probe* (Xinwen Diaocha), a documentary television program in CCTV, is 5.74%, which means over 70 millions people have watched this program (Chai, 2013). It is the first time public was shaken by her journalistic professionalism.

Despite her emphasis on journalistic professionalism, Chai is also being known for her sharpness in questioning interviewees and her penetrating and powerful interview techniques that help to reveal the corruption in China. In her autobiography, Chai (2013) recorded an interview conversation with an official who should be punished for infringing pollution limits (p. 176):

Chai Jing (CJ): "You say your plant does not violate emission limits?"

The official (OC): "Absolutely not"

CJ: "What is it, then, that I can smell as we sit here?"

OG: "I don't smell anything."

CJ: "Nothing?" (Chai picked her eyebrow while asking)

OG: "My nose, er, I don't have a nose as sensitive as yours." (Author's translation)

The last shot was ended with Chai's satirical smile, which means 'see, official'. When Chai interviews people, especially official, she invariably directly asks questions that interviewee try to shun. Surprised by her ingenious interview technique that let the official indirectly admitted they did violate emission limits, people also admired her as "the last public figure with a conscience in China" (Cai, 2013). During the period that Chai work for CCTV, audiences never see Chai flattering the government and they enjoy her independent streak. Chai was popular because she earned a reputation as a truth teller, and she is one of the few journalists who can reveal the scale of corruption in China.

The next stage that Chai gained national prominence for her humanistic perspectives in news reporting. In 2008, Chai went to Wenchuan directly after the earthquake to report the disaster. Unlike other field reporters just simply depict the terrible disaster and directly ask the refugees questions about how they feel after lost their family, Chai chose to live with those refugees to feel their pain in heart and to experience serious living conditions. This distinctly empathetic news-reporting approach was widely accepted by Chinese people. Chai compiled her experiences into a program called "Seven Days at Yangliuping". Once the program broadcasted, it attracted people's attention with its style of narration and humanitarian emphasis. People were touch by her sincere attitude during the interviews, which also made her different from reporters who are poker-faced.

Additionally, she was called as a “Goddess”, not only just because her professorial spirit to interview SARS patient, her courage to query corrupt official or to face the menace from underworld alone, but also her belief that journalists should be the stewards of the public interest and record. In 2009, she delivered a speech at the Beijing Journalists Association’s speech competition. In the speech, she described four individual stories that had happened in China, which are separately about a teacher secretly recorded the underworld in Tibet for 30 years; a lawyer prosecuted the Ministry of Railroads for the conductor refused to give him a 1.5 Yuan receipt; an official criticized the land constitution since people just gained nominal compensation after land confiscation; and an interview with Wen Jiabao, the former Premier of the People’s Republic of China. At the end of the speech, she elucidated her purpose for telling those stories. She believes China needs a truth-teller and people should continue fight for their rights:

A country is built upon individuals; she is constructed and determined by them. It is only if a country has people who seek truth, who are capable of independent thinking, who can record the truth, who build but do not take advantage of the land, who protect their constitutional rights, who know the world is imperfect but who do not slacken or give up — it is only if a country has this kind of mind and spirit that we can say we are proud of our country. It is only if a country can respect this kind of mind and spirit that we can say that we believe tomorrow will be a better day. (Hartono, 2009)

The five minutes video of this speech received more than 10 million hits within one week on “Tudou”, one of the most popular video websites in China. This video is considered as a great example of speech, a blogger named LL (n.d.) posted a blog article called *a rethink of media personality*, which stated this speech pointed out a direction of Chinese media, and complimented that Chai motivates every Chinese people to make an independent thinking. This speech becomes popular among intellectuals since it emphasizes people should develop critical thinking and their own understanding of China problems. In next section, after a briefly introduction of *Insight*, which was written by Chai Jing, Chai’s philosophy will be demonstrated drawing upon Confucianism and Bakhtinian perspectives.

Chai Jing’s philosophy of news reporting — the influence of Leo Tolstoy

The book *Insight* (Kanjian) could be considered as a memoir, with each chapter focus on a story that Chai Jing reported when she was the host of CCTV programs “News Probe” (Xinwen Diaocha, Chinese:新聞調查) and “Insight” (Kanjian, the same name as her publish book). Chai was charming as a person, but it is not the only reason that the book *Insight* enjoys its popularity. To analyze Chai’s philosophy, two theoretical perspectives will be presented. In the following paragraphs, depending on Confucianism and Bakhtin’s work, Chai Jing’s philosophy analysis will include the topic selection, narrative of stories and the deliverance (here means Chai’s values).

Chai’s topic selection is controversial for its complexity and contradiction. Since CCTV is always viewed as the ideological apparatus of the Party, the programs in CCTV are directly toward the “official mainstream ideology” (Xie, 2014). In order to adhere to the ideology of party, the topic selection should be “avoid triggering instability at home and providing subjects to be attacked from abroad” (Zhang, 2011). Independent of the ideology of party, the topics of *Insight* are always about

controversial social events and issues, like domestic violence, veteran retirement situation, rural land expropriation, animal rights, and the ethics surrounding the use of the death penalty. Even though it frequently used real stories about people's conflict to reflect the social problem under the management of bureaucratic officials, Chai was not the journalist who aims to go against the Party through reporting sensitive topics. Rather, like Dirks (2014) claims in his book review of *Insight* "her work is perhaps better understood as emblematic of a general trend over the past two decades towards a more investigative and critical (albeit not deliberately adversarial) style of journalism." With the objective to understand the history or the trend, the complexity and contradiction of the topic could add more uncertainty and possibility in order to make the topic open, or as Bakhtin called it "unfinalizable". That is to say, there are diverse communication patterns that resolve life's dilemmas (as cited in Homsey & Sandel, p. 61). The way Chai's philosophy indicated is people should think about the problems in society independently through controversial topics instead of accepting an idea that is given by others.

In spite of the sensitive topic selection, her narrative style embodied human-oriented philosophy. Chai has been controversial for her "performance style reporting", which means the reporter shows his or her exaggerated and emotional behavior during the interview. To make an illustration, Chai Jing investigated a series of juvenile suicide cases in 2008. During the investigation, as a professional journalist, she was anticipated to keep asking the boy questions in order to dig out the truth, but she just wiped away his tears and stopped the interview. This shot triggered a debate of objective news investigation between her staid peers and her supporters. Some people criticize her since she showed emotional facial expressions like squatting, frowning in the television broadcast, which may mislead the audience. Responding to the doubt, Chai said: "People always talk about the rules that a good journalist should obey such as objectivity and fairness. To be honest, all rules are less important than a man, the man who is sitting right in front of you" (Shen). In Chai's news reporting philosophy, the most important thing in a piece of news is the people involved. In spite of that the shot Chai wiped a tear for the child, all frames that contained children in the interview just showed silhouettes of them instead of distorting and blocking out their faces. In other words, Chai has integrated the humanities concern into the interview, into the narrative.

Both traditional Confucianism from China and Modernized Bakhtinianism from Russia influence Chai's deliverance, which indicates her values here. On one hand, the traditional Chinese communication style is rooted in Chai's mind. Scholars demonstrate that the style of communication in Chinese culture that has been influenced by Confucianism, especially prefers ambiguity as communicative resources (Fung & Miller, 2004). Fung also claimed the Confucian character of Chinese communication style accentuates richness in connotation. Accordingly, unlike English-speakers preferring the clarity of the message, Chai's communication message has multiple meanings, which can be interpreted in different ways by different people. And when the message can be interpreted diversely, there will be more voices of independence.

On the other hand, Chai has much similarity with Mikhail Bakhtin on the understanding of ethics. Both of them are inspired by Leo Tolstoy's novel, *Anna Karenina* (1877) and Fyodor Dostoyevsky's novel, *Crime and Punishment* (1866). On the understanding of ethics, both Bakhtin and Chai have a reluctant attitude to judge people with moral standards. In an article written by Homsey and Sandel, they stated

that Bakhtin did not advocate the ethical stance of absolute relativism, instead, he thought the ethic is the work of answering life's dilemmas by judging the "particulars of the situation and a special involvement with unique other people at a given moment of their lives" (as cited in Homsey & Sandel, p. 61). Chai (2013) also indicated a similar idea in her book *Insight* (p.212):

"Truth is rich, it needs strong power to see. The truth from the iniquity is unitary, people can grill pure white out of iniquity, and also can grill iniquity out of pure white. And someday when you fall in love with a girl, and she loves you as well. Pure white is what expression in her eyes when she looks at you." (Author's translation)

The former sentence means "Truth has multiple meanings, so it is difficult to determine. The truth that dug out from iniquity, which is defined by morality, is uncompleted. People may show their evil side when encountering difficulties, but evil people also have beauty of humanity." According to the latter sentence, what makes you love someone is the good of him or her, so the "pure white" can be considered as the beauty of the humanity. More specifically, she indicated that people tend to simply judge the person is evil or innocence when the controversial issue involves morality, however, the integrated comprehension between each other is more important than the right or wrong of the behavior itself. Chai (2012) said in the speech that she concluded from her reading of Tolstoy's novel that one should be understood under "a particular situation and a special involvement at a given moment". From this time on, she began to construct her own philosophy that reporter should put him- or herself in the particular situation of the interviewee.

Furthermore, Chai embodied the spirit that the involvement of humanistic concern transcends the consequence of moral judgment in one episode of News Probe (Xinwen Diaocha). A case in point is a widespread video about a woman used her high heels abused a cat, and the screenshot that the heels tramp the cat's eyeball was syndicated across China. The widespread may be attributed to involvement of the animals right and it triggered the denouncement towards that woman because of her ethical lapses. Netizen cannot tolerate her crucial behavior to the innocence cat. Shortly, the indignant netizen used Human flesh search engine and Google Earth found that the woman in the video was a nurse called Wang Yu (Wang), and the video maker was a news photographer named Li Yaojun (Li). Subsequently, the news from the mass media also directly condemned Wang and Li. However, Chai showed empathy towards Wang and Li. In her program, firstly, Chai interviewed with Wang and Li's colleges, who had positive impression on them. Secondly, the shots show their daily life which depicted they were just common people like us instead of indifferent monsters. Thirdly, Chai figured out the underlying reasons of their behaviors. Wang did it because she had negative emotion needed to release and Li was motivated by the money given by a website in order to earn more visitors. In the end of the episode, Chai finally summarized: "If there is deeper understanding and more concerns among people, hatred between man and man can be avoided" (Fan, 2014). Once again, she asserts that the involvement of humanistic concern transcends the consequence of moral judgment.

Discussion

This paper provides a discussion of the reasons that Chai Jing, a famous Chinese media personality, was popular among audiences in the first section. Section two gives an analysis of Chai Jing's philosophy drawing upon Confucianism and Bakhtinian perspectives. Finally, the discussion sector will summarize the controversy of Chai Jing and record the reactions from the public.

In the February of 2014, Chai Jing was labeled as "unpatriotic" because her decision to give birth to her daughter in the US (Lipman, 2014), but this does not destroy her "Goddess" image. The reactions from the netizen is polarized, some netizens viewed her behavior as contrary to what she's been advocating. For example, Alia (2014) quoted some netizens' comment in the article "one netizen [再见二丁目 c7] commented: 'I have no problem of her giving birth in the US. But she should not put on a show on TV as if she is a patriot and cares about this country or its people'". Another netizens [涛哥老吴] also express his or her disappointment "This shows the hypocrisy of liberals in China. Their credibility is declining. People are glowingly disappointed at these so-called liberals" (Alia, 2014). Yet some people think this behavior is just personal choice and it does not relative to her "Goddess" image. A fan of her claims, "Whatever your choice is, I will always support you. Other journalists will never be going to transcend the height of your thinking" in Weibo (來年春天 227). A considerable number of netizens, according to a poll held by China daily, 79% voters (Do you think Chai Jing is unpatriotic, 2014) claim this behavior should not be considered as "unpatriotic" since Chai's daughter is still Chinese citizen.

Following this, in October 13, 2014, Chai was exposed that she has resigned from CCTV at the end of 2013, which is confirmed by one of her former colleagues, Qiu Qiming. As soon as the message was exposed, her demission became the hot topic in Sina Weibo (a Chinese micro-blogging akin to a hybrid of Twitter and Facebook). Within one day, the cumulative amount of discussion has up to 140 thousand, and the cumulative amount of reading reached upwards of 440 million at the end of that week. The message raised a storm of conjecture, and the official version of Chai's resignation was due to she needs to take care of her newborn child. Another explanation comes from Qiu Qiming, "A program as excellent as 'Insight' suddenly went off the air last year. Just like a chef is asked to wait tables, it is normal that she resigned as she had been deprived of the opportunity to show her talent" (Wang, 2014). Even though her talent cannot get show seems to be one of the reasons for her resignation, Chai probably departed in view of the recent crackdown on journalists initiated by President Xi Jinping.

Though the reason is still uncertain, a considerable number of people express their pity feeling about Chai's left. Zhang (2014) comments that Chai's departure is the end of an era that has a fearless reporter, and he complimented Chai was not only a reporter but also a "goddess" because she used a book "change Chinese view of media" (Chinese: 改变中国人的媒介观). Up to the next day after news was exposed, the comment has got more than 1100 like in Sina Weibo. Another comment with 212 hits came from [略二的文艺男青年](2014) "You said your attribution in China Central Television just like a screw in a machine, you can change nothing. But in the process of being a screw, you have already move countless readers and audiences, thank you Chai Jing, a truth teller." In her fans opinions, Chai's strong belief in news ethics, tolerance, as well as keeping a low profile are the reasons they in favor of her.

So just like Chai can understand people in particular situation, her fans also can understand Chai's decision.

In the imagination prevalent among Western societies, Chinese journalists are nothing more than stenographers working for the ruling Communist Party (Dirks, 2014). Through what mentioned above, it seems that the appearance of Chai Jing is probably the turning point of Chinese news reporting. Even though Chai discussed the press freedom in her book *Insight*, she still describes those opinions in obscure generalities, and avoids identifying the Party-led state as the greatest impediment to a free press (Dirks, 2014). Nowadays, it is obvious to most China-watcher that China is going through a transformation. Despite of the change of economic rules, the norms of elite politics, the ways of social governance, and foreign policy are all with the increasing sense of uncertainty since centralization of power, which means the direction of transformation may be heavily influenced by Xi's personality (Yu, 2014). Chai behaviors were publicly associated as a journalist for the state-owned broadcaster before she resigned, but it may be another turning point for her to better map out the independence voice of China news reporting since she is an independent writer now.

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