

Paul French, *Through the Looking Glass, China's Foreign Journalists from Opium Wars to Mao*, Hong Kong University Press, 2009. 240 pp.

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The 19th and 20th centuries marked the second wave of colonialism. In *Through the Looking Glass*, Paul French walks readers through the most significant events of a period in Chinese history that spans over a century, going from the Opium Wars to Mao Zedong's Communist China. The period is illustrated by stories about the lives of selected foreign journalists active at the time. French's work deserved careful reading and should complement today's mass communication studies from various perspectives.

The author leads the reader through a spectrum of significant historical events that shaped modern China. In the contexts of the expansion of colonial powers, the decline of an Asian empire and the conflicts between religious beliefs, events shaped the power relationship among the key players, which included China, the United States, and Great Britain. The Qing regime made the Chinese empire weak against the invasion of Western interests. The Opium Wars forced the country to sign unequal treaties and to open trade opportunities that favoured the interests of the colonial powers--mainly those of the British, the American and the Japanese. Missionaries were offered advantages to penetrate the country, while the two large-scale rebellions of the time-- the Taiping Rebellion and the Boxer Rebellion -- promoted their uprisings as a struggle for changes in the name of their religions. The public intellectuals' efforts in reforms articulated the ambition of a group of patriots in response to the threats posed by the foreign invasions and the uprisings and rebellions in the country. Civil wars, famine, two World Wars, and the Japanese invasion followed the collapse of the Qing Dynasty, but the end of this imperial power did not bring peace to the people.

These historical events serve as the background to the stories about the lives of the foreign journalists that the book describes. We read that the, "China press corps" was "the major interpreter of China to the outside world." The journalists considered in the book all came from different background. Some journalists knew the Chinese language and had experience of the East. Some were "the children of missionaries, born and raised in China", while others had different credentials that allowed them to become, "experts and Old China Hands". Some had "a background in sinology", with a mixture of "a passion for China with a love of journalism."

Today's journalistic writing textbooks train students to study the elements of newsworthiness, including timeliness, proximity, prominence, conflicts, impacts, and necessity. This illustrates a result of a filtering process known as "gatekeeping." With the constraints presented by the historical setting at the time in China, "timeliness" in the eyes of contemporary journalists in those revolutionary time was not, and could not be, as important as the value that today's journalists place on it. And so we read that:

The reporters "could be out of contact for weeks, even months without postal services or telegraph stations for hundreds of miles. They wrote when they could and wired their despatches when possible; and they frustrated their editors who tore their hair out until a cable or finally a letter arrived."

The journalists selected the events that matched their interests and their missions in relation to the bigger framework of the interests of their home countries. The *Canton Press* and the *Canton Register* published prices on opium, which the Honourable Company used to monopolize. Paul French states in the book that the "nascent China coast English-language press did much to level the commercial playing field". Back in Europe businessmen knew "everything about trading conditions", and had a chance to "find their position in relation to the Honourable Company" and to convince Parliament to "open up the China trade." George Bronson Rea actively supported Japan.

The author points out that “the foreign press corps represented the three strands of the foreign experiences”, adding that:

Some immersed themselves in China’s culture, language and mores, and others remained resolutely foreign sojourners to their dying days, or the day their ships departed from a Chinese dock. A third group became archetypal China coast foreigners who adopted... the “Shanghai mind,” the mindset of the “hermetically sealed glass case” that was the privileged foreign-controlled treaty port life of China.

Moreover, these journalists, during the political, social, and economic instability of the country, could have hidden agendas. Paul French suggests that journalists in those days “reflected the politics of their contemporary world”. A British journalist Gareth Jones is a good example. Jones was killed in 1935 in Inner Mongolia, where he had prepared a feature story. Jones went to Inner Mongolia with two journalists, one of whom had connections with Nazi Germany and the other with spy activities. Jones was also believed to have had in his mind a secret plan of spying.

Today’s journalists are trained and required to be impartial and objective in reporting. But during the historical period considered in the book we learn that Thomas Millard, William Henry Donald, John Benjamin Powell, and Carl Crow had close relations with the Kuomintang government. Edgar Snow was best known for his book *Red Star over China*, and believed that the Communist Party would rule the country. The examples in French’s work show that it was not uncommon for journalists to take sides.

Also journalism in the twenty-first century emphasizes the value of separating facts from opinions. In some people’s eyes Emily Hahn became famous for her New Yorker article “The Big Smoke.” She became a concubine and got addicted to opium smoking. Her first-hand experiences and her “feet in two camps”--the “International Settlement social whirl of *Shanghai* life” and the “avant-garde Chinese life of the city”--allowed Hahn to write in “personal and political circumstances.”

Thanks to these insights, students and professionals majoring in media history, mass communication studies, and journalism in global communication, should benefit from the rich accounts of the journalists’ portraits and journeys that are a result of French’s research efforts in *Through the Looking Glass*.

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