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How do Chinese journalists perceive us?

An exploration of Chinese-language media and their views on Europe and the Netherlands

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Recommendations

1. If the Netherlands aspire not only to have an economic, but also a meaningful political and strategic relationship with China, it probably needs to have a closer look at how its high representatives communicate with Chinese media. An example of a well thought-through approach was presented during the visit of King Willem-Alexander to China in 2015, when the King did not only focus on trade and on economic cooperation, but also explained the central role civil society and the rule of law has played in making the Netherlands a stable, developed nation. He did this at a meeting where Chinese media were also present. This contrasts sharply with the interview given by premier Rutte to the *People's Daily* in 2014, in which he was presented in a subordinate position, only showing great admiration for Xi Jinping, the 'elected leader' of China. The Netherlands needs to consider how exactly it wants to portray itself to China.
2. To reach Chinese audiences with news about Europe, it is necessary to establish a direct link between foreign news and events and themes that are relevant to China today. Products, managements methods, ideas and technologies must be linked to a story that is specific and connected to a real and specific need in China. Chinese media look to other countries mainly to discover new methods or to learn lessons that are directly applicable in China itself. They want to find new ways and means to manage problems that can be used in a Chinese context. News and background information that is not seen as relevant to China will generally not be picked up by Chinese-language media.
3. Focusing on telling specific stories that are relevant in a concrete Chinese context is a better tactic than presenting broad concepts. For example, general messages like 'the Netherlands is an innovative country' do not resonate in China, but an innovative project by the Dutch artist Daan Roosegaarde to extract pollution from the air and to transform it into solid black stones that can be used as jewelry received extensive media coverage in China.
4. Simply tweeting or using other social media to target China as a whole is not effective: (social) media messages distributed directly by governments, (semi-)governmental organizations and companies generally reach a very limited audience and are easily perceived as either propaganda or advertising. Tweets from embassies are hardly read at all. It is advisable to find Chinese media partners to work with instead.
5. New, smaller Chinese-language media organizations in your own country that know both your country and China well are probably better partners than big, established 'traditional' media organizations. When choosing such partners, look not only at their own market share in China but also consider their network within China. Which media partners in China use them as a source? How widely are they able to distribute news and information through other Chinese media organizations?
6. Think also of cooperating with individual 'influencers', people who write individual blogs and gather followers because of their personal opinion or taste, or because they have knowledge about a specific subject like movies, architecture, travel or design.
7. Embassies and consulates can play a bigger role in the introduction of specific subjects and stories to Chinese journalists based in China. Many journalists mention events organized at or by embassies and consulates as important sources of information. Especially since many journalists cannot easily travel abroad to the areas they report about, information spread through the diplomatic network is seen as an important additional source complementing information available in foreign-language media and on the web.

8. Inviting more groups of Chinese journalists to visit Europe is an effective way to create new content about a country, a company, a product or a management system. Not only do these visits lead to new stories, but these stories are often copied by other media as well.

9. Connect your message to what is already known in China about your country, your product or your way of doing things, but do more than just repeat clichés. Expand and bend these clichés into new stories that can offer a different perspective. For example, that the Netherlands is known for its loose morals and sexual freedom has been successfully connected to stories on how and why the rights of LGBTs are protected in the Netherlands.

10. Be more responsive to the need for information on travel, study and culture in Europe. Especially in these areas there is a growing interest amongst a young urban Chinese who have more and more opportunities to actually experience what Europe is like.

Introduction

The image Chinese immigrants, students, travellers, tourists, investors, traders, banks and government organisations have of the Netherlands largely dictates whether they will travel here. Their decisions are mostly based on reports in Chinese-language media on Europe and the Netherlands; Western media play a minor role. To better understand why the Chinese decide to travel to the Netherlands or to other European countries, and which information they use once they are here, we need to study how Chinese journalists perceive Europe and the Netherlands and how Chinese-language media report on us. The report explores this by looking at three aspects. The first part of the report examines the presence of Chinese-language media and journalists in Europe. The second part focuses on how Chinese-language media report on the Netherlands, while the third is about the role of new Chinese-language media in the Netherlands and the drastic changes it is undergoing. Finally, the report presents several policy recommendations.ⁱ

Context

Over the past few years, the number of Chinese journalists in Europe, mostly journalists working for official Chinese media, has grown considerably. There is a reason for this: in 2009, the Hong Kong newspaper *South China Morning Post* reported that China had made available 45 billion yuan (more than 5.4 billion Euros) to strengthen the presence of Chinese media abroad.ⁱⁱ How much has been or will be spent in Europe is not clear, but what is clear is that the Chinese government, by deciding to reinforce Chinese media abroad, has considerably boosted the number of Chinese journalists abroad, also in Europe.

These investments in Chinese media abroad fit with China's broader policy goals. Following Chinese businesses, Chinese media are now also instructed to reinforce their presence abroad. This serves two goals. Firstly, it aims to reduce China's news consumers' dependency on foreign media for information about countries outside China. Secondly, possibly more important, Chinese media organisations abroad are to increasingly become channels supplying news to foreign media organisations and news consumers written from a Chinese (government) perspective. There is a growing notion in China, particularly following western reporting on the Tibetan uprising in 2008, that western news about China is too biased, and not in a good way. Chinese criticism of the role of western media since 2008, which is shared by some commentators and academics in the West, is unlikely to be the real, and certainly not the only, reason for the Chinese government to make available such extra resources for Chinese state media abroad. Rather, it fits with previous plans of the Chinese government to play a greater role in foreign reports on China in order to enhance China's so-called *soft power* globally.ⁱⁱⁱ Moreover, there seems to be some dissatisfaction that this internationalisation has not yet been a great success. Where Russia Today, the international television station founded by the Russian state, has become an influential international player, the international influence of Chinese media so far seems much more limited. Whether this will encourage China to concentrate the funds in the hands of a single internationally focused media organisation, and more interestingly, whether China will try to raise attention by way of disinformation, as Russia Today does, are all questions for the future.

For this study, we have not focused on finding out how large the share of European news in the media exactly is. However, Chinese journalists and editors agree that Europe is not an important region for Chinese media; the United States, Japan and other countries bordering China dominate its foreign news. Moreover, there is limited room for foreign news in most Chinese-language media. A journalist who works for a market-oriented medium aimed at a higher educated audience with a more international focus, estimated that some fifteen to

twenty percent of all articles in her medium have a foreign focus, about one third of which on Europe.

An editor working for Beijing-based Xinhua indicated that interest in Europe is growing. This she attributed not only to the so-called 'hard news' about the refugee crisis, the terror attacks and Brexit. She also attributes this to Chinese president Xi Jinping who undertakes many international visits, including to Europe, which are always covered extensively in Chinese media. She also indicated that countries with strongly developed media in China feature on the news relatively more easily, because Chinese media base much of their information on what is written in foreign media.

There is only very limited freedom of press in China. Reporters Sans Frontières, a Paris-based non-governmental organisation, places China at number 176 of 180 countries studied in 2016, where position 180 is the country with the most restricted freedom of press.^{iv} Yet China offers a much more varied media range than one would expect in a communist, authoritarian country. On the one hand, China offers what we refer to in this report as the 'official media' or the 'state-controlled media': media that speak mostly on behalf of the Chinese Communist Party (ccp) and that are governed directly by the ccp or by a state authority. This report focuses mostly on so-called 'central' media: media under the direct control of national (party) organisations in Beijing, rather than media directed at the provincial or local level. Media with a greater focus on binding large numbers of readers and attracting advertisers are referred to as 'market-driven media' in this report. These market-driven media do not operate merely as channels for the government or CCP. Instead, they focus on news about Chinese celebrities, fashion, travel and food, with the occasional report on social abuses in which the government plays a dubious role. In 2016, merics, a German think tank, explored coverage of Brexit by the Chinese media. According to merics, market-driven media explored the debate in Europe itself, while official media tended to use the event as propaganda to illustrate the failings of the entire western system, celebrating the superior, authoritarian Chinese system that will not be uprooted by pluri-party democracy.^v

Market-driven media are also bound by censorship restrictions. A journalist of a state-controlled medium described it as: 'Journalists working for official media are like caged animals. Those working for market-driven media are farm animals. They have more freedom, but are still restricted by the confines of the farm.'^{vi}

A journalist working for a Chinese state-controlled medium and who spent a number of years in Europe as a correspondent, talked about the relevance of non-Chinese-language reporting by Chinese media for the international media industry. An enrichment, he said. 'In some ways, we are much more objective than Europe and America. That is because as outsiders we are not involved in conflicts you are involved in.' The example he gave was Syria.

Interestingly, journalists reporting on Europe have more freedom than their colleagues reporting on China. This report explores how they use this freedom.

1. Chinese media and journalists in Europe

Nyíri Pál with Zhang Jialu

This short chapter summarises key findings from the research I conducted for LAC^{vii}. It also draws on my earlier research on Chinese correspondents. In addition to broadening and deepening our overall knowledge of recent developments in Europe's Chinese media and the main directions of reporting on Europe, this research has specifically aimed at identifying both perceived and actual obstacles in the way of Chinese journalists' work.

Chinese media in Europe: background

1.1 Europe-based Chinese media

“Chinese media in Europe” can refer both to (1) Chinese-language newspapers, television, radio and online content produced in Europe and to (2) the presence of Chinese-language media organisations based in the PRC, Taiwan, Hong Kong and elsewhere. The two spheres have, however, always overlapped. Although there was a lively Chinese-language press in France before World War II (Dai 2016:92-94), stable Chinese newspapers appeared in Europe only in the 1970s, following the growth of the continent's Chinese-speaking population. Reflecting migration from Hong Kong to Britain, the European edition of Hong Kong-based *Sing Tao Daily* was founded in London in 1975; until the 2000s, it remained focused on Hong Kong and Cantonese readers. In 1982, Taiwan's *United Daily News* (Lianhebao) group founded Paris-based *Ouzhou Ribao* (*Journal d'Europe*), and in the following year, its pro-Peking rival *Ouzhou Shibao* (*Nouvelles d'Europe*) was established. (The latter is formally independent but has maintained close editorial and personnel ties with both Xinhua News Agency and the smaller China News Service (CNS), and is widely believed to receive funding from the Chinese government.) Both papers aimed at a broader Europe-wide Chinese readership. *Ouzhou Ribao*'s popularity peaked in the early 1990s; it ceased publication in 2009.

In addition to these papers with continental ambitions and ties to competing Chinese polities, the 1980s and 1990s saw a proliferation of local Chinese papers across Western, Southern and Eastern Europe as Chinese migrants spread across the continent. In the pre-Internet era, these papers focused on local content, mixing practical information for Chinese readers, news related to local Chinese associations and companies, and local, Chinese and international news stories mostly translated from mainstream local media. China News Service, an agency created by the PRC's Overseas Chinese Affairs Bureau with the aim to inform Chinese overseas of developments in China, offered its news stories to overseas Chinese media at very little or no cost, but until the late 1990s, most Chinese papers and organisations distrusted the Chinese government and preferred to rely on local sources. After the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre, Chinese-language media in Europe overwhelmingly condemned the Chinese government. Many papers published contributions by participants of the democracy movement who had fled China. Some, particularly in Germany, stayed on as journalists and defined a tone sharply critical of the Chinese government.

In the course of the 1990s, the structure and orientation of Chinese media in Europe changed due to the confluence of several factors: increasing economic migration directly from mainland China, active courtship of Chinese overseas by the Chinese government, the rise of the Internet and satellite television, and growing nationalism in China. Taken together, these factors resulted in an expanding European Chinese media audience that was more positively oriented towards and economically dependent on mainland China and, for both technological

and political reasons, had more access to media content generated there. It became easy and cheap for local Chinese papers to reproduce content from Internet sources in China and riskier to produce or reproduce content critical of such sources. Increasingly, also, content shifted towards entertainment news. Most papers with an independent stance shifted their position or shut down; both the Hong Kong and the European edition of *Sing Tao* gave up their critical stance towards the Chinese government. Presently, the major Chinese-language papers in Europe no longer represent a plurality of political positions. An exception is *Epoch Times (Da Jiyuan)*, a free worldwide newspaper launched in 2000 and associated with the Falungong religious movement.

Today, some 40-50 Chinese-language dailies and weeklies are published in the EU, including some glossy magazines. Most are distributed free of charge and are sustained by advertisements. The papers serve primarily as public platforms for their publishers, who also run other businesses such as travel or service agencies. Both *Sing Tao* and *Nouvelles d'Europe* claim to be the largest-circulation Chinese papers in Europe. The former claims a circulation of 80 thousand copies; the latter has opened a network of five regional bureaux across Europe, publishing local versions of the paper.

In the 1990s, Chinese satellite television became available in Europe. The first to arrive on the scene were Chinese News and Entertainment (CNE) and Chinese Channel, both based in London and aiming largely at Cantonese-speaking audiences, later followed by Hong Kong-based Phoenix TV, China Central Television (CCTV), and other channels, including provincial TV stations from China as well as New Tang Dynasty, a U.S.-based station close to the Falungong. In 1999, CNE was acquired by Phoenix and shifted most broadcasts to Mandarin; its news perspective is now closely aligned with the PRC's official line. In 2015, a Chinese businessman in France launched a new entertainment channel aiming at the Wenzhounese speakers who form the dominant group among Chinese in France.

As elsewhere, radio stations have had the most local and targeted nature of all media, and are the least well-documented. At least in the United Kingdom, France, and the Netherlands there have been Chinese-language radio stations broadcasting in Cantonese, Mandarin, and Wenzhounese, and focusing on community news and practical information.

1.2 China-based media

Chinese Communist Party media have had a long presence in Europe, in some cases predating the establishment of the People's Republic of China: for example, Xinhua's London bureau has been operating since 1947. Until the 1990s, however, bureaux of Xinhua, *People's Daily* and a few other central Party newspapers were diplomatic and intelligence outposts as much as they were media organisations, and were staffed by specialists in particular countries.

In the late 1990 and the 2000s, Phoenix News Channel established a network of reporters (operating independently from Phoenix's European CNE Channel) to cater to the interests of China's expanding urban professional class. Although it is not state-owned and not even mainland-based, its bureaux are listed along with official Party and state media on the websites of Chinese embassies, reflecting Phoenix's ambiguous, semi-official status.

The number of Chinese media bureaux and correspondents increased gradually through the 1990s and the 2000s, particularly in key Western European countries. After 2008, as part of an initiative by the Chinese government to expand the worldwide presence of Chinese media, this growth accelerated. Today, the "big four" (Xinhua, CCTV, *People's Daily*, China Radio International) and *Guangming Daily*, the Party's ideology-focused paper, have extensive networks of bureaux in Europe, some coordinated from regional hubs that can number up to 30 Chinese and local staff. Xinhua claims to have correspondents in all European countries

except Monaco, the Vatican and Montenegro, employing around 120 correspondents dispatched from China and around 40 full-time and over 100 part-time local staff. CNS and some other central papers (*Economic Daily*, *China Youth Daily*, *Liberation Daily* and others) have far more limited networks of up to five bureaus, usually manned by a single correspondent.^{viii} Non-state-subsidised business media (*Caijing*, *Caixin*, *First Financial Daily*, and *21st Century Business Herald*) have at various points had one or two correspondents in Europe (London and/or Brussels), but these initiatives are often underfunded and unstable. Other media rely on stringers and “firefighters” on short-term reporting trips. This includes the major news portals (Sina, Tencent, Netease, Phoenix Online), which do not have the status of news organisations and are therefore not allowed to station correspondents abroad.

The bureaux of Chinese state media in Europe continue to have a double function: representing “China’s voice” to foreign audiences and providing news to audiences at home. Consequently, the European bureaux of the largest media (Xinhua, CCTV, and CRI) produce news output in foreign languages as well as Chinese. Being competitive in a global market dominated by Western media as well as credible domestically are explicit long-term aims, but most analysts conclude that these are hard to reconcile with the continued requirement of partisanship (recently reinforced by Chairman Xi Jinping), limits on the freedom of reporting, organisational inflexibility, and perceived lack of audience interests in in-depth reporting (Sun 2010, Xin 2012, Zhang 2013, Nyíri forthcoming). Overall, the quantity and standards of Chinese reporting from Europe has increased, but its scope, depth, and impact are limited. The new generation of Chinese correspondents in Europe, as elsewhere, consists of young journalists who, while better trained and engaging in more extensive reporting work than their predecessors, lack country expertise.

Recent trends

1.3 Blurring boundaries within transnational multimedia

Chinese media in Europe are facing demographic, economic, and technological changes that challenge their ways of operating. Younger audiences tend to get their news and entertainment online, and advertisers increasingly prefer to target them online as well. Both Europe-based and China-based media expand into online and social media in response to these shifts. As they do so, they gain access to a much larger potential readership than they were able to reach via traditional channels. Readers in China are now able to learn what is happening in Europe from platforms based in Europe – as long as those platforms are not blocked in China. All media therefore end up competing for the same readers and advertisers, largely in China. However, this requires operating on China-based social media platforms (WeChat, Weibo) and servers, since other platforms and servers are not popular among users in China and frequently blocked. It also requires greater understanding of the media preferences of young people.

While traditional media such as *Sing Tao* still claim a following, it seems to be largely limited to older Cantonese-speaking readers. Younger people coming from the mainland tend to follow media on WeChat. The most widely followed Europe-based WeChat accounts are those run by the regional bureaux of *Nouvelles d’Europe*, as well as a few independent ones maintained by young migrants from China: London-based *Yingguo na xie shi’er* (Those things in England) and *Yingguo dajiatan* (England everyone’s talk) and Paris-based *Xin Ouzhou* (New Europe), which grew out of an online platform helping young Chinese find their bearings in France, called *Zhandou zai Faguo* (Struggling in France). *Nouvelles d’Europe*’s most popular regional WeChat accounts are *Yinglunquan* in Britain and

Daodejing in Germany (both titles are puns on the countries' names). They do not run under *Nouvelles d'Europe*'s name and are edited independently of the main office in Paris by young people who came from the PRC as students. While the number of subscribers to each account is not public, posts on these accounts typically attract 20-30 thousand readers. A common estimate is that the number of subscribers can be ten times that. According to Tony Han, CEO of CTM, the company that runs *Yingguo dajiatan*, its account has 300 thousand followers, divided equally between the UK and China, with small follower bases elsewhere in Europe. Han estimates that *Yingguo na xie shi* has a million followers; however, *Yingguo dajiatan* is the only account that produces original journalistic content in addition to translating articles from local media and providing practical information. In any case, the estimated readership of these accounts far exceeds that of Chinese papers and attracts more substantial advertising, including consumer-goods companies targeting young urbanites in China. In addition to direct and "soft" advertising, another source of revenues are the organisation, promotion and sale of events ranging from conferences to travel.

The examples of *Yingguo dajiatan* and the *Nouvelles d'Europe* accounts demonstrate the way Chinese media in Europe have increasingly become part of a transnational media sphere in which owners, advertisers, writers and readers are both inside and outside of China, and in which technologies, styles, and practices common in China, including self-censorship, spread globally. (Only traditional Hong Kong-oriented media such as *Sing Tao* and media associated with the Falungong are outside this sphere.) This is not so much because of direct intervention by Chinese censors (Cook 2013) but because of media organisations' and editors' fear of their accounts being shut down in China, which leads them to err on the side of caution if the attitude of the Chinese government is unknown. Thus, when *Yingguo dajiatan*'s CEO, who was a journalist with Xinhua and *Shenzhen Daily* before moving to England, is unsure about whether an article is safe to publish or not, he asks his friends at Xinhua. For example, in the case of the so-called Panama Papers leak in 2016 and the subsequent publication of British Prime Minister David Cameron's tax return, the CEO was advised not to publish the story because the same papers also contained revelations about Xi Jinping's brother-in-law.

In the case of *Nouvelles d'Europe*'s WeChat accounts, there is a similar blurring between official and unofficial positions. The paper collaborates closely with China News Service, which typesets its China pages and one of its international pages in Peking. Its current chief executive previously worked at one of the central media organisations in China, and most staff used to be journalists or teachers in China, although some are local-born. As a journalist for the paper put it, "to the outside, we call ourselves a private paper," but its international expansion would hardly be possible without support from China. Each regional bureau also runs a cultural centre that organises exhibitions and publishes books using subsidies from China. Regarding coverage of major events, the paper would consult with the Chinese embassy, but content posted on the paper's WeChat account is not vetted by outside censors.

1.4 Growing importance of culture reporting

Chinese journalists and editors agree that Europe is not an important region for Chinese media; the United States and East Asia dominate foreign news. Neither political nor economic news, not even major stories such as the Eurozone debt or the refugee crisis, attract sustained interest in China. However, with the growth of a young, affluent urban Chinese population with increasingly differentiated tastes and lifestyles, the attraction of what is perceived to be European culture, from food and cinema to environmental protection, has been growing. Chinese journalists working across the range of media aim to cater to this interest, from the CCTV feature on environmental protection around the North Pole to Sina's story on why the Dutch like cycling.

An example of growing interest in feature stories on European culture is the expansion of reporting on film festivals. The main news portals, Netease, Sohu, and Tencent, began sending reporting crews to the Venice, Berlin, and Cannes festivals around 2010. At first, they hired Chinese students studying in Europe as fixers, but gradually, some of these became permanent stringers. The feature reports and interviews produced by these teams offered something that print media or television did not. However, these portals are increasingly outflanked by individuals or teams who run specialised WeChat accounts focusing on European cinema. In 2016, Sina collaborated in its coverage of Cannes with Dushe dianying, a WeChat film review group, while Phoenix Online collaborated with Taotao Linlin (the WeChat handle of an individual film commentator). Even so, reader interest is large enough to sustain other independent content providers such as Deepfocus, a WeChat film review account coordinated by a Chinese PhD student at the Sorbonne's philosophy department. Deepfocus has 30 thousand subscribers and has recently been attracting interest from investors in China. Consulting Chinese stakeholders keen to invest in the European film industry or purchasing copyright is an important source of income for many of these platforms and individuals. In other words, matching "European culture" with Chinese capital is a business opportunity.

1.5 Decentralisation, localisation, and the growing role of individuals

The above examples demonstrate how, with the growing importance of social media, media organisations increasingly depend on individuals who have a reliable online following. For most Chinese media that wish to provide live coverage of Europe, networks of stringers, often students or young professionals who are not professional journalists, are also a cheaper and flexible alternative to posting correspondents. Even if online news portals such as Tencent received permission to set up overseas bureaux, they may still prefer to retain microbloggers who have already made a name in cyberspace.

This is due in part to the lack of foreign correspondents with readily recognisable names. Correspondents for Chinese media tend to be young people who spend no more than 3-4 years at a station, and by their mid-thirties typically return to China. Foreign correspondence is not an attractive career in the long term, and most journalists at state media prefer rising up the administrative ladder, while those at commercial media often look for more stable and financially rewarding jobs. This creates a niche for talented professional and semi-professional overseas-based freelancers who often write for a number of state and commercial media outlets, traditional and new, and/or run their own social media or consultancies. It is not uncommon for an individual to write for media covering a wide political spectrum, from Caixin's liberal *Globus* to *People's Daily's* nationalistic *Global Times*.

For those privileged state media that do have extensive networks of bureaux - Xinhua and CCTV - hiring local staff is a strategy to produce more interesting and credible foreign-language (primarily English) stories (for Xinhua) or to gain better access to news sources.

Obstacles

For most correspondents, the greatest obstacle in the way of more comprehensive and accurate reporting on Europe is limited space and audience interest. Although there clearly are subjects that are off limits — no one would think of reporting on a visit by the Dalai Lama unless instructed to do so - these are far fewer than for domestic correspondents in China, and journalists do not think of these as a serious impediment to their work. Rather, they tend to complain of the fact that they tend to lose out on the limited space for foreign news to their colleagues in the U.S. or East Asia. Also, some complain that their editors sometimes ask them to report stories that they see as not newsworthy (but that their editors may, for example,

have encountered on social media in translations from sensationalist British papers such as the *Daily Mail*) but reject stories that are of importance locally.

Complaints about problems encountered in Europe are relatively uncommon. Quite often, correspondents praise European governments' communication regimes as well-run. In particular, Northern European, Dutch, and Swiss governments are often complimented for being open and responsive to queries. The list of international organization spokespersons, complete with mobile phone numbers, provided by Geneva authorities is sometimes cited as a positive example. In comparison, German, French, and especially British officials are seen as less accessible. Related to this is an occasional perception of suspicion towards Chinese media. Again, this is more often mentioned with regard to the larger countries: the UK, France, and Germany. According to a CCTV correspondent, Chinese journalists are seen as government "puppets," so a request based on personal interest would be met with suspicion because of the assumption that the government must be behind it. British politicians in particular are said to be wary of appearances in Chinese media that British media might criticize them for. For example, David Cameron gave CCTV two interviews but specified that they must only be broadcast in China.

Some correspondents complain that not only government officials but also local colleagues are also suspicious, and this prevents Chinese correspondents from developing contacts with them. A *People's Daily* correspondent in Berlin said: "German journalists are extremely watchful with Chinese colleagues. They think they are all spies." However, many correspondents do not report such suspicion. On the other hand, many do not try to develop contacts with local journalists in the first place.

Some correspondents think it would be useful if European governments organized briefings or activities specifically for Chinese journalists; others do not.

Chinese journalists typically do not have access to local assistants and fixers, or to a much smaller extent than foreign correspondents for Western media. Some see this as an obstacle in the way of gaining access to local news sources.

A final obstacle mentioned by some correspondents is that, in many countries, they have to renew their visas every year. The process can take up to a month or more, during which time they are often unable to travel.

Few correspondents related shortcomings in reporting to lack of preparation, limited knowledge of European societies or languages, or willingness to "hang out" with locals. Objectively, however, these should be counted among limiting factors. The reasons behind them relate to the career expectations of journalists as much as to correspondents' personalities. Few if any of them expect or want to be career foreign correspondents; once they reach their mid-thirties, foreign postings become less frequent, and most journalists move up the administrative ladder that requires them to stay at headquarters in China. Most correspondents will only ever have spent three to four years in a given country, and there is little expectation or incentive for them to become its experts. When experienced journalists do stay on or return as foreign correspondents, they often have to deal with requests from very young editors with no overseas experience. In addition, there is little money available for meals or entertainment with informants, which makes the cultivation of networks more difficult. However, it is likely that the personal habits of many correspondents also play a role in limited social contacts.

There are many capable and conscientious Chinese journalists working in Europe. Nonetheless, it is hard to ignore the judgment of a former correspondent for a commercial media organization:

State-owned [media are] too biased and incapable; non-state-owned too constrained with budget, hence no good journalists. When I arrived here [on his last reporting trip] and saw international news organizations with teams working on a project and active interactions between reporters and editors, I kept feeling ashamed as a journalist from China: no wonder there is no The New York Times and BBC. China is not in a position to blame the West [for] see[ing] us in a distorted way, because we don't even bother to closely look at them.

2. Chinese journalists and their coverage of the Netherlands

Garrie van Pinxteren with Jialu Zhang

This chapter explores Chinese-language media and their coverage of the Netherlands.^{ix} First we will look at journalists who cover the news for a Chinese-language audience. Who are they? Where do they live? How do they work and how do they perceive the Netherlands? This report aims to give an impression of the background to media coverage of the Netherlands.

We will then focus on a number of stories about the Netherlands covered in the news between March 2014 and March 2016. The start date of March 2014 coincides with Chinese president Xi Jinping's visit to the Netherlands; the first state visit by a Chinese president to our country since diplomatic relations were repaired in 1972. King Willem-Alexander paid a return visit to China in October 2015. The MH17 plane crash of July 2014 (a hard news fact about the Netherlands) made the front pages in China. We will explore these three news events, as well as reports that claim driving lessons in the Netherlands can be paid for by sex.

Our meetings with journalists revealed a number of themes they considered relevant. We also asked them explicitly which topical themes in the Netherlands they found the most important during the period studied in our survey. We then looked at how often and where these themes featured in the news. Our selection of the four news stories we explored in detail is partly based on this information.^x

2.1 Journalists

State press agency Xinhua, which has more offices in Europe than any other Chinese media organisation, is the only one to have an office in The Hague with a permanent correspondent, posted here from China, and support staff, consisting of a part-time Dutch employee who studied Chinese in Leiden. It also uses the services of two freelancers: a Greek lady who focuses mostly on the EU, and a sports reporter. A freelancer with Chinese roots is occasionally asked to produce video items. 'We're not using his services as much anymore, because it is expensive and it has become so much easier to get images elsewhere,' the correspondent explains. This makes Xinhua in The Hague smaller than it was under its predecessor, who founded the agency in 2010. Opening a new office fits with the Chinese policy referred to above to bolster the influence of Chinese media abroad, and to make considerably higher budgets available for this purpose. In 2013, it employed some four to six local people, plus several freelancers. Before 2010, Xinhua's coverage of the Netherlands mostly came from its European headquarters in Brussels, staffed by some thirty journalists posted there by China.^{xi}

The gentleman who founded the office still works at the same building in The Hague, but now for Xinhuanet, the Xinhua website and commercial division. It is a listed company eager to go commercial. This dual position of Xinhua – on the one hand the voice of the party, and on the other an 'ordinary' commercial company that plans to compete with other international press agencies – is typical of how many state-controlled media attempt to combine their commercial with their political objectives. All other media leave the reporting to correspondents who operate from outside the Netherlands, usually from Brussels. In addition, the Chinese-language media also work with freelancers, some of whom are based in the Netherlands. Like in the rest of Europe, these are mostly students or former students.

Much of the news is covered from China itself, where foreign affairs editors or specific European editors write about the Netherlands, some of whom have visited the Netherlands on reporting trips. A number of Chinese living in the Netherlands have set up new online media, while there are Chinese journalists who work for the Dutch media organisation RNW, formerly Radio Netherlands Worldwide. Last but not least, there are Chinese bloggers who write about Netherlands.

The fact that only one correspondent is posted here, is because the Netherlands is not considered a major European country. Although the Netherlands ranked number four on the list of EU countries in which China made direct investments in 2015, before even Germany,^{xii} this position was not reflected in Chinese media. Featured most often were Great Britain, Germany and France; Brussels, the EU capital, also featured regularly. Italy and Spain came second. The Netherlands followed in a group of countries that takes third or perhaps even fourth place as regards Chinese news coverage of Europe, together with Denmark and other Scandinavian countries.^{xiii}

A journalist working for Xinhua in Beijing described their coverage of the EU as: ‘News about Great Britain, Germany and France is usually hard news with a relatively smaller cultural-social focus. The reverse applies to the Netherlands.’

A journalist for the *Global Times*, a medium that publishes only foreign news, agreed that there is little hard news about the Netherlands. The Netherlands hardly ever features on the front page, but relatively often on the sports pages, usually involving soccer. Sometimes there are articles on the travel and cultural pages, or in the ‘did-you-know trivia’ section.

Important news about topics including the refugee crisis or the terror attacks is mostly published within a German or French context. The Netherlands features rarely in these reports. ‘You are too small and the country is too peaceful,’ a journalist who reports on Europe for a market-oriented medium claimed. ‘It gets just a little more attention than other Northern European countries because it is home to the International Court of Justice.’

The Xinhua correspondent in the Netherlands occasionally struggled to find something to write about: ‘There is a lot of commotion nationally about Geert Wilders, but he isn’t in power yet. He only becomes relevant to the rest of the world when he holds power. Until that time there is little for me to write about.’ To her, within the bigger stories about Europe, the Netherlands only plays a minor role: ‘If, for instance, I write that the number of refugees to the Netherlands dropped last year, and I quote a figure, it usually ends up being a short piece in a larger report on the refugee crisis in Europe in general. The numbers are high for the Netherlands, but low if you compare them with Germany.’ The same applies to reports about terrorism suspects arrested here, or reports that Brexit will inspire the Netherlands to have a Nexit: they rarely end up as more than a number of paragraphs in a larger report on Europe.

The office in The Hague not only focuses on a Chinese public: more than half of the articles appear in English, in the hope that they get picked up by international media. News coverage varies from the death of Johan Crujff to news events that are not specific to the Netherlands, but that take place here, such as cases tried by the International Court of Justice.

In practice, it isn’t easy for Xinhua to compete with international press agencies when it comes to providing news about Europe. After all, commissioned to function as the party’s mouthpiece, it is restricted in its freedom to discuss all topics. Western media have come to regard Xinhua as an indicator of the views of the Chinese government, rather than as an independent press agency. According to the correspondent, who previously worked in Cameroon for Xinhua, her stories were used extensively by the African media. The articles she wrote about the region were welcomed by Cameroon media, as local journalists often had

no funds to travel to and report on other countries. What she wrote about Cameroon drew a lot of attention from surrounding African countries, because they, too, lacked the funds to send their people to Cameroon.

The biggest case the correspondent dealt with in 2016 was the case before the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague, which involved Chinese claims to the South-Chinese Sea. China's sovereignty claim to some ninety percent of the area was not accepted by the Court. The case kept the office busy for two months. The correspondent spoke to Dutch experts on maritime law and delved into the legal details of the case, and published in both English and Chinese. Asked what she thought about the Dutch news coverage of the case, she said that she was disappointed, saying that 'Nobody took the trouble of really delving into the legal aspects of the case. That makes this type of journalism a bit lazy.'

Asked which topics she finds important in the Netherlands, she answered Dutch water management. 'I write about the Afsluitdijk for instance, about how the water boards operate and their policies, about Dutch plans to build a floating farm in the Merwehaven near Rotterdam and about other water management measures.' For those articles, she talks to Dutch experts and also reads their specialist reports. Not all articles she wrote on this subject were intended for a general audience; about half of the articles was written for, or even commissioned by Chinese research institutes affiliated with the government. Such reports generally give journalists more freedom to write and explore: this type of investigative journalism is reserved exclusively for the government and the party. Many of the Xinhua reports contain qualified, more or less confidential information: access to information may be restricted depending on your position in the party.

She also spent a lot of time and effort on a case that caused an outrage in China: a Buddha statue exhibited here in the Netherlands was said to have been stolen from China. But she also wrote about, for instance, Dutch lads who tipped milk powder over Chinese-looking people, the MH17 plane crash, the economy, and about technological advancements.

The journalist has direct access to Dutch sources thanks to her Dutch assistant. She also reads all major international newspapers, and policy documents produced by Clingendael. She referred to an analysis of Europe's response to Chinese plans to create a new Silk Road. Those plans, now known as the *Belt and Road Initiative*, are the showpiece of China's foreign policy, aiming to reinstate the former Silk Road across land and sea. The construction of new infrastructure should strengthen the economic collaboration between China and Europe.

Freelancers writing about the Netherlands can work for either state-controlled or market-driven media, or for both. What makes their position difficult is that they often lack official accreditation as journalists. This means they can write human interest stories, but have trouble reporting on hard news because their access to the key players in those stories is restricted.

Journalists stationed in China from where they write about the Netherlands often do so based on what English-language media report on the Netherlands. Incidentally, they are permitted to travel to the Netherlands, but this is rare, and trips are usually very short.

A journalist, who visited the Netherlands in the run-up to the visit by King Willem-Alexander to China in October 2015, writes not just about the Netherlands, but about Europe in its entirety. 'When I started as a journalist, I was given the opportunity to write about Europe four years ago,' she told us. 'Since there wasn't much to report on in Europe, the job would be fairly easy, just right for a woman.' But she was busier than she could have ever imagined. 'I write about the new Silk Road to Europe, about terrorism, about Brexit and about the refugee crisis. And there is great interest in these topics.' She writes little about the Netherlands, and estimates that of all her stories about Europe, some ten percent is about the Netherlands.

‘When I write about the Netherlands, it is mostly on agriculture, because that is the first thing people think about when they think of the Netherlands. Our president is also very interested in this topic. Secondly, I think of football.’ She would also like to write an article about the International Court of Justice in The Hague. ‘But I would need a topical reason for that,’ she said at the start of 2016. There is not much real hard news about the Netherlands, she said, which is why she mostly writes about culture and society. She also writes about homosexuality and prostitution: ‘People are very curious about it.’ She doesn’t write about drugs, ‘but people do know about it’.

2.2 Dutch news in Chinese media

Our study of the share of news coverage of the Netherlands in Chinese media has not been systematic, yet it is clear that it is very small. According to a journalist who covers Europe for a market-oriented magazine targeting a cosmopolitan urban audience, some five to ten percent of all articles published are about Europe, and only one percent about the Netherlands. Her manager could not even remember any specific news about the Netherlands that made the magazine. ‘Hang on, I do: your king visited our country. The Dutch embassy asked us to interview him in the Netherlands, and we did.’ So, attention is limited for Europe and even more so for the Netherlands.

Below we will explore four stories about three topics that illustrate to some extent the various ways Chinese media regard the Netherlands and Dutch news. The first story claims that sex can be used to pay for driving lessons in the Netherlands, which says enough about how China associates the Netherlands with a loose. We then focus on the MH17 plane crash that affected the Netherlands directly, and that was world news in China. Finally, we will look at the state visit president Xi Jinping paid to the Netherlands in 2014, and compare it to the return visit King Willem-Alexander paid to China in 2015.

2.3 Using sex to pay for driving lessons

The most unusual story to appear on the Netherlands in newspapers, including the *Global Times* of 23 December 2015, is one many Chinese journalists seem to know. The article’s header read “‘Sex used to pay for study” makes being a driving instructor a popular profession in the Netherlands: five times as many people sign up’. ‘Recently, many European men wanted to travel to the Netherlands to become driving instructors. According to a Dutch official, the number of applications has gone up five times since the adoption of new legislation about teaching driving lessons,’^{xiv} the article continues. It is claimed that under the new legislation, driving instructors may be paid with sex rather than cash.

The report, unlikely as it may sound, is partially correct. On 12 December 2015, *NRC Handelsblad* wrote that BOVAG, the Dutch association of motor car, garage and allied trade, had issued a statement saying that ‘the government should act against driving schools and horny driving instructors offering driving lessons in return for sex’.^{xv} However, responding to answers raised by Parliament, the responsible ministers said that this wasn’t possible. Because the driving lesson is offered in exchange for sex and not vice versa, it is, strictly speaking, not prostitution. However, the reference to new legislation, as reported by the Chinese newspaper, is entirely fictitious. Also, none of the other media refer to an increase in the number of driving instructors wanting to teach driving lessons in the Netherlands.

The Chinese article in the *Global Times* also describes the alleged responses in the Netherlands to the news: some they claimed thought parliament was crazy to permit this, others thought it the perfect solution for women too poor to pay the two thousand Euros (or more) it costs to get a licence. The article also said: ‘Dutch society has much more lenient views on sex than other countries. Offering sexual services is a legal profession in the Netherlands, where sex workers are regarded as self-employed entrepreneurs. They have a

work permit and pay taxes. Be that as it may, many people believe that this legislation contributes to a sense of abnormality in society, where bad instructors could intentionally make it difficult for students to pass, to benefit optimally from the relationship.^{xvi}

The article was written by a Belgium-based correspondent relying on English-language sources. However, the source he referred to, the English-language site Dutch News.nl, did not mention any newly adopted legislation. It carried the same information as the Dutch media.^{xvii} This raises the question if the site was indeed the source the journalist used. The British tabloid *Daily Mail* did refer to new legislation,^{xviii} while another British newspaper, *The Telegraph*,^{xix} wrote a background story on the legal position of prostitutes. This resembles the Chinese report.

This instantly exposes one of the problems Chinese media have with their coverage of the Netherlands: only few of the correspondents who live in the Netherlands or Belgium speak Dutch. The foreign affairs desks in China rarely employ people who can read Dutch either, so Dutch news mostly reaches China via international media. Moreover, some Chinese correspondents in Europe complain that their editors in China often base themselves on what British tabloids write, rather than on their own correspondents.

The story appears well known in China: most people have heard it. Quite likely, it was picked up so readily because it fits the image many Chinese have of the Netherlands as a small, peaceful and not unpleasant country with distinctly liberal sexual standards, as growing numbers of Chinese have witnessed first-hand in Amsterdam's Red Light District. This rings true with many others across the globe, too, which is why English-language media were so eager to pick it up. Interestingly, when journalists in China were asked if they associate the Netherlands specifically with human rights, many refer to the country's liberal standards for sex and prostitution, euthanasia and drugs.

The story about the driving instructors is meant to be a light-hearted, innocent break between all the 'heavy' news. It is the type of story that keeps a newspaper palatable and that shows the type of quaint views and customs people in faraway countries have. Not unlike, you may say, the preference we have in the Netherlands for exotic news from China. Take for instance the stories that the Chinese recycle used condoms into hairbands for children or use human hair to improve bread. Or the story about the sign outside the Louvre in Paris that supposedly reads Chinese only, banning people from pooing in the square outside the Louvre, because apparently this is something only the Chinese do. True, not true or partially true, the stories appeal here mostly because they fit with what we think we already know about them: hygiene and food safety aren't high on their list of priorities and they are capable of anything if it is in their financial interest.

2.4 The MH17 plane crash

Of the ten incidents that the Chinese media regarded as key events in 2014, only one involved the Netherlands during the period studied for this report. It was the only one to make it to the front page of the *Global Times*. This was the MH17 plane crash. Remarkably, the majority of China's news coverage of the disaster did not explore its connection with the Netherlands. There was attention for Joep Lange, a prominent AIDS scientist who died in the crash, but the actual news focus was on the battle between Putin and the western world. With China's official sympathy lying with Putin, its media reported that the crash had been attributed to Putin incorrectly and prematurely. It struck a chord with China, which often feels under pressure from anti-Chinese Western sentiments.

Few Chinese media drew parallels with the events involving flight MH370, which had disappeared off the radar a few months earlier, carrying 239 people, 153 of them Chinese. The

fate of that flight is still unknown, with no trace of any wreckage or bodies, leaving some relatives convinced that their loved ones are still alive somewhere. The crash caused a storm of indignation among family and friends of those on the plane, who said that the Malayan authorities gave poor and conflicting information about what had happened. Some even suspected a conspiracy, that they were being misled, and that there was more to the disappearance than they would ever know.

Unlike many of the Chinese media, blogger Weikoko, a Chinese scientist who had moved to Utrecht after graduating from a Dutch university, compared the two incidents and what had happened to the flights. She wrote an article about how the Netherlands handled the crash. At the time of the crash, she had only just started her blog to keep her family and friends up to date on her life in the Netherlands. Struck by how the Netherlands dealt with the crash, she wrote a personal blog about it. She posted it at three in the morning, and then went to sleep. The next morning her account had grown from 75 to 20,000 followers. Within 24 hours, her blog had been read some half a million times and had been adopted by many media in China. And before she knew it, it had been read some ten million times. It made her famous in China overnight. The Chinese state television phoned her for an interview, and other Chinese media followed. It made her an internet opinion leader on the Netherlands. These opinion leaders – a new phenomenon on the internet which we will discuss in the next chapter – use new media to publish personal articles about topics that matter to them.

Weikoko's story was titled 'Differences between the Netherlands and China dealing with the MH17 and the MH370 crash respectively'. It was a very personal story, in which she voiced her admiration for Dutch Prime Minister Rutte, who had been open from the start about what he did and did not yet know. She made sure not to criticise the Chinese or Malayan government in any way, or to say anything negative about the suspicions of the victims' Chinese relatives. But reading between the lines and from the way she described the situation in the Netherlands, it was clear she was critical of how China was dealing with the crash. She told how the Dutch were not suspicious of the Malayan authorities, about the attention for the victims, about their protection from intrusive media and about Prime Minister Rutte's reluctance to point the finger of blame straightaway. She said: 'The Netherlands is a small country, with no political, military or diplomatic influence whatsoever. While America and Russia argue, a journalist asked the Prime Minister: "Can a country as small as ours, stuck between the political interests of two major powers, trust two arguing countries?" I love the answer the Prime Minister gave: "It is because we are such a small country that we need to work with our allies to help each other. Trust is more than a choice, it is something you build. We will do our utmost to get all the evidence on the table, but we need to do this with care and deliberation and patience.'^{xx}

It illustrates what we discussed in the previous chapter, namely that the analysis of an incident abroad can be used to criticise China. This approach was often used by the Chinese-language editors of RNW, Radio Netherlands Worldwide. For instance, rather than reporting on the Chinese educational system and how it put so many children under pressure, stemming their creativity, they would write about why Dutch children were among the happiest in the world.

2.5. State visits

'China has elected an excellent leader!' Prime Minister Mark Rutte said. At least that's if we are to believe the *People's Daily*. On 22 March 2014, this newspaper published an interview with Prime Minister Rutte in the run-up to the state visit by Chinese President Xi Jinping to the Netherlands of that year. Rutte's quote also appeared in many other Chinese media, giving

China exactly what it wanted: proof that other countries are in awe of China's President and the wisdom of his policies.

In the interview Rutte also said: 'Only an excellent leader like President Xi Jinping has the capabilities to govern such a large country [as China] and to successfully solve all kinds of domestic and international problems.' Rutte then talked fondly about their previous meeting in Beijing. 'It was a Friday, the weather was nice. I had a deep conversation with President Xi Jinping at the state guesthouse Diaoyutai. We discussed many issues. President Xi Jinping is very open-minded, he has vision. At the same time, he is very much up to date with what is happening in everyday life.' Rutte then became emotional and said: 'We forged a deep personal friendship. President Xi Jinping is a person people like to work with and be around. I am very much looking forward to President Xi Jinping's visit to our country.'^{xxi} Whether Prime Minister Rutte did actually say this, and in which context, is difficult to verify. Nor do we know if he said more than these words of praise. However that may be, Rutte helped the Chinese media paint a picture of a Dutch leader who admires the highest Chinese leader and who takes not a peer role, but a rather subordinate one.

As it was published, the article fit the reporting style required from official Chinese media when covering foreign visits by the President. Reports must show that foreign leaders, businessmen and women, scientists and academics are all impressed by the rise of China and of the personal capabilities of China's President, and that they recognise the superiority of China and its highest leader. Rutte played the game, knowingly or not. Remarkably, prior to Xi Jinping's state visit to the Netherlands, no Dutch journalists were allowed to interview him. China's President never gives interviews to foreign media, preferring the safe, controlled lectures to foreign institutes and, in exceptional circumstances, written interviews.

There is a reason why China and the Netherlands take such different views of these state visits, and that is that they have such different goals. King Willem-Alexander's state visit to China was to demonstrate first and foremost that the Netherlands is willing and able to work with China in several specific areas, including economic collaboration. It hoped to convince China to do the same. China's primary goal was to show its people that other countries have growing admiration and respect for China and its leaders. Equally, the King's visit to China and Xi's visit to the Netherlands were taken to demonstrate that China is on the right development track, also in the eyes of other countries. While economic collaboration is important for China, it is not a goal in itself.

You could say that the royal visit to China was successful because of its limited ambitions. Basically, it served as a glorified trade mission, with a minor human rights aspect. And while King Willem-Alexander may not have liked being regarded as merely serving the interests of Dutch businesses, his visit could never be much more, because it lacked ambition. For instance, parties did not discuss their future relationship in the field of (geo)politics. Or if they did, it was not covered in the media. Without a broader vision, preferably formulated and voiced with other EU countries, the Netherlands was little more than a salesman trying to sell collaboration and trade to China, one in a long line of European countries knocking on China's door, all selling more or less the same message. Little wonder, therefore, that the Chinese were willing to believe the *People's Daily* when it described Prime Minister Rutte as an admirer of the Chinese President, who does present a broad political vision of China's future in the world.

It is the task of the official Chinese media to visualise China's superiority, and that includes reporting on enthusiasm abroad about Chinese plans and views. The business and other

agreements signed with China during those visits underline China's power and place in the world.

Dutch media mostly focused on whether the Dutch King voiced and defended Dutch interests and views in China, its economic interests and its position on human rights. Basically, neither country explored what the country of their visit actually is, does or wants.

If we look at the Chinese media coverage of President Xi's state visit to the Netherlands, the reports by a Chinese correspondent for a state-controlled medium in Brussels speak volumes. He told us: 'We started preparing articles about the visit at least one and a half months beforehand, and from about two weeks prior to the visit, we started publishing them.' For this, he had to find foreigners with sufficient status willing to voice their enthusiasm about Xi and his visit. He explained that managing this successfully is absolutely crucial for any journalist's career. But it's not easy, and it takes time and a strong network in the country to which you are posted. 'You need a couple of experts you know well and who know what you need,' he told us. To get the right quotes from these experts is even trickier. 'Respected experts are unlikely to say: "The visit by President Xi Jinping is great, we look forward to welcoming him." So, we need to be more concrete and discuss contracts, results, impressions. We cannot keep talking in general terms,' he said. 'Sometimes you may have to talk to a dozen or so experts to see who understands China and gives the answers we need,' he continued. But you usually get there, eventually. Reporting on the visit itself is not a job for the correspondents.^{xxii}

For foreigners discussing China, the hunt for positive quotes by Chinese media presents a dilemma. Everybody who has ever given an interview to an official Chinese medium knows that his words will be quoted selectively. And the only quotes to make the newspaper will be those that are not at odds with China's official viewpoints. So why would you give an interview under such circumstances, if you cannot speak freely? Are you willing to be nothing more than a mouthpiece for Chinese policies, like Prime Minister Rutte? Or is sharing some of your story better than not sharing anything at all?

2.6 Xi Jinping in the Netherlands

A closer look at Xi's visit to the Netherlands reveals some interesting things. The state visit was part of a five-day European visit, also taking in Belgium, France and Germany. The key reason for visiting the Netherlands was not the country itself, but the nuclear summit held in The Hague. Belgium was important as the headquarters of the European Union. If it hadn't been for the summit or the European Union, Xi may not have visited these countries.

The Chinese media covered the visit as they normally report on the Netherlands: rather than featuring in dedicated articles, the Netherlands appeared in general articles about the state visit.

Interestingly, CCTV, China's official television station, aired a programme on the Netherlands prior to Xi's visit. The brief report, entitled *The Netherlands, more than tulips and windmills alone*, described the Dutch as tall people in a low country. A cliché, but one that instantly showed that most Chinese are not even familiar with these clichés. It showed an employee of a Delft china factory who explained that Delftsblauw, so popular with the Chinese, is originally from China, an interview with Dutch diplomat and sinologist Robert van Gulik, and an item about Dutch students who study Chinese in Leiden. The report was used to illustrate the level of interest and admiration in the Netherlands for China. One student told the newspaper how he had visited China with his parents, and thought: 'Wow, what a wonderful country,' inspiring him to study Chinese. The report reflected the views of many Chinese

journalists: news about the Netherlands is almost only ever interesting if there is a direct link with China.^{xxiii}

The visit was covered mostly by the official media, who have much more access to the President and his entourage than the market-driven media. The official media travelled from Beijing to Europe with its own journalists, specialised in political reporting on the President. The Xinhua journalist in Beijing told us that journalists of the political desk are held in higher regard than their colleagues at the economics desk. They are followed by the science desk, and finally, the culture and society desk.

The Chinese media were interested in the Netherlands because this was the first state visit by a Chinese President to the Netherlands since 1972. According to the Chinese media, the closer ties being forged with Europe are particularly important at times of growing tension with the United States. They also wrote extensively about how the economic crisis in Europe created opportunities for Chinese businesses. They talked about trade and economic collaboration, with Europeans expressing their gratitude for China helping them out in these difficult times. Remarkably, trade was mostly about opportunities for China to export to Europe, not the other way around. Economic collaboration combined the European and the Chinese dream, European technology with demand from China, and European design with production in China. Reports also zoomed in on contracts and agreements signed during the visit.

What was missing from the official media were reports about protests on Amsterdam's Dam square against China's human rights policies, and China's treatment of Tibetans. To ensure that the Chinese President did not see any of the demonstrators when he drove up to the Palace for the state banquet, Chinese security officials were sure to quickly erect grey screens, placed between Xi's car and the demonstrators, who were, in fact a long way away. People who had travelled to the Dam square to see Xi and his wife were left disappointed. The screens caused some controversy in the Netherlands. Eberhard van der Laan, Mayor of Amsterdam, told the NOS, the Dutch state television, that the Chinese security officials and their screens had taken him by surprise, and that he had been informed of the plans only minutes beforehand. According to the Mayor, the police had initially wanted to stop them from being erected, but decided that there was no legal ground to do so. He also added that the Chinese President might otherwise not have attended, suggesting that the screens were an acceptable price to pay for Xi's visit to Amsterdam. The Mayor also said that it was up to the Chinese to decide if they wanted to place a screen, which opinion was shared by the then minister of Foreign Affairs, Frans Timmermans.

A Dutch Chinese lady invited to the state banquet posted a photo of the screens on her WeChat account asking: 'What is this?' Not being on the list of 'banned' words or terms, censors failed to spot the image of the screens, and the post was shared by many in China, drawing many comments.

President Xi's wife, a popular singer whose name had been established long before her husband became a household name, generated the best publicity for the Netherlands, when she refused to name a Dutch tulip after herself. Instead, she named it Cathay, an old name for China. According to Hua Liming, former Chinese ambassador to the Netherlands speaking to the Chinese media, this was a sign of China's modesty, lacking in so many westerners. The tulip was a big success, with Chinese visitors to the Dutch *Keukenhof* gardens all buying Cathay bulbs to take home.

China seemed much less interested in what Dutch journalists wrote about the state visit. No Dutch journalists were invited to China, although Chinese journalists had visited the

Netherlands, paid for by the Dutch state, prior to King Willem-Alexander's visit to China to generate attention and create opportunities.

2.7 King Willem-Alexander in China

Ahead of King Willem-Alexander's state visit to China in October 2015, Amnesty International placed large, bright yellow advertisements in Dutch newspapers, calling on the King to bring up human rights. The advertisements were meant to be playful yet ironic: His Majesty was invited 'when convenient, perhaps between dessert and coffee, taking into account the sensitivities, to tactfully and very briefly touch upon the Dutch trade interests'.^{xxiv} Amnesty also advertised on radio and television. Dutch coverage of the state visit focused on whether the King would address human rights in China, or remain silent.

The question was all the more expedient, since China had arrested hundreds of lawyers in July 2015, a few months prior to the visit, mostly lawyers defending civil and human rights activists. Combined with the ever-tighter restrictions on the freedom of press, this had resulted in the fiercest repression of critics in China since the student protests of 1989. Yet amidst other international news, the seriousness of the events was not picked up by the Netherlands.

Analysts in the Netherlands did not expect the King to address the topic in public, but that it would be left up to Bert Koenders, Minister of Foreign Affairs, to address the issue. But the King surprised them all. Prior to the state banquet, he referred briefly to human rights. Later, he discussed human rights in more detail during a speech to junior government officials in Shanghai.

Explaining why the Netherlands as a country is successful, he emphasised the role of civil society organisations. He explained how civil society benefits if these organisations are given the opportunity to play a public role. He also referred to the importance of being a state under the rule of law, with an autonomous judicial power, and autonomous bodies checking that power, to guarantee that human rights are indeed respected. He did not address specific human rights violations in China.

His speech was unusually frank for a head of state. Even the use of the term 'civil society' is more or less a taboo in today's China. Emphasising the importance of an autonomous state under the rule of law must have stung in view of the recent arrests. Yet there was no public outcry and the King's words in Shanghai do not seem to affect the Netherlands' standing with China. Could it be because the tone was mild, and the focus on the Netherlands, or was it because we fear China's 'heavy hand' more than we actually need to?

What's more interesting is whether the King's critical comments actually reached China and its people. Bearing in mind that Xinhua focuses mostly on those aspects that show admiration for China, its report opened with the King's words about the new Silk Route. While this may have come up during the meeting, the speech, as it was released, did not make any mention of the project. Xinhua also wrote that King Willem-Alexander praised China's achievements in its fight against poverty and that he saw common ground for future collaboration.^{xxv} While not untrue, it proved an entirely different selection from the one made by the Dutch media. For instance, *NRC Handelsblad* wrote: 'Wrapped in a song of praise of the Dutch state under the rule of law, King Willem-Alexander held up a mirror in Shanghai for future Chinese leaders,'^{xxvi} while *de Volkskrant* wrote about his reference to human rights: 'It went much further than the fleeting reference he made to human rights in his speech during the state banquet in Peking.'^{xxvii}

A Chinese journalist working for a state-controlled medium, called the King's speech pointless. He may have held up a mirror to the Chinese governors, but they won't have seen

anything new. 'Do you really believe that what the King told them was new for the future governors? Of course not. They all know, and have known all along that there is something wrong in the way China is being governed. Unfortunately, they cannot and will not change this. They have become slaves of the power.'

So what about the general public in China, did they not hear about the King's speech and his critical comments? They did. One of the journalists who joined the visit to the Netherlands and who works for a market-driven medium, said that she found the speech important, and decided to report on its key aspects. To her, these were the importance of the population's participation in policy making, the weighing up of various interests, and the importance of an independent judicial power. 'I regard those aspects in his speech relevant for China,' she said. Her article was published without any problems. 'The article was shared quite a lot on social media too,' she said. The fact that this journalist was able to write about the speech without running into any walls, should perhaps not come as a surprise. After all, a King from a country far away who makes general and polite comments about what he holds true for his own country is not considered world news in China.

State visits have become common, and almost every week China's flag in Tiananmen Square is flanked by the national flag of a visiting head of state, while the reception in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing's centre will cause chaos on the roads. State visits to China feature less prominently in the Chinese media than visits by the Chinese President to countries outside of China. The latter are covered extensively by the official media, and form the standard opening of the evening news. Asked to explain this difference, the surprising answer from a Chinese journalist was: 'There are many leaders of other countries, but we have only one President.'

So what news did attentive Chinese take away from the state visit? What did they hear about our Royal family and about the Netherlands? On the first day of the state visit, Willem-Alexander and Queen Máxima joined football player Edwin van der Sar on a visit of a primary school where he trained young football players. The event was widely covered in the news. To China, the Netherlands is the country of football, thanks in particular to star players like Gullit, Rijkaard and Van Basten. These Dutch players are legends in China, rising to fame at the same time China started to open up to the world. The Cultural Revolution, the decade spanning 1966 to 1976, had just ended and people longed for foreign news about more frivolous things such as sports and music. Johan Crujff is far less known in China, because he worked his magic on the field at a time when China was in virtual lockdown. Lately, football has become even more important, with the President vowing to ensure that China is take its place as an international football nation. And if a topic has the personal backing of the President, it has the highest priority for all Chinese media.

It was remarkable how the rest of the King's visit and the preparatory visit by the nine Chinese journalists to the Netherlands fell in line with the public diplomacy issues the Netherlands wanted to highlight in China. Public diplomacy is about raising attention and sympathy for a country's international aims with another country's government and population. There are two very different elements to the Dutch public diplomacy efforts in China. On the one hand, there's the hot potato of international law, peace and security, including human rights in China. On the other, there is the focus on strengthening economic relations with China. 'Innovation' is the umbrella theme, with the emphasis on what the Netherlands has to offer as regards technological expertise, particularly in the field of agriculture and horticulture. But rather than 'classical' export promotion of agricultural products, the Netherlands aims to offer innovative technology that could lead to a better, more sustainable and healthier food production. Other key areas are water and water management,

the environment and climate, and the creative industry, which includes fashion and design, as well as architecture and sustainable urbanification.²⁰

The subject of international law was on the Dutch agenda both in the Netherlands and in China. Invited by the Netherlands Enterprise Agency (*Rijksdienst voor Ondernemend Nederland*), nine journalists, mostly young women, explored the Netherlands for a few days, also paying a visit to the International Court of Justice. In China, the King voiced his support for human rights and autonomous legal power. Other public diplomacy topics were also discussed in both the Netherlands and China.

Unfortunately, Máxima's visit to China was cut short when she developed a kidney problem. It meant the visit did not generate as much publicity as it would otherwise have done. The Chinese are fond of royalty, and that includes an interest in King Willem-Alexander and Máxima. However, the most popular royals with the media and the general public are the British Royals, with Prince William and his wife Catherine featuring extensively in the news.

One of the journalists who visited the Netherlands and attended the interview the King granted the Chinese journalists, wrote about the role of the King, and his day-to-day life. Struck by the ordinariness of it all, she told the cliché of the King and Queen taking their children to school by bike. Her story even mentioned Queen Máxima's role as a 'nit nurse', a mother checking schoolchildren's hair for nits. That would be unthinkable for the wife of a Chinese President. The article also explained that the Dutch know where their royals reside and even write them letters, whereas the residences of China's highest leaders are kept strictly confidential for security reasons.

The Xinhua correspondent based in the Netherlands also sat in on the interview with the King, but did not cover the meeting. She said: 'Our policy is not to write about the personal lives of living heads of state'. In all likelihood, reporting on the personal lives of China's own leaders is a taboo. Strict rules even apply to the way leaders are photographed.

As a style icon, Máxima had been invited to open *The Future of Fashion is Now* exhibition of Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Shanghai. In her absence, the opening was performed by the Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs, Bert Koenders, rather less of a style icon than Máxima.

Willem-Alexander's visit to the Loess plateau in Central China was interpreted by some Chinese media as praise for China's President who spent part of his youth there. It made the King's visit a show of respect and admiration for Xi Jinping, the great leader and statesman.

The reports on King Willem-Alexander's visit to businessman Jack Ma and his e-commerce company Alibaba in the East Chinese city of Hangzhou were also remarkable. The visit generated a lot of media attention in China as Jack Ma, who also owns the Hong Kong newspaper the *South China Morning Post*, knows exactly how to turn such a visit into a PR opportunity. Oscar Garschagen, who attended the visit as correspondent for *NRC Handelsblad*, wrote: 'Soon this market will allow the Chinese to book KLM tickets or hotels in Giethoorn, or buy their groceries from Albert Heijn, Etos and Spar. The opening of the Chinese-language webstore for products including syrup waffles, raisins, baby wipes, muesli, mild cheese and baby milk was one huge advertisement stunt for Alibaba and Dutch businesses, in which Jack Ma plays the lead role, and the King is merely an extra.'^{xxviii}

2.8 Conclusion

The Netherlands plays an insignificant role in foreign media reports in China. Chinese media have a generally neutral stance vis-à-vis the Netherlands. The official media have few restrictions in how they report on the Netherlands.

Apart from the clichés, people know very little about the Netherlands. It is seen mostly as a country of tulips, mills, clogs and cows. And yet remarkably, we see that many journalists reporting on the Netherlands are interested in topics that play a key role in its public diplomacy. They probably share this interest with a younger, more widely travelled Chinese public. Journalists are mostly interested in topics relating to civil society and its organisation, with a focus on elderly care, education and how it contributes to a sense of wellbeing among Dutch youngsters, as well as good and affordable medical care. Tulips, mills, clogs and cows are no longer the major stories on the Netherlands, as interest in food safety, a key theme in China, and food production technology is growing.

Generally speaking, the perception Chinese journalists have of the Netherlands is that of a country which plays no or only a very limited role in international politics, but one that does have interesting technology and expertise. A country that has managed to create a harmonious society, without serious environmental pollution and where food safety is guaranteed. The Netherlands is also regarded as an interesting country in the field of design and architecture. Journalists of both official and marketized media seem to have a mostly positive image of the Netherlands in these areas. What they also find interesting is the liberal attitude towards sexuality, drugs and euthanasia.

Whether it is wise or necessary to play up to China, as Prime Minister Rutte seemed to do in the quoted interview with the *People's Daily*, is debatable. King Willem-Alexander's comments about human rights seem to have been accepted, and it is best to deal with China and the Chinese media from a position of equality and belief in one's own strength. Looking for a connection with Chinese themes appears to be the most effective way of raising attention among Chinese journalists.

We will explore in subsequent chapters how existing perceptions also play an important role in why Chinese students, businesses and tourists opt for the Netherlands, along with its impact on our economy and society.

New online media reporting on the Netherlands, mostly from the Netherlands, play an important and rapidly growing role. These new media will be explored in the next chapter.

3. The rise of Chinese-language new media in the Netherlands

Garrie van Pinxteren with Wang Bei^{xxix}

Chinese-language new media in the Netherlands are influential and this influence is growing rapidly. They bring news and information to which Chinese correspondents have only limited access. As the importance of posted correspondents is declining, new media are filling this void. These new media reach a growing, young audience that has little connection with traditional media and whose interests are completely different from their parents'. This audience has little interest in Dutch waterworks, they want to know all about world-famous Dutch deejays. New media are consulted not only by Chinese in the Netherlands, they also form an important source of news about the Netherlands circulating in China. The news is not just distributed via dedicated channels, but mostly through media based in China that copy or use this content and disseminate it on a much larger scale. Established Chinese media thus make good use of the Chinese-language Dutch new media. This includes renowned Chinese state press agency Xinhua, which regularly uses them as a source. Even the Chinese embassy in the Netherlands is said to be relying on it for fast, accurate Dutch news.

What people in China learn about our country is thus largely determined by Chinese people living in the Netherlands, with their own, small local media businesses, or by people writing blogs for fun. In addition, there are Chinese-language journalists who work for the only Dutch media organisation with a Chinese editorial board: RNW, formerly the Wereldomroep. They all rely on the convenience and speed of new, digital media, mostly publications on websites, blogs and apps.

New media are also on the rise in China and 2016 saw a break with the past when the Chinese for the first time spent more time on digital media than on all traditional media combined (newspapers and magazines, radio and television).^{xxx} China is the first to reach this point, the rest of the world is expected to follow in 2020.^{xxxi} The Chinese consult these digital media mostly via their smartphones, which are used twice as often as computers for this purpose.^{xxxii} Again, China is a frontrunner: in the Netherlands for instance, computers are still more popular than mobile telephones.^{xxxiii}

The rapid growth of the use of new media is redefining Chinese media. For instance, the location of media consumers and producers is becoming less important. There is more room for small, new players on the market, who can make their organisation viable with limited investments. Moreover, individuals find it much easier to start their own 'one-man station'. The focus of many of these one-man media is not on news but rather on opinions. These people can become opinion leaders: people valued by others because of their views, tastes or knowledge of a particular subject. They present themselves as a strong personal 'brand', and are followed because of who they are, not because of the organisation with which they are affiliated.

Some very influential social media are both unique to, and very popular in, the Chinese language region. Because of its restricted access to foreign social media, China developed its own social media apps. One is WeChat, referred to above, that allows users to create a so-called public account to which others can subscribe, free of charge. Social media like Weibo, the Chinese version of Twitter, are also used extensively, as are the more traditional websites.

The popularity of new media in China is soaring thanks to the use of smartphones by young people mostly, and fewer censorship restrictions than on traditional media. A journalist on social media said: 'I have some 45,000 to 50,000 followers. They might only really block me if I get more.' However, some words and expressions are still taboo on social media, and control is tightening.

3.1. Chinese new media in the Netherlands

There is a growing need for Chinese-language news and stories about the Netherlands, since an increasing number of Chinese come here to study, travel, trade or work. The type of information they need is not readily available via the more traditional media we discussed in the previous chapters. Original stories about the Netherlands are relatively rare in China: many are adopted from English-language sites, because only very few journalists writing about the Netherlands speak or read Dutch. Since fulltime and freelance correspondents tend to spend just three or four years here, news is generally provided by Chinese people who have been in the Netherlands for longer, who know the country better, and who have ready access to Dutch-language sources.

There is great diversity among the new media organisations operating from the Netherlands. Some sites focus on the commercial promotion of Dutch businesses and organisations or marketing the Netherlands, for instance. Take NextportChina.com, a platform for Dutch businesses and organisations wanting to promote themselves online and through social media in China. NextportChina.com also assists the University of Maastricht and Stenden University to attract Chinese students, factory stores in Batavia Stad, an outlet centre of brand products, or the Hoge Veluwe, a nature reserve in the centre of the Netherlands. Other new media organisations include a public account reporting on the latest trends in Dutch Design, such as the *Illustratie Biënnale* in Haarlem, with illustrations by Fiep Westendorp and Dick Bruna.

Overall, media interest in art and culture, such as architecture and design, has grown spectacularly. This includes an interest in the Dutch deejay culture, which has replaced Dutch footballers in the minds of youngsters. The advantage of writing about art and culture is of course that it has few political repercussions. Where journalists used to write about the economy or the environment, their focus has now shifted to art and culture. And this is where the Netherlands has much to offer. Cultural institutions could step up their efforts on the new Chinese-language media in the Netherlands to meet the demand for information among a young audience. The channels could also serve to draw a Chinese audience to cultural events in the Netherlands, both for those residing in the Netherlands and the travelling, cosmopolitan Chinese in China itself.

The Dutch embassy in Beijing and NBTC Holland Marketing are also present on social media in China, but have not yet been particularly successful. Messages posted by the Dutch embassy on WeChat are read some 500 to 1000 times. NBTC is a bit more successful, with sometimes 5000 views. Still, it does not compare to the posts by, for instance, Weikoko and HollandOne.com. Yet there is great interest in travelling to the Netherlands, particularly among China's more affluent residents, such as from the province of Guangdong, or from cities like Shanghai, also to places that are not typically regarded as Dutch tourist attractions. Again, Chinese-language new media can be a great tool in providing specific information about unexplored Dutch travel destinations.

We can only estimate how much of the news generated by Chinese media located in the Netherlands makes it to the established Chinese media. Wang Bei, who used to work for RNW, and who conducted research for the LeidenAsiaCentre, estimates that these media generate at least a third of the stories about the Netherlands. Based on dissemination figures in China, the impact of those stories is relatively great, possibly making up two thirds or more of the stories about the Netherlands. It is difficult to obtain exact data, because it is not easy to map out what happens on the rapidly growing and changing Chinese social media network. Moreover, stories are often adopted in Chinese media, without referring to the source

3.2. Examples

This chapter focuses on four of these new Chinese-language media operating from the Netherlands, from where they supply news and information, and more personal background stories to a Chinese-language audience in both the Netherlands and China.

They were selected because of how they differ from each other. The first is HollandOne.com, comparable to NU.nl. It mostly adopts news from Dutch-language news sites and translates this into Chinese. The second is Gogodutch.com, mostly aimed at providing Chinese readers with practical information about the Netherlands, the third is opinion leader Weikoko, referred to in the previous chapter, and the fourth RNW, which is partly funded by the Dutch government and aims to contribute to fewer restrictions on information in China.

The reason for exploring these four media is not just their growing relevance in the information about the Netherlands, but also to offer a handle to Dutch parties wanting to efficiently transfer information about the Netherlands to a Chinese-language audience.

3.2.1 *HollandOne.com*

HollandOne.com is a relatively new organisation. It was founded in April 2015 by Huang Jinhong, a 66-year old journalist who, after years of living in the Netherlands, is fluent in reading Dutch. He runs the company from his home office in Rotterdam. Huang was a teacher of Chinese before he joined the Dutch public service broadcasters, which made Chinese-language programmes for the Chinese ‘minority’ in the Netherlands. Later, he worked for Chinese-language newspapers in the Netherlands. He created the site with 37-year old Huang Chen – not related – who is more technically and commercially skilled. He builds websites for Chinese companies, and combines this with other commercial activities. Every now and then, they will hire staff to write for the site. Although they do have some Chinese-Dutch advertisers, they cannot live off the site alone.

Huang Jinhong rarely goes out to report on an item. Instead, he relies on news supplied on Dutch websites. He consults the NOS, RTL, *HET AD*, *de Volkskrant* and *de Telegraaf* daily, looking for interesting news to process, and posts some six to eight stories about the Netherlands on his public account every day.

‘Chinese are interested in house prices, for instance,’ he said. He wrote an article entitled ‘A house on the most upmarket street in the Netherlands costs 5,775 Euros per square meter, which is less than the price in a student district in China!’. The article shows a photo of a mansion on Konijnenlaan in Wassenaar. He also discussed the pros and cons of buying a house now or later. This news is relevant not only for Chinese people living in the Netherlands, but also for Chinese in China who are considering buying real estate here for investment purposes.

In 2016, the HollandOne.com account had 15,000 followers. Not huge by any means, but it is growing rapidly. HollandOne.com reaches its audience via its site and public account, as well as the very popular site Toutiao, which operates from China and aggregates news from various sources. Initially, Toutiao was not interested in working with HollandOne.com, but when it discovered that Huang continuously presented interesting and unknown news about the Netherlands, it invited him to also post articles on their site. Huang now supplies five news items a day to Toutiao. As competition is fierce, also on the Toutiao site, it is vital that the site recommends your article. ‘Luckily, that is the case for more than 70 per cent of all articles,’ Huang explained, and continued to say that his reports on the Netherlands were often much more popular than the official Communist newspaper *People’s Daily*: ‘Their articles are not

often recommended, and sometimes get as few as 70 clicks.’ In April 2016, HollandOne.com claimed to have achieved more than a million clicks on Toutiao.

Huang ‘sometimes adapts news to the Chinese situation’, as he puts it. For instance, if a report claims that many people work illegally in the Dutch catering industry, and the largest group turns out to be from China, he will write an article called ‘Chinese the largest group among illegal workers in catering industry’. He also writes the occasional opinion article or comment. For instance, he exposed the untruths in the story about the driving lessons in exchange for sex referred to in the previous chapter. He also commented on the popular news that Dutch children are amongst the happiest in the world, putting it into perspective by reminding readers that the number of children living on welfare and growing up in poverty is in fact increasing in the Netherlands, which suggests not all Dutch children are doing well.

Huang said that he, because he wants his news to be read in China too, also reports on visits by Chinese ministers to the Netherlands. The fact that these articles are hardly read is irrelevant. News suppliers need to carry these stories on their sites if they want to remain in the Chinese government’s good books. It is what the Chinese embassy expects of you. He is not afraid as such of talking politics, and feels that politics should feature on a news site. ‘Following Brexit, we wrote about a possible Nexit, for instance, and approached the subject in the most objective way.’ Having said that, there are topics of which he’d rather steer clear. Asked if he would write about the decisions by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague concerning Chinese actions on the islands in the South Chinese Sea, he answered that this was not his expertise and that he would only present the official Chinese viewpoint.

Shortly after the ruling, the site mirrored his viewpoints. It hosted a report on how some hundred overseas Chinese met in Utrecht, the Netherlands, to voice their opposition in response to the ‘illegal decision’ by the Court. The report consisted mostly of photos and quotes from the Chinese ambassador to the Netherlands. The article was not very popular: on 14 July, two days after the ruling, only ten people had read it.

By doing what China expects of him at crucial moments, he is barely troubled by China’s censorship. The only article removed from the site was the one on the Panama Papers. That had come as a bit of a shock, because Huang had taken great care to ensure the article did not refer to possible links with Chinese leaders.

According to Huang, some 40 per cent of all readers of HollandOne.com are in China, 50 per cent in the Netherlands and the rest is ‘elsewhere’. It is difficult to determine the importance of a site like HollandOne.com for the information supply, but Huang claims that even the Chinese embassy uses the site as a source. ‘I estimate that we are read by some 90 per cent of all embassy staff. They too, need objective reporting, which is what we supply,’ Huang smiles.

3.2.2. Gogodutch.com

Gogodutch.com was founded in 2001 by two former Chinese students. It now employs a large team. What started as an online discussion platform developed into a multimedia firm with both its own site and a public account on WeChat. Located in Rotterdam, it focuses on providing services to Chinese living in the Netherlands or wanting to travel here. It offers practical information on Dutch universities and colleges, tourist attractions, jobs and the housing market, and lists Dutch companies offering discounted goods. Input for the site mostly comes from Chinese students in the Netherlands, and can have a quite personal tone.

Gogodutch.com generates money by working with Dutch companies and organisations looking for a platform from which to operate. For instance, insurance company Aon offers

Chinese students studying in the Netherlands direct insurance cover on the site. But the site also offers options to book a six-day trip to Germany, Switzerland or France. And it supplies news, or rather it aggregates news published on other Chinese-language sites about the Netherlands, as well as its own translations of Dutch news. The site provides information about everyday life in the Netherlands, education and business and is sponsored by organisations including Nuffic, a Dutch umbrella university organisation, and The Hague Marketing. The company has also ventured into e-commerce, using the site to sell western brands to customers in China.

Ming Luo, one of the site's founders, explains the background to the site: 'When we first arrived in the Netherlands, we felt restricted in daily life due to a lack of information and communication. Therefore, we decided to build a platform to communicate with other Chinese in the Netherlands, and with Chinese wanting to travel here.'^{xxxiv} They use information about visitors to the site and followers of the public accounts for their marketing efforts. They actively approach companies possibly interested in reaching their target groups via their media channels.

Gogodutch.com is a big player in the Chinese-language new media in the Netherlands. The site claims to attract some 26,000 unique visitors each day and presents itself as the world's largest Chinese-language site about the Netherlands. Some 5.3 million people subscribe to the website, and 50,000 to the public account.

3.2.3. *Weikoko*

Weikoko's article about the MH17 plane disaster was discussed in the previous chapter. The author's real name is Wei Koukou. Now 36-years old, Wei Koukou travelled to Wageningen in the Netherlands in 2005 as a student of Human Health and Nutrition. She then obtained a PhD in Analytical Bioscience from the University of Leiden. Her parents recommended she study science, but she herself was more attracted to writing. She is now married to a Surinam-Dutch man and sits on the Utrecht city council as a representative for the local VVD liberal-conservative party. As an opinion leader and influencer, she has become a household name. She started her blog in July 2014, the month of the MH17 plane crash. In addition to her story about the crash, she wrote more personal articles, for instance about how Dutch parents teach their children how to deal with fear, disease and death. That story, too, was widely read, because it appeared at a time when Chinese media were full of stories about a pupil in China who had been studying for his university admission exams when his mother and father were involved in an accident. His mother died, and his father was badly injured. Together with the police, the family decided they would not yet tell the boy that his mother had passed away, to enable him to concentrate on his exams. It was not until after he had taken the exam that he learnt that his mother was dead and buried. A television crew filmed how very upset and angry he was by the news when he found out.

In her articles, Weikoko aims to present various angles for Chinese to enable them to develop an informed opinion. Weikoko's readers are mostly in China: some three quarters of her 45,000 followers live there.

3.2.4. *RNW*

RNW learnt about Chinese censorship the hard way. The former Radio Netherlands Worldwide was originally a broadcasting station comparable to the BBC World Service and the Deutsche Welle, and was funded within the Dutch broadcasting system. In 2007, the station started a Chinese desk. This resulted in a Chinese-language website in 2008 that hosted reports on the Netherlands and China; it was aimed at promoting freedom of press and plurality in China. All was well until 2012, when the site and all of RNW's social medial channels were blocked.

The reason for this is unclear but it seems likely it was due to the stricter censorship rules that applied during an important congress of China's Communist Party, where Xi Jinping would be appointed new leader of the Party.

The blocking more or less coincided with a major reorganisation within RNW. Cutbacks were made, and RNW had to leave the public broadcasting system, to be funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. RNW had to focus solely on providing information in countries where the freedom of opinion was suppressed or under threat. The Chinese website reinvented itself and continued under the title *Helan Online*. The site brought articles about elderly care, medical care and on child rearing in the Netherlands.

Chinese media organisations then contacted RNW, asking if they could use articles on their site as sources. When RNW realised that there was a market for its stories, it decided to remain in contact with Chinese traditional media, both marketized and official media, in addition to new media. The deal was that Helan Online would supply the articles free of charge in exchange for a source reference to create more publicity for Helan Online. It also led to invitations to RNW editors to comment in Chinese media about matters such as the Dutch welfare state, caring for, raising and educating children and even on topics such as Dutch policies on prostitution.

In 2014, RNW set up its own office in Shanghai. The office signed agreements with media partners in China who publish the content of Helan Online. RNW seems to have forged effective collaboration ties with Chinese media that are of great help in distributing their stories. Helan Online itself too, attracts a large Chinese audience. In 2014, the site had about 1.5 million users and it was consulted 78 million times via social media.

RNW underwent another reorganisation in 2016, after which it joined external partners to focus on innovation, sustainability, and social entrepreneurship in China, which enabled sponsored content.

In the near future, RNW's organisation will change yet again. It was announced in September 2016 that two thirds of its 91 employees are to be dismissed.^{xxxv} Until 2020, RNW's funding will be guaranteed through a government fund, after which RNW should be able to support itself. What this means for the Chinese-language activities in the Netherlands and in China, remains to be seen.

3.2.5. Conclusion

New media are an accessible and efficient way for governmental, cultural and civil society organisations in the Netherlands as well as for companies to reach a young Chinese target group. However, their collaboration with Dutch parties, either as advertisers or for the input of information, is still limited: the potential of these media as information channels for a young audience in China has only partially been exploited. Dutch parties focused on China are not yet familiar with Chinese-language new media that are therefore largely ignored as an efficient channel to establish contact with a Chinese public both here and in China.

The image new media reporters paint of the Netherlands is based on their own personal experiences and on the image Dutch media present of our country. Consequently, their reporting tends to be better substantiated and more varied than the input from correspondents.

They distinguish themselves from other Chinese-language media not by their approach, but rather by their access to Dutch news and society. Although one might expect Chinese-language new media operating from the Netherlands to be critical of China, this does not really seem to be the case in practice. Media operating from the Netherlands use the same approach and techniques as those used by their colleagues in China. They are also prepared to

observe outside of China the censorship rules and habits that apply in China. This means that censorship does play a role in the selection of and view on news. However, this role is limited because topics covered are rarely sensitive ones. Moreover, it is these media in particular that have developed skills to respect censorship without it turning them into a propaganda tool of the Chinese government.

Authors

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Bei Wang is an editor and media/communication expert. She combines working for organisations including RNW with running her own media consultancy firm. In October 2016, she became project coordinator for Helan Online. She researched Chinese social media and their reports on the Netherlands for this publication.

Jialu Zhang studied Journalism and Media in Beijing, Aarhus and Amsterdam, and works as a producer. For this publication, she mapped out the presence and activities of Chinese media organizations in Europe, and publications by Chinese media on the Netherlands.

Notes

ⁱ Most of this report is based on interviews with journalists in China, Europe and the Netherlands. Garrie van Pinxteren spoke with some twenty-five Chinese journalists in China in January 2016 and to four journalists in the Netherlands in July and August 2016. Pál Nyíri and Jialu Zhang spoke with Chinese correspondents in Europe. In 2016 they held ten meetings in Paris, six in Brussels, two in London, two in Berlin and two in Warsaw. Nyíri had previously held some twenty interviews in London, Paris, Brussels, The Hague Haag and Berlin. Wang Bei spoke with several journalists working for Chinese-language new media.

ⁱⁱ See ‘Beijing in 45b yuan global media drive’, *South China Morning Post*, 13 January 2009, www.scmp.com/article/666847/beijing-45b-yuan-global-media-drive, consulted 19 November 2016.

ⁱⁱⁱ See for instance Ann-Marie Brady (2015). ‘China’s Foreign Propaganda Machine’, Washington, D.C.: Wilson Center, www.wilsoncenter.org/article/chinas-foreign-propaganda-machine, consulted on 8 August 2016. Brady placed the extra investments in a broader historic perspective. For China’s policy in the field of *soft power* and the role of Chinese media in it, please refer to Ingrid d’Hooghe, 2015, *China’s Public Diplomacy, 1991-2013*. Leiden: Brill Nijhoff.

^{iv} See the RSF website <https://rsf.org/en/ranking>, consulted on 29 October 2016 for this article.

^v Jasmin Gong et al. (2016). ‘Questioning not the EU, but the “Western System” – European Crises through the Lens of Chinese Media’, MERICS China Monitor, 12 July 2016, www.merics.org/fileadmin/user_upload/downloads/China-Monitor/MERICS_China_Monitor_33_EU_crisis_in_chinese_media_web.pdf, consulted on 3 November 2016.

^{vi} Interview in August 2013 between the author and a journalist working for an official medium in Beijing. The names of journalists and academic researchers were randomised to enable those involved to speak freely.

^{vii} The research was conducted jointly with Zhang Jialu and entailed ten interviews in Paris, six in Brussels, and two each in London, Berlin, and Warsaw. My earlier research entailed about 20 interviews in London, Paris, Brussels, The Hague, and Berlin.

^{viii} Accurate figures for the number of correspondents are not public and difficult to obtain.

^{ix} Jialu Zhang undertook a quantitative and a qualitative study of reports in the media, in particular written media, about the Netherlands in the period between March 2014 (the month in which Chinese president Xi Jinping paid a state visit to the Netherlands) and the spring of 2016. Pál Nyíri and Jialu Zhang spoke with several Chinese journalists who reported on the Netherlands from elsewhere in Europe. Garrie van Pinxteren spoke with four Chinese-language journalists who lived in the Netherlands. She also spoke with some twenty-five Chinese journalists who live in China, and who, sometimes from behind their desks, and sometimes on short news trips, reported on the Netherlands. This group consisted of both journalists working for official media and journalists working for market-oriented media. Their offices were located across China, they worked for traditional media like radio, television, newspapers and magazines, but also for new, online media. Unless stated differently, all quotes are taken from interviews Van Pinxteren had in January 2016 with journalists in China as part of this study for the LeidenAsiaCentre.

^x Our study into the articles about the Netherlands in Chinese-language news is far from complete, and the four stories we focus on here are not by definition the stories that featured most prominently in the news. Instead, these are stories we believe show how and why the Netherlands featured in Chinese-language news.

^{xi} This information is based on a meeting Pál Nyíri had in June 2013 with the predecessor of the current correspondent.

^{xii} Baker & McKenzie, 10 March 2016, 'Chinese FDI hits USD 40 billion in 2015 for Europe and North America', www.bakermckenzie.com/en/newsroom/2016/03/chinese-fdi-hits-usd40-billion/<http://www.bakermckenzie.com/en/newsroom/2016/03/chinese-fdi-hits-usd40-billion/>, consulted on 3 November 2016.

^{xiii} We base this ranking on what we learned from Chinese journalists. We did not study how often these countries are actually discussed in Chinese-language media.

^{xiv} “‘Xing huibao daiti xuefei’ rang Helan jiaoxiao jiaolian da re shenqing zhe zengzhangle 5 bei’ (‘‘Sex to pay for study’’ makes being a driving instructor a popular profession in the Netherlands: five times as many people have signed up’), *Global Times*, 23 December 2015, <http://world.huanqiu.com/exclusive/2015-12/8236965.html>, consulted on 10 November 2016.

^{xv} ‘Using sex to pay for a driving lesson: it is allowed’, *NRC Handelsblad*, 12 December 2015, www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2015/12/12/rijles-met-seks-betalen-het-mag-wel-1570090-a315430, consulted on 10 November 2016.

^{xvi} See note xiii

^{xvii} ‘Green light for driving instructors who accept sex for lessons’, *DutchNews.nl*, 14 December 2015, www.dutchnews.nl/news/archives/2015/12/green-light-for-driving-instructors-who-accept-sex-for-lessons, consulted on 14 November 2016.

^{xviii} ‘Dutch learners can now pay for their driving lessons with SEX’, *Daily Mail*, 19 December 2015, www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3366958/Dutch-instructors-barter-tuition-sex.html, consulted 14 November 2016.

^{xix} For more about prostitution in the Netherlands, see ‘Driving instructors may offer lessons in return for sex, Netherlands government confirms’, *The Telegraph*, 18 December 2015, [/www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/netherlands/12059110/Driving-instructors-may-offer-lessons-in-return-for-sex-Netherlands-government-confirms.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/netherlands/12059110/Driving-instructors-may-offer-lessons-in-return-for-sex-Netherlands-government-confirms.html), consulted 14 November 2016.

^{xx} ‘Helan chuli mahang MH17 zhuihui shijian he Zhongguo chuli MH370 shijian the butong’, (‘Differences between the Netherlands and China dealing with the MH17 plane crash and the MH370 incident respectively’), publish on Weikoko’s WeChat account on 19 July 2014, http://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?biz=MzA3NjEzMjczMg==&mid=200707744&idx=1&sn=89800892b2448495436408db2e7f6548&scene=2&from=timeline&isappinstalled=0&key=c4f3a13b9b1b95ff9902bd4a5de598450abdeb127f72cd1292cca95b445c77ff5b8954e4dec12201ae915120e04978a4&ascene=2&uin=MTQ2MDA4ODM4Mg%3D%3D&pass_ticket=700MkCPzRd04iLWJ4LaGRMydp1y2uF1Z8oYxliuqjMN%2BJm9N76rzVtDslCOIFv3i, consulted on 31 May 2016.

^{xxi} See “‘Zhongguo xuanzele yi wei youxiu lingdao ren’”, *Ouzhou youhao renshi shengzan xi zhuxi* (‘China has elected an excellent leader’, European friends praise chairman Xi), *People’s Daily*, 22 March 2014, http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2014-03/22/nw.D110000renmrb_20140322_1-02.htm, consulted on 13 July 2016.

^{xxii} Quotes from a meeting Pál Nyíri had with a correspondent in Brussels.

^{xxiii} Quotes and descriptions from *The Netherlands, More Than Tulips & Windmills*, broadcast on 22 March 2014, available at

<http://english.cntv.cn/program/cultureexpress/20140322/103509.shtml>.

^{xxiv} This advertisement is available at <http://reclamewereld.blog.nl/issue-advertising/2015/10/19/vileine-china-boodschap-voor-koning-willem-alexander-van-amnesty-in-advertentie>.

^{xxv} ‘Helan guowang fang pudong ganbu xueyuan dui Zhongguo zhi li fangshi gan xingqu’ (‘During his visit to the China Executive Leadership Academy Pudong, the Dutch King shows an interest in the Chinese way of governing’), *Beijing Youth Daily*, 29 October 2015, <http://news.qq.com/a/20151029/003493.htm>, consulted on 14 November 2016.

^{xxvi} ‘King holds up mirror to Chinese governors’, *NRC Handelsblad*, 28 October 2015, www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2015/10/28/koning-spreekt-toekomstige-chinese-leiders-toe-over-mensenrechten-a1411971, [consulted on 14 November 2016](#).

^{xxvii} “‘Strong signal’: King emphasises importance of human rights in China’, *Volkskrant*, 28 October 2015. Taken from www.volkskrant.nl/buitenland/-stevig-signaal-koning-benadrut-belang-mensenrechten-in-china~a4172568 on 14 November 2016

^{xxviii} ‘Jack Ma in the lead, king as extra’, *NRC Handelsblad*, 31 October 2015, www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2015/10/31/ma-in-de-hoofdrol-koning-als-figurant-1551780-a596227, consulted on 14 November 2016.

^{xxix} Wang Bei was commissioned by the LeidenAsiaCentre to write a research report about Chinese-language new media in the Netherlands. This report formed the basis for this chapter. Garrie van Pinxteren also had three meetings with representatives of these new media.

^{xxx} ‘Digital Overtakes Traditional Media in China, but TV Consumption Holds Strong, Advertisers in China will devote 58.3% of budgets to digital media in 2016’, Emarketer, 27 April 2016, www.emarketer.com/Article/Digital-Overtakes-Traditional-Media-China-TV-Consumption-Holds-Strong/1013881, consulted on 16 November 2016.

^{xxxi} ‘These are the key media trends’, *NRC Handelsblad*, 8 June 2016, www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2016/06/08/indiase-house-of-cards-zegt-alles-over-media-1626821-a1402327, consulted 17 November 2016.

^{xxxii} Source: see note xxix.

^{xxxiii} ‘The Netherlands goes mobile’, article on the *Stand van de Nieuwsmedia* website, of the *Stimuleringsfonds van de journalistiek*, 9 March 2016, www.svdj.nl/de-stand-van-de-nieuwsmedia/nederland-gaat-mobiel/, consulted on 17 November 2016.

^{xxxiv} Interview with Wang Bei.

^{xxxv} ‘RNW Media dismissed two thirds of its staff’, Villamedia website of 26 September 2016, www.villamedia.nl/artikel/robert-zaal-vertrekt-bij-rnw-media, consulted on 21 November 2016.

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