

## **Pacifying the Dragon? The Role of Expatriate Media Professionals in the Gatekeeping Process in China**

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China is currently characterized as having a censored media system, which poses challenges to expatriates (expats) who work within the Chinese media system. This study analyzes the motivations for expats to work in China through a gatekeeping lens. Through in-depth interviews of expat media professionals, themes of limited acculturation emerge, as well as few opportunities for input during gatekeeping processes related to hard news, but there are more opportunities for input in the production of business news, entertainment, and lifestyle programming. Although content is restricted, participants laterally influence their colleagues by mentoring them based on individual-level forces such as professional values and education. Censorship is accepted by expats as unchangeable. Social system forces become more manifest instead of being implicit.

*Keywords: gatekeeping, China's media system, expatriates, censorship*

Amid the 25th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square uprising, 2014 was marked with regulation changes in China that further block outside media influences from penetrating its great digital firewall. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) employs as many as 50,000 employees at once to monitor 100,000 Web addresses, 15% of which are blocked in China (L. Chen, 2014). Specifically, in 2014, Google and its auxiliary functions were in and out of service, affecting approximately 9 of 10 Chinese users (Levin, 2014). In addition, in 2014, new social media regulations further restricted Chinese journalists such that permission must be granted from their employer to use social media and daily supervision of online activity was enforced ("New Rules and Regulations," 2014).

Despite the exceptional effort to stop the flow of outgoing or incoming information, a group of expatriate (expat) media professionals work legally in the Chinese media system. There is scholarship on foreign correspondents in China (MacKinnon, 2008; Wanning, 2014), but there is little on expat journalists, TV hosts, and other media professionals who work in China. Therefore, in this study, we concentrated on

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this overlooked niche in the Chinese media system through 10 in-depth interviews of expat media professionals and conducted a subsequent textual analysis of their responses. Considering the heavy censorship laws that earn China a “not free” label from Freedom House (2015), it can seem peculiar for any media professional to leave her or his native country—one with a free media system—to work for state-owned media outlets with relatively onerous regulations. Consequently, we analyzed the motives of expat media professionals working in the Chinese media system.

We employed gatekeeping theory, which is the study of how potential messages are winnowed by a gatekeeper and eventually disseminated to the audience (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Originally, gatekeeping theory focused on the individual gatekeeper’s decision-making process as to why certain potential stories were rejected from being published (White, 1950). Since then, specific external forces have been identified as influencing gatekeeping, including personal characteristics such as background, values, attitudes, education, experience, and demographics of the gatekeeper (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Furthermore, personal and professional viewpoints are correlated among journalists (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014) given that they have similar dispositions that led them to becoming journalists, as well as similar education and work experiences (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Weaver (2015), who has spent more than four decades studying journalists, notes that public service values are still highly regarded in the United States, even with a declining news system. Also, journalists from more democratic countries have differing values from those from less democratic countries, such as placing emphasis on the watchdog role (Weaver, 2015). Consequently, journalistic values that are mostly uniform in one media system are not universal. Given this background, in this study, we explored how media professionals cope when taken from one media system and placed in another, in this case, working for Chinese media organizations in the Chinese media system.

Gatekeeping theory is important in this exploration as it (a) identifies the process of filtering potential stories into what is disseminated to the public and (b) examines external forces as identified in the hierarchal model of influences (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, 2014) and levels of analysis (Shoemaker, 1991; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Specifically, we concentrated on individual, social institutional, and social system forces. Participants included in this study face atypical circumstances: They operate in a system and for organizations that differ from their own personal and professional values. We therefore examined how they do or do not compromise or adapt their previous gatekeeping practices to the new system in which they work. Also, previous external forces such as government or culture have now changed for the expat media professionals, and so this study investigated whether those forces influence them.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Media Regulations and Professionalism in China***

Understanding the media system in which the gatekeeper functions is imperative to the gatekeeping process as it determines the level of agency the gatekeeper or the media organization has (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). Although China has had strict media censorship laws since Mao Zedong (Tse-tung) came to power, media commercialization began in 1989, resulting in competition for audience share and advertising revenue (Shirk, 2011). However, this marketization should not be interpreted as

democratization; as Xin (2012) writes, many scholars note very little change in media messages after China's commercialization because of "tight ideological control over the media" (p. 5). Gatekeeping in this system has been determined mostly by government-appointed editors and carried out by reporters, all of whom needed to have a clear understanding of the media regulations of China (Xu, 1994). Understanding the CCP's media regulations can be complex and elusive; at the same time, they are effectively all encompassing (Simonite, 2013)—a challenge for any Chinese national familiar with the system, but more so for expats who mostly cannot read advanced Chinese characters.

As of 2013, the newly amalgamated State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television Agency (SAPPRFT) began to regulate the Chinese media system ("Chinese Government Merges," 2013). The SAPPRFT bears many responsibilities, including the monitoring of news activities, the investigation and prosecution of illegal activities, and the approval of news publications ("Chinese Government Merges," 2013). There are more than 500 specific laws referring to news publications that are subdivided into the management of newspapers, periodicals, journalists, delinquent conduct, and precautions against false reports (G. Wang, 2013). Whereas the basic concept of censorship in China may be implicit to media professionals—do not propagate messages that are in any way critical toward the CCP and especially do not mention Tibet, Taiwan, or Tiananmen Square ("China Denies Trying," 2014)—the rules of conduct for media professionals fluctuate, and recent changes have sparked concern from the outside community ("China Denies Trying," 2014). For example, when a car bomb detonated on Tiananmen Square in 2013, it was within hours that first-hand witness accounts were removed or blocked on the Internet and the CCP released guidelines to downplay the incident by not featuring it on news homepages (Rauhala, 2013).

The Chinese media system incorporates professional standards found in uncensored environments, even if they are constrained (H. Wang & Lee, 2014). In a 40-year analysis of scholarly research on investigative journalism in China, H. Wang and Lee (2014) report that in-depth reporting exists in China, but it is not outwardly critical, particularly of the CCP (some local investigation has been more critical). In a study of Guangzhou journalists' attitudes over three decades, Lin (2010) observed a steady increase of placing importance on professional standards (objectivity, independence, credibility, and timely reporting) and more liberal-minded journalists who are better educated. However, professional and commercial sensibilities were not strong enough to oppose severe political issues (Lin, 2010). Zhang (2009) found similar results through a case study on *Beijing Youth Daily*, and adds that Chinese journalists are attached to the CCP's interests and have a high tolerance for bribery practices that occur in China.

### ***Expatriates in China and Media Consumption***

It is difficult to calculate the exact number of expat media professionals working for Chinese media companies (no official number has been calculated); however, it is estimated that there are between 240,000 (Durnin, 2014) and 600,000 (Qian & Elsinga, 2015) expats working in China. Nearly half of those expats are from other Asian countries, but there also large numbers of Americans, Canadians, Germans, French, and other Europeans (Qian & Elsinga, 2015). To appeal to this number of nonnative Chinese speakers and the international market, there are currently a few English publications produced by

the CCP, at which many expat media professionals work. On top of that, some foreigners appear on various television networks throughout the country. At the forefront of English-language state-owned newspapers are *China Daily* and *Global Times*. *China Daily*, founded in 1981, has a circulation of 900,000 with five different editions, including the U.S., European, African, and Asian-Pacific and Hong Kong editions ("About *China Daily* Group," 2014). Founded more than two decades later, an English version of *Global Times* began in April 2009 to compete with the international media market ("About *Global Times*, 2014). Expats are used as a way of bolstering these publications so that they may contain correct English usage and Western news structures. Previous studies on the Chinese media system rarely have focused on expats; therefore, our study seeks to better understand who these expats are and what function they serve in the gatekeeping process. In one recent survey (Wu, 2015), expat media professionals reported placing low value on supervisors' guidance and are not easily promoted in the Chinese media system. Overall, 39.6% of respondents considered themselves as being a translator only and less than 1% said they plan to work long term in China (Wu, 2015). On the other hand, 71% of expats could communicate in Chinese and were aware of local Chinese culture (Wu, 2015).

Scholars have studied both the professional and personal milieux of expats living in China, which can be generalized to a wide range of professions. Wang and Kanungo (2004) conclude that an important characteristic of professional expat success is to have a social and organizational network comprising expats and locals to help bridge intercultural differences that arise. Furthermore, China's collectivist culture encourages a workplace in which social harmony takes precedence over personal goals and saving face is emphasized in times of conflict (Waterman, 1984). This is difficult for expats working for Chinese managers (Doucet & Jehn, 1997), especially when both censorship laws and collectivist ideals restrict their work. Understanding that media professionals will be working in a censored environment, we asked expats about their rationale for working in China as a first step in defining their overall role in the gatekeeping process:

*RQ1: What reasons do expat media professionals give for working in the Chinese media system?*

### **Gatekeeping Theory**

Adopting the gatekeeping theory to mass communications, White (1950) used the analogy of Mr. Gates to explain how the theory relates to news. Mr. Gates is an average copy editor working for a midsize newspaper, who has to sift through newswires and other information sources each day, publishing 10% of the information for the newspaper. White concludes that although the stories that were considered unworthy of being reported could be categorized systematically (not newsworthy, already been reported, not interesting, etc.), Mr. Gates's personal biases and judgments factor into the gatekeeping process. Shoemaker and Vos (2009) elaborate that gatekeeping is the study of "processes other than selection, such as how content is shaped, structured, positioned and timed" (p. 11). Likewise, "gatekeeping is the process by which the vast array of potential news messages are winnowed, shaped, and prodded into those few that are actually transmitted by the news media" (Shoemaker, Eichholz, Kim, & Wrigley, 2001, p. 233).

Shoemaker and Reese (1996) conceptualized a hierarchical model of influences that identified five specific forces that can influence (defined as having a measurable or perceived effect) the gatekeeping process: the individual level, the routines of work level, the organizational level, the social institutional level (previously called extramedia), and the social system level (previously called ideology). This model builds off of Shoemaker's (1991) earlier work that identified these five forces as levels of analysis in gatekeeping. Both models identify the same five forces; however, as the name implies, the hierarchical model considers varying degrees of power of the forces that the levels of analysis do not. For the purposes of this study, individual, social institutional, and social system forces were analyzed. Routine and organizational forces were excluded because the participants held various positions, thereby having various routines, and because media organizations are intrinsically connected to the government or social institutional forces in China, social institutional forces were prioritized over organizational forces. This means that the supervisors, whether they are editors, executive producers, or other types, are directly appointed by the CCP to enforce media regulations in each media organization (this is over and above those officials appointed for general surveillance; "New Rules and Regulations," 2014).

*Individual Level.* The individual level of gatekeeping considers the responsibility the individual may have over content selection and interpretation (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008). Concerning individual forces of gatekeeping, Shoemaker et al. (2001) factored in political ideology, gender, professional experience, ethnicity, and education, but concluded that these forces did not manifest strongly in the gatekeeping process. Cassidy (2006) used a similar set of criteria to expand to online journalists and found similar results. However, Kim (2012) notes that individual forces are more prominent with foreign correspondents because they work away from their organization and are often isolated. These studies were based on free media systems or journalists working for organizations in free media systems, and, therefore, to study individual forces in a censored media system complicates how these forces manifest when other strong forces are present, especially considering that expat media professionals' individual ideologies are based on systems and cultures that are different from those found in China.

*Social Institutional Level.* Shoemaker and Vos (2009) discuss several forces that exist in the social institutional level that affect the gatekeeping process, including audiences, advertisers, financial markets, sources, public relations, government, interest groups, other media, and news consultants. For this study, government was the major focus of these social institutional forces because censorship laws heavily influence the Chinese media system. Indeed, although censorship may be more restricting for Chinese journalists compared with journalists working in free media systems, scholars have repeatedly concluded that governments are an influence on media in democratic countries, too, both through regulations that affect the gatekeeping process and by being relied on as news sources (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). To add to this, Powers (1990) notes that although the tightening of newsroom budgets may allow for more efficiency in a business sense, it does decrease the quality of news and increases reliance on externally generated stories, such as government press releases or press conferences. This leads to a lopsided representation of government and elite voices (McManus, 1990). Consequently, no matter the degree of censorship, governments may influence media both directly and indirectly. Indeed, although economic pressures lead media organizations in market-oriented systems (including China's) to attempt to keep both advertisers and audiences satisfied in the most efficient ways (McManus, 1995), government and elite forces are often present.

This is further accentuated in times of crisis or international disputes (Bennett, 2012; Entman, 2004), as noted during the Persian Gulf War (Dickson, 1995) and then again during the most recent Iraq war (Kim, 2012). For example, before the Bush administration's announcement of the "Axis of Evil" and Saddam Hussein's possession of weapons of mass destruction, there was no "real-world" threat of Iraq invading or attacking the United States. That is to say, media gatekeepers did not rely on any event-driven stories of Saddam Hussein's doings or hostile behavior during that time period, but rather relied on the information given them by the Bush administration (Fahmy, Wanta, Johnson, & Zhang, 2011). In his research, Bennett (1990) emphasizes the overall reliance media have on governments, but adds that both parties need to cooperate with each other to do their jobs properly.

*Social System Level.* The social system level includes social system, social structure, ideological, and cultural forces (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). It is well established across many disciplines that there are differences between Western and Eastern cultures (as well as other cultures; Buck-Morss, 2002; Needham, 1969; Northrop, 1946). The individualistic values of the West versus the collectivist values of the East affect many personal and societal aspects of life including the use of logic (Okabe, 2007), religion and philosophy (Wilson, 1982), family and social structures (Farver, Narang, & Bhadha, 2002), work environments (Earley, 1993), and business organization and practices (Casson, 2004; M. J. Chen & Miller, 2011), to name a few.

Besides strict institutional censorship, individuals in China's collectivist culture self-censor by putting aside personal wishes or attributes to act according to "anticipated expectations of others" (Zhong, 2008, p. 112). This is incongruent with Western countries that place more emphasis on the self, particularly the United States (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010). That is not to imply that there is no awareness of self by Chinese journalists, but rather there is an increased value of others. For instance, in a survey of U.S. and Chinese journalism students, Zhong (2008) recorded similar levels between the students in regards to professional values and conduct, but Chinese students ranked colleagues' actions and views, and the editor's reactions, as more significant than did American students.

Cultural forces present in the social system consequently affect the journalist's individual gatekeeping and the level of influence that individual forces (political ideology, gender, professional experience, ethnicity, and education) manifest in the process. Therefore, in a censored and collectivist environment, gatekeeping becomes a process of the whole and not of the individual or organization as emphasized in individualist, noncensored media systems. Understanding that expat media professionals differ from their Chinese colleagues in background, attitude, nationality, and experience, we next asked whether individual forces manifest while working in the Chinese media system:

*RQ2: How do individual forces manifest or not manifest in the gatekeeping process of expat media professionals working in the Chinese media system?*

We also wished to understand how expat media professionals adapt to the greater Chinese media system through observing perceptions of social institutional forces, mainly the CCP, and social system forces, mainly China's collectivist culture.

*RQ3: To what extent do expat media professionals acknowledge social institutional forces in the gatekeeping process in the Chinese media system?*

*RQ4: To what extent do expat media professionals acknowledge social system forces in the gatekeeping process in the Chinese media system?*

### **Method**

This study identified the role that expatriates play in Chinese media system and the influence of individual, social institutional, and social system forces on professionals working outside their native countries. Qualitative in-depth interviews were employed, as they allowed the interviewer(s) to examine social and personal issues (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). All interviews were conducted via Skype or telephone because the participants were located in China. Interview questions mainly covered how the participants viewed the quality of their work, to what degree they felt controlled by censorship, how this censorship impacted their daily work, how they chose the stories they cover, how culture influenced their work, and how they perceive their role in China's media system.

Before the interviews took place, a proposal was sent and approved by the Human Research Protection Program. Once approval was obtained, we began to contact expat media professionals working in China. Because two of the researchers previously had worked in the Chinese media system, personal organizational networks became the main way of reaching potential participants. In addition, well-established expat media professionals were recruited through their social media Facebook profiles. In total, e-mails with the invitation and project explanation were sent to 25 potential participants. Twelve potential participants confirmed; however, 10 interviews were completed because of scheduling conflicts. According to McCracken (1988), under most conditions, 8 in-depth interviews are sufficient for qualitative in-depth interview-based studies. These 10 participants were working for Chinese TV stations, newspapers, and/or magazines at the time of their interviews. Their titles included CEO, host, freelancer, editor, and journalist (see Table 1). Although the sample was mostly male participants, this is representative of the population in general, which is dominated by mostly male expat media professionals. We reached out to other female expats, but all declined to participate or could not participate because of scheduling conflicts.

**Table 1. In-Depth Interview Participants.**

| Pseudonym | Gender | Nation of origin | Description of job title       |
|-----------|--------|------------------|--------------------------------|
| Daniel    | Male   | United Kingdom   | Freelance copy editor          |
| Emma      | Female | The Netherlands  | TV host                        |
| Gary      | Male   | United Kingdom   | Former CEO and editor-in-chief |
| Harry     | Male   | United States    | TV host and entertainer        |
| Jacob     | Male   | United States    | Editor                         |
| Leo       | Male   | United States    | Publications editor            |
| Lucas     | Male   | Canada           | TV host and entertainer        |
| Vince     | Male   | India            | TV host                        |
| Samuel    | Male   | United States    | TV host and entertainer        |
| William   | Male   | Australia        | Journalist                     |

Through e-mail correspondence, we stressed that all participants' personal information would not be released, excerpts from the interviews would be quoted under a pseudonym, and all recorded materials would be used for academic purposes only. This resulted in participants not having concerns about any potential problems speaking about their job. Among all of the participants, only one showed hesitation at first, but after we explained the rules of voluntary participation and anonymity, the participant was happy to continue. Participants not only actively joined the study; they had an interactive free talk with interviewer, and voluntarily shared their opinions about their living and working experiences in China.

After the interviews were completed, all 10 audio clips were transcribed verbatim and analyzed through a textual analysis. This was divided into four critical steps of the data analysis procedure including "immersion in the data, coding, creating categories, and the identification of themes" (Green et al., 2007, p. 546). We carefully reviewed and extracted quotes from the verbatim-transcribed interviews. Once categories were generated, we teased and narrowed the repeated quotes inductively into the following themes that best answered the research questions: motivation for working in China, working within the system, authority censorship, and adjusting to Chinese culture.

## Results

### ***Many Roads Lead to China***

RQ1 investigated the motivations behind expats choosing to work in the Chinese media system. When participants were asked about their background in media, only three (Daniel, Gary, and William) had previous journalism training and/or experience working in media before coming to China. The remaining seven participants had no professional media-related background. Among those seven participants, Leo joined a media company as a publications editor after he came to China as an intern. The remaining six started in myriad jobs before working in media. This included Jacob as an advertising sales



person, Samuel as a computer programmer, Harry as an English teacher, Emma as a member of an orchestra, Lucas as a club singer, and finally Vince as a quality controller for a trading company. When participants were asked about the reasons why they chose to come to China (RQ1), there was not one overarching motivation; rather, professional advancement, personal circumstances, financial enticement, and pure chance were all listed. Daniel was the only participant who expressed any personal circumspection before entering the Chinese media system:

I had to think about it because I had big problems with the ethics of the thing. So I called a couple of . . . professors and talked to them about the ifs and why nots of working for media in China, and after a lot of hemming and hawing and debating, I made the decision that I wouldn't really know until I tried it. . . . They [professors] were a little bit surprised that I preferred going to Communist Party's organized China than working in New Jersey.

Emma and Gary mentioned that family was the main reason because they had married Chinese nationals. Samuel and Harry considered China the new mecca for media and listed China as being preferable to the United States because they believed they could become more famous in China. Leo came to China for the purpose of improving his Chinese skills. Vince's company transferred him to China. An underlying motivation that connected the participants' reasons for working in China was financial incentives. Daniel explained, "Right now, I'm doing it for the money. I just collect the cash and I'll try to get in and out as fast as I possibly can."

Among those participants who did not have a media-related background, Vince, Harry, and Emma became involved in media through an accidental opportunity. For instance, Vince described his unintentional foray into China's media system:

I was in a restaurant with my Chinese friends having dinner, and I like to make Chinese jokes, so one of these guys from [the TV station] was sitting at the next table. He saw me, he heard me, and he came and gave his card and he said, "Would you like to be on TV?" I said, "Yea sure." So the next day I went for an audition to be a host for *Discover* [the city] *Daily Show*.

Overall, there were several reasons for expats to enter the Chinese media system, which illustrates that the recruiting process of expats occurs both in and outside China; does not require expats to meet specific criteria relating to education, experience, and skills; and gives a variety of expats the opportunity to work in the system.

### ***Navigating a Short Leash***

To answer RQ2, concerning whether or not individual forces manifest in the gatekeeping process while working in the Chinese media system, we asked participants questions concerning how their personal values, nationality, and attitudes have shaped their work without disruption or resistance from external sources. Through the interviewing process, it became apparent that the participants understood

quickly that their attitudes and personal values in regards to professional media standards were different from their colleagues, which required them to learn the Chinese media system both by rules and interaction (between colleagues and supervisors). All of the participants acknowledged, no matter their home country or industry, that strict guidelines limit the manifestation of personal ideologies and affect how they present themselves and their output, which in turn limits their individual-level input into the gatekeeping process. Given that expat media professionals display characteristics dissimilar to their colleagues, individual-level forces that could potentially affect the gatekeeping process are not focused on or valued as an asset, particularly in relation to hard news. As Jacob elucidated,

When you work in Chinese media, it's not like what you see on TV shows like *The Newsroom* or *Murphy Brown*. Media people in the West are fairly outgoing, they tend to have their opinions, but you know they are friendly, relatively good-natured people . . . people who go into media in China are the very conservative types.

Furthermore, as the only other non-Western participant, Vince also explained that a major difference between working in the Indian media system and the Chinese media system relates to the personality of professionals: "Chinese are more disciplined in what they do, but they are scared to try something new . . . they want to stick to the idea the boss give them." Personalities consequently become more uniform to fit in with the system, whereas in other countries such as India, it is important to position oneself as unique to maintain one's job or progress further. In other words, whereas participants were used to being from media systems that encourage unique input and ideas to contribute to the gatekeeping process, they observed from their colleagues that the creative process is managed through top-down instructions from the "boss." All of the participants (except Gary) worked under the direction of at least one CCP-appointed editor, oftentimes working with two or three levels of senior management. Comparing the editorial process with that of his host country, William commented,

Most daily newspapers tend to have one or two major editorial conferences where it is decided the sort of content for tomorrow's paper and another one maybe to be planned later in the week. [My current newspaper in China] has vastly more meetings. It's one way of control . . . like monitor what is being written. They go through the drafts.

For Gary, it was clearly established that when working in China, there is no room to work outside the lines: ". . . we had a fairly strict editorial guideline of what we can and most importantly should not be doing." As an editor-in-chief of his own publication, Gary was in a unique role for an expat media professional because he was one of the few in top-level management. His motivation for beginning the publication was to provide high-standard business news to non-Chinese professionals operating in China; therefore, his personal values and attitudes certainly were a driving force in the gatekeeping process. Nevertheless, he had to be constantly cognizant of the restrictions he was under. Moreover, producing business news content rather than hard news afforded Gary more freedom for individual forces to manifest when compared with the other editors interviewed in the gatekeeping process, who largely followed orders from senior-ranking officials.

Vince, for example, caught on quickly that if he delivered the main idea of what the director told him, he could give suggestions based on his personal taste or experience:

Ideas, I used to give. Like I used to come up with ideas like, I think it's better if we do it like this or we should shoot from here. Or we say this, or we cover this. . . . My part was to be there and to say what he wants me to say in front of the camera, using my own words and language obviously, but coming up with the result that he wants.

The system of essentially prechecking and postchecking to ensure that what is being disseminated does not waiver from CCP media guidelines greatly limited individual forces; nevertheless, one noteworthy point is that six participants emphasized that although they were confident that the work they produce is more or less toeing party lines, they do use their previous knowledge, training, and values to help guide their work colleagues to professional standards outside a censored environment (or at least an understanding of them). This lateral influence indicates that although individual forces may not be observed in the content being distributed to audiences, these forces can influence colleagues. Daniel, for instance, has repeatedly observed a disenchantment of new Chinese reporters after working for state-run media. The disappointment often leads to bitterness and leaving journalism:

And after a year, they are broken, and they are talking about doing something outside of the media; perhaps, starting a business. So, I find that if I'm working with people who arrive and who are fairly new, I can sort of help them understand what they've walked into because I feel that it's rather sad how people who go to work in state media don't . . . know what they are about to get involved in. So the people I work with, I try to help them find their voice and find their way through the system.

Others observed that their encouragement helped advance young Chinese media professionals to greater positions both inside and outside China. Like Gary said, ". . . my company tends to employ young people . . . and it is very satisfying . . . to see how we have helped them develop their careers." Given that expats are removed from their native country into a censored environment, their individual influence often does not explicitly affect the gatekeeping process (in relation to the content being produced); nonetheless, these individual forces may still impact other colleagues. Overall, those who are involved with business, entertainment, or lifestyle content have more opportunities than those involved with hard news content to give input about what stories should be covered or small details on how they should be covered. All participants were under the same CCP restrictions; however, regulations often refer to content that would not be as apparent in genres outside hard news. Accordingly, although all participants operated in a top-down gatekeeping process (Gary was the exception but was still externally monitored by the CCP), the content of the four participants working mostly with hard news topics afforded the least room for input in the gatekeeping process based on individual forces such as attitudes or values.

### ***Expats Must Play by the Rules***

Although allowing expats to work in the Chinese media system points to a willingness by the CCP to be open to outside forces, participants reported being just as censored as their Chinese colleagues. Therefore, answers to RQ3, which asked how much expats acknowledge social institutional forces, focused on a strict consciousness of the CCP at almost all times. In fact, this force is increasingly getting stronger. Daniel described the situation as not only challenging but also “a sort of two steps forward and two steps back. I tend to look at things through a political censorship angle. . . . Things have gone backwards politically, in terms of the freedom of the press and it’s been quite hard.” This lack of press freedom is found throughout all state-owned media, and their English publications are no exception, a fact commonly known to the public in Jacob’s eyes:

Chinese people know that the media is heavily censored. *China Daily* and also the *Shanghai Daily*—both of those papers are basically just almost pure propaganda from the Chinese government. It reflects what the Communist Party wants to say for that day.

All the TV hosts also mentioned that before each shot they would have detailed instructions about what to say. Emma recalled, “. . . a few were very straight, they had every word written. Others are like here is the general topic, say something along this line.” Vince explained that the approach of his Chinese supervisors is sometimes more subtle or less assertive, but the end result is still to follow the mandated agenda:

You cannot use words that will even sound like you are saying something bad about them . . . they never tell you up front. They never come and tell you not to say this or don’t say that. When you are taping a shoot, and when you are done with the shot, then they will tell you, “Oh you just said this. It’s better for you that you don’t say that.” When you ask the reason for this, they will only say that it’s their project so I need to make it perfect.

Daniel, William, and Jacob listed specific cases of attempting to report on a topic but being stopped; however, there were also a few examples when participants felt satisfied with the reports they actually were able to release to the public. Although not usually a part of the gatekeeping process in that they had to follow what their supervisor told them in a top-down gatekeeping approach, if patient and willing to not be overtly controversial, then even participants producing hard news content could suggest story topics, albeit intermittently between translating. One example of this was a story on ethical practices of Chinese hospitals. Again, suggesting more investigative or watchdog-like stories was constantly tempered by a fear of the CCP. Gary explained how he always consciously tried to prevent problems with the CCP by avoiding controversial topics. In fact, he experienced problems with censorship laws in only two cases. The first case was due to using a map of China without including Taiwan and the second was a report on Google’s dispute with China. William mentioned that their editorial department was more or less translators, taking news stories from other Chinese daily newspapers and copying them verbatim. To

some degree, all of the participants try to be thoughtful to prevent being censored and avoid possible dangerous situations. Leo provided this exemplar comment:

We try to stay away from anything that could be perceived as overtly political or controversial politically, we try to approach it from a certain business perspective. We try to keep it very business related and don't delve into topics that might be controversial.

### ***Understanding Culture as an Expat***

RQ4 asked how participants acknowledged social system forces. All participants were acutely aware that besides the legal implications and dangers of infringing on China's censorship laws, understanding culture is as important for success in China. Furthermore, the perceived cultural expectations on the expats led to changing behaviors and even personalities in a self-censoring process. Lucas noted, "My personality is totally different in China . . . that's just how it is because it's in the culture. In layman's terms, I guess you could say that I am more masculine in Canada. But in China I am more metro-sexual." Harry expressed the valuable lesson he had to learn adjusting to the Chinese media system:

One of the key things I've learned also is patience. . . . China and the people move to their own beat and the way they want to do it. And if you come here thinking that you are going to change the system and get things done my way, you are going to be hitting your head up against the wall.

Although there was a unanimous feeling for the need to understand Chinese culture, one dividing question was whether or not adapting to a new media system involved openly acknowledging oneself as an outsider. For Jacob, it was not necessarily being from a specific country but a Western culture that unifies most expats and distinguishes them from local culture:

Yes, I always did treat myself sort of as an ambassador of the West, but not necessarily just the U.S. But I think what I realized being overseas was being from the U.S., or Norway, or something, we're so different. We approach things so differently from the Chinese that I stopped differentiating whether or not someone was from the U.S. or France or something.

On the reverse side, a few of the participants were adamant that they did not have the responsibility to represent the West or their country. They were merely media professionals doing a job, even if it was in a country that was quite different from their own. Daniel lamented that on a personal level he did not wish to stand out, even though it is a challenge not to do so when you are living as an expat:

When you are in China, unfortunately, because of the mindset of the people around you, you fall into this trap as being seen as representing Britain or the West. . . . I'd like to

think there are international standards that apply to all countries everywhere. And we are all working together to form an international standard of journalism and an international standard of freedom. I'm just another international member of that.

### **Discussion**

This exploratory study assessed the motivation for expat media professionals to work in the Chinese media system, their role in the gatekeeping process, and the hierarchical model of influences (or levels of analysis) to which they may or may not be subject (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). Specifically, individual, social institutional, and social system forces were analyzed to understand their influence on those working outside their native countries. Overall, there was not a specific reason why participants work in China. One motivation mentioned by participants was family reasons because they had married Chinese nationals and chose to remain in China on a long-term basis. This then required adjusting to a collective, censored work environment permanently rather than temporarily as most expats do (Doucet & Jehn, 1997). Other reasons included being recruited while still in their native country and by being an expat at the right place and at the right time. Those who accidentally found their way into China's media system all worked in television, reflecting the infant nature of the television industry in China, unlike the expats who worked in print for the purpose of promoting Chinese English publications. For all industries, the recruiting process into China's media system as an expat is not uniform and lacks professional protocol even though standards and education are increasing in China (Lin, 2010; Zhang, 2009).

We relied on Shoemaker and Reese's (1996, 2014) hierarchical model of influence and Shoemaker's (1991) levels of analysis to understand individual, social institutional, and social system forces in the expat's gatekeeping process. Through this investigation, it became clear that none of these forces was mutually exclusive but rather they influence each other; particularly, social institutional and social system forces influence individual forces. Studies have shown that individual Chinese journalists report high levels of professionalism and Western sensibilities of watchdog and investigative journalism (Lin, 2010; Zhang, 2009); nevertheless, these values remain limited in the gatekeeping process because social institutional (censorship) and social system (culture) forces greatly restrict individual forces. The same was true for our expat media professionals who did not wish to challenge social institutional or social system forces, fearing the consequences. At the social institutional level, expat media professionals did not challenge the instructions they were given by their CCP-appointed supervisors because they knew they could be fired, legally prosecuted, and even kicked out of China. As a consequence, their input in the gatekeeping process was greatly restrained and, instead, influence proceeded from the top down, particularly with hard news. When participants did have input in the gatekeeping process because their content was not related to censored topics, social system forces manifested more as a secondary driving force in the gatekeeping process. However, in this case, expat media professionals did not fear legal ramifications but rather wanted to be accepted by their colleagues and their audiences. This was particularly apparent for television professionals who felt they needed to mold their own personal characteristics to the Chinese context. These social institutional and social system forces greatly determine the outcome of the gatekeeping process but do not change professional standards internally, illustrating the need for forces of gatekeeping, particularly individual forces, to be considered holistically

and contextually within a given media system. As Shoemaker (1991) asserted, there is a need for understanding the linkages between forces or levels.

Participants across all of the industries reported similar approaches to their work to successfully navigate the Chinese media system. This self-censorship was more veiled if the expat had previous media training. Given that many of the participants did not have a professional media background before working in the Chinese media system, they were not previously trained in professionalism standards (Donsbach & Klett, 1993; Schudson, 1981). Accordingly, their self-censoring mechanisms related more to the desire to do their job well instead of feeling forced. The three previously trained participants, on the other hand, came from media systems that stress holding governments and elites responsible in a watchdog role (Hanitzsch, 2011; Pinto, 2009) and were consequently the most critical about being constrained.

Just as Chinese journalists put individual forces (personal judgments or desires) aside for what is expected of them by their editor and colleagues (Zhong, 2008), the expat media professionals did so similarly as a way of recognizing China's collectivist culture. The reasons given were fear of losing one's job but also fear of offending those they were working for because they considered themselves outsiders working within a system. Notably, when individual forces did manifest in the gatekeeping process, it was through mentoring young Chinese journalists, although the end result would still be content that was acceptable for censorship regulations. Experience and education were particularly important, because those who came to China with previous experience and journalism education were more vocal about censorship and became mentors to Chinese colleagues. Kim (2012) suggests that because foreign correspondents are away from their organization, they rely heavily on personal judgment and experience or the individual level of gatekeeping; in this case, however, expats, while separated from their host country, are not given the same independence to rely on their individual judgment because they are working in a greater gatekeeping process in China. Therefore, they either cope by discreetly asserting themselves in the newsroom, leave China out of frustration for being restricted, or position themselves as a guest in the country that does not have the burden of being troubled by censorship.

Expat media professionals may be a small fraction of China's media system; nevertheless, by analyzing this previously overlooked niche, we propose that expat media professionals are used in the gatekeeping process in China's censored environment for certain topics such as business news, entertainment, and lifestyle. In relation to hard news, expat media professionals are valued for their English and writing skills rather than their values or attitudes. Relying on expat media professionals may reflect a strategic interest on the part of Chinese media managers to perform a kind of hybridized "Western-ness" in terms of diversity and objectivity, while nonetheless remaining in practice committed to a propaganda model of journalism, a strategy suggested by Peaslee and Berggreen (2012) through their exploration of the "expediency of hybridity." Furthermore, by using gatekeeping theory and, in particular, the hierarchy model of influences or levels of analysis, we propose the need for all forces to be considered more holistically in studies rather than as being isolated, as is the usual approach. Specifically, even though the CCP as a social institutional force is the underlying influence in the gatekeeping process in the Chinese media system, when participants were engaged in decision making outside government restrictions, culture played a major role. We also observed that when individual forces are restricted by

social institutional and social system forces, they are harnessed but rarely intrinsically changed and can be consequently turned to indirect aspects of the gatekeeping process such as mentoring colleagues.

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