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Shaping the policy debate

How does the British media present China?

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Foreword

By the end of 2022, British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak announced the end of what was once called the ‘Golden Era’ of the UK’s relationship with China. Whether or not this complex relationship was ever golden is debatable, but the surge in unfavourable views towards China in the UK since 2018 - reaching a historic high in 2020 – suggests the British public’s feeling towards China has unequivocally soured. This emotion has been increasingly reflected in the British media and policies towards China. Today it is clear that the UK has not decided to completely ‘decouple’ from China, its ‘systemic competitor’, as reflected in the UK Government’s Integrated Review Refresh 2023; ‘We will double funding to build China capabilities across government to better understand China and allow us to engage confidently where it is in our interests to do so’. Nuanced narratives on China are therefore necessary for as long as the UK plans to continue engaging with China.

A report published by Freedom House in 2022 revealed that the British public did not consider Chinese media to be a reliable source of information on China. British media plays an important role in providing more balanced coverage of China. Media reports are widely cited in policy research as factual information. As Dr Tim Summers points out in this paper, the British media contributes to shaping the ‘Overton window’, ie the acceptable bounds of policy discussion. The British media’s lack of substantial positive coverage and the absence of such discussions in parliamentary debates severely restricts the opportunity for conversations regarding engagement and policy options. Furthermore, this dearth of positive coverage contributes to an incomplete and potentially

misleading understanding of China within the context of current debates. Although the negative reporting may have derived from the Western journalistic culture of “reporting negative developments” and “telling stories that those in power don’t want us (journalists) to tell”, the oversimplification of the China narrative could reinforce misunderstandings of China as a place, as well as its people. For example, during COVID-19 which saw a sharp increase in violent crimes against people of Chinese/Asian heritage in Western countries.

In this paper, Dr Summers and his team looked at more than a thousand articles across different topics from different political leaning papers, collected between 2020 to 2023. Focusing on prominent outlets like *The Telegraph*, *The Guardian*, the BBC, *The Economist*, and the *Financial Times* the findings show that these media sources commonly employ a negative tone in articles about China.

Given the significant role of media in shaping public perception and policy decisions, the report concludes by discussing the policy implications of this biased coverage and highlighting the broader implications for understanding and engaging with China.

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Executive summary

Coverage of China in the British media over recent years has been predominantly negative, often heavily so. While negative reporting of China has dominated the British media for some time, it has become more evident over the last few years, alongside a hardening of the government's China policy. The British media texts researched for this paper contain almost no positive coverage of China. Politics and politically normative interpretations tend to be emphasised.

This will not come as a surprise to many readers. This paper aims to elaborate on that phenomenon with some systematic evidence and discussion of the characteristics of coverage of China, based on data collected from selected British media – *The Telegraph*, *The Guardian*, the BBC, the *Financial Times* and *The Economist* – between 2020 and 2023.

There are significant policy implications of this analysis. The paper suggests that there are iterative relationships between media reporting of China, public opinion, the views of political elites, and government policy. While policymakers have other sources of information available to them, the picture of China painted by the media is influential and contributes to shaping the acceptable bounds of policy discussion.

British media outlets' coverage of China therefore contributes to limiting space for discussion of engagement or other policies that might be based on alternative perspectives or on opportunities offered by China today. This means that the understanding of China that informs many of these debates is, at best, partial and, at worst, misleading and inaccurate. To achieve a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of China, alternative sources of information should be actively explored, and those with different opinions encouraged to contribute to the policy debate.

In short, media coverage and the wider public debate about China in the UK today fail to reflect the complex reality of China, and close off space for in-depth understanding or balanced debate about this most significant of countries.

Introduction and overview

How does the British media present China, and what are the implications of such reporting?

The research set out in this paper builds on previous studies that suggest coverage of China in the British media over recent years has been predominantly negative, often heavily so. There was almost no positive coverage of the country in the period covered by this research. This negative emphasis has become more evident over the last few years, alongside a hardening in the government's China policy.

This will not come as a surprise to anyone who reads British media on China. The aim of this paper is to elaborate on that phenomenon with some systematic evidence to support the conclusion that negative coverage of China dominates in the British media. It further discusses some of the characteristics and implications of that coverage, including through analysis of some of the more influential columns in UK-based media. One notable feature of this coverage is that **politics and normative value judgements about political systems dominate over other areas (culture, economy, society)**, in both the topics chosen for reporting and in the way that reports on many issues are refracted through a political lens.

Does it matter?

Whether or not the British media give an accurate and fair picture of China has potentially significant policy implications. Over recent years, it has been increasingly common for politicians and the media to cite an apparent deterioration in British public opinion of China. Indeed, recent public opinion surveys have shown that negative views of China dominate in the UK. But they also show that the public obtains much of its understanding of China from the media.¹ **The sources of negative views – how public opinion is formed – should be examined more closely, in addition to reporting on its effects.**

The media also provide information for policymakers, including government officials and politicians, and those engaged in policy research. Media reports are often cited in these policy discussions as authoritative sources for both factual information and assessments of developments in China.² At the same time, policymakers may have

other sources of information available to them, and the government should receive considered reports from British diplomats on the ground that are not driven by media or corporate agendas (though they may be influenced by the political environment). Other actors are also influential – in particular, lobby or advocacy groups that operate publicly or privately. Their influence can be seen in setting the agenda for parliamentary debates and questions on China; for example, in relation to the discussion of Hong Kong over recent years. The relationships between such groups and the media can also be mutually reinforcing: advocacy groups attempt to get media coverage for their positions, whilst basing much of their own descriptions of developments in China on media reports.

Even though media is not the only source, **the picture of China painted in the media is influential in policymaking and contributes to shaping the acceptable bounds of policy discussion** (the fashionable phrase is the 'Overton window').³ When it comes to China, the lack of any meaningful positive coverage in the British media (or in parliamentary debates, for that matter) means that there is very limited space for discussion of engagement or other policies that might be based on opportunities offered by China today. It also means that the understanding of China that informs many of these debates is, at best, partial and, at worst, misleading and inaccurate.

Why the negative reporting?

Some journalists have argued that their job is to report negative developments, and that being 'drawn to the negatives' is the nature of the beast. This would certainly explain the tone and content of much media coverage of China. For example, John Sudworth, the former BBC correspondent in mainland China who left for Taiwan in March 2021,⁴ admitted that the goal of his reporting was to highlight negative developments in China. He has spoken about 'focusing on the negatives' in reporting China, arguing that 'the job of good journalism everywhere is to tell stories that those in power don't want us to tell'. Sudworth himself admitted that this approach brings dangers of misunderstanding or over-simplifying China, and that the negative news can become 'shorthand not just for the Chinese Government and the Chinese system but

1 Tim Summers, Hiu Man Chan, Peter Gries and Richard Turcsanyi (2022). 'Worsening British views of China in 2020: Evidence from public opinion, parliament, and the media'. *Asia Europe Journal* 20(2), 173–194, p. 188.

2 The most obvious evidence of this comes in the prevalence of English-language media reports in footnotes to published reports by advocacy groups, as well as in policy research.

3 'The Overton Window is a model for understanding how ideas in society change over time and influence politics. The core concept is that politicians are limited in what policy ideas they can support – they generally only pursue policies that are widely accepted throughout society as legitimate policy options. These policies lie inside the Overton Window. Other policy ideas exist, but politicians risk losing popular support if they champion these ideas. These policies lie outside the Overton Window.' See <https://www.mackinac.org/OvertonWindow>.

4 See BBC News, 'BBC correspondent John Sudworth leaves China after "propaganda campaign"', 31 March 2021, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-asia-china-56594289>.

for the sort of place China is and for its people in general'.⁵ However, it is far from clear that 'journalism everywhere ... tell[s] stories that those in power don't want us to tell' – of particular relevance to this report, this is not generally the case when it comes to British media coverage of the foreign policy of the UK or its allies.

Should 'focusing on the negatives' be what the media does? An alternative view of a journalist's responsibility is to publish information that is 'accurate, fair and thorough', as the code of ethics of the Society of Professional Journalists puts it.⁶ That implies taking into account multiple perspectives and interpretations: something rarely done in coverage of China (by both Western and Chinese media, to be sure). This should particularly apply for publicly funded media. Most media outlets do not work like that, however, and, given the private ownership of many media organisations, the reality is that multiple principles and objectives exist in journalism and it would be naïve to think that media outlets are only or even primarily motivated by a desire to be accurate or fair. Indeed, commercial motivations play an important role for many media organisations (including publicly funded ones), which are constantly seeking to get ahead of competitors in profitability, numbers of readers or numbers of clicks.⁷

Other approaches are possible. China's domestic journalism tradition includes 'constructive journalistic practice' as 'an approach that combines the techniques of critical journalism with narratives that explore solutions', and Maria Repnikova notes that some Chinese scholars have advocated this as 'an alternative to Western media's focus on crises and failures'.⁸ The point is not to argue here that British policymakers or the public should simply turn to the *China Daily* for their knowledge of China. That is not likely to happen even if it were a solution, as Chinese media have their own biases and have a negligible impact on discussions of China in the UK.⁹ But constructive coverage of events should be just as legitimate a goal as 'focusing on the negatives'.

Realistically, **coverage of China in the British media is unlikely to become more balanced any time soon.** The implications of this for policy need careful consideration by those in

government, parliament and thinktanks. When China is being discussed within these policy circles, **responsible policymakers should be aware that what they read in the media is, at best, only part of the story.** Alternative sources of information should be actively explored, and those with different opinions encouraged to contribute to the debate. The conclusion of this report discusses this further.

This report

The next sections of this report build on existing studies that look at British media coverage of China at different points in time and across different topics by examining reporting of China between 2020 and 2023 by selected media outlets. The research focuses on two newspapers – *The Telegraph* and *The Guardian*, which represent the political right and centre-left persuasions, respectively – and online coverage of China by the BBC as a publicly funded broadcaster that does not have any overt political affiliation. Further research was carried out regarding substantial analysis on China published in *The Economist* and the *Financial Times* – two UK-based media outlets that have a more global perspective and audience and are particularly influential in political and business circles in the UK.

This research shows that negative framing and tone strongly dominate coverage of China from these media outlets, though the extent of this varies somewhat across outlets, time and issue. It also finds that politics – in particular, discussion of the political system – is dominant in coverage of China, not just in the selection of political topics as those most frequently reported, but in the way that a political and normative lens is often brought to coverage of social, economic and cultural issues. The paper further gives examples of how this coverage makes use of repeated memes about China that reinforce a monochrome, reductionist and negative picture of the country and its politics. Given the role that media coverage plays in shaping public and policy agendas around international and domestic issues, the conclusion to this paper discusses policy implications and some of the issues the research raises for understanding and dealing with China.

5 Sudworth said, '... [whether] as a foreign journalist are you in danger of misunderstanding or over-simplifying China, always focusing on the negative, is something I was often faced with and often thought deeply about. The way I would often answer that question is quite simply, I would simply say that the job of good journalism everywhere is to tell stories that those in power don't want us to tell. In China, of course, it meant focusing on the negatives, the denials of freedom of speech, of freedom of thought and faith, often enforced very brutally through jailings and rule by internal security agents, all the stuff as a journalist that I would run up against and end up putting on the [news]... But obviously there is a danger that that becomes shorthand not just for the Chinese Government and the Chinese system but for the sort of place China is and for its people in general, and I can really see the danger in this; but in the end these are the stories that the Chinese Government don't want us to tell, and I can't help but feel that as journalists we will always be drawn to those negatives.' (BBC Radio 4 *Today* programme, 27 December 2021, from 7:52:57am to 7:53:56am). Recording retained by the author.

6 Society of Professional Journalists, 'Code of ethics', available at: <https://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>.

7 I am grateful to Ting Shi for highlighting this point. The history of *The Economist* by Alexander Zevin makes clear that this has been a key driver for *The Economist* over recent decades; in particular, in expanding its American readership.

8 Cited in Maria Repnikova (2022). *Chinese Soft Power*. Cambridge Elements, p. 24.

9 A Freedom House report suggests that British readers do not trust Chinese media as a reliable source of information about China. See 'Beijing's Global Media Influence' in the United Kingdom, at <https://freedomhouse.org/country/united-kingdom/beijings-global-media-influence/2022>.

There is clearly scope for much more research on this topic given the growing volume of British media coverage of China. The research for this report does not claim to be comprehensive, but it does aim to provide a solid basis for the discussion of these issues.

Previous studies

A number of themes have featured in previous research on British media coverage of China. First, **the growth in Chinese influence and power has been accompanied by an increase in coverage of China**. For example, Wang Qingning found that British media coverage of China grew and became more diverse after the handover of Hong Kong in 1997, with ‘an important change in UK media portrayal of China: from an ideological other in the 20th century to a powerful yet different country in the beginning of the 21st century’.¹⁰ Examining British media coverage during the Beijing Olympics year of 2008, Colin Sparks found that China was no longer seen as a marginal or peripheral nation but as an ‘elite’ nation.

Second, **a consistent finding across these studies is that negative framing of China has dominated the British media**. For 2008, Sparks concluded that ‘it is not an exaggeration to say that the mass circulation press in the United Kingdom actually is slandering China, at least if we take that to mean unrelentingly hostile and one-sided coverage’, though he found that the ‘elite’ newspapers offered a more nuanced picture of China (at that point in time), and that, in particular for the *Financial Times*, ‘extensive and nuanced coverage of China is “news [readers] can use”’.¹¹ Studying coverage of China and Africa around the same time, Emma Mawdsley found a tendency to ‘demonis[e] China and largely exculpat[e] the West’.¹² A more recent paper by Wang Qingning concluded that the general media image of China offered after Brexit was as ‘a threatening economic and political superpower’.¹³

A third finding of previous studies is that there may be some correlation between the tone of media coverage and the policy agenda; this relationship has a long historical background, and Colin Mackerras comments that ‘the dominant images [of China] of most periods have tended to accord with, rather than oppose, the interests of the main Western authorities or governments of the day’.¹⁴ In assessing whether media coverage could be in line with the broad thrust of government policy, for example, Wang finds that, around the talk of a so-called Golden Era of UK–China ties in 2015, *The Times* (broadly sympathetic to the governing Conservative Party) leaned towards government positions that ‘the UK could accommodate China for the purpose of economic cooperation’.¹⁵ Looking at coverage of the Belt and Road Initiative from 2013 to 2017, Turcsanyi and Kachlikova found that the initiative was mostly framed in the British media as a global economic initiative, rather than in terms of security or geopolitical challenges;¹⁶ that was a perspective that broadly aligned to the approach of the British Government at the time.¹⁷ Previous research suggests that political affiliation could be a factor in the way China is reported in the media, with Wang arguing that, after the Brexit referendum, right-wing newspapers shifted from a China agenda of co-operation to portraying China as an ‘enemy’,¹⁸ and that the ‘left-wing/leaning newspapers, although still associating China more with threats than cooperation, offer[ed] a relatively more balanced coverage’.¹⁹

These points draw attention to an important assumption behind this research: that **media coverage – or the ‘media agenda’ – is influential in shaping public and policy agendas around international and domestic issues**, and that coverage is constrained and shaped by the broader political environment.²⁰ The relationship between these agendas is complicated and iterative, with the media both influencing and being influenced by policy debates and public views. But previous research shows that studying media coverage adds important context to policy debates and can help understand international politics and put public opinion in a broader context.

10 Wang Qingning (2022a). ‘Not so golden anymore: UK press coverage of the changing UK–China relations in the 21st century’. In Jesse Owen Hearn-Branaman and Tabe Bergman, eds. *Journalism and Foreign Policy: How the US and UK Media Cover Official Enemies*. London and New York: Routledge, p. 138.

11 Colin Sparks (2010). ‘Coverage of China in the UK national press’. *Chinese Journal of Communication* 3(3), 347–365, quotes from p. 363 and p. 364.

12 Emma Mawdsley (2008). ‘Fu Manchu versus Dr Livingstone in the Dark Continent? Representing China, Africa and the West in British broadsheet newspapers’. *Political Geography* 27(5), 509–529, p. 525.

13 Wang Qingning (2022b). ‘The China–EU relation and media representation of China: The case of British newspaper’s coverage of China in the post-Brexit referendum era’. *Asia Europe Journal* 20(3), 283–303, p. 301.

14 Colin Mackerras (1987). *Western Images of China*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 263.

15 Wang (2022a), p. 141.

16 Richard Turcsanyi and Eva Kachlikova (2020). ‘The BRI and China’s soft power in Europe: Why Chinese narratives (initially) won’. *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 49(1), 58–81.

17 Tim Summers (2016). ‘A platform for commercial cooperation’. In Frans-Paul van der Putten, John Seaman, Mikko Huotari, Alice Ekman, Miguel Otero-Iglesias, eds. *Europe and China’s New Silk Roads*. Clingendael Institute. Available at Clingendael Institute, available at: <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/europe-and-chinas-new-silk-roads>

18 Wang (2022a).

19 Wang (2022b), pp. 301–302.

20 Wang (2022a).

Methodology

The research for this paper built on the methodology of many of these studies, through both quantitative and qualitative analysis of relevant media coverage. The research was carried out in several phases. The first phase involved analysis in 2021 of *Telegraph*, *Guardian* and BBC reports on China, as part of a small funded research project.²¹ A second phase of analysis of coverage from the same three outlets was carried out from late 2022 to early 2023. In both phases, student research assistants collected online coverage of China using keyword and hashtag searches, collated details of the articles and coded them for category, topic and framing. The categories were selected to be similar to those used in existing secondary literature, and covered politics, geopolitics (or international politics), economics, security, culture and public health.²² Framing analysis – similar to what is elsewhere described as assessing the ‘tone’ of coverage²³ – was carried out based on what overall impression about China a British reader would be left with after reading each article: negative, neutral or positive.²⁴ Framing analysis reveals the processes of ‘selecting and highlighting some facets of events or issues, and making connections among them so as to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation and/or solution’.²⁵

The **choice of the three media outlets for this research reflects their different readerships and relationships to the policy debate**. The BBC is widely consulted in the UK, and survey data from the Sinophone Borderlands project in 2020 suggested that BBC outlets taken together – including broadcast media, not just online reporting – are identified by over three-quarters of the British public as important sources of information on China.²⁶ *The Telegraph* has a clear right-wing political stance and is more influential in the Conservative Party, while *The Guardian* is positioned in the centre or centre-left, and may be more engaged with Labour Party or other opposition policy debates.²⁷

The two phases of research into reporting from these three outlets were supplemented with a third phase, which analysed in-depth China coverage in *The Economist* and the *Financial Times*. Neither of these is as widely read by the British public: in the 2020 Sinophone Borderlands survey in the UK, the *Financial Times* was only mentioned by 26 out of 1,500 (1.7 per cent) respondents as a source of news on China, and *The Economist* by 1 out of 1,500 in the same survey.²⁸ But **both of these outlets are much more influential in policy circles**, being read by parliamentarians, civil servants, businesspeople, policy researchers and lobbyists, as well as audiences outside the UK.²⁹ In understanding policy debates, therefore, their coverage of China may be more important than that of the mainstream media. *The Economist* has a much longer history of playing an influential role at the heart of policy discussions – as historian of the newspaper Alexander Zevin put it, ‘What truly sets *The Economist* apart is the way it has shaped the very world its readers inhabit, by virtue of three close relationships: to liberalism, to finance, and to state power’.³⁰

This project did not look at other media outlets, including tabloid or social media coverage of China. The latter is clearly playing a more important role in disseminating reporting on China, and could even be decisive in what articles in traditional media are circulated and widely read. In the UK’s policy discussions about China, there are also other influential channels that highlight particular issues and point readers towards media coverage of China. One of these is the China Research Group of Conservative Party members of parliament, whose daily newsletter and social media posts offer selections of media reporting on China: in the process, further shaping the way that China is read and perceived.³¹ Another is the weekly subscription newsletter, ‘Beijing to Britain’, which offers a mixture of links to and commentary on developments relating to the UK and China, and is popular in policy circles.³² All of this points to the complex nature of the ways that policy debates and broader

21 CUHK Faculty of Arts Direct Grant: British media coverage of China, June 2021–June 2022 (HK\$54,968).

22 Public health was not included as a category in earlier secondary literature, but we added it to reflect the extent of reporting on China and COVID-19.

23 See Plamen Tonchev (2021). ‘Sino-Greek relations in Greek and Chinese media, 2020. Institute of International Economic Relations, p. 27. Available at: https://idos.gr/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Sino-Greek-Relations_in_Media_18-3-2021.pdf.

24 The ‘audience’ for this framing is a British audience. For example, ‘communism’ would generally be framed as negative by a British audience (except for a small minority), so we would follow this in the framing analysis, perhaps adding a comment if the interpretation could be contested. Chinese readers may be left with different impressions with references to communism, Hong Kong’s national security law, etc.

25 Entman, cited in Colin Sparks (2015). ‘Business as usual: The UK national daily press and the Occupy Central movement’. *Chinese Journal of Communication* 8(4), 429–446.

26 For background to this survey, see Summers et al. (2022).

27 Note that there are significantly more right-wing than left-wing media outlets in the UK.

28 For details of the survey, see Summers et al. (2022).

29 This speaks to a wider point about influence of these UK-based media outlets beyond the UK. The then director of Chatham House, Robin Niblett, commented in 2021 that ‘The BBC, *The Economist*, the *Financial Times* and *The Guardian* also leverage the power of the English language along with their independent editorial lines to dominate reporting and commentary on international affairs’. Robin Niblett (2021). ‘Global Britain, global broker: A blueprint for the UK’s future international role’. Chatham House, p. 17. Available at: https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-02/2021-01-11-global-britain-global-broker-niblett_0.pdf.

30 Alexander Zevin (2019). *Liberalism at Large: The World According to The Economist*. London: Verso, p. 6.

31 Details of the newsletter are at <https://chinaresearchgroup.substack.com>

32 The newsletter is available for subscribers at <https://beijingtobritain.substack.com/>.

perceptions of China are produced and shaped, and further research into these issues would be instructive.

Framing analysis

Analysing mainstream and widely read media reporting on China can give us some insights into perceptions of China and the policy debates. As noted in the methodology section, this research dipped into analysis of media reporting at particular points in time. We collated the most data for *Telegraph* reports on China, with 924 articles between January and July 2021 and 199 articles during the first quarter of 2023.³³ In the first of these periods, a broad search criterion was deployed, covering all articles in which China plays a significant role. For the later period (2023), the hashtag #China was used, but articles in which China, or what was happening in China, is not the main theme were not included in the analysis, giving a narrower dataset. For *The Guardian*, we collected 121 articles in November and December 2021, 209 articles in autumn 2022, and over 200 articles in the first quarter of 2023, when two independent parallel collection and coding exercises were carried out. For the BBC, 236 articles were collected for September to December 2021, 239 articles for August to November 2022, and 200 articles for December 2022 to March 2023. Framing analysis assessed whether readers in the UK would have an overall positive, negative or neutral view of China after reading the article; this could be through topic selection or through the addition of negative commentary or value judgements. For some periods of research, we further coded to assess whether they saw China as a threat or opportunity for the UK (see below).

Turning first to *The Telegraph*, during January to July 2021, the framing analysis concluded that 576 articles (62 per cent) were negative, with 325 (35 per cent) neutral and the remaining 23 articles (2.5 per cent) positive. In the first quarter of 2023, the negative framing in *Telegraph* coverage was notably more dominant, at 90 per cent of the total. For *The Guardian*, in the first quarter of 2023, a majority of reports also framed China negatively. During this quarter, two researchers independently collated and coded articles, with one set of 234 articles giving 59 per cent negative, 39 per cent neutral and 2 per cent positive, and another set of 277 articles having 55 per cent with a negative tone and only two positive articles. A separate coding of 209 *Guardian* pieces in October and November 2022 produced a negative framing in 90 per cent of cases. Analysis of BBC reporting produced similar results. From September to December 2021, only 73 of the articles were coded, of which 82 per cent were negative and 4 per cent were positive. The negative framing was coded for 62 per cent of articles from August to November 2022, with 2 per

cent being positive. In the December 2022 to March 2023 period, 75 per cent of articles were coded as negative and 1 per cent as positive.

Given the element of subjectivity in this coding, a significant margin of error should be allowed in interpreting these percentages. It would be misleading, for example, to conclude definitively that, say, 62 per cent of *Telegraph* reports in 2021 framed China negatively: that would be to suggest a specious precision that does not do justice to the complexity of engaging in this sort of analysis.

Nonetheless, it is fair to conclude from this data that a clear majority of the articles about China across different media outlets adopt a negative tone or frame China negatively for British readers. That majority is of the order of magnitude of two-thirds, probably higher rather than lower. Further, very few articles frame China positively. Our data also support the point made by Wang that the left-leaning media outlet (*The Guardian*) tended to offer a slightly higher amount of more neutral coverage than the right-wing *Telegraph*.³⁴

Looking at the categories of reports, a consistent picture emerges that politics dominates by some way, and comments on the political system is a strong theme throughout. This includes coverage both of domestic political events within China (from leadership politics to protests) and international politics. Political topics that were particularly widely covered across all three media outlets included US–China relations, China’s leadership and the Communist Party, as well as the Taiwan issue and the question of Chinese presence and influence in the UK.

After politics, economic and business issues were the next most significant category, including technology. In contrast, cultural issues were covered only rarely, but accounted for a considerable proportion of the very small number of positively framed reports of China – though that does not mean that cultural issues are always framed positively (Colin Sparks’ earlier research highlighted a number of examples of cultural issues – from food to art – being framed very negatively). Social issues were covered less than economic ones, but, as with the economy and business, these reports are often infused with political messaging.

Digging deeper

Some of the qualitative features of this coverage can be seen through an in-depth look at the 467 articles from *The Telegraph* and *The Guardian* collected for the first quarter of 2023.³⁵ These covered a wide range of topics, of which COVID-19 and US–China relations were dominant (see Figure 1). During this period, the change in China’s COVID policy was a major development, but 17 of the 50 reports on COVID were about the revival of the lab leak theory following a report by the US Department of Energy in late February 2023. On US–China relations, the balloon

³³ A smaller selection of articles was also collected for September to December 2021, but they have not been considered in this paper.

³⁴ Wang (2022a).

³⁵ I am very grateful to Lorenzo Trevisan for producing a longer version of this analysis summarised here.

saga dominated coverage during this period, as the subject of 67 of the 79 articles on US–China relations.³⁶ From both outlets, politics and security were the main categories – at 46 per cent and 17 per cent in *The Guardian*, and 42 per cent and 28 per cent in *The Telegraph*, respectively, though this suggests that *The Telegraph* focused slightly more on security topics during this period. The tone of coverage in *The Telegraph* tended to be more negative (70 per cent), whereas *The Guardian* was more neutral (45 per cent negative). Positive stories were very rare from both outlets.

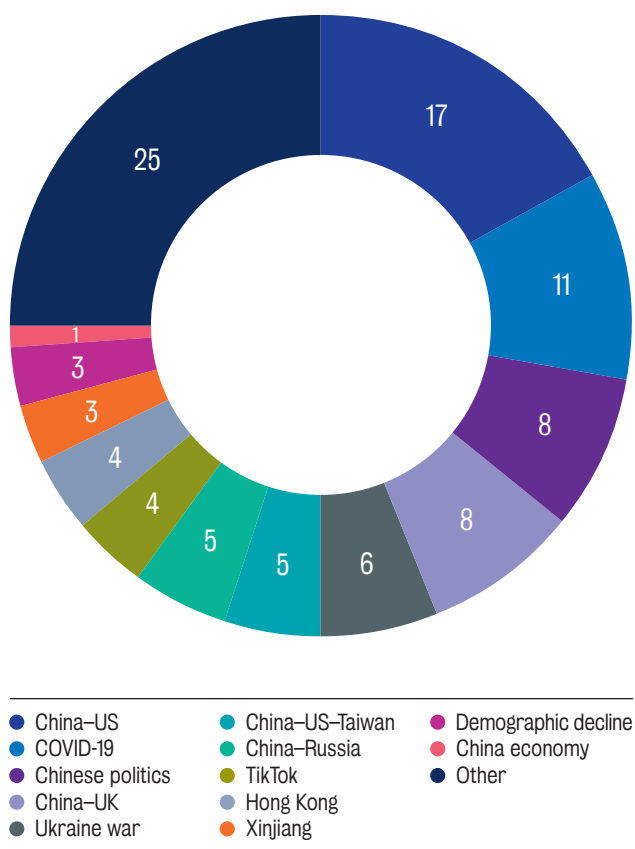


Figure 1. Main topics by percentage across Telegraph and Guardian coverage, Q1 2023³⁷

We further coded these articles to assess whether they saw China as a threat or opportunity for the UK, or neutral, adopting the concepts used in foreign policy analysis by Scott Brown and others.³⁸ A ‘threat’ framing dominated in this coding, particularly in *The Telegraph*. Qualitative analysis of the articles shows a number of key themes to this threat framing. During this period, four were particularly dominant: China is spying on ‘us’; China constitutes a ‘military threat’; Chinese ‘autocracy is a threat’; and ‘China brought COVID-19’.

For example, the idea that China is a threat (that word is not used officially by the government) appears in this Guardian piece on AUKUS, the trilateral deal between Australia, the UK and the US to build nuclear-powered submarines:

*In a bid to counter the growing threat from China, the UK’s prime minister, Rishi Sunak, vowed alongside his US and Australian counterparts to stand ‘shoulder to shoulder’ to protect peace in the Indo-Pacific given its implications for security across the world.*³⁹

Typical excerpts from *The Telegraph* reinforce this picture and link the ‘China threat’ to Russia’s war in Ukraine (a common theme of coverage during this period):

*As things stand, China wants to change the world order – to redirect power away from the rules-based international system led by the liberal democracies and have a world that is more compliant with the demands of autocratic states, such as itself, Russia and Iran. So in an environment where Russia is at war with Ukraine and Ukraine is substantially supported by the West, China’s sympathies lie with the Russians.*⁴⁰

We can dig deeper into the way China is portrayed in the media by looking at articles of substantial length.⁴¹ This could be done for *The Guardian*, which has had a number of ‘long-read’ articles on China, though it is less easy in articles from *The Telegraph* or the BBC. However, the *Financial Times* and *The Economist* are arguably more influential in policy circles, and both have regular in-depth China coverage and analysis and have enhanced their China coverage over recent years. While it would be possible to analyse all China articles in both publications, this research focused on the *Financial Times* Big Reads

³⁶ ‘Balloon saga’ is a reference to what was apparently a Chinese air balloon travelling over the United States just before Secretary of State Antony Blinken was due to visit Beijing. The US Government asserted that it was engaged in espionage and shot down the balloon.

³⁷ I am grateful to Lorenzo Trevisan for providing the data for this chart.

³⁸ Scott A. W. Brown (2018). *Power, Perception and Foreign Policymaking: US and EU Responses to the Rise of China*. London: Routledge.

³⁹ Aubrey Allegretti, ‘Size of UK’s nuclear submarine fleet could double under Aukus plans’, *The Guardian*, 13 March 2023, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/mar/13/britain-to-build-nuclear-powered-submarines-for-historic-aukus-pact>.

⁴⁰ Alexander Downer, ‘Embrace Aukus and make Britain great again’, *The Telegraph*, 12 March 2023, available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/03/12/embrace-aukus-make-britain-great/>.

⁴¹ This is the approach adopted by Sparks (2010). We did some analysis of *The Telegraph* and Guardian that differentiated between news articles and long reads, but I do not cover those details here.

that cover China, and *The Economist's* Chaguan weekly column.⁴²

Financial Times Big Reads on China

The *Financial Times* Big Reads are pieces of lengthy analysis that cover a whole page of the print version of the paper and are prominently situated on the internet and app versions. About 300 are published each year (close to one each day the paper publishes, which is six times a week). They are written by regular journalists at the *Financial Times* and often bring together analysis of issues that the paper has been covering on an ongoing basis, meaning that the approach and perspectives in these articles can reasonably be taken as indicative of wider *Financial Times* reporting and framing of the issues discussed.

China has been a regular topic, with a little over 10 per cent of the Big Reads in each year from 2019 to 2022 having their main focus on China.⁴³ Interestingly, China was even more prominent than Brexit as a topic in both 2019 and 2020, at a time when the UK was in the process of leaving the EU (it formally left on 31 January 2020 and originally set a deadline of the end of 2020 to negotiate a post-Brexit deal with the EU): in 2019, there were 20 pieces with Brexit in the title, compared to 34 on China; while, in 2020, there were only eight articles on Brexit, compared to 35 covering China and 83 on the coronavirus pandemic – the major news story of that year.

We coded the articles on China for the four years from 2019 to 2022, inclusive. The **vast majority of these framed China negatively, sometimes strongly so. A handful of articles each year were judged to be broadly neutral in their framing of China. Over the four-year period, we concluded that only two articles were positive** – both related to business and published in 2021 (see Figure 2). One was about innovations by BYD, the Chinese automotive

manufacturer, which presented the company positively as being ahead of its international rivals.⁴⁴ The other was about Baillie Gifford, the Edinburgh-based fund manager that was bullish on China; arguably, this is not really a China story, but as a Big Read that covered China quite a bit, we included it in the analysis.⁴⁵

The pieces focus almost exclusively on China's domestic and international politics and economy and business – not surprising given the nature of the *Financial Times* and its readership. In general, **the most negative framing tended to come in political stories**. A number of common negative themes in the characterisation of China run through these articles:

- China has become more 'assertive' or 'aggressive' externally, with Taiwan cited as an example on multiple occasions.⁴⁶
- China has become more 'authoritarian' domestically, with numerous references to this trend accelerating under Xi Jinping. In 2020 in particular, Xinjiang was frequently cited as evidence of this, along with Hong Kong (to a lesser extent). Both 'Xinjiang' and 'Hong Kong' have become bywords for Chinese authoritarianism, often mentioned in passing in articles that do not relate to developments in either place.
- The Chinese political system is regularly portrayed in negative terms as secretive, unpredictable, irrational and risk-taking.
- Coverage of COVID-19 reflected many of these themes, with China presented as having covered up the problem and made bad decisions: reactions that are presented as consequences of a problematic political system, and the approach of Xi Jinping himself.
- The Cold War frame became more prominent over time, while a US–China 'trade war' was a more common meme in 2019. The Cold War frame was often used implicitly and explicitly to compare China to the Soviet

Figure 2. Framing analysis of *Financial Times* Big Reads on China. Source: Compiled by the author

| YEAR | NEGATIVE | NEUTRAL | POSITIVE | TOTAL |
|------|----------|---------|----------|-------|
| 2019 | 30 | 4 | 0 | 34 |
| 2020 | 31 | 4 | 0 | 35 |
| 2021 | 23 | 4 | 2 | 29 |
| 2022 | 31 | 4 | 0 | 35 |

42 I am grateful to Zhao Wenhui for producing a longer version of the analysis of Chaguan, which is summarised here.

43 These data have been collected by the author by going through the titles and topics of all articles listed under Big Reads on the internet version of the *Financial Times* at <https://www.ft.com/> (not including podcasts or 'partner content'). In almost all cases, 'China' (or a metonym such as 'Beijing') appears in the title or the subtitle of the article. A few exceptions have been included where it is clear that China is a major focus of the article in question, though the title or topic may be broader.

44 Henry Sanderson. 'Battery technology gives China an opening in electric vehicles'. *Financial Times* Big Read, 7 October 2021.

45 Harriet Agnew and Joshua Oliver. 'Baillie Gifford: Can a new generation keep riding the tech boom?' *Financial Times* Big Read, 22 June 2021.

46 Possible conflict over Taiwan is a story that the *Financial Times* has really tried to own, with multiple 'exclusives', often based on briefings from US intelligence and security sources.

Union; there were a number of characterisations of US policy as a necessary response to China's ideology, political system and international assertiveness.

The salience of the coronavirus pandemic was also reflected in the China stories, with 11 of the China Big Reads in 2020 focusing on different aspects of COVID-19 in China: more than any other topic. There were three stories on Hong Kong in 2020, compared to four in the second half of 2019 when the social unrest was at its height; this number declined to one in 2021 and two in 2022. In 2020, there were stories on Xinjiang and UK-China relations, but, while those topics were referenced in some later Big Reads, there were no subsequent stories focusing on them.

Of the stories we coded neutral in their framing of China, two related to international politics, while the others concerned economic and business issues.⁴⁷ The international politics stories focused on Australian and Indian government policies towards China, respectively,⁴⁸ and, while the premise of these stories was that China presented a challenge to those two countries, we judged that China itself was framed in broadly neutral terms. That contrasted with another story about German policy towards China during the same period,⁴⁹ which framed China more clearly in a negative way (making comparisons between Xi Jinping and Mao Zedong, criticising the economy as weak, referring to 'theft' of intellectual property and 'foul' corporate practices, making negative comments about China's values). Another neutral article was on TikTok and strongly critical of the Trump administration approach to the company, though it also gave space to US national security concerns about China, implying they were legitimate.⁵⁰ Otherwise, criticism of the US approach to China was sparse in the Big Reads.

While economy and business themes were often covered in a less negative manner, the overall economic coverage, particularly in 2022, was consistently negative.⁵¹ China's economy was regularly described as weak and facing major challenges, with its growth model broken and problems of debt about to explode. Policy decisions and the political system were often given as partial reasons for this, including frequent criticism of Xi Jinping and the Chinese

Government for an inability to change course or to deal effectively with problems. This is a wider phenomenon in media coverage, by which the nature of China's political system and politics is regularly cited as a reason for all sorts of problems – problems that might have other structural, historical, political, economic or even mundane explanations that are not to do with regime type or mode of governance. During 2022, the Big Reads also contained regular swipes at the Chinese Government's 'common prosperity' agenda, under which many of the policy and economic problems – such as the so-called tech crackdown – were placed.⁵²

The Economist's Chaguan column

Another source of influential reporting on China is *The Economist's* Chaguan column, launched in September 2018. It takes up one page of the print version of the newspaper (in the region of 1,000 words per article), and appears most weeks (*The Economist* is a weekly publication).⁵³ Chaguan is written solely by one journalist, David Rennie, who is based in Beijing. From the columns, we can see that Rennie travels extensively in China to produce his reports, and on-the-ground anecdotes are a strong feature of this well-written and compelling column. The reports are topical, but, because they are published weekly, Chaguan is able to reflect and engage in more in-depth analysis than a daily newspaper, in a similar way to *the Financial Times* Big Reads. For this project, we read carefully each Chaguan column from January 2020 to February 2023 (inclusive), applying similar coding of category, topic and framing as for the other media coverage. The categories we used were economic, political, social and cultural, with further subdivisions in each category. We also added neutral-negative and neutral-positive as intermediate categories for the framing analysis. In total, 132 reports were analysed: 44 in 2020, 43 in 2021, 37 in 2022 and 8 in the first two months of 2023.⁵⁴

As with the other media analysed for this project, political topics dominated, with 86 of the 132 reports focusing on politics. In contrast to the *Financial Times* Big Reads, there were more society topics (31 in total) and fewer on the economy (eight articles). As with other

47 One story in 2020 that had 'Chinese' in the headline was coded neutral on China, though the China angle was not obviously relevant to the story and arguably this should be excluded from the dataset. It covered the court case between Anil Ambani and three banks. The headline and story repeatedly referred to these as 'Chinese banks'. Benjamin Parkin. 'Anil Ambani vs Chinese banks: Court case exposes stunning decline'. *Financial Times* Big Read, 17 March 2020.

48 Nic Fildes and Dimitri Sevastopulo. 'Australia's defence dilemma: Projecting force or provoking China?' *Financial Times* Big Read, 17 November 2022. Benjamin Parkin and Chloe Cornish. 'India's plan to take on China as South Asia's favourite lender'. *Financial Times* Big Read, 1 December 2022.

49 Guy Chazan and Yuan Yang. 'Germany struggles with its dependency on China'. *Financial Times* Big Read, 1 November 2022.

50 Miles Kruppa, James Fontanella-Khan and Demetri Sevastopulo. 'Trump's TikTok dance: The politicisation of American business'. *Financial Times* Big Read, 19 September 2020.

51 There may be some period-based effect here, as the Chinese economy faced numerous challenges during 2022.

52 Though there is a more neutral explanation of 'common prosperity' by prominent *Financial Times* writer on China James Kynge at the end of 2021. 'Year in a word: Common prosperity', 28 December 2021, available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/4dbbdade-15f1-4c6e-9220-738891d4c475>.

53 The first Chaguan column is available to subscribers at <https://www.economist.com/china/2018/09/13/the-economists-new-china-column-chaguan>.

54 As noted above, I am most grateful to Zhao Wenhui for this analysis.

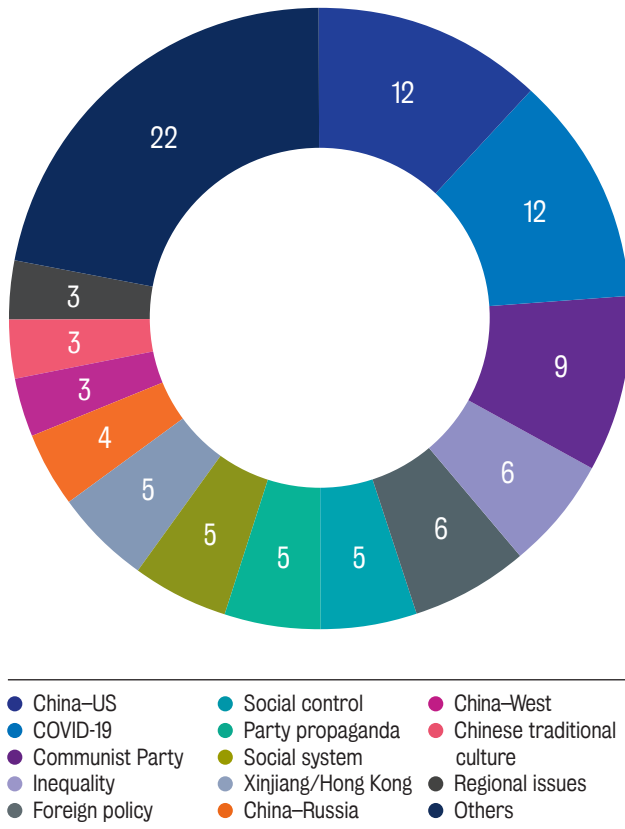


Figure 3. Topics by percentage in Chaguan columns

media, culture was covered least (six articles). Under politics, there was a broad balance between domestic and international topics over all the reports, with slightly more on domestic politics than international (49 and 43 articles, respectively). Unsurprisingly, given that this period covered the COVID-19 pandemic in China, there were numerous reports on public health (12 in total) – particularly in 2020 (the first year of COVID) and again in 2022, when China's COVID policy faced several challenges; when China was doing better than other countries in managing COVID, it was treated less by Chaguan and the media generally.

Our framing analysis identified negative coverage in 84 per cent of Chaguan's columns, with only four reports (1.5 per cent) being coded neutral-to-positive (and none clearly positive). All four of these neutral-to-positive reports also fell into the culture category. The proportion of negative reports was highest in 2022, and politics was most dominant during the same year; over the whole period, the proportion of neutral reports was lowest for politics, where a clear majority of reports were unambiguously negative.

The range of topics covered in these reports is quite broad, and often stimulated by topical developments (including popular TV dramas, incidents such as the

beating of a woman in Tangshan, and political events such as the Communist Party's 20th National Congress in late 2022). Figure 3 lists these topics.⁵⁵

Chaguan echoes the practice of other media in consistently repeating and emphasising particular terms or images of China, many of which are negative. For example, when discussing the economy, China's economic behaviour towards foreign firms or governments is often described as 'bullying' or 'threatening'. The use of negative terms is most common in reports on politics. Frequent keywords used in reports on Chinese domestic politics include 'authoritarian'/'authority'/'autocracy', 'censorship'/'controlling'/'surveillance', 'irresponsible' and 'violate'/'limit human rights'. Keywords regarding China's foreign relations include authoritarian/autocratic, bully/cheat/harass, aggressive/reckless and blame/accuse foreign countries. These words directly define the nature of China or its behaviour as negative, and their frequent appearance in political coverage creates their links to Chinese politics, subliminally transforming the framework constructed by the media into the reader's own perception. This constitutes a normalisation of a strongly negative picture of China's politics.

The way that Hong Kong or Xinjiang are referred to across all of these media outlets reinforces this pattern. These two places, and the central government's policies towards them, have become media bywords for repression and authoritarianism. They are frequently mentioned in passing in reports on topics that are not related to either place, in a way that frames China negatively: a template to plug into any story that needs evidence for Chinese 'repression', even if that story does not relate either to Hong Kong or Xinjiang.⁵⁶

Conclusion

This research has examined recent media coverage of China across a number of UK-based outlets. It finds that negative framing and tone are strongly dominant in coverage of China, though the extent of this varies across outlets, time and issue. **Political issues attract the most negative coverage and they also are dominant within reporting on China – not just in the selection of political topics as those most frequently reported, but in the way that a political and normative lens is often brought to coverage of social, economic and cultural issues.**

It should be noted that this research looked at coverage of China. It is sometimes argued that criticism is focused on the ruling Communist Party rather than the country, but even if such a distinction is meaningful, it gets lost in the way these reports are constructed. **It is China, not (just) the Communist Party of China, that is framed negatively in the British media.**

⁵⁵ I am grateful to Zhao Wenhui for providing the data for this chart.

⁵⁶ I am grateful to Ting Shi for her insights on this.

Some might argue that the British media has got China about right, that politics is really what matters, and that most of what the British public should know about China is negative – though, even if we accept that, it is not obvious why it should be up to media outlets to make that judgement. On the basis of my own experience of China, I would refute that and argue that there is much more to China than politics and that there are many positive developments to report alongside the criticism. The occasional story covered in this analysis demonstrates that there are positive developments to report; for example, the *Financial Times* report about BYD. At a minimum, the imbalance between politics, economy, society and culture in media reporting suggests that readers of the media are not getting a representative picture of China today.

What seems to be happening is that more negative issues are selected for greater coverage, as discussed in the introduction to this report. While, to some extent, this is a wider feature of the media that is not limited to China, when it comes to international issues it is a particular feature of coverage of countries that are considered ‘enemies’ or ‘rivals’ rather than those that are ‘friends’.⁵⁷

As discussed in the introduction to this paper, one view of many journalists is that their role is to report the negatives, though other approaches are possible. The purpose of this paper is not to engage in a theoretical debate about what makes good journalism. But we can observe that the **coverage of China analysed for this paper emphasises the negatives rather than setting out to deliver a balanced and accurate picture of what China is like**. That is done through selection of topics and repetition of ideas that normalise a strongly negative picture of China today.

An issue often raised in discussions of Western media coverage of China is the limited number of journalists based in mainland China itself. The numbers have indeed declined over recent years, due to a combination of factors: COVID restrictions, greater difficulty in obtaining visas, some tit-for-tat national security investigations (in the case of Australia, for example) and some internet-based harassment of journalists. A number of journalists also decided to leave Hong Kong in the wake of the passage of the National Security Law in 2020. Taiwan has been a big beneficiary, as a number of Western journalists have headed there. It should be common sense that it is more difficult to produce good coverage of China from outside the Chinese mainland, though it is less clear that being based in Beijing or Shanghai itself leads to more positive coverage of the country: counter-examples to this already referenced in this report are the BBC’s John Sudworth (before he left for Taiwan) and *The Economist*’s Chaguan column.

There are clear policy implications. Negative media coverage of China reinforces and contributes to widespread negative views about China in the UK.⁵⁸ This makes **a hawkish or more critical policy towards China more likely, in line with the interests of lobbyists and politicians inside and outside government who favour that approach** (in contrast, as noted above in the discussion of previous studies, during the ‘Golden Era’ in bilateral relations the negative media tone was less dominant). The relationship between media and policy agendas is iterative, and we can see that media commentaries and reports are used to push policy issues and to set the policy agenda. A good example around 2020 was the question of Huawei’s presence in the UK. More recent examples might be the steady stream of media articles on Chinese industrial presence in Internet of Things supply chains, or alleged risks from using security cameras made in China, or the campaign against TikTok, which has led to its being banned on government devices. In many of these cases, the media reporting follows information shared by lobby groups or anonymous officials, with little critical reflection or investigation.

The almost total lack of any positive coverage of China in the British media further closes off the scope even for making arguments that policy should reflect opportunities from dealing with China. The Overton window on China policy does not allow for positive coverage of the country at the moment. Others have commented on this – for example, Daniel Bell said, ‘There is almost universal consensus in the West that China is led by an evil government that is bad to its own people and dangerous to people in other countries. It’s extremely difficult to publish views that argue otherwise’, and continued, ‘Public opinion makes it almost impossible to publish comments that offer a balanced picture of Chinese politics in leading Western media outlets’.⁵⁹

In the current political climate, this looks unlikely to change. As discussed at the start of this paper, the important lesson is for responsible politicians and policymakers to realise that the picture of China they are getting from the media is an inaccurate and incomplete one. In short, media coverage and the wider public debate about China in the UK today fail to reflect the complex reality of China and close off space for in-depth understanding or balanced debate about this most significant of countries.

57 Jesse Owen Hearn-Branaman and Tabe Bergman, eds (2022). *Journalism and Foreign Policy: How the US and UK Media Cover Official Enemies*. London and New York: Routledge.

58 See Summers et al. (2022).

59 Daniel Bell (2023). *The Dean of Shandong: Confessions of a Minor Bureaucrat at a Chinese University*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 116 and pp. 124–125, respectively.



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