

COMMENTARY

Is Shanghai's *Sixth Tone* a New Model for China's Overseas Propaganda?

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Behind the news headlines of tightening censorship, China's media has seen an unprecedented wave of restructuring – even in the area of *da waixuan* or grand propaganda for foreigners. State-controlled media outlets have been trying to change the tone of their speech in foreign languages; market-based organisations have been introducing private capital while emphasising a different side of China that foreign journalists are not interested in covering.

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To observers of Chinese media, the landscape under the reign of Xi Jinping has been seen as grim compared to that under Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao. In the past five years, journalists in China have complained about the narrowing scope of investigative journalism. Hundreds, if not thousands, of orders have been issued by the authorities to stifle coverage of politics and society. (China Digital Times, n.d.). And even in the area of economic coverage, the government has shown uneasiness with anything it deems would 'rattle the markets' (Wong, Gough and Stevenson, 2015).

Yet behind the news headlines of tightening censorship, China's media has seen an unprecedented wave of restructuring – even in the area of *da waixuan* (大外宣), or 'grand foreign propaganda' to foreigners. State-controlled media outlets – such as China Central Television, now known externally as CGTN – have been trying to change the tone of their speech in foreign languages; market-based organisations have been introducing private capital while emphasising a different side of China that foreign journalists are not interested in covering. For example, CGTN dedicated an entire page to China's 'culture ambassador', the panda (CGTN, 2017). It has also made efforts to cover the art of ancient calligraphy (CGTN, 2018).

This is why the Shanghai-based website *Sixth Tone* (2018) has caught the attention of major international publications such as the *New York Times* and *Foreign Policy*. And inevitably, this relatively new online publication has raised the question of how far it can go in challenging the sophisticated Chinese censors.

There is a reason why this new publication is called *Sixth Tone*. According to its founding editor Wei Xing, Mandarin Chinese consists of five tones, including one rarely-known 'no-tone

tone'. This publication aspires to go beyond the existing tones of news on China, providing a fresh and imaginative perspective for readers in English, which editors there say would go beyond the often-negative coverage of China by mainstream Western English-language outlets as Griffiths (2013) reported.

Two years after its initial launch, *Sixth Tone* has proved far more effective than the hundreds of millions of dollars invested in English-language news programmes by the state broadcaster Xinhua, CCTV and CRI. Mainstream outlets such as the BBC often cite *Sixth Tone* as their source when reporting on Chinese social stories: (BBC, 2016a; BBC 2016b). For foreign journalists, it has also shown a diverse and authentic side of China that rarely received much attention elsewhere.

'The emergence of *Sixth Tone* should be largely expected,' Colum Murphy, the publication's first content director told me from Shanghai, 'English-language media face a shortage of resources and headcount, and they have little resource to go deeper into many modern China stories.'

A former veteran *Wall Street Journal* China correspondent, Murphy has spent the past decade in China, Hong Kong and Japan. When he was about to leave the *Wall Street Journal* in the summer of 2015, he was vacillating between an international newswire and the then-nascent idea of *Sixth Tone*. Finally, the idea of joining a start-up persuaded him.

'*Sixth Tone* does fit into what President Xi has called for: "to tell the China story well";' (Wu 2017) Murphy admits, 'but it isn't something that motivates me every morning when I start my day. We tell the China stories that aren't available in foreign media, both in terms of the scope and in terms of the geography.'

In recent months, the publication has taken a deeper look into some of the more contentious issues around which its sister Chinese-language publication *The Paper* would have to tread very carefully. For example, it proclaimed that 'China's Increasing Presence across the African Continent Has Led to Social Conflict,' (Aidoo, 2016). In similar vein, *Sixth Tone* has investigated child sex abuse in China (Liang, 2017), sexual assault (Fang, 2017) and why the country's HIV testing is unfairly targeting gay men, as well as how a shortage of a critical leukaemia drug is endangering sick children in China.

Nowadays, over 200,000 visitors come to *Sixth Tone's* webpages every month. Among them, more than 30% of *Sixth Tone's* readers come from the United States; 8 % from the United Kingdom; 12% from mainland China; and 7% from Australia.

It is also active on social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, which are both banned in mainland China. Its Twitter account has nearly 66,000 followers (Twitter, 2018) and its Facebook page more than 280,000 likes and over 312,000 followers (Facebook, 2018).

The success of *Sixth Tone* might be explained by the bigger change happening in China's media scene over the past few years. Although the Communist Party has intensified its control, it has also allowed many forms of media entrepreneurship. Anecdotally, this is, in part, because of a lack of impact overseas by traditional Chinese party-owned newspapers.

In a rare speech on media after he came to power, President Xi Jinping stressed: '[we must] forge a batch of new mainstream enterprises that are diverse in form, with advanced methods, which are competitive, and build a number of new media groups that have strong force, propaganda strength, credibility and influence, and shape a three-dimensional, diverse and modern communication system with converged development.' (CPCN, 2014).

To savvy media executives and entrepreneurs alike, this brings more opportunities than challenges. In the years that followed, hundreds if not thousands of new media start-ups sprang up in China's digital space. Nowadays, an investment in media is not something that can solely be done by the government. Private capital has also joined the game, and these firms are making profits.

Take *Sixth Tone's* umbrella publication *The Paper* as an example. Its parent company raised US \$96 million from 6 new investors, who were due to receive 17.8% shares at the end of 2016.

According to the *People's Daily*, initial investors in *The Paper* included the private equity firm Hony Capital, the Fortune Global 500 property developer Shanghai Greenland Group and the official Shanghai United Media Group, which alone has reportedly spent at least \$16 million.

This is a significant change in China's media scene. While few would be able to fight the Communist Party's stringent and increasingly sophisticated censorship rules, the abundance of funding has liberated Chinese journalists who have long been complaining about a lack of freedom and resources. These days, journalists working in start-ups say they have greater freedom to report on topics that would not be possible in well-established traditional media, for example the revelations made by *The Paper*. They also say that this new model guarantees enough funding for them to be more innovative. Both *The Paper* and *Sixth Tone* have invested to strengthen their visual presentation.

As a result a seemingly bigger space has been carved out for reporting and for entrepreneurship. In June 2016, a group of journalists from *The Paper* left the organisation to start their own video-sharing venture, *The Pear Video*. By the end of 2017, this YouTube-like service had become one of the most-watched video-sharing websites. Its recent video about a Chinese boy with frozen hair sparked a nationwide debate on the country's poverty gap (Allen, 2018).

So do *Sixth Tone* and its backers hold the answer to China's quest to dominate international discourse about itself and its place in the world? Possibly not. It is unlikely to prompt international media to change the way it covers China; nor would *Sixth Tone* provide the kind of critical news coverage that might change the image of China from inside.

As the website attracts more attention from foreign commentators, cases of apparent (self-) censorship have sprung up. Recently, the website took down an article about how some Chinese reporters used social media to show their support for the BBC's former China Editor Carrie Gracie, when the long-serving reporter resigned over pay inequality at the BBC. The archived original article is no longer available (Imgur.com, 2018). *Sixth Tone's* original page for its story returns only a 404 code (Sixth Tone, n.d.).

But such a new model from this indigenous Chinese publication could compensate for the shortage in resources of Western counterparts at a time when China itself is undergoing tremendous social change. It could also open a door for normally financially-constrained organisations that are looking for a transition. This could perhaps bring some hope for the future.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

Author Information

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