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Joseph Weber

University of Nebraska–Lincoln, josephweber@unl.edu

Linjun Fan

Shantou University

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How Chinese Journalism Students View Domestic and Foreign Media: A Survey on Credibility, Censorship, and the Role of the Communist Party in Media¹

Joseph Weber* & Linjun Fan**

ABSTRACT

According to a survey conducted in the fall of 2013, most students in a cross section of Chinese journalism schools call for less censorship, put more faith in Western media than in domestic Chinese media, and do not believe journalists should join the Communist Party. The thirty-nine question survey, conducted anonymously with the help of journalism teachers at eight universities in China, comes at a time when press freedoms are being curtailed on the mainland and in Hong Kong and even as journalists resist the curbs. The results suggest that Chinese leaders may face rising pressure over time to ease their media controls.

* *Joseph Weber* has been an Associate Professor at the College of Journalism and Mass Communications at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln since 2009. He taught at Tsinghua University in Beijing for a semester in the fall 2011. He has written about China for the *Columbia Journalism Review*, *National Review*, and the *Washington Post*. Before moving into academics, he served as Chief of Correspondents for *BusinessWeek*, his employer of twenty-two years. Earlier, he worked as a reporter for two newspapers and one other magazine.

** *Linjun Fan* is a Lecturer at Cheung Kong School of Journalism and Communication, Shantou University. She has her M.A. in Journalism at UC-Berkeley. She worked as a news researcher at the Beijing Bureau of McClatchy (formerly Knight Ridder) Newspapers (2005–2007), and was a reporter at China Central Television (2003–2005).

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1. Weber presented preliminary results of this survey 1 March 2014, at the mid-winter meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication. Early results were also discussed in Joseph Weber, *Chinese Journalists are Beginning to Fight Their Government's Censorship*, *WASHINGTON POST* 3 June 2014, available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2014/06/03/chinese-journalists-are-beginning-to-fight-their-governments-censorship/>.

I. INTRODUCTION

Aided by several colleagues in China, we surveyed students in journalism programs at several Chinese universities about their opinions on the credibility of Chinese and foreign media, censorship, and the appropriateness of journalists joining the Communist Party. Our aim was to get a sense of what future journalists see as the strengths and weaknesses of internal and external media and how they feel about the way journalism is practiced in their country. Because some of them may become journalists once they enter the workforce, their views, expectations, and values could, over time, bear on government policies and offer some insight into whether or not changes in practices could be on the horizon.

The context for this survey is complex. On the one hand, in recent years, media in China have been encouraged to be more aggressive in their coverage, especially in pursuing issues around corruption.² On the other hand, censorship remains a persistent and defining quality of state-controlled Chinese media. Moreover, foreign media have been pressured by the state when they reported on sensitive areas, especially those involving Party and government leaders.³ Particularly in recent months, new Chinese leaders appear to have throttled back on free expression in the media and have sought to reassert the primacy of Marxist doctrine for Chinese journalists practicing their craft domestically.⁴

In the fall of 2013, journalist Paul J. Mooney was denied a visa that he needed to continue his twenty-eight year career of reporting from China. Since, he has written about efforts by Chinese leaders to control media. Specifically, Mooney singles out policies of President Xi Jinping, writing, “[t]he speed with which [Internet] posts are deleted is just one indicator of the Chinese government’s ability to muzzle freedom of expression, a trend that has sharply worsened in the year since President Xi Jinping came to

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2. See *Investigative Journalism in China: Eight Cases in Chinese Watchdog Journalism* (David Bandurski & Martin Hala eds., 2010). See also Joseph Weber, *China’s Evolving Press*, NATIONAL JOURNAL, 6 Oct. 2012 (on file with author), available at <http://www.nationaljournal.com/magazine/china-s-evolving-press-20121004>.
 3. See *Foreign Journalism Under Pressure: A Little Local Difficulty*, ECONOMIST, 11 Nov. 2013, available at <http://www.economist.com/blogs/analects/2013/11/foreign-journalism-under-pressure>; Matt Schiavenza, *What’s at Stake in Bloomberg’s China Coverage: The Company’s Alleged Refusal to Offend the Chinese Communist Party Reveals the Limitations of “Journalistic Access,”* ATLANTIC, 20 Nov. 2013, available at <http://www.theatlantic.com/china/archive/2013/11/whats-at-stake-in-bloombergs-china-coverage/281660/>; *New York Times Reporter leaves China After Visa Denial*, AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE, 30 Jan. 2014, available at <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/afp/140130/new-york-times-reporter-leaves-china-after-visa-denial-0>.
 4. See Mia Li & Bree Fung, *Are You Qualified to Be a Journalist in China? Take the Test*, N.Y. TIMES, 23 Dec. 2013, available at http://sinosphere.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/12/23/are-you-qualified-to-be-a-journalist-in-china-take-the-test/?_php=true&_type=blogs&_r=0.

power in November 2012.”⁵ “Xi took office at a time when people were becoming dissatisfied with the state of society and hopeful for political reform. Instead, the opposite has happened, with crackdowns on Chinese and foreign journalists becoming more frequent and online censorship increasing. People need to be on guard against ‘Western anti-China forces,’ Xi warned in a speech in August, that ‘constantly strive in vain to use the Internet to overwhelm China.’”⁶

However, pressures for more openness in media are substantial on Chinese authorities, both from within and without. Despite extensive domestic controls, the growth of the Internet and increased access to global media are forcing Chinese leaders to contend with freer flows of information. Moreover, some journalists in China have pressed for fewer limits on free speech, most notably a group at *Southern Weekly*, a Guangdong provincial paper where staffers staged a three-day strike in January 2013 to protest the censorship of an editorial urging political reform.⁷ More recently, thousands of people took to the streets in Hong Kong to protest curbs on press freedom and the knifing of Kevin Lau Chun-to, a former editor of *Ming Pao*, on 26 February 2014.⁸

Furthermore, in recent years Chinese leaders have opened the doors of several universities to foreign journalism instructors and some Chinese schools are now staffed by Chinese instructors who were exposed to Western media mores during time spent studying abroad.⁹ Substantial numbers of Chinese citizens have attended universities in the West where they, too, have been exposed to Western media styles.¹⁰

5. Paul Mooney, *Command and Control: The State of Journalism in China, 25 Years After Tiananmen*, *The State of Journalism in China*, NIEMAN REPORTS, 18 Feb. 2014, available at <http://niemanreports.org/articles/command-and-control/>.

6. *Id.*

7. See *Special Feature: The “Southern Weekly” Controversy*, FREEDOM HOUSE, (18 Jan. 2013), available at http://www.freedomhouse.org/cmb/2013_southern_weekly#.Uuqv4_ZRZoA (a U.S.-based human rights advocacy organization that monitors press freedom around the world).

8. *Thousands Rally for Press Freedom After Hong Kong Editor Stabbed*, REUTERS, 2 Mar. 2014, available at <http://www.firstpost.com/politics/thousands-rally-for-press-freedom-after-hong-kong-editor-stabbed-1415369.html>; Wilfred Chan, *Hong Kong Newspaper Editor Kevin Lau Fights for Life After Stabbing*, CNN, 26 Feb. 2014, available at <http://www.cnn.com/2014/02/26/world/asia/kevin-lau-hong-kong-attack/>. See also *After Stabbing, Fears Grow About Hong Kong Media Freedom*, transcript of a 26 Feb. 2014, radio broadcast of “Here & Now,” featuring Shirley Yam, vice-chair of the Hong Kong Journalists Association, and James Fallows, national correspondent of ATLANTIC, available at <http://hereandnow.wbur.org/2014/02/26/journalist-hong-kong>.

9. Coauthor Weber taught business and economic journalism and multimedia journalism at Tsinghua University’s School of Journalism and Communication in the fall 2011. Coauthor Fan earned her master’s degree at the Graduate School of Journalism at the University of California at Berkeley in 2009. Earlier, Fan worked as a reporter at China’s national broadcasting company and the Beijing Bureau of *McClatchy (formerly Knight Ridder) Newspapers*.

10. With 274,439 students from China studying in US institutions of higher education in 2013–2014, the country is the leading source of foreign students in the US. See Institute of International Education, Open Doors Data, *International Students: Leading Places of Origin* available at <http://www.iie.org/Research-and-Publications/Open-Doors/Data/International-Students/Leading-Places-of-Origin/2012-14>.

Exposure to Western media norms is producing a generation of budding Chinese journalists who, according to the results of this survey, would prefer less censorship, put more faith in Western media than in their own, and do not believe it appropriate for journalists to join the Communist Party.

II. METHODS

Utilizing "SurveyMonkey,"¹¹ we developed a thirty-nine question survey in English and in Mandarin. Along with demographic, institutional, and geographic information, the questions dealt with the following: (1) whether students believed all, most, some or none of what they read or see in news coverage in domestic and foreign-owned media; (2) whether domestic or foreign-owned media were too critical of China, not critical enough or appropriately critical; (3) and whether such media sought to try to shape public opinion with their coverage. We asked whether students believed there would be more or less censorship in the future and whether there should be less censorship. We also asked whether they were Party members or intended to join and if they believed journalists should be Party members.

Academic colleagues at several schools in China, both Western and non-Western, were invited to ask their students to respond to the survey. We advised students that their participation was voluntary and would be anonymous. Noting that we sought only honest opinions, we informed them that there were no right or wrong answers. The questionnaire included a blend of quantifiable answers in a "yes/no" or "more/less/about the same" format and the opportunity for open-ended answers.

The survey launched on 12 October 2013, with the request that respondents complete the survey by 31 October 2013. To accommodate more respondents, we extended the response deadline to 8 November 2013. In all, we amassed survey results throughout a nearly four-week period during the students' fall semester.

III. THE SURVEY POPULATION

Our survey population includes students attending eight universities in the provinces of Shandong, Guangdong, Fujian, and Hubei, as well as Beijing and Chongqing. Both undergraduates and graduate students responded.

There are 126 respondents in all. Because all but two chose to respond to the Mandarin version of the survey, we restricted our data to the Mandarin version. Furthermore, not all respondents answered all questions.

11. SURVEYMONKEY, <http://www.surveymonkey.com>.

Some questions were answered by as few as ninety-six respondents, while as many as 121 answered others (and we have noted the total responses for each question below).

Ninety-five respondents, or 78.5 percent out of 121 respondents, said that they expect to work in the media. Out of ninety-six respondents who answered a question on this point, the lion's share, thirty-five, said that they expect to work in print, while twenty-five expect to work in multimedia, nineteen online, and seventeen in broadcasting. A large number, forty-five, said that they hope to work for the Southern Media Newspaper Group, a relatively independent media organization. Xinhua is the second most popular career destination, with fourteen students responding that they hope to work there, followed by China Central Television (CCTV), with eleven hoping to work at the state broadcasting system.

The overwhelming majority of respondents, ninety-nine out of 121, are female, which reflects a gender imbalance common in journalism programs in China and around the world. They range in age from eighteen to twenty-four years old, with the majority, thirty-one, at age twenty. Most, sixty-four, are majoring in journalism, while the remainder has majors in advertising, communications, or broadcasting. For convenience, throughout the article we refer to all respondents as journalism students. Most of the respondents, sixty-seven, or 61.5 percent of the 109 who responded to the question have not studied journalism with teachers from outside of China; but forty-two of the respondents have.

IV. RESULTS/DISCUSSION

Our survey findings suggest that, by noteworthy margins, Chinese journalism students put more credence in foreign media than they do in Chinese media. They registered this view in three separate questions asking whether they believed the information reported by foreign and Chinese media was true and accurate and whether more, less, or about the same amount was true in Chinese media or foreign media. In the most dramatic finding, 76.6 percent of the respondents said that they believe most of what they read or saw in Western media, compared to just 48.7 percent who said that they believe most of what they read or saw in Chinese media.

Several responses to a question about the credibility of Chinese media are sharply critical. One respondent stated, "[m]ost Chinese state-owned media only report the good news," whilst another bluntly claimed, "[n]o freedom." Other notable responses include: "[m]any reports limit the political factors and they published some unreal news;" "no one thinks it necessary to tell the truth;" and "very tight control and media is punished on a regular basis." One respondent took a historical tack, saying, "there

are several reasons [why Chinese media lacks credibility]: 1) in history, the media was founded based on Soviet communist theory, and now there is a historical continuity, 2) the government wants its people to think China is a 'harmonious' country to live and then love them, 3) in some areas, such as normal people's life or some corruption, the government wants to stop, the journalists are encouraged to cover, so maybe those [reports] are true."

Defenders of Chinese media argue that the truth generally emerges, claiming that, "[i]t's impossible to tell so many lies," echoing answers such as, "false news will [easily] be exposed," and, "it is hard to fake the news." A former intern at a Chinese newspaper said journalists, "repeatedly check the facts and statistics," a view that relies on the belief espoused by one respondent, that, "truth is the essence of news."

Responses to a question about the credibility of Western media are generally positive ("foreign reporters are very responsible"). However, some are accompanied by qualifications. Notable answers include: "[m]ore mature market economy, less government control, and a persistent belief in freedom of the press," "[t]he culture of foreign media has been the pursuit of independence and freedom. They believe in the power of the media. They are highly credible. However, the stories we read have probably been filtered already," and "[f]rom what I can remember, the mainstream foreign media are loyal to truth and to objectivity. So they will do their best to remain objective in reporting news. But it doesn't shield them from making mistakes sometimes." Again, anchoring the response in a historical context, a student responded "[m]edia manipulation exists almost everywhere, but because of the history—the way the media [were] founded and the theory media was based on—and the current free and democratic social environment . . . you guys can enjoy real news!"

Most of the students also fault Chinese media for failing to be critical enough of China, while also faulting foreign media for being too critical of the country. Some 87.3 percent said that they believe domestic media are not critical enough of their country, while 60 percent said they believe foreign media are too critical.

But the students also seem to believe that both Chinese and foreign media have axes to grind or bring agendas to bear. By roughly the same percentages, 91.8 percent and 89.1 percent, respectively, the vast majority said they believe both Chinese and foreign media sought to shape public opinion. Furthermore, by large numbers, respondents gave both domestic and foreign media low marks on whether they are fair, balanced, and thorough in news coverage of China. Some 87.2 percent answered "no" to the question of whether or not Chinese media were fair, balanced, and thorough, while slightly more, 90.8 percent answered "no" to the same question about foreign media.

Responses to the question about fairness, balance, and thoroughness in Chinese media include: "[t]he state controls the extent to which negative

news can be covered," "Chinese media are the mouthpiece of the government," "[c]ensorship has filtered out negative information," and "[t]he truth in news comes from objectivity. Unfortunately, Chinese state-owned media aren't capable of it."

Similarly, responses to the question about fairness, balance, and thoroughness in foreign media include: "[f]oreign media do not understand China," "[t]hey are hostile toward China. They twist facts to tarnish China's image," "[t]hey do not truly understand China," "[s]ome haven't lived in China before, so they don't know much about China," and "[s]ome foreign media deliberately distort the truth to smear China's image."

The students overwhelmingly criticized censorship in news media, but suggested they believe that it will remain a part of the Chinese landscape. While 75 percent would like there to be less censorship, 61.5 percent said that they expect it to remain part of the Chinese media scene, with just under half, 48.6 percent, saying that they expect more censorship in the future.

Critics of censorship suggested that it hurts society by responding with statements such as: "[t]he news media should not become a tool for political propaganda. It should be a social platform for citizens to monitor the government," "[t]he average citizen and the public conscience should be allowed to speak," and "[a] more open media environment helps social justice." But defenders of censorship countered with suggestions that censorship lends "authenticity and objectivity," or that "censorship will curtail fabrication of news," and that censorship would "insure the media shoulders a sense of responsibility."

Interestingly, a large share, 79 percent, said journalists should not join the Communist Party even as nearly half said they intended to join the Party. Advocates for independence from the Party suggested that nonmembership would foster impartiality among journalists. One respondent stated that nonmembership would be "more objective and fair," while others voiced opinions such as the following: "journalists should remain independent," "journalists should be free from party influences," and one respondent opined that nonmembership creates "value neutrality." Others, however, argued that there was "no relationship between them" and, more simply, "I think it does not matter." Finally, one respondent neatly summed up the issue surrounding Party membership and working the press: "[i]t's hard to remain objective if you join a political party. But the problem is, in China, it's hard for you to work in the mainstream media if you are not a Party member."

V. MEDIA CREDIBILITY

Chinese students were asked two separate questions: (1) to what extent do you think the news you read in Chinese state-owned media is true and accurate;

and (2) to what extent do you think the news you read in foreign media is true and accurate? Here, in a figure combining the answers, we see that, of 111 respondents, the largest number, eighty-five, or 76.6 percent, said that they believed most of what they read or saw in Western-owned media, compared to just fifty-four, or 48.7 percent, who said that they believed most of what they read or saw in Chinese state-owned media. (See Fig. 1, below)

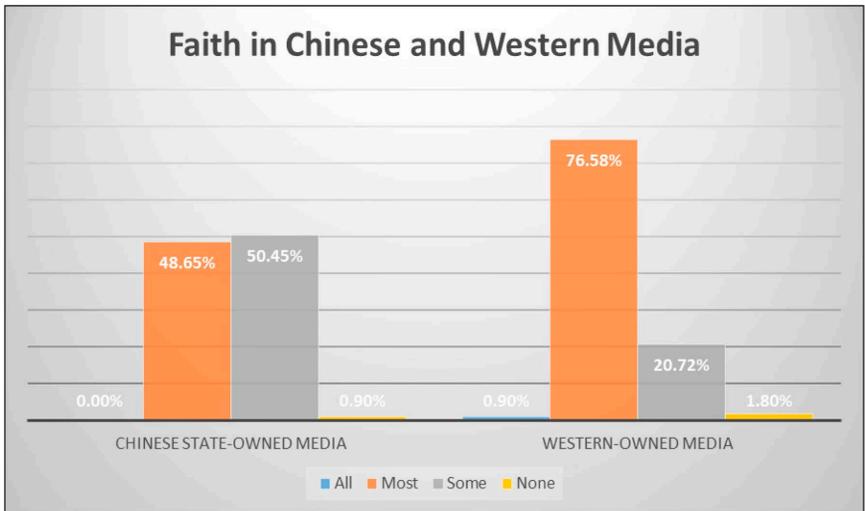


Figure 1. Share of 111 respondents saying that they believed that all, most, some, or none of what they read in news coverage was true and accurate in, respectively, Chinese and Western media. The totals: eighty-five said they believed most of the content in Western media, while fifty-four said they believed most of the content in Chinese media; twenty-three said they believed some content in Western media, while fifty-six answered “some” for Chinese media; none believed all the content in Chinese media and one believed all the content in Western media; one believed none of the content in Chinese media and 2 believed none of the content in Western media.

VI. MEDIA PURPOSE

The students were also asked whether or not they believed that Chinese media and foreign media sought to shape public opinion. Overwhelmingly, they said that they believed this was the case with both, with 91.8 percent of the respondents, or 101 out of 110, saying Chinese media sought to do so. Nearly the same share, 89.1 percent, or ninety-eight out of 110, said this was the case with foreign-owned media, as well. (See Fig. 2)

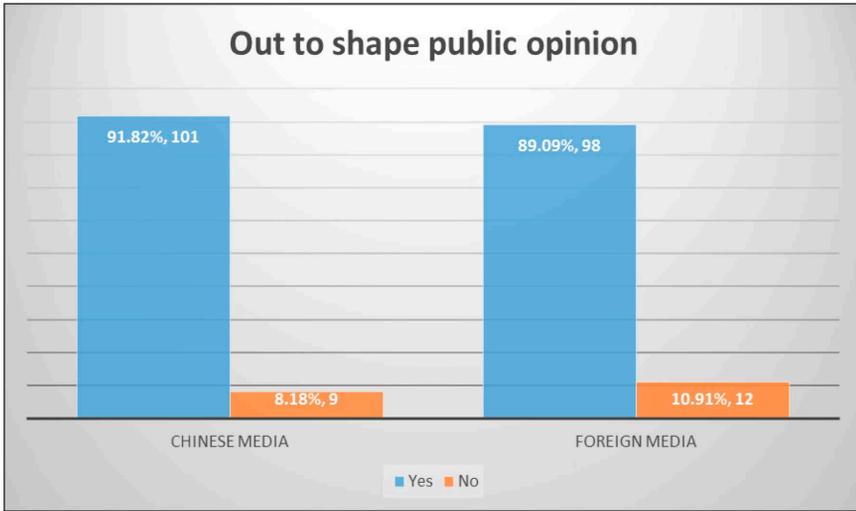


Figure 2. The vast majority of 110 respondents said that they believed Chinese and foreign media sought to shape public opinion.

VII. SKEPTICISM ABOUT CHINESE MEDIA

Respondents' skepticism of Chinese media was also apparent when asked for the following information: tell us whether you believe . . . more is true in foreign media than in Chinese state-owned media, more is true in Chinese state-owned media than in foreign media, or both are equally true. Only ten respondents out of 110, or 9.1 percent, said more is true in Chinese state-owned media than in foreign media, while fifty-four, or nearly half, said more is true in foreign media than in Chinese-owned media, and forty-six, or 41.8 percent, said both are equally true. (See Fig. 3)

VIII. HOW CRITICAL SHOULD MEDIA BE?

The students have widely differing views of Chinese and foreign media on the question of criticism of China. The great majority, ninety-six out of 110 respondents, or 87.3 percent, said they believe domestic media are not critical enough of China. But a substantial share, sixty-six respondents, or 60 percent, also said they believe foreign media are too critical. (See Fig. 4, below)

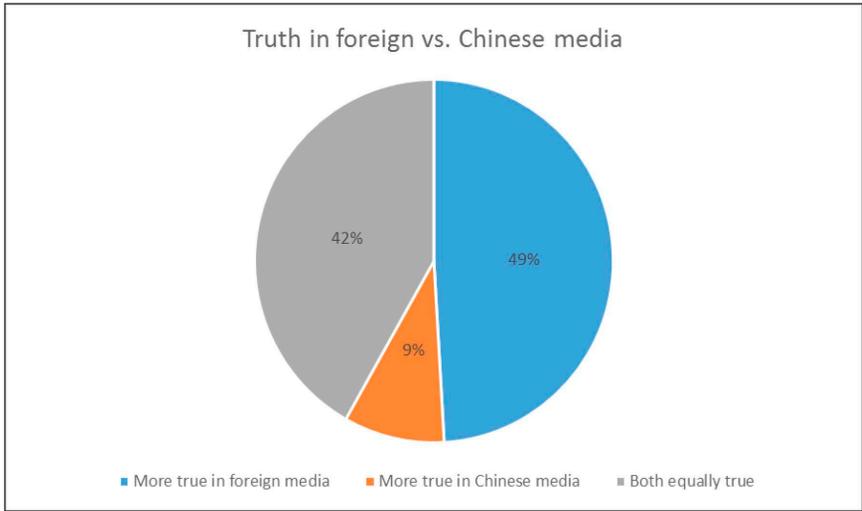


Figure 3. Share of 110 respondents who said that they believed more is true in foreign media than in Chinese media, more is true in Chinese media than in foreign media, or who said they believed both are equally true. The totals: fifty-four respondents said more is true in foreign media, forty-six said both are equally true and ten said more is true in Chinese media.

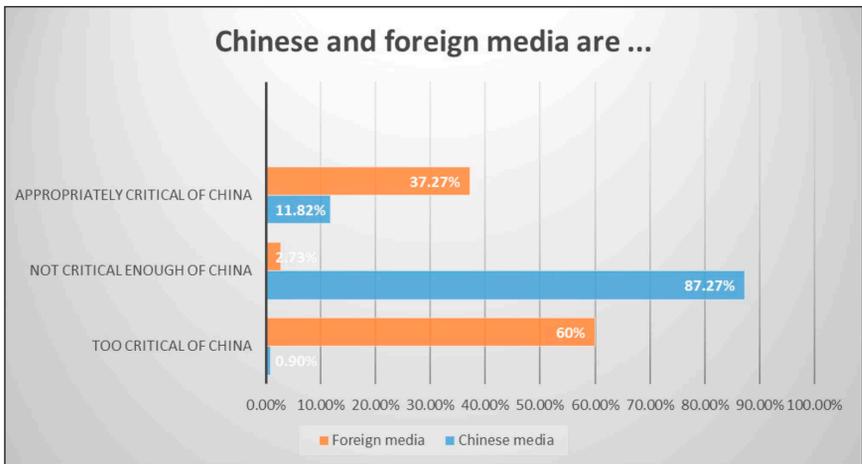


Figure 4. Shares of 110 respondents who said they believed Chinese media and foreign media are appropriately critical of China, not critical enough, or too critical. In all, ninety-six respondents said Chinese media were not critical enough, while three said that foreign media were not critical enough. And sixty-six said that foreign media were too critical, while just one said that Chinese media were too critical. Finally, forty-one said foreign media were appropriately critical, while thirteen said Chinese media were appropriately critical.

IX. TOO LITTLE FAIRNESS, BALANCE, OR THOROUGHNESS

Overall, the students gave both domestic and foreign media low marks on whether or not they are fair, balanced, and thorough in their news coverage of China. Out of 109 respondents, the vast majority, ninety-five, or 87.2 percent, answered “no” to the question regarding Chinese media. Slightly more, ninety-nine, or 90.8 percent, answered “no” regarding foreign-owned media. (See Fig. 5, below)

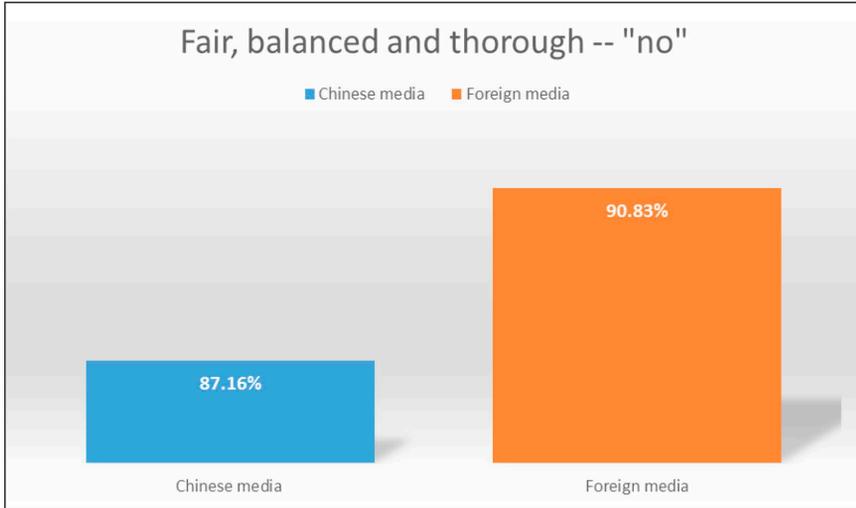


Figure 5. Share of 109 respondents who answered “no” to two separate questions of whether or not Chinese media and foreign-owned media are fair, balanced, and thorough in news coverage in China. Regarding Chinese media, “no” answers were registered by ninety-five respondents; regarding foreign media, ninety-nine respondents said “no.”

X. CENSORSHIP LIKELY TO STAY

A substantial majority, sixty-seven, or 61.5 percent, of 109 respondents expect censorship to remain a part of China’s media future. Of those, just under half, fifty-three, or 48.6 percent, said that they expect more censorship, while the other 12.8 percent, or fourteen, said it would remain the same. Only forty-two, or 38.5 percent, said that they expect less censorship. (See Fig. 6, below). However, a solid majority, eighty-one, or 75 percent of 108 who answered the separate question, said they believe there should be less censorship. (See Fig. 7, below).

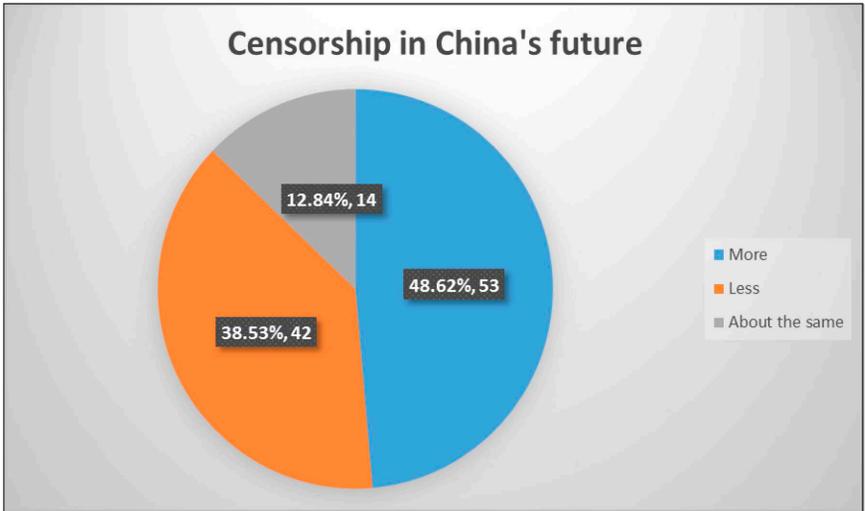


Figure 6. Of 109 respondents, sixty-seven said that they expect more or about the same amount of censorship in China's future. A minority of forty-two, or 38.5 percent, said that they expect less censorship.

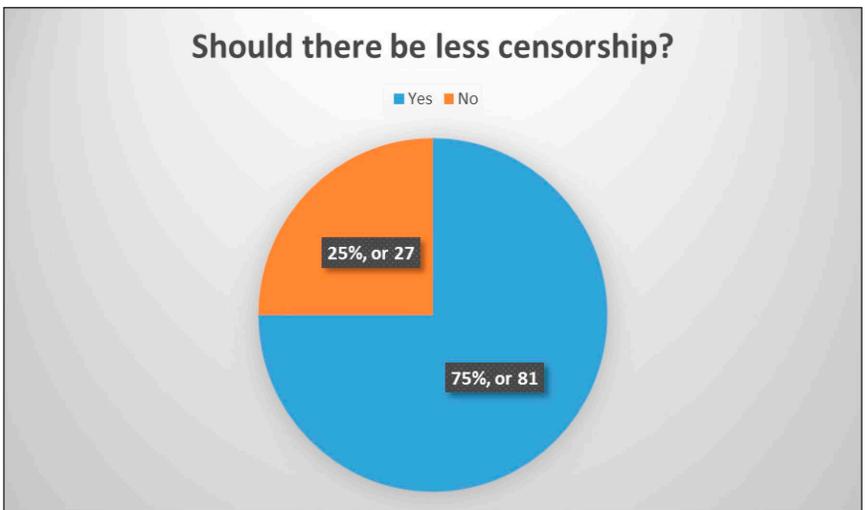


Figure 7. But three-quarters of the 108 respondents said that there should be less censorship.

XI. COMMUNIST PARTY MEMBERSHIP

Most of the students, seventy-eight out of 107 responding to the question, or 72.9 percent, said that they were not members of the Communist Party. And the vast majority, seventy-nine out of 100 responding to a separate question, said that journalists should not join the Party. Still, nearly half, forty-six out of ninety-nine responding to a third question on the topic, said that they intend to join. (See Fig. 8, below)

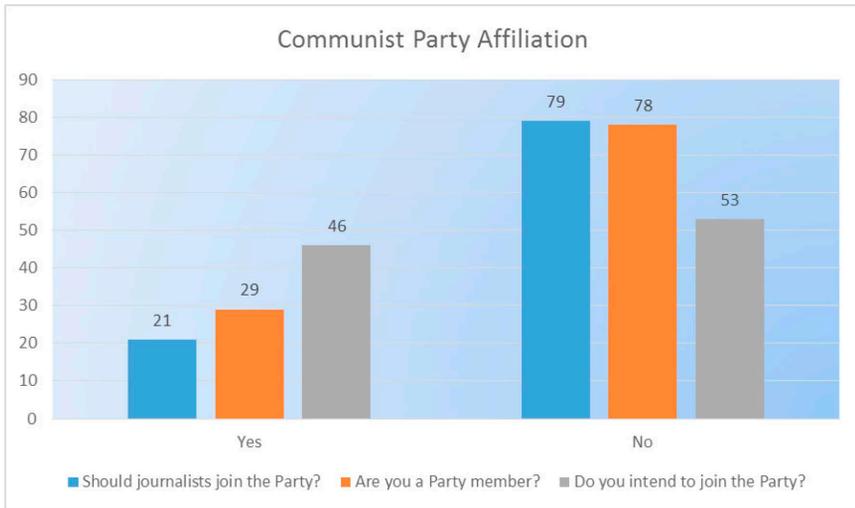


Figure 8. a substantial majority of respondents – seventy-nine out of 100 – said journalists should not join the Communist Party. But nearly half – forty-six out of ninety-nine – said that they intended to join and twenty-nine already had joined.

XII. LIMITATIONS

By its nature, this survey had some limitations. Our sample population was convenient in the sense that we were able to reach students based on personal acquaintanceships between the authors and various journalism teachers. The population may be representative, therefore, of views of journalism students at a relatively limited number of universities, rather than schools all across

the country. Furthermore, there might be a selection bias in that the survey was voluntary and students were urged to complete it online outside of the classroom, so it may have drawn responses from students with strong feelings one way or another about journalism in China. Finally, with a sample of 126 overall —and answers to some questions from slightly smaller populations —the survey has a margin of error that may approach 10 percent.

XIII. CONCLUSIONS

If there is an ebb and flow to the policies of the government and the Communist Party regarding media and if pressures for more freedom of expression grow, the views of budding journalists could have a bearing on how the government proceeds. At a minimum, those views could spawn tensions between these journalists and government overseers as these students become working reporters.

Skepticism about the reliability of Chinese media versus that of the West may be troubling to authorities and practicing journalists alike. One would expect that both groups prefer that citizens and journalists have more faith in domestic media. Furthermore, the substantial hostility among the students to censorship suggests that calls for more openness in media could grow. As news and information from the West and from within China grows more available, particularly through online channels, the need for credible and freer media in China may grow, as well.

This survey was taken at a time when government authorities were reining in media coverage, as some of the students may have known. It would be interesting to see if results would differ in a time of relative freedom, especially in periods when the media feels comfortable being more critical of Chinese society. Therefore, it would be useful to conduct this type of survey periodically in the future. Finally, a natural outgrowth of this line of questioning would be to provide the same survey to current working journalists in China.