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# A Quick Q & A with Kim Rathcke Jensen: A Beijing-Based Danish Journalist

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*A variety of events, from the Copenhagen environmental issues summit in 2009 to the controversy sparked by the Empty Chair in Oslo last year, have led to news stories in the American press that involve both China and a Scandinavian country. This led me to wonder what, if anything, was distinctive about the way Scandinavian media cover China. Realizing that there are bound to be important differences among Scandinavian countries in this regard, but needing to start somewhere in getting a feel for this issue, I turned to Kim Rathcke Jensen, a Danish reporter whose wide-ranging China-focused twitter feed <http://twitter.com/kinablog/> I've begun to check out periodically. Here are the results of the exchange we had via email:*

**JW:** What do you think is most distinctive and most generic about how China news is covered in Denmark as opposed to other Western countries?

**KRJ:** I think there are many similarities, which relate to two main shared narratives. First of all, during the last decade, there have been a staggering number of articles in the Danish press, as in that of so many other countries, about the booming Chinese economy and the endless opportunities for companies that invest in China. Second, there have been a lot stories in the Danish press, as elsewhere, about the big and faceless Communist dictatorship. Not all of this reporting in Danish venues is founded in reality and solid research, because a lot of the writing is being done from Denmark. And with all due respect for my colleagues back home, it is often being done by people who do not have Chinese language skills, lack a background in Chinese studies, and simply don't have a deep understanding of China. Specialised knowledge is really important when it comes to China. Comparatively speaking, "committing journalism" in many other countries (say, coming from Denmark and reporting about the US, where you are remaining within the same cultural hemisphere and speaking English gets you a long way) is easier. Most Danes simply grow up having little knowledge of China. As in many other European countries, the history classes in schools are very Eurocentric.

In addition, there is a heavily reliance on English language materials about China, which creates its own set of issues. Danish articles often quote articles from US and UK news sources, but rarely draw on articles published in Italy, France, Spain and other countries that use languages other than English. The reliance on English is also why, and I can't empirically prove this, there's a tendency to see the English versions of venues like Global Times, Xinhua and People's Daily quoted more and more often, being treated as though they were on par with agencies like Reuters, AFP and AP. This creates obvious problem if the reporter does not adopt a critical approach and demonstrating an understanding that an organisation like Xinhua does not share the same journalistic DNA and goals as Reuters. A result of all this is that a certain amount of the Danish news about China is influenced by the domestic agendas in the US and UK, the way the world is viewed from Washington and London, and to some extent also how it is seen from Beijing.

However, in spite of all this, the general coverage of China in the Danish media has improved enormously during the last decade. There's a difference between what is produced in Denmark and what correspondents based in China are doing—something that's true with other countries' media as well, of course. Obviously, being China-based myself, I'm biased here, but the majority of the Danish correspondents in China are skilled people who for the most part have been here for years or have some kind of China-related background. Also, when you think about how tiny a country Denmark is with only 5 and a half million people, there are a good number of correspondents here. Around ten of us are accredited, I think.

**JW:** Are there particular moments (like the Copenhagen Climate Summit or Nobel prize controversies involving China) when Scandinavian debates about and writing on the PRC veers off in particularly distinctive directions? And, of course, since the countries making up Scandinavia are very different from one another, I realize that in answering this you may need to bring contrasts between them into play.

The Beijing Olympics in 2008 was first and foremost a sporting event, not a political one. To a certain extent that was the mood in Denmark back then, and that was the feeling I got being here in Beijing. To my mind, this was obviously utter nonsense. However, until then, yes, there had been a lot of stories about "China's rise," which was already a cliché when I started to study Chinese in 2003, but I don't think most people had really understood and realized it, that with the economic power also came political power. Many Danes found out with the Copenhagen Climate Summit. I think that was an awakening moment for a lot of people, a clear indication that the West just couldn't push China and the developing world around as it pleased, but that they also demanded to have a say over their own fates. This sense was reaffirmed during the economic crisis. And especially also with the Nobel Prize, which created a lot of debate. Compared to previous years, it really generated a lot of discussion.

However, for the reasons I mentioned before, these issues, especially perhaps the Nobel Prize one, was too often present in simple black and white terms. When the regular news commentators in Denmark do not have a background knowledge of China, when they don't speak the language and perhaps have never even been there, you don't have the basis for them to frame a substantive and complex debate. Denmark is a small country, and the pool of Sinologists and old China hands is naturally quite small. I would very much like to see more qualified people engage in discussions of issues related to China, ones that could bring questions about China forward in a sophisticated and deeper way, instead of having the topic pushed around the surface by the ones speaking the loudest. Things are improving, albeit slowly. Too slowly, I think.

**JW:** Summits between the U.S. President and the Chinese head of state, like the one that recently took place in the U.S. ,generate a lot of attention in Beijing and Washington, D.C., as well as in the American and Chinese press. Are they seen as automatically newsworthy in Europe—and if so, more so or less so lately, if it's possible to generalize that way?

KRJ: Yes. These summits do generate a lot of interest. But because they take place in the US, not because of China's participation per se. The recent China-India meeting did not generate a lot of coverage in Denmark. But there's a huge amount of US news in the Danish media. Which in a way is very natural because of America's global position, because of the financial crisis, and perhaps also because the US is a good symbol of this identity crisis the West seems to be in right now, where a lot of people is unsure about the big changes, where we're heading, and what is going on in China and Asia.

So, in Denmark, you actually hear more news from the US than from Norway and Sweden even though we understand each other's languages, and are neighbouring countries with tight historical and cultural ties. I think there are more Danes who can name the American foreign secretary than her Swedish or Norwegian counterpart.

*About Kim Rathcke Jensen:*

*He first visited China in the mid-1990s and then studied journalism from 1999-2003 at the Danish School of Journalism. After that, he spent four years specializing in Chinese studies at Aarhus University and Nanjing University, earning a B.A. in Chinese from the former institution in 2007. Since then he has been living in Beijing and working as the China correspondent for the Danish newspaper Berlingske. You can follow his writing (and tweeting) at [www.berlingske.dk](http://www.berlingske.dk) , [www.kinablog.dk](http://www.kinablog.dk), and [www.twitter.com/kinablog](http://www.twitter.com/kinablog).*