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**The Media Impact Revisited:
A Case Study of Global and Chinese Media Coverage of Darfur**

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Introduction

In recent years, the Middle Kingdom has indeed been placed in the middle of a heated and global debate on the international community's involvement in complex emergencies. More specifically, global media outlets (as well as celebrities, athletes, and international organizations) have often cited the People's Republic of China's growing involvement in the domestic affairs of African nations and its simultaneous refusal to intervene in the complex emergency that has developed in the Darfur region of Sudan. It is generally accepted that global media have an impact on the decisions that powerful states make regarding humanitarian interventions, though the degree of that impact may vary depending on other factors. When this theory on the relationship between humanitarian interventions and global media is put forth, however, the states in question are generally ones that have well-established and relatively free systems of media dissemination.

The aim of this paper is to examine more closely the so called "CNN effect" as it relates to the People's Republic of China, a growing power whose population does not necessarily have access to uncensored media outlets. How do global and local media outlets influence the government of the People's Republic of China in the context of its decisions regarding complex emergencies and humanitarian interventions—if at all? In seeking to answer this overarching question, this paper will examine a recent case study, which has received much media attention on an international scale: Darfur. The first section of the paper will briefly discuss the relationship between the global media and international humanitarian intervention. The second section will examine the global media's response to China's involvement in Darfur, including the campaign against "The Genocide Games" during the 2008 Beijing Olympics. The next section will present the Chinese media coverage of Darfur, as well as a broader comparison among Chinese, African, and global media coverage of the PRC's affairs in Africa. Next, I will discuss the government's official response and policy towards Darfur and Africa more broadly and examine whether or not it has been influenced by the global media in forming that policy. Finally, I will discuss some possibilities for the future role of the PRC in Darfur

and in Africa and more broadly, the PRC's evolving role as an international actor in the realm of complex emergencies and international humanitarian interventions.

The "CNN Effect" and International Policy towards Complex Emergencies

The true meaning of the term "CNN effect," coined during the first Gulf war in 1991, has been widely disputed among activists, journalists, and policy-makers.¹ Generally, the term "CNN effect" refers to the theory that emotionally charged media coverage of complex emergencies can influence the decisions of international policy makers regarding a potential military or humanitarian intervention. According to past research, this effect can develop in three main ways. First, global media coverage may influence public opinion so that a potential policy response to a complex emergency gets placed on an international (or national) agenda. Second, the media response to an intervention may hinder its progress by questioning the legitimacy or effectiveness of an intervention. And finally, media coverage may act as a catalyst to policy decisions, placing pressure on policy makers to accelerate the political processes that would lead to a decision on a complex emergency.² In short, the theory of the "CNN effect" suggests that media coverage can act as a powerful force in shaping the actions of national and international policy makers, especially in the context of a complex emergency.³

There have been several studies conducted to examine the validity of the "CNN effect." Some scholars have concluded that the impact of global media on policy makers has been grossly exaggerated and that the term "CNN effect" might not even be a useful term for evaluating the relationship between media coverage and policy decisions. As one scholar argues, "the 'theory' [of the CNN effect] has never been properly defined and it is highly questionable whether it is at all a theory or just an attractive neologism."⁴ Other scholars, accepting the general premise of the "CNN effect" theory, have sought to better analyze the connection between media coverage and policy in the specific context

¹Gilboa, Eytan. "Global Television News and Foreign Policy: Debating the CNN effect." *International Studies Perspectives* 6 (2005): 325-341.

² Livingston, Steven. "Clarifying the CNN Effect: And Examination of Media Effects According to Type of Military Intervention." The Joan Shorestein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy: Harvard University, John F. Kennedy School of Government, 1997.

³ Robinson, Piers. *The CNN Effect: The Myth of News, Foreign policy and Intervention*. London: Routledge, 2002.

⁴ Gilboa, Eytan. "Global Television News and Foreign Policy: Debating the CNN effect." *International Studies Perspectives* 6 (2005): 325-341.

of the United States foreign policy response to complex emergencies in Somalia and Darfur.⁵ While the strength of the “CNN effect” is still subject to debate, for the purposes of this paper, it is essential to note that all discussion and research of the impact of media coverage on policy formation has occurred primarily within the context of policy response of the United States and European nations to humanitarian crises. Yet, recently, the media coverage of the ongoing crisis in Darfur has often shifted focus away from the potential role of the United States or the European Union and onto that of the PRC.

It may be tempting to disregard the impact of media coverage of humanitarian crises on policy decisions of the PRC in light of potential government censorship, but it would be an oversimplification to assume that the potential for media censorship precludes any relationship between global media coverage and the PRC’s actions with regards to humanitarian crises. Although the exact nature of that relationship is beyond the scope of this paper to determine, I will, through an examination of both international and Chinese media coverage of the PRC’s role in Darfur (and growing presence in Africa), bring to light the complexities of the relationship among global media, Chinese media, and the PRC’s policy decisions in the context of humanitarian crises.

The Heartless Dragon: Global Media Coverage of the PRC in Darfur

The humanitarian crisis in Darfur, a western region of Sudan, has been developing for decades, as several ethnic groups have struggled to gain access to a very limited number of resources.⁶ The crisis has attracted international attention and prompted the establishment of several activist organizations, including the Save Darfur Coalition, a union of several faith-based and human rights groups. Much of the activism and media coverage surrounding Darfur has focused on the crisis in the wake of genocide⁷, though several scholars believe that the complex emergency in Darfur has been wrongly and

⁵ Bernebring, Irina and Liselotte Olsson. “Media and Humanitarian Intervention: A Study of the CNN Effect and the United States Foreign Policy Making in the Context of Somalia and Darfur.” University Essays in Peace and Conflict Studies: Lunds Universitet, 2007.

⁶ For a full discussion of the history of the conflict in Darfur, see Julie Flint and Alex DeWaal’s *Darfur: A History of a Long War*.

⁷ Nicholas D. Kristof, an op-ed columnist for *The New York Times*, has perhaps been the most singularly vocal Western journalist on the identification of the complex emergency in Darfur as a result of genocide.

simply painted as a conflict between Arabs and Africans.⁸ There has also been much controversy surrounding the exact number of deaths that have resulted from the conflict in Darfur, but current estimates range anywhere from 200,000 to 500,000 deaths and up to 2.5 million refugees displaced as a result of the complex emergency. In 2004, largely as a result of domestic public opinion of the crisis in Darfur, then Secretary of State, Colin Powell, labeled the violence occurring in the region as genocide but did not specify any new actions that would be taken by the United States.⁹ Although Nicholas Kristof criticized news networks in 2005 for not providing adequate coverage of the crisis in Darfur, it is important to note that Darfur has been covered in more than 1669 pieces in *The New York Times* and in 929 pieces in *The Financial Times* in London over the past five years. Emotional media coverage, celebrity involvement, and the Save Darfur campaign seemed to have succeeded in placing Darfur on the United States agenda, if not in prompting a United States intervention in the crisis.

While there may be some debate as to the classification of the violence occurring in Darfur, there seems to be less debate in the international media regarding the idea that the PRC is in some way related to the crisis. Even years before the Beijing Olympics, Western media outlets were mentioning the crisis in Darfur as one of the important issues up for discussion between the U.S. and the PRC, alongside the PRC's trade and currency policies. In 2005, media coverage also portrayed the PRC as one of the major roadblocks in the United Nations Security Council to the implementation of economic sanctions on Sudan. Finally, the media's image of the PRC emphasized its growing presence in the Sudan and on the continent of Africa in general, as part of an urgent (and perhaps desperate) effort to increase its access to oil and other natural resources.¹⁰ What is crucial to note in the pre-Olympics coverage of the PRC's role in Darfur is that most allegations waged against the PRC were waged against other states, as well. For example,

⁸ See, for example, Mahmood Mamdani's "The Politics of Naming: Genocide, Civil War, Insurgency" in the *London Review of Books* (2007).

⁹ "The Crisis in Darfur." Colin Powell's testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Washington, D.C. September 9, 2004.

¹⁰ For examples of media coverage of the PRC's role in Darfur prior to the Olympics see: *The New York Times*' "The President's Trip to Asia" (November 2005), "Why Should We Shield the Killers?" (February 2005), and "Two Big Appetites Take Seats at the Oil Table" (February 2005) and *The Washington Post*'s "A Shift on Darfur" (December 2004) and the London's *Daily Telegraph* "Weakened UN Resolution Betrays Victims in Darfur."

media coverage suggested that a weakened resolution on the crisis in Darfur was the result of an effort to avoid isolation of both the PRC and Russia. And although some media coverage suggested that the PRC alone was the main supplier of weapons for militant groups in Darfur, most coverage acknowledged that other countries may also have been selling weapons to the region.¹¹

Closer to the opening of the Olympics in Beijing in 2008, however, the PRC had become the primary target of global media coverage within the context of the crisis in Darfur. In the wake of the PRC's response to demonstrations in Tibet, the Olympic torch met with Western protests all over the world, which was covered extensively by Western media outlets. Furthermore, a consensus that the PRC had the most leverage in changing the course of the crisis in Darfur (an idea pushed most strongly by activist and professor Eric Reeves) emerged among activists, which led to the "Genocide Olympics" campaign in the months leading up to the opening ceremony of the Olympics in August of 2008.¹² The "Genocide Olympics" campaign, run primarily by the Dream for Darfur organization and supported by celebrities such as, Mia Farrow and George Clooney, ran ad campaigns in popular Western magazines, held rallies, and joined with other Darfur activist groups to put pressure on heads of state, athletes, and sponsors of the Olympics to speak out against the PRC or to boycott the games. It was around this time that the Save Darfur Coalition added a separate section on its website concerning the relationship between China and Darfur. The link ("China and Sudan: A Deadly Partnership") now appears on the website ahead of sections about current U.S. legislation.¹³

What is most significant about the linking of Darfur to the Beijing Olympics is not just the amount of media coverage that the "Genocide Olympics" campaign received but also the nature of that coverage. Whereas in earlier coverage of the PRC's involvement in Darfur also often mentioned other nations, such as Russia, the majority of global media coverage surrounding the Olympics accepted the PRC's leverage in the Darfur crisis as a generally acknowledged fact. An excerpt from the March 30, 2008,

¹¹ See: *The Washington Post's* "China Invests Heavily in Sudan's Oil Industry" (December 2004) and *The London Times* "China and Russia Send Jets and Guns to Sudan" (November 2004).

¹² See "Genocide Games" in *The Boston Globe* (March 25 2007).

¹³ See: www.savedarfur.org

New York Times, entitled “Changing the Rules of the Games,” provides an informative example:

“China is the reason Darfur is happening. And it is happening now. There is nothing fast about the killing in Darfur.” For those on board with Dream for Darfur, connecting the dots between the Summer Games and hundreds of thousands of African corpses is not much more complicated than that. The brief against China is by and large uncontested (except by China): the Sudan government buys its weapons from China with the foreign currency it makes from selling China its oil. China, meanwhile, protects Sudan from excessive attention in the United Nations Security Council.¹⁴

In the months prior to the Beijing Olympics, it seems that global media coverage of the crisis in Darfur shifted its focus from the policy of the United States, whose interests in the region were hazy, and instead, focused on the “uncontested” connection between the government of the PRC and the government of Sudan and by extension, the connection between the PRC and the crisis in Darfur.¹⁵ The idea that the government of the PRC could halt the violence in Darfur (or at least significantly reduce it) if it chose to do so remained within international media coverage throughout the duration of the Olympic Games.

The Dragon Speaks: Chinese Media Coverage of Darfur

My own personal experience in the PRC led me to assume that Chinese media coverage of the crisis in Darfur was nearly non-existent, since many of my own generally well informed Chinese friends and colleagues knew very little about the issue—if anything. I was surprised to discover, however, that a relatively large number of reports on the crisis in Darfur had been issued in both the English and Chinese version of the mainland’s primary newspaper, *The People’s Daily* (人民日报) and to a lesser extent in online, print, and broadcast reports of *The China View* (新华通讯社), the PRC’s largest Chinese news company. In fact, reports on Darfur were present in the newspaper before the Olympics commenced and therefore, not just as responses to foreign allegations of the PRC’s involvement in the crisis. Because *The People’s Daily* and *The China View* are

¹⁴ Greenberg, Ilan. “Changing the Rules of the Games.” *The New York Times*. (March 30, 2008).

¹⁵ For more examples of this consensus regarding the PRC’s relationship and leverage with the government of Sudan, see: *The Financial Times*’ “Beijing Expresses Grave Concerns Over ICC Charges” (July 2008) and *The Washington Post*’s “Around the World, Activists Assemble to Press China on Rights” (July 2008)

the primary media outlets on foreign affairs in the PRC, I have chosen to focus my analysis on their coverage of the Darfur crisis, even though citizens of the PRC, especially those in urban areas, certainly may have access to information on Darfur through the internet or foreign news broadcasts.

It is important to note before proceeding that media outlets in the PRC are more strictly monitored, structured, and censored than those in the West. At the same time, as the PRC rises to power and becomes linked more closely to the global community, we must consider Chinese media as more than just a microphone for the Communist Party. Because a significant portion of the Chinese population does have access to foreign media, Chinese media coverage can no longer be dictated solely by the government. Further, since the major newspapers of mainland China still remain closely linked to the government, the contents of these publications may give researchers a strong indicator of what factors have risen to importance in the agenda of Chinese policy makers and how these factors relate to public opinion (a force of which the Communist Party is fully aware, as it tries to balance its power in the wake of a growing number of dissatisfactions throughout the vast country). In short, rather than disregarding Chinese media coverage altogether, taking the time to understand the complexities of a media system vastly different from those of most countries in the West may provide the international community with valuable insight into the actions of the PRC, especially with regards to complex emergencies and Darfur specifically.¹⁶

Not surprisingly, Chinese media coverage of the crisis in Darfur took a very different focus than that of the global media coverage examined in the previous section. What struck me immediately in conducting the research for this analysis was the fact that, while international media coverage of the violence in Darfur almost always contained photos of the victims of that violence, Chinese coverage of the crisis contained few photos, most of which showed Chinese and Sudanese officials shaking hands or in dialogue. Also noticeably lacking in Chinese media coverage of the Darfur crisis were the estimates, prominent in global media coverage, as to the total number of casualties that had resulted from the violence. A year prior to the Olympics, Chinese media

¹⁶ For a nuanced description of the development of mass media in the PRC since the 1980's, see Jianying Zha's *China Pop: How Soap Operas, Tabloids, and Bestsellers are Transforming a Culture*.

coverage of the crisis in Darfur primarily presented the PRC's efforts to facilitate a peaceful resolution of the crisis. While international media coverage cited the PRC as a roadblock to action in the U.N. Security Council, Chinese media coverage presented the actions of the U.S. and other countries on the Security Council as roadblocks to a developing peace agreement in the region supported by the PRC and Russia.¹⁷ Throughout my research, of course, I also noted over 20 articles describing the "spirit of friendship" between the people of Sudan and the PRC and detailing the aid that the PRC had given to Sudan in various forms.¹⁸

Beginning in 2004 with Colin Powell's classification of the violence in Darfur as genocide, Chinese media coverage seemed to suggest that the United States had vested interests in declaring the violence occurring in the crisis genocide. One 2004 article in the Chinese version of *The China View* described Sudan's foreign minister, Mustafa Osman Ismail's statement to the press during a visit in South Korea:

The visiting Sudanese foreign minister urged the international community not to be swayed by information manipulated by Washington about humanitarian crisis at Sudan's western area of Darfur. The Sudanese foreign minister also said George W. Bush's administration is using the Darfur issue to distract attention from what is taking place in Iraq to avoid pressure from the Democrats. . . . Ismail stressed that his country has the capacity and means to resolve its decades-long internal conflicts without US interference.¹⁹

There are a couple of interesting points to note about this excerpt, the first of which is the fact that the article's primary focus is the view of a member of Sudan's government. While the role of the Sudanese government in the Darfur crisis is often cited, the view of government officials has rarely been mentioned and has hardly ever been quoted directly. Another interesting characteristic of the article is the classification of the crisis as a result of "decades-long internal conflicts." Global media coverage, while often briefly mentioning the roots of the conflict in Darfur, does not expressly suggest (as this Chinese article does) that the crisis in Darfur should be treated as a civil war and therefore, the

¹⁷ "China Welcomes Pact Over Darfur." *The People's Daily*. (April 2007)

¹⁸ "China Opposed to More Sanctions against Sudan." *The People's Daily*. (May 2007)

¹⁹ "Sudanese Foreign Minister Refutes US Stance on Darfur Issue." *The China View*. (September 2004)

concern only of the Sudanese government. It is also interesting to note, four years after this article's publication, that there seems to be an assumption that a unilateral intervention by the U.S. in Darfur is if not imminent, at least highly probable. Finally, the most curious aspect of this article is the idea that Bush's administration would use the issue in Darfur to "avoid pressure from the Democrats," but there is no mention in the article whatsoever of the various activist organizations that pressured the Bush administration to declare the situation in Darfur genocide in the first place.

Responding to the direct criticism of the PRC surrounding the Olympics, *The People's Daily* published several reports not only defending the PRC's role in Darfur but also simply explaining the positive influence of the PRC in the region. An article as early as February of 2008, entitled "China's Role in Darfur Positive," detailed the nature of the special envoy that was sent from the PRC to Sudan to assist in resolving the crisis, the PRC's cooperation with the U.N., and its humanitarian and 140-member "engineering troops" contingent sent to the Darfur region.²⁰ The event that led to most of the articles (published in both the English and Chinese version of *The People's Daily*) on Darfur in the year of the Olympics was the decision of Steven Spielberg, who was supposed to act as an artistic director to the Olympic Games, to quit his post, specifically citing concerns about the PRC's role in the Darfur crisis. Again, there is no mention in any of the Chinese media coverage of Spielberg's decision of the specific action groups that may have influenced his actions. Throughout the coverage, there is reference to the misguided views of "Westerners" or "Americans" and in one instance, a reference by a Chinese professor to "Western countries exploitation of 'media hegemony' to whip up prejudice."²¹

In the months immediately prior to the Olympics, Chinese media coverage stressed the legality of the PRC's role in Darfur and reinforced its commitment to solve the crisis in Sudan "with full regard to its sovereignty and territorial integrity."²² Other Chinese media coverage discussed the "long tradition of interaction" between Chinese and Arab countries and posited that Western media (and indeed Western people) were not willing to take the time to understand the PRC's relationship with the Sudanese

²⁰ "China's Role in Darfur Positive." *The People's Daily*. (February 18, 2008)

²¹ "Spielberg Decision to Quit 'Regretful.'" *The People's Daily*. (February 15, 2008)

²² "China's Darfur Policy in Tune with Law, Morality." *The People's Daily*. (July 25, 2008).

government.²³ Undoubtedly, the actions of Spielberg, athletes, and activists influenced the media coverage of Darfur surrounding the Olympics. What is somewhat unexpected (and a departure from Chinese media coverage on other internationally recognized humanitarian crises) is the fact that the Chinese media coverage of Darfur does not suggest that the PRC does not have a connection to the situation in Darfur—or that conflicts are not occurring in the region—but rather, that the PRC’s role in the conflicts is and has been a wholly positive one.

The Dragon Moves Forward: The Future of Chinese Involvement in Darfur and Africa

The global media coverage of China’s connection in Darfur dropped sharply with the end of the Olympic Games.²⁴ By contrast, *The People’s Daily* continued to publish reports on the process towards a resolution in Darfur and most importantly, the PRC’s role in that process. A more extensive study would be required to fully understand the nature of Chinese public opinion of the crisis in Darfur (and the relationship between public opinion and government policy in the PRC), but what can we learn from a case study of the global and Chinese media coverage of the crisis in Darfur? And what can this analysis tell us about the PRC’s evolving approach to humanitarian crises? Can the “CNN effect” impact even an essentially authoritarian government’s agenda? The answer to the last question is that, even if the exact nature of the “CNN effect” remains ambiguous, global media coverage seems to have put the crisis in Darfur on the radar of local media coverage, which suggests that global media coverage may also have put Darfur on the government’s agenda. As one Chinese journalist said in 2007, “By and large, China’s international reporting is a mirror of China’s diplomacy.”²⁵

Therefore, even if Chinese media coverage of international affairs is tightly monitored by the government, this does not mean that international media coverage has no influence on the international actions of the PRC’s government—and perhaps, even on the evolution of the government and the public’s philosophical approaches to international actions such as, humanitarian intervention. After reviewing the Chinese media coverage of the PRC’s role in Darfur, I would argue that although the PRC’s

²³ “No Logic in Blaming China for Darfur.” *The People’s Daily*. (May 6, 2008)

²⁴ For example, only two articles directly linked the PRC and the crisis in Darfur in *The New York Times* following the Olympics (one of which was focused on the actions of basketball star, LeBron James)

²⁵ French, Howard. “As Chinese Media Grow, Foreign News is Left Out.” *The New York Times*. (December 7, 2007)

primary interests in the Sudan are financial in nature, the Chinese norms surrounding humanitarian crises are evolving, influenced in part by global media coverage.

Officially, the PRC's government maintains five principles for "peaceful coexistence for proper international conduct," which focus on "mutual respect for other countries' territorial integrity" and "non-interference in other countries' internal affairs."²⁶ In recent decades, however, the PRC's government has officially agreed that international intervention may proceed in special cases but only through U.N. Security Council authorization. The PRC's government was particularly critical of the NATO intervention in Kosovo, for example, stating that it "bypassed" the will of the U.N. member states.²⁷ Yet, the Chinese media coverage of the PRC's involvement in Darfur, while stressing the sovereignty of Sudan, has also focused on the PRC's humanitarian actions in the region, especially since the Olympic Games. Because pictures were so rare in the Chinese media coverage of the Darfur crisis, I was especially struck by the image below from an article on Darfur featured in an October 2008 printing of *The China View*.



The article, published in both Chinese and English and entitled "Chinese Peacekeepers Honored by UNAMID," shows members of an engineering unit boarding a plane in Henan Province, enthusiastically waving good-bye under the flags of the PRC and the U.N. before they begin their journey to Darfur. The article beneath the picture explains that the Chinese peacekeeping engineering contingent in Darfur was awarded a

²⁶ Zhou, Enlai. 周恩来外交文选 (*Selected Works of Zhou Enlai on Diplomacy*). (1990)

²⁷ Jia, Qingguo. "Position of the Chinese Government." *Humanitarian Intervention: The Evolving Asian Debate* Ed. Watanabe Koji. (2003)

“medal of honor for peace” by the joint UN-AU peacekeeping mission (UNAMID) in Nyala, capital of South Darfur State of Sudan²⁸ The picture in this article clearly reveals a desire on the part of the PRC’s government to be viewed as a positive force in the region of Darfur. For a government that is officially critical of intervention in other country’s affairs, this image certainly suggests that humanitarian actions—in some forms—are becoming increasingly acceptable and desirable, if only to protect national interests in a foreign region.

This analysis does not put to rest the (extremely) reasonable allegations of human rights abuses against the PRC. Nor does it suggest that the government of the PRC is doing everything in its power to improve the lives of those that are caught in the crisis in Darfur. Interestingly, the African press, which seems to get caught in the middle of Western and Eastern classifications, has been producing insightful and appropriately wary coverage of the PRC’s increasing influence on the continent over the past five years. What this analysis does suggest, however, is that the relationship between global media coverage and Chinese media coverage should not be entirely disregarded. Chinese media coverage of humanitarian crises, like the one in Darfur, is still tightly monitored by the government of the PRC, and yet, even that coverage seems to have been influenced global media coverage of the crisis. The PRC’s importance on the continent of Africa is growing, and as a result, its ability to assist or to hinder international solutions to humanitarian crises will undoubtedly increase, as well. If the goal of the international community is truly to improve the lives of the people impacted by humanitarian crises, it will need to uncover the most effective strategies to influence the PRC. Global *and* local media coverage should remain important components of those strategies.

²⁸ “Chinese Peacekeepers in Darfur Honored by UNAMID.” *The China View*. (October 13, 2008)

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