

Media Diplomacy: Zeng Jize's Strategic Engagement of Western Newspapers

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Abstract

For decades, scholarship on late 19th century Sino-west interaction has been greatly influenced by the impact-response paradigm while little is known about how the Chinese proactively influenced the western world. Focusing on Zeng Jize (1839-1890) , the Chinese ambassador to the Britain, France and Russia from 1878 to 1886, and especially his strategic engagement in western newspapers, this paper explores how a Chinese diplomat resisted the hegemonic narrative of western media and reshaped western public opinions about China's political and cultural image. Throughout his career, Zeng Jize perceived western media differently for various purposes. In the early days of his mission, Zeng took a conservative approach to intervening in the public opinion by dispelling rumors in western newspapers. His 1880 revisit to the Treaty of Saint Petersburg marked a turning point of his understanding of western media from a knowledge pool to a diplomatic tool. In the early 1880s Sino-French negotiations, Zeng took advantage of the relatively open press environment in France and publicly expressed his opinions to influence French public opinion on Vietnam issues. Such attempts paid off as French foreign ministry eventually resumed the suspended Sino-French diplomatic relationship due to the pressure of public opinion and the risk of being overthrown for parliamentary doubts. In 1887, Zeng's media diplomacy culminated in the publication of *China, the Sleep and the Awakening* in which he responded to and corrected the negative stereotypes of Chinese civilization in the Western world. This paper argues that Zeng Jize's media diplomacy showcased a successful dialogue with the western public and played a positive role in reshaping the image of China in the eyes of the West.

Keywords: Zeng Jize, Western Newspapers, Late Qing Diplomacy, Modern China

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Introduction

What role did the newspapers, as a new medium with profound influence in modern history, play in the communication between China and the West in the 19th century? In recent years, this issue has attracted the attention of many scholars. The history of China and the West in modern time is intertwined with each other, and the newspapers can be seen as an important bridge in this process.

It's a common sense that communication is two-way. But the "Impact—Response" model is still the main paradigm for most existing researches on media in the field of modern China studies, especially in the late Qing Dynasty. Admittedly, we can not deny that the West had played an important role in China's modernization. The earliest Chinese modern newspapers were founded by Europeans.

But is it really true that modern China has no voice to the West and no agency to influence the Western audience? Some researchers have paid attention to the communication of media organizations towards the western world led by different parties during the Republic of China (Ma, 2018; Wei, 2020; Ying, 2020). Some other scholars recognized that, at the end of the Qing Dynasty and the beginning of the Republic of China, though China did not have any news agency and telegraph transmission network to reach the international public, the foreign newspapers in treaty ports and concessions opened a channel for China to interact with the rest of the world (Li, 2018, p.25-43; Wei, 2020, p.14).

Along this line of thought, this paper sheds light on the writing of Chinese in the western newspapers, to study the international communication of China to the West through mass media. In previous studies, the emergence of China's self-run non-Chinese foreign media organizations was regarded as a prerequisite for such interactions. Seemingly, it was not until the end of the 19th century that China established relatively mature foreign news media (Li, 2005; Gan, 2004). However, such foreign communication could also happen with the aid of western newspapers. In fact, even in the 1930s, the Republic of China's international communication institutions still did their work with the help of the English newspapers in the concession area (Wei, 2020, p.18). In modern history, Western newspapers in China had always been an important platform for Chinese to communicate with the western world.

That's how the diplomats of the late Qing Dynasty came into my sight. Before the first Sino-Japanese war of 1894-1895, the diplomats of the early late Qing Dynasty, represented by Guo Songtao, Zeng Jize, Xue Fucheng and so on, went to the west on diplomatic missions. They had a deeper understanding of the western newspapers and public opinion than the others at that time, and they were thus interacted with the western local newspapers to a certain extent.

Among them, Zeng Jize had remarkable characteristics in his engagement of western newspapers. In comparison with the other Qing diplomats who were limited by their cultural background and language ability and only introduced the west to China, Zeng featured in an opposite way. Through the western newspapers, Zeng tried to show the world what is China and succeed in shaping the image of China in the western eyes (Liang, 2020, pp.119-128).

Contacting Western Newspapers: From Comprehension to Adaptation

Zeng Jize had already known about Western-style newspapers before his diplomatic mission. His diary showed that as early as in 1872, he had already begun to read foreign newspapers

(Zeng, 1998, p.238). In his diary of the next year, in a few diaries there were more records of newsprint reading. However, until the eve of his diplomatic mission, such records were still relatively rare. It was not until the time shortly before his diplomatic mission, that Zeng began to record his reading of *Shen Bao* in his diary (Zeng, 1998, p.736).

Zeng's understanding of the western newspapers also came from his predecessor Guo Songtao. Before his mission, Zeng had seen Guo's *Shi Xi Ji Cheng* (The Records to The West). In approximately two months of sightseeing recorded in this book, there are at least eight comments about western newspapers (Guo, 1982, pp.97, 99, 101, 114, 118, 123, 130). Guo took the western newspapers quite seriously, believing that western newspapers could be helpful for him and other Chinese to comprehend the situation of the west and their experiences. He even put paper clips in his memorials to the throne (Guo, 1982, pp.123). Guo was not only Zeng's predecessor and the first ambassador to foreign countries, but also a friend of Zeng's father Zeng Guofan. No matter before or after the diplomatic mission, Zeng often had dialogues with Guo before or after his diplomatic missions. It is conceivable that Guo's attention to the western newspapers would also affect Zeng. During his eight years on a diplomatic expedition, Zeng regarded the western newspapers as an important source of news to understand the political and social developments in the west and related to China.

Understanding western newspapers and periodicals does not mean that one has adapted to the media environment deeply influenced by western newspapers and periodicals in advance. After his diplomatic mission to Britain and France, Zeng began to feel the influence of western newspapers and public opinion more intuitively. Different media have different technical attributes, resulting in different modes of communication, that could cause a deviation of the development of culture (Innis, 1999). Therefore, understanding the production technology of western newspapers and periodicals may play a very important role in Zeng's change of mind from understanding western newspapers and periodicals to truly adapting to such media environment. In April, 1889, just half a year after his diplomatic mission, Zeng visited the *The Illustrated London News* accompanied by his translator, Macartney Halliday, and had a first-hand experience of the swiftness of printing in the Western industry. "The dexterity of the machine and the speed of the project are too great to be recorded." (Zeng, 1998, P.857) In October, he visited Waterlow and Sons, a large printing company, and marveled at its huge production scale again: "In this bureau, there are three thousand men and women in total, what a tremendous scene." (Zeng, 1998, P.922) From the big scale of western newspapers production, it is not difficult to infer the extent of its circulation. These investigations helped Zeng to develop a deeper understanding of the local media environment.

Zeng's profound Western learning background and English ability before his diplomatic mission enable him to adapt to the western media environment quite swiftly (Li, 2014, pp.18-34). Thanks to the influence of his father Zeng Guofan, one of the main supporters of the Self-Strengthening Movement, Zeng had made Western friends since he was young, and thus was quite familiar with the Western cultural environment. (Zeng, 2008, pp.147-149). When he first arrived in the West, he was able to quickly integrate into the local culture environment and carry out in-depth communication faster than other diplomats. For example, the famous British journalist Demetrius Charles Boulger recalled: "In many interviews with him (Zeng) in Portland and Folkestone.....From time to time, he would signal that he already understood what I meant before the translation." (Boulger, 1908, P.305)

Zeng had experienced verbal attacks by comments before his diplomatic mission. Although

China's public opinion wasn't dominated by the newspapers at that time, the comments of officials in the court had an important influence. In 1870, his father Zeng Guofan was criticized by the court when he was dealing with a case associated with Western missionaries happened in Tianjin. In Zeng Jize's words, his father "felt ashamed to speak out and guilty about the deity", and even decided to sacrifice his own reputation for preserving the empire's interest (Zeng, 1998, p.777). Guo Songtao was also criticized by other officials' comments during his diplomatic mission (Zeng, 1998, p.777). Perhaps for this reason, Zeng had always been critical of the political comments of some officials in the court who he considered to be nothing more than eloquent, stubborn, outdated people divorced from reality (Zeng, 1998, p.161). This tendency would be further intensified on his later mission to Russia.

In a word, Zeng entered the western media environment featured by the newspapers with the general cognition of public opinion and his outstanding understanding of the west at that time. On the one hand, before his diplomatic mission, he had a deeper understanding of the western cultural environment than most Chinese people of his time, which enabled him to take the initiative to get used to the western media environment and try to make it work for him very soon. On the other hand, he still retained the cognition of the Chinese people on comments and opinion at that time, which may have affected the way in which he engages with the western newspapers to some extent.

First Contact: An Early Attempt to Influence the Western Media

After initially adapting, Zeng took the initiative to influence in the local public opinion led by the newspapers, starting from removing the rumors about China in the western newspaper. In April, 1879, Zeng heard that there were comments in the West ridiculing China for spending huge sums of money on armaments during the famine in Shanxi, so he instructed Macartney to write to the newspapers to point out that the rumors were untrue (Zeng, 1998, p.860). In April 1880, *The Times* published an essay which a French journalist claimed to be from an interview with Zeng, stating that the Chinese government wanted to avoid a war with Russia "at all costs". But in fact, the interview was faked. Knowing the potential impact of such remarks when Sino-Russia relationship was in tense, Zeng quickly ordered Macartney to write letters of clarification to multiple newspapers including *The Times* (Boulger, 1908, pp.336-341).

In January, 1879, Zeng got acquainted with members of a local anti-smoking association in London, and hoped to promote the abolition of the opium trade between Britain and China through this non-governmental organization (Zeng, 1998, p.834). When he received a letter from Mr. Turner, a member of the group, he wrote a carefully worded reply. But to his surprise, the letter was published in *The Times* without his consent. Unexpectedly, this became Zeng's first speech in a Western newspaper. Later, Macartney wrote to Turner to show dissatisfaction at some of the inaccurate depictions of Zeng's views in published articles (Boulger, 1908, p.312).

Although this unexpected speech did not bring about any disturbance on public opinion, it can be seen that at the early stage of his mission, Zeng's attitude towards western newspapers was still conservative, and it shows that Zeng was not really ready to make his voice heard. But the comparatively complicated and liberal environment of public opinion in the West still forced him to react from time to time. Then, the treaty negotiations with Russia made Zeng further familiarize himself with the relations between the western newspapers and politics. And with the help of the press, Zeng started his strategic diplomatic attempt.

Zeng was not involved in the negotiation with Russia at the first time. Chonghou and Russia signed the Treaty of Livadiya, greatly damaging the interests of China, and then the news was sent back to the country. Such news shocked the Qing government, and hence Chonghou was dismissed from office. The mission to rediscuss with Russia for the sake of changing the treaty, fell on the shoulder of Zeng.

Zeng faced great difficulties in this mission, especially the tremendous challenge posed by Chinese and foreign public opinions. As a result of Chonghou's failure, Zeng, as his successor, had great pressure. The criticism that had plagued his father and predecessor had now fallen on him. With the domestic opinions on the treaty changing varied greatly, making Zeng to worry about following in Chong Hou's footsteps (Zeng, 2008, p.161). He once wrote a poem in private to criticize the misdeeds of some comments (Zeng, 2020, p.161).

At the same time, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs also imposed pressure on Zeng through western press. The Foreign Minister Jules François Camille Ferry believed that it was China that released the details of Sino-Russia negotiation to the newspapers, leading to "many countries' news discussion, all saying that China will have a war with Russia." (Zeng, 2020, p.9) Under such circumstances, if Russia readily agreed to change the treaty, "everyone would say that Russia was afraid of China and therefore gave away to China the land it had conquered in the past. Therefore, it is difficult for Russia to agree." (Zeng, 2020, p.19) However, Zeng seemed to think that the numerous discussions in the newspapers might be the result of Russian leaks. Therefore, in the telegram sent to the Zongliyamen on September 28, 1880, Zeng said that he planned to "imitate Russia and put rumors into news.....pretending that if Russia does not return all of Ili, Kashgar will not be preserved. China will make Kashgar an autonomous country and make a treaty with Britain to protect it. That's what Russia fears." (Guo&Dai, 2008, p.6)

In this situation, Zeng began to connect his previous understanding of the political vilification from the Qing Dynasty with the public opinion of the western newspapers. During the negotiations, Zeng argued that there was something similar between the western newspapers and Qing officials' memorials from Qing officials to the throne in Qing (Zeng, 2020, pp.161). Of course, it is not an accurate comparison, and Zeng didn't not necessarily think so. It may be more of a negotiation strategy, but even so, this statement still revealed Zeng's thinking of association between the two objects.

Zeng's experience in Russia might have influenced his afterward attitude towards the Western newspapers during his long diplomatic career. Throughout the interaction between Zeng and the western newspapers during his eight-year envoy life, his attitude was highly pragmatic, that was, although he regarded it as a tool to achieve diplomatic goals, it did not mean that he agreed with the interaction between the western newspapers and the political circles in his heart. In fact, Zeng's sporadic confessions suggested that he was not very optimistic about the way in which everyone was in charge: "Although the newspaper often makes surprising statements, it is not trustworthy enough" (Zeng, 2008, p.170).

Zeng's experience in Russia was of great significance to his subsequent diplomatic career: in the negotiation between China and France on the Vietnam issue, Zeng used the western newspapers to implement his "media diplomacy".

Media diplomacy: Communication Practice in China-France Negotiations

In Zeng's entire diplomatic career, it was only in the negotiation with France on the Vietnam issue that he really made extensive use of the western newspapers to convey his opinion for his diplomatic goals. This has to do with the political system of France at the time. After the Great Revolution and the Napoleonic Empire, France established its democratic republic. At the same time, the main countries in Europe were still monarchies. When Zeng first went to France for the first time, he observed the uniqueness: ".....Since France became a democracy, the power of the state has been vested in the upper and lower houses of parliament. The leaders of the two houses was called as president.....Although the position is respected, president's power is inferior to the two houses." (Zeng, 1998, p,843) It is in this system dominated by the democratically elected parliament that the newspapers in France played a greater role than in other countries.

Therefore, Zeng sent back to the Zongliyamen excerpts, translations and reprints of Western newspaper clips, often interspersed with his own comments, far more frequently than other envoys of the same period, which showed the importance he thought of Western press. It is important to note that the newspaper excerpts sent back to the Zongliyamen were the "reshaped" ones according to Zeng's own preferences and views. The selected excerpts can be used as strong evidence to support Zeng's views. For example, when Zeng advocated to the Zongliyamen to mediate the Sino-French conflict through Britain, he selected remarks in British newspapers against the French policy to provide wordless support for his claims.

Zeng had a deep understanding of the political tendencies of different media. In the transcripts, he often noted that a certain article was "written by *The Times*, which often uses severe words to stir up the people" "*Le Danglais* is complicit with the government." (Guo&Wang, 2016, pp.1010, 1092) He also noted that there was a turnover of staff between the newspapers and the government, which showed that the two are inextricably linked(Guo&Wang, 2016, p.2506).

That's why Zeng tried to sway the French political situation by speaking out in the newspapers before and during the Sino-French War. He followed up the war-support rhetoric in the newspapers and took countermeasures. In this process, his outstanding western learning and social skills cleared the way for his communication with journalists. There were communication records with the newspaper staff in his diary in the early days of his mission (Zeng, 1998, p.852). As the time went by, he gradually deepened his relationship with the newspaper writers and reporters. On November 15th, 1882, *Figaro* reporter said that "In the past years, people in the capital went to his tea party, all know that this gentleman understands the western customs, he is completely different from those ignorant Chinese people who are bent on denigrating the western countries." (Guo&Wang, 2016, p.646) So he decided to interview Zeng.

Zeng took this interview seriously. He said in the interview: "The current situation is urgent, and only the newspapers can enlighten the people to understand the situation." (Guo&Wang, 2016, p.647) It is noteworthy that Zeng thought very high of public opinion in his answer. He explained that the Chinese government was pressured by the public opinion of the "conservative" party which wanted to go to war, and thus had to prepare for war (Guo&Wang, 2016, p.647). Such emphasis on the influence of Chinese "public opinion", in a way that is easily understood by the French, enhanced persuasiveness.

Such a strategy, which applied outside the formal diplomatic arena, did not always work -- efforts to make voices heard in the newspapers can be easily offset by the voices of opponents. In a letter to the Zongliyamen, Zeng complained that, by his efforts, French parliamentarians learned that Vietnam was a Chinese vassal state, and because the previous war had been so costly, they gradually waned their claims to war to China. However, an article published by Prosper Marie Giquel, one of the main advocates of war with China again confused the public (Guo&Wang, 2016, p.201).

In general, the Vietnam issue became an opportunity for Zeng to move from observation to action, from passive response to active moves, and to begin to take in the political opinion space constructed by the newspapers in a more active manner. The open public opinion space in France at this time happened to be the best playground for Zeng to practice his views on the newspapers and the orientation of public opinion. As the Sino-French dispute over Vietnam intensified, this attempt became more and more important, and its importance in Zeng's "diplomatic toolbox" gradually increased.

The Second Battlefield: The Guidance of Public Opinion During the War

Zeng's diplomatic strategy of engaging media tended to become more aggressive as the situation became tense. When China and France were already fighting head-on in Vietnam, the French foreign ministry delayed and later even cut off communication with Zeng for more than one year. Under such circumstances, the public opinion circles became a "second battlefield" for Zeng to indicate his stance to the French officials and influence the civil opinion at the same time (Li, 2014, p.204).

As he observed, there had long been concerns in the French parliament that France was spending too much on Vietnam, but the government had been lying to them (Zeng, 2008, p.190). Therefore, on May 11th, 1883, in an interview with the newspapers when he went to Russia to congratulate the Tsar on his coronation, Zeng stated China's position on Vietnam on the one hand, and warned France that it might pay more than ten times the expected military costs on the other. Also, Zeng reiterated the influence of Chinese domestic warriors to strengthen his voice, he also gave many other interviews to journalists from all over the world on Vietnam issues (Zeng, 1998, pp.1251-1252). Zeng's intention to influence French diplomacy through newspapers was quite obvious when official channels were not available.

Western newspapers were quite familiar with Zeng that there was a general understanding of Zeng in the newspapers circle: "Marquis Zeng likes to discuss official issues with the newspaper staff." (Guo&Wang, 2016, p.1012) Some scholars believe that Zeng set off a "media campaign" throughout Western public opinion at the height of the Sino-French War, based on a number of anonymous articles that appeared in the British, French and American newspapers during the same period that were biased toward the Chinese position (Huangfu Day, 2018, pp.175-176). He had frequent appointments with journalists from major newspapers in his diary during this period (Zeng, 1998, pp.1251, 1254, 1255, 1261, 1271, 1277, 1284, 1285, 1286, 1293).

Since the French Foreign administration did not reply to any of the notes he sent, Zeng gave his external correspondence with France to *The Times* of London for publication. He also met with a journalist from *Le Figaro*, and accused French Foreign administration of embarrassing him for not replying his note (Guo & Wang, 2016, p.1009). French Foreign Minister Jules Ferry had questioned Zeng on the leak of diplomatic documents. Zeng claimed that he had

not given the documents to *The Times*, but because the date and content of the article published by *The Times* were accurate, such words could be Zeng's alibi (Guo & Wang, 2016, pp.1007-1008).

Soon afterwards, the media campaign Zeng launched caused even more trouble for the French government in Parliament. The documents disclosed by Zeng in the newspapers made the French parliament members realize that they had been deceived by the government. The French government did not tell the truth about Zeng's attitude in the previous meetings, but reassured members of Parliament that there was nothing to worry about. However, once the correspondence between Zeng and the French Foreign Ministry was reported, the previous statements of the cabinet were immediately debunked. A member of parliament thus questioned the government's intention: "Is it because they are afraid that the House will not agree if we know the truth?" He further accused the current government of violating democratic principles. Obviously, it was a very serious accusation. Another MP went even further and called for the reversal of the government. After this event, Zeng successfully brought the French government back to the negotiating table with China.

When the Qing army was losing in Vietnam, Zeng's strategy became more aggressive: He wrote to British newspapers that the war in Vietnam would affect British commercial interests there (Zeng, 2005, p.213), and in a letter to a German newspaper, he said that if France was emboldened by the Vietnam campaign, it would be able to recover the cities occupied by Germany from France, Metz and Strasbourg, and compared the war in Vietnam to the Battle of Sedan in the Franco-Prussian War (Guo & Wang, 2016, pp.1657-1658).

However, such efforts seemed to have backfired. Zeng's comparison was considered as an insult to France (Guo & Wang, 2016, pp.1657). As Britain and Germany did not appear the will of mediation, Zeng was hated by the French public opinion, so that the France took Zeng's transfer as the precondition of the peace talks between the two countries in the negotiations with Li Hongzhang in Tianjin.

Conclusion

Through his in-depth observation of the French political system and newspapers, Zeng had seen their close relationship. This transformed from conservative to active and radical, and finally became capable of setting off a "media diplomacy" in France that affected many western countries. But on the other hand, Zeng's efforts in this field still had limits, and cannot replace military forces and formal diplomatic meetings. Zeng's "media diplomacy" accompanied the whole negotiation period between China and France, but it was difficult to reverse the precipitous deterioration of the situation. In addition, public opinion could not be controlled all the time, thus Zeng's attempts to use public opinion to serve diplomatic goals were not always successful. When he tried to build momentum in the public opinion field of other countries in order to achieve the mediation of a third country, he touched the great taboo of the French instead, so that the "media diplomacy" had to come to a short end.

If Zeng Jize's "media diplomacy" during his time in France was to use the Western newspapers to serve his diplomatic goals, his article "China, the Sleep and the Awakening" published on the eve of his departure went further, attempting to defend China's political and religious civilization at a deeper level, reinterpreting China's national image in Western terms, and deconstructing the West's "Orientalist imagination" of China at that time. The article was published in the January 1887 issue of *The Asiatic Quarterly Review* of London. After its

publication, the article caused a great deal of reaction in English-speaking opinion circles in the West and in the Concession.

From the beginning, Zeng had some idea of the possible effects of the article. In his letter to Macartney, he mentioned that he hoped the publication of the article would improve “do good, and lead to a better understanding and appreciation of the present position of my country and the future prospects of the Western Powers.” (Boulger, 1908, p.433)

This paper argues that the case of Zeng’s Jize’s usage of media for diplomatic purposes responded to and changed the negative stereotypes of Chinese civilization in the Western world at the time. He refuted the Western assertion that Chinese civilization was in stagnation and decline, and by reinterpreting the meaning of the concept of “sleep” in Western discourse, Zeng use Western discourse to defend China, aiming to correct the negative image of China as stagnant and heretical that the West has created. (Yang, 2010, p.114-130; Wagner, 2011, pp.4-139; Huangfu Day, 2018, p.201.)

The publication of this article was not an isolated act. If the previous strategy was to serve Zeng Jize’s specific diplomatic strategy, then this article takes it to a higher level and begins to try to represent “what is China” in the context of Western media and Western discourse. This is not just a statement of China’s position and foreign policy--What is noteworthy is his interpretation of China’s own civilization characteristics using Western discourse, and his attempts to clarify and dispel negative Western perceptions of China.

Zeng’s views on the Western media during his eight-year mission to the West were full of traditional Chinese undertones. In Zeng’s eyes, free public opinion in a democratic society sometimes would bring chaos and backlashes. On the one hand, he was apt to include newspaper opinion in his “diplomatic toolbox”, but on the other hand, he had a more negative attitude toward its legitimacy. All this cannot be seen simply within the paradigm of modernization: behind the seemingly straightforward “westernization” trend, there was in fact an undercurrent of Chinese intellectual perceptions of the era.

As mentioned in the beginning of this paper, the important role played by China’s Western-oriented foreign communication before the Sino-Japanese War is understudies in current historiography. This is a very important area if we want to rethink the modernization paradigm and escape the shadow of the “impact-response” model. From the perspective of global history, the mid-to-late nineteenth century was the beginning of Western civilization’s “global regulation” and the “first historical scene” of the collision between Eastern and Western civilizations. And the Chinese were not silent in this process. This paper hopes to present more of the ways in which late Qing diplomats like Zeng responded to, resisted, and even counteracted the West by using the Western newspapers before China’s own newspapers went global.

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