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A relational perspective on media relations strategies: The Chinese government’s news conferences from 2001 to 2009

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**ABSTRACT**

This study used the conceptual framework of organizational–public relationship cultivation strategies to quantitatively evaluate how the Chinese government’s international media relationship cultivation strategies at news conferences changed from 2001 to 2009. It found that the Chinese government has begun to enhance its international media relations efforts but that there is room for further improvement.

The Chinese government has gradually become aware of the importance of soft power and the effectiveness of attraction versus coercion (Nye & Owen, 1996). In turn, the Chinese government has enhanced its public diplomacy efforts (Zhang, 2008), particularly in terms of international media relations. Aside from Soviet-style propaganda, the Chinese government has learned to use certain forms of modern public relations in polishing its image since 1978. For instance, the Chinese government named its spokesperson in 1983 and hired Western public relations companies in its bid for the 2000 and 2008 summer Olympic Games (Wang, 2003). However, during this initial period, the strategy focused on one-way public information and was inconsistent and half-hearted (Zhang, 2008).

The year 2003 was a turning point in the development of the Chinese government’s international media relations efforts (Zhang, 2008). During the spring of 2003, a viral pandemic of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) swept China, resulting in hundreds of deaths. Many believe that the lack of effective government information release and transparency was one reason for the disastrous results. Acknowledging the importance of information transparency in effective governance and image building, in the second half of 2003, the Chinese government launched a nationwide campaign to establish a spokesperson system across all levels of government sectors (China Daily, 2004). By conducting in-depth interviews with several American reporters based in China, Ainsworth (2008) found that foreign reporters’ access to government officials has improved significantly over time as the Chinese government has held more news conferences.

However, no empirical studies have examined the change in the Chinese government’s international media relations efforts. The recent availability of new data sources has facilitated a systematic and quantitative assessment of the change over time. The Chinese government has made available transcripts of news conferences held since 2001, which document the behaviors of Chinese government officials before both foreign and domestic reporters. To fill the gap in the literature, this project quantitatively analyzes the extent to which the Chinese government has improved its international media relations efforts using the conceptual framework of organizational–public relationship cultivation strategies (Hon & Grunig, 1999; Ki, 2006).

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1 In this article, the term “Chinese government” refers to the central government, as opposed to local governments.

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1. Literature review

1.1. Public relationship cultivation strategies

During the past two decades, public relations theory and research have undergone a paradigm shift from simple measurements of communication output and public opinion change to relationship management (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000). According to the relational theory of public relations, public relations is “the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends on” (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 1994, p. 2). As media practitioners are a unique group within the public (Shin, 2006), the relational perspective also applies to the interaction between journalists and sources such as government officials. There are many definitions of the organizational–public relationship (see Berko, Rosenfeld, & Samovar, 1997; Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 2000; Hung, 2005; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998), and all feature interaction, interdependence and mutual influence as key components (Ki, 2006). These three components capture the essence of the symbiotic relationship between journalists and government officials/sources; reporters and government sources cannot survive without each other.

Normally, the development of a relationship has three stages—situational antecedents, relationship cultivation strategies and relationship quality outcomes (Grunig & Huang, 2000; Ki, 2006). In the context of a generic organizational–public relationship, positive relationship cultivation strategies are empirically tested to have a positive influence on relationship quality outcome variables (e.g., Ki, 2006; Waters, 2007). In public relations scholarship, the relationship cultivation strategies consist of six dimensions and were initially derived from interpersonal communication research. These strategies are mutually beneficial and meant to create symmetric organizational–public relationships (Hon & Grunig, 1999). The dimensions are access, positivity, openness,2 sharing of tasks, social networks and assurance (Hon & Grunig, 1999; Ki, 2006). Although these strategies apply to both organizations and the public, this study focuses solely on the actions of organizations (i.e., the Chinese government officials) toward the public (i.e., foreign reporters).

*Courtesy* is a modification of the variable originally termed “positivity” in previous public relations research. Positivity exists when organizations make the relationship with the public enjoyable and cheerful (Hon & Grunig, 1999). Ki (2006) operationalized positivity as the degree to which organizations make “communication with members . . . courteous,” “enjoyable,” and useful. In Ki and Hon’s (2006) study of the ways in which Fortune 500 companies cultivate the public via websites, they stated that the companies operationalize positivity as any effort that makes a website easier to use, such as navigation tools for searching information.

Media relations consultants suggest that clients should respect journalists in their interactions (Stewart, 2004). In the media coverage of O.J. Simpson’s murder lawsuit, lawyer Robert Shapiro treated reporters with no respect. For example, at a news conference held at his office, Shapiro did not allow reporters to exit through the front door of the building. There were also many stories published about his mistreatment of the press. When reporters needed a quote, Johnnie Cochran, another lawyer on Simpson’s defense team, became the reporters’ preference. Cochran, unlike Shapiro, always treated reporters with full respect.

Based on the media relations literature, this study’s researcher narrowed the scope of positivity and focused on Chinese government officials’ courtesy in their interactions with foreign reporters. If Chinese government officials demonstrate care toward reporters and express gratitude regarding reporters’ interests in the Chinese government during the course of a news conference, then their relationship with foreign reporters is likely to be more cordial.

*Access* refers to public relations practitioners granting the public access to the decision-making process (Hon & Grunig, 1999). In Ki’s (2006) study, measurements of access included items such as whether the organization “provides members with opportunities to meet its staff” and “adequate contact information” (p. 67). Public relations scholars also studied the relationship cultivation strategies of business corporations by examining their websites (Hong & Kiousis, 2007; Ki & Hon, 2006). Measurements of online access included whether the website displays address, telephone numbers of staff members, and the company’s physical address (Ki & Hon, 2006). Hong & Kiousis’ (2007) study of companies’ online investor relationship cultivation strategies explored the presence of hyperlinks to investor relations sections and the speed of responses to inquiries.

Media relations guidebooks often emphasize the importance of access. In an effort to improve reporters’ access to the government’s decision-making processes and government-related information, the government holds press offices, news conferences and background briefings. It launches other routine channels and installs press officers to answer media questions in a timely manner (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). As journalists prefer sources who are more involved in the decision-making process, public relations practitioners often arrange interviews with executives and high-ranking officials for journalists. Journalists always deem news conferences to be valuable opportunities to talk to high-level people in a face-to-face manner. Press officers are expected to answer phone calls from journalists 24 h per day, seven days per week (Howard, 2004) and to answer inquiries from media promptly.

In journalism scholarship, access is a notable factor in influencing reporters’ sourcing patterns. Powers and Fico (1994) found that 62% of journalist respondents in their survey suggested that the accessibility of sources is often or always important, and half of the respondents said that time pressure is often or always important. In other words, if

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2 Positivity and openness are renamed in this study; this decision is explained in detail in the subsequent text.
the government fails to respond to reporters’ questions, the government officials’ version of reality cannot appear in the media coverage. The dominance of official sources, which scholars constantly criticize, is attributed to their availability to journalists (e.g., Paulet & Entman, 1981).

Completeness is a modification of “openness” used in previous public relations research, originally defined as the disclosure of the truth to the public (Hon & Grunig, 1999). Being open to the strategic public can help to establish trust and reduce distrust (Bortree, 2007). Examples of openness include the availability of annual reports and the helpfulness of an organization’s issue briefing for the members of the organization (Ki, 2006). In the case of journalist–official interplay, an example of a lack of openness is a situation in which reporters are invited to a news conference but officials refuse to give meaningful responses to reporters’ questions. In this situation, access is established, but openness does not exist.

To enhance openness, media relations consultants advise their clients not to say “no comment” to journalists. A simple “no” may give reporters the impression that a public relations practitioner or the client intends to hide facts (Howard & Mathews, 1985). This response will lead journalists and readers/viewers to draw their own conclusions (Gregory, 2000) and to contact competing sources for commentary (Howard & Mathews, 1985). Media relations consultants suggest that if clients are not able to give a straightforward answer to reporters’ inquiries, they should explain why there is no direct answer to the question (Howard & Mathews, 1985). This type of explanation may help the client build a good relationship with the reporter, which may be useful in the future (Stewart, 2004). Media relations consultants also advise interviewees to take a fact-based approach during an interview, as reporters appreciate facts (Stewart, 2004).

In an online survey of 159 US health public relations practitioners, Cho and Cameron (2007) discovered that openness towards reporters is significantly related to expert power. Openness towards reporters was operationally defined as public relations practitioners’ “willing(ness) to engage in dialogue with reporters and accommodate media stances in a conflict situation” and “open(ness) to media.”

However, openness is a psychological construct. That is, it depends on the perceptions of reporters regarding the extent to which the Chinese government officials’ tell the truth. This study is based on content analysis of the behaviors of government officials and reporters documented by news conference transcripts. Specifically, the study examined the way in which Chinese government officials responded to a reporter’s question and the extent to which the official answered it from an observer’s perspective. This design makes it difficult to assess the openness of the Chinese government in responding to foreign reporters’ questions because openness is a psychological construct. Therefore, the researcher changed the variable name from openness to “completeness” because the former is not directly observable, while the latter may be.

Assurance is defined as the organization’s acknowledgement that the public’s concerns are legitimate (Hon & Grunig, 1999). Examples of assurance include “the organizations take the concerns of the public seriously” and the “organization’s emphasis on the importance of the public” (Ki, 2006). In the context of nonprofit organization–child relationship, it is regarded as an act of assurance if the organization allows children to contribute to the website through, for example, online discussion forums, because this sends the message that they are valued by the organization (Bortree, 2007).

Media relations experts suggest that clients should thank journalists for the opportunity to provide an interview and that they should express interest in the reporters’ work (Getman). The researcher’s professional experience as a business reporter suggests that clients of public relations consultations widely adopt these practices. In June 2006, each time the researcher asked a question to a vice-president of Agilent Technologies, that vice-president first responded “this is a good and interesting question” before addressing the question.

Sharing of tasks refers to the clients of public relations practitioners working jointly with the public in problem-solving processes (Hon & Grunig, 1999). Examples of the sharing of tasks include the organization’s involvement in the management of community issues such as disaster relief and environmental protection (Ki, 2006) and the organization’s stay in business in the interests of the public (Grunig & Huang, 2000, p. 37).

Public interest appeal strategy (Davis, 2000) fits the ‘sharing of tasks’ category. This strategy refers to when an organization focuses on public welfare rather than its own interests. The focus on the public promotes positive media coverage (Davis, 2000). Journalists also prefer to use the information subsidies from sources that are perceived to have no self interest (e.g., Cameron, Sallot, & Curtin, 1997; Curtin, 1999). Journalists report and write for the public and represent the interests of the public (e.g., Clayman, 2002). In other words, their requests for information are equivalent to requests from the general public, and reporters serve as representatives of the public. Thus, if the organizations express the concerns that they share with media consumers, journalists are more likely to trust them.

The use of the public interest appeal strategy would be beneficial to China. In the case of China’s international communications, some countries believe that a stronger China poses a greater global threat. If the Chinese government can align its interests with the rest of the world, the effort would be appreciated by international reporters and the public they represent.

Networking refers to the public relations clients that form coalitions with the public (Hon & Grunig, 1999). For example, the organization might form an alliance that affects the public in some way (Ki, 2006). In studying corporations’ relationship cultivation using websites, Bortree (2007) operationalized networking using celebrity endorsements and popular cartoons. Ki and Hon (2006) consider operationalized networking to be when a corporate website offers information such as the corporation’s contact with public activist groups.

Within media relations strategies, there are two types of networking. The first is networking directly with journalists. For instance, if a public relations practitioner becomes a friend of a reporter, “there’s a lot of quid pro quo that can happen” (Wilby, 2008). At the least, a reporter will be more likely to pay attention to a press release sent by a familiar media relations consultant (Silverman, 2009).
The other type of networking is the so-called “third-party endorsement.” This kind of networking refers to when public relations people or their clients request stakeholders’ endorsements of their products or positions, which in turn increases the credibility of the clients or their products. This strategy is often employed by interest groups that lack authority in journalists’ eyes. By securing high-profile endorsements, public relations people or their clients obtain media coverage (Davis, 2000). In the context of this study, the networking strategies that Chinese government officials can utilize at the news conference may include the use of third-party research to support their claims. Third parties are those organizations that are independent from the control of the Chinese government.

1.2. Changes in the Chinese government’s international media relations

The relationship between Chinese officials and foreign reporters was formerly tense because of the differences in political and economic systems, ideologies and cultures. In the past, Chinese officials rarely entertained requests for interviews from foreign reporters (Kristof, 1990). However, the Chinese government has engaged in an international public relations campaign to build a positive image of China in various ways since the 1990s. China published a series of white papers to address sensitive issues such as human rights, military expenses, and environmental protection (Wang, 2003). In 2001, the state-run China Central Television offered 24-h English-language offerings that aired in the United States (Wang, 2003). The Chinese government also regularly sent artist groups to foreign countries to help them develop a better understanding of Chinese culture and art. For instance, between September 5 and 27, 2000, the China Disabled People’s Arts Performing Troupe performed in six American cities (Zhang & Cameron, 2003).

Although China was relatively slow in constructing positive relationships with foreign reporters, it has continuously enhanced its efforts to engage with foreign reporters, particularly after the SARS crisis in 2003. During the spring of 2003, the outbreak of SARS seeped China, causing hundreds of deaths. Ineffective release of information is blamed for the tragedy. The Chinese government then decided to establish a spokesperson system across all levels of government sectors (China Daily, 2004). In collaboration with journalism schools across China and renowned Chinese journalists, the Chinese government arranged training workshops for press officers regarding the principles of public relations and methods for approaching journalists. The frequency of news conferences has increased. The number of news conferences held by the Press Office of the State Council of China (POSCC) grew from 20 in 2002 to 68 in 2005 (POSCC, 2005). The strict travel restriction placed upon foreign journalists was suspended January 1, 2007, to provide journalists with better access to the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games; the Chinese offered to establish this suspension when they placed their bid for the Olympic Games. According to the new temporary regulation, journalists do not need to request permission from authorities to travel to open areas except Tibet. Although this Olympic Game-specific regulation was suspended, a new regulation that inherits the essence of the Olympic regulation came into effect on October 17, 2008. The Chinese government’s rhetoric towards the foreign media changed during this period. The Chinese government frequently used words such as “similar mutual benefits,” “cooperation” and “joint effort.” These terms are completely different from the anti-capitalism words used in the past (Zhang, 2008).

These changes suggest that the Chinese government has made efforts to enhance transparency and that it has become more aware of and accommodating towards foreign reporters in accordance with the characteristics of Grunig’s two-way symmetric communication model.

2. Hypotheses

Based on the above discussion, the following hypotheses were proposed with theoretical justifications.

H1. At news conferences, the level of Chinese officials’ media relationship cultivation strategies increased over time.

H2. The level of Chinese officials’ media relationship cultivation strategies became higher at news conferences with lower topic sensitivity.

H3. The increasing trend of the level of Chinese officials’ media relationship cultivation strategies at news conferences over time depends on the conference topic’s political sensitivity.

As anecdotal evidence suggests, the Chinese government has begun to adopt two-way asymmetrical and symmetrical communication strategies. This change is apparent at news conferences where Chinese officials interact with foreign reporters. In addition, it is believed that the political sensitivity of the topic of news conferences potentially influences the way in which Chinese officials behave. For instance, a Chinese official might speak less when the topic of the conference is sensitive and negative towards the Chinese government. Thus, the topic’s influence was taken into account and controlled in this study.

3. Methodology

This study evaluates the change in Chinese officials’ media relationship cultivation strategies from 2001 to the first half of 2009. To test these hypotheses, the study used content analysis of the transcripts of the news conferences that were jointly hosted by the Information Office of the State Council of China and individual ministries of the State Council of China (equivalent to the cabinet). The unit of analysis was the news conference.
Table 1
Media relationship cultivation strategies measurement items.

| Item                      | Description                                                                 |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| **Courtesy**              | The ratio of # instances of expressions of gratitude towards journalists to # Q&A exchanges |
|                           | The ratio of # instances of calling foreign journalists “friends” to # Q&A exchanges |
| **Access**                | The ratio of # ministerial level officials                                  |
|                           | The ratio of time (characters) Chinese officials spend responding to a foreign journalist’s questions at a news conference to that for a domestic Chinese journalist |
|                           | The ratio of time (characters) for the Q&A session to that for the entire conference at a news conference |
| **Completeness**         | The ratio of # foreign journalists’ questions answered by Chinese officials to the # questions raised by that journalist at a news conference |
| **Assurances**           | The ratio of # instances of acknowledgment the validity of journalists’ concerns to # Q&A exchanges |
| **Sharing of tasks**     | The ratio of # instances of expression of similar concerns, mutual benefits, and cooperation to # Q&A exchanges |
| **Networking**           | The ratio of # instances of citing supportive evidence from third parties to # Q&A exchanges |

3.1. Content analysis of news conference transcripts

Content analysis is an appropriate method to measure media relationship cultivation strategies. Several public relations scholars have used content analysis to study how Fortune 500 companies or nonprofit organizations implement organizational–public relationship cultivation strategies using their corporate websites (Bortree, 2007; Hong & Kioussis, 2007; Ki & Hon, 2006; Reber & Kim, 2006). Similarly, news conferences are a venue for the Chinese government officials to cultivate relationships with foreign reporters in China. Thus, it is feasible to analyze relationship cultivation strategies at news conferences through content analysis.

News conferences hosted by the Information Office of the State Council of China date to 1993. Each news conference focuses on an issue, and foreign and domestic reporters are permitted to attend. This study used conference transcripts from January 1, 2001, to June 30, 2009, because these were the most complete transcripts available online. These news conference transcripts consist of two components: opening remarks by Chinese officials and several exchanges of questions and answers (Q&A) between Chinese officials and journalists. The Q&A session transcript clearly indicates reporters’ media affiliations, which allows scholars to distinguish between Chinese reporters’ and foreign reporters’ questions. The news conference transcripts document when a given news conference began and ended, which government officials attended the conference, when a reporter raised a question and an official responded, and the content of the questions and answers. These transcripts are in Chinese.

3.2. Unit of analysis and sample size

The news conference was the unit of analysis. However, the recording unit for several cultivation variables, including courtesy, assurance, sharing of tasks and networking, was distinct from and more complex than the unit of analysis. These variables were recorded at the level of single exchange of Q&A (details of coding and aggregation can be found in the next subsection). A total of 3384 Q&A exchanges were recorded over the period of analysis. Of these, 1641 exchanges were between foreign reporters and Chinese officials. The remainder took place between domestic reporters and Chinese officials.

According to the website of the Information Office of the State Council of China, 458 news conferences were conducted between January 1, 2001, and June 30, 2009. However, some news conference transcripts were incomplete. Three news conference transcripts were completely missing, with only a date entry available on the website. A minor portion of the remaining transcripts suffered from missing data to varying degrees. Of the remaining 455 news conferences, 450 have complete transcripts, including the opening remarks and Q&A session. No foreign reporters raised questions at 12 of the news conferences. Therefore, in hypothesis testing, 438 news conferences were used.

3.3. Operationalization of media cultivation strategies

Chinese government officials’ media relationship cultivation strategies at news conferences were evaluated according to six dimensions: courtesy, access, completeness, assurance, sharing of tasks, and networking (see Table 1).

3 http://www.china.com.cn/zhibo/node_7030558.htm or http://www.scio.gov.cn/xwbfbh/xwbfbh/.
4 The five conferences that included only opening remarks were related to issues on Tibet, foot-and-mouth disease, agricultural development, the Boao forum (an economic organization) and taxation. Tibet is the only sensitive issue that was intentionally deleted by the Chinese government. The other four were common topics and may have been unavailable due to technical reasons. It can reasonably be assumed that the missing values did not affect the results of the study.
Courteous was operationally defined as Chinese government officials verbally expressing their gratitude and care towards foreign journalists at news conferences. For instance, if it was raining at the time of the news conference, Chinese officials would thank reporters for coming despite the rain.

A ratio of the total number of courtesy statements (dummy coding: 1 = courtesy expressed, and 0 = courtesy not expressed) per Q&A exchange to the total number of Q&A exchanges between Chinese officials and foreign reporters was calculated. A ratio was utilized because the number of foreign reporters varied across news conferences. If one conference included more foreign reporters than another, merely totaling the instances of media cultivation strategies would be misleading because it contains information on the difference in the number of foreign reporters who ask questions between conferences.

Access was operationally defined as foreign journalists being granted access to Chinese officials at news conference. Access includes (1) the number of ministerial-level Chinese government officials present at the news conference, (2) the ratio of time that the Chinese officials spent responding to foreign journalists’ questions compared to Chinese journalists’ questions, and (3) the percentage of time devoted to Q&A at each news conference.

The first dimension measures officials’ closeness to the decision-making process of the Chinese government in regards to a specific topic or issue. This measure takes into account two factors. The first consideration is the number of ministerial-level officials present at each news conference. Different officials possess differing levels of expertise. Within the same bureaucracy, different officials have different responsibilities, and sometimes a problem or issue is related to several ministries. Therefore, with more officials present at a news conference, the sources are more appropriate and more journalists’ questions can likely be answered. Second, the researcher must account for the officials’ levels in the political hierarchy. In general, the higher the officials’ position, the closer they are to the decision-making process; thus, higher-ranking officials can potentially offer more “authoritative” information on an issue or a policy. Ministerial-level officials are good indicators of closeness to the decision-making process. Finally, the researcher counted the number of ministerial-level Chinese officials present at the news conference.

The second dimension of access is the percentage of time that Chinese officials spent responding to foreign journalists’ questions compared to Chinese journalists’ questions. The logic of this operationalization is as follows. Normally, a news conference lasts a fixed period of time. An increase in the amount of time spent responding to domestic journalists’ questions is equivalent to a reduction in the amount of time spent responding to foreign journalists’ questions. In some cases, prior to the start of a news conference, Chinese officials give Chinese journalists small slips printed with questions that the officials wish to be asked. The Chinese officials then read their prepared responses (personal communication with a reporter who worked for a state-owned news agency, 2008; Wen, 2007). Chinese journalists cooperate in this manner because the Chinese media were formerly run by the government; even now, most media are subject to strict regulations. A similar tactic is employed by US press officers, as well, particularly President Clinton’s press secretaries Mike McCurry and Joe Lockhart (Hess, 2005). The term “foil” defines the act of controlling the direction of news briefings (Hess, 2005). When US spokespersons expect US journalists’ questions to be harsh, they sometimes offer foreign reporters the opportunity to pose questions that change the direction of the news conference.

In addition, to measure the time that the Chinese officials spent in responding to reporters, the researcher used the number of Chinese characters contained in their answers because time code is not available for all of the news conference transcripts. Uttering a character or word takes time, which makes counting the number of characters a valid measure of time. Furthermore, in four conferences, all questions were posed by foreign reporters; thus, the denominator in calculating this ratio is zero, and the ratio cannot be calculated. Such conferences denote that Chinese officials prioritized foreign reporters’ needs over domestic reporters’ needs. Therefore, rather than substituting the missing values with means, the researcher input the highest ratio value of the time that Chinese officials spent in responding to foreign reporters compared to Chinese reporters.

The third dimension of access is the percentage of time allotted to Chinese officials’ Q&A session out of the entire news conference. Normally, a news conference with a fixed-length of time consists of opening remarks and a Q&A session. Reporters prefer a longer Q&A session and more questioning opportunities with shorter opening remarks. The evidence suggests that the news conference organizers have attempted to increase the time spent for the Q&A session in each news conference. Since the end of 2003, the time devoted to the opening remarks was reduced by replacing consecutive interpretation with simultaneous interpretation (Liu, 2006). The average time allotted to the opening remarks has been shortened to 5–8 min, thus providing reporters with additional opportunities to pose questions (Jiang & Chen, 2005). Here, the researcher also used the number of Chinese characters to measure time as described above.

Completeness was operationally defined as the extent to which officials responded to questions or provided meaningful answers. A meaningful response addresses the reporter’s question and is factual. Completeness was assessed according to the ratio of the number of a foreign journalist’s questions answered by Chinese officials to the total number of questions raised by that journalist at a news conference. For example, a journalist may ask three questions, but a government official may choose only to answer two of them. Additionally, verbally responding to a question does not mean that the question is actually answered. For instance, an ideologically loaded response does not constitute a meaningful answer. “Ideological” means that officials’ responses to journalists’ questions are not substantive and do not address the journalists’ concerns.

\[ \frac{\text{Total amount of time in responding to foreign reporters}}{\text{the number of foreign reporters}} \times \frac{\text{total amount of time in responding to Chinese reporters}}{\text{the number of Chinese reporters}} = \frac{\text{the calculation formula the researcher used because for each news conference, the number of reporters varied.}}{\text{}} \]
A scenario that illustrates this is when a foreign journalist asks a Chinese official for his comments on a Taiwan issue and the official replies, “Taiwan is part of China.” Such comments contain little new information that foreign journalists can use and illustrate an actual refusal of information disclosure. This refusal will affect the journalists’ assessments of the source and give the impression that the interviewee is not candid. Another example is a vague response to a pointed question. If a foreign reporter requests the exact number of criminals who commit copyright violations and the Chinese official states, “not too many,” no meaningful answer has been provided.

Assurance was operationally defined as whether Chinese government officials acknowledged the validity of journalists’ questions and concerns. Different from courtesy, which focuses on Chinese government officials’ politeness in general, assurance examines Chinese officials’ compliments on the content of reporters’ questions. For example, after a journalist raises his or her question, the Chinese officials state that the question is good or legitimate. Acknowledgement that the journalists’ concerns are valid can potentially make journalists feel that the officials share their concerns.

The recording unit for this variable was Q&A exchange. Coding and aggregation schemes were identical to those for courtesy.

Sharing of tasks was operationally defined as the degree to which Chinese government officials verbally expressed that the Chinese government’s actions or new policies benefit foreign countries and people or that the Chinese government is willing to work with other countries to solve a problem. Zhang (2008) suggested that words such as “mutual,” “joint,” and “cooperation” appeared with greater frequency in the public discourse of high-level Chinese politicians after the Chinese government embraced the two-way symmetric communication model. The recording unit for this variable was Q&A exchange. Coding and aggregation schemes were identical to those for courtesy.

Networking was measured according to two dimensions. One was operationally defined as whether Chinese government officials use information from external parties to support their claims. “External” was defined as the independence of the entities cited by Chinese government officials. The entity has no political or financial relationship with the Chinese government. The other measure is Chinese officials’ cultivation of foreign reporters by calling them “friends.” The recording unit for this variable was Q&A exchange. Coding and aggregation schemes were identical to those for courtesy.

3.4. Independent variables

Time period. The nine-year period (2001–2009) was divided into three periods. The Chinese government began installing press officers across the country in late 2003; therefore, the first period is between 2001 and 2003 and functions as a benchmark. The second period is from 2004 to 2006. The third period is between 2007 and 2009 because in the second half of 2006, the Chinese government announced that it would relax its regulatory rules for foreign reporters beginning in 2007.

Topic. Each news conference hosted by the Information Office of the State Council addresses a specific area or issue. Some conferences intended to explain the quarterly economic development statistics of China, while some focused on efforts to rescue people buried in the debris of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake. Operationally, a total of 29 topics were identified, which ranged from food safety and public health to rural issues and social welfare (details can be found in Table 2).

Political sensitivity of the topic. The “topic” variable was coded in terms of its political sensitivity. “Sensitivity” in this study was defined as the extent to which the topic is negative towards the image of the Chinese government. Sensitivity ranged from 1 (extremely non-sensitive) to 7 (extremely sensitive). Because this study only examined the news conference hosted by the State Council Information Office and individual ministries, political sensitivity here is only defined at the level of the central Chinese government. “Extremely non-sensitive” was operationally defined as a topic related to the positive image of the Chinese government, such as an issue that demonstrated the government’s willingness to contribute to the welfare

### Table 2

Percentage (total) of topics of news conferences of the Information Office of the State Council of China (N = 455).

| Sensitive | Less sensitive | Least sensitive |
|-----------|----------------|-----------------|
| **Topic** | **Freq.** | **%** | **Topic** | **Freq.** | **%** | **Topic** | **Freq.** | **%** |
| Food safety | 22 | 4.84 | National economy | 70 | 15.38 | Business | 35 | 7.69 |
| Public health | 20 | 4.40 | Disaster relief | 50 | 10.99 | Local economy | 20 | 4.40 |
| Rural issues | 19 | 4.18 | Environment | 45 | 9.89 | Culture | 15 | 3.30 |
| Social welfare | 18 | 3.96 | National politics | 7 | 1.54 | Economic globalization | 15 | 3.30 |
| Copyright | 16 | 3.52 | Technology | 10 | 2.20 | | | |
| Minority | 16 | 3.52 | Space | 7 | 1.54 | | | |
| Work safety | 15 | 3.30 | Sports | 7 | 1.54 | | | |
| Party | 11 | 2.42 | Transportation | 5 | 1.09 | | | |
| Govt. info policy | 8 | 1.76 | Anti drug | 4 | 0.88 | | | |
| Education | 7 | 1.54 | Customs | 4 | 0.88 | | | |
| Religion | 1 | 0.22 | Legal issues | 4 | 0.88 | | | |
| | | | Diplomacy | 2 | 0.44 | | | |
| | | | Labor | 1 | 0.22 | | | |
| | | | Volunteer | 1 | 0.22 | | | |
| **Subtotal** | **N = 153** | **33.63%** | **Subtotal** | **N = 172** | **37.80%** | **Subtotal** | **N = 130** | **28.57%** |

*They add up to 100%.*
of other countries and international stakeholders. A topic that was “extremely sensitive” referred to a problem faced by the Chinese government that remained unresolved for many years and that damaged the interests of international stakeholders. The Chinese government has been notorious for concealing information regarding these sensitive issues. The researcher and a coder performed the recoding to ensure reliability. Scott’s Pi is .88, which reached an acceptable level of agreement. The coder and the researcher reviewed and discussed the three topics without agreement and eventually agreed upon a single solution.

Based on the cumulative percentage, the seven categories were reclassified into three groups of roughly equal numbers (“sensitive,” “less sensitive” and “least sensitive”) to facilitate moderation-effect analysis. Table 2 lists the details of the recoding.

**Foreign media** included those whose headquarters were located outside of the Chinese mainland, consistent with the definition provided by the Chinese government.

### 3.5. Intercoder reliability

Ten percent of the news conferences and Q&A exchanges were randomly sampled to train the coders and calculate intercoder reliability. Two Chinese coders coded the variables from the news conference transcripts. Scott’s Pi was calculated for all variables, with the following results: the number of questions answered by Chinese officials = .94 and networking languages = .88. The variables with unreported reliability coefficients achieved 100% agreement. Above .90 is acceptable for all situations, and above .80 is acceptable in most situations. More conservative tests that consider chance agreement afford a more liberal threshold (Lombard, Snyder-Duch, & Bracken, 2002). Thus, the coding scheme in this study was reliable.

### 4. Results

#### 4.1. Descriptive statistics

Table 3 displays means and standard deviations for Chinese officials’ media cultivation strategy ratio variables after aggregation. On average, the Q&A session accounted for 74% of the entire session in terms of Chinese characters. On average, a Chinese government official spent less time answering foreign reporters’ questions than Chinese journalists’ inquiries. Chinese officials meaningfully answered eight out of ten foreign reporters’ questions. Chinese officials expressed their willingness to cooperate in one quarter of Q&A exchanges, expressed gratitude to foreign reporters in one third of Q&A exchanges, and acknowledged the validity of foreign reporters’ questions in one quarter of Q&A exchanges.

However, Chinese government officials rarely called foreign reporters “friends” or quoted third-party evidence in answering questions, making these two variables constants. Thus, these two variables were dropped from the hypothesis testing.

| Variables                              | Mean | SD  | 95% CI      | N  |
|----------------------------------------|------|-----|-------------|----|
| Access                                 |      |     |             |    |
| % Q&A session                          | .74  | .12 | [.73, .75]  | 450|
| % ministerial level officials           | 1.22 | .94 | [1.13, 1.30]| 455|
| Ratio of foreign reporters’ answers’ time to domestic reporters’ answers’ time | .86  | .67 | [.80, .93]  | 438|
| Completeness                           |      |     |             |    |
| % foreign reporters’ questions answered by Chinese officials | .79  | .20 | [.77, .80]  | 438|
| Sharing of tasks                       |      |     |             |    |
| % Q&A exchanges citing willingness to cooperate | .26  | .32 | [.23, .29]  | 438|
| % Q&A exchanges expressing gratitude to foreign reporters | .35  | .37 | [.31, .38]  | 438|
| % Q&A exchanges calling foreign reporters friends | .06  | .15 | [.04, .07]  | 438|
| Networking                             |      |     |             |    |
| % Q&A exchanges citing third-party evidence | .05  | .15 | [.04, .06]  | 438|
| Assurance                              |      |     |             |    |
| % Q&A exchanges acknowledging validity of foreign reporters’ Qs | .26  | .30 | [.23, .28]  | 438|

**Note:** The last five variables in this table are ratios of the number of instances of each dimension at each Q&A exchange to the total number of Q&A exchanges between foreign reporters and Chinese officials at a news conference. A ratio was taken because the number of Q&A exchanges varies across conferences. For instance, at a news conference with a total of 10 Q&A exchanges between foreign reporters and Chinese officials, four Q&A exchanges contain assurance statements. For this conference, the ratio of assurance statements is .40.
Table 4  
MANOVA for Chinese officials’ media cultivation strategies over time/political sensitivity of topic (N = 438).  
| Effects | Wilks’ Lambda | F value | df | Error df | Sig. |
|---------|---------------|---------|----|----------|------|
| Time a | .89 | 3.74 | 14 | 846 | .00 |
| Topic b | .89 | 3.49 | 14 | 846 | .00 |
| Time × topic c | .94 | .94 | 28 | 1527 | .56 |

a Time is short for time periods. The three time periods are 2001–2003, 2004–2006 and 2007–2009.  
b Topic is short for political sensitivity of topic. Three levels of political sensitivity are “sensitive,” “less sensitive” and “least sensitive.”  
c The interaction term of time and topic is not statistically significant, which was dropped in ANOVA to keep the model parsimonious.

Table 5  
ANOVA for Chinese officials’ media cultivation strategies over time/political sensitivity of topic (N = 438).  
| Variables | Source | F | df | Sig. | Source | F | df | Variables |
|-----------|--------|---|----|------|--------|---|----|----------|
| Ratio of Q&A session | Model | 3.89 | 4 | .01 | Model | 5.40 | 4 | .00 |
| | Time | 4.67 | 2 | .01 | | 1.87 | 2 | .15 |
| | Topic | 3.25 | 2 | .04 | | 9.60 | 2 | .00 |
| # ministerial-level officials | Model | 4.46 | 4 | .00 | Model | 4.33 | 4 | .00 |
| | Time | .16 | 2 | .85 | | 8.10 | 2 | .00 |
| | Topic | 8.88 | 2 | .00 | | .97 | 2 | .38 |
| Ratio of foreign reporters’ answers’ time to domestic reporters’ | Model | 1.00 | 4 | .41 | Model | 5.83 | 4 | .00 |
| | Time | 1.92 | 2 | .15 | | 10.65 | 2 | .00 |
| | Topic | .15 | 2 | .86 | | .80 | 2 | .45 |
| % foreign reporters’ questions answered by Chinese officials | Model | 6.65 | 4 | .00 | Model | 5.48 | 4 | .00 |
| | Time | 11.91 | 2 | .00 | | 10.65 | 2 | .00 |
| | Topic | 1.67 | 2 | .19 | | .80 | 2 | .45 |

Note: Means and standard deviations of each cell are listed in Tables 6 and 7.

Table 6  
Bonferroni post hoc tests to compare Chinese officials’ media cultivation strategies over time (N = 438).  
| Variables | Comparison group (time) |
|-----------|-------------------------|
|           | 2001–2003 (N = 86) M (SD) | 2004–2006 (N = 169) M (SD) | 2007–2009 (N = 183) M (SD) |
| Ratio of Q&A session | .74 (.13) | .76 (.09)b | .72 (.13)b |
| # ministerial-level officials | 1.26 (.90) | 1.21 (.97) | 1.27 (.94) |
| Ratio of foreign reporters’ answers’ time to domestic reporters’ | .74 (.70) | .92 (.64) | .88 (.87) |
| % foreign reporters’ questions answered by Chinese officials | .70 (.20)c,d | .80 (.18)c,e | .82 (.19)d |
| % Q&A exchanges citing willingness to cooperate | .22 (.31) | .27 (.32) | .30 (.32) |
| % Q&A exchanges expressing gratitude | .22 (.33)c,e | .34 (.37)a,e | .42 (.38)y |
| % Q&A exchanges assuring foreign reporters’ Qs | .16 (.26)c | .23 (.28)a | .33 (.32)c,e |

Note: The same superscript in the same row denotes a pairwise comparison of differences.  
a p < .05.  
b p < .01.  
c p < .001.  
d p < .001.

4.2. Hypothesis testing  
MANOVA, ANOVA and multiple post hoc comparisons using Bonferroni correction were used. In terms of analysis strategy, two models were built. One model had three terms: time, political sensitivity of the topic and their product term. The other model had only two terms without the interaction term. If the interaction term was not statistically significant, the second reduced model was used to; otherwise, the complete model with three terms was used.

H1: At news conferences, the level of Chinese officials’ media relationship cultivation strategies increased over time. The results of the MANOVA in Table 4 suggest that differences existed in at least one cultivation variable across the three periods of analysis. The ANOVA results in Table 5 reveal that four of the seven cultivation variables displayed differences across time. These variables included the ratio of Q&A sessions, the ratio of foreign reporters’ questions answered by Chinese officials, the ratio of gratitude expression and the ratio of assurance statements. The variables yielded significantly different results across the three time periods. Multiple comparisons in Table 6 suggest that the ratios of foreign reporters’ questions answered and gratitude expression were higher in 2004–2006 and 2007–2009 than in 2001–2003. The ratio of assurance statements was higher in 2007–2009 than in 2001–2003 and 2004–2006. Unexpectedly, the ratio of Q&A session was significantly lower in 2007–2009 than in 2001–2003 and 2004–2006.  

This study had multiple dependent variables, thus MANOVA was used to examine whether at least one significant ANOVA model exists.
Table 7
Bonferroni post hoc tests to compare Chinese officials’ media cultivation strategies over political sensitivity of topic (N=438).

| Variables                              | Comparison group (political sensitivity of topic) |
|----------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
|                                        | Sensitive (N=143) | Less sensitive (N=171) | Least sensitive (N=124) |
|                                        | M(SD)             | M(SD)                | M(SD)                 |
| Ratio of Q&A session                   | .75 (.10)a        | .74 (.13)           | .72 (.13)a            |
| # ministerial-level officials          | 1.32 (.90)b       | .99 (.92)c          | 1.42 (.86)c           |
| Ratio of foreign reporters’ answers’ time to domestic reporters’ | .82 (.60)         | .84 (.71)           | .87 (.67)            |
| % foreign reporters’ questions answered by Chinese officials | .75 (.20)         | .78 (.19)           | .78 (.20)            |
| % Q&A exchanges citing willingness to cooperate | .24 (.30)a       | .19 (.27)c          | .35 (.37)c            |
| % Q&A exchanges expressing gratitude   | .31 (.37)         | .32 (.36)           | .36 (.39)             |
| % Q&A exchanges assuring foreign reporters’ Qs | .26 (.30)         | .23 (.30)           | .22 (.31)            |

Note: The same superscript in the same row denotes that a pairwise comparison of differences.

a p < .05.
b p < .01.
c p < .001.

2007–2009 than in 2004–2006. Because three of the seven cultivation variables display an increasing trend, this hypothesis is partially supported.

H2: The level of Chinese officials’ media relationship cultivation strategies became higher at news conferences with lower topic sensitivity. Table 4 suggests that differences existed in at least one cultivation variable across different levels of political sensitivity. The ANOVA results in Table 5 indicate that three of the seven variables differed across varying levels of political sensitivity. The variables include the ratio of Q&A session, the number of ministerial-level officials and the ratio of Chinese officials’ willingness to cooperate. Post hoc comparisons in Table 7 reveal that the ratio of Q&A session at news conferences on sensitive topic was higher than those addressing the least sensitive topics. The number of ministerial-level officials at news conferences on less sensitive topics was lower than those on sensitive and least sensitive topics. The ratio of Chinese officials’ willingness to cooperate at sensitive and less sensitive news conferences was lower than at the least sensitive ones. Because only one of the seven cultivation variables aligns with the study’s expectations, this hypothesis was not supported.

H3: The increasing trend of the level of Chinese officials’ media relationship cultivation strategies at news conferences over time depends on the conference topic’s political sensitivity. This hypothesis was not supported. Table 4 indicates that the interaction term was not statistically significant.

5. Discussion

Adopting the relational perspective of public relations theory, this study empirically examined how Chinese government officials’ media relationship cultivation strategies at news conferences changed from 2001 to 2009, controlling for the political sensitivity of the topic of news conferences. The news conference was jointly conducted by the Information Office of the State Council of China and individual ministries over a nine-year span. This type of systematic and quantitative assessment of the Chinese government’s international media relations efforts has never before been undertaken.

5.1. Positive changes in media relations strategies

Over time, certain dimensions of media cultivation strategies increased. This study found that three dimensions of media cultivation strategies displayed changes, which is consistent with the study’s expectations (see Fig. 1). The level of cultivation strategies was higher in 2004–2006 and 2007–2009 than in 2001–2003, respectively. They include the ratio of foreign reporters’ questions answered by Chinese officials (completeness), the ratio of courteous statements (courtesy) and the ratio of assurance statements (assurance). More importantly, Chinese officials answered more questions in a meaningful way than formerly, which suggests that they are making serious efforts to enhance transparency. Additionally, the ratio of time devoted to responding to foreign reporters’ questions to Chinese reporters’ in 2004–2006 was 14% more than that in 2001–2003. Although it is not statistically significant at the level of .05, its p-value is .07, which is very close to .05.

Additionally, the variation in cultivation strategies between topics was not as great as hypothesized. The sole dimension that is consistent with the hypothesis is the ratio of Chinese officials’ expression of willingness to cooperate. It was highest at conferences on the least sensitive topics. Different from expected, four of the seven media cultivation strategies did not vary across different levels of political sensitivity. Interestingly, the study found that foreign reporters at conferences on sensitive topics had better access to senior Chinese officials than those on less sensitive topics and that the ratio of Q&A session for conferences on sensitive topics was higher than that of conferences on least sensitive topics. Moreover, the trend of media cultivation strategies over time was not contingent upon news conference topics’ political sensitivity. It should also be noted that the proportion of conferences on sensitive topics increased from 2001 to 2009.

Unexpectedly, the study found that the ratio of Q&A session (access) was lower in 2007–2009 than in 2004–2006. This difference may be attributed to the 27 news conferences on the Sichuan earthquake from May 13 to June 16, 2008. These conferences contained relatively lengthy opening sessions, during which Chinese officials gave detailed statistics on the
Fig. 1. Chinese officials' media cultivation strategies over time.

earthquake. However, such detailed opening sessions may be regarded as a positive sign that the Chinese government accommodated the needs of foreign reporters for precise information, such as the number of casualties and the amount of relief resources deployed.

These results suggest that Chinese officials have attempted to cultivate the relationships with foreign journalists and accommodate their needs at nearly all types of conferences. Consistent with anecdotal evidence and previous studies based on interviews (Ainsworth, 2008; Zhang, 2008), Chinese government officials have learned and practiced modern public relations techniques in interacting with foreign journalists, at least in the context of news conferences. These findings lend empirical support regarding the positive changes that scholars have noted in the Chinese government's communication with foreign reporters in recent years. The Chinese government has indeed begun to embrace the two-way symmetric model of public relations (Zhang, 2008). Importantly, the Chinese government has made efforts to improve its information transparency by answering more questions from foreign reporters and acknowledging the validity of foreign reporters' concerns.

Moreover, this study makes contributions to public relations research. It attempted to extend the original organizational–public relationship cultivation strategies, which is often discussed and examined in the context of a generic organizational–public relationship, to the area of media relations—a subfield of public relations. This study also offers a new way to view various media relations strategies discussed in academic and trade literature by classifying them according to the six dimensions of cultivation strategies.

5.2. Further efforts required

However, these developments are far from sufficient. In the context of news conferences, Chinese officials have not exhausted all possible media relationship cultivation strategies. For example, in hypothesis testing, two variables—calling foreign journalists “friends” (networking) and citing third-party evidence (networking)—were excluded because of their low frequency of appearance at news conferences. Thus, there is room for the Chinese government's media relations to further improve.
5.3. Limitations and future research

This project did not examine the effectiveness of the media relationship cultivation strategies. For instance, this study did not examine the extent to which these strategies can influence the foreign media’s coverage of the news conferences sponsored by the Chinese government and the degree to which they can alter foreign reporters’ behaviors at news conferences. If future research can incorporate a measure of “effectiveness,” the validity of the metrics developed by this project can be significantly enhanced.

Moreover, improving the international media relations practices of the Chinese government is a continuing process. In 2010 and 2011, additional ministries and organs of the Communist Party of China (CPC) began holding news conferences that are open to foreign journalists. For instance, in 2011, the organs of the CPC at central and provincial levels began to unveil their spokespersons for the first time. It will be important to assess how these party officials communicate with journalists, especially foreign reporters. However, this process is neither simple nor straightforward. For example, in the first half of 2011, the relationship between the Chinese government and foreign journalists became tense because of foreign journalists’ interest in the “Jasmine Revolution” Rally on Beijing’s Wangfujing Street, which resulted in physical conflicts with the local police. Such fluctuations in the relationship between Chinese government officials and foreign reporters remind scholars of the importance of continuous monitoring of the situation.

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