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Ties with Thais?

Chinese Media Expats and China's Soft Power Footprint in Thailand

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Abstract

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This dissertation investigates China's global media expansion through a qualitative study of Chinese expatriate journalists stationed in Thailand. Moving beyond top-down narratives that portray these journalists as mere instruments of China's soft power, this research centers their lived experiences, professional aspirations, and everyday negotiations at the intersection of media practice and geopolitical mission. Drawing on four months of fieldwork in Bangkok and Beijing in 2023, the study employs Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *illusio* to understand how Chinese journalists construct meaning in their expat work in Thailand. The three empirical chapters respectively examine journalists' job attractions, their everyday work, as well as their evolving conceptions of professional excellence. Findings reveal that China's soft power is enacted not through ideological indoctrination but more through journalists' self-perceived belief

in the job and everyday acts of professional reconciliation—balancing institutional objectives with personal and professional commitments. This bottom-up perspective challenges binary frames of state control versus journalistic autonomy and offers a sociological account of how Chinese soft power is negotiated and enacted on the ground, thus making it possible to better assess its strengths and limits. These findings also highlight the human dynamics behind China's global media presence and the contingent nature of journalistic agency within evolving geopolitical projects.

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Introduction

Almost hidden at the top of Bangkok's Maneeya Center, overlooking the bustling Rajaprasong intersection, sits a storied relic of international journalism: the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Thailand (FCCT). With its modest bar and weekly discussion panels, the place might appear unassuming today, but it carries the legacy of a bygone era—when this Southeast Asian outpost pulsed with the geopolitics of the Cold War. In the mid-1970s, as Saigon, Phnom Penh, and Vientiane fell to communist forces in quick succession, Thailand's capital transformed overnight from a media backwater into a regional watchtower for Indochina (now known as mainland Southeast Asia). Foreign bureaus relocated en masse, and the FCCT evolved from an informal gathering of correspondents into Southeast Asia's largest press club (Tebbutt, 2000). Today, that golden age feels distant: industry-wide downsizing, shrinking foreign bureaus, and tightening media restrictions in Thailand have thinned the correspondent ranks (Faulder, n.d.). Where once the Associated Press or BBC teams packed the room, their numbers have dwindled to a handful of veteran reporters and freelancers.

Less visible in the FCCT's archives, however, is a shift that has steadily unfolded over the past two decades: as many Western bureaus downsized or withdrew from Bangkok, media outlets from China began to take root. Compared to the decades-old presence of Western media, the Chinese branches are much newer. China Central Television, for instance, only opened its Bangkok office in 1998. Yet the presence of Chinese journalists today has significantly expanded. By 2023, over 30 China-sent media expats from different outlets were working in Bangkok, easily outnumbering their Western counterparts. And Thailand represents just one node in a much wider pattern of China's global media expansion. By 2021, Xinhua News Agency operated more than 180 overseas bureaus (Kurlantzick, 2022b), and CGTN had built up a

substantial workforce of over 300 at its European headquarters in London (Di Stefano, 2018). In city after city around the world, Chinese media have gone from being newcomers to becoming permanent fixtures of the global news landscape. All this has taken place precisely at a time when most international news organizations have been downsizing their teams.

Clearly, China's push outward is not just about filling gaps in news coverage. Rather, it reflects Beijing's expanding geopolitical ambitions—not simply to report the news, but to shape the global narrative (Cook, 2020; Varrall, 2020). What China is seeking, many believe, is a form of international goodwill and acceptance—cultivated not only through media expansion, but also through language of promotion, cultural exchange, and other forms of state-led outreach. Collectively, these efforts are now commonly understood within the framework called *soft power* (Cook et al., 2022; Loomis & Holz, 2020). Just as Hollywood films and American pop culture once helped disseminate U.S. values and burnish its global image, China is now seeking to tell its own stories in ways that foster familiarity, affinity, and respect (Repnikova, 2022b). While soft power has become the default framework for explaining much of the Chinese government's global expansion, extant discussions remain overwhelmingly top-down in focus: scholarly and policy attention has centered disproportionately “on the state's strategy of soft power behind the global spread of institutions” (Nyíri, 2017, p. 22). In this view, as Nyíri (2017) argues, large networks of Chinese correspondents abroad are seen as “flag bearers for China's expanding global influence” (p. 22), as if their own vocational expectations and career trajectories were too trivial to warrant attention, and as if the state's intentions could be seamlessly translated by the individuals it employs.

Yet this narrative, for all its strategic clarity, rests on a problematic and, importantly, unproven, assumption: that the Chinese journalists stationed at overseas bureaus are naturally

agents of soft power. But understanding how soft power operates (or fails to operate) requires more than identifying who is presumed to serve its goals. It demands attention to whether and how these individuals perceive their own roles. Are they aware of the political scripts that underpin their work? Are they content with the part they are expected to play? Such questions cannot be answered without examining journalists' own experiences and perspectives. Their beliefs shape how they interpret their assignments, negotiate contradictions, and ultimately carry out their daily work for China.

Few settings reveal the tensions between assumed state alignment and personal belief more clearly than Thailand. As one of the most developed and politically symbolic sites of Chinese media presence abroad (Hewison, 2018), its case makes visible the micro-level complexities that larger theories often obscure. The growing cohort of Chinese journalists in Bangkok defies easy generalizations. They are men and women, veterans and newcomers, idealists and pragmatists—each shaped by distinct trajectories, ambitions, and thresholds of belief. Some take up the postings to gain the managerial experience necessary for promotion from reporting to newsroom leadership. Others see the assignment as a quiet chapter before retirement. Some are motivated by family considerations, such as securing international education opportunities for their children. Still others are chasing long-held reporting dreams to practice journalism on a global stage. These various considerations shape not only why they take the expat job but also how they might experience its integrated soft power dimension. To reduce their actions to the simple execution of soft power strategy is to ignore the texture and complexity of their lives. Just as importantly, this reduction makes it difficult to ask—let alone answer—basic questions regarding the efficacy on China's soft power ambitions. Are such journalists, in fact, the loyal and uncritical agents they are often presumed to be? And to what

extent do their lived experiences align with the assumptions embedded in the dominant soft power narrative?

Situated within and against the prevailing top-down perspective, this dissertation approaches China's global media expansion and the soft power ambitions behind it from the bottom up. It centers on the lived experiences, decision-making rationales, and everyday negotiations of the journalists themselves, viewing their perspectives as key to understanding how soft power is enacted on the ground by those often assumed to be its agents. Grounded in four months of transnational fieldwork and case studies of Chinese expat journalists in Thailand, this dissertation argues that Chinese soft power through media expansion is built through the ways in which expat journalists are drawn into and stay within these overseas media positions. The core of soft power's operation lies not only in how important it appears to the state, but in how deeply worthwhile it feels to those tasked with enacting it on the ground—without which even the most ambitious goals risk becoming perfunctory and hollow. For Chinese soft power to work, these journalists themselves must feel that the job is worth the cost of leaving home, confronting cultural and political dissonance, and committing to a role whose purpose may be politically charged but about which they feel personally ambivalent. Journalists sent abroad by China are not passive vessels of state propaganda, but actors who bring their own aspirations, life histories, and professional values into the picture. What China hopes to achieve through soft power is often carried forward by the considered alignment between institutional expectations and personal motivations.

However, this dissertation further argues that such alignment is far from uniform or guaranteed. It is shaped through diverse and often uneven pathways by which journalists come to see value in what they actually do. Among Chinese media expats in Thailand, people with

different social origins and career trajectories enter the profession with attractions that are differently perceived: some seek professional growth, others long-term stability, and still others hope to make an international impact. These expectations, in turn, shape not only why they take the job but also how they experience it, and crucially, the extent to which their work affirms or resists—if only slightly—their employer’s aims. Soft power, then, is enacted not simply through media content but through concrete media labor, through the people who find the work meaningful and who navigate its demands at the intersection of state agendas, professional values, and personal circumstances. Overall, this dissertation shows that China’s soft power efforts abroad depend less on top-down messaging than on the contingent and negotiated sense of *belief* felt by those tasked with enacting it. What unfolds on the ground is a contingent and negotiated form of soft power, shaped within the institutional and normative frameworks of journalism as a profession.

Of course, understanding these dynamics requires a closer look at the very concept of “soft power” itself. Before we can fully examine how it is enacted through journalists’ belief and everyday practice, we must first understand how soft power has been conceptualized and deployed as an analytical framework, and how it has been theorized, politicized, and institutionalized particularly in the context of China’s global media ambitions. The following section introduces soft power as a scholarly concept and traces its adaptation and evolution within China’s political discourse.

Soft Power: Winning Hearts and Minds

What is power—hard and soft?

Countless wars, conflicts, and violence throughout human history indicate that humans have a near-constant search for control, dominance, advantage, and influence. This long and

violent record suggests an enduring quest for power in human societies, albeit in different forms (Hirst, 2001). What is *power*? As a capacity to do certain things, power generally means being able to affect the behavior of others to get the outcomes someone wants (Nye, 1990, 2004). The term is particularly suitable and necessary in the realm of international relations, as countries (particularly the most dominant ones) always yearn for different forms of power so that they could influence other countries in ways they want (Holsti, 1964). The scholarly definition of power (particularly in international relations) once assumed a realist understanding (Gallarotti, 2011), as scholars tended to espouse power as a tangible and material concept (Gallarotti, 2011; Nye, 2004). In this traditional vein, military strength, economic might, as well as technological advancement were seen as the main sources of a country's power (Gilpin, 1981; Waltz, 1979).

While realists have traditionally looked at a country's power in terms of tangible and coercive sources, in the early 1990s, American political scientist Joseph Nye argued that the power of modern countries doesn't necessarily have to be confined narrowly as those hard forms. According to Nye (2004), to influence the behavior of others, one can coerce and induce others, but one can also try to attract and co-opt. The indirect, soft facet of power plays an equally important role in setting the agenda and attracting others in world politics. It was in this context that Nye introduced the now widely cited concept of *soft power*—an ability of a country “to structure a situation so that other countries develop preferences or define their interests in ways consistent with its own” (Nye, 1990, p. 168). Built on the American political context, Nye (2004) contends that a country's soft power rests on three major sources. The first one is its culture, which means the values and a country's cultural policies to promote the values to others. Hollywood films, especially how they transmit American popular culture, are a commonly cited example. The second source is a country's domestic political values. In regions like Europe,

where strict gun control is widely seen as a marker of responsible governance, the lax regulation in the US can diminish its appeal and credibility. Finally, foreign policies can be another source of soft power. Investing in global peacekeeping and human rights promotion, for example, has benefited the soft power of the US.

In today's globalized and information-driven world, advanced democracies increasingly seek forms of power beyond tangible assets and coercive force. The power of a modern country, hence, "does not rely solely on the hard power of economic strength and military force" (Nye, 2020, p. xix). This worldwide intellectual shift has enhanced the relative importance of soft resources in contemporary international relations. Although soft power was initially an American concept, international scholars, decision-makers, and political elites quickly recognized its significance (Nye, 2020). Over the past two decades, the concept has gained widespread currency—not only in scholarly discussions of international relations but also in policy formulation discourse (Kurlantzick, 2007). Although this rise in soft power discourse does not suggest that hard power has become obsolete; dominant states continue to invest in military capabilities and coercive strategies alongside their soft power efforts (Nye, 2011).

China's rise and the Chinese soft power.

More than three decades after Joseph Nye introduced the concept of soft power, the post–Cold War international order has undergone a significant transformation (Johnston, 2019; Rosen, 2020): China has increasingly come to be seen as the foremost challenger to the US-led global order since the collapse of the Soviet Union (Edney et al., 2020; J. C. Weiss & Wallace, 2021). Like the United States in the 1990s, a rising China has demonstrated a growing emphasis on international influence. Since the 2000s, soft power (*ruan shili*) has become a central concern for Chinese leaders (Barr, 2011; Kurlantzick, 2007; Li, 2009; Shambaugh, 2015; Wilson, 2008). In

his speech at the 17th Party Congress in 2007, then-President Hu Jintao first publicly articulated the strategic importance of enhancing China's cultural soft power (*wenhua ruan shili*) (Y. Zhao, 2013). This concept has featured prominently in Xi Jinping's political rhetoric and has been closely tied to his broader political agenda, including "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" (*zhonghua minzu weida fuxing*) (Li, 2009), the "tell China's stories well" (*jianghao zhongguo gushi*) campaign (Repnikova, 2022a), and global initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (*yidai yilu changyi*) (Edney et al., 2020). For the Chinese leadership, enhancing soft power appears to be a deliberate strategic choice amid the country's rise. A more subtle and palatable form of global influence not only helps shape a comprehensible and relatable image of China but also assists the country in offering its own approaches to addressing global challenges (Lynch, 2020).

Over the past two decades, China has drawn upon a broader range of sources from various social sectors to advance its soft power agenda—going beyond the narrower scope outlined in Nye's original framework (Dams et al., 2021). These sources include China's expanding global media networks (Sun, 2015); language- and culture-related educational institutions such as the Confucius Institutes (Repnikova, 2022a); individual diplomats and political figures (Huang & Wang, 2019); international events such as the 2010 Shanghai Expo (Blanchard & Lu, 2012); overseas Chinese diaspora communities (Hewison, 2018); and corporate diplomacy, exemplified by the global expansion of Huawei (Tang & Li, 2011). Among these sources, the media sector is widely regarded as one of China's most prominent soft power tools (Bachman, 2020; Cook, 2020; Hu & Ji, 2012; Sun, 2015; Yang, 2018; Y. Zhao, 2013).

The promotion of Chinese soft power heavily relies on the media sector for two reasons. First, as China continues to demonstrate an ability to reshape the international order, its

policymakers “are acutely aware of the need to encourage positive perceptions of their country while minimizing negative responses to its growing military power and economic influence” (Edney et al., 2020, p.1). Consequently, China holds its party-media accountable for promoting pro-China narratives as well as fighting against any media exposés that “present the Chinese government and its leaders in a negative light” (Cook et al., 2022, p. 4). A second reason lies in the way in which the media system functions in China’s socialist regime (Hong, 2011). It is believed that the external facet of Chinese media, which is often referred to as “external propaganda” (*duiwai xuanchuan*, later recast as *guoji chuanbo*, “international communication”), chiefly serves the leadership’s soft power agenda rather than any journalistic ambition (Marsh, 2018). In the recent decade in particular, the Chinese leadership delivered a clear signal that the country aims at sharpening its media presence globally to enhance its soft power (Cook et al., 2022). For instance, China has spent some 7 billion USD since 2009 to support the media global expansion (Yip, 2018). The annual funding granted to Chinese media even outnumbers Russia Today (RT) which is believed to receive about 300 million USD annually from the Russian government (Eckel, 2021). Specifically, this huge funding pool is used to support the Chinese media in three ways: the physical expansion of Chinese broadcasting networks in different countries (Thussu et al., 2018); the recruitment of experienced and well-regarded foreign journalists and editors worldwide (Scott, 2022); and the establishment of financial ties (such as content-sharing deals) with foreign media organizations or entities (Kurlantzick, 2023).

Yet governmental investment alone hardly guarantees success. For the same reason, evaluating China’s soft power should also consider the quality of how (and whether) it gets carried out rather than only focusing on the money spent (Hartig, 2020). Although China’s global media networks have been rapidly expanding, “[p]resence does not necessarily mean influence”

(Sui, 2019, para. 8). In fact, there have been scholarly voices questioning the degree to which China's efforts would produce the desired benefits. These researchers consider the external conditions China has amid its media globalization, arguing that Beijing's efforts are curtailed by limited news resources in certain regions, peer competition from independent media, civil activism against communist propaganda, and local laws protecting press freedom (Cook et al., 2022; Kurlantzick, 2022b; Sui, 2019; Varrall, 2020; Yip, 2018). Although these studies have noticed how external factors jeopardize the effectiveness of China's soft power campaigns, they are still inclined to believe that China's media expansion is a government-led project that is internally coherent: as if it's hardly necessary to question whether different parts and agents work well together.

Yet China's government-backed soft power projects may sometimes lack internal coherence: this internal dysfunctionality could also sabotage the effectiveness of the promotion of Chinese soft power. This is more evident when we recognize the gap between governmental resources committed to soft power efforts and the degree to which such guidance is understood and enacted by individual agents. For example, even though the Confucius Institutes (CIs) are believed to serve China's soft power, Yun Xiao's (2017) study finds out that those who work for CIs don't view their work as promoting soft power. These staff (usually language teachers) deliberately recognize their work as "promoting Chinese language and culture" rather than "promoting soft power," since the former sounds less aggressive than the latter (p. 33). Although soft power may still be achieved without agent-level awareness, the disjunction between institutional goals and individual perceptions raises questions about its coherence and sustainability. Similarly, albeit the belief that China's global media expansion reflects its soft power ambition, Nyíri (2017) argues that China's correspondents have different thoughts

individually: they “can and do assist, resist, go along with, or even ignore [the governmental goals]” (p. 14). These findings are illuminating in that they urge us to reconsider the possible *gap* between how the Chinese government sets up soft power goals and how this top-down guidance is understood and carried out by individual agents. If the teachers hired by CIs knowingly refuse to recognize their work as promoting soft power, why would we assume that the Chinese journalists abroad are obedient and submissive to the government’s goals? To see if there exist internal cracks in China’s global media expansion requires diving into the real thoughts expatriate journalists have about their job, especially those who work in countries where Chinese media outlets are believed to be active agents promoting China’s soft power and maintaining the bilateral ties. Thus, the first research question of this dissertation looks into the job attractions self-identified by expatriate journalists in Thailand, aiming to provide a nuanced understanding of the real attractions people have when they choose to work for Chinese outlets, and whether these attractions differ from or overlap the aim of the Chinese government.

Understanding what initially draws journalists to overseas postings, however, only addresses one part of the picture. Once in the role, how do they carry out their work on a day-to-day basis? After all, institutional goals do not implement themselves; they take shape—and sometimes change shape—through the routines, negotiations, and interpretations of those tasked with enacting them. This brings us to the second research question of this dissertation: What do Chinese expatriate journalists actually do in their everyday work, and how do they navigate their roles in ways that may align with, adapt to, or diverge from the soft power goals they are presumed to serve? To situate this question within the broader scholarly conversation, I review existing literature on how China’s overseas media and their staff are expected to function within the country’s external communication strategy.

Rethinking China's soft power through a media lens

Given that Chinese media have long been positioned as a central vehicle for projecting the country's soft power internationally, it is unsurprising that a substantial body of scholarship has examined how they go global and operate across borders. These studies often emphasize the role of Chinese media in disseminating information and narratives to foreign audiences, focusing either on strategies of content dissemination (Hu et al., 2018; Marsh, 2018; Y. Zhang, 2014; Kalathil, 2017; Livingston, 2016; Loomis & Holz, 2020) or on political economy perspectives on transnational media operations (Koh & Shiffman, 2015; Sun, 2015; Jacob, 2020; Molter & DiResta, 2020).

However, much of this scholarship continues to rely on Joseph Nye's classic conception of soft power as the ability to attract foreign audiences through cultural and ideological appeal. Yet a growing body of work has questioned the applicability of this model to the Chinese context. Scholars such as Rapnikova (2022a) argue that China's soft power efforts are not strictly outward-facing, but often serve domestic purposes as well—reinforcing political legitimacy, fostering national cohesion, and managing public sentiment at home. Similarly, Callahan (2015) suggests that Chinese soft power frequently operates through contrast rather than attraction, employing a strategy of “negative soft power” that builds identity by framing the West as chaotic or threatening (p. 223). Both perspectives highlight the socially constructed nature of soft power in China, where external communication and internal legitimation are deeply intertwined.

From the perspective of media, society, and politics, ongoing debates about the contested meanings and functions of soft power in China are both meaningful and necessary. These discussions invite us to move beyond a narrow focus on international influence and instead examine the multiple social roles that soft power plays—including domestic legitimation,

ideological work, and identity formation. This broader lens not only enriches our understanding of the concept itself, but also enables a more precise analysis of the evolving role of Chinese media—and media professionals—within the state’s soft power strategies.

This dissertation engages with soft power not as a fixed set of resources that states possess and deploy, but as a contested and evolving discourse shaped through both policy articulation and on-the-ground enactment. While Nye’s model tends to treat soft power success as measurable through international admiration or alignment, in China’s context, soft power discourse often blurs the line between internal legitimation and external persuasion—functioning simultaneously as a tool for foreign engagement and domestic political cohesion. My approach, therefore, treats soft power not simply as an outward-facing strategy, but as a socially constructed and institutionally enacted project that targets both international and domestic audiences, one that unfolds through everyday labor, belief, and negotiation among those charged with implementing it.

To investigate how soft power, an evolving and contested concept in China’s case, is actually enacted on the ground, we must shift analytical attention from state strategies to the actors themselves: their daily routines, belief systems, and negotiations with institutional expectations. In journalism and media studies, research that centers on individual journalists typically falls within the field of *media sociology*. In the following section, I briefly introduce the media sociology perspective to show how this lens allows us to better penetrate the workings of China’s soft power campaigns by centering the lived experiences and interpretive agency of individual journalists.

Sociological Approaches to Journalism

Influenced by the seminal American newsroom studies in the 1950s (such as David White's "Gatekeeper" study), and built on the increasing dissatisfaction with the post-World War II *media effects tradition* that seldom concerns how media content fits within the larger social structure (Gitlin, 1978), a group of journalism and media studies scholars started to examine who makes news, or what counts as news (Reese & Ballinger, 2001; Schudson, 1989; Tuchman, 1978). In the following decades, these inquiries generally yielded a productive area termed *media sociology*, or the *sociology of news* approaches (Reese & Ballinger, 2001; Reese & Shoemaker, 2016). Studies taking a sociological perspective bring to the foreground empirical concerns of how journalism works without focusing only on news as a taken-for-granted outcome. In his well-known essay, "The Sociology of News Production," Michael Schudson (1989) distinguishes three approaches to the study of news, namely the *political economy* perspective, the *sociological* perspective, as well as the *culturological* perspective. He argued that both the political economy and the culturological approaches tend to ignore the details of organizational and occupational routines while seeing news production as economic or cultural outcome. The sociological approaches nevertheless assume that news production involves a variety of forces, and it is thus important to understand "how journalists' efforts on the job are constrained by organizational and occupational routines" (p. 266).

Especially in the context of this dissertation that focuses on journalists, a sociological perspective has major strengths. First, since a sociological perspective holds the belief that "[news] is put together by journalists" (Gans, 2004, p. 73), it legitimizes journalists as the units of analysis in the empirical inquiries. Analyzing individual journalists and how they make sense of the government guidance (or mandates) given to them contributes to the extant literature on China's media expansion which is dominantly top-down. Second, since a sociological

perspective tends to understand the production of news through a relational lens—news both influences and is influenced by culture, politics, and economy (Ekström & Westlund, 2019), it thus helps reveal the mutual relations between journalism and other social sectors such as politics, economy, and culture, rejecting a simple unidirectional view that sees China's international journalism as the outcome of soft power policies. Third, a sociological perspective provides different paths to a variety of forces behind news arrayed from micro/individual to macro/societal (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). This is particularly helpful when we tend to understand journalism as a career path. Specifically, if we consider working for an overseas news outlet as an ordinary job—just like doing global business or foreign language teaching—then it's hard to ignore the fact that people must choose this career with different beliefs, expectations, and commitments. All of these individual factors theoretically shape how people do their work, and how they understand it. A sociological perspective thus maintains the hypothesis of a soft power mission on the part of the employer while also digging into the predicament of both personal expectations (of being an international journalist) and the work reality (working for an outlet that is associated with China's soft power aims).

As for extant literature about overseas Chinese media outlets, there are a few studies that take a sociological perspective. These studies unpack some key contradictions journalists experience while working for Chinese media transnationally. Wright et al. (2020), for example, find out that sometimes journalists' overt diplomatic role may jeopardize their journalistic autonomy. Through examining how African journalists hired by international news agencies (including China's CGTN) manage the tension between their diplomatic role and their own autonomy, the authors find out that these journalists have learned to ambiguously conceptualize soft power. This ambiguity serves as a boundary concept that helps them reconcile conflicting

expectations, and in some cases, deliver subtle forms of resistance. However, the authors emphasize that such resistance is rare, highly contextual, and often instrumental, emerging primarily when journalists fear reputational harm or diminished professional capital within the broader transnational news labor market. In another Africa-based research, Gagliardone and Nyíri's (2017) finding challenges a traditional understanding of China's broadcaster offices in Africa being powerful. They argue that the Chinese correspondents working in Africa can't fully transfer the resources China grants them into a tangible advantage in their reporting due to certain institutional constraints such as the problem of finding and communicating a clear Chinese media identity and the dilemma between trying different news styles and appealing to a niche.

Shixin Zhang's (2013) study demonstrates the discrepancy between personal motivation and real working conditions. Although China's war correspondents travel internationally with a variety of motivations such as "curiosity, seeking adventure, fascination with exotic history and culture" (p. 323), they must constantly compromise these dreams with the need to behave in a patriotic role for Chinese state media. Nyíri's (2017) multinational ethnographic study demonstrates the tension between China's foreign policies and Chinese correspondents' professional pursuit. He points out that China's changing foreign policies continue to confine the ways in which correspondents pursue professionalism, as more and more newsworthy foreign beats became taboos. In general, these media sociology approaches touch on the working conditions of expatriate journalists, providing valuable insight into how these journalists make sense of both the governmental political guidance and their own professional and vocational perspectives. Instead of taking any media outlet as a well-functional "black box," these studies

cast light on the possible tension between China's soft power guidance (as institutional factors) and journalists' own knowledge or preference (as individual factors).

The media sociology perspective helps surface tensions and internal cracks that more functionalist frameworks often overlook. As some studies have shown, working for China's overseas media outlets is rarely an idealistic pursuit that fully aligns with the initial fantasies or attractions journalists may have (Nyíri, 2017). It raises a set of interrelated questions: Why do individuals still choose to become China-sent journalists, and what do they find meaningful or worthwhile in such roles? How do these roles resonate with their value systems and professional beliefs, especially within the broader apparatus of China's soft power agenda? Taken together, these questions point to a central analytical task: understanding how journalists generate and sustain a core *belief* that this media expat work is worth doing, despite contradictions, constraints, and its potential distance from their personal ideals. This belief is not incidental, but central to understanding whether and how China's soft power apparatus achieves coherence from the ground up. From a sociological perspective, belief is not innate but cultivated. One does not naturally appreciate classical music without early and repeated exposure; nor does one intuitively understand financial risk without being socialized into a world where such an attitude is valued. Belief, in this sense, is a product of participation within a field. To better understand how such attraction and fulfillment are constructed in the realm of state-aligned journalism, this dissertation draws on Pierre Bourdieu's (1996a; 1998) concept of *illusio*.

Illusio: A Social Game Worth Playing

Journalism as a career path is oftentimes characterized by its seemingly self-contradictory mixture of both attractions and drawbacks: While it promises excitement and public impact, it often delivers routine desk work and long hours (Powers & Vera-Zambrano, 2023a). For the

same reason, working abroad as a journalist is a privileged job yet with often difficult, and sometimes harsh, conditions (Oaks & Delhi, 2003; Willnat & Weaver, 2003; S. I. Zhang, 2013). It's not unwarranted to imagine the possible psychological discrepancies between the initial job expectations and the actual working conditions (Nölleke et al., 2022; Ranji, 2022). To understand what keeps journalists in this unique career trajectory, some scholars turn to Pierre Bourdieu's *illusio* as an analytical framework (Nölleke et al., 2022; Powers & Vera-Zambrano, 2023a).

Illusio derived from the Latin word “*ludus*” (game), and it describes the fact of “being caught up in and by the game” (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 76). Generally speaking, as an “interested participation in the game” (Bourdieu, 1996a, p. 228), *illusio* describes people's belief that a social game (such as being a journalist) is worth playing, or that playing in the game is worth the effort it takes (Benson & Neveu, 2005). If someone has the *illusio* of a field, “they are motivated by its stakes as something worth struggling over; they see the investment of their own time, effort and emotion as a valuable endeavor; and they are committed to reaping the rewards of the field, [...] they see something worth aspiring towards” (Threadgold, 2018, p. 39). Like any social game, journalism has its own *illusio* that historically attracts and keeps people in it given all the social games available to them. In other words, journalism has the material and symbolic rewards that made it an appealing career pursuit (Powers & Vera-Zambrano, 2023a).

When it comes to career choices and trajectories, *illusio* helps understand why individuals find certain forms of work meaningful, and how such beliefs are shaped by their social background. Rather than treating professional choices such as taking or staying in an expat position as purely personal decisions, *illusio* highlights their social basis. It draws attention to how social origins, career trajectories, and available resources (e.g., knowledge of foreign languages, personal and professional connections, etc.) shape what individuals expect from a job,

how much they are willing to sacrifice, and what they perceive as success or failure. As Threadgold (2018) notes, *illusio* helps unpack how aspirations take shape in relation to one's position in the social structure. The concept thus serves both as a set of questions—such as who finds this work attractive and why—and a set of indicators for investigation, including class, education, professional stage, and personal values.

Sociologically, *illusio* is field-sensitive, characterized as a shared sense of purpose within a *field* (Bourdieu, 2000). It suggests that individual willingness to join the game is shaped by the very knowledge within the field and what matter to someone because they have been imposed in their mind as a feel for the game (Bourdieu, 1998). According to Bourdieu, *field* is defined as a configuration of objective relations between positions as “agents and institutions constantly struggle” within it (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 102). Moreover, Bourdieu believes that a field does not function without individual aspirations nor motivations (Bourdieu, 1990). “[I]llusio is the enchanted relation to a game that is the product of a relation of ontological complicity between mental structures and the objective structures of social space” (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 77). Yet *illusio* is also believed to uphold “scope to consider how the experience of aspirations, motivations, commitments, and rewards from one field may come to influence the strategies and struggles in another” (Threadgold, 2018, p. 44). Bourdieu argues that both internal and external hierarchization influence the power relations in the journalistic field, even resulting in possible modification of individual *illusio* (Bourdieu, 1996a). For example, economic considerations (such as profit expectations of media companies and the needs of advertisers) are believed to potentially affect individuals in the journalism field (Nölleke et al., 2022). This helps situate journalists and their possible aspirations in a broader social context where negotiations vis-à-vis the expectation-experience gap could be understood through relational lenses—social

status, political aspirations, cultural belongingness, vocational beliefs, as well as economic considerations could all influence how journalists think about their work.

Empirically, using *illusio* as an inductive analytical framework in this dissertation helps organize the potential findings related to the three research questions. First, it offers a way to understand what is attractive about the job from the journalists' perspectives. Through questions such as "What brought you to this overseas position" I examine what actually makes the job feel worthwhile—whether it is "becoming a Pulitzer-winning journalist" or "living in a country I've always wanted to live in." The framework also illuminates not only the relative efficacy of soft power, but also broader transformations in journalism by examining who gets assigned (or chooses to) work abroad, and what characterizes these practitioners. In this sense, *illusio* helps explain why certain individuals are selected or self-select into these roles in the first place. Crucially, these selections are shaped by the backgrounds and trajectories of individual journalists; the concept therefore points concretely to questions that can be empirically investigated (i.e., exploring now just how someone came to hold their position but also what their social origins, educational trajectories, etc. entail). Second, it can be used to explore how initial attractions relate to journalists' actual working conditions. In the second empirical chapter in particular, by exploring how *illusio* is maintained or reconstructed through daily exposure to real work, I examine whether Thailand-based journalists continue to engage in tasks that align with their initial attractions, and how they maintain or reconfigure a sense of worthwhileness as they become more deeply involved in their roles. Here, maintenance and reconfiguration is viewed as an effort to align individual dispositions (i.e., socially cultivates expectations of what a job entails) and objective opportunities (i.e., the daily demands associated with a given position). Third, since *illusio* can be shaped by external hierarchization (Bourdieu, 1996a), the concept can

help explore the possible symbolic hierarchy that journalists themselves construct around their work. Specifically for the third chapter about best work, knowing what these journalists privilege and value in their capacity as expat journalists is a way to understand how their belief that their efforts are worthwhile gets maintained, or what eventually gets ignored in the everyday work. Are these journalists doing things they really admire? If they don't believe they are doing something really admirable, then what do they admire?

When considering the broader debates about soft power in which this dissertation is situated, *illusio* also helps reveal the value hierarchy and stakes that Chinese journalists perceive in their work. It illuminates how soft power goals, although formulated as top-down policy, become embedded in everyday sense-making and gain traction only when they align with what individual actors recognize as worth striving for. The advantage of using *illusio*, and more broadly a Bourdieusian lens, is that it shifts attention away from soft power as a state-controlled communication strategy and instead focuses on the mechanisms through which individuals opt into the state-led agendas. This opt-in is not driven by coercion, but by perceived value, professional opportunity, or personal justification, all of which Bourdieu conceives as a struggle for legitimation. Rather than assuming compliance, *illusio* treats belief itself as a sociological object—something to be traced, explained, and historicized. In this way, the framework helps theorize soft power not as a coherent project, but as a socially enacted field of investments, negotiations, and practical judgments, bringing analytical clarity to what much of international political discourse invokes but rarely unpacks: how soft power actually works in practice.

Data and Methods

Thailand: A revealing site for Chinese soft power.

In this dissertation, adopting a favorable/positive case selection logic (Geddes, 1990), I select Thailand as the primary site for fieldwork to explore how China-sent journalists operate under China's evolving soft power ambitions. This choice is grounded in several considerations. First, Thailand has long held geopolitical importance in China's engagement with Southeast Asia. In recent years, it has also emerged as a key site for China's soft power outreach including media expansion, language education, and talent exchange, making it a strategically meaningful context for observing how soft power takes shape on the ground. Second, Thailand holds a unique place in the history of international journalism. Once a Cold War-era hub for Western correspondents in Indochina, it now serves as a frontline for observing the rise of Chinese media, making visible a broader transition from Western to Chinese presence in global news. Third, China's global media strategy has shifted since the COVID-19 pandemic. Amid mounting geopolitical tensions with countries such as the U.S. and India, Thailand became a more viable location for deploying Chinese journalists originally meant for more politically sensitive environments.

As such, Thailand offers a context where Chinese media not only have symbolic access but also tangible institutional footholds unlike more resistant countries where entry is limited. Lastly, Thailand has a relatively large contingent of Chinese journalists/correspondents, especially when compared to other Southeast Asian countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, or Cambodia. This makes it an especially fertile case for studying the lived experience of China's overseas media workers: a place where there are enough actors "on the ground" to observe the everyday dynamics of soft power in action. The following section provides a brief overview of China-Thailand relations and their evolving media ties.

Sino-Thailand relations revisited.

Generally speaking, the Sino-Thai relationship in the recent decade has been robust—particularly since the junta government ruled Thailand in 2014 (Hiebert, 2020; Kornphanat, 2016). The two Asian neighbors share a lengthy bilateral history: Chinese traders, artisans, and literati since the 14th century “played a crucial role in the introduction of Chinese culture to Thai society” (Kornphanat, 2016, p. 153). Long history aside, the Sino-Thai relationship went through a significant century-long vacuum, during which the anti-Communism sentiment once shifted the Thai government away from a Communist China and instead leans it toward the US. However, the changing Asian policies of the US in the 1960s—especially Richard Nixon’s Vietnamization Policy—tremendously impacted Thailand’s foreign policy towards the US, gradually pushing Bangkok closer to Beijing. In 1975, Thailand established a diplomatic relationship with the People’s Republic of China (Kornphanat, 2016). From the 1970s onward, although Thailand has performed as a long-time master of maintaining and balancing its relationships with major powers in Southeast Asia, and even today it always avoids picking a side between the US and China (Shambaugh, 2021; Strangio, 2020), its relationship with China nevertheless has been improving steadily. As Thailand’s largest trading partner and tourist abound, China now spends “more effort on public diplomacy in Thailand than in any other Southeast Asian nation” (Hiebert, 2020, p. 320), making Thailand one of the best exemplar countries that actively facilitate and host China’s high-profile soft power presence (Kornphanat, 2016). For example, among the total 31 Confucius Institutes (CIs) established in Southeast Asia by the Chinese government, 16 locate in Thailand teaching Chinese language and culture—including the first CI in the entire Southeast Asia region opened in 2006 in Bangkok (Hiebert, 2020; Kornphanat, 2016). Moreover, during Xi Jinping’s presidency, the Thai government has been actively participating in a wide gamut of China-led projects and initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiatives, the Lancang-Mekong

Cooperation, the Lao-China Railway project, as well as Huawei's 5G Alliance (Kornphanat, 2016; Shambaugh, 2021; Strangio, 2020).

As China continues to consolidate its influence in Thailand, its media footprint in Thailand is also substantial. According to the 2020 report published by the Center for Naval Analyses (CNA), Chinese media started producing Thai language content in the 1950s (Loomis & Holz, 2020), when China's largest state-owned international radio news network China Radio International (CRI) launched its Thai broadcasting program. Today, at least four major Chinese state outlets own Thailand-based offices that take charge of the news-making business in the Thai language, including Xinhua, China Global Television Network (CGTN), *People's Daily*, and China Radio International (CRI). There are also China-backed media offices that produce English or Chinese content locally in Thailand, such as China News Service (CNS), *China Daily*, and *Global Times* (Loomis & Holz, 2020). Moreover, some other media organizations have also opened offices or studios in Thailand, including China International Communications Group (CICG) and a provincial newspaper *Yunnan Daily*. As for the Thai side, it is believed that Thailand generally allows China's growing media influence—not only has Thailand established multiple content-sharing deals with Chinese media, but the Thai government also seems willing to learn from Xi's administration in terms of media control and censorship (Kurlantzick, 2023).

Fieldwork and data overview.

This dissertation draws on four months of transnational fieldwork conducted in Bangkok, Thailand (March–June 2023) and Beijing, China (June–July 2023), supplemented by post-fieldwork interviews completed by December 2023. The core data consist of in-depth interviews with 25 Chinese journalists who have worked for Chinese media outlets in Thailand, either during the fieldwork period or within the preceding decade. In total, I conducted 61 interviews,

including with Chinese journalists, Thai employees in Chinese media, executives at Chinese headquarters, and informants from Thai media, government agencies, and civil society organizations. Interview length ranged from 34 minutes to 2 hours and 11 minutes. Field interviews were complemented by participant observation of journalists' daily work routines (including media events, newsroom tasks, and social media activities) through which I was able to observe not only how journalistic labor was carried out, but also how soft power goals were interpreted, adjusted, or quietly sidestepped in practice.

Overall, the fieldwork also produced over 12,000 words of observational notes. In addition, I collected a substantial volume of digital and supplementary materials, including 56 computer files containing interviewee-shared documents, photographs, images, reports, and contextual artifacts—materials that, while not easily quantifiable, contributed meaningfully to the overall analysis. Together, these data sources form a rich empirical foundation for understanding how Chinese soft power is enacted and experienced on the ground. For details on how these data were synthesized into narrative vignettes, anonymized, analyzed, as well as discussions of field access, researcher positionality, ethical considerations, and other methodological and reflexive decisions, please see *Appendix A*.

Overview of Chapters

This dissertation proceeds as follows. Chapter 1 explores the initial attractions that lead Chinese journalists to accept postings in Thailand. While often state-coordinated, overseas postings offered by Chinese outlets also open up professional opportunities for journalists, complicating the view that they are driven solely by political mandates. This chapter shows that the perceived appeal of overseas postings is closely tied to journalists' positions within the media system, particularly their career stage and seniority. While the perceived job attractions vary, the

value of the assignment does not stem from alignment with political goals. Rather, it comes from how well the posting fits into one's broader career and life trajectory. In this way, soft power is not simply transmitted through state indoctrination. It begins with how journalists come to see their roles as related, legitimate, and worthwhile, shaped by motivations that are often personal, pragmatic, and grounded in their professional experience. Yet this bottom-up alignment is far from perfect—especially for younger journalists whose initial attractions may not fully align with state expectations. This raises a key question explored in the next chapter: how do journalists navigate and sustain their roles on the ground once the work begins?

Chapter 2 shifts from initial attraction to everyday practice, examining what these expatriate journalists actually do in their day-to-day work. Within the practical logic of news production, the abstract idea of “promoting China's soft power” is gradually reconfigured into specific tasks, editorial constraints, and deadline-driven routines. As journalists internalize these rhythms of work, they develop more nuanced understandings and, at times, shifting attitudes toward the state's objectives and their own roles in fulfilling them. Soft power is not simply implemented, but reshaped through the routines of journalism. As reporters navigate daily tasks—from routine newswriting to administrative coordination—they reinterpret state goals in ways that feel professionally justifiable. Most find ways to reconcile with the system, not through overt resistance but through subtle appeals to journalistic values. Yet this very adaptation, shaped by bureaucratic procedures, managerial conservatism, and performance metrics, often dulls the effectiveness of soft power itself. What emerges is a negotiated alignment: functional, but fragile.

Chapter 3 turns to the question of professional ideals: What do these journalists consider to be their best work, and what standards shape that judgment? It reveals that many Chinese

journalists, albeit assumed as propagandist agents, continue to draw on professional norms such as relevance, timeliness, and perceived social value in evaluating their work. These ideals do not always contradict state objectives, but neither are they wholly subordinate to them. Instead, journalists selectively reinterpret their assignments through a lens of dual loyalty: seeking to fulfill state expectations while maintaining a sense of professional legitimacy rooted in journalistic norms. This chapter argues that soft power is sustained not only through controlled content production, but through the strategic redefinition of what counts as “good journalism” within state-backed environments.

Across the three empirical chapters, this dissertation shows that China’s soft power abroad is sustained less by persuasion than by presence. Journalists are not inspired agents but pragmatically aligned participants drawn in by personal and professional incentives, not ideological conviction. Their alignment emerges through daily negotiation with institutional routines rather than top-down mobilization. What appears as soft power is, in practice, a politically performative system focused on maintaining visibility: filling overseas media posts, producing controllable media content, and keeping operations running. Influence, in this view, is measured not by changing minds, but by simply being there.

Chapter 1: All Roads Lead to Bangkok

In 2017, three Chinese journalists, Chen Tao, Chen Ruiming, and Luo Yong, were all sent to Thailand to start their expatriate positions at different outlets. Chen Tao, a mid-career media employee who had never lived abroad before, was drawn to the Bangkok position for the career boost it offered. The newly opened Bangkok office embodied his employer's aspirations to expand its reporting presence in Southeast Asia, and thus the pioneering expatriate posting presented a prime chance to further propel his career. Chen Ruiming and Luo Yong, however, had different motivations. For Chen Ruiming, a young and ambitious reporter, the opportunity in Thailand came unexpectedly through his open-ended application to correspondent positions. He initially aimed to enhance his global reporting portfolio, even aspiring to engage in war journalism. As for seasoned journalist Luo Yong, the Bangkok posting allowed an uncomplicated overseas finale before retirement, as reporting from Thailand seemed fairly easy to him thanks to the robust sources network in Thailand maintained by his predecessors.

By 2023, all three had completed their respective terms and left Thailand. Despite their exit, the presence of Chinese journalists in Thailand had surged from about a dozen in the late-2010s to over 30 by 2023 (see *Table 1* in Appendix B). From a diverse range of backgrounds and career paths, these journalists encompass locally recruited graduates, seasoned correspondents, journalists who relocated due to their spouses' employment, and those who were reassigned to Thailand because of diplomatic tensions and pandemic disruptions in other stations. From a diplomatic perspective, the growing presence of China-sent journalists in Thailand aligns with China's broader efforts to bolster its soft power influence in the region over recent decades (Loomis & Holz, 2020). As Chinese media outlets significantly expanded their operations in Thailand to propagate China's political narrative (Skaggs et al., 2024), so too came the expansion

of media expat roles. However, the attractions driving this sizable contingent of Chinese journalists remain relatively unseen. Although they are often collectively referred to as “*zhutai jizhe*” (Thailand-based journalists), their diverse individual situations and career trajectories reveal a wide range of factors that draw them to these positions. This very diversity of individual experiences, often overlooked, in fact reveals how China has been successful in attracting and deploying sufficient media professionals as it seeks to reinforce its media power in strategically important regions. What unique personal experiences or professional trajectories prompt certain individuals to perceive the allure of these overseas media assignments? And to what extent do journalists’ aspirations form the foundation for the aims of the Chinese government? A comprehensive investigation into the attractions of journalist postings in Thailand will contribute to our understanding of how soft power initiatives may or may not be realized through the alignment between top-down governmental initiatives and bottom-up individual volition.

Media Go Global: China’s Quest for Soft Power

As initially defined by American political scientist Joseph Nye (2004), soft power describes a country’s capacity to influence others and achieve desired outcomes by appealing to their preferences, values, and interests rather than through physical force or coercion. As China’s role on the global stage has increased in the post-Cold War era, the Chinese leadership has recognized the importance of soft power (*ruan shili*) in shaping a favorable environment that supports its values and interests (Gill, 2020). Although there are differing opinions on the conceptualization, scope, and forms of soft power within the Chinese context (Repnikova, 2022a, 2022b; Y. Zhou, 2021), there is a consensus on the strong connection between the Chinese soft power and China’s ideological work (*yishixingtai gongzuo*) (Nye & Wang, 2009; S. Zhao, 2020). This connection has also been frequently strengthened by elite rhetoric in China: In a 2024

article published in the *PLA Daily* for instance, Chinese researcher Yan Xu contends that “China’s soft power critically depends on enhancing its cultural strength” due to “the sharp and complex nature of struggles in the current ideological landscape.”¹

China’s goal on augmenting its soft power as an integral component of its ideological work has prompted the government to extensively leverage its propaganda system, particularly the external propaganda (*waixuan*) section such as media globalization and outreach (Edney, 2012; C. Wang, 2023). Maria Repnikova (2022a) contends that China’s global media expansion is imperative to its quest for soft power, citing reasons such as fostering a non-threatening image for China, improving global understanding of China and its government, and aligning with China’s diplomatic strategy. China’s ambition to bolster its international standing and reputation further propels the global business of Chinese state-funded media outlets, such as CGTN and Xinhua (Kurlantzick, 2022). A 2022 Freedom House report detailing the substantial progress in China’s media globalization emphasizes three key tactics: the creation of new channels for Chinese media to reach global audiences, the promotion of self-censorship on topics disfavored by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in countries where Chinese media operates, and the co-optation of media entities or individuals in specific countries to advance Chinese propaganda or suppress critical coverage of China (Cook et al., 2022). It is believed that these efforts demonstrate China’s sustained commitment to expanding its global media influence and shaping the international narrative in its favor (Kurlantzick, 2022).

However, as noted in the introduction, the current soft power discourse tends to focus primarily on macro-level analysis, with much of the attention directed towards examining the ideological motives of the government. Over the past decades, the major line of research has

¹ See http://www.qstheory.cn/qshyjx/2024-01/12/c_1130058403.htm 《大力提升国家文化软实力》 (*Vigorously Enhance the China’s Cultural Soft Power*).

treated soft power as a tool or instrument that governments can strategically employ to reach their desired goals (Vuving, 2009). While the recent behavioral or relational approach moves beyond merely discussing power as resources and material (Nye, 2021), this discussion hardly steps down from the assumption of nation states as the subject. This focus has overshadowed the role of individual agents and the “varied motivations and practices of different participants” in soft power initiatives (Repnikova, 2022a, p. 54). Without sufficient micro-level analysis, it may give the false impression that soft power is a well-orchestrated undertaking and that government marshalling and indoctrination alone are enough to ensure an ample supply of willing agents. However, rather than any monolithic agency, success in achieving government goals often hinges on the diverse actions and decisions of real individuals (Wilson, 1989). To assume that media expansion and globalization play a crucial role in sustaining China’s soft power, one must believe in China’s capacity to attract and retain a sufficient number of media professionals who find the work meaningful and align with government objectives. Without this micro-level alignment, sustaining any soft power initiative would likely prove difficult in the long run. Yet despite the constant acknowledgment by scholars that China’s soft power ambitions depend on correspondents abroad (Gagliardone & Nyíri, 2017; C. Wang, 2023), there remains a notable gap regarding micro-level analysis of the specific attractions that draw a significant number of media professionals to these global positions. To better understand the sustainability and effectiveness of China’s media expansion, it is crucial to investigate the factors that attract media professionals to these overseas positions. Moreover, grasping these micro-level aspects sheds light on whether and how the macro-level aims succeed. By examining individual motivations and experiences, we can better understand the actual shape and effectiveness of China’s government strategies on the ground.

Understanding Attractions: Illusio as a Framework

The complexity of individual decision-making, the diverse personal and professional motivations, and the varied experiences of journalists on the ground all suggest that a solely top-down, indoctrination-based model is insufficient. Moreover, the global nature of modern journalism and the personal agency of professionals further complicate this picture. Therefore, examining the potential attractions becomes necessary. This alternative approach can help unpack both the rewards of journalism and the benefits of working overseas, which often co-attract individuals to pursue such career paths (Pál, 2018). On the one hand, people choose to join or stay in journalism for reasons that extend far beyond mere financial compensation. Powers (2023a) and Vera-Zambrano found that journalism, in both US and French, became an appealing career choice in the late nineteenth century due to a unique combination of *material rewards* (such as financial compensation, job security, etc.) and *symbolic rewards* (such as self-expression, interesting lifestyles, etc.) it offered. Individual perceptions of these rewards are not formed in isolation but are profoundly shaped by different social background and life experiences (Powers & Vera-Zambrano, 2023b). On the other hand, the symbolic rewards are often regarded as significant factors influencing journalists' decisions to pursue overseas opportunities (Nyíri, 2018). For instance, the engagement with broader social values and the fulfillment of occupational responsibilities (especially in areas like war reporting) have been recognized as the primary factors that draw journalists to work internationally (McLaughlin, 2002; S. I. Zhang, 2013).

However, working as a journalist in a foreign country involves more than just symbolic and material rewards. Accepting a career relocation to Thailand, for example, may require individuals to make certain sacrifices such as navigating cultural or language barriers, being

away from family and friends, or facing potential risks and challenges. Understanding why anyone would still find such a career pursuit attractive, then, requires what Pierre Bourdieu (1996a; 1998) termed as *illusio*, a belief that a specific game someone is playing (just like being a media expat in Thailand) is worthy of “one’s energies and investments” (Powers & Vera-Zambrano, 2023a, p. 5). *Illusio* represents an individual’s attraction to a specific social game while fully acknowledging its inherent logic and conditions (Benson & Neveu, 2005; Powers & Vera-Zambrano, 2023a). This concept helps explain why individuals are willing to make sacrifices for their profession, driven by the promise of specific rewards. Without these potential rewards, the attraction to demanding jobs would be difficult to justify. It then entails that an individual must not only recognize the importance of journalism but also establish a firm belief that a career in journalism is worth all the risks and efforts they undertake. Specifically to the context of studying Chinese media expats, *illusio* provides a conceptual tool for investigating the attractions offered by the Thailand positions and how the belief in the attractions and their worth eventually transformed into actions of taking the offer and going to Thailand.

First, key to *illusio* is that it is shaped by the knowledge ingrained in people’s minds as a feel for the game they are playing. In other words, one is able to understand and agree with all the possible rewards, symbolic or material, through the knowledge they sufficiently obtained overtime in a certain field (Bourdieu, 1998). This means that people at different career stages may occupy different positions that allow them to perceive various aspects of the same career choice. Second and more importantly, people’s feeling and attraction to a social game are not free-floating, but the product of social origins, educational trajectories, and institutional experiences. For example, the perception of a journalistic career is not arbitrarily formed or suddenly instilled, but rather develops gradually through cumulative experiences, deeply rooted

in individuals' social positions and educational trajectories over time. Hence, using the concept of *illusio*, this chapter then aims 1) to reveal how different beliefs about overseas journalism positions are formed, and 2) to empirically trace the various social paths—such as upbringing, education, and career trajectories—that shape journalists' convictions that working abroad is a worthwhile endeavor.

With the help of *illusio* as a framework and through fieldwork-based data, particularly in-depth interviews and digital archives collected regarding 25 Chinese media expats in Thailand, I analyze how their social and career experiences and knowledge to the field influence the process by which they construct a belief in the attractions of the expat job. Analyzing how these unique appeals are perceived by different individuals may reveal nuances in how China's soft power ambitions manifest on the ground, filtered through journalists' bottom-up alignment with their employer and the state. This understanding could further help elucidate why certain people might perceive and harbor job attractions behind media expatriate positions that perpetuate state aims, while others do not.

Attractions on the Ground

As a media freelancer, Zhao Yajun has worked and lived in Thailand for over twelve years. His extensive experience, including two years as Chinese media expat, allows him to observe numerous Chinese expatriates and their diverse rationales for relocating, ranging from family to career considerations. Among the variety of attractions, he believes that “cultural affinity of Thailand” is often cited as an initial draw for the Chinese (December 18, 2023). In fact, Zhao himself was initially captivated by the vision of “a tranquil life characterized by a peaceful rhythm” living in Thailand. Unsurprisingly, similar affinities also attract other Chinese journalists, particularly considering that the nature of journalism work provides them with

greater work flexibility and opportunities for rich cultural experiences. Yet surface fascinations aside, a closer examination of the Thailand media postings reveals a range of other attractions: an access to an affordable modern lifestyle and global resources, safe career development opportunities, and even considerable expat/correspondent bonuses. These attractions can be perceived and interpreted differently from one individual to another, as journalists navigating various career phases or life realities tend to envision different outcomes from the same position or career opportunity.

In the following section, I showcase five major attractions that initially drew Chinese journalists toward accepting expat appointments in Thailand. As people's beliefs in the worthwhile nature of their career choice, or their *illusio*, is closely associated with their socially acquired knowledge and experience over time, I also demonstrate how attractions are closely linked to three distinct career stages: 1) senior journalists (32% of the total cohort) seeking a rewarding and comfortable posting before retirement, 2) mid-career journalists (44% of the total cohort) navigating complex personal and professional demands, and 3) young journalists (24% of the total cohort) driven by idealistic passions for meaningful reporting. I also demonstrate how these diverse attractions people self-perceived enable enough individuals to align their personal goals with China's soft power goal in Thailand, absent overt governmental mobilization or formal incentives.

Senior-career Journalists: Thailand as a Stress-free Paradise

Upon commencing my fieldwork in March 2023, I reached out to Fu Xiangdong, my old acquaintance in journalism, for a pilot interview. Fu and I had previously engaged in several conversations about his correspondent experiences in Southeast Asia. His years in Thailand encompassed several significant historic events, most notably the explosive 2010 Red Shirts

protests which can be counted as one of the most violent and severe political demonstrations in Thailand's recent history. However, almost a decade after leaving Thailand, what still lingers in his memory is not any of the sensational events he had covered but the relatively "relaxed time" working there. In the years following his departure from Thailand, Fu has worked in various departments at the Beijing headquarters and other overseas stations. His extensive career navigating different facets of media work in a Chinese state outlet has only made him more appreciative about the relatively carefree life he enjoyed while stationed in Thailand. "Now that I recall, reporting abroad in Thailand maintains an ideal pace for journalists—hectic news days prove rare," he concluded. In Fu's depiction, Thailand appears less like a country where foreign correspondents toil day and night. Rather, it's more like a tranquil backwater.

As his experience was recalled from over a decade ago, I questioned whether Fu's impression still held true in present day. To my surprise, my subsequent encounters with other senior journalists corroborated his mindset, revealing that the extent to which journalists see the peaceful life in Thailand as an attraction corresponds to their seniority in journalism profession. With years of experience in their media careers, most senior Chinese journalists have reached a phase where they neither need to strive for any professional advancement nor harbor any idealistic aspirations and, in their view, unrealistic drives as their younger counterparts do, such as the belief that their job can improve press freedom within the regime. Their seniority thus positions them well to view places like Thailand as a wise career choice before retirement, particularly with consideration of three factors specific to Thailand's case. First, unlike conflict-ridden regions such as Africa or the Middle East, Thailand offers a relatively peaceful environment. Second, working in Thailand is often free from the news work pressure associated typically with countries like the United States or Japan, the reporting on which would garner

much greater level of scrutiny and expectation from the CCP. Third, as a neighboring country with historical immigration ties to China, Thailand also boasts a substantial Chinese community and a foundation of pro-Beijing Chinese-language media. These attributes make Thailand “a most-wanted destination for many senior professionals” across different media organizations (Zhang Minghao, June 3, 2023).

After years of establishing his professional reputation, Lin Weiqiang, who began his assignment in Thailand in 2023, expressed a sense of accomplishment in reaching a well-deserved destination in his career. When I met Lin, he had already gained nearly thirty years of experience as a journalist in China. The accumulation of capitals (such as his sources network and experience) enabled him to gain a relatively prestigious position within his organization, which provided him with an advantage when choosing his subsequent overseas posting location. Though he was presented approximately five locale options, Lin’s sights never wandered. “I only considered Thailand—no comparison really,” Lin explained. “China and Thailand share closeness. It makes reporting easier here.” In addition to his seniority, Lin’s cultural identity uniquely positioned him to be a suitable candidate. Not only is he a Cantonese speaker, but he is also a native of a Southeastern China township known for its large Thailand-based diaspora community. Since the mid-1800s, a large group of immigrants from Lin’s hometown have migrated and settled in Thailand, establishing a stable community based on their shared Cantonese identity. This community has later produced many prominent Thai political and business leaders. Lin’s kinship and familiarity with this diaspora culture made him feel more connected to reporting on Chinese diasporic news, which has consistently taken precedence over purely political analysis of Thai affairs within his organization.

Thailand's distinctive geopolitical landscape and the prominence of the Chinese diaspora within the Chinese propaganda apparatus render news work in the country comparatively routine: journalists stationed there have minimal engagement in challenging subjects such as armed conflicts or political controversies. In another interview, Xiao Kai, a Middle East correspondent, described working in countries like Thailand as overly mundane, and that for senior coworkers this mundane-ness is exactly where the attraction lies.

“In countries like Thailand, there’s a sizable Chinese community and a lot of economic and trade relations with China. As a result, the time and effort of journalists there are often spent on reporting events that may not have much news value or are highly routinized... such as a bilateral economic forum or a trade conferences... or... or activities of diasporic communities. Compared to journalists stationed in the Middle East or Africa, the work of journalists in Thailand is definitely stress-free.” (Xiao Kai, May 26, 2023)

The story of another experienced journalist, Luo Yong, has deepened my understanding of why Thailand is able to attract journalists who are nearing the end of their careers. My time in Thailand briefly coincided with the final month of Luo Yong's posting. After several years serving as a Thailand-based expat, Luo concluded his term in the early of 2023 and was pretty set to retire soon after. To the young interns working with him, Luo's work demeanor appeared extremely “calm and nonchalant,” a stark contrast to the stereotypical image of a journalist rushing between breaking events (Feng Jiajia, May 19, 2023). At a very private gathering organized by the local Chinese diasporic community to bid farewell to Luo, I had the opportunity to closely observe this well-respected journalist who had cultivated strong relationships with local Chinese-language media and diasporic associations:

Working in a single-person station, Luo had to work alone most of the time reporting on entire Thailand. Fortunately, the solid networks his outlet had built with local media, the Chinese embassy, as well as the China Culture Center, and the close connections he maintained with his local sources greatly assisted him at work.

“We appreciate Mr. Luo’s support for our various activities over the years. We thank him for boosting the mutual understanding between Thailand and China, and, more importantly, we wish him all the best in the future,” a representative of the local Chinese diasporic association toasted in mandarin during the dinner. As everyone raised their glasses to him, Luo responded, his eyes brimming with gratitude. It was at that very emotional moment that I realized: for someone as senior as Luo, the decision to spend pre-retirement years in Thailand was sensible because individuals in his position often look for opportunities where they can leverage their experience to reduce challenges and uncertainty.

(Fieldnote, May 12, 2023)

Cultivating strong relationships with Chinese diasporic organizations and pro-China politicians, reporting positive news with a pro-Beijing narrative, and ensuring favorable news coverage for Sino-Thai friendship are highly manageable tasks for veteran journalists like Luo Yong and Lin Weiqiang. For Chinese outlets, dispatching such experienced journalists to Thailand should also be a wise decision: their professional capabilities and skills allow these institutions to accomplish more secure reporting agendas with a smaller team. This mutual alignment of interests makes Thailand a top preference for many Chinese veteran journalists before retirement.

Mid-career Journalists: Thailand as a Personal and Professional Opportunity

The mid-career journalists stationed in Thailand, unlike their senior counterparts, often view the opportunities in Thailand as a unique window for personal and/or professional growth. With about a decade of journalism experience and typically in their thirties or forties, these journalists have shed the naivety of entry-level reporters but have not yet amassed the extensive experience and recognition of their senior colleagues. Their decision to accept a posting in Thailand, thus, is combined with various resolutions typical of their age group. These may include a desire for career advancement, anticipation of higher financial rewards, or the pursuit of better education and lifestyle options for their family members. These different orientations draws them to the material aspects of the Thailand positions.

1.A financial enticement.

“When [my employer] raised the compensation for its overseas postings [in 2018], working abroad became a really popular opportunity that tons of journalists wanted—it was highly competitive to get those assignments.” (Chen Ruiming, June 11, 2023)

The material rewards such as a good compensation of the overseas postings can create strong appeal. Though expatriate packages offer no drastic salary explosion, they reliably ensure slight incremental income rises “compared to a rather static domestic compensation” (interview with Li Haoran, March 23, 2023). This financial enticement particularly attracts those facing mounting household costs, such as couples feeling family planning strains and middle-class parents financing children’s foreign studies. Ge Jiahui epitomizes this mindset. Graduating from her master program in the late 2010s when China’s economy growth was already slowing down, career options were limited for humanities major. Although she was prepared to settle for a teaching position in a public high school, an offer from a state media organization surprised her. Without hesitation, she accepted the job, becoming a journalist—a career choice that received

little consideration in her original plans. From her perspective, the decision was sound; aside from societal dignity, the state media job came with residency (*hukou*) in the Chinese capital Beijing—a privilege that most graduates would yearn for. However, the financial pressure as a first-generation Beijing resident soon began to weigh on her mind. Foreseeable financial liabilities like home loans compelled major trade-offs even early in her marriage, with no children. After discussing with her husband, this young couple eventually decided to let Ge Jiahui apply for an overseas posting. The mild financial perks offered by the expat job provided much-needed relief and attraction for them, even at the price of a long-distance marriage.

“I feel that my stint abroad is purely for the sake of family, whether it’s the immediate salary increase or future career advancement. I had just gotten married, and being an overseas correspondent does require sacrificing your family [...] As for my stint abroad, he [my husband] is quite supportive. We made this decision together after debating the pros and cons of me being stationed abroad. We’ve bought an apartment [in Beijing], so there’s a loan to pay. It’s always good to earn a little more!” (Ge Jiahui, June 11, 2023)

As a native Beijinger, Zhao Rui appears to be in a favorable position for home ownership, alleviating some of the financial strains experienced by Ge Jiahui. This relative prestige has allowed him to pursue a non-lucrative career in journalism. Notably, he has even worked as a war journalist in Kenya in his younger, more adventurous years. However, as his years in journalism have passed, the symbolic rewards of being a correspondent have been overshadowed by more personal concerns. Twelve years after starting his career, many of his peers have seized lucrative opportunities during China’s internet boom, becoming high-earning tech titans or successful business owners. Some of his former media colleagues have also transitioned to more lucrative paths in recent years. Feeling the pressure from his peers and facing family concerns,

Zhao Rui decided to pursue a second overseas assignment in Thailand, driven primarily by the relative financial benefit it offered:

“You really don’t spend much [when posted abroad]. Your housing, transportation... basically all living expenses are handled so you can save like your entire salary while overseas. Well... it’s obviously not something you could do for the rest of your life—you need to consider going back home and getting married sooner or later, right? But when you’re young, it’s still a good choice.” (Zhao Rui, May 26, 2023)

2. A springboard for career and personal development.

When I reconnected with Chen Tao in Beijing in a sweltering summer day in July 2023, we had not seen each other for over four years. The last time we met in person was back in 2019 when he was still Thailand-posted, briefly visiting Beijing as a media attendee of an international summit. Even back then, Chen Tao’s role had already begun to shift from that of a “reporter” to an “event organizer.” Instead of simply covering the summit, he traveled to Beijing to assist in organizing top panels and forums, including coordinating the visit of Thai high officials. Over 15 years into a media company transitioning from print publication to multifaceted communication enterprise, Chen Tao had already long sought potential career pivots. The establishment of the new Bangkok office and a pioneering expatriate position in 2017 seemed like a significant breakthrough for both Chen Tao and his company, as they were both seeking transformations. For Chen’s employer, the Chinese government’s active initiation of multiple cultural and economic ties with Southeast Asian nations presented an opportunity to quickly develop their Bangkok office, aiming to construct a strategic bridgehead throughout the Southeast Asia region. Similarly, for Chen himself, spearheading this enterprise expansion felt like a risk worth seizing, far preferable to remaining in a domestic publishing business he saw as stagnant.

“[Before my Thailand appointment], I was frequently engaged in organizing high-level visits and other events, so I didn’t feel unfamiliar with foreign liaison and intercultural work. When this opportunity arose, I immediately felt it was a challenge worth taking on in my career.” (Chen Tao, July 10, 2023)

By summer 2023, much had transpired. Chen Tao had successfully completed his four-year appointment and leveraged that success into an executive role where he now leads his own team in Beijing developing broader global media businesses. As I conversed with him in his new office, it became evident how his career had flourished after his time in Thailand. Observing his interactions with staff members seeking his signature, it was clear that they respected him deeply, displaying an unspoken yet palpable deference when conversing with Chen Tao. Beyond overcoming expatriate challenges, Chen Tao had extracted long-term dividends from the opportunity abroad: a promotion. For Chen himself, the Thailand posting offered twofold value. Directly, embracing this challenge is likely to impress his boss and earn him a positive reputation within his organization. In Chinese workplace culture, this positive reputation is considered an intangible asset that carries significant influence and can lead to tangible benefits in one's career. Indirectly, spearheading the pioneer expat role could provide training in media liaison, networking events, and budget oversight—skills that are often required for leadership positions. Acquiring these skills could help Chen Tao advance his career and move into higher-level roles in the future. At Chen Tao’s company that boasts an array of divisions encompassing much more than just daily reporting, these executive skills prove essential. For journalists like Chen Tao striving for managerial progression, they enable a crucial stepping stone—progression from journalist roles up to organizational leadership.

Unlike Chen Tao's multi-business organization, Zeng Shuyan's outlet focuses primarily on traditional news reporting—precisely what drew her to the field as a journalism graduate over a decade prior. Over the years, Zeng has developed strong professional networks through her work as a reporter, which could have ensured a stable domestic reporting career had she chosen to pursue that path. However, her past success has only made her more aware of the importance of her next career moves: Zeng is not satisfied with simply settling for a safe and predictable career path. Instead, she is driven to explore the full range of possibilities that her career has to offer.

“If you're a journalist and you only focus on news writing, it's good and bad. On the upside, you can really hone your skills and become excellent because you're putting all your energy into that thing, right? But at the same time, you're missing out on a lot of opportunities to explore other possibilities and expand your skill set.” (Zeng Shuyan, June 7, 2023)

Driven by this mindset, Zeng began to seek broader opportunities after spending 11 years in journalism, desiring to expand her professional horizons beyond news writing. This aspiration ultimately led her to accept a position at the then-vacant Bangkok office in 2022. As she reflects, this posting offers a rare opportunity to “take on challenges that [she] otherwise would never have and help shape [her] into a better person.”

“This position comes with a lot of challenges and difficulties, like whether we'll need to hire local employees, how to handle finances, and a bunch of administrative stuff... There's no structural support, so you have to build everything from scratch, which is a completely new field for me. But I find it interesting precisely because of that! [...]

Whoever stationed here needs to become a more multifaceted person. For me, it makes the job more attractive.”

Zeng’s attraction to the challenge underscores a belief that tackling foreign relocations cultivates wider skillsets—particularly in a place like Thailand where several Chinese outlets either recently (re)established or expanded operations. Both Chen Tao and Zeng Shuyan’s mid-career transitions through Thailand postings prove wrestling new environments professionally enriching among certain media professionals in China, as the postings promise maturation both as journalists and as individuals.

3. A balanced path between career stability and family aspirations.

My initial impression of Liu Kai contradicted my preconceived notions of a married Chinese father—he exuded an easygoing and relaxed demeanor, seemingly unfazed by pressure, even after texting me prior to the interview about “some urgent work” he needed to address. As our conversation progressed, I began to understand that his laid-back demeanor had only emerged after a strategic career move to Thailand in 2012, which he later explained was a decision made for his child’s education. As a middle-class, Liu Kai was aware of the intense pressures experienced by Chinese kids—the rigid education systems that drained the joy out of childhood, coupled with stressful exam preparations that parents fretted over for years. He observed that most families like his were unable to deviate from this path, bearing the burden of expectations for the next generation that weighed heavily upon them. In order to provide his child with an education free from the pressures of the rat race mentality, Liu Kai opted against sending his child to public schools in China and instead sought out opportunities at international schools. However, private international education programs in China are rarely associated with middle-class families, especially those on a journalist’s salary. The tuition fees of prestigious

private schools would impose a significant financial burden on middle-class families, if not render them completely unaffordable. “Those private international schools in China are for the wealthy. The tuition fees are ridiculously high. How could families like ours afford them with just a regular salary,” chuckled Liu Kai.

Although Liu Kai’s journalism job isn’t lucrative, it did open doors to broader opportunities. This became evident in 2012 when he was offered a posting in the Bangkok office. Seeing this as an opportunity aligned with his family-related plans, he began exploring the quality international schools in Bangkok. These schools not only provided excellent education but also had reasonable tuition fees compared to similar programs in China. When the potential benefit to his child, Liu Kai didn't hesitate to seize it.

“I brought my kid here for education. [What I chose for my child] is a different educational mode. The children [cultivated by China's education model] usually only know how to take exams; apart from exams, they don't know anything. [...] Chinese children often face greater pressure, are forced to learn a lot, and while they may have good test scores, they don't enjoy their childhood! I think (in Thailand), children would be happier, they can release their nature, and can have a preserved perfect childhood. I think that's enough.” (Liu Kai, June 3, 2023)

His first few years in Bangkok only reaffirmed his decision. So satisfied with the education provided in Thailand, Liu Kai even declined returning after completing his assignment. He instead joined another outlet enabling continued stay.

“When my expat appointment was about to end and we were about to return, my kid... was preparing to continue primary school back in China. But you know, it's quite troublesome.

I've heard from my friends in China that there are so many dramas about kids going to school. Umm... like teachers caring more about "who are your parents" - it feels like they're looking for whose parents can help them. Or they're constantly ranking the students, making the kids feel inferior. Then there's choosing school districts, teachers, and schools... It's just not as good as staying in Thailand. Here it's not as troublesome. [...] Even though the cost here is definitely higher than in Chinese public schools, the kids are happy, and parents are worry-free."

Unlike Liu Kai's long stay, other expat journalists strategically utilize even temporary postings, expressing no regrets about the exposure their families gain through this opportunity. Chen Tao is also a father of school-age children, and he also brought his entire family with him when he was stationed in Bangkok. Unlike Liu Kai, however, when his appointment ended in 2021, Chen Tao relocated his household back to Beijing—right when his child graduated from kindergarten. "Although only lived abroad for a few years, my kid encountered dramatically broader perspectives than possible in China," Chen reflected. "I would never second-guess bringing them to Thailand. It was undoubtedly an eye-opening childhood experience that benefit long-term growth." When reflecting on his child's experiences living in Bangkok, Chen Tao expressed that this expanded worldview would provide his child with more opportunities for future development and will also give him more ideas about his child's life plan. These are long-term advantages brought about by his experience as an expatriate journalist, representing a rare dual advantage of balancing career and family planning breakthroughs in media work.

In China, a journalism career offers many advantages, such as a modest but stable income, and relative insulation from economic fluctuations compared to market-driven industries. However, the drawbacks are equally apparent: as journalists accrue more years in the field, their

salaries gradually become insufficient to sustain the growing expenses and expectations of a middle-class family, especially considering that most state-owned media outlets are based in the high-cost capital city. These drawbacks often need to be understood and experienced over time as individuals accumulate social experiences. Expat positions, particularly in desirable locations like Thailand, offer an ideal balance for journalists to maintain their careers while achieving higher goals that would otherwise be difficult to attain. Professional advancement, income improvement, and access to better educational opportunities for their children—these attractive factors are particularly significant for journalists in the middle stages of their lives and careers.

Early-career Aspirants: Thailand as a Setting for the Pursuit of Journalistic Passions

In stark contrast to their senior colleagues, the cohort of young interns dispatched to Thailand exuded an infectious enthusiasm for global reporting roles. While senior and mid-career journalists embrace Thailand positions for reasons that are not journalism-related, these young intern journalists are initially attracted by the prospect of thrilling journalistic opportunities. They mostly view Thailand as an attractive and exciting journalistic paradise with breaking news, curious cultural stories, and significant societal issues to explore.

Feng Jiajia, like many of her peers, applied for the global reporting internship fueled by her passion for international journalism. With a background in Southeast Asian studies and currently pursuing a master's degree in international journalism, she is deeply committed to exploring transnational issues such as cross-national marriage and human trafficking issues. While her initial preference was for Nepal, Feng approached her final assignment in Thailand with equal enthusiasms. Like Nepal, Thailand offered herself a plethora of captivating stories, including the experiences of diasporic Chinese emigrants in northern Thailand, cross-border marriages, and the notorious phone scams and human trafficking prevalent in Southeast Asia.

The news landscape of Thailand made Feng see her assignment as an opportunity to pursue these compelling investigations while appreciating the accessibility and vibrant storytelling opportunities the country provided. Far from being a setback, Thailand offered an abundance of rich narratives waiting to be uncovered by a determined and curious storyteller. Unlike most short-term Chinese expats in Bangkok, Feng Jiajia deliberately chose to “reside away from popular areas where the Chinese communities are relatively concentrated.” Instead, she opted for a local residential area relatively far from the city center, aiming to better interact with the locals and experience their life through journalism lens.

“I really want to focus on the grassroots communities, so I came to Thailand to connect with them leveraging my journalist identity. I previously studied research topics related to Vietnamese cross-border brides, so I believe Thailand might have similar phenomena of cross-border marriages that I can report on. And there are opportunities for in-depth reporting topics in Southeast Asia, like the recently discussed issue of phone scams.”
(Feng Jiajia, May 19, 2023)

Likewise, Qiao Yingzi also eagerly dove into her internship in Thailand to accelerate her journalism portfolio-building efforts before entering full-time work. During her six-month stay, Qiao Yingzi took proactive steps to develop news ideas and write articles, aiming to make the most of this opportunity. Despite her peers' complaints about the scarcity of reporting tasks for interns, Qiao actively pursued every opportunity, even if it meant taking on supporting roles like scheduling interviews for her mentor or assisting with background research. Moreover, she also pursued long-term goals, seeking overseas exposure and cultural appreciation to lay robust foundations for future foreign correspondent prospects. As an ambitious emerging reporter, Qiao understood the importance of seizing every present opportunity to build a future.

“I feel that there are indeed many stories worth reporting here in Thailand. Like... as you should know, the well-known adult entertainment industry. I don’t just want to assist others in their reporting; I want to uncover some newsworthy angles myself.” (Qiao Yingzi, May 27, 2023)

Much of these young interns’ passion for challenging and meaningful reporting stems from their background at one of the top journalism schools in China. From “reading investigative journalism pieces” to “working as active campus reporters,” these young interns have learned, to some extent, why and how journalism has the potential to transform society. Having yet to engage in “real-world journalism” in China, they enjoy the privilege of maintaining a relatively pure and idealistic view of “classroom journalism,” where moral principles and responsibilities remain untainted by the complexities of reality.

In addition to the group of student interns, Chen Ruiming, a full-time journalist at his late 20s, also saw “an opportunity to produce better international reporting” as the major attraction behind his decision to come to Thailand (June 11, 2023). However, he admitted that this attraction was much stronger when he was a fresh graduate just entering the media industry. After graduating from a renowned journalism school, Chen Ruiming began his career as a state media journalist in 2015. He reminisced about his youth, marked by passion, ambition, and a profound influence from the legacy of the “golden age” of journalism in China in the early 2000s, exemplified by publications like Guangzhou’s *Southern Weekly*. With his journalistic impulse in mind, he believed that “the most dangerous places are the best places for correspondents,” which led him to apply for a foreign correspondent position, hoping to be sent to conflict-ridden places like Syria. However, he was ultimately assigned to Thailand in 2017. Reflecting on his mindset before coming to Thailand, Chen still remembers his eager anticipation

for the potential challenges, believing that he would have unlimited opportunities to explore the world as a journalist.

His passion, however, has gradually faded over the years in Thailand. Chen Ruiming's attitude shift reveals a fact: as journalists gain more experience and face the realities of their profession and personal lives, their initial idealism and passion may be tempered by practical considerations. This is observed more generally among older journalists working in expatriate positions. In comparison, younger individuals seem idealistic. Unlike the senior and mid-career journalists who most often have no problem with their positions being more or less associated with the Chinese government's soft power narrative, the way younger interns or journalists were attracted to the Thailand positions has little to do with soft power. Since they are passionate about contributive reporting, such as on the topic of human trafficking, their attraction underscores a hidden friction within China's soft power efforts.

Discussion

This chapter explored the factors that initially drew Chinese journalists to expat positions in Thailand. These factors encompassed both shared commonalities and distinct individual characteristics. While the Chinese journalists stationed in Thailand may be collectively categorized as *zhutai jizhe*, their decisions to come to Thailand depend on different beliefs they have established through various personal and career trajectories and experiences. Moreover, in different ways, they mostly recognize the job attractions while fully weighing the sacrifices associated with their decision. From an *illusio* perspective (Bourdieu, 1996a; 1998), these journalists would accept and be willing to take the Thailand positions because they have developed a belief that going to Thailand and being a media expat is a game worth *their* while. Their very understanding of what “game” they are playing, however, varies from one individual

to another. These various understandings largely depend on their career seniority and experiences in journalism, thus enabling them to perceive different combinations of symbolic and material rewards.

For relatively established journalists, going to Thailand is a game of seeking a comfortable and less stressful work environment. They are willing to take the positions knowing the potential career reward: a relatively easy, stress-free job in a peaceful country. They are more inclined to compromise for a safe, highly standardized, and somewhat mundane job. This is a material return uniquely available to those with years of experience in the media industry. In comparison, for young and intern journalists, the same decision indicates a game of fulfilling their journalism passion. These journalists see Thailand as fertile ground worth cultivating for aspiring reporters and are thus drawn more by the moral or symbolic rewards. While their work inevitably involves reporting less challenging news (e.g., pro-Beijing content) day after day, they are willing to accept the mundane aspects of the job in exchange for the opportunity to practice journalism in different ways. More complex than both senior and young journalists is a larger group of mid-career journalists, for whom the expat position in Thailand is more like a game of exploring further possibilities for a seemingly stable journalism career in China. The fact that they are attracted to Thailand positions for broader material rewards, such as career development, securing better income to alleviate financial pressures, or enhancing their children's educational opportunities by considering Bangkok a cost-effective investment, reflects the challenges broadly faced by middle-class families in China.

Despite their different visions of the game, the commonality among these journalists is their recognition of the attractions behind working in Thailand and their willingness to bear different costs for the specific appeals they perceive. Understanding both the benefits and risks,

their mindsets collectively demonstrate the existence and agency of a *bottom-up alignment*. For China's soft power efforts, this bottom-up alignment is undoubtedly advantageous, as it provides the labor foundation upon which media-based soft power could, theoretically and meaningfully, operate. From stress-free appointments to financial incentives, and from career advancement opportunities to the chance to fulfill family aspirations, expat positions in Thailand offer a wide range of attractions that entice media professionals to join their ranks. While each journalist has distinct reasons for finding the Thailand-based positions attractive, their collective belief in the value of their work in Thailand makes them particularly well-suited to advance their employers' and the Chinese government's political objectives. As the empirical evidence of the fieldwork shows, marshalling a group of media professionals in Thailand is not so much about how China indoctrinates the journalists and persuades them into accepting the positions, but rather a result of the journalists' self-formed alignment based on their beliefs that create a powerful drive for them to take on the positions. Paradoxically, it is the very lack of indoctrination that enables these journalists to leave China's soft power goals unquestioned, as they each willingly accepts a job or appointment that contribute to these goals.

In conclusion, I argue that the diverse ways in which different Chinese expat journalists establish *illusio* regarding the Thailand positions uncover one way in which China's soft power project actually gets carried out through so-called media expansion. As demonstrated by this chapter, ideological indoctrination isn't the major driving force, at least for the journalists stationed in Thailand. This finding disputes the belief that soft power is invariably the outcome of a country's conscious application of strategies or policies. Instead of emphasizing ideological goals and motivating journalists as soft power participants, what Chinese media in Thailand offer is a breadth of life and career choices with minimal presence of persuasion but instead a

combination of both the attractiveness of Thailand as a country and the symbolic and material rewards journalists will get as expats. The attractions, in fact, dovetail with people's different demands at different life or career stages.

However, it is also worth noting that China's soft power project is not entirely frictionless, as the cases of younger journalists demonstrate a version of journalism that doesn't always align with the government's vision. Rather than accepting jobs primarily focused on "reporting a good China to the Thais," these young journalists' enthusiasm lies in constructive and meaningful global reporting. Despite their preference for a version of journalism that may be at odds with what the Chinese government hopes for, they still seem to have a clear understanding of the hidden boundaries surrounding what can and cannot be investigated or questioned through their reporting. This is exemplified by their willingness to explore issues such as "human trafficking" or "international marriage," rather than delving into topics that fundamentally challenge the regime. This offers a caveat: despite the presence of strong initial job attractions, whether and to what extent these attractions can be sustained over time remains uncertain. In other words, what will the everyday reality of these journalists look like during their time in Thailand? Will their on-the-ground experiences maintain—or potentially jeopardize—their alignment with the government's objectives? It is crucial to explore the long-term implications of the media expatriate experience in Thailand and how it may shape the evolving relationship between the journalists and the Chinese state. In the following chapter, I investigate the everyday work and lived reality of these Chinese media expats and discuss whether their initial illusion of the game can be maintained.

Chapter 2: Duties Reconciled

In 2021, while still working as a researcher at a Thai think tank, Wu Peng encountered a new career opportunity. A friend in media reached out about heading a Chinese broadcaster's office in Bangkok. Journalism wasn't foreign territory for Wu Peng—he had established relationships with various Chinese outlets in Thailand through his work for years. Having built a life in Bangkok for decade and pursuing a part-time Ph.D. there, Wu viewed this as a strategic opportunity. His acceptance came naturally, since his career path had involved “interacting with people from the media and cultural circles” (April 7, 2023). He had even mentally prepared himself for his role—anticipating the heavy workload of running a single-person office, and recognizing that he would need to use his connections to help strengthen China's presence among Thai academic and official circles. The practical demands, however, only became apparent after he stepped into the role. Although he was confident in handling various aspects including news production and organizing bilateral activities, he received very little financial and policy support from the organization. The Beijing headquarters, he said, “seems detached from Bangkok operational realities.” Occasional grumbles aside, he managed his responsibilities decently and seemed to get along with the job. Even his fellow friends within Bangkok's media circles mostly praised him as “capable” and “motivated.”

When I first heard Wu Peng discuss his lack of support at work, a question immediately arose: given that the actual work was far more complex and challenging than previously imagined, what kept him there? If he had not developed a belief in the value of his work, he could have resigned, as he had other career options available to him. Yet I found that Wu Peng gradually constructed beliefs that made his work meaningful enough to continue, even finding ways to align productively with institutional objectives. This raised the question of whether Wu

Peng's case was unique. Did other expat journalists also find ways to construct beliefs that enabled both institutional alignment and personal satisfaction despite daily realities that often diverged from their initial attractions? While these journalists come to Thailand with various attractions that create essential preconditions for China's soft power goals, how this early alignment translates into day-to-day practice remains unclear. As Chinese journalists arrive in Thailand, their daily work experiences may create tensions that weaken their alignment with government objectives, or favorably, generate positive interactions that reinforce collaborative bonds—only by examining their actual daily work and what keeps them engaged can we understand which scenario prevails. This inquiry is particularly valuable as it helps us move beyond viewing these journalists as simply taking directives, revealing instead how they may have reconciled with different ways of finding satisfaction within institutional alignment. This approach helps understand how soft power, as an institutional goal, materializes not through simple implementation of directives, but more through journalists' ongoing reconciliation with various forms of meaningful engagement that serve government objectives. In this chapter, I analyze China-sent journalists' everyday work in Thailand, examining how they reconstruct beliefs about the worthwhileness of their work and how these reconstructed beliefs enable different forms of professional accommodation with government objectives, ultimately shaping their collective agency in soft power implementation.

Journalists at Work: Adjusting to the Reality

Given the popular understanding of overseas Chinese journalists as being closely tied to China's soft power agenda and broader geopolitical ambitions, scholars tend to differentiate their role from that of traditional "foreign correspondents" in a Western context, emphasizing their distinct function in advancing China's external communication objectives rather than merely

reporting international news (Charuvastra, 2019; Morales & Menechelli, 2023; Y. Zhao, 2013; Thussu et al., 2018). Current literature has identified three primary domains of the daily work of journalists sent abroad by Chinese media. The most widely recognized domain involves *media content production and narrative construction* (Cui, 2023; Lim & Bergin, 2018; Madrid-Morales, 2021; Yang & Chen, 2021). This involves not only producing China-related news content but also strategically constructing narratives that enhance China's global image and build international goodwill. Another significant sphere encompasses comprehensive *administrative work*, including external liaison and event organization (Carter, 2024; Charuvastra, 2019; Nantulya, 2024). The third domain centers on active participation in *digital transformation*, particularly in terms of global content delivery and audience engagement (Liang, 2019, 2021; Nip & Sun, 2022; Kao & Li, 2020; Wang-Hai, 2024). These activities represent both essential daily duties of them and key channels through which they are tied to the government's broader soft power ambitions.

However, numerous studies of Chinese journalists have indicated that when journalists operate under explicit government directives, they oftentimes encounter various pressures and constraints in their work, requiring them to adapt to and navigate these institutional realities (Lei, 2018; Polumbaum, 2008). Similar situations apply to those working overseas. Nyíri's (2017) anthropological study of Chinese correspondents in Europe and Africa represents one of the few empirical studies focusing on how these expat journalists handle work pressures and adjust their mindsets. He observes two primary modes of adaptation. The first strategy can be understood as *displacement*, where journalists offset workplace disadvantages by focusing on job benefits. For instance, someone may accept unstable living conditions and frequent relocations in exchange for the experience of living in overseas cities like New York. This mechanism echoes Zhang's

(2013) study of Chinese war correspondents, which demonstrated how moral pursuits and humanitarian concerns could motivate journalists to accept both personal risks and professional constraints. The second mode can be characterized as *internalization*, where journalists develop professional rationales for institutional constraints that might otherwise conflict with journalistic ideals. For example, Nyíri (2017) found that Chinese foreign correspondents not only practice self-censorship, but have come to view reporting restrictions as professionally legitimate, actively constructing justifications for limitations on their coverage.

While offering a valuable lens for understanding how journalists cope with workplace constraints, extant literature primarily examines general life- and work-related pressures rather than the specific challenges that emerge when government objectives materialize in journalists' daily work. This leaves open the question of whether and how journalists can achieve alignment with these institutional aims, particularly in strategically significant locations like Thailand where China's soft power ambitions through media are especially pronounced (Kurlantzick, 2022). First, merely understanding how journalists psychologically adjust to working abroad does not fully explain the actual relationships they construct with institutional aims through daily work. It introduces a risk of assuming that psychological adaptation necessarily leads to realignment with government objectives. Yet research has shown that surface-level harmony may mask deeper contestation. For instance, Repnikova's (2017) study of Chinese investigative journalists reveals how they develop strategic forms of resistance while maintaining surface compliance. Therefore, rather than focusing on reactive adjustment, we need to examine how journalists reconstruct and maintain beliefs about their work's value within specific, concrete work scenarios. This approach helps us move beyond *functionalist* limitations and creates analytical space for potential bottom-up resistance and discord (Sparks, 2010).

In addition, current studies remain constrained by the *media effects* framework, using content production as the sole criterion for examining journalists' relationship with soft power (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). This leads to a reductionist view, reducing journalists' alignment with soft power to the extent their news outputs serve China's interests. This not only misses the complex social dynamics that shape news practices but also fails to explain why certain journalists persist while others depart from the profession. While the previous chapter revealed how initial attractions filter potential candidates, a sociological perspective is essential for understanding who survives and thrives in these positions. By focusing exclusively on media outputs, existing literature cannot account for how journalists' varied social backgrounds, professional trajectories, and institutional positions influence their ability to sustain meaningful engagement with their work. This limitation creates a gap in our understanding of how China's soft power initiatives actually function through the agency of those it hires and deploys overseas—particularly in favorable cases like Thailand.

Beliefs in Work: A Field Perspective

The limitations of existing literature suggest that we must move beyond two common assumptions: that journalists automatically align with government objectives, and that soft power can be understood purely through institutional perspectives. Instead, we need to examine specific work-related scenarios to understand which individuals maintain their professional engagement and how they navigate their daily realities. Through this individual-level lens, journalists' work in a foreign country, like any career trajectory, emerges as a social game of investments and returns. Without such beliefs sustaining their engagement, only two scenarios would be possible: either China would need to powerfully force unmotivated journalists to work in Thailand, or it would face high turnover rates and widespread professional disengagement as journalists either

quit or perform their duties perfunctorily. However, empirical observations suggests neither scenario exists in a pure form. Given this logic, if journalists have established beliefs about their daily work at all, examining how they establish these beliefs while navigating their work and duties reveals how their ground-level agency is mobilized and whether this agency internalized or transformed institutional priorities such as soft power. For instance, if an expat is mainly in Thailand for the money, they'll be hard to motivate when the pay doesn't meet their expectations. On the flip side, if a journalist values the cultural experience above all else, they might still do their assigned work even if they don't love it, as long as they get time to explore Thailand.

In doing so, I will continue employing *illusio* as the analytical tool to understand and explain how journalists maintain or reconstruct their beliefs about work in daily practices and how journalists maintain or reconstruct their alignment with the government amid daily practices. I also draw on Bourdieu's (1993; 1996) field theory to examine how different socialization paths shape journalists' ability to find meaning in their work. According to Bourdieu, journalists form their own beliefs based on different forms of capital they possess—whether political (e.g., administrative rank), cultural (e.g., journalism education and language skills), or social (e.g., unique social networks) (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). These concepts help us understand how people develop different interpretations of the same job and varying degrees of belief in finishing their daily work—dynamics that exist beneath the seemingly harmonious surface of media institutions.

Methodologically, beyond field interviews, I also pay close attention to several key events and work situations during my time in Thailand. These included coverage of breaking news, political and cultural exchanges, newsroom mentoring, and media-organized public diplomacy activities. Observing these moments allowed me to better understand how journalists navigate

the practical constraints and symbolic expectations embedded in their daily assignments, forming the basis for the analysis that follows. For further methodological details, see *Appendix A*.

A Job with Common Challenges

Though initially drawn to Thailand by various professional and non-professional factors, journalists soon discovered their actual work as expats—a rich spectrum of news and none-news duties—bears little resemblance to their initial expectations. Among the journalists I interviewed in Thailand, facing and handling various challenges in actual work emerged as a clear consensus when they reflected on their everyday experiences. Former Africa correspondents now face a more sedate news landscape in Thailand, where hard news like conflict reporting is rare and leadership favors soft news coverage. Those without Thai language proficiency must learn to independently navigate communication challenges with local sources. Reporters interested in investigative journalism still confront the censorship constraints from Beijing headquarters. Meanwhile, journalists hoping to develop professional skills through overseas experience face resource limitations. Together, these practical challenges illustrate the shared struggles journalists encounter in aligning their professional practice with soft power-related work.

What necessitates adjustment is the tangible and specific nature of these shared challenges. While most had considered potential trade-offs to varying degrees, their assessment was inevitably colored by subjective interpretation or optimistic expectations prior to their departure. Unlike the findings in the previous chapter where journalists' pre-posting attractions closely aligned with their career stages, the daily work reality in Thailand reveals a more uniform picture. For instance, when young journalist Chen Ruiming envisioned his work in Thailand years ago, while acknowledging he “probably wouldn’t have complete editorial freedom,” he remained convinced that “exploring a new country would provide abundant opportunities to

exercise [his] journalistic curiosity and investigative impulses” (June 11, 2023). Even Liu Kai, who prided himself on being a “seasoned hand (*lao youtiao*)” in the media industry before taking the Bangkok offer, admitted he had underestimated the actual challenges of working abroad (June 3, 2023).

Meanwhile, the uncertain and provisional nature of overseas assignments erases traditional seniority distinctions. Most journalists, regardless of their seniority or institutional affiliation, handle diverse tasks without established routines, “frequently facing temporary assignments or periodic rotations” (Jia Zhongliang, April 30, 2023). Although some seniors in larger stations like *CMG* or *People’s Daily* indeed enjoy hierarchical privileges, they are not fully exempt from this common work culture. Once on the ground, these journalists—regardless of what initially drew them to Thailand—find themselves caught in a structural paradox. While Beijing entrusts them with the cultural mission of strengthening China-Thailand ties through their language expertise or storytelling capabilities, it simultaneously maintains tight control over their work. In this context, what matters is not seniority, but rather individual ability to negotiate autonomy and maintain belief in different aspects of a shared repertoire of expat work.

In the following analysis, I examine how different journalists reconstruct beliefs in their work across three major work domains—1) *routine reporting*, 2) *administrative duties*, and 3) *intercultural storytelling*. I analyze how journalists’ individual resources and social backgrounds eventually direct them toward specific spheres where they can rebuild different beliefs to stay. Finally, I demonstrate how, despite China maintaining a surface-level soft power presence and journalists making personal concessions to align with this institutional reality, this journalist-institution cooperation fails to generate systematic soft power impact.

Routine Reporting: Where Professional Impulse Emerges

Since most journalists having opted into a career in media before being posted to Thailand, they generally possess a basic passion for news reporting, if not an intense professional devotion. Thus, a most common and direct approach to reconstructing belief in their Bangkok work is finding their professional impulse—an inherent push as a professional journalist to dig deeper into stories, stay ahead of developments, or capture events with journalistic integrity, even when their assignments in Thailand seem routine and sometimes discourage deeper investigative engagement.

On January 9, 2023, Zeng Shuyan joined dozens of journalists, cameramen, and government staff at Suvarnabhumi Airport awaiting flight MF833 from Shanghai. Her job was to cover a symbolically charged moment: the arrival of 269 Chinese tourists marking China's first Thailand-bound flight since the country lifted its three-year travel restrictions. The airport was filled with elaborate displays of Thai hospitality: even the then Deputy Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul personally greeted arriving Chinese tourists at the jet bridge. Although the terminal was in chaos with uncoordinated crowds of media, Zeng still maneuvered through the crowd of media personnel to reach the front of the airport jet bridge drawing on years of experience. Securing a prime position, as she noted, would “at least offered the chance for some exclusive footage or content” (June 7, 2023). Even though the return of Chinese tourists was largely pre-arranged reporting with little inherent excitement, Zeng still found satisfaction in becoming “the only Chinese journalist on site to secure first-hand footage of Chinese passengers disembarking.” Her firsthand video footage “transformed what could have been a simple wire report into an engaging multimedia story” for Beijing, capturing vivid scenes of Chinese tourists receiving a sheerly warm welcome by the Thais—a small triumph emerging from an otherwise routine reporting.

This work episode reveals how a journalist seeks professional fulfillment while finishing what they usually call a “routine reporting” (*guiding baodao*). Just like the well-set-up ceremonies at the airport, such events make up a substantial part of expat journalists’ work in Thailand: “events that are less ‘breaking news’ than predetermined or prearranged” (Li Haoran, March 27, 2023). When routine reporting happens, journalists operate with limited professional autonomy. They cannot question the news value of such events nor alter their predetermined narratives by much. Take the airport ceremonies again: when covering an event demonstrating a rhetoric of harmonious Sino-Thai relations, every Chinese journalist stationed in Thailand is “bound to accept the predetermined news value and produce nearly identical news stories” (Zeng Shuyan, June 7, 2023). Yet noticeably, Zeng’s recounting of her experience at the scene carried a subtle enthusiasm:

“Making the extra effort to get all the way to the front row for exclusive footage was totally optional—something I could give or take. But I still did it—I suppose that’s the professional drive I’ve built up over these years in journalism. Beyond just completing assigned tasks, I could detect news details more quickly and accurately—that’s a professional instinct honed through more than a decade in journalism.” (Zeng Shuyan, June 7, 2023)

The regain of the “professional instinct” to always pursue reporting with greater depth, authenticity, or distinctive perspectives made Zeng’s work a little more worthwhile, even though her daily assignments in Thailand sometimes lack room for autonomy. This was not an isolated incident. Throughout my fieldwork, I observed Zeng consistently pushing beyond her comfort zone, actively seeking Thai sources despite language limitations and pursuing potential stories that required extra effort to develop. Her social media posts also documented a notably busier daily schedule compared to many of her peers. This professional adaptation stemmed clearly

from her “decade of experience as a beat reporter.” Through ten years at a state media, covering everything from finance to environment to culture at the Beijing headquarters, she had learned to navigate limited autonomy while maximizing journalistic value in her interactions with officials, institutions, and bureaucracies. After all, she had been playing this game for a decade—albeit now playing it in a new land. While her initial move to Thailand was motivated by hopes of developing new skills in areas like financial management, in practice she found herself relying on the most familiar strategies—those she had honed over years of navigating institutional constraints.

The limited autonomy in Zeng Shuyan’s experience in fact characterizes the work reality for most others in Thailand, where extra efforts and independent initiative are infrequently encouraged. This constraint manifests in two ways: journalists must dutifully cover and promote positive bilateral stories without question, while self-censoring their coverage of sensitive or breaking news events—remaining always mindful of propaganda guidelines even abroad. Take the case of Wang Haoyu. Early in his posting in 2023, he encountered an event that definitely demanded cautious coverage: the “Siam Paragon mass shooting” claimed the life of a Chinese national on October 3, 2023. As an experienced journalist, Wang quickly recognized the significant news value, “particularly given the timing during China’s national holiday when Chinese tourists were flocking to Thailand” (November 30, 2023). However, his self-censorship as a Chinese media employee soon kicked in: concerns about “damaging Thailand’s image in Chinese media” and “potentially affecting bilateral relations if it’s handled improperly” made him hold back and wait for official guidance on how to approach the story cautiously. Despite these reasonable concerns, nevertheless, his journalistic instinct to understand matters of public

concern led him to visit the scene the next day, even if just to “take a look at the place just in case.”

“For a journalist, witnessing events in person creates a different impact than merely reviewing casualty figures. As a professional journalist, I felt compelled to [be at the scene] because I saw it as my responsibility and duty to witness events firsthand.” (Wang Haoyu, November 30, 2023)

Wang Haoyu’s candid acknowledgment that he should “merely review casualty figures” reflects his cautious understanding of his role and its inherent limitations. Even when covering public safety incidents, he carefully considered potential impacts on Sino-Thai relations in his reporting. Yet he still sought to introduce extra efforts (visiting the shooting scene for firsthand investigation even with possible communication barriers). This way of weaving professional spirit into his work clearly gave meaning to his daily practice. Like Zeng Shuyan, Wang Haoyu had been a key reporter at his Beijing desk, and through this experience had learned to find satisfaction in overcoming various challenges to deliver breaking news coverage. The two of them, though, were far from alone in this mindset. I also observed similar professional mindsets when speaking with journalists during the 2023 Thailand general election. While the initial victory of Pita Limjaroenrat, known for his pro-Western democratic stance, led Chinese media to instruct journalists to downplay the election and carefully avoid coverage of democracy, LGBTQ+ rights, and other sensitive topics, many in Bangkok still found subtle ways to deeply engage with and document this historic moment, even if only for their personal records. Thai-speaking journalists immersed themselves in election activities from polling stations to campaign rallies, while others found creative ways to deepen their political understanding through professional networks and events.

“Even though I couldn’t publish most of the raw material I gathered, you know, going to rallies, talking to voters, I still... wanted to be there. As a journalist, you’re naturally drawn to being where news happens. That’s what gives meaning to this job.” (Niu Lili, June 6, 2023)²

Their persistent engagement, maintained despite limited prospects for publication, exemplifies how journalists actively construct meaning in their work when dealing with the duty routine reporting. Such efforts, serving not to get something published but rather to “give meaning to this job,” represent attempts to make the professional game worthwhile through acts that validate their journalistic identity. This pattern is particularly evident among journalists who have prior experience covering government departments or conducting in-depth investigations in China—this way of playing the game draws on the familiar approaches they developed through their career training. While fully cognizant of governmental expectations (particularly the imperative to protect Sino-Thai relations), journalists established informal boundaries in their daily work. Within these self-imposed limits, they found ways to satisfy their professional impulses (for instance, attending Pita’s LGBTQ+ campaign rallies without publishing coverage)—thus preserving their journalistic drive while staying within institutional lines. This self-regulated balance between professional drive and institutional constraints exemplifies how (many believe to be) soft power actually works: less through hierarchical attempts to control journalists’ actions than through an internalized balance among reporters between institutional compliance and professional fulfillment.

Administrative Duties: Where Personal Value Find Expression

² The journalist agreed to the use of a pseudonym but requested that this particular statement be fully anonymized if included in any academic writing.

Unlike in routine reporting where alignment with soft power objectives often remains passive, journalists sometimes also actively seek to advance institutional aims. This active engagement is particularly evident in their approach to various administrative duties. These activities advance soft power goals by enhancing external networks and expanding perceived influence in Thailand. Yet notably, most such work operates outside established protocols: they are often ad hoc assignments without clear procedural guidelines, requiring significant personal initiative and time investment, typically without additional compensation. The fact that journalists willingly take on these discretionary tasks suggests that establishing belief in this domain of work represents not only a recognition of its professional value but also a proactive embrace of soft power objectives—after all, few would invest extra effort in unrewarded tasks whose underlying values they fundamentally reject.

“What we [journalists] are doing here—all this networking stuff—it’s basically helping China interact with Thai people, right? No matter how much money you throw at it, if Thai people’s hearts aren’t with you, it’s all pointless, isn’t it?” (Wu Peng, April 7, 2023)

Notably, though fully aware that these soft power-oriented administrative duties offer no immediate returns, some journalists strategically leverage such tasks for long-term career advancement. For instance, I was able to witness how a journalist, Wu Peng, managed the entire process of organizing and executing a bilateral scholarly event—the “2023 Sino-Thai Youth Summit.” In fact, early 2023 marked an intensification of Sino-Thai bilateral activities following a nearly three-year pandemic pause. This revival naturally expanded journalists’ roles beyond traditional reporting, particularly in Wu Peng’s case where his outlet had an established tradition of supporting bilateral activities. Over a month of preparations, I observed how Wu Peng, as a

journalist, actively aligned his efforts with institutional objectives. I even attended the event at Wu Peng's invitation, where I observed and documented the details of his on-site work:

Wu Peng wasn't at the venue when I arrived—he was picking up guests from the airport. With limited staff and budget, he had taken on multiple roles: event planner, reporter, and logistics coordinator. I learned about his airport run the night before.

About 15 minutes before the event, Wu Peng, in formal attire, escorted Chinese guests to their seats. He hit the ground running as soon as he arrived at the venue. Throughout the event, I kept spotting him darting from task to task, clearly the busiest person there. Unlike his relaxed media colleagues, Wu Peng remained focused intently on attending to the guests: guiding officials to their seats, accompanying delegates, and providing impromptu Thai-Chinese interpretation during casual exchanges. While he occasionally greeted fellow Chinese journalists and discussed various details with them, he appeared more like an event coordinator, preoccupied with ensuring the summit's smooth operation.

I didn't even get a chance to say goodbye, as he was already focused entirely on coordinating the guests' orderly departure and was "scheduled to accompany them for dinner and a city tour that night."

(Fieldnote, May 5, 2023)

At first glance, what Wu Peng was tasked seemed quite unappealing: while his institution piled on multiple administrative responsibilities, it meanwhile offered minimal support for executing these tasks. Wu Peng not only had to manage everything from event planning to budgeting on his own but also had to fund basic operational costs himself (during my fieldwork, I observed him paying out of pocket for things from fuel costs to basic filming equipment).

However, whatever his occasional grumbling, I can tell that he actually embraces these responsibilities, investing his time and energy in the expanded duties. For Wu Peng, these efforts were far from futile: they instead provided good opportunities to demonstrate his unique value as a valuable connector facilitating official and civil exchanges between China and Thailand. Compared to others stationed in Thailand, Wu Peng possessed superior advantages: fluency in Thai language, extensive life experience in Thailand, and rich experience dealing with Thai political and business circles. Although his non-journalism background left him with no particular advantage in media writing or photography, these administrative duties beyond news making offered the perfect platform to showcase his distinct value. As he candidly acknowledged, he approaches his work primarily through the lens of “advancing his career that has already been tightly associated with this country (Thailand)” (June 12, 2023).

“Many journalists here don’t have the network resources I have. Most of them don’t even speak Thai. So the events I help organize can attract prestigious guests because I have these connections.” (Wu Peng, May 10, 2023).

Where others might see a lack of organizational and institutional support, Wu Peng, drawing on his unique background and career trajectory, recognizes opportunities: chances to build connections, coordinate resources, and enhance his professional visibility in his chosen field. This perspective enables his active alignment with government objectives even as he clearly recognizes both the soft power motivations underpinning his work and, more impressively, its inherent difficulties.

Similar to Wu Peng, Chen Ruiming found his own way to align personal commitment with institutional reality by discovering opportunities to express his unique value through seemingly tedious organizational or administrative duties. As a junior of the Bangkok office,

Chen already shouldered substantial duties, including coverage of not only Thailand news but that of neighboring countries like Laos where no office was established. Yet in early 2023, his responsibilities further grew to encompass an impromptu assignment: advising and mentoring several intern journalists assigned to his office. This task exemplified the informal, discretionary nature of administrative duties—with intern placements being irregular and Beijing headquarters providing minimal guidance on hosting procedures, much was left to individual initiative. More significantly, this demanding work came without additional compensation, representing the type of unwritten responsibility that typically fell to perceptive younger journalists willing to take on extra duties. Albeit an unattractive duty, Chen Ruiming’s investment in this assignment was remarkable: interns who worked with him unanimously described him as a “dedicated, responsible, and knowledgeable mentor” (Kang Xi, December 7, 2023). For instance, despite limited daily publication space that restricted byline opportunities, Chen “consistently worked to secure publication chances for his interns, ensuring each could publish articles under their own name” (Qiao Yingzi, May 27, 2023). He also devoted his precious free time to driving interns around Thailand, providing them “rich first-hand exposure to Thai culture and society” (Xu Xiaohan, intern journalist, December 3, 2023). While Chen’s mentorship might have partly reflected a cultivated professional persona, his spontaneous behaviors in private settings revealed genuine dedication. When talking about my graduate school experience in our private conversation, his thoughts quickly turned to his interns—he hoped I could share research insights with them since they “would be thinking about their master’s theses after returning to Beijing next school year” (June 11, 2023).

Once again, Chen’s dedication to unpaid administrative duty appeared puzzling from a practical standpoint. While it was widely rumored that expatriate expat journalists “competed for

reporting assignments since these directly translated to compensation credits (*gong fen*)” (Liu Kai, June 3, 2023), Chen voluntarily invested considerable time in tasks offering almost no material rewards. My subsequent conversations with Chen revealed how he found meaning in this role. As previously mentioned, this ambitious young journalist had once dreamed of “becoming a war correspondent.” With his journalism degree, he had prided himself on his “journalistic ideals (*xinwen lixiang*).” After several years of work, however, he had grown more realistic about the profession, even joking that when he could no longer handle journalism, he would “leave to write books instead” (June 11, 2023). Yet the arrival of these interns allowed him to reconnect with his younger, idealistic self while finding a space where his value could shine within the constraints of the media institution. He shared work experiences with the interns, discussing both the advantages and limitations of journalism as a career, while introducing them to the more appealing aspects of foreign correspondence, such as exploring different cultures. His own idealistic past made him “sympathetic to their excitement about foreign reporting and publishing dreams,” yet his experience with institutional realities drove him to “protect them from excessive optimism” (June 11, 2023). This unique mentoring position offered one of his few opportunities for autonomous contribution that garnered genuine recognition. Although he recognized that he was, to some extent, training media talents who might join China’s soft power undertaking in the future, he embraced this role willingly—it provided a rare space where he felt that his personal value could truly shine.

Wu Peng and Chen Ruiming share a crucial similarity: their social backgrounds and professional trajectories enabled them to recognize opportunities for meaningful contribution in duties others might dismiss as unrewarding. Without his deep knowledge of and strategic investment in Sino-Thai political and business cooperation, Wu Peng might not have recognized

the opportunities for leveraging these administrative duties for his career development. Similarly, without his years of experience in state media that stripped away his idealistic veneer, Chen Ruiming might neither have committed to mentoring nor found value in guiding young journalists through their own transitions from idealism to realism. Moreover, what makes these experiences in common is that both Wu and Chen have recognized the overlap between their duties and the Chinese government's soft power goals. While Wu acknowledges his efforts help forge government ties with Thailand, and Chen recognizes he may be training future external propaganda workers, they actively embrace these not-so-hidden soft power associations. Crucially, their alignment emerges not from indoctrination, but from rational calculations balancing personal rewards with institutional objectives.

Intercultural Storytelling: Where Innovation Is Pursued

Beyond routine reporting and administrative duties, Chinese journalists also regularly engage in a third major domain of work: producing targeted news stories and media narratives for their host country. This aspect of work resonates particularly with those passionate about intercultural storytelling.

“The opportunity to report on China to those who don’t know much about it often represents the real appeal of being a foreign correspondent. It gives you both the right and mission to bridge information gaps and communicate with the world.” (Fu Xiangdong, March 29, 2023).

However, such enthusiasm did not shield them from workplace challenges. While this motivation for presenting China to the world should naturally align with government soft power objectives, the way Chinese media institutions operate often undermines this potential synergy. A frequently detected criticism of management practices, for example, centers on how the

government “uses domestic propaganda approaches to direct international reporting.”³

Leadership too often assigns topics suited for audience in China without adequately considering international interests, yet journalists must ultimately defer to such directives. As recalled by a former journalist who worked in Thailand office in the early 2000s, this insular approach to global reporting—prioritizing domestic agenda over intercultural concerns—has persisted over the decades.

“Leadership keeps telling us that journalists stationed in foreign countries, like our domestic peers, ‘must also wage public opinion warfare with the foreigners!’ But you can’t use the word ‘warfare,’ especially with friends like Thailand. What are we even fighting about with the Thais? You can’t be so ego-driven in global reporting—that only makes it harder for others to like China.” (anonymous interview, May 24, 2023).

With enthusiasm rewarded by obstacles rather than support, finding satisfaction in intercultural storytelling seems almost irrational—who would continue investing in work where institutional practices actively discourage your well-intentioned efforts? Niu Lili exemplifies one that would love to play the game regardless: she saw value in innovating how China stories were told to the Thais. While acknowledging the challenges of working within management constraints, Niu persistently works toward her vision of making China-related news stories truly resonate with Thais. Unlike her colleagues who often compete for assignments offering compensation credits or accolades, she prefers to “simply do something meaningful to [herself] and to China” (May 24, 2023).

³ Originally framed as “用内宣的思维指导外宣.” Notably, multiple journalists I interviewed independently used this exact phrasing.

“Many of our news stories often simply adopt domestic approaches, without considering whether Thai people want to read it. China’s international reporting has significant room for improvement. I see myself as having both the capability and drive to work toward this goal.” (Niu Lili, May 24, 2023)

While she believes her ideas “aligned well with the broader objectives of China’s soft power efforts in Thailand,” she struggled to fully realize her vision of global storytelling. “Most stories we are asked to produce,” she explains, “seems designed to make China look better by comparison” for the Chinese readers. Despite her frustrations with daily priorities, Niu Lili seems to maintain strong conviction in her ability, as an expat journalist, to help China communicate more authentically with its neighbors. Only by “presenting China’s diverse aspects honestly and confidently,” she argues, “can Thai people develop genuine understanding and willingness to cooperate with their neighbor, rather than resisting perceived pressure” (May 24, 2023). It is this belief that drives her to constantly seek innovative initiatives in news stories that others might simply execute government guidance. For instance, over the past few years, recognizing the potential of social media, Niu Lili has taken the initiative to cultivate a collaboration with a young Thai content creator. Niu saw journalistic potential in the young man when meeting him for this first time, impressed by both his engaging personality and his mastery of Chinese language. So she quickly partnered with the Thai influencer to tell China’s stories through his local voice. “Using an accessible tone and covering a wide range of topics,” their content “directly addresses China-related issues where Thai people really show curiosity” (June 6, 2023). These programs, offering timely coverage of Chinese affairs enriched by authentic Thai perspectives, gained significant viewership and led to broader opportunities with Thai television stations. However, her efforts went largely unrecognized by leadership.

“The media leadership loves to talk about penetrating local markets, building partnerships, and enhancing China’s global image. But after years on the ground in Thailand, very few have made real progress. I did it. Although I don’t get any extra compensation for this work—it’s purely my choice, since this is exactly the work I want to contribute my efforts to.” (Niu Lili, May 24, 2023)

Yet not only does she receive no “extra compensation,” but her efforts go largely unrecognized by leadership. The boss often burdens her with other duties that limit her ability to fully invest in these collaborative programs with her Thai partner. Moreover, their ambitious topic selection often faces interference from leadership.

“Our leadership is obsessed with metrics. It doesn’t matter what kind of content you produce—all they care about are numbers. But we all know metrics can be bought, right? Throw some money at Facebook, buy some bot followers, and boom—you’ve got your numbers! The leadership doesn’t care how you get them, as long as the reports look good. Doing global storytelling in China means you have to be like me—someone who’s able to endure being overlooked and having your abilities go unrecognized.” (Niu Lili, May 24, 2023)

Clearly, not everyone can be like Niu Lili. Her conviction stems firstly from extensive experience observing China’s media operations in Thailand and elsewhere. This sharp insight allows her to clearly understand the power of media storytelling in building China’s soft power, knowing that “the world indeed lacks a profound understanding of China” (May 24, 2023). While those without Niu’s extensive experience might also identify problems, they rarely find meaning in efforts to transform the status quo. For instance, young intern journalists on their first

Thailand posting can recognize that “current storytelling lacks appeal and engagement” (Feng Jiajia, May 19, 2023), but most won’t find taking initiative to alter existing practices worthwhile. Moreover, Niu’s excellent proficiency in Thai, as a key form of cultural capital, enables her to perceive the significance of storytelling work where others might not. This expertise gives her confidence in establishing authority and affinity at work, as even her bosses “know less about Thailand affairs than [she] does” (May 24, 2023). After all, only those with a deep enough understanding of Thai culture and society would find it meaningful to improve communication between the China and Thailand (Chen Tao, July 10, 2023). Last but not least, with her family life now stable and her child in university requiring less attention, she is ready to embrace professional challenges, shifting her focus “back from family to work after years taking care of [her] child” (May 24, 2023).

The sense of fulfillment Niu Lili derives from work not only keeps her motivated amid an exceptionally busy schedule but also positively contributes to China’s soft power objectives. After all, while proposing storytelling methods that diverge from leadership preferences, her efforts organically fill the grassroots perspective lacking in official media narratives. However, achieving similar professional satisfaction demands a unique combination of social capitals: cultural knowledge of Thailand, accumulated media expertise in China, and meanwhile stable family situation to transcend material concerns. It also explains why journalists like Niu Lili remain exceptional—individuals possessing this combination of qualifications might not be attracted to these positions in the first place.

Discussion

A closer look at the everyday work of Chinese journalists in Thailand reveals how they continually seek ways to make their efforts worthwhile on a daily basis. While people were

initially drawn to these Thailand-based positions for various reasons such as higher income or low stress work, they eventually have to normalize the gap between attraction and reality. Using Pierre Bourdieu's (1993; 1996) concept of *illusio*, I view people's transition from initial attractions to acceptance of daily work as a new *game* they play. The new costs of this game are common and evident: working for overseas Chinese media branches offers limited autonomy and requires constant navigation of management deficiencies. Yet the game also offers returns: within different types of work in foreign bureaus, journalists find various forms of professional satisfaction. Some reconstruct their journalistic impulse through routine reporting, others establish personal value through administrative duties, while some pursue innovation in intercultural storytelling. This shift from imagined attractions to actual workplace satisfaction, as field theory would argue, reveals how different socialization experiences and varied cultural and political capital shape journalists' perceptions of work conditions, ultimately determining where and how they reconstruct a belief that the job is worth doing.

Meanwhile, the beliefs journalists renegotiate and reconstruct at work enable what I call a *professional reconciliation* with government objectives. From a sociological perspective, this reconciliation isn't uniform—it takes different forms shaped by journalists' distinct social trajectories and accumulated capital, which influence how they position themselves within the institutional framework. Those driven by journalistic passion compromise by lowering broad professional expectations in exchange for micro-level opportunities to practice “real” journalism; those seeking personal development redefine their role from pure journalist to cultural bridge, finding opportunities for growth within institutional boundaries; those pursuing cross-cultural expertise trade narrative autonomy for limited but meaningful innovations in how China's stories are told internationally, establishing epistemic authority in transnational news production. While

these forms of reconciliation vary, collectively they serve as the key mechanism enabling journalists to navigate work that is inextricably tied to China's soft power goals. Without such reconciliation, Chinese journalists would likely struggle to sustain their commitment in an environment of very limited autonomy, or at minimum would require hyper-attractive compensation or intensive indoctrination to maintain focus—none of which characterizes what I observed in the case of Thailand. Rather than solely relying on the power of top-down directives, this *professional reconciliation* represents the everyday but limited agency through which China's media-based soft power operates in Thailand.

The empirical data from this chapter also offers insights into China's soft power goals and expat journalists' role within them. In the case of Thailand, I find that the government fails to fully leverage and respect the reconciliation that journalists have carefully constructed: rather than providing bold or innovative directives to build international influence, the government maintains a bureaucratic, conservative management style that constrains journalists' agency (see discussion of Bailey, 2023). Although journalists find ways to align with soft power objectives and even derive a sense of purpose from their work, the government's "domestic over international" approach prevents this potential from being translated into effective soft power outcomes. This presents both opportunities and challenges for China's broader soft power strategy. For the Chinese government, certain factors do work in favor of its soft power ambitions. Foremost, its approach to recruiting journalists relies on soft alignment rather than brainwashing or forced assignments. This self-motivated alignment requires insider understanding of Chinese journalism—a knowledge barrier that effectively screens out those who might oppose or reject government objectives. This proves true: those who opt into expat positions in Thailand have demonstrated acceptance of the soft power dimension of their work—

albeit rarely with unquestioning enthusiasm. It is precisely this acceptance that drives their continuous pursuit of professional reconciliation at work. Theoretically, had the Chinese government clearly defined expat journalists as soft power agents who mainly serve Thai audience, then these lowkey aligned journalists it deploys could have naturally helped advance the “winning hearts and minds” goal together with the government.

However, there are also facts that work against China’s interests. Chinese journalists attracted through such alignment, foremost, can hardly become ideologically unified agents, as their recruitment itself relies on diverse attractions from the outset rather than indoctrination or ideological conformity. While these journalists have developed ways to cope with the challenges of working in Thailand, the reality, particularly the institutional practices and culture they are exposed to, prevent them from fully investing in advancing China’s image and influence.

Lastly but not least, examining how journalists construct beliefs about their work reveals their own interpretations of how soft power should operate through media. Their pursuit of professional impulse reflects aspirations for media responsibility; their cultivation of professional networks through news work symbolizes imagined transnationally connections between journalism and other spheres like politics and culture; their innovation at intercultural storytelling represents their visions of (re)building soft affinity with neighboring countries. Do these interpretations represent genuine insights about soft power, or are they simply ways journalists rationalize their continued engagement with institutional objectives? Understanding their ideal model of work and how they construct symbolic hierarchies is crucial for assessing whether Thailand-based journalists can become agents in repairing and rebuilding China’s soft power framework. In the following chapter, then, I examine how journalists construct and articulate

their vision of professional excellence, and what this reveals about the potential for transforming China's soft power initiatives from the ground up.

Chapter 3: Professional Height, or Narrative Might?

Like many of his fellow Thailand-based journalists, Zhao Rui couldn't help letting slip occasional grumbles about his work as an expat journalist. A few times, I found him reflecting on the limited scope of reporting topics, and even how his editors repeatedly asked him to contact “pro-China experts” (*youhua zhuanjia*) for positive comments on Chinese affairs—to the point where some experts had grown so weary of these staged interviews that “they simply acquiesced to whatever narrative was expected of them” (May 26, 2023). While these work practices seemed to align perfectly with popular discourse about Chinese overseas media—focused on crafting narratives that present China in a positive light and promote the appeal of China's governance model internationally—Zhao Rui seemed to express a dissatisfaction toward these aspects of his job, as if they ran counter to his own professional ideals.

But I quickly realized that this contradiction I had set up didn't fully hold. Despite the daily work being filled with what he considered “boring” reporting, he had found opportunities to combine institutional requirements with his professional ideals. In other words, his years-long career of telling stories and writing news about “China's goodness” had also yielded at least some work that filled this journalist with genuine pride. Two stories stood out in our conversation: one about a disability football team in Mali where he chronicled war-injured young men maintaining their passion through sports, and another about electrical infrastructure problems at a school in Southern Thailand. What made these reports meaningful was that in both cases, Zhao Rui leveraged his position to connect Chinese enterprises with local needs, facilitating tangible assistance to these communities. These experiences exemplified what he called “constructive journalism”—reporting that “not only documents issues but also drives change and improves people's lives” (May 26, 2023).

Zhao Rui's reflection on his most satisfying work merits deeper consideration. While we can sense a tension between his daily work (promoting China's "goodness") and what he personally considers professional excellence (producing socially impactful reporting), he can and did find occasions where these divergent aims converge. For instance, his story about providing assistance to the African football team simultaneously fulfilled his personal aspirations (making news constructive) while aligning with China's soft power objective (demonstrating China's international aid and thereby winning local hearts). It shows that his professional values can align with government aims, even if such opportunities are rare. But the question remains: can all Thailand-based Chinese journalists achieve what Zhao Rui has—simultaneously remaining faithful to their personal journalistic aspirations while serving institutional utilitarian objectives? If not, under what conditions can journalists become dually loyal to both their professional values and government aims? What factors enable some journalists to find balance between personal and institutional objectives, while others cannot?

While the previous chapter explores how Chinese journalists navigate their daily work realities and maintain psychological satisfaction despite institutional constraints, it leaves open the question of whether China's soft power objectives must inevitably remain a "limiting factor" that journalists merely accommodate. In other words, is soft power—particularly if most of us try to understand it as what Nye (2021) describes as persuasion and positive appeal—fundamentally at odds with journalists' professional aspirations, requiring them to reconcile this tension through psychological adjustments? Or could these seemingly divergent goals, in fact, complement each other in meaningful ways? Nye (2021) argues that China's top-down approach to soft power is inherently constrained by its reluctance to grant greater freedom to civil society. Can this critique be reflected in how Chinese journalists working internationally describe their professional

ideals? Understanding the work that journalists truly value and take pride in provides a crucial lens for exploring this question. If alignment between professional fulfillment and soft power objectives is possible, then promoting China's soft power does not have to remain a tedious obligation. Instead, it could be more effectively realized through work that journalists find professionally meaningful—creating, from the eyes of the government, a virtuous cycle in which institutional objectives and professional excellence reinforce rather than compete with each other. But less is known regarding this possibility. By examining how Chinese journalists in Thailand define and pursue professional excellence, this chapter explores whether their notions of excellence and their construction of symbolic hierarchies offer new insights into—and possibly even alternative pathways for—China's approach to soft power.

Journalists' Best Work

Journalists' best work—those in which they take the most pride—is often about achieving an ideal outcome despite the institutional and external realities that typically impede such ideals (Powers & Vera-Zambrano, 2023b). Classic newsroom studies, for instance, have highlighted how journalists' professional aspirations—whether informing the public, holding power accountable, or pursuing truth—frequently clash with organizational culture, editorial politics, and broader socioeconomic forces (Gans, 1979; Tuchman, 1978). While journalists may begin their careers with idealistic missions, their work is profoundly shaped by newsroom routines, organizational constraints, and larger political and economic pressures (Breed, 1955; Reese, 2020). Consequently, what journalists consider their “best work” is often understood as exceptional cases that stand out from their ordinary efforts—rare instances where circumstances align to allow the achievement of professional ideals despite typical constraints (Powers & Vera-Zambrano, 2023b).

This tension appears even more pronounced in propagandist media systems. In China, quintessentially, journalists are believed to face particularly challenging conditions for realizing professional ideals commonly shared within their profession. One major reason is that official media outlets in China always operate under explicit political mandates—party media must maintain ideological loyalty among audiences and reinforce the legitimacy of government rule (Brady, 2008; Shambaugh, 2007). Within this environment, journalists’ personal professional aspirations frequently conflict with institutional objectives and propaganda directives. This tension has intensified as China’s growing cultural exchange and intellectual engagement with Western democracies has influenced journalists’ professional outlook (de Burgh, 2003; Polumbaum, 1990). For instance, in her examination of post-2000 Chinese investigative journalism, Repnikova (2017) reveals how professionally trained journalists who develop fourth estate sensibilities—valuing critical examination of social issues and accountability—must navigate institutional expectations that consistently prioritize political alignment over journalistic independence. It seems that in China, a journalist’s best work is destined to be at odds with institutional reality. However, such a conclusion may be hasty, as the professional community of journalism in China is itself vast and internally complex. Different time periods, regions, degrees of marketization, and whether journalists work for central or local media all influence how they perceive and manage the relationship between personal ideals and institutional objectives (Repnikova, 2017; Stockmann, 2013; Y. Zhao, 1998).

Regarding how Chinese journalists balance personal ideals against the political demands of their institutions, extant literature offers two possible frameworks: *functionalist approach* that examine how journalists internalize organizational values through socialization processes, and *agentic approach* that explore how journalists maintain professional autonomy while navigating

the institutional constraints. According to the functional-institutional approaches, studies have found that journalists in China might gradually internalize institutional objectives as personal aspirations in a tightly managed environment (Nyíri, 2017). These studies highlight how journalists gradually adapt to the constraints of China's media governance, with many aligning their reporting with state narratives, either out of political conviction, career incentives, or habitual compliance (Stockmann, 2013). From an agency-resistance perspective, on the contrary, research has found that sometimes Chinese journalists adopt more subtle and strategic approaches when confronting conflicts between personal ideals and institutional culture or broader social governance models. Rather than directly challenging these constraints, they skillfully seek opportunities to navigate within them (Repnikova, 2017). As Nyíri (2017) points out in his study about Chinese correspondents in Europe and Africa, "Chinese journalists do not necessarily and fully share the government's goals. They can and do assist, resist, go along with, or even ignore them" (p. 14).

However, whether an individual journalist adopts a functionalist or agentic approach is not randomly determined. On one hand, the broader landscape of journalism constantly evolves—a changing field where diminishing economic rewards or shifting technological demands gradually attract entirely different types of people to the profession (Powers & Vera-Zambrano, 2023a; Powers et al., 2025). On the other hand, as the profile of those entering journalism changes, their diverse social backgrounds bring different cognitions and value orientations that influence how they might respond to personal-institutional tensions. For example, China's recruitment preferences for foreign correspondents have shifted over time—where language proficiency was once the dominant consideration, media organizations in the past decade have increasingly valued candidates with new media skills and digital capabilities (Wang-Hai, 2024). The changing

nature of Chinese media and the evolving profiles of those entering it mean that we cannot simply categorize someone as pro-institutional or revolutionary based on their actions and preferences alone; rather, we must also examine what social conditions led individuals with particular dispositions to become foreign correspondents in the first place. But this requires not just examining what work journalists value most, but also the specific conditions and resources that enabled them to produce such work in the first place—an area where extant literature provides limited insights.

Journalism Excellence and Symbolic Hierarchy

Moving beyond the functionalist-agentic binary, a Bourdieusian approach allows us to see how journalists' perceptions of their best work are not merely personal reflections but acts of positioning within the structured space of journalism, where legitimacy and prestige are continuously negotiated (Lafarge & Marchetti, 2017). On the one hand, a journalist's best work can reconnect them with why they chose this career in the first place. While oftentimes rare, its uniqueness helps journalists temporarily overlook the frustrations of their job and continue believing in its value (Powers & Vera-Zambrano, 2023b). For example, one may feel bored from attending endless repetitive cultural events in Thailand. However, if they have a strong passion for in-depth reporting, the occasional opportunity to pursue such stories can reinforce their sense of identification with the job. On the other hand, A journalist's best work also reflects their place in the profession's unspoken ranking system. By defining what they see as their best work, journalists are also shaping where they fit in this hierarchy (Powers & Vera-Zambrano, 2023b). A young intern may not yet have the opportunity to participate in major reporting projects. However, through the way they describe and benchmark their best work, they can at least signal their broader understanding of the profession's values and indicate how they position themselves

on its value scale. If we examine Chinese correspondents in Thailand from these two perspectives, we can assess how they internally perceive the role of soft power work (such as writing articles that praise China) within their own value system. This, in turn, allows us to understand whether they embrace such work wholeheartedly or if they harbor different aspirations.

Another contribution of a Bourdieusian perspective is its ability to reveal how journalists occupy different positions within the professional hierarchy based on the amount and type of capital they possess. People's perceptions of ideal journalism do not arise naturally; rather, they are socially constructed and shaped by their social positions (Lafarge & Marchetti, 2017). These perceptions are conditioned by the *habitus* journalists develop through their professional trajectories (Schultz, 2007), while the forms of capital they possess—whether cultural, social, economic, or symbolic—determine how they navigate the field and what they recognize as legitimate or prestigious journalism (Benson & Neveu, 2005). Some Chinese correspondents in Thailand, having been trained in China's journalism programs and worked in state or commercial media, may have internalized specific news values emphasizing national narratives and positive reporting. Others, particularly those with Western journalism education or experience collaborating with foreign media, may lean toward critical reporting, focusing on social issues and political accountability. Additionally, some correspondents have extensive cross-border networks, granting them access to foreign business figures, academics, and even dissident voices in Thailand. This broader social reach allows them to report from diverse perspectives and align their work with international journalism standards. These factors shape how they define their best work differently.

In this chapter, data about journalists' conceptions of "best work" were primarily collected through one-on-one semi-structured interviews and purposeful ethnographic conversations. To analyze the different forms of capital that journalists possessed, I also revisited the vignettes established earlier in this dissertation, identifying the distinct types of economic, cultural, social, and symbolic *capital* they drew upon in their work (Bourdieu, 1986, 1993). These forms of capital shaped not only their ability to produce certain kinds of international reporting but also their understandings of what constituted "best work." *Economic capital* in this context primarily refers to the financial resources and funding available through media institutions. *Cultural capital* manifested in journalistic training, language proficiency, and familiarity with Thai society. *Social capital* is the network of professional and institutional relationships that grant journalists access to sources, collaborations, and reporting opportunities. *Symbolic capital* means the recognition, legitimacy, and status journalists hold within the profession (such as through institutional rank, see *Appendix A*). In the following sections, I will present the four models of best work and examine how each intersects with the forms of capital journalists possess, illustrating how their professional aspirations are shaped by their institutional and social positioning.

Humanitarian Impact Model

As revealed in the earlier anecdote of Zhao Rui, journalists' reflections on their most excellent work sometimes gravitate toward themes such as "social value" or "humanistic impact." This vision of excellence appears especially prevalent among those with a few years of journalism experience but are not yet fully established in their careers. They champion international reporting that connects deeply with local communities, embraces grassroots

perspectives, and potentially catalyzes concrete improvements in people's lives through journalistic intervention.

“What makes international journalism truly good is its focus on local people: taking the time to understand and dig deep into human stories, creating content with real humanitarian value.” (Zhao Rui, May 26, 2023)

Zhao Rui's understanding of excellence appears shaped partly by his extensive experience in Chinese news outlet, particularly his years as an international correspondent in Africa. During his time reporting from volatile regions like Mali and Sudan—where his and his peers sometimes even required security teams for protection—he gained “first-hand exposure to diverse social conditions and ways of life” far removed from his upbringing in a major Chinese metropolis city (May 26, 2023). Even before his foreign assignments, Zhao Rui accumulated valuable domestic experience, including a rotational posting as a correspondent in a less developed western province in China. Such postings are a common training practice among Chinese state media organizations for their Beijing-based journalists. These valuable opportunities can be seen as a manifestation of economic capital: the Chinese media organization he works for has a powerful global reporter team network, with investments in equipment, talent, and hardware that place it in the top tier. His social and cultural capital, namely his educational background and the social networks, also played an important role. As a graduate of prestigious Chinese universities, his peers predominantly comprise well-educated elites who share a strong sense of social responsibility cultivated through higher education. Many of these peers have gone on to influential positions, particularly within government institutions. When discussing his own sense of social responsibility, Zhao often references a former classmate who “chose grassroots work in western China over lucrative opportunities in major cities, using his education to help local

farmers and transform the community's economy" (May 26, 2023). Such peer examples have also profoundly influenced Zhao's own professional aspirations and value system that emphasizes making small efforts to drive social progress.

Chen Ruiming, another young journalist, articulated similar views about what makes work truly excellent. Though I had heard about his practice of taking interns to experience Thai culture before meeting him, he maintained a traditional journalistic ethos, stating that as an international journalist, his ultimate goal "is still to produce good stories" (June 14, 2023). Without hesitation, he continued recalling a piece he wrote several years ago about a cherry farm in northern Luzon, Philippines. He had learned through a friend about this farm in a small city north of Manila that was cultivating cherries—a crop ill-suited to Philippine climate and soil—to such high quality that they were being exported to East Asia where cherries are typically grown under more favorable natural conditions. When he decided to drive to the farm after recognizing its news value, the local farmers were surprised by the presence of a Chinese journalist. "The mayor even told me I was the first Chinese reporter to visit them 'in his 30 years in office'." Chen modestly explained that he valued this story because he found "almost no previous coverage in either Chinese or English media," and he had brought "these people's stories to a broader audience" (June 14, 2023).

His cultural capital, shaped by his upbringing, also played a significant role. Chen Ruiming hails from China's Yangtze River Delta region, an area renowned not only for its historic cultural cities but also as a national pioneer in K-12 education reform, boasting leading educational resources and pedagogical approaches. Moreover, his engagement with social issues began early through his reading habits in high school. His family subscribed to *Southern Weekend* (*Nanfang Zhoumo*), an influential newspaper renowned for its oversight and criticism

of public power that once led China's media reform movement. This early exposure to investigative journalism shaped his critical thinking toward power institutions and his understanding of journalism's role in oversight and accountability, introducing him to critical social perspectives at a young age. These formative experiences shaped his early understanding of the relationship between society and individuals, ultimately leading him to pursue journalism at one of China's top journalism schools. "To me, journalism is a profession that explores society and provides humanitarian care," he reflected (June 14, 2023).

I categorize Zhao Rui and Chen Ruiming's ideas of best work as a *humanitarian impact model* in the pursuit of excellence in foreign correspondence. On the one hand, it reflects how some expat journalists understand the value of their professional path: seeking meaningful engagement with society and authentic individual stories. While such aspirations can rarely be fulfilled in their work in Thailand, which is heavily oriented toward soft power rhetoric (as evidenced by journalists' frustration with reporting rehearsed cliché from pro-China experts), these journalists clearly maintain these professional ideals, pursuing them whenever circumstances permit. On the other hand, comparing examples of this model (such as the Mali story or the Philippine farmers' report) with classic soft power objectives (winning hearts and minds) reveals not contradiction but harmony. When Zhao Rui facilitated corporate donations through his journalistic work, he effectively combined news reporting with international aid. Similarly, when Chen Ruiming's reporting brought stories of ordinary Filipino people to a broader audience, he demonstrated a subtle form of international influence of Chinese media. This suggests that journalists' pursuit of professional excellence and government soft power objectives are not necessarily mutually exclusive, despite journalists themselves feeling that soft news assignments "often restrict their professional potential" (Ge Jiahui, June 11, 2023).

However, this requires substantial economic capital as a guarantee. Those working in media organizations with fewer staff and branch offices, even if possessing similar cultural capital, often lack sufficient opportunities to leave the newsroom and go into the field like Zhao Rui and Chen Ruiming. Even when these journalists aspire to produce meaningful reporting that transcends propaganda slogans, they may simply not have the financial resources needed for field reporting and broader exposure, making it harder for them to remain motivated by their pursuit of journalistic excellence and occasional successes.

Cultural Bridge Model

Another prominent pattern in journalists' conception of best work can be termed the *cultural bridge model*. In this framework, journalists consider their finest work to be reporting that overcomes cultural barriers and fosters mutual understanding across nations, especially in helping foreign audiences grasp Chinese cultural, political, and social dimensions. This understanding of excellence appears particularly common among those expat journalists with higher cultural capital in the form of systematic foreign language training or expertise. Zeng Shuyan exemplifies this pattern. Though she received graduate training in journalism, she came to the profession with an undergraduate degree in German. This combination of foreign language skills and journalism training enabled her entry into one of China's biggest foreign-aimed media a decade ago. Having graduated from a Chinese journalism school slightly after her, I myself recall how media organizations focused on international audiences (such as *CCTV's* English channel and *China Daily*) typically imposed dual requirements in their recruitment back then. About a decade ago, candidates needed both advanced foreign language certification and journalism credentials (either a second degree or substantial internship experience) to be able to make it to foreign-aimed state media—this recruitment pattern explains Zeng's pathway into her

career. While she self-deprecatingly noted that “not speaking Thai posed certain challenges,” her foreign language proficiency still helped her quickly adapt to cross-cultural work. When discussing her most satisfying work, she pointed to two stories from her early days in Thailand. One of these stories compared mangrove conservation efforts between China and Thailand. The idea emerged during a casual outing shortly after her arrival in Thailand when, amid others admiring the coastal scenery, she recognized the journalistic potential in the mangrove coastline before her.

“At the beach, I noticed something significant. Thailand’s mangroves were better preserved than China’s. The mangroves near local fishing ports and coastlines showed minimal human disruption, which is crucial for coastline stability, soil conservation, and marine ecosystem maintenance. This naturally made me think about China’s situation. In recent years, China established national forest parks in Hainan, where mangroves play a vital role in the entire ecosystem. I’m particularly sensitive to connections underlying cultural differences.” (Zeng Shuyan, June 7, 2023)

As she noted, apparent differences that others might simply observe often revealed to her potential linkages between nations, creating opportunities for her reporting “to foster international collaboration.” While we discussed reporting that promotes Thai-Chinese understanding and cooperation, Zeng quickly mentioned another story about Thai elephant migration she had completed shortly before our interview. Her cultural bridging instinct had led her to investigate the elephant monitoring systems in Thailand’s Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC). Learning from agricultural officials about technology that tracks elephant movements and potential conflicts with human settlements, she immediately recognized parallels with China’s widely-discussed case of wandering elephants in Yunnan the previous year. For her, “such stories

exemplified opportunities to highlight local characteristics while drawing meaningful connections to China, helping readers recognize the intricate links and cultural commonalities between the two nations.” This approach, she reflected, “could help counter simplified or polarized views” of China, demonstrating how her language training background positively influenced her work in Thailand by enabling her to identify and articulate these cross-cultural resonances.

Some of my interviewees possessed formal Thai language credentials or training, including Yu Hong, who had pursued graduate studies in Thailand. Her language immersion fostered a deep connection with Thai culture and society, ultimately inspiring her post-graduation decision to stay in Thailand and join a Chinese-Thai joint media venture as a new media editor. Though she lacked formal journalism credentials, her language expertise and deep cultural understanding allowed her to identify China-related stories that would resonate with Thai readers, avoiding the pitfall of mechanically producing China-focused content that would attract no readership.

“When China’s ‘March 15 Day’ (Consumer Rights Day) exposed counterfeit Thai fragrant rice, we were the first media outlet to report on it from Thailand. I saw this as a great opportunity to help Thai readers understand the significance of Thai agricultural products in the Chinese market. This kind of reporting helps dispel unnecessary misunderstandings—for example, some in Thailand might think that the Chinese market discriminates against Thai agricultural products. In reality, China’s regulatory authorities had simply introduced stricter standards to prevent counterfeit Thai fragrant rice from circulating, which ultimately protects legitimate Thai distributors.” (Yu Hong, June 7, 2023)

Similarly, Zhang Minghao's Thai language background shaped his approach to finding meaningful cross-cultural connections. During an assignment in Laos that initially appeared to be a routine formality—"covering Chinese power company executives visiting their local employees and showcasing this Chinese company's global influence"—Zhang recognized that conventional coverage of "CEO's visits (*lingdao weiwen*)" would fail to resonate with foreign readers and might even be perceived as mere propaganda. Instead, he uncovered a more meaningful angle that had escaped notice. The Chinese company's work helping local villages upgrade and expand their electrical systems addressed a critical technical need in many Laotian communities.

"This company had a history of rural revitalization and electrification projects in China. When it comes to improving rural living conditions and developing rural economies, China has valuable experience to share with Laos. This point is far more meaningful than merely publishing PR pieces." (Zhang Minghao, June 3, 2023)

Despite variations in their specific descriptions of best work, these journalists uniformly emphasize the "international" aspect of their international postings. Unlike their traditionally trained counterparts from journalism schools, these language-trained journalists pursue professional excellence through the potential of news as a cultural product with its narrative power—one capable of communicating across cultural, national, and linguistic boundaries. This value orientation largely stems from their education process where they learned to view language "not merely as a tool but as a cultural bridge" (Zhang Minghao, June 3, 2023). Their journey from language acquisition to cultural understanding, from "mastering a foreign language to contemplating the cultural differences underlying linguistic phenomena" (Wu Peng, May 10, 2023), has shaped their commitment to building cultural bridges. Again, when considering

China's ultimate objectives for soft power, this *cultural bridge model* clearly represents an epistemological foundation for shaping foreign readers' understanding of China (both as a cultural unity and as a global power), in fact aligning with government goals. However, to both satisfy journalistic ideals and cater to soft power objectives, this model requires strong cultural capital—especially when targeting markets like Thailand with unique languages and cultures distinct from mainstream English-speaking countries.

Alternative Media Pathway Model

A third distinct pattern is the *alternative media pathway model*. Unlike the first two models, which primarily evaluate journalistic excellence through reporting quality and writing depth, some journalists position their work at the intersection of international news and China's global influence, seeing these two dimensions as inseparable. Rather than focusing solely on the value of individual news texts, they prioritize the creation of innovative platforms and new channels that open alternative routes for China's soft influence and international engagement. Ironically enough, journalists in this category often lack substantial economic capital, either due to limited budgets for international coverage or the absence of institutional financial security that allows for unrestricted work. However, they compensate by strategically leveraging the resources and advantages they do have, turning their social networks, digital platforms, or organizational branding into tools of influence. In their view, this ability to navigate constraints and build alternative forms of engagement defines what it means to produce the best work as an overseas journalist.

Wu Peng is a quintessential example. Having spent more time with him compared to all other journalists, I had the opportunity to observe the multiple responsibilities he shouldered. Interestingly, when discussing his most satisfying work, Wu Peng mentioned neither the high-

profile forums he had successfully organized which amazed me nor any “exceptionally well-written in-depth articles” that others have mentioned about him (Zhao Rui, May 26, 2023). Instead, he took the most pride in transforming the Thailand office of his organization into an integrated platform for Sino-Thai cooperation. Through his management of Facebook and other social media accounts, Wu Peng had strategically built his media outlet’s digital presence in Thailand. He considered developing these digital platforms his greatest professional achievement, as they “both expanded his media outlet’s influence and fostered broader Sino-Thai cooperation beyond traditional journalism” (May 10, 2023). In other words, his approach leveraged cultural insights, technology, and extensive local connections to create alternative pathways for media influence. This strategy yielded cascading benefits, as government and non-governmental organizations increasingly sought collaboration with him.

“Many Thai officials or businessmen from the Chinese diasporic communities here, even if they are willing to take your interviews, prefer their stories to appear on larger platforms like CCTV or People’s Daily. Our media outlet, however, is comparatively smaller. So you must find alternative paths. [...] These third-party digital platforms like Facebook provide the perfect channel for us: I can build a digital readership that far exceeds that of Xinhua. This way, when I discuss cooperation with Thai officials or business chambers, they value us because of our influential digital presence, making them more willing to collaborate or attend events that we organize.” (Wu Peng, May 10, 2023)

Compared to many other journalists, Wu Peng lacked a background in journalism: prior to joining the Bangkok-based office, he had never worked as a journalist, nor had he received formal professional training in the field. The lack of cultural capital might have placed him at a disadvantage within the conventional journalistic hierarchy, where excellence is often “measured

by reporting skills and investigative depth.” However, he compensated for this with leveraging his extensive networks in political and business circles to carve out an alternative path.

“When it comes to producing content, it’s just the two of us in our office—we can’t compete with major outlets. They have the manpower and the money. The budget they allocate for a single journalist is enough to sustain our entire operation. But my advantage is in my network and resources, which others don’t have. If you use your connections well—especially in political and business circles—then Thai counterparts will engage with you more and collaborate with you more.” (Wu Peng, May 10, 2023)

Rather than competing directly in traditional journalistic metrics, Wu Peng positioned himself strategically within the field by maximizing the capital he did have. His ability to cultivate digital influence and cooperation through relationships rather than conventional reporting allowed him to elevate his standing and establish himself as a key player in Sino-Thai media engagement. his approach underscores how, when journalism becomes intertwined with soft power initiatives, professional standing is no longer determined solely by cultural capital in the form of journalistic expertise. Instead, it also depends on the ability to strategically mobilize and convert different forms of capital to gain recognition and influence within both media and diplomatic spheres.

The example of another journalist, Niu Lili, also demonstrates that sometimes what capital one lacks is less important than effectively utilizing the capital one possesses. In her view, many Chinese media outlets are not short on funding, yet their so-called international media cooperation often amounts to little more than “paid content-sharing arrangements” with foreign commercial outlets, yielding limited real impact (May 24, 2023). Niu Lili aspired to move beyond these superficial content-sharing arrangements by establishing genuine co-production

partnerships built on quality content that resonated with local audiences—a level of excellence attainable only by journalists who know how to navigate constraints and work strategically. In a YouTube show covering current affairs that she had developed over several years, Niu deliberately crafted content with a less formal, more approachable style that departed from the often stiff, official tone common in Chinese media. Although her superiors “showed little enthusiasm for the project” and provided “minimal financial support,” she firmly believed that quality work must be built on “audience research” and understanding “how social media actually works” (May 24, 2023). She therefore persistently covered current affairs from perspectives and in language styles appealing to young people, stripping away propagandistic elements wherever possible to win over Thai youth on YouTube. Her efforts yielded significant results, as Thai media organizations began approaching her to discuss copyright cooperation and joint production opportunities. Notably, her sense of pride stemmed not just from personal success, but from how she assessed her work in relation to her peers, recognizing how to sharpen her strengths and push herself closer to professional excellence.

“Many (Chinese journalists) claim their programs ‘have entered the Thai market’ (zoujin taiguo), but they’ve merely paid for access while actually being resented by Thai partners. Thai outlets take Chinese money without any genuine appreciation. My program is different—I’ve truly opened new channels, through years of experimenting with new media formats, for media cooperation between our two countries.” (Niu Lili, May 24, 2023)

Although Niu Lili didn’t possess the extensive connections (as social capital) that Wu Peng had, and she also mentioned limited financial support from her media organization, she possessed excellent cultural capital and knew how to leverage her strengths to compensate for her weaknesses. Throughout her more than twenty-year journalism career, Niu Lili evolved from

a Thai language major to receiving formal journalism training, collaborated with Thai universities and think tanks as a visiting scholar in public diplomacy, and witnessed both the consolidation of Chinese central media organizations and the wave of digital transformation. These experiences shaped her view that expat journalists can play a role in cultural and political exchanges between countries that far exceeds merely producing texts.

Despite both Wu Peng and Niu Lili's approaches potentially advancing China-Thailand relations and China's soft power objectives more effectively, they consistently face bureaucratic resistance from Beijing headquarters. They have all encountered similar economic obstacles—limited financial support and organizational inflexibility—despite developing promising pathways for cross-cultural cooperation.

“The big problem now is that Beijing isn't sending the money. So what can you do? If the funds were there, a lot of things would be much easier. I'd also have way more flexibility on my end.” (Wu Peng, May 10, 2023)

Nevertheless, despite the limitations in capital they face, both Wu Peng and Niu Lili have demonstrated a keen ability to allocate resources strategically and navigate constraints effectively. They share a common understanding that excellence is not just about producing strong journalism, but also about building China's influence in Thailand—a dual objective they hold as the highest standard of professional achievement. This mantra allows them to remain highly motivated, even in the absence of ideal institutional support or, at times, despite active bureaucratic hurdles. Ultimately, their drive for excellence is deeply tied to their ability to assess their relative position within the hierarchy and push themselves as high as possible within the existing evaluation system.

Individual Capacity Model

During my fieldwork in Thailand, intern journalists constituted a distinctive cohort among the Chinese media professionals. These student journalists represented, to some extent, the perspective of individuals transitioning from journalism schools (which remain major institutions supplying journalistic talent in China) to media organizations (which provide these journalists with continued socialization). They typically lack sufficient capital, with limited networks, minimal experience working abroad, and “almost never given opportunities to report independently without guidance” (Li Haoran, April 9, 2023). This, to some degree, limited their chance to identify independent work as their career best. Unlike full-time staff, these interns’ understanding of Chinese media system remained exploratory, largely shaped by their college training and education, personal observations, and limited internship experiences. Consequently, they have expressed somewhat different perspectives regarding their best work and the values such work reflects. During discussions about “best work” or their idea of the “most admirable quality of correspondent work,” they would instinctively shift the conversation from specific journalistic pieces to particular individuals or role models, using these figures to articulate their understanding of the journalism profession they were attempting to comprehend more deeply. I term this approach the *individual capacity model*, as it represents a simple yet sometimes impractical notion about the decisive role of personal capabilities in professional success as journalists.

As one of the more productive interns, Qiao Yingzi had contributed over 20 articles during her first four months in Thailand, mostly from “assignments allocated by her mentor rather than self-initiated topics.” When asked about her “best work,” she quickly pointed not to any of these pieces but to her mentor as a role model, illustrating how interns often located excellence in individuals rather than in specific journalistic outputs. In her view, the personal capabilities

demonstrated by her mentor, the young and accomplished journalist Chen Ruiming, represented the essential qualities needed to achieve what she believes as “excellence in journalism.”

“First of all, he’s like a superhuman—I feel like he doesn’t even need to sleep and can work anytime! [...] The other thing is that he’s incredibly observant and thoughtful. Sometimes he can find newsworthy angles in things we consider ordinary. That’s his unique personal advantage. I can’t do that yet—I still have a long way to go.” (Qiao Yingzi, May 27, 2023)

Besides Qiao, I indeed heard similar narratives from several other interns. For instance, Kang Xi and Xu Xiaohan, both female, independently mentioned their admiration for the female role model Niu Lili, noting they observed in her impressive professional capabilities, strong language skills, and remarkable resilience in handling high-intensity work. In their view, excellent individual capacity is “the key to becoming a successful international-located journalist (*zhuwai jizhe*),” and represent the direction in which they “should continuously strengthen [themselves]” (Kang Xi, December 3, 2023).

However, their tendency to reference role models rather than specific works does not mean these interns lacked insights about international journalism. On the contrary, they each held thoughtful perspectives on the value of global reporting and international journalism. As mentioned in Chapter 2, Qiao Yingzi’s motivation for applying to this internship program stemmed from her aspiration to pursue investigative journalism. She believed that transcending national boundaries to bring media attention to people and issues requiring coverage was deeply meaningful work. Yet she framed this aspiration within a belief system that positioned personal capacity as the key to achievement. This framework partly reflects the strong cultivation she received in journalism school—where students are primarily encouraged to strengthen personal

skills and capabilities. Due to their limited socialization within actual media systems, these interns, still immersed in journalism school education, likely believed that once their personal abilities matched those of their role models, they would be better positioned to fulfill their highest aspirations for international journalism.

In contrast to this individual capacity focus, Deng Jiakun, a former full-time expatriate journalist in Thailand, demonstrated a different mindset shaped by years of training within media institutions. Deng identified BBC's reporting on fishing industry slavery as exemplary work, though he believed such reporting would be difficult to achieve in Chinese media. For him, the barriers weren't just about personal abilities but institutional constraints. First, the time investment required would be substantial, and Chinese media lack the necessary support systems. Despite the apparently large number of Chinese journalists stationed abroad, few have access to professional support teams comparable to the BBC's. Additionally, Chinese journalists abroad must fulfill institutionally mandated priorities—such as producing pro-China narratives—which often leaves little energy for pursuing more idealistic topics.

“When I worked in Thailand, I received many mandatory reporting assignments from leadership every day, especially finding Thai experts to discuss ‘China’s bright economic outlook (zhongguo jingji guangminglun).’ It was quite difficult to find Thai experts who would willingly praise China’s economy. So I was overwhelmed with these tasks daily. Of course, my own economic knowledge also needs improvement, but the main issue was having so many prescribed articles to write—you simply can’t be in multiple places at once. You can’t produce work like the BBC under these circumstances. [...] I believe good international reporting should change the status quo like the fishing slavery report, but that’s not very realistic.” (Deng Jiakun, May 31, 2023)

While one cannot entirely dismiss the possibility that Deng was rationalizing his own unfulfilled aspirations, his tone nonetheless revealed his personal understanding of professional ideals. By referencing the BBC fishing slavery report, he validated his value system that investigative journalism carries more worth than perfunctory expert interviews. The former represented the highest level in his symbolic hierarchy of journalistic identity, while the latter—a classic case of soft power work—was merely the job he needed to complete. In fact, the interns maintained a similar symbolic hierarchy (evident in their admiration for their role models' personal qualities). But unlike the interns, Deng has undergone thorough training within Chinese media and developed a deep understanding of institutional culture, and no longer shares the tendency of young interns to idealize individual professional capacities as the path to excellence. His socialization process can thus be viewed as a disenchantment with the notion that personal ability alone can achieve ideal journalistic goals.

From the perspective of institutional soft power objectives, the interns' mindset presents a challenge to media organizations' aims, as they believe developing personal capabilities will create opportunities for real, impactful international journalism that may or may not serve China's soft power in Thailand. By contrast, full-time employees, having undergone socialization, have a more realistic understanding of what their available capital can actually accomplish: they prioritize acceptance of institutional soft power goals, and only then consider whether they might simultaneously fulfill some of their personal journalistic ideals (such as Deng Jiakun's aspiration to "change the status quo"). Thus, even when both groups share a similar symbolic hierarchical recognition of journalism, people like Qiao Yingzi believe they should learn from role models to perfect themselves, eventually achieving their aspirations, while those like Deng Jiakun might have accepted possible career limitations.

Discussion

This chapter delves into Thailand-based journalists' best work or most ideal professional models. Through analyzing the fieldwork data, I find four distinct approaches to conceptualizing professional excellence. These include the *humanitarian impact model* (finding meaning in reporting that improves people's lives), the *cultural bridge model* (valuing news work that fosters cross-cultural understanding), the *alternative media pathway model* (creating innovative platforms beyond traditional reporting that connect China and Thailand), and the *individual capacity model* (emphasizing the decisive role of advanced personal capacity in achieving professional ideals). Their conceptions of best work are not uniform but vary based on the forms of capital they possess, which influence their ability to pursue ambitious projects and gain recognition. In the humanitarian impact model, economic capital plays a crucial role, as well-funded projects enable journalists to engage in impactful, resource-intensive reporting. The cultural bridge model is primarily shaped by cultural capital, where deep linguistic proficiency and cross-cultural expertise allow journalists to facilitate meaningful exchange. The alternative media pathway model reflects how journalists strategically leverage their strongest forms of capital to compensate for what they lack, using social networks, technology, or institutional branding to navigate financial and structural constraints. Finally, the individual capacity model reveals how intern journalists, when faced with capital scarcity, adopt a mindset of self-improvement as a form of professional achievement.

Best work also offers a new perspective on the tension between individuals and institutions. In most cases, journalists actively seek to align their professional excellence as journalists with their institutional role in advancing China's soft power agenda. This balancing act reflects a form of *dual loyalty*—they remain committed to their own standards of journalistic

excellence while adapting to the reality that their work ultimately serves broader Thai-Chinese diplomatic and media relations. Rather than mechanically emphasizing China's goodness in a formulaic and often ineffective manner (Nye, 2021), they aim to produce work that respects journalistic integrity while strategically creating space to showcase China's influence and goodwill. This study demonstrates how soft power materializes in practice—not as a rigidly imposed strategy, but as an evolving process shaped by alternative pathways, opportunistic moments for meaningful work, and strategic compromises. Through these tactics, media expats navigate constraints, negotiate their agency, and ultimately shape how Chinese soft power manifests on the ground.

However, subtle individual-level variations and the differences in agency that stem from them do exist, yet they do not align with the functionalist-agentic divide often subtly presented in existing literature (Repnikova, 2017; Stockmann, 2013). Because journalists hold unequal capital and varying degrees of agency, they do not all occupy the rare space where professional ideals and soft power goals seamlessly converge. The result is not a constant tension between the two, but rather a structural reality in which most journalists operate somewhere below this ideal intersection, navigating the constraints of their capital, organizational support, and institutional flexibility. In this process, Chinese journalists engage in strategic adaptations that allow them to maneuver within these constraints. At times, these limitations restrict their ability to pursue the kind of work that would be most personally or professionally fulfilling. However, when the right conditions align—such as in humanitarian-focused reporting or in efforts to foster meaningful cross-cultural dialogue—their work can become particularly rewarding. In this sense, professional ambition and soft power goals are not inherently at odds; rather, the challenge lies in

how often journalists can attain the status and autonomy necessary to bring them together in a meaningful way.

Moreover, this chapter demonstrates that over time, journalists tend to develop increasingly sophisticated strategies for adapting to institutional realities. Interns provide a particularly compelling example: as discussed in Chapter 1, many arrive in Thailand with journalistic aspirations that have little to do with soft power. When they later realize that these ambitions may be unattainable, they often attribute their limitations to a lack of personal ability rather than structural constraints. In contrast, full-time journalists are more pragmatic. Shaped by their cultural backgrounds and accumulated capital, experienced journalists navigate professional ideals in more nuanced, indirect, and strategic ways—maneuvering within institutional frameworks without overtly challenging them. This cautious pragmatism helps explain why many can turn a blind eye to explicitly propagandistic work that serves soft power objectives while still holding onto and cherishing the rare moments where their professional ideals and institutional roles briefly align.

Understanding journalists' best work offers a new perspective on how soft power operates—not as a seamless strategy but as an ongoing negotiation between institutional objectives and personal values. This perspective suggests both limitations and opportunities: on one hand, journalists' commitment to professional ideals may constrain how effectively they can implement certain soft power objectives; on the other, their creative adaptations might generate innovative approaches that advance soft power in ways bureaucratic planning alone cannot achieve. This offers a new lens for analyzing and understanding China's soft power landscape and strategic implementation. Soft power is rarely a standalone occupation but is often embedded within other professional trajectories such as international journalism or language and cultural

diplomacy (e.g., Confucius Institute instructors). Who is recruited into these roles, what pathways lead them there, and what skills and resources they bring to the table all shape the extent to which soft power can be effectively integrated and carried out. Ultimately, this is not just a question of political messaging, but one of the sociology of talents where professional dispositions, institutional structures, and career trajectories collectively determine the social construction of Chinese soft power in practice.

Conclusion

Summary

Despite the widespread use of keywords like “Chinese soft power,” “Chinese media globalization,” and “telling China’s story” in both scholarly and popular discourse, how China actually crafts and enacts its soft power remains an open question—one that calls for renewed perspectives amid shifting global geopolitics and changing international orders (Nye, 2021; Repnikova, 2022a). This dissertation responds to that call by offering a bottom-up rethinking of China’s global media expansion—widely recognized as a key vehicle of Chinese soft power—through the lens of the lived experiences and professional perspectives of expat journalists. Against the backdrop of sweeping narratives that portray these journalists primarily as effective instruments of China’s soft power strategy, this dissertation shifts the lens to the journalists themselves. Rather than focusing on the fact of China’s media expansion or simply the political intentions behind it, it examines who gets recruited, who stays, and how individuals become part of China’s global soft power architecture through their daily participation in cross-border news production. It shows that what the Chinese state hopes to achieve through global media expansion depends not solely on the presumed political significance of these efforts, but more on their bottom-up execution. This execution is grounded in an alignment forged through the perceived attractions of overseas postings, sustained by the ongoing reconstruction of personal belief in the job’s worth, and made operational through repeated efforts by individual journalists to reconcile, calibrate, or selectively align their professional ideals with state objectives.

By situating the analysis in Thailand, a key site where China’s soft power has gained notable traction, this dissertation unpacks how Chinese expat journalists operate not just as policy agents but as transnational actors negotiating meaning, career trajectories, and purpose in

the realm recognized as international journalism. Theoretically, it draws on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *illusio* and broader field-theoretical perspectives, framing these journalists' career choices as belief-driven engagements in a social "game" they consider worth playing. This framework helps reveal why such positions feel attractive at different life and career stages, and how people maintain commitment—or struggle to do so—when confronted with everyday realities. Through transnational fieldwork in both Thailand and China, this dissertation uncovers the diverse motivations and challenges that shape the work of Chinese journalists abroad. While government policies and media institutions set the broad framework for China's soft power efforts, their success ultimately depends on how journalists interpret, adapt to, and navigate these directives in their everyday work—while also balancing personal aspirations, professional ideals, and practical considerations. Rather than a rigid top-down system, soft power in the media sector emerges through a dynamic process of negotiation, compromise, and, at times, subtle resistance.

Review of Findings

1. Job attractions of Chinese media expats.

As Bourdieu's concept of *illusio* suggests, the primary rationale in taking on any job is that one must believe that the career choice is worth it. Chapter 1 thus explores a foundational question of this dissertation: what draws Chinese journalists to take up foreign postings in Thailand in the first place? Moving beyond views that frame *waixuan* (foreign-facing propaganda) work as merely top-down assignments, this chapter focuses on the often-overlooked side of individual attraction—why people find these jobs worth pursuing.

I argue that job attraction is not a fixed or universal logic, but a shifting orientation that changes with professional seniority and life stage. The appeal of Thailand postings lies not only in who these journalists are, but in where they are in their careers—and what such roles make

possible at those different stages. For junior journalists, attraction often stems from symbolic expectations—an aspirational belief that the overseas position offers prestige, cosmopolitan exposure, or a chance to grow into the image of real journalism. For mid-career journalists, the draw is more strategic and on the ground: the post becomes a career lever, a way to gain visibility, secure promotions, or reassert one's value within an increasingly competitive media system. For senior journalists, the role serves more as a stabilizing arrangement—offering relative calm or a dignified professional space to continue meaningful work without the intensity of domestic politics. While these meanings differ, they all reflect how attraction emerges from the intersection of career timing, institutional pathways, and personal interpretations of what the job enables at that particular moment.

China's soft power initiatives benefit from this “bottom-up alignment” of journalists' personal attractions with government objectives. Rather than relying on ideological indoctrination, China's media expansion succeeds by offering positions that naturally appeal to journalists at different life stages. This creates a powerful workforce that willingly advances China's interests without explicit coercion. China's soft power success through media expansion relies not on overt ideological mobilization but on aligning expatriate positions with journalists' diverse life and career needs. This approach creates a willing workforce that advances China's interests while pursuing personal and professional goals.

2. Everyday work stationed in Thailand.

If initial attraction draws individuals into the field, staying in it requires a reconstructed belief in its worth—formed through direct engagement with the everyday realities of the work. Chapter 2 turns from initial attractions to the everyday realities of being a media expat in Thailand. It asks: how do journalists continue to find their work worthwhile, even when daily

tasks fall short of earlier expectations? Building on the concept of *illusio*, this chapter explores journalists' transition from initial attractions to acceptance of daily work (stationed in Thailand) as a new game they play.

I found that regardless of seniority or prior attraction, journalists in Thailand confront a shared structural paradox: they are entrusted with carrying out China's soft power mission but operate under tight institutional control and bureaucratic inefficiencies. Autonomy is limited, reporting is often pre-scripted, and administrative burdens are high. Yet most of them still find ways to reengage with their work. To sustain a sense of purpose amid routine and constraint, journalists draw on different resources and orientations. Some, particularly those with deep newsroom experience, reconnect with their professional instincts—pushing for better footage, visiting scenes of major events, or maintaining a sense of journalistic presence even in predetermined assignments. Others shift their focus beyond reporting: some take on external-facing duties such as organizing bilateral events or building ties with local institutions, effectively acting as cultural intermediaries; others find meaning in internal roles like mentoring junior colleagues, passing down both technical knowledge and pragmatic insight. Still others, often with cross-cultural expertise or language skills, pursue more innovative forms of storytelling—gradually transforming rigid propaganda-style reporting into de-officialized cross-cultural stories about China in their daily work.

Despite the inevitable gap between actual work and initial attractions, these different aspects of daily work among Thailand-based journalists represent the mechanisms through which each journalist adjusts and rebuilds their belief in the job. This individual-level mentality adjustment also indicates that although many of the work responsibilities of Chinese media branches are indeed related to soft power, this system does not depend on ideological

enforcement or material incentives alone. Instead, it relies on what I call journalists' *professional reconciliation*—a psychological process of accepting and reconstructing belief in real work.

Ironically, while many journalists develop a nuanced sense of what soft power could look like on the ground, the institutions they work for often fail to recognize or support these efforts. What holds the system together, then, is not tight coordination—but the everyday agency of people who still find reasons to stay. In this sense, the efficacy of soft power lies not only in institutional consistency or government's coordination as is oftentimes argued, but also in the capacity of individual journalists to make the work feel professionally and personally justifiable.

3. *Journalists' best work.*

Upon revealing how journalists stay engaged through everyday compromises, Chapter 3 turns to how they hold on to aspiration—by defining what counts as meaningful or excellent work on their own terms. It examines how Chinese journalists conceptualize best work and professional excellence, and what those definitions reveal about how they position themselves within a system shaped by state objectives. If *illusio* explains why journalists enter and stay in the game, this chapter explores how they navigate the symbolic hierarchy of their profession—what kind of work is worth striving for, and what success looks like from their own perspective.

The chapter identifies four distinct models of professional excellence, each rooted in different forms of capital and career positioning. Some journalists, often those from bigger institutions and with strong field experience, pursue a “humanitarian impact model”—valuing news stories that connect with local communities and lead to tangible societal outcomes. Some others, especially those with foreign language or area studies backgrounds, follow a “cultural bridge model”—driven by a deep belief that journalism should serve as a channel for fostering mutual understanding between China and the world. A third group, working under the

“alternative media pathway model,” prioritizes building new platforms, partnerships, and media infrastructures that extend China’s cultural reach. And a fourth, primarily composed of interns, embrace an “individual capacity model,” focusing on personal growth and modeling their ideals through admired figures, in the hope of one day producing meaningful international journalism themselves.

Across these models, journalists are not simply reacting to institutional demands—they are constantly making sense of the symbolic hierarchy of their profession, and positioning themselves within it in ways that affirm what counts as good, worthy, or meaningful work. These internal frameworks allow them to reconcile, however unevenly, their personal standards with the broader system they operate in. The chapter argues that understanding journalists’ best work models offers a more grounded view of how soft power gets enacted: not as the outcome of clear top-down strategy, nor merely relying on journalists finding psychological motivation to persist through boring daily work they don’t identify with, but as the accumulation of micro-level negotiations, compromises, and small acts of meaning-making. In some cases, these acts align with institutional aims; in others, they point to alternate paths that state planning alone could not foresee. This suggests that soft power largely operates through the professional infrastructure that carries it. As agents embedded in a specific occupational field, journalists actively weigh their sense of journalistic excellence against state-defined goals, shaping what soft power becomes in practice through selective alignment, adaptation, or even quiet divergence.

Discussion

Soft power: from symbolic influence to concrete beliefs.

Looking closely at the individuals who actually carry out China’s media expansion reveals a key distinction: in China’s case, what was broadly (and vaguely) termed as “soft power” (*ruan*

shili) operates on two levels—first, as an *infrastructure* designed to project state power abroad and consolidate legitimacy at home; second, as a *professional lived experience* for those tasked with implementing it. As an infrastructure, the Chinese soft power is largely about top-down resource allocation—both financial and human. As seen in China’s global media outreach, this involves state investments in establishing overseas media bureaus and assigning journalists to work abroad. Beneath its soft power rhetoric, what the Chinese government truly values is twofold: 1) projecting state strength and governance capacity abroad, and 2) reinforcing legitimacy at home (Repnikova, 2022a). This performative orientation is clearly reflected in the everyday frustrations expressed by many journalists who noted that media leadership, and arguably the Chinese government itself, seemed more concerned with domestic audiences than with reaching foreign publics. Otherwise, they would not be spending their days chasing quotes from “pro-China experts” (*youhua zhuanjia*) in Thailand for stories that are clearly crafted for consumption at home. Nor would they need to report on Thai affairs (such as the election) in a way that “avoids making China appear less favorable” by comparison. This suggests that China is not primarily concerned with how deeply it influences foreign publics as classic soft power theory might assume (Nye, 2004), but with projecting an image and discourse of strength and coherence, both domestically and internationally. The goal is less about persuasion than performance; less about changing minds abroad than sustaining the state’s narrative authority at home.

Meanwhile, as a lived professional experience, China’s soft power also reflects the ongoing and situated process through which the real agents (such as expat journalists) construct and renegotiate belief in their work. While the highly top-down and state-driven aspects of China’s soft power—often critiqued for being overly official or performative—are indeed real

(Kurlantzick, 2007; Shambaugh, 2015), the mere allocation of resources and implementation of policies is not what ultimately makes soft power function (or fail to function). What also matters is how individuals on the ground—those tasked with carrying out the work—come to see their roles as meaningful, or at least worth continuing. It is this belief, fragile and negotiated as it may be, that sustains or challenges soft power in practice. Across chapters, and through close attention to the real work and mentality of expat journalists, we see that despite the ubiquitous bureaucratic management shaping personnel appointments and editorial decisions, China's soft power is held together less by ideological discipline or top-down indoctrination. Rather, it is sustained by the belief that individual journalists continue to invest in their roles—both as agents operating within the system, and as professionals committed to journalism. Belief that the job is worth doing, that one can still find meaning in the work, and that it still matters to strive for some version of excellence, even when institutional rewards don't follow. In tracing how such belief is constructed, maintained, and reshaped, this dissertation offers a grounded perspective on how soft power actually operates—not as a seamless or coherent strategy, but as an ongoing negotiation between state ambition and individual meaning-making. It is not the power of the state alone, but the daily investments of people who continue to find reasons to stay in the game. Soft power, in this light, is not a top-down broadcast but rather a lived, fragile, and contingent professional practice.

To speak meaningfully of soft power as the non-coercive capacity to influence others, we must first examine two foundational conditions: whether the profession it travels through (be it international journalism or language education) has sustained institutional investment, and who the people are that take it up. Without long-term commitment, the infrastructure of soft power—media offices, teaching centers, cultural institutes—risks becoming an empty shell. Take foreign

media postings: if China, like many Western democracies, begins to reduce spending and scale back overseas news operations, then the platform for soft power collapses before it can even function. Equally important is who inhabits these soft power-related roles. As we see, people's belief is never fully aligned with government objectives, even if they are officially hired and, undoubted, entrusted by the government (Nyíri, 2017). As this dissertation shows, what sustains soft power on the ground is a form of dual loyalty: a willingness to follow state direction, paired with the ability and agency to stretch that direction into something professionally meaningful. For Chinese journalists that work under China's hope, this includes testing boundaries, reinterpreting narratives, and experimenting with styles that feel more authentic to local audiences—whether through new media formats, solution-oriented journalism, or de-officialized language. In this sense, soft power works not despite journalists' critical distance, but because of it.

But not everyone is equally positioned to do this work. Sociologically speaking, the ability to carry soft power in this way depends on various forms of capital: professional knowledge, the economic strength of one's media institution, and access to relevant social networks. These are demanding requirements, and they make talent recruitment a recurrent challenge. This dissertation therefore offers not just a shift from institutional analysis to individual experience—a move already acknowledged in recent scholarship (Repnikova, 2022a)—but a deeper rethinking of how soft power functions as a lived and unevenly distributed process. Rather than treating individuals as mere transmitters of state narratives, it centers them as agents who construct, negotiate, and at times reimagine the meaning of their work under both political and professional constraints. In doing so, it sheds light on a central but underexplored question: who still finds this work worth doing, and under what conditions? While centered on China's global

media expansion, this framework also holds relevance for other sectors tasked with advancing China's soft power. For example, when Confucius Institutes are criticized as tools of ideological export, it is worth asking: do the China-sent language teachers themselves uncritically internalize this logic, or do they, within institutional constraints, negotiate a more exploratory and pedagogically grounded way of engaging with their role? The same question applies to newer forms of infrastructure often framed as carriers of Chinese influence. Or take TikTok—widely scrutinized as a technological platform embedded with geopolitical implications. But what about the engineers, product designers, and content moderators who build and maintain it? Do they consciously align themselves with a state-driven agenda, or do they navigate their roles through a mix of professional norms, technical constraints, and individual ethics? These questions remind us that soft power does not travel as a singular intention, but as a distributed and negotiated process carried by people embedded in different institutional and professional fields. This process of negotiation—sometimes successful, sometimes not—is where soft power becomes real, or fails.

International journalism: a profession in flux.

This dissertation also offers value for the study of contemporary journalism, both as a social institution increasingly questioned, and as a profession in flux due to ongoing shifts in media economics and digital technologies. It centers on a shrinking sector of the global news industry: the foreign correspondent. Historically, international reporting has been a vital part of geopolitical knowledge production. Foreign bureaus once played a critical role in shaping how domestic audiences understood world affairs, especially during key twentieth-century moments such as the Vietnam War and the Gulf War (Hallin, 1986; Hannerz, 2004). For journalists, spending months or even years reporting from abroad was more than just a professional

assignment—it was a distinctive cultural experience and oftentimes a path to professional ascension. Unlike traditional beat reporting, foreign correspondence demands not only thematic expertise, but also linguistic competence, cross-cultural fluency, and the ability to adapt to new environments. It offers a kind of journalistic life shaped by geographic mobility, institutional dislocation, and the emotional labor of negotiating between two worlds.

Yet since the turn of the millennium, international journalism and the news industry more broadly has undergone a profound transformation. The rise of the internet, mobile communication, and social media platforms has dramatically lowered the threshold for witnessing and disclosing news. This shift has prompted growing interest in forms such as citizen journalism and netizen reporting. At the same time, the commercial models that once sustained large media organizations have come under pressure. Many outlets have downsized significantly, replacing tenured foreign correspondents with freelancers, and reducing long-term overseas postings that were once seen as prestigious career milestones. The transformation is palpable in places like Bangkok, where the FCCT, once a symbol of cosmopolitan media life, has seen its membership and institutional relevance decline. Against this backdrop, China's rise, especially its economic rise, has enabled the state to invest in precisely those spaces where many Western outlets have withdrawn. This divergence is critical. At a time when BBC or CNN correspondents have become an endangered species in many parts of the world, Chinese journalists have become increasingly visible. This is not simply because of China's political ambition, but because it has the economic capacity and institutional will to step into the vacuum left by others. This shift has turned international journalism into an increasingly performative arena within global politics—where capital and voice are tightly intertwined. The more resources a country commands, the more journalists it can dispatch, and the louder its narratives become.

As a result, international reporting—already more entangled with national interest than domestic news ever was—has become a disordered field, where traditional norms of journalistic independence are constantly negotiated, and sometimes eclipsed, by geopolitical agendas. While this dissertation focuses on China, it is important to note that China is by no means alone in this trend. Other major powers—including Russia’s RT, Turkey’s TRT, and France 24—have also expanded their international broadcasting efforts in recent years, positioning media as a key tool in their geopolitical communication strategies (Repnikova, 2022a; Yesil, 2024).

If journalists working on domestic news are already grappling with economic precarity, algorithmic pressure, and political polarization, then those operating across national boundaries face these challenges even more acutely. Even in the case of Chinese journalists—a group often caricatured as obedient state mouthpieces—we see individuals constantly navigating tensions: between editorial values and institutional censorship; between national interest and universal ideals; and between personal aspiration and the demands of national image. These tensions make the entry into international journalism particularly demanding. As this study shows, it is often individuals from middle-class backgrounds with strong educational credentials and a degree of economic security who are best positioned to perceive the profession as worthwhile. They may not fundamentally reject China’s political system, but their cultural capital and international exposure allow them to retain a critical stance toward the status quo.

What we are witnessing is not the creation of a gated field, but a shift in how access to international journalism is structured and justified. Long defined by economic and cultural capital, participation in this space now appears increasingly shaped by national agendas and geopolitical ambitions (Waisbord, 2013; Seib, 2008; Yesil, 2024). Instead of primarily following commercial imperatives, many emerging media actors are entering the field through state-

supported initiatives that aim to project influence abroad. This development complicates older models of global journalism as a market-driven enterprise, and calls for closer attention to how national interests are embedded in the labor and logistics of international reporting. And while I have consistently emphasized the particularity of the Chinese case, it also offers a generalizable provocation: if we truly want to understand the future of international journalism (or journalism more broadly), we must pay attention to who still believes the work is worth doing while the entire industry undergoes profound transformation. This not only helps explain who stayed on amid China's global media expansion, but it also helps us ask: in a future defined by technological acceleration, who will stay? If the ideals, theories, and ethics of journalism continue to fade, while platforms, algorithms, and capital take over, who will still be doing the work of journalism? And what challenges does the emergence of these new actors pose to the relationship between journalism and democracy that we have long discussed? These are the questions that matters far beyond China: one that speaks to scholars and practitioners of journalism everywhere.

A Final Glance: What's Next?

In the final days before wrapping up my fieldwork and leaving Bangkok, I found myself, after a farewell meeting with one of my interlocutors, once again standing in front of the Maneeya Center. I hadn't planned to return, but there it was: the FCCT—the same place that had opened this dissertation as a symbol of a shifting media landscape and the undercurrents of a changing geopolitical order. What the FCCT has witnessed encapsulates the global reordering this project explores: one in which major powers contend less and less over the content of news itself, and increasingly over the discursive power and soft influence that news stories are made to project. China offers perhaps the most vivid case of this practice in action. But this, in turn, raises

a concern that is yet solved by studying China per se: is such a loosely structured, partially autonomous mechanism discovered in this study actually an efficient way for a state (like China) to exert soft power and influence abroad? Perhaps from the Chinese government's perspective, success may not (and never) hinge on foreign publics being truly persuaded. Rather, it may rest in maintaining a high-profile visible presence, producing controlled and censored content, and staffing overseas bureaus with minimally resistant, pragmatically aligned individuals—goals that are measurable, reportable, and politically legible. If such presence-based infrastructure already sustains symbolic participation in the global media order, the unpredictability of individual beliefs may be an acceptable cost. In this light, soft power functions less as an aspirational ideal than as a performative structure—where continuity, visibility, and bureaucratic fulfillment become ends in themselves. What the Chinese journalists' trajectories reveal, then, is not merely the soft edge of state power, but a deeper recalibration of how power is pursued, practiced, and evaluated in the shifting terrain of international communication.

All these reflections, again, deserve to be thrown back into the familiar but still unresolved question: is China an exceptional case, or does it illuminate unexpected commonalities in how power, media, and global presence are entangled? Future research might extend this analysis by examining how presence-based media infrastructures, rather than content strategies, are becoming normalized as acceptable forms of international influence. This calls for rethinking not only how we evaluate the “success” of soft power, but also what kinds of political imagination, bureaucratic rationality, and professional labor “sustain” that success in the first place.

Limitations

All research projects come with limitations, and this study is no exception. One major limitation of this dissertation lies in site selection. As argued, I chose Thailand as a telling case.

In many respects, Thailand represents a highly favorable context for examining China's soft power projection: China has the intention and capacity to expand its influence, and Thailand has generally shown a receptive attitude. However, this choice also limits the analytical scope. Using Thailand as the field site inevitably overlooks other geopolitical contexts where China's global influence is met with hesitation, contradiction, or resistance. Some countries exhibit a pattern of wavering or inconsistent administrative responses to China's growing presence. For instance, Malaysia, which actively participates in the Belt and Road Initiative but has also urged Chinese companies not to use Malaysia as a workaround to avoid U.S. tariffs. Others, particularly those in the Western democratic bloc led by the United States, have maintained a more overtly resistant stance. In early 2020, the Trump administration designated several Chinese media organizations as "foreign missions" and imposed personnel caps on Chinese journalists, leading to the abrupt departure of dozens of reporters. In fact, among the Thailand-based journalists I interviewed, several had previously been stationed in the United States. Due to those policy changes, some were forced to evacuate on extremely short notice, navigating international travel restrictions during the early stages of the pandemic. These cases suggest that journalists operating in more hostile or ambivalent foreign environments may develop different understandings of alignment, institutional trust, and professional worth—diverging in meaningful ways from the dynamics I observed in the Thai context. This dissertation does not fully account for those dimensions.

A second limitation stems from the duration of my fieldwork, which may not have been sufficiently extensive. Although I conducted three months of fieldwork in Bangkok, this period remains relatively brief by traditional ethnographic standards. While the timeframe was adequate for meeting and engaging with the majority of Chinese journalists in Thailand, it falls short from an ethnographic strategy perspective. A few journalists remained inaccessible despite repeated

attempts to establish contact. These were primarily senior personnel—heads of Bangkok bureaus or offices—some of whom were rumored to have stayed in Thailand beyond the widely reported “five-year limit” (*wunian renqi*) for foreign-stationed journalists. Their tenure, administrative rank, and accumulated capital likely differ from those of younger or mid-career journalists. Though few in number, these individuals might have offered perspectives unavailable from others—whether through stronger institutional commitment, longer organizational memory, or sharper critiques of evolving media management strategies. This represents a limitation of the study, and reflects a common challenge faced by solo social researchers working on politically sensitive topics.

The third limitation of this study involves challenges in maintaining a consistent interview strategy. I employed different interview approaches with various respondents based on circumstances and personal judgment. Some interviews followed a semi-structured format completed in a single session, while others took the form of looser, episodic conversations spread across multiple encounters. This inconsistency limited my ability to construct journalist vignettes with uniform dimensions. For example, information typically valued in sociological inquiry—such as parental occupations (as indicators of habitus in the sociological sense) or monthly income (as barometers of journalists’ economic status)—was not systematically collected from all participants. In retrospect, a more standardized data collection strategy might have enhanced the depth of sociological analysis. Yet in politically sensitive fieldwork contexts, especially when conducted solo, rapport-building often comes at the cost of full consistency. This trade-off was a necessary one, but it unfortunately represents a data-wise limitation of the study.

A final limitation lies not in what was asked or accessed, but in what may remain unsaid. Given the political sensitivity of the topic and the nature of state-affiliated media work, certain

aspects of institutional life or personal belief, particularly those touching on ideological compliance, long-term disillusionment, or exit strategies, may have been difficult for participants to express, even under conditions of trust. This is not a reflection of individual unwillingness, but of the structural conditions of speech that shape what can be articulated in politically bounded fieldwork. The dissertation captures what is visible and sayable, but may not access the deeper silences that also shape how soft power is lived—a limitation common to interview-based studies of motivation, where structural pressures constrain what can be reported as much as memory or honesty (Small & Cook, 2021).

Appendix A: Methodological Notes and Reflections

This appendix documents and demonstrates my overall multi-method approach, including how I gained access to the field and established relationships with journalist interlocutors, how I managed my positionality and navigated power dynamics as a researcher and ethnographer, how I employed a combination of traditional ethnographic practices alongside digital methods to gather data, how I addressed ethical issues and confidentiality concerns in my writing, and my reflexive analysis regarding my role as a researcher throughout the process.

Entry

My connection to the field—the community of Chinese media professionals stationed in Thailand—originated before my doctoral studies began. In 2015, I joined a Chinese state media outlet focused on international news reporting, where I worked on ASEAN-related projects and developed relationships with media professionals, press officials, and think tank scholars from various Southeast Asian countries, including Thailand. My identity as a “former Chinese journalist” and my connections with China’s “waixuan circle” (foreign-aimed journalism) provided two advantages for entering the field. First, I maintained good personal relationships with a small portion of Thailand-based correspondents, some of whom served as informal field guides and helped me navigate this professional community. After all, within China’s official media circles, those closely associated with ASEAN form a relatively identifiable community that, despite some fluidity, maintains direct or indirect connections. Second, as a journalist, I had previously engaged with staff from the Thai-Chinese Strategic Research Center at the National Research Council of Thailand (NRCT). I proactively applied to become a visiting scholar at this center and successfully negotiated a short-term affiliation in 2022 while drafting the prospectus

of this dissertation. These long-maintained connections outside academia provided the fundamental assurance for smooth entry into the field in early 2023.

It's worth noting that my research focused on professionally connected, dispersed, and mobile "cultural producers" in the field (Bourdieu, 1996b). These journalists neither lived/worked together in a geographical sense nor had everyday gathering rituals, making standard random sampling methods impractical. Instead, gaining access required drawing on different aspects of my identity—as a doctoral student, a former journalist, and a visiting scholar—to establish credibility and build trust. I strategically pluralized my point of entry (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019), sometimes relying on introductions from acquaintances, sometimes initiating spontaneous self-introductions at events, sometimes reaching out via formal email requests, and occasionally making connections through unexpected social encounters. For example, while visiting an anthropology professor at a university in northern Thailand, I discovered that her student happened to be friends with a Chinese journalist working in Bangkok, which ultimately led to an introduction. This multi-pronged approach allowed me to engage with journalists from a variety of perspectives and postures, avoiding the limitation of relying on a single entry point or interacting with each interlocutor in the same manner. By varying my points of entry and modes of engagement, I mitigated the risk of being uniformly perceived in ways that might trigger collective resistance or exclusion among this professional community, thus gaining access to more authentic and diverse perspectives (Goffman, 1989; Weiss, 1994).

Positionality

For the group I studied, my positionality was multifaceted. I am a male, early 30, alumnus of an elite journalism school in China, former journalist with five years of experience working

for a state media in China's capital, a former journalist who spent many years focusing on new media reporting for ASEAN countries, a current doctoral student at an American university, and a researcher broadly focused on China-Southeast Asia relations. My objective identity and background sometimes served as a passport when negotiating entrance and establishing rapport and trust. For instance, in many moments, when I mentioned my media experience in Beijing, some journalists would display a "you-are-one-of-us" attitude. In these cases, they willingly discussed the culture and commonalities of journalism circle with candor, often using phrases like "as you know" to talk about topics we both understood, such as declining media benefits despite increasing workloads, restrictions on story selection, self-censorship, and so on. This identity provided me with many advantages in collecting the genuine thoughts and stories of foreign correspondents. Moreover, the journalism school where I earned my master's degree maintains an extremely powerful alumni network throughout China's media industry. My former cohorts from both undergraduate and graduate studies now work across virtually all major state-owned media organizations in China, significantly expanding my social connections. For many Thailand-based journalists, I discovered we could identify mutual friends or former classmates with just one or two degrees of separation.

Insider advantage aside, I also recognized that my journalism experience could be a disadvantage to my research. When interviewees perceived me as one of them, they sometimes used professional shorthand or made assumptions about shared knowledge, saying things like "you must know how it is" without elaborating on important details. To overcome this limitation, I deliberately adopted a stance of strategic naivety during interviews, asking follow-up questions even about seemingly obvious matters and requesting clarification on industry jargon or common practices. I would say "That's similar to my experience, but I'm curious how this works

specifically in your experience,” or “I am not sure if my experience from a few years ago can still speak to yours. What exactly do you mean?” This approach helped ensure interviewees articulated their experiences completely rather than assuming shared understanding (Weiss, 1994). Additionally, I periodically reviewed my interview transcripts to identify instances where I might have failed to probe deeper, and followed up with my interlocutors when necessary and possible to fill these gaps while I was in the field.

However, at times, the very fact that I left Chinese media (and China) to study at an American university became a subtle “red flag.” After years of US-China trade wars, disputes over the origins of COVID-19, and international media narratives about US-China decoupling, the “American” label on my back had become an unspoken danger signal (Wong, 2024). It sometimes seemed as if my arrival was perceived as an attempt to steal “internal secrets”—especially since my fieldwork required extensive interviews, conversations, and as much contact with journalists as possible. A journalist with whom I had a personal relationship, upon learning of my fieldwork plans in Thailand, proactively mentioned that while he would certainly do his best to introduce me to more people, “whether some journalists would be willing to discuss work matters with you is indeed quite uncertain.” Indeed, this proved to be true. For example, in April 2023, I was introduced to a Thailand-based senior journalist at a press conference in Bangkok through this old acquaintance. When the senior journalist learned I was “from the University of Washington in the United States” and “wanted to interview him,” his expression revealed a noticeable confusion and reluctance. He politely suggested that he “might not have much experience to share” and, if interviewed, “would prefer to keep it as brief as possible.” After we exchanged WeChat contacts, he never replied to any of my messages. Later, I found his social media profile, where he had documented his experience of having his U.S. journalist visa

revoked at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic while stationed in Washington D.C., forcing his abrupt departure from the country. While I cannot speculate on the extent to which this personal history, his institutional rank, or strong ideological stance contributed to his reluctance, it does highlight how certain perspectives—particularly from those with sensitive professional or political backgrounds—could be difficult to access in my research.

Beyond my China-related identity, my position as a visiting scholar at the National Research Council of Thailand (NRCT) provided significant advantages when connecting with Thai interlocutors, particularly experts and scholars. For instance, when contacting Thai business chambers or tourism authorities, I was respectfully addressed as “Dr. Wang” from NRCT and University of Washington—clearly, my researcher identity conferred certain privileges that garnered support. In my experience, while Thai government departments and officials weren’t particularly quick in their communications (it takes weeks for them to get back to me), their respect for and support of academic research was evident.

While my professional background and long-term engagement with Chinese journalists granted me valuable access, I remained critically aware of the need to maintain analytical independence (Becker, 1967; Bourgois, 1995). To mitigate the risk of over-identification, I adopted a critical yet receptive stance toward the narratives I collected, ensuring that I engaged with them analytically rather than uncritically accepting them. In addition to speaking with Chinese journalists, I also consulted Thai journalists, think tank experts, and scholars to understand how China’s media presence in Thailand was perceived beyond my primary interlocutors, allowing me to maintain a relatively independent and balanced scholarly perspective. Furthermore, I relied on multiple sources of verification beyond interviews (Small & Cook, 2021). For instance, when a journalist described a particular news report as an example of

humanistic storytelling, I later reviewed the article independently to assess whether it conveyed substantive depth or was shaped by bureaucratic conventions. Recognizing that rapport-building does not preclude critical inquiry, I approached my findings with contextual sensitivity while maintaining a critical lens (Burawoy, 1998).

Data Collection Strategies

The most extensively used data collection method in my fieldwork was conducting one-on-one in-depth interviews directly with Chinese journalists based in Thailand. Since my research questions involved journalists' subjective intentionality and exclusive details of past events or experiences (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Weiss, 1994), direct in-depth interviews were a common practice in journalism research (Hannerz, 2004; Nyíri, 2017; Polumbaum, 2008; Repnikova, 2017). Interviews I conducted for this project primarily took two forms. One was standard semi-structured interviews completed in a single session, where I engaged with journalists based on my interview protocol (see Appendix D). Most of these were conducted in person, with a small number done as online remote interviews. The other format was what could be called ethnographic interviews with certain journalists, completed across multiple sessions (Spradley, 1979). This approach was necessitated either by journalists' time constraints or the nature of our relationship—sometimes journalists preferred to combine casual conversation with formal interviewing, making it impractical to cover all questions in a single meeting. In these cases, I would meet with them multiple times within their comfort zone, dedicating a portion of each meeting to discussing one or a few main topics in the protocol (for example, focusing solely on “job attractions”).

Beyond interviews, I also employed participant observation, particularly for the exploration in Chapter 2 regarding journalists' daily work. I negotiated opportunities to observe

authentic scenarios of journalists' daily activities in Thailand. These included attending news conferences and media forums where most Thailand-based media sent representatives, participating in pre-interview preparations by offering assistance with recording and photography, or engaging in social media account operations by providing technical guidance to certain journalists. This participatory observation method provided detailed insights into journalists' everyday work through direct involvement in their daily activities (Deacon et al., 2021). It revealed what people actually do rather than what they claim to do, thus serving as strong supporting evidence for the interview data (Jerolmack & Khan, 2014).

Of course, journalists' stories could also be verified through para-journalists or non-Chinese journalists—those who often and closely associate with these media expats (Schudson, 2011). Therefore, during my time in Thailand, beyond interviewing and engaging with journalists, I visited numerous institutions and broadly contacted organizations and individuals who might interact with Chinese journalists. These included the National Research Council of Thailand (NRCT) where I was affiliated, the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT), journalists' associations or clubs, professors and scholars from various Thai universities, staff from several Confucius Institutes and Chinese Cultural Centers in Thailand, journalists from Thai media outlets, Chinese Chambers of Commerce or cultural associations in Thailand, and public relations personnel from Chinese companies operating in Thailand. Through formal and informal interactions with these people and institutions, I gathered additional details and side accounts about how Chinese journalists work and live.

Beyond interviewing Chinese journalists working in Thailand, my data collection also extended to interviews with four Thai nationals employed by Chinese media organizations in Thailand; six executives or journalists from Chinese media headquarters who, while not directly

stationed in Thailand, maintained professional connections with Thailand-based journalists; four Thai journalists working for Thai media outlets; and 16 informants from Thai government departments, civil society organizations, think tanks, universities, and other institutions who possessed relevant expertise or insider knowledge. This multi-perspective approach provided a rich contextual understanding of Chinese journalists' professional environment in Thailand.

Data Analysis Strategies

Building on interviews, observations, and digital traces (including social media posts and published articles), I constructed 25 individualized vignettes of Chinese journalists affiliated with Chinese outlets in Thailand, spanning both my fieldwork period and the prior decade (see *Appendix A*). I employed an iterative qualitative coding process alongside basic categorical quantification to identify patterns across demographic and professional attributes. The following classifications were used in structuring the dataset:

Gender: I categorized journalists as Male (60%) or Female (40%) in this dissertation.

Age: To maintain privacy while capturing generational distinctions, I used decade-based brackets: 20+ (24%), 30+ (44%), 40+ (12%), 50+ (12%), and 60+ (8%).

Career Seniority: Defined by years of experience at the time of their first Thailand posting. Journalists with less than five years of experience or intern status were classified as Junior (32%), those with over 20 years as Senior (24%), and the remainder as Mid-career (44%).

Language Skills: I distinguished between those who spoke Thai fluently (Fluent, 24%) and those who did not (N, 76%).

Education: Given that all journalists in my sample had strong undergraduate backgrounds, I categorized education into three groups: those who attended top-tier Chinese journalism

schools (J School, 44%), those with other academic backgrounds (Other, 44%), and those with international education experience (International, 12%).

Office Size: I classified media outlets into Large (56%) and Small (44%) offices based on their staffing scale. In this context, large offices included major Chinese central media outlets such as People’s Daily, Xinhua, and CMG/CGTN, which typically employ five or more staff in Thailand, while all other outlets were classified as small.

Social Connection: Journalists whose professional ties extended beyond standard news sources—such as those with direct personal relationships in Thailand’s political, business, or cultural spheres—were classified as having High Connection (24%), while the rest were categorized as Low Connection (76%).

The Fluid “There”

The field of my dissertation differs from traditional single-newsroom studies or comparative studies across different newsrooms (Deacon et al., 2021). Given the relatively small size of most Chinese broadcaster offices and outlets in Thailand (Loomis & Holz, 2020), and considering that Chinese outlets typically function collectively to influence Thailand’s information environment (Kurlantzick, 2023), I needed to include journalists from as many institutions as possible. Furthermore, as previous research on international correspondents indicates (Nyíri, 2017; Zeng, 2019; S. I. Zhang, 2013), this type of media work is inherently multifaceted and less structured. These journalists' work rarely remains confined to offices or desks. Instead, they frequently visit various sites, conferences, press releases, shows, and other locations to gather news and cover significant events. These multisite working conditions challenge the traditional anthropological understanding of “being there”—where an ethnographer simply “travel[s] to a site, observe[s] interactions, talk[s] to people, and take[s] notes” (Small,

2022, p. 478). My fieldwork required a multi-site, patchwork approach to the concept of “there” (Günel et al., 2020; Hannerz, 2003), as I needed to engage with numerous loosely connected locations.

Maintaining a fluid, mobile perspective on the concept of “there,” during my fieldwork, I constantly traveled to important sites and events where Chinese journalists were present. After completing my fieldwork in Bangkok, I continued interviewing several journalists in Beijing who had previously worked in Thailand and later returned to China. I also maintained remote contact with various journalists to conduct follow-up interviews until December 2023. These patchwork sites provided crucial out-of-newsroom settings that illuminated the nature of expatriate journalists’ work in a foreign country.

Moreover, “there” exists both in physical reality and in digital spaces in my fieldwork. Building on traditional ethnographic methods, I also employed digital ethnography approaches to collect data, verify stories, and deepen my understanding of each journalist. This decision was partly influenced by conducting fieldwork during the tail end of the COVID-19 pandemic when international travel was slowly resuming, and also partly by how developments in journalism technology and social media have redefined the concept of space for journalists and cultural producers more broadly (Hendrickx & Picone, 2022). Foreign correspondents, beyond their daily work, often actively craft their digital presence through vlogs or blogs. As Small (2022) notes, these developments have prompted a re-evaluation of our understanding of space. Throughout my fieldwork, I actively followed these journalists’ public social media accounts and published articles, using these digital platforms to gain additional insights and develop more complete vignettes of their professional lives.

Research Ethics

To ensure ethical research practices, this dissertation employs comprehensive identity protection measures for all participants. Given that many subjects are journalists employed by Chinese state media organizations operating in Thailand, their professional vulnerability demands careful consideration.

First, I employ cultural pseudonyms for all participants rather than their real names. These pseudonyms maintain cultural authenticity while completely obscuring individual identities. Second, I deliberately avoid specifying institutional affiliations, particularly when identifying a specific media outlet might implicitly reveal a journalist's identity—especially in cases where only one person staffs a particular station in Thailand. While some scholars like Nyíri (2017) acknowledge the public nature of Chinese media presence in Thailand (including outlets like Xinhua, CGTN, and others), I prioritize participant protection over descriptive precision. Instead of naming specific institutions, I use generic descriptors such as “central state media outlet” or “Chinese broadcaster” when institutional context is necessary. This approach balances ethical considerations with analytical rigor, ensuring that the structural role of different media institutions remains clear without compromising participant confidentiality.

Furthermore, for events, locations, or temporal markers that might make stories easily identifiable, I have altered specific details while preserving the essential analytical value of these accounts. For instance, I might change the timing of an event, substitute comparable locations, or adjust peripheral details of a scenario without compromising the underlying social dynamics being analyzed (Fine, 1993; Nesper, 2000). These modifications serve to protect participants while maintaining analytical integrity. These identity protection measures reflect anthropological best practices for studying vulnerable professionals whose candid reflections might otherwise place them at professional risk (Saunders et al., 2015).

Details of the recruitment letter that was applied in certain cases, the standard interview protocol that guided most of my interviews (except for a few that were either non-linear or scattered across multiple sessions), as well as information about Chinese media offices in Thailand can be found in *Appendices C*, and *D*.

Appendix B: Information about Chinese Media Branches in Thailand

<i>Media Organization</i>	<i>Office Size</i>	<i>Major Businesses and Information</i>
State Media		
China Media Group, CMG 总台	5~8	CMG's Bangkok station is the result of a merge between the former CCTV Bangkok Station (established in 1998) and CRI Bangkok station (established in 2011). Journalists from this station report on news from Thailand, Laos, as well as South Asian countries such as India and Sri Lanka. Reporting encompasses TV (CCTV), radio (CRI and CNR), websites (CGTN), news apps, as well social media portals, with coverage provided in Thai, English, and Chinese. Additionally, it co-produces weekly news programs with Thailand national media.
People's Daily 《人民日报》	5~6	The <i>People's Daily</i> Bangkok station, also known as the Asia-Pacific Center Branch for the organization, covers news from Thailand and other Southeast Asian nations such as Laos, Cambodia, and Malaysia. Reporting includes newspapers (<i>People's Daily</i> , <i>Global Times</i>), magazines, websites (people.com.cn), news apps, and social media portals. Coverage is provided in both Chinese and Thai languages.
Xinhua News Agency 新华社	10+	Xinhua's Bangkok station primarily covers news in Thailand. It offers news services and news photography services internationally. Journalists also report for website (xinhuthai.com), news apps, and social media portals. The coverage includes reporting in both Chinese and Thai languages.
China News Service 中新社	2	The CNS Bangkok station provides news services primarily for Chinese diasporic worldwide, along with news reports on Thailand for the website (chinanews.com.cn) and social media portals. The reporting is conducted mainly in Chinese.

China Daily 《中国日报》	1	<i>China Daily's</i> Bangkok station reopened in late 2022 after a decade-long hiatus. It offers news reports on Thailand and neighboring countries for the newspaper (<i>China Daily</i>) and social media portals. Reporting is conducted in both English and Chinese.
Guangming Daily 《光明日报》	1	<i>Guangming Daily's</i> Bangkok office operates as a typical single-journalist station. It provides news reports for the newspaper (<i>Guangming Daily</i>) and social media portals, with reporting conducted in Chinese.
China International Communication Group (CICG) 中国外文局 亚太中心	2	CICG's Bangkok station was established in 2017. Journalists provide news reports for the magazine (<i>China Report ASEAN</i>), website (china.org.cn), and social media portals. Reporting is conducted in both Thai and Chinese.
China International Journalism MA Oversea Internship Program “国新”硕士项目	8	Started in 2012, this is an annual internship program funded by the China Scholarship Council. Each year, it supports a selected cohort of students from the “MA in International Journalism” programs offered by Tsinghua University, Renmin University of China, Communication University of China, and Beijing Foreign Studies University. The selected students typically receive funding for a 6-month period and are offered internship positions in multiple overseas Chinese media offices across Asia, Europe, and South America.
Provincial Media		
Yunnan TV 云南电视台	1 (<i>closed in 2020</i>)	Yunnan TV (now Yunnan Media Group)'s Bangkok station was established in 2009, marking the first instance of a provincial-level media setting up its station in Thailand. The single-journalist station provides news reports on Thailand and the wider Southeast Asia region for Yunnan TV. It has been temporally closed since 2020.
HK Media		

Phoenix TV 凤凰卫视	2~3	The Hong Kong media branch provides news reports on Thailand for Phoenix TV, website (ifeng.com) and social media portals. Reporting is conducted in Chinese.
Thai-Chinese Joint Venture Media		
Thai ASEAN Panorama (TAP) 《中国东盟博览》	10+	TAP was established in 2016, jointly funded by TCITV (Thailand) and China ASEAN Panorama (Guangxi, China). Journalists provided news reports for the magazine (<i>TAP Magazine</i>) until 2019, and exclusively for social media portals after the news digitalization. The majority of employees are locally hired Thai, and reporting is conducted in Thai.
Private-owned Chinese Media		
ThaiWind 《泰国风》	3~5	<i>ThaiWind Magazine</i> is a privately owned magazine founded in 1996. Journalists provide news reports for both the magazine and social media portals. The magazine's headquarters are located in Bangkok, Thailand, with offices in Guangdong and Guizhou in China, and reporting is conducted in Chinese.

Table 1: Information of Chinese media branches in Thailand⁴

⁴ The information is gathered from both open records and the oral accounts I collected during fieldwork in 2023. Sometimes station sizes vary due to turnover among journalists.

Appendix C: Recruitment Letter

Dear [interviewee name],

I am writing to ask for your help to participate in my research. The prospective study aims at better understanding how journalists work in a Sino-Thai bilateral landscape.

Within the next few days, I will be contacting you via phone/WeChat/Email to ask if you'll agree to be interviewed for my study. The interview will ask for details about your personal trajectory, professional ideals, proudest work, and perceptions of your work and your role as an international journalist in Thailand. Your confidential comments will be combined with those of other journalists in order to understand the factors shaping individuals' reasons for working in oversea broadcasting offices of China.

The project can only be successful with the help of people like you. I hope you'll say "yes" when I contact you to set up a time and date for an interview. Please feel free to contact me (wanghai@uw.edu) if you have any questions in the meantime.

Sincerely,

Hai Wang
Ph.D. Candidate
Department of Communication
University of Washington

尊敬的 xxx:

您好！来函诚邀您参与本人的传播学博士论文项目，该项目旨在深入对中国驻泰国记者如何完成对外报道、新闻采写以及讲好中国故事等多重任务，如何理解驻外记者的工作与建构中泰关系的宏观议题之间的联系。

接下来，我将通过电话（或微信等其他方式）与您沟通您是否愿意接受访谈并参与我的这项研究。访谈将聚焦于您的职业生涯、基本工作内容、对工作的认识、对海外社交媒体尤其是海外社交媒体上的受众的认识。您的身份信息将得到保护，您的访谈将仅仅用于研究。我的最终报告将不会使用任何您的身份信息（包含姓名、机构名称等敏感信息均会隐去）。

您的参与对我们至关重要，我们倍感珍惜，诚邀您参与并支持此项研究。如有问题欢迎垂询(wanghai@uw.edu)。

诚挚问候，

王海
华盛顿大学传播学系博士候选人

Appendix D: Interview Protocol

Date of Interview: _____ Location: _____
Start Time: _____ Time Completed: _____

Introduction and Purpose of Interview

I am conducting this interview as a part of a communication research study at the University of Washington. I am interested in learning more about the experiences you have had being an international journalist in Thailand. Would you mind if I audio-recorded this interview and took brief notes?

[GET VERBAL ASSENT/CONSENT HERE]

Okay, the recording starts now. If you wish me to stop recording at any time, please let me know and I will stop the audio recording.

Remember that you do not have to answer any question(s) that you are not comfortable answering, and you can stop this interview at any time if you so choose. It's also okay if you do not understand a question, want us to repeat or rephrase a question, or do not want to answer a question. Also, please know that all information shared in this interview is confidential and cannot be traced back to you. After the interview is recorded it will be transcribed and your information will not be attached to the recording or the transcript in any way. Your name will not appear in the data, nor will the information of your institution or any other real names appear within your institution.

I also want to take this time to see if you have any questions. Do you have any questions about the qualifying survey or the interview process?

Interview questions

Part One: Job attraction

- Can you talk a bit about yourself—What is it that gets you into journalism?
- What is your career trajectory thus far be like?
- How long have you been working in Thailand?
- Why did you choose to come to work in Thailand?
- What was the initial attraction of this job? What do you feel most excited about?

Probes

- Preparation or training in terms of language, journalistic skills, etc.
- Differences between international journalists and domestic journalists.
- Feelings about working and living in Thailand.
- Background: parents' occupations, etc.

Part Two: Work conditions

- Can you talk about your current work—What is your position in the outlet? What do you generally do?
- Can you walk me through the most recent day at work—What did you do that day?
- What happened/was discussed during your most recent editorial meeting?
- What's the most conversation with your editor/reporter about?

- Let's talk about how you find news—what is your most recent journalistic work? How did you decide on the topic?
- What's the most enjoyable part of your job? Most stressful part?

Probes

- About desk-based work vs. going out for the reporting?
- Target audience
- About digital work
- Relationship with para-journalists (institutions, embassies, PR people, etc.)

Part Three: Proudest work

- What's the thing that you're most proud of having done this job?
- What are the criteria that you immediately think of when identifying your proudest work?
- What other people that you really admire in your realm? Why?
- Which part of your job could possibly make you want to do it longer?
- Which journalistic example or past work that you've done that you dislike the most?
- What's the least exciting/ most disappointing part of your job? Why so?
- Which part of your job could possibly make you want to change to another job/position?

Probes:

- Having more viewers/ metrics data
- High engagements on FB/Twitter/etc.
- Favorite type of journalism (investigative journalism/cultural journalism/war journalism)
- Do you enjoy a free editorial culture as a journalist (having the freedom to select certain topics you like to report, etc.)
- How to align with bilateral ties (etc. how do you see yourself and your job making Thais and Chinese understand each other)

Close up

- Do you have any questions or anything you would love to talk about before we finish this interview?
- OK, now I will stop recording.

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