

2016

Contrasting American and Chinese exceptionalism : Representations of political corruption

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Rice, Tatiana, "Contrasting American and Chinese exceptionalism : Representations of political corruption" (2016). *Honors Program Theses*. 246.

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CONTRASTING AMERICAN AND CHINESE EXCEPTIONALISM: REPRESENTATIONS
OF POLITICAL CORRUPTION

A Thesis Submitted
In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Designation
University Honors

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May 2016

This Study by: Tatiana Rice

Entitled: Contrasting American and Chinese Exceptionalism: Representations of Political Corruption

has been approved as meeting the thesis or project requirement for the Designation
University Honors

Date

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ABSTRACT

This thesis compares media portrayals of political corruption in the United States of America versus the People's Republic of China. Political corruption is considerably understudied and poses a serious threat to the social, political, and economic wellbeing of all nations. By studying each country's corresponding media portrayals, this thesis was able to identify how seemingly opposing styles of government and culture framed political corruption in their own nation and abroad. In examining each country's national newspapers, this study resulted in two major findings: 1) each country had differing ideas of corruption; and 2) these portrayals played a role in framing each country's corresponding values and political agenda.

Introduction

Corruption has been identified as a one of society's greatest diseases and obstacles to social, political, and economic development (Amundson 1999, 1; Shan, Chan, Le, Xia, & Hu 2015, 1). According to Chr. Michelson Institute of Development Studies and Human Rights, "corruption is a disease, a cancer that eats into the cultural, political, and economic fabric of society, and destroys the functioning vital organs" (Amundson 1999, 1). *Transparency International* further elaborates the cost of corruption on society by dividing the costs into four main categories: political, economic, social, and environmental (*Transparency.org*). Corruption can have a large impact on a society because it erodes the people's trust in their system, institutions, and leadership as a whole (*Transparency.org*). Considering that corruption is often viewed as an injustice by the elites against the masses, it is no surprise that corruption is a strenuous issue for developing societies and newly democratized countries (Canache & Allison 2005, 92; Shan, Chan, Le, Xia, & Hu 2015, 05015001-1). In relation to economics, corruption "depletes national wealth" by often pocketing national resources and hindering or distorting a fair market (Chan, Le, Xia, & Hu 2015, *Transparency.org*). Environmentally, the lack of corruption enforcement and regulation leads to the exploitation of a nation's environment and destruction of entire ecosystems (*Transparency.org*). Lastly and most importantly to this thesis, in relation to politics, corruption can often undermine a country's democracy and rule of law, where these systems of governance lose their legitimacy when they are misused (*Transparency.org*). Philosophers Jürgen Habermas and Max

Weber explained that when a government experiences a “legitimation crisis”, a decline in the confidence of administrative functions, institutions, or leadership, an entire breakdown of the current system can occur since the authority of the government often derives from the will of the people (Rigby, 1982). Furthermore, political corruption has detrimental effects because of politicians’ key role in a government’s productivity, efficiency, and stability (Canache & Allison 2005, 91). Canache and Allison state that political corruption distorts governmental procedures and policies “because policies result not from an open clash of ideas in the marketplace, but instead back-alley deals” (2005, 91). These consequences make studying corruption so vital in maintaining stable, efficient, and fair societies.

Corruption is found in almost every society, however, research on corruption is limited largely due to differing ideas and definitions of what corruption is. Vague concepts of corruption can range anywhere from offering private money to certain bureaucrats and government officials to large-scale abuses of power such as dictatorship (Amundson 1999, 1). Therefore, based upon the problem of differing ideas of corruption, the purpose of this thesis is to analyze these differing perspectives of corruption through opposing country’s media portrayals of such crimes.

The analysis of this thesis research is twofold. First, this thesis identifies the differing media portrayals of political corruption in the United States and China. As discussed earlier, the United States and China are important countries to study because of their differing styles of government, society, and ideas of corruption. China was specifically chosen because of its’ long-standing communist beliefs, its’

current significant campaign against corruption, and its' standing as a global superpower. A content analysis addressed these portrayals by examining national newspapers covering issues of political corruption, whether within the nation or abroad. Based upon that data, the role of such representations in the nation's political agenda could be analyzed. Themes drawn from the research identifies the role of political corruption representations in the social, political, and economic climate of the society. However, this thesis will first explicitly address prior research and literature regarding political corruption in the two countries and the role of the media in representing corruption.

Literature Review

This thesis researched the People's Republic of China and the United States because not only are both global superpowers, but also because they are so different in terms of the way each society functions. Currently, there stands no existing literature that contrasts corruption between the United States and China, which is what makes this thesis so significant. These two superpowers were also important to study because of their different ideas of corruption. Dale Gertsenlager explains that according the Chinese rule of law, the United States has a "legally sanctioned system of corruption" (2013, p.2). "US politicians received untold millions legally funneled to them through political action committees (PACs), which assures that Congress vote the way they want" (Gertsenlager 2013, p.2). On the other hand, China does not have this system and specifically punishes those who engage in this type of behavior, which may be a reason they are seemingly more corrupt for acts

that parallel those done in the United States (Gertsenlager, 2013). This large discrepancy in typifying corruption cross-culturally is a reason why US-China political corruption research needs to be done. Specifically, Lancaster and Montinola (1997) claim, “The lack of cross-national empirical studies prevents a more complete understanding of general causes of political corruption.” (p185). From this thesis, social scientists can begin to understand the role media plays in political corruption in varying societies and governments.

Political Corruption in the United States versus the People's Republic of China

The sole mechanism for gauging political corruption cross-culturally is through *Transparency International's* (TI) Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI). The CPI constructs annual surveys that rank countries “by their perceived level of corruption, as assessed by expert assessment and opinion surveys” (*Transparency.org*). These assessments are based upon a general definition of corruption that characterizes corruption as “the misuse of public power for private benefit” (*Transparency.org*). The CPI, which holds the least corrupt countries as #1, has ranked the United States consistently in the top twenty for the past five years and ranked China 75th or lower (*Corruption Perceptions Index, 2010-2015*). It is also important to note that the CPI has also downgraded China’s ranking since the regime change to President Xi Jinping from #78 to #100 (*Corruption Perceptions Index, 2010-2015*). This is important to note because Xi has made a massive effort in anti-corruption efforts since he took office in 2012, which potentially points to a discrepancy in ideas of corruption (Leung, 2015; Welsh, 2015).

In 2012, when President Xi took office, he declared his war against corruption in China and listed corruption as an existential threat to the nation: “Endemic corruption could lead to “the collapse of the [Chinese Communist] Party and the downfall of the state” (Leung 2015, p.1). Statistics exhibit Xi’s commitment, where over 270,000 officials have been punished for corrupt behavior, some even sentenced to death (Leung, 2015). The purpose of such measures by Xi is to intimidate in order to send a “chill” throughout the entire political system and country (Welsh, 2015). Such efforts in combatting political corruption have lead to more positive images of the government by Chinese citizens (Leung, 2015; Welsh, 2015). Although general public perceptions and statistics have been positive regarding Xi’s anti-corruption efforts, TI continues to score China harshly on the CPI (Leung, 2015). Some of this discrepancy may be due to the fact that there are highly limited restrictions upon foreign media in their own investigations on the country’s corruption (Leung, 2015). Some of this discrepancy may also have to do with how widespread the culture of corruption is in China, despite Xi’s efforts.

However, it should not be assumed that China is inherently more corrupt. As explained earlier, Gertsenlager theorizes that US has lower levels of corruption in comparison to China because the US has a legal system of corruption (2013). “US politicians receive untold millions funneled to them through political action committees (PACs) in order to assure Congress votes the way they want” (Gertsenlager 2013, p.2). Anyone that paralleled these actions in China would be investigated and prosecuted for corruption, which could explain the large discrepancy in corruption rates (Gertsenlager, 2013). Specifically, TI’s corruption

rates are based off a broad definition of corruption, where the term “misuse” may be interpreted differently in differing cultures (Lancaster & Montinola 1997, 189). Lancaster and Montinola further express the dilemma of studying corruption in western and non-western nations:

“When studying non-Western countries--The Western observer is faced with an uncomfortable choice. He can adhere to the Western definition, in which case he lays himself open to the charge of being censorious...On the other hand, he may face up to the fact that corruption, if it requires moral censure, is culturally conditioned... [and] it may be necessary then to assert in the same breath that an official accepts gratuities but is not corrupt” (1997, 189).

Furthermore, Gertsenlager infers that US criticisms of Chinese corruption are simply a diversion from domestic corruption (2013).

On the other hand, 60% of American citizens believe that corruption is an issue and that it is increasing in the United States (Bidwell, 2013). Further, over three-quarters of the American population view that political parties as the most corrupt element in the American system, ahead of the legislative branch, police, and military (Bidwell, 2013). However, not only does TI rank the United States in the top twenty for lowest corruption rates, but statistically corruption has been decreasing in the United States for the past 150 years (Cordis & Milyo, 2016; *Transparency Index*). Research demonstrates that corruption in the United States is the lowest it has ever been in history (Cordis & Milyo, 2013). Cordis & Milyo (2013) explain that “headline-grabbing stories about high-ranking elected officials” are sexy for the American media, but “are not representative of the vast majority of official corruption cases.”

The Role of Media

The role that the media plays in studying corruption is vital to this thesis and a starting point for determining how to combat political corruption overall. Canache and Allison (2005) explain that the media can play a major role in combatting political corruption because the opinion of the masses are crucial in democratic nations and is often influenced by the media. Citizens in democratic nations are able to punish unethical and corrupt behavior at the ballot box, demand impeachment, and protest (Canache & Allison, 2005). Again, this accountability relies heavily upon the media and whether citizens recognize when corruption exists and is occurring (Canache & Allison, 2005).

Not only can the media be helpful for citizens, but the media can also be a critical tool for any government in instilling certain political agendas. Since the media has the power to frame stories in certain lights that sometimes don't reflect the objective reality, these outlets can be powerful in presenting a certain narrative or framing (Yousaf, 2015). According to the Yousaf's *Framing Theory*:

“Framing is a process of presenting a narrative to a target audience that promotes a desired interpretation of perceived reality by highlighting some aspects or issues while disregarding others and making connections among them” (2013, 3045).

Media in western-style democracies tends to frame instances of white-collar crime and corruption as sensations and “infotainment” (Benediktsson, 2010; Levi, 2006). This style affirms that these instances of corruption are not “just one bad apple”, but emphasizes that these instances are endemic (Benediktsson, 2010; Levi, 2006). Furthermore, these scandals are blamed on “infectious greed” of the elite

(Benediktsson, 2010 p2189). In western societies, where there exists a right to freedom of the press and speech, not only is the press often interested in reputational damage to get a good story, but it is also common for the media to receive “extra funds” to “throw some extra light” on certain events (Levi, 2006 p.1057).

Maria Los (2002) further explains that there is a distinction between communist and non-communist nation’s media portrayals of white-collar crime. There appears to be a shift between private media, used in democracies, to portray “bad news media”, while communist nations’ media portrays “good news media” (Los, 2002 p166). Los’s subject of her study was Poland, where there was an obvious transition from communist to democratic state (2002). A few gaps in research can be recognized here. First, there is little to no comparative research of media portrayals of crime in opposing democratic and communist nations. Furthermore, besides Los’s study on general crime, it is not clear on how the media frames instances of political corruption and white-collar crime in non-democratic nations currently. It is also not evident on how political corruption and media portrayals of political corruptions affects non-democratic nations. Further external research should be done to address media portrayals of these events in non-democratic nations and the effects of such representations on these societies.

It is evident though, that media portrayals of a state’s corruption play a role in the people’s attitude towards the government overall (Bidwell, 2013; Canache & Allison, 2005; Leung, 2015). As discussed earlier, Americans find that corruption is a significant problem in the United States although less than 1% of the 12,000

Congressmen or women are actually indicted for corruption scandals; American voters remain critical on the US government and their ability to fight corruption (Bidwell, 2013; Wines, 2014). Wines (2014) explain “it [political corruption] seems endemic because it is intensely covered — not just by newspaper and other news media outlets, but now by phalanxes of partisan political bloggers.” On the other hand, Chinese citizens are aware of the political corruption in their country, but do not perceive it as a big of a problem, with only about 50% or less perceiving their leaders as corrupt (Welsh, 2015). Likewise, these perceptions are largely due to President Xi Jinping’s campaign on anti-corruption measures (Leung, 2015; Welsh, 2015). Xi’s anti-corruption campaign has proven to be enormously popular with the public, which has contributed greatly to a positive public image of the state in China (Leung, 2015; Welsh, 2015). Although some have questioned the efficiency of the campaign and the true motives behind it, it appears that the Chinese public is at least impressed by the effort and the state’s stability has benefitted because of that (Leung, 2015; Welsh, 2015). However, it is important to note for the purpose of this research, that since the government controls the Chinese media, the government then has full control on framing reality in the media.

These contrasting discrepancies in public perceptions could be due to the “good news media” used by communist states and “bad news media” used by non-communist states (Los, 2002). This could imply that the Chinese communist government recognizes the significant role the media plays in public ideas of the government and uses that to their benefit by portraying a positive image of Xi’s anti-corruption campaign in order to instill a positive image of the state. Also, as

explained by Benjamin Ho in “Understanding Chinese Exceptionalism: China’s Rise, Its’ Goodness, and Greatness”, these media portrayals play a key role in promoting *Chinese Exceptionalism*, which stresses what is “good”, “great”, and “unique” about China within the national discourse (2014, 164).

Methodology & Hypotheses

The purpose of this thesis is to compare media portrayals of political corruption between the United States, a democratic and capitalist state, and China, a communist state. To accomplish this, two research methods were used. First, a content analysis focused upon media representations of political corruption in the People’s Republic of China and the United States of America. This content analysis contained a sample size of 25 articles for each country’s most popular newspaper between the years 2010 and 2015. This time frame was chosen based upon its recency to modern societies and governments, especially given the Xi’s recent presidency beginning in 2012. *USA Today* and *China Daily* were chosen exclusively because they are the most-popular newspapers, and *China Daily* also prints in English (“Q&A: China’s Newspaper Industry, 2013; Stynes, 2014). Popularity was an important detail to factor in because the most popular newspapers in the given countries would presumably have the largest framing effect on the population. A sample size of 25 was used in order to ensure a representative sample for the analysis, while also controlling for time and necessity of research for an undergraduate thesis. Articles for inclusion were identified through LexisNexis and filtered by the term ‘political corruption’. Given that there were far more results than 25, a systematic random sample method was used. By using a systematic

random sampling, calculations were made in determining which articles to use in order to create a sample that was both representative and random of the population (*Laerd Dissertation*). These calculations found a sampling fraction for each newspaper based upon the equation n/N , where n represents the desired sample and N represents the total population size (*Laerd Dissertation*). For *USA Today*, this required using every 7th article, and for *China Daily*, this required using every 71st article.

Four hypotheses were created based on the existing literature related to political corruption in the U.S. and China.

Hypothesis 1: Articles in the Chinese media will be more “positive” in tone than US media

The first hypothesis is based off of the *framing theory* arguments. Due to control of the media by the Chinese government, the Chinese government will emphasize the positive efforts and achievements of Xi and the Chinese government in curtailing corruption. This hypothesis will be labeled the *Chinese Exceptionalism Hypothesis* because it entails that these articles will be substantially more “positive” regarding corruption and corruption efforts in order to further the national discourse of Chinese Exceptionalism. This would parallel Los’ research (2002) regarding communist nations’ “good news media” and non-communist “bad news media”, and help explain why the Chinese public has a more positive view than TI regarding corruption in their country.

Hypothesis 2: Chinese media will emphasize corruption crimes in a more negative light than US media.

The second hypothesis has more to do with the specific nature of Chinese society versus American. Due to beliefs that counter capitalism, the inference in this hypothesis, labeled *Capitalism Hypothesis*, is that the Chinese media will frame instances of political corruption in a far more negative light than the American media. The *Capitalism Hypothesis* also speculates that Chinese articles will blame greed, which has a heavier impact on their collectivist society, where American media may use their articles to uphold capitalist ideas and frame political corruption as “one bad apple”.

Hypothesis 3: US media will focus on instances of political corruption with high-ranking officials and extravagant cases.

This hypothesis postulates that the American media will focus primarily on instances of political corruption with high-ranking government officials, specifically extravagant cases. This hypothesis, labeled the *Infotainment Hypothesis*, follows the literature from Benediktsson and Levi regarding the focus of western media on high-level white-collar crime in order to gain attention-grabbing headlines.

Hypothesis 4: each media outlet will frame corruption based upon differing definitions and ideas of corruption.

The final hypothesis will address the discrepancy in corruption ideas between China and the United States. Hypothesis 4, labeled the *Lack of Standards Hypothesis*, infers that each media outlet in the differing countries will portray corruption in different lights. For example, due to China’s communist and anti-capitalist ideals, they may formulate corruption to include greed, where the US may only view definite charges such as bribery and embezzlement as corruption.

In order to address these four hypotheses, a coding sheet was created that would provide the necessary information from each article to support or reject the hypotheses. Information in the beginning of the coding sheet first addresses the general information of each article such as the title of article, author, which newspaper was used, and date. In addressing the *Exceptionalism Hypothesis*, the data drawn from the coding sheet identifies items such as the author's attitude, how they portray the government's anti-corruption measures, and the main topic of the article.

Information from the coding sheet provides information for the *Capitalism Hypothesis* by exploring how the author characterizes the corruption, specifically whether it is "one bad apple", organizational, societal, or not applicable. Data drawn from the coding sheet further aims to resolve this hypothesis by determining what the primary focus of the article is, whether it is society, the government, the offender, or the victim and whether there is someone or something to blame. In many cases, material from the coding sheet was able to address the *Capitalism Hypothesis* as well by identifying whether a specific victim was listed, or just general society.

In addressing the *Infotainment Hypothesis*, information from the coding sheet identified the purpose of the article, whether political, opinion, entertainment, general information, or not applicable. Information from the coding sheet also found out about the details of the specific case such as the job position of the offender, the maximum penalty, and outcome of the trial. Furthermore, data from the coding sheet determines cited material used such as specific cases, people, events, or places

in order to identify if “attention-grabbers” were used. A section that describes the quotations given from outside sources were also used in the coding sheet that may also be applicable in this hypothesis.

Lastly, in resolving the *Lack of Standards Hypothesis*, the data from the coding sheet finds the specific corrupt actions the article discusses. The logistics associated with the specific case the article explains such as the crime and penalty will also help address how each country defines and views political corruption. A number of other details were identified by the coding sheet such as where the crime occurred and quotations from prosecutors, defense, and victims. A full sample of the coding sheet is attached in the Appendix.

Results

Figure 1 (below) shows the general statistics of the articles coded for *USA Today*. The dates of publication for the articles are about evenly distributed with about 20% of the total sample per year except the most recent year. The locations in which the article focuses on for corruption are split between domestic cases of corruption in the United States and corruption abroad. A significant amount of corruption articles abroad focused on Europe (20% of total) and the Middle East (16% of total). Most articles generally discuss how corruption occurred, however almost 1/3 of the articles cited bribery as the crime and ¼ listed some sort of fraud, whether that is tax, election, investments, etc. Also, a significant amount of articles from *USA Today* focused on the offender (36%) and the government (28%).

Figure 1: USA Today: General

<u>Dates</u>	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
	5	5	4	3	7	1
<u>Country Crime Occurred</u>	US	China	Middle East	Africa	Europe	South/Central America
	14	0	4	1	5	2
<u>Corrupt Action</u>	Corruption	Bribery	Fraud	Human Rights Violations	Other:	
	18	7	6	5	6	
<u>Primary Focus of Article</u>	Victim	Offender	Society	Government	Other	
	1	9	5	7	1	

Figure 2 examines the general information provided by *China Daily*. It is important to note that 25/25 articles regarding corruption occurred after President Xi came into office. Also, within that same light, 88% of the articles focused primarily within China. Besides generally discussing corruption, the most cited corruption charge was bribery (32%) and accumulating/being wealthy (24%). Furthermore, within the “other” category, words such as economic malpractice, monopolizing, and organizational crime were used to describe corruption instances. 76% of the time, the articles from *China Daily* focused on the government and government efforts, where only 12% did they focus on the offender and never on the victim.

Figure 2: China Daily: General

<u>Dates</u>	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	
	0	0	0	1	10	14	
<u>Country Crime Occurred</u>	China	“West”	Middle East	Africa	South/Central America	Asia-General	
	22	2	0	0	0	1	
<u>Corrupt Action</u>	Corruption	Bribery	Abuse of Power	“Unfair” Practices	Wealth	Lobbying	Other
	24	8	6	2	6	3	11
<u>Primary Focus of Article</u>	Victim	Offender	Society	Government	Other		
	0	3	2	19	1		

Figures 3 and 4 review how each newspaper generally discussed the corrupt act. *USA Today* examined a variety of offenders, with about $\frac{1}{4}$ of the articles blaming a specific person, $\frac{1}{4}$ blaming the US government, and about $\frac{1}{3}$ blaming another government. On the other hand, *China Daily* rarely blamed any specific person or government. Both news outlets rarely or never talked about the specific victim of the corruption. In contrasting who or what the author deems as corrupt, the US media mostly viewed the US government (20%), a specific person (20%), or another government (52%) as corrupt, while the Chinese media did not specifically explain who or what was corrupt. Rather, as demonstrated by the main topic of the article, the Chinese media focused on governmental efforts with corruption (64%) and the impacts corruption has on society (24%). US media’s main topic mostly focused on how a specific person or country, US included, was corrupt (52%).

Figure 3: USA Today: Corruption Generalizations

<u>Who is the Offender</u>	Specific person	Non-specific	US Gov.	Other Gov.	
	6	3	6	8	
<u>Who is the Victim</u>	Specific person	Non-specific/society			
	1	24			
<u>Who/What is Corrupt</u>	Specific person	Non-specific	Society	Other Gov.	US Gov.
	5	2	0	13	5
<u>Main Topic of Article</u>	Specific person/country is corrupt	Corruption impacts	Government efforts w/ corruption	Government efforts w/ other country's corruption	
	13	0	5	5	

Figure 4: China Daily: Corruption Generalizations

<u>Who is the Offender</u>	Specific person	Non-specific	US Gov	Other Gov	
	2	23		1	
<u>Who is the Victim</u>	Specific person	Non-specific/society			
	0	25			
<u>Who/What is Corrupt</u>	Specific person	Non-specific	Society	Other Gov	US Gov
	2	22	0	1	
<u>Main Topic of Article</u>	Specific person/country is corrupt	Corruption impacts	Government efforts w/ corruption	Government efforts w/ other country's corruption	Other
	3	6	16	0	1

Figures 5 and 6 refer to the data collected from *USA Today* and *China Daily* that discuss the specific information for a given corruption case. It is important to remember that about 7/25 articles from *USA Today* and only 3/25 articles from *China Daily* discuss a specific instance of corruption. Over half of the specific corrupt offenders from *USA Today* were a member of Congress (57%). The two corrupt offenders that were either a Prime Minister or a President, were not US government officials. In contrast, the three specific corrupt officials given by *China Daily* came

from differing job positions, where one was a CEO, one was a member of the executive branch of the government, and one was a military official. Given the seven specific corruption cases for the US media, only one listed a sentence for that official, which was a prison or jail term. On the other hand, all three of the corrupt officials listed by *China Daily* received the death penalty as punishment for their corruption.

Figure 5: USA Today: Specific Information

<u>Job position of specific person</u>	Prime Minister/President	Congress	Other	
	2	4	1	
Outcome/sentencing	Not guilty	Prison/Jail	Fine	Death
	0	1	0	0

Figure 6: China Daily: Specific Information

<u>Job position of specific person</u>	CEO	Executive	Military	
	1	1	1	
Outcome/sentencing	Not guilty	Prison/Jail	Fine	Death
	0	0	0	3

Figures 7 and 8 address how the authors of *USA Today* and *China Daily* characterized the corruption. The characterizations of corruption were broken into four categories: “one bad apple”, organizational, societal, and not applicable. “One Bad Apple” implies that the corrupt act or offender was an exception to the character of the group; therefore, only that one person was corrupt, but the rest of the group is not. Organizational refers to the idea that corruption is rampant throughout the organization. Societal indicates that either the given society is corrupt in itself or that the society pressured a corrupt act or actions to occur. Over half of the articles for *USA Today* (52%) characterized the corruption as organizational.

Similar to the findings in Figure 5, the organizational corruption derived mostly from characterizations of Congress. The purpose of the article was also categorized into five groups: political, entertainment, opinion, general information, and other. Political implies that an article discussed how a power in government should or has done *something* that affects the citizens it governs, i.e a government should or has done something about corruption. Entertainment refers to articles that either discuss corruption as a “scandal” or discusses corruption in a book, movie, tv show, etc. Opinion refers to the articles that were pieces given from a first-person point of view, and general information articles presented general information regarding a case, statistics, and data given in an objective lens. The majority (56%) of *USA Today* articles had a political purpose, i.e explained that a government should or did do something to combat corruption, however about 20% of the articles were general information pieces. Given this theme, the author’s attitude seemed objective a significant amount of the time (56%). Over ¼ of the time, the author’s attitude was pessimistic regarding corruption for the US media. This correlates with the data that the authors for *USA Today* characterized the government’s efforts in combatting corruption, whether domestic or abroad, as poor the most (44%).

Cited material and other’s quoted were also included within these tables in order to further characterize how the author framed the article. For example, the fact that *USA Today* quoted politicians almost 1/3 of the time correlates with the data suggesting that most of the articles were political in nature. It is also important

to note that academics, such as professors and researchers, were quoted the most in US media articles.

Figure 7: USA Today: Corruption Characterization

<u>Corruption characterized</u>	One Bad Apple	Organizational	Societal	N/A				
	2	13	2	8				
<u>Purpose of Article</u>	Political	Entertainment	Opinion	General Information	Other			
	14	4	2	5				
<u>Author's Attitude</u>	Optimistic	Pessimistic	Objective	N/A				
	3	7	14	1				
<u>Anti-corruption efforts</u>	Efficient	Moderate	Poor	N/A				
	0	5	11	9				
<u>Cited Material</u>	Obama	High-Ranking official	Low-ranking official					
	4	12	4					
<u>Others Quoted</u>	Citizen	Politician	Military	Obama	Academic	Reporter	Author	Lawyer
	3	7	1	1	9	3	1	2

Figure 8 demonstrates how the Chinese media characterized corruption. Differing largely from US media, *China Daily* characterized corrupt acts and people as “one bad apple” over $\frac{3}{4}$ of the time. However, *China Daily* was similar to *USA Today* in regarding the purpose of the articles to be largely political (88%), but never implied for their articles to be for entertainment or opinion purposes. The author’s attitude in Chinese media was mostly optimistic (76%) and anti-corruption efforts were overwhelmingly presented as efficient (84%). In alignment with this data, President Xi, the Communist Party, and Party officials were cited and quoted

most often. It was interesting to note though that numerous universities were cited as well in about 1/5th of the articles.

Figure 8: China Daily: Corruption Characterization

<u>Corruption characterized</u>	One Bad Apple	Organizational	Societal	N/A		
	19	2	1	3		
<u>Purpose of Article</u>	Political	Entertainment	Opinion	General Information	Other	
	22	0	0	3		
<u>Author's Attitude</u>	Optimistic	Pessimistic	Objective	N/A		
	19	2	4	0		
<u>Anti-corruption efforts</u>	Efficient	Moderate	Poor	N/A		
	21	1	2	1		
<u>Cited Material</u>	Xi	Company	Communist Party	University	High-Ranking Official	"West"
	4	3	13	5	10	2
<u>Others Quoted</u>	Communist Party	High-Ranking Official	Academic	Xi		
	3	7	1	1		

Discussion

The second portion of this thesis analyzes this data in correspondence with the hypotheses drawn and literature review examined earlier. Each hypothesis will be addressed separately with the related coding information applied to each theory.

Chinese Exceptionalism Hypothesis

The Chinese Exceptionalism Hypothesis inferred that due to control of the media by the Chinese government, the Chinese media will emphasize positive efforts and achievements by Xi and the Chinese government; especially in

comparison to US media, the Chinese media will portray a far more “positive” tone. This hypothesis falls in line with the literature that explains how the Chinese have their own version of exceptionalism that highlights China’s domestic uniqueness and greatness. Given the information from the coding, this hypothesis has been proven true. There is a number of coding statistics that support this hypothesis. First, *China Daily* characterized the corruption as “one bad apple” 76% of the time, which was almost nine times more than *USA Today* had. This indicates the Chinese Exceptionalism that Ho explains, where China presents the narrative of having a superior ethical order with only a few exceptions to that rule. Specifically, the exceptions to the harmonious Chinese order are those who are “lured by money” and “extravagant lifestyles” as quoted by *China Daily* articles (Yan, 2015). It is no coincidence that these “bad apples” are framed in the same light as the “West” within these articles. This will be explained later within the *Capitalism Hypothesis*, however it is important to note here that Chinese Exceptionalism considers that the Chinese order is superior to that of the “West” and is a solution to the problems of the current global order (Ho 2014, 165). If corruption was framed as anything other than “one bad apple”, it would disrupt the national discourse of Chinese Exceptionalism by addressing a flaw within the system.

The second statistic that is significant to this hypothesis is that the authors for *China Daily* carried an overall optimistic attitude (76%) and usually portrayed the anti-corruption efforts domestically as efficient (84%). This correlates with the data suggesting that Chinese citizens carry an overall positive attitude towards their government and the perception that Xi has been successful in his anti-corruption

campaign. The latter is especially true considering 100% of the articles were published after Xi began his corruption campaign in 2012.

It is also significant to note here that 88% of the articles by *China Daily* focused solely upon China itself and its' efficiency rather than discussing other countries' corruption. Within the articles from *USA Today*, it was evident that the US media was also portraying exceptionalism by examining other countries' corruption, specifically how corrupt and in need of help other countries were. American Exceptionalism is the idea that the United States is so uniquely powerful and a leader in democratic values, that it is our responsibility to police and democratize the world (*New World Encyclopedia*, s.v "American Exceptionalism"). An alternative hypothesis based upon American Exceptionalism was created here before further investigating.

Alternative Hypothesis 1: US media will frame other countries' corruption exceptionally poor and in need of democratic reform.

In order to further study this hypothesis, the data from *USA Today* was divided between how the newspaper framed political corruption domestically and abroad. Figure 9 exhibits how *USA Today* characterized corruption domestically and abroad given some of the most characteristic questions from the coding sheet such as the offender, who or what was corrupt, characterization of the corruption, the author's attitude, and anti-corruption efforts. The results are interesting because although *USA Today* was critical of corruption domestically, authors were even more critical on corruption abroad. This is most significantly shown through the data regarding anti-corruption efforts, where *USA Today* framed anti-corruption efforts

domestically as moderate 21% of the time and not applicable 50% of the time— meaning the author didn’t have a tone leaning whether corruption efforts were sufficient or not. This correlates with the data shown that within about half of the articles, the author maintained an objective attitude. On the other hand, anti-corruption efforts abroad were mostly regarded as poor. Similarly, the author’s attitude in articles about corruption abroad, was 15% more pessimistic than articles about corruption within the United States.

Figure 9: USA Today: US Exceptionalism

Domestic						
	Offender	Who/What Corrupt	Main Topic	Characterrization	Author’s Attitude	Anti-Corruption Efforts
	Specific person (35.7%)	US Gov. 57%	Specific Person (28.6%)	Organizational (50%)	Objective (50%)	N/A (50%)
	US Gov. (35.7%)	Specific Person (35.7%)	Gov. Efforts (28.6%)	N/A (42.9%)	Pessimistic (21%)	Moderate (21%)
Abroad						
	Offender	Who/What Corrupt	Main Topic	Characterrization	Author’s Attitude	Anti-Corruption Efforts
	Other Gov. (91%)	Other Gov. (91%)	Corrupt Country (45%)	Organizational (64%)	Objective (45%)	Poor (64%)
			Gov. efforts w/ other’s corruption (28%)	Societal (18%)	Pessimistic (36%)	

It is also crucial to note here that in over 1 in 4 articles, one of the main topics was U.S governmental efforts in aiding other countries’ corruption. Examples of this were demonstrated in the language of article such as: “U.S aiding in democratization of *X Country* to combat corruption” (Miller, 2012). The data also suggests that the

corruption is more widespread into the government as a whole, and society in general. This could also imply that the *American Exceptionalism Hypothesis* is true, given that the articles frame entire countries and societies to be corrupt, instead of just specific people, which accounted for over 1/3rd of the corruption articles domestically. Since this data was derived solely from a coding sheet comparing the U.S and Chinese media coverage of corruption broadly, further research should be done to address this hypothesis and phenomenon; theoretically, it should be no coincidence that these “corrupt” countries are also areas with strong U.S military bases and rich in natural resources.

Capitalism Hypothesis

As explained earlier, the capitalism hypothesis holds that due to anti-capitalistic views, the Chinese media will frame instances of corruption in a far more negative light and as a much more serious crime than US media. Also, as briefly discussed earlier, the Chinese government and society believe through the idea of Chinese Exceptionalism that Chinese ideals such as collectivism and communism are superior to Western ideals such as capitalism and individualism (Ho, 2014). This idea and validity of the hypothesis is demonstrated by some of the data given from the coding analysis.

First, one of the most evident examples of China’s anti-capitalist and collectivist ideals that oppose Western and US frameworks came from the main topic of the article. Although over half of the articles from *China Daily* are focused on domestic anti-corruption efforts, a significant amount of articles also discuss the societal impacts these actions and ideas have on society. Specific articles explain

how corruption “endangers economic and social stability.” Furthermore, in the few articles that discuss corruption abroad, exclusively the West, the authors illustrate the detrimental effects corruption has had on their economies.

Secondly, as discussed above, according to the articles, corrupt officials became corrupt due to capitalist thought and the “lure of money” and “extravagant lifestyles” (Yan, 2015). These “one bad apple” characterizations focus on how these officials had fallen victim to capitalistic ideals and how these ideals negatively impact society. Furthermore, the seriousness of a corruption offense in China is evident not only through how the Chinese media portrays instances corruption, but also through the outcomes the articles discuss. While *USA Today* only affirms in one specific case how the offender was sentenced to jail, *China Daily* explains that within the three specific cases examined, all three offenders were given the death penalty. This speaks to how serious the Chinese government is in preventing corrupt ideals and maintaining their traditional values. One should further investigate through Chinese media how these corrupt and/or capitalist ideals are portrayed as possibly treasonous to Chinese society and Chinese way of life.

Infotainment Hypothesis

The *Infotainment Hypothesis* stating that the American media will focus on instances of political corruption with high-ranking officials and extravagant cases has proven inconclusive from the data. On one hand, as shown by Figures 3 and 4, *USA Today* was 2.5x more likely to focus on a specific offender than *China Daily*, who, as discussed earlier, focused primarily on governmental efforts. The focus on specific offenders by western media in white-collar crimes, especially those who are

known to the public, is described by Levi (2006) to be “infotainment”. These infotainment portrayals that focus on high-level individuals are strategic in gaining newspaper publicity and ratings (Levi, 2006). Furthermore, paralleling Los’ “bad news media” research, the corruption portrayed by *USA Today* was framed as “endemic” and prevalent in over half of the articles. This could resolve the question as to why US citizens perceive corruption domestically to be far worse than statistics show.

However, this hypothesis was labeled inconclusive due to a number of other statistics drawn from the research. Although *USA Today* focused on a specific offender much more than *China Daily* had, 36% is not significant enough to declare that US media generally targets individual, high-ranking officials. It is even more obvious that this hypothesis is inconclusive given that in only six of the articles were the specific job title of the offender listed. If this hypothesis were correct, one could assume that at least half of the articles would include the job titles of the offenders. Furthermore, as demonstrated by Figure 7, over half of articles were objective in nature. The objective nature of the majority of the articles demonstrates that the authors were more interested in fact-finding and presenting an objective truth, rather than “getting a story”.

Lack of Standards Hypothesis

The *Lack of Standards Hypothesis* inferred that the U.S and Chinese newspapers would frame corruption based upon differing definitions and ideas of corruption. This hypothesis was derived from the literature by Gertsenlager and

Lancaster and Montinola, and it points to the fallacy of credible cross-cultural statistics on corruption. This hypothesis was confirmed from the coding data.

Similar to the other findings, much of the information for this hypothesis demonstrates the discrepancies in media framing due to differing cultural ideas and values. Within this hypothesis, most of the data came from how the newspaper described the corrupt action. On one hand, *USA Today* focused primarily on corrupt actions that are deemed corrupt by the law. This included specific actions such as bribery, fraud, and embezzlement. Also, in accordance to the *American Exceptionalism Alternative Hypothesis*, *USA Today* listed human rights violations as a corrupt act 20% of the time, and 100% of the time, the articles were discussing corruption abroad. On the other hand, *China Daily* focused more upon corrupt acts that challenged their societal norms. This included vague terms such as “unfair practices”, “excessive wealth”, and “extravagant lifestyles”. It is also critical to note that, as Gertsenlager discussed, numerous articles cited lobbying as a corrupt act--an action that is normative in U.S government and society.

These findings are significant because they demonstrate two things. First, the opposing ways these two countries described corrupt acts demonstrates that corruption is a fluid term that is only defined by a given country or society. This means that corruption is a changing term that continually alters given different cultures. The fact that China believes for corruption to entail traditional capitalist ideals that are “unfair” point to their communist, collectivist society. The fact that the U.S finds corruption to only be defined by law points to our belief in the legal

system as our “be all, end all.” Furthermore, our focus on human rights violations of other countries also point to our ideals of American Exceptionalism.

Secondly, given the first argument, it is problematic to compare corruption statistics cross-culturally. This is especially true given the broadness and vagueness of the current definition by *Transparency International*. As demonstrated by the data from this hypothesis, two of the biggest superpowers don’t even have similar ideas of what corruption entails. Until a definition can be reached that is applicable to every country and culture in the same manner, if that is even possible, it is extremely dubious to compare corruption statistics across differing countries and cultures.

Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis was to compare media portrayals of political corruption between the United States and People’s Republic of China in order to address: 1) how opposing styles of governments and cultures portray this crime; and 2) the discrepancy between corruption statistics via *Transparency International’s Corruption Index* and domestic perceived corruption levels. It was important to study political corruption because not only does it plague every country, but it also has significant effects on a country’s economy, environment, society, and government. Specifically, studying media portrayals of political corruption was relevant to broader corruption studies because the media is often the medium between citizens and their government. This is especially important when the public needs to be informed about these issues to hold corrupt officials

accountable in democratic nations. The media can also be important for framing issues in order to fit into a larger political agenda.

To research media portrayals of political corruption, a content analysis of major national newspapers for the U.S and China was completed. A coding sheet was developed in light of the four hypotheses drawn: *The Chinese Exceptionalism Hypothesis*, *The Capitalism Hypothesis*, *The Infotainment Hypothesis*, and *the Lack of Standards Hypothesis*. Each of these hypotheses was based off of the prior literature review given.

This thesis concludes with two major findings that derive from the hypotheses and data collected. First, and most evidently from the research, the United States and China portray political corruption in vastly different lights. Much of the research attributes these differing portrayals of corruption to the style of government and societal agenda of the given country. For example, while the U.S newspaper was highly critical of political corruption cases domestically and abroad, the Chinese newspaper was optimistic about Xi's anti-corruption efforts. This could be most likely explained by China's communist system of state censored media outlets. Furthermore, these portrayals played key roles in framing a narrative about the corresponding country's exceptionalism. This is seen when the US media portrayed other countries as severely corrupt and in need of democratization and also seen when the Chinese media portrayed its' own efforts in combatting corruption as exceptional.

Secondly, this research found that both countries define corruption differently as well. Much of this research attributes these differing definitions to the

corresponding nation's cultural values and ideals. For example, the fact that the Chinese media found instances of lobbying and accumulating excessive wealth as corruption points to the nature of China as an anti-capitalistic state. It is for this reason that this thesis concludes that current corruption statistics aren't representative nor objective. In fact, the current validity of *Transparency International's Corruption Index* is deeply questionable considering not only the broadness of the company's definition that would be interpreted various ways in various cultures, but also because this company seems to operate within a western-style framework of corruption. Thus, this western-style framework of corruption inherently places western nations towards the top of the rankings and non-western nations near the bottom.

Further research should be done to address this phenomenon and extensively analyze the credibility in *Transparency International's* credibility in its' cross-cultural statistics. Also, further research should be done to address the role of the US media in framing American Exceptionalism, especially those set in non-western nations and/or nations we are occupying militarily.

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