In Conversation with Greg Wilesmith on the ABC’s *Foreign Correspondent* and the Image of China in Australia

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**Abstract**

This is an interview with Greg Wilesmith, the executive producer of *Foreign Correspondent* broadcast by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). The interview focuses on the programme’s target audience, how China-related topics are selected, and the likely influence of the programme on viewers’ broad perceptions of China. The conversation also offers Mr. Wilesmith’s opinion on Australians’ notions of China as well as his suggestions to improve China’s image in Australia.
I interviewed Mr. Greg Wilesmith on 20\textsuperscript{th} January in 2009 at the office of \textit{Foreign Correspondent} in Sydney. Mr. Wilesmith was the executive producer of \textit{Foreign Correspondent} between 2003 and 2008, and is currently a senior field producer on the programme. He has more than 30 years of experience in journalism and his coverage of international affairs ranges from Europe, the Middle East, Africa and the Asia-Pacific region. My PhD research focuses on the Australian media’s representation of China with special reference to the ABC’s \textit{Foreign Correspondent} in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century. \textit{Foreign Correspondent} has been one of Australia’s most prestigious international current affairs program since 1992. It is broadcast weekly throughout Asia and the Pacific on the Australia Network and its reports are regularly seen on other international broadcasters. By interviewing Mr. Wilesmith, I gained insight into the programme’s audience, the journalists’ process of selecting topics to report on, and the likely influence of the programme on Australians’ perceptions of China. The conversation also discloses Mr. Wilesmith’s suggestions of ways to improve China’s image in Australia. This interview adds a practical perspective to the theoretical analysis of my PhD research.

Li: Can you describe the audience of \textit{Foreign Correspondent}?

Wilesmith: The audience fluctuates according to what sort of story we promote. But on average each week about 700,000 people are estimated to have watched in the five capital cities – Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth. The audience figures for other cities like Canberra, Hobart, Newcastle and regions like northern New South Wales and so forth are collated less frequently but the general estimate would be that at least another 300,000 will have watched in those areas; so more than a million people a week. There are also many people who watch the ABC through the cable networks, Foxtel and Austar. The number of people who are watching the ABC through cable services are not counted in the free-to-air television survey. The other issue is that our stories go on the ABC international service, called the Australia Network, which broadcasts into the Pacific, into North Asia, and into India and Pakistan, but not into China. Mostly the audience tends to be mature people, aged 40 or more, but not exclusively. So more than 50\%, maybe 60\% are 35 or above. The greatest concentration of people is between 45 and 60. They tend to be more educated and probably more affluent.

Li: What kind of stories about China will interest this audience group?

Wilesmith: A wide range of stories interest them. Last year there was clearly a lot of interest about the story on the internet called \textit{The Great Firewall of China}. There was a significant amount of interest in the programme which was broadcast after the earthquake, \textit{The Day the School Fell Down}; also the story about how the government was dealing with dissidents and petitioners before the Olympics. There were lighter stories too, what we call the postcards, like the story about the making of badminton rackets; \textit{Monkey Return} dealt with popular culture about a famous Chinese film \textit{Going to the West}. All of those stories were probably attractive to our viewers. And \textit{Damming the Three Gorges}, because the environment is a big issue in Australia, also got a lot of viewers. If we are going to cover international affairs, we have to have a political awareness. But equally we run some stories because pictorially and visually they are very interesting.

Li: You mentioned that the environment is a big issue in Australia. So does it mean that you select the stories based on the condition that the story is the focus of Australia?
Wilesmith: The way journalists make judgments is hard to define. It is based on experience and some degree of conventional wisdom. We don’t choose stories because, say, Australians are very interested in the environment and therefore we should go and look for environmental stories in China, or in the United States or anywhere else. I think we simply take the view that in China the damming of the Three Gorges has significant environmental impacts and those things are important in China. If they’re important issues in China, we should take them seriously, and so we should look at them. That is the approach we take.

Li: So how do you choose stories about China for Foreign Correspondent?

Wilesmith: These decisions are based on many things. But decisions about coverage depend to a certain degree on what are the biggest international issues at that time. When I came to the EP’s position in 2003, the biggest issue in the world at that time was not China. The biggest issue was the United States and the imminent conflict in Iraq. So I probably spent a great deal of time in early 2003 worrying about how we were going to report on Iraq and other countries in the Middle East. In terms of China, clearly, in 2008, we probably ran more stories in the course of the year than we would normally run. There were at least two reasons: one there was international attention focused on China because of the Olympics, and secondly because the earthquake was enormously significant. All the ABC news programmes were also covering those events. Thirdly, the ABC policy is that we send correspondents from Australia to China. Most often those people spend three years or four years in Beijing and then they come back to Australia. The ABC is fortunate in having foreign correspondents in China, such as Stephen McDonell, who spent several years in China learning Mandarin and understanding the culture before taking up the post of correspondent. So, we have a reporter, Stephen, who has a good understanding of the environment in which he is working. We feel that he’s giving us a good representation of things. There are many factors but those are some of them.

Li: Can you describe how the audience interest influences the stories about China you run?

Wilesmith: It would be wrong to say that the audience has no influence. But equally because we are a publicly funded broadcaster, we are not driven by seeking the highest audience number. It is much more important for us to produce programmes that are well researched, based on fact, and offer a comprehensive view of a subject rather than take what we would call a sensational approach. The commercial channels in Australia would not run most of the things that we do, because they think that they are boring and dull, and so they would not interest the audience. They want programmes that will get millions of viewers. We are less interested in that. We are not interested in sensationalism. We are more interested in providing programmes that are journalistically sound and have some enduring value.

Li: Foreign Correspondent claims itself in its homepage to cover major international stories that foreign governments sometimes dislike. What is your take on that?

Wilesmith: In some cases, that is true. Not every programme obviously. We did a story about the Dalai Lama in northern India. The Tibetan community in Australia thought that that was a very good programme. There were some Chinese residents and visitors in Australia who thought that it was not a very good programme, but there were not many. There were people who went on the website, on our guestbook and said that we were biased against China. But really if 800,000 people were watching and five people go on the website and say you were
biased, I do not think that it is a significant problem.

Li: In this case, can you describe what a good show is?

Wilesmith: A good show is one in which we show our audience things that they probably do not know very much about, and which reveal something more than they have previously heard or read. It is a fundamental principle of journalism. The best journalism is that which is revealing. In Australia, that means, among other things, exposing corruption in a government, a government department or in a company. So there is an investigative complexity in journalism. The object of the exercise is to reveal information and sentiment which is not necessarily widely known. In the case of the Three Gorges, *Foreign Correspondent* had done stories about the Three Gorges previously. So some of our audience knew something about that, but they probably did not know as much as we were able to tell them in the middle of last year. In terms of the story about political dissidents and *The Great Firewall of China*, we probably told our audience something they did not know. We are not trying to lecture people. What we are trying to do is to open people’s minds to things.

Li: Was there any reaction to *Damming the Three Gorges* and *The Great Firewall of China*?

Wilesmith: I do not recall any complaints about the Three Gorges. In terms of the Great Firewall story, I do not think there were any complaints. There has been so much said about China. I do not know how the Government would manage to deal with every issue. When we did the story about dissidents and petitioners, there was a reaction. But did this continue for months afterwards? Well, no. There are so many things to worry about in the world. I could worry about the Palestinians, the Tamils in Sri Lanka, Vietnamese dissidents and the Muslims in southern Thailand. It is an endless list.

Li: Is the audience of *Foreign Correspondent* concerned about China?

Wilesmith: I do not think that our audience spends a disproportionate amount of time thinking about China. In fact, I’d say people are more often worried more about what happens in the Middle East and what is going on in Iraq and Afghanistan. Australians are very concerned about what has been going on in the Palestinian territories, particular in Gaza. One of the reasons is that Israel calls itself a democracy. So Australians say how can a democracy behave like this? If the Vietnamese government which is not democratic, but repressive, behaves in a certain way, there is an expectation that they might do that. People are much more concerned about the United States. Because if the United States goes, not just into recession, but into depression, that will have an enormous impact on Australia. There is a much greater understanding in Australia about the American political process. There is a sense that we are comparable democracy. But it is not just about whether it will affect us. It is about the fact that people have a sense that Americans to some degree are like us. So I think that the Australian people are concerned about many things around the world, and not necessarily mostly about China.

Li: What is the average Australian’s perception of China?

Wilesmith: I think there is an enormous respect for China with its very long history and culture. That is one of the reasons that why so many Australians want to travel in China. Because they are impressed by a civilization that can look back for itself over 4,000 years and say this is what has happened. Whenever there are big cultural events, people will attend.
Many years ago, there was a Chinese exhibition at the Art Gallery of New South Wales and a huge number of people went to see that. So there is a great deal of respect for China’s history and culture, and there is considerable interest in how China has developed so rapidly, particularly since the 1970s. But equally there is a concern that the rampant development of capitalism that has driven China’s economy over the last 10 years has allowed the development of a very rich class, while the majority of Chinese remain quite poor. Australia used to be an egalitarian society where most of the people were at the same level in terms of their economic level and their educational level. So there were a great many people in the middle. As Australia became richer, there has been the development of a rich class and perhaps the development of a poor class. So we Australians have become a more stratified society characterized by money, education and business opportunities. But the perspective of Australians is that (economic divisions) in China are much worse. Fundamentally we think we have a democratic system in this country. I think the hope is that in China, over time, a multi-party democracy will emerge.

Li: What about the environmental perspective of China?

Wilesmith: To go back to what I have said before about how capitalism guided by the Party and the State has developed very quickly. It is quite obvious that in some cases there has been significant environmental damage done in China. So people obviously are concerned about that. Everybody who watched the Olympics kept being told that the air today is ok, “we can breathe it, but last night it was dreadful” and so forth. People understand full well that the price of the economic development has been a degree of poisoning of the environment. But Australia is not hypocritical. We understand full well that in 200 years, not in 4000 years, Europeans in this country have made terrible mistakes and we have continued to make mistakes in the 50s, 60s, 70s, and the 80s. Only in the last few years have we started to think about what we’re doing and how we’re doing it. So, most Australians know that we also have a bad environmental record in some cases.

Li: What do you think of the media image of China?

Wilesmith: It is a mix. Most people thought that the Olympics was a success. That was positive for China. But every time there were stories that said China had degraded the environment, China had imprisoned its writers, and the Chinese government had broken up workers’ demonstrations and imprisoned hundreds of people; every kind of story like that was negative for China.

Li: Why does it happen like that?

Wilesmith: Because that is nature of the media. It is not about China. You’ve seen how the Israeli invasion of Gaza has been widely reported in Australia. There has been very severe criticism of Israel for what it has been done and how it has been done. My point is that Australian journalism like American journalism, like British journalism, like French journalism can be very critical. So it is wrong to think that it is directed at China in particular. It is simply that people do not think that they should change the way they report on China, and that it should be different from the way they deal with Israel and Gaza. Australian journalists take the view that there are significant human right problems in the way that Israel has dealt with the war in Gaza. That is one of the reasons why we have correspondents there. If there are human right problems in China, Australian reporters, not just the ABC, all Australian media networks will report it. The way that the Australian media approaches
China is the way it approaches stories everywhere.

Li: What do you suggest that China should do to improve its image in the world?

Wilesmith: Well, our business is not to give advice about how countries, or companies, or anybody else can improve their image. But it is obvious that if China were a multi-party democracy which has serious respect for human rights, then there would be far fewer stories critical or negative about China. Reform of government and reform of politics would lead to that. At the same time, my feeling is that Australians are 22 million people. We need to know, obviously, much more about China. It is very important for us. It would be helpful if there were more Australian journalists in China and if there were more study tours of China. There are opportunities for people like Steven McDonell to go and spent years there learning the language, come back to Australia and go to China as a correspondent and do good work. The Australian newspaper has very good correspondents in Beijing and so does the Sydney Morning Herald. There is a need for many more to be there. There would be a great deal of benefit, if there were more study tours to China for journalists in the short term. All of those things are helpful in broadening people's horizons and understandings and making personal contacts.