

**ADVERSARIAL QUESTIONING AND ANSWERING STRATEGIES IN  
CHINESE GOVERNMENT PRESS CONFERENCES\***

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**ABSTRACT**

Studying political interviews and press conferences is significant as it may provide a special insight into the change in the policy of a country, and perhaps even the well-being of a society as a whole. Previous studies on broadcast interviews have identified adversarial questioning as an increasing and pervasive style in journalistic practice in the western world (Clayman and Heritage 2002a/b). The use of such adversarial style has emerged in Hong Kong — a metropolitan city deeply influenced by both Chinese and western cultures (Yip 2003). However, the general knowledge of how journalists treat public figures in other parts of the Chinese-speaking world remains relatively unknown. This study attempts to investigate the questioning and answering patterns, in particular adversarial questioning, in Chinese government press conferences which has thus far received little scholarly attention. Drawing on Clayman and Heritage's coding system for measuring adversarial questioning in U.S. press conferences (2002b), the current study examines the question-answer sequences based on a corpus of ten government press conferences held in mainland China, and aims to present a questioning format by showing any differences in the design of questions by Chinese journalists and their foreign counterparts. The study further explores the format of the response of Chinese officials typical of these events and some possible correlation between government officials' question-taking and their setting of the political agenda.

Key words: Adversarial questioning, government press conference

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

China's rapid economic growth has become a hot topic for the international community in recent years. What is also worth noticing is the social progress made along the way. The present Chinese government, since its inauguration in March 2003, has gained an overwhelming popularity both at home and abroad. The good reputation is earned partly because the new government has been dedicated to creating a fresh image of its being devoted, open and caring to the people. This endeavour is clearly reflected in how the government communicates with the public. It is found that since the new leaders took office, high-profile government press conferences are held in a more responsive and regular manner than at any time in the past<sup>1</sup>. These press conferences have been attracting great attention from mainstream world news agencies, and during which a wide range of challenging questions are raised directly to Chinese decision-makers. Undoubtedly, press conferences as such can be valuable opportunities for the government to justify its policies and depict a positive image; likewise, they can also serve as important platforms through which the outside world is able to look closer at what is happening in one of the world's fastest growing countries. The way new Chinese leaders handle the questions under the spotlight has been widely commended by media professionals and the general public, and this helps a great deal to enhance the credit of the government.

## **2. QUESTIONING AND ANSWERING IN BROADCAST INTERVIEWS**

Previous studies have revealed a growing trend towards adversarial questioning in news interviews largely based on data from English-speaking countries (Clayman 2001; Clayman and Heritage 2002a/b). According to Greatbatch (1988), the boundary of neutralism

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<sup>1</sup> At the beginning of 2003, the Central Committee of the CPC (Communist Party of China) proposed that the handling of government press liaison should be developed into a regularly held, standardized and institutionalized system. The Chinese government press conference system therefore witnessed a milestone in its development in 2003, particularly after the outbreak of the SARS epidemic (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) (Information Bureau of China State Council Information Office 2007: 2).

appeared to change over time in close connection with the changing degree of journalistic freedom at a given time, and in a given culture. For example, Clayman and Heritage (2002b) found that journalists tended to formulate their questions in an increasingly challenging or 'hostile' manner which was rarely seen decades ago in the U.S., and that the comparatively deferential style of questioning in the 1950s had given way to much more adversarial encounters in recent years, especially in British news interviews and in American presidential press conferences (ibid.: 751). They explained that this shift resulted from a host of changes in the political, economic and institutional environment of broadcast journalism; and argued that just as the way news narratives could reflect larger socio-cultural contexts, the way broadcast interviews were conducted may also serve as "an index of much broader developments in journalism, and perhaps national politics" (Clayman and Heritage 2002a: 15).

The 'adversarial character of contemporary journalism' (Clayman and Heritage 2002b) seemed even more salient in broadcast interviews dealing with politicians or public figures (Robinson 1983; Hallin and Mancini 1984; Clayman 2001; Clayman and Heritage 2002a/b). However, scholars did have concerns about the difficulty in providing a systematic and quantitative account of such adversarial practice (Schudson 1995; Smith 1990; Kernell 1986). For example, Kernell (1986) once argued that the frictional dimension of the press-politician relations was 'an elusive quality, difficult to quantify' (ibid.: 76). And in a similar observation, Schudson (1995) noted, in his discussion of the impact of the Watergate incident on U.S. journalism, that 'civility is not something easy to measure' (ibid.: 151). In light of this, Clayman and Heritage (2002b) developed a new model for analyzing the degree of deference and 'adversarialness'<sup>2</sup> of questions in media interviews and applied it in their comparative study of two press conferences given by U.S. presidents Eisenhower and Reagan. This model consists of four basic dimensions of adversarial questioning, i.e. *initiative* (the practice of questioning in which journalists 'set a more independent and constraining agenda' for interviewees while leaving the latter less leeway to pursue their own agendas), *directness* (straightforward style of

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<sup>2</sup> Clayman and Heritage (2002b) used this term to refer to the aggressiveness or hostility of journalistic questioning. Its adjective form 'adversarial' is used interchangeably with 'aggressive' and 'confrontational' in this study.

questioning which implies less consideration of the ‘face’ of self and the interviewee), *assertiveness* (the practice of questioning in which journalists ‘push for a particular response’ from the interviewee) and *hostility* (the practice of questioning which is overtly critical of interviewee’s ability or questioning his or her accountability). The four dimensions are further divided into ten indicators, i.e. *question complexity*, *question cascades*, *follow-up questions*, *other referencing question frames*, *self-referencing question frames*, *preface tilt*, *negatively formulated questions*, *preface hostility*, *global hostility* and *accountability questions*<sup>3</sup>. Clayman and Heritage’s study revealed substantial differences between the two U.S. press conferences in terms of adversarial dimension and question design indicators, all suggesting the increased adversarialness in journalists’ treatment of the two U.S. Presidents (Eisenhower and Reagan). This new coding system provides us with a helpful set of parameters to examine the style of journalist questioning, and can be presumably applied to study other genres of broadcast interviews in other socio-cultural contexts.

Apart from the questions from the journalists, the answers of the interviewees constitute the other half of the interaction in any broadcast interviews. Studies on interview responses have been quite fruitful in identifying different categorizations of making the answer, and nevertheless come to similar conclusions (Bull 1994, Harris 1991). For example, Bull (1994) presented a set of guidelines for differentiating between questions, replies, and non-replies based on a detailed analysis of 33 televised British political interviews. He argued that responses to questions in political interviews should not simply be dichotomized into replies and non-replies, but should be seen in terms of a continuum which allowed for the analysis of response midway between a complete answer and a complete failure to answer. This statement suggested that politicians could take the liberty to choose what question to answer and whether or not to answer it. With a different approach, Harris (1991) drew a similar conclusion based on the analysis of three dimensions of answering, i.e. direct, indirect and challenges, given by interviewees from different walks of life. Her study found out that the tokens of direct answers given by politicians (barely over 39%) were considerably lower than any other groups of interviewees (averaging over 67%). This

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<sup>3</sup> Due to the constraint of space here, definitions of these indicators are omitted, but such indicators as are relevant to this study are discussed in detail in Section 4.

finding coincides with the general impression that politicians tend to give evasive answers in front of the media.

In sum, studies on question-answer sequences in broadcast interviews seem to suggest that interviewers are more likely to raise aggressive questions nowadays than decades ago, and politicians are more likely to give evasive answers than other groups of respondents. However, it should be noted that most of the previous research on media interviews is based on data drawn from English-speaking countries, in particular, from the U.S. and the U.K. What is not known is whether, and to what extent, the impetus towards the use of an adversarial style is observed in other socio-cultural contexts. Also, what remains unclear is whether the perception that politicians are evasive holds water for other cultures. Given this, the present study attempts to provide an alternative perspective to the study of political broadcast interviews by addressing the following issues based on data from Chinese government press conferences:

- (a) Does adversarial questioning characterize Chinese government press conferences as it does in many western countries?
- (b) Are there any differences in the design of questions by Chinese and foreign journalists? If yes, what are they?
- (c) How do Chinese politicians typically respond to questions at such events?
- (d) Is there any relationship between the style in which the questions are taken and the political style of the government?

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

The data of this study consists of ten Chinese government press conferences, held by the State Council Information Office since the present government took office in early 2003. All of them were broadcast via TV, radio or the internet. Two were attended by Premier

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Wen Jiabao<sup>4</sup> and the transcripts and footage can be downloaded from the internet<sup>5</sup>; the other eight press conferences were attended by different ministerial officials and the corresponding transcripts and footage can be downloaded from China's official portal, China Net<sup>6</sup>. Most of these question and answer sessions average 25 minutes; the one given by Foreign Minister Li lasts 90 minutes and the two given by Premier Wen last about 70 minutes each. As only Chinese transcripts are available on the internet, the exchange sequences in the footage that signal a frictional nature of the encounter will be glossed for analysis.

The exchanges in Chinese government press conferences is less interactive than most broadcast interviews in that in the former context only one-way flow of information is allowed with multiple journalists being information seekers and the spokesman being the sole information provider (Jiang 2006), and that each journalist is normally expected to ask questions only once due to the large number of journalists present. These organizational features of Chinese government press conferences offer an analytical basis which makes separate discussion of question and answer formats possible. Based on Clayman and Heritage's coding system (2002b), a pilot study is conducted. Preliminary findings show that some indicators (such as *question cascade*, *negatively formulated questions* and *preface hostility*) are not as prominent in the mainland Chinese context as in U.S. press conferences. Interestingly, two new indicators have been identified in the sample data of the Chinese government press conferences, which the author terms *target-oriented questioning* and *question tilt*. The former indicator (*target-oriented questioning*) may fall into the category of *directness* dimension, whilst the latter one (*question tilt*) may fall into the *assertive* category. See Table 1 for a summary of a comparison of dimensions and indicators for adversarial questioning that are prominent in the U.S presidential press conferences (column 4) and the Chinese government press conferences (column 5). The preliminary study also reveals that some indicators

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<sup>4</sup> The press conference given by the Premier is held regularly in March each year after the annual meeting of the CPPCC (Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference) and NPC (National People's Congress) in Beijing.

<sup>5</sup> [http://news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2004-03/15/content\\_1365856\\_2.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2004-03/15/content_1365856_2.htm), and [http://news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2005-03/14/content\\_2696724.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2005-03/14/content_2696724.htm), last accessed on 10 January 2010

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.china.com.cn/zhibo/zhuantu/ch-xinwen/node\\_7068339.htm](http://www.china.com.cn/zhibo/zhuantu/ch-xinwen/node_7068339.htm), last accessed on 5 June 2009.

might overlap in question design (which presumably applies in the U.S and other contexts as well). For example, a journalist may use both the strategy of complex questioning and target questioning at the same time in order to put forward his or her journalistic agenda. Therefore, the analysis of the present study is based on a modified coding system (as shown in Column 5 of Table 1), which yields a corpus of 96 questioning turns that happen to be split evenly between Chinese and foreign media (See Table 2).

Different from previous ‘categorization’ approaches in the discussion of responses to questions, this study attempts to examine the way politicians answer questions by treating each answer as a dynamic process itself including opening, elaborating and closing elements, much like a series of acts in a play, and provides a descriptive account of typical answering strategies adopted by Chinese politicians in such high-level, central government press conferences.

**Table 1:** Dimensions and Indicators for Adversarial Questioning

Dimensions	Clayman and Heritage's indicators (2002b)	New indicators	U.S. press conferences	Chinese press conferences
(a) Initiative:	(a1) Question complexity		√	√
	(a2) Question cascades		√	
	(a3) Follow-up question		√	√
(b) Directness	(b1) Other-referencing question frames		√	√
	(b2) Self-referencing question frames		√	√
	(nb) Target-oriented			√
(c) Assertiveness	(c1) Preface tilt		√	√
	(c2) Negatively formulated questions		√	
	(nc) Question tilt			√
(d) Hostility	(d1) Preface hostility		√	
	(d2) Global hostility		√	√
	(d3) Accountability questions		√	√

**Table 2:** Questioning Turns by Journalists

	Number	%
<b>Local JRN<sup>7</sup></b>	48	50
<b>Foreign JRN</b>	48	50
<b>Total</b>	96	100

<sup>7</sup> Local journalists, here and in this study, refer to journalists representing news agencies from mainland China. The abbreviations used in this paper are: JRN= Journalist; IR=Interviewer; IE=Interviewee; SASAC=State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission, P.R.C.

#### **4. QUESTIONING PRACTICE IN CHINESE GOVERNMENT PRESS CONFERENCES**

##### **4.1 Initiative**

According to Clayman and Heritage (2002b), instead of allowing interviewees to take the liberty to frame their own response, journalists may choose to raise questions in a more constrained way that confines the interviewee's answer to a certain degree. Clayman and Heritage term such practice 'initiative' questioning, and assume that the instances of initiative questions increase if the general practice of journalism is becoming adversarial (ibid: 754). Two indicators have been found for initiative questions in the sample data of the Chinese press conferences, i.e. complex questioning and follow-up questioning.

##### **4.1.1 Question complexity**

Unlike simple question design that consists of one or two sentences as in Example 1, some questions are designed in an extremely complicated way that includes prefaces and multiple questions as illustrated in Example 2.

**Example 1 (29 Dec 2003, IR: a journalist from *Wen Wei Po* of Hong Kong, IE: General Administrator Mr. Gong, General Administration of Customs)**

IR: 請問內地海關和香港海關有什麼具體合作內容?  
Could you please tell me some concrete cooperation schemes between Mainland and HK customs?<sup>8</sup>

**Example 2 (30 Nov 2004, IR: a journalist from *Bloomberg News*, IE: General Director Mr. Li, SASAC)**

IR: ... I have three questions. The first is can you confirm that Sinopec Group is in talks with Hutchison Whampoa to buy a stake in Hutchison Energy in Canada. What is your view about Chinese

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<sup>8</sup> The English texts after Chinese sequences in the examples throughout this paper are my translations.

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energy companies going overseas to buy companies in foreign countries? Second is a question about debt-for-equity swaps. Why are you making the investigations into the debt-for-equity swaps? What are you most concerned about? What will you do if you find irregularities? The third question is about listing. You just talked about listing in communications. Why is it that the companies that are under your control are choosing to list overseas when there is so much demand in China for these companies to be listed in China because the companies currently listed on the Chinese stock market, people are complaining about the quality? So why is it that they are all going overseas? ...Obviously you are running these companies, what is your view on increasing the dividend payout of these listed companies

IE: 您效率比較高，一下子提了四個問題，我想先回答第二個問題……

You are quite efficient, asking four questions in a row. I will take your second question first...

In Example 2, several questions are raised in one question turn by a foreign journalist with each single question heavily prefaced. This question design clearly multiplies the demands placed on the minister. As shown in his response, the minister recognized that the journalist had raised several questions in his time slot and chose to answer the second question first. All the questions were eventually responded by the minister in this case, exactly following the pre-designed agenda of the journalist. With complex questioning, the journalist may take the initiative in putting forward more specific or multiple questions which might contain information hostile to the ministers and the government alike as in Example 3.

**Example 3 (30 May 2003, IR: a journalist from *Sanke Shinbun* of Japan, IE: Deputy Health Minister Mr. Gao)**

IR: 高副部長，衛生部內除了張文康原部長以外，還有幾位官員應該承擔責任？您本人是幾月幾號知道北京疫情情況的，是從哪裡，以怎樣的方式知道的？在中央政府、地方政府的官員當中，到目前為止一共有多少個人應承擔責任？並因此而被免職？

Deputy Minister Gao, besides the former minister, who else should be held accountable? On which date and in which month did you know about the epidemic situation in Beijing, from where, and through which channel? How many officials in the central and local government should be held accountable thus far, and how many have been fired because of this?

The question here essentially addresses the issue of accountability. The foreign journalist embedded several specific inquisitions in her questioning including the additional number of officials being held accountable, the exact date and month when the minister got to know the serious situation of SARS outbreak in Beijing, and even the means and channel through which he gathered the information. A complex question design allows journalists to encode more journalistic enquiries than a single or simple design, which ultimately imposes pressure on interviewees to give specific answers and the ‘adversarialness’ in such interaction is likely to be stronger.

#### 4.1.2 Follow-up questions

Apart from complex questioning, the other indicator for initiative questions which can be found in the Chinese data is follow-up questioning. However, the follow-up question design discussed here is slightly different from that introduced in Clayman and Heritage (2002b) who use the term to refer to the situation where journalists exceed ‘the one-turn-per-journalist norm’ and regain the floor to raise a second or third question even though the chance of getting additional turns is small and depends on the spokesman’s choice of picking up journalists (ibid: 758). In this study, the one-journalist-one-turn norm is strictly followed and none of the journalists in the sample data got a second-turn to ask a question. Nevertheless, it is worth noticing that some journalists do formulate their questions based on the remarks in previous question-answer turns, and the author refers to this practice as ‘follow-up questions’ in this study. With the follow-up question design, journalists can dig deeper into a subject and impose pressure on the politician to provide focused answers, as seen in Example 4, where the journalist starts his question by saying “您剛才在講話中提到” (You mentioned earlier in your remarks). In this way, the journalist pushes the minister to give a more focused answer or elaborate on the remarks made earlier.

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**Example 4 (27 Jan 2005, IR: a journalist from *China Daily*, IE: Education Minister Mr. Zhou)**

IR: 周部長，您好。您剛才在講話中提到今年要繼續把農村教育擺在重中之重的位置，請問有哪些具體措施來繼續推進農村教育？

Minister Zhou, you mentioned in your earlier remarks that you would continue to put rural education at the top of your government agenda. Could you tell us some concrete measures that you will take in order to achieve this?

Follow-up questioning typically involves an initiative by the journalist to provide relevant background for the question itself and to narrow the scope of an acceptable response. In Example 4, the design of the question seems to limit the minister's response to the topic of rural education and to put the minister in a rather passive position where he has to provide relevant information on 'concrete measures' to address the issue.

Complex questions and follow-up questions are useful indicators of the initiative dimension of questioning. One may assume that the more complex the way a question is designed and the more relevant the question is to previous turns of talk, the stronger the initiative a journalist may take in questioning and thus the more aggressive the question may be. Table 3 is a summary of the distribution of initiative questions raised by Chinese and foreign journalists in the data. The table shows that initiative questioning is frequently used by both local and foreign journalists, and takes up 90% of the total questions raised by local journalists and 98% of those from foreign journalists. It also displays that complex questioning is more commonly used than follow-up questioning. Moreover, it indicates that 73% of questions are complex formulations, and 17% of questions are follow-up formulations asked by local journalists and 25% by foreign journalists. The data reveals that both local and foreign journalists ask initiative questions with high frequency (73% for both groups), but foreign journalists tend to further engage in follow-up questions more often than Chinese journalists (by a margin of about 8%).

**Table 3:** Initiative Dimension of Question Design by Journalists

		<b>Complexity</b>	<b>Follow-up</b>	<b>Others</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Local JRN</b>	N (%)	35 (73%)	8 (17%)	5 (10%)	48 (100%)
<b>Foreign JRN</b>	N (%)	35 (73%)	12 (25%)	1 (2%)	48 (100%)

#### 4.2 Directness

It has long been held that the way people express themselves can be generally distinguished into direct and indirect modes of speech, and research on the latter has helped nurture a relatively new branch of linguistic study, i.e. pragmatics. The indirect mode of speech is considered in many cultures to be a polite way of communication, which is displayed as an interactional ritual that poses less threat to the ‘face’ of either interlocutor (c.f. Brown and Levinson 1987; Goffman 1967). In light of this, direct questioning is also considered as less deferential than indirect questioning, and the latter often utilises polite forms of “a phrase, clause or sentence that precedes and frames the focal question” (Clayman and Heritage 2002b: 759).

##### 4.2.1 Other-referencing question frame

Based on Clayman and Heritage’s coding system, one of the indicators for the directness dimension is the ‘other-referencing question frame’, which involves reference to the interviewee’s ‘ability or willingness’ to respond to the question (ibid: 759). Similar to what is found in the U.S press conferences, journalists in the Chinese data are also found to frame their questions by using modal verbs such as ‘can’, followed by verbs such as ‘comment’ ‘explain’ and ‘tell’. This type of question design generally falls under the rubric of ‘ability type of questioning’ as in Example 5. Here, by framing the question with ‘can you give us...’ (see the underlined), the journalist slightly challenges the deputy health minister’s authority to provide relevant information.

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**Example 5 (30 May 2003, IR: a journalist from *Associated Press of Pakistan*, IE: Deputy Health Minister Mr. Gao)**

IR: You have made some positive remarks on the results for SARS; can you give us some ideas on when you can finally get rid of SARS?

Interestingly, unlike the finding in the U.S. presidential press conferences (Clayman and Heritage 2002b); there are no ‘willingness-type’ questions found in the sample questions of Chinese government press conferences. In English, the frame of ‘would you’ conveys a sense of deference to the addressee; whereas its literal translation into Chinese (‘你會’) loses the deferential flavour unless Chinese linguistic markers of politeness such as ‘您’ (the polite form of second person single pronoun ‘you’) are used. The ‘ability’ frame is generally more direct and aggressive than the ‘willingness’ frame. If journalists tend to be more aggressive in their question design, more ‘ability’ frame of other-referencing questions would be expected.

4.2.2 Self-referencing question frames

Another indicator for the directness dimension is the ‘self-referencing question frame’, which involves reference to journalists’ “own intentions, motivations, or capacity to ask the question” (ibid: 761). It may be formulated with phrases such as ‘I wonder’ and ‘I want to know’, as illustrated in Example 6

**Example 6 (30 May 2003, IR: a journalist from *China Daily*, IE: Deputy Health Minister Mr. Gao)**

IR: 剛才您提到，這次非典疫情暴露了我國在公共衛生建設這方面的問題，我現在想知道，我們在這方面有什麼具體的打算？  
Just now you mentioned that the SARS outbreak had exposed a number of problems in our public health system. I now want to know, do we have any specific plan to tackle these problems?

Such type of self-referencing as underlined “我現在想知道” (I now want to know) refers to the journalist’s own intention to dig into the matter and functions as an outright request for a specific answer from the

interviewee. In this case, the question is a direct enquiry about concrete measures for improving the public health system which increases the pressure on the minister to provide a direct answer.

Both self-referencing and other-referencing question frames are introduced by Clayman and Heritage (2002b) in order to examine the directness dimension of adversarial questioning in the analysis of press conferences. In the present study, one new indicator for directness is discovered in the Chinese context, which the author terms *target-oriented* questioning.

#### 4.2.3 Target-oriented questioning

This indicator refers to a range of questions that are formulated in a highly target-oriented manner. For example, questions of this type may be designed to enquire about statistical figures (as in Example 7) or the interviewee's personal issues (as in Example 10), or prefaced with a topic sentence to solicit a leading response from interviewees (as in Examples 8 and 9). It is assumed that the more target oriented the question is designed, the more aggressive it appears.

#### **Example 7 (30 Nov 2004, IR: a journalist from *Interfax* of Russia, IE: General Director Mr. Li, SASAC)**

IR: 我有這樣一個問題，現在國有企業建立股份制，百分之多少的股份是屬於國家，百分之多少的股份可以上市？

I have a question. Many state-owned enterprises have been reorganized into the share-holding system. What percentage of shares is owned by the state and what percentage is owned by public investors?

In Example 7, the use of “百分之多少” (what percentage) clearly specifies the type of answers that the journalist expects, i.e. the statistical figures that show the distribution of shares between the state and public investors. Alternatively, by using “實效性” (truly effective) in Example 8, the journalist is questioning the effectiveness of implementing “the one-fee-for-all policy”.

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**Example 8 (27 Jan 2005, IR: a journalist from *Jingbao* of China, IE: Education Minister Mr. Zhou)**

IR: 從 2004 年 9 月份開始，實現了“一費制”，有什麼實效性的進展或是成果？

The one-fee-for-all <tuition> policy was implemented in September 2004, what truly effective improvements have been made or results achieved?

As shown in Examples 7 and 8, specific lexical choices may frame questions in a way that pushes interviewees to give specific answers. Such target-oriented questioning may threaten the ‘negative face’ of the interviewees (Brown and Levinson 1987) and can also be regarded as a type of adversarial questioning. Other ways of showing the target purpose in questions are illustrated in Examples 9 and 10.

**Example 9 (14 Mar 2004, IR: a journalist from *ARD TV* of Germany, IE: Premier Wen Jiabao)**

IR: About the Constitution... my question is what do you, Premier Wen, plan to do to make sure that in the future the law is above the Communist Party rather than today the Communist Party seems to be above the law?

The question in Example 9 is prefaced with a topical phrase at the beginning (‘about the Constitution’), which clearly defines the scope of the question. Proposing the topic at the very beginning may lead the interviewee to give a focused answer, and once the topic is specified, it paves the way for the journalist to unfold potentially aggressive questions as in example 9 where the question implies a criticism of the Communist Party. Such tone of criticism is even more salient in Example 10, where the journalist packages his journalistic agenda by challenging the performance of the minister (see the underlined part), and the ultimate effect of the questioning appears fairly confrontational.

**Example 10 (27 Jan 2005, IR: a journalist from *China Radio International*, IE: Education Minister Mr. Zhou)**

IR: 第二個問題，周部長出任教育部長快兩年的時間了，教育是每個人都關心的問題，您也面臨著一些批評或者是種種非議，請問周部長對於這些批評持什麼態度？

Second question, it has been two years since you, Minister Zhou, took office. Education is an issue of common concern. You are also faced with criticisms of one kind or other. What is your attitude towards the criticism, Minister Zhou?

The results of the three indicators for direct questioning that are found in the data are summarized in Table 4. The use of ‘target-oriented’ questioning design is prevalent for both local and foreign journalists with 52% and 67% respectively. Though the frequency of using ‘other-referencing frame’ is more or less the same for foreign and local journalists, the foreign journalists do employ more ‘self-referencing frame’ question designs than their local counterparts.

**Table 4:** Direct Dimension of Question Design by Journalists

		Other-referencing	Self-referencing	Target-oriented	Others	Total
Local JRN	N (%)	6 (13%)	3 (6%)	25 (52%)	14 (29%)	48 (100%)
Foreign JRN	N (%)	5 (10%)	7 (15%)	32 (67%)	4 (8%)	48 (100%)

**4.3 Assertiveness**

The third dimension of the adversarial style, which Clayman and Heritage (2002b) term ‘assertiveness’, refers to the type of questioning which implies a certain response to be given or pushes for a particular answer from the interviewee (ibid:762). Certainly, there is no absolute neutrality in journalism; however, different types of question design may suggest different degrees of neutrality or partiality, and some do appear more assertive in their design than others in terms of expressing “an opinion on the subject being inquired about”, thus suggesting “one type of answer as expectable or preferable” (ibid). The discussion of assertive

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questioning can be signalled by two indicators: *preface tilt* and *question tilt*.

#### 4.3.1 Preface tilt

Preface tilt, obviously, refers to the design of a question that suggests a preference for an answer that may be contained in the statement before the question itself (ibid: 763). As pointed out by Clayman and Heritage, not all prefatory statements tilt a certain type of answer, most function as introductory remarks such as background information of an event to both addressed and unaddressed audiences. However, some do push for a particular answer (from the interviewee), which may severely threaten the image of the politician and the institution he or she represents, as illustrated in Example 11.

#### **Example 11 (30 May 2003, IR: a journalist from *Kyodo News* of Japan, IE: Deputy Health Minister Mr. Gao)**

IR: I think many people appreciate the efforts the governments at local and national level have been making to stop the spread of SARS. But there has been some criticism that the efforts have been in some way concentrated more directed at being seen to be doing something ..., rather than being directed at small practical measures. For instance, there is a big meeting of SARS next week. And the requirement for the journalists to attend is they having medical checks. This involves not only checking temperatures, but also taking blood test and doing X-ray examination. And the WHO actually said these measures are not necessary, but it will be appropriate enough just to have temperature checked on the day. And just comparing this with the situation at Beijing train station where I went last week. And you know the toilet, there is no soap and that means people are unable to wash their hands. And just considering that, I believe SARS spreads very easily through human contact, and there seems to be something you've missed there.

This is an extreme case with a tilting preface that is hugely hostile. Before pointing out the inadequacy of the government's efforts at the end ("there seems to be something you've missed there"), the journalist employs a lengthy prefatory statement to introduce the ineffective

measures taken by the government (see the underlined part). These prefatory remarks effectively lead the question to a 'yes' answer that government's efforts did have missed out something. Moreover, the titled preface itself is simply a criticism of the government.

#### 4.3.2 Question tilt

Apart from being assertive in the preface frame, journalists may also formulate assertions in the question proper, and the latter design is termed by the author 'question tilt'. In the Chinese press conferences, most of the assertive questioning is formulated with the use of question tilt (with 31% of local questions and 52% of foreign questions so designed). These question tilts mostly include Chinese syntactic structures such as 'do-not-do', as shown in Example 12.

**Example 12 (14 Mar. 2004, IR: a journalist from TVB of Hong Kong, IE: Premier Wen Jiabao)**

IR: 香港自從回歸以來，每當我們有經濟困難的時候，中央都大力支持，去年底就實行了 CEPA 還有開放自由行……中央最近會不會有新的措施出臺來支持香港的經濟？

Since HK's handover to China, whenever Hong Kong has been faced with a difficult situation, the central government has supported Hong Kong by all means. Last year, the CEPA and the Flexible Travel Scheme were put in place.... So now, will or will not the central government come up with new measures to help Hong Kong?

The Chinese structure of 'do-not-do' (roughly translatable into English 'will-V-or-won't-V') provides alternatives for response. However, in some cases, one of the alternatives is definitely preferred or implied. In Example 12, considering the relationship between Hong Kong and China and the economic difficulties in Hong Kong, the central government has the responsibility to support Hong Kong by all means. Therefore, the question “中央最近會不會有新的措施出臺” (will or will not the Central Government come up with new measures), though seemingly suggesting both 'yes' and 'no' answers, actually pushes for the 'yes' answer, i.e. “會出臺新措施” (will come up with new measures). Not surprisingly, Premier Wen, in his response to the question, does pledge Beijing's continued commitment to the economic

sustainability of Hong Kong. The results for the two indicators of assertiveness in the data are summarized in Table 5. They show that it is not common for either local or foreign journalists to use prefaced tilts. Such instances take up only 2% and 6% of the respective total questions. In contrast, tilts in the question proper are more frequently used, with 31% of the local and 52% of the foreign questions framed in this way. In addition, assertive questioning is more widely used by foreign journalists, 21% more often in using tilted question proper and 4% more often in using tilted preface than local journalists. In sum, foreign journalists tend to ask more assertive questions than their local counterparts. This result corresponds with what are reported in the discussion of the first two adversarial dimensions.

**Table 5:** Assertive Dimension of Question Design

		Prefaced tilt	Question tilt	Others	Total
<b>Local JRN</b>	N (%)	1 (2%)	15 (31%)	32 (67%)	48 (100%)
<b>Foreign JRN</b>	N (%)	3 (6%)	25 (52%)	10 (42%)	48 (100%)

#### 4.4 Hostility

Hostility, referring to questioning that is ‘overtly critical’ of the interviewees and the institutions they represent, is the last dimension of the adversarial style introduced by Clayman and Heritage (2002b). This is also the dimension that is measured differently from other dimensions discussed earlier as hostility is less assessed by the linguistic features of question designs, but more by the ‘thematic or topical content’ of the questioning (ibid: 766). In order to code questions in terms of the hostility dimension, Clayman and Heritage introduced three indicators, i.e. *preface hostility* (the question design in which prefatory statements contain critical remarks), *global hostility* (the question design in which both the preface and the question proper contain critical remarks) and *accountability questions* (challenging the accountability of the interviewee or the institution he/she represents). In the Chinese context, however, only ‘global hostility’ and ‘accountability’ questions are found as in Example 13 below and Example 3 above; no instances of ‘preface hostility’ are discovered, although this does not exclude the relevance of the latter indicator for a study of a larger corpus.

4.4.1 Global hostility

Example 13 is typical to illustrate ‘global hostility’, which contains an overt criticism of the government (see the underlined part) in both the preface and the question proper. In the prefatory remark, the foreign journalist identified an inconsistency in the minister’s remarks by pointing out that “so I don’t understand why you were saying that he did not try to conceal the epidemic”. Also, the prefatory statement is critical of the government as the information is not shared properly, in particular the information regarding SARS cases in military hospitals. In the question proper, the journalist expresses his dissatisfaction with the government, to the highest degree, by overtly challenging the government that “why is it so difficult to enforce the sharing of information which we all know is very critical in the treatment and prevention of SARS”.

**Example 13 (30 Mar 2003; IR: a journalist from CNN, IE: Deputy Health Minister Mr. Gao)**

IR: I remember it was in this very room when the former Health Minister Zhang Wenkang told the press in April that SARS epidemic has been effectively controlled even though it turned out SARS epidemic was spreading wildly in China. So I don’t understand why you were saying that he did not try to conceal the epidemic. My other question is although a lot of information is now being collected concerning SARS, some experts complained that much of the information is still not being shared not just with the outside world such as agencies like the WHO, but also among the Chinese agencies involved in the prevention and treatment of the SARS. Particularly, they complain that information pertaining to and coming from the military establishments are not being shared. Is that the case? If so, why is it so difficult to enforce the sharing of information which we all know is very critical in the treatment and prevention of SARS?

4.4.2 Accountability questions

The final indicator for hostility dimension is ‘accountability’ questioning which refers to the design of questions that overtly challenges the

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accountability of the officials and the government per se and can be seen as showing the highest degree of adversarialness. Example 3 above is an illustration of this point, repeated here for convenience.

**Example 3 (30 May 2003, IR: a journalist from *Sanke Shinbun* of Japan, IE: Deputy Health Minister Mr. Gao)**

IR: 高副部長，衛生部內除了張文康原部長以外，還有幾位官員應該承擔責任？您本人是幾月幾號知道北京疫情情況的，是從哪裡，以怎樣的方式知道的？在中央政府、地方政府的官員當中，到目前為止一共有多少個人應承擔責任？並因此而被免職？  
Deputy Minister Gao, besides the former minister, who else should be held accountable? On which date and in which month did you know about the epidemic situation in Beijing, from where, and through which channel? How many officials in the central and local government should be held accountable thus far, and how many have been fired because of this?

The question in Example 3 openly asked for the number of officials that were held accountable in both the central and local governments due to the ineffective response to the SARS epidemic. It touches on the issue of accountability both at the beginning and the end of the question. Accountability questions are generally considered the most adversarial style of questioning and the most serious face threats posed to interviewees because by framing questions in such a way, journalists may display quite different lines from those of the interviewees'.

The distribution of hostile questions is summarized in Table 6. The results indicate that hostile questioning is relatively uncommon on the part of local journalists in the context of mainland Chinese high-profile press conferences. Only three local questions imply negative comments on the performance of the government and no local ones touch on the issue of accountability at all. On the contrary, hostile questioning seems to be employed more frequently by foreign journalists as 36% of the total questions raised by foreign journalists can be placed under the hostility dimension, surprisingly higher than in the U.S. context (Clayman and Heritage 2002b: 768). This is probably caused by the different thematic and topical contents of the press conferences being held. More hostile questioning is expected during press conferences on emergent topics such as the SARS outbreak than on ordinary topics.

**Table 6:** Hostile Dimension of Question Design by Journalists

		Global hostility	Accountability	Others	Total
<b>Local JRN</b>	N (%)	3 (6%)	0	45 (94%)	48 (100%)
<b>Foreign JRN</b>	N (%)	9 (19%)	8 (17%)	31 (64%)	48 (100%)

## 5. ANSWERING PRACTICE OF CHINESE MINISTERS

Having discussed various means of adversarial question designs and how they are manifested in Chinese government press conferences, it is worthwhile to look at how government officials deal with such aggressive questioning under the spotlight. Unlike previous research, the present study treats each answer turn as a dynamic and independent performance including opening, elaboration and closing. The following section will discuss the three stages of answering on a case-by-case basis.

### 5.1 Opening

In dealing with relatively polite or less adversarial questions, the Chinese ministers tend to start answering by commenting on the immediately preceding question. Some of these comments seem to have nothing to do with the main message he or she wants to convey and are generally regarded as cooperative gestures towards the press. Some of these remarks are formulaic expressions such as “謝謝你的問題” (thank you for the question). Some comment on the positive values of the question, for example, “非常感謝你提出了一個大家非常關注的，也是社會輿論關注的問題” (thank you for raising a question which is of concern to both the public and the press). In response to difficult questions, however, some ministers start by challenging the question first. This seems to be an effective tactic for gaining some extra time for reflection, as seen in Example 14.

**Example 14 (14 Mar 2005, IR: a journalist from *Much-TV* of Taiwan, IE: Premier Wen Jiabao)**

IR1: 在剛剛結束的人大會議上，我知道以非常高的票數通過了反分裂國家法……不曉得這個新的法律對於這些廣大台商的權

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益是不是會造成任何影響；或者相反，而是對他們的權益有進一步保障？

In the recently concluded NPC meeting, the Anti-Secession Law was approved with an overwhelming majority of votes... I wonder whether this new law will affect the interests of the Taiwan businessmen living in mainland China, or is it formulated to help protect their interests.

IE1: 我想先問你一句，你看到這部法律沒有？

I want to ask you something first. Have you read this law?

IR2: 看過相關的法條。

Read relevant articles.

In this example, a Taiwanese journalist asked Premier Wen about the recently formulated Anti-Secession Law. Instead of answering the question directly, Premier Wen challenged the journalist by asking “我想先問你一句，你看到這部法律沒有？” (I want to ask you something first. Have you read this law?). This unexpected question from the Premier took the journalist by surprise as evidenced in her simple short answer afterwards, “看過相關的法條” (read relevant articles). Challenging the journalist with a question may somehow change the dynamics of the situation and provide the interviewee some extra time to organise his/her answer and therefore may help put forward his/her own agendas more forcefully.

In some extremely challenging circumstances, some ministers choose to start answering by using counter-arguments such as in Example 15. In this example, the journalist mentioned that the former minister of health had been fired because of the covering-up of information regarding SARS cases; and in his response, the minister started by pointing out the question itself was beyond the scope of the SARS prevention and control and then expressed his disagreement on what the journalist had said in the preceding question with respect to the reason for the resignation of the former minister of health. This move may also give the interviewee some valuable time to reflect on how to develop his answer further.

**Example 15 (30 May 2003, IR: a journalist from *United Press International*, IE: Deputy Health Minister Mr. Gao)**

IE: 這個問題已經超出了非典防治的範圍。首先，我不認同這位記者提出的……

This question is beyond the scope of the SARS prevention and control. First of all, I disagree with what you said about the reason why Mr. Zhang Wenkang resigned...

Another common way for the Chinese ministers to start an answer is to reaffirm relevant government policies against harsh questioning as illustrated in Example 16. In this case, the journalist prefaced his question with the remark that some people believe Chinese foreign policies are not oriented towards the interest of Chinese people. Instead of arguing against this remark, the minister of foreign affairs reaffirmed the principles of Chinese foreign policies at the very beginning of his response, ignoring the negative comment in the previous question.

**Example 16 (6 Mar 2005, IR: a journalist from *CCTV of China*, IE: Minister of Foreign Affairs Mr. Li)**

IE: 中國外交致力於維護世界和平、促進共同發展、推動互利合作、為中國人民服務……

Chinese foreign policies are aimed at maintaining world peace, promoting common development, boosting mutually beneficial cooperation and serving the Chinese people ...

**5.2 Elaborating**

After the opening remarks, the interviewees under study are keen to elaborate their points of view by using idiomatic expressions or quotations. This practice is found to be more frequently used in the Premier's press conferences. It is observed that in Premier Wen's 2004 press conference alone, as many as eight idioms and quotations are used. For example, in response to a Taiwan-related question, the Premier

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quoted two poems written by Taiwanese poets in a row<sup>9</sup>. The quotations suggest that the Premier and the Chinese government he represents are feeling very close to the people in Taiwan. So far, the effect of such practice of elaboration is not known; however, it helps mitigate the interactional friction to a certain extent.

Having examined all answer turns in the collected data, one interesting finding is that Chinese ministers do appear candid and accountable in the face of challenging questions, in particular, to those related to the highest degree of hostility, i.e. accountability. In Example 17, a foreign journalist asks whether some officials concerned in the Department of Health should be held accountable for the ineffective management of the SARS outbreak, and the response that the Deputy Minister has given sounds sincere and firm.

**Example 17 (30 Mar 2003, IR: a journalist from *Sanke Shinbun* of Japan, IE: Deputy Health Minister Mr. Gao)**

IE: 張文康同志任衛生部長的時候，衛生部出了問題，他當然應該負責任。我到衛生部以後，如果再出了問題，我來負責。

When Mr. Zhang Wenkang was in office, problems occurred. Of course he should be held accountable. Now I'm in the office, if any problem occurs, I am the person who should be held accountable.

**5.3 Closing**

Closing here refers not only to the concluding part of the answer to each question, but also to the general concluding remark of the entire press conference. It is observed that the ministers tend to utilise the last minute effect to strengthen their political agendas.

In the press conference given by Foreign Minister Li, for instance, in his response to a final question about international cooperation on anti-corruption, he took this last-minute opportunity to criticize Taiwan's

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<sup>9</sup> The first quotation is “春愁難遣強看山，往事驚心淚欲潸，四百萬人同一哭，去年今日割臺灣” (On such a nice spring day, my heart was so heavy with sadness. So I went out sightseeing in the mountain, however, my mind always went back to this day last year when four million people on Taiwan cried the same tears of sorrow as Taiwan was ceded), by poet 丘逢甲 (Pengjia Qiu). The second quotation is “原鄉人的血，必須流返原鄉，才會停止沸騰” (Only when the blood of the native son flows back to his native place will it stop boiling), by poet 鐘理和 (Lihe Zhong).

“美元外交” (‘dollar diplomacy’, using money to win the support of other countries), and asserted that this was in fact a kind of “行賄外交” (‘bribery diplomacy’). Similarly, at the very end of the Premier’s press conference after the annual meeting of NPC 2005, Premier Wen showed his closeness to the people by saying that “We meet every year, but it (our conversation) is still too little, too short”. This concluded his whole press conference with a long applause. Remarks as such certainly help the officials win support and trust from the audience.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

The coding system developed by Clayman and Heritage (2002b) proves to be particularly relevant to the study of adversarial questioning in Chinese press conferences. This study has examined ten sampled Chinese government press conferences and coded all the question turns based on the four dimensions of adversarial style (initiative, directness, assertiveness and hostility) and a modified set of nine indicators for the design of adversarial questions. Of the nine indicators, two are newly identified in the Chinese context, i.e. target-oriented questioning and question tilt (see Column 5 in Table 1 for a summary of all indicators used). The results indicate that adversarial questioning is also emerging in Chinese broadcast press conferences despite the fact that traditional values such as ‘face-saving’ and ‘face-giving’ run deep in the Chinese socio-cultural context (e.g. Gu 1990; Smith 1894). Significantly, the pattern of questioning suggests that local Chinese journalists do ask challenging questions and they tend to employ complex and target-oriented question designs to this end. In addition, all indicators for the four dimensions point towards a similar conclusion that foreign journalists are much more aggressive than their Chinese counterparts in asking politicians challenging questions, in particular hostile questions. The rationale for such different journalist practices is not fully known yet; however, some socio-cultural differences may be taken into consideration such as the relatively greater news freedom that western media is able to enjoy, and a potential desire among the local journalistic community to safeguard national dignity.

With respect to the answering pattern, this paper takes a different approach from that of the previous studies by treating each answer turn as a dynamic process consisting of opening, elaborating and closing.

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Generally speaking, the Chinese officials address the challenging questions in a firm and candid manner, and that they tend to employ various strategies such as prefacing with an initial comment on the preceding question, challenging the credibility of the interviewer or the appropriateness of the question, using idioms, quotations and the last minute effects to clarify their policies, point out misconceptions and admit their inadequacies if necessary, in order to pursue their political agendas. It is also interesting to observe that even though China's official news liaison had not been developed into a formal system until recent years (Information Bureau of the China State Council Information Office, 2007), the manner in which Chinese high-ranking officials deal with journalistic questions under the spotlight seems to be quite impressive, particularly in projecting the image of being capable, responsible, and caring for the people. The general pattern of how the new leaders handle these press conferences appears consistent with their endeavour to create an open and honest government.

Investigation into the question-answer sequences in press conferences or other genres of broadcast interviews based on a larger corpus can be a promising topic for future research. And comparative studies on journalistic practice in different social-cultural contexts and across different periods of time in history are also potentially interesting.

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探究中國政府新聞發佈會中的對抗式提問及作答策略

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對政治人物訪談和政府新聞發佈會進行研究可以幫助人們瞭解一個國家的政策走向及國民生存狀態。相關研究已經發現在西方政治人物訪談中，記者對政治人物的提問愈加具有對抗性 (Clayman and Heritage 2002a/b)，這種對抗式的提問風格已經影響到了中西文明交匯的香港(Yip 2003)。而對於更廣泛的華人地區記者和政治人物之間的語言互動及問答風格，目前還沒有太多的深入探討。本文基於 Clayman 和 Heritage 兩位學者所提出的‘對抗式提問’分析模型 (2002b)，將對在中國大陸召開的十場新聞發佈會進行研究，試圖探討中國政府新聞發佈會中問答的語言特色，特別關注中外記者提問的風格差異，各種對抗式提問的形式，政府官員的作答策略以及由此反映出的本屆政府的執政理念。

關鍵字：對抗性提問，政府新聞發佈會