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Chapter 4

TRAUMA REPORTING AND ITS IMPACT ON JOURNALISTS: A CASE STUDY OF LEADING CHINESE NEWS OUTLETS

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Trauma reporting such as disaster, war and conflict often generates large newspaper headlines as news deemed to have impact, proximity and scale tends to attract the audience's attention. Journalists are asked to seize "immediate, dramatic and novel" news to evoke "excited curiosity", by digging and exposing "the blood, injury and violence", a trend that is more evident in commercial news outlets.¹ Reports about conflicts and disasters also conform to the fourth-estate mantle of serving the public interest; to inform, educate and unite the public, especially in the event of a tragedy. In China, there is now more room for journalists to navigate when reporting such topics and since the 1990s there have seen numerous occasions when Chinese correspondents have been able to cover traumatic events like disaster, war and conflicts in and out China. This has been aimed at domestic and even international audiences.²

Conventionally, journalists are deemed to be the impact-makers through their agenda-setting and framing, but the impact on themselves is largely neglected. This omission is further complicated by the negative attitude towards stress and its symptoms, or generic help-seeking. It is a culture of silence.³ Some research views journalism as a macho profession and journalists as a resilient group.⁴ Yet, journalists and correspondents are not always well-trained or prepared before they are sent to

¹ Eileen Berrington and Ann Jemphrey, "Pressures on the Press: Reflections on Reporting Tragedy," *Journalism* 4:2 (2003): 4.

² Shixin Ivy Zhang, "The New Breed of Chinese War Correspondents: Their Motivations and Roles, and the Impact of Digital Technology," *Media, War & Conflict* 6:3 (2013).

³ Neil Greenberg et al., "Journalists' and Media Professionals' Attitudes to Ptsd and Help-Seeking: A Descriptive Study," *Journal of Mental Health* 18:6 (2009).

⁴ *Ibid*; Patrice A. Keats and Marla J. Buchanan, "Covering Trauma in Canadian Journalism: Exploring the Challenges," *Traumatology* 19:3 (2013).

cover events that in themselves induce trauma. Some of them are early-career journalists who may not know what after effects they may encounter. *The Bang-Bang Club* is a precise and extreme case to show that journalists who cover tragedy and trauma “do not walk away clean”⁵. Self-reported symptoms were well documented in a number of studies conducted in professions that directly deal with traumatic events or witnesses of trauma, such as firefighters,⁶ combat veterans⁷, mental-health workers⁸, social and clinical workers.⁹ Journalists who cover trauma are put into similar situations where they also experience events that “involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others, and that their immediate response involved intense fear, helplessness, or horror”¹⁰. Recent years have seen a steady growth in research on journalists working in traumatizing situations as they may be vulnerable to symptoms similar to the direct victims¹¹ and experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD),¹² vicarious

⁵ William J. Drummond, "Equipping Journalists with Tools for Emotional Balance," *Nieman Reports* 58 (2004): 80.

⁶ Laura Riolli and Victor Savicki, "Firefighters' Psychological and Physical Outcomes after Exposure to Traumatic Stress: The Moderating Roles of Hope and Personality," *Traumatology* 18:3 (2012); Shannon L. Wagner, Juanita A. McFee, and Crystal A. Martin, "Effects of Traumatic Stress on Firefighters' World Assumptions," *Traumatology* 15:1 (2009).

⁷ J. Kale Monk, Brian G. Ogolsky, and Victoria Bruner, "Veteran Couples Integrative Intensive Retreat Model: An Intervention for Military Veterans and Their Relational Partners," *Journal of Couple & Relationship Therapy* 15:2 (2016); M. Graça Pereira, Susana Pedras, and Cristiana Lopes, "Posttraumatic Stress, Psychological Morbidity, Psychopathology, Family Functioning, and Quality of Life in Portuguese War Veterans," *Traumatology* 18: 3 (2012).

⁸ Marla Buchanan et al., "Secondary Traumatic Stress: An Investigation of Canadian Mental Health Workers," *Traumatology* 12:4 (2006).

⁹ Kyle D. Killian, "Helping Till It Hurts? A Multimethod Study of Compassion Fatigue, Burnout, and Self-Care in Clinicians Working with Trauma Survivors," *Ibid.* 14:2 (2008).

¹⁰ Paul Bennett et al., "Associations Between organisational and Incident Factors and Emotional Distress in Emergency Ambulance Personnel," *British Journal of Clinical Psychology* 44 (2005): 216.

¹¹ Roger A. Simpson and James G. Boggs, "An Exploratory Study of Traumatic Stress among Newspaper Journalists," *Journalism and Communication Monographs* 1:1 (1999).

¹² Anthony Feinstein, John Owen, and Nancy Blair, "A Hazardous Profession: War, Journalists, and Psychopathology," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 159 (2002); Caroline M. Pyevich, Elana Newman, and Eric Daleiden, "The Relationship among Cognitive Schemas, Job-Related Traumatic Exposure, and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in Journalists," *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 16 (2003); Elina Newman, Roger Simpson, and David Handschuh, "Trauma Exposure and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder among Photojournalists," *Visual Communication Quarterly* 10:1 (2003); Roger Simpson and William Coté, *Covering Violence: A Guide to Ethical Reporting About Victims & Trauma*, 2nd edn. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Mark Sinyor and Anthony Feinstein, "War, Journalism, and Psychopathology: Does Gender Play a Role?," *Traumatology* 18:1 (2012).

traumatization or secondary traumatic stress STS,¹³ among other types of crisis. Detailed effects were identified as depression, anxiety and relationship problems, burnout, compassion fatigue, numbing and so on.¹⁴ Also, the accumulation of exposure at work to more intense crises was found to have caused negative impact on the psychological well-being of journalists.¹⁵ What is worse, journalists covering tragic events tend to “compartmentalize” their emotions and “isolate them from professional reactions”¹⁶ leaving their difficulties unattended.

Previous studies were mostly conducted from Anglo-American perspectives. This chapter intends to address the challenges Chinese journalists experience when covering traumatic events like disaster, crime and war, and how they respond to and cope with the aftermath, to fill in the gap of existing knowledge from a non-western perspective. It aims to investigate the emotional and professional impacts through semi-structured in-depth interviews with four “elites” in Chinese leading national news outlets producing national and international news.

Research questions and methodology

A review of the literature reveals that little research has been done on the dealing with emotion and stress caused by producing tragedy coverage in China. This study will attempt to fill part of what is something of a lacuna by asking the following research questions: What experience do the reporters encounter during or after reporting trauma in and outside China?; what effect and impact are caused by being directly exposed to traumatic events or engaging with trauma survivors?; and, finally, what are their strategies in coping with work-related or personal stress?

This project initially recruited 21 participants who covered traumatic events from Chinese tier-two cities in 2013, namely Chengdu, Ningbo and Dalian. The sample number was very small compared with previous western research and thus the results are not discussed in this chapter. However, these questionnaires were useful in

¹³ Keats and Buchanan, "Covering Trauma in Canadian Journalism"; Patrice A. Keats and Marla J. Buchanan, "Addressing the Effects of Assignment Stress Injury," *Journalism Practice* 3:2 (2009); Greenberg et al., "Journalists' and Media Professionals' Attitudes to Ptsd and Help-Seeking: A Descriptive Study."; Buchanan et al., "Secondary Traumatic Stress: An Investigation of Canadian Mental Health Workers."

¹⁴ Katherine N. Kinnick, Dean M. Krugman, and Glen T. Cameron, "Compassion Fatigue: Communication and Burnout toward Social Problems," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 73:3 (1996); Rebecca J. Erickson and Christian Ritter, "Emotional Labor, Burnout, and Inauthenticity: does Gender Matter?," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 64:2 (2001).

¹⁵ Klas Backholm and Kaj Björkqvist, "Journalists' Emotional Reactions after Working with the Jokela School Shooting Incident," *Media, War & Conflict* 5, no. 2 (2012); Dworzniak Gretchen, "Journalism and Trauma: How Reporters and Photographers Make Sense of What They See," *Journalism Studies* 7:4 (2006); Charles R. Figley, *Compassion Fatigue: Coping with Secondary Traumatic Stress Disorder in Those Who Treat the Traumatized* (New York, NY: Brunner/Mazel, 1995).

¹⁶ Simpson and Boggs, "An Exploratory Study of Traumatic Stress", 1.

the preparation of in-depth interview questions for this qualitative study. The interview protocol consisted of a list of open-ended questions. For example: how many years of traumatic coverage experience?; what relevant training and support was received before and during work?; what experiences have journalists encountered when covering incidents?; what kind of pressure and stress do they encounter when witnessing gory scenes?; and how do journalists cope with or overcome this pressure or stress?

For the purposes of this study, four journalists who work for Chinese leading news outlets were recruited. These were an on-camera reporter with extensive trauma reporting experience from *CCTV News* channel,¹⁷ one war correspondent from the *Global Times*,¹⁸ and two war correspondents from *Xinhua News Agency*,¹⁹ including one photo-journalist embedded with troops. The rationale behind their inclusion in this study was: (a) they work for leading national news outlets, which are more representative as these news organisations have the financial and technical resources to sponsor war coverage or to provide large-scale and lengthy disaster reports; (b) they represent a cross-section of roles within the journalism profession, working as print, broadcast and visual journalists with outputs in text, photography and video formats; (c) they have enough exposure to various types of traumatic events, including natural disasters, severe accidents, massive explosions, wars and conflicts (it should be noted that there is no clear-cut division between war correspondents or disaster journalists in Chinese journalism as yet). The participants recruited had more experience of being exposed to traumatic events than other journalists who cover routine news. War correspondents interviewed were initially overseas correspondents who covered a range of news in a foreign country and later were deployed to conflict zones for war coverage. They are part of the new breed of war correspondents in Chinese journalism.²⁰

The interviews were conducted face-to-face, by telephone, WeChat and QQ live chat from 2013 to 2015 ranging from 40 minutes to two hours. Ethical approval was gained from the University of Nottingham Ningbo. Interviewees were informed

¹⁷ *China Central Television, CCTV*, is China's predominant national broadcasting network with 50 channels broadcasting in six languages, reaching more than one billion viewers. *CCTV13*, the news channel, has broadcast 24-hour news reports exclusively in Mandarin Chinese from 2003, covering domestic and international affairs. Programmes feed into various news programmes for other channels and are also available via satellite.

¹⁸ The *Global Times* is a daily Chinese newspaper established in 1993 by the People's Daily, focusing on international issues with a nationalist perspective. It is a commercialised newspaper with a claimed circulation of 2 million.

¹⁹ The *Xinhua News Agency* is the official press agency of China. It is a ministry-level institution subordinate to the Chinese central government. *Xinhua* is the largest and most influential media organisation in China, operating more than 180 foreign bureaus worldwide. It prints in eight languages. *Xinhua* is also a publisher that owns more than 20 newspapers and magazines with a combined circulation of 7.5 million.

²⁰ Zhang, "The New Breed of Chinese War Correspondents".

that they could skip any questions that they felt uncomfortable in answering. All textual and audio materials are compressed and protected with a pin-code to make sure that the data was protected and could not be abused. The names of the interviewees were omitted to protect their identities. The interviews were translated into English. Important quotes were used in creating key themes. Based on the data obtained from journalists who covered follow-up stories of traumatic disasters and accidents, namely Wenchuan²¹ and Ya'an earthquakes,²² Eastern Star cruise accident,²³ and the recent massive explosion in Tianjin in China;²⁴ overseas conflicts and wars included the Iraq War, the Palestinian-Israeli conflicts, and the 2014 Gaza conflict. Two significant themes generated through the coding are: *Chinese journalism culture* and *Impact associated with trauma reporting*.

Chinese journalism culture

The day-to-day newsroom practice tends to be routine. Reports are conducted according to existing formats and templates so that some argue that the news content only varies in terms of the names, dates or locations.²⁵ However, this is not so true in terms of breaking news that is related to catastrophe and human tragedy or to war correspondents who are embedded with troops or living and working in conflict zones. The pressure and stress that goes with the reports are magnified on both professional and personal levels. The practices and ethics in reporting trauma were touched upon in the interviews but they were not the subject investigated in this chapter. Instead, the focus was on the effects and impacts on journalists within a Chinese journalistic culture.

In the interviews, journalists revealed unique cultural views in Chinese newsrooms especially with regards to trauma reporting. Interviewees talked about their values, ethical considerations, practices and attitudes towards the reporting which make this group of journalists somewhat distinct. The extraordinary nature of the events they covered shapes the way they work, how they cope with and express the

²¹ The Wenchuan Sichuan Earthquake is one of the largest in human history in terms of socio-economic loss. It had the highest homeless count in history with an estimated 10 million. More details, see James Daniell, "Sichuan 2008: A Disaster on an Immense Scale," BBC News, <http://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-22398684>. Last accessed on 28th December, 2016.

²² Calum MacLeod, "China Quake Leaves Nearly 200 Dead, 6,700 Injured," USA TODAY, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2013/04/19/chinas-sichuan-earthquake/2098249/>. Last accessed on 28th December, 2016

²³ CCTV.com, "Death Toll of Capsized Eastern Star Rises to 434, Eight Remain Missing," <http://english.cntv.cn/2015/06/10/VIDE1433883003992624.shtml>. Last accessed on 28th December, 2016

²⁴ The Tianjin warehouse explosions in August 2016 claimed more than 165 people. Xinhua, "Improperly Stored Hazardous Materials Blamed for Tianjin Blasts," Global Times, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/967630.shtml>. Last accessed on 28th December, 2016

²⁵ Berrington and Jemphrey, "Pressures on the Press".

effects caused by the experience encountered in the field. And in turn, how they define and value the success of their career which was categorised into three aspects interwoven with the impact of reporting trauma. These were: (a) complex feelings about the work they do – feeling privileged and pride to cover unusual events with relative flexibility and legitimacy (a growing area in China) and at the same time silencing the negative impact (fear, stress and depression) which may be perceived as weakness or incompetence, (b) being successful and the need to maintain that success in a competitive environment, (c) normalisation of the stress that goes with the work, including but not limited to, tight deadlines, overwork, dangerous and remote locations, and being either constantly on the move or being relocated to a foreign country. These three aspects were mapped against existing literature.

First, the findings echo the conventional impression that journalists reporting trauma are seen as a resilient group of professionals as they often deal with challenging and tragic situations. Chinese newsrooms also tend to regard it as normative that trauma journalism is a high-pressure profession. Therefore, journalists showing and expressing a negative impact caused by reporting traumatic incidents are viewed as weak and lacking the competence to deal with the job they signed up for. As most journalists learn by doing jobs with their peers and established journalists in the same organisation, there is an acculturation process when a rookie journalist become a member of an existing journalism culture. They gradually learn to hide, suppress, ignore or even joke about the challenges that go with the job. They are also clear that the management and organisation they work for prioritise the journalistic output as the most valuable asset rather than the journalist, so reporters are in an imbalanced bargaining position in terms welfare, health and safety. However, they acknowledged the desirability to get more support and motivations from their management and organisations, especially when they compare their situation with international colleagues who cover similar demanding traumatic events side by side. A journalist from *Xinhua* provided a good summary of this:

Basically, journalists are deployed to the country or region according to their expertise and preferences. By that I mean, I learnt Arabic at university and I signed up for the job in the first place. It does not make sense if you say you fear for the danger, it's too late when you sign that death warning letter to be an embedded journalist. Our organisation²⁶ and leaders will have a one-on-one talk with us before we go. I personally feel I have the responsibility to do my job well. Not only for my personal fulfilment but also for our country, you know, 'the function of public service' emphasised by our senior colleagues. But things are a bit different when you are out there in the field. Journalists from other international agencies or local journalists we hire are paid much more than us. Double or even triple. It is not about money, but imagine, once your job or even lives are measured by money, you obviously feel disappointed. After all, I am not the only one. We all face the same difficulties; why cannot you deal with it well? They

²⁶ This refers to both the news agency and the organisational branch of the Chinese Communist Party. State-owned news outlets are under the leadership of Chinese Communist Party and their values are supposed to be aligned.

expect you to produce quality and timely report and that's why they nurture [support] and send you there. That expectation, comes with responsibility. Our country is still a low income country and it is changing [for better]. We make China's voice heard on the international stage. I am glad that I could be part of it.

It is surprising to learn the contradictory attitude towards trauma reporting, recognising themselves in a disadvantaged position while serving the public good. They were puzzled sometimes to conceptualise and to make sense of their own reactions to their jobs and the negative impact associated with that sense. This is not helpful for them on their journey from recognising, talking about, and supporting their difficulties. Silence on the negative impacts on journalists is also evident in Chinese journalism culture. This supports the findings of previous research which indicated journalists "chose to suffer in silence" as their "ambition, coupled with a belief that war reporting enhances the career by giving a high media profile, left journalists reluctant to speak out about their fears and insecurities".²⁷

Second, the definition of success in trauma reporting also requires a journalist to be resilient, calm and professional when reporting in the traumatic scenes. Interviewees generally agreed that journalists working on breaking news, especially as overseas war correspondents, are regarded highly by their peers and the general public. They admitted that they established their careers-and some became famous overnight-due to trauma related reports on disasters, conflicts and war. This is more evident with photojournalist and on-camera TV reporters. One example is a journalist working for *CCTV13*. He used to work for a local television station for 15 years as a presenter and reporter, but acquired renown, and later got recruited by CCTV, because he was the very first reporter at the Sichuan earthquake to provide live feeds to various TV news programmes across the country. What made him unique was the way he reported disasters. He was lauded for his calm, coherent and professional reports in the sense that he did not add unnecessary emotions when reporting.²⁸

Another example is a photojournalist with *Xinhua*, who barely took pictures before being assigned to Gaza to cover the conflict there. He is grateful to *Xinhua* who gave him the opportunity to nurture his photographic skills which built him a considerable reputation, his work being recognised in national and international photography competitions. This recognition conforms to a pattern because photographs of human tragedy, conflicts, and war often get ranked highly in international photo competitions -for example, more than 65% of the winning photographs for Pictures of the Year International and the Pulitzer awards would be ascribed to the above categories.²⁹ Furthermore, the public often see war and trauma

²⁷ Feinstein, Owen, and Blair, "A Hazardous Profession", 1575.

²⁸ This is linked to the first 24 hour reporting of a natural disaster in Chinese TV history in 2005. His reporting, including sobs on-camera, became so synonymous with the event that reports by other journalists have become attributed to him. He also had a nickname on social media as *Lianxiange* (Link-up Bro or Correspondent Bro in Chinese).

²⁹ Keith Greenwood and Zoe C. Smith, "How the World Looks to Us: International News in Award-Winning Photographs from the Pictures of the Year, 1943–2003," *Journalism Practice* 1:1 (2007).

journalists as celebrities. Two war correspondents who were the first two Chinese journalists embedded with US troops in Afghanistan wrote biographies when they returned to China which received massive attention³⁰. Keats viewed this as the most difficult aspect of journalism culture since it intensifies competition within the journalism profession and, in turn, “perpetuates the norm of risk-taking in getting story or photograph in a dangerous environment”³¹.

Both aspects discussed above contribute to the normalisation of the negative impact on journalists who cover traumatic events. Long working hours, multi-tasking in a dangerous and traumatic environment create further stress for journalists. This are often evident in the quick formation of a small-scale mobile newsroom which involves interviewing, editing, reporting, and logistics concerns, including driving, technical support and even cooking. They adopt poor eating habits, receive inadequate rest due to long working hours or encounter difficulties to sleep, and acquire unhealthy coping strategies such as substance abuse.³² Another challenge revealed in the interviews was the conception that it is unacceptable for a journalist to refuse a particular assignment. This was mentioned earlier in the contradicting conceptualisation of journalistic careers; one needs to build a career by gaining a reputation as an active and available journalist ready for assignment. At the same he or she works in a highly competitive environment, both within the newsroom and across different news outlets. This was described by one interviewee:

If you do not have it done this time, there will be no next time, for you or for your team. Because somebody else with the desire and skills is readily available. It doesn't mean that they will fire you. But if this happened for a couple of times, you obviously will not get promoted. Maybe you will get side-lined, or stepped down to take other roles...As for me, I will always be the first to go to the field, that's what I do. I was not trained in a prestigious university, and I got to this stage based on my dedication and hard-work.

As mentioned earlier, some of the reporters are not trained in journalism schools. Some of them studied media and communications, or politics, while some overseas war correspondents read English literature or Arabic language at university. So most of them learn by doing, which gives them the opportunity to get acculturated and influenced by the journalism culture which shaped their views on the negative impacts of trauma exposure and how to discuss and cope with them. Stoicism and the acceptance of the trauma that goes with the job contributed to building their career and reputation. This is not uncommon among journalists covering traumatic events.

Impact associated with trauma reporting

In this section, this chapter focusses on the impacts of trauma reporting on journalists as described with their own words. The chapter does not aim to access their

³⁰ Zhang, "The New Breed of Chinese War Correspondents".

³¹ Keats and Buchanan, "Covering Trauma in Canadian Journalism" 213.

³² *Ibid.*

psychiatric symptoms in a clinical or medical sense, such as the aforementioned acute stress disorder, PTSD, or STS. It is problematic to assume that the interviewees are medical patients with trauma symptoms. Rather, this chapter puts the journalists' voice in a central position to describe the effects of trauma reporting. Four key aspects were identified in terms of journalists' psychological, emotional, physical, and social wellbeing.

Psychological impact: The data collected shows that symptoms reported were similar to STS or PTSD. Before the interview, the questionnaire of the Impact of Event Scale-Revised (IES-R)³³ was used to measure self-reported distress. The tool was also used in other research to study the post-traumatic impact among Chinese people in relation to the Sichuan earthquake³⁴. Yet, it was only aimed to work as an instrument for screening not diagnosing for PTSD. It informed the understanding of the effects caused by trauma reporting in three subscale clusters, namely intrusion, avoidance, and hyperarousal.³⁵

Intrusion refers to distressing memories of a frightening traumatic event which include nightmares, dreams or flashbacks. The affected often feel upset accompanying physical and somatic symptoms such as muscle tension, sweating, and heart racing.³⁶ Flashbacks were reported by interviewees as a common symptom in dreams or even months later during the day time which were often caused by certain triggers, including sounds, objects and colours. For example, one photojournalist stated:

Compared with my colleagues, I think I was easier to get asleep. They couldn't sleep because the bombing and gunfire often woke them up. I had difficulty sleeping when first arrived, but later, I slept very well despite the bombing. My colleague would wake me up at midnight and he looked frightened. We even joked about being bombed during a sleep would be painless. But when I went back home during the Spring Festival I got woke up in the early morning and I thought I was in Gaza! It's *ertijiao*, you know, the firework only has two sounds!

One journalist also described one trigger he encountered when talking about his reporting strategy,

When you're reporting, there's a lot you can shoot. But our team would choose not to shoot the scenes that might cause pain to the victims' families. Like, after an earthquake or a ship accident, the bodies will be going through a disinfection process and are covered with a body-bags. I never shoot that even though it's an important and necessary measure to avoid potential pestilence. Then, once in a railway station, I was

³³ Daniel S. Weiss, "The Impact of Event Scale-Revised," in *Assessing Psychological Trauma and Ptsd*, ed. John P. Wilson and Terence M. Keane (New York: Guilford Press, 2004).

³⁴ Zhiyue Liu et al., "A Cross-Sectional Study on Posttraumatic Impact among Qiang Women in Maoxian County 1 Year after the Wenchuan Earthquake, China," *Asia-Pacific journal of public health* 24, no. 1 (2012); Xiao Pan et al., "Symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, Depression, and Anxiety among Junior High School Students in Worst-Hit Areas 3 Years after the Wenchuan Earthquake in China," *Asia-Pacific Journal of Public Health* 27: 2 (2015).

³⁵ American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV-TR*, 4th edn. (Washington, DC: Author, 2000).

³⁶ *Ibid.*

taken aback by a long black bag at a distance! Normally I would not be startled as I have seen that many times, but I don't know, it just caught me that time.

One interesting scenario revealed in the interviews is that photojournalists were more open to discuss the scenes they saw and the negative feeling they encountered, which may be because they work in a visual world and they are more sensitive to textures and patterns,

I had to work 18 hours a day which was very exhausting when first arrived in Gaza. I went to the local hospital every morning around 7, and stayed near the mortuary. The bodies just piled up with all sorts of human remains and blood. You hear people crying, yelling all the time. That scene was like a hell in real life, very unsettling and heartbreaking. You did not know what would happen next, you had to report while the warplanes hovering above in the sky. So it's very stressful, especially in the later days, there were too many bodies for the mortuary to take, the blood directly leaked outside. So they expanded the mortuary into the courtyard of the hospital, and you saw the in-betweens of the ground tiles filled with blood, like endless # sign in red. And the smell, it's more vivid than in the movies. I was not frightened, but shocked I guess, and it's depressing. And for a period of time, I don't want to see red colour especially with a huge amount. It reminds me of that.

The photojournalist talked about the colour red as a trigger which also brought up another emotional cluster, avoidance.³⁷ This refers to a desire to avoid any triggers, like place, feelings, people that may remind them of trauma. As one journalist stated: "I kept the door of my inner heart shut every day. I kept the door of my emotions shut and focused only on my work." They experienced gaps in memory either willingly or unconsciously, apathy-like isolation, a lack of interest in daily activities, a feeling of numbness, and pessimism for the future. The reporter said:

We only stayed there for less than two weeks before we were transferred to safer place. When you left the centre of the war, you felt relieved and you try to forget those tragic scenes. You need breaks otherwise it's too overwhelming... But for the locals, they don't have choice. I still remember the tiredness on journalists' faces, like saying "quickly let me pass [the checkpoint]". My colleague burst into tears loudly like nobody was watching... It was a nightmare for everyone. I sometimes feel we have committed sins by just taking pictures [and leaving]... those empty eyes, they would stare at you...

Most interviewees use distancing themselves from horrific scenes as a strategy when and after reporting trauma. They try to numb the carry-over fear and unforgotten trepidation, especially when they left a dangerous situation or war zone. As one participant stated: "I was trying to forget the vivid images. I felt lucky that soon after I shot the bomb-ruined Hamas Interior Ministry building, it was bombed once again. It was like 'it was that close and it could have been me [being bombed]'. The intense fear is often significant and the inner depression and struggle could lead to substance abuse like alcohol and smoking. "I know a lot of war journalists who are heavy drinkers or smokers. Even though I am not a drinker, my colleague would let me drink a little as he said it could calm you down, and sometimes it did help," explained one journalist. However, dissociation as a strategy can have a negative effect on

³⁷ *Ibid.*

journalists' wellbeing as it misleads their evaluation of their own situation and they lack the awareness to ask for physiological and physical care.

Arousal is a cluster that consists of sleeping difficulties or disturbances, irritability, hypervigilance, which might hinder one's concentration in danger situations or cause exaggerated reactions.³⁸ The quotes above proved sleeping difficulties and exaggerated reactions (crying) are evident. One journalist stated: "I would drive very fast, even in the area they labelled as safe. You felt your heart racing and you experience a complicated reaction, both excitement and fright. When you got somewhere safe, you felt you have dodged another danger."

Emotional impact: The most frequent emotions and feelings experienced by the journalists were anger, frustration, disappointment, anxiety and guilt. This is linked to the opaque and silent journalism culture in China discussed in the previous section. During a disaster, tragedy or crisis, information is organised and disseminated in a different way due to the often chaotic circumstances. Journalists, local government workers and the police have to adopt new ways to deal with sudden and unprepared issues. Journalists from different organisations work in a competitive environment as well, which is further complicated by the ease of information dissemination backed by digital technologies and the prevalence of social media. The government, especially the propaganda department in China, has to work under great pressure, hoping to provide updated information while safeguarding institutional interests. As one journalist reported: "You have to verify and try really hard to get the information needed as the authorities are often reluctant and slow to tell you the truth. It's sometimes a frustrating and irritating experience. What's worse, most know that but do nothing about it". Other work-related emotions, such as anxiety and guilt when reporting trauma were reported by one journalist:

I think sometimes I really put too much on my shoulders. When you are in the centre of the quake zone, the outside world relies on you to get updated information. But you feel guilty when other people were rescuing people and caring people in need of help. But on a second thought, I've got my job to do. I had to check on the food and water supply; if the tents were enough since there might be aftershock. Nobody could predict anything. I have to let people know what's happening and that attention is powerful. If you are thinking about yourself, you are too selfish. Me and my colleagues ate breads we prepared for ourselves. We left the food for the locals who were affected. I walked in the mountains for seven hours in one day and got severely sunburnt, but it was nothing compared with what the locals suffered. I had difficulties sleeping at night, but I told myself I have to get some rest because I have important things to do the next morning.

This echoes the finding of previous research³⁹ that tragedy reporters feel a sense of achievement since they believe their work has a purpose: reporting stories and providing useful information. At the same time they raise concerns about the human

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Hal Himmelstein and Perry E. Faithorn, "Eyewitness to Disaster: How Journalists Cope with the Psychological Stress Inherent in Reporting Traumatic Events," *Journalism Studies* 3:4 (2002).

conditions and the need to improve the lives of individuals, feelings that stem from empathy and an understanding of the suffering. The associated burn-out is often caused by overloaded responsibilities when people are immersed in trauma. Powerlessness and guilt are also powerful drivers.⁴⁰ This is also evident with the above Chinese journalist, albeit in a relatively mild way, since he managed to adjust in order to fulfil the role for which he is proud.

In addition, with tight schedules, journalists and reporters have to do “door-stepping” or the death-knock to interview the injured victims or family members who lost their beloved ones. The interview process could itself be a challenge, but the feedback, if not critique, from the public is sometimes hard to swallow for journalists who conducted the interviews. This links to the question of trauma interview techniques, journalism ethics and professionalism.

It’s difficult not to think about how people comment on you, especially on social media.

Sometimes you feel angry as the public only care about how you did the coverage [wrongly], but not the message you sent. But it’s a mixed reaction as well. Some audiences are very kind and they appreciate what you did at the front. As a professional journalist, you have to understand that you need to do your job well, nobody cares what you went through. So whenever possible, I will check their comments and private messages on Weibo. They would tell you why they liked your report and why they hated it so that you can improve next time.

This respondent expressed his strong sense of responsibility as a journalist, he even named his verified Weibo account as *Gongmin* (Citizen). He asserted that he adjusted his emotions well by focusing on how to do his job well. This dissociation and avoidance strategy suppressed his real emotions.

Physical impact: when emotions accumulate, they will have physical impact as well. As one female journalist stated: “I can feel I am a bit intense in everything I do, especially after I return home. I would drive very fast sometimes as if I was in the war zone and someone is after me. And when I parked, I feel relieved and I say to myself ‘I got home’.” This may be caused by the inhabitation of the quick “embed and withdraw” approach when a journalist covers a dangerous and traumatic event. These events have significant potential to put journalists into physical risks, for example, attacks, threats, injury or even death. Within the competitive journalism culture, journalists are constantly on the run and deal with overwork and high work pressure. Physical struggles may lead to acute or chronic illness. Reported symptoms were gastrophelcosis, recurrent aphthous ulcer, astriction and back problems. One journalist said:

When I first took a picture of the body, I felt sick and felt like fainting, I went outside, retching up. I even found my hair coming off significantly while I was there. After I left the warzone, I got better, so I think it must be the stress.

However, physical symptoms that could be recognised by journalists seem to be a positive thing in the sense that it makes them think seriously about their job, and in

⁴⁰ MaryDale Salston and Charles R. Figley, "Secondary Traumatic Stress Effects of Working with Survivors of Criminal Victimization," *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 16:2 (2003).

turn their coping style. One journalist said: "I am now more careful about my health and I tend to do more exercises. I found almost every time after I went to cover breaking news, I would have to go to hospital for an intravenous drip and that is not healthy."

Social impact: Journalists interviewed also described the social and relational impact caused by trauma reporting. As the nature of their work requires relocation for a period of time or frequent business trips within tight schedules, they felt disconnected to their family and friends. This had a twofold meaning: there was the actual distance and inadequate time spent together, but there was also a sense a social isolation as people either did not understand what the journalist had experienced or showed a lack of interest. This also triggered mixed feelings about their relationship, as one journalist explained: "It seems better when they are reluctant to know more, but I kind of need someone close to talk to. But it also makes things worse if they want to know more. They become worried and depressed if you tell them too much." This further strengthens the relational isolation and causes a feeling of displacement and even replacement within a family or a relationship. Experiencing the loss of colleagues within the same community is also difficult for the journalists to cope with. As one journalist reported: "It's terrible when someone you know got killed. Two journalists who work for other agencies got killed by a suicide-bomb. One of them was found dead in a driving pose and got severely burnt in the van with a big PRESS sticker on it. We even talked to each other in the morning before I went to a local school, and in the afternoon he got killed. War is so wanton and you just have to be very careful."

Conclusion

This chapter has analysed the impact of trauma reporting on journalists who are not always prepared when arriving at a scene of disaster or a conflict zone. This can be due to short notice or lack of training, or a journalism culture that tends to suppress the expression of stress and depression. One journalist revealed that he only attended one workshop delivered by a Western war correspondent in the past six years. Journalists in traumatic assignments often follow the flow of events and react accordingly. Stress and pressure is brought by various complex factors, such as personal ethics, career progression, organisational interests and sometimes even national interests. They need to gain access to and collect information that is less organised than in other routine news reporting, and to produce copy with tight deadlines. This may compromise coordination with the vulnerable, for example, to contact and interview devastated families who are mourning their immediate loss. These findings are consistent with previous research that making efforts to produce news while overcoming emotion stress is difficult with stronger pressure.⁴¹ Even though they don't deny the pressure and stress, they are reluctant to seize emotional

⁴¹ Patrick Lee Plaisance and Joan A. Deppa, "Perceptions and Manifestations of Autonomy, Transparency and Harm among U.S. Newspaper Journalists," *Journalism & Communication Monographs* 10:4 (2008).

support as it is considered as “an inability to cope with the territory which goes with the job”.⁴² Despite all the effects discussed above, it is worth noting that trauma symptoms may differ according to the journalist’s personality and the amount of exposure to tragedy.⁴³ The issue in focus is the problematic theorisation of PTSD and STS around weakness or impotence in dealing with one’s job professionally in a macho and silent journalism culture. This chapter reinforces the urgent need to reconsider work related and personal stress as ordinary reactions from traumatic situations which need support and care on different levels in different contexts.

Regarding recommendations and future research, education is an important component to understand the experiences of trauma journalists. Institutional support from the government, journalism associations, and news organisations are needed, especially for early career journalists. A change in the culture of journalistic stoicism is also urgently needed so that physiological and social support can be better utilised. As most of the journalists treat their job as a public service, their wellbeing should cause proper attention in return. On the individual level, journalists themselves should pay attention to their work-life balance. Their role in understanding and recognising the negative impacts of trauma reporting is crucial in changing professional culture.

One of the limitations of this research is its scale, since China’s news outlets are so diverse across different regions. The cases discussed shed some light on the impact of trauma reporting on journalists in leading Chinese news outlets. However, a further quantitative study with a larger scale will be beneficial to form a more thorough and comprehensive research. Qualitative studies with more interviewees involved may make the research findings more rigorous. Possible research topics or methods are listed as follows: first, ethnography study or participatory observation in relevant newsrooms can be conducted to collect first-hand data with rich texture of trauma reporting journalists and correspondents. Also, longitudinal research will be useful in studying how rookie reporters become experienced reporters in trauma coverage in a given journalism culture. In addition, a comparative study between Western and Chinese media workers who get involved in covering trauma is worth exploring. Lastly, the inadequate practical training in covering trauma, both in journalism schools and on-the-job training in Chinese newsrooms, is also a relevant topic to discuss in the future.

⁴² Berrington and Jemphrey, "Pressures on the Press: Reflections on Reporting Tragedy", 241.

⁴³ Simpson and Coté, *Covering Violence: A Guide to Ethical Reporting About Victims & Trauma*.

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