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CHINA IN THE PRINT MEDIA OF VENEZUELA

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The series of DOCUMENTOS DE TRABAJO DEL CIES are work in progress or reports that documents the activity performed by the researchers associated to the Interdisciplinary Research Center CIES with the purpose of consolidating an interdisciplinary research work on legal, social and humanistic issues to contribute to the understanding and the solution of problems of regional and national interest being carried out at the university, through a simple and accessible language.

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China in the print media of Venezuela

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*New time of the great China has arrived:
of no more an emergent but an established
power that is returning [to the world scene]
after a tragic period of interventions, wars,
and communism.*

José Luis Cordeiro, “China: el
futuro se acerca”, *El Universal*
(Caracas), 15 November 2010

Introduction

Lately, we have witnessed a rapid increase in interest among researchers in and outside Latin America of looking into the growing incidence of China in this part of the world. However, many of the recent research initiatives have been focused on responding to questions like: *What is China looking for in Latin America? What are the short-, medium-, and long-term strategies of China in the region?* And others formulated in similar ways. There have been fewer attempts to look at the other end of this link, namely: *How does Latin America perceive China’s advance into its territory?* This working paper reflects on preliminary results of a wider research project that narrows this gap by examining the representations of China in parts of Latin America; more specifically, the Andean region in countries such as Colombia, Venezuela, and Ecuador, through an analysis of its print media.¹

It is not to say that China’s growth and its political, economic, and cultural incidence in Latin America is new for Andean journalists. For instance, already in 1997, following the signing of an agreement on economic cooperation between Colombia and China, one of the leading Colombian newspapers *El Tiempo* was underlining the importance of relations between Colombia and China:

“The signing of an agreement on [economic cooperation] between China and Colombia strengthens relations that will have indisputable importance

¹ Usually, Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia are considered as Andean countries.

in the near future... When socialism fell, the Berlin Wall disappeared and the People's Republic of China adjusted its socialist ideas with a good deal of democratic improvements, it is not difficult to predict which country is going to be the second most powerful nation, in a short time, and which would have a notable influence with regard to the rest of nations".²

Indeed, today, more than a decade after the above observation was made, few Colombians, Venezuelans or Ecuadorians have doubts that China is a newly emerged powerful actor on a global scale. The continuing growth of publications in the Andean print media on China-related issues must surprise no one. At the same time, it is important to notice that the growth consists not only in terms of quantity, but also in the quality, reflected in the changing character of these publications: for example, while the number mentions for China in *El Tiempo* during the last ten years have doubled, the number of editorials and opinion columns dedicated to China have increased, during the same period, by three times.³ There is a similar tendency in the case of other major print media in other Andean countries.

The growth of the number of editorials and opinion columns on China-related issues can be explained by the increase in interest of Andean intellectuals, business, and political elites –the major consumers of today's print media in this part of the world– of better understanding this new phenomenon called "China" and of expressing their point of view with regard to a greater perception of China's incidence in this part of the world. From this perspective, a careful examination of China's representations in Andean print media is pivotal for any researcher who is interested in investigating Latin American perspectives on today's China. This is also true because, in Latin America, and especially in the Andean area, there are only few other tools available for reaching the above objective: the surveys of public opinion with regard to foreign policy are rare and those that are carried out have certain limitations.⁴ Besides, despite the spread of Internet-based media and news sources, print media maintains its role of an important public opinion builder in the foreign-policy realm in most Latin American countries. Also, there is evidence that China has become very much interested in increasing its coverage in Latin America's mass media outlets, including print media.⁵

Amongst the key research questions for this paper, the following seem to be the most important ones:

2 "China y Colombia", *El Tiempo*, 16 May 1997. Here and elsewhere translations from Spanish originals to English are made by the author.

3 Proper calculations using data provided by *El Tiempo* web site (www.eltiempo.com.co)

4 An introduction to one of the recent surveys on public opinion and foreign policy in Latin America acknowledges this problem (Botero, Felipe, and Arlene Tickner (2009), *Colombia y el Mundo, 2008: Opinión Pública y Política Internacional*. Bogotá: Universidad de los Andes. See also related publications at *Foreign Affairs Latinoamérica 2009*(3) for the other Latin American countries.

5 See Douglas, Farah and Andy Mosher (2010), *Winds From the East: How the People's Republic of China Seeks to Influence the Media in Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia*, Washington: Center for International Media Assistance

While the number mentions for China in *El Tiempo* during the last ten years have doubled, the number of editorials and opinion columns dedicated to China have increased, during the same period, by three times.

Perhaps not surprisingly, back in 2010 the coverage of China-related issues in the Venezuelan print media reflected the division by political lines in Chavez's Venezuela.

1. After the opening of the Latin American continent to China⁶, what were the printed media channels in Ecuador, Colombia, and Venezuela that could be regarded as important contributors to building public opinion as far as the foreign policy of their countries is concerned?
2. What are the editorial policies of the printed media in question as far as editorials and opinion columns on international issues are concerned? Who writes these editorials and opinion columns on China?
3. How has the coverage of China-related issues in these printed media outlets changed during the last decade in terms of the quantity of editorials and opinion columns published?
4. What are the central themes (areas of interest) in China-related issues that authors and editorials discussed most frequently of these opinion columns? Do the priorities with regard to central themes change? If so, do these changes reflect the growing incidence of China in the Andean countries? Do these changes reflect China's intent to influence the media in the Andean region in terms of the topics covered and the interpretations given to sensitive for China issues?
5. How different is the coverage of China-related issues by the print media in Ecuador, Colombia, and Venezuela?

In order to illustrate one way to answer some of these questions, this paper offers an analysis of the coverage of China by the Venezuelan print media. In this case, the analysis is limited to one year, 2010. Although the review of the country's mass media in the years before and after 2010 reveals a similar tendency, it would be too early to embark upon the analysis of the changes that might –or might not– occur in Venezuela after the death of Hugo Chavez due to the ongoing political turmoil in this country.

The representations of China in Print Media of Chavez Venezuela

Venezuelan Print Media: A Brief Overview

Perhaps not surprisingly, back in 2010 the coverage of China-related issues in the Venezuelan print media reflected the division by political lines in Chavez's Venezuela. Hence, one can presume that Venezuelan print media reflects more accurately –than other media in this country– a true spectrum of opinions of Venezuelans as concerns the main topic of our research: China in the Western Hemisphere, especially, when it deals with the means of knowing the points of view of this country's business elites. To confirm this observation, let us take a closer look at two newspapers *El Universal* and *Diario Vea*.

⁶ The wider project covers the period from 2000 and 2010. For the Andean countries, it is during this timeframe when China transforms into a key trade partner.

China's Coverage in El Universal in 2010

El Universal is one of Venezuela's oldest newspapers: it was founded in 1909. Undoubtedly, in 2010, with some eighty thousand copies of the paper sold on week days, and some two hundred thousand copies sold on Sundays⁷, El Universal was rightfully considered as one of the most influential print media channels in Venezuela, especially, among the country's business elite.

In 2010, El Universal published more than twenty editorials and opinion columns, which dealt specifically with China-related issues (roughly, two per month). These writings can be divided into three categories: those intended to provide the readers with some knowledge –in general terms– of China's politics, economy and culture; those that discuss the growing China's role as a global power, and, last but not least, editorials and columns which talked about the relationships between China, Venezuela and other Latin American countries.

Editorials and opinion columns, which fall into the first category, include those that explain to the readers the political, economic and cultural properties of China after 1949. For example, in the beginning of 2010, El Universal published a column entitled "Who rules China?"⁸ This column helped those interested in learning about Chinese politics, to understand the particular characteristics of its evolution and today's power structures within the China's Communist Party and the Chinese government. On another occasion, the author of an opinion column⁹ discussed the differences between the former Soviet, Cuban and Vietnamese economic models and China's approach today. It is interesting to note that the discussion of the causes of Beijing's success was not limited to the Chinese context but was exploited by the author in order to make the following observation with regard to the economic policy of Venezuela:

"In [the Venezuelan] case, we do not have to repeat negative experiences of the Soviet Union or China in order to understand the advantage of [the other economic model that is a feature of today's prosperous economies] in which citizens –and not the State– have private entrepreneur initiative. This is something that China understood and today it is a capitalist economy".¹⁰

A similar observation is made by another columnist¹¹ who evaluates the Shanghai 2010 Expo. According to the author, "the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games and the [recent] Shanghai 2010 World Expo have demonstrated to the entire world the great advances achieved by China after abandoning Marxism-Leninism imposed by Mao Zedong when the Communist Revolution triumphed". The column concluded with the following observation:

The 2008 Beijing Olympic Games and the [recent] Shanghai 2010 World Expo have demonstrated to the entire world the great advances achieved by China after abandoning Marxism-Leninism imposed by Mao Zedong when the Communist Revolution triumphed.

7 According to El Universal data.

8 Alfredo Toro Hardy, ¿Quién manda en China?, El Universal, 4 February 2010

9 Guillermo García, ¡China economía capitalista!, El Universal, 8 September 2010

10 Ibid.

11 José Luis Cordeiro, "China: el futuro se acerca", El Universal, 15 November 2010

“A new time for the great China has arrive: of no more an emergent but an established power that is returning [to the world scene] after a tragic period of interventions, wars and communism. China had lost a century and a half of its hegemony, but does it matter to the country with more than five millennium of continuous history?”

The imprisonment of Xiaobo is characterized as a typical action by the regime “that has achieved an impressive economic growth by paying the costs of a systematic violation of human rights, the only way in which the Chinese socialism was able to develop the levels of productivity compatible with that of a capitalist economy”.

The awarding of 2010 Peace Nobel Prize presented the editors of *El Universal* with another occasion to discuss the communist legacy in modern China: a column¹² was published under a provocative title in the Venezuelan context: “When Nobel said: no more socialism”. The author of the column decided to compare Liu Xiaobo with Mario Vargas Llosa and starts with references to the discourse made by the winner of 2010 Literature Nobel Prize who “offered to Venezuelans a key lecture of how to reject a meager concept of socialism in any version, as [Llosa] did when he was beginning to be recognized as the most influential Latin-American intellectual of the present times”. As far as the Chinese case is concerned, the author referred to Xiaobo as a hero: “no words are enough to describe the value of his deeds in front of an economic giant like the People’s Republic of China”. The imprisonment of Xiaobo is characterized as a typical action by the regime “that has achieved an impressive economic growth by paying the costs of a systematic violation of human rights, the only way in which the Chinese socialism was able to develop the levels of productivity compatible with that of a capitalist economy”.

Another type of publication at *El Universal* provides its readers with a historical overview of Chinese experiences in cultural, political, and economic domains. When it comes to the discussion of the Chinese Revolutionary reforms in the agricultural sector that followed the proclamation of the People’s Republic in 1949, the author of the column entitled “Revolution and Contra-revolution of Chinese rural areas”¹³ warns the readers not to rush with conclusions about China, in particular, with regard to the future of the Chinese agricultural sector: “it is not wise to try to predict the future of the Chinese agrarian sector”. It is likely that behind the publication of the column on the topic in question, namely, the agrarian reform was the desire of the paper’s editorial board to respond to the challenges faced by the Venezuela’s agrarian sector.

Within the publications that can be grouped into the second category, the predominate place is reserved for writings that discuss the challenges posed by China’s rising challenge to the hegemonic power of the United States in the Western Hemisphere. By number of publications, this is the most frequent category and many of the writings are highly polemical.

As far as the last category is concerned, that is the bilateral relations between China, Venezuela, and the other Latin American countries, many of the publications at *El Universal* are rather critical towards China’s increasing

12 Ronny Padrón, “Cuando el Nobel dijo: ‘no más socialismo’”, *El Universal*, 13 October 2010

13 Chen Chi-Yi, “Revolución y contrarrevolución del campo en China”, *El Universal*, 14 January 2010

incidence in Latin America. Particularly with regards to the way in which the government of Venezuela has been maintaining and strengthening its ties with China. For instance, in a column published on 1 May 2010 and under the title “Indebted with China”¹⁴, the author of the column criticized the deal the government made with the Chinese Development Bank. The author wondered how the government “can indebt country’s future” and further emphasized that the growing external debt of Venezuela was due to its close ties with China and Russia.

In another publication¹⁵, the author wonders if the growth of China would bring about positive or negative change for the development countries. He argued, “In some aspects, the answer is ambiguous. On the one side, as economic expansion is concerned, giant [Chinese] investments into the infrastructure sector and an accelerated process of urbanization sustain the era of ‘fat cats’ with regards to the prices of natural resources. In Latin America’s case, there are many analysts who believe that this would lead to several decades of sustainable economic growth. [On the other hand], the long-term low costs of Chinese labor leave many countries of the world with no capacity to respond. [This scenario] means not only the loss of the markets, but also the displacement of investments to China. This is precisely what Latin America is witnessing”.

Summing up, the *El Universal* showed a great deal of interest to cover, on a regular basis, China-related issues from a variety of perspectives.

“Sharing the revolutionary spirit”: China’s representations at the *DiarioVea* in 2010

Let us now take a closer look at the opposite side of the Venezuelan political spectrum represented by *DiarioVea*. This newspaper can be considered as one of the major print media of Venezuela associated with Chavez’s government.

DiarioVea is a perfect example of the way in which leftist media covers China in the Andean region today: there are almost no news which can be regarded as “negative” as far as China’s image is concerned, except for reports on natural disasters. As a result, in 2010, the paper published news that reflected China’s growing influence in world affairs ranging from a few lines on Hu’s official visits abroad to a more detailed accounts of China’s increasing capacities to lead the global affairs. Only few reports dealt with unpleasant events in China. Overwhelmingly, China was presented as a rapidly emerging reliable alternative to traditional powers on the global scale, primarily to, the United States.

As bilateral China-Venezuela relations are concerned, the newspaper emphasized the role which Chinese international cooperation played in Venezuela’s social progress; for example, in May 2010, *DiarioVea* praised China’s assistance to efforts to increase the offer of social housing in the country or, as in July 2010, Chinese participation in major construction projects in the country.

DiarioVea is a perfect example of the way in which leftist media covers China in the Andean region today: there are almost no news which can be regarded as “negative” as far as China’s image is concerned, except for reports on natural disasters.

14 Luis Eduardo Muro, “Hipotecados con China”, *El Universal*, 1 Mayo 2010

15 Alfredo Toro Hardy, “China: ¿Bendición o maldición?”, *El Universal*, 10 June 2010

Interestingly, *DiarioVea*'s coverage of China dealt not only with the current issues. From time to time, this newspaper offered symbolically important excursions into the past. But *Diario Vea* does this in a different way from that of *El Universal*. When it came to historical and socio-economic reviews, the latter usually provided its readers with an analytical overview of past Chinese experiences, with the references to external academic sources, as in the case of the review of the evolution of the Chinese agricultural sector mentioned earlier.

Although a direct comparison of the roles of Bolivar and Mao Zedong in each country's history is rare, it is difficult not to notice the symbolic importance attached by *DiarioVea*'s editorial board to placing these two monumental figures together.

In *Diario Vea*, the paper offered a section called "A day [in the past] as it is today". This section is small: rarely more than three or four events are mentioned. Yet, the events in the Chinese Revolutionary history often are amongst the most privileged ones selected for publication. The following is an example of a typical editorial choice for this section of the newspaper:

"In a day as it is today, 1 October 1949, in front of an impressive concentration of the people and the army, Mao Zedong proclaimed the People's Republic of China... Since 1 October 1949, China commenced a steady recuperation of its sovereignty and independence, the economy started to acquire high levels of prosperity and the country established cordial relations with the rest of the world based on the principles of mutual respect, auto-determination, not interference into internal affairs and mutual benefits. Today, China is a great power [,] friend of Venezuela and a peace-builder".¹⁶

Besides keeping strictly to Beijing's official interpretation of the past, one can notice yet another symbolically important feature of "A day as it is today" section: the stories of Mao Zedong's heroic deeds in China were often accompanied with stories of Simon Bolivar's heroic deeds. Although a direct comparison of the roles of Bolivar and Mao Zedong in each country's history is rare, it is difficult not to notice the symbolic importance attached by *DiarioVea*'s editorial board to placing these two monumental figures together.

Another divergence clearly identified upon the examination of *El Universal* and *DiarioVea*, is the way in which these two newspapers covered international issues sensitive for China like the 2010 Nobel Prize.

Here is how an editorial of *DiarioVea* evaluated the 2010 choice of the Nobel Prize Committee:

"The Peace Prize was given to a person who is serving a sentence in a jail for the crimes against public safety of China. In other words, the Nobel Prize had been converted into a political arm to attack the revolutionary peoples and to serve the strategic interests of the Empire, besides of representing an insupportable interference into the Chinese internal affairs... In conclusion, the Nobel Prize had been converted into a political arm of the US Empire".¹⁷

16 *DiarioVea*, 1 October 2010

17 *DiarioVea*, 16 October 2010

Concluding the above examination of China's representations in *Diario Vea*, one can notice that this newspaper, similar to *El Universal*, often pays great deal of attention to China-related issues. However, the way in which *Diario Vea* covers China is starkly different to that of *El Universal*. This difference can be explained by pointing towards the newspapers' editorial boards opposing political preferences. Both newspapers frequently used discussions of China-related issues as a stage to refer to the problems faced by Venezuela.

Concluding Remarks

This brief examination of the coverage of China-related issues by two Venezuelan newspapers in 2010 confirms the importance of the evaluation of China's representations by print media in Latin America's Andean region.¹⁸ Despite the fact that the scope of the analysis was limited to two newspapers only and dealt only with the editorials and opinion columns published in 2010, it was possible to identify some interesting features, which helped to confirm the validity of the working hypothesis of this research proposal. In particular, it confirms our assumption of the existence of a strong interest in print media to cover China-related issues in their editorials and opinion columns. Secondly, it shows that the coverage of China is multi-dimensional and is not limited to the Chinese foreign policy or economy only. Thirdly, even though the print media in other countries in the Andean region aside from Venezuela is rarely characterized by the same sharp division line as in the case with *El Universal* and *Diario Vea*, perspectives on China's increasing incidence in the Andean region differs and this helps to paint a more complete picture of the public opinion in Latin America as far as China's growth is concerned.

The way in which *Diario Vea* covers China is starkly different to that of *El Universal*. This difference can be explained by pointing towards the newspapers' editorial boards opposing political preferences. Both newspapers frequently used discussions of China-related issues as a stage to refer to the problems faced by Venezuela.

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18 See Armony, Ariel (2012), "A View from Afar: How Colombia Sees China", in *The China Quarterly*, Vol. 209, pp 178-197

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