



# Presenting China To The World

An Interview with The Honorable Zhao Qizheng,  
Minister, State Council Information Office, Beijing



The Hon. Zhao Qizheng

**EDITORS' NOTE** After graduating from the Chinese University of Science and Technology, Zhao Qizheng joined the Communist Party of China (CPC) in 1979. He spent seven years in leadership roles in the CPC Shanghai Municipal Committee, and in 1993, he became vice-mayor of Shanghai. He was later appointed director of the State Council Information Office. Zhao is a member of the 16th CPC Central Committee.

**INSTITUTION BRIEF** The State Council Information Office (SCIO) of the People's Republic of China was established in January 1991 with the principal aim of facilitating the Chinese media in reporting China to the rest of the world. Among its activities, the SCIO hosts press briefings for Chinese and foreign reporters; provides books, data, and film and video products; offers assistance to foreign correspondents in China; and organizes cultural exchanges in other countries, working in close collaboration with government departments and media organizations. In addition, the SCIO supports the Chinese media's news coverage of foreign countries and international issues, with a view to keeping the Chinese people abreast of global events.

**The State Council Information Office [SCIO], which you lead, looks like a**

**state public-relations firm in the eyes of many foreigners. Do you agree with that idea? What do you think of the role played by the SCIO?**

I agree with you. There is only one thing the SCIO does, and that is to let the world know about China, by offering the world real information about China instead of launching propaganda campaigns. It is difficult to find an English word exactly right for the Chinese phrase *xuan chuan*. It is a big mistake to translate it as "propaganda." As far as I know, this English word means forcing people to accept some ideas or beliefs by using lame arguments and perverted logic.

So this office is called the State Council Information Office. The word "information" has a much wider meaning: to interpret China and supply the world with more information about China. There are a great many ways to do this, such as holding news conferences; issuing white papers; publishing books, periodicals, and newspapers in foreign languages; setting up Web sites using foreign languages; and organizing culture activities in the U.S. and other countries. What is the purpose of such interpretations? We want to let the world understand China better. That is to say, we want to create a better environment for public opinion. We would like to tell stories about the real China, letting the outside world know about the progress made in China and also its shortcomings. Every day we keep telling stories about China. However, we need to do it in a universal way. Because foreign people are quite different from us in education, culture, and religious beliefs, we must do it in a way that foreign people can understand. Generally speaking, we voice China's position, and tell China's stories in an internationally understandable way.

So we are indeed like a state public-relations firm. Our task is to tell the outside world exactly what has happened in China, and help China establish better relationships with foreign countries.

**Have there been any changes in the SCIO's role over the past years? If so, do they reflect any changes in China's society today?**

As I mentioned, our office is not a publishing house but a government organization engaged in promoting China's international public relations. I have been working in this office for eight years. When I first came here, the main task of this office was simply publishing and distributing publications in foreign languages, and there was a little negligence in terms of PR.

As for changes in our role, written contact has turned into face-to-face, interactive contact. Interaction is very important. It could clear up a lot of misunderstandings and it could promote much better communication.

Intergovernmental exchanges fall into one facet, and nongovernmental exchanges among people and businesses fall into another, an economic facet. Economic exchanges could promote the development of political exchanges, and this is the best way to build public credibility of political exchanges.

**In your opinion, what is the best way to promote China?**

Firstly, tell the truth. I believe that if you don't tell stories, other people will; if you don't tell the truth, rumors will spread. That is why we are improving the emergency reporting system at home, which must be quick and accurate. Noticeably, we have made great progress and we are much faster in our reporting than we were before.

Secondly, we ought to build a more immediate and rapid channel for information distribution, instead of having that information reprinted. The progress in our news-briefing system is one of the changes I have brought about and feel proud of. In the past, we didn't have a system in place to host regular press conferences, nor was very detailed information given to reporters. However, we hosted 60 press conferences in 2003, and that number will increase to 90 this year. Most of the press conferences were attended by government ministers, which raised the levels of transparency and accuracy, and showed their sense of responsibility. Moreover, all of our press conferences were broadcast live by four TV stations, which is quite rare in other countries.

Thirdly, we should use international languages to express what has happened in China. By doing so, we can show our respect for other cultures in the world. We ought to recognize the differences between cultures and respect them, and then we will be able to enhance mutual contact in an internationalized language.

**What stage is China at in terms of its contact with the outside world? Are there any problems? How could it be made better?**

As a rapidly developing country entering the arena of the world economy, China needs to express itself to the outside world several times a day, instead of just once a year. But still we have to face a severe reality. First, many foreigners still stick to the stereotyped thinking about China, which has remained unchanged for ages. Second, our own media are not strong enough. Despite having branches established throughout the world, the Xinhua News Agency mainly focuses its efforts on informing domestic readers. Third, only a few countries use Chinese, even though the Chinese-speaking population ranks the biggest in the world.

To promote the dissemination of information about China at home and abroad, the Chinese government has stepped up its efforts in recent years, encouraging the media to carry more reports on China's social development and China's policies, and to answer questions about China that are being raised by the outside world. We are able to provide the best information sources for the international media. The SCIO has really improved its work on press conferences. In the past two years, we have trained 4,000 press spokesmen from 30 provinces of the country. Last year, both central government and local government at all levels held more than 900 news conferences. The news briefings held in my office drew media crews from AP, AFP, Reuters, CNN, three channels of CCTV, and Hong Kong's Phoenix TV. Some Chinese Internet service providers did live broadcasts. In this way, reporters could gain ample information. It is said that 80 percent of the information issued by the SCIO is adopted as front-page news for that very day or week.

Further, we need to cooperate with the foreign media. We have initiated some cooperation with Time Warner and Kyodo News. They helped get CCTV4 and CCTV9

established in the U.S., Europe, and Japan. We hope, through such efforts, to create a sound atmosphere suitable for promoting understanding between China and the outside world.

**How well do you think the outside world knows China? What are the main areas of misunderstanding and prejudice?**

Generally speaking, China is not able

point out the flaws of China, and even discuss human-rights issues, as long as they have correct and kind intentions. It's quite unfortunate when they come to the conclusion that China is not so good first, and then try to find the so-called facts to validate their position. Oftentimes, the so-called facts are not accurate or real. Also, some people still won't give up the Cold War thinking about China.



*Elizabeth H. Yang, China Chief Representative, LEADERS Magazine, interviews Minister Zhao Qizheng*

to express itself thoroughly. This has resulted in the fact that it is hard for foreigners to know a lot about China. I once came across a young man at the entrance to the Golden Hall in Vienna, who was handing out pamphlets, and when he saw me, he made several Chinese kung fu postures. I am sure that all he knew about China came from seeing Chinese kung fu movies. This is only one side of China.

The Western media still dominates international reporting all over the world. About 80 percent of important news in the world originates from a couple of the foreign mainstream media. They sometimes fail to make objective reports about China and often exaggerate the flaws of China. Sometimes, they release so-called news, which, as a matter of fact, is just rumors. Misunderstandings arising from such a situation are very difficult to clear up only by explanation. The Western media once made exaggerated reports on China's growth and, furthermore, brought up arguments about the so-called "China threat." It is downright nonsense. China is never an aggressive country.

Some commentaries can distort facts much more viciously than news. Of course, the foreign media has the right to

**You are the number-one information officer in China. What is the essence of the national brand of China? What messages should China, as a brand, convey to the world?**

China is the most populous country in the world and it is also a developing socialist country. The essence of the China brand embraces two points. First of all, ideologically speaking, China is a country led by the CPC and set on the road of socialism with Chinese characteristics. It has transformed the imported Marxism into one suitable for China. Therefore, one must make judgments about today's China based on today's China's policies.

Secondly, China is an ever-changing and progressing country. It is far from perfect and there are still plenty of improvements to be made. For instance, we Chinese have a very good traditional culture, but now it has only a slight impact on other civilizations in the world. China's economy is evolving, the construction of the legal system and democracy is under way, and new laws are being decreed gradually. Why? The answer is that we need them. I suppose no country produces as many new laws every year as

China. Some foreign countries always blame China, saying that there is no democracy in China. That is just because they don't understand the foundation of China, which is that China leaped into socialism directly from a semi-feudal and semi-colonial society, without having gone through the capitalist or trained legalized society. We must acknowledge the fact that Chinese citizens need to be trained in and taught legal awareness. We need to build a sound and complete legal system. China never ever turns its back on democracy. Instead, it very much wants to get it established. This is a process. We dare to face the problems emerging from our development process and try to get them solved, step by step. The changes and developments taking place in China are where its vitality and energy are being applied, which contribute to a new China every day that everybody witnesses.

**From your perspective, what would you like foreign political and business leaders to better understand about China's financial and banking industry, the regional economies, and media?**

Speaking of the regional economies in China, one needs to understand that China is a more complicated market than Europe, because of the vast differences among China's economic regions. Some regions are similar to those in developed countries, and others are very backward. Both of these levels coexist in China. So the business dialogues between China and the outside world should be held in and organized by central cities at different stages of economic development. In other words, one needs to study the complementary nature of China's regional economy. It is critical to the development of the regional economy to avoid similarity.

The development of the regional economies can be divided into two phases: a form-developing phase and a function-developing phase. Let's take an example. It is just like a football-ground project. We are going to build a football ground to international standards. The flat ground should be covered with green grass, surrounded by stands with good views and shelters to protect spectators from the sunshine. That is the development of form.

As for the development of function, we can take international games as an example. How many international and domestic games will be held? What teams will go in for them? Will the games be ruled by internationally accepted rules? Are referees competent to judge the international games? Will there be live broadcasts of such games? These all involve the development of function. The development of function is the most important thing. If it doesn't happen, all efforts for the football ground will be in vain. The Pudong Development Area in Shanghai is in the phase of function developing. The

administration of the Binhai New Coastal Area in Tianjin should lay emphasis on both form developing and function developing. It is the right time for the Binhai New Coastal Area to make further development. The opportunity should be shared with the world.

About the financial and banking industry, we could say that our banks were large savings banks before, with very few financial products offered. Making Chinese banks internationalized means two things: expanding international business and absorbing international capital. Although the banks' international business has not yet been opened completely, it is already expanding day by day. It is



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inevitable that foreign banks will take shares in Chinese banks in the future, which will improve the Chinese banks' stability and levels of operation.

Speaking of the media, there is a saying that the Chinese media works as the mouthpiece of the CPC. In fact, that notion is changing. The media should always report the government's statements and policies accurately. Other than that, in terms of their obligation to the government, they only need to carry out their sense of social responsibility. Also, the media didn't pay attention to economic benefits 10 years ago, whereas now we are inclined keep a balance between both social and economic benefits. What we should do is transmit real news and healthy ideas to the public by commercial means. We should never regard social benefits and commercial benefits as a pair of contradicting factors. It is an outdated thought that if you want to gain commercial benefit, you will have to get rid of your social responsibility. Nowadays, you must hold both things together in your arms. We'd like to show the public the real China. China's growth is testament to our overcoming the old shortcomings and developing new strong points. So the Chi-

nese government encourages the media to report both our progress and our shortcomings, and to tell more true stories about China and leave it to readers to judge their authenticity.

**You are highly praised by the international society as a leader who is straightforward and sincere, and one who deals with public affairs in a pragmatic way. Could you tell us something about the new generation of Chinese state leaders?**

On the one hand, the new generation of Chinese leaders received an overall good education. On the other hand, they have held different government posts for a long time, and have grown as seasoned state leaders through long-term working practice. It is quite natural for them to hold their offices today and they are fully competent in their jobs. People are confident about them. They are able to handle foreign affairs properly. China's policies will be further developed, and you won't see sudden or fundamental changes in them. I believe this new generation of Chinese leaders is worthy of the world's trust.

**You are now an image ambassador for China and the top spokesman of China. You were also once an image representative for the Pudong Development Area in Shanghai. If we take all of these titles away, we are left with your name, Zhao Qizheng. What does your name connote in spirit?**

This man named Zhao Qizheng is a man who sets strict demands on himself. He ought to be obligated to his family, honest to his friends, and make a positive contribution to society. He is a man who can bring joy to people around him. Some of my friends think I am a rational idealist.

**Finally, what are your comments or suggestions for taking Branding China into the foreign mainstream media outside of China?**

China is playing an increasingly important role in the global forum. Its existence has impacted the world. If you want the world to be influenced by China in a positive way and to share China's opportunities, you must understand it and conduct dialogue with it. LEADERS' Branding China is presenting to its readers a changing China from an incisive point of view. It is very helpful for global leaders to know more about China, with a correct attitude, so they can further share the opportunities China has brought to the world. I believe LEADERS has good judgment in what it is doing. China has appeared in the arena of the world. It should be among the members of LEADERS. I hope that reporting of this nature will happen regularly in LEADERS, and not just once. I understand that you do not yet publish a Chinese version of LEADERS. What you are doing is a good start. 