

Diplomatic TV anchor brings modern China to the world

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China correspondent

Rui Chengjiang is the new face of China. His is a profile that China wants to present to the world: young, super-smart, photogenic, internationally attuned, fluent in English, media savvy and, last but by no means least, a convinced and convincing spokesman for China's surge to superpowerdom.

Rui, 29, is flying to Brisbane to speak at the Australian Davos Connection Future Summit on May 11-12. He comes from Hefei, the capital of Anhui province in central China, a great agricultural and military centre. Like a scholar of old taking the gruelling exam to become a mandarin, he won his way against the odds to a small, elite foreign affairs university in Beijing.

"I was set to become a diplomat, that was my dream," he says.

Near graduation, a visit by Boutros Boutros-Ghali, then recently retired as secretary general of the UN, changed Rui's life. Boutros-Ghali talked about the controversy over whether the UN Security Council should be augmented.

Rui asked if so, who would be picked as the first, new member of the



council? Boutros-Ghali answered swiftly: CNN.

"He said the influence of CNN on world politics was six times bigger than that of a medium-sized country because all the world's leaders watched it. It was more powerful back then, when it was newer."

He says Boutros-Ghali explained there had been two natural disasters in different parts of the world. One was covered by CNN, the other wasn't.

"Help flooded into the country covered by TV, the other received virtually nothing," Rui says.

So Rui chose the media as a career. At about the same time, he won second prize in a national speaking competition and was chosen to represent China at an international context in London. He came fourth, the highest of all the Asian entrants. A tape of Rui's speech was played back home.

Central China TV executives heard it and asked him to consider



Power: Rui and Clinton

journalism. His first appointment was as a reporter on a small local television station in Shandong province, in northeast China. Then he shifted to Jinan, the capital of Shandong, and back to Beijing.

He arrived at the right time. CCTV, the core government broadcaster, was planning to set up its first English-language station, Channel 9.

"and there were very few people out there who could help, so I became one of a small group to help build up the new channel".

He says: "I feel very passionate

and strong about the mission of CCTV9, to introduce the real China to the world. So often China is misinterpreted and misunderstood. There's so much bias against China, particularly in the Western world."

Rui started a daily live interview show, *Talk China*, featuring international political and business leaders. The only bilingual TV host, he fronts a version of the program in Mandarin on domestic station CCTV2 (sometimes attracting as many as 200 million viewers), then in English on CCTV9, where it is broadcast domestically as well as internationally by satellite.

"It's very exciting for me, very satisfying," he says. "Two live shows every day. Domestically, I explain to Chinese people what's going on in the world."

"A few hours later, in a different studio, I introduce the rest of the world to what's going on in China."

Rui says he doesn't feel frustrated by the constraints of the Chinese media. "The way media work and interact with politics and the business community is very different in China and the US. In China, they're very little influenced by the business community; in the US most media companies are listed, so there are a

lot of commercial interests. I work for a station owned by the Chinese Government and often tell people it's like Fox News in effect becoming a Republican TV station."

Who has been his favourite interviewee? "I kind of like Bill Clinton, because he's such an effective communicator. He represents the finest of US politicians, but at the same time he's a very good liar."

He was involved in President Hu Jintao's recent visit to the US and was "especially close to him during his speech at Yale. One of the differences, I was told after his visit, was that in contrast he received a long-lasting, standing ovation when he spoke to the Australian parliament. In no other country has he had such a warm welcome."

Rui has no ambitions to move on from his present high-profile career: "For a journalist, the only way to do well is to do work you feel passionate about. And my passion is to communicate the real, comprehensive China to the world, bridging the understanding gap."

He believes the future of China's media will be a mixture of the courses charted by the US, Japan and South Korea, including interactive and high-definition TV.

Rui recalls having dinner with News Corporation chairman and chief executive Rupert Murdoch and asking him if he might consider spending \$1 billion on a new headquarters, as CCTV is doing.

"He said never, he said that 'the show we produce and the articles we print decide whether we live or die, not the building we operate out of,'" Rui says.

He also said that advertising was no longer the crucial revenue stream for News Corporation, and that subscription fees were starting to provide the bulk of the income from its TV stations. In China, ads are big. "All the government-owned stations sell commercials. But the more educated people are, the less time they spend watching TV."

"When I grew up," Rui says, "TV was the essential medium for a household, but now people have more choices, they get their news from the internet and other places, and TV's entertainment role has also diminished. We are moving towards a truly multimedia world and those of us in TV need to be prepared for that day."

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