



CNN Newsroom

Peng Shuai – Comment & Concern

Robert Lawrence Kuhn, December 22, 2021

The screenshot shows a CNN Newsroom broadcast. On the left, a man with glasses and a suit, identified as Robert Lawrence Kuhn, is speaking via Skype from New York. On the right, a tennis player in a red outfit is shown in action, hitting a backhand shot. The broadcast includes a headline about Peng Shuai's case and a 'LIVE' indicator.

Via Skype
New York

Getty Images

PENG SHUAI CASE

TENNIS STAR SAYS SHE NEVER ACCUSED A SENIOR COMMUNIST LEADER OF SEXUAL ASSAULT, RAISING MORE CENSORSHIP QUESTIONS

LIVE
CNN
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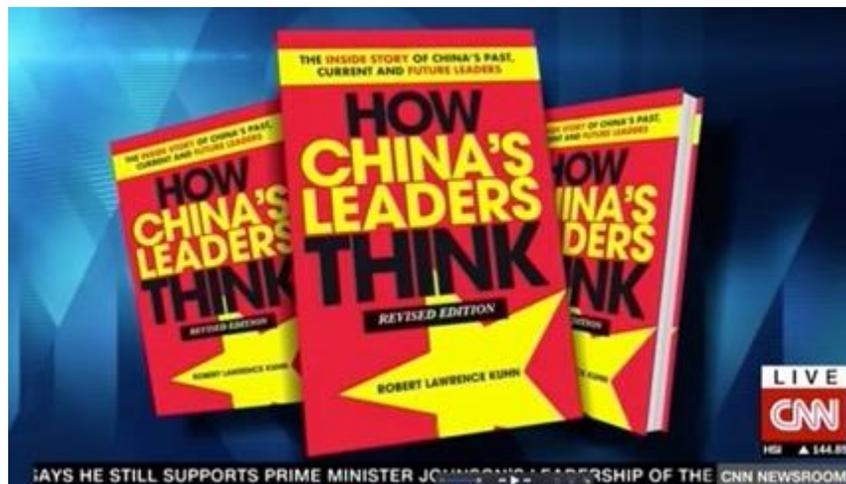
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CNN Newsday
Host John

Vause:
Host of the PBS show *Closer to Truth*, Robert Lawrence Kuhn is with us now from New York. For more than 20 years, he was an adviser to China's government. He is also the author of *How China's Leaders Think*. It's great to have you with us. It's a pleasure to see you.

Robert
Lawrence Kuhn:
Good to see you, John.





CNN Host: Okay. So I see a significant number of people who know Peng Shuai believe she was coerced into withdrawing her allegations of sexual assault. If she was, it would not be the first time. Here's Robert Daly, from the Woodrow Wilson Center to explain how all of this works. Listen to this.

Robert Daly: There's a phrase called "having tea," where a couple of people with authority, and with the coercive powers of the police state behind them, come to you to have a chat about what may be in your best interest, what you might want to do as a patriotic Chinese to help the party.





CNN: Do you believe that something like that is happening here?

Robert Lawrence

KUHN: Certainly, the government has been involved in this, but I think we need to be clear that what she said was not reversing what she had said previously. And you have to parse carefully the words, particularly in Chinese, because what she said now is that there was no sexual abuse or violence in some way the equivalent of what we would call rape.



KUHN: What she said originally, if you look at the whole Weibo post that she wrote — which was quickly taken off, of course — she said that this was a very long, multiple-year consensual relationship that had at least one... when she talked about some sort of a coercive event, sexually. That is very different than sexual abuse. Maybe she is taking coaching lessons from Bill Clinton in terms of how to parse sentences to make it make sense.





CNN Host: That is the question, I guess, which was raised at one of the regular briefings in Beijing. Here's a spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, when asked about Peng Shuai.

Zhao Lijun, Spokesperson, Ministry of Foreign Affairs: This is not a foreign affairs matter. Next question.





CNN Host: Officially, it may not be a foreign affairs matter, but, clearly, this attempt at trying to manage this story in some way is driven by concerns of international perception. Right? Especially ahead of the Winter Olympics.

KUHN: Yes. No question about that. And we've seen China state media and various facets of it intervening early on by releasing videos or comments multiple times about the situation. So clearly there has been an effort beyond her personally in this whole situation.





CNN Host: No doubt about it when it comes to censorship, no one does it better than the Communist government in Beijing. They have this incredible control over 1.4 billion Chinese people on the mainland, what they get to read, see, hear. Historically, though, compared to Russia, especially the Soviet Union, there hasn't been sort of this investment in spreading party propaganda or even owning their own narrative globally. Does that explain, at least in part, why this effort to make a story go away if you like, or controlling the narrative, seems to have blown up in their face?



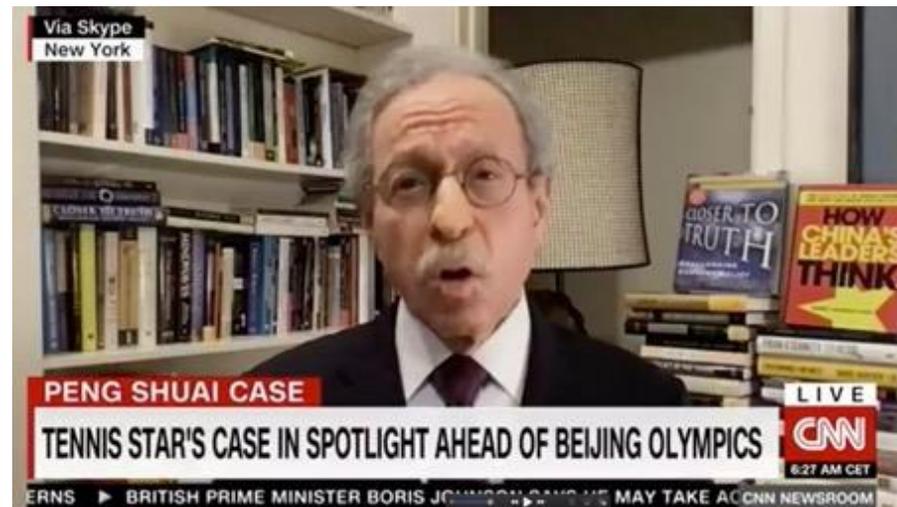


KUHN: Well, certainly, China is very much engaged in projecting its image into the world, as China has become the second largest economy, has achieved many things, for example, the elimination of all extreme poverty, the GDP increasing, what, 65 times per capita over the last 40 plus years. A remarkable story. And yet China feels that it's very much misunderstood in the world, and therefore it wants to have its voice heard — the equivalent of being the second largest economy and the largest trading nation with most countries. So that is a normal thing that all countries do.



KUHN: Now, the way China does it has problems because what they want to do is operate sometimes the way they operate internally, [also] externally. And that has caused more problems than it solves. For sure.

In this situation, though, there's a difference between trying to affect what people think, what they believe, and how they behave. And let's look in terms of the International Olympic Committee, the IOC. The effort was not to change how they really believe, but to affect what they do, their behavior. In other words, not interfering with the Winter Olympics.





KUHN: China wants to give organizations like the IOC, corporations, a chance to do what they want to do anyway in their own best interests. So, by the activities showing Peng Shuai, people may not believe what they see. And that's quite obvious: Virtually 100% of the people don't believe what they see to be the whole story, but it will give them an excuse, or a way to rationalize the behavior, that they themselves want to do anyway. We sometimes call it, when it's a negative term, "plausible deniability". This is "plausible acceptability": that it is okay to continue with the Olympics. If she remained hidden, for example, there would have been great pressure on the IOC, so that's the difference.





CNN Host:
Robert, it's a key insight, which I haven't heard before. So we really appreciate you being with us. Thank you.

KUHN: Thank you.

