

# CHANGING MEDIA, CHANGING CHINA

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# China's Emerging Public Sphere: The Impact of Media Commercialization, Professionalism, and the Internet in an Era of Transition

*Qian Gang and David Bandurski*

IN CHINA THERE IS an old saying about Lord Ye, who professes to love dragons but runs for dear life when finally confronted with one. The parable is a fair characterization of the deep ambivalence that China's leaders now feel toward the increasingly freewheeling commercial and Internet media. Since the 1990s China's leaders have encouraged the commercialization of the country's media: in 1998, China's media industry earnings totaled RMB 126 billion (USD 16 billion),<sup>1</sup> and by 2005, that figure had nearly tripled to RMB 320 billion (USD 40.5 billion).<sup>2</sup> China also has actively supported the development of Internet infrastructure to keep stride with its global competitors, spending USD 138 billion in the five years to 30 June 2005, and it had 384 million Internet users by 31 December 2009, including 346 million broadband users.<sup>3</sup>

But the implications of these changes have also, like Lord Ye's dragon, caused alarm and consternation among leaders who strongly believe that controlling the public agenda is critical to maintaining social stability and the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) hold on power. While actively encouraging the media to operate on market principles instead of relying on government subsidies, the CCP resists a redefinition of the role of media, which it still regards first and foremost as promoters of the party's agenda. Since the massacre of demonstrators at Tiananmen Square in 1989, "guidance of public opinion," the most common euphemism for agenda control, has been the centerpiece of propaganda work.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, media commercialization, developing norms of journalistic professionalism, and the growth of new media are combining to erode the CCP's monopoly over the public agenda and to open a limited public sphere.

The resulting tension between control and commercialization has altered the relationship between the CCP and the media, prompting the CCP to adopt new control tactics to uphold its influence on news and propaganda. Despite the fact that the CCP continues to punish editors who step over the line and the media remain formally a part of the party-state apparatus, China's leaders are beginning to treat the media and Internet as the voice of the public and to respond to it accordingly. In other words, the CCP seeks a power-maximizing balance between censorship and propaganda on the one hand and responsiveness on the other. Journalists in turn are developing their own tactics to gain audiences and challenge censors.

This chapter proceeds as follows: the first section discusses the nature and history of the commercialization of Chinese print media, in particular newspapers. The second section goes on to raise the question of an emerging credibility gap between party and commercial papers. Evidence suggests that consumers view commercial newspapers as more credible than their party competitors. Third, we address the development of a professional journalistic ethos and the struggle between the journalistic community and the state over how that ethos is defined. The fourth part addresses the expansion of the Internet and the growth of Web-based media and their effects on news coverage. In the fifth section, the prior sections are brought together to argue that commercialization, emerging professionalism, and the growth of Web-based media are all shifting agenda-setting power from the party-state apparatus to the media. Last, we conclude with an assessment of the transitioning relationship between the media and the party-state apparatus.

The process of media commercialization that brought the CCP to its present amalgam of control and change began in the 1980s but was accelerated by the intensification of economic reforms in the mid-1990s. As trade and foreign investment grew, and as China sought to enter the World Trade Organization, the prospect of competition from foreign media loomed. But because the CCP still regarded the media as promoters of party ideology and social guidance, change came more gradually than in the economic sector. Nevertheless, during the 1980s a few foreign media groups did in fact strike up joint ventures—in areas that were deemed politically safe, such as computers and fashion. International Data Group led with *China Computer-world* magazine, set up in 1980 in coordination with a business arm of China's IT industry regulator, the Ministry of Information Industry. In 1988 the Chinese-language edition of the fashion magazine *Elle* followed suit.

A much bolder attempt by an overseas media investor to gain a foothold in the Chinese market came in August 1992, when Hong Kong businessman Yu Pinhai signed a joint venture deal with Guangzhou's *Xiandai Renbao*. While the contract yielded complete editorial control to the Chinese partner, Yu's company exercised its influence through Lie Fu, who managed the operations side. He introduced editorial methods and compensation systems in line with the global newspaper industry, put a system of totally computerized copy flow in place, and employed modern management techniques. The highly competitive *Xiandai Renbao* caused concern among Guangzhou's three top newspapers, *Nanfang Daily*, *Yangcheng Evening News*, and *Guangzhou Daily*.<sup>5</sup> Although an important first for overseas participation in the highly sensitive area of news, Yu Pinhai's newspaper venture was nevertheless doomed. Guangdong leaders shut down *Xiandai Renbao* on 1 January 1995.

Although early foreign competitors found themselves unable to gain footholds in China's media market, the threat of competition mobilized the media to move toward self-sufficiency. The big picture was about China's place in what the CCP still regards as a global information struggle. In the CCP's view, media strengthening—asset restructuring, changes in modes of operation, and the creation of engaging media products to foster domestic competition—is necessary for China to “face competition by international media groups and face the global struggle for public opinion.”<sup>6</sup> Domestic competition continues to be regarded as an urgent matter of national strength.

The strategic global dimension of media strengthening became much more apparent in 2009, with news of massive government investment to enhance the global presence of core party media, and China's organization of the ostensibly nongovernmental World Media Summit, which was financed by the CCP and held in the Great Hall of the People.<sup>7</sup>

In the mid-1990s, fresh media offerings sprang up all over China. Newspapers such as *Southern Weekend*, a commercial spin-off of Guangdong Province's official *Nanfang Daily*, and a myriad of metro newspapers (commercially oriented daily tabloids or broadsheets) spiced up official news with consumer-relevant lifestyle, entertainment, and sports coverage. Investigative news programs like China Central Television's *Focus* came into being, offering a fresh approach to news and analysis. Naturally, political support was an indispensable component of their initial success and continued operation. *Southern Weekend* was able to weather several political storms with officials in Beijing because it had support from provincial leaders in Guangdong. The television program *Focus*, which routinely shed light on such social and political problems as administrative corruption, was supported by the country's top propaganda official, Ding Guangen, who actually had a role in its creation.

Commercialization meant a radical reconfiguration of the relationships between media and audiences, the tight grip of the propaganda apparatus notwithstanding. No longer were readers purely targets of CCP messages. The era of choice had arrived. Initially, the changes went forward in much the same way as they had at large state-owned enterprises—through experimental ventures. Generally, this meant party media or government offices used an existing publishing license to launch a commercial media spin-off.<sup>8</sup>

The new commercial newspapers drew massive audiences. By mid-decade, Wuhan's *Chutian Metropolis Daily* had a circulation of over 1 million or approximately 12 percent of the city's population.<sup>9</sup> In the late 1990s, as more commercial newspapers came onto the market, their growth contrasted sharply with circulation declines for official party newspapers. While reliable figures are somewhat problematic in China because independent circulation audits are rare, we can get a fairly clear picture of the shift to commercial papers by looking at official figures for average daily print runs at party and commercial newspapers (figure 2.1). In the ten years from 1993 to 2003, *Beijing Daily*, the official mouthpiece of municipal leaders in the capital, went from an average daily print run of 523,000

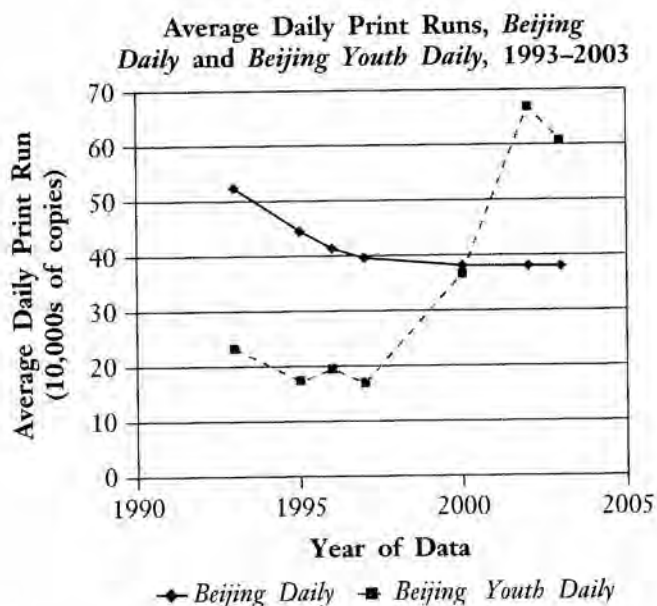


FIGURE 2.1.

copies to just 380,000 copies—a 27 percent drop. Over the same period, *Beijing Youth Daily*, a commercial newspaper published by the Beijing Communist Youth League, almost tripled its daily print run from 231,000 to 600,000.<sup>10</sup>

In southern China, Guangdong's official *Nanfang Daily* suffered a 14 percent drop in its average daily print run, from 876,000 copies per day in 1993 to 750,000 in 2003. However, the paper's commercial spin-off, *Southern Metropolis Daily*, which recorded a meager daily run of 41,000 in 1997, printed an astounding 1.4 million copies in 2003. The CCP's flagship newspaper, *People's Daily*, was no exception to the downward trend for party papers. In 1993, the newspaper had an estimated circulation of 2.78 million. Yet this figure had plummeted to 1.8 million only ten years later.<sup>11</sup>

Throughout the 1990s, the central government closed down or withdrew subsidies for local and regional publications to reduce the crowding out of central news media. Funding was maintained for key mouthpieces like *People's Daily* and the central Xinhua News Agency. Yet this tough love had the inadvertent effect of sending underfunded publications into the marketplace in search of their own commercial niches. This further stimulated media commercialization as the managers of many of these publications had to get creative to survive. The minor-league official newswire China News Service provides a good example: state funds to China News Service

had been substantially reduced by the end of the 1990s, so in 1999 the newswire capitalized on one of its licenses to launch *China Newsweekly*, a news-magazine that takes its cues from *Time* magazine and is now one of China's market leaders.<sup>12</sup>

But commercial ventures were not exclusive to media that had been cut loose from government subsidies. As media commercialization gripped the country, there was money to be made by everyone. Even *People's Daily*, the official organ of the CCP's Central Committee, jumped on the commercial bandwagon with the May 2001 launch of *Jinghua Times*, a metro newspaper sold at newsstands in Beijing. The newspaper, which offered thirty-two full-color pages at the time of launch and contained the usual range of consumer fare, expanded to forty-eight pages just nine months later.<sup>13</sup> *Jinghua Times* made China's annual top twenty list of most influential commercial newspapers—based on such factors as circulation, advertising strength, and reader involvement—for the first time in 2006, and climbed to the number seventeen spot in 2007.<sup>14</sup> Once official publications have to compete for audiences, the style and substance of even these publications change.

Despite the commercial evolution of China's media, however, the market remains highly regulated through the media licensing system. The CCP limits the number of licenses granted and the terms of the license may restrict the content of publications. For example, the weekly market-oriented magazine *Lifeweek* is barred from coverage of current affairs stories.<sup>15</sup> Asset allocation and investment, particularly foreign investment, are also rigorously controlled. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the media now constitute an industry. The objective of propaganda officials is to bolster this industry under a regime of tight control.<sup>16</sup>

By the time President Hu Jintao came to power in 2002, the media commercialization process was already in high gear. The president's own media policy was, as expected, a marriage of commercialization and control. The policy, called the Three Closenesses (to reality, to people, and to life), urged journalists to make their reporting more relevant by moving away from dull regurgitations of official news releases.<sup>17</sup> The Three Closenesses was about creating more savvy, lively, and believable media products. The policy reiterated the imperative of party control, or "guidance," but also underscored what had already become obvious—the media now had two masters, the party and the public.

## THE CREDIBILITY GAP BETWEEN PARTY AND COMMERCIAL NEWS

One criticism of media commercialization in China has been that it leads to bottom-line thinking and sensationalism.<sup>18</sup> Numerous examples have been cited in support of this argument. In 2005, for example, editors at a leading commercial newspaper in China's western Sichuan Province were found to have convinced a young woman to donate her liver so they could publish a heart-wrenching front-page news story.<sup>19</sup> Commercial media need stories that sell. This imperative, combined with CCP news control, effectively encourages sensational yet politically innocuous content.

Yet commercialization has undoubtedly expanded content diversity. The variety of media offerings in China has mushroomed over the last decade, a fact patently obvious to anyone browsing newsstands, where a deluge of magazines, dailies, and tabloids beckons to passersby. Looking critically at major news stories and how they play out at the newsstand, one can also begin to recognize the interesting and important ways commercialization has begun to push the envelope and expand space for expression.

The most critical factor shaping the expanded content of news and media is the consumer, the person at the newsstand voting with his or her pocket-book. According to a study of newspaper readers in Beijing in 2004, nearly all respondents who said they read one newspaper (44 percent of the total) preferred commercial newspapers. Only those who habitually read two to three publications picked up party newspapers.<sup>20</sup> In a media environment increasingly driven by consumer choice, the news gap between party and commercial media is opening a corresponding divide in public trust and credibility, which has direct implications for the CCP's ability to guide and shape public opinion.

The source of the credibility gap is revealed by the way different types of outlets treat the same news story in China. When Beijing Vice-Mayor Liu Zhihua was stripped of his party rank in June 2006 on suspicion of corruption, propaganda officials issued a ban on independent reporting by Chinese newspapers. In other words, reporters were not to interview people related to the case, or other officials or experts. They were provided only limited information by Xinhua News Agency in the form of an official release, or *tonggao*. Officials regarded this as a highly sensitive corruption case since Liu Zhihua had been responsible for construction projects for the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. If the scandal had bored deeper into the

CCP's ranks, it could have become a major international news story and stigmatized the games themselves. At the same time, Beijing's municipal leaders hoped to control damage so that the Liu Zhihua case did not implicate them. But on the other hand, this was a great story from a commercial and professional standpoint. How did party and commercial media handle it, and how did coverage differ from region to region?

On June 12, mention of the Liu Zhihua case did in fact appear in *People's Daily*, but the story was consigned to a tiny space on page 4, just above the weather report. The report made use of the official Xinhua release with a headline—"Standing Committee of Beijing Party Congress Opens 28th Conference"—that de-emphasized the real news that a top-level official had been removed for corruption at that meeting. Figure 2.2 shows page 4 of the June 12, 2006, edition of *People's Daily*.

As a central party newspaper, the managers of *People's Daily* did not necessarily seek to protect municipal officials in Beijing. Battles against local corruption are, after all, a regular feature of China's internal politics. But central officials certainly did not wish to taint the CCP as a whole or preparations for the 2008 Beijing Olympics by calling too much attention to the story.<sup>21</sup>

Turning to *Beijing Daily*, the official mouthpiece of Beijing's top leadership, we find that while coverage of the Liu Zhihua story was downplayed, it made the paper's front page. The item, again the content of the Xinhua release, was squeezed in at the bottom of the page. The lead stories, about attracting tourism to Beijing and new labor policies, emphasized the positive leadership of Beijing officials. In fact, the story directly above the Liu Zhihua item is a declaration of the need to fight corruption in the CCP's ranks. The point is to draw the public's attention away from the story and its implications for Beijing's leadership while maintaining some credibility by reporting the bare facts on the front page.<sup>22</sup> Unfortunately, *Beijing Daily* refused in May 2010 to provide or authorize the use of a high-resolution image of its 12 June 2006 front page, a reminder of the lingering sensitivity of a story of this nature in China's media environment.

Moving from party newspapers to commercial ones, the differences become conspicuous. *Jinghua Times*, as previously mentioned, a commercial spin-off of China's official *People's Daily*, had an interest in using the Liu Zhihua story to attract readers. With the ban on original reportage in force, *Jinghua Times* was forced to work with the same Xinhua material. The paper nonetheless differentiated itself by announcing the real news with a prominent headline at the top of page 1. The headline did not attempt



FIGURE 2.2. *People's Daily*, 12 June 2006. Liu Zhihua corruption story at bottom left, above weather map.

to obfuscate: "Beijing Vice-Mayor Liu Zhihua Removed from Office." A page jump referred readers to the inside of the newspaper, where they could discover the same story available to *People's Daily* readers.<sup>23</sup> If nothing more, the article's front-page placement sent a very different message about the relative significance of Liu Zhihua's removal from office.

The most startling differences in treatment appeared in commercial newspapers outside the nation's capital. Shanghai's *Oriental Morning Post*, a commercial spin-off of the official *Wen Hui Bao*, also placed the headline across the front page, directly beneath the banner.

However, in the *Oriental Morning Post*, readers were given more than just the Xinhua release.<sup>24</sup> Although the reporter did not directly violate the prohibition on reportage, the article includes more information on the case from an official government Web site: "According to the information made available to the public on the Beijing municipal government Website, 'Window on the Capital,' Liu Zhihua's 'job responsibilities' included: 'Assisting and presiding over [city] planning work, presiding over construction work, management of land and real-estate, sports [training, construction of sports facilities, etc.], building of light-rail and transportation.'"

The front-page article went on to mention the various municipal committees on which Liu Zhihua had served. All of this information could be used with relative safety because it had been publicly released on a government Web site. The information pointed unequivocally to Liu's central role in the Beijing government and suggested his relationship to key infrastructure projects and sports activities. While readers were left to put two and two together, the implications were clear. The story also highlighted the key role the Internet can play in helping reporters and editors act as professional journalists by expanding news stories. Variance in coverage of the Liu Zhihua case suggests that even in politically controversial cases where the CCP has a strong interest in monopolizing the message, media are finding ways to attract readers by adding their own voices. Nevertheless, stories like that of Liu Zhihua remain politically delicate. In May 2010, nearly four years after the original Liu Zhihua story, the *Oriental Morning Post* refused to provide or authorize the use of a high-resolution image of its 12 June front page, citing the sensitive nature of the story.

This gap in coverage between party and commercial publications has clear implications for media credibility and the CCP's exclusive power

# 北京副市长刘志华被免职

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(A03版/第101)

荷兰1:0胜塞黑  
A04版/第102页

外语口语考试  
发现一人作弊  
A04版/第102页

四医院院长  
涉嫌受贿案  
A05版/第103页

扎卡维死亡  
被枪杀所致  
A04版/第102页



## 进京治疗

昨天, 北京市副市长刘志华因生活腐化堕落, 被中央纪委、监察部决定对其立案审查。刘志华在事发后, 曾一度试图自杀, 后被家人发现并送往医院治疗。目前, 刘志华正在医院接受治疗, 病情稳定。

(本报记者 孙悦 摄)

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FIGURE 2.3. *Jinghua Times*, 12 June 2006. Liu Zhihua corruption story in large bold headline text at the top of the page.

to set the public agenda. Readers are picking up commercial papers because they offer better entertainment and sports coverage. But it is also true that commercial papers have achieved a higher degree of credibility than their party counterparts, and this, in turn, has meant that public opinion is increasingly being shaped by commercial rather than party media.

This trend is particularly visible in the coverage of crisis events.<sup>25</sup> When a deadly gas explosion occurred in a coal mine in Henan Province in October 2004, the news was covered by both party and commercial newspapers. On October 22, the day after the explosion occurred, sixty or more miners were confirmed dead and more than eighty missing. China's top leaders, Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao, issued a statement urging authorities to do their utmost to rescue miners trapped beneath the surface. Rescue crews were on the scene, as were survivors and family members of the dead and missing. On this occasion, reporting from the scene was permitted, and both party and commercial papers dealt with the same basic facts.

For the *People's Daily*, Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao were the story. A headline on the newspaper's front page read: "Order from Hu Jintao, Wen Jiabao and Other Central Leaders: Spare No Effort in Rescuing Personnel Inside Mine in Gas Explosion at Henan Province's Zhengzhou Coal Electric [Group's] Daping Mine." The first line of the article mentioned that personnel had been "severely injured" in the "accident," but only in the last sentence was there mention of the number of dead and injured. All other details in the report dealt with the positive actions of top national and provincial leaders. The report on Daping also had to fight for space against a bigger news item about a meeting of the Politburo and its decision to hold "advanced education programs" for cadres.<sup>26</sup>

Virtually the same story made the front page of *Henan Daily*, the provincial party mouthpiece. The only difference was the addition of a photograph of a provincial party official on an inspection tour of Daping. The headline read "Hu Jintao, Wen Jiabao Place Great Importance on Accident at Daping Mine."<sup>27</sup> No number of dead or missing was given in the story, though these figures were supplied in another article below the first one. But the emphasis was again on the response by party officials, this time by Henan's top leadership.<sup>28</sup>

The official party newspapers obscured the human elements of the Daping story. Their portrayal of the tragedy read like a stage play starring only official actors. But readers who turned to *Beijing Youth Daily*, a newspaper

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FIGURE 2.6. *Beijing Youth Daily*, 22 October 2004.

*Daily*. On 22 October 2004, the front page of *Southern Metropolis Daily* was dominated by a large photograph of two rescue workers in Daping removing a victim in a body bag. The picture conveys the tragedy of Daping and shows readers a more personal aspect of rescue work. The headline, in a white font against a black background, is unmistakable: "Major Mine Disaster in Henan: 62 Dead 86 Missing."<sup>30</sup> The use of "disaster" rather than "accident," while it may seem a trifle to those in freer media environments, is a purposeful choice, guiding readers away from the focus on government action and leaving open the possibility of government responsibility for the losses. Furthermore, the Daping story did not have to share space with a story about the CCP's "advanced education program" for cadres.

*Southern Metropolis Daily* also provided a whole series of supplementary news reports, including vivid accounts from survivors at an on-site dormitory.

"So many years and I've never come across anything as tragic as this," says 43-year-old Zhang Juyou. Hunan Province native Gao Wusong, who works in the same crew as Zhang Juyou, says he was even luckier because he felt uncomfortable that day and only worked until 9 before getting off. "I'd just eaten a little something in the dormitory when I heard a huge boom that shook the building."<sup>31</sup>

At the *Beijing News*, a commercial daily in the nation's capital, the focus was similarly on the relatives of disaster victims. The front-page headline read: "62 Die in Major Henan Mining Disaster." The photograph dominating the page was a close-up of a wallet-sized picture of a disaster victim resting in the palm of a relative's hand.

In provinces outside Henan, the differences in coverage between party and commercial newspapers were similarly conspicuous. Much like *People's Daily*, the official *Sichuan Daily* emphasized the actions of party leaders and referred to the disaster at Daping as an "accident."<sup>32</sup> In contrast, *Chengdu Commercial Daily*, a tabloid in the capital of Sichuan Province, localized its coverage, making it relevant to readers in Sichuan: "Some miners told our reporter there were Sichuanese among the dead and that their families had already been notified by the mine. Owing to the long journey, the relatives had not yet arrived. As to specifically how many Sichuanese miners there were, they could not say clearly, and the mine does not yet have specific numbers."<sup>33</sup>

The disparities between party and commercial coverage in such situations is evident to Chinese readers. After Typhoon Saomai slammed into

## 郑州煤电集团大平煤矿深夜发生瓦斯爆炸

breaking stories, and he talked about Internet media and the new generation of commercial metro newspapers as propaganda "resources" that needed to be better utilized by the party.<sup>37</sup> This policy change, though in development for several years, was in many ways a response to the international image crisis China suffered as a result of unrest in Tibet in March 2008, which was a watershed moment for the CCP on the rethinking of news and propaganda. In the CCP's post-game analysis, Tibet was regarded as a failure of media policy. By resorting to traditional censorship tactics, shutting off access to the region, and dragging its feet in releasing an official version of facts and events, the CCP created an information vacuum that international media nevertheless occupied aggressively. The agenda, therefore, had been yielded to others.<sup>38</sup>

The shift in the CCP's approach to agenda setting can also be glimpsed in the rapid rise of a new media buzzword, "public opinion channeling," which has augmented and seemingly overtaken the Jiang Zemin-era term "guidance of public opinion." Essentially, Hu Jintao has moved away from a sheer emphasis on classic controls—banning content, shutting down media, shutting up reports—to a combination approach that involves pushing the CCP's message out more actively through commercial media and Internet as well as official media. This shift, which journalists in China have referred to as "grabbing the megaphone," or *qiang la ba*, can be seen as a direct response on the part of the leadership to changes in the nature of agenda setting, both domestically and internationally, as a result of media commercialization and the rapid development of new communications technologies. At the China Media Project, we have coined the term Control 2.0 to refer to a whole range of more active news and propaganda policies that have been pushed under Hu Jintao's leadership.<sup>39</sup>

Despite attempts to close the gap, the "disjoint between the party and government agenda and the public agenda" Tsinghua University Professor Li Xiguang spoke about still exists.<sup>40</sup> The CCP's censorship mechanisms allow officials to shut out or contain certain news events, and "channeling" enables them to disseminate through commercial media and the Internet what the CCP likes to call "authoritative" information and agendas. But there are limits to what these mechanisms can accomplish in China's increasingly diverse and market-oriented media environment, and journalists continually seek to push open new spaces, both professionally and commercially.

## PROFESSIONALISM IN THE ERA OF TRANSITION

In Chinese academic circles and the media industry, the concept of professionalism, or *zhuanye zhuayi*, has taken on greater importance in recent years.<sup>41</sup> While there is often little agreement about what professionalism entails, a number of trends point to the emergence of a professional journalism community. A sense of social mission among Chinese journalists has emerged as party news ideology has faded. As early as the Tiananmen crisis, journalists joined the protests and reported on them freely for several days in May before the crackdown. Media consumers are also a factor, with newer concepts like "serving the consumer" tied closely to the journalist's sense of purpose.<sup>42</sup>

CCP leaders have moved to co-opt the notion of journalistic professionalism since it came into use in the 1990s, redefining it as responsibility to the party and society.<sup>43</sup> The creation of a national Journalist Day (8 November) in 2000 was meant to recognize journalism as a profession of relevance to society—following holidays for the nursing and teaching professions.<sup>44</sup> But when China's propaganda chief and other officials honored journalists with speeches on the inaugural Journalist Day, the theme was respect for the CCP's news workers.<sup>45</sup> The theme did not resonate with journalists. *Southern Weekend* wrote in a special issue that the social function of the media was to "show care for the weak, to give strength to the powerless," and that journalists should express their "social conscience" by revealing the truth to the people.<sup>46</sup>

The roots of this sense of journalistic mission in fact go back beyond the present era to what Zhang Yuren has called the origins of "liberal press theory" in China.<sup>47</sup> Zhang traces Western journalistic ideologies in China back to the late Qing Dynasty and independent newspapers like Wang Tuo's *Universal Circulating Herald*, launched in Hong Kong in 1874.<sup>48</sup> The CCP's press system, while in part incorporating the "enlightenment tradition," transformed the relationship between the state and the press, co-opting independent intellectual elements in journalism.<sup>49</sup> Tracing lineages in this enlightenment tradition is a fuzzy process, but generally included are such Mao-era press figures as Deng Tuo, the first editor in chief of *People's Daily*, and Liu Binyan, China's most celebrated reporter.<sup>50</sup>

This tradition, voiced in *Southern Weekend's* Journalist Day dissent of November 2000, was also at work in one of China's biggest press freedom stories of 2006, the CCP's shutdown of the *Freezing Point* supplement to

*China Youth Daily*, the official publication of the China Youth League. *China Youth Daily* had become a lively and highly profitable commercial newspaper with national circulation, and *Freezing Point* was home to some of China's most outspoken journalism for roughly a decade. It was shut down in January 2006 after receiving repeated criticisms from propaganda officials.<sup>51</sup> The shutdown was followed by a wave of criticism not only from international media but from the journalism and academic communities within China. On 2 February, thirteen officials, including former bosses for some of China's most influential media, circulated an open letter speaking out against the shutdown of *Freezing Point*.<sup>52</sup> The letter was directed at the country's top leaders but also circulated on an overseas Web site. It called for more freedom of speech and advised leaders to "demolish every method of news censorship."<sup>53</sup> The signers of the open letter personified China's enlightenment tradition as well as the political reform tradition of the 1980s, during which time such officials as former premier and CCP General Secretary Zhao Ziyang and former CCP General Secretary Hu Yaobang had been strong proponents of press freedom.

In mid-February, it was announced that *Freezing Point* would be allowed to relaunch without its editors, Li Datong and Lu Yuegang. Li Datong has stated many times since that an outcry from the journalist community, academics, and more liberal officials prompted China's top leaders to step in and interdict the order from the Propaganda Department. The response from the journalist community in China, Li said, underscored deep-seated resentments about China's propaganda regime and a growing resistance to the docile role defined for journalists by the CCP.<sup>54</sup>

The *Freezing Point* episode is, on the one hand, a case of CCP leaders employing strong-arm tactics to control the media and the maneuverings of the Propaganda Department and leftist elements within.<sup>55</sup> On the other hand, it underlines the limitations of such tactics in China's era of transition. Criticism of the government's action presents leaders with a dilemma. As Minxin Pei observed, Hu Jintao might have chosen to take action against those coming to *Freezing Point's* defense, but would have risked looking "politically clumsy." Leniency, by contrast, might have further emboldened media that were already chomping at the bit.<sup>56</sup> The end result was a calculated compromise.

The *Freezing Point* case is only one, albeit dramatic, example of how journalists in China are resisting the actions of the propaganda regime and the CCP's monopolization of the truth. Similar actions are happening

regularly, on a smaller scale, throughout the media. One Chinese editor says the relationship between the propaganda regime and the media "looks increasingly like a game of cat and mouse."<sup>57</sup> Given China's political climate, she says, it is naive for journalists to suppose they can slip through the bonds of state control, reporting hard news simply by improving the level of their professional techniques. Still, journalists are finding ways to take stories in their own directions and push the bounds of censorship.

Commercialization and new media alone cannot provide the impetus for working around the limitations imposed by China's media control regime, or for promoting concepts like the public's right to know. However, in the hands of professionals with a bold vision of what role the media should play in China, they are potentially powerful tools for changing the nature of agenda setting in China. This trend becomes even clearer when we look at recent changes brought on by the growth of the Internet in the country, which brings the reader—or rather media consumer—more directly into the picture.

## A READ/WRITE CULTURE EMERGES IN CHINA

A substantial body of research and speculation in recent years has explored the impact of new media on the profession of journalism globally. Much of this discussion has centered on the role of technology and the Internet as democratizing forces, giving everyone with a computer (or mobile phone or device) access an opportunity to participate directly in public affairs.<sup>58</sup> Journalist and new media expert Dan Gillmor says that while traditional media have, for the last century and a half, been either "one-to-many" (books, newspapers, radio, and TV) or "one-to-one" (letters, telegraph, and telephone), the Internet is transforming how we communicate.<sup>59</sup> Gillmor writes: "The Internet, for the first time, gives us many-to-many and few-to-few communications. This has vast implications for the former audience and for the producers of news because the differences between the two are becoming harder to distinguish."<sup>60</sup>

China's paradox of control in change is apparent in the development of Internet-based new media. China has plowed substantial investment into the development of its Internet infrastructure, and consequently the country's online population has boomed. By the end of 2008, 35.2 percent of the online public said they had their own Weblogs or personal Web sites that

they regularly update, a level of response indicating that users are doing more than just reading.<sup>61</sup> At the same time, China's government has made ambitious attempts to manage the Web, even building controls into the Web infrastructure itself, what has been called China's "Great Firewall."<sup>62</sup>

The apparent contradiction between the promise of the Chinese Internet and persisting controls has sometimes thrown observers for a loop. Alarming accounts of tightening censorship are joined by seemingly incommensurate stories about how the Internet is changing the country or eroding CCP control. In "Death by a Thousand Blogs," *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof argued that Chinese leaders are "digging the Communist Party's grave, by giving the Chinese people broadband."<sup>63</sup>

While simplistic assumptions about the revolutionary or destabilizing role of the Internet do not hold, there is little question that the Web is a force of change in China. Hu Yong, a mainland Chinese expert on new media and author of *The Internet Is King*, argues that though the Internet has had an impact on expression in China, these changes cannot be understood purely through the prism of Western democratic desires:

I do not deny that the Chinese government places strict controls on the Internet. . . . Nevertheless, Internet control in China and the flow of information present a picture far more nuanced than that criticized by Western media. Internet activists outside China see the Internet as equal to democracy. When China's Internet is unable to realize the democratic results they envision, these activists feel angry and cannot understand. All they can see are the negative factors of the Chinese Internet, and it becomes easy to overlook the ways in which the Internet has significantly expanded space for free expression.<sup>64</sup>

In the above passage, Hu Yong is critical of both Internet idealists and pessimists for failing to recognize the complexities of China's media environment. The media in China no longer compose a "monolithic bloc," he says. Chinese society has stratified and diversified. Moreover, commercialization has moved to accommodate the demands of increasingly heterogeneous media consumers. The Internet allows these consumers to become producers of content and participate directly in a new kind of public discourse through tools like Weblogs, bulletin boards, and online forums—what Gillmor refers to as the "read/write promise of the Web."<sup>65</sup> Hu Yong's glass-half-full argument is that participatory forms of

new media are a "testing ground for public opinion" and a "sign of the development of a civil society in China. . . . More groups and individuals can participate in the process of handling social affairs, and ultimately policy decisions will be more fair."

The implications of the Internet for the continued exercise of control and agenda setting have not gone unnoticed by Chinese leaders. A 2005 study in the official *News Line* urged that "actively pursuing the patterns of Internet dissemination, finding efficient means of guiding online commentary, and promoting the emergence and broad dissemination of correct online opinion are necessary for Internet media to seize the high ground in the manufacturing of opinion."<sup>66</sup> The document shows China's propaganda regime trying to come to terms with the new challenges posed by a read/write culture. In January 2006, *Guangming Daily*, a party newspaper published by the Central Propaganda Department, published a short analysis concluding that Internet media were impacting agendas on major news issues: "Internet media can not only amplify the play and influence of major news but can weaken the influence of party media in setting the agenda."<sup>67</sup>

At the root of these changes is the decentralization of communications, which allows Internet users to "choose their own agendas."<sup>68</sup> As with media commercialization generally, readers, as consumers of news products, decide what news to read and which links to follow. They respond to news, post their own comments, and answer the comments of others via either the news sites themselves, bulletin board sites, or personal Weblogs. Participation of this kind generates an unprecedented degree of interaction not only among Internet users but also between the Internet and traditional media. As one scholar, writing in a provincial-level party journal, put it: "The Internet is open to anyone . . . and every Internet user can freely choose. They can also express themselves, issuing corrections or dissensions. The trend of agenda-setting toward the personal and the individual is clear. The receiver's role in the process of agenda-setting is now greater than it has ever been."<sup>69</sup>

News now routinely bubbles up through the Web and makes its way into print and broadcast media, a process *Beijing Youth Daily* has referred to as "comment posting culture."<sup>70</sup> In some cases, stories generated from Internet postings reemerge on major Web portals in China, where they generate more discussion and commentary. In other cases, stories in the print media, including local newspapers, reach broader national audiences

via Web portals and chat rooms, where they prompt both further postings and further reporting from traditional media, and so on.

For example, on 19 August 2006, a student from one of China's elite educational institutions, Tsinghua University, posted on the school's bulletin board site digital snapshots he had taken of parents of incoming freshmen sleeping on the school's athletic field and in doorways because they had been unable to find, or could not afford, local hotel rooms. Two days later the story appeared in one of the city's leading commercial newspapers, the *Beijing News*.<sup>71</sup> It then became the focal point of fierce discussion on a number of issues, from whether the school or the parents were responsible for paying for accommodations, to whether education fee reforms were needed nationwide. Between 21 August and 13 September close to sixty news reports and editorials on the topic appeared in scores of media nationwide.

#### COMMERCIALIZATION, PROFESSIONALISM, AND THE INTERNET SET THE AGENDA

One of the earliest and best examples of the Internet, media commercialization, and professionalism interacting to set the agenda for public discourse is the government's response to the outpouring of public rage in 2003 that followed the news of the beating death in a police detention and repatriation center of Sun Zhigang, a young college graduate who had moved to Guangdong to find work.

The detention and repatriation system under which Sun Zhigang was detained had been in force since May 1982. Its purpose was to assist cities in managing the migration of peasants from the countryside. The fear was that uncontrolled migration would impact public safety in the cities and strain their resources. The detention and repatriation system required all migrants to register and purchase temporary residency cards. Police could ask to see identification and essentially detain migrants who were not carrying or had not yet obtained their temporary residency cards. These migrants were packed off to local repatriation centers where they were either bailed out by family members or shipped back to their native towns or provinces.

Beginning with a 25 April 2003 report in *Southern Metropolis Daily*, Sun Zhigang's story became national news.<sup>72</sup> The original news story by reporter Chen Feng was posted the same day on major Web portals, taking the story

into homes and offices across the country. While the story originated in the print media, the Internet was crucial to disseminating these reports and prompting further discussion.

Sun Zhigang had been in Guangzhou just twenty days, according to Chen's report. Having previously worked as a professional designer in Shenzhen, he had been hired by a clothing company in Guangzhou. Chen Feng's report explored the reasons behind Sun's detention and death, raising doubts about police files on the case: "How is it that in the documents signed by Sun Zhigang [while he was in police detention] he was listed as 'having no means of support'? This is a question not yet answered, and Director Xie of the Civil Affairs Bureau is also puzzled by this: 'As a university student, he would have had a high intelligence quotient, so why would he say he had no job?'"<sup>73</sup>

In the days that followed the *Southern Metropolis Daily* report and its enthusiastic reception on the Web, commercial newspapers across China reran the story, including *China Youth Daily*, *China Economic Times*, *Southern Weekend*, *Yangcheng Evening News*, *Huashang Daily*, and *Chutian Metropolis Daily*.<sup>74</sup> Party newspapers initially avoided the story altogether. In the days immediately following Chen Feng's report, the focus remained on the Sun Zhigang case itself. People wanted to know who was responsible for Sun Zhigang's death and how justice could be attained. In subsequent weeks, though, the debate turned to institutional ramifications, namely how to ensure that the situation did not reoccur.

As the local news story of Sun Zhigang's death expanded into a national debate on overarching questions of social policy in China, the media featured the views of independent experts. On 15 May 2003, *Southern Weekend* ran an editorial by Deng Zibin, a legal scholar with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, called, "We Must Not Have a Second Sun Zhigang."<sup>75</sup> Relating the Sun Zhigang case to the months-long cover-up of the outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), Deng Zibin said: "The spread of diseases of the natural world terrifies us. But the injuries done by social diseases not only terrify us but also anger us. The latter, because it happens through choice, is the most odious of injuries."

Much like the disaster reports from commercial media, Deng Zibin's editorial emphasized the value of individual human beings:

"Thoroughly investigating [the case] and dealing severely with the killers" . . . represents the feelings of the vast majority of people. But

a further wish of the people, we can guess, is making sure cases like Sun Zhigang's do not happen again. This comes down to the fundamental rights and interests of the people, and these rights and benefits are in "taking the value of people as the base and freedom as the core and transferring this into political principles and structural principles."

The public furor moved from appeals for justice for Sun Zhigang's killers to demands for institutional change so that the lives of other Chinese would be valued and protected.

Like the SARS epidemic, the Sun Zhigang case highlighted the growing role of both commercialization and professionalism in the Chinese media. Chen Yizhong, the editor at *Southern Metropolis Daily*, kept abreast of the story as it developed and told his reporters to finish before propaganda officials could catch wind of it, and to check their facts scrupulously.<sup>76</sup> Other commercial media followed up on the story, adding viewpoints from a broad cross-section of experts and academics.

Nevertheless, it was the Internet that allowed the real-time interaction between media, experts, and ordinary members of society. The *Southern Metropolis Daily* was not the first domestic media outlet to raise questions about China's detention and repatriation system. A September 2000 article in *Legal Daily* had pointed out numerous problems in the detention process and said the system had already "lost its legal foundation."<sup>77</sup> Another *Southern Metropolis Daily* report in October 2001 had told the story of a young woman taken into detention and later released to a stranger who extorted money from her relatives.<sup>78</sup> These stories had not brought the country any closer to reforming the system because they had reached only limited audiences. The number of Internet users had tripled in the two years between the two *Southern Weekend* stories. Thus, when news reports on the Sun Zhigang case were replayed on major Web portals in China, they reached a wider audience than the commercial newspapers with metropolitan circulations. The *Southern Weekend* editorial even appeared on sites such as people.com.cn, which is run by the central mouthpiece *People's Daily*.<sup>79</sup>

Right on the heels of Deng Zibin's editorial, news came that three bold law students from Peking University had appealed directly to China's National People's Congress (NPC), its national legislature, for repeal of the country's law on detention and repatriation. On 14 May, the students, Xu

Zhiyong, Yu Jiang, and Teng Biao, delivered their formal opinion on the law to the NPC.<sup>80</sup> Xu Zhiyong had learned about the Sun Zhigang case through Peking University's bulletin board site.

Communicating through the Internet and by phone, Xu Zhiyong, Yu Jiang, and Teng Biao strategized about how to bring the focus of public opinion around to the question of reforming the detention system. They first explored a possible civil case on the behalf of Chinese who had been detained, but later settled on the idea, raised by Yu Jiang, that as citizens under China's constitution they were entitled to submit a formal opinion to the NPC.<sup>81</sup> Yu Jiang worked out a draft of the opinion and e-mailed it to Teng Biao, who sent his version to Xu Zhiyong. Xu made his own changes and emailed these back to Teng Biao, who faxed it to a legal working committee within the NPC.

News of the action by the three law students spread quickly through domestic newspapers and Web sites after an initial report in *China Youth Daily* on 16 May.<sup>82</sup> The next step came as five legal experts, including He Weifang of Peking University, supported the efforts of the law students.<sup>83</sup> They advised the Standing Committee of the NPC to launch an investigation into the law's constitutionality.<sup>84</sup> Through June 2003, the tide of media coverage continued, with Sun Zhigang and the detention system becoming the focus of widespread debate in all corners of Chinese society. On 19 June, *Southern Weekend* ran another editorial, "Realizing Justice Even If the Sky Falls." The author, a professor at China University of Political Science and Law, wrote, "I believe that no matter what inconvenience the repeal of this system causes, the constitution must be upheld. The atmosphere of freedom cannot be polluted by the detention system!"<sup>85</sup>

The next day, the professor's wish came true. Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao signed State Council Order 381, abolishing the detention and repatriation system. As the State Council moved to repeal the detention system, propaganda officials were meeting behind closed doors to silence media they felt had been overly bold in reporting on the Sun Zhigang case and the SARS epidemic that spring.<sup>86</sup> Even as the media celebrated their crucial role in an important policy achievement, more than ten publications were censured, including *Caijing* magazine, *Lifeweekly*, an outspoken general affairs magazine, and *China Economic Times*, a newspaper published by the State Council's Development Research Center.<sup>87</sup> Problems with the authorities would harry *Southern Metropolis Daily* throughout the coming

year, culminating in the arrest of its editor, Chen Yizhong, and two colleagues in March 2004.<sup>88</sup>

Nevertheless, the Sun Zhigang case dramatically demonstrates how the Internet can combine with commercialized media to drive the CCP's agenda and spark a rapid response from national leaders.

The power of the new media and China's emerging read/write culture was again showcased in 2007, when residents of the southern city of Xiamen opposed the building of a new chemical plant in the dense urban area. This time, technology provided more than just a broader platform for dissemination and discussion of professional news stories—it offered a means of circumventing control efforts once propaganda authorities decided to censor the story.

In February 2004, the municipal government of Xiamen approved the so-called Xiamen PX project, a large-scale chemical factory being built by Taiwanese businessman Chen Yu-hao, and in July 2005 an environmental impact assessment report was prepared. However, Xiamen residents were never consulted in this process.<sup>89</sup> The controversy began in November 2006 when Zhao Yufen, a local chemistry professor from Xiamen University and a delegate to the official advisory body, the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), wrote a letter to the city's top leader, CCP Secretary He Lifeng, expressing his concerns about the project.<sup>90</sup> The three-hundred-acre facility, located in a largely residential area across a narrow channel from downtown Xiamen, was gearing up to produce paraxylene (PX), a toxic chemical used as an industrial solvent.<sup>91</sup>

Xiamen officials were determined to go ahead with the project and Professor Zhao was urged to keep quiet. Instead, he wrote a letter to the two top leaders in Fujian Province, CCP Secretary Lu Zhongong and Governor Huang Xiaojing. The result was a 6 January 2007 meeting between top Xiamen officials and several academics, including Professor Zhao, who had concerns about the project.<sup>92</sup> Officials present, including He Lifeng, paid no heed to the experts' warning, emphasizing instead the importance of the project to the local economy.

In March 2007 Professor Zhao instigated the drafting of a petition against the project on the grounds that it posed a health danger to Xiamen residents.<sup>93</sup> The petition received signatures from delegates to the annual session of the CPPCC in March and drew some coverage in mainland newspapers as well as media in Taiwan and Hong Kong.<sup>94</sup>

On 11 March, Guangdong's *Southern Metropolis Daily* became the first newspaper to cover Zhao Yufen's petition.<sup>95</sup> In a page 5 story that also ran on the popular Web portal Sohu.com, the newspaper quoted Professor Zhao and more broadly criticized development projects undertaken by local officials in China without due consideration for the citizens.<sup>96</sup> The article provided key figures on the Xiamen PX project, including the number of residents living in the immediate vicinity (approximately 100,000), and it also reviewed past industrial accidents in China. Within a week, three newspapers, the *China Chemical Industry News*, *China Youth Daily*, and *China Business*, ran news features on the project that emphasized the issues raised by the CPPCC delegates.<sup>97</sup> As news of Professor Zhao Yufen's petition made the rounds in national commercial newspapers and on the Web, top CCP leaders in Xiamen suppressed local coverage of the story. According to a report published by China's *Oriental Outlook* magazine in May 2007, Xiamen Municipal Secretary He Lifeng held an urgent meeting in March at which he urged leaders to ignore the criticism and move ahead with the project as quickly as possible.<sup>98</sup>

As Xiamen media were prevented from reporting on opposition to the PX project, new technologies began showing their strength.<sup>99</sup> Xiamen-based freelance journalist Zhong Xiaoyong started following the PX story on his personal Weblog, written under the penname Lian Yue, in late March. A well-known columnist for several leading commercial newspapers, Zhong had formerly worked as an editor for *Southern Weekend* and *21st Century Economic Herald*.

Zhong first posted about the chemical plant on 18 March 2007. The post, which bore the suggestive title "Xiamen Commits Suicide," provided information on the decline of air quality in Xiamen during 2006 that was based on official statistics, and then ran in full the *China Business* report that was published on the same day.<sup>100</sup> Over the next few months, visits to Zhong's blog soared as the site became an important source of Xiamen PX-related information, particularly in Xiamen itself, where the content was pasted across local chat rooms.<sup>101</sup>

As he aggregated news stories on his blog, Zhong also wrote a number of critical editorials for major commercial newspapers outside his home province, including Hunan's *Xiaoxiang Morning Post* and Guangdong's *Southern Metropolis Daily*. Zhong's first editorial, "The Public Will Not Be Safe," published in the *Xiaoxiang Morning Post* on 22 March and concurrently on

Zhong's blog, contrasted the safety concerns with the propaganda put out by local CCP officials.<sup>102</sup> After a rundown of government documents in Fujian Province extolling the project's virtues, Zhong wrote sarcastically:

Any cheerful city resident, seeing this news and then turning to the biblical chapter of Genesis, might suppose God was a bit lazy during those six days, that He didn't work hard enough and that the world He created was still missing something. My, how could Adam and Eve have lived happily in the Garden of Eden without a PX project of their own?

After listing the dangers posed by the plant, including figures from the original *China Business* story, Zhong wondered at how the opposition could be pushed aside nonchalantly, so that even a report to the national CPPCC brought no real action to protect the residents of Xiamen. "Even if there are voices of opposition at the national Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, public safety can be sacrificed," he wrote. "When you think about it, how many of these dangerous projects must we have across the nation that cannot bear public criticism? All of us live in a public space marked by public danger."

Discussion of the Xiamen PX project continued through April and May 2007 as a handful of reports from such newspapers as *Southern Metropolis Daily* and *Information Daily* buzzed through cyberspace, augmented in real time by comments in chat rooms and on blogs.<sup>103</sup> Residents in Xiamen transmitted text messages in protest of the project on 27 May. The city leadership nevertheless persisted in their plans. On 28 May 2007, top municipal officials pushed their message about the project's safety through the *Xiamen Evening News*, a commercial paper under the official *Xiamen Daily* group.<sup>104</sup> The article bore the headline "Haicang PX Project Has Already Been Approved According to Nationally Recognized Legal Procedures and Is Under Construction."

On the morning of 29 May, the Xiamen government sent out a notice ordering all departments to work together to ensure the project went ahead smoothly.<sup>105</sup> But as municipal leaders were digging in, public opinion spiraled out of control in cyberspace. By 29 May newspapers outside Xiamen were reporting that short text messages of protest had been sent among more than 1 million people in Xiamen as well as mobile subscribers in other cities.<sup>106</sup> One of the messages, posted online by a Web user at Oeeee.com, read, "PX is paraxylene, a dangerous chemical and highly

cancerous with a high rate of fetal malformation (in the words of Chinese Academy of Social Science Professor Zhao Yufen)." The text messages called on Xiamen residents to turn out in force on 1 June to publicly protest the Xiamen PX project.<sup>107</sup>

The turning point came late in the day on 29 May as Xiamen leaders met with top provincial leaders to discuss how to handle the public opposition.<sup>108</sup> The following day, Xiamen leaders called a press conference and announced they would "postpone" the project.<sup>109</sup> But the 30 May press conference did not slow the momentum building among Xiamen residents. Calls for a public show of opposition continued through the Internet and mobile text messages in the final days of May, despite attempts by the municipal branch of the Public Security Bureau to block the mobile network-based movement and to round up residents who issued calls for protest.<sup>110</sup> One Xiamen resident, Wu Jian, was taken into custody by police on 29 May after posting a call to "march" in a chat room on the popular Shenzhen-based Web portal QQ.com.<sup>111</sup> Despite the government's efforts, thousands of protesters took to the streets in peaceful protest on 1 and 2 June.<sup>112</sup>

Contravening the blanket ban by central propaganda officials on coverage of the protests in the domestic media, Xiamen residents used their mobile phones to transmit eyewitness accounts of the demonstrations across the country. Wen Yunchao, a Xiamen-based blogger, wrote, "The second police defense line has been dispersed. There is pushing and shoving. The police wall has broken down."<sup>113</sup>

In the wake of the protests, leaders in Xiamen finally set into motion a process of public consultation, which culminated in their December 2007 decision to relocate the chemical plant.<sup>114</sup> *People's Daily* lauded the new responsiveness of the Xiamen government in a 20 December editorial on page 5, praising it for "turning from a passive to an active posture in dealing with public challenges" and "creating new channels for communication" with citizens.<sup>115</sup> A few comments from Web users appeared on the same page. "As for the future of the Xiamen PX Project," wrote one, "I think that aside from considerations of economic benefit, more should be done to consider the well-being of the environment and public opinion."<sup>116</sup>

In the wake of the Xiamen PX protests, party leaders have fought to reclaim agenda-setting power from the new technologies and professional journalism. President Hu Jintao delivered a major media policy speech on

20 June 2008 that launched the drive for central party media to cover breaking news more aggressively in order to shut out the freewheeling commercial media. This strategy—Control 2.0, which party leaders call by the new buzzword “public opinion channeling”—marks the CCP’s attempt to forestall the trends we have highlighted in this chapter.

Yet despite the CCP’s efforts, media commercialization, journalistic professionalism, and the growth of new media continue to transform the ecology of agenda setting in China. For example, in August 2009, news of a mass lead poisoning case in Fengxiang, a village in Shaanxi Province, came to light after concerned villagers reached a local commercial paper, *Sanqin Metropolitan Daily*. Ten years ago, this story might very well have disappeared, escaping the notice of other media and eventually falling victim to local propaganda officials. But thanks to distribution by commercial news Web sites with much broader reach, the *Sanqin Metropolitan Daily* story rapidly became national news. The gap between party and commercial coverage was again decisive. *Sanqin Metropolitan Daily* is a commercial spin-off of the official *Shaanxi Daily*, which remained silent on the story even as it went national.

## CONCLUSION

Much like the dragons of Lord Ye, the modern Chinese media evoke a deep ambivalence among CCP and government officials. The Internet and Web-based media have combined with commercialization of traditional media and a new professionalism among Chinese journalists to heighten pressure against the existing news control regime. True, the political impact of these trends may not look impressive in the face of prominent cases of CCP control like the shutdown of *Freezing Point* or the jailing of *Southern Metropolis Daily* editor Chen Yizhong. The present generation of Chinese leaders is weaker than the paramount leaders of the past: though they still exercise some control over the media, this control is challenged on a daily basis by professional journalists and online commentators. As former *Freezing Point* editor Li Datong said during a meeting in Hong Kong with top journalists from the mainland and Taiwan prior to his supplement’s shutdown, he believed Chinese media professionals had now entered a “strategizing” phase (*boyi jieduan*) in which they could deal with leaders on their own terms.<sup>117</sup> “Before it wasn’t possible to strategize,” said Li. “Now do you think

I can’t play a couple of chess moves against government authorities? We believe we now have the space [to do this].” Li further raised two possible strategies open to journalists. The first was to use professional techniques to publish articles that were outside the official agenda, or that “central party papers would never publish.” The second, he said, was a strategy of “direct confrontation.” *Freezing Point*, as an example of the latter, had resisted an official order to run a piece of traditional propaganda in its pages. Li Datong’s flat refusal to bow to propaganda officials shows both the professional will to oppose the CCP’s news agenda and the institutional possibility, under certain conditions, of resisting party pressure and maintaining journalistic autonomy.

The eventual shutdown of *Freezing Point* of course underscores the limitations of Li Datong’s strategy of confrontation. The more common pattern is a calculated testing of boundaries wherein journalists seek to creatively circumvent official bans on reporting. But the more important point is that the nature of the game has changed. Chinese media are employing various strategies to advance their own agendas, uphold their professional principles and, of course, gain audiences. Journalists are becoming more skillful at setting the agenda for public discourse while striking a balance between political survival and their professional ideals.

## Notes

1. Figure in “Copyright: The Core Value of the Media Industry,” *Renmin Wang* (*People’s Daily Online*), 19 August 2004, <http://www.people.com.cn/GB/14677/22114/36721/36725/2723149.html>.

2. Cui Baoguo, Lu Jinzhu, and Li Feng, “Transition and Renewal: An Overall Report on Development of the Media Industry in 2006,” in Cui Baoguo (Ed.), *Report on Development of China’s Media Industry, 2006* (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2006), pp. 4–5.

3. Figures regarding public spending on Internet infrastructure were found in Hu Yong, “Blogs in China,” China Media Project Case Study (on file at the Journalism and Media Studies Centre, University of Hong Kong), 4 August 2005, p. 2. Figures regarding numbers of Internet users were found in China Internet Network Information Center, *25th Statistical Report on the Development of China’s Internet*, January 2010, <http://www.cnnic.net.cn/uploadfiles/pdf/2010/11/15/101600.pdf>.

4. In the aftermath of Tiananmen, there was a strong conviction among those who came to power that the events of 4 June had been precipitated by mishandling of media

- policy. Zhao Ziyang, China's ousted premier, purportedly told China's propaganda ministers on 6 May to "open things up a bit." There was "little danger in increasing the openness of the news," he said. As a result, many newspapers had openly expressed support for demonstrators in Beijing, "leading events in the wrong direction." "A Record of Major Events," *China Comment*, no. 7, 1989, Internal Edition.
5. Zhao Shilong, *Diaocha Zhongguo: Xinwen Beibou de Gushi* [Investigating China: Stories behind the News] (Beijing: China Fangzheng Publishing House, 2004), p. 7.
  6. "Finding the Right Foothold and Point of View for Planning for the Future," *Chinese Journalist*, December 2002, <http://www.chinesejournalist.cn/>.
  7. Discussion of the CCP's global media ambitions can be found in Pascale Trouillard, "China Unveils Its Global Media Ambitions," AFP, 11 October 2009. Discussion of the CCP-sponsored World Media Summit can be found in Li Congjun, "Writing a New Chapter in the Development of Xinhua News Agency," *Chinese Journalist*, February 2009, <http://www.chinesejournalist.cn/html/>.
  8. Hu, "Blogs in China."
  9. Jin Liping, "Our Predicament and Our Way Forward" (case study, China Media Project, Journalism and Media Studies Centre, University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, October 2005), p. 2.
  10. Data compiled from *Zhongguo Xinwen Chubao Tongji Ziliao Huibian* (China Statistical Data Collection of Press and Publication) Volumes 1993-1997, published by the China Statistical Press (Beijing); Volumes 2000-2003, published by the China Labor and Social Services Press (Beijing).
  11. Cheng Qinghua, *Giving Ear to Liang Heng: In Media, Literature and Politics* (Beijing: Xinhua Publishing House, 2004).
  12. Jin, "Our Predicament and Our Way Forward," pp. 1-2.
  13. Overview of *People's Daily* publication, *People's Daily Online*, [http://www.people.com.cn/paper/jianjie/bzjj\\_01.htm](http://www.people.com.cn/paper/jianjie/bzjj_01.htm).
  14. Media Development Research Center of China's General Administration of Press and Publications, *China Newspaper Industry Competitiveness Monitoring Report*, 2007, 29 December 2007, [http://baoye.net/ic\\_edit/uploadfile/20080113012255899.doc](http://baoye.net/ic_edit/uploadfile/20080113012255899.doc).
  15. Jin, "Our Predicament and Our Way Forward," p. 2.
  16. Qian Gang, "Guidance/Supervision/Reform/Freedom: Looking at Chinese Media Through the Media Buzzword," *Twenty-First Century Bi-Monthly*, June 2006, p. 6.
  17. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
  18. This point is raised by Li Xiguang in "China's Blue Pencil," *On the Media*, WNYC New York Public Radio, 17 March 2006, [http://www.onthemedial.org/transcripts/transcripts\\_031706\\_bluepencil.html](http://www.onthemedial.org/transcripts/transcripts_031706_bluepencil.html).
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3

## The Rise of the Business Media in China

*Hu Shuli*

AS THE ARTICLES IN this volume demonstrate, market reforms have led to significant changes in China's media industry. Among the most dramatic of these changes has been the growth of business journalism. Since 2000, the rapid expansion of capital markets in China has led to increased demand for financial news, which has, in turn, led to a boom in coverage and a highly competitive financial news market.

This chapter reveals what this market looks like, how it developed, and its journalistic strengths and weaknesses. Working from a social science perspective, I investigate the role the financial news plays in China's economy and society, and what broader trends it reflects in China's changing media industry.

### COMPETING MEDIA

Financial news has become an increasingly prominent element among China's television, print, and Web-based media. Since 2001, national, regional, and local TV stations have launched special channels offering financial