

Public Opinion – a New Factor Influencing the PRC Press

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Summary

Two noteworthy developments fuel the increasing importance of the role public opinion plays in mainland China's press. One is initiated from above: In an effort to counter corruption, the government has permitted the media to report misbehavior by local officials, which, in turn, has encouraged citizens to increasingly turn to newspapers to let them voice their concerns. Another tendency is triggered from below, as an unintended consequence of press commercialization: Since newspapers now rely on advertisement incomes that demand large readerships, audience interests influence editorial decisions to a far greater extent than they did a decade ago. Both factors have to be assessed in order to determine, whether these criticism reports are primarily government- or market-induced.

Current academic debate over public opinion in mainland China and empirical research on readership interests and journalists' professional attitudes indicate that the rising importance of public opinion is primarily due to market competition and less to media policy. Moreover, the results suggest an even greater impact of public opinion on media content in the near future, clearly beyond the importance the leadership intended to attribute to it. This will have consequences for China's transformation process, which leaders in the West will have to consider when making foreign policy decisions regarding China.

1 Introduction¹

Western social scientists analyzing Chinese politics have traditionally regarded statements and reports found in the Chinese media to be the genuine views of the leadership. Reading newspapers² has been, and to a considerable extent still is, an

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² I will focus on the press in this paper, as the general problem of how to deal with public opinion is essentially the same for all media branches: It does not matter whether we study TV-stations, radio broadcasters, book publishers or journalists in the print media. Most of these units relied on direct or indirect state subsidies until the late 1980s, they now have to generate advertisement income to survive on the market, and find themselves in the same dilemma of serving two masters at a time, audiences and political authorities. They compete for advertisement income by attracting large audiences

important way to obtain information about the arcane course of internal CCP power struggles and decision making. Whenever divergent views were published in different organs, they certainly had to be attributed to the existence of antagonistic factions within the leadership. Except for brief flowerings of public expression (as in the spring of 1989), media content in the PRC has consisted of little other than the leadership's opinion made public, and it has never represented anything like public opinion³ as it is understood in the West.

Beginning in the late 1990s, however, pressures from above and below have sewed to transform this paradigm. On the one hand, the leadership began to consider the media as an ally in the battle against local corruption, and encouraged critical reporting of minor incidents of misbehavior by government officials. Since citizens lack other channels to voice their concerns, they have increasingly turned to TV-stations and newspapers to make their complaints public. On the other hand, media commercialization has made media units depend on the market for economic survival, and has thus forced editors to consider audience demands for criticism reports and less propagandistic and more informative news work. Consequently, media workers have felt an incentive to devote more space to public opinion. Yet it is difficult to assess the quality of this development.

The first problem concerns the role of the leadership in the process: To what extent is the greater share of citizen concern voiced in the media genuinely market-driven (pushed from below), and in how far is it initiated by the party-state (pulled from above) in order to increase the grip on local officials and the economic efficiency of thought work? To put it differently: Is the extent to which public opinion is expressed in papers exactly what the party had in mind when promoting the slogan of "supervision (of cadres) by the press", or does it go beyond that scheme, so that we witness a change in political communication reflecting societal forces rather than central planning? The second problem concerns the nature of market forces themselves. Even if it were clear that commercialization contributes more to the process than political deliberations, it would still remain unclear whether or not readership demand really induces a stronger representation of *critical* public opinion. Some observers expect a commercialized press to bank on sensationalism and entertainment to capture the attention of readers. That way, editors could respond to audience expectations without touching on politically sensitive issues. This would rather pre-

that provide the incentives for companies to run the ads (Hemelryk/Keane 2002: 9; Redl/Simons 2002: 21ff; Li 2002: 18; Weber 2002: 58ff); on the other hand, they all face largely the same restrictions implemented by the party-state through the use of broad propaganda outlines that frame political and (to a lesser extent) non-political contents, even if there do exist some differences in degree (Lee 2000).

³ This paper deals with public opinion only as far as the media is concerned, and does not analyse the impact of opinion polls. Although those have developed into an instrument of considerable political influence in the late 1990s (Liu 2001: 402ff; Yang 2001: 29; interview with Yu Guoming, 2002), they still – for the good or bad – neither shape nor represent public opinion as extensively as they do in Western democracies.

vent the media from developing into an open forum for the exchange of ideas, and would only continue the current division of propaganda in which party papers are responsible for "hard" propaganda, while evening papers mix entertaining reports with softer propaganda messages.

Generally speaking, there are two possible ways to find a solution to these problems. The first of these is to investigate *input-factors*. This includes an analysis of factors motivating editors to decide on the general direction of their paper, its content, style, etc. Such an analysis would have to take into account all the factors that influence editors' decisions: the political framework, readership demand, market developments, and not least of all the professional attitudes of media workers. Alternatively, one could consider *output-factors*, in which the content of media publications is the object of analysis. Through this lens one could ask: Is there more critical reporting in commercialized papers than in non-commercial ones? Is there even a spectrum of political directions *among* the range of commercial papers emerging, which would be indicative of a newspaper landscape guided by an increasingly diverse audience rather than by a single political scheme? While the second approach has been chosen only recently (Brendebach 2004 and Brendebach, submitted), the first approach has informed the detailed analyses of Lynch (1999), Zhao (1998), and Lee (2000). This paper focuses on the question of input-factors by drawing upon empirical research as well as theoretical considerations of mainland Chinese scholars.

The question we are concerned with can thus be put like this: To what extent does media content in present-day PRC represent public opinion? To answer this question, we have to analyze how media content is shaped, considering four factors that contribute to any editor's decision on which articles to publish: (1) Politics (What does the party consider to be the political function of public opinion? How effective are the party's control mechanisms?). (2) Markets (Is there a genuine competition? Which kind of papers rely on market success how heavily, etc.). (3) Readers (What kind of reports do readers demand?). (4) Professionals (What is the professional attitude of Chinese media workers? Do they have a genuine interest in ideals like freedom of expression, or are they loyal to the state? Or, are they primarily compelled by economic incentives?).

2 The political framework

It is a well known fact that China's media are among the most heavily restricted in the world. In fact, China ranks last in the freedom index of reporters sans frontières (RSF 2004b). Nevertheless loopholes still exist in the political framework, that give editors some leeway to test their limits. The first of these is that pre-publication censorship does not exist (for the more or less subtle mechanisms of censorship in practice see Zhao 1998: 20; White 1990: 104; Zhang 1993: 196). Actual implementation of propaganda guidelines depends largely on personal connections (Lu X. 2003: 23), and large differences exist between regions and provinces with regard to

the extent the press is controlled by the party (Yang 2001: 48f). Secondly, the grip of ownership regulations on the media is eroding, since private publishers increasingly buy licences from organizations that officially serve as the publishing unit (Stevenson-Yang 2003: 227f; Feng 2003: 43ff). Third, the financial dependence on the state that characterized most media units well until the late 1980s has turned into an interest of the state in the commercially successful activities of media companies. Before the late 1980s, the party-state not only funded the media's personnel and production costs, it also regulated basic components, such as paper supply, and even, via forced subscription, ensured a readership for party papers. This paradigm changed significantly when papers increased their advertisement income by more than 100% between 1992 and 1993. Advertisement income increased about 30% annually every year after until advertisement became the main source of income newspapers had by the mid-1990s (Dong 1999: 6). Today, large media enterprises have turned into important pillars of public spending. *Guangzhou Daily*, for instance, is among the five largest taxpayers of Guangzhou (Zhou 2002: 186).

2.1 The political function of public opinion

The Chinese term for public opinion, *yulun*, primarily referred to "leadership views as reflected in the official media which the masses are expected to share" (Dittmer 1994: 90) until the mid-1990s. Another concept of public opinion exerting some sort of control over officials, *yulun jian du*, or supervision by public opinion, has existed theoretically ever since the communist propaganda system had been established. *Yulun jian du* was significantly upgraded by the party in 1998 and has since developed into a new phenomenon in China's media landscape. The press, in theory, had to give a voice to the needs of the people, so that the party could adjust its policies accordingly. In practice, however, the press fulfilled this task more in the manner of a secret police than that of a public forum, using inner dossiers and the careful selection of letters to the editor by special "mass work departments" (Hsiao/Cheek 1995: 80ff; Yang 2001: 30f; Hood 1994: 41; Polumbaum 1993: 298f). Although Chinese students of public opinion seldom fail to stress that the media has always been encouraged to write criticism reports on corrupt officials since the founding of the PRC (see Tian 2002: 63ff; Yang 2001: 50ff; Wang/Wei 2000: 4), voicing criticism and complaints was never a prominent function of the media prior to 1998. After Zhao Ziyang had stressed the critical role public opinion should play in 1988 (Zhao 1998: 36), the party's tune went back to its normal position after June 4th. In 1994, Jiang Zemin (on the National Conference on Propaganda work) confirmed the conservative stance on media policy. In his words, the function of public opinion was to "correctly guide the people". In his view, the news were expected to publish positive role models of noble spirit and to stick to the "party principle" (Luo 1999a: 157).

Since 1997, however, things have been changing: Mainland media researcher Yang (2001: 24) explicitly connects the liberalization drive after the 15th congress to new prospects for "supervision by the press". Most Chinese scholars, while citing Deng to bolster their argument, do not deny the qualitative difference between Dengist concepts of public opinion obsessed with uniformity, on the one hand, and the growth of diversity in the expression of public opinion that allowed debates on a broad array of fields in the late 1990s on the other (Liu 1999: 17ff, 88ff; see also Chen 1999: 128f; Yang 2001: 25).

As a matter of fact, the political shift of the 15th congress has brought on a new tune in press supervision. Party leaders now stress press supervision as a helpful tool to counter corruption and cadre misbehavior. In 1998, new premier Zhu Rongji ostentatiously visited journalists of *Jiaodian Fangtan*, a daring political TV-program that has grown in popularity over the years. Viewer rates are about 30%, which means that about 300 million people watch the program every night (Chan 2002: 37; for typical content see Li 2002: 23f; Yuan et al. 2000; Chan 2002: 42f). *Jiaodian Fangtan* is extremely popular not only in terms of passive viewing ratings, but also as an institution. Citizens often besiege the program's studio in long queues attempting to get their story into the program (Liu 1999: 185). Still, both the limitations of its reports (e.g. no criticism of cadres on the first two levels of the party or government) and the positive propaganda content it carries (e.g. reports on the falungong sect or foreign policies) make the party-state's liking for the format understandable (see Chan 2002: 44). *Jiaodian Fangtan* therefore serves as a "model program". Far from endangering the rule of the communist party, it is nevertheless aggressive to be a threat to corrupt local cadres.

However, formats like *Jiaodian Fangtan* and criticism reports in the press are certainly a double-edged sword for the party. The fact that the new trend has been approved by the authorities does not mean that they can fully control its effects – the wisdom of exposing too many cases of corruption has already been called into question by party officials (Stevenson-Yang 2003: 239). And no one knows whether the 1998 initiative for "supervision by the media" will be intensified or rather curbed in the near future. The perception of an ideological shift was further nourished when Jiang Zemin in his "Three Represents" theory emphasized the "general interest of the majority of the people", which has been interpreted to naturally strengthen the role of public supervision (Tian 2002: 72ff; Yang 2001: 63). However, actual reforms do not allow more than very cautious optimism. Although some "fourth generation" leaders, like Zeng Qinghong, seem to favor further press liberalization as a means to counter corruption (Nathan/Gilley 2002: 194), only time will tell, if Hu Jintao's encouragement of more open media coverage of problem areas in society and politics after the SARS epidemic will actually be reflected in a real opening of the Chinese press. Magazines that did report frankly about SARS suffered repercussions shortly after (Zeitlin 2004). Moreover, the new propaganda chief, Liu Yunshan, reminded media bosses to keep coverage of sensitive topics to a minimum;

according to his guidelines, all publications must continue to stick to the party line and maintain a quota of articles and analyses put out by Xinhua, and even Hu Jintao himself stressed the need to stick to the party principle in December 2003 at a party conference on propaganda (RSF 2004a).

2.2 Debate on public opinion in China

Since assessing the political significance of the new concept (or rather the actual significance of the old concept) is difficult, let us consult the contributions Chinese academic discourse has recently made.

From the early 1990s on, research on public opinion influenced by Western ideas has found its way into Chinese research on mass communication (Hu 2001: 110ff, see there for the changes in definitions; Keane 2002: 9). The Western understanding of "public opinion" as originating from the attitudes of the people and not from party propaganda has increasingly found an echo among Chinese academics (Liu 2001: 32ff). Its main political function is now considered to be the supervision of cadres by public opinion. Public opinion is supposed to serve as a forum for public discussions of important policy issues that strengthen the participatory function of the society, and as a "security valve" for pressures that may arise from struggles among conflicting interests (Yang 2001: 39).

Obviously, this is only to some extent what the Chinese government has in mind. More conservative scholars support the official line and stress that "positive guidance of public opinion" led by the party has to be distinguished from "negative guidance of public opinion" independent from party directives, which could endanger public security (Hu 2001: 226). These scholars favor restrictions on criticism reports, and some publications still promote the ultra-orthodox understanding of the media as a weapon in ideological class struggles (Kang 2001: 18), or the nationalist view of the press as a battle field, where foreign interpretations of international politics must be defeated (Lu 2001: 109; Kang 2001: 264). Yet conservative, left-wing, or nationalist views do not dominate academic discourse. The (liberal) majority of scholars are not content with the current restrictive practice of "supervision by the press" and complain about the practical ban of any criticism of high-ranking politicians and of cadres of the own administrative level (Liu 1999: 215, who gives some illustrations there; Wang/Wei 2000: 10, 34; Tian 2002: 102). Yang (2001: 26) postulates that no topic and no person, except institutions and persons directly linked to state security, should stand above supervision.

It is clear that no publication dares to openly question the legitimacy of party control over the press – that would be dissidence. Even liberal scholars therefore emphasize the positive role the party has to play (Yang 2001: 17ff; Chen 2000: 328f). Yang points to the fact that press supervision, if fine-tuned and well-dosed, could consolidate rather than weaken the existing political system:

Press supervision can also serve as a way to let off some air for discontent masses. If they see that at least some wrong-doers are punished and that the authorities do at least something about the problem of corruption, people might be satisfied with that and won't urge for further measures or political liberalization (Yang 2001: 42).

Nevertheless, recent literature often ties public opinion and press supervision to the question of democracy and people's political participation (Qiao 2001: 423). Tian (2002: 103) states: "As it represents the will of the majority, "supervision by public opinion" is the most democratic power under the political framework of the socialist state". Liu (1999: 33) argues that the suppression of public opinion by cadres or enterprises is a suppression of democracy, and that the turbulence of the Cultural Revolution was largely the result of a lack of democracy, namely the freedom to express opinions. Yang (2001: 43f) stresses the function of public opinion as a channel for political participation, and concludes that it is even more important as long as other channels, namely elections, do not exist. Liberal Chinese scholars often point to the positive effect press freedom had in the West to check governments and to promote civil rights in the 1960s (Liu 1999: 26ff; Yang 2001: 13) and endorse the liberal model of the press as a "fourth estate" (Jian et al. 1999; Ma 1998; Yang 2001: 60ff).

The dominant role of the party in the process of public opinion building has been questioned. Liu explains:

The problem lies in the fact, that in some places the right to control public supervision lies concentrated in the hands of the party secretary alone. Thus, efficient public supervision is not possible (Liu 1999: 189).

Therefore, Liu argues for more independence of the press by an effective distribution of power (Liu 1999: 217). Yang (2001: 11) calls for the realization of the "freedom of the expression" provided in the PRC constitution and argues in favor of a press law that should cover the right of journalists to investigate, report, and criticize, and that should explicitly protect the right to do so against institutions and authorities (Yang 2001: 68f). This is of growing importance to critical journalists, since institutions, enterprises and individuals tend to defend themselves against critical reporting by charging the media in court on grounds that reports were not based on facts or that personal rights were violated. It is clear that such practice intents to suffocate criticism (Yang 2001: 107). Media workers therefore hope for a press law that would guarantee the right to investigate and publish critical reports and thus provide a legal basis for their work (interviews). The drafting of such a press law has been an issue on and off the political agenda since the 1980s, and it seems rather unlikely that such a law will be implemented in the near future, as it is a thorny issue that promises no rewards to the politburo member who would take it into his portfolio, but bears a high risk if it would turn out to liberalize the press more than the party intends to (Stevenson-Yang 2003: 235).

2.3 Preliminary conclusions

As far as the political framework of Chinese media policy is concerned, we can therefore summarize:

- (1) Media control is strict, but loopholes do exist that allow editors to diverge somewhat from official lines. Editors may devote more space to public opinion than the propaganda apparatus explicitly approves of.
- (2) The party-state has upgraded the concept of "supervision by public opinion", but wants to keep actual criticism low-profile.
- (3) The understanding of "supervision by public opinion" prevailing in the Chinese academic community differs significantly from the ideas of the party: Most scholars advocate concepts very close to a genuine fourth estate role of the press.

3 The emergence of market competition

When analyzing the increasing role of public opinion in the PRC media, it is necessary to depict the changes that have occurred in the market. Growing market diversity has fuelled fierce competition, driving economic incentives for media companies to cater to audience demands.

Since the mid-1990s, a growing number of editors and papers have been competing for the lion's share of "general interest papers" market. Whereas prior to 1994, each city's urban evening paper held a de facto monopoly, the new tide of so-called metropolitan newspapers kicked off a fierce market competition that still characterizes the urban press market today. This trend is evident especially in Beijing and Guangzhou, where numerous new papers have emerged since 1994, and the situation today is marked by a wide range of competitors with divergent backgrounds and styles.

- (1) From the mid-1990s on, as a direct consequence of this new economic framework, a third generation of papers, as they have been labeled by Chinese scholars, entered the market by the name of "metropolitan papers" (*dushibao*) – most of them being seedlings of municipal party papers. This step was the beginning of genuine competition on the media market, as it undermined the regulation that had formerly forbidden the existence of more than one paper of the same kind at the same administrative level. With the rise of the "metropolitan papers", which did not differ much qualitatively from the evening papers, the monopoly of evening papers was effectively broken (Liu/Zhang 1999: 92ff).
- (2) The party itself initiated this commercialization of the press, by choosing *Guangzhou Daily* as an experimental unit in 1996: This was the first party newspaper dedicated to market activity. Active recruiting of personnel and financial incentives for staff members tore down the old payment system based on rank and seniority, and younger, better educated journalists from all over

China got a chance for quick promotion (Sun 2002: 4ff). Other party papers followed the example set by *Guangzhou Daily* after the experiment proved successful.

- (3) Other organizations also took part in the struggle for market shares: *Beijing Youth News*, for example – the organ of the Beijing Communist Youth League – has been even quicker than *Guangzhou Daily* in many aspects to experiment with new management and recruiting styles. In 1991, *Beijing Youth News* was one of the first to break waves after the Tian'anmen-incident by giving up the secure municipal subsidies in turn for a guarantee that the paper would be allowed to keep any profit it would generate in 1991 (Zhao 1996: 145f). In the following decade, advertising revenues rose from 350,000 Yuan in 1991 to 86,000,000 in 1996 (Sun 2002: 74f) and to an incredible 640,000,000 in 2001.
- (4) The latest development in China's newspaper markets is the emergence of economic dailies as players on the general interest sector. Daily papers specialized on economic issues had existed before, but some of them changed their nature from the mid-90s on, turning from dull vehicles of propaganda and statistics into up-to-date papers that engaged in debates about current (economical) policy issues (Li P. 2001), and provided their readers with reliable business information. One of the fore-runners of this new breed of business newspapers was the *China Business Daily*, a weekly paper that is still considered to be one of the most influential in its branch, and the first one to explicitly target a certain segment of the population (age 20-45, business background, male). The *China Business Daily* was also the first to expand the scope of their report to include policy issues and international news in order to come closer to the range a general interest paper would cover (Sun 2002: 215ff).

There is, however, also a trend which runs counter to the tendency of a growing plurality – namely the central leadership's attempt to force the building of a few large media corporations to replace the multitude of small players on the market. While the motive for that step is primarily economic (large companies are at least assumed to be more efficient and to compete better with international players (Lu 2001: 161ff) – the political effects of this move must also be taken into account. A dozen major media companies are simply more easily controlled than 2,000 newspapers responsible to 2,000 organizations, governmental bodies, and party branches. Many students of the Chinese media are alarmed by this politically-induced concentration campaign (Zhou 2002: 24ff; Zhao 1998; Fischer 2001). This development indeed demands further attention, as it promises to significantly reduce the number of independent actors while diversification of products will go on undisturbed, paving the way for an artificial diversity of information.

Yet the trend towards a greater multitude of editors is still the dominant one at present. Chinese experts expect this competition to increase the role public opinion will play in the papers. Journalists, editors, and scholars interviewed in Beijing in August

2002 unanimously expressed the view that competition for newspaper markets will drive editors to further sharpen their political profile. Different papers will deliver different views of interest to different social segments of society. Chinese scholars see market success, readership attraction and political newspaper content as inseparably linked phenomena:

The major factor in revenues for newspapers is advertisement income, and the key to economic success is thus a large and prosperous readership, that makes a paper attractive for enterprises to let it run their ads (Fan 2001: 35).

One result of the growing media competition is that the position of the audience has been upgraded enormously (Chen 2000: 40).

In terms of political content, this necessity will increase the number of critical reports published:

The growing importance of audiences and the longing for readers to see their critical views expressed leads the press to lean on the masses [...] as one of the most important strategies of the media to win the market competition (Yang 2001: 12).

Any media enterprise that does not perform public supervision will lack vigor and spirit, and will have no competitive force [...] and will not attract the reader's interest. To the contrary, if it emphasizes supervision, it will be welcomed by the audience and gain not only political influence, but also generate profits (Yang 2001: 18).

But this is not where the process is expected to stop:

The second round of competition will lead the general interest newspapers to sharpen their profile and to specialize: Although newspapers are often still called mass appeal papers, in a society characterized by increasing plurality, "mass" does not exist as a homogenous reference group. Plurality of society will lead to the individualization of newspapers (Sun 2002: 199; see also Zhang 2001).

A similar point is made by Fan, who concludes from his own empirical research that the trend towards plurality of topics will develop further:

The interest of the people will further differentiate according to the processes underway in society: Different educational backgrounds and income levels push for a wider spectrum of issues offered by the media (Fan 1999: 143).

Moreover, at the local level, scholars have already traced interest groups exerting their influence via the media (Cheng/Huang/Wang 2003: 68).

4 Readership demand

These optimistic views might be contested by concerns about the true nature of audience demands. Mass audiences, one might suspect, are not at all interested in critical reports and do not care for public opinion as a political corrective, but want rather to be entertained. This objection, however, is refuted, based on several empirical research projects conducted by Chinese media scholars that provide us with insight into Chinese audience demands. All surveys of readership interest we know

of document an alleged greater interest in political news and practical information than in entertainment. When asked about their motivation to buy or read a newspaper, most readers declare that they prefer to read about politics (Liu/Zhang 1999: 25ff; Luo 1999b; Yu 2000: 52; Fan 1999: 141; Yu 2001: 92). As to the specific preferences, the results of the studies are difficult to compare due to a difference among category sets applied and a lack of detailed definitions (see Fan 1999: 141f; Yu 2001: 92; and Luo 1999b for results). Beyond the strong preference for political news in general, the only feature revealed by all surveys is a strong demand for critical reports. According to a poll conducted by the Anhui Institute for Social Sciences, 90% of the interviewees supported more critical reporting in the media (Yang 2001: 42).

Qiao (2001) found that readers are drawn to critical articles more than to any other kind of news reporting, but that the majority was displeased with both the quantity and quality of the criticism which is for the largest part directed only against low-ranking officials. Similar results were produced by Luo (1999b: 158). In another survey, Yu (2000: 95) built 17 topic categories and asked Beijing residents which kind of articles they most liked to read in newspapers. "Critical and investigative reports" ranked second (with 61.1%), only behind "reports on personalities and affairs that are currently hot spots" (*redian renwu huo shijing*) (66.9%), a very broad category. Correspondingly, asked which social functions consumers wished the media to fulfil, most interviewees regarded "being the voice of the people" as being of primary importance, while the more official term, "help people to perform supervision by public opinion", ranked only seventh among thirteen items. The traditional propaganda function, "guiding public opinion", finished almost last (Yu 2001: 221). This finding was confirmed by another survey by the same author (Yu 2001: 242; see also Liu/Zhang 1999: 26). Growing self-confidence of the readership is further confirmed by Fan's survey (1999: 140) about the self reception of readers, which found that readers relied much less on the official media to form their opinion on public matters in 1996 than in 1992. More readers also disagreed with the claim of party propaganda to streamline the people's thinking on political issues. When asked whether they would change their opinion, if they found it to disagree with official statements transported by the media, 48.3% of the test group answered "yes" in 1992, dropping significantly to 33.1% in 1996 (1992: 23.8%). Luo (1999b) also concludes that the party's hope to mould public opinion is largely in vain, as people tend to think more independently now than in the past (Luo 1999b: 158). Liu and Pu (2000: 179f) also infer from this that it is questionable, whether the party's "guided public opinion" in fact reaches its goals, as readers have become more self-confident and more critical of party papers over the years.

The demand for critical reporting ranks high across all ages, educational backgrounds, and both sexes (Yu 2000: 95ff). Nevertheless, there do exist differences among these groups. When asked, which kind of reports they would hope to appear most in newspapers, interviewees answered as follows with regard to critical reports

(the overall interest in such reports was the second highest of all 17 topics, as stated in the previous paragraph).

Evidently, criticism reports are demanded most by adults and senior men and well-educated readers, although values for almost all (except for the lowest) ages and educational backgrounds are quiet high.

Table 1: Readership interest in criticism reports (in %)

total		61.1
sex	male	63.6
	female	58.8
age	19 and below	51.1
	20-29	54.3
	30-39	64.2
	40-49	65.4
	50-59	66.2
	60 and above	62.1
education	elementary school	40.5
	basic middle school	40.5
	higher middle school	62.2
	first academic degree	56.4
	second academic degree	85.7

Source: Yu 2000.

We have quoted several Chinese scholars, who expect contents of newspapers to differ greater as market forces propel editors to attract specific audiences, and who predict a rise in criticism reports as readers of all ages and educational backgrounds demand them. Analyzing the empirical research done by Chinese scholars so far, we can conclude that Chinese newspaper readers demand critical political content and that they buy primarily papers that devote a comparatively large share of their reports to critical issues.

5 Journalists' professional attitudes

Unfortunately, we know much less about today's journalists' attitudes than about the journalistic ethos prevailing in the 1980s. Outstanding journalists, such as Wang Ruoshui or Qin Benli, were then among the public figures who pushed for a more liberal society (Lee 1990: 12; Berlin 1993: 270). Even beyond these outstanding personalities, a general tendency of China's journalists to show commitment to press

liberalization could be observed (Polunbaum 1990: 37; 44ff). Yet "it must be emphasized that the press corps' attempts to expand the scope of journalistic power were not entirely antagonistic toward the state" but rather received some "tacit if not explicit encouragement from the political authorities" (Polunbaum 1993: 303). In the spring of 1989, however, journalists went beyond their professional role, and became an integral part of the protest movement. News workers played a vital role to generate the atmosphere of political change by joining the protests (Goldman 1994: 32; Berlin 1993: 270). Especially younger journalists of this time were characterized by "professional pride, expertise and energy, knowledge about the West [...] and questioning spirit" (Tan 1993: 280). A less heroic motive is mentioned by Zhang (1993: 196f), who points to the economic interests of journalists, who could profit from a further liberalization of the media.

After June 4th, the conservatives pounced on media workers who had shown themselves to be "unreliable". Purges of journalists and editors began immediately after June 4th and continued well into 1991. *People's Daily* lost almost its entire editorial staff, 597 out of 700 were blacklisted and four imprisoned, and many other media organizations were forced to undergo changes in leading personnel (Zhang 1993: 202f; Polunbaum 1994: 120). The leadership further strengthened its grip on the media workers via the All China Journalist Association, that was equipped with a new, much more conservative board (Polunbaum 1994: 122). Yet, Zhang (1993: 204ff) has shown how imperfect this new strictness was right from the very beginning. Although many eminent media workers were purged, liberal minded journalists remained in both substantive number and quality to pursue their goals. We can expect China's current journalist corps to be both politicized and cautioned, although the new trends of the 1990s are hard to assess. The political attitude of Chinese journalists can only be extrapolated from the past and – cautiously – from present research. The results of a survey carried out in 1997 (Yu 2000: 13ff) show mixed results: According to this study, journalists defined their most important political task as "to help the people to understand party and government policies", but 85% also contended that "helping the people to exert supervision (of officials)" was an important task of journalists, too. Moreover, money often seems to be a stronger incentive than professional ethos, as corruption counts as a serious problem within journalistic circles. An overwhelming majority of interviewees admitted that "accepting gifts" in exchange for favorable reports is a wide-spread phenomenon in China's journalistic circles (Yu 2000: 23).

We should therefore be cautious to expect a majority of China's journalists to be determined agents of change. Nevertheless, these findings also suggest that a significant number of them will be genuinely interested in a more open media system, and we can assume that they will probably make further efforts to push their limits.

6 Conclusions

Public opinion is a latent force in China's polity. It is latent, because the political framework still prohibits open discussion of policies, and the range of topics for publicly voiced concern is limited. But a force it is nevertheless, since we find that (1) audiences push for more open political discussions in the media, (2) a significant part of the press corps is open to these demands, and (3) markets compel editors to devote more space to genuine public opinion. There can be no doubt, though, that as long as the leadership is determined to stick to the existing political system, no substantial breakthrough can be expected towards press freedom. But looking at political developments in China since 1989, and taking into account political attitudes of both elites and citizens, it is highly unlikely that we will see either complete political standstill or radical political change in the near future, anyway. Against the background of gradual change happening in the PRC, latent forces become the more important. Even gradual developments may increase political openness and freedom, even if they stop short from genuine democratic reforms. Second, if political developments in the PRC toward a democratic model accelerate, it will make a difference whether the society is prepared for enlarged political freedoms or not. The closer the Chinese media landscape gets to the role the media plays in democracies, the easier the eventual transition from authoritarian rule will be. Editors, journalists, and, most importantly, readers are accustoming themselves to new roles, and they will be better prepared to fulfil a constructive and critical political function in the future.

We must be careful, however, not to let optimism seduce us into underestimating the party's ability to react to newly emerging challenges. The decision to boost concentration processes by forming a dozen large media companies partly intends to increase political control and reduce the variety of editors and voices. It remains to be seen, however, if this move will really impede competition, or if the effects of the reform will be annihilated by the fact that more and more general interest newspapers are appearing. Another reform announced by July 2003 is quite ambiguous: After *Guangzhou Daily* had proved that even a party paper could compete successfully on the market, the party decided to put an end to forced subscriptions or subsidies for most papers (RSF 2004b). This will have direct consequences for many ultra-conservative papers previously protected from the market's harsh judgement. Orthodox party papers that no reader would spend a penny on will have to commercialize or close down. The step means, on the one hand, that the party gives way to the new trends, but on the other hand, the party obviously feels safe enough to entrust commercialized papers with the task of getting the propaganda messages across.

What do these results mean for Western China policy? They call, as many findings on other political developments in the PRC have done, for a sort of "active patience". We have to content ourselves with the knowledge that there are forces at work inside the PRC that might bring about political change, and that these forces

will probably contribute more to substantial reforms of the polity than any foreign effort to promote China's democratization will ever be able to do. But these forces are only beginning to gain strength and will need time to fully develop. Overly radical and aggressive foreign criticism, as advocated by most human rights activists, would probably impede rather than promote reforms. Polemic criticism of this sort would be fuel to the fire of those conservatives denouncing the demand for more press freedom as part of a Western scheme to destabilize China. So far for the patience. But on the other hand, this analysis should not be misunderstood as an excuse for Western governments (and enterprises) to turn a blind eye to the permanent violation of press freedom in China. Since there are forces active today inside China pushing for a press law that would guarantee journalists the right to investigate and write critical reports, the issue would be a very suitable subject for the official human rights dialogues between Europe and China.

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