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A New Political Role? Discursive Strategies of Critical Journalists in China

Elin Sæther

Abstract

The simple opposition between free and restricted media is insufficient for understanding the dynamics within the Chinese media field. The media has diversified greatly during the last two decades, and social problems have become part of public discourse. Critical journalists in China have formulated a new professional identity. The hegemonic role of the Chinese media holds that journalists are propaganda workers, and that their main assignment is to forward the party line. Critical journalists oppose this definition of their role and seek to articulate a position that enables them to report more freely about social problems.

Critical journalists are contributing to carving out a new political role for the Chinese media. The paper discusses how this role is a product of journalists' attempts to increase their autonomy. On the other hand, the increase in critical journalism also reflects the party-state's wish to utilize new media discourses, since limited exposure of local problems can portray the central party-state in a favourable light, as a responsive and responsible central state. The result is that the media acquires a conditional autonomy where the party-state retains the controlling power over a media that seeks to expand the range of topics that can be discussed in the public sphere. (Manuscript received August 18, 2008; accepted for publication October 03, 2008)

Keywords: China, media, critical journalism, discourse, political role

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Eine neue politische Rolle? Diskursive Strategien kritischer Journalisten in China

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Abstract

Die vereinfachende Gegenüberstellung von freien und unfreien Medien reicht für ein Verständnis der Dynamik innerhalb der chinesischen Medienlandschaft nicht aus. Während der vergangenen zwei Jahrzehnte haben die Medien eine erhebliche Diversifizierung erfahren, und gesellschaftliche Probleme sind zum Gegenstand des öffentlichen Diskurses geworden. Kritische Journalisten haben für sich eine neue professionelle Identität formuliert. Vom Standpunkt einer hegemonialen Rolle der Medien in China gelten Journalisten als Propagandadienstleister, deren Hauptaufgabe die Verbreitung der Parteilinie ist. Kritische Journalisten widersetzen sich dieser Rolle und versuchen, eine Position zu artikulieren, die es ihnen ermöglicht, freier über gesellschaftliche Probleme zu berichten.

Kritische Journalisten tragen dazu bei, eine neue politische Rolle für die Medien in China zu definieren. Der vorliegende Beitrag diskutiert, inwieweit aus den Bemühungen von Journalisten um größere Autonomie tatsächlich eine solche Rolle resultiert. Andererseits reflektiert die Stärkung eines kritischen Journalismus auch das Bestreben des Parteistaats, die neuen Mediendiskurse für sich zu nutzen, da eine begrenzte Aufdeckung lokaler Missstände den zentralen Parteistaat als responsiv und verantwortlich und damit in einem günstigen Licht erscheinen lässt. Im Ergebnis genießen die Medien Autonomie unter Vorbehalt, indem der Parteistaat die Kontrollmacht über ihre Bestrebungen behält, die Bandbreite an öffentlich diskutierbaren Themen zu erweitern.

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Keywords: China, Medien, kritischer Journalismus, Diskurs, politische Rolle

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Introduction

An independent media is conceptualized as a precondition for a functioning democracy, because it serves as a check on government, ensures openness, and channels information between different parts of society (O'Neil 1998). A consequence of the emphasis on independence is that ownership becomes the main indicator of the media's potential as a democratizing force in the state-society relation. It follows from this that the political role of the media in authoritarian states is easily disregarded, due to its lack of autonomy. This paper seeks to nuance this understanding of the media's role within an authoritarian one-party state, and argues that the media's discursive and social practices are important in evaluating the media's political role in society. In China, state ownership has not prevented the media's role from changing during the process of economic reforms underway since the beginning of the 1980s. The paper[1] addresses the paradoxes inherent in the political roles of the Chinese media and analyses the self-perception of critical journalists in China, and their strategies to change the role of the media from a top-down propaganda channel to a bottom-up channel representing the views and fates of ordinary people (*laobaixing*). The strategies of critical journalists are shaped in opposition to the hegemonic mouthpiece role of media. This means that even in critical and investigative reports, the mouthpiece discourse is present, as a "defining other". Critical journalism is a field of resistance, but this resistance takes place through negotiations with the hegemonic role of the media, which is stated as being the mouthpiece of the Communist Party. However, to the extent that journalists have succeeded in making critical and investigative journalism become part of the Chinese media landscape, they have contributed to democratizing Chinese public space. Critical media opens up new possibilities for representing the various experiences and living conditions of Chinese citizens, in a way that can contribute to political change.

The Media and Democracy in an Authoritarian Context

To many people, the phrase "critical journalism in China" has an oxymoronic value, since the media in non-democracies are often considered to be no more

[1] I would like to thank Professor Kristian Stokke and Associate Professor Marina Svensson for their comments on previous drafts of this article, as well as the two anonymous referees who contributed with concise and relevant suggestions.

than propaganda machines. This paper, on the other hand, argues that due to journalists' willingness and ability to resist domination, it is possible that state-controlled media can also contribute to democratizing political practices. The simple opposition between state-independent and restricted media is insufficient as a basis for understanding the media's role in different societies. This distinction rests on a belief in the unrestricted position of the mass media in liberal-democratic countries. In general, an understanding of the political role of the media depends on a contextual approach that encompasses both discursive and institutional perspectives on media practices.

Within traditional liberal theory, the importance of the media is connected to its role as a free-market watchdog (Curran 2005). The media's major task is to function as a check on the state by monitoring its institutions and exposing abuses of state power. The fulfilment of the watchdog role depends on private ownership and freedom from state involvement. Any state engagement within the media sector is perceived as a threat against the media's freedom that will prevent it from exercising this role (Curran 2005). Investigative journalism is supposed to safeguard public interests and uphold democracy by uncovering obscured truths, exposing immoral or illegal practices and defending victims of injustice (Curran 2005; de Burgh 2000a). Equally important for democracy is the media's role in providing an arena for information and debate. Through journalistic practice that reflects conflicts and gives voice to a plurality of interests, journalists mediate the interests of the people in a way that responsive governments take into account. As such, the mass media serves as a channel for continuous feedback from citizens to their elected representatives (Curran 2005).

A principal problem with the above conception of the relationship between the state and the mass media is that it places insufficient emphasis on sources of power other than state power (Curran 2005). A substantial portion of global media is owned by large corporations, such as media conglomerates, and even in liberal democracies it is naïve to conceive of the media as being free of constraints. If the public/private distinction is made synonymous with the restricted/free opposition, the countervailing interests involved in the media's relationship to corporate as well as government power remain hidden. Privately owned media have supported authoritarian state rule in Argentina and Chile (Curran 2005), and private media in Taiwan accepted and contributed to legitimizing authoritarian rule (Lee 2000). Media mogul Rupert Murdoch, who controls the Star TV network in China, removed the BBC's World Service channel in response to Chinese authorities'

negative reactions to the channel's reports from the Tian'anmen massacre in 1989 (Chambers 2000). In the late 1990s, there was a strong belief that the globalization of media and the development of the Internet would bring down totalitarian regimes and pave the way for democracy (Lagerkvist 2006). This optimism did not take into account that Internet technology has been developed on a commercial basis that has also made it susceptible to state interests that weigh in the opposite direction of free information.

The image of free, unconstrained media power in liberal democracies is an idealized picture of a more complex situation. The relationship between government and the media is often characterized by mutual dependency. Watchdog journalism is facilitated by the political opposition, as they have an interest in exposing problems and misconduct that can be blamed on their political antagonists (de Burgh 2000a). Investigative journalism is expensive and resource-intensive and requires editors and owners who are willing to place social responsibility above profitability. This has meant that public media has been an important provider of watchdog journalism (de Burgh 2000b), contrary to what should be expected according to the free-market thesis. Private, free-market media is also subject to economic constraints that influence how the media contributes to democracy. Deregulation and commercialization of media appears to have reduced rather than increased the amount of watchdog journalism (de Burgh 2000b).

The various limitations on the media's watchdog role weaken liberal theory's conception of the independent media, but that does not prevent the media from playing an important role in upholding democracy. However, the media's role in contexts of domination is less clear.

The Media and Political Transitions

In spite of the assumption regarding the close relationship between media and democracy, there have been few attempts to analyse the media's role in political transitions (O'Neil 1998). The political role of the media received little attention in the debate that followed in the wake of the transitions in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in the 1990s. An elite perspective has dominated transition literature and this reflects a narrow conceptualization of democracy and democratization, one that emphasizes the formal characteristics of democracy rather than its substantial aspects. The distinction between formal and substantial democracy was introduced by de Tocqueville, and implies that there is

no necessary correspondence between the formal institutions of a democracy and the redistribution of power that makes citizens able to influence decision-making processes (Luckham et al. 2003). Grugel (2002) elaborates on the characteristics of formal and substantive democracy and describes substantial democracy as a more inclusive concept that depends on whether or not rights have real meaning for people. Democratization is understood as the processes that contribute to this goal, by introducing and extending citizenship rights as well as creating a democratic state. Such politics of inclusion contain processes that give citizens a political voice and a stake in government. The government's accountability and responsiveness to the needs and interests of its citizens is crucial, as is the construction of democratic institutions that enable political contestation and debate. A successful politics of inclusion will lead to a situation where democratization from below is combined with effective governance (Luckham et al. 2003).

In many societies, this goal will seem unattainable, but the concept of politics of inclusion is still valuable because it points out processes of democratization that may occur, even within authoritarian states, without necessarily resulting in the constitution of a formal democracy (Luckham et al. 2003). Sklar's (1987) analysis of developmental democracy introduces the phrase "democracy in parts", meaning that even within authoritarian states, there might be pockets of democracy embedded in institutions such as the courts, the media, or the unions. Authoritarianism is not necessarily monolithic, and to the extent that institutions are able to create expanded spaces for dissent and debate, they contribute to democratization in its substantial sense, while not necessarily resulting in the establishment of a formal democracy. Political resistance against authoritarian regimes is often associated with dissidents who openly challenge the legitimacy of the dominant power holders. However, in a country like China, there are numerous people who are working towards greater freedoms of expression, and improved human rights, from within the existing institutional setup. They practice political strategies of resistance that may contribute to a more open society.

From Mouthpiece to Market: the Instrumental Role of the Media

The Chinese media has undergone profound changes in the post-Mao era, and due to institutional legacies, market reforms, and the information revolution, the

current media situation is both complex and paradoxical. While market reforms have changed the modus operandi of the media, some of the tensions within the Chinese media field are embedded in institutional practices and the political role assigned to the media in the Mao era.

During the formation of the People's Republic of China, the media was moulded into the party-state structure (Chang 1997; Cheek 1989; Lynch 1999; Nathan 1985) as part of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) propaganda system. A double task was assigned to the media by the CCP: it was to propagandize party policies and assist in the rectification of the party (Cheek 1989). The first task, communicating party policies, was conducted through the distribution of propaganda, while the rectification established the media as one of several supervisory channels that could receive complaints and grievances from the people (Liebman 2005). The media should serve the people, not only through propaganda but also by keeping them informed. Investigative journalism was conceived as a check on tendencies among lower-level officials to overrate positive results and underestimate local problems (Liebman 2005). In theory, journalists were expected to combine their role as propagandists with critical, investigative reporting. In practice, the two aspects of media's role were not equally valued, and the critical, investigative practice was strictly restrained. CCP leadership decided that critical reports should only be published if they were of immediate benefit to the party's interests (Nathan 1985; Polumbaum 1990).

As in most countries, Chinese media policy was framed in a discourse about the public interest (Keane 2001). The Maoist idea of the public was connected to an image of society as a totality in which all relationships were changeable. Within this totality, culture was a means to be utilized in the education of the public and public interest was "recognized as the maintenance of collective morality and obligation rather than an individual's constitutional rights" (Keane 2001:789). In principle, the Chinese media was not intended to be an oppressive, top-down propaganda channel. Maoist ideology considered the party to be the representative of the people's government, so the party's mouthpiece could simultaneously be the mouthpiece of the people (Lee 1990). This harmony-oriented conceptualization of the state-society relationship assumed that the members of the proletariat had a common interest, and that the party was the articulation of the interest of the people. In this context the media's role was to ensure this unity between the party and the people.

This instrumental notion of the media's role meant that media content was evaluated according to its potential function in the construction of a new society. News was not evaluated according to its perceived importance, but according to its potential effect. The mouthpiece conception of the media's role and the distinction between positive and negative news are legacies that still shape the working conditions of Chinese media (Interview, Xu Feng[2]).

The solution to the inherent conflict between the propagandist role and the investigative role was to establish two different channels to separate them. In addition to the open media directed at the public, the internal media channel kept political authorities informed (Hsiao & Cheek 1995). This dual channel system has been upheld, and constitutes one aspect of the mouthpiece media that critical journalists oppose and distance themselves from. However, in the process of framing a new professional identity, critical journalists have used the fact that they have also previously been called upon to produce investigative journalism and to serve the people as a discursive resource. Critical journalists have construed themselves as loyal to the fundamental task of serving the people, but they have chosen to foreground the second of Mao's two assignments to the media, which involved the reflection of common people's grievances and living conditions.

Critical Discourse in the Public Sphere

From a completely integrated position within the party-state structure, Chinese media actors today manoeuvre between competition, market constraints, and political boundaries. Economic subsidies have been reduced, and market incentives now partly fill the space previously occupied by propaganda purposes (Huang 2001; Lee 1994; Lee et al. 2006; Zhao 2008, 1998). As a result of the growing competition within the media market for customers and advertisements, the Chinese media outlets have tuned in to the interests of their audiences and the range of topics written about in the press has expanded. Pan and Chan (2003) show how this development away from the dominance of the party press has led to the establishment of more entertaining, readable, and practically useful news media, as demonstrated in Shanghai's tabloid *Xinmin Evening*. However, the competitive media market evolving in China during the 1990s also opened the

[2] All journalists interviewed for this research project have been granted anonymity and the names are pseudonyms.

way for more problem-oriented and investigative journalism, and the *Southern Weekend* (*Nanfang Zhoumo*) has been at the forefront of the development of a critical press.

In the context of a politically controlled media system, criticism can easily be understood as subversive and contrary to party-state interests. Negative images of China and Chinese society such as social and environmental problems, grievances, crime, and corruption were not previously discussed within the open press. Making these topics part of the public sphere was contradictory to the mouthpiece media's emphasis on positive news. In order for Chinese media outlets to forward such news, they have had to represent their discursive and social practices as being compatible with the formal and informal regulations governing the media field. In interviews with problem-oriented Chinese journalists who have been working for the *Southern Weekend* and other media organizations, I have asked journalists to explain their own practice, their motivation, and their objectives. Their accounts show how their professional identity is defined in relation to the mouthpiece role of the media. The mouthpiece role of the media is their defining other. The party press represents the normal and undisputed that characterizes hegemonic understandings of social phenomena (Laclau & Mouffe 2001). Critical and investigative journalism is measured against the mouthpiece conception of the media's role, and this means that the taboos and discursive boundaries inscribed in the mouthpiece role of the media are restrictions that critical journalism must take into account.

In order to avoid party-state sanctions, critical journalism must appear as non-subversive. In critical journalists' accounts of their work, they articulate conscious strategies directed at representing their journalistic work as being within the boundaries of the politically acceptable. To be able to continue working in the media, critical journalists must respect and include the requirements of the mouthpiece role, to a certain extent.

In their writing there is a parallel process of negotiation between the mouthpiece role of the media and the role of social criticism. As a result, articles from the *Southern Weekend* are polyphonic texts where several voices or perspectives can be identified. The texts analyse social problems, but at the same time, they include elements of the mouthpiece discourse to prevent accusations of subversion. Representations of conflicts and systemic problems are often balanced by the journalist's focus on individualized representations of suffering and misery, which are construed as less political. This balance makes the social criticism more

subtle, and this is characteristic of forms of resistance taking place in situations characterized by highly asymmetrical power relations (Pan & Lu 2003; Scott 1990).

One of the consistent taboos in mouthpiece journalism is representations of politics that do not reflect the party line. For *Southern Weekend*, a discursive tool used to avoid this limitation has been the establishment of "social news" as a major news category.

Social news has been construed as clearly separate from politics. This category includes topics such as environmental disasters, corruption, violence against women, the performance of the legal system, the health system, and violations of constitutional rights. The framing of these issues has made it possible to represent them as something apart from politics, and as not directly related to the government's performance. As of the mid-1990s *Southern Weekend* started to write more extensively about social news. The paper published longer articles written by academics and authors in a supplement, and when these essays proved popular and influential *Southern Weekend* formed a group of their own journalists who started to look into the problems faced by ordinary Chinese. The newspaper's aim was stated as promoting democracy and the legal system, and to do that they chose to focus on the situation of peasants, the unemployed, and other weak and powerless groups in society (Interview, Fan Yihong). Seen from the outside, this is an explicit political objective, but within the Chinese media discourse, this aim was conducted under the heading of social news. This also meant that concepts such as "democracy" and "rule of law" had to be assigned content that did not challenge the rule or legitimacy of CCP. The way this has typically been done is by emphasizing incremental steps towards more accountable and less corrupt social practices, while never questioning the legitimacy of CCP rule.

Conducting Critical and Investigative Journalism

The post-Mao transformation of Chinese society has improved the living conditions of millions of people, but in the process of reform, China has become one of the most inequitable countries in the world. Since the 1990s, there have been frequent protests where poor people, peasants and unemployed workers, and other marginalized people have voiced their grievances and complaints (Shue & Wong 2007). The pace, the policies, and the implementation of economic reform in China are disputed, but for Chinese journalists this has been an area

they have had to approach in a very careful manner. Change is a nodal point in the representation of modernity in China, and changes in media practices are framed as a parallel narrative that represents critical and investigative journalism as being linked with progress in general.

The 14 journalists I interviewed for this project in the fall of 2002 all position their experiences within an overarching narrative of transition:

> Before, our media was top-down, but during the last decade there has been a great change that has taken place after the opening and reform of the country. The change has consisted in the Chinese media's road towards a market economy [...] the development of newspapers depends on catering to the readers' demands, as the market economy does not request the flattering of anything, instead it wants to achieve the identification between newspapers and its readers. (Interview, Fan Yihong)

This narrative of the media's reform is structured around the meaning of "now" as opposed to the meaning of "the past". The past/present distinction aligns media reforms with modernity, openness, and the market economy, while the past is represented as backwards, without any "real" journalism. In Fan Yihong's narrative, the great changes within Chinese media are construed as a process of adaptation, and not as the results of opposition to the mouthpiece role of the media. The media has developed because it needed to adjust to the introduction of a market economy following the opening and reform of China (*gaige kaifang*).

Normalization through Professionalism

Within these limitations, *Southern Weekend*'s articles nevertheless represented a new development within Chinese journalism, and readers considered its coverage of social problems to be brave and innovative. *Southern Weekend* journalists have used the traditional/modern dichotomy to align investigative, bottom-up journalism with modernity and development, and to distance it from propaganda, framed as traditional and backwards. They put the distinction between modernity and the past to further use when they developed the category of social news. According to journalist Wu Yunlu, traditional, old-fashioned social news follows a set formula. For instance, when an accident has taken place, it describes how many people who were injured or killed, how serious the damage was, and finally what the government has done to put things right again. Such narratives are compatible with the mouthpiece role's limitation on negative news, because the emphasis on restoration allows the positive aspects to come

to the forefront. Hence, stories about accidents may be read as narratives about the party-state's ability to ensure order and help people. Wu Yunlu, on the other hand, says that modern social news breaks with this formula and describes problems that are not yet resolved and problems that have more structural causes. This explanation also builds on the discursive opposition between the past and the present, backwardness and modernity, and contributes to positioning the mouthpiece role of the media as belonging in the past and critical journalism as part of modernity. However, Wu avoids terms that indicate opposition, instead choosing to present *Southern Weekend*'s social news as a natural part of modern media.

Nevertheless, in order for investigative and critical journalism to become part of Chinese media discourse, opposition has been unavoidable. For problem-oriented journalists, it has been impossible to accept that the main objective of the media should be bringing the party line to the people. Hence, they have confronted the hegemonic standing of the mouthpiece role of the media and have refused to be propaganda workers. Within an authoritarian context, voicing such opposition is potentially dangerous. Discourses that challenge a hegemonic discourse are easily depicted as being contrary to the public good or simply as subversive. Therefore, critical journalists in China have employed normalization as a resistance strategy: they have made use of existing discursive elements and rearticulated the media discourse, in order to construe their own practice as legitimate and conducive to the public good.

One of the major aspects of normalization as a resistance strategy has been to establish an understanding of investigative and critical journalism as professional. Since critical and investigative journalism is defined in relation to the hegemonic mouthpiece role, the intended implication is that mouthpiece journalists are less or are not professional. In this way, the critical journalists draw a line between themselves and the majority of journalists in China. However, they define the content of their professionalism by aligning themselves to the basic conception of the mouthpiece role, which is to contribute to the interest of society; what they challenge is the notion of how this should be done. By focusing on social problems, journalists activate the media's role as a channel for public supervision. This was an aspect of the media's assigned task within the mouthpiece role, but it became subordinate to the media's propaganda mission. In their ambition to change Chinese journalism, critical journalists use selected aspects of the hegemonic discourse to represent their choices as legitimate. Simultaneously,

they make the mouthpiece role of the media appear to be illegitimate, because it is a top-down channel that excludes the voice of the people.

These identity aspects reverse the top-down character of mouthpiece journalism, and critical journalists describe their own practice as real journalism, in contrast to propaganda. Their emphasis on serving the people changes how they see the relationship between journalists and the party-state, and this in turn influences the critical journalists' relation to the internal channel. Within the mouthpiece role of the media, investigative reports revealing social problems have always been communicated directly to the leadership through the internal channel (de Burgh 2003; Hsiao & Cheek 1995). This excludes the general public, which the critical journalists see as their audience. Several of the journalists interviewed felt that writing stories that reach fewer readers, the better they are, is contrary to the whole idea of what journalism is about (Interview, Xu Feng, Zhao Sanpeng, Ai Hongwen). To these journalists, it is their relation to the public that defines their profession, and they argue that their capacity to influence functions via the public's knowledge and reactions. The media's influence does not depend on a direct relationship between journalists and the state, but rather on the media's relation to its public audience. This notion of media power attaches more importance to independence from the state, and through it, critical journalists voluntarily close the gate to direct political influence. The internal channel has provided journalists with a capacity to influence power relations without bestowing them with autonomy. This distinction between capacity and autonomy is incompatible with critical journalists' notion of professionalism and their relation to the public.

The propaganda role of the media has meant that journalists in China have evaluated news according to how well it communicates politically correct messages on behalf of the party-state. This instrumental conception of news value is something critical journalists do not acknowledge. The politically instrumental view of news influences both what is reported and how it is reported. Problems, conflicts, and accidents that do not contribute to presenting the authorities in a favourable light are restricted within the mouthpiece role of the media. When negative issues are reported, they are framed in ways that are seen as conducive to the dominant political interests. In contrast to this, one interviewee explained that he looks upon journalism as a reflection. He thinks the journalist simply ought to describe what he sees for the public (Interview, Ai Hongwen). Another informant used a truck as a metaphor, saying that he sees himself as the truck

that loads the news and transports it to the public (Interview, Xu Feng). The idea conveyed by these two journalists is that the reporter is a neutral conductor between incidents and the audience. They see the journalist as objective rather than as an actor that actively shapes attitudes.

Within the mouthpiece conception of the media, objectivity has been a politicized term regarded as synonymous with reporting everything. This has been understood as being in opposition to Marxism because it undermined the propaganda function of the media (Nathan 1985). In international media discourse, objectivity is a defining characteristic in the professional identity of journalists. However, being objective is generally described as impossible within the academic research literature (Curran 2005; de Burgh 2000c). Although academics view journalists as situated social actors reflecting the particularities of class, education, interests, and dominating discourses, whether or not neutrality and objectivity are truly possible is not the most important aspect of this question in the Chinese context. The notion of the journalist as a neutral and objective actor is a useful discursive means for critical journalists in China. It facilitates a representation of the professional identity of critical journalists as incompatible with the instrumental role the journalist is assigned within the mouthpiece role. The image of the critical journalists as neutral also distinguishes investigative reporters from the practice of paid journalism that has become widespread in China during the post-Mao period (Zhao 1998). Paid journalism involves receiving money for attending press conferences, or bribes for representing companies or other social actors in particular ways. Sometimes bribes are also used to discourage journalists and editors from publishing unwanted news. Similarly to propaganda, paid journalism is a form of advocacy journalism, which critical journalists distance themselves from. When journalists construe professionalism in a manner that excludes propaganda, they state that neither journalists taking bribes nor those working for mouthpiece organs such as the *People's Daily* are real journalists (Interview, Xu Feng). Discursively, this makes critical journalism stand out as more legitimate and the only form of journalism that meets professional standards.

When critical, investigative journalists express how being objective is fundamental to their work, objectivity is articulated not only as an opposition to propaganda but also as the opposite of being subjective and biased (Interview, Shi Youli, Xu Feng). They represent subjectiveness as a common problem in Chinese media discourse. Chinese journalists often refer to anonymous sources, and not

infrequently these represent the journalists' own views in disguise. This is an inheritance from propaganda journalism, for which the instrumental utility of the news story defines its importance. Objectivity is also seen as connected to working methods, since listening to and reporting from both sides of a conflict make articles less biased and more objective (Interview, Xu Feng). Within propaganda journalism, there is never any doubt about right and wrong, nor any call for interpretation, since the general aim is to provide the public with politically pre-approved information.

Ideas about objectivity and truth are central in Western media discourse (de Burgh 2003). When critical journalists transfer these ideas to the Chinese context, they confront an authoritarian one-party state that forbids independent media. Journalists choose discursive strategies that give concepts such as objectivity, truth, and public service a content that is compatible with the context within which the journalists work. For instance, Shi Youli (Interview) says that as long as there are people willing to talk, critical journalists try to get as close as possible to the truth, but without violating rules and regulations. There is a discursive convergence with foreign conceptions of journalism among the critical journalists, but the discourse is modified and contextualized in order to fit into the existing framework.

Social Stability and the Right to Know

During the last decade, the pre-eminent reason for the party-state's need for information control has been presented as the need to protect social stability (Lagerkvist 2006; Shue 2004). In the same way that critical journalists co-opt the notion of serving the public by making it a defining trait of their own identity, they also take the hegemonic argument about protecting social stability and use it to carve out their own identity. Critical journalists argue that social stability can be threatened by ignoring people's right to know. When accidents happen and information is withheld, rumours and panic are often the result (Interview, Zhao Sanpeng, Xu Feng). This argument does not question the importance of social stability, only the means for achieving it. In a controlled political environment, it is not possible to openly challenge the hegemonic discourse on social stability. Stability is conceived of as one of the main sources of legitimacy for the Chinese party-state; to avoid negative consequences, journalists must accept social stability as a premise.

While critical journalists do not challenge the idea that social stability must be protected, they emphasize violations of people's right to know as a key source of public unrest and dissatisfaction. Human rights discourse is controversial in China, and is often represented as a cover for the imperialist ambitions of the Western world (Sæther 2000). Using the phrase "right to know" (*zhiqing quan*), rather than freedom of expression, signifies a distance from international human rights discourse. Strategically, it is important that people's right to know appears as a collective right, whereas freedom of expression can more easily be brushed aside as a liberal, individual right that must be subordinated to the need for social stability. The focus on people's right to know can also be understood as a market discourse where people's demand for information must be satisfied by the supply side, which is the media. The discourse of the market-oriented economy is less politically sensitive than the human rights discourse, and is better suited for convincing the authorities to ease their control over media content. Nevertheless, arguing for people's right to know challenges the mouthpiece conception of media. For instance, critical journalists argue that the channelling of news through the internal channel is a violation of people's right to know, as is the continuing media censorship of important incidents, perspectives, and problems.

A central component of the media policy denying people their right to know has been the division between negative and positive news. The media has been required to restrict the amount of "negative" news to maximum 20 per cent; the remaining 80 per cent should consist of "positive" news. Critical journalists perceive the positive/negative dichotomy as a means of media control, and they oppose it on the grounds that it is useless for the purpose of evaluating news value (Interview, Ai Hongwen). According to Xu Feng:

> The things that are newsworthy, and can be called news in China, are categorized as negative news [...] That a public security official or a tax office do their job in a good manner, that is only normal, regular, and that cannot count as news. Dereliction of duty, crimes, that is news.

The insistence on judging the importance of news on an independent basis brings critical journalists in China more in line with Western conceptions of the media's role. Western journalists in general believe strongly in their own objectiveness and autonomy and look upon themselves as tellers of the truth (de Burgh 2003). In China, the media is prevented from being independent from the party-state, but critical journalists still emphasize their awareness of independence from other

influential actors.

Critical journalists or newspapers such as *Southern Weekend* cannot claim to be autonomous. Their strategies to establish themselves as a natural part of Chinese media are characterized by partial opposition and partial loyalty to the mouthpiece role. Critical journalists relate to fundamental aspects of the mouthpiece conception of the media's role, such as "serving the public" and "protecting social stability", but modify these aspects through the formation of a new critical identity. Within this identity, people's right to know, objectivity, and independence are central discursive moments, and measured against these milestones, mouthpiece journalists fall short. Critical journalists diagnose mouthpiece workers as having split professional identities: partly government officials and only partly journalists. This is associated with the old-fashioned, closed society that China used to be. Critical journalism, on the other hand, is modern and more in line with ideas of journalism abroad (Interview, Wu Yunlu). To critical journalists, professionalism is incompatible with co-optation as government officials. A central question then becomes whether or not critical journalists are actually able to be the independent watchdogs they identify themselves as being.

Government Mission or Independent Watchdogs?

Given the critical journalists' opposition to the hegemonic mouthpiece conception of the media's role, one may wonder what has made the Chinese party-state tolerate the development of critical journalism. As long as journalists stay within the rules that regulate their professional activities, are they really the independent watchdogs they see themselves as? It is evident that critical journalists' emphasis on serving the public does not make them equal to dissidents. The Chinese party-state accepts "public supervision" (*yulun jiandu*). This "means acting like a watchdog, keeping an eye upon society and drawing attention to what the authorities may have missed" (de Burgh 2000d, 2003:111). On the other hand, the party-state does not allow independent media; yet within Chinese political discourse, public supervision does not necessarily imply impartiality. It can be conducted on behalf of the state, and it can enhance the legitimacy of the state, because it makes it appear to be more responsive to the grievances of the population. However, when critical journalists state that their loyalty lies with ordinary people (*laobaixing*) and not the state, they attempt to create freedom of movement for a role that exceeds the limitations placed upon a government watchdog. The discussion below addresses this tension between

critical journalism as a government-inspired mission and as an independent watchdog role by investigating the objectives of critical journalistic practices.

Zhang Ping is a senior journalist who has been engaged in investigative journalism since the 1980s. He has published several books and has been particularly interested in rural China. When asked about his work and his motivation, he tells of cases where individuals are victimized due to power abuse, for instance, a woman who was forced into a marriage where she was abused and her basic human rights violated. As a farmer she was poor and without the necessary connections to further her case. She had wanted to sue her husband, but was not able to make anything happen. Being from a locality where the judicial system is secondary to the political institutions, her abusers could get away without being punished. To the journalist, such stories are interesting because they illustrate more general problems such as the absence of an independent judiciary and the continued oppression of women in China.

In this case, Zhang Ping's investigation and report caused a reaction and the culprits were punished. This can be interpreted as the journalist's government-inspired mission: he conducted public supervision on behalf of the central state, and addressed a concrete problem that was later rectified. In this sense, his report did not diverge much from previous propaganda, since it had an instrumental function in representing political authorities in a particular way. Brady (2008) argues that in its meeting with the information revolution, the Chinese party-state's propaganda methods have been refined, and the exposure of limited, local problems may very well be in line with the Propaganda Department's interests. However, as the journalist emphasizes, there are many women like this victim. They are vulnerable as a result of systemic injustice, and almost powerless when the judiciary is corrupt and undermined by personal and political interests. The concrete, local case has a more systemic context dealing with social injustice and the failings of the judiciary system; investigating this challenges the party-state's legitimacy.

Since the late 1990s, cases of corruption and criminal behaviour among officials have frequently been disclosed (Interview, Xu Feng, Wang Yi, Fan Yihong). The journalist Ai Hongwen has investigated many such cases and says that his goal is to help the victims of corruption and abuse of power as best he can. He too shares the focus on the individual victims of abuse of power, and tries to use his own knowledge of law to compensate for victims' lack of resources. He is motivated by his sense of justice, and this inspires him to take risks and to

"ferret out" the hard-to-find evidence in corruption cases. His hope is that his reports may influence higher levels of government to investigate and prosecute the criminals involved. Ai Hongwen portrays himself as playing an active role in revealing how public officials abuse their positions. There is discussion among Chinese journalists as to how far they should take this role. One of the informants from a more heavily controlled news organization stressed that media should not act as the police or be a judge, and that other institutions are responsible for bringing forward evidence of criminal behaviour. This journalist confines the media's role to reporting on cases after they are revealed (Interview, Feng Lihong). The difference of opinion between these two interviewees can be represented as one of degree rather than as a complete opposition. They both believe to some extent in the central party-state's ability to deal with crime and injustice. Neither of them explicitly criticizes the systemic level. However, the willingness to actively scrutinize abuses of power makes Ai Hongwen less likely to restrict his investigations to topics and circumstances approved by the party-state.

In the critical journalists' accounts of their work, they place little trust in the authorities' accounts of how and why things happen. In particular, they emphasize that local government officials have an interest in protecting a positive image of the locality. The tendency of local officials to underestimate problems and exaggerate qualities of the locality was acknowledged as a problem during the Mao era, and has continued to the present day. This has made it less sensitive for journalists and media positioned above the county level to approach problems at the local scale. In addition to utilizing the geographical hierarchy, journalists have also extended the field of critical and investigative journalism by focusing on social problems and incidents in provinces other than their own. The resulting focus on social problems at the local level may be consistent with an interpretation of critical journalists as government watchdogs, since it makes social problems appear to be unitary instances, more than the systemic results of general policies. However, the political development during the last few years has transferred more power over the media to local party bosses, and since 2005, the possibility of provincial media outlets exposing social problems in other provinces has been restricted. To do this now requires permission. The practice of reporting critically about lower geographical levels has also been contained, since journalists now need permission from local authorities if the topic in question is a negative one (Zhao 2008). Also, central authorities have often supported the local authorities' version of reality, rather than protecting

journalists' investigations into local matters. The central Propaganda Department assists local authorities in communicating news blocks to all news organizations and affirms the protection of authorities against negative exposure. The party-state's containment of investigative journalism during the last few years indicates that the role of critical journalists exceeds the limits of government watchdogs.

Given the restrictions placed upon Chinese journalists, Xu Feng tries to act as quickly as possible when he decides to investigate a case. He talks to people and tries to find out what really happened. Even when the case he is working on is closed by the Propaganda Department, he believes in the importance of being present. To him it is important to know, even though he will not be able to publish a story. He explains that perhaps, at a later stage, when the political climate has changed, he will be able to tell people what really happened. Xu Feng's belief in the importance of being present is also indicative of his idealist convictions, in that he believes that his own journalistic practices can contribute to a more just society.

Hybrid Roles

It must be admitted that the question of whether critical journalists are independent watchdogs or employed on a government mission has a weakness. It furthers traditional binary thinking and is too crude to capture the hybrid forms of journalism developing within the Chinese media field today. Journalists, such as Xu Feng, who are independent-minded and defy restrictions contribute to extending the parameters of what Chinese journalists can do. Others do investigative work, but limit themselves to officially endorsed issues or produce their stories for the internal channel. For instance, journalists at the Xinhua news agency continue to write internal reports that go directly to the political leadership (Interview, Feng Junjiu, Wang Yi, Feng Lihong). To the extent that the objectives of journalists are restricted to helping individuals who suffer from local authorities' abuses of power, they do not explicitly question the legitimacy of the central level of the state. On the contrary, the problems they address can contribute to making the government appear more responsive and compassionate. This has been a common argument about TV shows such as *Focus* (*Jiaodian Fangtan*), which only features problems that can be easily rectified and contributes to a positive image of the central authorities (Chan 2002). In this sense, critical journalism can be seen as a continuation of the mouthpiece role of the media, as it serves a propaganda purpose. Finally, there are newspapers within party-state organizations

that uncover important social issues, but they also have to uphold their role as a particular organization's mouthpiece.

A major problem inherent in combining the mouthpiece role with independent, investigative journalism is one of trust. Propaganda is designed to provoke a specific reaction, while investigative journalism is defined by its problem-oriented content and by its methods. *China Women's News* (*Zhongguo Funü Bao*) is a paper which combines critically oriented news with traditional propaganda. The paper is the mouthpiece of the mass organization All China Women's Federation. Its propaganda content consists mainly of pieces in which the local divisions write their accounts of what they have done in order to present a convincing and positive image of their own practice. The problem for the paper occurs when they want to put forward a more critical voice, because their promotion of propaganda content makes their real news harder to believe (Interview, Zhu Yang). The paper then depends on skilful readers' ability to separate between the typical patterns of the propaganda texts and freer and more real journalism.

Another hybrid form of journalistic agency can be found in the conception of the journalist as activist. To some journalists, the most relevant response when their capacity to influence through independent reporting is restricted is to engage in politics as social activists. Seminars and meetings offer a third channel, in addition to the open press and the internal channel. Meetings offer an opportunity to exchange views and to write reports and articles, and constitute a more direct way of influencing government officials (Interview, Zhu Yang). For journalists to work as activists within a mass organization is a way of engaging in advocacy on social issues without challenging the authority and legitimacy of the party-state.

Activism can be seen as a response to the restricted media situation that is common in authoritarian states, where state power cannot be influenced through democratic elections and where freedom of expression is limited. However, when a certain level of autonomy is allowed, the media can be one of very few channels of influence from society to the state. I suggest that this situation can be understood as conditional autonomy. This conception is grounded in an understanding of the social as open and of hegemonic orders as changeable, while also recognizing the relative strength of the state versus social actors. It is a conceptualization of the state-society relationship that allows for an analytical separation of autonomy and capacity, which is important for explaining situations where political influence on the state depends on close ties rather than on

autonomy. Journalists who are also activists within mass organizations, such as All China Women's Federation, do have influence and political capacity, but not much autonomy. Finally, conditional autonomy is a concept that opens the way for an analysis of democratizing political practices and their implications in contexts where the state remains in a position to impose sanctions upon any unwanted political developments. This is the case with the development of more critical journalism in China. It has expanded the range of issues that can be discussed and reported in the public sphere, but the freedom of critical journalists is only conditional, and remains subject to party-state control.

Conclusion

The CCP leadership has never officially redefined the political role of the Chinese media, and the hegemonic mouthpiece discourse of Chinese media still restricts what journalists can and cannot communicate to the public. The changes that have taken place in the organization of the media field and in media practices have evolved gradually. Today, the Chinese media is diversified and is characterized by a wide array of media outlets offering products that cater to the interests of the audience. One aspect of this development has been the expansion of critical journalism within some media. Critical and investigative journalism challenges the mouthpiece role of the media, while simultaneously adapting to a controlled media environment. Critical journalists utilize the tension between the propaganda and the informational aspects within the mouthpiece role of the media when they refer to serving the public as central to their role as journalists. Investigative journalists balance between criticism and propaganda, but their journalism has nonetheless contributed to making social problems part of the Chinese public sphere. The naturalization strategies of critical journalists represent their journalism as a legitimate and necessary part of the Chinese media. Through their work they contribute to redefining the political role of the critical press, so that it includes people's right to be informed and the exposure of official power abuse and injustice. To the extent that the media contributes to politicizing social issues, it becomes a factor in the democratization process, giving voice to interests that might otherwise remain unrecognized. In spite of the absence of an independent media, this shows how discursive and social practices can contribute to new spaces of representation, even within an authoritarian state.

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