
Alliance and Tactics among Government, Media Organizations and Journalists: A Description of Public Opinion Supervision in China

Wusan Sun

Chinese Academy of Social Sciences

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Abstract

This article analyzes a case of media supervision in China. The case shows that in the context of economic and bureaucratic decentralization, central and local governments as well as central and local media have respective interests in what is known as ‘public opinion supervision’. The article concludes that the development of public opinion supervision (*yulun jiandu*) is a result of strategic alliances among government bodies and the media. However, in a specific media supervision event, every party involved will evaluate their own potential gains and losses as well as their relationship to the other parties concerned and make decisions accordingly. The result of such deliberation between the party-state and the media propels the development of a public sphere in China. The different interests and goals of central and local government and media institutions, and the dynamic restructuring of power and interests in a society undergoing dramatic transformation create significant space for public opinion supervision in contemporary China.

In China, media reports that criticize the government are a special aspect of news production. During the Mao era, this type of reporting was called ‘criticism report’ (*piping baodao*). State power over the media was manifested in such reports, which usually reflected the views of a higher party-state official towards a subordinate, who then received political or administrative punishment. Since China’s policy of opening and reform began in the late 1970s, the scope and aims of such reporting has shifted and expanded. Now called ‘public opinion supervision’ (*yulun jiandu*) or ‘media supervision’ (*meijie jiandu*), it serves as a means for the media to monitor the government (or in US parlance, to take on a ‘watchdog’ role), and the targets have also broadened to include social problems and the market system. The change in terminology reflects a re-declaration by the party-state media of its own power as well as its legitimacy in representing the will of the public to hold government officials accountable and in being a force for social change.

The significance of the role of public opinion supervision can be seen in the fact that it has been on the agenda of every meeting of both the National Congress of the Communist Party and the National People's Congress since 1986. On 31 December 2003, the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection of the Chinese Communist Party passed the Regulation on Inner-Party Supervision of the Communist Party of China, which stated that the news media should play a role in public opinion supervision. Some provincial and city governments have also passed similar regulations outlining the media's role in exposing corrupt officials. However, public opinion supervision reporting does not mean journalists have free rein to criticize at will. Instead, such reporting falls 'under the leadership of the Communist Party' and is regulated by 'related rules and processes'. Public opinion supervision must adhere to 'a Party spirit' to guide public opinion in the 'correct' manner and it must 'emphasize practical results' (Regulation on Inner Party Supervision, 2003). Such principles reveal the desire of the party-state to strongly control public opinion supervision as an apparatus of power. Although these regulations mean that the media's attempts to check power are also monitored by the power of the party-state itself, and that the media are prevented from actually registering a dissident voice, they also represent the Communist Party's overall positive attitude toward public opinion supervision.

Both central and local governments have undertaken public opinion supervision. For example, in 1994, CCTV's news program *Focus* (*Jiaodian fangtan*) was launched and its critical reporting garnered much praise. Over the course of several years, three Chinese premiers (Li Peng, Zhu Rongji and Wen Jiabao) were guests on *Focus* and wrote inscriptions in calligraphy for the show to encourage its efforts. The influence of the show can be seen in the fact that eventually 'all TV stations in 31 provinces and municipalities except Qinghai and Tibet launched 60 programs, and all 31 provincial party papers inaugurated their special sections. All focused on critiques' (Zan, 1999). Each of these programs and special sections were supported by the central and local governments.

Furthermore, in 1999 a special group dedicated to investigative reporting was formed by the local party committee, local propaganda department and journalists in Zhuhai City. A local party official was in charge of the group, whose stated purpose was to expose and criticize problems while at the same time reporting positive examples as a way to solve such problems. The official added that the party hoped to use the media to 'promote the improvement of the investment environment and encourage economic development' (Xu, 2003).

Another case that exemplifies this new era of media supervision occurred in Changzhi City in Shanxi. In 2000, the city's new mayor put forward a catch phrase, the 'media administer the city'. The purpose of this slogan was to get all media, including daily and evening newspapers as well as radio and television stations

owned by the city government, to launch public opinion supervision columns or broadcasts. The mayor himself even went to a newsroom and worked there in case some officials attempted to block the media's critique of their abuse of power (Sun, 2004). In addition, some local governments (Pixian in Sichuan province) asked their officials to make public self-criticisms of their mistakes, which were broadcast on television. Discipline inspection officials in Ganyu county of Jiangsu used hidden cameras to film officials' illegal activities and these videos were also shown on television (see *Southern Weekend* [*Nanfang Zhoumo*], 26 March 2007: 6).

Despite public proclamations and policies to the contrary, quite often the party-state interferes in the media's efforts at public opinion supervision, as a recent case reveals. In April 2005, the Propaganda Department of the Party Committee of Chenzhou City issued a formal document to the local media that prohibited the following: providing any tips to media from other areas, receiving journalists from outside and jointly conducting interviews with outside journalists (see *Southern Weekend* [*Nanfang Zhoumo*], 9 Feb. 2007). The reason for this injunction was that a scandal involving a local official was being investigated by journalists from outside the city. In 2006, however, a counter-supervision event occurred when the Fujian provincial government rebutted public opinion supervision by the Xinhua News Agency, which had criticized it for failing to help victims of a deadly flood. The Fujian government mobilized all provincial government-owned media, including newspapers, television stations and websites, to publish a series of reports and editorials accusing Xinhua of undermining the local government's rescue efforts (Chen, 2007). It was the first time in party history that a local government publicly repudiated criticism from the central media. Yet such interference does not only occur at the local level. Criticism and discussion about institutional reform of the medical and education systems were halted by the central government in recent years, and media supervision of any state-monopolized business, such as telecommunications, railway and power never go very deep.

As an entity with its own interests, the media's attention to public opinion supervision comes from audience ratings, circulation and related advertising income. There are also professional ideals, including intellectuals' and journalists' sense of mission and their inflexible seeking of truth and facts (Lu and Pan, 2002; see also Zhang, 2006). The fact that both the party-state and the media need public opinion supervision guarantees space and time for such reporting in the media. However, their different goals cause conflicts concerning the objects, scope, depth and timing of such supervision. The practical process of public opinion supervision, therefore, has become a game of interference and counter-interference. Governments at every level constantly issue prohibitions, while journalists and editors employ the strategies of 'improvisation' and 'breakthrough' to surmount obstacles imposed by the government and to successfully publish their critical reports. The former means that journalists determine what tactics they

will use in deliberating with the government depending on particular local circumstances and activities, including a re-explanation of institutional or party-state principles (Pan, 1997). 'Breakthrough' includes publishing a report before an anticipated ban, using vague words to evade an existing ban, delaying a report until the end of a time restriction and planning self-criticism in advance for a report which is expected to be questioned by a government department or a specific official (Pan, 1997). This is a continuous game where both sides win and lose at various times. Incisive criticisms can be seen in the media, yet many themes and stories have to be abandoned in the name of media or journalistic self-discipline or government interference.

Clearly, the issue of public opinion supervision is complex. The party-state actively encourages the mass media to conduct public opinion supervision reports while seeking to confine such reporting only be an internal affair of the party, and imposing tight and complicated limitations on the content of the mass media while still allowing some flexibility. Journalists probe the limits of public opinion supervision as a matter of routine and test tactics to break through limitations. This complicated picture may be the reason that some have asserted that the party-state has been successful in keeping the commercialized media within its 'orbit' (Zhao, 2000; see also He, 2004). Others believe the media have exceeded the boundaries set by the party-state (Zhang, 2006).

Such contradictions in the role and function of the Chinese mass media have not been sufficiently examined. Instead, scholars have:

... drawn upon conceptual frameworks derived largely from the western historical experiences of moving from authoritarian to libertarian press systems, which typically view mass media reform in terms of an ongoing adversarial struggle between freedom-seeking dissidents and authoritarian governments, in the context of which the Chinese Communist party-state is often portrayed as a monolithic entity intent on promoting market-oriented reform in China's economic base, while keeping a tight grip on the country's mass media system and political superstructure. (Akhavan-Majid, 2004: 553)

I believe that a description and explanation of Chinese public opinion supervision must begin with an analysis of the reassignment of power and interests among the central and local governments as well as the media since the reforms began. Thus, this article will first provide a case study of public opinion supervision to show how a particular combination of actors and circumstances led to a specific outcome. All involved chose different tactics according to their own interests, and there were varying amounts of control or support from different government bodies as well as loud and quiet media voices. I will then discuss how the relationship between the government and the media has changed and how such change produces their uneasy alliance in public opinion supervision.

A Case of Public Opinion Supervision

In 2002, immediately after Spring Festival, a report in the *Dabe Daily*, a provincial newspaper in Henan Province, revealed that a rural girl was found to be suffering from an industrial disease that eventually was diagnosed as benzene toxicosis. The girl, who had been employed in a workshop in Baigou Town in Hebei Province on the border of Henan, died the third day after she had returned to celebrate the lunar new year with her family in her hometown of Xuchang in Henan. In this area, five other migrant women died of the same disease after they came home from factories in the same location, Baigou.¹

From 14–30 March, 14 news stories, features and commentaries about these events were published in the *Dabe Daily*. The media's critical stance was supported by the Xuchang local government, and when the city administration held an emergency meeting, representatives from all related administrative departments were in attendance. They accused the owners of the workshops in Baigou in Hebei Province of poisoning the women and announced that action would be taken. The local government also planned to appeal to the Baigou Town administration on behalf of families whose sons and daughters were employed in the workshops to improve their work environment.

Following the reports in the *Dabe Daily*, some newspapers in Beijing, such as the *Jinghua Times* and the *Beijing Youth Daily*, also printed stories and commentaries criticizing the negligence of the workshop owners in Baigou. In response to the Beijing media's coverage, on 24 March several central government departments became involved, and an investigative team led by the Ministry of Labor and Social Security was immediately assembled and dispatched to Baigou. Five other state ministries and commissions, including the Ministry of Public Security, the All-China Federation of Trade Unions, the All-China Women's Federation, the State Administration for Industry and Commerce and the State Economic and Trade Commission, had representatives on the team. The make-up and mission of the team implied that the media's exposure of the deadly workshops in Baigou had been co-opted by the central government to be used to strengthen its control and influence.

On 27 March, the CCTV program *Focus* joined in the chorus. After interim Premier Zhu Rongji happened to watch a *Focus* segment on the Baigou workshops, he immediately wrote a memorandum expressing his opinion. The next day, the

¹ I discussed this case in 'Critical reporting as an administrative technique' (Sun, 2003). In that article I underscored the active interaction between the central government, Henan local government and media in Henan, Beijing and also national media, such as CCTV, but neglected the actions that were taken by Hebei government that had been criticized, and media in Hebei. When the responses of the Hebei government and media were added in to the analysis, the deficiency of the prior analysis was clear.

State Council formed an investigative team composed of officials from eight state ministries and commissions and dispatched it to Baigou. Two months later, eight suspects were arrested and sentenced to prison. Two of Baigou's top leaders, the party secretary and town mayor, were dismissed, and other officials in the vicinity of Baigou were also fired or given disciplinary warnings. More than 1100 illegal family workshops were closed down, accounting for one-third of the town's workshops.

In contrast to Henan and Beijing's media, from 14–25 March, there were no stories about the Baigou workshops in Hebei's media. On 29 March, the day after the investigative team from the State Council was sent to Baigou, the provincial government-owned newspaper, the *Hebei Daily*, released a story about the meeting held by the provincial administration to deal with this event. While half of the space in this 10-paragraph story quoted the leaders, there was no mention of the girls who had died.

The story of a migrant girl's death caused by a toxic work environment provided by a boss who saw nothing but profit has high journalistic value and clearly would draw a number of readers. However, it was not only the newsworthiness of the story that generated such a deluge of reports during a two-week period, but also the central government's response. The interaction between Henan local and central governments as well as the media set the tone during this time. For the Henan local government, the death of the women was not merely news; rather, it created a public relations opportunity for the government to play the role of advocate for justice in its criticism of the Baigou bosses.

For the Hebei administration at every level, however, the story was not just news, not just death. It was a serious political storm. Baigou was a model of small town economic development in Hebei and the only national model in the entire province. Prosperous home workshops were one of the most important achievements of Hebei's officials. The criticism of Baigou's home workshops raised questions about the competence of the local and provincial governments. Therefore, this was not a scandal confined to the town of Baigou but one that would potentially reach all levels of Hebei's political circles and spell disaster for some and administrative punishment for others. Of course, no official wanted to see these results in Hebei. Thus, for these officials, allowing the media to make public the existence of the deadly workshops in Baigou was much too great a political risk. There is no proof that Hebei's leaders held the media's collective tongue, but the fact that all media kept absolute silence on such a valuable and widely reported story is evidence of suppression of the media. Such suppression was too strong to allow any space for 'improvisation' or 'breakthrough' on the part of journalists.

In discovering an illegal means of production in the town's workshops, correcting it, streamlining and reorganizing the local administration, and strengthening its own authority, the central government turned out to be the biggest winner in this case. CCTV's *Focus* program also garnered a lot of attention from both viewers and the government through creating similar programs, thereby increasing its status and broadening its influence (*Focus will increase...*, 2004). It was thus another winner. The Baigou case clearly demonstrates that parties involved in public opinion supervision plan their tactics according to their own interests. Although in principle the Chinese government encourages the media to criticize wrong or improper policy or actions, its decision to support such criticism or not depends on its calculation of political gains and losses. In the same way, the media seeks to balance business profits and political validity.

Discussion

Who stands to gain or lose – the government or the media – from public opinion supervision is related to the realignment of power and interests among the government, media and journalists after 30 years of reform.

A Decentralized Party-state Needs Public Opinion Supervision

With a highly centralized government, where a hierarchy of power exists from the central government down to the local administrative level, the top ruling bodies of China's Communist Party could control all political decisions as well as the assignment of resources within the national economy (Xie et al., 1998). However, this situation changed dramatically in the post-Mao era. For the purpose of 'encouraging the enthusiasm of the state, localities, enterprises, and individuals', as Deng Xiaoping put it in his collected works (Deng Xiaoping, 1983[1978], 145), since the late 1970s, the Chinese central government has enacted a series of policies to streamline government institutions and their administration as well as decentralize the economy so that local governments could keep a bigger share of profits. Such policies have profoundly changed the relationship between the central and local governments. Decentralization made local bureaucrats responsible for their local economies and allowed them a certain amount of autonomy in making decisions regarding local development (Jin and Zhao, 2006; see also Lin, 1998). Local governments are no longer merely agencies affiliated with the central government but instead are comparatively independent entities (Zhao, 2000). In the course of building a socialist market economy in the 1990s, the centrally planned economy began a transformation into a market economy, which led to decentralization at all levels: from the state to society, the national to the local, the higher government authority to the lower, from the government to enterprises and from city governments to sub-district offices to neighborhood committees. As a result, local interests have gradually gained relative independence.

This reassignment of power and resources has also affected the media at multiple levels. Before the end of the 1970s, local media, just like local governments, strictly adhered to the unified political and ideological rules of the central party-state. With decentralization, the media became an important tool for local administrations to promote their own economic policies, improve public relations and affirm their own validity. In addition to regulations from the central propaganda department, local media now have to stay within 'a circumscribed space with clear and specific boundaries for news products made by local governments'(Lu, 2002). The case referred to earlier, in which the Fujian provincial government media rebutted criticism levied at it by the Xinhua News Agency, exemplifies how local governments, with their developed financial strength and strong regional protectionism, stand up to unfair criticism from the central media. Such a situation would have been unimaginable just a few years ago, when local media was totally dominated by the central government. This new arrangement of media power was also seen in the Baigou case.

With the transition to a market economy and decentralization of power, two new problems appeared. The first was that the newly established market economy led to an unexpectedly rapid pace of development and reallocation of resources, yet it did not bring corresponding policies to manage such change. Second, decentralization brought a sort of ambiguity and even some chaos into the relationships between governments, localities, markets, enterprises, investors and managers. In such an environment, government officials often ignored legal boundaries and regulations for the purpose of rent-seeking (Lin, 2002). With a lack of political reform and proper legal mechanisms to control these problems, both the central and local governments needed a way to increase governmental efficiency, effectively supervise economic development, eliminate corruption among officials and provide better services to society. Public opinion supervision thus proved a useful technique (Sun, 2003).

There are some unique advantages to using public opinion supervision as a means of governmentality. First and foremost of these is the fact that news organizations in China are part of the government and thus share the same bureaucratic rank as other departments. This means their supervision of other government bodies is empowered by the party-state. Such empowerment is fundamental to the media's ability to criticize government officials at lower levels. Furthermore, compared to the government, the media can streamline the process and costs of such supervision.

Journalistic Professionalism and Public Opinion Supervision

In the mid 1980s, the central government faced increasing financial difficulties as a result of economic decentralization and a lack of mechanisms for collecting revenue from provinces. As a result, the national media, which had been supported

economically by the central government, gained its economic autonomy from the government, as did the local media. The media, which had once completely relied on government funding, had become a self-contained entity with economic autonomy. Propelled by the market, the media continued to strive for more autonomy and to pursue its own interests. The resurgence of journalistic professionalism was an expression of such autonomy (Lu, 2002). The push for media autonomy was situated within discussions on civil society in politics, sociology and law that were influenced by the successful casting off of centralized power in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union (Deng, 1995). The growing awareness of Western discourses of civil society was also inseparable from the burgeoning market economy in China (Yu, 2002).

Within this context, journalistic professionalism emphasized ‘advocating for the people’ (*weimin qingming*) (Lu, 2002). When journalists engaged in public opinion supervision identified themselves as ‘spokesperson of the people’ (*renmin de daiyanren*), they were not invoking the abstract concept of ‘the people’ found in communist ideology; instead, they meant persons and groups who fight to protect and facilitate their own interests and values (Yu, 2002). In other words, they are independent from the state. Being a spokesperson of the people meant representing such persons and groups by overseeing public power. The slogans about media formula: ‘no clique, no selfish interests’ (*budang busi*; Zhang, 2006) and ‘independence from power’ (*duli yu quanli*; He, 2006) should be understood in this context.

The fervor for media supervision that began in 1994 with CCTV’s *Focus* was encouraged by the party-state, driven by the market and pursued by journalists. Perhaps the apex of public opinion supervision occurred with the case of Sun Zhigang – a young man who was beaten to death while in detention in Guangzhou for not carrying a temporary residence permit. After his death the regulations for detaining and repatriating migrants and mendicants in cities were abolished.

The efforts made by journalists to ‘advocate for the people’ and the tactics they employed in the newsroom caused media supervision to progress rapidly, but it is questionable whether such supervision was autonomous. Even though journalists did not have to seek formal permission to write their critiques, the media in China gains its validity from the government not from the law. This fact means that the media are not able to criticize government departments or officials at will. What can and cannot be criticized by the media and journalists is determined by central and local administrations. The media thus must seek a balance between legitimation and the market, as well as professional and propaganda roles when publishing a critical report. What is currently accepted is local media supervision of issues where a non-local government can be blamed. Critiques of local government, even at the lower administrative level, are forbidden if such criticism

could damage its image. Media supervision of the central government has never been permitted.

Public Opinion Supervision under Control

Over the course of the last several years, Chinese society has become increasingly polarized with many unresolved contradictions. A lack of legitimate ideology, cultural tradition of dialogue and proper institutions for negotiating conflict mean today's society is highly volatile (Sun, 2004). However, if the government's rationality or legitimacy is questioned, the government would feel its validity is also threatened. For this reason, the government works hard to ensure that public opinion supervision is controlled in the name of 'stability' and 'harmony' while at the same time encouraging the media to criticize corruption. For example, when discussion in the media arose surrounding reform of the medical care and education systems, the government soon squelched the debate of such sensitive topics. After the Sun Zhigang case, other institutional challenges in the media were limited. In the case of Baigou, it is obvious that for both government and the media, public opinion supervision is a political choice. The government utilizes public opinion supervision when it expects to gain something, as the central government did in the Baigou case. On the other hand, the government will repress such supervision, as the Hebei government did, when political risks may result. The media always weigh political hazards and business profits in such decisions.

Strict control of public opinion supervision also protects government officials. Government is not an abstract entity; it is made up of deputies at the central and local administrative levels. Negative press affects the political future of officials even if they are not guilty of wrongdoing. This fact makes officials extremely cautious when exposing cases of corruption. In China, government at all levels wants to control any public opinion supervision activity of the media. In the public opinion supervision cases in Zhuhai and Changzhi mentioned earlier, the government oversaw the entire process. The conflict described at the beginning of this article arose when the government's tactics for controlling public opinion supervision came up against commercialized media and its professionalized journalists.

Conclusion

In closing, as this article has sought to demonstrate, public opinion supervision is a result of an often uneasy alliance between government, commercial media which are still government-owned, and journalistic professionalism. Though different in goals, strategies and power, all of them have their own motivating force. This kind of strategic relationship is the basis for the development of public opinion supervision in China.

Of course, in practice public opinion supervision is a dynamic process of alliances and tactics. In a specific media supervision event, every party involved will evaluate their own profit and loss as well as their relationship to the other parties concerned and will make decisions accordingly. The government will allow a broader space for a free press when a specific public opinion supervision is not critical of it, yet media institutions and journalists will always seek to stretch the boundaries of what is allowable. The media and journalists utilize the legitimacy provided by the party-state (Lu, 2002) to conduct public opinion supervision and test tactics to broaden space for it. At the same time, they must reach a compromise with the government, for example by giving up some principle temporarily or abandoning some reports, so as to seek business profits and the incremental implementation of journalistic professionalism. Every party considers its interests while making decisions. Journalists certainly don't have complete autonomy, but the existence of this compromise shows great progress in China, and might be one of the forces propelling the development of a public sphere in China.

Finally, this new configuration of power after decentralization is both good news and bad news for public opinion supervision. It definitely means multiple forms of control from the central and local government. At the same time, the different interests and development targets between the central and the local, and the dynamic restructuring of power and interests in a society undergoing dramatic transformation, create significant space for public opinion supervision.

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