
How Big Is the Cage? An Examination of Local Press Autonomy in China

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Abstract

It is often mentioned that reform of the Chinese media since the 1980s, characterized by the withdrawal of state subsidies, has led to the tension of the media having to serve ‘two masters’, the ruling party and the market. Yet there has been little examination as to how journalists in local newsrooms operate in this milieu, and how they feel about and deal with various pressures. From an insider’s perspective, this article attempts to provide a fresh look at the autonomy of China’s local press, and bring new insights to the dynamic of politics, marketplace and media. It concludes that it is with tactics and guile that journalism at the local level in China struggles, survives, develops and thrives.

In China, media freedom means knowing how big your cage is.

This was the verdict of the former editor-in-chief of the *Southern Metropolitan Daily* (SMD) and the winner of the UNESCO ‘World Press Freedom Prize’ (UNESCO, 2005), Cheng Yizhong,¹ in December 2002 at a journalists meeting in Guangzhou, China, describing what he believed to be the golden rule of safely running a newspaper under the dual political and economic pressures in an authoritarian regime like China. Ironically, only a few months later Cheng’s story took a tragic turn. Cheng somehow broke his own rule, forgetting how big his cage was. Along with two fellow journalists at the newspaper he was arrested by the authorities for publishing a bold investigative report,² which, though a significant journalistic

¹ Cheng’s story was reported by a number of Western media, including the *Washington Post*: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A30835-2004Jul31.html>

² Cheng guided the newspaper to publish an outright investigative story which condemned the country’s decade-old detention law through an investigation of the abnormal death of a detainee in a local camp. This is believed to have overstepped the bounds of government tolerance and led to his imprisonment.

triumph, enraged the government. Only in February 2008, after serving four years in jail, was the last journalist involved released.³ The case attained a legendary status in Chinese journalism and the ‘cage’ metaphor was popularized among journalists. Looking back from 2009 such a view does not seem outdated, but is still a truthful description of the situation of press autonomy in China today.

This article, adopting an insider perspective, attempts to explicate the nature of such a ‘cage’, that is the limits and constraints of local journalism in the complex Chinese media environment, by focusing on the previously little-used practice of investigative journalism. Through an examination of the reporting of the Hepatitis B Virus (HBV) carrier anti-discrimination movement in 2003 in the *SMD* it presents a thorough analysis of how Chinese journalists at a local level walk a fine line between various restrictions and their professional pursuits.

It is often mentioned that the reform of Chinese media since the 1980s, characterized by the withdrawal of state subsidies, has led to the tension of the media having ‘to serve two masters’, the Party and the market (Polumbaum, 1990), or in other words, to adhere simultaneously to ‘the Party line and the bottom line’ (Zhao, 1998). Chinese investigative journalism develops and grows within this context, reflecting this underlying conflict of interest: the political priorities of the Party clash with the principles of the commercialized news media; communist propaganda norms confront the journalists’ pursuit of a free press.

Since its emergence in the late 1970s Chinese investigative journalism has attracted the attention of academics in the West. A number of studies seek to explain the myth of its emergence and the social-political implications of its continuing growth (de Burgh, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c; Zhao, 2000). Some (Brady, 2006; He, 2000a, 2000b; Tong, 2007) have touched on media professionals’ responses in accommodating the tension between political and market forces. It has been argued most recently that the changing political and economic situation has led to increasing restrictions upon the ability of journalists to report critically, and that ‘journalists are forced to develop tactics to enable them to navigate the minefields of economic and political obstacles’ (Tong and Sparks, 2009, 345). Such tactics include the practice of self-censorship, trying to make audiences read between the lines and so on. Yet, there has been little explanation as to how Chinese journalism actually operates in this milieu, where exactly the boundary is, and how journalists feel about this and deal with it. It is this author’s view that an insider’s perspective will add to the understanding of Chinese investigative journalism and yield new insights into the dynamic of politics, marketplace and media.

³ Of the three journalists arrested Yu Huafeng, the deputy editor, served the most time in jail. He was released on 8 February 2008.

The method this article adopts is auto-ethnography, a type of ethnography that uses the experiences of the researcher as a source of data. It is perhaps unusual in media research but it is a well-established practice in social science. As has been discussed, this autobiographical genre of writing and research is based on the idea that our knowledge of the world is inevitably filtered through personal experience (e.g. Ellis and Bochner, 2000; Marvasti, 2004). It suggests that the researcher turns participant-observation inward and writes about themselves as they participate in the social world, connecting personal consciousness to the cultural consciousness.

Based on my experience as a former Chinese journalist, this article attempts to provide a bird's eye view of the practice of a group of journalists in a local newsroom in South China. I have been an investigative journalist, first a reporter and then the editor of *SMD*'s Investigative Reporting Team in Guangzhou since 2001. In previous years I was based at the local news desk of the same newspaper. In many ways this experience helped me to understand Chinese journalism; in particular, the struggle of professional journalists in pursuing greater autonomy. The key example I use as a case study in this research is one of my stories from 2003 about the movement campaigning against discrimination towards Hepatitis B Virus (HBV) carriers. This case study was conducted principally on the basis of written materials. I revisited my working diary, which I write as part of my daily routine, and the online forum that our team used to record and discuss the process of interviewing, transcribing, amending, subediting, etc. of most stories. I examined the two versions of the reportage of the HBV case: the original draft and the final version published in the newspaper. By comparing the differences, I could observe the 'war' that took place between the censors and the journalists. Also included in my data are formal interviews and informal conversations with fellow journalists in *SMD*.

This article focuses on reflecting the practices of local journalists in Guangdong, a coastal province in South China neighbouring Hong Kong. In part this is due to the association with my former workplace, which has provided me relatively easy access to empirical data. More importantly it is because the study has its own intrinsic academic value. A number of studies about Chinese professional journalism to date have dealt with journalists in the newsrooms of China Central Television (CCTV) in Beijing, the most powerful national media organization in China (de Burgh and Xin, 2006; Zhao, 1998, 2000). Although these journalists are influential, and possibly successful, they are not typical. Most Chinese journalists work at local levels, and are more subject to political and commercial pressures, which distinguishes them from their equivalents in the national media. Moreover, Guangdong, known as the 'Southern Gateway to China', has unique characteristics which are conducive to its media being the most liberal in the country and worthy of study. Geographically Guangdong is far from Beijing, the country's power centre, and borders Hong Kong, the former British colony. Hong Kong, in its

quite subtle but significant way, has been influencing the Guangdong media by exchanging media professionals, exporting media products and offering insights into the possible future of Chinese media (Chan et al., 1996; Lee and Chu, 1998). Economically Guangdong was where China's first wave of economic reform began, marked by the launching of the 'Reform and Open Policy' in 1978; it was also where the second phase of accelerating economic reform started after Deng Xiaoping's 'Southern Tour'⁴ in 1992. Being the 'launch pad' of two waves of economic reform, Guangdong has become one of the strongest and most open economies in the country. More importantly, both geographical and economic factors played a part in Guangdong leading the way in reforming the media in the early 1990s. In January 1996, Guangdong established China's first press group, the Guangzhou Daily Press Group in Guangzhou (the capital city of the province), and later the Southern Daily Press Group (1998) and the Yangcheng Evening Press Group (1998), all of which were among the earliest and strongest press associations in China. The Guangdong media, especially the print media, have gained a reputation throughout the country for their continual innovation in content, layout and printing techniques, which have attracted a growing readership. A number of leading market-oriented newspapers have appeared, such as the *SMD*, influencing the whole country due to their liberal, innovative and open-minded styles. In doing so they both met the requirements of the media market and raised the professional level of their journalism, surpassing their counterparts in other regions.

Reporting the HBV Movement

This case is based on my own experience of conducting an investigative report for the *SMD* in November 2003 into the movement campaigning against discrimination towards HBV virus carriers. By primarily revisiting the working diaries and making comparisons between the original story and the published article, I examine what kind of constraints local Chinese journalists have to face, how they respond to them, and the various consequences.

The Real Story

Three main reasons drove me to start this piece of reporting. The first was the fact that for a long period of time HBV carriers in China had been living with deeply rooted social discrimination. Hepatitis B Virus is one of the world's most common liver infections. According to experts, approximately 60 percent of the population in China has been exposed to HBV and over 120 million people – or nearly 10

⁴ Deng Xiaoping was leader of the Chinese Communist Party from 1978 to the early 1990s. As a reformer who held China towards a market economy, he made his famous tour to the southern cities in Guangdong Province in spring 1992, reasserting his economic agenda and urging these cities to accelerate pace of economic reform in various speeches during the tour.

percent of the whole population – are either carriers of HBV or are infected by the virus. (*Beijing Youth Daily*, 18 December 2003). This virus is primarily transmitted by blood and blood products through sexual contact or from mother to infant. Only those who are acutely or chronically infected exhibit symptoms of the disease; other carriers look the same as everyone else and pose no threat to people around them. However, because there is currently no cure for Hepatitis B and many Chinese people traditionally believe that the virus is easily spread, huge numbers of HBV carriers face pervasive discrimination in education, marriage and, most notably, in employment. For instance, if a person is discovered to be an HBV carrier, he or she would probably not be able to enrol in school; when they grow up no company or government office would employ them, hardly anybody would want to marry them and they would live their entire life in the shadow of social discrimination.

My second incentive to conduct an investigation into this issue was a lawsuit that arose in November 2003. A university graduate in Anhui, an inland province, took the local government to court because they refused him a job simply because he had HBV. The case, which was afterwards identified as being the first HBV carrier anti-discrimination lawsuit in China, attracted nation-wide attention. The plaintiff, 25-year-old Zhang Xianzhu, made a high-profile allegation that the ban against HBV carriers in Anhui province was a discriminatory practice which violated his constitutional rights of equality and political participation (*Beijing Youth Daily*, 14 November 2003).

My third reason for wanting to investigate the issue was the appearance of a follow-up HBV anti-discrimination movement. When I heard Zhang's story from my contact, I noticed that at the same time there was a huge mobilization through an online forum of those who sought to use Zhang's case to change the fate of China's 120 million HBV carriers. Communicating via the Internet they organized to petition the central government and the National People's Congress, requesting a constitutional review of all existing government regulations which excluded HBV carriers from the ranks of the civil service, and for the enactment of special legislation aimed at protecting HBV carriers from employment discrimination (HBV BBS, 20 November 2006)⁵. All in all, a rich background story, a dramatic lawsuit plus a radical movement – these were what attracted me to immediately write a report.

The 'Inverted' Story

However what happened afterwards was beyond my expectation, in general reflecting the constraints under which Chinese investigative journalists routinely work. These constraints reflected political sensitivities, economic considerations

⁵ See this link for the online discussion <http://www.hbvhbv.com/forum/forum-1004-714.html>

and self-censorship on the part of both journalists themselves and news organization managers. The impact of such constraints was the production of a re-edited and ‘inverted’ story which greatly differed from the ideal and real one.

The first sensitive word I came across was ‘petition’. As we usually do I had a meeting with my editor, A,⁶ before flying from Guangzhou, where our newspaper is based, to Hangzhou, where Zhang’s supporters were assembled. I reported to him all the evidence I had gathered prior to the meeting and explained my investigating plan. He was quite cautious and warned me that there was a serious political risk. A comment in the team online forum which was recorded by editor A but accessed by every team member read as follows:

I believe this would be a good story. But you should be aware of the risk. The risk lies in that this is basically a petition. It aims to challenge some kind of governmental authorities. And we all know petitions are strictly forbidden to report. Not to mention that this petition involves the participation of thousands of people. (Smiling Forum, 14 November 2003)⁷

Restrictions on reporting ‘petitions’ have long been common knowledge among Chinese journalists. Ever since I started my journalistic career in 1999 I have been reminded of it constantly by my superiors. I have grown used to hiding my professional curiosity and ignoring the angry petitioning crowds whenever I pass the squares of every provincial or municipal government office in every city in the country in which I have been travelling. But did it mean that I would have to give up doing this story? After discussion, editor A and I agreed that it was such a highly newsworthy story that we certainly should try, but it could only be reported indirectly. At the time I wrote in my working diary:

It sounds like a mission impossible. But I have to sort out a solution to turn the impossible to possible. I can’t directly criticize the government and the current employment law. Neither can I fully show the movement’s details and the participants’ fevered mood. Instead I could turn to the stories behind the movement to describe their poor living conditions. (Working diary, 14 November 2003)

With these considerations in mind I started to examine the stories behind the movement. In Hangzhou, a university student told me that the thing he hated the most was cheating but that he had to cheat all the time. At primary school, middle school, high school and now in university, every year when the compulsory medical test came, he had to plan for his deception at least one week in advance

⁶ Due to the sensitive topics addressed in this article, I used letters such as ‘A’ and ‘B’ to disguise the names of my informants who asked to remain anonymous.

⁷ The Smiling Forum was closed down after the completion of this research. The original URL has been blocked access, but the author has kept a duplicated version of the discussion for check.

because he did not want anybody to know he had HBV. In Shanghai there was the case of a recently divorced young lady who had been married for seven years but had never sat down to have a meal with her husband. When her husband found out she was pregnant he forced her into having an abortion because he did not want a child that carried the same virus as the mother. There was also the story of a little boy who was refused admission to kindergarten because he had HBV. All the children in his neighbourhood were warned by their parents to keep away from him. There were many stories like this. The next question was how to put all this material together in an acceptable way given the aforementioned political considerations. I wrote a 7000-word report, of which more than 4000 words were about these stories. I also wrote a large section about Zhang and his lawsuit, the findings of medical laboratories and the research of law experts. Only in a very small part did I mention that there was a group of people who were organizing via the Internet to appeal to the government to improve their basic rights. Thus the whole report was turned upside-down. The emphasis was no longer on the radical movement that wanted to change the law but rather on the milder stories about the living conditions of HBV carriers.

However, I did not include in my report all the HBV stories I had collected. A shocking murder case relayed to me by a mournful mother was omitted. In April 2003 her son Zhou, a university graduate in Zhejiang Province, walked into a government office with a knife and attacked two officials in charge of hiring civil servants, killing one and injuring another. Zhou had successfully passed the city's civil service qualification examination but was later rejected because he had tested positive for Hepatitis B. In court he was sentenced to death for the murder, despite the fact that he was motivated by the unlawful decision to refuse him a job. His mother, joined by nearly 4000 HBV carriers across the country, sought societal support to petition the court to show leniency. I had intended to use this story as the major focus of my report but my editor refused:

Zhou's story excites me in an unprecedented manner. It is just what a good story should be, sensational, debatable and ongoing. But what a pity I can't write about it. Editor A reacted immediately after I told him this case. He said 'I knew this story, but our boss (here he meant Central and Provincial Propaganda Department) has ordered us to keep silent about it.' I don't know why a ban came out again. Because someone died in this story? Because people petitioned? Because the trial was still on? Because Zhejiang officials successfully lobbied the propaganda system? Neither editor knows the answer. (Working diary, 18 November 2003)

Comparing the Two Versions

Comparing the article I submitted to the editor and the one that finally appeared in the newspaper, I found two significant changes. First, that a story about TCL, a large electronics corporation that fired HBV carriers, had been completely

removed. Second, that the names of central government leaders who were petitioned by HBV campaigners were deleted from the report. As I will demonstrate later, the first was for economic reasons while the second was due to political considerations.

The story about TCL went as follows. In Suzhou, a booming manufacturing town near Shanghai, a 32-year-old accountant, who had worked for TCL for three years, found me after hearing about my investigation and sadly showed me his unemployment letter. In a recent physical test he and around ten of his colleagues were asked to leave the company immediately because they were found to be carrying HBV. According to the corporation's employment policy, people who carry this virus would not be employed, even though this broke the corporation's promise in SA8000 (Social Accountability 8000 International Standard) stating that companies may not engage in or support discrimination based on race, sex or disability.

I included this story in my report, though I realized that it might not remain there since TCL has strong economic power, a huge national influence and an international market presence. By the end of 2003 its annual sales had exceeded \$3.4 billion and it was identified as 'the world's largest color TV manufacturer and the seventh largest mobile handset supplier' (TCL, 2005, 1). The corporation's CEO, Li Dongsheng, was so famous that the following year he was named by *Time* and CNN as one of the world's '25 Most Influential Business People', together with Jeffrey Immelt, CEO of General Electric, Aad Jacobs, Chairman of the Royal Dutch/Shell Group, Chuck Prince, CEO of City Group; Gunther Thielen, CEO of Bertelsmann and Sinan Al-Shabibi, President of the Central Bank of Iraq (*Time*, 17 December 2004).

Not surprisingly, my editor phoned me late in the day and said that the TCL story had to be deleted. A working diary recorded the reason cited by my editor, which was apparently one of economic interest:

Editor A referred my report to the editorial board in the pre-editorial meeting. A senior editor found that TCL was mentioned. He suggested that A consult the management office. He did. Then a manager said TCL is one of the most important advertisers in our newspaper. Its annual advertising investment is more than 250 million Yuan, covering almost all the popular media in the country, from CCTV in Beijing to local newspapers in Guangdong. And it promised to advertise its mobile phones and air conditioners in our newspaper next year. Hopefully it will add 5 million Yuan to our newspaper's annual advertising revenue. Editor A told me that was why TCL is so important and that we couldn't report any negative aspects of this company. (Working diary, 20 November 2003)

What made editor A refer this story to the editorial board and the management office was a sort of ‘routine control’. In the newsrooms of many Chinese media organizations, editors do not have enough editorial autonomy in deciding which articles to publish. The final power lies in the joint decision of the editorial board and the management board, which combine market interests and Party interests. In the case of the *SMD*, prior to editing a news page editors will normally have a meeting with the senior members from both boards, going through all the articles which are intended to appear in the next day’s newspaper in order to ensure that no ‘unnecessary offence’ is given towards government and business partners. Investigative reports, together with commentary articles, endure the greatest scrutiny in these meetings due to their open criticism and significance. Sometimes a whole article will be refused while at other times only a few sentences or paragraphs in the article will be subject to requests for deleting or re-editing. It was in just such a meeting that editor A was asked to delete the aforementioned story about TCL firing HBV carriers.

The other significant change was the concealment of the names of two Party leaders: Premier Wen Jiabao and Vice-Premier Wu Yi. In the original report it was clearly written that the petition signed by 1161 HBV carriers, which requested a constitutional review of all existing government regulations, was directly sent to Premier Wen Jiabao, Vice-Premier Wu Yi and five other officials in the central government. Yet in the report that appeared in the newspaper these two names were removed and the leaders were referred to as ‘the related officials in the State Council’, although the other lower-ranking officials were still identified.

Why did the reporting of these names matter? In recalling a talk with me in June 2006 editor A said:

At first I thought there should be no problem because we are only mentioning their names, not criticizing them. But when I finished editing and submitted the half-finished page layout to the executive editor who was responsible for checking all the news pages during that night, he seized upon these names. He blamed me: don’t you know the leadership’s names cannot be mentioned casually? Certainly I didn’t know. No government documents tell us when the media can say those names and when they cannot. But anyway, the executive editor insisted on removing them. He said the leadership would think that you are showing them no respect and engaging in subtle criticism of them if you use their names in this way, and this would cause unnecessary trouble for the newspaper. I listened to him at last. (Interview with editor A, 11 June 2006)

From this statement it is difficult to understand why exactly the Premier and Vice-Premier’s names mattered. But editor A’s later recollection partly explains the situation. He said the issue had taught him a lesson: all reports relating to the nine members (Premier and Vice-Premiers naturally included) of the Standing

Committee of the Political Bureau of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which represents the highest power in country, should be authorized and checked by the central and provincial propaganda department; there are no written rules and the media do this on their own initiative.

As I have demonstrated, the HBV report in the *SMD* in November 2003 was first intended to be about a radical anti-discrimination movement involving thousands of HBV carriers across the country. Instead it was eventually turned into a set of much milder, less relevant and loosely related stories about the living conditions of those carrying HBV. Moreover, due to various constraints, the case of a shocking killing, a scandal involving a company firing employees without strong reasons and the Party leaders' names in targeted in a petition, all of which were apparently newsworthy, were purposely removed in different stages of the reporting. As a result, a less critical investigative report was published with the newspaper narrowly escaping political and economic censorship.

Where Is the Boundary?

What happened in this case was not unique. Rather, in many aspects it reflects some characteristic modes of Chinese media at the local level, and their operation within certain political, economic, cultural and sometimes organizational constraints. These constraints, listed below, are shared by each type of reporting, ranging from current affairs and social issues to lifestyle, sport, business and finance, but are particularly salient to the relatively critical nature of investigative journalism.

Political Taboos

Political taboos mainly relate to the legitimacy of the CCP and communist ideology. These are the constraints of the constraints, the most strictly controlled area. No media dare to cross these lines unless they want to be shut down. Summarizing my ten-year professional experience, political taboos in news reporting can be classified as follows:

- Political system issues: any criticisms of Chinese Communist rule or one-party totalitarianism and any advocacy for implementing a democratic political system in China are not allowed.
- Leadership issues: the media should not investigate any aspects of the CCP leadership, including their personality, background, family, personal life, working competence and wrongdoings, unless permission is given.
- National stability issues: events such as riots, petitions, human rights violations, anti-government, anti-party or pro-democracy campaigns, *Falungong* activities and so on are strictly forbidden.

- National security issues: the media are forbidden to report on topics related to the armed forces, whether it is about weapons innovations, military actions, daily life, wrongdoings or corruption.
- National integrity issues: any advocacy for the independence of Taiwan, Tibet, Hong Kong or other places which are deemed as integrated parts of the country is strictly forbidden.
- Diplomatic issues: the media are not allowed to report independently on topics concerning China's international image and its relationship with other countries.

These red lines have a history as long as the CCP and are inherited across generations. They are made known to media organizations and media workers through various channels: some are clearly identified in published propaganda policy, some are emphasized in journalism textbooks, others are regularly sent to the media as internal propaganda guidelines. These constraints are so rigid that almost every new recruit in the mainstream media has to be seriously schooled about these rules before beginning his or her career.

Economic Constraints

Compared with political restrictions, economic constraints are not as transparent as political intervention, but they are no less powerful. As I demonstrated in the TCL case, economic constraints are mainly imposed by advertisers, who nowadays enjoy more and more power in influencing editorial decision-making as most of the media have to rely on their advertising revenue to survive in the marketplace. A fellow journalist in our team once wrote about this:

Who is suppressing the media nowadays? The powerful, the politically powerful and the economically powerful. The politically powerful use political power, while the economically powerful use money. The former is the stick. The latter is the carrot. The media likes the carrot because it means money, which is the lifeblood of new offices, new houses, new cars for employees. Obviously the media won't ruin the business of their advertisers, especially of their big advertisers. (Smiling Forum, 9 May 2006)

In recent years one of the most well-known cases suppressed by economic power in Guangzhou involved a resident being assaulted by a gang of mafia-like thugs hired by a property management firm in Huanan New City, a residential block in Panyu District in Guangzhou that was being developed by a local real estate tycoon. In February 2006, a resident, Li, who was an active leader in protecting the rights of fellow residents in the neighbourhood, organized a protest against the decision of the property management firm to disband its shuttle bus service. Shortly after the protest, several tough guys came to his house and assaulted him. Li was so badly injured that he had to have a surgery to remove his spleen.

However, in that week the angry residents found zero coverage about this incident in the local media, who were apparently swayed by commercial interests. Ironically, a few weeks later some local newspapers even published flattering reports about this developer and its subsidiary property management company, saying how harmoniously the residents and the management were getting along.

Other examples of economic suppression I have experienced in the newsroom include the investigations of: (a) the cheating of consumers by the Guangzhou branch of American International Insurance Co. Ltd; (b) the corrupt activities of the chairman of the Sanjiu Pharmacy Group, a leading pharmacy company in China; and (c) the storm of shareholders withdrawal from a leading local soft drink corporation, the Jianlibao Group. All these reports, aimed at exposing corporate scandals, could not be published because of the intervention of the economic power of these companies.

Other Constraints

Apart from political and economic limitations, there are also other reporting constraints such as:

- No pornography: the media normally avoid diffusing ‘yellow content’ (*buangse*), which means content related to sex, prostitution or other topics that are viewed as indecent or in poor taste in the Chinese tradition.
- No violence: content and images which may evoke violent thoughts of violence in people are also avoided by the media.
- No religious issues: news about Buddhist, Muslim, Christian and other religious communities, and their doctrine and worship, are deemed dangerous reporting areas.
- No disasters: the media are normally ordered by the authorities not to cover natural or man-made disasters which have caused a large number of casualties unless permission is obtained.
- What is worse is that in many cases the boundaries are not at all well defined by the government:

What can we do? What can we not do? We really wish the government would give us a clear list. But in fact there is no list. Most of the time, we tackle a topic with so-called common sense. It is so easy to make mistakes. Some taboos are just so difficult to define. Maybe today you can do a story without any problem but tomorrow you will get criticized if you do a similar one. This often makes us confused at work. (Smiling Forum, 10 May 2006)

What Can Journalists Do?

Despite reporting restrictions, rigorous organizational control and pervasive self-censorship causing numerous obstacles for independent reporting, investigative journalism has managed to survive and develop in China. Newspapers, journalists and sometimes the readers conspire, often with considerable success, to escape press control through intelligent strategies and clever evasions. Resistance to press repression takes two forms: mild means of resistance and bold means of resistance. Mild resistance could be divided into two types: one is active and the other is passive. The active type of mild resistance includes using various reporting strategies to resist political pressure, while the passive type of mild resistance could be simply characterized as apolitical.

The active strategies for mild resistance, based on my observation are mainly as follows:

- Keeping a balance: when reporting the negative aspects of government or an official in an investigative story always add some positive points to moderate the overall tone of the report.
- Open one eye and close the other: report part of the truth while hiding the other.
- See the forest, ignore the trees: criticize (if you have to and have the courage) the authorities as a whole rather than one particular government office or one particular official.
- Pinch the soft persimmon: expose the weak sectors rather than the strong sectors in the political system. Some government offices, such as education, are less powerful than others, such as the police; some remote regions such as Ningxia, Gansu, Inner Mongolia in north-west China are less strong, economically and politically than the main cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen.
- Beat dead tigers: report the misconduct of officials who have already been removed by the authorities rather than that of current officials, or crimes already identified by the police rather than the unidentified cases.
- Race against bans: publish the story as fast as possible before reporting is banned. Usually, if a report threatens the interests of those with economic or political power, there will be a government ban sooner or later. Courageous journalists always try to publish the story before those involved succeed in lobbying the propaganda authorities and instigating a government ban on reporting.
- Collaborate with other media: when reporting risky topics, journalists collaborate with colleagues in other sectors of the media to investigate and publish at the same time. By doing so they may miss the opportunity

of gaining a scoop but they alleviate the degree of possible risk and pressure.

- Take advantage of friction within the leadership: occasionally a disagreement within the leadership about an important decision/case/event/accident might be made known to the media. The media could take the opportunity to report on something that might be censored while the authorities argue among themselves.

This active type of mild resistance, walking along the edge and evading the authority's censoring power, has been universally practised and has been effective in many circumstances. In contrast, the passive type of mild resistance is essentially 'apolitical' – to minimize political reports and to reduce the political import if politics is unavoidable. The main reason for this is that in China politics is still the most sensitive, dangerous and taboo subject to report. For the media, the consequences can be an increased fear of reporting politics, and for the readers a decreasing public interest in political issues. Journalists and readers are now both becoming less interested in political news, though they still talk about it occasionally in private. For instance, every March when the 'two sessions' (the National People's Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference – the most important political forums and annual events in China since the establishment of the PRC) take place, most investigative journalists find it 'the best opportunity in the year to have a holiday'. Alternatively, journalists nowadays focus more and more on social issues. Instead of holding power to account, journalists prefer more down-to-earth stories of ordinary people and their lives in the course of rapid economic and social change.

With regard to bold resistance, this would include outright testing, challenging, ignoring or even overstepping the boundaries. It is an attempt to define new boundaries through breaking them. In most cases, the media have to pay a huge price for being aggressive, such as removal of the editor-in-chief, closure of media outlets or occasionally the jailing of journalists. However, it is worth mentioning that while some attempts end in complete failure, some do result in journalists defining a new boundary. The Sun Zhigang case mentioned at the beginning of this article, for example, though it resulted in several journalists going to prison for years, did indeed create a breakthrough in reporting the wrongdoing of the law enforcement authority, which was traditionally regarded as one of the areas that is most strictly forbidden for Chinese media.

Conclusion

By looking at the limits on reporting and the way journalists deal with them, this article has attempted to examine some aspects of the present state of Chinese media autonomy. It is based on an auto-ethnographical case study associated with

the news organization I worked for. While this connection gives me easy access to empirical data, the advantage itself demonstrates the limits of my approach. My account has been largely focused on Guangdong media, with limited reference to other media organizations outside the province. My discussion mainly covered print media, paying less attention to the growing importance of television journalism. Considering that 'Chinese journalists vary according to the channels in which they work, generation and many other aspects' (de Burgh, 2003c, 192), this research can hardly represent the whole picture. However, in the course of China's media reform over the past ten years, the Guangdong press has long been regarded as typical of this process in terms of news coverage innovation and financial success. So from another perspective it is possible for my account to offer a glimpse of at least some aspects of Chinese journalism today.

It is often assumed that the emergence and development of investigative journalism in China was due to the proclaimed media reforms and growing government tolerance. This is only half the story. Certainly media reform transformed the landscape of Chinese journalism, giving birth to a more critical and professional investigative journalism. But it is questionable whether the government has become more tolerant. Although the media have tended to be more liberal and outspoken, driven by commercial and professional imperatives, this does not necessarily mean that the government is accordingly relaxing its grip over the media. In fact political control of the media remains as strict as ever. The current Hu-Wen leadership, which assumed power in 2005, has even increased restrictions on media coverage of social problems in the interests of developing a so-called 'Harmonious Society'. What has changed is the method of control and the strategy employed by journalists in dealing with these constraints. As an editor of the *SMD* said:

Outright resistance against the government line is acute suicide (you will give the government an excuse to close you down immediately); ultra obedience to the government line is chronic suicide (you will gradually lose all the readers). We want neither acute suicide nor chronic suicide. We want to survive between the lines. So we choose to walk on the edge of the cliff, always approaching the cliff but never falling into the abyss. (Interview with editor B, 26 May 2006)

To return to the verdict of a leading editor in Guangdong cited at the beginning of this article: 'In China, media freedom means knowing how big your cage is.' How big is the cage, then? My view is that there is always a struggle between the different forces in control of this 'cage' and its overall size changes with the incessant ebb and flow of these elements. While political censorship, commercial censorship and cultural censorship form the three main pressures on this 'cage', there is also a counterforce stemming from the journalists' social, professional and financial imperatives. They try to test the boundaries of reporting/control, redefine the boundaries and expand the territory of the 'cage'. The two sides are in an

endless tug-of-war: the censors try to assert media control while the journalists fight for media autonomy, but there is no conclusive victory.

The ‘tug-of-war’ is still going on. At the time this article was written the government had just issued a series of restrictions concerning the reporting of the twentieth anniversary of the Tiananmen Movement. ‘Tiananmen’, ‘crackdown’ and ‘4 June 1989’ are words no media outlet dare mention. However, it is impossible to ignore the fact that more critical reporting is published every day either in newspapers in Guangdong, CCTV in Beijing or media in other places, despite these strict restraints. Two prominent examples are the poisoned milk powder scandal in 2008 and the Deng Yujiao case in 2009. The former was exposed by the Shanghai-based *Oriental Morning Post* against the wishes of the Propaganda Office; the latter, about a young waitress who accidentally killed one of two government officials who tried to rape her, was reported by both national and local media. There were unbelievable difficulties in reporting this latter case. Journalists were even beaten by thugs hired by the local government, but their reports finally brought justice to the waitress, Deng Yujiao, who received a reduced sentence from the court. Though these reports can hardly be said to overtly challenge the politically and economically powerful, they are nevertheless critical, influential and stimulating.

To sum up the state of media autonomy in China I could not find a better description than that of a famous Chinese military tactician philosophy: ‘You have your measures, I have my countermeasures’ (*shang you zheng ce, xia you dui ce*). It is with tactics and guile that journalism today at the local level in China will struggle, survive, develop and thrive.

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