

# Media, Culture & Society

<http://mcs.sagepub.com/>

---

## The crisis of the centralized media control theory: how local power controls media in China

Tong Jingrong

*Media Culture Society* 2010 32: 925

DOI: 10.1177/0163443710379665

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://mcs.sagepub.com/content/32/6/925>

---

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

**Additional services and information for *Media, Culture & Society* can be found at:**

**Email Alerts:** <http://mcs.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

**Subscriptions:** <http://mcs.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

**Reprints:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

**Permissions:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

**Citations:** <http://mcs.sagepub.com/content/32/6/925.refs.html>

## The crisis of the centralized media control theory: how local power controls media in China

Tong Jingrong

UNIVERSITY OF LEICESTER, UK

Chinese media studies has developed a 'centralized media control' theory with regard to the relationship between media and government, which has existed for over half a century since the Central Propaganda Department (CPD) became the headquarters of the Chinese national propaganda system.<sup>1</sup> The CPD, in representing the viewpoint of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), oversees the propaganda system that gives instructions for, and monitors, cultural production throughout Chinese society (Brady, 2006), with the aim that all societies in China should speak with one voice. The CPD sets the propaganda rules for nationwide media, indicating what news can be covered and the manner of coverage, prioritizing national interests over all other issues (Brady, 2006; He, 2004). Even media marketization has not stopped the ruling CCP from monopolizing media control (Brady, 2006; Liu, 2004; Lynch, 1999). Much evidence in recent years has supported the theory of 'centralized media control'. A recent prominent case of this was the 2008 milk scandal. A *Southern Weekend* journalist had already investigated the contamination of milk in early July but, because the Olympic Games were being held in Beijing on 8–24 August that year, the CPD banned any reports until mid-September.

This national-interests centred control of media however, is insufficient to explain many other cases from last few years. In these cases, it is local power rather than the central authority that actively controls media. In some cases, such local media control aims to protect local interests, interests that sometimes even oppose the central government's will and national interests. Two well-known examples of this are the local media's lies about the number of trapped miners in the Zuoyun mine disaster in 2006 (5 reported but actually 56)<sup>2</sup>

---

*Media, Culture & Society* © The Author(s) 2010, Reprints and permissions:  
<http://www.sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav> Vol. 32(6): 925–942  
[ISSN: 0163-4437 DOI: 10.1177/0163443710379665]

and local authorities' brutal behaviour towards journalists reporting the collapse of Fenghuang Bridge in 2007.<sup>3</sup> In both cases, the local authority was endeavouring to control the media to protect local interests. In some other cases, local governments even punished local media, which, although in tune with the political rhythm of central government, impaired local interests. In the case of the illegal sale of 'economic houses' (China's equivalent to the UK's council houses) in 2006, *Dahe Daily* covered a report criticizing local authority abuse in selling 'economic houses' in Zhengzhou, the provincial capital of the province. Although the coverage was in tune with the central government's reform of land use, the Governor of Henan province, deeming the coverage to give a negative image of Henan, had the reporter sacked. At this point, the editor-in-chief of *Dahe Daily* even stated that, because local authorities have local considerations, the media should represent, and not disagree with, the interests of local government, even when their policies are different from national ones.<sup>4</sup>

These examples imply that the propaganda system throughout China is unable to stay consistent and monolithic, and does not always speak with one voice. The evidence suggests that local power actively controls media to protect local interests rather than national interests, which fragments the party-state's monopoly of propaganda control. Consequently, two crucial issues need to be resolved. The first concerns the level of impact of the rise in local authority power on the media-government relationship in China; and, second, the theory of centralized media control in the national interest may be deemed to be invalid. This article aims to work toward resolving these issues.

This article argues that the intrusion of local power stratifies Chinese media control. Chinese propaganda control is no longer the homogeneous, top-down sort that dominated the media in the past. The official propaganda line has become inconsistent and no longer monolithic. Voices that are dissonant from the central authority's main theme frequently appear at lower administrative levels. The growth of local power has caused a fragmenting of the power of the central elite. When the interests of local elites diverge from those of the central elite, the Chinese Marxist<sup>5</sup> principle of media control becomes a propaganda tool to serve the central and local elites' separate and even conflicting needs. Local power employs the classic principle to set and define news agendas in local media defending local interests. The rise of local propaganda control, therefore, leads to the centralization of the interests of the local ruling elites and the marginalization of both lower-level social groups' interests and national concerns in the public discourse.

### **The 'centralized power' theory**

The CCP follows two principles in managing the media and society. The two principles are closely related to each other. The first is a totalitarianism of the

state–society relationship, which requires the state to control every aspect of society. A strong Beijing leadership is believed to be a guarantee for national development and security (Gries and Rosen, 2004). The second is the traditional Chinese Marxist understanding of the role of media. According to this understanding, the media system should be an integrated part of political system as well as an absolute propaganda tool; the ruling party holds a monopoly over media content in order to disseminate its ideology among the populace, to justify its governance and to prevent dissent (Hong, 1998; Huang, 2006).

These two arguments suggest that the Chinese media should function as the mouthpiece of the party; the media should represent the party and advocate the party's policies to keep the country united; consequently, journalists are more like government personnel who enjoy the system-granted prestige and voice the party line without expressing their own ideas (De Burgh, 2003a; Hong, 1998; Zhao, 1998). Guided by these two principles, media control converges and is centralized in the hands of the ruling party, the CCP. The CPD is the centre of the CCP's propaganda system and enjoys a monopoly of power, steering the country's ideology and monitoring the content of the mass media (Brady, 2006; Lynch, 1999; Zhao, 1998).

After two decades of economic and media reform, media control is still believed to be continually monopolized and centralized in the hands of the party-state (Sparks, 2008). Even the rise of the liberal tendency, stimulated by investigative journalism, is viewed as reflecting the needs of elite class but limited within the orbit of the party line (Zhao, 2000). Journalistic professional identity inspired by the market is also subjected to continuing political authoritarianism (De Burgh, 2003b). Since the late 1990s, a false marketization of China's media has emerged, in which large media conglomerates have flourished under administrative directives instead of being driven by genuine marketization (Sparks, 2008). False marketization leads to the concentration of economic and symbolic power in the hands of a small elite whose continuing dominance in the Chinese media system further prohibits the liberal function of the market (Sparks, 2008). Investigative journalism, the genre that most possibly inspired liberal notions in Chinese society, is deemed to be declining in the 21st century, as a result of the economic paradox and the political risks (Tong and Sparks, 2009). That is, the media is deemed to be subjected not merely to political control but also to the party–market alliance which was initiated by the ruling political party (Lee et al., 2006).

In such a situation, the party-state's media control is dominant and exclusive for three reasons. The first is the continued belief in the significance of political power in China's modernization. Authoritarian leadership is persistently regarded as helping to solve social problems and improve social development (Gries and Rosen, 2004). This wide belief in the importance of the party-state's power is an extension of the former totalitarian state control argument that the state should control all aspects of society.

The second reason is that the national propaganda principle still follows the classic Chinese version of Marxism, which holds that mass media should function as a conduit for the central ideologies of the ruling elite. This means that the party's attitude toward mass media stays unchanged, which prevents the party from giving up media control. As Liu Yunshan, director of the CPD, recently explained in *Seeking Truth (qiushi zazhi)*, the theoretical journal of the Central Committee of the CCP, the importance of propaganda requires the party-state to keep a firm grip on what the Chinese media can do and should do (Liu, 2008).

Third, guided by the above two reasons, the nature of the Chinese propaganda system stays intact despite media commercialization (Zhang, 1993). The CPD continues to take a central role in guiding ideology and overseeing Chinese society in its entirety (Brady, 2006). The CPD issues, to its local branches and the Chinese media, propaganda instructions (Brady, 2006), which the media need to follow and implement in order to serve national interests. The frequent political crackdowns of recent years on elements of the Chinese media have been used to send messages to the media to 'toe' the CCP's line. The media's adherence to CCP/CPD instructions is a clear sign of the continuity of centralized control.

### **The decline of central power and the growth of local power**

The dynamics of social reality oppose these principles in the ideological and cultural sectors. Though a strong leadership is promoted by the CCP in Beijing, the socio-economic development of China has inevitably led to a sharp erosion of central power and the growth of local power (Goldman and MacFarquhar, 1999; Gries and Rosen, 2004; Shue, 2004). Local power plays a more crucial role than central power in developing local economies. The power of Beijing as an economic decision maker is declining, as economic power is increasingly decentralized. Economic decentralization inevitably leads to political decentralization, which in turn influences the political power structure (Balzer, 2004; Goldman and MacFarquhar, 1999).

Decentralization created the conditions that were a prerequisite for localization. The CCP, in order to quicken the pace of economic reform, enacted decentralization policies which local authorities used to maximize local interests (Zhang, 2002). Local interest groups, for example, political, cultural and economic elites, have consequently become integrated into local power structures. Local economic elites, for example private enterprises, now work more closely with local authorities than with central government, to influence local policies and to gain access to resources vital for development, such as land, buildings and loans (Goldman and MacFarquhar, 1999). Indeed local officials and business elites collude in order to achieve mutual benefits (Balzer, 2004). Furthermore, the rise of local power has forged a new societal

force, which counteracts central government's political control (Lin, 2004; Zhao and Zhang, 1999) and now employs protectionist policies to defend local interests. The power relationship between state and nation in China has, therefore, been reconfigured; the state's top-down hegemony has been dismantled and shared among local societal agents (Goldman and MacFarquhar, 1999; Yang, 2004).

Such local protectionism, however, impairs social justice and undermines the legitimacy of the party-state (Yang, 1997). The selfishness of local elite groups has led to many social problems that originate from economic activities conducted in the name of government. Local politicians and bureaucrats use their political power to ensure business elites' profits. Indeed, local governments in pursuit of maximizing profits, prefer to sacrifice local human and natural resources, and ignore the legalities as well as human rights (Lubman, 2006; Zheng and Zhang, 2006). These activities have transferred the antagonism of the public toward business institutions to governments instead. Localism is undermining national development and contributing to a legitimacy crisis of the party-state (Yang, 2004), especially when domestic social conflicts came to a head in the first term of the Hu-Wen administration (2003–present). Hu's re-affirmation of the importance of ideological construction as a response to the current reality of Chinese society is indicative of the current Hu-Wen administration's awareness of the crisis. Given the Chinese Marxist principles concerning the media, the media is certainly deemed to be an efficient tool in dealing with the ideological problem.

### **How local power can relate to the local media**

Local media has been closely related to local power in the two decades after the reform. The subservience of local media to local power structures is due either to their need to achieve the support of local political and economic elites for media development or to the tendency of media to be involved in the activities local interest groups. The interrelationship can be examined in three aspects.

First is the increasing dependence of local media on the economic power of the local power structure. Two decades after the reform, Chinese media is beginning to be market-dependent instead of merely being market-oriented (Sparks, 2008). Influential local business entities, either through utilizing political power or by directly intervening in media practices, have become a threat to media independence. Big advertising and circulation revenue contributors have increasingly intruded into media practices (Tong and Sparks, 2009). A prime example of corporate interference in media activity concerns the airline China Eastern after pilots of 21 flights returned in mid-flight to their departure airport, Kunming, as a protest over working conditions and pay.<sup>6</sup> Afterwards, coverage in four local newspapers was not much different

from each other. Two newspapers did not report it; one did but did not mention the name of the airline, and the fourth carried the official report supplied by China Eastern. The airline's ability to control the media coverage in these newspapers is based on the large contributions the airline makes to the newspapers' advertising and circulation revenues, as well as the desire of each newspaper owner that the airline will carry and distribute their newspaper on flights, which is believed to be an efficient method of advertising (Wang, 2008).

Second, local media relies on local power structures to provide beneficial policies towards establishing a monopoly market. Recently, Lee et al. (2006) argued that the media is itself a beneficiary of the reforms, acting as state-capitalism's honest 'lapdog'. At this point, local government, in implementing advantageous nationwide policies directed by central government at media and allowing them to diversify their interests, plays a more important role than the state in helping to develop subsidiary business for profits.

Local authorities and interest groups, that is, news source providers and advertisers, oppose newspapers launched by out-of-town press groups and the expansion of cross-regional newspapers. The local authorities issue disadvantageous policies, block news sources, and refuse advertisement and circulation revenue contributions to these non-local newspapers. The phenomenon of launching cross-regional newspapers started from 1999 and reached a peak after 2003, when the central government started to encourage press conglomerates to launch cross-regional newspapers (Yu and Zhu, 2003). The phenomenon, however, not only impairs the interests of local newspapers, but also the interests of the local power structure, as local government has no administrative right to supervise cross-regional newspapers.

There are numerous failures of newspapers that are launched cross-regionally; frequent causes are the inability of newspapers either to establish a presence in other areas or to have their pages published at local levels. For example, an evening newspaper at the provincial administrative level wanted to launch its regional pages in the publications of the regions within the province. The provincial branch of the CPD received a joint complaint from 26 party organs in 13 regions, which successfully aborted the expansion plan of the evening newspaper (Yu and Zhu, 2003). The oppositional stance of the 'local' papers remains problematic for those organizations that do succeed in launching cross-regional newspapers or pages, as experienced by the Guangzhou-based *Southern Metropolitan Daily (SMD)* in 2001 and 2003 when expanding into the Shenzhen press market. The Shenzhen Publishing Circulation Bureau reacted to *SMD*'s critique in May 2001 of two Shenzhen local newspapers by ordering more than 1000 newsagents to stop selling the Guangzhou-based newspaper. In May 2003, *SMD* claimed that the Shenzhen Press Conglomerate (SPC) had penalized advertisers who had bought advertising space from *SMD* using two strategies: (1) the SPC ceased to provide advertising space to those advertisers and (2) it published critical reports about those advertisers.

Third, local media groups rely on local authorities to issue advantageous policies in terms of land and loans to support local media groups in developing their non-journalism businesses. In 2002 central government issued the Detailed Introduction to the Reforms of News Publication and Broadcasting in China and in 2006 the National Newspaper Publishing 11th Five-year Development Plan, both of which encouraged media conglomerates to establish non-journalism businesses. Since then, many press conglomerates have invested in a range of businesses: for example the *Xinhua Daily* Press Group in Jiangsu Province and the *Hainan Daily* Press Group both own real-estate development companies; the *Jinan Daily* Press Group in Shandong Province invested in a medical company; and the *Guangzhou Daily* Press Group runs a four-star hotel. One of the most impressively diversified portfolios is that of the *Southern Daily* Press Group in Guangzhou, which has a real-estate development company, a trading company, a consultancy company and even a car body-shop business. Press conglomerates seeking to invest not only need capital resources but also supportive policies from local governments. Real-estate development, for example, needs local governments to grant land to press conglomerates, as well as rescheduling the land usage. Under these situations, media owes a favour to governments and it is therefore difficult to maintain independence (Wang, 2008). In this context, local governments have used central government's policies to draw media within the local sphere of interest.

### **Local governments' struggles over control of the media**

Both the aforementioned principles that support the centralized media control theory have seen changes. First, the power of the state is waning in all aspects of Chinese society, despite the CCP's desire to strengthen its leadership. Second, although still holding to the Chinese Marxist principle, the CCP's media control guideline has been employed in the struggles occurring between local and central government. The ruling elite in China has fragmented, as the interests of local elites diverge from the interests of the central power structure, although both groups use the Marxist discourse to mould propaganda control for their own purposes. Under such conditions, the basis of the centralized media control theory is shaky. Media control in China has been reshaped. The most prominent dynamic is that local power structures struggle to increase their control over media to defend local interests.

Central government wishes to limit the power of local government and reconstitute governance in order to regain national integration. These requirements push central government to employ the power of media propaganda. The CCP's central leadership uses public opinion to supervise the media, which replaces the Maoist discourse of 'criticism and self-criticism' in the post-Mao era and is a powerful tool for supervising local officials (Zhao and Sun, 2007). The party tacitly permitted, and even encouraged, such critical

reporting (*piping jiandu baodao*) of local government in the 1990s, in order to preserve stability at the national level and avoid criticism that targeted the party-state itself (Zhao, 2000).

Nevertheless, this desire of central government is not a fundamental principle but instead a by-product of the concern over national stability. This was especially so in the early years of the new century, when domestic social conflicts came to a head and could no longer be neglected (Wu, 2004). The party fears that too many problem-oriented reports may result in a loss of national stability (Tong and Sparks, 2009). Central government, therefore, has an ambivalent and paradoxical psychology. On the one hand, the party leadership depends on the critical role of journalism in supervising local authority and governance inefficiency in order to re-establish party legitimacy and achieve social harmony. On the other, the party leadership is reluctant to see media exposes negative sides of society due to a lack of confidence in their governance (Tong and Sparks, 2009).

Besides encouraging critical reporting, central government also creates policies that are advantageous for the press. As discussed above, from 2003 onwards, the central government started to issue documents and policies to encourage launching cross-regional newspapers among press conglomerates (Huang, 2007). This is regarded as a symbol of the central government's wish to control local authorities (Huang, 2007; Zhang, 2005).

The cross-regional expansion of newspapers also increases the freedom of expression of the press. The main reason lies in the increasing ability of the national and cross-regional press to bypass the control of local power structures. First, many newspapers have established their own regional pages in lower administrative levels of regions (Guo, 2008). The establishment of local pages originates from the wish of these newspapers to occupy more press markets and gain more profit. This commercial need, however, indirectly increases newspapers' supervision ability and space of autonomy in these lower administrative levels. Second, the launch of cross-regional newspapers within press conglomerates facilitates the sharing of news sources between a local newspaper and its parent newspaper in another city.

The Guangzhou-based *Southern Metropolitan Daily* (*SMD*) is a prominent example of this sharing of news resources, doing so with the recently established Kunming-based *Yunnan Information Daily* (*YID*). In this relationship *SMD* is the 'parent' newspaper and *YID* the 'child paper'.<sup>7</sup> While *SMD* provides reports to its child newspaper, *YID* reciprocates by offering news sources to its parent newspaper. This means some reports produced by *SMD* are covered by both newspapers simultaneously. This broadens the geographic scope of the coverage's influence. Furthermore, when politically sensitive events happen in Yunnan Province that can not be covered by *YID*, journalists from *YID* will inform the journalists at *SMD* and invite them to Yunnan to provide coverage (Wang, 2008). This helps to bypass the intervention of the local power structure in Yunnan Province.

The reportage of the Nujiang Dam provides a prime example. The provincial government of Yunnan started to arrange enforced migration in March 2008 from the affected environs of the Nujiang Dam, which the provincial government secretly intended to build. The decision to construct the dam ignored not only the objections of experts and citizens, but also the objections of central government, which had not given any authorization for the dam. Local media including *YID* could not report the issue because the provincial government enforced a ban on reporting the issue. *YID* informed *SMD* and the latter conducted an investigative report soon afterwards. The coverage transformed a local Yunnan event into a national issue that attracted global attention. The sharing of news sources not only increases the influence of individual reports but also circumvents the propaganda control of the local government in Yunnan.

In the context of central government's media control strategies, local power is tightening control over local media, but as Sun (2006) argues, local propaganda control is important to serve local government. Basically, local power structures control media in two ways, either to stop reporting on negative events or to define how the media report on events in the locality. Through these two methods of media control, local power structures aim to propagate and disseminate their own ideas, prevent media from reporting negative events that happen in the localities, and push media to establish a good image of the localities. These two methods are exactly those that central government has used to control the propaganda system since 1949. This means the classic totalitarian Marxist form of media control has been employed by local power structures to protect local interests, and even to oppose central government.

A major reason is that local political leadership prioritizes economic achievements over many other societal aspects: justice, environment, employment, housing and social benefits (Zhao and Zhang, 1999). This prioritization is due to three reasons as Chen (1998) contends: (1) the criteria for assessment and promotion of local leaders has been shifted from political to economic achievements; (2) there are indirect or direct relationships between local political elites and local economic elites either at provincial or township levels; and (3) local authorities have become 'scapegoats' for failures of central governance.

Local officials have close personal relationships or, in some cases, familial relations with local business people, and they are sometimes – especially at township level – businessmen themselves (Chen, 1998; Goodman, 2000; Lubman, 2006; Zheng and Zhang, 2006); so control of the media discourse is important. By controlling media, local governments can implement advantageous policies, which benefit local developments and defend local interests, and prevent the image of the locality from being impaired by critical reports. A positive local image also guarantees that local officials will receive promotions and local economic elites will make a profit.

Furthermore, if negative events are exposed, local authorities are blamed for the failure of governance. For example in the 2008 milk scandal, the local officials in Shi Jiazhuang city were punished instead of central government. But it was in fact a failure of central government to impose viable regulatory measures for food production, and the managing director of Sanlu, the company involved, was appointed by the CCP. Consequently the need to safeguard local interests is a façade protecting the parallel interests of local elites: political advancement and making money.

Many cases identified from recent years are evidence of the abuse of power by individuals in local governments for private gain. Local governments use a broad range of control measures, such as reporting bans, propaganda instructions, censorship and post-coverage censorship, in attempts to cover up the misdemeanours of members of local elites, local incidents, disasters and all other negative events that happen within their localities. Furthermore, local governments are increasingly intruding into media activities on behalf of local commercial institutions to protect the latter's business interests. In the newsrooms of both *Southern Metropolitan Daily* and *Dahe Daily*, reporting bans to protect the interests of enterprises are extant from time to time. The commanding discourse in some bans even directly and overtly orders media to stop reporting events in order to protect local enterprises' interests.<sup>8</sup>

The reportage of the media of the Zuoyun mine disaster (see the beginning of this article) was essentially under pressure from local government on behalf of the operators of the mine. But it is not only individual or corporate interests which warrant protection, as the media wrangling over reportage of the Sangmei typhoon, which hit Fujian in 2006, indicates. A spectrum of out-of-town cross-regional media, including central government's news agency Xinhua, criticized local Fujian media for misreporting the number of fishermen who died in the typhoon. Fujian's media refuted the criticism and censured the cross-regional media for blaming them for the misreporting. The inference was clear – the local media were being controlled by Fujian's provincial government. When an industrial or natural disaster happens in the local domain, the attitudes of government and media are clear. While central government would like to know the truth, local governments attempt to conceal the damage, as any damage has a negative effect on governance. The concealing of any problem – industrial, natural or individual misdemeanour – puts the interests of local elites at the centre of the media discourse.

Due to the limits of permissible control (Table 1), however, local governments can control local media, but are unable to exercise any influence over out-of-town media. As a result, in clashes of interest (media exposure *versus* concealment of the facts) propaganda battles erupt between local governments and the cross-regional media over which they have no control.

Local governments have made use of the party-state's concerns, over losing propaganda control, and over impairing national stability and ideological integrity, as an excuse to protect local interests. For example, in 2005, 17 local

**TABLE 1**  
**Levels of media control**

Media level	Administrative level	Media control of levels
1 National	Central	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 of all the provinces
2 Provincial <sup>1</sup>	Provincial <sup>2</sup> (local)	2, 3, 4, 5, 6 of own province
3 City <sup>1</sup>	City <sup>2</sup> (local)	3, 4, 5, 6 of own city
4 County <sup>1</sup>	County <sup>2</sup> (local)	4, 5, 6 of own county
5 Town <sup>1</sup>	Township (local)	5, 6 of own township (no public media at this level)
6 Village <sup>1</sup>	Village (local)	6 of own village (no public media at this level)

Notes: <sup>1</sup>Media specific to a particular location. <sup>2</sup>China's Constitution allows three levels below the national level – but five actually exist.

governments sent a joint appeal to central government, requesting the banning of cross-regional critical reporting, which the CPD subsequently upheld. A key aspect of the appeal was the assertion that cross-regional critical reporting could 'impair the local social stability and the people's will for security'.<sup>9</sup> In this case, local governments used central government's national concerns to meet local needs. The CPD's 2005 ban on cross-regional critical reporting, however, is not always effective. Chinese media still criticize misdemeanours in other localities, which indicates the strength of concern on the part of central government regarding management of the local levels of administration as well as the journalistic need for critical reporting.

### The responses of Chinese media

Chinese media of the 21st century are in an unusual predicament, caught between the complex manipulative tendencies of local power structures (politicians and entrepreneurs) and central government. Central government, on the grounds of not impairing national interests, does not want the media to criticize either the CCP or the dynamics of central government, yet Chinese media are encouraged to behave as a 'fourth estate' to help stop the abuse of power by local governments and privileged local elites. By contrast, the local power structures aim for a 'partnership' of common interests with media in order to defend local interests, both political and economic.

Chinese media have responded to the predicament with an ambivalent mixture of rebellion and obedience. However, due to the contrasting intentions of central and local government, Chinese media have a chance to press for greater freedom and independence. In the meantime, plurality in the media discourse, which was impossible before the media reform of the 1990s, is now in evidence in the media.

The Chinese press, in the process of transitional reform, has welcomed the CCP's preference for critical reports, and has started to use them since the 1990s. Official corruption scandals across the nation are not the only target of these critical reports, they also include injustices meted out to the powerless ordinary people (Sun and Lu, 2003; Zhu, 2006). Recent studies of the grass-roots topics of a selection of critical reports nationwide noted that many told of powerless individuals and underprivileged social groups (Tong and Sparks, 2009; Zhu, 2006). Two prominent instances of recent years are those of the Shanxi brickfield scandal in 2007 (involving the use of young children as slave labour) and the milk scandal in 2008 (involving bottle-fed babies and parents).<sup>10</sup>

In the process of practising critical reporting, the scope of expression in the media discourse has been broadened. This broadening mainly refers to the appearance of the discourse of the lower strata of society in media coverage. Journalists, in the process of critical reportage, focus attention on unprivileged individuals and print their stories. This method of reporting, unusual in China, provides the unprivileged and unrepresented strata of society an opportunity to have their voices heard in media discourse, which helps to develop media pluralism. The unrepresented strata of society are content to provide news for the media, as they also seek symbolic forms to draw the attention of the world to their issues in order to change their status and the social order.

The trait of critical reporting in cross-regional newspapers means the voice of the lower strata of society is often represented in media discourse in places other than the locale. The most common occurrence is that the narratives of the lower strata are embodied in symbolic meaning for nationwide or out-of-town audiences, which may influence the local power structures' relationships with society on a nationwide basis. Media's liberal activities may, as a result, be viewed as urging central government and regional authorities to change their attitudes towards the local social order, especially at the county or lower levels.

The media's degree of freedom, however, is limited by their need to gain the support of local political and economic elites for media development. This relationship unavoidably leads to a certain degree of obedience by media to the local power structures. Indeed, some newspapers that were overtly progressive in the 1990s – which central government viewed as rebellious – now prefer to publish reality in a mild manner, thus exposing their intimate relationships with local authority. For these media, critical reporting was used as an illusion of media freedom that could quickly raise the media's reputation, achieve public recognition and expand the media market in the 1990s. However, once success was achieved, these media refuse to continually risk economic capital that has been accumulated during the process.

*Dahe Daily* is a prime example. The newspaper was renowned in the 1990s for exceptional and brave investigative reporting on local misdemeanours and

abuses; the newspaper was the first in China to practise critical reporting as a function of public opinion monitoring (Jia, 2006). The newspaper's decision to publish critical reports was not wholly based on either ethics or professional ideals but was an economic decision, as it was seen as the quickest way to gain a large proportion of the market.<sup>11</sup> The newspaper has, however, abandoned its progressive stance and now works in harmony with local governments, even when local policies oppose national policies.<sup>12</sup>

The submission of media is not just a result of the strength of the local power structures, but also – ironically – a result of central government's policies to develop media conglomerates. Encouraged by the spirit of central government's economic and media reforms, the Chinese press experienced a wave of cross-press conglomerates cooperation, cross-regional expansion and intra-industrial business management (Wei, 2006). The inherently capitalist concept of investment diversification without interference, in the context of non-media enterprises owning newspapers, changes dramatically in an environment where media control is the norm. Essentially, the growth of intra-industrial enterprises brings about significant prohibitions on media autonomy for two reasons. First, the interrelationship between enterprises and local political structures is based on the former requiring the latter's support to practise their business. Second, as a consequence of the first reason, when media are an element within an enterprise they have a high degree of interest in the success of the political-economic relationship. Media cannot afford to publish critical reports of a system on which their survival depends. The interplay of political and economic structures is drawing media closer to the local power structures' spheres of interest and control.

## Conclusion

This article discusses how the rise in the strength of local power structures has changed the relationship between media and government in China. The findings provide deep insights into media control in China today, of which three characteristics are discernible.

First, the centralized propaganda control theory that has prevailed since 1949 is in crisis. The party-state's dominant control over media has been deconstructed among lower administrative levels of government. The struggle to gain control of the media's symbolic power has different aims at national and local levels. Central government is keen to control media in order to endure national safety and integrity, while local governments need to safeguard local interests. The disparity in the aims has left a gap in media control, which allows certain space for media freedom.

Second, there is a paradox in the central government's attitude toward media control. On one hand central government requires media across China to speak with one voice when reporting topics of national interest, for

example, the Olympic Games in 2008 and the economic recession in 2009. Central government is unwilling to see any dissonance in media, which may impair national harmony and hegemony of the CCP. On the other hand central government wants media to become a tool of political control, seeking to use media to supervise local power structures. Central government's key tool for media surveillance is the use of critical reportage. The problems for local power structures are that the critical reportage: (1) occurs in levels of media beyond their control; and (2) establishes a democratic image for central government. Critical reportage, encouraged by central government, has produced a certain space for media freedom. Such limited freedom, however, aims to serve the need of the party-state to construct and maintain hegemony. The party-state's agenda is to regain the public's confidence in the rule of the CCP and to re-establish the legitimacy of the ruling party. Moreover, due to public approval of the exposure of the privileged strata of society, this media surveillance is an eminently acceptable way to construct and maintain hegemony.

Third, local power structures need to maintain their local political hegemony and to safeguard their economic interests. In order to achieve these twin aims, local power structures require a high degree of propaganda control. The tactics used by the local administrative levels to control media are the classic Chinese Marxist media control principles, which central government has been using since 1949. There are, therefore, in the context of propaganda control, two levels of the same basic tactic now in use. Local governments have adopted the authoritarian, repressive tactic of hard media control that served central government so well for the best part of half a century. By contrast central government has developed the previous system but crucially adapted their attitude towards the media to include a 'soft' level of control that imparts a hint of democracy. Nevertheless, local governments' overt willingness to use central government's tried and tested ideological tactic of 'hard' media control means that, whenever local interests come into conflict with national interests, local governments can and will use the local media in the most effective way. Consequently, national interests will be impaired at the expense of the protection of local interests.

These recent innovative changes in the relationship between media and governments of all levels are of great importance to Chinese society. Central government's encouragement of media surveillance of local power structures may help central government to adapt nationwide socio-political relations, especially the central-local relationship. Critical reporting not only puts local political activities under national scrutiny but also brings national awareness of local issues, which will help to negate the current burgeoning of localism and contribute to the rebuilding of the CCP's legitimacy. The ambivalent attitude of central government towards media has also brought about an expansion of Chinese media's scope of expression and the ability to

represent a plurality of social groups, which in turn allows media to integrate professional practices into news production and to ensure the plurality in the social discourse. Ultimately, the more voices that are heard in the social discourse, the less likelihood there is of domestic conflicts occurring.

Such complex media control, however, results in the media tending to lean towards serving political interests, especially those involved in the interests of the local power structures. When media focus on serving local interest groups, marginalization of national and public interests occurs. Chinese media is now a multi-level cultural industry in the environment of an increasingly free market (albeit a market 'constructed' by central government). As a result, Chinese media have not one, but two linked, concerns: to maintain a balancing act between the necessity for political alliances and the commercial need to make a profit. The problem is made more acute because the integrity of their news coverage is under threat – how do media represent local interest groups in the socio-political arena when the media is a local interest group?

The media's tendency to lean towards local political patronage is also because local interests are, inherently, not national interests. The local power structures desire to control local media reflects their conservative attitudes towards social change. They do not want to see the current local social status quo changed because then they might lose their dominance over the local society; free media, however, would disturb the current situation and pose a challenge to their dominance. Local power structures invariably have no desire to take into account the broader scope of national stability and ideological integrity when social development threatens their control over local interests. Local economic elites have formed alliances with their political counterparts and strengthened the local power structures' control over the media discourse in order to maximize their interests. As the local power structures use the party-state's former logic to control media and to oppose central government, the party-state's willingness to maintain ideological integrity and reconstruct the legitimacy of the party is severely obstructed. Furthermore, by making the interests of local elites central in the media discourse, the local power structures' control over media helps to exclude the symbolic representations of lower strata of society, thus leaving the current social order and socio-political relationships in the locality unchanged.

The current media-government relationship will, ultimately, challenge the authoritarian control of the party-state. In a country like China, which believes in the overwhelming power of propaganda, the central authority is unwilling to see such a situation come about. Nevertheless, although the future is precarious for Chinese media, the current environment allows the media an opportunity to seek greater freedom. The extent to which Chinese media can achieve freedom and autonomy is dependent upon the uncertain future relations between the local and national political arenas.

## Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the two newspapers and all journalists who accepted her interviews. Besides, thanks also go to Professor Colin Sparks, who read the earlier draft of this article and provided with valuable comments, and the anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions.

## Notes

1. This article is based on in-depth interviews with 73 journalists between 2004 and 2008, and a six-month period of participant observation in the newsrooms of *Dahe Daily* and *Southern Metropolitan Daily* in 2006.

2. See URL (consulted 28 November 2006): [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2006-05/28/content\\_4610674](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2006-05/28/content_4610674)

3. See URL (consulted 3 February 2008): [http://shanghaiist.com/2007/08/18/todays\\_links\\_fe\\_1](http://shanghaiist.com/2007/08/18/todays_links_fe_1)

4. According to an in-depth interview with the editor-in-chief of *Dahe Daily* in 2006.

5. The Chinese version of Marxism is different from Marxism in the Western democratic societies. It will be explained in detail later in the article.

6. See URL (consulted 30 June 2008): <http://www.eturbonews.com/2321/skies-not-so-bright-chinas-airline-pilots> for further details.

7. In China, press conglomerates own a variety of newspapers ranging from (once government subsidized) 'official' national dailies and weeklies (traditionally representing the CCP) and commercially oriented 'popular' dailies, weeklies and weekend papers. The decision by central government in the late 1980s to stop media subsidies caused many of the 'official' papers to seek alternative funding; a common method was to launch a commercially oriented paper. This was the origin of the 'parent-child' relationship, referring to the official daily (parent) and the 'popular' daily (child). Subsequent developments in cross-regional reporting created the conditions for 'popular' papers (e.g. *SMD*) to launch their own 'child' newspapers (e.g. *YID*).

8. According to the author's fieldwork in 2006.

9. Internal *Dahe Daily* document made available to the author during 2006 fieldwork.

10. For details see URL (consulted 10 July 2007 and 5 June 2009): <http://www.business-humanrights.org/Documents/Shanxibrickfactories> and <http://chineseculture.about.com/od/2008milkscandal/a/Milksummary>

11. From in-depth interviews with the newspaper staff.

12. From in-depth interviews with the newspaper staff.

## References

- Balzer, H. (2004) 'State and Society in Transitions from Communism: China in Comparative Perspective', in P.H. Gries and S. Rosen (eds) *State and Society in 21st-century China: Crisis, Contention, and Legitimation*. New York: Routledge.
- Brady, A.-M. (2006) 'Guiding Hand: The Role of the CCP Central Propaganda Department in the Current Era', *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* 3(1): 57-76.

- Chen, K. (1998) 'Administrative Decentralization and Changing State-Society Relations in China', *International Journal of Public Administration* 21(9): 1223-55.
- De Burgh, H. (2003a) *The Chinese Journalist: Mediating Information in the World's Most Populous Country*. London: RoutledgeCurzon.
- De Burgh, H. (2003b) 'Great Aspirations and Conventional Repertoires: Chinese Regional Television Journalists and Their Work', *Journalism Studies* 4(2): 225-38.
- Goldman, M. and R. MacFarquhar (1999) 'Dynamic Economy, Declining Party-State', in M. Goldman and R. MacFarquhar (eds) *The Paradox of China's Post-Mao Reforms*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Goodman, D.S.G. (2000) 'The Localism of Local Leadership Cadres in Reform Shanxi', *Journal of Contemporary China* 9(24): 159-83.
- Gries, P.H. and S. Rosen (2004) 'Popular Protest and State Legitimization in 21st-century China', in P.H. Gries and S. Rosen (eds) *State and Society in 21st-century China: Crisis, Contention, and Legitimization*. New York: Routledge.
- Guo, Q. (2008) 'The Competition of Chinese Press Market is Entering a New Stage' [zhongguo baoye jingzheng jinru ronghe jingzheng xin jieduan] *China Journalism Newspaper* [zhonghua xinwen bao] 2 July.
- He, Q. (2004) 'Media Control in China', *China Rights Forum* 4: 49-51.
- Hong, J. (1998) *The Internationalization of Television in China: The Evolution of Ideology, Society, and Media since the Reform*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Huang, C. (2006) 'Transitional Media vs. Normative Theories: Schramm, Altschull, and China', *Journal of Communication* 53(3): 444-59.
- Huang, R. (2007) 'Development of Cross-regional Newspaper Launching System in China' [woguo kua diqu banbao zhidu de bianqian], *Communication Today* [dandai chuanbo] 5: 49-51.
- Jia, Y. (2006) 'The Appearance of Public Opinion Monitoring in China' [yulun zhifeng chu liangjian], *Southern Metropolis Daily*. Special Issue of Ten-year Development of *Southern Metropolis Daily* 27 December.
- Lee, C.-C., Z. He and Y. Huang (2006) 'Chinese Party Publicity Inc.: Conglomerated: The Case of the Shenzhen Press Group', *Media, Culture & Society* 28(4): 581-602.
- Lin, S. (2004) 'Book Review: Changing Central-Local Relations in China: Reform and State Capacity', *Pacific Affairs* 68(1): 101.
- Liu, X. (2004) 'Corruption Lingers in the Shadows of the Chinese Media', *Open* [kaifang zazhi] 54: 45-8.
- Liu, Y. (2008) 'Reflections Over and Implications of Unusual Experiences in 2008' [2008 nian bupingfan jingli de qishi he sikao], *The Truth* [qiushi] 19, URL (consulted 25 January 2009): <http://www.qstheory.cn/zxdk/2008/200819/>
- Lubman, S. (2006) 'Looking for Law in China', *Columbia Journal of Asian Law* 20(1): 1-92.
- Lynch, D.C. (1999) *After the Propaganda State: Media, Politics, and 'Thought Work' in Reformed China*. Palo Alto, CA, Stanford University Press.
- Shue, V. (2004) 'Legitimacy Crisis in China?', in P.H. Gries and S. Rosen (eds) *State and Society in 21st-century China: Crisis, Contention and Legitimization*. New York: Routledge.
- Sparks, C. (2008) 'Media Systems in Transition: Poland, Russia, China', *Chinese Journal of Communication* 1(1): 7-24.
- Sun, W. (2006) 'A Small Chinese Town Television Station's Struggle for Survival: How a New Institutional Arrangement Came into Being', *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* 3(1): 42-57.
- Sun, X. and R. Lu (2003) 'Three Points of How to Improve Public Opinion Supervision' [guanyu tuijin yulun jiandu de sandian jingyan], *News University* [xinwen daxue] 2: 28-31.

- Tong, J. and C. Sparks (2009) 'Investigative Journalism in China Today', *Journalism Studies*.
- Wang, L. (2008) 'Change and Challenges: China's Media Today', Keynote speech at 'Researching China's Media' conference, University of Westminster, 13 June.
- Wei, Y. (2006) 'Ten Years of Chinese Press Conglomerates' [*zhongguo baoye jituan shinian zuji*], *Chinese Journalists [zhongguo jizhe]* 3: 45–7.
- Wu, F. (2004) 'Urban Poverty and Marginalization Under Market Transition: The Case of Chinese Cities', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 28(2): 401–23.
- Wu, G. (2000) 'One Head, Many Mouths: Diversifying Press Structures in Reform China', in C.-C. Lee (ed.) *Money, Power and Media: Communication Patterns in Cultural China*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Yang, D.L. (1997) *Beyond Beijing: Liberalization and the Regions in China*. London: Routledge.
- Yang, D.L. (2004) 'Economic Transformation and State Rebuilding in China', in B. Naughton and D.L. Yang (eds) *Holding China Together: Diversity and National Integration in the Post-Deng Era*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Yu, L. and X. Zhu (2003) 'The Development of Chinese Press Conglomerates' [*woguo baoye jituan wenhua kulv*], *Media [chuanmei]* 9: 12–28.
- Zhang, J. (2005) 'Cross-regional Operation: The Road of Chinese Media Conglomerates' Expansion' (*kuajie yunzuo zhongguo meijie jituan bijing zhilu*), *Xinjiang Social Science [xinjiang shehui kexue]* 3: 96–7.
- Zhang, T. (2002) 'Decentralization, Localization, and the Emergence of a Quasi-participatory Decision-making Structure in Urban Development in Shanghai', *International Planning Studies* 7(4): 303–23.
- Zhang, X. (1993) 'The Market versus the State: The Chinese Press Since Tiananmen', *Journal of International Affairs* 47: 195–221.
- Zhao, X.B. and L. Zhang (1999) 'Decentralisation Reforms and Regionalism in China: A Review', *International Regional Science Review* 22(3): 251–81.
- Zhao, Y. (1998) *Media, Market, and Democracy in China: Between the Party Line and the Bottom Line*. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Zhao, Y. (2000) 'Watchdogs on Party Leashes? Contexts and Implications of Investigative Journalism in Post-Deng China', *Journalism Studies* 1(2): 577–97.
- Zhao, Y. and W. Sun (2007) 'Public Opinion Supervision: Possibilities and Limits of the Media in Constraining Local Officials', in E.J. Perry and M. Goldman (eds) *Grassroots Political Reform in Contemporary China..* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Zheng, Y. and Y. Zhang (2006) 'Globalization and Social Conflict in China', *Issues & Studies* 42(2): 85–129.
- Zhu, Q. (2006) 'Analysis of Traits of Public Opinion Supervision in the Southern Weekly in Transition' [*nanfnagzhoumo zhuanxingqi yulun jiandu tese fenxi*], *The Young Journalists [qingnian jizhe]* 17.

**Jingrong Tong** is a lecturer at the Department of Media and Communication at the University of Leicester. Her recent publications include articles on investigative journalism in China and self-censorship within newsrooms. Her book, *Investigative Journalism in China*, will be published in spring 2011. Address: Department of Media and Communication, University of Leicester, University Road, Leicester, UK LE1 7RH. [email: jt183@le.ac.uk]