

# ASIAN SURVEY

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A Bimonthly Review of Contemporary Asian Affairs ■ University of California Press

Vol. XLVIII, No. 3, May/June 2008

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# CONTROLLING THE CHINESE MEDIA

## *An Uncertain Business*

Jonathan Hassid

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### Abstract

Increasing economic liberalization of the Chinese media has not resulted in proportional political liberalization, and previous explanations for the state's puzzlingly firm grip are inadequate. This article argues that a "regime of uncertainty" is critical toward keeping the Chinese media in line.

Keywords: media, uncertainty, control, Chinese politics, China

How does the Chinese government manage to control an increasingly commercialized and decentralized media? As media are critically important to any modern political system, this question goes to the heart of understanding contemporary politics in the People's Republic—and there has been no shortage of proposed answers. Indeed, over the past decade or so a veritable cottage industry has arisen to produce answers ranging from monetary controls<sup>1</sup> to outright coercion.<sup>2</sup> And while these praiseworthy efforts have gone a long way toward broadening our understanding of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s media control regime,

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1. E.g., Ashley Esarey, "Cornering the Market: State Strategies for Controlling China's Commercial Media," *Asian Perspective* 29:4 (Winter 2005), pp. 37–83.

2. E.g., the testimony of Frank Smyth in the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, "Hearing on China's State Control Methods and Mechanisms, April 14, 2005," First Session, One Hundred Ninth Congress (U.S. Government Printing Office, 2005), p. 92.

*Asian Survey*, Vol. 48, Issue 3, pp. 414–430, ISSN 0004-4687, electronic ISSN 1533-838X. © 2008 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Rights and Permissions website, at <http://www.ucpressjournals.com/reprintInfo.asp>. DOI: AS.2008.48.3.414.

all of the previous efforts have neglected a critical aspect of this regime: uncertainty.

All Chinese media are regulated by the CCP's Central Publicity Department (CPD),<sup>3</sup> although in the absence of a detailed academic study of the CPD itself, it is hard to know the extent to which power is shared among the CPD and local or provincial propaganda departments. Because the responsibility and bargaining among different levels remain so unclear, for the purposes of this article all decisions, unless otherwise noted, are assumed to come from the CPD itself. And the CPD is indeed powerful, though ironically enough, one of its few consistencies is the degree of arbitrariness with which it closes publications and fires or jails editors and journalists. With its power to determine—post hoc—what is appropriate media coverage, the CPD demarcates the boundaries of the acceptable in such a deliberately fuzzy way that news workers self-censor to a critical degree. In other words, only the CPD can decide how far media workers can push against government controls without punishment. It is the very arbitrariness of this control regime that cows most journalists into more conservative coverage.

Illuminating the CPD's use of uncertainty as a control mechanism—something I term the “regime of uncertainty”—has at least two forms of payoff. First, and most obviously, this knowledge gives us a more thorough working knowledge of the Chinese print media, a critical component of contemporary Chinese politics. There are tantalizing indications that the Chinese government also uses this mechanism to restrain the Internet,<sup>4</sup> but these newer electronic media are outside the scope of this paper. And second, this awareness may prompt researchers to look for other aspects of Chinese society where this type of control strategy may exist, potentially stimulating a reexamination of these other areas. The apparent effectiveness and efficiency of the regime of uncertainty for print media make it likely that it exists in other areas of Chinese society as well.

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3. The official Chinese name is the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee Propaganda Department (Zhongguo Gongchandang Zhongyang Weiyuanhui Xuanchuanbu), but the official English name was recently changed from the Central Propaganda Department to the Central Publicity Department. The Chinese word “*xuanchuan*” can mean either “publicity” or “propaganda” in English, without the same negative connotation the latter word has in English. An official reason for the change was not given, but it seems likely the change was done in an effort to improve the CPD's image abroad.

4. Indeed, the executive director of the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard Law School has testified that a “lack of transparency contributes mightily to the climate of self-censorship.” See the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, “Hearing on China's State Control Methods and Mechanisms, April 14, 2005,” First Session, One Hundred Ninth Congress (U.S. Government Printing Office, 2005), p. 27.

## A Brief History of the Chinese Media

To understand the current Chinese media control regime, it is helpful to understand the context out of which it developed. During the Mao era (1949–76), the state tightly controlled all outlets for media, restricting not only their numbers but also their content, length, and format.<sup>5</sup> From 1949 until the mid-1990s, all news providers were funded either directly by the state, indirectly through a policy of forced subscriptions that kept circulation numbers artificially high, or through “back scratching” arrangements across organizations (“We’ll subscribe to your publication if you subscribe to ours”).<sup>6</sup> All told, these mechanisms meant that “the vast majority of the Chinese did not even have the ability to be suspicious of the CCP’s political system, because they didn’t know that in the outside world a different, worthier life (*geng you jiazhi de shenghuo*) even existed.”<sup>7</sup> Control of information was close to total.

Many aspects of the relationship between state and press began to change with Deng Xiaoping’s reforms of the late 1970s. Commercialization was allowed for the first time in the guise of advertisements and market competition, and the number of news providers and range of acceptable content both dramatically increased. For example, newspaper titles alone have risen from 188 in 1980<sup>8</sup> to over 1,800 in 2004,<sup>9</sup> with the number of television stations, radio stations, satellite broadcasters, etc. also increasing proportionally. As the number of news providers has soared, so have their financial resources and day-to-day independence from the government. While Mao-era journalism relied entirely on government funding, today the Chinese news business is market-driven, with advertising revenue increasing from zero at the start of the reform era to \$18 billion in 2005, or 0.78% of China’s gross domestic product (GDP).<sup>10</sup>

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5. Zhou He, “Chinese Communist Party Press in a Tug of War: A Political-Economy Analysis of the *Shenzhen Special Zone Daily*,” in *Power, Money, and Media: Communication Patterns and Bureaucratic Control in Cultural China*, ed. Chin-Chuan Lee (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2000).

6. Ashley Esarey, personal communication, December 17, 2006.

7. He Qinglian, *Media Control in China* (New York: Human Rights in China, 2004), p. 4 (in Chinese; my translation).

8. Zhongguo Shehui Kexueyuan Xinwen Yanjiusuo (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences News Research Institute), *Zhongguo Xinwen Nianjian* (China journalism yearbook) (Beijing: China Journalism Yearbook Publishers, 2000).

9. China Data Online, “China Yearly Macro-Economics Statistics (National),” 2006, <<http://141.211.142.26/eng/default.asp>>, accessed April 30, 2006.

10. Jing Wang, *Brand New China: Advertising, Media, and Commercial Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 1, quoting from Guang Xuan, “2005 Nian Zhongguo Guanggao Ye Tongji Shuju Baogao” (2005 statistics report on China’s advertising industry), *Xiandai Guanggao* (Modern Advertising), no. 4 (April 2006), pp. 38–39.

But economic liberalization has not translated into much political freedom. Beijing has made clear that it will continue to exercise very tight control over the news media in the short and medium term. Officials have done this by banning wayward publications, jailing dissident journalists, and attempting to consolidate control under huge government-run conglomerates.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, China remains in the throes of a very public media crackdown.<sup>12</sup>

### How the Central Government Controls the Media: First Edition

So how has Beijing managed to control the media so effectively in the face of the market juggernaut? After all, newspapers have noticed that exposé style investigative reporting draws readers—and advertising money. Adventurous papers like *Nanfang Zhoumo* (Southern Weekend) saw their circulation soar in the 1990s and 2000s on the strength of investigative reporting. The two-thirds drop in circulation the paper endured after its boldest editorial staffers were replaced in 2003–04<sup>13</sup> provides solid evidence that the readership was indeed responding to the paper's muckraking style.

More generally, one prominent scholar, Minxin Pei, has claimed that “[t]he higher the level of marketization, the greater the degree of self-liberalization. Strong market forces [have] reduced the effectiveness of government censorship of the media by multiplying the channels of production and dissemination.”<sup>14</sup> In retrospect, this argument seems premature. Why? How is it that, as Martin Brendebach sees it, “the party obviously feels safe enough to entrust commercialized papers with the task of getting the propaganda messages across” to the extent that officials are actually encouraging further commercialization?<sup>15</sup>

Proposed answers to this series of questions tend to fall into three broad categories: monetary, legal/structural, and coercive. Beyond arguing, as does the former publisher of *Beijing Qingnian Bao* (Beijing Youth Daily), that

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11. Yuezhi Zhao, “From Commercialization to Conglomeration: The Transformation of the Chinese Press within the Orbit of the Party State,” *Journal of Communication* 50:2 (Spring 2000), pp. 3–26.

12. See Nicholas Kristof, “A Clampdown in China,” *New York Times*, May 17, 2005; or Melinda Liu, “Silent Games,” *Newsweek*, September 19, 2006.

13. Author interview with a former *Southern Weekend* reporter, San Francisco, April 2005.

14. Minxin Pei, *From Reform to Revolution: The Demise of Communism in China and the Soviet Union* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 155.

15. Martin Brendebach, “Public Opinion—a New Factor Influencing the PRC Press,” *Asien, Deutsche Zeitschrift für Politik, Wirtschaft, und Kultur* (Asia, German Journal for Politics, Economy, and Culture), no. 96 (July 2005), p. 42.

“marketization and political orientation of the news are not incompatible,”<sup>16</sup> the monetary control theorists assert that the state can actually use marketization to its own advantage. Media scholar Ashley Esarey writes that “the state developed market incentives to encourage media to produce news that was politically acceptable and popular with consumers.”<sup>17</sup> Critically, the top managers of most papers are appointed directly by the CPD and CCP or by the local propaganda department branch, and they are typically well compensated for their efforts, with the editor-in-chief and publisher of one Shanghai paper making more than 10 times the local per capita income.<sup>18</sup> Further down the ladder, reporters’ pay is often “tied to the number and length of stories that are broadcast or published,” and so “journalists who fall out of favor with their superiors, or whose work is frequently censored, find themselves quickly out of the money.”<sup>19</sup>

Because reporters’ bonuses, a substantial portion of their total compensation, are often linked directly to the number of stories that get published, there is a strong monetary incentive to toe the party line in order to ensure publication. In 2005, evidence emerged from the *Zhongguo Qingnian Bao* (China Youth Daily) that this strategy is entirely deliberate. Soon after being appointed editor-in-chief by the CCP, Li Erliang promulgated a new policy to link workers’ bonuses directly to the reception their articles receive from top Chinese officials, positive or negative. After learning of the new regulations, one furious editor, Li Datong, wrote a scathing open letter to his boss that was soon “leaked” to the Internet, in which he noted that if an article “makes some official unhappy,” the reporter then “needs money to pay for this—a month’s salary might not be enough!”<sup>20</sup> Li had no illusions as to the real authors of this plan, writing that he was “not so naïve as to think that this is a product of [the new editor-in-chief’s] personal will. It goes without saying that [he is] an executor [for higher level officials].”<sup>21</sup>

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16. Quoted in Yuezhi Zhao, *Media, Market, and Democracy in China: Between the Party Line and the Bottom Line* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), p. 149.

17. Esarey, “Cornering the Market,” p. 37.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 57.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 58.

20. The monetary consequences Li describes stem from the fact that often the bulk of a reporter’s pay comes from article bonuses, not base salary (*ibid.*, pp. 57–60). Thus, if the bonus is cut based on an official’s negative reaction to a report, a journalist stands to lose much of his or her wage. Li Datong, “Jiu Zhongguo Qingnian Bao Xin de Kaoping Banfa zhi Li Erliang Zongbianji de Xin” [A letter to editor-in-chief Li Erliang on the new methods for evaluation at China Youth Daily], *Zhongguo Qingnian Bao*, 2005. From Greg Distehorst, trans., “Full Text: Li Datong’s Memo,” *Washington Post*, February 18 2006, <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/02/18/AR2006021800565.html>>, accessed May 2, 2008.

21. *Ibid.*

Although this particularly heavy handed method of monetary control ultimately was not implemented, the incident does provide telling insight into Beijing's media control regime.

Many scholars argue that the overall media control regime also uses legal and structural mechanisms. Among the most important of these structural constraints is the fact that all news media units must be subordinated to a sponsoring government unit in their geographic area. This ensures that aside from a few illegal samizdat style publications, there are no officially independent news media outlets.<sup>22</sup> Although oversight is often hands-off, the fact that sponsoring units retain ultimate responsibility over the content published by their attached news units creates a strong incentive to set appropriate boundaries. After all, few players in the Chinese bureaucracy want to invite greater scrutiny from the center.

Equally critical is the fact that top editors of most newspapers can be appointed and removed directly by the CPD and CCP Organization Department, rather than by the sponsoring government unit or the newspaper itself. This creates a natural incentive for editors to feel responsible not to their individual newspaper but to Beijing and the CPD. Although these papers are "commercially oriented media, they are still under the ideological leadership of the Party."<sup>23</sup> Ultimately, this often leads to a policy of "being critical on small issues and being supportive on major issues" (*xiaoma da bangmang*),<sup>24</sup> a result encouraged by at least nine specific laws and regulations.<sup>25</sup> For example, the General Administration of Press and Publication (GAPP) in late 2005 "required that a newspaper's Publication Permit be revoked if 'the newspaper publication quality fail[s] to reach the prescribed standard over a long period of time,' or if it 'fails to improve after being investigated and penalized'."<sup>26</sup> Neither the "prescribed standards" nor the "long period of time" are further specified,<sup>27</sup> and, as will be discussed further below, this vagueness is unlikely to be accidental.

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22. Many magazines are seen as more independent than newspapers, but all are still officially subordinated to a relevant government agency.

23. Zhao, *Media, Market, and Democracy in China*, p. 161.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 163.

25. He Qinglian, "Media Control in China," p. 5.

26. The GAPP is the central government bureaucracy's equivalent to the party's CPD, and as such is responsible for licensing and regulating newspapers and other media outlets.

27. Jonathan Hassid, "China's Contentious Journalists: Reconceptualizing the Media," unpublished manuscript, p. 14, quoting from Article 53, paragraphs (2) and (1), respectively, of the *Regulations for the Administration of Newspaper Publication*, promulgated by the GAPP on September 30, 2005, as Decree no. 32, translated in Jesse T. H. Chang, Isabelle I. H. Wan, and Philip Qu, eds., *China's Media and Entertainment Law*, vol. 2 (Hong Kong: Trans-Asia, 2006), p. 459.

Meanwhile, in the midst of creating these highly visible and symbolic laws, the Party has been forcing smaller media units to consolidate. This process helps create larger, more easily monitored media conglomerates, and more direct lines of structural control. Ease of control is one of the major factors in the government's drive to media concentration<sup>28</sup> and "state policy is moving unmistakably toward further media consolidation."<sup>29</sup> Structural constraints, then, remain an important piece of the puzzle.

Finally, many scholars argue, coercion is the last critical component of this control regime. Unlike the former Soviet Union, the Chinese press has never extensively used pre-publication censorship as its primary means of media control. Instead, the CCP expects newspapers and magazines to toe the party line; those publications that occasionally go too far are subject to post facto suppression, sometimes involving punishment of the journalists who wrote the offending articles. Frank Smyth of the Committee to Protect Journalists, a Washington-based non-governmental organization (NGO), illustrates a typical view among Western journalists and academics: "In decades past, Chinese authorities relied on censorship<sup>30</sup> and legal action as the main tools to silence the press, but in today's dynamic climate, the Communist Party has increasingly resorted to jailing journalists in order to silence some of the nation's most enterprising reporters."<sup>31</sup> Zhou He writes that "coercion—in such forms as imprisonment, exile, purge, and unemployment [i.e., firing]—has become the main means of safeguarding the supremacy of the Chinese version of Communist ideology. This is particularly true in the media."<sup>32</sup>

But this is only part of the story. It is true that Reporters sans Frontières (Reporters without Borders), a French-based NGO, claims that China has more journalists imprisoned than any other country and ranks 163rd out of 168 rated countries on press freedom.<sup>33</sup> But at the same time, the jailing of 32 journalists<sup>34</sup> out of over 170,000 registered<sup>35</sup> represents a vanishingly

28. Zhao, "From Commercialization to Conglomeration," pp. 13–19.

29. Chin-Chuan Lee, "The Global and the National of the Chinese Media: Discourses, Market, Technology, and Ideology," in *Chinese Media, Global Contexts*, ed. Chin-Chuan Lee (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 11.

30. Again, this is not strictly true, as even *overt* post-publication censorship was and remains relatively rare.

31. U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, "Hearing," p. 92.

32. Zhou He, "How Do the Chinese Media Reduce Organizational Incongruence? Bureaucratic Capitalism in the Name of Communism," in *Chinese Media, Global Contexts*, ed. Lee, p. 208.

33. Reporters sans Frontières, *Worldwide Press Freedom Index* (website) (2006), at <[http://www.rsf.org/rubrique.php3?id\\_rubrique=639](http://www.rsf.org/rubrique.php3?id_rubrique=639)>, accessed March 8, 2007.

34. *Ibid.*, at <[http://www.rsf.org/rubrique.php3?id\\_rubrique=116](http://www.rsf.org/rubrique.php3?id_rubrique=116)>, accessed March 8, 2007.

35. Data were obtained from the official GAPP website at <[http://press.gapp.gov.cn/tongji/type\\_sex.php](http://press.gapp.gov.cn/tongji/type_sex.php)>, accessed November 20, 2006.

small .019% of the total. Likewise, although the Chinese control regime certainly does rely on both monetary and structural restraints on the press, none of these explanations—even in combination—tells the full story.

### How the Central Government Controls the Media, Revised

Self-censorship, a powerful information control strategy, refers to “a set of editorial actions ranging from omission, dilution, distortion, and change of emphasis to choice of rhetorical devices by journalists, their organizations, and even the entire media community in anticipation of currying reward and avoiding punishments from the power structure.”<sup>36</sup> Media researchers, scholars of contentious politics, and others have long recognized the power of self-censorship in the Chinese press, but few have elucidated the mechanisms that make it so pervasive. Statements like “self-censorship is the major form of media control in China”<sup>37</sup> are pervasive, but few reporters or academics delve into why the self-censorship regime is so effective.

Perry Link’s impressive article “China: The Anaconda in the Chandelier” provides a notable exception, pointing the way toward the importance of the regime of uncertainty in creating the proper environment to encourage self-censorship. Link terms this uncertainty “vagueness,” and writes that it “is purposeful and has been a fundamental tool in Chinese Communist censorship for decades.”<sup>38</sup> There are four principal advantages to this “vagueness”: (1) vague accusations frighten more people into changing their behavior, (2) they pressure these people to control their behavior to a greater extent, (3) they are “useful in maximizing what can be learned during forced confessions,” and (4) they allow authorities to zero in on whomever they want.<sup>39</sup> Of these four, all but the third are important mechanisms of the Chinese media self-censorship regime. Link convincingly and succinctly explains many of the underlying factors that encourage self-censorship, but he does so mainly in a descriptive, rather than an analytical way. This article extends his analysis through the theoretical lens of organization theory and should provide some new analytical traction in examining the Chinese media.

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36. Chin-Chuan Lee, “Press Self-Censorship and Political Transition in Hong Kong,” *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 3:2 (March 1998), p. 57.

37. Chen Yali, “Statement by Chen Yali, Research Associate, Center for Defense Information, before CECC” (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Executive Commission on China, 2003), <<http://www.cecc.gov/pages/roundtables/031003/yali.php>>, accessed May 1, 2008.

38. Perry Link, “China: The Anaconda in the Chandelier,” *New York Review of Books* 49:6 (April 11, 2002), <<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/15258>>, accessed May 1, 2008.

39. *Ibid.*

## Uncertainty and Organization Theory

The CPD's power to determine what is and what is not acceptable news coverage lies at the heart of China's effective regime of self-censorship. The CPD alone has the authority to demarcate the boundaries of acceptable coverage, and it does so in such a vague way that even professionals with decades of experience can be caught off guard by its decisions. It is this uncertainty about how far they can push coverage without facing a harsh and arbitrary punishment that keeps many reporters and editors from being too aggressive in their coverage. In other words, the uncertainty that surrounds the CPD's post hoc decisions on specific news topics is critical to controlling news workers.

The power of uncertainty has long been recognized in organization theory literature. Writing in 1964, the brilliant French sociologist Michel Crozier analyzed the link between predictability of behavior and bargaining power. He argues that "the power of A over B depends on A's ability to predict B's behavior and on the uncertainty of B about A's behavior." He continues, "As long as the requirements of action create situations of uncertainty, the individuals who have to face them have power over those who are affected by the results of their choice."<sup>40</sup> In a footnote, Crozier clarifies that this applies to relevant uncertainty only, that is, to uncertainty about actions that actually affect other groups. In other words, those with the ability to make unpredictable decisions ultimately have the power.

The CPD has just this leverage. But this regime of uncertainty does more than just constrain media outlets' *external* behavior. Organization theorists argue that an uncertain environment changes power dynamics *within* organizations as well. Following Crozier and other theorists, Pfeffer and Salancik argue that because "the source of the most important organizational uncertainty determines power within the organization," therefore "those subunits most able to cope with the organization's critical problems acquire power within the organization."<sup>41</sup> This means that those employees most likely to reduce uncertainty over the proper boundaries of coverage should gain prominence within the media outlet. In short, those editors who know what the CPD is likely to do are the organizational winners.

In the Chinese case, these employees are likely to be the ones with closest ties to the media control apparatus—in many cases, either the same top officials appointed by the CPD or the publication's own internal content

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40. Michel Crozier, *The Bureaucratic Phenomenon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 158.

41. Jeffrey Pfeffer and Gerald R. Salancik, *The External Control of Organizations: A Resource Dependence Perspective* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), p. 230.

monitors. While these officials already have the power inherent in their position, their internal knowledge of the regime of uncertainty makes them indispensable to their organization's success and thus means they are even more difficult to challenge. Indeed, in Esarey's view, those employed as internal content monitors within publications not only tend to be "the most cautious" but they often have critical work experience with a central or local propaganda department.<sup>42</sup> This setup potentially means that the most politically reliable members of the media receive dramatically enhanced power potential relative to journalists more hostile to the aims of the Party. The end result is insidiously brilliant: from the CPD's point of view, media units' responses to government-created uncertainty in essence shift power internally toward the very people the CPD trusts most. This fact suggests that some reporters and editors might welcome the government's replacement of bold but unknowledgeable editors, even if they supported these editors' goals and politics, because such a change would reduce the survivors' personal uncertainty levels. In short, organization theory argues that not only does uncertainty constrain media outlets' macro behavior but it also changes their internal dynamics in a way most helpful to the media control apparatus.<sup>43</sup>

### An Uncertain Control

It is the CPD that holds precisely this power of uncertainty. Without pre-publication censorship, it is often impossible for reporters to know ahead of time what will be a safe story. It is true that the CPD sends out specific briefings outlining which current topics are unacceptable, and some topics—such as Taiwan independence or the 1989 Tiananmen massacre—are so clearly off limits that the media know better than to attempt them. But without clear guidelines on every single topic or story, and with China's subtly shifting political winds, even long-time journalists can often get in trouble for stories they and their editors thought were acceptable or that had gone unnoticed in the past. "It's something we are all aware of, we sense it, but we can't really express it," one veteran reporter says about which topics are allowable day-to-day,<sup>44</sup> although this ad hoc approach naturally fails at times. Because the CPD uses its agenda-setting power to change its

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42. Ashley Esarey, personal communication, December 17, 2007.

43. In a fascinating historical parallel, Cosimo de Medici seems to have used this very strategy to control early 15th century Florence. See John F. Padgett and Christopher K. Ansell, "Robust Action and the Rise of the Medici, 1400–1434," *American Journal of Sociology* 98:6 (May 1993), p. 1310.

44. Zhongdang Pan, "Improvising Reform Activities: The Changing Reality of Journalistic Practice in China," in Lee, ed., *Power, Money, and Media*, p. 82.

standards about acceptable topics so often, a story praised yesterday or last week might get a reporter into trouble the next time it is published.

One of the best known examples of this phenomenon is the fallout that resulted from the Sun Zhigang case in 2003. Early that year, designer Sun Zhigang, originally from Hubei Province, moved to the southern Chinese city of Guangzhou to begin working for a garment company. In April 2003, he was detained by Guangzhou police for not carrying his temporary residence permit. While in police custody in an internal migrant detention facility, he was beaten to death by the facility's staff members. After the aggressive *Nanfang Dushi Bao* (Southern Metropolis Daily) reported the circumstances of Sun's death on April 25, newspapers all over the country reprinted the article, in the face of a national uproar. Ultimately, the pressure on the government to act was so great that the 20-year-old law authorizing the use of such internal detention facilities was repealed in what amounted to a major victory for a watchdog press.

This victory was temporary, however. A few months later, police raided the *Southern Metropolis Daily* and "detained the top editor and six other officials in what many journalists regarded as retribution for aggressive reporting" on the Sun case and on an earlier story reporting the government's coverup of the SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) epidemic.<sup>45</sup> Ultimately the managing editor and one other official were sentenced to prison time on clearly weak evidence of alleged corruption. As assessed by Asia researcher Sophie Beach, many journalists knew this outcome was the result of "local officials' retaliation for the paper's coverage of Sun's case." And the chilling effect was immediate: "A former editor at another popular Guangzhou-based newspaper, who spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of reprisal, called the arrests 'the most serious blow to the Chinese media in the last decade'."<sup>46</sup> The *Southern Metropolis Daily's* top staff have been replaced by CCP appointees, and the paper has never regained its prominent pre-arrest reputation.<sup>47</sup>

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45. Joseph Kahn, "Police Raid Chinese Newspaper That Reported New SARS Case," *New York Times*, January 8, 2004. It is unclear, however, whether this crackdown was initiated by the CPD itself or by local or provincial authorities. One reporter at a sister paper claims in an author interview (Beijing, October 2007) that the crackdown was initiated at the highest levels of the provincial government, though this must surely have been with the knowledge and acquiescence of the CPD. Note, again, that without a more thorough knowledge of the CPD it is difficult to disaggregate the government's actions, and this article does not attempt to do so.

46. Sophie Beach, "The Rise of Rights?" *Dangerous Assignments* (New York: Committee to Protect Journalists: Spring/Summer 2005), p. 32, <[http://www.cpj.org/Briefings/2005/DA\\_spring05/DA\\_spring\\_05.pdf](http://www.cpj.org/Briefings/2005/DA_spring05/DA_spring_05.pdf)>, accessed May 1, 2008.

47. Several author interviews with current and former print journalism reporters, including staff of the Southern Newspaper Group, publishers of the *Southern Metropolis Daily*, Beijing and Shanghai, 2005.

The example of the *Southern Metropolis Daily* demonstrates how uncertainty and coercion work together to great effect. Ultimately it is not the limited coercion itself, but the central government's vast and deliberate amplification of coercion's effects, that makes this form of control so particularly powerful. This situation is what makes Perry Link's "anaconda in the chandelier" metaphor so apt: everyone knows the snake might strike at any minute, and the uncertainty of how and when keeps people on their toes. For the Chinese media, uncertainty is so effective in amplifying the effects of coercion that the state is able to control newspapers even with the jailing of fewer than one in five thousand reporters.

### A Deliberate Strategy?

Again, to this author's knowledge an explicit study of the inner workings of the CPD has never been attempted, and without such a study it is impossible to truly assign motives to the organization and its leaders. Despite this caveat, both circumstantial evidence and interviews by the author with about 50 current and former Chinese reporters suggest that this regime of uncertainty is used as a deliberate media control strategy.

One of the most suggestive pieces of evidence comes from discussions surrounding various proposed general Chinese press laws, none of which the PRC has yet implemented. Indeed, one long-time editor, himself fired for publishing a politically unacceptable story, asserts that a "high-level official" called for rejection of a proposed national media law "because then they [news workers] would know everything (*shenme dou zhidao*)" and reporters' uncertainty would be dramatically reduced.<sup>48</sup> This status quo has continued, for despite extensive discussion within the CCP and media industry over the past two decades, Beijing still has not proposed a general, comprehensive media law. And a recent series of proposed small-scale press laws, although superficially helpful, do little to clarify the boundaries of the acceptable.

For example, the National People's Congress Standing Committee announced a draft Sudden Event Response Law in late June 2006, allowing the government to fine Chinese media outlets up to RMB 100,000 (\$12,000) for reporting "sudden events" without authorization or in a way that caused "serious consequences." Sudden events are defined as "natural disasters, accidental mishaps, public health incidents, and public safety incidents," while "serious consequences" include events that are "harmful to society, with a broad impact and are either especially significant, significant, some-

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48. Author interview with the former editor of a major paper, Shanghai, August 2005.

what significant, or ordinary (*yi ban*).<sup>49</sup> This definition does little to clarify the boundaries of acceptable reporting, while explicitly including events that have merely “ordinary” importance. Thus, while a media law would seem in principle to elucidate the situation for Chinese reporters, this proposed statute does just the opposite. This is surely no accident. In the face of a media uproar in 2006 involving harsh editorials across the country, the draft law was ultimately changed. According to an article on the China Media Project website:

In its stead was language about how media would be punished (after the fact) in cases where “fake information” (*xujia xinwen*) was disseminated, particularly where the social consequences were deemed severe (*yanzhong houguo*). On the plane of language, this is progress. On the plane of practice, there are major lingering questions about (1) how authorities will apply their definition of “fake information,” and (2) how they will determine “severe consequences.”<sup>50</sup>

As David Bandurski’s commentary makes clear, however, these superficial changes do little to clarify reporters’ working environments. Again, this is surely no accident.

Indeed, in early 2007 the CPD moved to further institutionalize its regime of uncertainty by instituting a new “points-based penalty system for the print media in a stepped-up effort to tighten its grip on the sector.”<sup>51</sup> Although it seems likely this point system was only temporary through the Seventeenth Party Congress in late 2007, its appearance does provide further evidence that the CPD’s use of uncertainty is a deliberate control mechanism. Broadly, according to Cary Huang, writing in Hong Kong’s *South China Morning Post*, “media outlets will be allocated 12 points each and [will be] subject to closure if all their points are deducted.” Most critically, Huang adds that “it is not known how the severity of a wrongdoing will be determined.”<sup>52</sup> In other words, as usual the CPD—and GAPP, its approximate central government equivalent—will have the post hoc power to assign punishments to publications that break arbitrary rules and standards

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49. Duan Hongqing, Ye Doudou, and Wang Bing, “Tufa Shijian Yingdui Fa Cao’an ‘Tufa Zhengyi’” [Sudden events response law draft causes “sudden controversy”], *Caijing* (Finance Magazine) (Beijing), June 28, 2006.

50. Posted by David Bandurski (March 1, 2008), China Media Project, “China’s Emergency Response Law Quietly Takes the Stage, Targets ‘Fake Information’” (2007), at <<http://cmp.hku.hk/2007/09/03/602/>>.

51. Cary Huang, “Beijing Tightens Media Grip with Penalty Points System,” *South China Morning Post*, February 9, 2007.

52. *Ibid.* Although admittedly this might reflect reporter ignorance more than a deliberate effort at obfuscation, the fact that “senior state media executives” have reportedly “not been given details” suggests the latter possibility.

for conduct. Unlike even the turbid June 2006 proposed media law, this point-based system provides not even a fig leaf of purported benefit for media outlets themselves. In fact, it appears to be an effort to institutionalize arbitrariness. If news units cannot know in advance what is acceptable reporting, or even how many points are assigned to each infraction, all they have learned is that the CPD is likely to be even less tolerant than usual toward aggressive reporting.

Evidence for uncertainty as a deliberate strategy does not stop at proposed laws and CPD regulations, however. A former editor noted in an interview that in 2004 the CPD had moved to reissue press cards for actively working reporters, but the reporters had to reapply for them, “like a test (*kaoshi*).”<sup>53</sup> Because no reporter can work without a card, this allows the government to weed out undesirable workers in a relatively discreet manner. Moreover, these new cards, unlike the old ones, have no expiration date, meaning the cards can now be switched at arbitrary intervals. Now, when the press as a whole gets too aggressive, the potential always exists for the CPD to recall all old press cards and purge reporters who have angered the government.<sup>54</sup> Therefore, not only can the CPD act to fire or jail reporters who go too far on individual stories, it can force reporters out of the profession forever at entirely capricious intervals.<sup>55</sup> Such a threat increases the uncertain boundaries journalists face and has the potential to impact their behavior in the long run.

Somewhat more circumstantial evidence comes not from mainland China but from Taiwan. From the 1950s to the 1980s, Taiwan had an authoritarian government exercising firm control over its own press. In this respect, Taiwan provides a perfect parallel with the mainland, for its later system of press control was very different from the uncertainty-creating mainland media control regime. Because Taiwan is part of what is historically considered cultural China, any cultural explanations may be abandoned, leaving government policies and media structure as primary explanations. In Taiwan, especially in the 1970s and early 1980s, the government was explicit about the boundaries of acceptable reporting, creating, ironically, a much

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53. Author interview with former editor of a major paper, Shanghai, August 2005.

54. The CCP employed a similar strategy in the pre-revolution days to weed out undesirable members.

55. Moreover, in order to reapply, reporters must attend dozens of hours of study sessions on Marxism, the leading role of the CCP in Chinese society, and other similar topics before their press card is supplied. These sessions thus serve not only to increase the hardship inherent in the application process but may also have an indoctrination effect as well. See Ashley Esarey, “Speak No Evil: Mass Media Control in Contemporary China,” in *A Freedom House Special Report* (Washington, D.C.: Freedom House, 2006), pp. 3–4.

bolder press.<sup>56</sup> Taiwanese magazines, especially, often were not shy about criticizing the government.<sup>57</sup> For example, one Taiwanese publisher “seized on a legal loophole and applied . . . for three separate licenses” so that whenever one magazine was suspended, he could move publication to another outlet.<sup>58</sup> This sort of behavior, though potentially “legal,” would be impossible in contemporary China. The Taiwanese government’s reliance on formal legal procedures (especially in the 1970s and 1980s) meant that newspapers and journalists knew exactly how far to push the state, knowledge that allowed them to be consistently more aggressive than is possible on the mainland. In short, the Taiwan case demonstrates that it is possible to regulate media with routinized procedures in *cultural* China, making it more likely that the mainland’s system of fuzzy media boundaries is a deliberate control strategy.

A major scholar of the Chinese media, writing about much freer Hong Kong, writes:

Self-censorship, given its huge social cost, is used as a preventative defense [by journalists]. The external pressure can be real, imagined, or both. Real pressure is exerted behind the scenes, if possible, to avoid public criticism. Imagined pressure can sometimes be more intimidating because the consequences of failing to succumb to it are ambiguous. Self-censorship is directly related to the “imagined boundaries” of how tolerant China will be and what it will do in the way of reward and punishment.<sup>59</sup>

Even in Hong Kong, the “imagined pressure” is critical in keeping reporters from being as aggressive as they would otherwise be. It is clear that the CPD—and journalists themselves—recognize the power of uncertainty (coupled with judicious use of harsh coercion) to produce a solid regime of self-censorship. This regime is the government’s most effective weapon in its struggle to control a media reliant on market signals in both Hong Kong and mainland China.

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56. Daniel K. Berman, *Words Like Colored Glass: The Role of the Press in Taiwan’s Democratization Process* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1992).

57. Andrew Leonard, “Freedom to Be Irresponsible: Taiwan Independence and the Post-Martial Law Taiwan Press” (unpublished Masters thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 1991). Magazines were usually more aggressive than daily newspapers in Taiwan because they were often associated with opposition forces (the so-called “*dangwai*”), while all major newspapers were controlled by pro-government affiliates.

58. Chin-Chuan Lee, “Sparking a Fire: The Press and the Ferment of Democratic Change in Taiwan,” in *China’s Media, Media’s China*, ed. Chin-Chuan Lee (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1994), p. 184.

59. Chin-Chuan Lee, “The Paradox of Political Economy: Media Structure, Press Freedom, and Regime Change in Hong Kong,” in Lee, ed., *Power, Money, and Media*, p. 315.

Finally, and to reiterate the earlier caveat, the absence of a comprehensive study of the CPD itself means that this conclusion—that the regime of uncertainty is a deliberate media control strategy—is necessarily preliminary. But the preponderance of evidence and interviews with working journalists both suggest the validity of this conclusion. Clearly, more study in this important area is warranted, and this paper now suggests other future directions.

### Future Directions

It is clear that uncertainty over the limit of acceptable reporting is a major factor shaping the behavior of the Chinese press. There is circumstantial evidence, too, that this uncertainty is a deliberate strategy to ensure compliance among increasingly commercialized media outlets. There are, however, many unanswered questions and avenues for future research. While this piece relies on a control metaphor, it is perhaps equally useful to think of the regime of uncertainty as a signaling game between state and press, and indeed, the state itself should probably be further disambiguated. Certainly the relationship between the state and press is dynamic, even turbulent, and thinking only of “control” may obscure this interaction effect. For example, how can journalists tell when a given topic has become “safe enough” to cover? Are there group effects among the journalistic community that create bursts of coverage, and strength in numbers, in previously off-limits areas? What are the interactions among different government agencies, and can we do more than simply guess at the state’s motivations? Exploring signaling between state and press may well provide an analytical handle to tackle these and other issues. This article is just a start, and future research would do well to explore dynamic interaction effects between government at all levels and media.

Researchers might also examine when, why, and how this control breaks down. When, in other words, does the regime of uncertainty fail? Some elements of the press have engaged in highly visible “pushback” against state restraint in recent years,<sup>60</sup> and we are only beginning to understand the circumstances surrounding this resistance. Preliminary research suggests, for example, that both grievances and disruption of normal work routines play a role,<sup>61</sup> but there is a long way to go before we fully understand this recently highlighted media assertiveness. The breakdown of state control strategies, then, provides another fruitful avenue for future research to explore.

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60. Jonathan Hassid, “China’s Contentious Journalists.”

61. *Ibid.*

Finally, this study prompts some questions outside the narrow realm of the media. For example, is the regime of uncertainty a universal control mechanism? Does the Chinese government use this strategy in other aspects of society, and if so, where? If not, why does it fail outside a media context? In short, knowledge of the regime of uncertainty might cue researchers to look in other areas of Chinese society where the state potentially uses this or similar methods to constrain behavior.

### Conclusion

But before any future research begins, it is helpful to recap this study's empirical and conceptual payoffs. First, it is clear that uncertainty over the limit of acceptable reporting is a major factor in control of the Chinese press. Second, although it is not yet possible to reach a definitive conclusion, this regime of uncertainty is likely to be a deliberate strategy used by the CCP. This awareness is important not only intrinsically but also because the media are such a crucial component of contemporary politics. Understanding media control in China is helpful in understanding myriad aspects of the Chinese political situation, from elite politics and policy analysis ("the media . . . have greatly affected CCP decision-making")<sup>62</sup> to studies of collective action among the peasantry ("even publication of a single letter or report detailing a case . . . can instantly nationalize and legitimize a focus for popular action").<sup>63</sup>

Finally, there is a conceptual payoff as well. The Chinese party/state has stumbled upon a strategy that works very well in controlling large numbers of independent actors, with minimal investment. Critically, though, newspaper content is easy to monitor and hard to hide, and it is possible that activities that are much harder to accurately monitor are potentially less influenced by this control strategy. The strategy does potentially represent a way for any sufficiently authoritarian government to cheaply and easily control an increasingly decentralized society, because the proliferation of societal and market organizations outside the government's direct oversight makes other control strategies increasingly less effective. This situation deserves further investigation and should provide a wakeup call to both China scholars and organization theorists. Something interesting is happening in China, and it is time for a deeper look.

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62. Yan Jiaqi, "The Nature of Chinese Authoritarianism," in *Decision-Making in Deng's China: Perspectives from Insiders*, eds. Carol Lee Hamrin and Suisheng Zhao (Armonk, N. Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1995), p. 13.

63. Lianjiang Li and Kevin O'Brien, "Villagers and Popular Resistance in Contemporary China," *Modern China* 22:1 (January 1996), p. 48. For a more contemporary look at rightful resistance in China, see Kevin O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).