

## Investigating China

### What it means to be a journalist in a socialist market economy

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**In authoritarian China, control of the media exists, but so does control by the media. Two recent books explain how the government has strategically allowed investigative journalism to flourish, strengthened by the market and the expectations of the Chinese population.**

**Reviewed:** David Bandurski and Martin Hala, *Investigative Journalism in China*, University of Washington Press, 2010, 176 p.; Tong Jingrong, *Investigative Journalism in China*, Continuum, 2011, 280 p.

Two books published in the last few months offer a complementary analysis of investigative journalism in the People's Republic of China. David Bandurski and Martin Hala's book looks at stories that have caused a major stir both nationally and internationally, while Tong Jingrong's work takes a more general approach to the profession in the context of the history of Chinese journalism.<sup>1</sup>

The 1990s seem to represent the golden age for investigative journalism in China. It established itself thanks to a convergence of political, social and economic factors. In an authoritarian state such as China, where censorship is institutionalized, investigative journalism had to meet the needs, or at least conform to some extent to the will of the Party in order for it to first be practiced in the media. Tong Jingrong stresses the idea of a real need on

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<sup>1</sup> The author of this review has chosen to focus on the development of investigative journalism from a general perspective; this summary therefore contains more quotes and references from Tong Jingrong's work, as the format of this article does not allow the author to make both a general analysis and an examination of the case studies in D. Bandurski's work. Despite this imbalance, the author of this review in no way wishes to underestimate the importance of the latter work and the relevance of its analyses.

the part of the political authorities. The economic reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping in 1978 enabled the Chinese economy to develop extremely quickly, but growth also led to major problems: mediocre quality of production, an increase in social inequalities, widespread corruption, environmental problems, etc. – all of which challenged the legitimacy of the policies implemented by the political leaders. As a way of regaining public trust in the Communist Party and the system of a socialist market economy, the government allowed critical information to appear in newspapers. Beginning with an investigation into the problems of product quality, investigative journalism gradually spread to other areas, thus prompting a form of “control by the media” (*yulun jiandu*).

### **A Political Need**

Leaders encouraged the practice of investigative journalism in order to serve their own interests. The investigative work carried out by journalists enabled the central government to control local governments as part of a system of decentralization brought about by economic reforms, while the spread of articles uncovering flaws in the system allowed the authorities to regain the public’s trust. Journalists were then of valuable assistance to the central government which, better informed about the situation in the country, could implement more effective policies and punish any corrupt officials who hindered them. They could have demanded that journalists’ reports remain unpublished, and that information should only circulate within the administration in the form of internal reports – *neican*. In contrast, the publication of those reports in the mass media showed that the government was seeking to restore public confidence and lessen people’s dissatisfaction by giving the illusion that freedom of the press existed.

The concept of *yulun jiandu* is a key term in any reflection on Chinese media, and the final chapter of Bandurski’s work is devoted entirely to this issue. The author Li-Fung Cho explains how this term has been able to take on different meanings depending on the time and the leader. In 1987, Zhao Ziyang, then Premier of the PRC, used this expression in the political report he delivered at the 13<sup>th</sup> Party Congress. This was the first time that the term appeared in such a significant document, thus highlighting the importance of the media in guiding the government’s policies. Zhao Ziyang took a liberal view of the press and saw the role of the media as part of a broader policy aimed at curbing corruption. Through the press, he wanted to make the Party more transparent and create communication channels between

the public and the Party. While newspapers such as the World Economic Herald seized on this speech to intensify their criticism and step up investigations, Zhao was accused of having led the press onto the wrong track. With the Tiananmen Square massacre, the brief period of liberalization that had witnessed the beginnings of investigative journalism ended in bloodshed. The press entered a period of apathy. It was not until 1992, when Deng Xiaoping stepped up economic reforms, that investigative journalism established itself in China. Since then, the expression *yulun jiandu* is still frequently used by officials, but it implies more a form of critical journalism in the service of the Party than a real monitoring of power by the media. In 2007, Hu Jintao, in his first political report, reaffirmed the importance of *yulun jiandu* but made clear that it should not be taken to mean the right to be independent from the Party. It thus bears little resemblance to the term “watchdog journalism,” which is sometimes used as a translation.

Investigative journalism has been given permission to flourish, but criticisms must remain within the Party’s established limits; they cannot relate to underlying problems linked to the political system, otherwise journalists and chief editors of media organizations are subject to punitive measures: fines, dismissals, closures and even, in rare cases, imprisonment.

### **A Commercial Advantage**

Political and politicking strategies have therefore triggered the development of investigative journalism. However, it has only been able to thrive in such a way because it corresponds to the interests of media organizations.

The structure of the media underwent major changes during the 1980s and 1990s. With decentralization, the state was only receiving part of the taxes levied in the country. Finding itself less well off, it let go of certain financial burdens, particularly the financing of the media, which now had to find sources of funding other than state subsidies. The use of advertising, previously condemned as an instrument of capitalism, was authorized once again (an advert was broadcast on Shanghai TV in February 1979, and advertising spread in newspapers throughout the 1980s), as was the direct selling of newspapers in the street. The post office no longer had a monopoly over their distribution. Each media organization could manage its own distribution system. However, it was not until Deng Xiaoping launched his accelerated programme of economic reforms during his trip to the south in 1992 that proper

commercial management of the media was established. Newspapers became consumer goods, and media organizations became enterprises, although still strictly controlled by the state. Zhu Xueqin, a committed liberal intellectual, declared, “We have created a massive creature combining market economics and Leninist politics.”<sup>2</sup> From then on, journalists were torn between economic and political imperatives. Due to the increased competition that had developed during the 1990s, caused by the explosion in the number of publications allowed after the sector was liberalized, the media were looking to attract new readers. This is where the third element of the journalism boom came into play: the Chinese population.

### **Public Expectations**

Investigative journalism is dependent on its public. Certainly, if the Chinese population had not been so receptive, media organizations (media outlets, television, radio) would doubtless never have dared stray from the strict limits determined by the Party’s needs. They would probably not have lent so much support to those journalists who tried to push back the limits of censorship. Liu Bing, an investigative journalist working for the *Nanfang Dushibao* (Southern Metropolis Daily), known for being one of the most critical daily newspapers in China, declared to Tong Jingrong in a 2005 interview that “the public and most colleagues regard our newspaper as one with professionalism and ideals, but... my understanding is that the top managers of the newspaper think in another way... Ideals are only one strategy for the newspaper, because first of all it is an enterprise.” (Tong, p. 121) The role played by the senior staff of the newspapers is difficult to assess. Despite everything, Tong Jingrong’s book puts forward a fairly positive view. Without denying the variety of situations, she maintains that editors-in-chief generally provide journalists with invaluable support. Based on an in-depth analysis of the *Southern Metropolis Daily*, she states that the media mostly shoulder political responsibilities and lend financial and logistical support to investigative journalists. In contrast, the analyses made in the book by David Bandurski and Martin Hala stress the lack of support these reporters must face. Ying Chan, head of China Media Project, a research centre on the Chinese media, believes that “these journalists work very much as “loners” without institutional support from their own media organizations or supervisors, who are afraid of rocking the boat and straying too far from the party line. At these media organizations, reporters are generally paid a piece rate according to the number of words published in addition to the base salary (...) no incentive exists for reporters to invest

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted by David Bandurski during the presentation of his book at Sciences Po, Paris, on 23 November 2011.

their time in detailed investigative work since compensation is pegged to quantity rather than quality.” (Bandurski, p. 6)

### **The Role of Journalists**

Finally, we should not forget the part played by the journalists, without whom investigative reports would obviously never come to light. The generation that began working in the 1980s aspired to greater professionalism and refused to adopt the Party’s journalistic principles. Before the reforms, all journalists were paid by the state and employed for life in order to serve the Party’s interests. They were expected to be loyal servants who praised official policies and the benefits that the regime brought to the population. After the 1980s and 1990s, the media have been able to take on journalists who are outside the system (*tizhiwai jizhe*) and do not enjoy the same privileges. The arrival of these new recruits has enabled the journalistic profession in China to undergo a profound change. They no longer recognize themselves in their role as Party spokesmen, and aspire to greater autonomy.

This young generation’s new conception of the role of journalists is partly derived from Western theories and practices that blossomed in China when Deng Xiaoping opened up China. Media independence, objectivity, scrutiny – all these principles went against the Party’s conception of journalism and worked in favour of greater professionalization. Investigative journalists have therefore enabled the re-legitimization of a profession that was losing its privileges and suffering from a widespread loss of confidence in the Party. What credit could the public give to the spokesperson of a regime whose legitimacy was increasingly being called into question? Journalists highlighted a new set of values, such as objectivity and the quest for truth and independence, and gave journalism back a mission that matched the public’s expectations: helping the destitute, fighting for justice, pushing for social change, and so on. However, in their book, D. Bandurski and M. Hala stress some serious problems affecting the Chinese media, an aspect that Tong Jingrong omits completely. They speak, in particular, of a lack of ethics and professionalism among journalists. They explain that newspapers sometimes make accusations with insufficient proof, and they detail corruption cases within the media itself. Chapter 6, “Cashing in on Silence,” is devoted to an investigation which revealed that reporters from the Xinhua News Agency accepted pay-offs in exchange for covering up the major security failures of mining companies that had caused the deaths of several dozen employees. This phenomenon, known as *xinwen qiaozha*, or

“news extortion,” seems to be spreading. It results from a clear lack of professional conscience among journalists, but also from low salaries, which force reporters to seek other sources of income. It poses a major threat to the press, which loses all credibility with the public and runs the risk of having its scope of action limited by the government.

### **The Position of Journalists within Chinese Society**

It would, however, be a mistake to think that the current, more critical role of journalists originated only in the Western theories that spread after the 1980s. Chinese history and tradition have indeed left a considerable mark on changes made to the configuration of the profession. This aspect is mentioned in both books and analysed at length by Tong Jingrong.

First of all, the image of the Confucian scholar has a certain amount of influence over the way in which journalists are seen in Chinese society. Those who could now be called intellectuals are considered go-betweens for the population and the government. They must therefore convey the government’s policies to the public as well as act as spokesmen to convey the people’s problems and demands to those in power. Journalists, as public intellectuals who also have the means to take on the position of mediator, have inherited the role of scholars and the image of champions of the fight against injustice, as embodied by the great Confucians of China’s past such as Bao Zheng and Hai Rui.<sup>3</sup> In a country where the judicial system is flawed and often manipulated by the authorities, journalism – particularly investigative journalism – is an alternative that is widely used by members of the public when confronted with an injustice they cannot resolve. Scholars, however, as an integral part of the Chinese bureaucratic system, have in fact never fundamentally challenged the regime. Far from having a subversive role, they have, at the very most, sought to eradicate abuses in order to correct and therefore consolidate the government’s power.

The Chinese conception of journalism is also linked to the idea forged by reformist intellectuals such as Liang Qichao at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Bao Zheng, an official from the Song dynasty, was known for his hatred of injustice and corruption. Referred to as Justice Bao (*Bao Gong*), he symbolizes justice and integrity in China. Hai Rui, an official from the Ming dynasty, dared to criticise the Emperor, out of concern for the fate of the population. Incapable of governing properly, the Emperor also allowed corruption to reign within his government and administration. Hai Rui was not looking to challenge his authority but to improve it. He was nonetheless condemned to death. Imprisoned while awaiting execution, he was then released after the sovereign’s death. He also represents integrity and justice.

They gave shape to a profession that had only just made an appearance in China, by mixing Confucian ethics and liberalism. They made a particular mark on the Western ideas of liberal democracy, freedom of the press, media control, etc. They believed that journalists should help strengthen the Chinese nation, and that they should first and foremost guide and enlighten the population, but also take responsibility for criticising leaders who did not practise good governance.

These two elements are often quoted in studies of Chinese journalists. On the other hand, another influence analysed by Tong Jingrong is rarely mentioned: that of the self-critical tradition of the Communist Party and the key role that journalists can play in it. In 1945, criticism and self-criticism were written into the new Party constitution “as being an excellent tradition of the Communist Party, which should be practiced and implemented from time to time to ensure the integrity of the Party.” (Tong, p. 24) In 1950, the Party published a document entitled “On the decision on practicing criticism and self-criticism in newspapers” in which it stated that it was necessary to “criticize and self-criticize all wrongdoing and disadvantages of the Party’s work among the people/masses and all public arenas, especially in newspapers.” (Tong, p. 25) The aim of this exercise was, once again, to improve the Party and therefore strengthen it. Even if in practice this position did not allow the press to carry out investigation and criticism during Mao Zedong’s era, this tradition has influenced the image that the population, journalists and some leaders have of the press.

Chinese ideas and those of a good number of Western democratic countries are by no means opposed, but they nonetheless have differences broadly linked to the history, culture and political situation of the respective country. Tong Jingrong concludes her comparative analysis thus:

*“In practice therefore, it would be unrealistic to expect Chinese investigative journalism to function as a power check on the ruling political authority, or to anticipate that it will have a revolutionary power to facilitate the alternatives of political Party, as it happens, in multi-Party democratic societies. What Chinese investigative journalism could more likely do is to form a bridge between the ruled and the ruler, and to exercise journalism’s reformist and advocacy influences to improve social development” (Tong, p. 27).*

## **Developments After 2000**

It is hard to form an opinion on the perspectives of investigative journalism when

interpretations of the current situation already divide analysts. In her introduction to Bandurski's book, Ying Chan points out that, since 2003 and the coming to power of Hu Wen's team, investigative journalism has lost some of its prestige. While many regional newspapers have created investigation units, their work involves a less general questioning of the problems that China faces. According to Ying Chan, reporters tend to address more local issues and deal primarily with less sensitive matters, such as trade or the environment. Qian Gang, former editor of the progressive newspaper *Nanfang zhoumo* (Southern Weekend), believes that, since 2003, the Party has finally made "control by the media" impracticable, particularly the possibility of independent investigative journalism.

Tong Jingrong takes the view that investigative journalism is perhaps not as dynamic as it was at its high point in 2003, when the SARS crisis erupted and the student Sun Zhigang died while in police custody,<sup>4</sup> but it is still alive in newly established newspapers that resist political and commercial pressure. While advertising agencies in the 2000s kept their distance from such activity, afraid of the punitive measures to which investigative newspapers were exposed, Tong Jingrong maintains that journalists were even bolder than before, no longer content to go along with the issues chosen by the authorities: "Before 2003, (...) Chinese journalists investigate what they were told to investigate. Since 2003, however, Chinese journalists have initiated many investigations into taboo subjects despite these investigations perhaps being against the will of the authorities." (Tong, p. 52)

The ambiguous stance taken by the media and the government makes it that much more complicated to carry out an assessment. The government continues to speak out in favour of media control but also restricts freedom and does not think twice before severely penalising bolder investigations. It seems to hesitate between the idea that investigative journalism might enable the legitimacy of the regime to be strengthened, and the fear that it might be dangerous and threaten social harmony by destroying the image of a prosperous society. How, then, should one interpret the speech delivered by President Hu Jintao at the 17<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Communist Party, when he stated that the public should be

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<sup>4</sup> This 27-year-old student died on 20 March 2003 of injuries inflicted by state agents in a 'detention and repatriation centre' (*shourongsuo*) for migrants in Canton, three days after being arrested by police for failing to produce an identity card or provisional residence document. On 25 April 2003, the Southern Metropolis Daily published an article bringing the incident to light and provoking widespread indignation that was relayed in the press but above all on the Internet. The mobilization that followed, particularly that of lawyers and experts in Chinese law, led to a reform of the law relating to the detaining of migrants, setting a precedent in Chinese history.



guaranteed four fundamental rights: the right to information, participation, expression and supervision? Tong Jingrong explains that the government would simply like supervision by the media to be maintained, but within established limits so as to remain entirely at the service of the Party. It is therefore futile to look for a basic principle that might be guiding current policies. According to her, pragmatism alone can explain the Party's policy turnaround at the summit, making concessions or tightening control according to what is needed at any given moment. In 2007, just before the Beijing Olympic Games, the government wanted to construct a more respected and legitimate international image for itself. It gave out all the signs of liberalization, and then had no qualms going back on its word when events in Tibet broke out a few months later. 2008 was the year of contradictions: increased censorship on the issue of the riots, and signs of an opening-up following the Sichuan earthquake. The opportunities the press were given to cover this disaster gave good reason to hope that change was coming. However, the limits of this were swiftly realized when it was forbidden to discuss the collapse of schools. The fragility of the buildings was due to the fact that local governments had embezzled the funds allocated for their construction.

The authorities also sought to adapt to the challenge presented by the arrival of the Internet. Censorship was the first means established to limit access to subversive content. However, this did not allow total, immediate control of the Web. Between the moment the content was published and the moment it was blocked, some Internet users had the time to read the information and potentially spread it to other websites. When the era of Web 2.0 began, the government recognized that it could no longer control society as it had up to then. Once they had acknowledged this fact, the political authorities seemingly took the decision to report more problematic events more swiftly. When they were unable to cover up a disturbing piece of news, it was more advantageous for them to present a version that had been doctored by the government. They flooded the major Internet portals with these official versions, which gave users the impression of being informed and therefore tempered their desire to go on to other websites. In on-line discussions, the role of moderators was supplemented by that of the *wu maoqian* (50-cent army), Internet users who are paid to introduce the official positions into forums and other chat sites.

A section of the Chinese population has taken over this resource as a way of staying informed and expressing its opinion on current affairs that are sometimes sensitive, or in order to expose injustices that have gone unpunished. Ying Chan speaks of "citizen journalism."

This kind of activity resembles investigative journalism to some extent: ordinary citizens use the Internet to spread news about little-known events and to give a voice to the oppressed. Zhou Shuguang was one of the first “citizen journalists.” He originally chose the pseudonym Zola with the Italian footballer in mind, but the reference to the French author, which he has now adopted, suits him rather well. This young IT technician, from a modest family, travelled across China for nine months to give an account of the suffering of peasants and migrant workers. He was followed by more than 20,000 online readers a day. He also reported on a couple that refused to leave their house in Chongqing – the famous “nail house” case.<sup>5</sup> Traditional media had also spoken of it, but he can be credited with the impact this story had around the country.

Tong Jingrong makes an in-depth analysis of the relationship between the Internet and investigative journalism. She believes that the Internet alone cannot give stories a national and international scope. It needs to act in synchrony with traditional media. One of the Internet’s weak points is its lack of credibility. The information broadcast online must therefore be checked and validated by investigative journalists. Journalists, on the other hand, often use the Internet as a source of information. According to Lu Hui, head of a team of investigative journalists for the Southern Metropolis Daily, 80% of the newspaper’s investigative reports in the year 2000 came from online information and discussion. Internet is a remarkable means of spreading information, which has allowed some events to attract the government’s attention. In 2007, for example, the Shanxi brickyard scandals, in which children were kept as slaves, erupted when a post on Dahe.net spread to Tianya Club, whereas local television reports had failed to make an impact at national level.

The activity of certain Internet users shows their desire to take part in public debates. Tong Jingrong speaks of “active citizens:” “The forging of such a space has proved that the Chinese public are active citizens (...) The public participates in the construction of public discourse as citizens, striving for an expression space for political and public discourse”. She even goes so far as to say that, “The relationship between the media and the public is no

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<sup>5</sup> In 2007, a couple, the Wus, withstood pressure from property developers who had already begun demolishing an entire residential area in Chongqing. Left without water or electricity, they nonetheless refused to leave their house, which then stood alone on an island ten metres high in the middle of a crater formed by the building site where a shopping centre was due to be built. They became a symbol of all the property owners who were being subjected to violent evictions and who received poor financial compensation that by no means covered the costs and difficulties caused by the eviction.

longer the media-masses relationship, and is not merely the media-audience relationship; instead it is a media-citizens relationship.” (Tong, p. 206) Not everyone agrees with this last point, as seen from a comment by Lee Chinchuan, a renowned specialist in Chinese media, whom Tong herself quotes earlier on: “Contemporary Chinese media ‘have not treated their audience like citizens’ but like the political masses and economic consumers (Lee 2005)<sup>6</sup>” (Tong, p. 203). It cannot be denied that the new media have established a space for dialogue in which the public can express itself. However, it should not be forgotten that this space is subject to censorship, and that this form of expression is only accessible to well educated people. Many Internet users also use the Web solely for entertainment purposes. The work of an investigative journalist is not as freeing as one might imagine. It has certainly fuelled a sense of citizenship by pushing the population to exercise critical thinking on political issues, but, given that the activity is still seen in a pedagogical light, Tong Jingrong believes that it limits the public’s capacity for political expression as citizens. Journalists do not seem to trust in its capabilities. They seem to want to guide rather than free their readers, and do not show them the respect that citizens deserve.

Investigative journalism has therefore enabled a transformation to take place in the entire journalistic profession and in the relationship between the public, the press and the authorities. However, even though it has occasionally brought about changes in the political order and allowed conflicts to be resolved, in no way does it pose a threat to the regime: “In China, investigative journalism plays a dual role as an arm of the government and a watchdog press struggling to be free.” (Bandurski, p. 17) According to Li-Fung Cho, this constant tension between its use as a tool for propaganda and an instrument for government surveillance leads to major differences with the Western situation and the dominant model for media autonomy: “In sharp contrast to the Western liberal ideal of independent and even adversarial state-press relations, China’s press system advocates a ‘constructive’ approach. Media are in most cases best seen as cooperating and collaborating with the party-state toward shared goals such as opposition to local corruption and abuse of power. The interaction between the press and the state stays contentious but interdependent as opposed to naturally adversarial.” (Bandurski, p. 171)

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<sup>6</sup> LEE Chin-chuan, “The Conception of Chinese Journalists: Ideological Convergence and contestation,” in DE BURGH Hugo, *Making Journalists: diverse models, global issues*, Oxon, USA, Canada, Routledge, 2005, 107-126.

By making a detailed analysis of the situation of investigative journalism in China, these two books resist the temptation to fall into the kind of extreme culturalism that makes China such a specific case that it cannot be used in a comparison; they also avoid the pitfall of simplistic comparatism, which implicitly measures progress in China against Western criteria that are established as universal standards. They present the work of courageous journalists who are all too often obscured by the idea of a press subjected to authoritarian government censorship.

### **Further reading:**

- University texts analysing the media situation in China:
  - ZHAO Yuezhi, *Communication in China: political economy, power, and conflict*, Lanham, Md., Rowman & Littlefield, 2008, and *Media, Market, and Democracy in China: Between the Party Line and the Bottom Line*, Urbana, Illinois, University of Illinois Press, 1998.
  - LEE Chin-Chuan, *Power, Money, and Media: Communication Patterns and Bureaucratic Control in Cultural China*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 2000.
- Websites for translation and analysis of the Chinese press:
  - China Media Project <http://cmp.hku.hk/>
  - China Digital Times, Berkeley China Internet Project <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/>
- Study on censorship in China: <http://opennet.net/research/profiles/china>

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