

# State vs. market: media in transition

China has over 2,000 newspapers, 9,000 magazines and 568 publishing houses. More than 700 million Chinese listen to 306 radio stations, while 360 television stations broadcast 2,900 channels. Despite censorship, bureaucratic control and political pressure, media are slowly gaining in freedom and professionalism.

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## A capitalist body with a socialist face

That's how one insider characterizes the current state of Chinese media. Others call it 'media liberalization under authoritarianism' (Chan and Qiu 2002) or 'bird-caged press freedom' (Chen and Chan 1998). What these paradoxical catch phrases don't capture is the precarious nature of China's balancing act between free market capitalism and state-controlled media.

While ideological control persists, national policy has shifted from class struggle to economic growth. Chinese media have both contributed to and embodied this reorientation. Since 1979, market dynamics have slowly crept into the state's subordination of journalistic media. Like economic reform, the media's evolution has been blocked whenever the state has perceived it as a threat.

Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms and open-door policy of the late 1970s led to a loosening of state control over the media in the mid-1980s. But in 1989 the Party cracked down on the pro-democracy movement and clamped down on the media. Excepting Party mouthpieces such as *Renmin Ribao* ('People's Daily'), the state cut subsidies to all media outlets and required publications to earn at least one-half of their revenue from subscriptions. Shortly thereafter, authorities closed 673 unprofitable state-funded newspapers and periodicals (Freedom House 2004). Thus, in the 1990s, media enterprises were forced to finance themselves and to rely on the market to survive and prosper. This marketization fragmented the state's monopoly and created room for liberalization - 'changes significant enough to offer an increasingly larger space for journalistic reports in the social realm, albeit not yet in the political realm' (Wu Guoguang 2000: 46).

## Censorship

'Not yet in the political realm' because the principal role of China's media industry remains to propagate the policies of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and to educate and inform audiences under a tight censorship regime, in which the General Administration of Press and Publication (GAPP) and numerous state agencies participate. The *Xinhua News Agency* holds a monopoly on the distribution of political news, which the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) reviews before publication. To ensure media sources 'do not have problems with political orientation' (Xinhua 2003), its daily report of political events must be prominently featured on newspaper front pages and in broadcast news programs (Chan and Qiu 2002). Prior to political events such as Party Congresses, important news media organizations are 'urged' to follow the Party line. Authorities dictate who publishes news and forbid criticism and coverage of sensitive topics such as privatization, class conflict, Taiwan's political status, religious minorities independent media, political reform, the inner workings of government and data that the state itself has not released (often defined as state secret) (Freedom House 2004). For example, in October 2003, the Ministry of Health forbade the media from publishing anything about the SARS outbreak (Wu Yi 2003).

Because a journalist's 'political qualification' and 'right standpoint' matter to the government, being a journalist is still a sensitive and sometimes risky job. Every day, journalists reconcile conflicts between serving the political elite (the state) and their audience (the market). According to the *Committee to Protect Journalists* (CPJ), authorities detained 41 journalists in early 2005 and sentenced dozens of individuals for express-

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ing political beliefs (CPJ 2004; Freedom House 2004b). Courts interpret law in a manner that favours protecting the government's image over freedom of expression. Thus self-censorship is highly palpable in newsrooms.

## Developments

But marketization remains a decentralizing force. While media organizations remain state-controlled, their state-driv-



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**YANG ZHENZHONG**  
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photography,  
120 x 80 cm,  
2002.

en transition into commercial enterprises has made them more responsive to audience demands. The growth of alternative information and cultural resources reflect this: new genres and formats in radio and television such as phone-in programs, advertising and stock news; new journalistic practices such as investigative and live reporting; and new apoliti-

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ical topics such as local crime, homosexuality and HIV/AIDS - all of which were previously unavailable. Talk radio and tabloid newspapers flourish in many cities. Even social organizations, such as the Youth League and the Women's Association of All China, are establishing their own publications. Genres traditionally close to the centre of power enjoy less freedom than those at the periphery, but political and social issues are no longer absolute taboos.

For example, newspaper editors follow the party line on their front pages but exercise greater autonomy on subsequent pages, publishing sensitive information and sometimes testing ideological boundaries - what one chief-editor refers to as a 'face' and 'body' issue, where the 'face' is the space devoted to Communist content and the 'body' is market-oriented (He Zhou 2003, 205). Distance from Beijing also appears to be liberating. Investigative newspapers *Southern Metropolitan Daily* and *Southern Weekend*, located in Guangdong Province, print less ideological news and follow a more relaxed editorial line.

Even China Central Television (CCTV) isn't inured to the realities of a living, breathing marketplace - it can't be if its claim to an audience of over one billion is accurate. Star TV President Jamie Davis, referring to CCTV, says, 'China realizes that the mouthpiece of the Communist Party can contribute to GDP'. Policymakers recognize that they can only influence public opinion if state media attract and keep an audience influenced by other sources. The problem for the state is that with sources like the Internet, what viewers and readers demand is changing. According to the latest statistics (January 2005) from the China Internet Network Information Center, 94 million Chinese surf the Internet (CNNIC 2005). That may be less than a tenth of CCTV's audience, but it's hard for a billion people, let alone two, to communicate directly with each other through a television set. Authorities use software and hardware tools to prevent citizens from viewing and publishing opinions of which the government disapproves, but chat rooms offer the freedom of anonymity to discuss taboo topics and denounce high officials. The Internet has joined local and regional media as state-run media's competitors - even better, it's unadulterated by a history of unequivocal state control.

Censorship and economic liberalization can co-exist for only so long. Increased freedom within the media of any country is a product of market logic and a political commitment to free expression. In China, the media is a product of market and Party logic, leading the media to an impasse and the state to a paradox perhaps only the Chinese model could arrive at. Maybe economic principle really is all that makes a free market free. But when the product the market demands is freedom of speech - something the state must supply, but doesn't - economics goes out the window. If the market refuses the state's line that it can't have what it wants, the state must then choose either to bend (glasnost), to break (Berlin), or to break the market (Tiananmen). Certainly, economic growth and marketization are two important conditions for the development of a more liberal press, but without democratization they are no guarantee. <

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